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Volcanic Poetics: Revolutionary Myth and Affect
in Managua and the Mission, 1961-2007

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Comparative Literature

by

Zen David Dochterman

2016
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Volcanic Poetics: Revolutionary Myth and Affect
in Managua and the Mission, 1961-2007

by

Zen David Dochterman

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature
University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Efrain Kristal, Chair

Volcanic Poetics: Revolutionary Myth and Affect in Managua and the Mission, 1961-2007 examines the development of Nicaraguan politically engaged poetry from the initial moments of the Sandinista resistance in the seventies to the contemporary post-Cold War era, as well as its impact on Bay Area Latino/a poetry in the seventies and eighties. This dissertation argues that a critical mass of politically committed Nicaraguan writers developed an approach to poetry to articulate their revolutionary hopes not in classical Marxist terms, but as a decisive rupture with the present order that might generate social, spiritual, and natural communion. I use the term “volcanic poetics” to refer to this approach to poetry, and my dissertation explores its vicissitudes in the political and artistic engagements of writers and poets who either sympathized with, or were protagonists of, the Sandinista revolution.
Chapter 1 examines the notion of the “engaged poet” in Central America and how Ernesto Cardenal, Gioconda Belli, and Daisy Zamora framed insurrection against the Somoza regime in the seventies through three myths that would come to define their volcanic poetics: natural force (the capacity of a people to embody the powers of the earth), cosmic love (revolution as being guided by the unfolding of love in the universe), and poetic martyrdom (suffering as the highest aesthetic calling of the revolutionary). Chapter 2 examines how, despite a poetic ethos of rupture, insurrection, and communion, these writers often failed to interrogate the shortcomings of the period of Sandinista rule (1979-1990), instead employing a volcanic poetics to affirm national unity. Chapter 3 analyzes the impact of the end of the Cold War and the defeat of Sandinismo on Cardenal, Belli, and Zamora, showing how their works became infused with a nostalgia for the earlier moments of the Sandinista revolution or an attitude verging on cynicism about the political possibilities of the present. Chapter 4 details the ways in which this volcanic poetics had an impact in Bay Area poetry through the work of Alejandro Murguía, Nina Serrano, and Roberto Vargas, and the development of a poetics of “tropicalization” that linked local nationalist concerns (such as those of the Chicano/a movement) with international social movements in Nicaragua and other parts of the “Third World.”

Along with an engagement with the aesthetic and ideological debates informing the texts I analyze, this dissertation traces how affects, such as tedium, angst, or depression often circulate in them to reveal a persistent unease with various forms of class and gender oppression unaccounted for by this volcanic poetics and its ethos of communion. *Volcanic Poetics* proposes a way to read the ongoing relevance of engaged poetry in the contemporary era by recuperating moments of affective dissonance with forms of social oppression and the myths of revolution, as
well as the utopian longings informing these texts. *Volcanic Poetics* critically reexamines the contemporary aesthetic relevance of the Sandinista moment, its repercussions on San Francisco Bay Area poets in the United States, and what an engaged poetics might mean in the era of global capitalism.
The dissertation of Zen David Dochterman is approved.

Jorge Marturano
Eleanor Kaufman
Kenneth Reinhard
Efrain Kristal, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles
2016
For my family, who gave me a love of knowledge.
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While I have read many acknowledgments pages throughout my life, before writing this dissertation I never truly understood the depth of gratitude contained in the phrase “I could not have done this without…” But more than that, I came to understand the literality of this phrase; looking back on this project now, I realize that without certain people in my life, there would have been no creative insights, no humor to carry me through the darker times, and ultimately none of the following pages would have been written. Asserting the myth of one’s own pseudoindividuality in the production of knowledge not only produces isolation, but reifies and thereby degrades what is, in its essence, a collective process and project. Instead, perhaps an acknowledgments page like this, in some small way, is testament to the hope for a world in which individual acts, lives, and experiences might better reflect the communal nature of our being. If what follows reads as an index of names, it is not only due to the countless people who have touched me, but equally it is due to the fact that we are as yet not better able to name and speak from that collective sense of being.

First, I want to thank my colleagues at UCLA, especially Yuting Huang, Alexei Nowak, Timothy Haehn, Shir Alon, Nasia Anam, Carolina Beltran, Fatima Burney, and Isabel Gomez for sharing in all of the intellectual and emotional journeys that accompanied this part of my life. It is no exaggeration to say that without their insights, feedback, humor, and care this project would not be what it is. I want to thank the professors who I have worked with and who have given me valuable feedback on the chapters and my lines of thought, especially Jorge Marturano, Hector Calderón, Kenneth Reinhard, Eleanor Kaufman. In particular, I appreciate the conversations I have had with my Efrain Kristal, who challenged me to understand the stakes of such a project in
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Introduction

“El dolor ha sido reto
y el porvenir esperanza
construimos como escribiendo un poema
creando, borrando y volviendo a escribir.”

—Vidaluz Meneses (“En el nuevo país.” El aire que me llama 51)

“[T]he revolution was primary: the dream we had to make reality, the most urgent poem all Nicaraguans had to help write”

—Gioconda Belli (Interview with Margaret Randall. Risking a Somersault in the Air. 106)

Stephen Kinzer, who wrote the definitive English-language history of the Sandinista Revolution, Blood of Brothers, asks in his 2007 “Afterword” to the text, “How did this small, remote, and miserably poor country become the center of world attention during the 1980s? What led Nicaraguan leaders and their counterparts in Washington to conclude that the future of freedom in the world would be determined here?” (395). For indeed, when in 1979, Nicaragua, led by the guerilla organization, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) toppled the Somoza dictatorship that had ruled in the country since the mid-thirties, the many writers among its ranks, including Ernesto Cardenal, Gioconda Belli, Daisy Zamora, Sergio Ramírez, Michele Najlis, and Rosario Murillo fostered dreams of the revolution as a world-altering, eruptive event, capable of changing the very course of human history. Many of the international Left—including writers such as Julio Cortázar, Salman Rushdie, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Ntozake Shange, and Graham Greene—were seduced by such dreams and thought that Nicaragua (along with El Salvador and Guatemala) would be the epicenter of the struggle for—and against—world socialism. In the Bay Area of the late sixties and seventies, Latino/a poets such as Alejandro
Murguía, Roberto Vargas, Nina Serrano, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Francisco X. Alarcón,¹ all of whom were writing in a city shaken by protests against the war in Vietnam, the rise of Chicano nationalism and the Black Panthers, and student struggles for Ethnic Studies programs and free speech on campus, saw in the Central American struggles a parallel for their own fight against the internal colonization of Latino barrios and indeed, African-American ghettos, by the United States.² This faith in the importance of Nicaragua led Vargas and Murguía to fight in the guerilla insurrection in Nicaragua in 1978-9, and throughout the eighties many of these writers made solidarity trips and wrote poetry about the Central American armed struggles.

Nicaragua came to play such an important role in the intellectual imagination of leftists for many historical reasons. After the disenchantment with authoritarian direction of Cuba, especially after the Padilla affair of 1971, heartbreak over the coup against socialist reformer Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, and the, for all intents and purposes, victory of the United States Operation CONDOR against left-wing movements in places such as Argentina and Uruguay in the seventies, intellectuals, activists, and artists saw Nicaragua as representing a new vision of how socialism might triumph in Latin America and hopefully, proceed, without reproducing the failures of prior revolutionary movements. The hope was that the revolution would be democratic and anti-authoritarian; it would hold the trenchant critiques of political economy of Capital in one hand and the communal love of the Bible in the other; it would embrace capitalist production through the very multiclass alliance of students, peasants, business owners, clergy,

¹ The work of these several of these writers and the impact of Nicaraguan writing on their poetry will be the focus of Chapter 4.

² “The activism of the Sandinistas articulated the Marxist ideals of San Francisco cultural workers and expressed their dissatisfaction with U.S. capitalism from a war front of their own, the Latino barrio of San Francisco” (Cordova 213).
and urban workers that it to power, while ensuring the state played a large role bring about a
transition to a new economic order; it would democratize culture, creating a “revolution of poets” in which all could read, write, and produce literature that reflected the awakening of working-class consciousness.

These were large hopes to pin on a nation of just over three million people, living in the “shadow of the eagle” cast from the north. Looking back, we can see how, especially after the escalation of the U.S.-funded counterinsurgency—the Contra War—beginning in the early eighties under the Reagan administration, such dreams never came to pass. When the Sandinistas left office after the electoral defeat of 1990, the Cold War would end little more than a year later, leaving the dreams of a new type of hybrid socialism—and the poetry it generated—crushed. In retrospect, it is easy to see how the Nicaraguan Revolution represented, for all intents and purposes, merely the final gasp of a communist sequence founded on the primacy of the vanguard party and the state, as well as the affirmation of the worker or peasant as the positive subject of history.

In this work I contend that along with these historical reasons, we can trace a large part of Sandinismo’s appeal—and its shortcomings—to the structuring myths, affects, and aesthetic forms found in the era’s poetry. A key group of writers would develop what I call a “volcanic poetics” to frame their political objectives through the representation of revolution praxis as involving both a decisive rupture with the binding structures of time, reason, social oppression, and/or individuality, and a promise human communion with interpersonal, spiritual, and even
ecological dimensions. In this work, I explore how this volcanic poetics—and the way in which official Sandinista ideology reproduced its core myths and affects—made the Sandinista vision of nationalist revolution appealing to many across the Americas, especially the constellation of Bay Area Latino/a writers I examine in this work. The revolutionary uprising, in this volcanic poetics, comes to act as a figura for the direction of time, as a single moment that embodies the teleology of history, which drives toward a reconciliation of individual and collective, nature and human, life and death, themselves. At the same time, this volcanic poetics will often present revolutionary time as a return to origin (in the forces of nature, love, and community) that animate the cosmos.

My contention is that this spiritualization of the revolution, which relied in no small part on the impact of liberation theology, contributed to Sandinismo’s historical and aesthetic appeal for many leftists when faced with the versions of state socialism in China, the Soviet Union, and

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3 This term does not refer, as should be clear, to any “natural symbolism” or a geographical determination of how poetry and politics can be conceived, but rather to the notion of revolution as absolute rupture, a concept derived from a mixture of Sartre’s existentialism and Che Guevara’s idea of the hombre nuevo (discussed below). Certainly, many Nicaraguan writers formulated the revolutionary moment as volcanic eruption, but this figuration is in no way the determinant factor of such a poetics. While El Salvador is no less “volcanic” a nation, this type of poetics did not figure as prominently there, given the influence of more traditionally Marxist understanding of class dynamics, while this notion of revolution as absolute rupture did translate into the aesthetics of several of the Bay Area writers I examine in Chapter 4.

4 Such a formulation may be common to post-68 leftism in general, if, as I am inclined to do, we follow Bruno Bosteel’s argument that the “left, too, frequently falls for a melodramatic figuration of politics by presenting itself in the guise of a radical disjunction between, on the one hand, a pure social force such as the poor of the powerless, and, on the other, the corrupt machinery of the rich and powerful, protected by the State” (“The Leftist Hypothesis: Communism in the Age of Terror” 43).

5 As Auerbach says, “figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first,” and in this sense, the revolutionary eruption—however defined—portends the cosmic teleology of social reconciliation (53).

6 When writing of Cardenal’s work, Pailler says, “el tiempo presente aparece como una vuelta del tiempo original, cobrando así un sentido oculto, su pleno sentido, en referencia con un mito fundador” (86).
Cuba, that, by 1979, had revealed their authoritarianism and a bureaucratized the very notion of revolution. At the same time, this spiritualization of the revolution as pure rupture and communal reconciliation—and its nationalist underpinning—hindered its ability to confront ongoing material antagonisms in Nicaraguan society—around the role of peasants and urban workers, patriarchy and women’s issues, racism along the Atlantic Coast—once the Sandinistas came to power. My working hypothesis is that by examining this poetry, we might better understand how the notion of social change as both decisive rupture and ecstatic communion—while almost always an animating hope of political movements—often obscures deeper material conflicts and the affects that arise from them, even, as we see, “after the revolution,” especially around gender and class dynamics. In a global capitalist society after the 2008 economic crisis where the antagonisms between rich and poor, the state and the often racialized “surplus populations” living in ghettos and favelas have become all too evident, perhaps utopia, for those of us who insist on thinking it, is now best thought of not primarily as human communion, but rather, in negative terms, as the abolition of the material conditions making such conflicts possible.

Therefore, my purpose is also to uncover how the meaning of these myths change in each of the writers I examine, in each of the three periods I explore—the insurrectionary period (1961-1979), the period of Sandinista rule (1979-1990), and what I will call the era of globalization (1990-2006)—and the affective resistances to them, which poetry has a unique role in articulating.7 As such, reading this poetry might help us better understand the forms of economic

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7 Stephen Henighan’s lucid Sandino’s Nation admirably examines the work of Cardenal and Ramírez in all three periods but does not deal extensively with other poets. On the connections between Nicaragua and Latino/a and Chicano/a writing, Ana Patricia Rodríguez’s Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures & Cultures dedicates one chapter to exploring Alejandro Murguía’s Southern Front and Nina Serrano’s film After the Earthquake, but she does not examine their poetic works, nor those of Roberto Vargas, on which I focus in Chapter 4.
control and gender hierarchy—and the affects these circulate—that persisted in Nicaragua throughout these three periods, and that continue, in various forms, throughout the isthmus, and indeed, at a global level, to this day. Along with the formalization of an insurrectionary volcanic poetics in 1961-79, and its affirmative uses during the period of Sandinista rule, I also trace the appeal of the Sandinista mística in the Bay Area for the formulation of a “tropical” poetics that placed issues facing Chicano/a and Latino/a people in the United States within a broad international context. I also analyze how the “engaged poets” of Nicaragua reworked the major tropes and myths of the volcanic poetics that sustained them during the Cold War era in order to keep their utopian longings alive, even if they become infused with a newfound sense of nostalgia, hopelessness, or cynicism.

One of the key research questions therefore is about the interrelation between this poetry’s formal structures and the circulation of the myth of revolution as an eruption from time and a reconciliation with both origin and telos of history. I follow this volcanic poetics through three major myths: natural force (the insurrectionary powers of the earth that a people can embody in political action), cosmic love (a communal love in the universe that compels political praxis), and poetic martyrdom (the glorification of revolutionary death an aesthetically gratifying act). In each myth, one can see how revolution comes to be conceived as an absolute rupture: natural force breaks with modern or even “civilized” order, cosmic love breaks with individual limitation, fear, and selfishness, and the romanticization of the martyr offers a promise of a rupture with mortality itself. While many critics have focused on the ideological positions shaping these writers’ texts,8 I examine how such myths deployed—often in contradiction to any

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8 See my discussion of Beverley and Zimmerman as well as Dawes below.
socialist or Sandinista ideology—a core nexus of affects that shaped political engagement:
mística or revolutionary “mystique” (a spiritual ethic of self-sacrifice and dedication to the political cause), colloquiality (the sense of a shared language and shared set of cultural references), nostalgia (loss of the nation, of the past), a sense of communion (with nature and the collective), and, at least until 1990, the overwhelming sense of the urgency and the immediacy of struggle. At the same time, my work hopes to trace moments of affective dissonance with these very myths, in those moments when poets create a sense of unease with the glorification of work and revolutionary death, the masculinist conception of engagement, or the teleological vision of revolution.

The Formation of the Engaged Poet in Nicaragua

While the notion of an “engaged” or even “revolutionary” poetry might strike many ears, especially those trained in the dominant Euro-American traditions of interpretation, as oxymoronic, in Nicaragua, as indeed throughout much of Latin America since the dissolution of vanguardismo around the time of the Spanish Civil War (1936-8), politics and poetry were often thought of as not only complementary but for many, intrinsically linked. Julián Pérez claims that after the Spanish Civil War in particular, many poets questioned the “solopicismo que amenazaba la concepción vanguardista del arte” and moved toward a new “poesía ‘orgánica’ representativa, que aludía directamente al mundo histórico y social” (51). Neruda’s España en el corazón, written for civilians and soldiers—many of whom were anarchists and communists—on the front lines of the battle against Franco, and later, his epic of Latin American history, Canto

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9 Of course, we must note, along with Whisnat, that the Nicaraguan writers of the 1960s and later were “actually deeply divided” with Pablo Antonio Cuadra arguing against the “contamination” of literature by ideology and members of the Betrayed Generation (“La generación traicionada”), such as Roberto Cuadrá, Edwin Yllescas, Ivan Uriarte, and Beltrán Morales contending that “political commitment and literary-cultural rejuvenation were antithetical and incompatible” (Rascally Signs in Sacred Places 166).
general, with its focus on miners, farmers, and slaves, mark major developments in this regard. For not only did these texts offer “counterhistories” and revolutionary calls to resistance, but they offered a more accessible, colloquial, and oral poetry than his vanguardista works Residencia en la tierra I and II, while still retaining much of their lyricism and quasi-surrealist imagery.

However, the term “engagement,” while retroactively applicable to Neruda and Vallejo’s poetry, came to be theorized—and entered into Central American writing—through the works of Jean Paul Sartre, specifically, in Qu’est-ce que la littérature? (What is Literature?), published in 1948. Sartre defines the engaged writer as one who “knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change. He has given up the impossible dream of giving an impartial picture of Society and the human condition,” such that art takes on inherently political objectives (23). Instead of using art to either represent society objectively or to promote an art for art's sake, the Sartrean writer takes political positions in order to critique and change the world.

Sartre's concept found widespread popularity not only in Latin America but in many parts of the world engaged in anti-colonial struggle, most notably in the writings of Franz Fanon, for whom the French philosopher wrote the Introduction to Les damnées de la terre (The Wretched of the

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10 However, such a claim has never been nearly as contentious in the Latin American literary tradition as it has in the Euro-American context. As Jorge Castañeda has argued, the “role of the intellectuals also originated in the enormous gap that existed, and that endures today on a lesser scale, between the state and civil society in Latin America, between traditionally strong states and chronically weak civil societies” (182). The point here is that given the relative underdevelopment of civil society in Latin America, it has been left to the letrados, including poets and novelists, to articulate political concerns, including “for” the popular classes.
Earth) and the Negritude movement writers such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor. The concept itself seems to have been brought to Central America by Ítalo López Vallecillos, the Salvadoran writer who named the group of writers around him, including Roberto Armijo, Manilo Argueta, and Roque Dalton, “la generación comprometida” or the “engaged generation.”

However, in Central America, “engagement” did not merely entail an aesthetic stance. Sartrean existentialism, after 1959, became combined with the concept of the hombre nuevo of Ernesto “Che” Guevara to create the notion of the poet not merely as revolutionary, but as active member of the armed guerilla. Guevara developed the concept of the hombre nuevo as one who was filled with both love for the people and a ruthless militancy, who had, we might say, made the existential leap into total commitment for the cause, abandoning all traces of his prior “weaknesses.” Bayardo Arce describes the hombre nuevo of Sandinismo as “forged in the image of Sandino” and as one who “rejects selfishness, individualism: the man that feels part of a collective; the man that takes pains because he feels that work, sacrifice, abnegation, and mystique are his reference letter” (qtd. in Ross 121).

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11 However, despite the Sartrean terminology framing their literary endeavors, it is unclear whether the majority of the poets in the generación comprometida ever read Sartre at length, despite the undeniable fact that his thoughts were part of the Zeitgeist of the left from the fifties onward. As Carlos Sandoval, who worked with Dalton and López Vallecillos as an editor at El Independiente, claims in relation to the generación comprometida, “sus miembros nunca conocieron ni la filosofía de Sartre ni su obra literaria, como lo reconocería Roque en su novela Pobrecito poeta que era yo...el ícono de los ‘comprometidos’ era el Neruda de España en el corazón (1936) y la doctrina del realismo socialista, una estética fundada por Zhdánov en 1934, en donde los poetas debían cantarle al trabajo, a la fábrica, al koljós y al comunismo. Lo demás era arte burgués.” See Carlos Sandoval. “La literatura comprometida.” El Salvador. 18 August, 2007. Web.

12 I am intentionally masculinizing this term, to reflect the gendered dynamics of the hombre nuevo, examined below.
Although drawing on Guevara as his model, Régis Debray formally theorized the concept of the revolutionary foco that would become an inspiration for the FSLN. The foco would be comprised of a small group of committed revolutionaries, who, reversing the Leninist notion that a political vanguard must precede and inspire an uprising or a military wing, would engage in insurrectionary attacks on the state.¹³ He writes that in “most countries where conditions for armed struggle exist it is possible to move from a military foco to a political foco, but to move in the opposite direction is virtually impossible” (Debray 120). Rather than relying on building support through political organizing in the countryside, the foco might take key areas of the country and gain support through the inspirational power of its insurrectionary acts, and indeed many FSLN members, including writers and poets participated in a daring takeover of the Nicaraguan congress in 1978. In this sense, it was not merely enough, in Sartrean fashion, to write “about” politics from the standpoint of a Marxist or nationalist position, but rather, many poets viewed the ultimate task of commitment as participation in guerilla struggle itself. In this spirit, Roque Dalton, writing about fellow engaged poet Otto René Castillo, who was murdered at the hands of Guatemalan armed forces writes, “La muerte heroica de Otto René Castillo es la máxima prueba del respaldo que dio con sus hechos a la aceptación de que “El poeta es una conducta moral…La máxima fidelidad al contenido de esa frase llevó a Otto René Castillo a la tortura y a la muerte” (“Otto René Castillo: Su ejemplo y nuestra responsabilidad” 26).

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¹³ Interestingly, he frames the issue of creating a foco as one of urgency—a key affect in the engaged poetry of the region. He says, “Between military focos and political focos there is not only the difference between the less and the more urgent, the less and the more decisive: this difference will be conceded by every one” including the “‘Marxist-Leninist’ or nationalist” who prioritized the political (Debray 121).
Therefore, it is no exaggeration, to return to Dalton, to say that many Central Americans would echo his sentiment in the dedication to *Taberna y otros lugares*, “Yo llegué a la revolución por la vía de la poesía.” Poetry in Nicaraguan allowed for the circulation of ideas derived from feminism, Marxism, liberation theology, and anti-colonial nationalism that—given the repressive nature of dictatorships such as those of the Somoza family—found few outlets elsewhere. Since, as Castañeda argues, “[i]ntellectuals are frequently situated right at the seam between Latin America and the rest of the world, and between a strong state and a weak civil society,” poetry often assumed a critical perspective on politics that popular organizations often could not during times of dictatorship throughout the region (179). And such conceptualization of the role of the artist and of poetry resonated during the Bay Area throughout the sixties, seventies, and eighties. This project aims to be one of the first to understand the international aesthetic and political links in the Sandinista moment, inasmuch as they also shaped American poetry during the second half of the Cold War. It asks how a notion of the engaged poet—derived from sources as diverse as Sartre, Guevara, Dalton, and Neruda—evolved in Nicaragua (and indeed Central America) between approximately 1961 (the year the FSLN was founded) and 1990, specifically in the works of Ernesto Cardenal, Daisy Zamora, and Gioconda Belli. From there, it seeks to understand what impact this concept and its attendant aesthetic forms had on Bay Area Latino/a and Chicano/a writing in the seventies and eighties. Finally, I explore how the various authors redefined—or even abandoned—the very notion of an engaged poetics after the Cold War, while their texts reworking the foundational myths and aesthetic forms of this earlier period.

I examine continuities and dissonances in the concept of the engaged poet and engaged poetry before, during, and after the Sandinista revolution. Rather than simply read these three periods as
initiating radical breaks in poetic voice and style, I propose that we read these myths as in some way attendant upon an exteriorist poetic style, which sought to represent social reality in concrete terms, highlighting its political contradictions. At the same time, these poets’ efforts to represent such contradictions—and their affective impact—was often counterbalanced by the three myths I have outlined and worked to efface the complexity of such antagonisms. The exteriorist style, which was formalized in Cardenal’s “Unas reglas para escribir poesía,” published first in the March 10th 1980 edition of Barricada (but was implemented as early as the fifties), and among the seven “rules,” laid out for it there, Cardenal recommends concretion, the use of proper names, colloquial language, and a focus on the senses rather than the subjectivity of the poet or speaker.14 This focus on the “exterior” or objective eschews excessive metaphoricity or lyricism, instead encouraging poets to engage with social reality. Such an aesthetic not only shaped the attempt to break down the divide between popular or working-class reader in Central America and the—typically—elite background of the poets, but became a means for concretizing the material structures and forces of oppression affecting the nation. But this only raises a further question: how and why did such an aesthetic form, with its focus on “objectivity” and the materiality of domination, ironically help these writers mythologize revolution as absolute rupture, a return to the primal forces of nature, or a mystical experience of communal love? And, we might ask, what exactly was so appealing about such an aesthetic in the Bay Area, as poets used it to represent the impact of the Vietnam War, racism, police brutality, or factory labor, and what they viewed as “internal colonization?”

14 See David Craven's Art and Revolution in Latin America 1910-1990, pages 135-9 for an explanation of how the cultural policy of the workshop poetry revolved around these aesthetics.
Finally, the stakes of this project revolved around a redefinition of the role of ideology and affect in engaged poetry, and perhaps, political poetry in general. By reading ideological disruption as occurring at the formal and affective level of these texts, we might better appreciate how texts committed to social transformation often resisted the limitations and confines of the nationalist and state-socialist ideologies that surrounded them during the Cold War. As Sianne Ngai argues, we should understand that “feelings are as fundamentally ‘social’ as the institutions and collective practices that have been the more traditional objects of historicist criticism” (Ugly Feelings 25). At stake is a redefinition of “engagement” not merely in terms of the manifest level of signification, but how the euphoric or “ugly feelings” such texts disperse might indicate political longings and directions not taken by history. In our era, when “actually-existing” socialism is absent and largely discredited, a reading of poetic affect will help us understand the political longings animating the cynicism, frustration, and nostalgia of writers like Belli, Cardenal, and Zamora in the twenty-first century.

Next, this project examines not only the aesthetic influence of writers like Belli and Cardenal on the work of writers like Murguía, Vargas, and Serrano, but also the role these latter writers had in translating and disseminating Nicaraguan and Central American engaged poetry. Instead of reading Chicano/a nationalism and poetry as self-enclosed or local moments, I explore how these writers depended upon an internationalist perspective subtended by the twin hypotheses of a global capitalist underdevelopment and internal colonization. I explore how these writers saw Chicano/a and other nationalisms as stages within a larger movement toward a “Third World” politics common to the FSLN and the Latino/a barrios of the United States. Again, such “Third Worldism” when not formulated specifically in these texts often appears at the affective rather
than ideological level, as sympathy, shared rage, or solidarity that hopes to spread itself to peoples of the Global South.

Methodology: Engaged Poetics in Form, Ideology, and Affect

Given the importance of poetry in shaping politics in Central America, the main lens through which critics have understood the work of writers such as Cardenal, Belli, and Zamora, on whom this project focuses, has been that of the “engaged” or “politically committed” poet. Indeed, the Chicano/a movement, and writers such as Murguía, Roberto Vargas, and Nina Serrano, who wrote in its Bay Area milieu, drew on similar notions of aesthetic engagement, going back at least as far as 1965 and the development of the teatro campesino of Luis Valdez—a popular theater originally used to help organize Mexican and Chicano/a farm workers in Northern California—and Alurista’s poetic celebration and call for the reclamation of the lost Chicano/a homeland of Aztlán in 1971’s Floricanto en Aztlán. Indeed, many of the key texts responsible for the construction of Chicano/a identity and the corresponding political movement are poetic works, from José Montoya’s El sol y los de abajo, to Raul Salinas’s Un Trip Through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions to Rodolfo González’s “Yo soy Joaquín.” The writers I examine all shared this assumption of poetry as political and indeed, revolutionary engagement, be it in Managua or the Mission, throughout the seventies and eighties.

However, there are several problems with the very conception of “engaged poetry” that are important to unravel. First, we should note that central to most notions of engaged poetry is the idea that such poetic works, through dispersing popular, unofficial, or revolutionary narratives and ideologies might combat the hegemony of local dictatorships and thereby help create the
subjectivities needed for insurrectionary political praxis. As Beverley and Zimmerman begin their seminal *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*, “This book began in the intuition shared by its authors that what had been happening in modern Nicaraguan poetry was crucial to the developmental and eventual victory of the Sandinista Revolution” (ix). Such a perspective allowed them to position such poetics texts as weapons in the struggle for hegemony, such that, as Beverley and Zimmerman would have it, “literature, rather being simply a reflection or epiphenomenon of the social as in the traditional base-superstructure model, is constitutive—in historically and socially specific ways—in some measure of it” (ix). While this is a productive starting point, for analysis, such formulations tend to focus on the fact that poetry can produce “revolutionary” subjectivity (which often becomes conflated with the national-popular), at the expense of examining questions of form, aesthetic mediation, and perhaps most importantly for this study, the production of affect. That is, given that engaged poetry did produce tangible effects on many people in Nicaragua and the Chicano Southwest, the question as to how it proceeded to do so at a formal, aesthetic level, and how this form might relate to for instance, to various myths of the revolution (a return to an original, natural plentitude, or the cosmic redemption of martyrs) and the production of affects, such as urgency, nostalgia, or even a sense of dissociation and exhaustion. In other words, we must refuse to read the “effectiveness” of engaged poetry as merely ideological in a battle of ideologies at the rational level, but rather show how it produces specific aesthetic effects and formed subjects at the affective as well as cognitive levels (if indeed such a separation can be said to exist). In this sense, I follow Beasley-Murray when he argues that political praxis points to “processes that involve neither consent nor coercion” as in the theory of hegemony, but rather depend upon “embodied feeling for the rules of the social game,” including how one feels about opposition to that “game” (x).
The other temptation with regard to the concept of engaged poetry is to read such texts in a slightly economically reductionist manner, as in many parts of Dawes’s *Aesthetics and Revolution: Nicaraguan Poetry 1979-1990*. While I am sympathetic to his focus on understanding “the actual social relations of production” (xiii) generating different ideological trends within Nicaraguan engaged poetry, his analysis tends to reduce questions of form and aesthetics into a battle between the “quasi-Leninist philosophy” of Cardenal, who wished to raise realist aesthetics and popular poetry to a central position, and the bourgeois writers who by “abstracting reality” into the realm of subjectivity denied the “objective reality” of the Sandinista era and its material contradictions (Dawes 194). In both cases, issues of ideology—while certainly important—efface productive readings of precisely how these texts achieve their aesthetic and affective effects (what creates a sense of urgency at the textual level?), as well as myths deployed (of biological evolution as the guarantor of communist altruism, as in Cardenal’s “Oráculo sobre Managua”) that often ran counter to any official Sandinista socialist ideology.

The problem with such readings lay in how the non-ideological components of meaning at work in engaged literature a problem that can be traced back to Sartre’s original formulation of the concept, in which he sharply distinguished poetry and prose, even denying the possible of an “engaged poetry.” For while prose could deploy clear ideas, for the poet:

> between the word and the thing signified, there is established a double reciprocal relation of magical resemblance and signification. And the poet does not utilize the word, he does not choose between diverse acceptations; each of them, instead of appearing to him as an autonomous function, is given to him as a material quality which merges before his eyes with the other acceptation (14-15).
In other words, the poet does prioritize the “signification” of the words and their utilitarian function, but rather is guided by “magical resemblance,” that is aesthetic, intuitive, or sonorous associations between words.\(^\text{15}\) Indeed, one can see how the realist, testimonial, and exteriorist style developed by Nicaraguan—and to some extend Bay Area—writers relies upon a prosification of poetry. However, we should critique this idea on two fronts, namely, by understanding how affect might give insight into social and historical changes represented by poetry, inasmuch as such affects are in no way identical to ideology, and secondly, understanding that at moments such texts employ formal techniques that render them illegible or incomprehensible, and in this sense might be read as “political” at the very moment of their rupture with rational understanding.\(^\text{16}\) Following Raymond Williams, we would say that Sartre utilizes “an artificial distinction between poetry and prose, reserving the inevitability of commitment to the ‘meanings’ of the prose-writer and seeing meaning and emotion in the poem as transformed into ‘things’, beyond this dimension.” (Marxism and Literature 202).

Put simply, meaning and feeling are not antithetical to a text’s political valences, but may arise from material structures such as economic exploitation or gender dynamics that elude ideological formulation. Raymond Williams calls such constellations of affects “structures of feeling” in

\(^\text{15}\) Ironically, Sartre himself discusses the ability of poetry to function as committed literature, in a manner similar to Adorno and Williams in his discussion of anti-colonialist poetry in “Black Orpheus.” In this essay, he examines how poetry functions in colonial Africa and Afro-Caribbean nations, saying the for writers from these regions, “a Northern Spirit steals his ideas from him, bends them slightly to mean more or less what he wanted” such that poetry becomes the only means adequate to the expression of colonial difference, as “poetic experience has its origin in this feeling of frustration that one has when confronted with a language that is supposed to be a means of direct communication” (What is Literature? 302). In other words, by vacating prose and its alleged communicability, the author expresses a politicized affect, this “frustration,” or inability to speak, in the face of colonial power dynamics that control what is sayable. It is in this sense that my own readings follow Sartre’s concept of how an engaged poetics might operate.

\(^\text{16}\) These two positions are derived from Raymond Williams’s and Theodor Adorno’s critiques of Sartre, examined below.
order to describe “a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange” and often characterizes what he elsewhere calls “emergent” social formations, including the rise of a class to power or fractures within that class (131). In other words, structures of feeling visible in such texts, and not merely their ideological or prosaic formulations capture shifts in material and economic structures that may not have congealed fully into narrative. As such, we might move beyond the concept of hegemony, which stresses the rational and ideological components of political belonging, and instead also include the role of affect, of “impersonal and embodied flow of intensities, that undermines any concept of a rational subject who could provide or withdraw his or her consent” from domination in simple voluntarist terms (Beasley-Murray x).

Next, following Adorno, we could read the political—even in engaged texts—as arising out of their formal contradictions and moments of negativity and unintelligibility. In “Commitment,” a critique of Sartre’s notion of engaged literature, Adorno argues that “not the least of the weaknesses of the debate on commitment is that it ignores the effect produced by works whose own formal laws pay no heed to coherent effects. So long as it fails to understand what the shock of the unintelligible can communicate, the whole dispute resembles shadowboxing” (77). For Adorno the “shock of the unintelligible” that disrupts narrative might offer not only an affront to the authoritarian personality, but to the dominant logics of cultural and social life and as such open utopian possibilities.

However, I believe this model for reading engaged poetry, and its realist manifestations, is most strongly theorized in Frederic Jameson’s *The Antinomies of Realism*, in which he contends that
realism, rather than simply offering a chronological record of events is itself marked internally by a disjuncture between two temporalities, namely that of linear time on the one hand and that of a “perpetual present,” in which free-floating affective states emerge one the other (Antinomies of Realism 44). Linear time corresponds to what Jameson calls “narration,” and the effect that events have on the destiny of characters in the realist novel, whereas it is “description” or “telling” that foregrounds affective relations to spaces, institutions, events and material structures, much like, I would argue, William’s structures of feeling (Antinomies of Realism 38). For this reason, I follow Jameson when I read engaged poetry, especially in its more realist variants, as deploying these two opposed tendencies, moving between rational cause-and-effect explanations of history in narrative time and more existential, free-floating affects arising from the societies in which these authors lived.

The second issue with notion of engaged poetry, arises from its combination of Sartrean existentialism and Guevaran foquismo, namely, a reliance on voluntarist and subjectivist notions of political praxis. For this would make ideology, rather than affect, the primary component in analyzing how such political choices are made and how engaged texts operate. The problem of prioritizing the ideological and rational in politically engaged works goes back to Sartre himself. While the poetry might often wish to frame commitment in such terms, critics need not reduce all politics to an ethical or existential choice, instead understanding the complicated imbrication of subjects within material conditions that make such political praxis untenable or even undesirable, as Sandinismo often was for Miskito residents of the Atlantic Coast, some of whom viewed it as yet another form of ladino domination, feminists who saw their demands ignored by
the revolutionary government, or small-scale farmers who were displaced and had to work on state cooperatives.

Furthermore, we should not ignore how such voluntarism was often framed in largely masculinist, heroic terms. Rodríguez notes that the revolutionary experience was one in which “vanguard parties, political leaders, and engaged writers neglected, demeaned, and marginalized women, therefore disparaging and omitting all that was synonymous with Woman,” such as weakness or lack of conviction (xv). Such voluntarism frames the revolutionary as true master of control and threatens to efface those (especially women, peasants, and the indigenous) who cannot attain a similar mastery. This voluntarist notion of engagement—and the engaged poetry that might generate it—depends upon a subjective eruption with whatever subjective or material forces might hold one back from absolute commitment. As such this revolutionary is one who “demonstrates both rigid self-control and unending flexibility, who shows no mercy and is a loving companion, who is entirely self-contained and entirely dependent on the ‘longing for the people’ for his own survival” (Saldaña-Portillo Revolutionary Imagination 85). Such an ideal was neither realistic nor, I would argue, a desirable form of political subjetification, but was reproduced time and again throughout the texts of the writers in Nicaragua and the Bay Area that I examine. It is my thesis that the “volcanic poetics” they developed, as I call it, depended upon the absolutization of insurrectionary rupture, such that revolution—so it was formulated—would break with all past forms of oppression and subjugation or to some, even time itself.¹⁷ A volcanic eruption of the new.

¹⁷ See my reading Cardenal’s “Canto nacional” in Chapter 1 or of Serrano’s “Volcano” in Chapter 4, for instance.
However, engaged poetry runs into a final problem, namely that of history itself. What happens to the very notion of engaged poetry after the defeat of “actually-existing” socialism as a political form? How are we to look back on works that, while they undoubtedly inspired many, also mythologized and even romanticized the revolution in Nicaragua that, in the end, did little to change the material conditions\textsuperscript{18} of some of the poorest people in the Western hemisphere? How are we to make sense of the trajectory of these writers—who turn to theological visions, identity politics, cynicism about politics itself, and/or nostalgia for the Sandinista moment—after the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the 1990 electoral defeat, and the ultimate end of the Cold War? And if we might add one more question, what might their poetry—its utopian kernel, one might say—provide the present, in which, despite the fact that both the nationalism of Sandinismo and the Chicano movement have become untenable solutions, and the socialist state has been revealed as an oppressive rather than liberating force, global capitalism, since the 2008-9 financial crisis, faces an unprecedented combination of economic and environmental impasses? These are some of the animating questions of this project and should frame any discussion about the very possibilities of engaged poetry after the end of the Cold War. While I offer some speculations at the conclusion of this work, my sense is that it is in moments of poetic moments of affective dissonance with the existent capitalist order that we might best read nascent “structures of feelings” or political longings which expose what Moreiras has called a “negative globality” that “affectively” maps the world-system. As Moreiras says, moments of the breakdown of the narratives of modernization and capitalist progress, “because they are planetwide and affect everyone, produce a sort of negative globality” that must be culturally ciphered in the various

\textsuperscript{18} Little by way material changes pushed toward the creation of what we might think of as a socialist economy, given that it was by many estimates, “70 per cent capitalist” and “the state sector, given the importance of private capital, can be viewed as a form of state capitalism” (Ross 122).
impossibilities, everywhere observable, of narrative closure and cultural self-understanding” (81). How this “negative globality” might begin to form links—from Ferguson to the banlieues of Paris or once again, from Managua to the Mission—with or without a communist theorization is one of the aporias of our day.

Chapter Summaries

In the first chapter I trace the origins of the figure of the engaged poet and “committed writing” in Nicaragua and El Salvador, during the fifties and sixties, focusing on the work of Zamora, Belli, and Cardenal from 1961 to 1979. I begin by examining the historical and social changes that lead writers of the generación comprometida, such as Otto René Castillo and Roque Dalton to create a poetic voice that emphasized a colloquial Spanish, a documentary, realist style, and an imbrication of the poetic speaker within the sufferings and wounds of the people as opposed to what they saw as the Nerudian poet’s removal from the pueblo. I show how their influence, along with Ernesto Cardenal’s formalization of exteriorismo, shaped Nicaraguan poetry throughout the insurrectionary period.

My argument is that the work of Zamora, Belli, and Cardenal diverged from that of most of the generación comprometida in developing the myths of natural force and cosmic love (both shared the myth of poetic martyrdom) because of the largely rural composition of Nicaragua, whereas Salvadoran writers, by and large came from and hoped to appeal to a more urban and educated strata of readers. The myth of natural force allowed Nicaraguan writers to “strategically rely upon some type of discourse of precolonial purity and unity that was eroded through exposure to modernization, capitalism, colonialism, and/or toxic pollutants,” especially while evading the
thorny question of how to actually carry out class struggle and the abolition of capitalism in a Cold War environment (DeLoughrey and Handley 23). Whether in Cardenal’s glorification of pre-Columbian social forms in *Homenaje a los indios americanos* or the Nicaraguan land in “Canto nacional,” or Belli’s erotic, Whitmanesque communion with nature in *Linea de fuego*, the Nicaraguan landscape provided both a space of “purity” before and outside of capitalist social relations that might inspire political change. Cosmic love for Cardenal provided a structure within the universe—underwritten by God’s will—pushing toward social reconciliation, whereas for Belli, the erotic body—and the community inspired by revolution—resounds with such power. Love—as *apage* and *eros*, respectively—reconciles the collective. Zamora, at this point, creates poems with an almost abstract utopian longing for communion and reconciliation, that, in their very opacity, refuse to give positive representation to revolutionary content, avoiding many of the pitfalls of natural force and cosmic love in obscuring deeper antagonisms. Finally, whereas Belli is not yet concerned with the figure of the martyr, Cardenal utilizes the martyr as one who is exemplary of the revolutionary commitment necessary for the living, who has erupted from the confines of time in death, and who acts as a portent of the utopia to come. In these three myths, these poets consolidate both an affective constellation of urgency, *mística*, and a return to the natural and amorous that frames revolution as communion and reconciliation, a rupture with the binding forces of oppression. The ultimate stakes of this chapter are to show how in the effort to build a national-popular subject, such mythologies of the revolution detracted from a deeper examination of the material antagonisms that pervaded Nicaraguan society. As such, these texts substitute myths of love, nature, and death for representations of class tensions (around the peasantry, service sector workers, and the unemployed) and the role women—especially those of the working class.
Chapter 2 examines the Nicaraguan poetry of 1979-1990 (focusing on Cardenal, Belli, Murillo, and Zamora) and how the myths of natural force, cosmic love, and poetic martyrdom were reworked in order to help the consolidation of Sandinista power at the cultural level. This moment entailed a major shift from a critical, insurrectionary role of a volcanic poetics to an affirmative one, including the creation of a positive model of revolutionary culture and subjectivity. The revolution that took place in the eighties was now figured as itself having “erupted” out of time and limitation, ushering in a new historical epoch. This move diminished several of these poets’ ability to deal with ongoing tensions around gender, race, and class, given its desire to promote a vision of Nicaragua as unified and certain of its destiny.

My central claim is that cultural democratization—how to create a revolutionary culture for or by working-class people—became the central artistic issue to which these poets, in their own way, had to respond. For all of them in some way felt that there remained a gap between the material developments—including the perpetuation of capitalist production—and the desire of the Sandinistas for a “socialist” consciousness, such that these writers thought of their poetry as trying to “ensure the dynamism of this process a revolutionary cultural movement” so that in the transition to socialism, “Sandinista culture would therefore be revolutionary, non-aligned, popular, indigenous, and democratic” (Ross 120). While it would be too simplistic to reduce the poetry of this decade to mere propaganda, the myths of natural force, cosmic love, and martyrdom limited the scope of these works in many ways to the perpetuation of a vision of communion, unity, and the celebration of sacrifice that ignored those people—especially working-class women, peasants, and residents of the Atlantic Coast—who failed to benefit much
from the Sandinista years. Whereas Murillo’s work embarks upon a quasi-symbolist celebration of love and the revolution, full of allusions to Rimbaud and Neruda that represent the revolution as a magical break with the mundane world. Cardenal’s works during this period become shorter and even more colloquial, focusing on small snapshots of daily life in the Nicaraguan reconstruction, in an attempt to democratize his own poetic voice, but also to reveal the revolution as the sacred destiny of a people now reconciled with the plan of the cosmos itself. Belli’s work comes to see a rationality-rupturing passion for revolutionary reconstruction as the highest calling of Nicaraguans, which leads her to the politically suspect position of positing motherhood—and the birth of the next generation of Sandinistas—as the highest calling of women. However, all three poets refuse to abandon a volcanic poetics, instead framing revolution as the eruption of passion, love and desire, in the case of Belli and Murillo, or as the eruption of the very altruism and collectivity guiding biological evolution and indeed, God’s development in the universe, for Cardenal. My contention is that Daisy Zamora’s broke with this volcanic poetics and her poems show the most complicated examination of the problems of poverty, service sector labor, unwaged housework, and marriage, and the affects not just of euphoria, but exhaustion, disillusionment, and confusion that registered the many failures of the Sandinista project.

In chapter 3, I explore how the poetry of Gioconda Belli, and Ernesto Cardenal, in the aftermath of the Sandinista electoral defeat and the end of the Cold War continues to deploy many of the same myths of natural force, cosmic love, and poetic martyrdom, although their poetry, now devoid of the urgency that marked the period from 1962-1989, becomes infused with melancholic longings for utopia. Their poetry is symptomatic of a post-Cold War world in which
both the affirmation of global capital and the concrete possibilities of communism seem equally untenable for any engaged poetics. However, I argue that a major split marks the trajectories of the two writers, as Cardenal turns to metaphors of quantum mechanics in order to perpetuate his vision of the utopian trajectory in the universe, and therefore a volcanic poetics, although he must do so by displacing the question of utopia from the present to the longue durée of history. On the other hand, Belli comes to question her former utopian longings—almost to the point of cynicism—and even the role art had in catalyzing and sustaining them in Nicaragua. For Cardenal, as for Belli, the Nicaraguan landscape becomes the site of a lost—but still active—natural force, suffused with failed political dreams. Cardenal’s theological vision of cosmic love remains unshaken, and his work represents the Sandinista moment as one moment of history that erupted from time, in the intergalactic (and even inter-species) movement toward a communism of love. For this reason, martyrs no longer demand of the living an imminent political struggle, but come to represent an ethical reminder of the utopian destiny of the cosmos itself.

Belli, on the other hand, foregoes the erotic emphasis of her poetry, and, writing from Los Angeles, explores the difficulties of domestic and communal love in the metropole. Finally, she questions whether or not the martyrdom of the insurrectionary and Sandinista era was worth it, including how art may have promulgated false hopes and dreams, leading young men and women to their death unnecessarily. Whereas Cardenal displaces the question of art and politics onto a nearly unimaginable future, thus preserving meaning for the Sandinista struggle, the love it inspired, and the sacrifices of the dead, Belli more fully embraces the contradictions and complexities of creating a political art in the aftermath of defeat. For her, cynicism, disgust, hopelessness, melancholy, and doubt become the new affective currency of her work. In this
sense, her works might at least point a way toward an engaged poetics that operates through the negative, refusing to prefigure what transformation might look like while exposing the fissures and disruptions in the global order. I end by analyzing the work of Daisy Zamora, who frames revolution and its failures as an imperfect love, one that poets must keep faith in, despite its shortcomings. In this way, Zamora avoids the cynicism of much of Belli’s work and the nostalgia that suffuses Cardenal’s, revealing an unshaken utopian longing despite the lack of clear answers.

In chapter 4, I examine how Bay Area Chicano/a and Latino/a writers, in particular Roberto Vargas, Alejandro Murguía, and Nina Serrano engaged in solidarity work and revolutionized their own aesthetic production based on their encounters with Central American, and especially, Nicaraguan poetry. While Vargas, Serrano, and Murguía would visit Sandinista Nicaragua, Vargas and Murguía would fight against the Somoza dictatorship in 1978 and 1979. Not only did these authors move back and forth between Nicaragua (as well as Cuba) and the Bay Area, but most significantly, they attempted to trace out common economic and social dynamics, such as underdevelopment, internal colonization, state repression, and a connection to indigeneity, that linked the Central American revolutions and Latino/a social movements in the United States. I show how several of the same stylistic choices centered around exteriorismo—colloquiality (here by codeswitching between Spanish and English), realism, and a politicized poetry—merged with a Beat-inflected subjectivism and musicality, giving the work not just a sense of

19 Following John Chávez, we would argue that theory of “internal colonialism seeks to explain the subordinate status of a racial or ethnic group in its own homeland within the boundaries of a larger state dominated by a different people” especially inasmuch as “that status usually results from military conquest, typically followed by political, economic, cultural, and complete social and even psychological subordination” (786). However, the theory has also been applied to situations in which the dominant group and the subjugated group may be of the same ethnic or racial background, as in the case of poor ladinos in Central America.
urgency, rupture, and reconciliation as in the Nicaraguan texts of a volcanic poetics, but a vibrant playfulness, and quasi-mystical sense of the potential of urban community sometimes absent from the works of the isthmus. I also trace how the myths of natural force, cosmic love, and poetic martyrdom continue to inform these works in new and unique ways. I argue that the trope of natural force was often used to create a link between life in the United States and a precolonial past and the reclamation of an imagined Aztlán. Likewise, cosmic love becomes a sense of solidarity spreading between different impoverished ethnic groups from the “Third World” nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America living in the Bay Area. Finally, poetic martyrdom takes on a similar function as in Nicaragua, extolling the example of those who died—often at the hands of police—for the living. Where it differs however, is when these writers evoke the specters of Guevara, Sandino, and Fonseca in a “volcanic” manner, they forefront the translatability of political struggle across nations through their ability of their examples to transcend—or erupt from—time and space.

Along with such stylistic choices I argue that the notion of a poetic “tropicalization” saw such encounters between North American and Central American forms as producing a hybrid style capable of voicing the dynamics of capitalist underdevelopment common to both the Mission and Managua. These writers sought to create a poetry rooted in a challenge to the breakdown of modernity’s narratives of development in both First and Third World. For this reason, the poetics of tropicalization certainly included but also moved beyond solidarities centered around a shared cultural or ancestral heritage (in the indigenous roots of both Nicaraguans and Latino/s in the United States) and extended to Vietnam, Angola, and Mississippi as well—all spaces of capitalist underdevelopment and potential revolutionary eruption.
Chapter 1


In this chapter, I examine the rise of Nicaraguan engaged poetry in the sixties and seventies, with a focus on the work of Ernesto Cardenal, Gioconda Belli, and Daisy Zamora, and the creation of the testimonial, exteriorist, and colloquial style that would have a profound impact on the isthmus during the Cold War. I begin by tracing the rise of the engaged style to the generación comprometida in El Salvador between 1950 and 1956, and to the development of exteriorismo by Ernesto Cardenal, in his works of the same period, most notably “Hora cero,” which was composed between 1954 and 1956 in Nicaragua and published in 1957. My central claim is that while Salvadoran poetry tended to focus on traditional Marxist issues of class, wage labor, and private property, Nicaraguan engaged poetry took a more strongly populist form, guided by the three myths of natural force, cosmic love, and poetic martyrdom, which frame revolution in affective terms of reconciliation rather than antagonism, offering subjects a spiritual mística in response to the ethical urgency of the situation. Furthermore, this poetry depended upon what I have called a “volcanic” poetics, which utilized these myths to conceive of revolution as an absolute rupture with (depending on the author and poem) the limiting forces of time, reason, individuality, history, oppression and so forth. Before proceeding, we will define natural force as

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20 While a further discussion of exteriorismo follows, we should provisionally define exteriorism as a poetry, based on Poundian Imagism, that foregrounds specific, concrete images of external realities over a lyrical interiority or a poetry suffused with metaphorical language.
the idea that through struggle, the nation might embody the primal power of the landscape and a more harmonious relation to the earth, *cosmic love* as the notion of a communal, egalitarian bond that suffuses the universe and drives history, and *poetic martyrdom* as the notion that suffering and martyrdom are the highest aesthetic acts of the revolutionary, reconciling him or her with a cosmic destiny.\(^{21}\)

In tracing the evolution of Nicaraguan engaged poetry from its relation to the Salvadoran context of *la generación comprometida* (the engaged generation), I argue that these divergent tendencies\(^{22}\) in Nicaragua and El Salvador, toward national-popular myth on the one hand and toward a more class-based analysis can be traced to the material nature of the struggle in each nation. Zimmerman claims that Salvadoran poetry turned out to be “más urbano, irónico e ideológicamente más agudo que su análogo nicaragüense” due largely to the more modernized economy of El Salvador, with a more pronounced urban proletariat (73). By contrast, Nicaraguan poetry was directed in part to a *campesino* audience and hoped to formulate a conception of national character drawn from the geographical and ecological symbolism of the Nicaraguan countryside. The Nicaraguan uprising took on an anti-imperialist character that depended upon a broad coalition of peasants, students, middle-class intellectuals, business owners, and urban workers, such that these poetic works often sought to minimize internal tensions between different classes and interests and instead offered myths of reconciliation to promote a more

\(^{21}\) This later myth no doubt depends upon the historical power of liberation theology in the region, although as we will see Belli will turn this force of cosmic love into an *eros* rather than the more spiritually focused *agape* of Cardenal’s vision.

\(^{22}\) Of course, the divide is not absolute. In particular, much of Otto René Castillo’s poetry, who spent a good deal of time in El Salvador, will evoke myths of natural force, whereas Daisy Zamora’s poetry will tend toward a more materialist and feminist analysis without as much of a reliance on such myths.
unified anti-Somoza struggle. In the Salvadoran context, the political struggle, at least initially, was carried out by an urbanized working class, as well as students and intellectuals, often with direct links to traditional socialist and communist political parties. As such, many of the Salvadoran writers, such as Roque Dalton and José Roberto Cea tended to write in a voice attuned to the urban and it would not be until the later years—especially the late seventies and early eighties—that the attempt to bridge engaged writing with the peasantry, who were the most successful in occupying territory for the FMLN, would occur. For this reason, while Salvadoran poetry lacked some of the unifying power of the Nicaraguan texts, it exemplified an ability to deal with both political contradictions—around the party form, the role of private property (apart from the oligarchy), and wage labor—rather than subsume such antagonisms within a telos of reconciliation with nature and community. As I show, Belli and Cardenal often substituted the myths of reconciliation and for a more materialist analysis of antagonisms within the Nicaragua around issues of urban poverty, the agro-export economy and its relation to the peasantry, and women’s role in both the home and in political struggle.

