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A New Heroic Figure: Female Protestors and Precarity in Puerto Rico

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Abstract: This paper offers a critical look on an isolated, failed incident of protest carried out by a young Puerto Rican woman and her two children. In doing so, it explores the possibilities of radical political thought and action on the island. Furthermore, by situating this event within the larger context of danger—physical, social and discursive—that women in Puerto Rico are subjected to, it seeks to question the manner in which female protestors’ vulnerability and agency challenge those on the left to formulate gender-progressive strategies for emancipation. Lastly, it is argued here that this protestor features as new type of radical political subject on the island that could very well serve as a figurehead for large-scale social movements arising from a shared sense of precarity.

Keywords: female protestors, nontraditional protests, precarity, Puerto Rico, vulnerability

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Our task is to find a new heroic figure.
— Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*

Introduction: Vulnerability and Vision

In April 2014, Christina Victoria Pasquinucci trespassed into a Walgreens construction site in the municipality of Hatillo to protest the chain pharmacy’s hyperbolic expansion in Puerto Rico.¹ A local online newspaper covered the event under the headline “Mother Invades Walgreens Land in Protest of Monopoly” (Quintero 2014).² In the article’s opening line, however, Pasquinucci is referred to as an “environmentalist” who made the incursion into the site with her young son and daughter (ages six and two, respectively). According to the report, the woman perpetrated an act of civil disobedience by blocking the entrance to the construction site with a van that donned scribbled messages such as “Enough is enough, Walgreens,” “Hatillo = culture,” and “Support local [businesses].” She also planted what was meant to be the first of many trees. In her words, the protest was directed “against the American monopoly in pharmacies” and “on behalf of the local economy and natural medicine.” Her plan was to set up camp on the site for several weeks. Unfortunately, she ended up abandoning it the very same day.

Upon arriving at the scene, police threatened Pasquinucci with reporting her to social services and filing a formal complaint of child abuse with Puerto Rico’s Department of the Family for exposing her children to the protest. Regarding her son and daughter’s participation in the act, she was quoted as saying, “I wanted them to be part of the message because this is for their health and their future” (Quintero 2014). Thus, the event could be summarized as follows: A female protestor exposes herself to arrest by breaking into private property, accompanied by her children, to deliver a clear-cut message regarding an American corporation’s

control over a significant sector of the local economy. Her plan for a sustained occupation of the site is cut short, however, due to law enforcement's gender-specific manner of dealing with the protestor. This manner was particularly cruel and tantamount to torture.

Police could have very well arrested Pasquinucci if she refused to leave the premises and could have also arranged for a family member to pick up the children. The officers' choice to forego these options and threaten her instead showcases women's particular vulnerability as protestors. One could argue that women's incursion into the space of a political manifestation expands the spectrum of ways and forms in which law enforcement and other entities (such as the media) can and will respond. As pertains specifically to law enforcement, recent reports by the American Civil Liberties Union (2012) and the US Department of Justice (2015) have found that Puerto Rican police have been particularly abusive when called to intervene in situations of "citizen unrest," acts of civil disobedience, marches, picket lines, and other forms of individual and mass protest. This abuse reaches even more worrisome levels when women protestors are arrested and/or detained, as they are often forced to suffer acts of bodily aggression through touching, groping and sexual harassment. Furthermore, the gender violence specific to situations of political opposition in the street occurs within the wider context of general police unresponsiveness and mishandling of cases of domestic violence and sexual assault, which run rampant on the island.³

In this particular case, one could safely assume that if Pasquinucci was willing to drive her van into the construction site, she was certainly willing to risk being arrested. Thus, that threat, from the responding officers' perspective, would not have been enough to dissuade her from her chosen course of action. The threat, then, had to be augmented by expanding the spectrum of acceptable state violence towards her: "Your children will be taken away." And thus the proposed occupation came to a screeching halt. No more trees would be planted on the site, no walk-in protestors would join in, and the construction would continue as scheduled. This failure was further punctuated by the manner in which the media covered the event: "Mother Invades Walgreens Lands in Protest of Monopoly." "Mother" in the headline seems to respond to the manner in which the police handled Pasquinucci's act of civil disobedience—as *prima facie* evidence of parental negligence and not as a political act. Therefore, it could be argued that the protestor's motherhood made her the least ideal political actor to convey such an urgent message regarding American corporate control over Puerto Rican economy. This, perhaps, helps explain the discrepancy between the headline and the article's opening line. While the rationale for the act corresponded to the views and values of an environmentalist, the protestor was not handled by law enforcement as such but rather as a "bad" mother—someone to be punished not for a political, unlawful act that arose from her deepest convictions but rather for the foolishness and irresponsibility displayed by a woman in her (vulnerable) condition of motherhood. Judith Butler elaborates as follows on the vulnerability of protestors:

