

SPECIAL SECTION

Roundtable on María Pia López's *Not One Less: Mourning, Disobedience, and Desire*

Introduction

Latin American Feminisms, a Land of Political Experimentation

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ABSTRACT On June 3, 2015, thousands of people in Argentina gathered in the streets to protest the murder of fourteen-year-old Chiara Paez at the hands of her boyfriend. Following her brutal death, a wave of indignation spread on social media with the viral hashtags #NiUnaMenos and #VivasNosQueremos. What started as an act of public grief and defiance against patriarchy rapidly found an angry but also unexpectedly upbeat tone, a combination of collective fury and exhaustion expressed in highly theatrical and political performances of affection and resistance. “We are moved by desire” became one of the movement’s taglines. María Pia López’s *Not One Less: Mourning, Disobedience, and Desire* (2021), among the first English accounts from inside the movement, reflects on this phenomenon and serves as a practical tool in current feminist struggles, feeding the very same transnational, intersectional, transformative movement in which the author has participated as protagonist, connoisseur, and chronicler. López is one of the leading voices of the fourth wave of Latin American feminisms. This collection of commentaries is animated by the dialogical spirit of her book, addressing issues ranging from the transnational identity of feminist political activism; the connection between gender equality and class struggle; the movement’s combination of mourning, ecstasy, and desire; and—arguably one of the most important achievements of NUM—feminism’s ability to alter the political imagination and common sense.

KEYWORDS María Pia López, Not One Less, feminism, Latin America, desire

In 1997 María Pia López published *Mutantes: Trazos sobre los cuerpos* (*Mutants: Strokes on Bodies*), a brief but striking essay on the politics and poetics of the body in Latin America during the twentieth century. López examined multiple attempts to discipline, restrain, and punish vulnerable bodies in the region and, in turn, the strategies used by those bodies to gather in public and contest diverse abuses of power. Focusing on Argentina, she proposed a genealogy of corporeal political experiences, which included the sacrificial idea of *poner el cuerpo* (to put the body at risk) that animated the armed struggles of the 1970s, the absent and spectral bodies

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disappeared during the 1976–83 dictatorship, and the secluded bodies of the neo-liberal 1990s—the time when she was writing the book—when politics was conceived as a spectacle that *se mira y no se toca*: seen, usually on TV, but not touched. State terror and fear, López argued, created inactive political subjects, withdrawn from political struggles and immersed in what she called the “tactics of the ostrich,” bodies imprisoned in their homes, connected to the public only through the reception of power. These bodies produced “una forma *hasta ahora* exitosa de hacer política. . . . Pero por supuesto tampoco esto es irreversible: el presente aún puede ser materia de la acción” (a means of enacting politics that has—to date—been successful. . . . But which is also not irreversible: the present can still be a site for action).¹

Fast-forward to the publication of *Not One Less: Mourning, Disobedience, and Desire* and we confront a very different reality. The global COVID-19 pandemic has forced us all to stay indoors. But unlike during the 1990s in Argentina, this new form of bodily confinement has neither produced inactive political subjects nor stopped the powerful *green tide* led by thousands of Latin American women since the emergence of the Not One Less movement in 2015. In March of that year a group of feminist activists and writers (including López, at the time the director of the National Library’s Museo del Libro y de la Lengua in Buenos Aires) organized a reading marathon with the slogan “Not One Less,” a verse used by Mexican poet and activist Susana Chávez Castillo in 1995 to protest the femicides of Ciudad Juárez. “Ni una menos, ni una muerta más” (“not one less, not one dead more”) was the original phrase used by Chávez Castillo, murdered in 2011 for denouncing the murders of women in Mexico. On May 10, 2015, the tweet “#NotOneLess. We Want to be Alive.” went viral. Five years later, the movement achieved one of its most significant victories, the legalization of abortion in Argentina, by far the largest of the handful of countries in the region to guarantee this right to women.

The pandemic and this new wave of feminism are not unrelated. As UN Women recently declared, femicides are the “other” pandemic, more dangerous now than ever before as many vulnerable women and dissident genders have been forced to spend more time indoors with their aggressors.² The pandemic has even been used perversely by some governments to regain control of the streets. Nelly Richard, one of the most renowned cultural critics in Latin America, has suggested, for example, that for Chilean president Sebastián Piñera, lockdown has been an opportunity to “disinfect” (*higienizar*) the capital city of social revolts and the echoes of the rebellions against the government that took place in early 2020 and were led by young Chilean women and students.³ At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted the strength of some of the legacies of feminist movements around the globe, not least because, if vulnerable women can now rely on each other, that is partly thanks to

previously established, and viral, networks of affective care (*políticas del cuidado*) and solidarity.⁴