At the same time, these myths, and the volcanic poetics that made them possible, spiritualized revolutionary activity, providing hope for rupture with the present dictatorship and reconciliation in the national liberation struggle. As such, this poetry encoded a variety of affects—urgency, rage, nostalgia, indignation, hope for change—whose meaning for political action often needs little deciphering. I have also hoped to correct a tendency in many readings of engaged poetry through which the thematic or ideological meaning of such texts are considered primary and the

23 Zimmerman writes that in El Salvador “la lucha política era mucho menos populista y más abiertamente ‘moderna’ en el sentido convencional marxista de un conflicto entre burgués/trabajador, fuerzas capitalistas/socialistas,” as well as having a more obviously sectarian character, exemplified by Dalton’s assassination (Zimmerman 73).
affective secondary. Instead, I read the narrative impulse of such myths—and their temporality of past and future—in a dialectic with the affects they circulate, affects that as Jameson will argue operate within a “perpetual present with a diminishing sense of temporal or indeed phenomenological continuities” (Antinomies 28). Thus, just as Jameson argues that realism depends upon such an antinomy of narrative and description, the linear time of recognizable emotions and this “perpetual present,” so too, the engaged poetry of this period relies on tensions between the linearity of myth and free-floating or less temporally placeable affects. I have also chosen to focus on how these myths generate affects that like Sianne Ngai says, might be “less narratively structured, in the sense of being less object- or goal-directed” even to the point of being “politically ambiguous feelings” (Ugly Feelings 26). As such, there is a certain unintelligibility that cuts across what might otherwise seem to be clearly demarcated ideological position. For instance, even affective urgency, a hallmark of engaged poetry itself, often appears without a goal, a “something must be done” without a clear object to which it might attach itself, just as the nostalgia that traverses these works often fails to find an image of the longed-for social realities of the past that continue to elude it. Reading the tensions between the narrativizability of the revolutionary ethos and the interruptions of affect will therefore serve as one of the methodological tools through which I approach this poetry.

The Aesthetics of Engaged Poetry

The influence of Sartre’s vision of the engaged writer, as examined in the Introduction as one who “knows that words are action… that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change,” while exerting a strong influence on Central American writers, came to be challenged by these very writers as privileging the intellectual as a distinct social class (23). This questioning of the role of the “committed intellectual” as vanguard of political thought found a
parallel in a questioning of the literary *vanguardismo*, which around Latin America at the time, came to be seen as hermetic, excessively lyrical, or in more blunt terms, “bourgeois.” Engaged poetry sought to undo what it saw as the elitism of the poetic voice through a more prosaic language, orality, concrete (rather than lyrical or subjective) description, the incorporation of non-literary texts, such as telegrams, historical chronicles, and legal documents, and at times, the self-effacement or “poetic martyrdom” on the part of the poetic speaker. Such maneuvers sought to equalize the poetic speaker and a growing working-class and even peasant readership, as orality and colloquiality did not require high levels of education, and concrete description and the use of intertextuality brought to poetry popular images of the Nicaraguan landscape, history, and culture.

However, these efforts also revealed a deep anxiety around exactly how to bridge the distance between the poetic speaker, of middle-class or even an oligarchical background, and the working-class readership they often called to armed struggle against dictatorship. For this reason, the myths of natural force, cosmic love, and poetic martyrdom created the image of a revolution worth fighting and dying for, as it was a reconciliation with nature and community, often framed in Catholic terms, that would be the end result. As such the issue was how to compel a revolutionary subjectivity not merely through a sense of duty, but through an aestheticization of the image of the militant. As Pheng Cheah reminds us, “culture is the ontological paradigm of the political. This emerges even more clearly in postcolonial national *Bildung*, where radical

24 The fifties saw a general reassessment of what were viewed by many writers as the “excesses” of the *vanguardia* and generated, as Pérez argues at least five key responses: the appropriation of popular voice (as in Guillén), a radicalization of the vanguardia toward an even more transcendental poetics (Paz), anti-poetry (Parra), neovanguardism (Lezama Lima) and a realist poetics (Dalton, Alegría) of the type examined in this project (See Paz 51-8).
political activity patently reverts to revolutionary literary culture” (7). Although the situation cannot be described accurately as “postcolonial” in Nicaragua, Cheah’s point applies here, inasmuch as culture in Nicaragua became the space where militant subjects were made and remade, without the appearance of coercion, but rather through the eudaemonic influence of the aesthetic. 

This move generated a variety of poetics including Cardenal's theologically-driven vision of natural equality (found in biological evolution itself) against which the oligarchy has “sinned,” and a spiritual love embedded in the universe and realizable through revolution, as well as Belli's emphasis on the power of nature within all Nicaraguans and the shared erotic force subtending revolutionary activity. In El Salvador, by contrast, Roque Dalton's moves toward a speaker who relishes self-critique, doubts, and anguish about his own ability to give voice to the struggle for socialism, and embodies a “sacrifice” of his class privileges, including the privileged space of poetry itself. Taken to its logical conclusion in the eighties, such a poetics resulted in a radical questioning of the field of literature itself as an elite institution, for the ultimate horizon of such “poetic martyrdom” and the sacrifice of the poet’s elite role would be the democratization of the literary itself—exemplified by the Sandinista poetry workshops of the eighties, combat poetry, and the testimonio form itself—that sought to make literature the dominion of working-class people, even at the expense of traditional aesthetic categories themselves. In this sense, I argue

25 Of course, the origins for such an aestheticization of the subject, as Cheah is quick to point out, lay in the German Idealist philosophical tradition and the works of the German Romantics. As Eagleton argues, after Schiller, “moral-ideological imperatives no longer impose themselves with the leaden weight of some Kantian Ought but infiltrate the very textures of lived experience as tact and know-how, intuitive good sense or inbred decorum. Ethical ideology loses its unpleasantly coercive force and reappears as a principle of spontaneous consensus” (329). In this sense, the creation of the Sandinista “hombre nuevo” in poetry relied on this distinctly modern aestheticization of the subject, such the three myths and the affective intensities—urgency, mystique, communion—they circulated acted as a form of seemingly non-coercive form of Bildung in the formation of the militant.
that the poetry I examine below is caught in an intractable tension between the site of its
enunciation and its imagined readership, the aestheticization of the struggle and how to perform
such aestheticization for others. Examining such tensions—and how our authors hope to bypass,
displace, or embrace them—will reveal both what remains politically generative in such works,
as well as the way in which these authors hoped to sublate larger antagonisms within Nicaragua
itself, for the purpose of producing an aestheticized militant subject who might find his or her
destiny in the myths of natural force, cosmic love, and poetic martyrdom.

The Salvadoran Context: La generación comprometida

La generación comprometida, as discussed above, centered around writers living in San Salvador
and was given its name by Ítalo López Vallecillos, who derived the notion of the politically
engaged writer from Sartre’s idea of “engaged literature.” The group had two iterations, a first in
1950 that included Menéndez Leal, Waldo Chávez Velasco, Orlando Fresedo, Mauricio de la
Selva, Mercedes Durand, Irma Lanzas, Eugenio Martínez Orantes, Ricard Bogrand, Ítalo López
Vallecillos himself, and a second, and more important one for our study, which began in 1956
and included Roque Dalton, Roberto Armijo, Elmer Trujillo, José Manilo Argueta, Fernando
Melara Brito, Tirso Canales, José Roberto Cea, Aristides Larin, René Araujo Solís, and Abel
Salazar Rodezno among others (Cea La generación comprometida 19, 24). After the fall of
Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, El Salvador became a space for artistic experimentation in Central
America, attracting many expatriates from the isthmus, most notably the Guatemalan Otto René
Castillo. As Beverly and Zimmerman write, despite the alliance of the army and oligarchy, “the
years after Martínez through the 1950s were a time of relative prosperity (coffee revenues
quadrupled), economic diversification, and relative liberalization of public and intellectual life in
El Salvador” (122-3). Of particular note were the government’s offers of amnesty toward former
political opponents between 1948 and 1950 that signaled a possible new direction toward
democracy.\textsuperscript{26}

The group was centered around the University of El Salvador in the capital city, giving writers
and activists a safe haven from political repression.\textsuperscript{27} Like the Ventana group in Nicaragua, \textit{la generación comprometida} was profoundly influenced by the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and saw
social militancy as a key to their poetic development. As Uriarte writes, “La frase que esta
generación acogió, fue una consigna de Miguel Asturias, ‘El poeta es una conducta moral,’ que
ellos asumieron como rigurosa praxis” (44). Che Guevara would become the ideal figure of
political commitment for this group, as the example of his political praxis seemingly broke down
the very boundary between intellectual and popular classes, whereas Sartre’s model framed
commitment for intellectuals primarily in terms of the aesthetic and philosophical impact writers
might have on struggles, rather than their “conducta moral” itself.

Two key events marked the rise of the group’s notoriety within the region. First was the
publication, through the Editorial Universitaria of the University of El Salvador, of \textit{La Pájara
Pinta}, a cultural and political magazine. The magazine ran between 1966 and 1972. As Cea says,
it contained “testimonio de lo que hicimos en solidaridad socio política como estética cultural;
dedicamos un número a la Nacionalidad Palestina, a Los Panteras Negros de USA, a las luchas
estudiantiles, mayo de 1968, en Francia...a la literatura soviética, a todos y cada uno de los países

\textsuperscript{26} “En sus inicios permiten el retorno de unos exiliados” however, over time, “la represión continúa y siguen
vigentes los trasfondos y fondos de la dictadura militar al servicio de los sectores dominantes” (Cea \textit{La generación
comprometida} 35).

\textsuperscript{27} As Cea says: “la Universidad de El Salvador fue baluarte para nuestro desarrollo, aportamos a ella, nos dio
espacio y tiempo para hacer lo mejor que deseábamos hacer” (\textit{La generación comprometida} 87).
These touchstones clearly mark the magazine as the voice of radical political activity in El Salvador during the time. As we will see in Chapter 4, Bay Area writers Alejandro Murguía, Nina Serrano, and Roberto Vargas worked on *Tin-Tan: Revista Cósmica*, which, in a similar vein, “was intercontinental in scope, a combination of politics and literature and art and different trends from the Mission to Mexico City to Argentina and everywhere in between” (Murguía qtd. in Lyle “The Mission and the Revolution as Lived and Told by Roberto Vargas”). Given their cosmopolitan focus, one might say that these magazines were a product of what Christopher Connery has called the “world sixties,” in which political movements across nations developed not so much in concrete coordination with each other so much as in “a chain of connection and co-presence,” seeing struggles in Vietnam, Oakland, Managua, and Palestine as linked by their resistance to United States hegemony and capitalist relations (78). This more cosmopolitan focus also distinguished the *generación comprometida*, to some extent, from their Nicaraguan counterparts whose focused veered toward the national-popular. In addition to political texts, *La Pájara Pinta* published the work of several of the poets associated with the *generación comprometida*, as the university gave them free reign in their publishing efforts. It became the key magazine in linking aesthetic innovation and radical politics.28

The second key moment was the appearance of *De aquí en adelante* in 1967, which compiled the work of the five major poets known as *Los Cinco*: Tirso Canales, Roberto Armijo, Manilo Argueta, José Roberto Cea, and Alfonso Quijada Urías. The anthology—seen as an outgrowth of *La Pájara Pinta*—was thought of as a “campanazo” directed not only at fellow poets in El

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28 The magazine was so well regarded by Nicanor Parra that he would later tell Cea that the magazine was used in the former’s classes when he taught at Yale (Cea *La generación comprometida* 87).
Salvador, but especially to those living in exile, like Dalton, so that they might recognize and rejoin the struggle at home (ibid 92). Upon its publication the text generated a series of critical articles and interviews in the local papers and magazines. Additionally, Claudia Lars, widely recognized as one of El Salvador’s greatest poets, would offer a glowing letter to Los Cinco. Writing of the potential pitfalls of engaged poetry, she says that “La terrible difficulté, bien entendue, c’est de ne pas limiter le poème aux circonstances” but that she recognized in Los Cinco “une attitude humaine, sociale, parfois politique, avec la qualité essentielle du poème” (qtd. in Cea La generación comprometida 100).29

Melodrama and Class Structure in the Generación Comprometida: Otto René Castillo and Roque Dalton

The two writers that came to epitomize the values of the sixties-era generación, particularly the notion that “El poeta es una conducta moral” were Otto René Castillo and Roque Dalton, inasmuch as they both reflected the aesthetics of the “poetic martyr” in their works and in their personal lives.30 At the aesthetic level, both writers radically questioned the divide between poet and working-class readers. Whereas Dalton’s poetic martyrdom involved an effacement of the aesthetic through a hip, ironic, and anxious style that broke apart the pretensions of the middle-class intellectual, Castillo martyred himself as artist by attempting to create a poetry seemingly devoid of self-indulgence or egoism, given over to the needs of the pueblo. For this reason,

29 She goes on to note that Neruda at times fails to achieve a similar balance between the situational and the “essential” aspects of poetry, showing how a clear rethinking of the limits of Neruda shaped the efforts of the writers of this time.

30 Despite such differences in how these writers martyred their speakers in poetic form, their ultimate martyrdom occurred after their respective incorporation in the guerilla, with Castillo dying at the hands of the Guatemalan government and Dalton at the hands of his Salvadoran “comrades.”
Castillo’s works often involve a melodramatic\textsuperscript{31} representation of politics as the moralization of injustice, as we will see in my reading of “Informe de una injusticia,” that was attractive to Nicaraguan writers who, given their largely nationalist and anti-imperialist focus, could frame the struggle as one between a “corrupt” or “sinful” oligarchy and the pueblo. On the other hand, while Dalton is certainly not without his moments of melodramatic presentation, his focus is often structural and historical, and his works tend to analyze the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and class struggle.\textsuperscript{32} Therefore, we might say that engaged poetry on the isthmus entails a negotiation with the temptation to moralize—creating easy divides between “us” and “them,” allowing for a volcanic rupture with the “enemy”—and the desire to uncover the structural factors at work in shaping individual or personal destinies. For it is in this latter desire that the persistence of material antagonisms, the non-immediacy of rupture, might be discovered.

To begin our discussion of Castillo, we should note that although Guatemalan by birth, he fled to El Salvador after the fall of Arbenz, and his presence supercharged the leftist Salvadoran literary scene. Part of his importance lay in how Castillo “forjó un lenguaje poético marcado por su simpleza de expresión, tono directo y popular, al expresar y denunciar los problemas de la

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\textsuperscript{31} I am not using “melodrama” in its colloquial sense as a pejorative, but rather focusing on how in melodramatic texts, “stylistic articulation may uncover the falsity of moral values by providing an ironic parallelism. Put differently, as artistic expression, melodrama both registers the ruptures that characterize melodrama as a mode of social experience and critiques the moral values that this social experience generates” (Zarzosa 238). Melodrama then, focuses on moral incongruities within social experience, especially “the fact that the losers are not always those who deserve it most, but has also resolutely refused to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms” (Elsaesser 72). There is thus a tension in Castillo’s works—and indeed that of Cardenal, Belli, and Zamora—between examining social oppression in “private and emotional” terms on the one hand and in structural terms on the other.

\textsuperscript{32} Take for example, Dalton’s powerful poem “Todos,” about the Martínez coup of 1931 and the government’s massacre of peasants—many of whom were Pipil—in 1932 in El Salvador and its lasting effects on his contemporaries: “Todos nacimos medio muertos en 1932 / sobrevivimos pero medio vivos / cada uno con una cuenta de treinta mil muertos enteros / que se puso a engordar sus intereses / sus réditos” (Las historias prohibidas del pulgarcito 128).
política guatemalteca y de la vida cotidiana, una función de una perspectiva mundial socialista” (Zimmerman 87). For many Central American artists, he “ejemplifica el más alto nivel de responsabilidad del intelectual revolucionario, del creador revolucionario, en la unidad del pensamiento y la práctica” (Dalton “Otto René Castillo: Su ejemplo y nuestra responsabilidad” 12). Castillo’s work seems to have no doubt about its ability to speak alongside the working-class and indigenous of his own country of Guatemala and such confidence in his poetic speaker certainly helped to bolster his personal legend as an uncompromising revolutionary. However, it was Castillo’s decision to join the armed struggle with the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR) in 1966 and his death at the hands of the Guatemalan army in 1967 that made him into the most important symbol of the unity of poetry and praxis, heroism and martyrdom for Central American writers until at least the death of Roque Dalton in 1975.

While Castillo’s own dedication to communism remains essential in understanding his poetry, one of the remarkable features of his poetry is the way in which ideological abstractions do not trump the development of a realist style focused on concrete imagery, even if this does involve at times, a melodramatic presentation. For example, in “Retorno a la sonrisa,” the speaker imagines the happiness of children in the future given the fact that the struggles in the present will create a new social order for them (Poesía 151). These children, who will be born “bajo otra forma de vivir / bajo otro aire profundo” are thus the inverse image of the children of the immoral present who are surrounded by “látigos y hambre.” This moralization occurs at the grammatical level at the opposition of past “Retorno a la sonrisa” and future “los niños serán alegres” [emphasis mine] to the corruption of the present. While the clarity and forcefulness of such a utopian vision appealed to Nicaraguan writers, assuming this quasi-prophetic voice allows Castillo to forgo a
more complex interrogation of economic and social dynamics but generates a powerful affective sense of nostalgia. However, history would show that Castillo’s longed-for happiness would not come. Ironically perhaps, the poem encodes such a disjunction between the misery of the present and the fantasized future of reconciliation in its final lines: “Soy feliz por la niñez del mundo / venidero, y, lo proclamo a grandes / voces, lleno de júbilo universal.” Here the enjambment of “mundo” and “venidero” reveals that the speaker cannot be happy for the children of this “world” without a phantasmatic projection of what is “to come.” Melodrama allows for a narrative of future moral reconciliation that ruptures from the present completely, here grounded affectively in personal hope and righteous indignation. Such a combination of volcanic rupture with the present, and a “return” to a former happiness in the liberated future became an appealing form through which poets like Belli, Zamora, Murillo, and Cardenal would stage the conflict between oligarchy and pueblo. However, in the Nicaraguan poetry I examine, such narratives of reconciliation will also search for a basis in the myths of natural force, cosmic love, and the value of martyrdom.

Not all of Castillo’s poems utilize melodramatic presentation to the same degree as “Retorno a la sonrisa.” The poem “Informe de una injusticia” exemplifies the conversational poetic voice of Castillo, his ability to endow scenes of everyday injustice with a sense of their structural causes. The poem tells the story of a woman evicted from her home for not paying rent, and Castillo focuses on an individualized portrait of the woman, relates it to a larger analysis of capital (and rent in particular), and ends, with a vision of social change cast, unlike in “Retorno a la sonrisa,” in negative terms, as he writes, “Yo no quiero / para nadie en el mundo / estas cosas.” The melodrama that paints the eviction of the elderly woman as an incomprehensibly immoral act is offset by the exploration of how state violence undergirds the economic dynamics of rent.
The poem starts with an epigraph from a “radioperiódico” that explains the eviction of the seventy-seven-year old woman Damiana Murcia v. de Garcia (Castillo 203-6). This use of intertextuality along with the fact that the poem is presented as an “informe” prompt the reader to consider the poem as an artifact with a relation to social life and as such, become “distanced” from notion of the poem as reflection on interiority or as hermetically sealed aesthetic object.

Castillo’s speaker begins the poem with a direct address to the reader, using the informal tú, “Tal vez no lo imagines.” The speaker creates an intrigue and affective urgency by alerting the reader to the incomprehensibility of what is to follow. This will of course contrast with the fact that eviction itself is an everyday occurrence therefore initiating a gesture of bonding around a common moral reprehension of the woman’s eviction. He proceeds to describe the fate of the woman in the epigraph, “pero aquí / delante de mis ojos, / una anciana, Damiana Murcia v. de Garcia / de 77 años de ceniza, / debajo de la lluvia / junto a sus muebles / rotos sucios, viejos.”

The slow pace of the beginning—created by short, two to five word lines—generates a sense of anticipation, as if a great mystery is soon to be revealed. However, absent from the context of the epigraph, the initial portrait is nothing shocking; the speaker simply represents a woman standing in the rain among some broken belongings. In Castillo’s initial melodramatic representation, however, the woman now appears not as an agent of her life but as the victim of the cruelty of the individuals—rather than the structural and economic factors—responsible for her eviction.

The power of such melodrama is to turn the everyday into the incomprehensible, to make acts of injustice into objects of wonder and confusion for the speaker—and by extension, prompt the reader to a moral stance. As Adorno writes in “Commitment” we must “understand what the
shock of the unintelligible can communicate,” for the eviction turns into Kafkaesque nightmare, and its poetic “engagement” operates not as much ideological but rather through the unintelligibility suffusing the speaker (77). However, the poem also turn melodrama into an interrogation of class structure itself as in the next stanza the speaker says, “Por ser pobre, / los juzgados de los ricos / ordenaron deshaucio.” The speaker then proceeds to try to explain the word “deshaucio” for the reader, creating a sort of poetic defamiliarization or ostranenie of the act of eviction on moral grounds.

Rather than resorting to legalistic or juridical explanations of eviction, the speaker says to the tú of the poem that eviction occurs when “no puedes pagar el alquiler” and “las autoridades de los ricos / vienen y te lanzan / con todas tus cosas / a la calle.” The explanation of eviction given by the speaker turns it into a struggle at once personal (between those who cannot pay rent and those who evict them) and at the structural level between “los ricos” and “los pobres.” Furthermore, by directly addressing the reader, the speaker positions the interlocutor as equally vulnerable as the old woman since both live in a world shaped by the dynamics of rent. By explaining eviction’s human causes and effects in class categories (“no puedes pagar,” “los ricos”), the speaker turns the notion of rent itself into an oppressive class dynamic, supported by violence on the part of the authorities.

Toward the end of the poem the speaker issues a call for such injustice to end, repeated in three slightly different iterations, and in the most minimalist language imaginable:

Yo no quiero para mi patria estas cosas.
Yo no quiero para ninguno estas cosas.
Yo no quiero para nadie en el mundo estas cosas.

The effect of these lines is to create a powerful negativity ("I don’t want") that reiterates the slow place and minimalistic phrasing of the initial description of Damiana. Affectively the short lines of the beginning, with the terseness of incomprehension, have been transformed rather to the silence of indignation and rage, rather than the nostalgia and hopefulness of “Retorno a la sonrisa.” While this denunciation begins with the “patria” of the speaker—the eviction process that forced Damian onto the street—he then turns such injustice into something no “one” person should suffer (“ninguno”) until this singularity becomes universal in that nobody (“nadie”) should suffer it. There is no positive subject enunciated, but rather the universal is conceived as simply that which should not face the dynamics of rent. But if the poem creates a sense of urgency—one of the hallmarks of engaged poetry—it also fails to articulate a vision of what is to be done. Rather than regard this as a failure of political imagination, the very negativity and free-floating nature of such affect effectuates a moralization of eviction that is also an economic analysis, an individual portrait than comes—through the very negativity of its assertions—to universalize an impasse in global capitalist economic dynamics. Here, Castillo resists the type of mythologization of class dynamics that would tempt those committed to a volcanic poetics of rupture and reconciliation.

*Roque Dalton and the Negativity of the Nation*
With only the possible exception of Ernesto Cardenal, no Central American poet has been hailed as the epitome of a politically engaged and experimental writer as much as Roque Dalton. A member of the generación comprometida, Dalton would also work for the Partido Comunista Salvadoreño throughout the sixties and part of the seventies and faced “the usual misfortunes—jail, torture, death threats, exile—with the patience and irony that are expected of a good cadre member” (Beverly and Zimmerman 126). Dalton produced major narrative works including Miguel Mármol, which consists of the testimonial reflections of a revolutionary of Farabundo Martí’s generation, and Pobrecito poeta que era yo, an experimental collage text focused around the political and literary scene of San Salvador. Ironic, self-defeating, tender, macho, exuberant, didactic, ascetic, and hedonistic, Dalton’s poetry revels in its contradictions and inconsistencies, including its own self-interrogating nature in texts such as Poemas clandestinos, Las historias prohibidas del pulgarcito, and Taberna y otros lugares.

Dalton’s poetic work has been compared to Brechtian literary praxis for its desire to avoid lyricism, and I would add, to avoid the type of melodramatic presentation that runs from Pablo Neruda to Otto René Castillo to Ernesto Cardenal. Although Mosquera will argue that Dalton’s efforts “consiste en proponer como modelo un tipo de construcción dialógica y ‘dramática’ que estimule la reflexión práctica oponiéndose, de este modo, a una vertiente de la lírica tradicional latinoamericana, concretamente...a la influenciada por la poesía de Neruda,” this opposition to lyricism is not entirely accurate (186). More in line with Sartre’s conception of the engaged writer as one who must create “reflection,” Dalton most often uses lyricism to undermine the self-assurance or reliability of the lyric “I.” However, in one of his most famous poems, “Como
tú” Dalton presents a sweeping lyric celebration of the beauty of everyday objects and experiences:

Yo, como tú,
amo el amor, la vida, el dulce encanto
de las cosas, el paisaje
celeste de los días de enero

And it ends with the speaker asserting that he believes:

que mis venas no terminan en mí
sino en la sangre unánime
de los que luchan por la vida,
el amor,
las cosas,
el paisaje y el pan,
la poesía de todos.

However, even this lyricism depends upon the diminution of the poet’s traditional visionary or prophetic function, as the speaker is simply “como tú” and united with the reader a love for the everyday. It works to celebrate the universality of the sensual and the everyday as something that must be “fought” for, even turning the countryside into a heavenly place (“celeste”). The poem at the affect level evokes a world of simple pleasure both immediate and seemingly lost, since lurking beneath this lyricism is the threat of those who do not believe “el pan” and “la poesía” are for everyone. As such, Dalton’s lyricism does not always shy away from melancholy or a romanticization of the popular. We can read in this poem an affective “colloquiality,” that is, an egalitarianism of humanity conferred through a “democratization of the sensible,” as Rancière might have it.

At the same time, perhaps more than any poet of the era, Dalton utilizes irony and self-reflexivity as a means to both deal with and overcome the anxiety about his role as middle-class intellectual
in what was by and large, a struggle carried out by working-class people and peasants. As Ostegaard has argued, Dalton’s poetry engages in a “mea culpa irrevocable” that serves as a “examen de conciencia” whose ultimate aim is to attempt to produce solidarity with the working class by mocking his own background as well as the vanguardist pretensions of the Party (45).

The goal of this, I contend, was in some sense to create what Alvarenga, in analyzing Roque Dalton, has called “un marxismo ‘abierto’” in that “la historia se concibe como un proceso ‘abierto,’ no determinado por la inevitabilidad de sus ‘leyes naturales’” (137). In the face of the “closed Marxism” of the Soviet Union, with its developmentalist and teleological pretensions, Dalton by and largely avoids prefiguring what communism might look like and seems to challenge even the simple faith and self-assurance of Castillo in the moral outcome of history.

Such an “open Marxism” required a speaker who could speak in a voice similar to the popular classes, yet who was riddled with doubts and uncertainties about political struggle and his role in it. Ileana Rodríguez contends, “Dalton wants to make do with human frailty and make political matters an everyday affair” (81) and forges his bond with the popular classes primarily through “ridicule” of the holy cows of revolution, such as “courage, bravery, theoretical knowledge, sacrifice, schemes, the sacred, and above all, the Party” (82). While for Ileana Rodríguez, this very lack of certainty positions Dalton as an anti-machista poet, since he lacks the ascetic self-assurance of the ideal hombre nuevo and is vulnerable to his own shortcomings, we would do well to question the gender dynamics of Dalton’s poetic representations further. For, as in the standard model of the hombre nuevo as the man who has ruptured with all limitation, vulnerability—especially when it might indicate one’s complicity with capitalism—becomes the enemy. For this reason, Dalton’s poetry often seems to try to show the speaker in the midst of
attempting to effectuate this “rupture” with limitation: a volcano bubbling beneath the surface. Therefore, the mood of Dalton’s poetry “is a sort of hip machismo directed against that tenderness the poet is afraid will reassert itself, take his anger away, make him a dupe and a victim,” such that the speaker’s efforts to become vulnerable indicate his desire to abolish his flaws and weaknesses entirely, to burst into pure revolutionary consciousness (Beverley and Zimmerman 129). If the *hombre nuevo* is characterized by his asceticism, discipline, and relentless dedication to the cause, then Dalton’s poetic speaker often seems to critique himself for failing to live up to such an ideal, a rhetoric that only serves to reinforce its masculinist formulation. Such shows how the tendency to absolutize the communist struggle in the creation of the *hombre nuevo*, shows, in Badiouian terms, that “The Immortal exists only in and by the mortal animal. Truths make their singular presentation [percée] only through the fabric of opinions” (*Ethics* 85). To put it more simply, Dalton’s exposure and ironization of the “mortal animal” (with its vulnerabilities, egoism and so forth) reinforces the notion of an absolutizable truth—by the “immortal” *hombre nuevo* who explodes outside of limitation—that might be imposed upon the social.

Dalton’s irony and the way in which he tends to tarry with the structural rather than personal aspect of politics can be seen in his “Poema de amor,” which champions the nationalistic and populist imaginary that would be the hallmark of many Nicaraguan writers, at the same time that it refuses to give the Salvadoran people positive characteristics through which it might assert a right to revolt in spiritual, mythic, or moral terms. As such, Dalton’s poem “Poema de amor” on the surface celebrates the Salvadoran, and more broadly, Central American people, and as such seems to be exactly the type of poem of the “hymn” against which Dalton might rail (*No
pronuncies mi nombre III, 361-2). However, his celebration of not merely working-class but the so-called “underclass” or “lumpen proletariat” (criminals, vagrants), especially inasmuch as they are wounded by capital, differentiates this poem from a nationalist poem that celebrates the positive characteristics and those of the nation. Instead, the poem focuses on how the Salvadoran working-class and lumpen might be thought of as a sort of negative space that exposes the lie of capitalist narratives themselves.

To begin with, those he celebrates in the poem are “Los que ampliaron el Canal de Panamá” and “los que se pudrieron en las cárceles de Guatemala, / México, Honduras, Nicaragua.” Dalton focuses on migrants drawn to Panama by the promise of economic success, as well as political prisoners, driven to the jail cells in protest of the lack of economic opportunity in the region. The poem celebrates those who are “rotting” and displaced from their nation, in contrast the idealized proletariat of socialist realism or the peasant who is autochthonously connected to the nation by natural force, as in Cardenal’s “Canto nacional” (see below). Rather than lauding the Salvadoran people for their love, connection to the earth, or national spirit, he refers to them as “los guanacos hijos de la gran puta” and as “los hacelotodo, los vendelotodo, los comelotodo.” Here “guanacos” replaces the more formal “salvadoreños,” as a gesture of the speaker’s own position within this dejected national community. Their common birth as a people is signified through expletive—a birth grounded in prostitution and abjection—that stands in for the colonial history of rape and gendered violence. This woundedness alone is at the basis of the national community.
It is due to precisely to their wounded existence, as well as due to their multiple adaptations to the world of capitalism, as the “vendelotodo” and “hacelotodo” that the working class inspires the speaker’s love. More vernacular, and seemingly anti-poetic descriptions of the speaker’s beloved guanacos crop up through the poem, such as when he refers to them as “arrimados,” and “marihueros.” This vernacular develops around a shared resistance to the misery of daily life—having to “mooch” or “smoke weed”—is the basis of the imaginary bond between poet and collective. Dalton finds collectivity in the shared compensatory behaviors taken by those who deal with life under capitalism. The poem celebrates the ways in which his fellow Salvadorans and Central Americans—and by implication, the poetic speaker himself—have lived with and attempted to heal the wounds of life under capitalism. By ending the poem with the lines, “los tristes más tristes del mundo, / mis compatriotas, mis hermanos” Dalton refuses to condemn those who break the law to cope with their lives, as those in power do, instead showing a common bond in a certain abjection itself. As such the poem figures a “community of those who have nothing in common,” if we take “nothing” as referring not merely to an absence of all qualities, but rather the “nothingness” of living on the margins of capitalist society.

*Insurrection and Poetry in Nicaragua 1961-79*

In Nicaragua, by contrast, engaged poetry followed a different trajectory rooted in the more populist and rural character the armed struggle took from the inception of the FSLN in 1961, one in which the revolution would be figured as an absolute rupture with the present and an almost spiritual reconciliation of the community. The volcanic poetics of authors like Cardenal, Belli, and Zamora codified these myths and helped proliferate affects of urgency, love for the national-popular, nostalgia for an imagined past and natural harmony, and above all, a spiritual *mística* subtending revolutionary activity itself. However, the origins of this type of poetry go back to at
least 1960-1. Literary groups dedicated to bringing forth social change through cultural change arose after the Cuban Revolution, such as Ventana, in 1960. Their magazine, of the same name, with Sergio Ramírez among its editors, “had no qualms about publishing works deemed to be political” and even dedicated an entire issue to works of Cuban poetry (Dawes 109). In 1972 “a group of young writers including Rosario Murillo, David MacField, Guillermo Menocal, Eric Blandón, and Bayardo Gámez…established a cultural “brigade” of politically committed artists called Gradas” (Beverly and Zimmerman 88). Other groups such as the Bandoleros, Grupo M, and Grupo Presencia had a role in the early development of engaged writing in Nicaragua.33

From their inception, these groups, and especially Ventana, would come into conflict with the vanguardist aesthetics of Pablo Antonio Cuadra’s La Pez y el Serpiente and especially La prensa literaria, which was the “official” literary magazine of Somoza’s Nicaragua. La prensa literaria was under the aegis of Roberto Cuadra and Edwin Ilescas, members of the “Betrayed Generation,” who “argued that Nicaraguan literature had been tainted by political interests and that artists should concentrate on technical or literary experimentation” and became Ventana’s most persistent target (Dawes 109). As in El Salvador, the university also became a space for free thought and expression against the Somoza dictatorship as the “poetry and prose testimonies of Sandinista martyrs, prisoners, combatants, and fellow travelers began to appear in the pages of the new UNAN-based magazine, Taller, directed by Michele Najlis and Alejandro Bravo, or circulated more informally in mimeographed sheets among revolutionary cells, student organizations, and clubs” (Beverly and Zimmerman 88). While much of the poetry of the sixties and early seventies does not bear explicit traces of such anti-Somocismo—for fear of

33 See Beverly and Zimmerman, 72.
repression—writers found inventive ways to circumvent censorship and still make lasting and powerful critiques. For indeed, when ideological contestation is foreclosed, eliciting powerful affects in poetry may be one of the most revolution activities a writer can do.

_Ernesto Cardenal and The Naturalization of Revolution as Cosmic Order_

Cardenal’s work of the pre-revolution years can be divided into three phases, with the 1954 April Revolution against Somoza having a profound impact on his early work. The fallout from this event—in which he saw many of his friends murdered—led not only to the production of the poem “Hora 0,” with its celebration of Sandino as a redemptive hero for the nation, but eventually caused him to join Thomas Merton at his monastery in Kentucky from 1957 until 1959. There he studied theology in Mexico and came under the sway of liberation theology in the early sixties, although he did not become an ordained priest until 1965. During this first phase of his specifically engaged poetry, Cardenal produced works such as _Gethsemani Ky_, _Oración por Marilyn Monroe_, and _Salmos_, which combined theological visions with political critique, often focused around the greed of the oligarchy and casting capitalism as a “sinful” practice. Next, Cardenal moved toward writing epic poems focused on Latin American history in the second part of the sixties, with the publication of _El estrecho dudoso_ (1966) and _Homenaje a los indios americanos_ (1969), a text that would have a profound impact on Alejandro Murguía and Roberto Vargas in San Francisco in their reclamation of an indigenous past. Beginning around the time of Cardenal’s visit to Cuba in 1970 and the publication of the prose work _En Cuba_ in 1972, Cardenal became a socialist.34 This visit was crucial generating Cardenal’s belief

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34 Interestingly, as Henighan notes, Cardenal came to his appreciation for Cuba in part through Margaret Randall who he met through his acquaintance with Beat writers (many of whom also knew Vargas and Murguía) in Mexico. See _Sandino’s Nation_ 50.
that Cuba represented “the closest approximation to Christian values” and that “the Catholic Church had lost its sympathy for the poor” (Henighan Sandino’s Nation 52). The texts that follow his visit to Cuba best represent his attempt to synthesize Marx and the Bible, national liberation and liberation theology, especially through the myths of natural force, cosmic love, and poetic martyrdom. The two texts that represent the shift toward this perspective on national liberation and socialist ideology are “Canto nacional” (1970) and “Oráculo sobre Managua,” (1973) and for this reason, I have chosen to focus this chapter’s analysis on these two longer poems, especially as they exemplify how exteriorismo—which I seek to define below—was put to the service of concrete political and insurrectionary aims. In each text, I will show how Cardenal develops a notion of revolution as a volcanic rupture with present forms of oppression, in order to present the future society as, paradoxically, a return to a harmonious past.

Exteriorismo at times refers specifically to Cardenal’s own poetics, while at other times it is deployed more broadly to refer to a pan-Central American form of poetry that stresses concrete description, the “prosification” of poetry, and the inclusion of non-traditional materials in poetry, specifically intertextual sources, ranging from newspaper reports to statistics. For my purposes, I prefer this latter and more broad sense of the term, while still recognizing Cardenal’s unique role in both coining the term and helping spread it as a dominant poetic mode.

The aesthetics of exteriorismo, which one might say began with his epic poem “Hora cero,” only become formalized in Cardenal's “Unas reglas para escribir poesía,” which was often used as a handout for the Sandinista poetry workshops, but published first in the March 10th 1980 edition of Barricada. Among his seven “rules,” Cardenal recommends using concrete terms (“malinche” instead of “tree”), proper names (Rivas, Pablo Antonio), the “natural plainness” of colloquial
spoken language, appealing directly to the senses rather than ideas, and condensing the language of expression. Like Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," Cardenal recommends an unadorned language that creates its emotional and intellectual appeal through image rather than metaphor, abstraction, or the speaker's "ideas."

However, Cardenal also uses the term in a broader sense in the "Prólogo" to his *Nueva poesía de Nicaragua* when he defines exteriorismo as:

> la poesía creada con las imágenes del mundo exterior...es la poesía objetiva: narrativa y anecdótica, hecha con los elementos de la vida real y con cosas concretas, con nombres propios y detalles precisos y datos exactos...Poesía que para algunos está más cerca de la prosa que de la poesía (qtd. in Uriarte 158).

What should be clear is that exteriorismo, in Cardenal’s account, strives to be a form of poetic realism, stressing as it does the "objectiva," "la vida real," and "cosas concretas." Along these lines, Uriarte correctly situates Cardenal within the context of the reaction to Neruda in Latin American poetry after 1950, which was marked by the twin directions of Parra and Paz, the "amarga sátira" of antipoetry and the "hermetismo" of the Mexican poet (151). Cardenal, unlike Parra and Paz hopes to trace a path through and beyond (rather than against) Neruda, affirming "una concepción profético-política de la poesía y con un lenguaje llano y directo" that infuse his works with broad visions of history and time, while focused on the details of life under Somoza (151).

The first of the innovations that separates Cardenal’s exteriorismo from other forms of realism is how, in line with his appreciation for the American imagist tradition, Cardenal tends to deploy concrete imagery, although his purpose is to make material the forms of violence that traversed
Nicaraguan society as well as moments of rebellion against them. As I contend, the purpose of concretion here is not to find an “objective correlative” for an internal emotional state, but rather to provide a counter-hegemonic narrative, grounded in the reality of landscape (and the reclamation of the geographical), the solidarities arising in opposition to Somoza, and the oracular examples of martyrs. This search for the real—in a society plagued by the dictatorship’s lies and half-truths—becomes a political move in itself.

For instance, in “Hora 0,” Cardenal will describe the repression used by Central American dictatorships and the influence of foreign capital in the region. At one point, the speaker will recount how banana production must be maintained at a certain level so as to ensure maximum profits for the United Fruit Company. Rather than describe the processes of supply reduction—and therefore price increase—through waste in abstract terms, the speaker follows the trajectory of bananas from the plantation to the store:

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El banano es dejado podrir en las plantaciones,
o podrir en los vagones a lo largo de la vía férrea,
o cortado maduro para poder ser rechazado
al llegar al muelle, o ser echado en el mar;
los racimos declarados golpeados, o delgados,
o marchitos, o verdes, o maduros, o enfermos:
para que no haya banano barato
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The speaker builds a concrete description of the circulation of bananas in Central America, as well as an extensive list of moments at which the bananas could have been saved from waste, if not for the profit motive. By describing each site of waste, the plantation, the train cars, the wharf, and the sea, the speaker shows how capital shapes whether or not human needs—in this case for nourishment—will be met at various stages in the circulation of commodities. Detailing
such sites also shows the broad reach of foreign capital—in this case the UFC—and its impact on social relations in the region. The adjectives used to describe the reasons for excluding bananas from consumption—that they might be “marchitos,” “verdes,” “maduros” or “enfermos”—works to represent the banana as commodity, as seen through the eyes of the plantation owners, for whom such details allow them to extract the bananas from circulation so as to drive up prices. Concretely describing the litany of reasons for which bananas might be wasted—none of which seem to trump the social need for nourishment—makes the moral injustice of the situation more apparent than abstracted denunciations of the system as such. The poem thus neatly traverse melodrama—in the moralization of waste—and a structural analysis of the production of value. The speaker then turns toward the dynamics of dictatorship that keep the cycle of profit and waste churning, namely the government’s threat of imprisonment used to keep costs down and prices up: “Y los campesinos son encarcelados por no vender a 30 ctvs.” By detailing the specific price of bananas at which people must sell at, the speaker is able to convincingly show the commodification of human life itself, the point at which the need to keep banana profits high will produce violence in order to sustain the broader economic dynamics of the region. The life of the campesinos becomes reduced to “thirty centavos.”

Second among Cardenal’s innovations is poetry’s prosification and synthesis with narrative forms. Paraphrasing Sergio Ramírez’s poignant conception of it, Uriarte will write that exteriorismo “llenó el vacío de narrativa que había en Nicaragua y que creaba de esa manera una narrativa en verso que relata y rescata la historia” (156). This lack of narrative in Nicaragua—especially the lack of a narrative fiction that might parallel that of the Boom writers of more highly industrialized nations of Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia—is dealt with by making
more space within the poetic in Cardenal’s work. Epic poems such as “Hora 0,” mentioned above, will narrativize the broad impact of the United Fruit Company and the rise of Sandino’s rebellion whereas the chronicles, such as *El estrecho dudoso* will themselves tell the story of colonization by drawing directly from 16th century chronicles, by writers such as Christopher Columbus, Bernal Díaz, and Bartolomé de las Casas.

This brings us to our third point. Given the need to “relata y rescata la historia,” in Nicaragua, Cardenal will utilize intertextuality, including diverse forms of non-poetic materials within his poems so as to better document history, contradict the official government narrative, and catalogue moments of historical revolt. As Cardenal says:

> Todo lo que se puede decir en un cuento, o en un ensayo, o en una novela puede también decirse en un poema. En un poema caben datos estadísticos, fragmentos de cartas, editoriales de un periódico, noticias periodísticas, crónicas, documentos, chistes, anécdotas, cosas que antes eran consideradas como elementos propios de la prosa y no de la poesía” (qtd. in Uriarte 156)

Unlike Eliot and Pound however, Cardenal does not turn to intertextuality as a way to salvage an elite poetic tradition, but rather to undermine official history. Accounts of the *conquistadores* cited in *El estrecho dudoso* paint them as bloodthirsty and incompetent marauders driven by a lust for gold rather than a civilizing mission. Statistics and newspapers are cited not to vindicate the status quo, but rather to show the incongruence of its messaging and the concrete political realities Cardenal describes. “Hora cero” uses official telegrams to detail Sandino’s uprising and how it was handled in Nicaragua via the influence of U.S. authorities. Cardenal will highlight such intertextuality through the use of capitalization, as for instance when Moncada sends a telegram describing Sandino’s refusal to surrender: “TODOS MIS HOMBRES ACEPTAN LA
RENDICIÓN MENOS UNO.” By highlighting such intertextuality, Cardenal can show how Sandino’s actions interrupt official history, much like the telegram and the capitalization “interrupts” the regular font and flow of verse. In this sense, intertext “es el lugar donde se revela la carga ideológica que orienta y define al texto totalizante” in Cardenal’s poetry since it highlights a particular stance toward the historical record, indicating the impossibility of a neutral record of events (Uriarte 161). Intertextuality often operates at a formal level as an “eruption” of utopian times, histories, or narratives into a moment of oppressive social circumstances.

Finally, Cardenal’s exteriorismo often utilizes collage, juxtaposition, and montage carrying forward the lessons of the vanguardia, although juxtaposition hereforegrounds not a disordered self, but rather a historical reality that is traversed with contradictions and antagonisms. Like Dalton, there is an attempt to break with the lyrical “I,” by highlighting textuality and the communicability of ideological and historical ideas, as “Cardenal recoge sin duda las enseñanzas de un Vallejo o de un Neruda, pero inicia un nuevo camino fraguado en la ruptura de aquel Yo lírico en aras de la claridad y el acto de comunicación con el oyente” (Veiravé 78). For example, Cardenal at the beginning of “Hora 0,” juxtaposes the personal details of Guatemalan president Ubico, who is “fumando un cigarillo” and “está resfriado” in his private palace to the massive suffering he has caused in the public sphere, where “Afuera el pueblo / fue dispersado con bombas de fósforo.” The irony of such a juxtaposition is that in the description of Ubico, his cold seems more important than the police repression going on outside his palace, and the ideology charge of the poem becomes clear. Although Cardenal uses the passive voice to describe the violence outside (“fue dispersado”) the lack of a subject hardly hides the fact that Ubico’s regime
is behind it. In fact, such an elision of Ubico’s responsibility only makes the juxtaposition more jarring and the oppressive relation between the dictator and the pueblo more obvious.

Cardenal’s “Canto nacional” and “Oráculo sobre Managua”

My argument regarding these two poems is that despite Cardenal’s dedication to the concrete, historical, and “objective,” his notion of exteriorismo in fact depends upon the subordination of materiality—the sewers, quetzals, newspaper vendors—to their meaning within a larger teleological narrative in which the landscape, forces of nature, biological life, and the very cosmos itself all seem to justify and even long for revolution. As such, I contend he presents revolution not so much as an issue of class antagonism but rather as a return to a more harmonious natural state that ironically, can be recaptured by seeing the proper direction of the future as a movement toward revolution. Therefore, while Pailler celebrates how in Cardenal’s epic poems the world, and “la sociedad nicaragüense en particular, lograrán entonces volverse a colocar en un movimiento cósmico, donde el tiempo venidero se caracteriza tan sólo por un retorno a las condiciones óptimas de la creación original,” we should read Cardenal’s hunt for origins and a “mythification” of the present as obscuring the material conditions of Nicaraguan society (89).

In particular, “Canto nacional” renders the landscape as a space of harmony and an anti-accumulative ethos prior to imperialism to which Nicaragua might return by embodying natural force and creating the revolution that is the destiny of cosmic evolution. 35 Revolution would act

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35 “El proceso viene desde los astros / Nuevas relaciones de producción: eso / también es el proceso.” (Canto nacional 20).
as the moment of rupture between a sinful imperialism and the altruism of the cosmos. In “Oráculo sobre Managua,” Cardenal will attempt to turn the 1972 earthquake in Managua into a quasi-Biblical portent of the revolution to come, as the earthquake “levels” the symbols of multinational and oligarchical rule in Nicaragua, such as banks and foreign companies and returns humanity to evolution’s primal lessons of sharing and altruism. In each case, Cardenal the anti-accumulative lessons of evolution necessitate the rediscovery of cosmic love—embodied synecdochally in martyred heroes such as Sandino and Leonel Rugama—since love both connects the human community and is capable of acting against the “greed” and “sin” of the oligarchy. These three myths of revolution—cosmic love, poetic martyrdom, and natural force—therefore supplant a more complex materialist examination of class and gender dynamics in Nicaragua, and instead give positive shape to the Nicaraguan people, attempting to assure them of their victory through myths of cosmic reconciliation. This narrative both attempts, problematically, to naturalize revolution as a necessary part of the cosmic structure itself, and I argue, depends upon a theological understanding of biological and physical evolution.

Affectively, these poems create both a nostalgic longing for the past coupled with an equally intense urgency about the need for political change, as if what has been lost is also immanently available for recovery. While such narratives were compelling to many in the insurrectionary moment of the seventies, they would reveal their full irony during the eighties when Cardenal himself and other poets would deploy these myths to inhibit a more complete examination of the impasses and difficulties faced by working-class people under the Sandinista government.

“Canto nacional” was published in 1970 and dedicated to the FSLN (9-59). The poem traverses about thirty years of Nicaraguan history, alluding to, among other events, the overthrow of
President Zelaya, the expansion of the United Fruit Company, the occupation of Nicaragua by United States Marines, the subsequent uprising by Sandino, and the eventual rise to power of the Somoza family. The poem’s title immediately evokes Neruda’s *Canto general*, which in its origin, began as a reflection on Chilean, or national, history before it became a text of universal history. In both cases, the poems begin with evocations of a natural landscape, and in this case Cardenal begins with a description of the flora and fauna that are specific to Nicaragua and the isthmus. The second section details the how this national landscape came to be controlled economically by the United States and how the Marine invasion triggered Sandino’s uprising, and shows the influence of the late Darío and his anti-imperialist “A Roosevelt.” The third and longest section recounts the beauty of the Nicaraguan landscape, related through the perspectives of exiles, the writings of Rubén Darío, and the experiences of the first-person speaker himself, creating a nationalist sense of Nicaragua as a country worth fighting for. The poem ends with the speaker’s call to create a socialist future, even evoking the dictum popularized by Marx, “De cada uno según su capacidad / a cada uno según sus necesidades,” that seems to be echoed by the birds and the landscape itself. While this description of the poem’s structure is undoubtedly somewhat schematic and overly simplified, it helps us understand several of the key rhetorical moves that Cardenal employs in the poem.

At the broadest level, I argue that the poem presents imperialism as determined by the “sins” of accumulation and domination, which go against the proper course of the universe’s unfolding, since for Cardenal’s speaker, the cosmos necessarily moves from “el primer huevo de gas, al

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36 Lines such as “corrupción nacional fue el banquete de los banqueros” and “el imperialismo… / ha amparado robos prostituido la política” cast accumulation and oligarchical rule not merely as economic dynamics but as sinful and criminal in nature.
huevo de iguana, al hombre nuevo,” with capitalism or imperial domination not seemingly part of this natural “proceso.” Put simply, the poem conflates natural and historical evolution in order to present revolution as the inevitable result of nature’s unfolding, despite a temporary disruption of that process by U.S. imperialism. I argue that the dominant metaphor in this naturalization of historical change is one of animal predation and scavenging, through which Cardenal represents the oligarchy as sustaining its life through violent, unnatural and “unclean” means, devouring the populace and metaphorically disrupting the movement of existence toward the “hombre nuevo.” Thus, Cardenal reproduces a melodrama between an innocent, but potentially revolutionary populace, and a predatory oligarchy. If for Cardenal, “La Revolución empezó en las estrellas, a millones / de años luz,” then the act of making revolution becomes cast, in what can only be called a fairly aggrandizing manner, the explosion that would restore the proper course of the universe’s unfolding.

The poem begins in a pastoral mode, with lengthy descriptions of birds (toledo, quetzal, pijul, chichitote, zanate) distributed throughout Central America and Nicaragua in particular, as well as images of reptiles, trees, and marine life whose behaviors change with the seasons. These animals are described more in biological terms than with the chthonic lyricism of Neruda’s Canto general, as Cardenal’s speaker recounts, beginning in May, a year’s worth of their natural cycles: singing, giving birth, and migrating. The birds’ activities are all rendered in the present tense to indicate their seasonal repetition and invariability, the way in which natural time itself can be measured apart from human existence. Nature comes to occupy the “perpetual present” of affect, to return to Jameson’s theorization, that is before, outside of, or impermeable to narrative. In other words, the representation of the Nicaraguan birds and landscape acts as a sort of
harmony or affective equilibrium, seemingly independent of human beings, and hence independent of narrative.

The poem’s ecological vision—and this perpetual present—is interrupted in a jarring fashion by the first use of the preterit tense, with the line, “Pero sucedió que otro país tenía necesidades de estas riquezas.” Natural history quickly becomes human and political history with the phrase “pero sucedió,” which turns the seemingly non-human landscape into an object full of “riquezas,” defined by their ability to produce profit for the United States rather than aesthetic pleasure for the speaker. It also turns the stasis of nature into human narrative with the entrance of history itself (sucedió) in the form of imperial domination. The irony is that this description posits the nature/culture divide at the very moment of United States intervention, ignoring not only Spanish colonial rule, but in this way, the history of indigenous people in Nicaragua. In this way, the poem, I argue, posits the entry of the United States as an “unnatural” break in the harmony of Nicaragua as landscape and therefore as a disruption of Nicaragua’s primal, natural force.

The intervention of historical detail—beginning it seems, with the twentieth century—comes as a shock to the pastoral, quasi-edenic scene that precedes it:

Por los préstamos de 1911 Nicaragua cedió sus aduanas a los prestamistas y la dirección del Banco Nacional reservándose también los banqueros el derecho de adquirir el Banco Nacional

Cardenal’s poem next details the specific dates, names of banks, and laws in its description of the aftermath of the United States-sponsored overthrow of president Zelaya—key components of the
popular “counterhistory” that would be familiar to most Nicaraguan readers. The use of intertextuality, concretion, and the narrative quality of exteriorismo here are used not for the sake of melodramatic presentation but to trace the material causes and effects of United States domination. Cardenal details how Adolfo Díaz, president at the time, requested loans from the United States and employed an American as collector general of customs for the country. The poem’s speaker mentions not only the use of the National Bank but also the railroads (in 1912) as a sort of collateral. By using these concrete reference points of Nicaraguan history, Cardenal does not seek an “objective correlative” through his exteriorist description, but links American imperialism to the domination of material structures (banks, railroads) and geographical sites that are caught in a web of struggle over their ownership and meaning. Such moments will become increasingly rare, but are powerful reminders of this poetry’s ability to detail the logics of economic domination that operated before, during, and the Sandinista revolution.

