Feminine Desire, Feminist Politics

KAREN BENEZRA

Not One Less: Mourning, Disobedience, and Desire is a book about "a movement underway," as María Pia López writes in the epilogue. The book reflects upon the heterogeneous Argentinean feminist movement known as Not One Less (Ni Una Menos), which emerged in Argentina in March of 2015 in response to the extraordinary number of then-recent femicides and the conventionally misogynistic treatment of the victims by the news media. The slogan "Ni Una Menos. Nos queremos vivas" (Not One Less. We want ourselves alive) lent the movement its name when it became a viral hashtag in May of the same year. Over the same period, "Ni Una Menos" also became synonymous with the ongoing popular and parliamentary struggle for free, legal, and safe abortion in Argentina, a movement that preceded it. The name also came to encompass the women's strikes of March 8 in 2017 and 2018 in the cities of Buenos Aires and Córdoba, and throughout Latin America. The latter were assembly-based movements that were also notable for their intersections with multiple struggles over the exploitation of natural resources and of conventionally feminine forms of labor.

In their preface, Critical South series editors Natalia Brizuela and Leticia Sabsay note the "tricky business" of rendering intelligible new and necessarily localized forms of feminist revolt like those instantiated by Not One Less. In their words, "the reframing of a social movement, rendering it more or less visible or intelligible, is often marked by the social conditions that obscured the movement in the first place." They go on to observe that López "embraces two distinct roles, crafting a *plural-singular* voice: on the one hand, the body acting as part of a collective in the heat of every battle, and, on the other hand, the meditative scholarly voice of the intellectual."[1] Sabsay and Brizuela thus shed light on the movement by situating it within its own immediate context and as part of a longer genealogy of national and transnational feminist, queer, and anticapitalist movements. In doing so, they follow López's lead in resisting the reduction of insurgency and radical thought to

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culturalism or the conquest of individual rights. While the editors' preface draws out López's intentions in one way, I would like to do so in another: by focusing instead on those tensions that render her text purposefully illegible and, in so doing, help define the specificity of the book's critical and political intervention.

As a gesture that I hope is in keeping with the subtlety of the author's own approach, what follows is not a polemic, either with López, or the more or less organic intellectuals of Ni Una Menos or the Argentinean women's strikes. Rather, it is an attempt to decipher the theoretical frameworks and political stakes of López's essay. My remarks are aimed against the demand for polemical, journalistic, non-systematic, or otherwise easily digestible writing that has become an increasingly common feature of academic discussions about femicide and social reproduction. Faced with nothing less than the imbrication of existence and capitalism as illuminated by new political languages and organizational forms in determinate political-historical conjunctures, once and again emancipatory thought pays its pound of flesh. The more radical the political and ontological stakes of its claims, the neater the packaging of Third World feminism and the tidier its supposed divorce from the problems or conceptual vocabulary of sexual difference and experience.

Anticipating one of the book's most intriguing points, López suggests that the novelty of Ni Una Menos holds the potential to reveal a register of experience inextricable from but not limited to the organic body. As López signals, Maurice Merleau-Ponty described this register of knowledge and being as the flesh of the world.[2] For López, it is this that is at stake when the discourse about Ni Una Menos threatens reducing the female body to an organic substance opposed to reason. Merleau-Ponty himself considered that this register of experience revealed ontological rather than merely anthropological or biological questions and distinguished the horizon of Freudian psychoanalysis from that of anthropology.[3] Critical of the enjoyment of the superego lurking behind the search for a chiasmus prior to the division of subject and object in his initial assessment of Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Lacan eventually associated the register of experience in question with woman and, more broadly, with those subject positions whose enjoyment remits to a creativity beyond the economy of neurotic self-sacrifice. López's text similarly refuses to offer itself as an object of university discourse—not because of its appeal to feminine desire, but rather because of its unremitting political realism.

