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CECILIA PALMEIRO

## NI UNA MENOS AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION

In her paper “Not One Woman Less: From Hashtag to Strike”, Liz Mason-Deese analyses the Ni Una Menos movement in Argentina in terms of the creation of a new political discourse and practice through a very particular relation between the digital sphere (especially social media and hashtags) and physical encounters in assemblies as well as in multitudinous mobilizations. In order to do so, she approaches the “intersection between the material practices of the feminist movement and its forms of knowledge production and digital presence.” Mason-Deese highlights a very important issue: that the construction of the movement and its practices of organization and action produce a specific form of knowledge – one could call this a *feminist epistemology*. Her paper also focuses on the kinds of *militant research* that this mode of political organization enables, extending the practice of research beyond academia, and developing forms of *collective intelligence*. This involves combining theoretical concepts with women’s everyday life experiences, mapping chains of violence and strategies of survival and transformation.

In this short paper, I will analyse a number of concrete actions that have been carried out by the Ni Una Menos (or Not One Woman Less) collective that I believe further illustrate some of Mason-Deese’s claims. These are actions that involved using strategies of online agitation and the dissemination of hashtags (keywords) through social media in order to mobilize large numbers of people, and to activate a new political subject – the feminist global tide. The image of the tide (*marea*, both in Italian and Spanish) as a multitude of feminised bodies was originally coined by Non Una Di Meno, an Italian feminist organisation founded in 2016 after Ni Una Menos, and whose name also translates into English as Not One Woman Less. The notion of a ‘tide’ as a multitudinous political subject was inspired by the use of the term by the Spanish ‘15M’

movement – a mass, horizontal, radical, social movement that erupted on May 15, 2011, and swept across the country, setting up encampments and occupying city squares for months.<sup>1</sup> The feminist adaptation of the concept mobilised the idea of a massive tide of feminised bodies, albeit without invoking an essential biological identity: the tide crosses borders, languages, identities, generations, ethnicities, and social classes – transversally, horizontally, intersectionally, and in solidarity. The notion of tide (*marea*), after having been widely adopted and redefined by Argentinean and Latin American feminism, has become one of the key conceptual tools produced by the movement to reflect on itself; and to do so in ways that are very different from the periodization of feminist waves in the global north which neglects feminist movements that originated in peripheral countries (indigenous, communitarian feminisms, non-western matriarchal cultures, etc.). Aquatic metaphors in both cases are useful in that they describe the different flows of energies that feminist social movements have deployed throughout history. In this case, the tide appears as the force that disrupts and displaces waves.

In this short paper, and writing from the perspective of an active participant in the Ni Una Menos movement, I would like to build on Mason-Deese's account by trying to elaborate the notion of political translation as a central practice of this feminist revolution. By political translation, I mean a spontaneous and collective translation flow between different national and regional languages, between visual and verbal languages, between different levels of a language (from everyday to theoretical language, and vice-versa), including poetry and the languages of social media, public discourse and the bodily languages of social protest. My argument is that this idea of political translation can describe the logics of our activist network; taking into account the fact that Ni Una Menos is a hashtag, the name of a collective, the name of a broader social movement, a claim, a utopia, a keyword, password, a declaration of solidarity, and a collective war cry.

*Ni Una Menos*, as a formulation that comes from poetry, was condensed and transformed into a hashtag – a translation from poetry into a social media slogan and a historical keyword.<sup>2</sup> With #NiUnaMenos, the power of poetic expression meets the connectivity of the hashtag; its ability to link keywords and therefore the written voices of women talking about this topic. It thus formed an initial

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<sup>1</sup> The *mareas* of Spain's 15M movement organised mass demonstrations, occupations and other actions around various social, economic and political issues – from privatization in health and education through to a deficit in democracy. See: Ana Méndez de Andrés, "Spain's Radical Tide", *Red Pepper*, April 1, 2014. Available at: <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/spains-radical-tide/> [accessed August 8, 2019].