Despite this effective use of structural and historical analysis, the poem frames the reconciliation of the nation through myths of natural force, and as a return to the harmony of the natural order prior to imperialism. In particular, Cardenal will describe financial elites as “zopilotes” at least three times and compare their greed to that of “el tiburón cuando ha olido sangre.” The text represents bankers as animals that disrupt the natural harmony inasmuch as they survive by feasting upon the dead—as scavengers—or by directly killing other animals. The speaker also fashions economic accumulation in terms of predation, as Cardenal writes that Magnavox was “Atraída por el olor de las materias primas,” while International Telephone and Telegraph “anda suelta, como el tigre.” However, predation and scavenging are not the sole metaphors through which the text formulates this disruption of national harmony, as the text says that foreign
companies “pasaron por aquí [Nicaragua] como ciclones,” yet another disruption of the peaceful harmony of the landscape.  

By contrast, the text will frame the Nicaraguan populace—and the insurrection itself—through bird metaphors, especially in the power of their song—which no doubt stands in for the power of poetry’s song—to restore a natural harmony. After detailing the sale of the rights to the Canal by the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, the text interjects—using a double line indentation, “Oscura la noche y sin kerosín el rancho. / Un tecolote canta sobre la patria. / Han callado el canto del pequeño pijul.” Cardenal’s use of montage and juxtapositions draws us out of the narrative and into the “perpetual present” of the affective. Why this jarring shift to a rural scene that seems to have no narrative context or clear spatio-temporal position? The darkness of the scene and silence of the “pijul” create the sense of a cosmic dysfunction, in which the predatory “tecolote” can sing, while the “pequeño” pijul lives in fear, victimized and silent. The pijul, as a stand-in for the Nicaraguan populace, is terrorized as the order of predation—U.S. imperialism—has taken over the pastoral mode of the beginning of the poem.

Cardenal finally metaphorizes the nation as a carcass—that “unnatural” form of animal existence between life and decomposition—as the speaker likens the nation to having “un zopilote y un perro disputándose una tripa de pescado.” Not only is the nation simply “carcass,” it is “tripa,” or the organ meat that is least edible, least suitable for nourishment. Therefore, the question for

37 This formulation of the natural disaster as ravager of the nation will be turned on its head in Cardenal’s Oráculo sobre Managua, in which the 1972 earthquake portends the fall of capital.
Cardenal becomes how to give the carcass life again, how to resurrect the nation—an answer that will await us in the final section of the poem.

The turning point of the poem comes when the speaker attempts to perform a theodicy of sorts in which the destruction of the natural order—via imperialism—can make sense in light of the larger evolution of the cosmos.\(^{38}\) The most telling passage in the text, and the one that naturalizes historical change rather than understand it in structural and material terms, follows directly after the poem metaphorizes the nation as a “tripa de pescado.” The text will posit the power of love and generation in evolution against the “predatory” forms of economic existence. I will quote the passage at length:

Decía que desovan las iguanas... Es el proceso. Ellas (o las ranas) en el silencioso carbonífero emitieron el primer sonido la primera canción de amor sobre la tierra la primera canción de amor bajo la luna es el proceso El proceso viene desde los astros Nuevas relaciones de produccíon: eso también es el proceso. Opresión. Tras la opresión, la liberación. La Revolución empezó en las estrellas, a millones de años luz. El huevo de la vida es uno. Desde el primer huevo de gas, al huevo de iguana, al hombre nuevo

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\(^{38}\) Unsurprisingly perhaps, Cardenal will return to this very trope of the triumph of imperialism as a mere deviation in the natural course of the cosmos in order to explain the defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990, most notably in Versos del pluriverso, which I analyze in Chapter 3. There, the failed revolution brings the cosmos as a whole closer to the final Kingdom of God. He prefigured such themes in his memoir, La revolución perdida: “Son esos millones y millones de estrellas con planetas habitados, con evoluciones y revoluciones como el nuestro...Toda revolución nos acerca a ese Reino, aun una revolución perdida. Habrá más revoluciones. Pidamos a Dios que se haga su revolución en la tierra como en el cielo” (666).
First, it should be noted that these lines, with their varying indentations, give a sense of contraction and expansion, not unlike the very cycles of oppression and liberation, birth and death, to which the speaker alludes. The poem turns away from images of scavengers and toward the generative power of animals—iguanas and frogs in particular—seeing in their reproduction the first signs of the type of love that subtends the revolutionary impulse. Such cosmic love—unlike greed and accumulation—is part of the natural order that moves the cosmos in the “right” direction, at least for Cardenal. Cardenal’s poem frames these animals’ biological reproduction as “el proceso” and conflates this biological growth with historical growth and change, since “nuevas relaciones de producción” are also part of this same “proceso.” These lines narrate cosmic history as a coming-into-being of universal love, beginning with the “huevo de la vida” in the primordial hydrogen clouds that allowed for the development of stars and planets, running through early land creatures, and culminating in the revolutionary love promised by the “hombre nuevo.” The poem conflates the force of nature as cosmic love as the revolution itself “empezó en las estrellas,” just as biological life—and the love it is capable of—also began with the hydrogen, carbon, and oxygen atoms produced by the stars.

The importance of this stanza for the overall movement of the poem lies in this attempt to turn the natural world—from astrophysics to biology—into a figura, in Auerbach’s sense, of human revolutionary destiny and therefore inject the natural with a spiritual dimension. Since, as discussed in the Introduction, “figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first,” the evolution of “love” in amphibians and reptiles can only be “fulfilled” in the cosmic love the hombre nuevo promises (53). Humanity can erupt with such
love in acts of revolution. In this politically problematic move, Cardenal represents the *hombre nuevo* as a messianic figure of love in the cosmos itself, the completion of the universe’s destiny, rather than a particular political idea arising from the distinct circumstances of Cold War Cuba and Central America.

Following upon this evocation of this cosmic teleology, the next two stanzas detail the beauty of the Nicaraguan landscape—as well as the beauty of some of its human-built objects—and how this landscape has been controlled by the Somoza dictatorship and foreign companies. Therefore, I argue that the stakes of the poem become a battle over the beauty of the landscape itself, and in Kantian fashion, we might say that this beauty prepares the speaker to appreciate the landscape without interest and with the very love that is the destiny of the universe, for Cardenal—that is, in the opposite manner of the accumulative gaze of imperialism. The speaker describes the Nicaraguan landscape first through his own childhood memories, next, as it appeared in the writings of Darío, and finally through the perspective of exiles reflecting on the land they’ve left behind. The three methods through which Cardenal narrates natural beauty link the idea of wresting Nicaragua from foreign power to the notion of a return to innocence (childhood), a vindication of cultural patrimony (Darío), and the recovery of a lost pleasure (due to exile), respectively. Affectively, the recovery of Nicaragua becomes charged with a nostalgia for a lost innocence and harmony that parallels the evocation of the bird-filled landscape at the beginning. The poem next links this beauty back to the overarching cosmic *telos* reinforcing the Kantian dynamics of the text: “El lago de color de blue-jean que dijo William / Esta belleza nos fue dada para el amor” and later, “Tanta belleza, para la igualdad,” inasmuch as the “beauty” of the landscape comes to represent the promise of equality, if love can come to trump accumulation.
Of course, much like Kant, Cardenal must ultimately rely on a conjecture of the theological as in this case beauty is “given” or “dada” by God and ensures that humans have a natural point of access to the ethical disinterest required to bring the hombre nuevo into existence.

This brings us to what in my mind is one of the central unsolved tensions of the poem: the conflict between socialism as return to a past natural order and as a future to be constructed. Cardenal will deploy Christian metaphors first to describe Nicaragua as “Una tierra prometida para la Revolución,” and later will say, “les cuento que el Paraíso ha sido vendido.” In the first case, socialism requires a future to be built (or “discovered” if we retain his metaphor of the promised land) whereas in the second case, he represents Nicaragua as a paradise lost in the past. For this reason, Cardenal’s poem ultimately stages socialism primarily as a return to an originary harmony, neglecting what the “construction” of socialism would mean in practical terms. We arrive at a split temporality of socialism in which the myth of cosmic love as a primal force of nature tries to, with extreme difficulty, make sense of how oppression can exist in a world given to us by a God that longs for equality and love in His creation. While the experience of beauty (as a symbol of the good) should be enough to ensure humanity of such a destiny, the accumulative impulse corrupts the world by treating it as object for self-interest and creates oppression.

This split between the natural harmony of the past and the socialist future—as well as the role beauty has in mediating them—is made explicit as the speaker imagines what this new world might look like, filled as it will be with “Casas escuelas transportes hospitales alimentos carreteras presas luz / pero ahora sólo la belleza de la llegada a la choza de palmera.” The lack of
verb tense used in describing these institutions and material structures indicate that they are outside of time, as spaces to be built but almost contained within the unfolding “proceso” of the cosmos at its very inception. The asyndeton makes these images appear as an unstoppable “rush” of fantasy images, at the same time that they seem to be the unstoppable onward “rushing” telos of history.

In the next line, the phrase “pero ahora” brings the poem to the present, in which the “belleza” of the hut can prefigure a fantasized socialist reality. On the one hand, we might be tempted to read the aesthetic pleasure of the scene as allowing the speaker to imagine an equally “beautiful” future in which inequality has been overcome. On the other hand, we should note that the speaker envisions new institutions and material realities at the very moment that he confronts a thatched hut—a symbol of poverty throughout rural Nicaragua. Again, this double movement points toward the tension in the text between a lost natural order—in which the “hut” would be part of the harmonious landscape—and the movement toward revolution—in which the hut prefigures a socialist future devoid of the very suffering it currently exemplifies. If we adopt a “parallax view,” of the situation, it would be precisely the contradiction between the speaker’s present experience of beauty of the thatched hut and the ubiquitous poverty it speaks to that would produce the vision of a socialist future. The disjunction between the experience of beauty at the site of an oppressive social relation—that of the peasant to oligarchy—therefore acts as a powerful representation of how a certain aestheticization of the landscape can efface the economic dynamics at work within that landscape.
Unfortunately, Cardenal is not always nuanced in his representation of campesinos when it comes to portraying the economic conditions that shape their lives. Instead, several times, Cardenal represents peasants—especially women—as aesthetically equal to the birds and trees, part of a timeless, natural, Nicaraguan landscape that might be recovered. Such a prioritization of the myth of natural force over an interrogation of material structures would, unfortunately, become a hallmark of much of Cardenal’s later work. The exclusion of the peasantry’s economic conditions appears in the third section, in which the speaker’s nostalgic memories of Nicaragua are recounted. After describing the sounds of various birds, the speaker adds some human-made sounds and smells to the scene: “Las 5 de la tarde y el palmeo de las tortillas / y el olor de las tortillas en el comal / el olor a humo de leña. A / la hora en que las lavanderas de Nindirí volvían de la laguna.” These descriptions lack verbs, again to indicate their timelessness, their status as images of a natural Nicaraguan landscape, much like the birds described at the beginning of the poem. The phrases “Las 5 de la tarde” and “la hora en que” read as having to do less to do these forms of domestic labor—making tortillas and washing clothes, which are typically women’s work—and seem instead to be part of the “natural” rhythms of human beings, a parallel to the rhythms of birds. Both “Las 5” and “la hora en que” indicate habitual, almost instinctual actions, not unlike the cooing of peahens or squawking of jays, rather than forms of economic activity imposed by material conditions.

The next line, in montage-like fashion describes how, “Sobre el lago de Managua un vuelo de garzas” flies. This line frames the description of these female domestic workers on each side within naturalized description of the landscape and fauna. These bird images that frame the domestic work appear seemingly “timeless” and “natural” inasmuch as they lack a verb to
indicate action, paralleling the description of the peasantry. The speaker’s descriptions of the female workers fail to introduce any notion the relation of such unwaged labor to male wage labor, or on the sexual division of labor, instead presenting such domestic labor as worthy of a nostalgic longing for a simpler Nicaraguan relation to the land.  

The next way in which the poem effaces the peasant’s economic conditions comes during the speaker’s descriptions of the bounty of the Nicaraguan landscape, a bounty that is, in fact, dependent on crops intended for agro-export. To play on Benjamin’s famous formulation, we might say that there is no document of “nature” that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. The poem includes images of “el algodonal en flor como un campo novado,” which acts as an effacement of the labor process that produced the cotton, reproducing the very logic of commodity fetishism in which social relations are masked by the commodity-form. At the same time, the speaker inadvertently or not hints that the cotton has an origin in labor (rather than being naturally occurring or “wild” cotton) because he imagines “el tractor en el algodonal,” although human beings—and their social conflicts—are absented from Cardenal’s pastoral description. Similarly, we are told of “el canto de la locomotora en el campo” but the purpose of this train, its human context, and its relation to the very economic processes Cardenal critiques,

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39 By contrast we could look at Roque Dalton’s “Para un mejor amor” in which he describes the division of labor between men and women in ensuring social reproduction as a battle for survival in the capitalist economy:

(él, buscando el pan en la calle,  
en las oficinas o en las fábricas;  
ella, en la retaguardia de los oficios domésticos,  
en la estrategia y la táctica de la cocina  
que permitan sobrevivir en la batalla común  
siquiera hasta el final del mes).
seems absent. It becomes a “canto” much like that of the birds. The circulation of capital becomes an object for aesthetic contemplation.

The text also frames the rural as a source of exoticism and enchantment rather than social conflict, as it narrates one of Rubén Darío’s encounters with a young peasant woman. We are told that “En una finca de café la campesina de color cacao / le dio un agua fina en un guacal y él observó en el guacal / escudos, aves, panículos, grecas y letras.” Both the finca and the peasant woman recede into the background, part of the “voluptuousness” of the landscape. Her skin color—marked as exotic—and the color of the coffee mix and become one in the description. Instead, they are the natural bounty that brings forth the gourd with its birds and floral patterns, an embodiment of a “natural” Nicaragua. In this passage, the natural world—and the peasant woman—appear as a source of wonder and aesthetic enchantment to Darío.

In sum, the very images that might tend offer an entry point for Cardenal to further explore social contradictions—to tarry with the negative of the peasantry in particular—instead evoke a nationalistic nostalgia that glazes over the material contradictions embedded in the very sources of aesthetic pleasure the text deploys. Unfortunately, in my assessment, “Canto nacional” fails in this regard because it attempts to gloss over the “crueldades” of the landscape, instead focusing only on the land in solely aesthetic and national-popular terms.

The ending of the poem posits the restoration of this lost Nicaragua in terms of a newfound unity between human and nature, with a litany of semi-comprehensible bird calls, such as “PIJUL PIJUL PIJUL / PIJIL / FUÍ FUÍ / KRAK!!” These bird calls seem to mirror the disruption of
language’s signifying capacity\(^{40}\) as the human subject can only express longing for a new world by returning to a more primal animal “canto.” Just as the natural order was disrupted by the acquisitive impulse, here, I see bird song as acting to interrupt the narrative of imperialist history itself, turning into a space of asignifying affect, an almost pure desire for change. At the same time, Cardenal has the birds mimic human, turning them into symbols of the justness of the anti-imperialist struggle, as in the lines “El ché-ché de las montañas del norte, las de las guerillas / que canta CHE-CHE-CHE CHE-CHE.” The bird supports the guerillas and their drive toward the \textit{hombre nuevo} theorized by Che Guevara and upheld by the speaker of the poem as the telos of human development. The insurrectionary force of the bird call has become the insurrectionary force of poetry and its potential to inspire change.

In conclusion, I contend that by the end of “Canto nacional” we are left with Nicaragua as source of nationalist pride and aesthetic enchantment in which foreign imperialism, rather than a wide array of social contradictions, seems to be the true enemy, the disruptor of the natural order and cosmic love. Cardenal presents a return to the natural order—and the reclamation of the love driving bird song, the reptiles, and the revolutionary \textit{hombre nuevo}—as the solution to the sins of accumulation and greed. In so doing, however, he often aestheticizes the landscape instead of exploring in more detail the economic conditions shape both geography and the people who inhabit the countryside. By turning the destruction capitalist dynamics into a natural history of love’s unfolding in the universe, Cardenal turns aside the question of how beyond the oligarchy, 

\(^{40}\) The obvious parallel’s is to the end of Huidobro’s \textit{Altazor}: “Campanudio lalali / Auriciento auronida Lalalí / Io ia / iiiio / Ai a i a i i i o ia” (111).
unwaged labor, gender oppression, and rural impoverishment might continue—even with the Sandinistas in power.

*Prophecies of Destruction and Revolution in “Oráculo sobre Managua”*

“Oráculo sobre Managua,” (7-72) written in response to the 1972 earthquake in Managua, which killed approximately 6,000 people and left another quarter-of-a-million people homeless, is another lengthy poem whose focus, unlike “Canto nacional,” is the urban space of the capital and the inhabitants of one of its poorest areas, Acahualinca. The neighborhood hosts a museum dedicated to fossilized 2,100-year-old footprints, an image Cardenal will draw on in order to imagine a sort of “primitive communism” in Nicaragua, in which altruism ruled. The beginning section of the poem details the poverty of the neighborhood—especially in its proximity to La Chuerca, a dump where families work sorting through trash for saleable materials—and the misery in the neighborhood caused by the Somoza regime. The poem proceeds to detail the martyrdom of poet Leonel Rugama, murdered by the guardia at age twenty and frames him as an almost Christlike figure of redemption that portends the revolution to come. The poem moves into a lengthy description of the aftereffects of the earthquake that leveled Managua, in which Cardenal presents the disaster as an act of divine justice in the style of the plagues of Exodus. Since for Cardenal the earthquake has struck down the rich—creating a Managua in which there is equality in ruination—the disaster actually portends a socialist future. The poem ends by returning to its central thematic, namely, that the evolution of the universe itself inevitably

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41 Rugama, became, in many ways, the Nicaraguan epitome of the *hombre nuevo* and martyred poet, the corollary of Otto René Castillo in Guatemala and Roque Dalton in El Salvador.
moves toward “Revolution,” a term that combines a Biblical, natural, and especially in this poem, a more Marxist-inflected teleology that “Canto nacional” lacked.42

My argument is that by representing the earthquake as a great leveler of those in power—returning Nicaragua to a less-industrialized, “primal” state, in which technology had not yet corrupted humanity’s naturally altruistic impulses—the text offers a false sense of redemption, ignoring how the earthquake only further impoverished the working class of Managua. The text—perhaps in spite of itself—casts this ruination as bringing the nation closer to the less technologically sophisticated moment of human origin (represented by the Acahualinca footsteps) during which time, so at least Cardenal imagines, the sins of accumulation and greed had not yet ravaged mankind. Instead of arguing that “el referente histórico viene a enriquecerse con el peso de un pasado mítico y proyectarse en un tiempo venidero” I contend that such mythologization and future projection make it less compelling by ignoring the impact of the earthquake on the city and the nation (Pailler 96). Although Cardenal refers to the poverty he sees in Managua as the “sismo permanente,” the poem also does little to show how the ruination caused by the earthquake might practically translate into a better future for those most affected by it. In this sense, the poem subordinates an understanding of the human effects of the earthquake to Cardenal’s allegorical and aestheticized vision of disaster as the portent of a socialist world to come that harkens back to the altruistic origins of humankind. That the earthquake would, in many ways, be a trigger for the Sandinista revolution in no way confirms

42 Henighan claims that this is the first time that these three ideas appear together to form “an integrated discursive fabric” and as we saw in the analysis of “Canto nacional,” whatever Marxist elements of Cardenal’s vision there might be are subordinated to the anti-imperialist ones (Sandino’s Nation 368).
the poem’s speculations. Rather, the lasting legacy of the earthquake was the displacement and immiseration of thousands of people in central Managua, with its devastation forcing many to live in shacks and slums throughout the Sandinista years. Such conditions continue to this day.

The poem begins with a description of the ancient Acahualinca footprints that frames the events of Managua in the broader context of human evolution and history. Cardenal uses this image to establish the existence of a sort of primitive communism such that contemporary class oppression represents a recent movement away from the more generalized human history of harmony, equality, and virtue:

Si la historia de la humanidad fuera 24 horas
digamos
la propiedad privada, las clases, división
de ricos y pobres: serían los últimos 10 minutos.

The poem positions oppression as a recent “fall” from the Paleolithic-era primal communism that humanity knew, since private property only constitutes ten minutes of the twenty-four hour “lifetime” of humanity. As such, the Paleolithic occupies the same conceptual space as the bird-filled landscape in “Canto nacional.” Just as this primitive communism occupies more of humanity’s history, Cardenal also imagines it occupies a deeper psychic register in the human mind, acting as something like a “collective unconscious” as he writes “(La última capa de tierra con cerámica Maya y llanta Goodyear) / Todo el gran subconsciente pues / es comunista.” Just as only the recent geological layers hold traces of “civilization” from Maya pottery to car tires, so it seems he wants to suggest that only the “conscious” part of man would act based on greed or

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43 If anything, the earthquake proved not so much to radicalize the working class as to change the allegiances of the commercial class, as they would be excluded from the reconstruction of the city center, given Somoza’s preference to hand out contracts to members of the oligarchy.
individual interest—a clear psychologization of the problem of private property. Cardenal’s wager—however suspect—seems to be that since more of human history seems to have been lived in a quasi-communist condition, so the “subconsciente” of humanity would have a more natural affinity revolution than the continuation of oppression.

Following this logic, Cardenal personifies evolution as a “teacher” and posits the fall into private property as an unnatural act, as a forgetting of the wisdom of life itself. However, by writing that “La evolución enseñó lecciones a las especies / para sobrevivir. Unión: fue de las más importantes,” the text refuses to acknowledge forces other than “unión” that have produced human history. Inasmuch as the poem says that “La división de clases la guerra / no fueron lecciones de la evolución” it misses the mark in that the complexity of human cooperation the text lauds itself depends, in no small part upon “la división de clases,” since wage labor, feudal labor relations, and slavery have been used precisely to compel such “cooperation.” Cooperation in human history comes about as much through division as through union.44 The text’s idealized vision of the human prehistory of cooperative continues as the author holds that inventions such as “Agricultura, cerámica, tejidos, la vela, el gran / invento del pan” belong solely to this cooperative past, rather than examining they arise out of class society. In other words, the text wishes to inscribe the nature/culture divide at the very moment at which injustice and class oppression appear, breaking from the harmony of the “pasado mítico” of early human

44 The difference between altruism or “sharing” and the destruction of relations of private property seem to be one of Cardenal’s conflations, which allows him to likewise frame socialism in moral and religious rather than strictly political and material terms. However, we would do well to remember that “[s]haring as such—if this has any meaning at all—can hardly be understood as involving this undoing of capitalist relations, for various kinds of ‘sharing’ or ‘making common’ can easily be shown to play important roles within capitalist society without in any way impeding capitalist accumulation” (Endnotes “What are we to do?” 27).
civilization. However, this originary point of history remains shrouded because of the text’s refusal to examine the way in which, along with cooperation, war, class division, and scarcity also precede early “civilizations,” of the type that would have ceramics, weaving and so forth. Put simply, there is no primal communism except as myth, except as a destination to which Cardenal hopes we might return.

In this respect, the text seems to slip at times into a jeremiad not simply against private property and wage labor, but against technologized society and individual greed. The capitalist urban space becomes the epitome of such a forgetting of the primal communism that forms the subconscious and ancestry of humanity. However, such an interpretation runs counter to the real effects of the earthquake: its primary victims were—and still are—the Nicaraguan working class, rather than any sort of act of divine retribution against the most wealthy and privileged, who in fact benefitted from it.45 If anything, in historical terms, the earthquake exposed the conflict among wealthy Nicaraguans and the oligarchy over who would reap the economic benefits of reconstruction, such that in the end the disaster only “exacerbated the existing administrative corruption by excluding other sectors of the bourgeoisie from the opportunities for investment created by the earthquake” (Jarquin and Barreto 165). For this reason, many middle-class people came to see Somoza, after 1972, as inimical to their economic interests and decided to support the FSLN.

45 Despite some economic growth generated by the reconstruction of the capital, it was the “government’s failure to respond to the critical needs of the people following the earthquake precipitated a crisis of support among the middle class and especially among the masses of suffering poor” (Jarquin and Barreto 165).
Despite these economic realities, Cardenal represents the earthquake not as an event that might further expose and intensify the deep class divisions of Nicaraguan society, but rather a disaster that makes Managua *a tabula rasa* through which the speaker can fantasize a mythic a return to this primal, less technologically sophisticated communism. In the final section of the poem, the scenes of destruction focus on buildings that represent privilege, foreign capital, and class society. As the speaker surveys the rubble he notices the fallen “Estadio Somoza,” “Country Club,” “mansiones de los ricos” and “el rascacielo del Banco de América” among other buildings. The earthquake, in Cardenal’s portrait, seems to have enacted a selective divine justice against class society, while in fact no such selectivity existed.

However, this representation too quickly turns ruination into a false utopianism through a series of Biblical allusion that in fact complicate the poem’s utopian promise. The text analogizes the ruination to one of the ten plagues of Exodus, as the speaker says “cuéntelo en los palacios de Egipto,” and as the moment before the birth of Christ, “Sin luz sin comida sin agua Managua.../—como la noche en que no hubo posada para ellos / todo Belén celebrando sus cenas de Navidad.” The irony of the first of these allusions is that in *Exodus*, God granted the Hebrew people a promised land away from the space he destroyed. However, in the case of the poem, Managua acts as both space of captivity and, through the destruction, promised land. This makes the utopian vision of ruination problematic in that the damage it wrought was far from selective, undermining the notion that in this case we can apply the formula that there are “Dos maneras de ver una plaga: / el punto de vista de Egipto / y el de los hebreos.” If anything the text skews these two perspectives, so that we might see it through that of the victimized “hebreos” while effacing the presence of the true victims of the disaster. Second, the text turns the lack of electricity and
water in Managua into the rural quietude and silence faced by Mary and Joseph on the eve of Jesus’s birth. The irony is that this characterization seems to celebrate the very conditions of impoverishment—lack of light and natural resources in the city—that created misery for thousands inasmuch as they promise redemption from the oligarchy. In this sense, the myth of natural force returns as the earthquake comes to allegorize insurrection, yet ironically, this natural force has been turned against the urban working-class itself. The earthquake, for Cardenal however, creates a seismic rupture in the unfolding of capitalist domination.

The poem, when it does represent the working-class of Managua, wavers between mythologizing them as benefiting from the earthquake and thankfully, several more complex portraits of the suffering they endure. Throughout the text Cardenal will often use “el pueblo,” to convey a sense of wholeness and unity that remains even after the destruction and chaos of the earthquake instead of interrogating the fractures caused by the disaster. “El pueblo” is “intacto,” he writes, such that “nunca muere” and the pueblo “es inmortal.” By attempting to keep the pueblo “intact” Cardenal hopes to preserve their bodies for martyrdom, representing them as oracles of the revolution to come. How to imagine the hundreds of thousands left homeless as “intact” seems baffling at best. Just after the speaker says that, “El pueblo está intacto” he describes how people “limpian los escombros y transforman la ciudad macabra / constructores de la ciudad trabajando sólo por la comida,” a juxtaposition which seems to undermine the poem’s effort to preserve such “intactness.” In other words, instead of working for wages, people now work for mere subsistence (“sólo por la comida”).
This narrative of working-class redemption through martyrdom via the earthquake generates a problematic aestheticization of death, most notable in the line, “Pero el pueblo es inmortal. Sale sonriente de la morgue.” Despite Cardenal’s attempt to redeem the dead with an image of their beatific smiles as they greet death, the smiles become cruel and ironic reminders of the moments of joy ripped from these people, while their compatriots continue to clear the remains of devastation “sólo por la comida,” struggling under the same—or even more dire—conditions of class oppression that existed before the earthquake.

It is perhaps telling that Cardenal’s most convincing portraits of the devastation come not at the end of the poem, at which point he has attempted to subsume the destruction of infrastructure (including that relating to water, light, and food) and the dead into his larger myth of a return to primitive communism, but at the beginning of the poem, where he deals most explicitly with the everyday negativity of capital and the ongoing sufferings of the inhabitants of Managua. There he describes the Acahualinca neighborhood as full of “casas de cartón y latas / donde desembocan las cloacas” and “calles oliendo a cárcel.” Here Cardenal’s exteriorist description works to trace the material structures—cardboard shacks, foul-smelling streets—that mark working-class life in Managua. Furthermore, Cardenal captures the working conditions of “Viejas agachadas sobre las tripas que arroja el rastro” and the faces of people “sonrientes, pero cubiertos de moscas.” Here the idealized language of an “intact” pueblo gives way for personalized images of the destruction wrought by class society, one that is only exacerbated by the human, all too human disaster of an unequal distribution of aid after the earthquake. The “scavengers” of “Canto nacional” have now become the working-class themselves fighting for
scrap, much like early humans did for part of their survival. The text unwittingly deconstructs the very image of primitive communism it depends upon with this oblique reference to the “non-redemptive” image of human origins as rooted in scavenging. The text also reveals the non-redemptive nature of the earthquake to the inhabitants of Acahualinca who know that “no vendrán aviones / trayendo alimentos enlatados” and that they will not receive “medicamentos, casa de campaña, agua potable.” Here, when Cardenal refuses mythologization and abides by his realist exteriorist aesthetic, the earthquake becomes a disaster than only causes immiseration—a representation that better captures its actual historical effects and exposes the class divide that shaped to whom aid was given out.

Before entering into his later mythologizations of the earthquake, Cardenal will also describe these Managuans as the “Damnificados de un sismo permanente.” Had an interrogation of the conditions of existence in this ongoing “sismo” in latter parts of the poem equaled that of the beginning, Cardenal’s vision might have been more compelling. The “hell” in which these “damnificados” live both precedes the earthquake and redemption would not as a result of the earthquake. If Cardenal forgets this first and more fundamental “sismo”—that of ongoing class antagonism—in his representation of the second, it is because only in so doing can he turn the 1972 quake into an oracle of the future he hopes for. But this tradeoff is quite a price to pay when the oracle’s words are incomprehensible to those not allowed in her temple.

Gioconda Belli: Revolution as Erotic and Natural Force

46 While many contemporary researchers, such as Briana Pobiner, have posited the primary role of scavenging (or a hybrid scavenging-hunting approach) in early human history, in 2002 Domínguez-Rodrigo asserted that “the hunting hypothesis cannot be ruled out, and it seems that its heuristic power is greater than that of the passive scavenging scenarios out lined so far” (“Hunting and Scavenging by Early Humans: The State of the Debate” 45).
Gioconda Belli’s *Linea de fuego* (1978) has traditionally been considered the defining work of Nicaraguan feminist poetry in the period of the armed struggle. Additionally, it is considered to be one of the first collections of poetry by a Central American woman to celebrate sex, the female body, and the entanglements of erotic love with such abandon and lack of shame, even more so that the author’s 1974 *Sobre la grana*. Along with Claribel Alegría’s *Sobrevivo*, *Linea de fuego* won the *Casa de las Américas* prize, a recognition of its contributions to feminist literature worldwide and the struggle for gender equality in the Sandinista movement. Upon its publication, while the author was in exile in Mexico, the text “caused an uproar in Nicaragua” with its descriptions of “physical intimacy and intercourse, menstruation, and childbirth” (Dawes 130).

Belli’s text will present sex, love, and the body in highly romantic and metaphorical language, as when she writes, “Me he llenado la piel de polen, / caminando en las alas de las mariposas, / yendo a robarle la miel a las abejas, / porque tu amor ha florecido en mi” (“Es tu nombre que retumba” 73) or “Yo caliento tus noches / encendiendo volcanes en mis manos, / mojándote los ojos con el humo de mis cráteres” (“Yo, la que te quiere” 50). Other examples abound. It would be easy to dismiss such language as mere poetic flourish or to chalk them up to the romantic legacy of love poetry in Nicaragua. However, Belli’s inventiveness lays in how she combines the myth of natural force with the explosiveness of erotic passion, a passion that easily slides over into a metaphor for collective and insurrectionary passion. Sometimes such metaphors are made explicit, as in the poem “Mi amor es como un río caudaloso” in which the speaker says, “Mi amor toca tambor y flauta / en las montañas de mi tierra, / dispara con ametralladora / su
descarga de besos,” weaponizing this erotic passion as a machine gun and sending her love to the “montañas” of the guerilla uprising (57).

Therefore, we are compelled to read the text as engaging in far more than a “simple” celebration or reclamation of the female body, however important this aspect of its trajectory is. As Pilar Moyano has convincingly shown in her essay “La transformación de la mujer y la nación en la poesía comprometida de Gioconda Belli,” the female body throughout Latin American appears as “la imagen de la mujer-nación aparezca injuriada y en actitud pasiva, abandonada a su suerte e incapaz de defenderse” with images of rape or subjugation standing in for political or colonial domination (322). Therefore, part of Belli’s work is to represent the female body as in charge of its own political and erotic destiny in contrast to poems by writers such as “Neruda y Cardenal donde el impulso a la acción suele ser masculinizado” (Milano 325). Belli’s work provides a female body that can be both feminine and active, no longer “incapaz” of fighting for itself.

At the same time, as I will argue, by relying on a volcanic poetics of desire, Belli’s poems often reproduce the very gender dynamics and binary of female passivity and male activity that one might expect her to question. The majority of her love poems in this collection involve a female speaker who waits and longs for her departed male lover. In “Partirás otra vez,” the speaker addresses a lover who has left—so it seems—in order to join the Sandinista uprising (62-3). The lover leaves the speaker “porque es allá / donde la vida de tantos se resuelve. / Allá te espera la esperanza / la lucha sin cuartel.” The speaker details her support for the soldier leaving, and concludes with the notion that her love will follow him wherever he goes. In this poem, the woman remains confined to the domestic sphere, and although Belli might represent her acts as
admirable, we cannot help but notice how she supports the male guerilla-hero emotionally and physically, while remaining anonymous in the struggle. While her desire “erupts” in the absence of her love, his revolutionary desire is allowed to “erupt” in the public sphere. Indeed, the speaker’s statement that the earth calls out for her male lover “con la fuerza de una mujer desamparada” only seems to reinforce the way in which the poem upholds traditional gender dynamics, casting earth as mother and/or lover and the male as the active agent of transformation. While natural force is available to the speaker in her erotic passion, only the man can answer the “call” of the natural force in the earth and it cries for revolution. In this regard, Ileana Rodríguez has rightly noted that “the gendered subject constructed by revolutionary men is not very different from that of bourgeois Romanticism. In his texts the guerilla writer recycles ideas of woman as “the angel of hearth and home,” or “the resting-place of the guerrilla,” the apotheosis of his desire (33). The irony of course, is that Belli often reproduces these “ideas of woman” in her own feminist works.

Taken more broadly, Belli’s texts veer between such a contradictory vindication of traditional gender dynamics and a critique of female passivity at the level of the subject, as many different notions of “love” abound in the text. In “Mi amor es como un río caudaloso” for example, the speaker compares her love to war in the line, “Es un amor de guerra,” politicizing it as a sort of insurrectionary affect. However, this love moves in the direction of a collectivized agape that compels her to fight and become active. The speaker’s love here shakes off its private, individualized meaning and becomes an expansive, free-flowing, “caudaloso” love that is meant “para cantar victoria / para llorar heridos.” She also describes this love as “ardiente como la libertad,” and compares it to the instruments of war, rendering it as just one more weapon that
Sandinista insurrectionaries have at their disposal: “un amor para llevarse en mochilas / para andar clandestino.../ lo llevo cargado como un fusil al hombro.” This myth of cosmic love therefore subtends the struggle, as love becomes as powerful as rifles, even if how such love might translate into a destruction of patriarchy is far less clear.

My central claim about Línea de fuego is that for Belli, erotic love comes to be the means through which humans might embody the eruptive, insurrectionary force of the nature, a conception that not only at times individualizes and privatizes the formation of revolutionary subjects, but leaves countless forms of gender domination—from violence against women to poverty to domestic labor—uninterrogated. In other words, the reclamation of such insurrectionary desire by the female body—and the bourgeoisie body of Belli’s speakers—stands in for and obfuscates the material conditions of female workers in the home, factory, and field. At times, the celebration of such erotic power renders the continued patriarchal domination of the women in her texts—who again, are mostly of middle-class origins—unquestioned. Ultimately, this conception of the erotic, when transferred to the political realm, creates a problematic conception of revolution as an absolute rupture with the realm of order, logic, and subjectivity itself and which would seek to annihilate all “duplicity and impurity...in the articulation between the old state of things and the new emancipatory truth” (Bosteels The Actuality of Communism 28). As we will see in the next chapter, Belli will only be able to maintain such a conception of what the “revolution” means with great difficulty during the eighties, when the Sandinista government frames revolution in much more down-to-earth terms: opening hospitals, building roads, and increasing literacy.
A first example of how Belli posits revolution as an absolute, “volcanic” rupture occurs in the stream-of-consciousness prose poem that begins “Esta soledad...” (70). The prose poem is comprised of two sentences, two “explosions” of the speaker’s desire for a violent euphoria in the wake of her lover’s departure. The first of these sentences consists of a metaphor in which the speaker compares solitude to being “perdido en una ciudad hostil y extraña.” From there, the speaker longs for an “explosiva felicidad” to invade her senses, which will burst forth “como grandes flores” in her body. This second metaphor—which turns joy into a set of flowers bursting from the body—likewise “bursts” into the primary metaphor inasmuch as it subordinated by the gerund “añorando.” That is, the flowers of her “euforia irreprimible y animal” can burst forth because of this mad yearning to break with alienation and solitude. The body becomes subject to a violent natural force—the growth of flowers—at the same time that the speaker has to “become animal” to escape her solitude.

The speaker reiterates this desire to become animal in the beginning of the next sentence, “Debo morir para volver a nacer, para convertirme de nuevo en un animal joven,” figuring this rebirth as a new capacity for violence. Upon becoming animal, the speaker can “reír en grandes e inmensas carcajadas que quiebren todos los vidrios de la ciudad.” This laughter shatters that most fragile of human constructs—the “vidrios,” which are themselves symbols for representability—in the alienated city. By attaining animal force, the speaker attains a violent, insubordinate subjectivity that destroys logic, representation, and subjectivity represented by the “vidrio.” Insurrectionary love breaks with the ordered human realm, just as the violent laughter of this animal self becomes a figure for a revolutionary subjectivity. Belli’s figuration of desire as a violent rupture with subjectivity represents revolution as the product of such world-
destroying desire. The urgent explosion of the subject, a volcanic poetics, subtends this representation.

In “Hasta que seamos libres,” we have one of the most explicit examples of Belli’s attempts to intertwine a metaphoric of cosmic love, natural force, and poetic martyrdom in order to represent the speaker’s body as a landscape wounded by the oppressive Somoza regime and capable of “exploding” in a torrent of insurrectionary love. I argue that just as Cardenal imagined the revolution as a return to a harmonious nature, so Belli posits erotic love as a means of returning Nicaraguans to a more effusive, passionate existence, in touch with the natural force of the land of volcanos, earthquakes, and thunderstorms. The poem begins by linking the body and nation as follows: “Ríos me atraviesan, / montañas horadan mi cuerpo / y la geografía de este país / va tomando forma en mí.” At first glance, these rivers might metaphorize veins or blood flowing through her body and the mountains might metaphorize her breasts. While this reading is valid, the diction employed suggests a violent interchange between body and landscape as the verbs “atravesar” and “horadar” both suggest piercing and penetration. In other words, the speaker is wounded by the geography of the nation (an act of poetic martyrdom through which the speaker becomes equal to the pueblo) and events taking place alongside the rivers and in the mountains. Likewise, she says she hopes to sow her love “que me está abriendo como un surco.” Although Belli reproduces the metaphor of nation as a wounded female body that Moyano has pointed to, the effort is to subvert it, by representing the wounds as catalyzing the power of nature to “grow” inside her. Just as the wound of the “surco” on the earth creates fruits and vegetables, so too, the wounds of the nation produce the insurrectionary love that is to follow. Female passivity becomes an active revolutionary love.
From there, the speaker seeks to project this love outward in a motion that is both healing and violent, as she says, “Quiero explotar de amor / y que mis charneles acaben con los opresores.” Revolt becomes framed as an explosion of subjectivity itself rather than a material struggle, as the movement of the speaker’s love outward toward to the pueblo seems to be enough to also harm “los opresores.” The text will return to metaphors of biological infection in order to explain the transmission of such insurrectionary love as a healing affect when the speaker says, “mi canto se contagie” and “todos nos enfermemos de amor.” For Belli, love is a social affect that can be “caught,” like an illness, or better yet, a madness, driving people to daring acts they would not otherwise engage in. Again, revolution seems to be predicated on the transcendence of subjectivity, reaching an explosion point of the “limit-experience” rather than the result of struggles against economic structures and gender dynamics.

This love that destroys subjectivity comes to heal the very wounds created by the Somoza regime, since it will not stop until “gritos de gozo y de victoria / irrumpan en las montañas, / inunden en los ríos / estremezcan las ramas de los árboles.” Ingeniously, Belli returns to the very metaphors of wounding with which she linked body and nation at the beginning of the poem in order to show how nature itself can be healed through the irruption of desire. Eruption leads to reconciliation. Thus, the ultimate metaphor holding the poem together is that healing the body (wounded by dictatorship) through accessing revolutionary passion would in turn heal the nation. Activity becomes equated with desire and even if this is a step forward in feminist terms, it also threatens to subjectivize struggle. Put simply, Belli prioritizes the individual’s transformation of desire to the materiality of struggle.
Belli’s “Amo a los hombres y les canto” (42-6) carries forward this notion of revolution as insurrectionary desire and the break with subjectivity, but, problematically for a feminist poetics, celebrates the power of the Nicaraguan male worker as uniquely capable of such insurrectionary force, in my reading. The end result is that Belli produces idealized visions of the working-class—especially in her attempt to vindicate male activity and female self-sacrifice—that not only reinforce traditional gender dynamics but fail to interrogate the economic conditions of those she represents. For instance, she will describe manual laborers as “sudorosos gigantes morenos / que salen de madrugada a construir ciudades,” which emphasizes both the physicality of the men’s work and their attractive, muscular build. Carpenters do not simply “labor” but seem to make love to the naked body of the wood with which they engage since they are men who “conocen a la madera como a su mujer.” Male work is active and imbued with the power to transform a feminized earth. Each type of worker is presented as an almost idealized vision that vindicates the value of their labor: workers do not merely lay bricks for a wage, they “salen de madrugada a construir ciudades,” farmers do not merely plant crops for export, but rather they “rompen el vientre de la tierra y la poseen.” This later formulation in particular lends the campesino the virile masculinity that the oppressiveness of his social position might threaten. That is, he both “possesses” the earth, a form of domination and control—and in so doing is able to inflict violence on its “vientre.” Rather representing how such labor is alienating and the result of an agro-export economy, Belli seems content to produce heroic portraits of peasants and working class men.
Belli’s text next focuses on social outcasts and intellectuals—the alienated middle-class men of Somoza’s dictatorship—in similarly idealized terms. Her representation of poets, as “bellos ángeles lanzallamas” who “inventan nuevos mundos” and painters as “hombres colores” who “guardan la hermosura para nuestros ojos” elevates their role to that of demiurges and priestly guardians of the inner sanctum of truth and beauty. We should note that artists, thinkers, and writers are all figured as male subjects, as they are included in this section, as she will move on to discuss her love for the women of her country in the next section. Art becomes the property of men, a proposition that Belli strangely fails to interrogate.

Belli, perhaps against herself, makes the traditional gender dynamic informing her vision explicit as she writes, “A todos amo con un amor de mujer, de madre, de hermana.” That is, the speaker implies that she writes about the lives and labor of working-class men in their most magisterial implications because she is a woman, and that it is part of her affective labor to vindicate them in a culture that denigrates manual laborers, artists, and social outcasts. In the most generous reading, we might be tempted to say that Belli vindicates Nicaraguan masculinity at the points of its utmost fragility within the social system: its engagement with capitalist labor processes and contestatory modes of thinking, writing, and creating. But this interpretation does nothing to further a feminist poetics, reinforcing as it does the necessity of that very masculinity.

In the second part of the poem, Belli describes the women of Nicaragua, although in a language marked more by simple admiration than intoxication, praising them for more their sacrifice, sadness, and courage rather than their lofty contributions to the world at large. In this way Belli will reproduce, perhaps unwittingly, many of the typical gender dynamics in which men are
represented as rational agents imbued with natural force and an explosive capacity for action, whereas women are represented as passive and emotional subjects. For instance, she says that she loves the woman who “se levanta de noche a ver a su hijo que llora” and the woman who “camina con el peso de un ser en su vientre.” While such forms of domestic and reproductive labor are indeed valuable, Belli seems to praise women primarily for their ability to care. That is, Belli will not describe women as “constructing the future,” in childbirth, “possessing the home,” or use the type of heroic language with which she formulated the male intellectual and working-class. The “vientre” of the earth that the male farmer broke in an assertion of his masculinity open now becomes praised as the “vientre” that carries and cares for his child.

Even when she writes about the female laborer, the tone is bitter instead of heroic, as when she writes that she loves “a la que trabaja—mal pagada—en la ciudad,” although this lack of heroism makes the representation more compelling. The use of dashes to separate the phrase “mal pagada” from the rest of the line here accomplishes two things. First, it acts as an interjection of a political claim—about the what might be a more acceptable wage in general terms and second, it enacts the very incision in the gendered dynamics of wage labor itself because the fact that it is a female subject that “mal pagada” modifies immediately draws attention to the differential between how men and women are remunerated. “Mal pagada” both implies that a man might not be similarly poorly paid due to the very privilege of his gender, yet the female body will be marked by differential wage dynamics. Belli focuses on the disadvantage the female worker has in the market of capital, which is an important economic insight, but fails to represent them with the same heroism that she does the male worker.
Finally, even in the more “heroic” images of women, Belli does not focus on the outcome of their acts, as she does with the male subjects, but rather their passion, sacrifice, and courage. In particular, she writes that she loves “A la que se rebela y forcejea con la pluma y la voz desenfainadas.” That is, she praises the woman not for the final product of such rebellion, but rather the fact that she is able to “unsheathe” her voice to find forms of self-expression and revolt. While male activity is vindicated, female desire seems to be all that matters. Second, she will write that she loves “a la que lucha enardecida en las montañas” seemingly without reference to what such struggle brings about. Rather it is the very fact that she is emotionally engaged, “fired up,” one might say, that seems to draw the speaker’s admiration. Inasmuch as women can sacrifice, care, or become passionate, they are to be valued. Other than the representation of the woman who is “mal pagada,” Belli does little to focus on the forms of economic and gender violence facing countless Nicaraguan women.

By the end of the poem, Belli represents the revolution as an overcoming of feminized shortcomings, such as laziness and trepidation, instead positing it in terms of an insurrectionary and volcanic eruption of subjectivity. The speaker’s final exhortation of “Vámonos” urges the reader to abandon all that is “perezoso,” “amedrentado” and “tibio” in their revolutionary commitment. Insurrectionary desire, however idealistic such a conception is, must become a complete break with the previous world for Belli. Unsurprisingly, the metaphors of this revolutionary passion—social love—are themselves derived from images of natural force. The speaker says that by overcoming such sloth and affective ambivalence, social love might attain “la fuerza de los terremotos, de los maremotos, / de los ciclones, de los huracanes.” In these final lines, Belli brings us from a pastoral vision of nature in the fifth stanza, to a vision of nature as
the dynamically sublime. Revolutionary passion embodies the part of nature that is so powerful as to escape human comprehension, rationality, and subjectivity. This sublimity of nature stands in for the revolutionary desire, and it is the role of the poet to make the transition from natural to social force legible through the power of insurrectionary love.

The result of this affective regeneration is the birth of the *hombre nuevo*: “y todo lo que nos aprisione vuele convertido en deshecho / mientras hombres y mujeres nuevos / van naciendo erguidos / luminosos / como volcanes.” After the destruction of the “prison” of society, Belli posits the birth of a volcanic type of subjectivity—a passionate and violent revolutionary human. Belli’s use of the volcano—not merely a quintessential symbol of Nicaragua—but as a slumbering, violent force in need of being awakened, provides the metaphorical kernel through which she can link poetry and revolution, love and violence, nature and social history, eruption and revolution. The masculinization of this heroic subjectivity is ironically present in the “erguido” through which she can link the volcano and the male. However, as I have shown, positing revolution as such a “volcanic” eruption of desire not only individualizes it, but it works in Belli’s poems to efface the material conditions of working-class women and men in Nicaragua. Perhaps, we would do better to read such a “volcanic” subjectivity as the privilege of the bourgeois body of Belli’s protagonists and instead come to understand the difficult work of revolution not merely as insurrectionary desire, but as antagonism in the field of economic relations and indeed, over the meaning of society itself.

*Daisy Zamora and the Utopian Negative*
Daisy Zamora’s poetic works from 1968 to 1978 are compiled in _La violenta espuma_ and unlike Belli and Cardenal, tend to avoid the type of volcanic poetics shaping their works while still retaining a political “engagement” albeit at the level of affect. The works tend to focus on the speaker’s relation to her lover, mother, and children, with a sense of the heartbreak of passing time and a longing for communion. In the third part of the compilation, “A las puertas de la furia,” Zamora has several poems dedicated to _compañeros_ in the struggle and martyrs, such as “Comandante Dos” and “La salida.” Thus, while the first two-thirds or more of the book seems to eschew any direct mention of politics, I argue that we can read the appearance of an insurrectionary longing in the very affective intensities that traverse several of the poems, especially as these are linked to the myth of natural force and the allegorized by the love she feels.

For example, in “Cuando regresemos,”47 in my opinion one of the most beautiful poems written in the insurrectionary period, the speaker dreams of returning to “nuestra antigua tierra” that, paradoxically, she has never known. In this poem, the speaker’s utopian longing is framed in terms of an unknown and perhaps unknowable future. For here, unlike in Cardenal where revolution promises a return to an origin filled with love and altruism, Zamora’s speaker describes the land as one “que nunca conocimos” in which the “we” of the poem will talk about “todas esas cosas / que nunca han sucedido.” This ancient land becomes the promised land of revolution, without ever having to mention it; the representation becomes suffused with a nostalgia while at the same time exposing the regrets and failures of the present, as those who

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47 This edition of the text is not paginated.
come to inhabit it still reflect on what “did not happen.” As such the “antigua tierra” does not promise fulfillment and reconciliation so much as alternative space to reinterpret the past. The “we” who walks in this land will also talk to children “que nunca han existido” and will live the life “de la que tanto hablamos / y nunca hemos vivido.” This strange formulation—a dialogue with invisible or non-existent children—heightens the sense of the impossibility of finding this utopian “ancient land.” At the same time, the poem suggests that finding it and living in it is indeed possible—although it will be filled with a regret for other forms of life, other possibilities not taken in the past. As such, rather than create a sense of revolution as absolute rupture, Zamora has deployed an affective sense of social transformation as a reworking of the past, an opening of new possibilities, and a reclamation of those moments of life lost to an oppressive social order. By refusing to give positive representation to the revolution, Zamora perhaps best codifies the affects and dreams inspiring insurrection, while not mythologizing it (other than in terms of a return) as a necessary part of the cosmic destiny of Nicaraguans, as Cardenal would do, or dependent upon an eruptive desire, as Belli would do.

Zamora’s later poems, written just before the uprising, participate in the myths of natural force, poetic martyrdom, and cosmic love, while at the same time focusing on the difficulty of the moment just as much as a hope for the revolution’s eventual triumph. In “Canto de esperanza” for instance, she writes that “Algún día los campos estarán siempre verdes / y la tierra será negra, dulce y húmeda.” While this poem clearly draws on the notion of revolution as a mythical transformation and regeneration of the land through natural force, it also refuses to lose sight of the present. For by the end of the poem, despite the speaker’s vision of a world in which children “serán libres como los árboles del monte” (rendered in the certainty of the future tense, instead of the subjunctive), the speaker ends the poem with the following reflection on her hope: “Algún
día…/ Hoy aramos los campos resecos / pero cada surco se moja con sangre.” The ellipsis after “algún día” gives it a sense of ominous foreboding—or even impossibility—revealing how such dreams might distract from the present task. By reminding the reader that in the present the “surcos” drip with blood, Zamora refuses to ignore the sacrifice, struggle, and bloodshed that necessarily stain any such utopian vision. Rather than celebrate the martyrs as heroes, they appear as ghostly traces, reminding the living of the stakes of their hopes and desires.

When we reach the Sandinista years—it would be Zamora, not Cardenal and Belli—would who refuse to write a simply “affirmative” poetry that represented the revolution as a rupture with all oppressive forces. For the poet who, during this era, wrote some of the most abstract and least obviously “engaged” poetry would become in her works of the eighties one of the FSLN’s most acute critics from within. And rather than focus on the free-floating affective longings for a marvelous utopia present in these works, Zamora would become more precise and detailed than her counterparts in following through with the teachings of an exteriorist aesthetic. In the eighties Zamora will detail the material structures shaping housewives, female service workers, and newspaper vendors, to show how their sense of disillusionment and confusion paralleled that of a nation that was slow to see the types of explosive social change promised by the Sandinista leadership. Whereas in the seventies her work captured the abstract utopian longings of the nation, in the eighties it would be poised to capture its cynicism and disenchantment.
Chapter 2

Affirmative Poetics and the Negativity of Revolution: 1979 to 1990

In July 1979, after months of intense fighting and several general strikes throughout Nicaragua, the FSLN marched into Managua, ousting the much-despised Somoza regime that had ruled the country since the late 1930s. Within the country—and to many people in the international Left, disillusioned with the increasingly authoritarian direction of Cuba—it was a triumphant moment in Latin America and represented, for many, the possibility of a new type of socialism: one committed to human rights and a mixed economy, liberation theology and Marxism, and one that might produce better economic conditions of some of the poorest people in the Western hemisphere. The translation of poets such as Cardenal, Dalton, and Castillo into English in the eighties and the publication of the dual-language anthology Volcán by City Lights in 1983 by Alejandro Murguía and Barbara Paschke brought the writing of Central American engaged poets to American audiences that, before 1979, had probably almost never thought of Central America writing. Roberto Vargas, Alejandro Murguía, and Nina Serrano, who I examine in the fourth chapter of this project, all were inspired by Nicaragua and drew on the example of the FSLN to create a poetics of “tropicalization” that sought to link the struggles of Third-World, “tropical”

48 Jean Franco in Decline and Fall of the Lettered City argues that Cuba allowed many Latin American writers, especially in the fifties and sixties a space where works could be formally innovative and represent national realities, so that they could reject the rigidity of Soviet aesthetics and, while championing artistic autonomy, remain critical of the United States (43). Many writers, including Vargas Llosa, praised Cuba in the early phase of the revolution for its insistence on aesthetic autonomy, not limiting writers to a realist aesthetic. This is precisely what made the Padilla affair and the consolidation of a realist aesthetic around 1968 that much more disillusioning. See Kristal, Temptation of the Word, pages 19-24.