Indeed, even in the moment of actively appearing on the street, we are vulnerable. This is especially true for those who appear on the street without permits, who are opposing the police or the military or other security forces without weapons. Although one is shorn of protection, to be sure, one is not reduced to some sort of "bare life." On the contrary, to be shorn of protection is a form of political exposure, at once concretely vulnerable and potentially and actively defiant. How do we understand this connection between vulnerability and defiant resistance within activism? (Butler 2013, 168–69)

In trying to understand the "connection between vulnerability and defiant resistance within activism" as it played out in Pasquinucci's particular act of dissent, what is significant is that her children were present on the scene not out of necessity—as an unfortunate but inevitable result of the objective conditions that shape her daily life (i.e., there being nobody else to take care of them)—but, rather, were active participants

in the protest. Their presence was desired and responded to a larger political project and/or vision; as Pasquinucci put it, “I wanted them to be part of the message because this is for their health and their future” (Quintero 2014). In a sociopolitical context where parents—especially those who belong to the most socially disadvantaged classes—and their children are policed in a variety of forms, this statement is nothing short of liberatory.⁴ Pasquinucci’s children were there to receive an education in civil disobedience as a legitimate response to corporate greed and state complicity with foreign corporations. Thus, in Alain Badiou’s terms, Pasquinucci’s protest against Walgreens was “at the service of a true idea” (Badiou 2012a, 30), which we could articulate as follows: If protesting is the ultimate recourse of the disenfranchised and the vulnerable, it stands to reason that the most necessary protestors are those whose increased vulnerability makes them the least ideal by any stretch of the imagination. As Butler continues,

women are at once vulnerable and capable of resistance, and that vulnerability and resistance can, and do, happen at the same time, as we see in certain forms of feminist self-defence, or even in certain openly political movements of women in the public sphere where they are not generally allowed to appear (trans women in Turkey), or where they suffer harassment or injury by virtue of appearing as they do (and this would include Muslim women wearing full veils in France, for instance). (2013, 169)

In this case, it could be argued that female protestors in Puerto Rico are not allowed to appear in the public sphere as mothers, even when identifying themselves as environmentalists or under any other similar guise.⁵ To do so is to put themselves at risk in ways that male protestors would seldom, if ever, have to do. Now, as Butler notes, this does not mean that women as a group are inherently more vulnerable than men as a group: “Rather, certain kinds of gender-defining attributes, like vulnerability and invulnerability, are distributed unequally under certain regimes of power, and precisely for the purpose of shoring up certain regimes of power that disenfranchise women” (2013, 170–71). In the context of public protests, chief among these attributes are legitimacy and credibility as political actors, the presence or absence of which can be determined by the monikers used to identify those protesting. In all probability, if it would have been a man protesting with his children, the media would have only tagged him as a “father” if the protest was directly related to a parental issue. He would not be expected (much less forced) to speak from that position. Furthermore, it would be hard to imagine police officers tending to the situation in the same way. In all likelihood, the children’s mother would have been called to pick them up as their father was taken into custody. Additionally, the headline would have read drily, “Environmentalist Invades Walgreens Land in Protest of Monopoly.” The editorial choice of naming Pasquinucci “mother” in the actual headline is meant to entice readers to click on the news story while concomitantly dismissing the woman as a legitimate and credible political actor, for “mother” means that she could only really be serious about issues related to childrearing, and the fact that she brought her children with her means that she cannot be taken seriously at all. Butler argues:

We think about goods as distributed unequally under capitalism, as natural resources, especially water, are, but we should also surely consider that one way of managing populations is to distribute vulnerability unequally in such a way that “vulnerable populations” are established within discourse and policy. (2013, 170–71)

Vulnerability here—as made use of by both police and the media—makes possible the discursive transformation of political activism into parental negligence. Thus, if one is not careful as a reader, one risks misrecognizing the nature of the interaction between police and protestor. The threat levied by officers, as reported, could easily be misinterpreted as a direct consequence of the protestor-as-mother posing a greater danger to her own children by making them unwilling accomplices to a criminal offense than the

danger inherent in the figure of the mother-as-protestor, who is “crazy” enough to think that she could stop Walgreens by simply parking her van at the site and planting a few trees. By threatening to take her children away, the police not only managed to coerce the protestor into relenting in her dissent as originally designed, but this egregious tactic also has the added ideological effect of erasing seemingly all traces of “politicity” from the event.