<sup>2</sup> As Mason-Deese explains, the Ni Una Menos slogan derives from a phrase used by Susana Chávez, a Mexican poet and activist.

attempt at an online encounter or forum. The fact that the hashtag went viral can be explained in terms of the urgency and the appeal of the claim, its catchy poetic sound, and its focus on gender in terms of grammar. The stress put on the grammatical gender of the pronoun expresses the gender-based character of femicide, which is neither a private nor a domestic issue. It is women and other feminized subjects, including genderqueer individuals and trans women, who are being murdered because of who they are. By saying *Ni una menos* we mean that we will not tolerate femicide, that we will stand together to defend ourselves and to challenge the roots of this violence. The expressive power of the claim sets the bar for the creation of a new political language, a language coming from poetry and from a political tradition of radicalized queer and feminized voices; a lineage in which the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo meet feminism and the LGBT movement, a language able to connect the plane of bodies with the plane of discourse and to express collective impulses of social transformation – our desire for a different life.<sup>3</sup> It can be said that our political translation is fuelled by a flux of desire that traverses languages and levels as a political force. In fact, #NosMueveElDeseo (#DesireMovesUs) is one of our hashtags that has been adopted by a myriad of groups and collectives around the world. Our political discourse translates mourning and anger into struggle, and into the creation of something different, by injecting desire into political language (a language that is typically bureaucratized and reified, and thus lacking the expressive potential to move the masses).

The poetic expressivity of both our rejection of femicide and our desire to transform our lives is what made the #NiUnaMenos hashtag go viral, but according to our own militant research, it is also what broke the limits of the social media sphere and got millions of bodies into the streets in oceanic demonstrations. Through the organizational but also the energetic/bodily experience of our massive protests, women and feminized bodies have composed a new collective political subject that perceives itself as the feminist tide.

The fact that the global feminist tide erupted in Spanish speaking countries (with Spanish being the second most widely spoken native language in the world) allowed for the claim to be immediately

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<sup>3</sup> Mothers of Plaza de Mayo are considered to be founders of the Argentinean/Latin American human rights movement. They campaigned against the last civic-military dictatorship (1976-1983) which was responsible for the forced disappearance of 30,000 people. As mothers of the disappeared, they confronted the perpetrators of genocide and created a movement that helped reestablish democracy in 1983. Today, they continue fighting for human rights in a broad sense and searching for their disappeared children and grand-children. They are a crucial point of reference for the women's movement and, through their involvement in the Ni Una Menos movement, have begun to recognize themselves as feminists.

appropriated across Latin America and Spain: women in many of these countries have organized Ni Una Menos marches and have formed groups under the same name, thus creating a decentralised political network similar to #BlackLivesMatter or #Occupy. This fact also determined a distinctive aspect of our internationalism as coming from the south and from below. The rapid spread of the demand within and beyond Spanish-speaking countries, crossing national borders to become regional, provoked a wave of activist translations into many other languages; particularly Portuguese, English and Italian. All these translations were made possible by the dynamics and the temporality of social media (news and shared discourses travelled fast!) and by the socialization and collectivization of cultural production both online and offline. By getting together to do things, and by working together ‘horizontally’ – without hierarchy or centralization – we have activated a collective intelligence that transcends any individual’s ability and liberates the social imagination from the constraints of individuality, authorship and the privatization of language and notions.<sup>4</sup> This idea of collective intelligence is related to the feminist epistemology that we practice where, through coming together in horizontally-organised public assemblies, we produce a common discourse, a common knowledge, and theoretical tools as an experimental form of producing theory outside of academic institutions. There are parallels here with *Jineology* (or the science of Kurdish women), a revolutionary epistemology where theoretical concepts meet ‘minor’ forms of knowledge deriving from women’s traditions and accumulated historical experience.

