

Imagining Not One Less

SARAH BANET-WEISER

In late December 2020, while I was reading the remarkable book by María Pia López, *Not One Less*, I was also witnessing two world phenomena unfold. I watched media footage of thousands of women in Argentina, wearing green pañuelos (handkerchiefs) and waving green banners, cheering as the Argentinian senate voted to legalize elective abortion. After years of organizing in the Argentine abortion rights movement, Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal Seguro y Gratuito (National Campaign for the Right to Free and Safe Legal Abortion), finally saw the passing of the law. The media images of the masses of women expressing both their joy and their commitment to a new future was simultaneously moving and hopeful. The coalitional nature of the abortion movement was also evident when activists from other organizations fighting for women's rights in Argentina joined in the celebrations, many of whom were themselves victims of rape, murder, and sexual violence. Though the media focused on the movement's goal for legal abortions, there is no doubt that this was a movement of an intersection of struggles, from gendered violence to women's work to reproductive rights.

Then, just over a week later, I watched footage of a different kind of collective action: thousands of rioters, predominantly white and male, stormed the US Capitol in Washington, DC, breaching the Senate floor, apparently with the intention to commit violence against politicians in the wake of what they claimed was a fraudulent US presidential election. Wearing MAGA hats and waving the notoriously racist Confederate flag, as well as displaying many other symbols of white supremacy and conspiracy theories, the rioters claimed to be "taking their freedom back." Then-US President Donald Trump had incited the insurrection earlier that day when he urged his followers to march to the Capitol, declaring, "You will never take back our country with weakness."¹ While January 6, 2021, will stand out as the day

of an attempted coup in the United States, it was an event that had been a long time in the making. After all, we have witnessed years of right-wing politicians, pundits, media, and activists who have encouraged white men to think of themselves as victims. In early December, after Trump had clearly lost the election, he gave a speech to his followers in which he asserted “We’re all victims. Everybody here, all these thousands of people here tonight, they’re all victims. Every one of you.”²

The affective, political, and cultural differences between these two events remains with me, resonating in ways that have to do with gender, race, and the differences in value and perceived vulnerability between bodies. The December media coverage of Argentinians celebrating the legalization of elective abortions depicted part of a long history of feminist protest in Latin America: from the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who began protesting in the 1970s during a time when over thirty thousand people were disappeared or murdered during the dictatorship in Argentina, to the Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal Seguro y Gratuito that continues to this day.³ The recent protests in Argentina were accompanied by other feminist demonstrations in Latin America and Spain, where coalitions were formed and were often visibly marked with the varied colors of the handkerchiefs, or pañuelos, so that the white from the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo connected with the green from the Campaña Nacional and the violet from the #NiUnaMenos feminist movement.⁴

The protests were about many things, but for me the common theme connecting them all is female vulnerability. Vulnerability is often tied to passivity, but in these demonstrations the female protestors made it clear that vulnerability is centrally about resistance. As Judith Butler, Leticia Sabsay, and Zeynep Gambetti argue, we can read this vulnerability as one of an “embodied relation,” a vulnerability that recognizes the ways in which women are dependent on infrastructures of power.⁵ This embodied relation, this agential vulnerability, can be seen as the condition of possibility of resistance in certain contexts. The dynamic of vulnerability and victimhood undergirds many Latin American feminist movements, where challenges to patriarchy is connected to other resistances, allowing for a feminism that, as Liz Mason-Deese argues, “emerges from the frustration women experienced participating in other movements, be they movements of the unemployed, the workers’ cooperative movements, or other populist and leftist struggles. In each of these, women were central to both everyday organizing and the day-to-day practices that kept these struggles together.”⁶ The “keeping the struggles together” is found in the usually invisible labor of social reproduction and care work that mostly women do, in every context. This “keeping the struggles together” also, as Silvia Federici has discussed, allows for the emergence of the “collective subject.”⁷ This collective subject is what has been so moving and joyous about the visibility of the Argentinian abortion rights movement.