Not One Less is both easy to read and purposefully difficult to decipher. López's text, which moves fluidly from citations of Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, to lyrical descriptions of the Ni Una Menos protests, and sweeping historical genealogies of feminist intellectuals dating back to the nineteenth century, is more than a mere illustration of the *discurrir libre* of Latin American essayism. Its detours through apparently distant or academic discussions in political history and thought could thus be said to fulfill an integral and performative function. Its prose unfolds the way in

which its author's own knowledge about feminist politics finds itself embedded within the phenomena it tries to apprehend. Such detours through seemingly disparate anecdotes and references are perhaps the only way to arrive at or to construct its object of inquiry. López asserts her book's critical aims against an academy that tends to legitimate knowledge by appealing, alternately, to the scientific objectivism or to the salvific mystique of social abjection. In her words, "Feminism needs critical thought and the teachings of deconstruction in order to avoid taking for granted the position from which speech is emitted, the body on which it is inscribed, the truth it harbors" (95). López's essayistic writing carries out a form of critique aimed at sustaining the question of how femicide and capitalism intersect against the reduction or reification of the movement's demands and, at times, in tension with the internal disputes over its own identity, alternately as victim or as revolutionary subject. The book's apparent lack of systematicity is not merely an aesthetic choice. We might think of it, instead, as the medium for sustaining a theoretical question that has yet to be determined politically.

Similarly, the book's tensions and contradictions are more than just stylistic. It is an open-ended, essayistic reflection on a political movement published in an academic press but one that also criticizes the reduction of political thought either to objectivism or to activism. Without ever saying so explicitly, López insists that the truth of contemporary feminist politics remits neither to a sum of empirical data nor to the willful assertion of its purportedly autonomous self-determination. It is a truth that will have been apprehended only through the very experience that López aims to capture. Though the author begins from the idea that life in common presumes an embodied subject, for the same reason, she also criticizes the insistent return of what she calls "the dream passed down to us [of] a corporality that is full, desiring and illogical" in contemporary feminist theory and politics. Instead, López asks, after Merleau-Ponty, whether "we can . . . in the politics we are inventing, affirm that our experience is not the other of reason but sensorial reason conjugated in experience" (95). The accounts, impressions, and reflections that compose *Not One Less* offer snapshots of the creativity of recent feminist movements in Argentina—most notably in the demand for life—while also insisting that we question the purported immediacy of the body and with it, the reification and conflation of femininity with flesh as opposed to the intellect. López affirms the novelty and affective register of the collectivity instantiated, particularly in the assemblies of the women's strike, but refuses to impute to the movement as a whole either the telos of a revolutionary self-consciousness or the efficacy of its immanent political power. On one hand, *Not One Less* is a chronicle that offers space to consider the movement's anticapitalist horizons. At the same time, López also criticizes the movement's ideological inconsistencies and voices skepticism about the capacity of its micropolitical gestures to effectively confront government institutions aimed at pacifying its most radical claims through the empty rhetoric of solidarity with women's causes and the support for women's rights.

Not One Less appeared at the same time as the English translation of sociologist Verónica Gago's chronicle of the women's strikes, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything*. In contrast to Gago's immanentist approach to the historical importance of the women's strikes, for López, the extent to which the movement will have been able to articulate liberal claims on gender equality with class struggle remains to be seen. Though crude, the comparison points to a question that falls outside of both texts, but constitutes one point of intersection: how does an experience of the social common to women (in a formal, psychoanalytic, rather than descriptive sense) intersect with the expropriation of their labor? Both authors assume, more or less explicitly, a descriptive understanding of femininity. For Gago this issue bears on the logic of the commons instantiated by the social and political practices of the strikes.[4] For López it concerns the form of experience at stake in the constitution of collective popular will catalyzed by demands against gender violence and the exploitation of feminine labor. To say this more directly, López understands woman as a contingent signifier whose capacity for galvanizing social conflict has yet to be determined or replaced (97–98). From opposite perspectives, both Gago's and López's accounts leave unquestioned the imbrication of class struggle with the logical or extra-historical phenomenon of sexual difference.