49 This was in fact, how, as a nineteen-year-old, looking through the poetry section of City Lights in San Francisco, I came across the work of Dalton, Cardenal, Belli, and Castillo for the first time.
people living in conditions of underdevelopment, from Managua to the Mission. The Sandinista triumph also meant that many of the major Nicaraguan writers of the era moved into positions of authority within the government, in what would be called a “revolution of poets.” Ernesto Cardenal became the Minister of Culture, Sergio Ramírez, the Vice President, Rosario Murillo, the head of the Asociación Sandinista de Trabajadores de la Cultura (ASTC), Daisy Zamora, as Vice-Minister of Culture, and Gioconda Belli, Michele Najlis, and Vidaluz Meneses, all held government positions at one time or another (Craven 110).

For the United States government and many wealthy Nicaraguans, the story was quite different, as they “feared the immediate imposition of a Soviet-style state and economy” and the coming of a “second Cuba” (Walker and Wade 43). However, such fears were largely unfounded, as the Soviet Union—only about a decade away from its fall—had no interest in funding another socialist project in the region, and the multiclass alliance of students, business owners, church members, peasants and urban workers that brought the FSLN to power had little taste, by and large, for heavy-handed state control.50 The Sandinista’s human rights record, while certainly not flawless, especially when it came to the displacement of over 10,000 Miskitos and the death of another one-hundred fifty on the Atlantic Coast during military operations against the contras, was far better than in U.S.-supported Guatemala and El Salvador, and according to Walker and Wade, did not “even remotely approach the wholesale abuses prevalent in a number of other Latin American countries” (49). Not only that, but of the three factions initially comprising the FSLN, the Tercerista group that took control had a more decidedly national-populist character and willingness to deal with the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie, as opposed to the Maoist-leaning

50 See Walker and Wade page 44.
Guerra Popular Prolongada or Jaime Wheelock’s more urban-focused Tendencia Proletaria. Of course, these moderating influences on the FSLN would not prevent the Reagan administration from viewing Nicaragua as the epicenter of the Cold War, especially in the early part of the eighties, and from helping train and arm the contra rebels, a group composed, at least initially, of former members of Somoza’s army, the guardia nacional (Kinzer 87). The ongoing toll of the contra war throughout the eighties, in which approximately 1 percent of Nicaragua’s population would die, therefore greatly limited what the Sandinistas could achieve in terms of economic and social change (Walker and Wade 57).

Against this historical backdrop, the new Sandinista government undertook an extensive literacy and cultural democratization program, beginning in 1980, which not only created new readers for Nicaraguan poetry, but also threatened to upset the elitist foundations of the nation’s artistic and literary worlds. Of particular interest for our study was the creation of a series of free national poetry workshops, designed by Cardenal, who became head of the Ministry of Culture, through which thousands of peasants, working-class people, and women—many lacking significant formal education—would come to read and write poetry for the first time. As Craven writes, the Sandinistas established a “national network of Talleres de Poesía (Poetry Workshops) in order to create a ‘nation of poets’ by socializing the means of artistic production. Within a year there were 25 such workshops—the first two were established in the Indian barrios (sections) of Monimbo near Masaya and Subtiava near Leon—and by 1985 the number had risen to 70.” (“The State of Cultural Democracy in Cuba and Nicaragua During the 1980s” 111).
That is, within five years of taking power, the Sandinistas had created approximately one poetry workshop for nearly every 50,000 people in Nicaragua: an astonishing “socialization” of the aesthetic means of production. Many of these new poets had only learned to write during the Sandinista literacy campaign, which reduced illiteracy in the nation from approximately 50% to only 15% in nine months (Arnove 244). The government would also put money toward printing the poems of these workshop writers, and as Henighan writes in *Sandino’s Nation*, “[w]orkshops poems were published in mimeographed literary journals in order to break down the distinction between amateur and professional writers; there was also an official journal of workshop poetry *Poesia libre* (Free Poetry), edited by Cardenal's protégé, the Masaya poet Julio Valle-Castillo” (54).

Additionally, the Sandinista insurrection, which put women in prominent positions in the guerilla and the political sphere, would be followed by the Sandinista government’s unevenness in dealing with women’s issues in the eighties. As Margaret Randall writes, after the 1990 electoral defeat of the government, “it has been important for feminists and others to look at how these revolutions’ failures to address certain so-called secondary issues may also have helped to weaken political structures” such that in hindsight, we might attribute at least part of the government’s downfall to its inability to alter the deeper structures of patriarchy in Nicaragua (“Introduction” *Sandino’s Daughter’s Revisited* 4). The Sandinistas often relegated women’s issues such as abortion (which was only ever decriminalized, but not made a right), domestic violence, uneven pay, female working conditions, and the internal sexism of the party to the sidelines, focusing instead on economic and military issues. In particular, women in Sandinista Nicaragua never could “develop a truly autonomous feminist movement” as AMNLAE.
(Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinosa) operated under the direction of the male-dominated FSLN and often had its demands dismissed, pejoratively as “feminist” (ibid 24, 28).

The central claim of this chapter is that Nicaraguan poetry of the eighties is therefore shaped by two crucial and intersecting trends: how to deal with new working-class and female readers and their challenge to the privileged role of the male-dominated poetic space on the one hand, and the need to write an “affirmative poetry” that would vindicate the Sandinista state, despite, at times, its difficulty in producing material change for women, the poor, and the excluded. For the “socialization of the aesthetic” meant “a democratization of culture, building a culture that is open and accessible to the masses...as participants and as spectators” and that ran counter to traditional notions of poetic genius (Cardenal qtd. in Craven “The State of Cultural Democracy in Cuba and Nicaragua During the 1980s” 110). In response to the democratization efforts of Cardenal and Zamora, Rosario Murillo, head of the ASTC and editor of Ventana, would critique the workshops, claiming they undermined the notion that poetry should be created by a select few and judged primarily for its aesthetic merit. Murillo and Ventana launched attacks on Cardenal and protégé Mayra Jiménez with a “call for creative diversity and cosmopolitanism” as opposed to what was seen as the dogmatic realism and poor quality of the workshop poetry (Beverley and Zimmerman 109). Within just a few years, Daisy Zamora would leave her post as Vice Minister of Culture under the pressure of such attacks, and by 1987 the Ministry of Culture had itself dissolved, and the workshop experiment ended. Zamora, reflecting on the experience after the electoral defeat, noted that the ultimate goal of the workshops was not aesthetic per se, but rather the laudable goal, in my opinion, of trying to “get people to read poetry, too, and to
understand that creativity belongs to us all” (Randall Sandino’s Daughters Revisited 106).

Looking back on this peculiar moment in Nicaragua history, it seems clear now that the shock of an incipient working-class culture taking shape threatened the more conservative and elitist foundations of much of the Nicaraguan art world, and unfortunately, was cut down rather than generalized. For this reason, I argue that the workshop experience became the most profound—and divisive—poetic event of the decade.

Along with having to champion, address, or at least acknowledge the presence of such working-class subjects more fully, poets during this time clearly felt the need to create what Marc Zimmerman has called “affirmative poems,” namely poems whose mythic and affective force might inspire deeper linkages with the state (“Ernesto Cardenal After the Revolution” Vuelos de victoria xxx). The question for most of these writers became how to write an “affirmative poetry” that would celebrate the revolution without turning literature into mere propaganda and thereby effacing the existential difficulties faced by working-class readers under the Sandinista government. As Beverley and Zimmerman correctly note, before the revolution, poetry “had served as a nexus between anti-Somocista sectors of the bourgeoisie, radicalized middle sectors, and the popular masses,” and therefore during the Sandinista years, the question remained whether poetry would seek to unify these sectors or reveal and heighten the lasting class antagonisms that traversed them (94). Generally, this latter route was abandoned.

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51 By and large the poets I examine opted for the former trajectory, while Zamora, although eschewing more polemical attacks against the national bourgeoisie, continued to highlight the suffering of women and working-class people.
At the broadest level, the question was how a volcanic poetics—the eruption of past and future time into the present, as in Cardenal’s case or an eruption of desire to break the order of reason and self-control, as in Belli’s case—would operate in a moment in which these writers sought measured, rather than insurrectionary, social change, and ultimately, stability from the state? Perhaps for this reason, it was not the volcano that served as the primary metaphor for poetic production, but rather poetic production came to metaphorize the work of constructing the nation itself. In this vein, Vidaluz Meneses would write, in her poem “En el nuevo pais” that “construimos como escribiendo un poema / creando, borrando y volviendo a escribir,” (51) and Belli would claim that the “revolution was primary: the dream we had to make reality, the most urgent poem all Nicaraguans had to help write” (Randall Risking a Somersault in the Air 106).

Along with Ernesto Cardenal, Gioconda Belli, and Daisy Zamora, who I examined in the last chapter, I have also chosen to analyze the works of Rosario Murillo, as she came to be Cardenal’s main antagonist in the cultural democratization debates, and her work provides examples of a more lyrical, symbolist style that relies on traditional notions of poetic creativity that we might juxtapose to Cardenal’s exteriorismo, which the author hoped to generalize through the poetry workshops.52 As I show, the eruptive metaphorics of poetry do not disappear, but rather, especially in the work of Cardenal, Belli, and Murillo, come to posit the reconstruction of Nicaragua as a radical break with history, an “eruption” of a pure revolutionary present outside of past determination.

52 A more exhaustive examination of the period could also look at the works of Michelle Najlis, Vidaluz Meneses, Yolando Blanco, Julio Valle-Castillo, David MacField, and Francisco de Asís Fernández, among others.
My contention is that this “affirmative poetry” and its dependency upon the glorification of martyrs, the evocation of natural force, and the notion of a cosmic love, failed to grapple with the daily realities of Nicaraguans and ongoing class and gender conflicts that a more hybrid style—at once critical and laudatory—might have been able to. For Cardenal, perhaps one of the figures most sympathetic to working-class writing itself, poetry trades in an examination of “on the ground” life in Nicaragua for a cosmic teleology in which the pure present of revolution foreshadows its ultimate victory in the *longue durée* of time. At its worst, his poetry trades in an exploration of ongoing forms of suffering for a myth of a natural and cosmic evolution that guarantees the continuance of the Sandinista state, one hardly borne out by reality. For Belli, the continued celebration of the eruptive power of desire at the root of sexuality, art, and revolutionary fervor itself leads her to a lyrical celebration of interiority rather than the material stakes of the revolution. While no other poet did as much to promote women’s desire and the female body, her texts often do little to speak to the slow gains made by women or working-class people. Murillo, the poet most committed to aesthetic autonomy, positions the poet as a seer, whose visions of new and better worlds erupt into the present to help those less inclined to the mystical make sense of the struggles of daily life. As I will show, the works of Murillo and Belli from this period are particularly interesting when placed in light of this anxiety over the encroachment of the working-class upon the traditional poetic sphere. Murillo wavers between trying to assert the power of the Nicaraguan working class while giving them little actual voice within her poetry, preferring instead a Rimbaudesque series of “illuminations” and reflections on lost love, beauty, and dreams as the sources of revolutionary desire. Belli likewise does not detail the reconstruction of Nicaragua in any profound way but rather champions the “passion” at the core of the insurrectionary act. In so doing, both authors preserve the volcanic poetics of their
pre-revolutionary literary style, giving working-class subjects positive representation only inasmuch as they allow the poet to embody the violent, creative spirit of insurrection. All three of these poets attempted to create a mythology of the FSLN that glorified its military aspects. In this sense, the poet reinforced a trend in Sandinista leadership of a “tendency toward systemic overvaluation of the military, epic, heroic facets of their victory, and a corresponding sublimation of the political and international factors. Once the requisite lip service has been paid to the principle of not stressing the military side of things, torrents of poetry and analysis are devoted to the military side of things” (Castañeda 109).

On the other hand, I argue that Zamora’s poetry best exemplifies an ability to tarry with the negativity of the revolution by representing the ongoing struggles of working-class people around wage labor and poverty, and women around sexism, the demands of marriage, and feminized forms of labor, especially in the service sector. While she certainly does not escape (or hope to escape) the myth-making and affirmative poetics of the period, her work is focused on the political forces—and the groups of people—who brought the FSLN to power, rather than its military aspect. Her text from this era, *En limpio se escribe la vida* gives the best picture of what life in the Sandinista reconstruction might have been like those who benefitted from some of its social and economic change as well as those who did not, especially working-class women. For Zizek, this type of negativity, suture, or cut in the social order represented by the figures Zamora focuses on is precisely what makes the excluded representative of “the singular universality exemplified in those who lack a determined place in the social totality, who are ‘out of place’ in it and as such directly stand for the universal dimension” (*Less than Nothing* 831). By being “out of place” before, during, and indeed, after the revolution, the specter of working-class people,
women, and peasants on the margins of the Sandinista government’s efforts continued to haunt the positive mythologizing of Cardenal, Belli, and Zamora. Whereas the texts by these three authors, given a post-Cold War perspective, now often read as attempts to justify and gain international support for a nascent government threatened by U.S. invasion and a prolonged contra war by excluding the “singular universality” of these excluded figures, Zamora’s works examine the dynamics of capitalist underdevelopment that shaped Nicaragua before and during the revolution, and that continue to shape it to this day. For this reason, I claim that her work represents a way to reclaim some of the legacy of the Sandinista revolution inasmuch as Zamora refused to turn the excluded into allegories or myths of revolutionary successes, but instead showed that a revolution could only go as far as those who were most “out of place” in the social order.

*The Nicaraguan Reconstruction from Above: Ernesto Cardenal’s Vuelos de victoria*

*Vuelos de victoria* (hereafter *Vuelos*) collects the majority of the poems written by Ernesto Cardenal during his tenure as Minister of Culture for the Sandinista government (1979-87). Several facts of the book’s production and the shift in its thematics reflect the new dynamics around engaged poetry after the July 19th revolution. First of all, these poems were not conceived as a unified project, but the majority of them were compiled from magazines such as *Nicarápue* and *Poesía libre* (both of which published workshop poems alongside the work of traditional poets such as Cardenal), as well as *Casa de las Américas*. As for the title, Cardenal said in a 1990 interview, “*Vuelos de victoria* es un título que creó Mark [sic] Zimmerman cuando lo traduje al inglés. Yo todavía no le había puesto título. Y él me puso ese título en inglés y a mí me gustó mucho y entonces lo usé en español. La razón del título es porque aparecen muchas veces ahí vuelos de avión.” (Salmon and Cardenal 194).
As such, they offer diverse “snapshots” of the reconstruction of Nicaragua, but have little overall unity, although editor and translator Marc Zimmerman has organized them into sections with some thematic consistency. Second, Cardenal, tasked with his new government post—as well as the demands of international travel as a Sandinista representative—has said that he found new time constraints placed upon his poetic production, such that he could only write short poetry—in contrast to the more epic style of “Oráculo sobre Managua” and “Canto nacional.” Part of this new style can be attributed to such material circumstances, while part of it can also be attributed to Cardenal’s belief that during this era he “must write like the poor people who are finding their voices” and abandon, as much as possible, his position as an educated priest from the former oligarchical classes (Henighan 387). As he would state at the time, this poetry “has become even plainer and simpler than before,” although he claims that such a movement was by “no means intentional” but rather part of an effort to increase comprehension (Cardenal, Morris, Falk, and Cohen 83). Rather than function as chronicles, the poems veer between brief observations on the death of comrades, the successes of the Sandinista government, ecology, disease prevention, and the literacy campaign, among other issues. The result is that this shorter, “near-aphoristic” style resulted in the collection becoming Cardenal’s “most popular and widely read collection; individual poems were recited aloud, read on the radio, reprinted, and translated as Cardenal travelled the world to drum up international support for Nicaragua” (Henighan 384).

53 In a 1984 interview, he says, “After all those years of struggle, so much traveling and exile, underground and agitation, I dream of returning to Solentiname, rebuilding the community and writing the chronicle of this revolution. But the revolution had other plans for me.” See Randall 107.
This clearer and more popular style also no doubt helped the international reception of his poetry in the effort to “drum up” support for Nicaragua.\footnote{Murguía and Vargas had already brought Cardenal to the United States for a poetry reading in the early seventies, and other sympathetic leftist writers, such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Graham Greene, Ntozake Shange, Julio Cortázar, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and Salman Rushdie all made a case for the Nicaraguan revolution, with Ginsberg being especially impressed by Cardenal’s poetry.}

I agree with the majority of critics who see this collection as an aesthetic regression by Cardenal. For example, Gonzalez and Treece argue that in Cardenal’s \textit{Vuelos}, “the very features of the shared public emotion concealed and suppressed the tension and conflict, the doubt and dilemma out of which growth and exploration was born,” resulting instead in almost caricaturized portraits of Nicaraguan life (qtd. in Henighan 387). That is, whereas his previous writing often focused on material contradictions, Cardenal, according to the authors, increasingly allegorized the working class as symbols of the revolution’s inevitable triumph. For Stephen Henighan, \textit{Vuelos} is by and large an inconsistent compilation, despite moments of insight and heartfelt political commitment that lead the author away from “elitist” poetic language. According to the author, the “contradictions between the needs of workers and peasants and the assertion of national sovereignty are subordinated by the lyrical moment and by his [Cardenal’s] sheer wonder at the Revolution’s triumph” such that this “wonder” threatens to become nothing more than another form of ideological control (\textit{Sandino’s Nation} 386). Zimmerman also rightly points to what might be called the “pictoral as opposed to a narrative or dramatic orientation” of the poems, through which they praise historical change rather than offering an “actual depiction of the process in action (“Ernesto Cardenal After the Revolution” \textit{Vuelos} xxix). In line with
Zimmerman, I also argue that the text is weakest because it refuses to give a sense of the unfolding of historical change and the details of reconstruction.

While drawing on such critiques, I challenge the notion that *Vuelos* represents a rupture with the style of his earlier epic poetics, inasmuch as this compilation perpetuates not merely a volcanic poetics of time, but does so through the myths of natural force, poetic martyrdom, and cosmic love examined in Chapter 1. However, instead of positing the revolution as a rupture with the oppressive present of the Somoza regime, a rupture that prefigures the socialist future as a return to natural origins, here the present itself becomes imagined as such a rupture itself. In other words, the Sandinista era becomes mythologized as a pure present that retroactively works to vindicate the deaths of martyrs and, through the very way in which it has healed the community and ecology through love, reveals the trajectory of history as moving, of necessity, toward communism. For instance, Cardenal will describe two sea turtles mating in “Las tortugas,” as driven by the same love that drives “la especie humana / y a su culminación / el comunismo. / El acto que se ha venido haciendo desde el principio del mundo” (72). In this way, while we should certainly critique Cardenal’s text for ignoring the “process” and conflicts involved in historical change in all their particularity, I read such an effacement of detail as commensurate with Cardenal’s aims: to present the revolutionary moment as pure rupture with the oppressive past, as volcanic eruption that is the origin and telos of the cosmos itself. In this sense, my critique is not that he effaces historical detail in spite of “knowing better,” but rather that he does so in order to preserve the notion of revolution as absolute rupture, a conception that time would certainly prove wrong.
It is no accident that many poems in this compilation take place on airplanes, since international flights (to Cuba, Europe, or back to Nicaragua) in particular are used as a trope that give the speaker a space of pause and reflection from his duties as a Minister, not merely affording him an opportunity to write poetry, but offering him a vision of time, history, and experience that is detached from daily struggle. It is the perspective of a pure present—a synchronic snapshot—in which the sacrifices of the past and the triumphs of the future, for the speaker at least, seem clear. Cardenal's poem “Aterrizaje con epitafio” reflects upon the Sandinista revolution, martyrdom, and (at least in passing) the literacy campaign, and metaphorizes the nation as a tomb for revolutionary heroes (36). The title signifies the central tension of the poem.: whereas normally a “landing” or “aterrizaje” implies safety, homecoming, and return (with its etymological roots in “tierra” or earth), the “epitafio” would, at least on the surface, seem to indicate the dangers of this particular landing. However, the “tierra” in “aterrizaje” becomes a burial ground through which Cardenal’s text seeks to redeem the deaths of thousands of Nicaraguans who died for the revolution in a synchronous vision of the present state of the revolution.

The poem begins with Cardenal's plane flying “en el Atlántico, y después del Caribe, / siempre en la dirección del sol, y siempre / en el amanecer.” Cardenal's unique vantage point over Nicaragua, in which the plane always faces the rising sun means that the speaker is caught in a “perpetual dawn” in which he can see the future only as possibility and hope. That is, the present vantage point effaces any negativity or shadow. The handbook for the literacy campaigns would even be called El amanecer del pueblo, meaning that the metaphors of dawn—and perpetual
dawn—are central to the Sandinista imaginary, as symbols of ever-present possibility of the present. This is the pure present of Cardenal’s volcanic poetics.

In looking at the land below, the speaker sees the “montañas liberadas de Nicaragua.” The “mountains” here would seem to act as a metonymy and the Nicaraguan nation as a whole. Cardenal also calls these mountains “recién alfabetizadas,” alluding to the literacy campaign the government undertook in 1980. However, rather than actually presenting a synchronous snapshot of a liberation present, in my reading, the speaker’s geographical perspective actually betrays the unevenness of the Sandinsita revolution. The poem begins with a vision of “el Atlántico and “el Caribe” but does not mention the “jungle,” the Miskito living there, or give form to this region in particular. Likewise, while the speaker mentions the “literate” mountains, he fails to ask about literacy in these other regions. In other words, the Atlantic both appears within the “amanecer” of Cardenal’s vision but quickly disappears from view when it comes time to detail how the revolution has affected it. Following Zimmerman, who also wrote the introduction to the bilingual (English-Spanish) text, I argue that at moments like this Cardenal is “less able to grasp the decisive contours of the reconstruction than he was of the revolution...he seems to soar over the reconstruction without fully and firmly touching the ground” (Vuelos xxx). However, I contend that this move depends upon his desire to construct the present as a radical rupture with the past, rather than as a continuation of many of the same forms of—in this case, racialized—oppression.

To continue with our reading, once the plane touches ground, the speaker asserts that the background upon which this historical moment of hope has been built is not been forgotten, as he
lists over a dozen “mártires” who died for the revolution, including “Fonseca,” “Sandino,” and “Pedro Joaquín” Chamorro. These martyrs are, in a sense, what allows for Cardenal to have the vision of a liberated present of Nicaragua from above. Thus, when the past appears in this text it is only to justify the absolute rupture the present represents and vindicate the sacrifices of the dead. Cardenal returns to an earth that is “muy sagrada,” and that forms a “gran tumba de mártires.” Rather than returning to a Nicaragua of unevenly distributed economic and political gains, the speaker gives it as a single, homogenous meaning: a sacred tomb. Affectively, such sacralization works to prevent a further interrogation of the material conditions shaping the society—what is sacred cannot be challenged. The negativity of death as that which makes the present meaningless or threatens its rupture has no place in Cardenal’s perpetual dawn. The aim of such a poetics of martyrdom is not merely to buttress the foundation of the Sandinista state as the protector of the memory of the dead, but for Cardenal in particular, to move from the celestial (that is, in its secular sense of “of the sky”) to what we might call the cosmic, especially in other poems in the collection. In other words, for Cardenal, a cosmopolitan perspective quickly transcends its moorings in the human realm and fuses with a cosmological one in which the workings of humans on earth (including their political struggles and suffering) are subsumed into the dynamics of the universe as a whole—of entropy, gravity, and biological evolution—and therefore given a higher sense of purpose and sense of natural determination. Martyrdom will become sublated as the guarantee of resurrection in the immanence of the revolutionary present, and the indeterminacy of the future will become pushed away by the promise of the revolutionary telos of the universe itself.
These dynamics appear explicitly in “En Managua a media noche,” in which the speaker meditates on the interplay between his faith in the movement of the earth in the darkness of outer space and his faith in the direction of the Nicaraguan revolution (Vuelos 88). My argument is that the poem ultimately collapses the metaphor of the “rightness” of cosmic movement (of earth’s rotation around the sun) and the “rightness” of human history, problematically replacing mere faith in the “dondequiera” [wherever] of the Nicaraguan revolution for an interrogation of its actual trajectory. Since it takes place at midnight, at the opposite moment of “Aterrizaje con epitafo,” the poem represents that confrontation with the negative, a “dark night of the soul” in which the speaker can temporarily voice his doubts about the revolution, and existential meaning itself.

The poem begins with the speaker lying in bed, asking himself, “¿Para dónde vamos?,” a question that refers, to the earth’s orbit in space, but also, as the unfolding of the poem makes clear, to the direction of the Sandinista revolution itself. Cardenal is here playing on the dual sense of the word “revolution” as both an astronomical term and as a political one. After this question, the speaker notes that Nicaragua is “en la mitad oscura de la tierra” while the other half of the world is “iluminada.” If there is a moment for Cardenal to deal with the negativity and darkness of the revolution, this would seemingly be the place. The speaker recounts numerical facts about the speed of the movement of the earth around the sun (“30 kilómetros por segundo”) and the sun in the galaxy (“250 kilómetros por segundo”), adding that “siento el viaje,” as if the propulsion of the journey—including the political one—has begun to affect him. At this moment, it seems the doubts about the destination of the earth—in these dual registers—troubles the speaker as he reiterates, “¿Pero para dónde vamos?”
However, I argue that Cardenal retreats from the specter of such cosmic contingency and even meaninglessness by evoking three revolutionary martyrs—Donald, Elvis, and Felipe Peña—in order to assure them—and perhaps himself—that their deaths have not been in vain. The speaker, by telling the dead “vamos bien,” effaces the seeming directionlessness of the earth (the “¿para dónde?”), and by metaphorical extension, history, while still asserting that the exact destination of history is unknown. For this reason, the speaker toward the end of the poem will say, “dondequiera que vayamos, vamos bien,” rendering the direction of the revolution an act of faith more so than a human struggle for a better direction. I argue that for Cardenal the eruption of the revolutionary present has rendered the exact nature of the future, the “dondequiera” (“wherever”) secondary to the faith in the moment of eruption itself. The text renders this temporal projection with the subjunctive, as it indicates the uncertainty about the exact destination, making it into a matter of faith rather than human direction. Thus, in a most unconvincing fashion Cardenal writes that wherever the revolution goes “también / va bien la Revolución.” This figuration seems to imply nothing less than a cosmic faith in the revolution regardless of its missteps or difficulties, and that simply by being in motion, like the earth, it is “doing well.” In sentiment, the phrase is an eerie echo of the 1990 Sandinista electoral slogan “Todo Será Mejor,” a phrase that, as Gioconda Belli would say, was as fantastical and out of touch with Nicaraguan reality as “a Coca-Cola commercial” (Randall Sandino’s Daughter’s 180).

To return to the poem, the volcanic present, which again, in my reading, Cardenal tries to tether to the communist telos of the universe, silences any critique of how the revolution might not be “going well,” or how everything might not someday be better. Ultimately, the poem hopes to
consecrate the memory of the dead through such a faith that the Sandinista experiment partakes in a cosmic drama of union and separation in which “Todo es movimiento” such that one is seemingly left only to implore God: “hágase tu voluntad / así en el planeta como en las galaxias” (Vuelos 16). It is therefore no surprise that Cardenal’s first work published after the 1990 electoral defeat would be entitled Telescopio en la noche oscura, a reference to that “dark night of the soul” in which the Catholic mystic momentarily has lost faith in God. Perhaps with a bit less faith and a bit more interrogation of the continuation of poverty, racism, and gender oppression, the Sandinista experiment could have produced more lasting results. But Cardenal, as we will see in the next chapter, will return to his revolutionary teleology, especially in Versos del pluriverso, where he represents the failure of the Sandinista experiment as merely one short moment of retrogression in the “inevitable” cosmic movement toward communism. The dark night of the soul would not last long.

Gioconda Belli and the Erotics of Revolution…and Reconstruction?

During the Sandinista years, Belli worked in several jobs, including at the television station, the Ministry of Planning, and the Department of Analysis and Propaganda, as well as working on the electoral campaigns of 1984 and 1990.55 Even after the 1990 electoral defeat, Belli would say that the Sandinista years “offered extraordinary hope, and it created a tremendous communal energy. It was like living inside a mighty river that constantly renewed you—spiritually, even physically” (Randall Sandino’s Daughter’s Revisited 185). However, she was not without her criticism of the government, especially of its ongoing sexism in which women’s “most important problems always seemed to be considered secondary” (ibid. 180), and during the mid-eighties

55 See Randall, Sandino’s Daughters Revisited 176-7.
she wanted to create an autonomous women’s group, known as P.I.E. or the Partido de la Izquierda Erótica that would fight for abortion rights, “land titles for peasant women, an institute of consumer protection,” and the prevention of “domestic violence” (ibid. 181). Her retrospective comments show an attention to the internal contradictions of the moment, especially around sexism and the role of working-class women that, unfortunately, rarely appeared in the poetic works she produced during the eighties.

During this time, she published three major texts: Truenos y arcoiris (1982), the anthology Amor insurrecto (1984), and De la costilla de Eva (1987). Many of the poems in these collections are marked by a lyrical approach in which Belli details her amorous passions and political insights rather than narrating historical events in an exteriorist sense, like Cardenal’s work of the seventies. As such, many poems read as psychological statements on the speaker's experience of longing, love, the erotic, insurrection, and pleasure and continue the notion of revolution as an eruption with the order of logic and reason. But how does such a metaphor work given that the Sandinista-era reconstruction entailed such “unromantic” and “unsexy” work such as building roads and hospitals, or ensuring the distribution of vaccinations?

I follow Beverley and Zimmerman who argue that despite the feminist construction of the “new woman” as one who challenged the notion that women’s demands must be postponed when faced with the demands of economic revolution, Belli’s poetic representation during this period of “the aggressively erotic lover, equating strike with lovemaking, revolution with orgasm” often overlook other notions of revolutionary activity (106). In continuing to rely on a volcanic poetics that equated desire and revolution, Belli’s feminism “concentrated on sexual liberation and was
accused of paying insufficient attention to the concerns of women with fewer economic privileges,” as well as forms of sexual violence and economic discrimination facing women (Henighan 700). Thus while Belli, against patriarchal notions of the desiring subject, hopes “to define the human subject as active participant in the eros of revolution” her representation of Nicaraguan society tends to “lose its material roots,” instead focusing on the privileged interiority of its middle-class protagonists (Dawes 130). In line with these assessments, the noticeable lack of working-class women in Belli’s texts from this period is striking, especially when compared to those of Daisy Zamora. In Belli’s texts, the vindication of women’s desire—which obviously has a progressive role—as an eruption and breaking with subjective constraints, seems too easily equated with revolutionary praxis itself. Ultimately, Belli’s own focus on the revolutionary role of desire will lead her to some, in my view, decidedly non-feminist moments, such when she metaphorizes sex as a battle that vindicates the Sandinista male as aggressor, as well as those instances when she celebrates motherhood and childrearing (as acts of love where the personal meets the political in the creation of the next generation of Sandinistas) as the ultimate revolutionary acts for women to undertake.

*Truenos y arcoiris*, published in 1982, was a work that Belli characterized as exemplifying “poetic maturation; more craft, more rigor” and that was increasingly concerned with “internal revolution, which becomes more intense during peacetime…the search for one’s authentic identity, for new human relations which are difficult because one knows that it’s necessary to destroy much of the past” (Randall 150). The construction of “new human relations” in the text entails—sometimes explicitly, sometimes less obviously—reflections on the role of poetry, and her middle-class privileges, in a post-revolutionary situation in which working-class readers
come to play an increasingly important role in society. The poem “Exorcismo” (97-8) represents one of the more successful efforts in this regard, and while it never makes the speaker’s negotiation with new social dynamics explicit, I argue, it deploys the metaphors of overcoming possession and blindness as means to represent the new challenge to class privilege at the affective rather than ideological level. The primary affect of the poem is one of a tentative, anguished awakening from a nameless confusion into a new reality.

The speaker says she writes, “para exorcizare / y sacarme de adentro / la andanada de angustias / persiguiéndome,” and while we might be tempted to read these “angustias” in general or existential terms, the text—perhaps unwittingly—politicizes them in the following stanza. There, the speaker says she does not know “quién es sta nueva mujer que soy,” with the phrase “nueva mujer” immediately evoking the concept of the revolutionary hombre nuevo or mujer nueva. In this sense, I read the “exorcism” of poetry as performing a working-through of the “angustia” of her class privilege. Belli here deploys the metaphors of a sublime, volcanic shattering of subjectivity examined in Chapter 1 not to celebrate the irruption of revolutionary desire, but rather to represent the breakdown of the poet and intellectual’s role in society. She metaphorizes this uncertainty in terms of a natural disaster—perhaps an earthquake or volcanic eruption—as her speaker’s subjectivity becomes like a city “despues del cataclismo” in which she has lost “los puntos de referencia.” The myth of natural force turns not onto the revolutionary force of the nation, as before, but onto the inner transformation necessary for the privileged intellectual in a nascent socialist nation.
Belli continues to deploy the myth of natural force, this time with an earthquake, as she turns the past itself—and as I read it, the struggles of the working-class people who brought the government to power—into such a subjectivity-shattering presence, as there arise in her, “perennes pasados cuyos simios no puedo medir.” The unmeasurable and sublime earthquake of the revolution turns into the inner “cataclismo” through which she must question and exorcise her own privilege. The end of the poem in my reading, represents the speaker’s tentativeness about giving up such a privileged role for herself and her own poetry, as she experiences “el fin de una dolorosa / pero todavía dulce / ceguera.” By the end of the poem does blindness bring insight, leading her to a new poetic style or does the lure of its “sweetness” pull the speaker back toward her old ways? This poem makes a compelling case, at the affective, rather than ideological level, that all is not clear in the new Sandinista order, and here, more than in any other poem Belli uses her volcanic poetics as a means not to simply celebrate the revolution, but to question intellectual and class privileges. Not only does the myth of natural force allow her to represent the formation of new subjectivity as a cataclysmic shift, but the poem itself enacts a poetic martyrdom in which the speaker is blinded, possessed, and only half-awake to the new world that awaits her, a world that she, no more than millions of other Nicaraguans knows how to control or master.

Unfortunately, not all of Belli’s work on the role of the poet and intellectual are as nuanced and critical. “Obligaciones del poeta” (37-8) would seem to function almost as an official ars poetica for the Sandinista-era poet, and has a celebratory affective character that “Exorcismo” clearly lacks.\textsuperscript{56} As one notices from the title, rather than offering a meditation on the aesthetic qualities a

\textsuperscript{56} It would be this much more rousing poem and not “Exorcismo” that Murguía and Paschke would anthologize in...
poem must have, the text encourages writers to think about their moral and spiritual “obligaciones,” a phrase that reminds one immediately of Asturias’s “el poeta es una conducta moral.” The poem begins by warning the poet against being an “intelectual privilegiado” or a “mustio pensador adolorido,” instead calling on him or her to pursue a prophetic vision imbued with the passion of existence. In a mode reminiscent of Shelley's famous formulation that poets are the “hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration,” Belli asserts that poet must “desgranar estrellas” and act as an “adivino del porvenir.” The celestial metaphor places the poet above the earth in space, while acting as a “seer” places him or her outside of time. In this sense, Belli often shares this cosmic perspective of the reconstruction with the airplane-voyaging Cardenal, and the idea that the poet, like the revolution, might erupt outside of the confines of the present. At the very moment Belli wants to undo the privilege of the poet she describes him or her as having a privilege (even using the word “privilegiado”!) in terms of affective sensitivity: “tu piel era más tierna y delgada / que la de las gentes nacidas a ojos cerrados / fuiste privilegiado para el dolor y la alegría.” Such images evoke the Rousseauean (and Romantic) notions of sensitivity or *tendresse*, and by extension, poetic genius—hardly a “deconstruction” of the unique place of the poet. The poem is filled with similar evocations of poetic genius, including ones that rely again on myths of natural force. For instance, Belli describes the poet as one conceived on nights “cuando aullaban lobos y corrián enloquecidas las luciérnagas” and as the “hijo del mar y la tormenta.” Belli’s volcanic poetics, unlike in “Exocrismo” turns the destruction of subjectivity for the sake of a higher sensitivity into the *privilege* of the poet who becomes “crazed,” “howls,” and strikes with the fury of the “storm.” The poet alone seems capable of embodying natural

the dual-language (English-Spanish) *Volcán* in 1983, and I believe that its more traditional celebration of the poet as seer and visionary helps explain why.
force through a particular attunement to its subjectivity-destroying power. The poet becomes the erupting volcano.

One is tempted to ask, what does this have to do with a political, let alone revolutionary conception of poetry? Is Belli not offering the most traditional notion of the poet in the Western tradition, as a sensitive, or even enlightened seer? Belli makes a pivot in the poem such that poetic genius must be put in the service of the popular classes, but the manner in which the speaker makes this gesture only turns them into yet another muse to couple with the wolf, stars, and storms. She writes that as part of refusing to be a “pensador adolorido,” the poet must “descubrir la risa de la muchedumbre entre los árboles.” But the speaker encourages only discovering the “smile” of the masses, not any of its other features. Furthermore, placing the “muchedumbre” comfortably among the “árboles” represents them as idyllic background, as landscape, especially in an increasingly urbanizing Nicaragua. This “muchedumbre” becomes yet another figure for natural force from which the poet can draw inspiration, given its supposedly autochthonous connection to the land.

The figure of the working-class as muse and conductor of natural force becomes explicit at the end of the poem, as Belli writes: “Ahora el fondo de la tierra / emana electricidad para cargar tu canto.” The working-class hidden among the trees now becomes, in my reading, the electrical charge coming from the earth, whose primary function it would seem, is to inspire poets. Belli ends the text by saying the poet need do nothing more than “cantar lo que te rodea / al suave diapasón / de las ardientes voces / de la multitud.” But the poem does not seem to sing “in tune” with the “voices of the multitude” but rather presents them as offering the speaker another
opportunity to claim access to poetic genius and provide a moral-political foundation for writing of poetry in the post-revolutionary era. Unfortunately, it is one that has little to do with such voices.

While Belli’s erotics of feminism has often been celebrated, a closer examination of her texts reveals the ways in which they often reproduce traditional gender dynamics. In her own words, during the late seventies and early eighties, although she felt that women were treated unequally, women in Nicaragua, herself included, did not fight “for power the way the men did…Maybe I was too romantic. ‘Let the men have the glory,’ I said. And we paid for that romanticism” (176). It is this sense that I argue that during this era, the female protagonists of her poems tend to act as muse and inspiration for male glory, reinforcing rather than challenging the very notion of masculine heroism. Such moments are not without moments of “self-deconstruction,” in the sense that despite their, at times, anti-feminist visions, the very dynamics of domination that mark the encounters often throw into question the erotics of the scenario at hand.

In “En la doliente soledad del domingo,” Belli focuses on a domestic scene in which the female speaker lies in bed and conjures the image of her disappeared male lover, and uses martial metaphors to describe their love. The poem, in my reading, moves uneasily between an eroticization of female passivity and a critique of it. Along semiotic lines, the poem seems to celebrate the male lover as the embodiment of a virile masculinity, while affectively, the poem deploys a mixture of excitement and danger—often through the use of militaristic metaphors—that makes the very erotic encounter seem undesirable, the result of patriarchal domination, as
much as the speaker longs for it. As such, its feminist critique occurs at this ambivalent affective register, rather than at an ideological level.

To begin, the speaker realizes that her vision of herself is split by his absence, “Me veo y no me estoy viendo, / es un espejo de vos el que extiende doliente / sobre esta soledad de domingo,” such that she does not see herself so much as she sees herself through the mirror provided by her lover's absence, so that she becomes “un molde hueco buscando su otro hemisfero.” Belli figures love in a manner similar to Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* as the bringing together of an individual and their lost half. By the female speaker as a “molde hueco,” for the male to “fill,” Belli reproduces a traditional gender dynamic of male completeness and activity and female incompleteness and passivity.

The speaker compares her breasts to birds held in “tus jaulas de cinco barrotes.” This image conveys the ambiguity of the poem itself: the female body experiences erotic pleasure like that of a domesticated animal, but the male must control her, as his fingers to “barrotes,” in order for her to experience such pleasure. The caged speaker’s body therefore records pleasure, and the text—perhaps unwittingly—calls into question the gender dynamics of control shaping the encounter. Continuing with these metaphors of domination, the speaker refers to her body as a “territorio de tus besos” with the militaristic term “territorio” implying that the body falls under the control of the male lover. The martial metaphor extends to sex itself, in which it seems the female body must be captured by the male: “este cuerpo lleno de recuerdos...sobre el que peleaste sudorosas batallas / en largas noches de quejidos y risas / y ruidos.” Here we notice that the battle is not mutual, but rather the “tú” of “peleaste” is the speaker’s male lover. However, this metaphor leaves out the obvious question: against whom is the lover fighting and what does he hope to
win? Two possible answers provide themselves. In the first instance, the speaker's body itself may be the landscape to be won away from other males, in which the female body is merely the triangulated object in the struggle between men. At the same time, the speaker seems to compare the sexual act itself to a battle of the male body against female body. In this case, the male “soldier” dominates the woman herself and this reading is reinforced by the comparison of orgasm to “descargas de fusilerías / y truenos primitivos.” Orgasm is earth-shattering violence. Such a violent allegorization of the erotic ultimately serves to support an image of the hombre nuevo who, as conqueror of women, learns how to conquer his battlefield opponents, a victor in the domestic and public sphere. The poem’s affective ambiguity around such a characterization allows us to throw into question the libidinal economy of the hombre nuevo itself.

However, the amorous also comes to allegorize the volcanic, shattering force of the revolution itself, as in “Evocación a la magia,” a poem that conceives of passion as a radical break with everyday temporality, including both the dictates of reason and the stasis of the political order. By the end of the text, I argue that what seems to the true “obligation” of the poet is not a representation of the present so much as the celebration of the insurrectionary passion that underlies the moment of both erotic longing and of revolution. In this poem, the speaker compares her lover to a magician who allows her to transcend time and mortality. The poem proceeds through a series of questions in which the speaker asks the magician-lover when she will see him next, and several of these encounters are framed in terms of a vulnerability bordering on submission. She imagines herself crying “con la cara escondida en las rodillas,” or “contándote que yo pensaba ser Sherezada de tus noches / para que nunca me cortaras la cabeza.” The lover holds a life-and-death power over her, and provides her access to a
transcendental, “magical” temporality. She imagines meeting the “Mago” on a day “sin citas / sin premeditación” that overturns quotidian time. By the end, this eruption of the magical temporality of passion becomes metaphorized as revolutionary madness. The poet says that her male lover “me ama / como un loco suelto en media Revolución.” Although the male lover here has a volcanic eruption of subjectivity, he, and not the female speaker becomes the person caught in the middle of the revolution. That is, the true passion of revolutionary ecstasy is marked as male, despite Belli’s feminist convictions.

Belli’s next work, De la costilla de Eva, published in 1986, carries forward many of the themes examined above, although this time, in a political moment characterized by increasing insecurity and internal tension, and in terms of its representation of female desire will lead to a series of startling conclusions. In particular, in “Seguiremos naciendo” (17-18) from De la costilla de Eva, the equation of sexual love and revolutionary fervor means that women can best “engender” revolution by giving birth to children raised as Sandinistas. Given its publication in 1987, this also takes on the gruesome aspect of suggesting that women need to replace the dead who have fallen in the Contra War.

The poem, addressed to her daughter, Maryam, begins with the speaker and her daughter in what seems to be the Plaza de la Revolución in Managua, “bajo la intensa mirada de Carlos Fonseca.” This symbolic setting—the site of the Sandinista triumph—frames it as a narrative about how best to honor martyrs, and thereby honor the revolution. The plaza quickly becomes a “gigantesco vientre dando a luz,” that seems to give birth to the new nation and new political possibilities. The plaza is feminized as birth canal, and so too, Belli will call on women for their
reproductive capacities. The poem ends with the mother's reflection on the future loves of her daughter, and finally, the notion that inasmuch as Maryam falls in love with men and eventually becomes a mother herself, the spirit of Sandinismo in the two of them will be reborn, “prolongando roja nuestra bandera.”

While on the surface the poem seems to be about the passing of a political worldview from mother to daughter, I argue that it quickly becomes an allegory for the political implications of the passage from adolescence to adulthood, and in particular, the obligations of marriage and childbirth. Rather than focus on the positive political contributions that Maryam might make, the poem instead links the passing of the “sangre,” from mother to child to the proper revolutionary duty of Maryam. Interestingly, we should notice this formulation from the beginning of the poem: instead of a conversation between the two women, Maryam's oath is triangulated by the specter of Carlos Fonseca, the martyred revolutionary leader. The female body—and even the very erotic passion Belli has consistently celebrated—have become subordinate to the political imperatives of carrying forward the revolution’s ideals. The poem's ending links the “rojo” of the flag to the “sangre” that flows between mother, daughter, and her future children.

While Pilar Moyano reads traditional attitudes toward the role of women in terms of the spread of feminist ideas, “La mujer nicaragüense que observamos en la poesía de Belli, y que en principio acepta la concepción del papel de madre como protectora de la familia, se sirve, sin embargo, de los acontecimientos políticos y sociales que se desarrollan en el país para alterar su papel,” I am not so certain that this route was the only one available to Belli (328). For not only do the politics of reproduction support a heteronormative ideal and enforce the obligation of
motherhood upon women, but I argue that in some sense, this position is the logical consequence of Belli's poetics, in which erotic desire allegorizes revolutionary desire. Volcanic poetics here come back to represent the mutual “explosion” of two revolutionaries in the act of love so that they might create a third. This stance—derived from the primacy of the erotic metaphor of revolution in her work—leads Belli away from interrogating the contradictions of the patriarchal family, gender norms, and male privilege. Ironically, it would be these very institutions and ideologies of patriarchy that left her feeling alienated within the Sandinista government while writing these poems.

_Rosario Murillo: Visionaries Against Massification_

Rosario Murillo, who was married to president Daniel Ortega, became the antagonist of Cardenal and Zamora’s efforts to democratize literary culture during the eighties. Rosario Murillo “felt that the ministry should have applied less stringent regulations in the workshops” but at the root of the debate was a conflict “that pitted ‘high culture’ against the democratization, or what some termed the ‘massification’ of art” (Dawes 28). For Murillo poetry, could best defend the revolution by producing works of literature that gave the revolution “intellectual and literary respectability” including in the eyes of writers around the world (Beverley and Zimmerman 104). Naturally, such “respectability” had little to do with popular art or culture and more to do with the demands of international aesthetic trends.

Murillo’s own aesthetic, which draws on symbolism, romanticism, Neruda, and the Central American tradition of engaged poetry tries, although not very successfully, to balance this promotion of high culture with political commitment. As I have shown is the case with much of Belli’s work, Murillo’s texts also partake in traditional notions of poetic genius and sensitivity,
exemplified in her stance that as part of government policy “there should be greater access to consuming and appreciating art, but not necessarily to creating it,” which at its root implied that “only the ‘gifted’ could produce worthwhile poetry” (Dawes 29). For this reason, as Henighan rightly points out, Murillo, who was “raised in a Conservative intellectual milieu” can be seen to have “perpetuated the positions of the Betrayed Generation within the Sandinista context” while at the same time dealing with the anxiety of the new role for working-class people by positioning them, not unlike Belli, as “inspiration” or “muse” for aesthetic reflection (Sandino’s Nation 268).

Her collection, “En las espléndidas ciudades,” published in 1985 provides a text that seems both structurally torn between its admittedly elitist aesthetic commitments and a desire to account for the revolutionary transformations underway. Murillo’s text evokes Rimbaud—the poetic genius par excellence—as the title of the collection comes from the final section of Une Saison en Enfer, and three of the poems in the latter half of her work are titled “Iluminación,” evoking Rimbaud’s second work. To begin the text, Murillo cites the “Adieu,” from the conclusion of Une Saison en Enfer in Spanish translation: “Y cuando llegue la aurora, / armados de ardiente paciencia / entraremos en las espléndidas ciudades.” In the context of Rimbaud’s text, these lines read as the speaker’s overcoming of the past and its traumas in “le combat spirituel” that is as “brutal que la bataille d’hommes.” At the same time, the speaker moves from the “I” that has so dominated the text to a vision of collectivity with the “we” that will enter the cities (“nous entrerons” or “entraremos”). These cities evoke a spiritual New Jerusalem that can transform earthly injustices with divine intervention: a metaphor for the Sandinista triumph.
However, the quotation also evokes the conclusion of Pablo Neruda’s 1971 Nobel Prize speech entitled “Hacia la ciudad espléndida” that also draws on these lines of Rimbaud. In the course of the speech, Neruda examines the social function of poetry and his decision to celebrate workers and common people rather than the individual. Paraphrasing Huidobro, Neruda says, “El poeta no es un ‘pequeño dios’…A menudo expresé que el mejor poeta es el hombre que nos entrega el pan de cada día: el panadero más próximo, que no se cree dios.”

Rather than create the world, the poet should give voice to the collective dreams of the multitude. In so doing, the poet should neither delve into a confining realism or a lyricism that tends toward incomprehension:

Nos vemos indefectiblemente conducidos a la realidad y al realismo, es decir, a tomar una conciencia directa de lo que nos rodea…Nos imponemos un realismo que posteriormente nos resulta más pesado que el ladrillo de las construcciones, sin que por ello hayamos erigido el edificio que contemplábamos como parte integral de nuestro deber. Y en sentido contrario, si alcanzamos a crear el fetiche de lo incomprendible…nos veremos de pronto rodeados de un terreno imposible, de un tembladero de hojas, de barro, de nubes, en que se hunden nuestros pies y nos ahoga una incomunicación opresiva. (Neruda, “Hacia la ciudad espléndida”)

On both of these counts, the reference to Neruda’s speech, whether conscious or not, by Murillo seems uncanny. For as I hope to show, her aesthetic conception has more in common with Huidobro’s idea of the “little god” than Neruda, as her work moves toward “incomunicación” rather than “realism.” However, it is in Neruda’s own evocation of Rimbaud that we perhaps understand Murillo’s ultimate reason for the title of the collection. To conclude his speech, Neruda says, “debo decir a los hombres de buena voluntad, a los trabajadores, a los poetas que el entero porvenir fue expresado en esa frase de Rimbaud: sólo con una ardiente paciencia conquistaremos la espléndida ciudad que dará luz, justicia y dignidad a todos los hombres. Así la poesía no habrá cantado en vano” (ibid.). This evocation links the destiny of

poetry to the fulfillment of revolutionary dignity, one that Murillo hopes to claim for her own work.

At the broadest level, the text is divided into two sections, entitled “En las espléndidas ciudades” and “Eva después del paraíso” respectively. Both section titles, in their own way, evoke the notion of a utopia, whether it is one to come or one, like Eden, one that has been lost. The similarity to Cardenal should be noted, as indeed, these two are often collapsed: the future is a return to a prior harmony. Formally and thematically the two sections are quite distinct, with the former generally composed of the speaker’s reflections on contemporary Nicaragua (often in poems of several dozen lines), while the second section consists largely of love poems written in a quasi-symbolist style as well as epigrammatic poems with metaphysical themes, such as the two-line “Tiemblo” (84) that reads, “Tiemblo / cuando escucho el silencio.” There is some thematic overlap in the two sections, especially with the introduction of more politically inflected poems toward the end of “Eva después del paraíso.” Like Belli, Murillo’s poetry of this period relies on the myth of natural force and often metaphorically represents Nicaraguan society as embodying a chthonic, telluric power, which gives the revolution its life-force. For example, the first poem in the text “En mi país hay hombres que cantan a la noche” (13-14) traces how Nicaraguans, for the speaker, are in touch with the primal forces of life: the sun, love, and the earth. This connection to vital force provides the country with its revolutionary power, as when she writes, “Hay quienes visten de sol y materias frutales / de maderos y hierbas / de esperanza. Hay quienes hablan con la vida en la mano.” These people are clothed in nature in an almost prelapsarian fashion, wrapped in wood, grass, and fruit. The verb “visten” then comes to describe their psychological characteristic, as they are also clothed in “esperanza.” This slippage between
the natural and psychological, or a vital connection to the earth and the ability to speak “con la vida en la mano” creates an idealization of the Nicaraguan national character and especially the peasant, as representing the true spirit of the revolution, rather than questioning the conditions giving rise to their status as peasants.

Next, the speaker defines “life” itself through a series of metaphors that link it to the most primal natural elements, “La vida que es el agua / el calor de verano / el olor a monte en invierno / los aguaceros / la batalla en las tejas.” The beginning of the poem defines the Nicaraguan subject as those who can relate to these primal powers and continues to define life itself as natural force, which syllogistically places the Nicaraguan subject as the conduit of natural force itself. In the final lines of the poem, the speaker says that “la vida que para nosotros es / indiscutiblemente la sangre / la revolución,” and this ending attempts to justify Murillo’s own lyrical poetic tendencies. I argue that she hopes to position the poet as one who can best see and capture the natural force in both the landscape and people as the “essence” of revolution, thereby reinforcing the role of poetic genius in the Sandinista era.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Murillo’s reliance on this myth of natural force is coupled with a turn to magic, as in the poem, “Batiendo sombras” (26-8) The title foregrounds the poems theme: the magical power needed to build a new world from what is insubstantial and evanescent, or in a more literal sense, from the nothingness of shadow. The poem begins with images describing the hope for a new future due to the Nicaraguan revolution: “Pienso en nosotros que hemos reclamado a la mañana / un vestido de luces, un ramo de margaritas.” As with “En mi país hay hombres que cantan a la noche,” this poem also stages new hope as the ability to draw on the
power of nature in the form of “luces” and “margaritas.” Murillo next describes the difficulties facing the people who clamor for this new future: “todavía empolvados, sucias las manos y tristes aún las palabras / con la espalda doblada bajo una capa de noche / exigimos inclementes la posesión del futuro.” I claim that in Murillo’s formulation, those who are “empolvados” and the hands that are “sucias,” work to prop up the speaker who can take “possession” of the future through, as we will see, her poetic magic. The “we” of the “exigimos” is actually split along class lines.