This kind of collective subject, which links vulnerability, resistance, and agency across difference, is precisely what was absent from the protest on the US Capitol a

week later. Rather than a movement that stressed the vulnerability that comes with “embodied relations,” the (predominantly) white men who stormed the Capitol were attempting to return to their singularity and felt that their entitled individual “freedoms” were under threat. To be sure, the protestors at the Capitol also formed a collective subject, but one mobilized and bonded by Trumpist unity and white nationalism. Even if they acted as individuals, these protestors were followers of Trump’s commands and unified in their purpose and sense of self as victims. Their victimhood was centered around the notion that their entitlements were being seized from them: like the Argentinian demonstrations, this specific protest also has a long history that predates January 6, 2021, but *this* history depends on the rerouting of victimhood, a reallocation of the victimhood claim from those who are marginalized and discriminated against to those who do the work of marginalization. Like the Latin American feminist movements, these protestors connected through colorful material symbols; unlike the pañuelos, however, the Confederate flags and MAGA hats represented not solidarity across difference but racism, violence, and oppression.

It is within this broader conjuncture of global protests that particular aspects of the expansive, moving, and haunting book by María Pia López, *Not One Less*, resonate. The two protests that are so antithetical to each other nonetheless compel me to confront each and to think about what it means to witness the emergence of the “popular,” whether that be popular feminisms or populist white nationalism. Here, I want to use López’s work to think broadly about what it means to be a victim in the current moment: Who gets to claim victimhood? How do we protest, remember, and mourn the victims of femicide that López writes so movingly about, when the category of victimhood seems to move so easily from those women who are used and discarded as if they were “rubbish,” and reallocated to the privileged?

Not One Less is indeed a popular feminism, as López asserts. But it is a different kind of “popular” than the highly visible and mediated neoliberal popular feminism that has gained dominance in the Anglo-American world in recent years.⁸ The neoliberal version of popular feminism has at its core an individualized feminism, based on particular kinds of “freedoms” that are already understood within a normative state-centered framework. This kind of individualized freedom is also part of the populism that was manifest in the insurrection on the Capitol in the United States (though that was certainly not feminist). The struggle over “freedom” ostensibly at the core of the Capitol insurrection is not a collective struggle; indeed, the fact that this insurrection took place in a global pandemic, where millions have lost their lives, is not insignificant: Trump has refused to acknowledge these deaths and has resisted mourning them. As Judith Butler has recently written, the “resistance of Trump to public mourning has drawn from, and intensified,

a masculinist refusal to mourn that is bound up with nationalist pride and even white supremacy.”⁹

While neoliberal popular feminism is not necessarily bound up in masculine white nationalist pride, both involve claiming the neoliberal ground of individualism that is designed to render those who are marginalized or engaged in collective struggle invisible. And both invoke a particular kind of melancholy. The people who were part of the Capitol insurrection frequently positioned themselves as “forgotten,” disenfranchised, or “real” Americans who needed to take their country back; this version of melancholy and longing is often expressed in violent terms as white nationalism. On the other hand, neoliberal popular feminism is about a slightly shifted version of melancholy that is focused on individual bodies and livelihoods, a nostalgic longing for capacity and entitlement that is only—and scarcely—available to already privileged groups. As López so eloquently points out, some communities are never afforded the capacity to lose and thus grieve, and this forced denial of grief is part of what has led to this act of public mourning.

I’m reminded here of the difference between the melancholy of the Capitol rioters and the public mourning of the Not One Less protestors: often, melancholia is a nostalgic reflection on victimhood, a turn inward that typically individualizes the subject with no ability to move past the self. As a collective move, melancholy is less about fighting for collective futures than inward emotion and nostalgia. And melancholy is obviously not something that is embraced only by those who want to protect white nationalist masculinity; as Wendy Brown argues, the melancholy on the left is also expressed through its attachments to traditionalism (albeit a different kind of traditionalism than that of white nationalists). In the context of a cultural politics of identity and the disintegration of socialist regimes, these attachments mean that the “Left has come to represent a politics that seeks to protect a set of freedoms and entitlements that confronts neither the domination contained in both nor the limited value of those freedoms and entitlements in contemporary configurations of capitalism.”¹⁰ She continues by arguing that the left dwells not in hopefulness but in *failure*, so that the left “is thus caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing.” This is also the melancholy of the right, manifest in the rioters on the Capitol building, who seek to protect—and restore—their perceived freedoms and entitlements. The flying of Confederate flags and the exhortation to make America great *again* are part of a broader set of melancholic attachments to ghostly spirits, including medieval cosplay and protecting statues, strategies in what Jack Bratich calls the “war of restoration.”¹¹