López's book was written in dialogue with the voices and experiences of many other women and *compañerxs* who have participated in and written about contemporary Latin American feminist movements. The book is also entwined with the memories and words of women who led previous struggles that laid the foundations for today's battles. "Disobedience has a history," write Natalia Brizuela and Leticia Sabsay in their introduction to the book, "in fact many histories."⁵ López chronicles those intersectional and transnational trajectories, from popular movements such as that of the suffragists and the *piqueteras* to LGBTQI acts of disobedience and the weekly rounds of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. If feminists have often been compared to mythical figures with negative connotations such as witches or Medea (the mother who killed her children), Latin American women's movements have been equally inspired by fictional and mythical characters of transgression such as La Malinche, the native polyglot woman given as a trophy of conquest to Hernan Cortés, and Antigone, a "feminine figure who defies the state through a powerful set of physical and linguistic acts."⁶

In this history of Latin American feminisms, there are victims—the captive women of the nineteenth century, the kidnapped women of the Zwi Migdal ring, the *desaparecidas*, the victims of femicides—but there is not victimization. There are "killjoys" but not *amargadas* (bitter women), as feminists have often been labeled by anti-rights activists.⁷ There is (public) mourning, and if any semblance of melancholia is present it is only in the sense set out by Butler and Christian Gundersmann when analyzing the myth of Antigone, that is, not as a paralyzing effect of trauma but as an act of political resistance in the face of neoliberal demands for oblivion.⁸ "The tone is festive," says López, because Not One Less operates, in Gago's words (cited by Brizuela and Sabsay), on the basis of "preserving vitalism" and "to safeguard the expansions of liberties, joy, pleasure and affects." The vitalist nature of the movement opposes itself to the conception of the female body as ungrievable or as rubbish, symbolized by the bodies used and disposed of in black plastic bags by the perpetrators of femicides.

As a leading scholar in contemporary Latin America, López writes as a sociologist. But she also writes from what she calls a "sensory experience," the experience of being a woman in Argentina, the experience of humiliation and shame, but also of joy, euphoria, and desire ("We are moved by desire" is one of the movement's slogans). The book thus has a clear political objective. It aims to impede the movement's "conservative appropriation and stop the work being done from devolving into something purely ornamental." Because in the battle against patriarchy the performance of words matters in equal measure to that of bodies.

“Ahora devuélvanos la palabra ‘vida’” (Now give us back the word “life”), demanded a tweet by a feminist in Argentina hours after the vote in the Senate to legalize abortion on December 30, 2020. The tweet referred to the slogan “Let’s protect both lives” used by antirights activists, a slogan that appropriates a word, *vida*, that belongs to everyone. In her book, López examines the inverse operation, that is, how certain words—notably “revolution” and “strike”—were taken up by the current feminist movement to acknowledge a lineage of disobedience and resistance. Crucially, though, this legacy is not received passively by contemporary feminists but rather transformed in the very act of transmission. As Egyptian psychoanalyst Jacques Hassoun argued, successful transmission offers to the heir the freedom to betray heritage so as to better find it.¹⁰

Thus, if the current feminist movement is a “revolution,” it is a specific type of revolution: it has no boss, no leader, no owner, and not just one spokeswoman. This revolution is also nonsacrificial. In fact, says López, the feminist movement is the opposite of a sacrifice. Moreover, if the revolution sought by the armed groups of the 1960s and 1970s believed that violence and *la guerra revolucionaria* (the revolutionary war) was necessary to respond to and ultimately counteract a violence already installed in society,¹¹ the feminist revolution is nonviolent. As Judith Butler explains,

Nonviolence is often misunderstood as a passive practice that emanates from a calm region of the soul, or as an individualist ethical relation to existing forms of power. But, in fact, nonviolence is an ethical position found in the midst of the political field. An aggressive form of nonviolence accepts that hostility is part of our psychic constitution, but values ambivalence as a way of checking the conversion of aggression into violence.¹²

Butler further claims that “nonviolence is less a failure of action than a physical assertion of the claims of life, a living assertion, a claim that is made by speech, gesture and action, through networks, encampments, and assemblies; all of these seek to recast the living as worthy of value, as potentially grievable, precisely under conditions in which they are either erased from view or cast into irreversible forms of precarity.”¹³ She specifically mentions Latin American *femicidios* (caused by the failure of institutions including the police and the legal system, coupled with cultures of terror inherited from periods of state authoritarianism) and the practices of *Ni una menos* to illustrate the strength of nonviolent movements built around alliances of solidarity and resistance.