In addition to the creation of hashtags, Ni Una Menos’ strategy for developing and deploying collective intelligence has also entailed the collective writing of manifestos, documents and calls for action which have then circulated online, often being translated into Portuguese, English and Italian, as already noted; but also at times into Arabic, Chinese, Korean, French, German and Polish.<sup>5</sup> These texts produce theory out of practice and elaborate on the ideas carried through the hashtags in order to agitate the tide both online and in the streets. Perhaps the challenge for social and political protest is to translate the political language of diagnosis and demands into a bodily sensation; one

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<sup>4</sup> For a definition and critical reflection on the notion of ‘horizontalism’ (or *horizontalidad*) as this has been used by social movements in Argentina, see the extended quotation from Colectivo Situaciones in: Marina Sitrin, *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina*, AK Press, Oakland, CA and Edinburg, 2006, pp. 53-55.

<sup>5</sup> The first book published by Ni Una Menos (the title of which translates into English as *Political Friendship + Collective Intelligence: Documents and Manifestos 2015-2018*) develops this notion of ‘collective intelligence’. Ni Una Menos, *Amistad política + inteligencia colectiva. Documentos y manifiestos 2015-2018*, 2008. Available at: <http://niunamenos.org.ar/herramientas/biblioteca/amistad-politica-inteligencia-colectiva/> [accessed June 5, 2019].

able to move bodies out of their homes and into the streets, to abandon the realm of the individual (and one's personal screen) so as to compose a collective body in public space.

One of the particular characteristics of the tide is its scale, representing a huge growth in feminist social movements through massive demonstrations of hundreds of thousands, and at times even millions. On August 8, 2018, for instance, the largest rally in support of the legalisation of abortion brought together two million in Buenos Aires. It was at the first Ni Una Menos protest against femicide that the feminist tide initially emerged in Argentina, with 300,000 bodies gathered in Buenos Aires (and 500,000 across the country) on June 3, 2015. Since then, the Ni Una Menos collective has deployed numerous hashtag-claims with the similar aim of mass mobilisation. One of the most successful campaigns to internationalise the tide took place under the slogan of #NosotrasParamos (#WomenStrike), launched to mobilise for the first National Women's Strike on October 19, 2016, and re-deployed for the three International Women's Strikes on March 8 in 2017, 2018 and 2019. In the case of these strikes, the Ni Una Menos calls for action, which were again written collectively in assemblies, were translated and taken up in very different contexts, being used as tools with which to approach local issues, but in a global context of neoliberal violence and intense extractivism.<sup>6</sup> The connectivity of the concepts deployed in these collective manifestos allowed for what could be called a territorial, situated, internationalism. As a preparation for the strikes, our first transnational call for action on November 25, 2016 (when Non Una di Meno in Italy emerged and the Ni Una Menos rally was organised in Brazil) coined the hashtag #InternacionalFeminista (#FeministInternational) which went on to be the tide's motto as it crossed borders, languages, and identities, contributing to a calling into being of one of the most expansive political subjects in history. Transnational actions have now repeatedly been organized on the same date (i.e. March 8), under a common set of demands, and mobilising many millions of bodies – in Spain alone, six million participated in the 2019 Women's Strike. This kind of internationalism can only exist through this particular articulation between language and bodies, where the momentum and the force of poetic language pushes claims and proposals out beyond individual screens and into the streets.

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<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to debates around extractivism in Latin America, see: Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra, "A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital: Toward an Expanded Concept of Extractivism", *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, 29 (4), 2017, pp. 574-591. Also, for a Latin American theory of neoliberalism, see Verónica Gago, *Neoliberalism from Below. Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017.

Poetics is crucial for this movement in that it allows for the articulation of desire and expression (that is, it allows for the power of a new political language) as that articulation nurtures the creation of utopian images, stimulating the collective imagination to conceive and put into practice the world we want to live in, thus emancipating creative forces from the artistic field, diverting them towards the construction of a different society.