This issue is striking in the case of *Not One Less* both because of the author's emphasis on the knowledge of politics born of embodied experience and because of her sensitivity to the ways in which claims around women's victimhood at once render the movement legible under the liberal guise of capitalism and impede it from positing its own agency. For example, López warns of the facility with which the movement's claim on female life captured in its slogan, "Ni una menos. Nos queremos vivas," could be co-opted by capitalism's own instrumentalization of life as a source of wealth. We find another example in López's passing remarks about Rita Segato's interpretation of femicide. According to Segato, the act of femicide, though necessarily directed at individual women, also addresses "the collective of women of which she forms part" (24). The target is not the individual woman but, in Segato's words, "a generic woman, a type of woman, merely for being a woman and for belonging to that type" (25).[5] López argues to the contrary that the social language around femicide operates through the constant differentiation between the sexualization and desexualization of victims' bodies based on race, or between the moral value of the victim's life and that of her perpetrator. Extending López's argument in Lacanian terms, we might say that the proliferation of divisions and subcategories coding "woman" show that she is not completely under the phallic function, or the organization of "social language." The social pedagogy that makes women "in general" the object of physical and symbolic violence does not for that same reason make them into a collective political subject.

López argues repeatedly against identifying the potential subjects of Ni Una Menos as victims. While her criticisms are well taken, the issue of victimhood is

not limited to one of identity, but rather refers us back to the question of feminine experience and the potential knowledge that it harbors about culture in determinate historical contexts. Certainly, it is only the winners in class struggle who abstract feminine oppression from its concrete social instantiation. But the reason why feminine desire does not easily translate into political shorthand or is rendered intelligible only under social and moral stratifications is because, despite generating real, material effects in history, it has no representation in culture. While "woman" is an abstraction that remains subordinate to the contingency and overdetermination of political labels, sexual difference deserves an analytical priority parallel to that of class struggle.

The fact that the movement's claims on life have to do with femininity and feminine labor both potentiate and potentially obscure this register of experience beyond the confines of the ego. In other words, from López's perspective, the movement's feminist identity, while still in flux, intensifies the existential stakes of politics as a work of symbolic creation and interpretation. However, the movement's feminist contours often appear negatively in the shape of a warning against the dangers of either victimhood or activist affirmation. The issue and the urgency of "construct[ing] emancipated subjects . . . which we call 'women'" are ever present in *Not One Less* (129); they stand opposed to the abjection and conventional objectification of femininity. At the same time, it is difficult to grasp the extent to which, if any, sexual difference bears on existence, or the experience of the flesh, in López's account.

In *Not One Less* one finds a certain schism between the philosophical and cultural codification of woman as the second sex and the creative possibility of defining woman "as a heterogeneous mass of singularities" and "a word that must reverberate with multiplicity, with disobedience and anomaly" (129). "A word that must reverberate with multiplicity, with disobedience and anomaly" announces the imperative of finding a language capable of expressing the concrete ways in which sexual oppression is intertwined with capitalist exploitation, as well as with the privatization of common goods and the financialization of informal networks and spaces of sociability, as Gago signals, over and against the abstractions of liberal and academic feminism. And yet, the question remains as to whether López assumes sexual difference among the material determinations of politics. If we entertain the notion that feminine desire has no representation in the unconscious, then we must also admit that in order to perceive the emergence on the social scene of a radical political claim on femininity, we must look for it in terms other than those of feminism per se. Such claims are doubly obscured—not only by liberal individualism but also by culture as such. When, in the epilogue, López characterizes the book's aims as those of "constructing a political feminist subject," we should understand this statement in the strongest sense possible (148). Committed critical work

concerned with claims on feminine experience cannot remain content with revealing or analyzing the assumptions of the texts or phenomena it takes as its object of inquiry; it cannot merely signal the absence of an articulate claim on femininity. Rather, in a vein similar to Merleau-Ponty, it must, instead, both interpret and creatively construct the discourse of its object also as its own.[6]