As such, the speaker’s “solution” to the difficulty of attaining this future is to see revolution in magical and transcendental terms, rather than in the material terms of working-class struggle, a conception that allows her to retain a special role for poets. She will say that “la revolución es un sueño / una sonrisa y una voz de misterio— / la revolución es un acto de magia cotidiana.” Dreams, smiles, mysterious voices: this characterization of the revolution posits it as an inner, subjective quality to be lived, or better yet, captured in the poetic act: a spiritualization of revolution as Sandinista mística. The poem proceeds, without any punctuation, such that the “magia cotidiana” may however, qualify the next lines, which characterize the revolution as “una reunión de obreros un domingo en la tarde / unos niños edificando un poema con ristras de papelillo.” Murillo here gestures towards a concrete vision of what this “everyday magic” might look like: workers at a cooperative meeting or children studying poetry. While Murillo tries to incorporate the details of what revolutionary transformation entails, the mundane quality of a “workers meeting” seems completely incommensurable with the poetic magic she craves as the heart of the revolution. Such a disjunction appears more stark in light of the images that follow, in which the speaker characterizes the revolution as “un hombre soñando bajo un alero / una
mujer armada vigilando la noche / un grito en una pared, desnudo como cuchillo.” Dreams, violence, screams: these images of revolution as a transcendence of the quotidian order seem a more in line with the rest of the poem’s volcanic poetics and Murillo’s other works in this text, all of which reinforce her romantic conception of politics as subjective transformation.

In retrospect, such a conception of revolution hardly seems a compelling conception of the relation between poetry and working-class life in Nicaragua. Doubts about poetry and poetic myth-making haunted Murillo at various points in the collection. The most significant example of self-reflection on poetry’s role comes in the poem entitled “Es cierto que estamos construyendo el mundo” (40-2). This poem catalogues how the speaker wishes to withdraw from the exigencies of social reality in order to write poetry and I argue deploys the reconstruction of the nation as mere backdrop and barrier to the lyrical subjectivity of the poet. The poem begins with a series of rhetorical questions in which the speaker seemingly seeks permission and understanding for her need to write poetry:

Quién me dará ahora permiso
para ausentarme de las cinco reuniones de esta tarde
para no ir al círculo de estudio
para dejar de hablar sobre los formularios, las hojas de control y los cuadros
a quién puedo explicarle que en mi agenda de esta tarde hay un poema
que debe completarse (40).

This formulation seems to oppose poetry itself to the action necessary to carry forward the revolution, including meetings and study groups, such that poetry becomes incompatible with the “reality principle” and the demands of Nicaraguan reconstruction in a way somewhat similar to Cardenal’s “Reflexiones de un ministro,” (Vuelos 60). In that poem the protagonist says
“Quisiera quedarme aquí / para observa mejor este gato” so that he can write a poem about it, but finds that he must rush off to a meet with foreign diplomats. In Murillo’s poem, the speaker says that “a veces buscando un título, una línea, un epígrafe /...me pierdo, loca, disparatada, en comparaciones ilícitas / entre un altar de purísima y un barco / entre un saludo y una reverencia.”

Poetry is transgression, an “illicit” act that defies reason. Reinforcing this characterization, writing is also compared to a “tormenta,” and something that “me vuelve nube, órbita, planeta.” It is a “locura” and a “sueño,” as in much of Belli’s poetry, and as such, Murillo represents it as incompatible with revolutionary reconstruction, since it involves the eruption of a wild, mad subjectivity.

This volcanic conception of poetry develops as the speaker calls writing poetry an act “sin metas específicas, sin objetivos concretos” and as such a break with instrumental logic. The poem ends with a series of rhetorical questions similar to those with which it began. However, this time around they are aimed at the seeming impossibility of justifying poetry to those who continue to live in oppressed social conditions in Nicaragua:

A quién puedo explicarle, sin vergüenza, sin culpa
ante la gente sin techo
ante los que todavía no hacen más que un tiempo
ante los hospitales desnudos, las escuelas sin bancos…
quién va a creer en la exigencia de un poema
que también nos reclame
como si fuera lo único en el mundo
como si lo estuviera inventando.

The urban poor, the run-down hospitals and schools, that is, the realities of post-revolutionary Nicaragua appear in Murillo’s poem not as topics to explore, but rather as a backdrop against
which her speaker seeks to justify the “madness” of writing. It is almost as if the speaker wishes them not to be there so that she might better get on with writing. The speaker’s subjectivity, in which she is the “only” person in the world, and in fact the “creator” of it positions here much like Huidobro’s “little god.” Therefore, I argue that it is precisely in alluding to these realities that allows the speaker—without guilt—to unleash her lyrical aesthetic. If we return to the title, “Es cierto que estamos construyendo el mundo,” the disjunction between the collective “we” as world-creator and the solipsistic “I” as world-creator at the end of the point becomes even more stark. Throughout the poem, there is little “world-building” except in the imagination of the poetic speaker herself.

By drawing on the concept of the poet as visionary (Rimbaud is the privileged touchstone), Murillo wants to stake a claim for poetry’s aesthetic autonomy, its ability, like the act of revolutionary insurrection, to envision new worlds in a form independent of any instrumental thought or seemingly, any “obligación” to the world. In contrast to Cardenal’s aesthetic that she fears might turn poets into mere chroniclers of daily life, here the poet can act as a myth-maker unchained by the present and perhaps through her or his visions lend an aesthetic “respectability” to the revolution. Such was her wager. Looking back on her work now, her poems seem to have less to do with the actual changes taking place in Nicaragua and more to do with the threat posed by working-class writing to her own position as writer. In this sense, the poetic record of this anxiety, and what I would describe as her reactionary turn to symbolism and Romanticism is, in some sense, the material trace of how many of the cultural elite registered the aesthetic
democratization that took place in Nicaragua. In Adornian fashion, Murillo is perhaps most historical when she tries not to be.  

Daisy Zamora: Negativity and Working-Class Life in the New Nicaragua

Daisy Zamora worked with the clandestine Radio Sandino while in exile and after the revolution became the Vice-Minister of Culture next to Ernesto Cardenal. In her role, she promoted not only poetry and the popular workshops, but also helped engender “a complete revival of Nicaraguan arts ranging from native cooking to handicrafts, from folk art to its incomparable literature” (Evans “A Chunk of Violent Foam” xx). However, the polemics with Ventana and Rosario Murillo over the poetry workshops soon led to her ouster from the Ministry (while Ernesto Cardenal stayed on). Looking back on the experience of the Sandinista years after the 1990 electoral defeat, Zamora attributed her demotion as well as her exclusion from other positions in the government to both her outspokenness as well as her gender. She has also been outspoken, after 1990, in critiquing the Sandinista leadership in eighties and the misogyny prevalent in it: “there were plenty of sexual pressures. In the eyes of a number of our male leaders, women continued to be seen as ‘meat’ or ‘cattle,’ as our macho slang would have it. The quickest and easiest way for political women to acquire a ‘protector’ and gain direct access to power was by sleeping with someone in power” (Randall Sandino’s Daughters Revisited 109).

58 As Adorno reminds us, “Works of art that react against empirical reality obey the forces of that reality, which reject intellectual creations and throw them back on themselves. There is no material content, no formal category of an artistic creation, however mysteriously changed and unknown to itself, which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free” (“Commitment” 86). However, I would argue that in Murillo’s aesthetic retrogression, poetic autonomy does not reveal a critique of the Sandinista social experience, but rather the longing for a world in which the space of art was untroubled by popular critiques of it.

59 Speaking of her job as Vice-Minister and then in the national directorate’s secretariat, she says, “I didn’t last long in either place because I continued to open my mouth when I had something to say. It wasn’t that I was thought I was right; I just couldn’t stand this ‘correct line,’ where there was a single vision” (Randall Sandino’s Daughter Revisited 106)
While such internal critiques did not make their way into her poems during the eighties, Zamora’s work during this time represents perhaps the most sustained feminist critique of Nicaraguan society as well as what I regard as the most sophisticated examination of ongoing forms of class oppression in the eighties. For she most completely abandons the volcanic poetics of the era and its myths, and instead engages with the material realities facing working-class women and the affects they produced. As such, her feminist critiques often operate at this affective level, as well as through the depictions of working-class life she presents us with.

Perhaps Zamora was attuned to these realities because she, unlike Murillo, did not view poetry and political work as incompatible:

> Sometimes when I read a statement by one or another of the comrades…and they speak of that dilemma between the craft [of poetry] and one’s revolutionary responsibility…I’ve really never felt that contradiction that seems so difficult to others. Because I think you are a poet whether or not you are able to write, at a given moment. It’s the way you see and feel things (Randall, Somersault 156-7).

Perhaps due to this perceived compatibility between the aesthetic and political, Zamora tends to represent the daily struggles of seamstresses, waitresses, nurses, and other working-class people more than the other poets of this chapter. There seems to be little need in her works to represent the present in terms of a total rupture with the past; the present is still haunted by traces of prior economic and social forms. At the formal level, the lack of such volcanism pushes her away from celebratory portraits of the post-revolutionary society found in Belli, Cardenal, and Murillo (although these are not absent from her work) and toward telling the stories of toothless washerwomen, disillusioned wives, coconut sellers, or distant cousins. Her own self-assessment of the collection, taken from a 2010 interview, is largely accurate: “No hay un panorama idílico
sino el ojo que observa la vida cotidiana, por ahí hay una cronista haciendo un recuento de las mujeres en la revolución” (La prensa literaria “Daisy Zamora a viva voz”). Zamora's poetry of this period dialectically engages material realities and the impact they have on the emotions, fantasies, and anxieties of those caught within ever-changing external circumstances, with an affective sense of exhaustion, boredom, and disillusionment. In an epoch of “revolution,” perhaps the most revolutionary aesthetic act is to conjure images of its incompleteness.

In her seminal work of the Sandinista period, En limpio se escribe la vida (1988), Zamora examines the daily life of workers, the possibilities of communion between women, ruined marriages, the limitations of the body, memories of her family, the glories of the revolution, United States involvement in Central America, the poor economic conditions of working-class Nicaraguans, and the impact of figures like Cardenal and Coronel Urtecho on her own writing, among other topics. Zamora's work unleashes and codifies affects that do not simply elaborate the successes and heroism of the revolution (even when she does so at the narrative level) such that the text becomes suffused with both a melancholy for what the revolution has not achieved and an expectation, often tempered, for what it still might. The first section of the work, “Yo soy las otras mujeres” foregrounds the sense of female communion that Zamora hopes to forge. Inasmuch as the speaker identifies herself with the women about whom she writes—mostly working-class women, often beset by marital troubles—the poet creates a sense of communion in shared alienation. At the same time, these vignettes also reflect on the particular forms of labor that tend to be dominated by women—Zamora writes about housekeepers, nurses, seamstresses, and waitresses—and they expose the particular challenges that working-class women face even after the Sandinista triumph.
For example, Zamora at the beginning of the collection contains a series of three “Mesera” poems, each of which details the hardships of a different female restaurant server, often with an emphasis on the physicality of the labor and how the female body navigates this workspace. In “La mesera (1),” I argue that Zamora points to a contradiction between the material demands of service work—the speed at which the server’s job must be done—and the performance of “proper” femininity and sexualization that are part of the job expectation and that did not change due to Sandinista rule (21-2). The affect is thus one of a routinized exhaustion without hope for the future, quite an “ugly feeling,” following Sianne Ngai, that exposes one of the gaps in the revolutionary government’s efforts to improve working conditions and the conditions of women.

The poem begins by her traveling “De mesa en mesa” where she “recoge las botellas vacías de cerveza.” The former phrase creates a sense of standardized, habitualized movements, and the inclusion of the adjective “vacías” to modify the “beer bottles” also refers to the emptiness of the movements and the experience itself. The poem then proceeds to describe how the “trajín” (hustle and bustle, commotion) strains her body as it “enciende su rostro” and “agita sus brazos y los pequeños pechos / bajo el vestido celeste con delantal.” Zamora physicalizes the suffering of the workplace and then, through a description of the server’s outfit, reveals the gendered dynamics of the server’s experience. By focusing on the “vestido celeste” and the “delantal,” Zamora gives us an image of the server who must perform her femininity for what, we might imagine, is a largely male clientele. This reading is supported by the fact that the server seems to be worried in particular about how her rapid “órbita” around the restaurant is affecting her face—with the implication in “enciende” that she is either turning red or beginning to sweat, and
thereby hurting her appearance. The fact that she worries about her arms and breasts beneath her
dress implies a heightened attention to the role of her own body and its sexualization in the
workplace.

Toward the end of the poem, the same “De mesa en mesa” movement that began the poem is
repeated, however with a twist:

Va
de mesa
en mesa
hasta que las pláticas se arralan

We witness not only the repetitive movements of the server within the span of a few minutes—
the movement from table to table—but a repetition of this movement diachronically, a second
order repetition. The poem breaks the phrase—and therefore the movement—into three lines,
giving it a sense of lethargy, apathy, and boredom, as the phrase “de mesa” is given a single
indentation and “en mesa” is given a double indentation. These indentations register the
unspoken affect of the workday: an exhaustion and void that language cannot fill. As such the
indentations represent traces of the physical and emotion wrought by the server’s labor and its
sexualization. These indentations also provide an asymmetry within the poem, as the rest of the
lines are simply left-justified. By beginning and ending the poem with “De mesa en mesa,” she
constructs the chronological movement of workday routine as a circular return of standardized
movements that leave traces of damage. In this rendering, “las ardientes voces / de la multitud”
of Belli’s “Obligaciones del poeta” are nowhere to be heard, silenced by wage labor itself.
“La mesera (2)” (24) furthers Zamora's reflections on the sexualization of female labor and in particular, how little payoff there is, in economic and social terms, for the “proper” performance of femininity in the workplace. I argue that at the affective level, the speaker’s longing for “what could have been” with an ex-lover allegorizes a social longing for a Sandinismo that would have better addressed the needs of working-class people, and especially women. The poem begins with a server describing how men treated her when she was younger and how they treat her now. As such, the poem’s setting is retrospective and nostalgic. The rhetorical question that begins the poem frames this dissonance between the past and present:

Cómo creía entonces que de verdad
para algo me serviría el físico.
Morena y delgadita
sólo por mí venían los montones de clientes

The dissonance between past and present is revealed by the grammar of the rhetorical question, as its construction in the first two lines depends upon the imperfect “creía,” which creates a sense of a long-held but now altered belief since the conditional “me serviría” reveals that the hypothetical future she projected in the past has not come to be a reality. That is, the belief, that she no longer holds, was that her appearance “would help” her achieve a certain status or social mobility. The speaker recollects how she “tenía / ofertas al escoger: De amorcito para arriba me trataban” and thus a higher social status due to her youth and beauty. While Zamora presents the speaker as glorifying her youth at this moment, by the end the text will show that whatever gains her beauty allowed her within a patriarchal order did not “serve her” in the long run.
Her speaker seems ambivalently caught between romanticizing the attention she was able to receive in a sexualized workplace, and how, in the present, she receives neither attention, nor status, nor respect. The central moment of the poem in the second stanza recollects the speaker’s seemingly one “true” love from this period, Castillito, who went to Mexico to study, leaving her heartbroken. The rest of the poem becomes an address to Castillito, as in the third stanza, the speaker uses the “tú” (or “vos”) to express her feelings of alienation and physical inadequacy in the workplace: “Ya ves, cómo me tienen los muchachos: / gorda, cansada y varicosa.” The poem ends, in circular fashion by turning the rhetorical question with which it began into a statement of disillusion about the present, revealing that just as beauty is fleeting so are opportunities for women to advance economically: “La mesera más linda del “Mini-16 Rojo” / y de qué me sirvió.” The statement is rhetorical, and because it lacks a question mark, turns what might have been an open-ended lamentation (if it were framed as a question) into a bitter closure for the poem. This irony is only heightened by the fact that although she has “served” (“servir”) clients for many years, her job and her beauty have not “served” her in any way.

This alone would make for a compelling representation of the gender dynamics in the service industry. However, I argue that the text also presents the lost love between the speaker and Castillito as an allegory for the position of women in Sandinismo before and after the revolution. Just as Castillito remembers the speaker at the height of her social and economic power, so the lost love represents a longing for an equally central place for women in the Nicaraguan society of the eighties that they enjoyed within the FSLN during the uprising. As Gioconda Belli would say in an interview with Margaret Randall, the late seventies were “like some sort of golden age…Women participated to an extraordinary degree,” whereas just before the revolution and
during it “things began to change” for the worse, including the exclusion of women from prominent positions of power (Sandino’s Daughter’s 175). And Zamora herself would echo this timeline, as she says, “By the end of the war [1979] the old order had been completely disrupted, all the women who had taken part had the opportunity of working in our respective fields to help construct a more just society. I think the problem was that this new space wasn’t accompanied by a new mentality on the part of most of the male-dominated leadership” (ibid. 111). Castillito, who remembers the speaker during her “youth” (in our allegorical interpretation, the seventies of the uprising) and loves her as an equal, allegorizes a utopian longing for such a transition toward feminism in the early Sandinista years. On the other hand, the speaker in her old age (the late eighties in our allegorical reading) has been excluded and belittled by men, and epitomizes the marginal position of women in the Sandinista government and Nicaraguan society. As such, the affective ambiguity of the text becomes somewhat legible. There is in Zamora’s work both a nostalgia for the insurrectionary period and its feminist promise coupled with a disillusionment about the direction the revolution took that parallels the server’s own ruminations.

When Zamora catalogues accomplishments and challenges within the reconstruction of Nicaragua, as in her poem “El vende periódicos,” she chooses to do so not through the “celestial” perspective of Cardenal, who sees the land redistribution and literacy campaigns from above, but rather by recounting the story of a newspaper salesperson who calls out the headlines of the day. This poem, which can scarcely be called narrative in any traditional sense, consists of a series of newspaper headlines, which appear in a capitalized typeface, while a newspaper vendor sells on the street corner. My argument is that Zamora represents and celebrates the real accomplishments of the Sandinista government that appear in the headlines, at the same time,
and dialectically one might say, she represents the poor working conditions of the newspaper vendor who acts as a site of their enunciation. Just as Cardenal used intertextuality and capitalization to create an “ideological charge” in his texts, Zamora’s text, as I interpret it, reveals the disjunction between formal FSLN ideology and the “structures of feeling,” confusion, hopelessness, exhaustion affecting many working-class Nicaraguans. At the formal level, the disjunction between the standard typeface, which constitutes only thirteen lines (to tell the story of the vendor) becomes overshadowed by more extensive use of capitalization (for the newspaper headlines) and thus acts to “silence” the sufferings of the poem’s protagonist, which highlights the tension between official ideology and lived experience.

The poem begins with newspaper salesperson shouting headlines:

“CERO POLIOMIELITIS
134,000 MANZANAS ENTREGADAS A LOS CAMPESINOS
15,600 TERRENOS Y VIVIENDAS PARA LOS POBRES
52,000 FAMILIAS RECIBIERON AGUA POTABLE
13,000 MÁS ADQUIEREN ENERGÍA
DEVOLVERÁN A MÍSKITOS Y SUMOS TIERRA USURPADA EN EL PASADO”

Each of the first five lines emphasizes the number of Nicaraguans benefitting from governmental social changes, through the eradication of disease, land redistribution, or the spread of basic necessities such as water and energy. Here the newspaper acts a key instrument for giving that sense of “imagined community” of which Benedict Anderson writes, that is, of uniting distinct geographic regions of space under the idea of common national citizenship, a national citizenship that might seem especially precarious in the Sandinista years. The newspaper headlines would also have us see the return of Miskito and Sumo lands as part of this process of constructing a
new, inclusive nation, especially as tensions between the Sandinista government and the Miskito in particular were intense before the 1987 creation of an autonomous region. At the same time, Zamora's use of a second-order textuality within the poem—and the newspaper headlines in particular—to detail the accomplishments of the Sandinistas raises problems about representation itself and the reliability of the facts as presented. Does the newspaper represent these events, and therefore history, “objectively” or has it become an agent of propagating a politicized worldview? To what extent have the Miskito benefitted from this land redistribution and what other problems still beset them? As we will see, by examining the life of the vendor himself, Zamora will gesture toward the incommensurability between Sandinista official truth and the experience of many working-class people.

Next, the poem moves from the headlines themselves to an image of the individual calling them out:

Ya noche
bajo los semáforos
su cara amarilla
roja, verde
y otra vez amarilla

This description tells us next to nothing about the interiority of the salesperson, but instead simply casts his face as changing colors with the changing stoplights in the night. One could read the inclusion of these stoplights in two other senses. In a first and explicitly symbolic reading, I read the stoplights as representing the very movements of collective history—its stops, starts, and pauses—that transcend, yet impact, individual lives. By beginning and ending with yellow—which signifies a slowdown and hence uncertainty—the text would show how the vendor is
affectively caught between believing the very headlines he trumpets and being disillusioned by them. If we extend his figure synecdochically, the salesperson would become the Nicaraguan subject who is both marked by the reconstruction yet cannot portend its future direction, especially with the looming threat of “LAS AGRESIONES DESDE TERRITORIO HONDUREÑO” and the Contra War (102).

However, in the second, nonsymbolic reading, the changing lights are “description” in Jameson’s sense and thus move us from narrative to the domain of free floating affect. As such, the lights represent nothing more than the physical sensations experienced by the vendor in the middle of an impersonal urban space that he feels alien to. Much like, the “mesera” in “Mesera (1),” the vendor’s working conditions are framed as a dull repetition in time, as the stoplight returns “otra vez” to yellow. The seeming “narrative” of improvement in the Sandinista newspapers is thus interrupted by the twin affects of boredom and exhaustion, and thus as I argue, the text represents the tension between the national spread of the Sandinista achievements and their failure at the local level. As we learn later, he has “ojos brillantes del desvelo” reflecting how he must work long hours into the night. Likewise, his shirt is like a “vela ondeando,” perhaps from the gusts of cars and buses that breeze past him, and his body is described as “flaquito,” which might either be a simple term of endearment or a sign that he doesn’t have enough to eat, given his working conditions. Hardly the appropriate messenger for a glorious socialist future.

In the final image of him in the poem, this tension between the headlines and the site of their enunciation in the vendor is raised to its climax. The vendor becomes the “Ángel pobre / anunciador de la Historia.” While I have no evidence that Zamora was aware of Benjamin’s
interpretation of the Klee painting, the contemporary reader will readily hear echoes of the “Angel of History” whose “face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (*Illuminations* 257). In this sense, for the vendor, history appears as “wreckage” rather than progress, as illumined by the repetitive catastrophe of his days.

While some might be tempted to read Zamora’s text as assigning him a quasi-prophetic value, a bit of ironic distance elucidates a different perspective. That is, the term “pobre” must be interpreted in economic terms as it follows the noun, whereas if it meant “unfortunate,” (and signified primarily pity or compassion) it would be required to follow the noun, “ángel.” By opening space for an economic resonance, this formulation actually points out the discontinuity between the vendor as the site of articulation for the Sandinista government's achievements and the lofty claims of the government itself. Again, I do not believe Zamora’s intention is to minimize the material accomplishments the vendor himself voices, but rather to treat history as both wreckage and possible redemption.

This exact tension is played out in the final three lines of the poem: “‘A SECARSE LAS LÁGRIMAS PARA AFINAR LA PUNTERÍA / SE HARÁ JUSTICIA / Y SERÁ DEFINITIVA’.” This call to forgo sadness and cultivate discipline in order to “AFINAR LA PUNTERÍA” no longer resonates as the type of journalistic discourse of the beginning of the poem. Rather, it sounds like a direct call from the government in order to support its narrative of progress and directed at working-class supporters, like the newspaper vendor himself. I contend that by the end, Zamora's poem leaves it unclear to what extent the vendor himself will “dry his
own eyes,” or if he is capable of doing so. The poem leaves the speaker, like the yellow light of history itself, caught in between the promise of a forward movement toward “justicia” and the stoppages and blockages that bind us.

While Zamora might not answer, in this poem, whether or not such “justicia” might triumph over the long run of the Sandinista revolution, history would turn her text, published in 1988, into the record of a social order about to crumble. Within two years, the electoral defeat would bring a new government, committed to economic liberalization and undoing many of the social gains the Sandinistas had fought for, to power. As Gioconda Belli would say of 1990, “the main problem was the separation that developed between the Party and the people. The FSLN began to lose its ability to identify with what ordinary people were feeling, with what they needed” (183). In the end, along with the toll of the Contra War and economic isolation—events whose impact cannot be understated—the Sandinistas lost power because they lost touch with the newspaper vendors, servers, coconut sellers, and seamstresses about whom Daisy Zamora wrote. As Badiou has written:

> The party had been an appropriate tool for the overthrow of weakened reactionary regimes, but it proved ill-adapted for the construction of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in the sense that Marx had intended—that is, a temporary state, organizing the transition to the non-state: its dialectical ‘withering away’. Instead, the party-state developed into a new form of authoritarianism. (‘The Communist Hypothesis” 36)

As would become clear to many on the Latin American, and indeed, international Left after the Cold War, the very notion of a state power that might adequately reflect the needs of working people had been discredited once and for all. The party, following Badiou, could never ensure the “withering away” of the state but only its perpetuation and its forms of violence and control. The very “separation” between party and people Belli hoped to overcome was thus not
something that more enlightened leadership might have prevented, but rather a structural
feature—and flaw—of “actually-existing” socialism, and thus, Sandinismo itself.

For many, the end of this sequence also entailed the end of the “communist hypothesis” as such,
leading to focus on the power of grassroots movements, NGOs, and subaltern formations in the
nineties and aughts. For others, and I would count myself among them, the end of the Cold War
communist sequence entails a deeper thinking about a communism without the party, and indeed
without the state itself, one that can learn both from the success of Sandinismo—of which I
would count its literacy campaign and cultural democratization program—and its failures—
including its exclusion of feminism, its handling of indigenous issues, its inability to challenge
oppressive labor conditions, and the use state cooperatives to enforce an agro-export economy.
And indeed the myths subtending its volcanic poetics. In the end, it seems the Sandinistas were
undone by the very antagonisms that Zamora’s work, like an angel of history, now allows us to
look back on as so much wreckage. To varying degrees, as we will see in the next chapter, the
nineties and aughts will see Cardenal, and Belli “repent” of some of these failings while
neglecting to treat others, while in each case, these authors, however tentatively at times,
continue to keep the communist hypothesis alive amidst the smoke of an extinguished volcano.
“From observing defeat after the fact, it seems to be only a small step to proclaim the original nonexistence of the lost cause—or to assert that only lost causes are ever worthy of our defense.”

–Bruno Bosteels, *Marx and Freud in Latin America*, 188

The 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinistas came just about a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall and a year before the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union. In the end, the Contra War of the eighties had taken over 30,000 lives, almost 1 percent of the Nicaraguan population, and left 20,000 people wounded, astonishing figures for a country of around three million people at the time. The Sandinistas had expanded the army and reserve force to almost three hundred thousand, or more than ten percent of the population. It is thus no surprise that as much as Nicaraguan voters wished to oust the Sandinista party for its internal failures—and those were certainly plenty—it also hoped to put an end to a decade of war. In Kinzer’s assessment of the decade, the “conflict of the 1980s produced no real winners…Those who lost the most were the people of Nicaragua. The war tore their country apart and left its rich soil tainted with blood” (396). That much is certain. Kinzer also paraphrases Adolfo Calero, a top *contra* leader in the eighties, as saying that the war “was an old-fashioned Nicaraguan power rivalry that had spun horribly out of control after it was swept up into the Soviet-American conflict” and in the

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60 See Walker and Wade, page 56 for the exact statistics.

61 *Kinzer, Blood of Brothers*, page 392.
counterrevolutionary’s own words, “Without that overlay, the war would never have happened” (397). Perhaps.

What is certain is that the Sandinista moment was indeed swept up in this larger Cold War battle and led to massive funding of both sides by the two global superpowers, especially in light of the U.S. decision to aid what might have been an otherwise negligible contra movement. The use of Nicaragua as a pawn in Cold War dynamics led to far more bloodshed and a greater militarization of the population than would have occurred otherwise. But the government was also voted out of power for its internal failures, most notably its disconnection with ordinary Nicaraguans. As Daisy Zamora would say, “the FSLN’s electoral campaign [of 1990] was utterly divorced from this country’s reality…It was all about dancing in the streets, being happy…It didn’t point to anything in terms of pointing to real solutions to people’s problems” during a time when the war and economic inflation had left the country crippled (Randall Sandino’s Daughters 114). Indeed, this disconnection was so profound that the leadership “had been living in an unreal cocoon of their own making,” imagining a nation filled with ardent militants and supporters, while the “real Nicaragua, however, was a nation exhausted by years of war and deprivation” (Kinzer 392). However, this disconnection also extended other areas as well: the reluctance to deal with feminist issues, the mistreatment of people on the Atlantic Coast, depriving peasants of land and having them work on state cooperatives.

For the next sixteen years—that is until the 2006 elections—Nicaragua would be ruled by a series of presidents committed to a neoliberal agenda and undoing whatever progressive social gains in “health care, education, housing, land tenure,” the Sandinistas had made, culminating in
the astounding corruption of the Aléman presidency 1996-2001 (Walker and Wade 63). Even when Ortega returned to power in 2007, having made a pact with Aléman to exclude third party contenders, his regime would be marked by corruption, increased authoritarianism, and, by almost all accounts of the writers examined here, a betrayal of the Sandinista vision. Cardenal, Belli, and Sergio Ramírez had all long abandoned the FSLN, with the former vice president claiming at the time that the FSLN “has no ideals any more, no organizing principle except Daniel Ortega’s will for power. He turns out to have a very traditional idea of his political role” (Kinzer 401). Against this historical backdrop, in this chapter I read the works of Ernesto Cardenal, and Gioconda Belli during the nineties and aughts as a renegotiation with the meaning of their prior revolutionary engagements in the post-Cold War era, and their attempts, however tentative, to hold on to a utopian politics in the face of both economic neoliberalization on the one hand and a corrupted version of Sandinismo on the other.

To begin, it makes sense to understand these authors’ reaction to the 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinistas—whatever the party’s faults and failures throughout the eighties—as having crushed their political hopes and leaving them with a sense of having been betrayed by the very working-class people for whom they fought had fought their entire lives. It also left them questioning what “engaged poetry” might mean without a clear cause to fight for. Belli, who devotes six pages of her four-hundred-page memoir El país bajo mi piel to discussing the electoral defeat, writes, “Cuando alcé la mirada para ver la ciudad distante, me impactó sentir en el verdor de las montañas una emanación hostil alzándose de mi propia tierra. El pueblo nos rechazaba. Nunca creí que me tocara vivir ese día” (395). The natural force of the Nicaraguan people that Belli celebrated in “Obligaciones del poeta” as rising from the earth to inspire the poet (“Ahora el
fondo de la tierra / emana electricidad para cargar tu canto”) here becomes an “emanación hostil,” seemingly directed at her. Cardenal, more so than Belli (who sensed the possibility of defeat), registers the events of 1990 with a sense of incomprehension:

Esa madrugada [the day after the election] tuve una “noche oscura”, que fue la más oscura de mi vida, yo creo. Acostado en mi hamaca estaba sin poder entender la voluntad de Dios. Cómo era posible que el pueblo se hubiera volteado contra nosotros, que hubieran rechazado la revolución (La revolución perdida 654).

As the quotation shows, Cardenal at the time could not see, like much of the upper FSLN leadership the toll that the war, inflation, and internal corruption had taken on the Nicaraguan people. As with Belli, Cardenal represents the “hostility” of Nicaraguans as a personal attack (the phrase “contra nosotros” is telling), rather than a political and economic issue, one that makes him nearly question his faith in God.

At the same time, the post-Cold War period led them to also take culpability for many of the failures of Sandinismo itself. While during the eighties, most within the government blamed the slow progress of the government on the Contra War and the toll that economic isolation by the United States produced, after 1990, these authors were more likely to point to some of the internal contradictions of the movement itself. Ramírez would say that the Sandinista’s “top-down hierarchy was inspired by Leninist manuals, by the exigencies of war, as well as by caudillismo, our oldest cultural heritage” and made the FSLN bureaucratize the mass organizations, such as neighborhood councils and unions (201). Zamora, along with her critiques of the sexist hierarchy within the FSLN, would claim that the war and economy alone could not

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62 As Sergio Ramírez would write, the FSLN “thought that the signs of discontent, the increasing resistance to military service and the economic disaster, were temporary situations that would be remedied, specifically, by the end of the war” (Adiós muchachos 194).
explain the defeat, and that “many in the upper echelons became addicted to power…and the abuse of power effectively separated them from the masses of people” (Randall Sandino’s Daughters 114). Poet Michelle Najlis would echo these comments stating that corruption in the party “tended to support the verticality of the state and the Party” and that the women’s organization AMNLAE had become “an appendage of the FSLN, run by male members of the national directorate who frequently made terrible comments about women and women’s issues” (ibid. 56, 57). However, in subsequent memoirs and interviews, former Sandinistas tend to underestimate the impact of land reforms—or the lack therefore—and the way in which their modernizing developmentalism simply proletarianized more farmers (rather than abolishing proletarianization itself) and used state cooperatives as a coercive form of labor.

Saldaña-Portillo on the other hand argues for the centrality of this aspect of the eighties in leading to disaffection with the FSLN. Land-poor peasants became distrustful of a government that sought to turn them into wage-laborers on state farms, in keeping in line with the government’s quasi-Leninist notion of the need to modernize and collectivize agricultural production. She writes that “MIDINRA’s [the agricultural ministry of Nicaragua] decision to create state farms rather than redistribute lands suggested that the ministry intended to ‘complete’ the process of proletarianization through increased employment and improved conditions on state farms” (116). However, coupled with agricultural price controls, such state farms did not raise living standards for most workers and destroyed any sense of autonomy in farmers who lacked the ability to farm their own land. For Saldaña-Portillo, this move, among others, posited the “backwardness” of the small scale farmer as an obstacle to development of a national, Sandinista ideology in which land could be held by the state and national concerns
would trump local and familial ones. These decisions would turn many itinerant and small farmers into the counterrevolutionaries that fought Sandinista rule. As both she and other critics have noted, “the Sandinista land reform had concentrated on creating a significant state sector for agro-export but beginning in 1985 much greater emphasis was placed on land distribution to individual campesinos” so that many peasants experienced the reforms of first half of the Sandinista decade as coercion by the state to turn them into wage laborers and deny them access to land (Prevost 307).

Likewise, many ex-Sandinistas have been mum on the failures in the government’s dealing with the Atlantic Coast, especially before it granted the region autonomy in 1987. Likewise, Baraco has shown how Costeño identity (Miskito and Afro-Caribbean) were posited as barriers to national belonging, and he claims that for the Sandinistas, “[r]acial divisions, like class divisions, are seen as the consequences of imperialism” and hence foregrounded the “need to assimilate Costeños into mestizo struggles” as the only way to ensure their political agency (136). He goes on to argue that for many Costeños the economic legacies of Spanish colonialism had been much more oppressive than those of the Anglo nations, and as such predisposed them against the Sandinistas, who were seen not as necessarily bringing about a radical “revolution” but rather representing a simple change within a mestizo-dominated government. In this sense, Prevost will write that “Nicaragua’s eastern coast, rich in minerals and other natural resources, had long been exploited with no care for the environment nor the non-Hispanic population that lived there.

63 Prevost however, will also argue that by the end of the decade the Sandinistas had made massive strides in dealing with inequality in the agricultural sector: “by 1990 the majority of farms were in the hands of small and medium size producers, in contrast to the historic maldistribution of land going back to the colonial times” (307).
Initially the Pacific coast-based Sandinistas continued the same pattern of dominant relations with the coast” until granting the region autonomy in 1987 (309-10).

Postrevolutionary Affect: Nostalgia and Cynicism

Therefore, my central claim of this chapter is that in the postrevolutionary period the poets I examine, Cardenal, Belli, and Zamora, navigate their relation to their former utopian dreams by moving uneasily between nostalgia and cynicism, that is between a longing for a return to the ideals of Sandinismo and, on the other hand, a critical disavowal of these very ideals in a neoliberal capitalist world. What haunts these works then is the question of how to relate to the “lost object” of Sandinismo—a specter that at times threaten to turn into a melancholic self-criticism and disavowal of the past, and indeed all future utopianism. For as Freud writes, in mourning, the lost object and the subject’s affective withdrawal from it are conscious, however in melancholy, “one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, take it as its object” (247) resulting from the fact that the melancholic knows “whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him” (245). Following this logic, we might say that while these poets know that it is Sandinismo that has been lost, their works reveal an uncertainty about the full extent of what this loss entails for their writing, identities, and political hopes for the future. However, rather than simply urging an adaptation to a global capitalist reality on the one hand or a naïve return to the state socialist politics that sustained these writers in the eighties, I would argue that utopianism and melancholy might not be opposed terms in these works. Following Bruno Bosteels’s assessment of post-68 Left’s melancholy relation to the prospect of a liberatory communism, I contend that “utopian desire can no longer be opposed simply as a force of innovation to the allegedly regressive negativity of melancholy, but rather is somehow contained
within the latter” (161). That is, what if, in the very acting of losing Sandinismo, and working through its implications, these authors might be better poised to capture what was most emancipatory in it?

The urge to navigate the Scylla and Charybdis of nostalgia and cynicism in the reclamation—however tentative—of a utopian poetics greatly shapes the form and texture of the works of Cardenal, Belli, and Zamora after 1990. It should be noted, however that for many younger writers, this period became a way to conceive of poetry without the demands of overt politicizing gestures, often while still retaining a critical function in the face of globalized capitalism. On the one hand, Yvette Aparicio will claim that throughout Central America “younger writers deal with dismembered post-conflict homelands,” often through a nostalgia for “homes that have disappeared because of physical, economic, political, emotional, and/or familial transformations” (15). That is, the nation—or at least the nation as a fantasized space—that was lost during the civil wars and revolutions becomes the object of desire, often as an antidote to the hypocrisy and increasing social contradictions generated by modernizing projects through the isthmus. However, nostalgia reflects a longing for an object—the nation—but as Freud points out, the “what” that the subject longs for in a melancholic relation—in this case, the egalitarian promise of the past—may be hidden to consciousness. Nostalgia however, in my reading, becomes a critical practice inasmuch as it allows writers to imagine an otherwise to neoliberal orthodoxy, even if the object of nostalgia (in this case pre-1990 Central America) might, on closer inspection, contain many of the same contradictions—poverty, displacement, racism—as presented these authors critique in the nineties and aughts.
On the other hand, Aparicio shows how younger writers such as Juan Sobalvarro and Marta Leonor González in Nicaragua generate what Beatriz Cortes has called a “literatura de cinismo,” ironizing or even mocking the modernizing pretensions of the post-conflict governments as well as the revolutionary ideals of the older generation, therefore rejecting utopianism in any form (Aparicio 16). What for Belli, Cardenal, and Ramírez was experienced as a “dark night of the soul” became for younger writers an opening in which a critique of Left and Right, the false utopias of state socialism and neoliberal modernization could emerge. I would read such cynicism as itself the product of a melancholic relation to the emancipatory dreams of a socialist past, a criticism toward all political “dreaming” as such as inherently flawed. However, in such refusal to dream, cynicism often carries the kernel of a utopian longing. In this sense, we cannot follow Beatriz Cortes who wishes to read such cynicism as “un proyecto fallido, como una trampa que constituye la subjetividad por media de la destrucción del ser a quien constituye como sujeto” (26). In other words, while she would argue that cynicism annihilates the very political possibilities of the subjects that circulate, it may be more productive to read cynicism as the historical trace of the closure of utopian possibilities in the post-Sandinista era, and indeed in the post-Cold War world, a means to think utopia in the form of the negative.

To return to our authors, for Cardenal, the loss of Sandinismo forces him to make sense of political defeat and lost utopias within a larger timeframe, as his poetry moves increasingly from the terrestrial to the cosmic, relying as it does on scientific metaphors to give a naturalized basis to the emergence and dissolution of utopias throughout history. White holes (new universes generated on the “other side” of black holes), socially advanced extraterrestrials, a purposive

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64 Cardenal’s post-electoral poetry collection Telescopio en la noche oscura will make this connection directly.
biological evolution, and quantum interconnection all come to allegorize the utopian future teleologically promised to human beings, at the same time that, I will claim, they reflect Cardenal’s nostalgia for the certainties of the Sandinista era (in which such a teleology seemed feasible), now displaced onto the structure of the universe itself. I contend that Cardenal, in his representation of the universe as guided by natural, cosmic laws that are at the same time political laws, creates an image of a post-Cold War global capitalism that no matter how triumphant at the moment, must, so Cardenal would have it, undo itself in the end. As such, while he holds onto a utopian poetics, this comes at the cost failing to move into and beyond cynicism, as he reinscribes an unconvincing political teleology (one whose loss it seems he has not properly mourned) rather than interrogating the very conditions of global capital and their effect on Nicaragua.

For Belli, poetry, like politics, becomes an uncertain practice, as her works entails a rapid movement between this nostalgia for the Sandinista years and a cynicism about her lost ideals. I argue that the use of nostalgic reflections on Nicaragua, from her position of distance in Los Angeles, provide her texts with a critical counterbalance to the global dominance of the United States and neoliberal capital. At the same time, Belli’s works, while refusing a full-fledged cynicism, deploy an affective sense of hopelessness and disillusionment toward political possibility. In so doing, she more deeply engages with contemporary realities, such as the war in Iraq, violence in America and Sudan, and poverty that make the text more utopian, in my assessment, due to its ability to interrogate the conditions of possibility (or impossibility) for political action in the present. It formulates its utopianism not through a volcanic poetics but through the negativity of the present.
At the same time, the argument of my chapter is that Cardenal and Belli will continue to use myths of natural force, martyrdom, and cosmic love in the post-Sandinista years in order to make sense of the 1990 electoral defeat. If the main affects of the engaged poetry of the seventies and eighties were *mística* and urgency, from the nineties onward, these become disappointment and introspection, mixed with a sense that utopias may not be of the present moment, that they can only be thought against the *longue durée* of cosmic time, if at all. In both cases, these authors produce a post-urgent literature, in which Cardenal will double down on the cosmic certainty of utopian social formations and meaning inherent in the universe, whereas for Belli, it will seem that all such certainty has been erased, allowing her to think politics only through an at the moment, unredeemable negativity.

*Cardenal’s Post-1990 Poetics: Terrestrial Revolution Lost, Cosmic Utopia Regained*

As previously stated, Cardenal experienced the electoral defeat of 1990 as “*una ‘noche oscura’, que fue la más oscura de mi vida*” that challenged his faith in God, politics, and literature itself (*La revolución perdida* 654). Speaking of the celebratory, pro-FSLN *Vuelos de victoria* in particular he asks himself “¿En qué quedaba ahora toda esa poesía?” (ibid. 654). Indeed, as our analysis in the last chapter has shown, little seems left in terms of the compilation’s aesthetic and political content apart from its record as a mythologizing text, especially compared to more nuanced portraits of the Sandinista era. While the post-Sandinista period initiated an “autocritica que no se había hecho antes,” in which he took seriously the claim made by some that the FSLN “no era el partido de los campesinos del ‘poder popular’ sino un poder que se imponía al pueblo, a menudo con arrogancia; había sido incapaz de abandonar el verticalismo militar,” we find

As I argue, Cardenal will try to piece together a triad of broken dreams (God, politics, poetry) not by addressing the failures of the Sandinistas—the racial dynamics on the Atlantic coast, the FSLN’s developmentalist economics, its political corruption—but rather by moving his texts away from national, or even global concerns and reframing the loss of socialism within a sort of intergalactic, cosmic timeline, in which God (and the ultimate telos of the universe) will eventually promise the Sandinista moment redemption. From the dark night of the soul in his 1993 work, Cardenal will move to construct a pluriverse (a universe composed of multiple universes, some closer to “redemption” than our own) whose origin and endpoint is the very love and collectivity exemplified in Sandinismo. In fact, the end of Cardenal’s memoir presages such a move toward an increasingly cosmic poetry to make sense of the loss of socialism and the new global capitalism:

Son esos millones y millones de estrellas con planetas habitados, con evoluciones y revoluciones como el nuestro. El Reino de los Cielos es la tierra y todo el cosmos, la sociedad de planetas habitados. En ellos también habrá revelación de Dios…Y un Reino de los Cielos que es el mismo de nosotros. Toda revolución nos acerca a ese Reino, aun una revolución perdida. Habrá más revoluciones. Pidamos a Dios que se haga su revolución en la tierra como en el cielo. (666)

For Cardenal, the loss of one revolution becomes less significant given the expansiveness of the cosmos since, as he writes, “aun una revolución perdida” moves history toward the ultimate Kingdom of God. Rather than abandoning a volcanic poetics, Cardenal here points to Sandinismo as having temporarily “exploded” out of time, of breaking from the cosmic trajectory of oppression (of greed, sin, and accumulation that appear in works such as “Canto
nacional” and “Oráculo sobre Managua”) that holds back this drive toward the pluriverse’s ultimate reconciliation in love. But it is the case of martyrdom, and Cardenal’s uneasy attempts to redeem the lives of the dead that, I argue undermines such efforts. As Henighan eloquently writes, the phrase “El que conserve su vida la perderá” appears in Cardenal’s later works “almost as a form of survivor’s guilt” and as I will argue, animates a poetry trying to make sense of the deaths—whose meaning is now in question—that took place during this “revolución perdida” (Sandino’s Nation 373).

Cántico cósmico and the Beginnings of the Pluriverse

Although written and published (although by a mere three months) before the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, Cántico cósmico exemplifies Cardenal’s efforts to render political events in the light of a larger cosmic destiny, with a more vigorous synthesis of scientific discourse (quantum theory, the Big Bang) and religious mysticism that will prefigure his Versos del pluriverso on which I focus this chapter’s analyses. However, a few brief points are worth mentioning here. Cántico cósmico, along with works by Belli, Cabezas, Borge, and Ramírez published in 1988-9 “constitute a quintet of epics in which Sandinista leaders anchor in history the contours of the revolutionary nation precisely at the point where, as a consequence of the US proxy war, it is losing the ability to deliver on its promise of national sovereignty and social justice” (Henighan 402).\(^65\) Therefore, while not part of the post-Sandinista and post-Cold War era proper, we can read this increasing emphasis on the cosmic—and Cardenal’s own fascination with the scientific—as generated by the evident failures of Sandinismo and the first phase of Cardenal’s

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\(^65\) Although not included in this list Zamora’s En limpio se escribe la vida, analyzed in Chapter 2 here, could certainly be added (although not an “epic” in any traditional sense), due to its obviously critical relation to the ongoing problems of Sandinista Nicaragua after 1985.
withdrawal from the FSLN, especially after the closure of the Ministry of Culture in 1987.

_Cántico cósmico_, as Henighan has claimed, can be divided (roughly) into three parts, each representing one of the main discourses shaping the poem: _cantigas_ 1-16 focus on the scientific, including the origins of the universe and life, _cantigas_ 17-33 focus on the political, including events in Nicaragua, and the final section of the text, from _cantigas_ 34-45 focuses on the religious and Cardenal’s vision of God (Sandino’s Nation 410). This text shows a retreat from the affective urgency as well as the episodic and journalistic moments of his earlier poetry as he delves deeper into questions of cosmic destiny, natural and human evolution, and the presence of the divine in the universe. Cardenal’s retention of a directly political section will differentiate this work from his later _Versos del pluriverso_, which focuses almost entirely on cosmic evolution rather than “on the ground” political affairs. It is a “turn” in the sense that Cardenal no longer speaks as representative of the revolution so much as he hopes to render the revolution a part of the universe’s structure itself, in the communion of matter and the tendency of creation toward sociality rather than individuality.

However, as I show in my analysis of _Versos del pluriverso_ Cardenal anchors his poetry in the same tropes of martyrdom, love, and natural force that sustained his works of the seventies and eighties, although these now become less attached to individual figures or even the Nicaraguan nation and become the structures through which he wants cosmic and historical evolution to be understood. As Henighan argues, “the ineluctable presence of the decaying bodies of the martyrs, in fact, is in many ways the catalyst animating _Cosmic Canticle_’s entire vast, dense architecture” since Cardenal can use the intersection of religious, political, and scientific discourses to provide
an “illustration of the potential form of human immortality in the cosmos” (*Sandino’s Nation* 423). The martyr, as in *Versos del pluriverso*, embodies the most acute moment of cosmic love toward which the universe itself is striving. In this sense, the martyr attains an immortality in that they become one with the universal love that as Dante would have it “moves the sun and other stars.” For Henighan, “martyr worship” was “one of Sandinismo’s central tenets” and it was the FSLN’s decision to no longer participate in “martyr worship” for those killed in Solentiname that lead to Cardenal’s decision to leave the FSLN in 1994 (573). It therefore makes sense to analyze Cardenal’s continued emphasis on vindicating the place of martyrs in the Sandinista cause and assuring them a place of privilege in the cosmic schema even after his break with the FSLN. It is in his 2005 *Versos del pluriverso* that we can see his most well elaborated formulation of the ongoing relevance of martyrdom, natural force, and cosmic love in his poetic work after the defeat of socialism.

*Telescopio en la noche oscura*

However, before arriving at such a cosmic vision, Cardenal dealt with the existential shock of 1990 by creating one of his most personal and mystical texts, *Telescopio en la noche oscura*, a roughly forty-page poem that reads as the speaker’s efforts to reconnect, as an emotionally starved and jilted lover, with a God who both seemingly loves him beyond measure and has abandoned him. Although surprisingly López-Baralt makes no mention of the post-Sandinista context of this work, the author of the prologue rightly notes the “conflicto melancólico del poeta” and the eroticism that shapes the speaker’s dynamics with his divine interlocutor (20).

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66 Examples of this relationship abound: “¿Qué gano que la luna sea bella / si estoy sin vos?” (29) or “Me quitaste todo, / dáteme todo pues” (36).
Given that the first moment the speaker refers to himself is with the line “Yo nací para un amor extremista,” Lopéz-Baralt’s omission of historical details from the prologue seems more curious. For while this “amor extremista” in the context of the poem is the speaker’s love for God that drives him to celibacy, suffering, and sacrifice, for in reading this poem as “melancholic,” one quickly understands that the lost-object at work here is the “extreme love” of Sandinismo that once was propped up by the speaker’s divine faith and now lays in tatters. Without this “amor extremista” we can read what the speaker says to God, “Pareciera ahora que no meieres. / Peor aún, que ni siquiera existes,” as referring to the absence of any transcendental term that might guarantee Cardenal’s socialist convictions (37).

Time and again, it becomes clear to the careful reader that as much as a dialogue with God, Cardenal is having a melancholic dialogue with his Sandinista past in light of his current lack of faith in its ideals. For example, at one point the speaker reflects on the “terror” of free will, as he says, “Libre albedrío en todas las galaxias. / Terror del universo el libre albedrío. / Poder perderte, amor mío, si yo quiero” (47). It should be clear that the “terror” of free will refers not to the speaker or a choice he has made, but rather the free will of others that, like a sublime power, comes from the outside to affect the speaker. In other words, the speaker—perhaps unknowingly—struggles to make sense of the “terror” of the free will of the working-class Nicaraguans that lead to the ouster of the Sandinista in 1990, and that caused him to lose his “love” for the revolution. Interestingly, the theme of free will returns in Versos del pluriverso as
the speaker there comes to define God as an incompleteness and imperfection who must come to realize himself—by granting free will in the universe—through the process of evolution.\textsuperscript{67}

Indeed, part of what the poet, in melancholic fashion, struggles with is not the material factors that lead to the loss of Sandinismo, but the insufficiency of his love. In this sense, the speaker doubles down on cosmic love as the source, sustainer, and end goal of revolutionary activity. For example, he implores God to “inspirar mejor poesía” in the speaker so that in turn, he might (speaking in the third person) inspire “un amor mayor que el que pudo tener por ti el poeta” (49).

The speaker pleads for God: “Únete a mí aunque no te sienta, aunque / mi conciencia queda afuera con el frío,” emphasizing his own “coldness” and lack of feeling (43). However, as Freud reminds us, in melancholy, “an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification” (\textit{Complete Psychological Works XIV} 249). Therefore, I contend that this very self-criticism should be read as a criticism directed at the “lost object” of Sandinismo (displaced onto the divine), which represents that part of the ego “altered by identification,” as the speaker accuses “it” (that is, the Sandinista moment, the working-class of Nicaragua) of coldness, lacking of feeling, an absence of love. In other words, I argue that Cardenal displaces a sense of political betrayal onto a mystical dialogue in which the speaker criticizes his own lack of “love,” when in fact the true target of the critique is the Nicaraguan working-class. If the themes of poetic martyrdom and natural force are absent from this text, it is

\textsuperscript{67} In the poem entitled “Pluriverso” for instance, the speaker will link free will to the downfall of socialism, and indeed to the presence of evil in the universe: “Tampoco Dios diciendo: / ‘Perdimos. Ya no hay campo socialista. / Perdimos también las elecciones sandinistas. / Empecemos otra vez desde el comienzo. / Cambiemos de sistema. / Dejemos este pendejo sistema solar.’ / El mal es porque Dios nos hizo libres” (19).
precisely because Cardenal does not yet know how to relate to working-class Nicaraguans who sacrificed their lives, who supposedly embodied the power of nature in their revolutionary force. As such, the text wavers between a self-critical cynicism—that the speaker has been abandoned for his own failings—and a nostalgia—as a return to the certainties of the time when he was favored by God (and by extension, the revolution) that allegorizes the uncertainty of socialist politics in a post-Cold War world. While I imagine few readers will find it as aesthetically compelling as “Canto nacional” or many of Cardenal’s earlier works, the text, in Adornian fashion, subtracts itself from the social at the very point of a material contradiction: the speaker’s sense of abandonment and nostalgia testify the power of global capital in the nineties, in such a way that socialism itself seems to have entered a “dark night of the soul.”