Furthermore, the police threat illustrates how women, as they move across different spheres of social life, always have something “extra” to lose. A key part of the protestor’s vision for her dissent was certainly rooted in an ethics of care: *Walgreens is bad for the economy and the environment. People should turn to natural medicine and alternate ways of healing, physically and socially. This knowledge and practices will be beneficial for my [and everybody’s] children in the future.* In this sense, the protestor presented herself as more than simply a messenger or a political opponent, but as a caretaker, with her dissent springing from her beliefs as well as her feelings. The threat to take away her children, its effectiveness on that day, also implies that all of us as intended subjects of her care were in fact taken away from her. One could thus view her protest as situated within the coordinates of personal responsibility and human connectivity, which strike at the essence of precarity as conceptualized in feminist theory. As Isabell Lorey notes, “To say that life is precarious is thus to point out that it does not exist independently and autonomously, that it cannot be grasped with any identities derived from this. Instead, life requires social support and political and economic conditions that enable it to continue, in order for that life to be liveable” (Lorey 2010).

Taking this into account, the woman’s understandable decision to comply with the officers’ orders makes Badiou’s question particularly daunting and almost heartbreaking: “How are we to be faithful to changing the world within the world itself?” (2012b, 67). It is a question that initially seems directed at the possible trappings that daily life might pose (in the form of co-optation by or compliance with the established order) to those who seek to radically change existing structures of power. The question, however, when considered in relation to the protestor’s incursion into the construction site and its aftermath, can be rearticulated as follows: How are we to remain faithful to those who stand the most to lose when changing the world within the world itself? This question is about care, about the possibility of “joining in” as protestors long after Pasquucci was coerced into leaving the site, so as “to open a new sequence of political invention” (Badiou 2012a, 22).

Former Pussy Riot member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, in her correspondence with Slavoj Žižek during her imprisonment, offers what I choose to read as a partial (and inevitably hopeful) answer to both Badiou’s original question and to my reformulation: “All of our activity is a quest for miracles” (Tolokonnikova and Žižek 2014, 28). Here, the admittedly modest, but no less significant and necessary, miracle is that the Walgreens protest, although cut short and seemingly stricken of its political meaning, may become a type of contagion for future instances of radical thought and action on the island. Thus, while one could easily dismiss the event as a failure—a brief, isolated and minuscule stand taken against state and corporate entities that had no discernible impact and was covered by a single local media outlet—it might be worthwhile to consider the protest as significant for the future of emancipatory politics in Puerto Rico and elsewhere, inasmuch as the actor’s stated vision and plan for protesting was revolutionary.⁶

Island Intellectuals and the Political Imagination

As regards the possibility of revolution in Puerto Rico, local intellectuals seem to have relinquished any hope of bringing about radical political change through the difficult relating of theoretical and activist work.

Their motto seems to be that all our intellectual activity is a quest for miracles, or, more precisely, for proving miracles false or impossible. Historian Carlos Pabón Ortega, for example, has even gone so far as to argue that “today what [intellectual activity] is about is interpreting the world, not transforming it” (2014, 143). Furthermore, at present, the most ardent desire of a significant sector of the island’s “intellectual class” is to distance themselves as much as possible from both political party lines and grassroots movements. Legal scholar Érika Fontáñez Torres, for example, reflecting on the short-lived community-based effort named Action of the People, which sought to oppose a series of austerity measures introduced by the government in 2015, posited that the most urgent political task at the time was not mobilizing under the moniker of the people, but rather questioning and problematizing what “the people” could possibly mean (Fontáñez Torres 2015). Her comments find resonance in a series of op-ed pieces and short articles written by academics over the past five years that seem to take more exception to the difficulties, challenges and affronts experienced by the local intellectual class than to the broader spectrum of state-sponsored precarity. As such, one finds searing articles denouncing the perils (for academics) of anti-intellectualism on the island, the supposedly innate exclusionary character of the mass of Puerto Rican people, and the failings of the University of Puerto Rico faculty to defend their own interests in tumultuous times (Quintero Herencia and Pabón Ortega 2015; Rodríguez-Casellas 2013; Pabón Ortega 2011). This is troubling for at least three reasons. First, it showcases an almost total absence of reflexive critique on the part of the “intellectual class” (composed mostly of tenured male professors of the University of Puerto Rico system), who, when compared to the majority of the population, enjoy considerable time, space and independence to think deeply, seriously and freely about anything. Second, these writings serve as *prima facie* evidence of a severe disconnect between what passes for “radical thought” in university circles and the day-to-day events, both major and minor, that highlight many islanders’ attempts to resist, refuse and/or elude official state policy, and that, for the most part, are not receiving the critical and creative attention academics and cultural critics could offer, which could be translated into future modes of dissent. Lastly, the insistence on the existence of such a thing as an “intellectual class” and the academics’ passionate defense and lobbying for it to be recognized, respected and valued, is nothing less than a seemingly righteous attempt at further promoting social hierarchies in a country besieged by severe socioeconomic inequality.