López does not address this question directly but rather places it within the opaque and contingent realm of politics. In so doing, her chronicle confronts the interpretation of feminine desire with the actual political terrain in which its claims either transform or conform to extant social codes. Despite the joyous and long-fought legalization of abortion in Argentina in December 2020, for López, the meaning of the movement's different modes of self-representation—from street protests and street theater to the declarations published on its web page—has yet to be determined. This is so both in the sense that the feminist movement is itself in a state of becoming—it has not yet agreed upon a way of representing the collective subject in whose name it speaks and has not yet institutionalized its own forms of decision-making beyond the circumscribed space assigned to it within constituted forms of power—and in the sense that there is no closure to politics. It is not yet clear how the radical intervention represented by the movement's claims on feminine life will institutionalize themselves. López is also keenly aware of the facile codification and instrumentalization of merely symbolic gestures. As she asks in the chapter titled "Power, Representation, and Bodies: The Construction of a Political Subject," "Would questioning the relationship between genders, the sexual division of labor and patriarchal control, pull a fundamental pillar out from under the social order and cause the very conditions for its reproduction to topple? We don't dare remove the question mark, because it is a well-known fact that cunning capitalism has managed to survive all prophesies of its demise" (88).

Not One Less sustains this question by describing the political, historical, theoretical, and mass-media discursive contexts and forms of its interventions. In so doing, it also traces a point of view that itself remains unintelligible within the confines of university discourse. Ni Una Menos has invented new forms of social and political organization and new forms of signification—new words, new means of corporal representation—that are subject to constant dispute both among its members and within the broader field of the mass media. López poses the following question in the final paragraph of her introduction: "What is this phenomenon, encapsulated in a single phrase, which has become password and symbol, common code, filled with multiple meanings, tool employed by diverse political constructions, contested territory?" (6). The assumption is that the movement's name and slogan, "Ni una menos. Nos queremos vivas" functions as a metaphor whose interpretation or self-interpretation is synonymous with the movement itself. Notably, while López does ask repeatedly whether or not the movement will prove capable

of linking liberal demands with class struggle, she does not herself affirm any specific interpretations. Nor does the text attempt, in its author's words, to "translate" the movement's inchoate potential or desires either into a ready-made theoretical or mythical Gramscian prince. In the final chapter, on language and theatricality, López adopts the more modest task of registering the transposition of academic and mass-media language from above onto the movement and, inversely, of tracing the effective decisions and modes of appearing (in street protests) by which Ni Una Menos defines itself as a popular movement. This is the nature of the book's intervention: it sustains a critical space within the movement, not only or principally by questioning the theoretical pretexts of its declarations, but rather by recording and probing the vicissitudes of its unfolding.

KAREN BENEZRA teaches at the Institut für Philosophie und Kunstwissenschaft at Leuphana University Lüneburg. She is the author of *Dematerialization: Art and Design in Latin America* (2020) and editor of the forthcoming *Accumulation and Subjectivity: Rethinking Marx in Latin America* (2022). She has coedited the journal *ARTMargins* since 2012.

Notes

1. López, *Not One Less*, vii. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
2. López cites the following from *The Visible and the Invisible* in a footnote: "We must not think the flesh starting from substances—from body and spirit—for then it would be the union of contradictions—but we must think it, as we said, as an element, as an emblem of the general mode of being" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 147; López, *Not One Less*, 170n65).
3. Shepherdson, "Pound of Flesh," 80–81.
4. See, in particular, Gago's discussion of the "body-territory" and its expropriation in *Feminist International*, chap. 3.
5. Segato, *La guerra contra las mujeres*, 47.
6. Lefort, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty," xix.

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