_Edith Frankforter_ 
Versos del pluriverso: Intergalactic Socialism in the Pluriverse

Cardenal’s _Versos del pluriverso_, published in 2005, consists of six medium-length poems of about ten pages each that (with the exception of “Las cavernas”) deal with the theme of cosmic evolution from the Big Bang to the possible heat death of the universe and the role that human affairs, including political ones, have within that cycle. The text is marked by its numerous references to quantum physics (including scientists such as Niels Bohr, Josef Schrödinger, and Werner Heisenberg), biological evolution, the anthropic principle (the notion that the universe is compelled to have a species in it capable of observation), the laws of thermodynamics, and the Big Bang. The stakes of this collection, I believe, are quite different than the _Cántico cósmico_, although the two share a similar interest in new scientific theories. _Versos del pluriverso_, unlike its earlier counterpart moves away from immediate political life entirely and I argue that it can

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68 As Adorno would have it, criticism should “discover how the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unity, is manifested in the work of art” (“On Lyric Poetry and Society” 39).
best be seen as an attempt to reconcile the loss of the Sandinista era’s revolutionary with a larger, cosmic notion of time, in which those ideals must—by the very nature of the universe—remain valid. By moving toward a cosmic perspective, Cardenal’s speaker can cast the brief moments of human life—political struggle, martyrdom, and the new globalized world—within the light of eons. Whereas the “dark night” of Cardenal’s 1993 work abandoned volcanic poetics, this text reintroduces it, as Cardenal would have us believe that Sandinismo, and other moments of the socialist past, have erupted outside of time and history and resonate with the ultimate telos of the universal itself. The sequence of socialism, while ended, was a cleavage and rupture with the retrogressive tendencies of human and cosmic history. As such, the myths of cosmic love, natural force, and poetic martyrdom return in full force.

Formally, the text becomes a work of science fiction since it will use scientific hypotheses, many of them speculative—on the existence of white holes, extraterrestrial life, and quantum interconnection—as allegories for utopian political possibilities, in much the same way that terrestrial natural force—in the form of earthquakes, the countryside’s beauty and so forth—served as allegories for a utopian national-popular imaginary in his work of the seventies and eighties. This pluriverse itself, as Cardenal represents it, moves toward love and communion through the process of evolution: “En la dirección del alma / la evolución biológica” (29). This somewhat shocking theological proposition, namely that evolution, through biology, will bring about the Kingdom of God subtends much of the work. For this reason, I contend that Cardenal “salvages” God from the abyss of his political and personal disillusionment by constructing him as imperfect, as his workings are known through the evolutionary process and the “terror” of free will (to return to Telescopio’s term) he has granted humanity. If “Un Dios que es amor no puede
ser estático / ni completo” it becomes a human moral obligation to help “complete” creation through embodying cosmic love, the driving force of nature itself (20). Such a vision therefore, in my reading, only postpones the question of what communism might mean in a post-Cold War world especially as it refuses to examine the problems facing not only Nicaragua in the latter part of the nineties and aughts (neoliberalization, the corruption of the Aléman regime and Ortega’s pact with him), but the world at large (the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example). In this way, I argue that whereas Telescopio en la noche oscura wavered between a nostalgia and self-critical “cynicism,” Versos del pluriverso, inasmuch as it subtracts itself from concrete social realities, does so in the longing for the clear-cut certainties of the Sandinista past. However instead of affirming the nostalgia of such a move, Cardenal simply imagines a future world in which the heroism, sacrifice, and bloodshed of that time could find redemption. That world, to draw upon Cardenal’s own metaphors, might be eons, and light years away.

The term pluriverso of the title has several important registers that must be discussed before proceeding. Obviously, the title of the work plays on the word “verso,” which can mean both a line of poetry or, as in English, “verse,” taken as the opposite of prose. The text therefore posits the universe as a work of poetry, such that Cardenal’s own poems are in themselves a “pluriverso,” a site in which the poetry of the universe(s) come together. However, in contemporary physics, a pluriverse can be conceived as the existence of multiple parallel universes, each determined by the branching possibilities generated by the different probabilistic occurrences taking place at the quantum level. Just as our world represents one set of possibilities there are also worlds in which “Napoleón venció en Waterloo. / Y un mundo en que ella aceptó mi amor
However, the notion of a pluriverse also has a different sense that is explored in the poem “Hoyos blancos,” in which each “universe” is nothing more than the opposite side of a black hole, such that countless universes must exist beyond black holes (as “white holes” or “hoyos blancos”). In either case however, these multiple universes—whether shaped by probabilistic occurrences or emerging from black holes—remain inaccessible to human observers. Their function in the poetic work is to provide a sense of the multitude of possible worlds (in which our history knows but one outcome) and cast human affairs, including Cardenal’s own life, within this unfathomable mystery. Both notions of the pluriverse open a radical alterity in which everything from Napoleon’s fall to the defeat of the Sandinista become just one probability of millions, or one “universe” of millions, reminding us that other histories (including perhaps the ultimate victory of Sandinismo) were at each stage possible. My contention is that the pluriverse provides a scientific metaphor through which Cardenal can imagine alternate realities in which the Sandinista past—including the deaths that occurred in the Contra War—might be redeemed at the same time that he avoids mapping the coordinates of political possibility in the era of global capitalism.

This move to highlight the indeterminacy of the cosmos—along with the inclusion of references to chaos theory—means that Cardenal now “refuses to extrapolate the predestination” that haunted his memoirs “into an assentation that God intended the Sandinistas to lose in 1990” (Henighan 619). However, Cardenal does not abandon predestination entirely, since, the telos of
the pluriverse is the dissolution of all matter into energy, all separate times becoming one, so that everything is simply “Una conciencia colectiva / cuyo cuerpo es el universo” (68). In this way, evolution is cast as the inevitable movement toward collectivity in that “Todo ser tiende a trascenderse / A ser un ser superior al anterior” (36). The internal rhyme of “superior” and “anterior” shows how history has a directionality moving from an imperfect past toward a “superior” future, whose ultimate destiny is the Kingdom of God mentioned throughout the collection and at the end of Cardenal’s memoirs.

However, there is yet another significance of the term “pluriverso,” which, as used by Walter Mignolo and Enrique Dussel in the aftermath of the Cold War, describes a sort of multi-ethnic, global community that might undo the colonial violence of the last five hundred years. As such, the “pluriverse” model allows for thinking an “outside” to global capital that is not, at the same time, explicitly anti-capitalist, let alone communist (which to these authors represent another form of Westernizing universalism). Walter Mignolo has used the term “pluriversality” to describe the coexistence of multiple universalities, in line with Zapatista thinking about the interrelation of modernity and indigenous subjectivities. He writes that “the universal can only be pluriversal, which also matched the Zapatista’s idea of a world in which many worlds would coexist. We, in the planet, had arrived at the end of the era of abstract universals, that is of one universal universality. Pluriversality is not cultural relativism, but entanglement of several cosmologies connected today in a power differential” (“On Pluriversality”). Dussel’s formulation has perhaps, a more utopian formulation, conceiving pluriversality as a positive state of equality between worldviews to be achieved. He writes:
El proyecto futuro no sería una cultura universal homogénea, única; sino un pluriverso diferenciado creación del indicado diálogo entre la tradición excluida de las grandes culturas (y aun las menos universales o secundarias) de la periferia postcolonial con la Modernidad occidental (209).

While the power of this conception is its critique of the Eurocentric perspective of “imperial reason,” including that found in many forms of communist thought, it seems more difficult to understand exactly how such multiple universalities could coexist, translate each other, and produce new cultural forms, especially if they have no common link through an anti-capitalist politics. As such, the conception of a pluriverse—while highlight the need for a coexistence of worldviews—does little to question the material foundation of worldviews, that is, their dialectical relations to economics and environment, such that it becomes symptomatic of a retreat from anti-capitalist politics. Cardenal’s use of the term represents does not represent an abandonment of the “communist hypothesis” as in Dussel and Mignolo, but rather attempts to grapple with what universality might mean in the post-Cold War era.

“Hoyos blancos”

I will now turn to the poem “Hoyos blancos” in order to analyze the political implications of this conception of the pluriverse and how it reworks the tropes of cosmic love, martyrdom, and natural force. The poem begins with the speaker’s remembrance of his classmate at the university and Mexican writer, Rosario Castellanos, and a reflection on the circumstances around her death by accidental electrocution in the seventies. From there, the poem attempts to make sense of her death by claiming that in the cosmic scheme of things, death itself has meaning, since “Morir es entrar en Dios” (51). The speaker then elaborates on the formation of “white
holes” and the possible existence of new universes on the obverse side of black holes. He then uses various references to Neils Bohr and quantum physics in order to assert that there is truly no separation between physical entities (as in the Copenhagen interpretation) apart from human observation. Nor does time itself exist in any absolute sense, as the speaker will have the physicist Wheeler say, “‘Tiempo:…tú que no existes’ / Tú que no existes sino en mis neuronas” (55).

This quantum cosmology will lead the speaker into a series of metaphysical speculations on the destiny of human life in the cosmos, specifically that human beings do no truly die, such that death is a sort of optical illusion caused by a limited understanding of time: “Todos los que llamamos muertos están vivos / porque el pasado existe como el presente / aunque inobservado” (56). At the same time, each death brings forth new life in the universe, until all beings dissolve into divinity, such that “En la Revolución final los muertos / estarán todos resucitados” (57). The poem ends with a meditation on how Christ’s incarnation in human beings and even in other sapient species throughout the pluriverse means that redemption must be found in time, as a collective phenomenon. The collective dimension of redemption, for Cardenal, means that the “black hole” of death, including that of Castellanos, serves a purpose, as each death is also a “hoyo blanco” opening up new possibilities of life and transformation in the universe.

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69 Barrau writes, “Bounces should replace singularities in most quantum gravity approaches, and this leads to an expanding region of spacetime inside the black hole that can be considered as a universe. In this model our own universe would have been created by such a process and should also have a very large number of children universes, thanks to its numerous stellar and supermassive black holes.” (See “Physics in the Multiverse an Introductory Review” 14).
As this summary should make clear, the poem wanders, often in convoluted ways, between quantum physics, religion, and politics so that it is unclear to what extent Cardenal uses a poetic license to imagine the actual existence of other universes and to what extent he wishes to develop a new sort of political theology. What is clear is that this use of physics “substitutes for the exhausted discourses of liberation theology and revolutionary Marxism, and acts as a vehicle to smuggle them across the boundary-line of 1990 into the era of accelerated globalization” (Henighan Sandino’s Nation 625). Additionally, however, the use of physics allows Cardenal to celebrate natural force by removing it from the Nicaraguan nation or landscape—and its relation to the failed Sandinista past—and projecting it onto the structure of the universe as whole.

Whereas in the seventies and eighties, the revolutionary pueblo embodied the power and physical force of terrestrial nature, particularly the jungles, volcanos, and storms of Nicaragua, here the power of nature reminds beings of their ultimate communion and interconnection in the distant telos of the universe. His promise of a scientific basis for the redemption of martyrs—since time in his understanding of quantum physics does not exist—becomes a means of dealing with survivor’s guilt, a way of appeasing the dead his poetry inspired to take up arms.

Therefore, I contend that in this text, the figure of the martyr plays a crucial role in Cardenal’s efforts to “salvage” Sandinismo from its political defeat, as the Sandinista martyr, who for Cardenal seems to have liberated him- or herself from the limitations of greed, sin, and accumulation in life, comes to know the cosmic telos directly in death. If “Morir es entrar en Dios,” then the martyr, who embodied cosmic love in life, becomes synonymous with it in death. In this way, the text attempts to save the legacy of Sandinismo as an irruptive temporality of liberation that connects it—and other revolutionary moments—to the final destiny of the
In an ironic twist, the political cry of “Venceremos” becomes a question oriented to the cosmic structure itself: “Venceremos la Segunda Ley de la Termodinámica?” / es el grito de todos los muertos de la tierra” (54). For Cardenal, martyrs, who embody love, seem uniquely poised to overcome such cosmic entropy. In this sense when Cardenal writes that “En nosotros hay algo que no muere. / Un ADN de los cuerpos resucitados / Es un fenómeno orgánico la resurrección” he may simply be referring to the soul, or more probably, it is the very selflessness and altruism given to humanity by evolution (as we will see below), and epitomized by Sandinista martyrs that promises this resurrection (52).

This is why Cardenal wants to deploy highly speculative forms of quantum physics to supplement the seeming inevitability of thermodynamic heat death. While it is true that quantum physics points toward the immateriality of matter, that is, the idea that all matter is a communion of energy, “Ondas de materia insustanciales / como unas olas solas sin el agua,” Cardenal time and again gives the term “energy” a spiritual tenor without justification (55). For him, at the moment of death, when matter begins to dissolve into energy, the individual realizes a cosmic destiny: “La eternidad individual como parte / de una comunidad de eternidades. Y / la conciencia individual que surge / y se diluye en lo universal” (56). In other words, these lines indicate that just as behind the multiplicity of matter is the energy-wave of the cosmos, so too behind individual lives stand the “community” of beings in the universal. Communism may exist, but for the time being, we can only know it in death. And who would be better poised to know it than those who embodied the love that animates history—Sandinista martyrs? This seems to be Cardenal’s macabre proposition.

In this spirit, he writes:
A propósito de esto, cuando murió Alejandro
su hijo chavalito dijo que se pusieron alegres
Felipe y Donald y Elbis y Laureano
(sus compañeros mártires) y dijeron riendo
‘ya estamos completos otra vez’ (51).

In this case, death offers a form of communion and a “completion,” that can be spoken only by
the Sandinista martyrs—not for instance anonymous civilians or people who died in the 1972
earthquake. Life itself becomes “un fluir temporal de lo eternamente junto” such that in dying we
can simply “entrar en Dios” (51). In this sense death through martyrdom loses its sting not due to
the inevitability of socialist triumph but rather because “Todos los que llamamos muertos están
vivos / porque el pasado existe como el presente / aunque inobservado” (56). In this volcanic
temporality, the martyrs have erupted out of history and become one with its ultimate end-point:
a communion of beings united in cosmic love. Although communion now only takes place in
death, not in the glorious moment of insurrection.

By focusing on the redemptive power of the white hole and the fantasy of an overcoming of the
second law of thermodynamics, Cardenal refuses to deal with the threat of the black hole—from
which nothing can escape—and the negativity of entropy itself. To transform this into allegorical
terms, the text refuses to allow the Sandinista past to fall into the “black hole” of history that
would reveal its limitations and failures more completely, and instead uses nostalgia as a mode to
project a future in which Sandinismo will be accorded its true meaning. I argue that the political
appears not as project to be realized in the present but as an imagined communion in death.

While we might praise Cardenal for attempting to hold onto what was of value in the Sandinista
legacy, the price he pays—in this aestheticization of death—is far too great for any utopian politics in the twenty-first century.

“Con Martí mirando las estrellas”

The other key poem in the collection is “Con Martí mirando las estrellas” (25-38) in which Cardenal posits that sharing and altruism are the true lessons of biological evolution and humanity’s existence is a necessary component of the universe inasmuch as it reveals the movement of time itself toward love and communion. The poem begins by considering how the Big Bang produced life, and what it might be like elsewhere in the universe. The text next traverses through a consideration of the strong anthropic principle and the seeming purposiveness of the cosmos, given that human beings exist and can contemplate it as such. About three-fourths of the way through the poem, the speaker considers human evolution in particular, and the idea that collectivity is the true meaning of evolution, such that “El pecado es ir contra la evolución” (35). This leads the speaker to see all of evolution as a process of transcendence—as the human being itself will “trascender a otro ser mejor” seemingly into something divine (36). Finally, the poem ends with a scene of a child, looking at the stars and talking to José Martí, who insists that the universe was indeed made for human beings (as in the anthropic principle), and therefore “tenemos obligaciones con eso que se ha creado” (37). In short, the poem creates the sense of a cosmos created for sentient species to realize the very purposiveness of existence by embracing their “obligaciones” toward sharing, communion, and love, as exemplified by Martí, and we imagine, the FSLN of the eighties. I argue that Cardenal

70 As Efrain Kristal noted in a conversation, “contra la evolución” easily becomes “contra la revolución,” such that, I would argue, the electoral defeat becomes a “sinful” moment in Nicaragua’s history, its abandonment of a cosmic destiny.
attempts to give the Sandinista moment this cosmic destiny as yet another form of nostalgia, as a way to redeem its legacy without questioning its shortcomings or interrogate how to translate its anti-capitalist politics into the present. By reducing its legacy to an almost metaphysical, communist love, Cardenal spiritualizes the movement, this sacred affect rendering it immune from critique.

The first thing one notices about this poem is Cardenal’s use of the anthropic principle to guarantee a purposive directionality to evolution, inasmuch as he represents sentient observers of the universe are represented as necessary components of the universe. Cardenal writes, “Nuestra existencia es causa de la estructura del universo…” / ‘El universo tenía que crear observadores de él’” (38). Human existence retroactively “causes” the universe to take the form it does, and therefore, the implication is that in knowing about human destiny we might know something of the meaning of the universe itself. As seen in “Hoyos blancos,” the martyr embodies the love that is “la estructura del universo” itself.

However, another striking feature of the poem is Cardenal’s displacement of the question of human, terrestrial liberation onto that of a more transspecies or intergalactic sense of liberation, as he casts aside the political realities of his contemporary Nicaragua for a science fiction imaginary of communism. The speaker imagines alien life forms as closer to the socialist vision the Sandinistas were unable to achieve, describing the bodies of alien life forms in exotic ways: “pudrian ser nube interestelar solamente / O seres inteligentes hechos solo de radiación” (26). The very insubstantiality of the “nube” and “radiación” offers a utopian vision of beings no longer determined by their material conditions, such as the need for food and shelter. The
speaker wonders whether perhaps “los extraterrestres del universo, con nosotros / estamos tratando de crear un universo mejor, / un nuevo universo?” (27). In other words, if the drive to build a “new” or “better” universe is common to all species, then Cardenal can construct his prior utopian engagements in the Sandinista years not as misguided political adventures, but rather as in harmony with the greater telos driving all sentient species. Unfortunately, not all beings are made of light.

However, it is not enough to refer the cosmic telos to aliens, as Cardenal also hopes to make it the origin of biological evolution itself. As such he repeats a volcanic poetics in which origin and endpoint become clear in the moment of eruption that was the Sandinista revolution. Several times throughout the text, Cardenal details what for him is the pre-human history of this tendency toward cooperation, saying that “La cooperación es a todo nivel biológico y / tan antigua como la vida,” as well as “Células individuales de Myxobacteria, por ejemplo, / salen a cazar en grupo” and “Compasión como un factor de la evolución / Altruismo el otro / Desde que éramos animalitos chiquitos entre dinosaurios” / La primera economía fue compartir” (32). What each of these formulations have in common is a turn toward the prehistoric—which, in temporal terms, stands juxtaposed to the projection of an extraterrestrial encounter in the future—in order to read a common thread in evolution: the tendency toward altruism. Communism is primal origin (just as in “Oráculo sobre Managua” and “Canto nacional”) and alien future. In other words, the continuity from the “Myxobacteria” to the beings made of “radiación” is their capacity, given by evolution, to better the universe through love, sharing, and collectivity. Natural force, rather being immanent in the national character of Nicaragua becomes this very
collectivist urge of biological evolution. Unfortunately, it seems that this communist impulse is nowhere to be found in the present for Cardenal.

Where does this leave a place for the human realization of cosmic love for the speaker? In the final part of the poem, Martí has a dialogue with a child, explaining how humans have a necessary part in the universe. In particular, Martí says that “no fue hecho para divertirnos / y tenemos obligaciones con eso que se ha creado” (37). Here the relation between humanity and cosmos is framed as one of “obligation,” namely the practical effort to embody the very animating force of love that drives evolution forward. Just as Cardenal establishes a narrative continuity between early evolution and the extraterrestrial utopia, so he will insert the figures from the past, including Sandino and Martí to create a narrative continuity between the longue durée of earthly revolutionary history and Cardenal’s own hopes for political change. Reiterating humanity’s “obligation” of the universe as a praxis of love, Cardenal cites a French communist as saying “Mi acción revolucionaria / por la fe en la resurrección de los muertos” (33) and quotes Sandino as writing “‘el amor, o sea Dios’ / escribió Sandino. / ‘El comunismo del amor’ / (A.C. Sandino)” (34). These citations work to lend authority to the conviction that the universe’s destiny is in a cosmic “love” and that revolution is the manner through which human beings have sought to embody it, however problematic or even disastrous the results. Revolutionary moments, I argue, in Cardenal’s poem come to represent an eruption out of the “sin” of going against evolution inasmuch as reveal the trajectory of the universe. I argue that this poem allows Cardenal to justify his prior political activities, and those of the Sandinista years, casting them not merely in the light of prior revolutionary engagements, but now as, in a somewhat self-aggrandizing manner, as in harmony with the divine love that drives physical and biological
reality itself. In this sense, the specific faults, failures, and contradictions of the moment go unexamined, instead they are made sense of in light of an almost intergalactic movement toward a socialism of love that he renders as the meaning of natural evolution itself. Such a movement also secures a place for the dead as the full embodiment of a sense of “obligation” toward the universe, as the densest points in the universe of cosmic love itself. Rather than reveal the meaning of their lives and struggles to a contemporary politics, Cardenal prefers to refer them to a future of reconciliation.

To conclude, we should note that much like *Telescopio en la noche oscura* (although here more overtly), this text also involves a theodicy that hopes to make sense of free will, and by extension the “evil” of the Sandinista electoral defeat. At one point in the poem “Pluriverso,” Cardenal will, as a counterfactual have God say that He has abandoned the solar system after the fall of the Sandinistas:

Tampoco Dios diciendo:
“Perdimos. Ya no hay campo socialista.
Perdimos también las elecciones sandinistas.
Empecemos otra vez desde el comienzo. Cambiemos de sistema.
Dejemos este pendejo sistema solar.”
El mal es porque Dios nos hizo libres (19).

Interestingly, the speaker has God use the “nosotros” when describing the defeat of Sandinismo, such that, even in this counterfactual, there seems to exist an inherent bond between those who fight for socialism and God’s plan itself. The idea is that God has *not* abandoned earth even though he is united to those who struggle for political revolution. But perhaps what haunts this text, as it did *Telescopio* is this very abandonment by God with the loss of the socialist ideal.
However, it is not God who has abandoned “este pendejo sistema solar” but Cardenal himself. The most generous interpretation of such work might point to the difficulty of articulating an alternative politics in the post-Cold War Nicaragua in which Cardenal stayed (while Belli and Zamora left), marked by the corruption of Ortega’s FSLN as well as its rightist opposition. The desire to flee the earth, in Adornian fashion, becomes the desire to keep the communist impulse alive in a world in which communism no longer seems possible. However, I believe that in refusing to relate Sandinismo—and its martyrs—to the contemporary moment and impasses of global capitalism, Cardenal instead turns the revolution into a mere allegory for the love he believes animates the universe. The poem circulates the affective sense of a sacred nostalgia for the Sandinista years, but little else. As such he guarantees their “redemption” at the expense of interrogating their full complexity and ongoing relevance for our era.

**Gioconda Belli: Fragments of Exile in Neoliberal North America**

For Gioconda Belli, the electoral defeat of the Sandinista party presented no less of an existential and political crisis than it did for Ernesto Cardenal, although her poetic response to it, as we shall see, could not be more different. Put succinctly, Cardenal turns toward a divine, cosmic sense of time in which the Sandinista revolution figured as one brief failure in the larger liberatory telos of the universe. He betrays both a nostalgia for the clear answers of the socialist past and a melancholic relation to the working-class people who ousted the FSLN. For Belli, who decided to leave Nicaragua for Washington D.C. and then Los Angeles, the failure of the revolution provokes a profound sense of disillusionment without an accompanying mythology to make sense of it. At the same time, her texts of the nineties and aughts, retain a critical political disposition that also refuses to accommodate itself to the real. In this sense, to return to Bosteel’s
quotation with which I began the chapter, her melancholy for the Sandinista past is in no way incompatible with the utopian.

Since the 1990 electoral defeat Belli published several novels, including the best-selling *El infinito en la palma de la mano*, *Waslala* (a follow-up to *La mujer habitada*), and *El País de las Mujeres*. Additionally, she has published three works of poetry, *Apogeo* (1997), *Mi íntima multitud* (2003) and *Fuego soy apartado y espada puesta lejos* (2007), and it is the latter two that I analyze below as, given their distance from 1990, reveal the evolution of a new poetic style attuned to post-Cold War realities. However, unlike her previous works, these texts are produced from a space of exile from Nicaragua and reflect Belli’s increasing discontent with the FSLN under Ortega’s leadership, especially after he took power in 2006.71 This self-imposed exile goes back to 1992, and Belli began living a sort of double life, travelling between North American opulence and Nicaragua, the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere. This duplicity—and the isolation, alienation, and sense of increasing obligation without joy—will suffuse *Fuego soy* and *Mi íntima multitud*. Or to put it in her own words: “En el país de los rascacielos / Soy un árbol sin raíces” (“Vida dividida,” *Fuego soy* 39). In this sense, her works can often be read as reflections—even if often told through personal anecdotes of nostalgia and longing—on the loss of place, as well as the loss of the sense of collective purpose that she, and so many others, felt regarding the Sandinista years. In these works, references to revolution or utopia are almost

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71 As Belli says, “Daniel Ortega has ruled the party with an iron fist and stifled any kind of dissent. He has turned the FSLN into his personal fiefdom” (Elizabeth Hoover. “Interview with Nicaraguan Writer Gioconda Belli.”).
always marked by a nostalgia coupled with disenchantment, cynicism, or a sense of impossibility.\textsuperscript{72}

While the focus of this project remains on her poetry, it should be noted that the novel \textit{Waslala}, published in 1996, holds a special interest in regard to feelings of political disenchantment. In it, Belli returns to Faguas, the site of \textit{La mujer habitada} (1989) at a moment in the future “after all revolutions have been fought and lost and it lies in fantastic, futuristic abandonment” (Rodríguez 215). The dynamics introduced in the novel presage the increased deregulation of global capital and the rapid destruction of the environment that became hallmarks of the 1990’s alterglobalization movement. Faguas’s economy now “runs on the exchange of contraband, the production of air (trees are preserved to generate oxygen for the world), and the incineration of global waste” (Rodríguez 215). War, air, and waste: a tragic recycling of the damaged resources—including bodies—of a global economy. In the novel, Melisandra, who lives in Faguas searches for the utopian land of Waslala, which when she encounters it, is found to be far less utopia than imagined. At the end of the novel, however, Waslala provides a faded, if utopian dream whose memory might still serve to inspire people to forge a better reality in Faguas. As Zubiaurre notes, the text marks a shift away from the local and national into a twenty-first century, planetary feminist vision, “El énfasis en el protagonismo y el papel activo de las mujeres se mantiene. Pero el pensamiento político, en cambio, trasciende las fronteras de la política local, se internacionaliza y, sobre todo, se ‘ecologiza’” (75).

\textsuperscript{72} We can cite some examples from \textit{Fuego soy}: “Ese en el desvelo / y las pesadillas / donde yace el misterio / que no resuelven las revoluciones ni las utopías” (85), “Rotas las utopías, revueltas las nociones impertérritas” (70) and \textit{Mi íntima multitud}: “En el Motastepe la grama borra las siglas del FSLN” (52), “Recuerdo la pasión / El tiempo cuando lo prohibido o lo imposible / me tentaba” (48).
However, as a reclamation of Sandinismo, the text also performs an important work: although Waslala has fallen from its glory days, Belli wants to insist that remembering it is precisely what keeps future generations fighting for a better world. The return to the past—and the full realization of its imperfection—compels rather than inhibits utopian desire, precisely because it catalyze the imagination to ponder what could have been, and therefore, what could be. As she asks in “Fogonazos,” from Fuego soy, “¿Para qué la imaginación / si no para desafiar / las ínfulas del Tiempo / machista / y engreído?” (58-9).

However, what differentiates the poetry of this period of Belli’s career, especially the latter two works written in the aughts, from her poetry written in Nicaragua is precisely the difficulty that the poetic speaker has in keeping such imagination—and with it, utopian possibilities—alive. Apogeo celebrates the “zenith” of her life in middle age, as well as the cycle of birth, motherhood, and aging. Coupled with a new emphasis on the domestic sphere of marriage, the erotic dimension of her poetry now becomes something wrapped up with the aging process, with the speaker often staring at her wrinkles in the mirror or comparing herself unfavorably to Cindy Crawford. For the most part, Apogeo forgoes any conventional political focus, turning toward the sphere of family, marriage, and individual psychology.

In Mi íntima multitud and Fuego soy however, the celebratory character of Apogeo seems to have entirely disappeared, and the burdens that accompany domestic life and the sense of living in an alien culture have become full-fledged points of tension. The texts also become darker at an existential level, concerned with the sense of loss produced by aging as well as the seeming
foreclosure of political possibilities in Bush-era 00’s. These two texts are filled with nostalgia for Nicaragua unseen in *Apogeo*, a sense of disillusionment about the political past, as well as an, at times, almost claustrophobic sense of domesticity, rendered especially alienating given the speaker’s exile and discomfort with the North American culture that surrounds her. The inevitability of death, and the strangeness of passing time gives the works an affective sense, if not of resignation, of recognition of the rising and falling of dreams, their deceptiveness and ultimate dissolution. Instead of the volcanic erotics of *Línea de fuego*, we have a claustrophobic domestic space in which the female speaker subordinates her personal desires to family obligations due to gender expectations. Instead of natural force evoking the sense of limitless political possibilities, it seems only available to the speaker in her nostalgic reflections on Nicaragua. Finally, the praise of martyrdom is important by its near-absence, and as we shall see, the moments where Belli does try to reconcile a sense of political meaning in the post-socialist, globalized world with the sacrifices fellow Nicaraguans made in the name of the FSLN become key points to understand how she both critiques the Ortega regime and holds out hope for utopian possibilities.

To begin with, Belli has many poems in *Fuego soy* and *Mi íntima multitud* that deal with her sense of alienation in the United States, and the sense of political and personal hopelessness that comes with it. She renders her life in Los Angeles as that of an increasingly duty-bound and isolated one, stripped of all sense of collectivity. While she has several poems celebrating her husband and children, many others are complicated by an ambivalence toward domesticity. She will write in “Carne de desasosiego” about the familial obligations that keep her from writing, as well as the shame that she experiences, as a woman, in trying to carve out such time for herself.
The speaker first laments how thought begins to “enredarse en la tela de la domesticidad: / la voz que a diario me confronta / con mis carencias de mujer entregada a su familia” and compares such thought to a spider’s web (Fuego soy 33). The speaker experiences her own “shortcomings” in relation to a feminine domestic ideal, especially as she wishes to read and write instead of “ordenar la vida.” This entanglement of thought and domesticity become the tool through which the predator, in this case the “spider” of domesticity itself, will devour her body. The metaphor of domesticity as predator also appears in Fuego soy’s “Muerte por transplante” (a reference to the difficulty of adapting to life in the United States), where “Esta vida, esta casa… / se ha convertido para mí en planta carnívora” (51). However, in “Carne de desasosiego,” we see from the title that such predation is rendered as corporealized affect, felt in the “carne,” and provides a stark contrast to the eroticized body that felt the wounds of the nation in the Sandinista era and reached out to heal them. Here the body is private and individual, caught between family and desire, victim of the demands of domestic life and trying to escape entanglement rather than erotic and collective.

By the end of the poem the speaker seems haunted not merely by the ideals of domesticity, but by the thought of her own vanity: “Narciso enfrentado a la cotidianeidad / Avergonzado de su imagen.” However, we would be wrong to read these lines as the speaker’s self-critique for not living up to the domestic ideal, and should instead read them as symptomatic of the speaker’s role—as mother and wife—within the patriarchal order. The speaker’s “narcissism” is simply her desire to explore creative and intellectual endeavors apart from her family. In other words, the speaker, while fully experiencing such shame, offers a critical distance from it, especially if we interpret the “vergüenza” she feels as referring not so much to any real vanity in the desire to
read and write more, but rather to a shame she feels as she reproduces the socialized image of the female narcissist. That is, the speaker shows that perhaps what she is ashamed of is feeling like a narcissist for simply wanting to partake in activities that any man could do without a sense of guilt. As such, the text records an affective dissonance with the material structures of marriage and the nuclear family, offering a feminist critique unseen in her earlier works focused on the liberatory potentials of passion.

Such a reading is reinforced by another poem in Fuego soy, “Asismismada” in which a certain self-centeredness becomes staged as female rebellion in the face of oppressive family and social demands (42). In this rebellion the female protagonist of the poem “se atrinchara en un declarado egoísmo / Así logra sobrevivir.” Both the terms “antrincherar” (entrench, barricade) and “sobrevivir” (survive) carry obvious martial connotations, such that escape into the self is rendered as a sort of pyrrhic victory. However, such a retreat—whether into solitude, or as in Belli’s case, into reading and writing—when performed by a woman often appear as selfishness such that for the woman in the poem, “sus hijos / y los demás / le reprochan / su ensimismamiento.” In these final lines of the poem, the social pressure of family, “hijos,” is directly tied to an abstract social pressure of “los demás,” such that each mutually reinforces the other. In both cases, love no longer seems to reach outward, but tries to become a self-love that might, at best, help the female speakers “survive” the social pressures on their femininity and their roles as mothers and wives. This vacillation between the love that women in the text feel for their families and the sense of being trapped within gendered obligations occur throughout the text and make for one of Belli’s most profound critiques of the material conditions of women throughout her oeuvre.
The second major feature of the poems set in Los Angeles is the sense of cultural dislocation, rendered especially acute by the sense of exile from a longed-for Nicaragua. The poem “Domingo azul en Los Ángeles” from Mi íntima multitud presents a cityscape completely devoid of the type of vitality and natural force that her work on the Nicaraguan landscape (including poems in these two collections) offers (99-100). It recounts the speaker’s drive through Los Angeles as she sees freeways and neighborhoods that still feel alien to her as well as a series of disenfranchised people that make her reflect on the solitude and suffering within the United States. The poem begins as a series of fragmented images, most of which are only a noun (“La vida. Las curvas”) or noun and adjectival phrase (“Frágiles los seres humanos”). This fragmented form dominates most of the poem. The absenting of verbs creates the sense of derealization, such that when the speaker inserts herself into the text, often with questions (“¿Tiene sentido todo esto?” “¿Lo ha tenido una vez?”), it appears as a series of troubled attempts to make sense of a dislocated urban reality.

This sense of dislocation appears not merely because of the “Ciudad extraña” in which she lives, but rather because of the contrast she notes between “Los desposeídos y los que todo lo poseen.” Belli here represents class contradictions and the sense of subjective rupture they produce in the speaker in a manner surprisingly absent in her so-called “engaged” poetry of the seventies and eighties. Such a vision of several disenfranchised people in the poem, including a homeless man and a poor Argentine waiter, gives her a sense of human fragility and solitude, including her own. Fragility is the affective trace of class differentiation. By the end of the poem such fragility and dislocation—the sense of shared and common suffering—become redeeming features of Los
Angeles, since it “no tiene patria. / Pertenece a los despatriados. / Me gusta por eso.” Solidarity becomes a sense of shared “homelessness.” I contend that while the move toward the communal remains abstracted, rather than material (since the speaker cannot imagine what forms of collectivity might arise from it), Belli’s poem tarries with class differences and carries forward a utopian urge—however tentative—of a community of those with nothing in common other than the negativity of their dispossession. As such she maps collectivity at the affective level by lingering with the traces of fragility and dislocation.

The actuality of American collectivity—if it can be called that—appears most vividly as a hypertechnologized dystopia in Belli’s poem “Contra toda esperanza” from the same collection (33-4). There, Belli examines the American passivity generated by consumer culture and its attendant tendency to glorify violence:

Hay cientos de seres pereciendo
mientras otros asisten impávidos a sus agonías
—espectadores en mullidas butacas
pulsando botones—
Una sociedad de voyeaus
bendice su abundancia.
—Los muchachitos en el centro comercial
disparan y acumulan puntos destruyendo enemigos imaginarios
Técnicas sofisticadas recrean masacres en salas de cine
de innumerables pantallas—

From the privacy of the home, with its “mullidas butacas,” to the social spaces of the mall and cinema, Americans, in this representation, seem content to witness (television, film) or vicariously participate in (through video games) massacre, while never questioning their role within a political system that spreads actual violence. Belli refers us to a puzzling dialectic:
Americans seek to escape the violence of daily life in the culture industry’s fantasies of violence (“pulsando botones”), which are themselves part of the violent economy of “abundancia” these very spectators hope to escape. Although Belli writes that these people are “dando la espalda al destino común” what her poem, in another dialectical turn, she reveals the ways in which American collectivity itself comes together around ritualized and symbolic forms of violence, as in video games and television shows. Instead of creating a poem that shows these figures ignoring a “common destiny,” Belli, I contend creates an image of the “common destiny” of Americans as sustained by moments of an almost ritualized bonding around violence. Here, Belli’s cynicism seems at once entirely appropriate to the American historical moment, and at the same time contains within it a utopian longing for a “destino común.” This disillusionment in the face of the material structures of contemporary capitalism creates a deep affective dissonance and sense of the nightmarish qualities of American consumer culture.

By contrast, these two texts have several poems in which a return to Nicaragua—and the landscape and community of Belli’s younger years—represents a rebirth and sense of the communal. Natural force and the collectivity generated by cosmic love still seem operative, at least to some degree, in Nicaragua for Belli. However, one must wonder if this vision is not the result, at least somewhat of the distortions produced by exile and nostalgia. For instance, the poem “Metamorfosis” from Mi íntima multitud tells of the intense sense of disconnection she feels in her exile in Los Angeles, contrasting it to her sense of belonging in Nicaragua (57). Her dissociation in Los Angeles is conveyed as physical “Descarnada ambulo en las esquinas de este exilio,” as well as psychological, “Antes. Cuando yo era yo, / cuando mi nombre en mí se reconocía,” and even spatial, “No tengo ojos para el césped / perfectamente verde y
domesticado.” “Dissociated” does not quite capture the affective sense Belli creates here, since coupled with it, there is always a longing for a return to wholeness, as with the “yo” that might become “yo” again, or the spirit that might become “encarnada.” Such longing occurs through a longing for the power of the Nicaraguan landscape to infiltrate the speaker, such that she says, “Tengo la patria atravesada en el cuerpo / creciendo sus cordilleras en mis pulmones / extendiendo sus valles en mi vientre.” However, rather than allegorizing the wounds of the nation or the force of the pueblo, the “cordilleras” and “valles,” remain entirely personal and individual, signs (or symptoms?) of her longing to return to the isthmus. There is no political project through which the joys of Sandinista experience, and Nicaragua itself, might be recaptured.

Likewise, the nationalist representations of the countryside in her work of the seventies and eighties returns suffused with longing, as she presents nothing more than a series of “Imágenes” (the bay of San Juan del Sur, the Laguna de Apoyo, rain in May, wet earth, smiling faces). These are listed over the course of eleven lines without a verb, which renders them inactive, having no dialogue with her body or with the future. Without the verb they appear as both timeless and as nothing but the remnants of memory, despite being present realities in front of the speaker. The natural landscapes do not affect the speaker and seem stripped of their “natural force.” I argue that Nicaragua here is mourned as lost object: as a space once filled with passion, energy, and political hope that, as Belli correctly recognizes, cannot be recovered.

“Vida dividida” is similar in many ways and tells of a return to Nicaragua and the sense of dissociation she experiences in relation to her life in Los Angeles (Fuego soy 39). The poem
consists of short, sparse lines of four to seven words, far removed from the fulgent lyricism of
her Sandinista-era poetry. In this work, the United States “Semeja un espejismo imaginado / Otra
dimensión,” and yet the “mirage” seems to refer just as much to Nicaragua. The text is filled
with haunting, ghostly images of the night “Bandera negra es la noche / Que el viento mueve.”
This break in narrative in favor of description, as should now be clear, returns us to the ghostly
or haunting aspect of the affect in the text. Nicaragua has become a spectral darkness. At the
same time, the poem posits Nicaragua as a plentitude that gives her a (temporary) sense of
belonging “Es aquí solamente / Donde mi alma habita mi cuerpo,” as her life in the States
becomes mere dissociated “body.” Additionally, being in Nicaragua gives her a poetic voice she
seemingly lacks in Los Angeles: “soy una mujer sola / Asomada al borde del Valle Ticomo / En
la noche dulce / Donde puedo nombrar todas las cosas.” Despite the darkness of night, Belli
becomes an Adam (or Eve) who can name things because the landscape and its people resonate
with her, temporarily overcoming the pangs of exile. There is a sense that Nicaragua, and the
“Valle Ticomo” still have a resonant natural force, that can only be temporarily reclaimed. While
a sense of the collective has been lost in Belli’s work, in these works nostalgia points toward a
utopian desire for the reclamation of social being.

However, it would be wrong to say that Belli simply recreates the romanticized vision of
Nicaragua and its natural force from her Sandinista-era poetry. Two of what I believe are the
most compelling poems in these texts deal with the contrast between such an aesthetic relation to
the landscape and the poverty that persists within it, showing an increased sophistication in
Belli’s poetic representations of nature and urban space. These are “Pastoral en tiempo de
guerra” from Fuego soy (101) and “Retrato de ciudad” from Mí íntima multitud (65-7). In the
former, the speaker appears at first seduced by the beauty of the roads, houses, and people in a rural Nicaraguan landscape. The portrait is seemingly of a “pastoral” and timeless, even enchanted landscape similar to those of Cardenal’s “Canto nacional” from the insurrectionary period. However, this pastoralism is quickly upended when the speaker says “Fuera de esta estampa bucólica / hay armas inteligentes que dividen la tierra con precisión de bisturí.” The poem ends with the speaker unwilling to be seduced by the pastoral vision, which only looks at “la superficie” and fails to see the traces of underdevelopment and ongoing social and economic violence. In this sense, the poem deploys an ominous sense of foreboding and danger lurking beneath any desire to aestheticize the material conditions of Nicaragua.

The latter poem represents post-1990 Managua now not as the space of a vibrant collective, but rather as landscape increasingly dominated by transnational capital, violence, and disenfranchisement. Despite the aesthetic pleasure of “Las fuentes” and “Las luces de néon” emerging from the reconstruction of the city, and despite the fact that “Ya no hay guerra,” the city appears as a space of devastation. Gangs, drugs, underage sex work, and the allure of the “centro comercial” and international corporations dominate the scene. In such a postwar world there can be no heroism, just a “literatura de cinismo” in which survival depends on a jaded knowledge of the ruin to come. Hence the closing lines of the poem: “Y yo quisiera no saber como sé / quienes serán los crucificados” indicate that it already known in advance how neoliberalism will play out for the poorest members of Managua. Belli, in these two poems, delicately balances an aestheticized relation to urban and rural spaces and the barbarism that makes such aesthetic relations to them possible.
How then does martyrdom, the third of the tropes we have followed enter into these texts? First, death takes on an increasingly private, individualized register. As mentioned the two texts deal with aging and middle age, and struggle with questions of mortality and death. While this is not shocking in itself, death is represented not as communion or the fulfillment of life as in Cardenal’s work of this period, but as absolute loss and non-meaning. In the poem “Está la noche despejada” with which Fuego soy begins, Belli will write that “Lo único real y verdadero es la soledad, / la del nacimiento / y la muerte” (10). Death becomes “soledad,” rather than heroic act. Rather than focusing on affects of solidarity and collectivity, the speaker now asks whether “¿Llega el momento en que la emoción pierde su novedad?” and regrets a heart that is “cansado de rabiar y de ilusionarse en vano” (10). Reading “rabiar” and “ilusionarse” more neutrally, we might be tempted to see these such broken hopes and rage as referring to the difficulty of dealing with a variety of life’s disappointments. However, reading them in terms of the linguistic economy of these two texts, such terms have a political and poetic valence as well. The striving and longing of the Sandinista era now seems in vain. Death, rather than redeeming them, questions the sacrifices of those who lost their lives for a socialist cause that history has—at least temporarily—vanquished.

In “Carlos, ojalá las hormiguitas no te lo cuenten” from Mi íntima multitud Belli addresses the legacy of Carlos Fonseca in a twenty-first century Nicaragua filled with broken dreams and, I argue, the corruption of his ideals by the Ortega-led, post-1990 FLSN (52-4). Throughout the work there is the sense that Nicaragua has proven itself unworthy of its martyrs, having turned its back on the socialist ideals of the previous period. This shift in the dynamics of martyrdom, I contend, creates a haunting sense of the figure of Fonseca in the poem who, in both a
melancholic and utopian fashion reveals the discrepancies between Sandinista ideals and the current state of neoliberal Nicaragua. This haunting, in my reading, both creates despair in the speaker and the hope that such ideals might be regained.

The speaker begins the poem by saying “Qué suerte la tuya de estar muerto / Carlos Fonseca” since now “En el Motastepe la grama borra las siglas del FSLN / pero es más lo que se ha borrado.” Here the “grama,” represents, of course, that loss of a sense of nationalist natural force, the feeling that the pueblo might embody the virility of nature. At the same time however, the term hearkens back to Belli’s own 1974 work, Sobre la grama and the type of nationalist discourse, founded in natural force, that marks her poems from the seventies and eighties. In this sense, my contention is that this text posits the erasure of natural force from both the landscape—with its faded revolutionary dreams of the FSLN—and her own poetry. Fonseca’s death, like that of other martyrs, becomes a sort of ghostly haunting, in which his specter can only be incorporated by Belli’s own poetry, and the nation, through a melancholic reaction. Fonseca appears as critical specter, as he “alza su dedo acusador y nos confronta / con nuestra propia miseria.” This “miseria” does not seem to be the poverty of the nation, but rather its “spiritual” poverty, its inability to continue the dreams of the dead.

At the same time, the loss goes beyond the simple failure of the Sandinista ideology, since it is the dead who remind the speaker of the true cost of the battle against Somoza and during the Contra War. She writes that the loss is “algo más que los sueños / lo que se ha hecho humo / lo

73 We might look at “Uno no escoge” from Sobre la grama itself: “y me encarne quizás en la niña / que oirá historias / en las tardes iguales de Nicaragua / con el olor a tierra naciendo, / urdiendo en sus entrañas / la vida verde del trópico lujurioso.”
que se ha muerto y lo que a diario nos persigue / con su olor a carroña.” The term “carroña” here is telling, and it will reappear in the next and final poem we analyze when trying to understand the speaker’s relation to martyrs. As “carrion” the dead are the unburied—those who have not been given proper rest and closure. Their presence is menacing because of their “olor,” reminding the living of the reasons for which they died, and therefore, in a sense, their own inadequacy in the face of past sacrifices. It is the smell of rot produced by having forgotten to bury the corpse. The verb “persigue” only reinforces this sense of a menacing relation between the martyrs and the living in this new era.

This relation to the dead brings a list of regrets and lamentations, a sort of mea culpa, in which the speaker recognizes her own failings in the political projects of the past. While this may be a self-reflection, one cannot help but read these self-condemnations as having their true object in the post-1990 FSLN under Daniel Ortega. Belli writes, “Pudimos haber sido humildes penitentes / reconocer que el poder y sus trampas / nos habían jugado el sucio truco de enredarnos,” and then addressing Fonseca, says, “se perdió la vergüenza de la que vos hablaste.” By collectivizing the subject of the enunciation (“pudimos”) or at other times making it impersonal (“se perdió”), the speaker’s self-critique becomes aimed at a larger collective structure, namely, the party itself. The irony of course, is that the poetic speaker seems to be performing the very humility and shame that she says this collective “we” lacks. As such, it seems that she would distance herself from the “trampas” of power through this poetic act, performing the religious act of penitence before the image of Fonseca that others have not yet performed.
Such a reading is confirmed in the fifth and penultimate stanza, in which the speaker presents Nicaragua as “triste y pobre” while Fonesca’s “hijos pelean por tus vestiduras.” This latter line has a double meaning. First, we could read it as implying that in the post-socialist world, Nicaraguans have turned against each other, simply fighting for their own material survival, even at the expense of desecrating Fonseca’s image and ideals. In this sense, they fight for whatever material advantages can be in a world without the socialist vision that Fonseca represents. Neoliberalism becomes the war of all against all. On the other hand, Fonseca’s “hijos” would refer to the FSLN party itself that hopes to wrap itself in his “vestiduras” so as to give their ongoing political hierarchy and centralization legitimacy. In this sense, the FSLN does not want to give Fonseca’s body proper burial since it needs to evoke his legacy for self-interested justification of its practices into the twenty-first century. Fighting for his “vestiduras” in this reading indicates the willingness to exploit the Sandinista past for personal and political gain.

The strength of such a poem lies in its unwillingness to bury the ghost of the Fonseca while offering us a vision of both the speaker’s and the FSLN’s ongoing betrayal. Instead, it tarries with the “rot” produced by the discrepancy between the FSLN’s ideals and its praxis while in power throughout the eighties, as well as the further discrepancy between how the party—now through its grassroots populism and electoral strategies—continued to distort the radical vision of its moment of inception. The martyr returns as hero, certainly, but even more profoundly, the dead bodies haunt the speaker as reminders of political failure, unnecessary sacrifices. Rather than silence and bury the dead, Belli chooses to listen to them. If the text passes from melancholy into mourning, it is precisely because Belli can recognize the full extent of the loss
that haunts her country. In the gap opened between the lost political ideal she mourns and the neoliberal reality shines the specter of an elusive utopia.

This brings us then to the final question, namely, what is the role of an “engaged poetry” for Belli in an era of neoliberal dominance, in which collective dreams have been replaced by the realities of global capital? Can poetry relate to the death and sacrifices in the Sandinista past without saying that they were all in vain? Belli gives us her most clear response—or rather, her most clear questioning of poetry’s role—in *Fuego soy*, with the poem “Reunión de poetas en Granada.” The poem recounts the difficulties the speaker has in reconciling the mission of poetry as a space of hope in the future with the broken dreams of her past, and is pervaded with a sense that poetic creation may be nothing more than an illusory, self-deceptive daydreaming that at its worst, leads people to their deaths. The speaker begins by asking her fellow poets, “¿Cuál es el sentido de la vida?” and each of the next five stanzas (out of eight total) will end with a rhetorical question, filled with self-doubt about the very function of poetry (105). Likewise, the eighth and final stanza directs this very question, “¿Cuál es el sentido de la vida?” to the poets assembled in Granada. Given this structure, what exactly causes the speaker to question poetry and its utopian urge to dream of better futures?

Belli, evoking the volcanic poetics of her past, frames the relation between literature and politics as one of magic. However, although in previous iterations, such as “Evocación a la magia,” examined in the last chapter, magic meant enchantment and transformation, here magic becomes deception:

> Pero díganme, poetas.
en esta sucesión de años—volcán que hemos vivido
cuando la carroña nos rodea y nos acecha
no es acaso la lira un instrumento tenue y anacrónico
¿No somos acaso sobrevivientes del sonar,
Ilusos románticos creyendo en los conejos de los magos? (105)

First, we should note that the poem is directed at other Nicaraguans poets, so that the “we” implied here implicates them in a common history in which the “volcán” of revolution and the Contra War leaves a trail of death. Next, Belli evokes the image of a pervasive and menacing “carroña which I contend refers specifically to the victims of the civil war in the late seventies and the Contra War. The appearance of the term “carroña” in Belli’s poem on Carlos Fonseca reappears, except here the point is not to question the discrepancy between Sandinista ideals and present realities, but rather the very validity of such ideals, inasmuch as they led to death, a movement in which poetry was more than complicit. This would also explain the choice of “carroña” over “cadáver” or a similar term, since it refers to the unburied, rotting body (often animal), that will be devoured by scavengers. Given that the text was published in 2007, this may be a veiled critique of the appropriation of a more radical vision of Sandinismo by the post-1990 FSLN (the metaphorical “scavengers”) and by the forces that brought Ortega back to the presidency in the 2006 campaign. As such, I argue that Belli positions the deaths of martyrs as having been “devoured” and glamorized by the new FSLN for political gain, rather than questioned.

But the critique is not simply outward-directed. Instead, Belli turns this moment into one of poetic self-critique, since she says the dead not only surround the poets but also “nos acecha.” This verb can be translated more neutrally as “to watch” but can also have menacing
connotations, such that “to lie in wait for” or even “to stalk.” This reading would turn poets into the potential prey of the dead, the futility of whose sacrifices haunt writers. In my reading, the dead themselves no longer believe the dreams proffered by poets—and this, above all, is what fuels the speaker’s self-doubt—such that she leaves us with a questioning of to what extent the martyrdom of the Sandinista years was, in the end, worth it. As such, poetry—offering political hopes and utopian aspirations—appears “anacrónico” in a post-socialist world and the provenance of “ilusos románticos” whose very hopes for a better future might cause more harm than good. In fact, she will describe the world her fellow poets have created as “descalabrado y desapalabrado,” reinforcing the harm done and discord created among the “indefensos” and “incautos” who believe in their poetic visions (10, 11). Not unlike in Plato’s *Republic*, poets appear as deceivers and those who believe in poetry, victims of their deception.

It is in the telling seventh stanza—the only one without questions—that the speaker reveals the basis of her self-questioning and doubt: the unpredictable domination of global capital. She says that whereas she has been a “mujer de esperanzas / de viva voz de pasiones tremendas” such affect seems to have given way to a sense of confusion, loss and uncertainty (106). In particular, she no longer thinks she can “leer los augurios en las cartas / porque nada es ya predecible, ni calculable” (106). Poetry in this sense, has lost its prophetic function, the certainties of its meaning and mission that accompanied it during the Sandinista years, but also, for Belli it will no longer inspire people with false and dangerous dreams. The seeming “predecible” victory of socialism that inspired her earlier works becomes an unpredictable social chaos. I argue that for Belli, the domination of global capital renders poetry’s dreamwork, at least as practiced in the past, “anacrónico,” while at the same time she time and again in these collections to the notion of
a critical poetry. For her, the issue is that “lo que antes no tenía precio / se vende ahora en los pasillos, / mercadería que se anuncia / sin vergüenza,” such that poetry, and the political aspirations her prior work carried has no place in a world dominated by the market (106-7). But by noting the very discrepancies between a world in which the dream of something that “no tenía precio” was viable and the present in which the commodity dominates unabashedly, Belli remains political at the moment she seems to retreat from politics.