The end result is an inaccessible and unengaged class of academics that, when actually broaching matters separate from their particular set of group interests, more often than not offer the reasons why an individual or collective act of dissent will not in any way conquer the minds and hearts of the population, much less alter the balance of power in Puerto Rico or elsewhere. One could even go so far as to say that an ideological premium is placed on teachings and writings that ultimately serve to chill any speech acts that allegedly “make too much” out of singular acts of dissent, such as a woman protesting at a Walgreens construction site with her two young children. The underlying logic is that harboring hope within the current political context in Puerto Rico is not the intelligent choice to make when out of nowhere a random person brilliantly and/or brutally refuses to accept their everyday reality on any given day. It would thus seem that the headline of these intellectuals’ political imagination would read: “Walgreens Will Forever Strike Back and Win, So Why Bother at All?”

Fortunately for us, as Jacques Rancière points out, “Frustrated hope does not make reality any more than disowning hope makes thought” (2014, 24). Therefore, while it might be too farfetched to imagine that by simply parking a van in the middle of a construction site, Walgreens’s expansion on the island would be slowed down; or that through a sustained occupation of that site, the protestor would have succeeded in “raising awareness” as to the urgent need for islanders to support their local economy; or that, inspired

by her, other people (mothers, fathers, children) would trespass on the property of the multiple American corporations currently operating or establishing themselves on the island, bringing such activity to a screeching halt; or that, in the future, political protests would be a critical part of children's upbringing on the island, one would have to admit—with Badiou—that “Mother Invades Walgreens Land in Protest of Monopoly” is not the only thing that can be said about what transpired there on that day. And this simple, modest admission has revolutionary implications in the contemporary Puerto Rican context.

In that vein, here are some possible headlines from online newspapers of an alternative political imagination: “Mother and Children Flip the Script on the Manner in Which Protests Are Conceptualized and Practiced on the Island”; “Woman and Her Two Young Children Invade Walgreens Land with Extreme Vulnerability and Vision, Plant a Tree”; or simply, “Take That, Walgreens.” But take what, exactly?

Isolated, seemingly random and innocuous acts of dissent have taken place in Puerto Rico over the past couple of years.⁷ The protagonists of some of these events have acted alone in a variety of settings—government-sponsored celebrations, hospital waiting rooms, Twitter—moved by perhaps purely individual concerns and without a clear-cut, properly political agenda. The context of and reactions to their actions, however, have shed light on patterns of prejudice and exclusion by race, gender and class that run rampant on the island. Other acts—such as those of an ex-convict who every three months walks alone for two days from the municipality of Morovis to the Capitol building in San Juan on behalf of prisoners' rights—stand in contrast to the dominant forms that protests (and political activism in general) have taken in Puerto Rico to this day. I would argue that these events, taken together, form a quantum of disparate, unorganized opposition that reflects the precariousness of contemporary life in Puerto Rico and how people, in their everyday existence, are attempting to denounce it.

Precarity and Protest

Walgreens's expansion in Puerto Rico is part and parcel of a historically oppressive economic model that through tax incentives and the like continues to foster and depend almost exclusively on foreign corporate investment in the island, offering little if any real chance of building a sustainable local economy. On the contrary, while the government supposedly pushes for the development of small and medium-sized independent businesses, the overwhelming majority of jobs available in the private sector—after five straight years of layoffs and cutbacks in public-sector jobs—are temporary positions in retail and construction, which offer no decent wages or benefits. The only alternatives to these positions are jobs in the informal sector (domestic work, care work), which ensnare workers in even greater insecurity. Meanwhile, universities continue to promote short, fast-track technical programs that train healthcare professionals and medical technicians for jobs somewhere outside of Puerto Rico. In fact, at present, Puerto Rico is in the midst of what has been officially termed its second great mass migration, which features a “flight of talents”—young, educated and highly skilled professionals—from the island to the US and elsewhere. The official story is that our best and brightest migrate at a rate of 200 per day on account of poor quality of life on an island besieged by crime, substandard governmental services, and political and economic instability. Consequently, since 2012, newspaper reports have pointed to the continued aging and impoverishment of the population and the corresponding precariousness of its present and future living conditions. Soon, as the story goes, the island will be the exclusive province of the old and the poor, who in our collective political imagination have neither the resources nor the agency to “steer the economy in the right direction.” In the meantime, 45% of the population live under the poverty line, with those most affected being women and children.⁸