As Mason-Deese shows, the feminist strike is in itself a mode of militant or existential research – “[making] visible all the different forms of work that women carry out precisely by their absence”, and examining the relation between forms of economic and political as well as gendered violence.<sup>7</sup> This research interrogates the multiple relations between labour, time, body, economy, desire, and value – as well as disrupting these links and providing a rehearsal of a world to come (one with a different, fairer distribution of wealth and labour).<sup>8</sup> The online campaigns that surrounded the strike have been crucial to both agitating for action – sharing tools about what it means to strike and how we can do it – and actually carrying out this research.<sup>9</sup>

A further example of the feminist tide’s engagement in both on- and off-line organising, and in a project of militant research, can be found in the #DesendeudadasNosQueremos (#WeWantOurselvesDebtFree) campaign. It began by looking at the effects of both public and private debt on women’s lives, specifically examining it as a further form of violence that reduces our autonomy and exposes us to more exploitation.<sup>10</sup> The conclusion of the first stage of this research (carried out through the strike process and in situated assemblies and interviews) was marked by the launch of the hashtag, with its demand for freedom from debt further elaborated through a manifesto (published under the same name), and offline attention drawn to the campaign via a ‘We Want Ourselves Debt Free’ performance protest held outside the Central Bank of Argentina in June 2017. Through slogans like “More Debt = Less Life” and “Debt is a Bomb”, the campaign attempted to highlight the

<sup>7</sup> Mason-Deese, “Not One Woman Less: From Hashtag to Strike”.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed account of the process of the strike, see Cecilia Palmeiro, “The Strike as Our Revolutionary Time”, *Verso Blog*, March 7, 2018. Available at: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3670-the-strike-as-our-revolutionary-time> [accessed August 19, 2019].

<sup>9</sup> The production of these campaigns allowed for the popularization of complex theoretical concepts, as a translation from academic language into a simple yet powerful language able to affect bodies. Silvia Federici’s ideas on the relation between violence against women and capitalist accumulation have inspired and promoted the feminist strikes: <https://www.facebook.com/NUMArgentina/videos/771845543006630/>.

<sup>10</sup> Our comrades Veronica Gago and Luci Cavallero have developed this research and published the book *Una lectura feminista de la deuda. Vivas, libres y desendeudadas nos queremos*, Buenos Aires, Fundación Rosa Luxemburgo, 2019. (The book’s title translates as *A Feminist Approach to Debt: We Want Ourselves Alive, Free and Unindebted*.)

connection between the abstraction of debt (and the opaque language of finance) and the very concrete everyday experience of being indebted. Both the hashtag and the demand went viral, being adopted by numerous collectives, and encouraging greater research into the links between financial violence and the crisis of social reproduction.

Militant research, including its aesthetic aspects, provide concepts and images for the flow of political translation that connects the theoretical, the poetic and the collective body.<sup>11</sup> This translation between screens and the streets, but also between verbal language and image, has become a regular practice, nurturing and radicalising the tide as a collective intelligence moved by the desire for the construction of the commons: common discourses, knowledges, demands and practices; but also common forms of social reproduction that allow for escape from violence, exploitation and indebtedness.<sup>12</sup> The collective intelligence that is activated by the assembly form of gathering also explores the ways in which social media can be used to practise new forms of horizontality and foster a new internationalism.

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<sup>11</sup> By aesthetic research I mean the collective horizontal creation of a feminist aesthetics of protest, i.e. the use of glitter in the '*revolución diamantina*' protests against violence against women in Mexico in August 2019, or the internationalisation of symbols such as the green scarves for the legalization of abortion in 2018; and the hashtags turned into graffiti, banners and T-shirts. All this imagery has permeated aesthetic languages, which play a central role in the spread and socialization of concepts, claims and utopic images. In other essays, I elaborate the concept of a feminist avant-garde to study the translation flow that connects artistic and political practices and blurs the boundaries between them.

<sup>12</sup> Through the years and the incorporation of the traditions of non-western, indigenous, queer and black feminism, the tide has radicalised its claims in terms of a critique of the patriarchal and colonial foundations of capitalism as the source of violence against feminised bodies.