A Festive Feminism for Radical Times

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There is a poignant, personal question underlying *Not One Less*: "Can a person write as an activist and as a theorist and critic at the same time?"[1] A passionate answer unfolds across 180 pages. It is this unusual combination of theory and activism that makes the book so appealing, enjoyable, and fresh. The continuous exchange between writing and political construction delineates an affective genre that goes beyond the personal essay and collective autobiography. At once intellectually rigorous and affectively intimate, *Not One Less* stands as an experiment of writing about a movement "capable of reinventing and transforming itself" (2), which has managed to transform not only the horizon of women's struggles in Latin America and beyond, but also the lives of its individual protagonists. "Bearing witness to the dawning of this movement turns the story we write into a story about ourselves," argues López (6). While tracing the whereabouts of the collective, *Not One Less* invents its own activist genre, one that successfully traces an activist's journey from an allegedly self-absorbed "I" to a collective "we," revealing its author's personal engagement within a radically new feminist experience.

López confesses that she only begins to imagine herself as a feminist in 2015, at the start of the women's uprising. She ties the emergence of the local feminist movement to a circular genealogy of women's struggles, including the pioneering work of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who demand to know the fate of their children in the wake of military terror in the 1970s. Grief has been present in these movements from the start, she contends. Quite strategically, however, the NUM (Ni Una Menos) movement transforms the force of mourning into desire, that slippery impulse that manages to bring together a political sisterhood emerging out of loss. This fundamental attachment between mourning and desire—which I will explore here—is one of the great discoveries of the book. Drawing upon fragility

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and the precarious vulnerability of bodies, the movement conceives of a radical politics that would change the story of the region forever.

Still, the critical value of the book cannot be grasped entirely without having a sense of López's personal embeddedness in networks of affective activism. During the early 1990s, as an undergraduate student of sociology at Buenos Aires's massive, free, and public university—where "public" stands in opposition to "elite"—I had the opportunity to share with López the crowded halls of a building massively covered by left-wing political inscriptions with revolutionary flair. By then, two harmful decades of neoliberal governance were commencing in Argentina, and patriarchy was the silent and mostly unrecognized rule. I was blind to this, as were many women at the university. More than twenty years later, López is still a professor there. I have been following her work from the United Kingdom, where I have been living and researching for the last fifteen years. Thus, I have had the opportunity to witness López's intellectual and political expansion. She has learned to engage the tensions around the feminist movement with the same humility and critical spirit with which she approaches Walter Benjamin, Alain Badiou, or Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and initiates dialogues with more vernacular traditions including Jorge Luis Borges, José Carlos Mariátegui, and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, and even the Peronist tradition of the country. However, something has changed. Not only has she delicately revisited and interrogated those male authors with feminist readings—spanning Diana Taylor and Judith Butler to Rita Segato and Silvia Federici—but she has also become fully embedded in another network of affective support and care: the *sorora* movement. All these explorations come together in this book. Because of its heterodox approach and its strong Latin American background, López's first monograph to be translated into English comes to disconcert critical dialogues with the Global South. The difficulties of categorizing this volume are part of a complex trajectory of an author who openly, and maybe also defiantly, avoids speaking English, and is keen on positioning herself within a *marrón* (Brown) tradition. Within her book, boundaries between theoretical intellectual flirtations and affective inspirations become mostly blurred and decentered. More than a random whim, López's decision not to write in English should stand as an act of rebellion, intimately connected to her preoccupations on how to build insurgent hospitalities that can welcome dissident, Brown, heterogeneous bodies in the South. Thus, the book confronts its readers with several difficulties, inviting them to be captivated by its insurgent power and feminist, activist discomfort. Its form of activism is built upon a recognized sense of bodily vulnerability as much as the pleasures of a newly discovered feminist network.

Still, the creation of a new narrative of mourning sparked tensions within the original NUM group. López traces the origins of the movement to a moment back in March 2015. Before the conservative backlash was initiated in December of that