In spite of all this, there has yet to arise in Puerto Rico an organized movement embodying a sense and outrage about precarity as a shared condition. Rather, workers' unions continue to strike due to the government's failure to comply with or renegotiate existing collective bargaining agreements—a discourse that sounds extremely self-centered and selfish to many. Similarly, the primary oppositional, and outwardly leftist, progressive political party, which made its debut in the 2012 elections, adopted the curious moniker of Partido del Pueblo Trabajador (Working People's Party), failing to capture the lived reality of the overwhelming number of under- and unemployed islanders. The only exception to this pattern was the University of Puerto Rico student strike of 2010–11, which garnered enormous support among large cross-sectors of the population and was explicitly articulated as a movement bent on assuaging social inequalities through a political, financial and ideological investment in the public university system. However, much of this movement's discourse and appeal was co-opted by the present government, which not only employed the strikers' rhetoric during its successful campaign run in 2012 but also employed several of the movement's leading voices as advisors to the governor and in other high-profile positions. These appointments were meant to symbolize the administration's stated desire to establish a "government of consensus" that was allegedly welcoming of a diversity of beliefs and proposals from across the political spectrum. Alas, the consensus on all matters political appears to have been decided beforehand. Therefore, the calls made to the citizenry have not been invitations to dialogue but rather to compliance. And inasmuch as no large-scale oppositional movement has developed, one could say that people have in fact complied.

However, as Lorey (2010) argues, "In insecure, flexibilized, and discontinuous working and living conditions, subjectifications arise that do not wholly correspond to a neoliberal logic of exploitation, which also resist and refuse." The Walgreens protest, and other similar events mentioned in the previous section, are instances of a particular subjectification, which has sporadically shown its face on the island and which—because it arises out of the set of experiences of hardship common to so many whose life has become precarious on account of the economic crisis and the manner in which the government has tended to it—has real possibilities of provoking empathy and solidarity among different social sectors. As Lorey points out, "the precarious have no common identity, only common experiences." Thus, one does not have to envision this type of protestor as a representative or spokesperson for a particular cause. On the contrary, the possibility arises of viewing, for example, the woman (any woman, everywoman) who parked her van in the middle of that construction site, scribbled some messages on it, and planted a tree, as somehow demonstrating the type of action that the lived conditions of millions on the island may very well demand, in fact, if they are to be changed. Because while Pasquinucci's act might be ridiculous to some—in its curious mixture of enthusiasm and futility—it is also quite easy to replicate and improve upon by anybody (everybody) with access to markers, poster boards and a small tree. And, of course, an idea. This, I think, multiplies the possibilities of staging future and frequent acts of dissent, along with the corresponding interruptions to daily life, during regular business hours. And while each individual act on its own may prove to not be enough to spark a prairie fire, their repeated occurrence would certainly make the local sociopolitical climate a highly combustible one.

It is this combustible climate that those on the left—academics, activists, artists, community organizers, and the like—must be able to identify and take advantage of in order to start mobilizing around a new radical subject in Puerto Rico, both free of the trappings of identity politics (workers, governmental employees, pro-independence groups, etc.) and, ideally, disinclined to engage in so-called "oppression Olympics." As Lorey (2010) notes:

If precarization has become a governmental instrument of normalization surpassing specific groups and classes, then social and political battles themselves should not assume differential separations and hierarchies. Rather, those who wage such battles should look specifically for what they have in common in the midst of normalization: a desire to make use of the productivity of precarious living and working conditions to change these modes of governing, a means of working together to refuse and elude them.

To Lorey's insightful analysis, and in the spirit of generating discussion and debate directed towards making such coalition building possible, one could add Rancière's thoughts regarding the beginning of the political. As he writes, "The political—in the strong sense of word—is the capacity of anyone to concern himself [*sic*] with shared affairs. It begins with the capacity to put away one's ordinary language and small sufferings, and to appropriate the language and suffering of others. It begins with fiction" (2014, 50).

Now, while Rancière's words are certainly inspiring, there is something to be said about the specificity of the oppression to which women in Puerto Rico, for example, are subjected to, which may very well make it difficult for others to relate to them and appropriate their language, so to speak. This specificity requires—paraphrasing poet Eileen Myles—for us all to be equal in the complexity of our gaze (Myles 2012, 56). Especially when it comes to gender violence. I specifically have in mind the social construction of danger as a gendered attribute that seems to shift, change and assume an impressive array of forms that serve to constrain women's agency, quality of life, and chances of survival. As discussed, the Walgreens protest evidences how a political actor was turned into a negligent mother by way of police action and the media's nefarious implementation of scripts of danger into the event as originally planned and executed by Pasquucci. As a result, an act of civil disobedience was turned, officially, into a possible case of child abuse. This is no coincidence, for in the Puerto Rican context women's physical and discursive movements must be quick, yet calculated and cautious, as women must avoid "becoming a danger" to themselves and/or their loved ones.