The International Women’s Strike that takes place every March 8 all over the world is also inspired by many other strikes in the history of popular movements.

Yet, just like the feminist revolution, the feminist strike has its own characteristics: it is “immeasurable because the notion of work that it acknowledges and aims to interrupt is not unidimensional,” says López. “It does not accept the reduction of work to its paid incarnation but encompasses all productive labor, creative force, moulding of material, weaving of community ties.”¹⁴

Far from being a distant chronicle of the events, *Not One Less* is not only the book of an activist but also a book that is itself activism and a reminder of the performative power of both words and emotions. The editors’ decision to commission a translator (Frances Riddle) and publish it in English in the prestigious Critical Theory series of Polity Press is, in turn, another political act. It aims to continue the open conversation started by López and open it up to other geopolitical and affective horizons.

It is with that expansive and inclusive spirit that this dossier includes commentaries from six highly respected feminist activists and scholars from different parts of the world: Sarah Banet-Weiser (United States), Karen Benezra (United States), Alejandra Castillo (Chile), Claudia Salazar Jiménez (Peru), Lidia Salvatori (Italy), and Cecilia Sosa (Argentina). We were keen to include scholars working on the intersections between feminist struggles and race struggles because, as López says, “the emancipation of women cannot be limited to the few, to the white, or the rich.”¹⁵ Yet this dossier is not fully representative of the plurality of voices that constitute Latin American women’s movements. Nonetheless, it remains another rhizomatic intervention in the intersectional, interracial, interclass, and international exchanges and conversations that circulate in and through diverse feminisms.

In her contribution, Karen Benezra attempts to decipher the theoretical framework and political stakes of López’s essay. She is particularly interested in López’s explicit or implicit dialogues with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan and how the personal and collective experiences of being a woman reveal ontological rather than merely anthropological or biological questions. Benezra not only reads López in the practice of the *discurrir libre* but also suggests that López’s book goes beyond that tradition of the Latin American essay by playing a performative function. She points out how “the book’s apparent systematicity is not merely an aesthetic choice” but sustains “a theoretical question that has yet to be determined politically.” Proposing a comparison with Verónica Gago’s *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (2020), Benezra draws out López’s caution around the movement’s ability to articulate liberal claims on gender equality with class struggle.

López’s unusual combination of theory and activism, says Cecilia Sosa, creates an “affective genre” that fits the central role that “desire” and other emotions have in the Not One Less movement, where mourning is paired with a kind of “ecstasy” that we often see in marches and demonstrations, which are both protests and

celebrations of sisterhood and togetherness. This festive spirit, Sosa argues, distinguishes NUM both from their more “austere” counterpart movements in the North as well as previous generations of women in the region, notably the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. For Sosa, the encounter between the Mothers’ white scarves and the green scarves first used by young activists in the campaigns for legal abortion in Argentina can be read as the passage from a form of activism based on blood ties and firsthand victims to one comprising “anonymous activists with no further credentials, willing to join an impure activist lineage, which shall remain open to all sorts of assortments, combinations, and libidinous mixtures.” In her reading of López’s book, Sosa also highlights one of the risks of contemporary feminism, namely that it can become a capitalist maneuver to keep us all on the so-called progressive side. The Not One Less movement has so far escaped the danger of capitalist appropriation, Sosa argues, by hosting instead a deep transformation of interaction, sensibility, and sexuality.

Echoing the transnational nature of the movement and the feminist practice of *thinking together* that animates López’s book, Lidia Salvatori, who shares with López a place of enunciation that entwines feminist activism, autoethnography, and critical discourse, connects the Latin American expression “Ni una Menos” to its Italian counterpart, Non Una Di Meno, launched publicly in November 2016 when thousands of Italian women protested in the street, enraged by the femicide of Sara di Pietrantonio, killed and set on fire by her partner. Salvatori suggests that “the call of Not One Less has contributed to the formation of a transnational identity and conceptualization rather than a transnational organizational structure”: a distinction that points both to what the movement has already achieved with its “spontaneous contamination” of practices and slogans, facilitated by new technologies and a globalized horizon, and to what the movement might aspire to become truly international. One might also argue that the absence of a transnational organizational structure is in fact what gives the Not One Less movement its diverse nature, the possibility of adapting itself to local realities and circumstances without losing sight of the common goals in both national or regional contexts. Either way, Salvatori argues, the recognition of a transnational and intercontinental sisterhood is crucial to resisting xenophobic and neoconservative forces that, particularly in Europe and in the United States under the Trump administration, have become expressions of the antirights movement.