year when businessman Mauricio Macri came to power, a group of women, mostly intellectuals, journalists, artists, and writers, gathered at the Museo de la Lengua—of which López was director—for a marathon reading of poetry. The event aimed at confronting the growing trend of femicide, and especially a series of murders of young women, mostly at the hands of their partners or close acquaintances.[2] "All lives matter" was by then the call of the incipient movement, showing that every body lost to femicide needs to be accounted for and also that every singular story of femicide has to be extracted from patriarchal mass media discourses to be recounted and retold. The day of the event, a crucial controversy began to emerge. As López recalls, the local feminist "queen" María Moreno, a self-educated and extremely sharp writer, prepared a short manifesto to kick off the reading. "We are all the woman in the bag. . . . Women are rubbish," she read, in reference to a nineteen-year-old woman whose body had been recently found half-naked inside a rubbish bag. A disagreement soon emerged. "I am not the woman in the bag. That's why I am here, standing before you, reading this text and breathing in all our pain, our struggle and our hope," the journalist and writer Marta Dillon, whose mother was "disappeared" during the dictatorship, and the lesbian scholar Victoria Cano shouted together. Retrospectively, that initial controversy sheds light on how much women were trying to find a novel narrative to come together in mourning on the basis of a common sense of vulnerability and loss. Yet that fragility put them in disagreement over whether precariousness should be used as a source of victimization or empowerment.

This narrative of standing together in anger and pain, but also in hope, managed to gain traction, and on June 3, 2015, hundreds of thousands of women mobilized outside Argentina's Congress and in plazas across thirty cities in the country. As López shows us, the tagline "Not One Less" has become a collective shout against machismo and explicitly avoids clichés of victimization. Thus, femicide emerged not only as a human rights issue but also as a way to denounce the naturalization of gender violence from a new perspective. "If violence is expressive, *Not One Less* is a teacher," writes Moreno. The collective also embraced the promise of a radical pedagogy that sought to protect "the wretched," including "all travesties, poor, transgender persons, working-class women," as López puts it (12). Eventually, a movement with "no boss, no leader, no owner" emerged. Through her writing, López metaphorizes the collective as an unruly flag: "If the streets are happily heterogeneous and multiple, if they unfold diverse languages and tensions, so too the collective must avoid being univocal," she argues (4).

Beyond an account of a local movement, what is at stake in López's book is the search for a broad definition of feminism for contemporary, transnational times. Is feminism a radical practice that can show us how to live? Or is it just a capitalist maneuver to keep us on the so-called progressive side? Even if López alerts us that feminism can go either way, her personal account is underpinned by palpable

enthusiasm, optimistic engagement, and hope toward the feminist crusade. Her double role is as a committed protagonist of an effervescent movement that has changed the landscape of what has become tolerable, and a mesmerized witness of a display of forces that exceeds any master, which rejects any alleged impartiality, instead embracing the excessive and even sensual nuances of a growing assembly of intensities that are evolving right before her eyes. Even if uncertainty might be always around the corner, López's confessional writing offers a vivid taste of how NUM managed to transform femicide into a learning experience, one that empowered women despite their age, race, and class.

One of the many strengths of López's book is its ability to show how the NUM movement managed to contain a form of feminism liberated from victimizing calls. Moreover, in the midst of the Argentine conservative backlash (2015–19), the collective dared to stand as an invitation to explore the pleasures of being together in the wake of loss. In coming back to the Freudian distinction between public mourning and melancholia, López insists that mourning is an acknowledgment of commonality. This sense of commonality did not preexist the movement but was forged on the very basis of sharing the streets during different events and demonstrations, and through social media. In this manner, López invites us to see mourning as the potential to find ourselves in others, to sympathize before the death of others who we might not even know. Moreover, for López, NUM constitutes a clear case in which the performance of public mourning can become a weapon against victimization. Not surprisingly, López draws upon Judith Butler to argue that "mourning recovers a shared corporal condition: vulnerability." Precisely, this sense of collective mourning emerges as a tool to break with victimizing narratives. "Mourning implies crying together over the deaths, sharing in the pain, the fury and the decision not to be victims," she writes (19). For instance, during the first National Women's Strike, women of different ages gathered together dressed in black to march, disrupting routines with a collective and furious call. After all, as the saying goes from Brazil, *luto es luta* (mourning is fighting).

If mourning liberates us from the category of the victim, it is because it manages to become a path to action. Though López follows Butler in the conviction that mourning can help to construct a political community based on vulnerability and loss, she also goes further. She contends that mourning also brings together a political community out of desire. "It is a desire to share. Desire, then, not as neoliberal impetus or affirmation of a solitary decision" (18). Even if López argues that desire is always problematic, always slippery, always a name for what is not there, she acknowledges that it is connected to mourning in a very fundamental way: they are both experiences of dispossession (18). López goes on to contend that even if embedded in mourning, "feminist mobilizations create a kind of ecstasy, a

leaving of the self, a break from private individuality" (18). This "ecstasy" is crucial. It allows Not One Less to produce a politics that combines the fragility of corporal experience with an ecstatic force with guts. In fact, "We are moved by desire" has been one of the most idiosyncratic taglines of the movement, launched in the wake of 2016 International Women's Strike.