Gender, Motherhood and Danger

In February 2012, a 58-year-old man shot and killed his eight-year-old son as the boy slept (Colón Dávila 2012). Then he shot himself. His wife, a police officer in training, had just fled the house with the couple's older son to look for help. She had been beaten by her husband and, according to the statement she gave to authorities, had left the youngest child sleeping, thinking that no harm would come to him. After the story broke, commentary and discussion on the incident centered around the mother's apparent lack of sense demonstrated by 1) leaving the young boy in the house, and 2) being involved in an abusive relationship to begin with. Seeing as the aggressor was no longer around to be tried and punished, the woman was left to take the blame for the child's death, the logic being that she, as a woman, should have known the danger inherent in entering and ultimately fostering an abusive relationship. Also, she should have recognized the risk she took in choosing to leave the house without her youngest child. Thus the danger women in Puerto Rico are made vulnerable to—by living in a patriarchal society where domestic violence runs rampant—is a condition that they are ultimately held as most (if not solely) responsible for, inasmuch as they must measure their day-to-day actions always taking into account the possibility of harm.

This same discussion was replayed in traditional media outlets and social media platforms in December 2014, when two women were sexually assaulted and killed on a forest path close to their home, where they regularly exercised in the mornings (Colón Dávila 2014). As of this writing, no one has been charged with the crime. What was identified immediately by seemingly everybody who chimed in on the public

discussion—from police officers, neighbors, and family members to Facebook users, talk-show hosts, and newspaper analysts—was the dangerousness of the area in which the two women chose to walk every day. Thus, reporters on the scene narrated a cautionary tale of female foolishness while cameras focused on the solitary, rural path where dead bodies and stolen cars had been found before, implying that the event, while tragic, could have easily been avoided if the two women simply had more sense.

The knowledge to be surmised from these two events and the Walgreens protest is as follows: Women cannot work out alone, together—too dangerous. Cannot flee from certain physical danger if it means leaving their children behind—too irresponsible. And they cannot bring their children to a protest—so obviously dangerous and irresponsible that it is tantamount to child abuse. As Butler writes:

Indeed, vulnerability cannot be understood restrictively as an affect restricted to a contingent situation, nor can it be understood as a subjective disposition. As a condition that is co-extensive with human life, understood as the invariably social life of the human animal, and as bound to the problem of precarity, vulnerability is the name for a certain way of opening onto the world. In this way, vulnerability not only designates a relation to the world, but asserts our very existence as a relational one. To say that any of us are vulnerable beings is thus to establish our radical dependency not only on others, but on a sustaining and sustainable world. This has implications for understanding who we are as emotionally and sexually passionate beings, as bound up with others from the start, but also as beings who seek to persist, and whose persistence can be imperilled or sustained depending on whether social, economic and political structures support us, or not. (2013, 184–85)

Following Butler, one could say that the way in which women in this part of the world “open up to the world” is heartbreaking due to the loneliness inherent in such an opening, as the world has apparently closed them off, making them vulnerable to an array of exceedingly cruel contradictions. First, they, as criminals of conscience, will not even receive the recognition of being arrested for their beliefs; second, while they can and are in fact routinely killed as innocents, they are unable to die guilt free; and third, if they are to survive the death of their loved ones, stricken ever so violently from them, they will not be allowed to mourn them without accepting responsibility for deaths in which they had no part. What connects the four women involved in the events discussed here is the overwhelming social desire to punish not the decision to protest or the decision to work out or the decision to flee, but, rather, to punish the women’s demonstrated refusal to live their life according to a societal understanding of the danger inherent in being a woman in Puerto Rico. In this sense, their actions are interpreted to mean a falling out with the larger community—discrete acts of treason committed by those who do not wish to belong any longer. They are those who seem more willing to embrace the precarity of their condition in its full consequence, rather than comply with the societal expectations that have been set in place for them to survive, with greater or lesser success, the dangerous conditions society itself continues to reproduce.

As Lorey writes, “The conditions that enable life are, at the same time, exactly those that make it precarious. For this reason, as Butler argues, there must be a focus on the political decisions and social practices under which some lives are protected and others not” (2010). A question thus arises: How does feminist, revolutionary thought engage protection? Or, in Rancière’s terms, how are we to craft a fiction where vulnerability and invulnerability cease to be gendered attributes?