If this is a poem of shame, it is marked by a double shame, the very opposite of the way the market operates “sin vergüenza.” First, there is the shame of Belli and her fellow poets’ decision to have offered political hopes to those who became nothing but “carroña,” a regret directed toward those who martyred themselves for what turned out to be an inspiring, at times progressive, but ultimately failed revolution. Secondly, there is the shame within Belli’s efforts to continue writing such poetry despite the brokenness of those dreams and the difficulty of finding something that “no tiene precio.” For this reason, I believe it is one of her most compelling works of this period, as it refuses any easy answers to the question of poetry’s role within new geopolitical realities of the post-Sandinista years.

What makes these texts most engaging is the way in which they refuse to cast aside the poet’s utopian hopes and the specific ways in which she struggles to affirm any concrete utopian vision (which would be writing “anarchronically”) for poetry in a technologized, affluent, and individualistic culture. Rather than offering any easy solutions, these poems succeed best when they engage contemporary realities (from the Iraq War to Darfur to the violence of mass media to the ongoing poverty of Nicaragua) and admit the difficulty of a utopian poetic thought of the
moment, while affirming its obstinacy and necessity by tracing the affects that circulate throughout capitalist economies. Unlike Cardenal, for Belli, nature no longer provides a grounding for the political; it is only a temporary reminder of sense of collectivity and national feeling that pervaded the seventies and eighties. In fact, nature functions far more as a sign of loss: of the personal sense of meaning and of political clarity, of the faded collective dreams that seem no longer operative in Belli’s new life in the United States. Second, the dynamics of love also no longer reach out toward a collective ecstasy or communion among social agents. Instead, examining the domestic sphere of love leads Belli to an intensified critique of gender dynamics and inequalities, especially as these are reproduced by marriage and the family. Finally, martyrdom and the worship of the dead no longer provide a certain grounding for the righteousness of revolutionary activity itself or the inevitability of political triumph. Rather the dead have become a certain kind of “rot” and “carrion” that menace the living, asking whether their deaths have, in the end, been worth it at all. Martyrs no longer confirm the being of the living, but haunt them, while still impelling them to realize their ideals, however impossibly. Rather than lament such an ontological unmooring in Belli’s poetry, I believe that it is most welcome, as extracting political activity from her previous volcanic poets and the particular conjuncture of the nature-love-death nexus will, in fact, only point toward new possibilities. Belli writes a poetry of the negative, and for a world in which history’s outcomes seem more uncertain than ever, Belli offers a way to consider the complex and unforeseeable realities that await the new century—even if that might involve the resurrection of the communist idea.

*Daisy Zamora and the Reclamation of Sandinismo*
Daisy Zamora’s poems of the post-Cold War era continue much of the trajectory of her engaged poetics of the eighties in focusing on the lives of socially outcast women or gender expectations more generally, while also showing a slight move toward the abstraction of her work in _La violenta espuma_. Her work eloquently deals with struggles around marriage in “Trámites de divorcio,” (Clean Slate 173) written about Sylvia Plath, and gender expectations in “Ser Mujer” (ibid. 188-90). In that poem she represents a rage-filled feminist pathos: “Haber nacido mujer significa: / poner tu cuerpo al servicio de otros / dar tu tiempo a otros / pensar solo en función de otros” that effectively reveals the dynamics of gender construction through patriarchal power and points to a hope for women to resist it.

My contention is that Zamora navigates the twin pulls of nostalgia and cynicism in order to produce a poetry that hopes to keep alive the utopian promises of the past while recognizing its promises and limitations. For instance, her “Mensaje a los poetas,” (Clean Slate 156) seems a not so veiled swipe at Rosario Murillo, who shut down the poetry workshops and other poets who are “siempre en conciliábulo. / Camaleónicos, encubiertos,” a deceptiveness that allows them to “se engordaban malinformando.” Whereas Murillo profited both during and after the Sandinista years, Zamora dedicates the poem to “Ernesto [Cardenal], Julio [Valle-Castillo, I believe], and Vidaluz [Meneses],” who are as true poets, become “incondicionales únicamente de la Poesía.” By contrast, the deceptive poets—and here again Murillo, as wife of Ortega seems the most proximate target—want “usurper las voces de los héroes” an effort in which life’s power ultimately “borrará sus palabras.” While not making a direct critique of Nicaraguan politics, Zamora here uses a cynicism toward the “lies” of the poets shaping the contemporary, post-1990
FSLN in order to hint at its corruption and the foreclosure of Sandinismo ideals. It would seem to be the job of poets to rescue Sandinismo from itself.

Along this lines, in her response to Ernesto Cardenal’s *Telescopio en la noche oscura*, “Ars Amandi,” (*The Violent Foam* 196-204) Zamora will juxtapose her earthly, physical love to the spiritual, celibate love Cardenal discusses in his text, that I read as an allegory for their differing positions on the Sandinista past. In it, she seems to posit her own love, which has no divine guarantees, but persists despite that fact to Cardenal’s love that has been shaken along with his faith in God in *Telescopio en la noche oscura*. As such, Zamora’s subtext, in my reading, is how Cardenal’s Sandinismo, which relied on the notion of the revolution’s commensurability with the perfection of God’s love cannot make sense of defeat and failure as readily as one who, like Zamora, can love “physical” creation in all of its flaws and imperfections. That is, whereas Cardenal can only see the cosmic love of Sandinismo in a binary of perfection and betrayal, Zamora can understand its imperfections and that for this reason, cause her to persist in her love. She begins the poem by paraphrasing *Telescopio* when she writes “Yo nací también para un amor extremista,” immediately evoking their shared Sandinista past. Instead of attempting to posit love as a continuous, mystical communion—or if we read it allegorically, cosmic love as uninterrupted revolution—Zamora writes that “la historia de un amor verdadero / es siempre una historia de amor y soledad.” In other words, instead of longing for the lost communion of the Sandinista years, Zamora shows that such a dream of reconciliation and communion that animated his volcanic poetics was in fact an impossible hope.

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74 While the text includes poems from *La violenta espuma*, it also contains several of Zamora’s newer, post 1990 works.
She reminds Cardenal that perhaps true love involves “de no esperar nada,” but to persist, despite this impossibility of communion. Thus, as much as the poem claims to be an “Ars Amandi” it is just as much an “Ars Politica” for the post-Cold War world. Instead of nostalgically clinging to the past in hopes of reconciliation, Zamora recognizes that former Sandinistas would do better to not expect a reciprocated love from the very people they alienated in the eighties, while still not abandoning the utopian altogether. That is while the body of the lover (or allegorically, history may change), the speaker will say “mi amor no se engorda ni aburguesa / y el rostro del amado, para mí no envejece.” Telling, the term “aburguesa” politicizes this love, indicating at the allegorical love, the speaker’s desire to retain her love for the proletariat she hoped to help in the eighties. Just as her lover’s face does not “envejece,” neither does this communist love, despite the new world that faces her.

For this reason, she will tell Cardenal that “Vivir en el amor es asumir los riesgos,” including, as we now see a sense of rejection or betrayal by the beloved, or allegorical the working-class people he once loved. For this reason, Zamora does not fall into a blind utopianism of love, as she recognizes the very impossibility of the communist desire and the risk of its absurdity. For this reason, she says “La transformación del sistema, ni usted ni yo la veremos. / La multitud, en todas partes, sigue esperando,” but this seeming impossibility of transformation does not negate or question the very love that sustained her political engagements, based as it was, on the imperfectability of human acts. Unlike Cardenal, for whom the volcanic moment of Sandinismo promised the immanence of God’s will, Zamora secularizes her own communist impulse, ending the poem as follows:

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Conozco a extremistas del amor
Que ni siquiera tienen el Consuelo divino,
ni el poder,
solo el poder de su amor extremo.

No todos los versos de amor se escriben en vano.

Just as not all love poems are written in vain, so it seems that Zamora wishes to say that neither was the Sandinista moment, despite its imperfections, in vain. In this sense she holds out hope for its meaning in the present without giving it either a cosmic destiny, as does Cardenal, or seemingly abandoning it, as does Belli.
Chapter 4

Tropicalizing Bay Area Poetry: Revolutionary Solidarities from Managua to the Mission in

*Roberto Vargas, Nina Serrano, and Alejandro Murguía*

The guerilla movements in Central America—especially after 1979—sent shockwaves throughout the United States, on both the Right and the Left, and the purpose of this chapter is to examine its impact on the aesthetic production and cultural work of Bay Area Latino writing, with a focus on three poets inspired by the triumph of the Sandinista revolution: Roberto Vargas, Alejandro Murguía, and Nina Serrano. Their work is shaped by not only the larger national dynamics around the Central American movements, but arises from the unique context of San Francisco in the sixties and seventies, as an epicenter of the countercultural lifestyle movement (hippies and the psychedelic experience), progressive university politics (the Berkeley Free Speech movement, fight for ethnic and women’s studies programs), and nonviolent civil rights movements. Not only would the works—especially of Murguía and Vargas—reveal a reworking of Beat aesthetics and the evocation of a psychedelic poetic voice, but these latter two poets would also be on the front lines of the fight for Ethnic Studies programs at San Francisco State University in 1968-9, with Murguía himself becoming a professor there in Ethnic Studies. 75 Additionally, the labor struggles of the United Farmworkers and the *teatro campesino* developed by Luis Valdez, who went to school in San Jose, California (about an hour’s drive from San Francisco), provided important touchstones for rethinking what a politically engaged, popular art

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75 See Lyle, “The Mission and the Revolution, as Lived and Told by Roberto Vargas”
might mean for Chicano movement. Developing within the milieu of other politically committed theater groups like the San Francisco Mime Troup, *teatro campesino*, founded in 1965, “had one specific, political goal—the organization of farm workers. For the two years the Teatro Campesino was actively involved in the everyday struggles of the farm workers' strike” led by César Chavez and the UFW (Jiménez 101). By 1967, the *teatro campesino* sought to combine its politics with a more moralistic and identitarian focus, producing works that hoped to inspire spiritual values and pride in Chicano culture (ibid. 101-2). Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* would appear on Broadway in 1979, the year of the Sandinista revolution, bringing many of the aesthetic structures of the *teatro campesino* to elite theater venues. This theater movement helped lay the groundwork for a politically engaged and Chicano nationalist poetics.

However, I contend that the most formative events for these writers in terms of developing an internationalist and “tropical” perspective would be the rise of radical political formations, in the anti-Vietnam War protests, the American Indian Movement, the Black Panthers of Oakland and—most importantly for this study—the Chicano movement itself. In Vietnam a “disproportionate number of [U.S.] combat troops were poor, brown, and black,” causing many people of color to question the class and racial dynamics shaping the draft, and, when taken to its logical conclusion, the racial dynamics informing the Cold War (Mariscal 18).76 These writers vehemently protested the war, and indeed for many Chicanos/as, anti-Vietnam protests became their entryway into radical politics.

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76 This internationalist perspective would lead to Muhammed Ali’s famous saying that “The draft is about white people sending black people to fight yellow people to protect the country they stole from the red people” (qtd. in Khan “Muhammed Ali’s Legendary Words Pack a Powerful Punch”).
Given the racialized dynamics of the Vietnam War and the draft in which the Chicano movement emerged, these writers, and Murguía in particular, turned to nationalism as a means to vindicate their indigenous heritage, and understand economic dynamics in the United States in terms of the colonialism and capitalist underdevelopment affecting other parts of the world. Alurista, whose 1971 *Floricanto en Aztlán* is one of the foundational poetic texts of the movement, utilizes Aztec mythology to address the problematics of Chicano/a life in the United States, deploying the concept of Aztlán, as a mythic, originary homeland for Chicano/a people. Alurista’s “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán” delivered two years earlier at the National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, would theorize Aztlán in concrete, nationalist, and anti-colonialist terms, “Aztlán belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops and not to the foreign Europeans. We do not recognize capricious frontiers on the bronze continent” (Alurista 1969). For its proponents, this concept could not only provide a model for local resistance—the reclamation of an indigenous nation—but is some ways, frame the struggles such as those taking place in Vietnam and the Chicano struggle of the United States in similar terms.

In this sense, it would be wrong to read the Chicano movement (especially that centered in the Bay Area), as narrowly focused on the racial dynamics at home, and I contend that cultural nationalism—while in retrospect, is certainly suspect as the end goal of an emancipatory politics—allowed for an engagement with global political dynamics for at this moment. Instead, these writers elucidated a “Third World” politics that included struggles in Cuba,

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77 In the Chicano movement, McCaughan rightly points out that “nationalist identity and ideology often did as much harm as good, masking the persistent conflicts of class, race, and gender among the very people who embraced nationalism as their salvation” (59) while not dismissing its capacity to mobilize popular struggles in a way that the more “abstract” versions of Marxism could not (60). Nationalism appears as an ambivalent ideological form.
Vietnam, Mozambique, and the underdeveloped regions of the United States themselves, which were often theorized as spaces of underdevelopment or internal colonization. Nor was such an understanding of the role of Chicano literature unique to the Bay Area writers I study, for as Texan Tomás Rivera says, “I don't think Chicano literature necessarily has a different perspective. If it does, it's in the area of looking at the world through the eyes of the oppressed, something like a Third World Type” (Novoa 137). Likewise, as Ferreira points out in the retrospective narrativization of the late sixties and early seventies moment, “lost to our collective memory, are the profound political and personal ties that existed between activists of color. The recognition of this unique relationship has been obscured by the tendency to discuss racial matters (and movements) in strictly White-non-White terms” (31). “Free Huey” rallies drew Chicano nationalists and residents of the Red Guard Party, centered in Chinatown, just as when Los Siete—a group of Chicano and Central American men—were arrested on spurious charges of murdering a police officer, it was “the Black Panther Party who lent assistance without any hesitation” (Ferreira 35). By the time the Central American armed struggles truly erupted in the seventies and early eighties, the groundwork had been laid for a political poetry could relate the

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78 Internal colonialism, which theorized uneven economic dynamics as a form of colonialism, became an attractive model in the sixties and seventies to many African-American and Chicano groups in order to explain the similar forms of underdevelopment in the “First” and “Third” Worlds and the racial and labor relations subtending them. However, for many, this hypothesis led to a nationalist position, of which some strands of Black nationalism or the Chicano/a notion of reclaiming Aztlan remain prominent examples. Stephen Wyn Williams describes the seven traits of internal colonization as follows: “First, there is a commercial, trading and credit monopoly by the centre. Secondly, commerce is predominantly carried on by recruits from the core. Thirdly, an economic dependency on external markets arises due to complementary development with the core, and usually rests on a single commodity. Fourthly, the movement of peripheral labour is brought about by forces outside the periphery and is due in the main to variations in the price of a single commodity. Fifthly, economic dependence is reinforced through juridical, political and military measures. Sixthly, there is a general lack of services within the colony. Seventhly, there is a national discrimination on the basis of language, religion or other aspects of culture” (273-4).
local realities of the Mission to the broader international context and the fight against underdevelopment and internal colonization.\textsuperscript{79}

In 1997, José David Saldívar challenged scholars of American studies to move away from solely analyzing narratives, especially Chicano/a narratives, in terms of “immigration, assimilation, and nationhood” and instead ask whether or not we can “imagine new cultural affiliations and negotiations in American studies more dialogically, in terms of multifaceted migrations across borders” (\textit{Border Matters} 1). In this spirit, my central idea is that the notion of “tropicalization,” namely the idea of common economic, structural, and even cultural forms shared between “tropical,” people in spaces of capitalist underdevelopment (in both the “First” and “Third” Worlds) allowed these writers to create an internationalist poetics of solidarity that moved beyond the dominant forms of Chicano nationalism popular at the time. However, by the time the Cold War ended and the possibilities for international solidarity disappeared, a “tropical” aesthetics came to be replaced by a focus on the local and national, including personal and cultural identity. At the aesthetic level, tropicalization played out in these authors’ texts of the seventies and eighties as a creative reworking of styles derived from U.S sources, such as Beat poetry and jazz rhythms with those derived from Central American exteriorist and testimonial style I examined in the first three chapters of this work. It both interrogate the material conditions of capitalist combined and uneven development and sought to mythologize “Third

\textsuperscript{79} In the absence of a global communist movement, the question animating present struggles against capitalism and state violence is precisely how to formulate such linkages and points of solidarity. While Third Worldism and “tropicalization” hint at what such forms might look like, their desire to give positive content to the subjects of resistance seems unfit for the present age.
World” as a vibrant space through which the positivity of the working-class might be represented. I examine the formulation of “tropicalization” more extensively below.

However, the impact of Central American poetry on San Francisco Bay Area poets—Roberto Vargas, Nina Serrano, and Alejandro Murguía, in particular—went beyond the aesthetic. They also translated and distributed texts by figures such as Ernesto Cardenal, Otto René Castillo, and Roque Dalton as part of the Roque Dalton Cultural Brigade, brought Central American poets to the Bay Area for readings, and staged political protests against dictatorship in the isthmus, most notably during the 1978 occupation of the Nicaraguan embassy in San Francisco. They saw their role not merely as writers but as “cultural workers,” whose mission was to create political and aesthetic exchanges between the Mission and Managua, North and Central America. I have chosen to focus on Vargas, Serrano, and Murguía because their works incorporate the most sustained attention to Nicaragua and Central America as a whole, and it best demonstrates the aesthetic and political impact of the armed struggles in their writing. Additionally, all three travelled to Nicaragua for extended periods of time (with Murguía and Vargas actually taking part in guerilla operations), such that their political involvement—and how it shaped their poetry—cannot be thought apart from their encounter with Sandinista Nicaragua.

It also important to note that these three writers were only part of a constellation of writers in the Bay Area with a deep interest in Central America, including Chicano/a poets Francisco X. Alarcón, who translated Tomorrow Triumphant, the first collection of Otto René Castillo’s poems in English, and Juan Felipe Herrera, who provided translations for the Central American poetry anthology Volcán and whose poem “Nightpainters” from Exiles of Desire describes the
terror of the Salvadoran *Guardia Nacional*.\(^\text{80}\) We should also include African American dramatist and poet Ntozake Shange, who “nearly joined the Sandinistas in Nicaragua”\(^\text{81}\) and writes about her experiences in Nicaragua in *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can*, among other places, as well as Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg, who travelled to and read poetry in Nicaragua, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who published an account of his travels in *Seven Days in Nicaragua Libre*. Finally, it is important to note that many writers outside of the Bay Area wrote about the events in El Salvador and Nicaragua, such as Salman Rushdie, whose essays collected in *The Jaguar’s Smile* give a first-person account of the problems and success of the early Sandinista government, as well as Joan Didion, who published *Salvador* in 1983. A more exhaustive account of writers whose work was shaped by the uprisings in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, of which this project is only a beginning, would undoubtedly benefit our understanding of the mutual influences of Central American and English-language writing in the seventies and eighties.

**The Development of the “Poetic Cultural Worker” in the Bay Area**

Within this Bay Area context outlined above, the solidarity efforts of Murguía, Vargas, and Serrano and their notion of tropicalization in the Bay Area traversed three major institutions: first, the Pocho-Ché Collective, which published politicized works of local as well as international Latino/a writers, second, the Roque Dalton Cultural Brigade, which translated Central American poetry, and third, the Mission Cultural Center for the Arts, a meeting place for artists, activists, and community members and the home of the San Francisco Solidarity and

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\(^{80}\) His moving poem “War Voyeurs” also has the Salvadoran civil war as a subtext: “I do not understand why men make war…/Is it because the flood of blood is the proper penance / workers must pay for failing tribute at the prescribed / hour?” (*Exiles of Desire* 64).

Peace Movement. I argue that these authors, in a fashion similar to several of the Central American writers studied, challenged the elitist foundations of art by positioning themselves as “cultural workers,” dedicated equally to social change and aesthetic production.

The Pocho-Ché collective was founded in 1968 by Ysidro Ramon Macías, who “recruited Mission members such as Roberto Vargas, René Yañes, Magaly Fernandez, Gilberto Osorio and Alejandro "Gato" Murguía.” (Herrera “Riffs on Mission District Raza Writers” 217). The Pocho-Ché Collective published Nina Serrano's poetry, Murguía’s Oración a la mano poderosa, ruálsalinas’s Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions, and Vargas’s own Nicaragua yo te canto, besos, balas y sueños de libertad, an ecstatic celebration of Sandinismo and Nicaraguan cultural identity. The name “Pocho-Ché” testifies to a certain hybridity and inbetweeness that characterized its members’ position in the United States, as “pocho” emerged as a derogatory term used by some Mexicans to describe Chicanos or Mexicans living in the United States, especially those who spoke an “imperfect” or hybrid Spanish, or had otherwise adapted key elements of Anglo culture. In his poem, “Alma pocha,” Américo Paredes, one of the founders of a distinctly Chicano poetry, has destiny describe this hybrid “soul” as follows: “En tu propio terreno serás extranjero / por la ley del fusil y la ley del acero” such that the speaker tells his “pocha” soul, “vas llorando / la vergüenza mexicana” (35-6).

82 In Herrera’s 1984 interview with Alejandro Murguía, he explains where the name came from: “It had to do with living in San Francisco, the Central American and Mexican Barrios; the contact among us all. It was a year and a half after Che’s death which sparked a lot of reading, interest and investigation in Latin American guerrilla and political movements... and the call for the Zafra came from Fidel (Castro). Latin American movements were very strong in the late sixties. It kind of forced you to find out who Carlos Mariguélua was or who Camilo Torres was; Pocho Ché came out of this mixture.” See Herrera “The Tropics of Pocho-Ché.”

83 For Paredes, as for the Pocho-Ché publishers, it was a productive encounter with Nicaragua that helped him to think of an internationalist politics, and in his case, outside of a United States-Mexico binary. In 1939, Americo Paredes wrote “A César Augusto Sandino,” five years after the Nicaraguan commander’s death, in which he praises the Nicaraguan leader for throwing off the imperial “yugo” that still binds him (Between Two Worlds 53). My thanks to Professor Héctor Calderón for directing me to the encounter between Paredes and Sandino.
the “out of placeness” of life in the United States, “Che” referred to the figure of Guevara and the internationalist guerilla ideal he stood for.

After the formation of the collective, and given their interest in global underdevelopment and the theory of internal colonization (especially as it affected people of many different racial groups), in 1973 the members of the Pocho-Ché joined the “Third World Communications Collective (TWC)” welcoming “members such as Janice Mirikitani, Ntozake Shange, Jessica Tarahata Hagedorn, Serafín Syquia, Geraldine Kudaka, George Leong and Victor Hernandez Cruz—all major figures in the Mission's literary world” and published two anthologies, *Time to Greeze: Incantations from the Third World* and *Third World Women* (Herrera “Riffs on Mission District Raza Writers” 219). The latter was the first anthology of women of color poets published in English.

It was around this time, says Murguía, that the members of Pocho-Ché became interested in two distinct but related cultural and political interventions. First, as Murguía says, “was the return to our indigenous roots” and second was “the expansion of our political involvement, which firmly established our link to Central America” (*Medicine of Memory* 128). The Central American moment has an important role to play in the development of Chicano/a identity politics in the seventies. In the reclamation of their indigenous ancestry, Vargas and Murguía were influenced as much, if not more, by the poetry of Ernesto Cardenal as by that of Alurista. Erik Lyle cites Murguía as saying, “For us the work of Cardenal was very important” and *Homenaje a los indios Americanos* in particular provided a “continental vision of Native Americans—everything from the San Blas Indians of Panama to the Indians of Omaha to the Indians of Mexico City and Peru”
As Vargas says in the same article, in Cardenal’s work, such as *Homenaje a los indios americanos*, “There is a longing for the simplicity of that civilization—the creativity, the innocence, the tribalism. Can we get it back after all the dictatorships, after all that capitalism has done? Cardenal showed us what we were, what we had, what we lost” (Lyle “The Mission and the Revolution as Lived and Told by Roberto Vargas”). In this formulation, anti-capitalist politics becomes a form of nostalgic longing, a recovery of “simplicity” and “innocence” of previous economic formations we witnessed in Cardenal’s own “Canto nacional” and Oráculo sobre Managua.” But it also came to embody the very ideal of a political struggle against underdevelopment and internal colonization that these writers also saw emerging in the Mission.

This expanded sense of political possibility, coupled with a growing sense of indigeneity and the “tropicalization” of the Mission led these writers to internationalize their worldview. In 1973, “the Pocho-Ché group had produced two additional issues, journeyed to Cuba to work in the Third Venceremos Brigade, assisting in the sugarcane crop, meeting young Angolans and Vietnamese, and intensifying their internationalist perspectives, their visión tropical” (Herrera “Riffs on Mission District Raza Writers” 218-9). In 1974 Pocho-Ché published *Tin-Tan: Revista cósmica*, a magazine, which, according to Erik Lyle, “presented a sweeping utopian vision of a borderless invisible Latino republic united culturally and politically under the sign of the palm tree. The poets situated the capital of this world right here in the Mission District,” and included essay, stories, and poetry by writers from El Salvador, Mexico, San Francisco, and Uruguay, among other places (“The Mission and the Revolution as Lived and Told by Roberto Vargas”). In more prosaic terms, *Tin-Tan*, which lasted until 1977, emphasized an internationalist
perspective, putting translations of Mayakovsky side by side with news about Roque Dalton's death, political analyses of Nicaragua next to Chicano paintings of apartheid in South Africa.

The writers associated with Pocho-Ché also had a key role in the translation of the engaged writers of Central America themselves. Shortly after Dalton’s death in 1975, several of the members of Pocho-Ché, along with Francisco X. Alarcón, Barbara Paschke, David Volpendesta, and Jack Hirshmann, among others, formed the Roque Dalton Cultural Brigade, which was dedicated to translating and disseminating texts from Central America. In addition to his iconic status as a revolutionary martyr, Dalton’s poetry and wry, ironic, testimonial voice was of a great influence to the Mission writers. Murguía, in the Introduction to *Stray Poems*, says that “Dalton’s work has touched most every poet I know here in San Francisco” (7). The Roque Dalton Cultural Brigade were the first to publish an anthology of Otto René Castillo (translated by Chicano poet Francisco X. Alarcón) and brought a volume of Roque Dalton’s poetry into English with the publication of *Clandestine Poems* in 1984. With Barbara Paschke, Murguía co-edited the first dual-language anthology of Central American revolutionary poetry, *Volcán*, published by City Lights Press in 1983.⁸⁴ In the Introduction to *Volcán*, Murguía describes the work as “not an anthology at all, but a contact bomb, a volcano ready to erupt,” creating a sense of poetry as weapon, cataclysm, and natural force (xii). According to Murguía’s own assessment, the “work of this cultural brigade was instrumental in forming a new consciousness among poets as well as encouraging more translation from Latin America” in California of the seventies and eighties (*Stray Poems* 7).

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⁸⁴ Among the translators were all of the above mentioned members of the RDCB and Wilfredo Castaño, Magaly Fernández, Cecilia Guidos, Juan Felipe Herrera, Murguía, Walter Martíne, Tina Alvarez Robles, and Tony Ryan.
Finally, it should also be noted that the three poets were among the co-founders of the Mission Cultural Center for the Arts in 1977, which became a key Latino/a-focused venue for poetry readings and workshops, art performances, and which became the primary space for the organizing of the San Francisco Peace and Solidarity Movement for Central America. The space grounded the new internationalist Latino/a aesthetic in the Mission District of San Francisco, where the Center helped spread it to artists and community members. Serrano, Vargas, and Murguía supported Central American poets by organizing talks and events about the conflicts, publishing critical essays about the situation in the isthmus, and performing solidarity actions throughout the seventies and eighties. Vargas and Murguía would take their solidarity efforts one step further, for beyond organizing solidarity marches in the Mission, they saw fighting in Nicaragua as the logical conclusion of their aesthetic commitment to the Central American armed struggle and Nina Serrano went on several trips in order to learn from the political example of Sandinismo and the writers who supported it. It therefore makes sense to analyze their literary texts in light of these multiple forms of commitment and solidarity.

The Tropical Hypothesis: From the Mission to Aztlán to the Universal

My central contention is that throughout the period described above, these writers’ focus on uneven development and internal colonization at a global level differentiated Northern California “green” or “tropical” Chicano/a and Latino/a poetry from those forms of Chicano nationalism focused primarily on a reclamation of indigeneity and the geographical space of Aztlán. It was their connection to the Central American struggles, given the radical politics and cultural makeup of the Bay Area, that led these writers away from more limited conceptions of nationalist
politics. In the pages of *Pocho-Ché* (the name also of the literary and critical magazine through which the writings of Murguía, Vargas, Herrera, and others were published) the groundwork for tropicalization was formulated by Ysidro Ramon Macías. In “The Evolution of the Mind,” an essay for the inaugural edition of *Pocho-Ché*, he “stressed the progression of historical consciousness from the initial plane of ‘Mexican-American’ to ‘Third World’ and then ‘Humanist’ awareness” (Herrera “Riffs on Mission District *Raza* Writers” 218). For Macías, this tripartite sense of struggle does not necessitate mutual exclusions, but rather forms an interrelated set of dynamics that link “local” struggles in San Francisco, for example, to both a Latin American context, and what will become a “tropical” or more broadly “third-world” context. By moving through this “tropical” world as a mediator, the Latino/a writer might thereby gain a sense of the planetary or fully “human” sense of struggle against capitalism and imperialism. Unsurprisingly perhaps, Macías’s text “underlined the Third World as the literary audience for artists in the Mission, a very different focus than that taking place in other parts of California” (Herrera “Riffs on Mission District *Raza* Writers 218). By positioning the “Third World” as the ideal readership, underdevelopment, not just common culture or a sense of Chicano identity became one of the key ways to conceptualize “tropical” solidarities. As Saldaña-Portillo has argued:

> the Chicano nationalism of the later 1960s and early 1970s was heavily influenced by the theory of internal colonialism. According to this theoretical model, just as U.S. capitalism had a vested interest in maintaining the economies of Latin American and the Third World in conditions of underdevelopment and dependent development, so too did it have an interest in maintaining U.S. minority populations in conditions of underdevelopment and dependency. (278)

As Juan Felipe Herrera writes about his time before moving to the Bay Area, “In the south writers were attracted to the Red [indigenous] poetic voice…We did not see Che Guevara as our emblem or Latin America as our center; rather the Aztec poet-prince of the Valley of Texcoco,
Netzahualcoyotl” (“Riffs on Mission District Raza Writers 221-2). Chicano nationalism, when shaped by the theory of internal colonization, became an appealing alternative to the discourses of assimilation or stale Marxist party politics in the United States on the other hand. Marissa López says, “The political climate of the 1970s buoyed Alurista [and Chicano nationalism] on a wave of essentialist indigenism, and the 1980s and 1990s excoriated his supposed phallocentric, nationalistic identity politics,” a fate that, even if unfair in Alurista’s case, some Northern California poets with a more international focus did not share (111). While Saldaña-Portillo has critiqued “the continued use of mestizaje as a trope for Chicana/o identity and the presumed access to indigenous subjectivity that this biologized trope offers us,” I argue that the metaphorics of tropicalization offered a compelling alternative at the time to the nationalist solutions of the era, as it both included a vindication of indigeneity and Chicano identity, but opened to make more expansive solidarities possible (279).

Rather than simply serve as a critical, analytic tool to connect the underdevelopment of various people across the Americas to struggles in other locales, I contend that tropicalization provided an aestheticized celebration of “Third World” subjectivity as a locus of resistance. Murguía says that the notion of tropicalization emerged after reading Cien años de soledad. He writes that after the encounter with García Márquez’s text, Puerto Rican poet Victor Hernández Cruz, Roberto Vargas, and he “reinterpreted our existence…We transposed our Latino roots from Central

85 In a 1976 interview with Jorge Rufinelli, Alurista makes clear his internationalist perspective, “vamos a hablar de la ausencia de fronteras. Porque la soberanía nacional de los pueblos chicanos no se puede concebir—esta es mi opinión, no la opinión mayoritaria de nuestro pueblo—independiente, aislada, separada de la soberanía nacional de los pueblos centro y sudamericanos” (31). Going even further, López questions whether or not the notion of Aztlán ever had a concrete nationalist basis in his work, arguing that “While Alurista may have intended it to serve as an abstract concept, other activists understood Aztlán materially” noting how he later came to use “Amerindia” as a broader, more all-encompassing concept (106).
America, land of volcanos and revolution, from the Caribbean, land of palm trees and salsa music; and from Aztlán, land of lowriders and *vatos locos*, and fused these tropicalized visions to our barrio” (Murguía *Medicine of Memory* 126-7). Their specific Latino/a identities in the United States came to make sense in terms of shared forms of resistance to capitalism. The affirmation of the tropics escalated to the point where “We ate tropical food…we drank only rum or tequila” (127). However, this focus on giving positive content to the subjects of “tropical” resistance also contributed to a mythologizing of the struggle and, at times, a failure to interrogate deeper class inequities.

Among its adherents, Juan Felipe Herrera would turn the tropical into a celebration of linguistic and cultural hybridity:

> The tropical metaphor refracts our world—tropical peoples stripped of their homelands…Latino/as, Filipinos, Afro-Americans, Cubans, Asians and Indians. Hindi, Samoan, Tongan, Chicana and Salvadoreña talk, all in a be-bop stream of "green" sounds, neon and elastic, polished, bilingual and re-souled with adolescent first generation speech play, Nicaragüense, Salvadoreño, Guatemalteco, Hondureña, Peruana, Brasileira and Chicana rap. There is a palm tree outside our windows, the Pocho-Che poets seemed to say, we are that green barrio palm, we are that green earth flame star sparkle. (“Tropicalized Mission Palms”)

Herrera connects diverse groups of people not merely by the structural oppression they face after being “stripped of their homelands,” but rather in a “be-bop stream” of sounds they make as they invent new forms of English, create new forms of life in the Mission. These “tropical” people generate a jazz improvisation of hybrid cultural forms, both within their own groups, and in relation to other groups in the city. The “green barrio palm” is thus the symbol of this new tropical vision of solidarity and the way in which the notion of natural force enters Bay Area poetry. By not merely responding to structural inequalities, but embodying a “tropical” people,
Along these lines, it is worth examining a poem of Juan Felipe Herrera, the U.S. poet laureate at the time of my writing (2016), who would not only theorize such tropical solidarities during the eighties, but would embody this aesthetic in his representation of uneven capitalist development entitled “Ode to the Industrial Village of the World” from Exiles of Desire (59-61). The three-part poem begins by evoking the Third World as the site where “dependence, depression and death” circulate, as corporations turn profits from uranium plants, mineral mines, and asbestos factories, causing workers to suffer illness and exploitation. “Dependence” links these villages at the economic register, while anaphora allows the speaker to link them poetically:

O village of Mercury mines drowning the great Wabigoon River of Canada
O village of Mercury death flooding Bahia Cartagena waters of Colombia
O village of Petrochemical plants shrieking into the tropical night
Of Cubata, São Paolo

O village of petrochemical hysteria exploding into the soft and dark ears
Of Sukra el Kheima, Egypt

Just as Marx describes the infinite exchangeability of commodities on the market, here “Mercury” becomes “petrochemicals,” as earlier it was “uranium” and “asbestos” in these anaphoric phrases. In the initial two-thirds of the poem, the villages have only the common logic of the commodity—the extraction of surplus value at the expense of living human labor—to bind them together. However, I claim that the tropicalization of underdevelopment at the beginning of the poem becomes the tropicalization of the working class’s natural force at the end of the poem. Herrera deploys animal and meteorological imagery from the tropics in order to call for a “fatal strike” against capitalist exploitation. In it, he beckons for the “jaguar throat,” “tigress howl,” “eagle chant,” “anaconda waves,” “monsoon arms,” “lava claws” and “hurricane mouth” among
other forces, to perform this revolutionary transformation. Rather than evoke the peoples of the
industrial village, Herrera returns them to an immanent relation to their magical, tropical power
embodied in nature—with “lava claws” referring, I believe, to the volcanic lands of Central
America. Through this transmutation, the industrial villages of the tropics become the site for
various peoples to embody the natural force of the landscape and “sing in harmony of our
sovereign independence.”

These forms of thinking through the Third World and a tropical poetics will shape the works of
Serrano, Murguía, and Vargas as well. My argument in this chapter is that in the case of both
Serrano and Murguía, the emphasis of their work remains on the individual transformations
experienced by the subject in political action, rather than, as with Vargas a more thorough
examination of how structural factors shape subjectivity, and thus, the impact that these
structural factors have in an international context.

All three writers borrow from and develop a volcanic poetics in one form or another. While
Serrano retains a close attention to external detail through the use of a testimonial voice, her
ultimate aim is to understand what an eruption of revolutionary subjectivity consists in, rather
than examining the economic or political as such. Murguía, on the other hand, creates a poetic
subject whose posits interiority itself, in its transgressions and quasi-psychedelic consciousness,
as revolutionary. Finally, I contend that it is Vargas who best captures the radical potentials of
the aesthetic of “tropicalization,” as his poems relate the impact of economic and political
structures in the Bay Area to the way in which they shape subjectivity, and in turn, how similar
forms of underdevelopment might shape the lives of those throughout the Global South. As such,
tropicalization in his works becomes a form through which to imagine and indeed, trace out, the forms of political co-presence and commonality that existed throughout the seventies. For him, a volcanic poetics works to formulate what a global or “tropical” eruption of resistance might look like.

*Nina Serrano: Poetic Practice at the Volcano’s Mouth*

The Colombian-American poet Nina Serrano played a critical role in the Central American solidarity movement in the Bay Area and the formation of the Pocho-Ché collective. She attributes the beginning of her own literary career to an act of international solidarity in 1968 and the making of a video drama for Cuban television, during which time she met Roque Dalton:

> My concern for his [Dalton’s] safety inspired my first poem in 1969, as he prepared to join the Salvadoran revolutionaries to liberate his country from the military dictatorship. At the time of the poem’s publication in an alternative SF newspaper, *Express*, I could only use his initials in the title and refer to El Salvador as “unknown terrain” (Serrano “Poetry Life: A Life in Poetry”).

This poem, “To R. Before Going to Fight in Unknown Terrain 1969,” would later appear in *Heart’s Song* with his full name and “El Salvador” replacing “Unknown Terrain.” What allowed for the figure of Roque Dalton to emerge from the shadows of anonymity was his death in 1975. It was also Dalton who, upon seeing a headline about Los Siete de la Raza in a newspaper, first encouraged Serrano to become involved in the struggle to defend the Salvadoran Mission-area men accused of killing a police officer. For Serrano, this moment pushed her poetry in a political direction and led her to meet Vargas and Murguía, who were some of the main organizers of the
protests. As Ferreira argues, the formation of this protest group, also known as “Los Siete” would become a foundational moment in Bay Area Latino militancy, founded as it was on “political, economic, and cultural empowerment” but also drawing “materially and ideologically from the interconnected network of Third World activists within the local area” (32). Serrano therefore played a key role in this “translation” of Third World struggle in El Salvador (as well as Cuba), and later Nicaragua, to the Mission, and it is reflected in her poem “Antepasados/Ancestors” from *Heart Songs*:

> We are one people tied by the buried bones of antepasados the buried bones of ancestors. from Asia to America from Africa to America from Europe to America.

Unsurprisingly, her poetry reflects such transnational political interests, with about a half a dozen poems written directly about events in Nicaragua, as well as others about the invasion of Grenada, the Vietnam War, and the feminist struggle.87

In his lyrical introduction to her first collection of poems, *Heart Songs*, published in 1980 by the Pocho-Ché collective, Chilean literary critic Fernando Alegría praises the regenerative vision of

86 “Back in San Francisco I linked my poetry with the neighborhood struggle to “Free Los Siete”…This led to my involvement with an exciting group of activist Latino poets in the San Francisco Bay Area, a literary collective called Editorial Pocho Che.” See Serrano, “Assassination of a Poet: Memories of Roque Dalton.”

87 At the time of this writing she was also planning to release the novel *Nicaragua Way*, which she describes on her website as “the story of Lorna Almendros, a San Francisco Nicaraguan-American poet, passionately engaged in supporting revolutionary struggles in Latin America and the Sandinista solidarity movement in the U.S.” (“*Nicaragua Way*: A Novel by Nina Serrano”). The autobiographical parallels—despite the fact that Lorna is Nicaraguan-American, rather than Columbian-American—should be obvious.
Serrano’s poetry, saying “I don’t know any other poetry equal to that of Nina Serrano. It rises today and the sun rises with it, together they create the morning, the afternoon and the night of stormy and inventive dreams” (“Introduction by Fernando Alegria”). Alegria’s emphasis on poetry as an almost magical creator of the “world” and “dreams” conjures up similarities to Belli’s poetry and the use of natural force as a metaphor for revolution. Indeed, many of the same tropes of natural force that came to define Nicaraguan poetry in the seventies also appear in Serrano’s poetry written in the eighties while in Nicaragua, most notably in the poem “Volcano,” which I analyze below.

Overall, Serrano’s poetic voice is one that is marked by a clarity of expression and, most often, an understated lyricism that combines existential themes with political visions. It generally shows less of the rhythmic and imagistic influence of Beat poetry so characteristic of Vargas’s work, and often highlights the more intimate, testimonial voice of writers like Dalton. This gives her poems a more acute focus on concrete events and political happenings than Vargas, but at the same time it often lacks the connective potentials of his more expansive consciousness, in which multiple cultures come together in a phantasmagoria of struggle. In this sense, her voice often feels more attuned to the particularities of the struggles about which she writes in her poems of solidarity. However, as I claim, despite this detail, Serrano often substitutes an examination of the material structures shaping political struggle for a celebration of the type of volcanic subjectivity they generate. That is, Serrano often reveals what a “revolutionary” consciousness looks like, without examining its etiology in the material structures shaping it.

Along these lines, we might begin with what Serrano herself dubs her inaugural poem, “To R.
Before Going to Fight in Unknown Terrain 1969” in order to understand the influence of Dalton and the testimonial style that shapes her work, as well as how her texts often celebrate—rather than examine the making of—revolutionary subjectivity (Heart Songs). In the poem, she observes Dalton’s willingness to sacrifice “blood” (both his own and others) and questions whether or not she could do the same. The poem initially stages this question in gendered terms, as the speaker must come to terms with the fact that “Women die too” or that “Tania [Tamara Bunke] died before Che.” The climax of the poem comes in the question “Can I spill blood by my own volition?” and apparently, the speaker beginning her menstruation at that moment. The poem ends with water being accidentally dropped on the speaker by a woman mopping her balcony—a symbolical bloodshed—which leads the speaker to say “The question is answered.”

I read this poem therefore as a sort of revolutionary “Bildungsgedicht” in which the speaker must come to temper her own personal concern and care for Dalton (and by extension her own life) in order to achieve a revolutionary consciousness. In particular, I will show how the subordination of female menstrual “blood” to male martyred “blood” stages this revolutionary consciousness in gendered terms. This reproduces what Ileana Rodríguez has described as the way in which in Central America “vanguard parties, political leaders, and engaged writers neglected, demeaned, and marginalized women” including all that was “synonymous with Woman” such as uncertainty and vulnerability in the space of the armed struggle (xvii). As such, the poem, in idealist fashion, focuses more on the masculinized “courage” necessary for revolutionary subjectivity rather than the material conditions that might make it possible (or impossible) in the United States.
The poem begins with the speaker referencing the Cuban television drama on which she was working with Dalton (“Mass media I adore you”) and proceeds with the speaker saying to Dalton “Don’t die.” Dalton in return says, “When I die I’ll wear a big smile,” a response that highlights his seeming cavalier attitude toward death, while the speaker’s concern appears, if not as anti-revolutionary, as being out of place in a political reality that involves armed struggle. The discrepancy between her care and his willingness to shed blood appears as the contrast between personal interest and political militancy. This leads her to reflect on the fact that “Women die too” in the armed struggle, with the implication that her own fear—both for Dalton’s life and her own—might be a hindrance to her own political consciousness and in some sense attributable to her lack of “masculine” virility and fearlessness.

The speaker goes on to say that in Cuba “blood is stirred by the sacrifice of smiles / to armed struggle,” indicating that not only fear, but joy, must be subordinated to the political cause, as safety and “smiles” become sacrificed. Political enthusiasm is therefore rendered as a type of “blood” that can “stirred” by the prospect of more blood spilled during the armed struggle. To stir the “blood” of the masses, one must be willing to spill one’s own blood. In this sense, “Tania,” who fought and was killed in Bolivia with Che Guevara (“Her blood floated in the river”) becomes a sort of feminine ideal as she can shed blood in the properly “masculine” way and attain the status of martyr. In both instances, revolutionary subjectivity becomes an issue of developing the proper type of courage or “blood” instead of something that arises from material antagonisms in society.

In the second half of the poem, the speaker links these metaphors of bloodshed to the gendered
dynamics of childbirth, framing the society to be born as a child. She writes:

“Death to the known order. Birth to the unknown.”
The warmth of it between the thighs
soothes the channel
the baby fights and tears

This formulation links the “unknown” social order to be born through parataxis to the “blood” that she imagines must be spilt. However, by then turning the image of blood into a “warmth” that enables childbirth, the speaker converts the trauma of blood shed through violence as “death to the known” to the life-giving force of blood in creating the “unknown.” In the poem, despite the masculinized call to spill blood through violence, the speaker has inserted, perhaps unwittingly, a call to spill blood that generates life rather than takes it. The devaluation of this life-giving force of blood is evoked in gendered terms since the speaker must ask “Can I spill blood by my own volition?” In this sense, both menstruation and the “blood” of childbirth represent autonomic forms of bloodshed, whereas blood that gets shed in armed struggle is the product of consciousness, of the masculine “volition” of the hombre nuevo. She therefore conceives of herself as standing by a puddle “a woman full of blood / not yet spilled,” unlike Tania. The inclusion of “woman” in this line makes clear, that unlike a “man,” such as Dalton, she lives in fear of spilling it voluntarily. Again, in voluntarist fashion, the issue of revolution becomes one of overcoming a lack of courage, or a deficient subjectivity, rather than an issue of the different material conditions facing the Bay Area and Dalton’s El Salvador—and how to potentially link them. The gendered politics of her formulation are especially suspect in retrospect.
The poem ends in an ambiguous manner, with these dynamics of bloodshed as violence and bloodshed as birth left unresolved. In response to her own question, the speaker responds “Now it [blood] flows from me by a call of the moon,” therefore seemingly indicating that this bloodshed of menstruation is not the product of her volition, as the preposition “by” makes the moon the active agent in this line. However, the poem culminates with a woman accidentally mopping water onto the speaker’s body, in a manner reminiscent of blood flowing down her and “into the puddle.” This puddle also evokes the “river” into which Tania’s blood “floated.” The final line, which says, “The question is answered” therefore seemingly responds to the “volition” of her ability to sacrifice blood in a dual sense.

First, it would seem that at the psychological level, the speaker, after having the metaphorical “blood” (the spilled water) dripping across her body and into the puddle, accepts the fact that she too may have to risk her life at some point, and therefore the question is answered in the affirmative. As such, the poem represents a sort of “conversion narrative” in which the speaker becomes as courageous as Dalton. However, the conclusion also seems to point to a negative answer in that this metaphorical bloodshed is the result of an involuntary process (the water is spilled on her), just as her own menstruation is an involuntary process. In this sense, inasmuch as the speaker is still “woman,” she cannot shed blood by her own volition, it can only occur by way of an imagined violence done to her (symbolized by the water dropping across her body). Therefore, while the first reading might indicate that the speaker has overcome her hesitancy about the need to risk one’s life for the armed struggle, this second reading would indicate that the speaker’s hesitancy persists, linked to her inability to “overcome” her resistance—marked as decidedly feminine. At the same time, the presence of the moon and the spilt water as active
agents shaping the speaker’s consciousness point to—perhaps involuntarily—the presence of the very material and social transformations that might likewise transform the speaker’s subjectivity.

However, rather than simply reproducing the gendered dynamics of the guerilla, what emerges in the tension between volitional, “male” violence and involuntary “female” hesitancy is the idea of a generative bloodshed (childbirth, menstruation) which gives birth to new worlds without physical violence. This is in a sense, the utopian fantasy that animates the poem, a wish-fulfillment through which Dalton would not have to risk his life with the risk of becoming a martyr, but political change might occur. Serrano represents martyrdom here, as in the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran poetry of the seventies, as a heroic calling. However, by representing it as essentially an issue of subjective transformation, she not only fails to interrogate the very applicability of Dalton’s type of armed struggle in a U.S. context, but the very conditions that might differentiate it from or link it to El Salvador. Affectively the poem is caught between a call to courage and a fear of the consequences, which parallels the speaker’s own hesitancy about the viability of armed struggle in her own case.

Serrano’s most successful attempt to use a tropicalized aesthetic in order to interrogate the links between Managua and the Mission occurs in “I Saw it Myself on the Corner of Mission and Twenty Fourth Streets,” also from Heart Songs. In it, she deploys a language deeply indebted to the Central American exteriorist, testimonial style and one that veers away from the type of subjective reflections found in “To R. Before Going to Fight in Unknown Terrain 1969.” In the poem, Serrano details the renaming of 24th and Mission in honor of Sandino, an important protest action that Vargas, Murguía, and her all took part in on one of their almost weekly
demonstrations against Somocismo. The focus of the poem, is tight and controlled, as it details
the cityscape rather than focusing on the speaker’s subjectivity:

    this shared cement ground
    surrounded by a sweet shop
    a fast food store and four bus stops
    was renamed by
    WE THE PEOPLE
    from a radius of twenty miles or so
    “Plaza Sandino”

The hybrid nature of such an act of solidarity is rendered with the capitalization of “WE THE
PEOPLE,” which frames the protest as an act of solidarity by citizens of the United States,
lending it an almost patriotic tenor. The text “WE THE PEOPLE,” therefore appears as a
moment of disjuncture between the “United States” figured as political entity, as a state (and
supporter of Somoza) and as popular collective subject, including many Nicaraguan-Americans.
This capitalization is reminiscent of Cardenal’s use in order to register disjunctions in official
history, as in “Canto nacional.” Throughout the poem she will also capitalize chants and slogans,
such as “QUE SE CAIGA SOMOZA,” and “SE SIENTE / SANDINO ESTA PRESENTE”
which, although in Spanish, occupies a similar textual space to the patriotic, English “WE THE
PEOPLE.” This turns the collective subject of “WE THE PEOPLE” into a culturally hybrid and
bilingual one. When the speaker does link the local struggle to those taking place abroad she
does so not through the revolutionary subjectivity shared in each space (as Dalton and her
“shared” a similar courage) but rather, by representing the internationalist chants of the crowd:
“PINCOHET ROMERO / Y SOMOZA…SON LA MISMA COSA.” The affective charge of the
poem occurs in this juxtaposition of linear narrative and the rage and hope registered by the
capitalized lines.
The poem ends with an evocation of the rain as natural force, acting as a sort of portent for the struggle:

it was raining
ending a three year drought
I saw it myself on the corner
of Mission and Twenty-Fourth streets

Although subtle, such an evocation of natural force makes the rain into a “tropicalizer” of an arid California, just as the protest “tropicalizes” a politically arid United States.

The use of rain as the tropicalization of the myth of natural force also appears in “End of the California Drought” written in 1978, a poem in which the connection between this natural force and a revolutionary love becomes explicit. The poem details the coming of a much-needed rainstorm and relates it, as in her poem about Roque Dalton, to the image of flowing blood, although this time, the blood conjures images of the insurrection in Nicaragua. The poem repeats many of the tropes of “I Saw it Myself on the Corner of Mission and Twenty Fourth Streets,” although about halfway through this poem, the speaker deploys an image of the earth that, after the rain, mends the cracks in its surface.

First, the rainstorm (often a daily occurrence in the tropics) is what allows the poetic transition between the speaker’s images of the Mission and Nicaragua. Serrano writes:

Candlelit walk on San Francisco Plaza Sandino
Walking / chanting on rainy concrete
Shoe feet heard on the south of the continent
Blood flows on far-off Nicaragua street
Here Serrano combines parataxis with concrete descriptions of the scene, although she represents these without any clear subject in the first three lines. Instead, the use of the verbal nouns “walking” and “chanting” make the subject of the protest amorphous, just as we are unclear as to who is taking the “candlelit walk.” By the time she writes “shoe feet heard” this lack of a subject allows her to move fluidly between North and Central American spaces. It could be that we are to read these “feet” as those of the marchers in San Francisco whose footsteps create a “sound of solidarity” that resonates further south. However, conversely, we could read these footsteps “on the south of the continent” as those of the Sandinistas who, instead of marching in rain, march in the “blood” that follows in the next line. In other words, the rain and blood link the two streets, as walking in a “tropical” rain in San Francisco mirrors the footsteps in “blood” on the isthmus. Blood in the south demands political action in the rainy north: a tropicalization of the dynamics of capitalist oppression.

This leads us to the other image of footsteps in the poem, in which “Love makes feet connect deeper with the ground / The floor of our world was cracking in the sun / It is mended / It is healed.” In this image, the rain has acted to “heal” the fissures in the earth that ripped apart the “ground” and “floor” of existence. The “footstep” links the two spaces, just as here “Love” is what allows feet to “connect deeper” with earth. In this sense, we should read “It is mended / It is healed” as the rain’s ability to bring together different parts of the earth—North and Central America—just as its moisture brings together arid land. Here, the speaker returns to another moral and subjective factor—love—in order to explain this transnational solidarity, rather than evaluating the common dynamics between Managua and the Mission. The natural force of rain is
easily subsumed by the notion of a cosmic love that might, for the speaker, bring together north and south. In this sense, the text reminds one of Cardenal’s utopian teleologies of love as the driving force of history in “Oráculo sobre Managua.”