Undoubtedly, the Argentine tradition of women's activism has been hugely inspired by grieving. López's book triangulates different feminist activist traditions. At the end of the dictatorship from 1976 to 1983, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo famously transformed mourning into a public and collective call. The disappearance of their children, with no bodies to be mourned, has been indeed an experience of extreme dispossession and loss, which the group of women managed to transform into an utterly public encounter. The Mothers' performance has been inspirational to López's book. Although she follows Diana Taylor's definition of performance as an "act of transference that permits identity and collective memory to be transmitted through shared ceremonies," she could have drawn more upon Taylor's famous work on the Mothers to analyze Not One Less activism.[3] If the Mothers' experience of embodied transmission of mourning destabilized the military but "left a restrictive patriarchal system basically unchallenged," the contemporary creation of feminist forces taking place in the streets brings important novelties to the evolving power of women's genealogies, namely the unprecedented encounter between mourning and pleasure, which was arguably absent in the Mothers' performance.[4] In this manner, NUM's focus on pleasure establishes a clear break with the Mothers' tradition that has not been highlighted in López's or Taylor's reading of the movement. In particular, the evolving encounter between the Mothers' white scarves and the green tide—associated with reproductive rights and the pursuit of legal abortion, which was finally passed by the end of 2020—provides another instance of cross-fertilization among mourning, disobedience, and desire. In fact, I would suggest that the victimizing accounts, which remained resiliently present in the Mothers' performance, could be reversed for the first time. In my research I have argued that, in a sense, the encounter between the white and green scarves could be thought of as a progression from defensiveness to impureness, from selected victims to anonymous activists, from immunity to contagion. The force of the movement does not come from direct victims of gender-based violence but rather from the anonymous multitudes, the "implicated" others, to use Michael Rothberg's expression.[5] Therefore, the green scarves name a bond that can be either transferred or exported. It relies on a sense of solidarity and companionship, supported by a system of sisterhood, which circulates, like a virus, beyond bloodline ties. If the white scarves act as a reminder of the delicate thresholds of the Mothers' performance of blood—in

which the purity of the scarves was ultimately championed by the bloodline connection with the disappeared—the green scarves have committed themselves to excess, to the ecstasy of transposing individual boundaries and joining a festive sisterhood of feminist desire. The green scarves have welcomed a new generation of anonymous, nonkin 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.[6] So far, NUM has created a radical version of feminism whose consequences we are still about to see.

Whereas protests usually involve a dramatized exhibition of bodies in the streets, López argues that Not One Less's 2015–18 appearances exposed a compelling paradox: although they were motivated by the pain of femicide, mourning "does not manifest as sadness and the mobilizations are combative yet festive" (130). López's book also suggests how much this entanglement between mourning and desire is powerfully mediated through disobedience and humor. She traces this celebratory, nonsubmissive element back to two street traditions: the anniversary demonstrations of the 1976 military coup, held every March 24 in Argentina, and the daylight party carnival of Gay Pride that takes place mid-November. More unconventionally, she includes a third lineage: the Peronism movement, not precisely a women's collective, to say the least, but one that manages to use "sarcastic mockery as forms of displacement that can reverse power" (135). In this manner, López wittily manages to "save" Peronism from its misogynist criticisms to relocate the populist tradition as an ad hoc contribution to the mordant, disobedient features of the contemporary feminist movement.

López also highlights the "degree of self-awareness" (143) of the Argentine movement, which allows its members to curate their own aesthetics with "a bellicose yet festive corporality" (131). In fact, this central entanglement between mourning and festive corporality also breaks from more austere feminist traditions coming from the North. The focus on pleasure, rebellion, and desire places vulnerability at the core. Moreover, the scandalous cross-fertilization between pleasure and mourning, which is located at the core of López's reading of the NUM movement, becomes also politically inspiring for future understandings of desire and dispossession. It offers a road map to further feminist movements emerging in landscapes affected by loss. In this sense, NUM deserves to circulate beyond the Argentine context; it deserves to engage with other traumatic, "multidirectional memories," as Rothberg would say, in order to show the extent to which this entanglement—instead of victimization—has shed light on different forms of solidarity.[7] This radical path to the transnational is only suggested in the book. It is up to further feminist movements emerging from disparate forms of dispossession and vulnerability to discover the new potentials.

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Notes

1. López, *Not One Less*, 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
2. As López argues, by 2015 there was a femicide committed every thirty hours (8), approximately the same number as today.
3. Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 144.
4. Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 119.
5. Rothberg, *Implicated Subject*.
6. See Sosa, "Between the White and the Green Scarves."
7. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*.

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