From my perspective, feminist organizations in Puerto Rico have not been able to articulate such a position, inasmuch as events like the Walgreens protest seem to go unnoticed by them. Feminist discursive practices on the island are for the most part rights-centered, which is not surprising considering that the preeminent feminist groups are either headed by lawyers or lawyers make up a considerable portion of the

membership. Furthermore, there is a noticeable trend among feminist activists to either work closely with governmental entities—serving on advisory boards, running for political office, and/or holding positions in the public sector—which limits the horizon of feminist political action to that which can be attained through formal, legal means. As such, issues like abortion, gender violence, hate speech, and the use of stereotypes in commercial media are (as they should be) usual and urgent topics. However, other subjects and issues tend to fall by the wayside, in particular if the issues and subjects involved are somehow clad in illegality.

Feminist scholar Ariadna Godreau Aubert (2014, 2015a, 2015b) has shed light on these issues and subjects in her writings on sex workers, female prisoners, the penal code, and the police. Her work, grounded in the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality in women's lives, portrays the bodies and selves of women on the island as riddled by ideological and sociopolitical trappings of precarity and offers a cartography of the complicity of state, corporate and individual actors in holding women in "their place." Godreau Aubert argues:

If precarity is the experience of "those who proper place is non-being," within a colonial reality, it also embodies the anxieties fostered by a complex relationship between non-being for Other (dependence) and being misplaced (illegibility). In the same way that the Island politics are determined by the subordinate relationship with the US, colonialism denies women's autonomy, limiting their readings to their relationship with patriarchal expectations. Women become misplaced or illegible when public policies declare them unreadable and unworthy of participation. Occupation positions women in marginal settings, prescribing the must's and ought-to's of the feminine while forewarning against deviance. (2015b, 2–3)

It is possible that one of the effects of women becoming misplaced within a context of colonial and patriarchal domination is that certain groups of women also become misplaced and/or unnoticed by the very organizations set up to advocate for them. On this point, Godreau Aubert offers a scathing critique of what she terms are Pyrrhic victories in the feminist struggle on the island. According to her, too much energy is directed at (and wasted on) voicing claims toward government officials for the step-by-step inclusion of a gender-conscious agenda in schooling, policing, etc. Too often, according to her, such incursions have led to the adoption of less than adequate provisions and protections for women, which nonetheless must be celebrated by all, no matter how insufficient they may be, because they required significant time and effort. What is celebrated, then, is the manner in which the horizon of feminist political action closes in on us with every seemingly good-faith governmental commitment to meet with, hear out and engage activists. Organizations celebrate the occasion of being granted an audience with reluctant interlocutors, as opposed to seeking out and engaging other publics with the aim of embracing and following the possible acts of failed and/or ludicrous and/or futile revolution that are taking place outside of their membership, under no banner. The end result is that the possible political brilliance of such acts is missed and its authors—like Pasquinucci—are, in a sense, left alone.

So how might feminist, revolutionary thought engage protection? With hope. With the vulnerability and vision of that lone female protestor, whose singular act of dissent illustrates that in the realm of the political, desire, will and optimism—however uncalculated the risk, however frustrated the goals—trump objective living conditions time and again. We must, in our most critical and creative thought exercises, strive to seek out and identify these events, and offer their protagonists, in solidarity, the protection of the countless things we could and will in fact continue to say about their actions: "Take that, Walgreens!" "That," after all, is whatever we choose to make of it, with brilliance and/or brutality.

Postscript: A New Heroic Figure

In Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Slavoj Žižek's correspondence, initiated by her in January of 2013 and compiled in *Comradely Greetings* (2014), the then incarcerated political activist and the famed philosopher exchanged views on revolutionary politics. But in actuality, theirs is a conversation on precarity and its possibilities. Žižek's second letter starts off as follows: "Dear Nadezhda, I sincerely hope that you've been able to organize your life in prison around small rituals to make your stay there at least tolerable, and that you have some time to read. Here are my thoughts on your predicament" (Tolokonnikova and Žižek 2014, 33). He goes on to wax poetic on the role of radicals in our societies. Tolokonnikova responds to and comments on Žižek's ideas and theoretical insights. The philosopher, happy and relieved at knowing that his letter arrived at its intended destination, writes back, and after going on a bit about "radical and emancipatory politics," admits the following:

But, my dear Nadya, I feel a certain sense of guilt in writing these lines: who am I to explode in such narcissistic theoretical outbursts when you, as a concrete individual, are exposed to very real empirical deprivations. So please, if you can and want to, do let me know about your situation in the prison: about the daily rhythm, about (maybe) the small private rituals which make it easier to survive.... I have always thought that true heroism lies in these apparently small ways of organizing one's life so as to survive in crazy times without losing one's dignity. (51–52)