This melancholy display of the right is different from the public mourning of the sort that López discusses in her book. She details the different protests and movements in which women in Latin America participate, from publicly protesting

in front of courthouses to wearing all black to commemorate victims of femicide to chanting: “Now that we’re together, now that they can see us, the patriarchy will fall, will fall, feminism will win, will win.”¹² She movingly describes the brutal murders and forced disappearances of cis and trans women in Argentina, rightly calling femicide an epidemic. Beginning the book with the statement “Here, no one is dispensable,” made by activist Nora Cortinas to hundreds of thousands of women protesting in 2018, López offers us a portrait of what intersectional struggle looks and feels like, poignantly detailing not only the mourning that forms an affective core of the movement but also the kinds of visibility that both respond to and sit alongside the mourning, through the chants, the colors, the expressions of joy.

Indeed, the Not One Less protests are a profound and complex form of public mourning; through naming, counting bodies, and insisting on justice, Not One Less both centers individual victims and insists that this centering is not nearly enough. In this, Not One Less is dedicated to public mourning rather than to melancholy. The movement powerfully claims that we need collective remembrance and grieving, not only for individual women who were disappeared but for *women as a category*:

Justice for these wasted lives is also narrative; it implies extracting them from the patriarchal discursive mechanisms that resound in the mass media and in courtrooms, dissecting the victims and not the system or the criminal logic. Faced with this reality, we have tried to produce a narrative and create meaning; to use words as defense against violence; to commemorate the dead women in a kind of public act of mourning.¹³

Here, public mourning creates commonality and coalition, a kind of freedom from individualized victimhood.

The way that the public mourning of Not One Less focuses on “dissecting the system” rather than dissecting the victims is crucial to contemporary feminism; the move from singular bodies to structures of power is part of the reclamation of woman as a *category*. Victimhood here is about the vulnerability of women as a category, the ways in which the construct of womanhood has at its core varied vulnerabilities. As López points out, we are not all equally vulnerable, and displays of public mourning manifest in Not One Less shatter the false distinction between those lives deemed valuable and those considered disposable. For one thing, as Not One Less demonstrates, there are overlapping (and sometimes contradictory) systems of gendered oppression, from femicide to sexual violence to reproductive choice to economic precarity. Mourning here is both affective and concrete: it offers the possibility of working through and beyond the loss, a recognition that something happened to someone or some community: “Not One Less is the outcry against a growing horror: it says that lives matter and that every body counts, should be

valued, counted—one of the movement's initial demands was the creation of a public register of femicide—but also that their stories should be recounted" (8). Not One Less, then, offers profoundly different affects and practices from a neoliberal reclaiming of victimhood, which focuses on abstract individual grievances, whereby those in power can easily claim it against women who accuse them of gendered violence.¹⁴

Not One Less practices mourning as a way to "identify commonalities in our mutual vulnerability, in the fragility that puts us at risk, and in our empathy for the victims" (9). Importantly, as López points out, women draw political nourishment from public mourning; it is a way to mobilize as a collective against violence. Both vulnerability and its subsequent mourning are transmuted into collective agency. Here, we return to the notion of the category of womanhood, rather than individual women; turning to Not One Less helps to reorient what we mean by womanhood—beyond individual identity and neoliberal capacity. In this way, these mobilizations were an "acknowledgment . . . of the human interdependence that is at the very origin of life and remains like an unconscious trace, veiled behind the notion of individual autonomy" (16). By contrast, neoliberal popular feminism either demobilizes or mobilizes individuals precisely through these prescribed paths of individual autonomy. That is, for those individuals with the privilege of race, accessibility, or social class, neoliberal popular feminism provides a pathway for success. For those, however, who are marginalized in society (from any number of positions), the promises of neoliberal popular feminism will not only remain out of reach, but indeed, marginalized individuals themselves are often held accountable for their "failure" to succeed according to neoliberal parameters.