After the Sandinista triumph, Serrano, like many of her friends associated with the Pocho-Ché collective, went to Nicaragua for solidarity trips. The impact her activist work had on her poetry was not negligible: “Throughout the 1980’s, I continued to write poetry. But my poetic activities were often subsumed by solidarity work around the Nicaraguan Sandinista revolution (1979-1989)” (Serrano “Poetry Life: A Life in Poetry”). However, aesthetically speaking, there are several differences that appear in her writings about Nicaragua in Heart’s Journey, such as “Oration in the Rain,” “A Song for Ben Linder,” and “The End of Faith.” Several of Serrano’s poems begin to praise the triumph of the Sandinista revolution and agonize over its fall in terms of the subjective effects it has on the poet, rather than detailing the political events shaping the nation.

I argue that whereas her earlier work had more of a documentary and exteriorist character, her poetry written about the Sandinista triumph becomes more interiorized in order to celebrate it as not just a political, but an almost mystical and spiritual transformation. Accompanying this transition is a move to incorporate the tropes of natural force and the possibilities of martyrdom in more profound ways. Of particular note in this regard is “Volcano,” which uses allegories of natural force to represent the speaker’s ability to transcend time and space (examined below). Whereas her poetry of critique in Heart’s Song depended upon more detailed renderings of social reality, in my reading, in “Volcano,” social reality—the Sandinista transformation of
Nicaragua—enters the poem as background, as natural force that redeems existence from the clutches of time. Sandinista Nicaragua becomes an irruptive limit-experience that the speaker can momentarily step into and then leave. While this formulation may have acted as an intriguing call for solidarity for North American poets, such an approach also tended to obscure the concrete transformations—both beneficial and detrimental—brought about by the new government.

The poem “Volcano” details the speaker’s voyage to a volcano in Nicaragua and how it comes to represent the persistence of the Nicaraguan revolution and the hope for a new human society. The poem takes place as a conversation with her husband Paul Richards, to whom it is dedicated, and the “echoes” of the volcano come to symbolize their love for each other. The slippage between interpersonal love and natural force reoccurs throughout the poem. The volcano also accrues a second layer of meaning, inasmuch as it comes to represent the revolutionary power of the Nicaraguan people, which, like love, is capable of liberating the speaker from time-bound experience. “Volcano” then, might be seen as a tropicalization of the Romantic sublime that gestures not toward the ineffability or unknowability of material existence, but rather parallels the transcendence of time at an existential level with the deliverance of a people from social constraints as they erupt into the “eternity” of revolution.

“Volcano” begins with an epigraph comparing Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am” to “I exist, therefore I am,” a paraphrase of Sartre. Serrano’s intention however is not philosophical so much as to insist that, almost tautologically, just as her own existence has been generated by the past, the existence of the Nicaraguan revolution—and the prior struggles that made it possible—
confers substance upon it. Persistence over time alone makes something “exist.” She asks rhetorically, “What does it matter / that centuries of others / struggled with survival / to create my bones and meat…/ I exist / I shout into the echoing volcano.” The implication here is that the struggles of prior generations may have allowed for her being to come into existence, but in no way limit or confine it. The past “does not matter” given the liberated present. Foremost among the liberating forces of the volcano is the love she feels for her partner: “Your name repeats itself / in the tropical air / My love transforms / into vibrating sound.” Just as the volcano echoes the speaker’s shout, the “tropical air” echoes the name of her beloved, such that love becomes physicalized as sound, interiority becomes exteriority. In my reading, the meaning of the revolution for the speaker is that love and solidarity can now “erupt” out of time and spread themselves across the globe. This formulation of love as a revolutionary eruption evokes Belli’s “Hasta que seamos libres” with its “Quiero explotar de amor / y que mis charneles acaben con los opresores.”

At the same time, the volcano is described as a “silent threat of power” that grips the speaker with “awe and respect / for the centuries of others who struggled / with survival to create my existence.” While it stands for an eruption from historicity, it represents that very historicity itself, as the “struggle” of generations. However, despite this “awe” and “respect,” the speaker overcomes the dynamically sublime force of history by positioning a part of herself—not unlike the capacity of Reason in Kant—outside of and beyond time. She makes this formulation clear with the lines: “Here above the volcano / I bring my future / My past has flown / into a dimension called time / Eternity is mine.” It seems that the Nicaraguan volcano has come to destroy the limitations of the past, opening up a new future for both the speaker and for
humanity. However, nowhere does the speaker show how or what this volcano means in more concrete terms; it is a revolution without human beings, a revolution aestheticized as eruption and transcendence.

The aesthetic experience of the volcano, in a manner similar to the political experience of the revolution, is finally cast as a liberation from death. This parallel emerges nowhere more clearly than when the speaker says, “I harden my muscles / that grow against death” and that the Nicaraguan revolution “proclaims self determination / even when surrounded / by a nuclear enemy navy on maneuvers.” This analogy turns the revolution into a biological being asserting itself, “hardening its muscles” against the “death” represented by the threat of US intervention. Just as the speaker attains a subjectivity free of time and death, so too the irruptive fervor in Nicaragua would seem—for the speaker at least—to somehow guarantee Sandinismo a freedom from death and the threat of U.S. invasion. This is the wish-fulfillment—or wishful thinking—of the poem in which a subjective sense of the eternal would seem to confer on the revolutionary a similar—although of course, false—eternity.

In the face of this wish-fulfillment, I also read the sublime experience of the volcano as representing not merely the power of revolution, but equally so, the power of counter-revolution, both popular and state violence. In other words, the “eternity” the speaker accesses appears precisely due to the threat of death represented by a “nuclear enemy” with “mercenary jets” threatening invasion. In this reading, while the manifest level of the poem becomes a celebration of the existential sense of freedom realized in Nicaragua, its latent content is that fact that such a sense of the “eternal” is in fact fleeting in a Cold War dynamic in which the odds are stacked
against Sandinismo. As such the speaker’s experience of sublimity is the hope for a frightful deliverance from time generated by the imminent threat of state violence. While the text attempts to deploy the magical experiences of the speaker as a means to guarantee the “magic” and eternity of the society that generated them—Sandinista Nicaragua—the text undoes its own presumptions. In place of an eternal revolution, we see one struggling to survive. The deliverance from the clutches of time the speaker promises only reveals how fleeting the time of the revolution might be.

_Alejandro Murguía: The Poetics of Chicano/a Nationalism and Tropical Internationalism_

Alejandro Murguía played a large role in the organizing and publishing activities of the Bay Area group of Latino/a writers that also included Vargas, Serrano, Herrera, Corpi, and Alarcón, however, his poetic output during the period of the Sandinista solidarity movement is not as extensive, nor, in my opinion, does it consistently match the aesthetic quality of Serrano and Vargas, on whose work I have decided to focus this chapter. In fact, Murguía’s most well-known text from the seventies is undoubtedly the semi-autobiographical novel _Southern Front_, which proclaims to tell “the stories of the Chicano internationalist who fought shoulder to shoulder with the Nicaraguans in the Southern Front” (8). _Southern Front_ narrates the stories of Ulises, a Chicano from Los Angeles who, like Murguía, joins the Nicaraguan uprising in the final days of the armed conflict by traveling through Costa Rica. As Olguín has argued, “Murguía’s Southern Front resituates Chicano literature by paralleling the praxis-theory-praxis teleology that animates foundational Latin American guerrilla testimonial,” detailing the development of Ulises’s political and cultural consciousness (“Sangre Mexicana” 103). Throughout the text, Nicaragua becomes the place where the U.S.-born, Chicano Ulises can access and solidify his revolutionary
consciousness due to the access the experience provides him to his indigenous roots, in a manner reminiscent of Vargas’s “They Blamed it on Reds!” analyzed below. Ulises sees in the “Chicano, Mejicano, Nicoya—the same ancient Nahuatl culture and language” and this common “culture” provides a basis for his decision to fight (18). Thus, in the “praxis-theory-praxis” nexus that Olguín has described operative in the guerilla testimonio form, praxis leads Ulises to posit—at the theoretical register—the recuperation of a lost Aztlán. His internationalism is still primarily one linked to cultural forms rather than a shared sense of global capitalist dynamics.

In retrospect, there are several problems with such a theoretical formulation. As Saldaña-Portillo argues in her critique of Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the indigenous in mestizaje, “mestizaje is once again deployed to produce a biological tie with pre-Aztec Indians rather than a political tie with contemporary U.S. Native Americans or Mexican Indians” (282). In a similar vein, Ulises does not see the living Native American in Central America, but rather relies on a largely mythologized and imaginary vision of the indigenous. The narrator’s decision to prioritize Nahuatl culture might call into question how other solidarities—such as those with the Maya uprising in Guatemala, Native Americans in the United States, or with Nicaraguan costeños (including those resistant to Sandinismo)—might be imagined. In other words, while Ulises imagines the Nicaraguan “front” as an extension of Chicano/a nationalist struggles in the United States due to the positing of shared nationhood and “blood” anterior to colonization, to some extent his decision to see “the same struggle from Cuauhtemoc to Carlos Fonseca” too easily conflates the divergent spaces, economic dynamics, and racial questions in the United States, Nicaragua, and other regions of Latin America, despite its positive attempt to link struggles internationally (18).
Additionally, in the text indigeneity is often conflated with masculinity, virility, and heroism. Saldaña-Portillo’s continues her critique of developmentalist thought in the Latin American guerilla text, by arguing, along similar lines to Ana Patricia Rodríguez that “the whole guerilla experience served as the trope for fantasmatic recuperation of full masculinity,” an assessment that, when applied to this text would also frame Ulises’s decision to join the struggle as an act linking revolutionary politics, masculinity, and indigeneity (273). However, I argue the text actually shows a movement away from such a “recuperation” of masculinity. While the text begins with the narrator’s heartbreak over a breakup, in which he “problematically displaces a fetish for his lost girlfriend onto his newly issued assault weapon,” the majority of the text narrates “Ulises's concientización, or ideological transformation, as an internationalist revolutionary and immanent feminist” (Olguín “Sangre Mexicana/Corazón Americano” 104). Thus, my argument does not aim to simply undermine or “deconstruct” Ulises’s international solidarity, but rather to complicate aspects of its aesthetic representation, especially its reliance on neo-indigeneity and at times, its masculinist undercurrent. The text moves through and ultimately beyond any limited vision of cultural nationalism, moving toward an expansive pan-Americanism and indeed “tropicalized” Third-Worldist vision of political struggle.

The text is also notable for the way in which Chicano/a narrative was shaped by—rather than simply shaping— Central American texts. Formally, this is played out as Ulises’s guerilla narrative gets interrupted several times by short testimonio-like passages of the “subaltern” voices of Nicaraguan and other Central American combatants. Not only does this gesture show the porousness of the Chicano text by a form derived from Cuba and Central America, these
voices themselves enter into a horizontal, non-hierarchical relation to Ulises’s own, making his narrative simply one among dozens that might represent the Sandinista experience. As such, “tropicalization” here appears as the tension between the admittedly dominant narrative voice of the North American, Chicano, Ulises, and the entry of Central American voices. Ultimately, I contend that in the text, Ulises moves from using Sandinismo as a means to compensate for the “emasculating” caused by heartbreak and political powerlessness to using it as a means to gain a more—if imperfect—feminist understanding of gender as well as a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of working-class people in Nicaragua. Ulises is “tropicalized” by the Nicaraguan experience.

Murguía’s major poetic work of the period is the 1972 Oración a la mano poderosa, published in a collection with José Montoya’s El sol y los de abajo and other R.C.A.F. Poems by Pocho-Ché. This edition is notable for the fact that the poems are at times accompanied by photographs, many of which represent isolated figures in bedrooms or living rooms, their faces often obscured or in shadows, in an almost expressionist manner. My argument is that Murguía’s text privileges the existential and internal conflicts of his speaker, such that rather than tracing the material conflicts producing them, he ends up romanticizing angst itself as a political gesture, imagining it creates a rupture with the forces of oppression. Although Serrano’s texts are not filled with the same level of pathos, both her work and that of Murguía emphasize the subjective factors of revolutionary praxis at the expense of material factors, with Murguía, at moments, having seemingly abandoned any vision of the collective itself. This turns his reclamation of indigenous identity and its attendant nationalist claims into a nostalgic longing that afflicts the individual rather showing how it might generate a collective praxis.
The first thing one notices about Murguía’s work, which at times deals with political themes directly, often narrates the speaker’s romantic and sexual encounters, unfulfilled dreams and hopes, and so forth. Such existential tropes often work effectively in representing the angst of living between two cultures and two worlds, such as in “Mexican Nights in Mecca” (Oración a la mano poderosa 17-20). In the poem, which is divided into seven sections, the speaker narrates his wanderings around New York City, including drunken escapades, encounters with women, and ultimately his decomposition by the power of the city itself. The poem uses several images that create a spatial and temporal disjunction between New York as the “Mecca” of American power and the indigenous past of the landscape, the “manhattan de los indios.” In the fourth section, a Native American shaman “chants to the ancient gods / to deliver him from the police state / to ease the burden of his debts,” revealing how the “gods” have come to function as political entities. The “ancient” is invoked as a temporality to combat the present, while the poem while at the same time, the past does not become merely an object of nostalgia. Instead, it provides a disjunctive temporality through which to critique the American century.

In section five, the speaker will conflate various images of industrial technology with Mexican symbols to transmute Manhattan into an Aztec landscape, carrying forward this psychedelic mixture of different moments of time. He says that the road that brings him home, “causes my eyes to mistake poles for cactus / winged mechanical monsters for eagles.” This spatial transformation also turns the industrial into the natural, thereby creating another temporal leap into the past. The speaker imagines a North American space “before” the telephone pole and airplane, and infuses it with symbols of indigenous natural force: the cactus and eagle. Again,
while effective poetically, such transformations take part at the level of the subject and as such become rendered as hallucinatory rather than indicating how the United States might be transformed by a collectivity.

For this reason, by section seven, such a recuperation of the past and the dream of an alternate spatiality causes the dissolution of the narrator. He says, “Tell them / that my bones have been dried / by the winds of nyc / that my eyes fell into the east river / and are sailing towards mazatlán.” In these lines, the “winds” of New York City seem to be the industrial cityscape, or modernity itself, that cannot account for indigenous cultures and therefore, the speaker’s consciousness itself. However, rather than politicize this moment, the speaker becomes destroyed by it, ending the poem with a return to the Mexican homeland in death as his eyes drift toward Mazatlán. In my reading then, the speaker enacts a version of poetic martyrdom in which only death—not political action—seems to promise a unity with his culture and the social. The lack of collectivity the speaker—even if unconsciously—feels turns into self-annihilation. Affectively however, Murguía maps the very experience of living as a Chicano male in the United States as one of angst, confusion, and a nostalgia for a lost homeland, but seems to see no way out other than death.

This theme recurs at other points in the collection, including most notably, “I Want to Know How it Feels to You That They Will One Day Kill Me,” which recounts the speaker’s disembowelment, leaving him dead “in the middle of amerika / in the middle of nowhere.” America is a “nowhere,” a space without the social, that seems to be not only violent, but unalterable, all-powerful. While “Mexican Nights in Mecca” compellingly captures the difficulty
of living within the racial dynamics and economic precarity of United States as a Chicano/a, it runs the danger of fetishizing such alienation. In returning at the end to an existential pathos, embodied in the speaker’s death, it forecloses alternative visions that might undermine the very dynamics producing the speaker’s afflicted consciousness.

Interestingly, Murguía breaks with poetry in his most directly political writing in the text, “The Theatre as Revolution/The Revolution as Theater,” which is an essay with a literary style (a “poem-essay?”) that combines Latin America history, reflections on religion, revolution, and most notably, the figure of Otto René Castillo as a sort of cosmic martyr and prophet. As the title suggests, the text posits oppression and class struggle as a sort of “theater,” giving them a sense of tragic melodrama, and, in my reading, celebrates the courage, sacrifice, and vision of Castillo as representing the type of collective subjectivity wed to the forces of life and love that might overcome the angst experienced by the speakers of Murguía’s other poems.

The essay traces a movement of “theater” first as indigenous religion, in which there was “communication with the forces that shaped destiny, the sun, the moon, earth, nature” (33) to the Catholic Church’s “theater” that was “mesmerizing” and focused people not on nature, but on “the mas alla” (34). The natural force of indigenous history becomes the magical and deceptive force—in Prosperian fashion—of colonial history. The events of colonization are called a “tragedy” in which the forces of destiny (sun, moon, stars) have been replaced by the “New forces” of “Imperialism, oligarchies, the ruling class” (34). Toward the end of the work, Murguía invokes the guerilla struggle carried out by Otto René Castillo and Guevara as well as the liberation theology of Camilo Torres to assert that a “new Theatre, a new lifestyle is being born
all over America” (36). Castillo in particular will be figured as “Quetzalcoatl re-incarnated” and as a “poet-prophet” who “offers alternatives to the script that has been playing out for four centuries” (35). This melodramatic formulation of politics reminds one of Castillo’s “Retorno a la sonrisa” or Cardenal’s invocation of the immorality of capitalist “greed.”

With the guerilla movement, “theater” seems to have come full circle, breaking with the forces of “imperialism” and the “ruling class” that have replaced the sun, moon, and earth. Castillo and other guerillas represent a return to indigenous forms of life, in which poetry might now act as prophecy, rewriting the “script” of history. In this formulation, the poet as “prophet” becomes the connective link between ages (pre-Colombian past and socialist future) and cultures, the very opposite of the “anti-life forces” that plague Central America (35). Thus, Murguía deploys a metaphysical mythos to define class struggle as a theatrical struggle of life versus death, past and future versus present, destiny (in the form of capitalist exploitation) versus tragic hero. History becomes melodrama.

Although the text, with its more evident political register, might seem to have escaped the dilemmas of his existentialist poetic style, both this work and his poetry reproduce a sort of melodrama of politics, in which the “hero” (whether it is Murguía’s speaker or Castillo) is crushed under the weight of a seemingly insurmountable destiny and tragically succumbs to his fate—death. Here, martyrdom deifies the figure of Castillo, but his legacy remains to have shown his people “an alternative way of acting, of building, of giving…of forcing history to change” (36). Castillo becomes an almost founder-god, or a Prometheus figure who makes possible the future for humankind.
Despite the melodramatic framework in which Murguía’s theater of revolution takes place, and its emphasize on the subjective heroism of Castillo, the text leaves it up to the living to determine their own fate. After recounting Castillo’s murder, the text ends with the lines “THE DUTY OF EVERY REVOLUTIONARY / IS TO MAKE THE REVOLUTION” and this emergence of a poetic style, with a new typeface, mirrors the emergence of a new political thought, of new possibilities (36). In other words, whereas throughout the text, the speaker’s individual angst almost always ends with his death or self-dissolution, here Castillo’s death points toward how the living might themselves create the world anew: acting, building, and giving in such a way to bringing about a space more poetic, and more communal than before. As such, at its best, it leaves aside the question of a prophetic heroism in favor of a demand to think through the conditions framing the present and demanding of the living new forms of praxis.

Roberto Vargas: Tropicalizing Underdevelopment from Managua to the Mission

In this section, I examine Nicaragua, yo te canto besos, balas, y sueños de libertad, a sprawling bilingual (English and Spanish) work that combines poetic and prose works by Roberto Vargas, published in 1980 by the Pocho-Ché collective. Roberto Vargas, a Nicaraguan-American who also went to fight in Nicaragua just before the ofensiva final, combines many disparate themes revolving around life as a Latino/a in the United States, the pressures of assimilation, the sixties counterculture, and the value of Sandinismo and Nicaraguan cultural nationalism. It is also noteworthy for poems such as “73 Burning Images for African Liberation and 1 Sad Cuban Song,” which represents the history of African slavery and political struggle in places as diverse as Harlem, Angola, Cuba, and Nicaragua itself. Although Nicaraguan-American, Vargas and his
poetry had a profound impact on Chicano/a writing. As Murguía notes in his article “Poetry and Solidarity in the Mission,” Vargas’s work “appears in all the major Chicano anthologies” of the seventies, including *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature* (1972) and *Festival de Flor y Canto: An Anthology of Chicano Literature*, (1976) (70).

My contention about Vargas’s work is that it best represents the spirit of tropicalization in examining the material conditions common to people throughout the Global South and moves beyond a strictly nationalist politics toward a vision of international allegiances and solidarities. Tropicalization occurs at the formal level of the text through the combination of at least two dominant styles: the American, Beat poetic style and the exteriorist style of Nicaraguan poets such as Ernesto Cardenal. For this reason, Vargas’s text moves readily between concrete descriptions of social and economic realities and an almost psychedelic, visionary consciousness that can link them to other locales. As such, the affects of rage, confusion, disillusionment, and urgency comes to map, not merely the “structures of feeling” shaping subjects confronting poverty, racism, and state violence in the United States, but map something like a “Third World” situation shaped by the dynamics of underdevelopment and U.S. imperialism.

The first of Vargas’s styles is the jazz-inflected, often psychedelic Bay-Area Beat poetics made familiar by writers Allen Ginsberg. Vargas himself had met and was familiar with many of these writers from a young age. As he says:

> I graduated from Mission High School in 1958 and used to hang out in North Beach, going around to see all the poets…I met Allen Ginsberg when I was just a 19-year-old kid running around in North Beach. Diane di Prima, Bob Kaufman, Ted Berrigan — all
the major poets knew me when I was in my teens. (Lyle “The Mission and the Revolution as Lived and Told by Roberto Vargas”)

Later in life, these connections would help the Pocho-Ché collective carry out their mission of bringing what was happening in Central American writing to the Bay Area. Vargas says that Ginsberg “helped me with my organizing for Nicaragua” and as Ginsberg was a member of PEN, “in 1973 or ’74 he went to the State Department with other writers to put pressure on [. ] Somoza. Eventually Somoza relented and we brought Cardenal to New York for a reading.” (Lyle “The Mission and the Revolution as Lived and Told by Roberto Vargas”). Less than ten years later, Ginsberg would return the favor, travelling to Nicaragua for the Rubén Darío festival in 1982 and returning to Nicaragua in 1986, whereas City Lights owner Lawrence Ferlinghetti would publish *Seven Days in Nicaragua Libre* in 1984 after his trip there (Morgan 268-70).

Clearly, the aesthetic influence of Ginsberg was also felt in the case of Vargas. Vargas’s speaker uses an impressionistic tone with quasi-mystical observations in many of his sojourns around the city. Examples of this would include Vargas's Blakean vision of revolutionary fervor in the Bay Area in “2 Thoughts…”: “Neo Indios carry/-ing xeroxed copies of the Popul-vuh and Che on Urban Guerilla / Warfare” (128) or the jazzlike rhythms and alliterative beat used to represent Central Park, “u sweet u life u sueño / u floating factory teatro of Garcia Lorca’s / Pen not included in O’Henry’s vision / your plátanos your proletario your plenas” (“Central Park 7” 92).

88 In “Nicaragua Libre: A Conversation with Lawrence Ferlinghetti” Volpendesta asks the writer, “What poets in North America do you see as being political, and what could they learn from their Nicaraguan counterparts?” to which Ferlinghetti responds, “The poets and translators who published *Volcan* [sic] are artists and activists. What could they learn from their Nicaraguan counterparts? I’d say poets should actually go there and go with an open mind.” (Volpendesta “Nicaragua Libre: A Conversation with Lawrence Ferlinghetti”).
Murguía will describe Vargas’s poems as “meant to be performed, which the poet often did accompanied by congeros. The images are clear and precise, and flowing, often without connecting phrases, just the pure image carrying the poem” (“Poetry and Solidarity in the Mission District” 65).

At the same time, Vargas will carry forward the testimonial, exteriorist, politicized style created by poets like Castillo, Dalton, and Cardenal. For example, “Liberation” reads with the same ethical outrage and urgency, found in Otto René Castillo “Yo no quiero / para nadie en el mundo / estas cosas” from “Informe sobre una injusticia.” Vargas writes:

As long as the liberation
of any nation is secondary
to you or I Nicaragua
will always have a Somoza
as President
as General as dictator (Nicaragua, yo te canto 88)

This style allows Vargas to incorporate direct calls to political consciousness, that the more Beat-influenced style might not, as when he writes, in Spanish: “YA ES TIEMPO QUE NOS PONGAMOS / MAS SERIOS...SERIOS/BRAVOS/FUERTES Y UNIDOS / VENCERMOS” (15). Such lines, especially as they are written in Spanish, links the poem both to the Cuban context (“VENCERMOS”) and makes the question of political militancy into one of attaining the consciousness of the hombre nuevo, similar to tropes used in Central American poetry.

If the testimonial style in these texts is precise in its political meanings, the more Beat-inflected, impressionistic style creates an almost mystical consciousness that allows for Vargas to focus on cross-cultural solidarities as when he sees in San Francisco “a collective feeling of compassion
for each other Nicas Blacks Chicanos Chilenos oppressed Indios…we will work to free our patrias, together here we will work to free Indios and African brothers and sisters in mind jails and avenues of oppression” (“Managua to Mission” 22-3). The asyndeton links the various groups Vargas names as if in a political unity, while the use of “mind jails” refers to Raul Salinas’s *Un Trip Through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions* published by Pocho-Ché, extending the Chicano writer’s conception to various cultural groups in the Mission. Vargas’s mixture of the two styles—one derived from North American rhythms, music, and poetry, and the other derived from Central American political poetry—is what allows for the “tropicalization” of his verse: a local, interracial politics and a Third World internationalism.

Vargas writes several poems dedicated to the cause of the Nicaraguan uprising against Somoza. While sometimes not as technically complex or poetically effective, in my opinion, as the two poems that I focus on in this chapter (“Then There Was…” and “They Blamed it on Reds!), these poems offer many insights into the poetic techniques and tropes used to formulate the poet’s vision of international solidarity. Most notably, the figures of Sandino, Fonseca, and others are used not primarily as martyrs who promise a redeemed existence, as in the works of Cardenal and other Nicaraguan writers, but rather as figures of mediation between the United States and Nicaragua—capable of moving between borders or beyond time and space. In this sense, Vargas reproduces a volcanic poetics, in which revolutionary heroes erupt from history in order to inspire change across national boundaries. Unfortunately, Vargas does not always examine the exact nature of the linkages he assumes, casting them as “moral calls” to action.
The prose poem “Sandino 1925” (53) represents Sandino’s decision to leave the United States, where he was working, in order to fight the marine invasion: “‘Que jodido estoy haciendo allá,’ he thought. ‘Debiera estar en mi patria, tomando parte en la lucha.’” It next tells of how Sandino went looking for people who would rather die than live as “slaves” to U.S. imperialism, such that Sandino says “Si en Nicaragua hubieran cien hombres que la amaran tanto como yo, nuestra nación restauraría su soberanía absoluta.” This love for Nicaragua then becomes the calling of the FSLN itself, that, as the poem traces out, in 1974 issues a request for international solidarity. In this way, Sandino’s call for a nationalist love of Nicaragua—and therefore become militant in one’s devotion—becomes a call that transcends time (picked up by the FSLN almost fifty years later) and space, in that Vargas’s speaker, living in the United States, feels compelled to honor it. Sandino allows politics to occur transnationally, from the Mission to Managua.

In “Mountain for November” (102-3), the speaker praises Carlos Fonseca and the “unsilenced blood / of our martyred brothers/sisters.” While this poem often takes on more of the testimonial style of similar odes in the Central American tradition, for instance Cardenal’s praise of Leonel Rugama in “Oráculo sobre Managua,” the use of references to Buddhism (“in your militant amador stride / towards nirvana”) and a certain mystical tone in its final lines (“there is no difference / in time nor space / nor Nicaraguas”) link it to the Bay Area counterculture and Beat tradition. Whereas poems such as Cardenal’s posit the martyr in largely Christian terms, as one whose death promises redemption (secularized via the revolution), here Vargas represents Fonseca as a being who has transcended time and space themselves in dying for the revolutionary cause. In the same way, the ending of the poem reveals how just as Fonseca has
transcended time and space, so too the struggle should transcend national borders. Nicaragua is pluralized to become an allegory for the international scope of struggle.

In a similar vein, in “9 Revolutions” (119-21) Fonseca will not be the Christlike figure of many Central American poems, but rather as one who knows “the meshing/the Alchemy / Sandinismo y Marxismo—our people tropical.” By turning him into a cosmic “alchemist,” the poem makes Fonseca one who can “mesh” different ideas and as such, his death serves as an inspiration for those who would also “mesh” the Sandinista struggle with that of the Mission. The phrase “our people tropical” exemplifies such alchemical meshing in that the “our” comes to represent both Latinos living in the United States and Nicaraguas, just as the use of “tropical,” following “people,” alchemically turning an English word “tropical” into a Spanish one, merely by its placement after the noun. Fonseca unites a people across time and space, turns diverse peoples into “our people tropical.” However, these formulation, I contend, risks collapsing the distinctions between say, Vietnam, Nicaragua, and the Mission, relying as they do on nothing more than the vision of heroic martyrs who have seemingly escaped the ravages of time. Vargas’s internationalist vision is weakest when it uses the mystical voice to “transcend” history rather than cognitively map concrete connections between dispersed spaces of capitalist underdevelopment.

However, I believe that some of Vargas’s best work is produced when he examines the social and political contradictions of life in the United States and relates these to an international context, providing a richness and depth to his vision. One of Vargas’s most innovative poems in this regard is entitled “Then There Was…,” which examines the tension of living as a
Nicaraguan-American in the United States, especially given its support for the Somoza regime (25-30). Murguía argues that the poem shows the “influence of United States music, rhythm and blues, oldies, mixed with boleros, mixed with nostalgia for his homeland and his emerging political consciousness,” (“Poetry and Solidarity in the Mission” 65). What makes it unique is precisely its ability to merge this Beat-inflected, style in English with the more testimonial style, which often appears in Spanish, for a truly hybrid poem at the formal level that mirrors the cultural hybridity he explores at the level of the content.

In this text, Vargas examines the contradictions between his identity as a Nicaraguan-American and the calls to support a country that has suppressed struggles for liberation in his home country and around the world, as in Vietnam. As such the nexus of the Mission, Managua, and Vietnam becomes central to the development of the poem’s critique of U.S. politics. The beginning of the poem recounts, in a more testimonial style, and in Spanish, various memories of Nicaragua, such as the palm trees swaying, eating nacatamales, and looking at the volcano Momotombo. These memories are suddenly interrupted by the capitalized “GUERRA POBREZA SOMOZA,” which, in Cardenalian fashion juxtaposes the personal and private with social history. It next represents his life in Hunter’s Point, in San Francisco, and the speaker’s encounters with North American culture and politics ranging from the dropping of the A-Bomb to TV commercials to the Korean War and Coca Cola. Toward the final third of the poem, images of the sixties counterculture and a politicized attitude toward U.S. politics begin to predominate, as the speaker discusses the global impact of war in Vietnam and Laos, the revolution in Cuba, as well as the music of Bob Dylan. The poem ends with a repetition of many of the speaker’s memories of Nicaragua from the beginning of the poem, and another repetition of the phrase “still ‘GUERRA POBREZA
SOMOZA,’” revealing just how little has changed in the speaker’s homeland over the course of thirty years. However, as we will see there is one significant shift in this final repetition of the scene from Nicaragua—the inclusion of Sandino—that reveals an alteration in the speaker’s consciousness.

My argument is that the poem uses an impressionistic technique and parataxis to link several key moments in which the speaker enters into dissonant relationships with dominant U.S. culture, focused around the racism he experiences in the Bay Area, and the international context of both Nicaragua and Vietnam. While some of these moments contain a joy or ecstasy that seems opposed to the dominant order—dancing to charanga bands or cruising in Thunderbirds—many more indicate forms of cultural or political violence against the speaker. Rather than link cause and effect—disenchantment with American culture and the speaker’s subsequent politicization—hypotactically, the text deploys these moments of tension and alienation and leaves it to the reader to trace the political consequences a global order dominated by the United States. The use of parataxis, or as Murguía said, the development of images “without connecting phrases,” allows for an examination of the material structures linking these three “tropical” spaces without an overarching mythos that might simplify their diversity and complexity.

One example of the speaker’s dissonance with United States culture occurs when he juxtaposes parts of the pledge of allegiance with various images of suffering, poverty, or violence to reflect on his formation as an American citizen. Vargas writes:

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the fillmore ‘say boy spk english’
enita mamá fear/pain/hunger
‘i pledge allegiance to the flag’
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fisheads & rice   everything nice
(see the USA in a chevrolet)
‘of the united states of america’
in 1944 my father went to war
he pulled the trigger & shot a nigger
‘FOR WHICH IT STANDS/FOR WHICH
IT STANDS’ (26)

In this passage, parataxis predominates, however the use of counterpoint operates to offset visions of the American Dream (the Chevy, “everything nice”) with the experiences of the speaker as a Nicaraguan-American immigrant, in particular, the imperative to speak English and his experiences of hunger. The internal rhyme of two parallel four-syllable phrases “fisheads & rice,” referring to his more modest diet, and “everything nice,” satirizes the American Dream, from which the narrator, through his hunger, is excluded, as this line degenerates into a near doggerel. The next line repeats this structure, with an internal rhyme of two five-syllable phrases, in which the dream of seeing the “USA” in a “chevrolet,” appears again in an almost mocking, sing-song line. The counterpoint continues as the text uses the pledge of allegiance to highlight dissonances between the American Dream and the speaker’s reality. The first line of the pledge is framed by “fear/pain/hunger” and the “fisheads & rice,” and the second line of the pledge is followed by an invocation of “war.” Vargas represents the local experience of poverty through concrete details—the food the speaker eats—and contrasts them to the ideological promises of fifties-era America in order to reveal the “local” level of political dissonance the speaker experiences.

Most tellingly perhaps, the speaker uses a doggerel-type line with yet another internal rhyme, this time between “trigger” and “nigger” to highlight the racialized violence operative in the United States. I contend that just as the speaker notes the racial dynamics shaping his poverty, he
links it to the situation of African-Americans who readily become victims of police and white, vigilante violence. The mocking tone of the previous internal rhymes reaches a menacing pitch, indicating that the justification of such racialized violence might be the very thing “FOR WHICH IT [the United States] STANDS.” Of course, a certain racialized, linguistic violence—this time against Latino/a Spanish speakers—begins this stanza, with the imperative, “say boy spk english” given to the speaker. Thus, one of the central tensions of this passage becomes the way in which political violence (his father’s entry into the war), mirrors a racialized violence against African-Americans, that in turn mirrors the cultural and linguistic violence turned against the speaker himself. It also foreshadows how the experience of the Vietnam draft—which will follow in the poem—becomes another form of U.S. “war” against both its own and foreign people of color.

The latter half of the poem reveals the shifts that occur in the narrator’s teenage years and early adulthood, especially the trauma of going to war and the struggles of taking on working-class jobs. After partaking in “USMC BOOT CAMP” and a “medical discharge” the narrator lists a series of factories in which it seems he worked: “was working / factories mattress factories steel wage slaves / (T-1* 72 by 84 kingsized peacock blue) / xk – 120 jag factories planter’s peanuts.” The lack of punctuation creates a slippage between the commodities (mattresses, Jaguars, and peanuts) and the workplaces themselves, in which the speaker disappears. That is, one cannot discern whether the speaker has worked in a “jag” factory or in a “planter’s peanuts” factory or if he is a mere observer of those who do. This ambiguity generates a productive tension in the poem itself, as the laborer disappears, evident only in the movement from one factory, one commodity to the next. The affect is one of reification. Rather than glamorize the working-class
experience in any way, Vargas presents it as a figure of negativity. The consciousness observing the work process in the factory that may or may not be the speaker’s, and that, in its very genericity and abstraction becomes exchangeable for that of any other worker. The use of the passive voice “was working” further voids this subject, as there is no “I” who does this work, but merely an interchangeable, abstract labor power. Finally, while we might be tempted to think that he either is eating the peanuts or driving the Jaguar, the phrase “steel wage slaves” clearly positions these lines as critiques of workplace alienation. As such, the text remains critical and anti-capitalist but avoids giving positive representation to any “revolutionary subject” in a way that we can productively draw from in our contemporary historical moment.

From there, the poem dissolves as a seeming crisis afflicts the speaker’s consciousness, as he becomes increasingly unable to adapt to the American reality around him. Instead he evokes the “vietnam war” and scattered images of death and madness, “was dead… / dead / vertigo symbols ashes to ashes / madness madness.” Just as the poem has absented the subjectivity of the speaker and highlighted the process of wage labor, here it evokes impersonal, one might say, sublime powers of war and death carried out by the United States, indicating the way in which they have torn apart the speaker’s consciousness. Does the death and madness refer to Vietnamese citizens, U.S. soldiers abroad, or the speaker himself? Such ambiguity allows for the transnationalization of the scene of violence, moving back and forth between Southeast Asia and the Mission. At this limit of madness and death, a new politicization will come to the speaker in the final stanza of the poem.

The poem ends with a return the speaker’s vision of the Nicaraguan landscape with which it
began. In the first evocation of his Nicaraguan memories, the call to return to his homeland

“‘volver a mi tierra donde nace el sol’ / ‘jodido hombre’” reads primarily as nostalgia, suffused with a feeling of regret at living at such a distance from Nicaragua. However, by the end of the poem, the speaker alters these lines in significant ways from their rendering in the beginning:

    sandino’s last words peel off the moon
         ‘jodido hombre’
       Marimbas marimbas
         ‘volver, a mi tierra donde nace el sol’

The insertion of Sandino turns “jodido hombre” into a curse, and the memory of his martyrdom now becomes a battle cry to reject the false compromises with political leaders that lead to his death. Additionally, the “return” to Nicaragua becomes, for Vargas’s speaker, one with a militant purpose, a return to end the reign of “GUERRA POBREZA SOMOZA” that “still” haunts his home. Instead of simply romanticizing Sandino, as in previous poems, Vargas, I argue, uses his image to provide a conceptual link between the “guerra” in Nicaragua and Vietnam, the poverty that runs throughout the Mission and these international locales, and the forces of power (for which “Somoza” also acts as a metonymy) supporting them. In other words, the speaker’s experiences in the United States have resulted in a new relation to his homeland, as the speaker connects racial violence and economic exploitation at home to the “madness and death” in Vietnam to the “pobreza” in Central America against which Sandino fought. Madness and affects of a hallucinatory disintegration map the global reach of U.S. imperialism. Thus, the speaker’s return to his homeland will not be one of nostalgia, but rather one of political action, just as Vargas himself would return to Nicaragua in 1978 to fight for the Sandinista cause.
The other key poem in carrying out a tropicalized aesthetic focused on the material structures of state power (both at home and abroad) is “They Blamed it on Reds!” (61-64), which recounts the murder of Vincent Gutiérrez by San Francisco police in 1970,89 and the ensuing protest following his funeral. The political group, Los Siete, of whom Vargas was a part, named after the seven defendants accused of killing a police officer in the Mission in 1969, rushed to protest Gutiérrez’s killing. The title refers to how, for Vargas, anti-communist ideology was used not just to justify “Chente’s” death, but how the United States used it to justify the deaths of young men just like him throughout the world during the Cold War. In the poem, we can also see the “tropicalization” of the poetic style, as it combines a realist, testimonial style to narrate the events of Gutiérrez’s death, with a phantasmagoric style filled with American pop culture and corporate references alongside the quasi-mystical tone of Ginsberg. The speaker code-switches rapidly between English and Spanish, often using English to render the procession of “normalcy” and Spanish to generate affective ruptures in the scene. This poetic tropicalization mirrors the “tropicalization” of the political problematics of Vicente’s murder inasmuch as the poem links his death to similar ones throughout the Global South.

The poem is divided into six parts. It begins with the events of the funeral, follows that with the scene of the street protest, and just after the halfway point, asks Vincent to remember the living. In the fifth stanza, the speaker attempts to understand the circumstances of Gutiérrez’s death in terms of other murders taking place throughout the world: “En los barrios de Guatemala / San Francisco o Mississippi.” In the sixth and final section, “Chento” becomes a political martyr whose death returns him to the “magic dance of / Mayan ancestors,” and as such would seem to

89 See Marjorie Heins’s Strictly Ghetto Property, pages 197-200 for a full account of his death.
turn it into nothing more than a rallying point for an indigenous nationalism. However, the speaker also interjects this linear narrative throughout with images that evoke the social, economic, and ideological forces he deems responsible for Chente’s death, creating a tension between the progression of the poem (and the march itself) and a politicized affect (“Angered in love walking”) that takes on a transnational character and threatens to disrupt the linear narrative of the poem. These poetic maneuvers turn Gutiérrez’s death into a synecdoche for the violence perpetrated by the United States in a broad international context.

However, even before these six sections, the poem deploys a short poetic epigraph that narrates the events around Gutiérrez’s death and the protest that followed. The speaker tells his story in a strictly third-person, testimonial style: “Vincent Gutiérrez died / At the hands of mercenaries / In the Mission on Mother’s Day / The people rose together and / Marched at his funeral procession,” a section whose eulogistic tone will contrast with the irony through which the speaker lambasts the forces responsible for the young man’s murder. This poetic epigraph thus attempts to minimize the distance created by poetic representation through its documentary tone, much like Castillo’s “Informe sobre una injusticia”—assuring the reader of the reality of Vincent’s murder—and thereby legitimize the affects of anger, outrage, and militancy that follow. However, the epigraph ends with the line “Thursday May 14th Aztlán/Babylon,” which immediately politicizes the events by placing them both within the context of North American occupation of “Aztlán” and analogizing the position of Latinos/as and other disenfranchised groups in the United States to the Israelites during the time of Babylonian captivity. This maneuver turns Vincent’s death into a political allegory that at once clashes with the seemingly realist narrative of events in the poetic epigraph, invoking temporally distant images of
colonization, oppression, and exile. The nationalist and anti-colonial emphasis of the poem should not be understated, however a much more complicated politics is at work, as I will show.

The first section begins with a series of disparate one to three word images (mostly nouns and participles used as verbal nouns) of the funeral, all of which lack a normal subject-verb-object structure (“Thursday…crying…St. Peter’s Church…organ”), evoking the very dissolution of selfhood that comes with mourning. The text first renders Vincent’s death in line three with “Vincent gone” (occluding the verb), and repeats this in line four “Chente gone now,” creating a sense of rupture in narrative produced by the overwhelming affects. What allows the speaker to enter into narrative understanding once again is precisely the political context of Gutiérrez’s death, as he comes to relate it to a larger anti-communist narratives propagated by Cold War advertising and television:

Eunuch chronicles plastered with lies
Reds, Reds melting in American minds
Brought to you in living color by CBS
Dial soap and the puppet-coroners
Of the TV world…
(“Reds will make you dead” they squeal)

This return to narrative highlights an irony between the American mainstream perception of danger—the “Reds” that “Eunuch chronicles” and “CBS” warn about—and the actual perpetrators of violence in Gutiérrez’s case, the San Francisco police. At the same time, these lines also can be read as linking Vincent’s death in 1970 to the violence taking place in Vietnam. In this reading, the “Reds melting in American minds” would be those Viet Cong who “melted” when bombed by napalm, which was used until 1973, by American planes. The mention of “Dial
soap” is not coincidental, given the fact that soap was used as a thickener in early forms of napalm. As such, I argue that Vargas turns the affect of mourning Chente’s death into a moment of mourning for all those who have died at the hands of U.S. state power. Affect—and mourning in particular—becomes a means to approach the universal.

The second section reinforces such a reading, initiating a counterpoint movement between the Mission and Southeast Asia, between the subjective experience of rage during the protest and the “stop/go” of “business as usual” in the city (phrases that will recur throughout the poem). Chente is “Not killed in Cambodia…but war,” which reveals how the speaker wishes to analogize U.S. military violence and the police violence needed to perpetuate “business as usual” at home. The protest renders “business as usual…slower” as hundreds of protestors march throughout the streets, this slowness acting as resistance to forward movement of “Progress.” If traffic lights and the speeds of the work day guide the normal temporality of “stop/go” in the city, both excessive slowness and speed might offer political protestors alternatives. The poem renders these alternate speeds by dropping verbs, thereby introducing the “non-action” of rage that interrupts narrative, while creating a sense of speed, as the reader moves from image to image without hypotactic linkages.

In section five the counterpoint between Mission and Southeast Asia comes to the forefront as the protest passes a draft center. Here the poem enters its most prophetic and mystical phase, with a terrorizing image of Vietnam reminiscent of the madness and death of “Then There Was…”:

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Vision of monsoon flies
Bloodsmell cheeks of bronze
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Organisms  shell pierced  screams of death
Vietnam! Vietnam!
    Chente dies everywhere
(Blame the Reds!)

The affects of rage and confusion have broken the narrative and even the subjectivity of the speaker itself. However, rather than representing a mere existential dissolution as in Murguía, the poem creates a free-floating description in which the affects of rage, confusion, even dissociation map the international nature of American state violence. I claim that these lines do not discriminate between the American soldiers who die abroad and the Vietnamese soldiers and civilians who die in their home country, nor the “Chentes” who die in the Mission. While “cheeks of bronze” might seem to refer to the soldier who is “brown and 18” in Vietnam, it might equally apply to the Vietnamese people fighting the United States. Such a reading is reinforced by the fact that the poem generalizes Chente’s death by using the term “everywhere.” In other words, his figure becomes not just a synecdoche for Latinos abroad, especially those involved in war, but for all young men who die too early at the hands of U.S. state violence. The use of the term “Organisms” to describe those who are “shell pierced” also emphasizes this generality, rendering the corpses anonymous, in almost animal terms. Finally, by declaring that Chente is also dying “En los barrios de Guatemala / San Francisco o Mississippi” Vargas’s more internationalist, cross-racial, “tropicalized” vision comes to the foreground, as the speaker sees common threads in the civil wars of Central America, the Civil Rights struggle of the American South, and his own experience in the Mission. While such a formulation might efface the real differences between the struggles, instead they are connected by the facts of police repression, or even military aggression. For the speaker, the answer given by his society is to “Blame the Reds!,” a phrase, that given its inclusion within parentheses, produces a sense of irony,
heightened by its repetition throughout the text. This ironic repetition serves to focus the poem on the violence of U.S. foreign policy and domestic affairs rather than the dangers posed by the supposed “Reds,” who themselves might be dying in the streets of Guatemala City or the villages of Vietnam. As such, Vargas creates a tropicalized vision of the international not through a socialist mythos, but rather through a focus on similar of violence shaping the *barrios* and ghettos U.S. and the Global South and the affects of mourning, and rage they elicit.
Conclusion

Negative Utopianism and the Legacy of Sandinismo

In this project, I have explored the concept of a volcanic poetics—the notion of the revolutionary process as a decisive rupture with material and subjective conditions that might produce a human communion—as it was constructed, deployed, and thrown into question in Nicaragua and the Bay Area. This volcanic poetics created a voluntarist notion of revolutionary subjectivity founded in the existentialism of Sartre and the concept of the hombre nuevo, in which a single act of decision, much like a single moment of revolution could become a figura for freedom itself. Above all, we have seen how such a volcanic poetics depended not merely on an exteriorist aesthetic that claimed to represent objective reality in concrete terms, but three overarching myths—natural force, cosmic love, and poetic martyrdom—that framed the revolution as a spiritual reconciliation: between man and nature, individual and community, life and death. In so doing, these poets often contributed to giving a positive content to the working-class subjects and peasants who they believed were leading the revolution to an all-but-certain triumph.

If we have learned anything from the state socialist sequence of 1917 to 1991, of which Nicaragua played a small but important role, it is that socialism’s programmatic visions, its affirmation of a teleology of history, of the worker as positive subject of history, and indeed its hypothesis of a volcanic rupture with all forms of domination and subjugation most often worked to immiserate and oppress the very people its revolutionaries, theorists and, yes, poets, hoped to
emancipate. For this reason, if there has been any major difference between the era in which the majority of Nicaraguan and Bay Area engaged poetry was written and ours, it is the skepticism—again, not unfounded—toward the very types of narratives and myths of liberation examined in this project. For many critics, activists, and artists, this skepticism has also led to an abandonment of the “communist hypothesis” itself: the possibility of the abolition of wage labor and private property, the destruction of the state apparatus, the dismantling of the hierarchies of race and gender.90

It is in light of this latter turn away from history—and the possibility of communism—that I see this intervention taking place. For indeed, “the waning of our sense of history, and more particularly our resistance to globalizing or totalizing concepts like that of the mode of production itself, are a function of precisely that universalization of capitalism” (Postmodernism 403). While after 2001, and especially after the 2008-9 economic crisis, the notion of an “end of history” has been discredited, the forms of resistance to global capital, which once seemed clear to people like Cardenal, Belli, Zamora, Vargas, Serrano, and Murguía, seem nowhere to be found. It may seem to be an odd moment at which to stage a reexamination of the legacy of committed socialist art, but my conjecture is that given the impasses of the present and the crisis of international capitalism that is now almost a decade old, we would be wise to learn from this history, without either romanticizing it or disavowing it entirely. As Sianne Ngai writes, in the neoliberal moment of capitalism “the very effort of thinking the aesthetic and political together—

90 Or to put it more precisely, we might define this hypothesis, as Bosteels does, as a “series of axiomatic invariants that can be found whenever a mass mobilization directly confronts the privileges of property, hierarchy and authority, and, on the other hand, by the specific political actors who historically and with varying degrees of success or failure implement those same communist invariants” (“The Leftist Hypothesis: Communism in the Age of Terror” 59).
a task whose urgency seems to increase in proportion to its difficulty in an increasingly anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society—is a prime occasion for ugly feelings” (Ngai 3). However untimely such a prospect might be, I have tried in this work to examine such utopian longings, especially inasmuch as these ran counter to the very narratives of state socialism or the heroic, revolutionary masculinity that subtended the volcanic poetics of the authors I studied.

What this examination has revealed is that this poetry helped codify utopian longings and affective resistances to the material structures of patriarchy, the agro-export economy, wage labor, and state violence and led to the toppling of an oligarchical dictatorship that was supported, at that time, by the most powerful country in the world. However, I have also shown how despite the volcanic poetics subtending the revolutionary imagination of this era, for a variety of reasons, the very structures of patriarchy and capitalist exploitation against which thousands of Nicaraguans fought persisted during the eighties, after 1990, and have only become generalized in the era of global capital. Thus, what I have tried to capture in this project is how not merely at the ideological level, but at the level of affect, engaged poetry reveals “structures of feeling” (senses of nostalgia and loss, rage and disillusionment, confusion and boredom) that result from the dialectical relation between material structures (wage labor, domestic work, marriage institutions, the agro-export economy) and the subjects inhabiting them. As such, my aim has been to recuperate those moments from within Nicaraguan engaged poetry and the “tropicalized” poetics of the Bay Area, where poets revealed the persistence of various economic and social structures of domination and the affective relations—of tension, angst, and depression—produced by them. For as is now clear, the volcanic events of 1979 and their aftermath did not fundamentally create a rupture in the position of peasants, urban waged
workers, of women within a patriarchal society. Therefore, in looking back on this poetry, I have tried to look to those moments when poets represented more fully the contradictions of these peoples’ existence or registered them in the affective intensities of these texts.

It is my sense that after the Cold War, utopia is thinkable only as a negative form. This statement is descriptive rather than prescriptive, revealing the skepticism toward the types of myths and narratives of socialist triumph that suffused many of the texts I study. However, this does not make utopia unthinkable, but rather raises the question as to what extent we might imagine a communism of the negative, concerned as it is with the abolition of gender, class, the value form, and private property themselves—and how poetry might best approach such a task. I hope to have given some clues in the preceding pages. For what I believe I have shown is that it is not in mythologizing social change through nature, love, or death that best captures the structures of feeling shaping the present—and the possibility of changing the material circumstances from which they arise—but a representation of the economic and social forces at work in the world and how subjects deal with them.

In this sense, my hypothesis about what an engaged poetics in the 21st century might look like shares much in common with Moreira’s conception of a “negative globality,” in which art might represent the breakdown of capitalist developmentalist narratives, and the impact of such breakdown on individual lives. For Moreiras, these “reversals of expectations, because they are planetwide and affect everyone, produce a sort of negative globality that must be culturally ciphered in the various impossibilities, everywhere observable, of narrative closure and cultural self-understanding” (Moreiras The Exhaustion of Difference 81). Just as much as “the worker” is
now an impossible grounding, this does not mean that the project of communism itself is
wrapped in such impossibility. For as long as capitalism’s promises and “expectations” are not
met, and indeed, this is a structural necessity of the economic system, there will be affective and
material traces for poets to record and seek to link to the conditions of those around the world
without in any way hoping for “narrative closure” in the form of a new mythos.

While this position shares many assumptions with the so-called “communization” hypothesis put
forward by the Endnotes and Theorie Communiste collectives in which “the revolution as a
communising movement would destroy—by ceasing to constitute and reproduce them—all
capitalist categories: exchange, money, commodities, the existence of separate enterprises, the
state and — most fundamentally — wage labour and the working class itself,” I am less certain
about how the coordination of such immanent moments of communization—in their desire to
avoid any “transitional stage” or “dictatorship of the proletariat” might be coordinated or seen to
exist in solidarity with one another (Endnotes “Communization and Value Form Theory”). This
is not to disavow the possibility, but rather to suggest that in our historical moment, the problem
of the internationalization of struggle is no less pressing than it was in the time of Belli, Murguía,
Cardenal, and Vargas. That is while “communization insists on immediacy and the abandonment
of debates about ‘transition’ or teleology, i.e. debates on what we are aiming to achieve, it’s hard
to see how it can coordinate or develop such ‘moments’ of communization globally across the
social ‘field’” (Noys 14). Perhaps the Sandinista moment, and its poetry, has something valuable
to teach us in this regard.
For while we have abandoned any notion of a heroic “Third World” or “proletarian” subject of history, perhaps we have not been able to overcome the very material structures and affects that led a previous generation of poets to represent them as such. Tropicalization, and indeed many parts of the Nicaraguan poets’ works I examine moved from within a nationalist formulation to affirm a broad international politics, seeking to link people across borders by representing shared affective dissonances to the economic and material forces of capitalist accumulation: wage labor, patriarchy, state repression. While this formulation is certainly less heroic than that of the state socialist sequence, it gives us a glimpse of how a “negative globality” might be turned into a global project, by drawing on affect as a means to cognitively map the effects of global capital. In this sense, utopia might become thinkable once again, if only in the negative, as Daisy Zamora dreamt of almost forty years ago, as “nuestra tierra antigua / que nunca conocimos.”
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