To this, Tolokonnikova responds: "Don't waste your time worrying about giving in to theoretical fabrications while I supposedly suffer 'empirical deprivations.' There's value to me in these inviolable limits, in my being tested this way.... I'm finding inspiration in here, ways of evolving. Not because but in spite of the system. Your thoughts and anecdotes are a help to me as I negotiate this conundrum. I'm glad we're in touch" (55–56). Žižek then recognizes his mistake and in his following letter apologizes: "Let me begin by confessing that I felt deeply ashamed after reading your reply ... my expression of sympathy with your plight basically meant, 'I have the privilege of doing real theory and teaching you about it while you are basically good for reporting on your experiences of hardship'" (57–58). He proceeds to call her an equal partner in the dialogue.

One would be tempted to say that up to this point—until Žižek's apology and recognition of his interlocutor as his equal—Tolokonnikova was alone in their dialogue due to the philosopher's assumption that her ability and desire to theorize were also taken from her, along with her freedom. This assumption, in actuality, represents that something extra that could be and was in fact taken away from the jailed female protestor, who had to explicitly demand that Žižek stop wasting his time excusing himself for sharing his thoughts because, ultimately, he was wasting *hers*. That something extra in this case was a definite sense of a shared struggle, within precarity, which at that particular juncture found the activist jailed and the philosopher on the outside, but which, from Tolokonnikova's perspective, could at any point in the future find her on the outside and the philosopher behind bars. Žižek failed to see this inasmuch as he failed to truly see her. There is a certain lack of complexity in his gaze, which makes them truly unequal and which helps us trace and identify Tolokonnikova's heroism. You see, Žižek was wrong: True heroism, at least in this case, does not reside in the activist's "small rituals" that help her organize her life behind bars. Rather, the heroism that this woman (any woman, everywoman) exhibited in the exchange is in remaining faithful to changing the world while in the world itself. And the *world itself* at that time in her life was not only made up of time in prison but of the time wasted by those contacting her from the outside, who failed to consider her situation in all its complexity. For Žižek, Tolokonnikova's precarity, the real empirical deprivations that

she was subjected to as a prisoner, disqualified her from the “privilege” of engaging in theoretical thought. In this respect, she is much like the woman who invaded that Walgreens construction site, whose precarity, the real empirical deprivations she was subjected to as a young mother in contemporary Puerto Rico, disqualified her from the “privilege” of being recognized as a legitimate political actor. In a way, the two women share the same struggle. Heroes often do.

Notes

1. There are more than a hundred Walgreens pharmacies currently operating in Puerto Rico. For more information on the matter, see Cintrón Arbasetti 2014.

2. All translations from Spanish are my own.

3. On April 10, 2014, for example, the island’s leading newspaper, *El Nuevo Día*, dedicated its editorial to the mishandling of sexual assault cases by Puerto Rico’s Police Department (<http://www.elnuevodia.com/editorial-impuneel-malmanejodeloscasosdeviolacion-1749345.html>).

4. Under the present administration, parents are under direct threat of a fine if they do not show up on the scheduled day to pick up their children’s grade reports in public schools. Department of the Family personnel are on site during Black Friday sales to make sure no young children are present. Both parents and children are submitted to searches of their persons with hand-held security wands in order to gain entrance to government-sponsored Christmas celebrations and gift giveaways.

5. An exception to this could be the activist group Madres contra la Guerra (Mothers against the War). However, one could argue that in their case “mother” is the chosen speaking position and metaphor for the articulation of the group’s opposition to military campaigns—something along the lines of “our children’s lives will not continue to be lost to war”—whereas in the Walgreens protest, “mother” is not the moniker chosen by the protester but a label imposed by the media and, more importantly, the reading that is made of the protestor by the police.

6. My use of the term “revolutionary” aligns with James Penney’s definition: “By revolutionary I mean to describe a politics based on two primary assumptions: First, that thoroughgoing social change is not only possible but that its possibility is signaled by the very conservative doctrine that insists on its impossibility; and second, that the possibility of this change isn’t discernible from within the logic of the social situation in which this change is speculatively, counterintuitively imagined” (2013, 176).

7. For a discussion on a slew of sporadic, haphazard incidents of protest that have served to pinpoint the workings and consequences of systems of exclusion based on race, gender and class in Puerto Rico, see Rebollo Gil 2014.

8. For a summary and analysis on poverty in contemporary Puerto Rico, see Rivera 2013.

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