When I've spoken about structural, intersectional feminist rage, I'm often asked what this rage looks like, how it manifests itself. Not One Less is what it looks like—the marches, the collectivity, the symbol of wearing black or green or violet, the counting of women, the demand that they come back alive when it is known they are dead. Feminist intersectional rage is, as López states, a "surging tide," a "hydra of a thousand heads, a new political subject, a menacing force, an enigma to be solved, a challenge for our insomniac intellectuals and politicians" (2).

Above all, Not One Less is about political imagination: it is about recognizing that femicide can't be curbed through public safety issues because it is a human rights issue; it is not about making someone pay. And this is where it differs most strikingly from both neoliberal feminism and the white men claiming victimhood at the Capital. This political imagination recognizes vulnerability and human interdependence, producing a heterogeneous commonality through this recognition; it understands freedom as part of the web of relationality. Neoliberal feminism disavows interdependence and ultimately differential human vulnerability. Not only does white nationalist masculinity understand freedom as individual

liberty (to do what one wants) but its followers externalize their anger at losing their privilege and orient their rage toward making someone—women, people of color, immigrants—pay. This political imagination is truncated because it looks backward with nostalgia or remains stuck in our individualized present. It cannot work through its grief toward a common future. *Not One Less*, on the other hand, offers us something else: it renders feminist rage audible and collective. And this is precisely the kind of popular feminism we need to draw on in the current moment.

SARAH BANET-WEISER is a professor of media, gender, and communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California. She is the author of *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (1999), *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (2007), *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012), and *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (2018). She is the coeditor of *Cable Visions: Television beyond Broadcasting* (2007), *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* (2012), and *Racism Postrace* (2019), and has published in journals such as *Social Media and Society*, *International Journal of Communication*, *American Quarterly*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *Feminist Theory*, *Cultural Studies*, and *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. She is currently working on a new book titled *Believability: Gender, Race, and the Labor of Being Believed*.

Notes

1. Haberman, “Trump Told Crowd.”
2. Rosenberg, “Donald Trump.”
3. Gofni, “40 Years Later.”
4. Gofni, “40 Years Later.”
5. Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, *Vulnerability in Resistance*, 7.
6. Mason-Deese, “From #MeToo to #WeStrike.”
7. Federici, *Re-enchanting the World*.
8. Rottenberg, *Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*.
9. Butler, “Why Donald Trump.”
10. Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy.”
11. Bratich, *On Microfascism*.
12. Lopez, *Not One Less*, 75.
13. López, *Not One Less*, 8. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
14. See Chouliarakis, “Victimhood”; Cole, *Cult of True Victimhood*; Banet-Weiser, “‘Ruined Lives.’”

Works Cited

- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. “‘Ruined Lives’: Mediated White Male Victimhood.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, February 5, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420985840>.
- Bratich, Jack. *On Microfascism: Gender, Death, War*. Philadelphia: Common Notions, 2022.
- Brown, Wendy. “Resisting Left Melancholy.” *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 19–26.

- Butler, Judith. "Why Donald Trump Will Never Admit Defeat." *Guardian*, January 1, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/20/donald-trump-election-defeat-covid-19-deaths>.
- Butler, Judith, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, eds. *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Chouliaraki, Lilie. "Victimhood: The Affective Politics of Vulnerability." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (2020): 10–27.
- Cole, Alyson. *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Federici, Silvia. *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018.
- Gofi, Uki. "40 Years Later, the Mothers of Argentina's 'Disappeared' Refuse to Be Silent." *Guardian*, April 28, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/28/mothers-plaza-de-mayo-argentina-anniversary>.
- Haberman, Maggie. "Trump Told Crowd 'You Will Never Take Back Our Country with Weakness.'" *New York Times*, January 6, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/us/politics/trump-speech-capitol.html>.
- López, María Pia. *Not One Less: Mourning, Disobedience, and Desire*. Cambridge: Polity, 2020.
- Mason-Deese, Liz. "From #MeToo to #WeStrike: A Politics in Feminine." In *Where Freedom Starts: Sex Power Violence #MeToo*. New York: Verso Books, 2018.
- Rosenberg, Paul. "Donald Trump and the Politics of Victimhood: From Winning to Whining." *Salon*, December 19, 2020. <https://www.salon.com/2020/12/19/donald-trump-and-the-politics-of-victimhood-from-winning-to-whining/>.
- Rottenberg, Catherine. *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.