Both Claudia Salazar Jiménez and Sarah Banet-Weiser stress in their interventions the need to tie the contemporary feminist movements in Latin America to issues of race and colonialism. Peruvian feminist scholar Salazar Jiménez writes that, compared to Argentina, Peru is often seen as “the caboose of the feminist movement: one of the last to recognize sexual and reproductive rights.” While that

is true, Salazar Jiménez draws out the contributions made by Peruvian thinkers to the collective efforts of women in the region, notably those set out by French-Peruvian author Flora Tristán, who “helped López to point out the double neglect to which the female proletariat has been subjected, both by Marxism (which only speaks of the male one) and by feminism (which overlooked the working class).” The colonial and racist aspects of historical oppression against women and dissident genders—including forced sterilizations of Andean women during Fujimori’s regime—are also inscribed in the chants of both the women who proudly recognize themselves as the “granddaughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn” and also the antirights male protesters who claim proudly that they are “the sons of the inquisitors.”

US-based scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser celebrates the emergence of the Not One Less popular movement and distinguishes it from two other forms of the popular/populist in the North. On the one hand she puts NUM into dialogue with the predominantly white men who stormed the US Capitol in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021. She sets the intertwined discourses of white supremacy and *machismo* in contrast to “the kind of collective subject, which links vulnerability resistance and agency across difference.” She also makes a distinction between Latin American popular feminism—a collective and common struggle—and the “highly visible and mediated neoliberal feminism that has gained dominance in the Anglo-American world in recent years,” a melancholic phenomenon of white mainstream feminism focused on individual grievances and the impossibility of moving past the self. Both the populist white nationalist storming of the US Capitol and Anglo-American popular feminisms base the figure of the victim around a claim of a “neoliberal ground of individualism that is designed to render those who are marginalized or engaged in collective struggles invisible.” By contrast, the NUM movement is inclusive, intersectional, international, and interracial, and instead of looking melancholically and nostalgically to the past, it fights for collective futures.

Finally, Chilean scholar and feminist activist Alejandra Castillo also highlights feminism’s capacity to alter the common sense of politics and to expand the political imagination. She discusses the force of images in López’s book, especially those of the mythical figures of Antigone and Demeter, the mother in search of her kidnapped daughter, figures that were paradoxically invented by men trying to imagine the body and the experiences of women in mourning. Castillo argues that it is now time to build our own repertoire of inspiring female models. Both Antigone and Demeter are commendable women, but they fight, and mourn, alone. The Not One Less movement offers an alternative narrative, where mourning becomes a collective and public experience, the foundation for a new *poiesis*.

All the commentaries included here highlight a key aspect of López’s book: that, as the author herself puts it, “feminism is a land of great political experimentation,”

and that the alliances and complicities between struggles against different types of sexual, racial, class, and neoliberal oppression prove that feminism is not just *una cosa de mujeres* but, in Verónica Gago's words, the desire "to change everything."¹⁶ Such changes should also take place within academia, especially Anglo-Saxon academia, with its logics of exclusion and rigid registers of writing. Lidia Salvatori claims that López's book "is an act of recognition of the collective dimension of knowledge production in contrast with the tendency to measure and reward individual achievements, typical of neoliberal academia." Similarly, Karen Benezra stresses that López's text "refuses to offer itself as an object of university discourse—not through an appeal to feminine desire but rather through an unremitting political realism." Cecilia Sosa recalls meeting López as a sociology student at the University of Buenos Aires, that "massive, free and public university, where 'public' stands at the antipodes of the British elitist standards." Finally, Claudia Salazar Jiménez also commends López's unique style of writing, which invites us to imagine alternative readers for our work. In sharp contrast to the "ideal" reader of academic writing, which she imagines as an "anonymous male, who stands as a wall to which one speaks but who maintains a silent distance," this dossier demonstrates that another type of interlocutor is still possible.

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Notes

1. López, *Mutantes*, 79; my emphasis.
2. UN Women, "Urgent Action."
3. Richard, "Imaginaries of Revolt."
4. Gago and Cavallero, "Deuda."
5. Brizuela and Sabsay, foreword, x.
6. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 2.
7. Ahmed, *Living*.
8. Gundermann, *Actos melancólicos*, 47.
9. Brizuela and Sabsay, foreword, xv.
10. Hassoun, *Les contrebandiers*.
11. Calveiro, *Política y/o violencia*.
12. Butler, *Force of Nonviolence*, 5.
13. Butler, *Force of Nonviolence*, 19.

14. López, *Not One Less*, 49.
15. López, *Not One Less*, 3.
16. Gago, *Feminist International*.

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