THE SUBJECT OF WRONGS:
Crime, Populism, and Venezuela's Punitive Turn

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It was another robbery gone wrong. On the evening of January 6, 2014, the Venezuelan actress and former beauty queen Mónica Spear and her ex-husband, Thomas Berry, were murdered along a strip of highway in the state of Carabobo. The couple was vacationing with their five-year-old daughter, who survived despite a gunshot wound to the leg. Overnight, the case made international headlines. In Venezuela it inspired a wave of demonstrations, editorials, and televised homages. Many of them made the point that the Spear-Berry murders, while tragic, were not unusual: Venezuela has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. The only thing that made this case different from hundreds of others and attracted the attention of the international press was the celebrity of one of the victims.

Weeks later, the international spotlight again turned toward Venezuela after a series of volatile student protests racked the country. Youth armed with Molotov cocktails took to the streets, first in the border town of San Cristóbal and later in major urban areas like Caracas. Insecurity was one of the primary grievances of the student protesters. They held up the Spear-Berry murders as emblematic of a larger problem and identified it as a driving force behind the protests. Less than a year after the death of President Hugo Chávez, the killing of Mónica Spear and the ensuing student protests marked the beginning of a series of crises that

engulfed the country and helped legitimate a draconian shift in the government's approach to security (Zubillaga 2015; Antillano, Zubillaga, and Ávila 2016; Smilde 2017). Not only did Chávez's handpicked successor, President Nicolás Maduro, take a hard-line position with opposition protesters, he also adopted a harshly punitive model of policing against the popular sectors—his own political base.[1]

The Maduro government's tough-on-crime stance deserves to be situated within the context of a broader punitive turn that has transformed law, policing, and corrections in Venezuela and much of the world. *Mano dura* (literally, "strong hand"), as it is known in Latin America, has been inspired in part by developments in the United States and Europe, including the philosophy of broken windows, the spread of zero-tolerance policing, and the rise of mass incarceration.[2] These tough-on-crime policies champion the use of overwhelming, often deadly, force against entire populations, most explicitly the poor, the foreign, and people of color (Garland 2002; Wacquant 2009; Alexander 2010). President Chávez repeatedly denounced such tactics as thinly veiled attacks on the popular sectors. For that reason, the Maduro government's rapid embrace of *mano dura* constituted a striking political reversal.

Venezuela's punitive turn illustrates a paradox that emerged in the late twentieth century—the expansion, from within democracies, of a security paradigm that singles out poor people of color and strips them of their rights (Caldeira and Holston 1999; Caldeira 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Godoy 2006; Goldstein 2012; Moodie 2012). Tough-on-crime policies target the very populations that suffer most from criminal predation. As a result, the popular sectors experience a double victimization at the hands of both police forces and criminal actors. And yet, surprisingly, there is often strong support for tough-on-crime policies by the very populations who suffer their sting (e.g., Forman 2017; in Venezuela, see Hanson and Smilde 2015). Critical scholarship finds itself at an impasse. If the punitive turn carries explicit racial, ethnic, and class biases, then how does it gain traction among the popular sectors in a place like Venezuela?

My objective is not to resolve this impasse, but to suggest a shift of perspective that casts the problem in a somewhat different light. I want to take seriously the proposal that the punitive turn grows out of a political logic internal to democracy, the logic of populism.[3] The pairing of populism and tough-on-crime policies is, by now, a fairly standard analysis of the right-wing movements sweeping much of the globe.[4] What these analyses tend to elide are populism's democratic credentials.[5] Populism upends most of what liberals have come to take for granted about democracy.[6] Nowhere is this more evident than around questions of citizen-

ship. Instead of beginning, as is customary, with the citizen as bearer of rights, populism presents an inversion in which the citizen appears, first and foremost, as the subject of wrongs. Seen from this perspective, it is the force of injustice that provides the impetus for democratic subjectivity. Those who feel wronged, in one way or another, are those who most passionately pursue political demands.[7]

It is on the subject of wrongs that anthropology may have the most to contribute to analyses of the punitive turn and populism more broadly. Elsewhere, I have explained how populism pits a victimized "Us" against a perpetrating "Them" (Samet 2013, 532). Familiar targets of populist ire include corrupt politicians, foreign powers, and financial or cultural elites. Beginning in the late twentieth century, a new wave of populist movements used the figure of the criminal—and later the terrorist or the migrant—to make neoliberal economic policies palatable through appeals to racism and ethnonationalism (Hall et. al. 1978; Kazin 1995). Critical appraisals of the punitive turn have exposed how the stigma of criminality became deliberately stamped onto the poor, the foreign, the queer, and people of color. And yet insufficient attention has been paid to the construction of crime victimhood, its relationship to the material experience of injury, and its constitutive role in political subjectivity. Theories of populism bring this dimension of the punitive turn more sharply into focus and allow us to understand how tough-on-crime policies grow out of particular, historically contingent articulations of victimhood.

Anthropology is no stranger to the politics of victimhood. What Joel Robbins (2013) calls "the suffering subject" was at the root of the discipline's political reawakening during the 1970s and 1980s. This preoccupation with suffering was linked to a wider provictim turn, which has been described by Cathy Caruth (1996), Thomas Laqueur (2002), Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009), and Samuel Moyn (2010). Recently, some debate has emerged about whether victimhood should be the focus of anthropological attention. For some, including Robbins, anthropology's turn toward suffering was a bridge too far. I believe, to the contrary, we have not followed it far enough.

Wrongs are essential because they represent the symbolic and material foundation on which a particular kind of political solidarity is constructed.[8] Populism appeals to "the people" through the experience of injuries; it is through the righteous indignation of victims that populist movements constitute the popular will. Populism's critics sometimes mistake its wounded subjectivity for a fatal flaw. They fail to recognize how democracy's most fundamental principle, popular sovereignty, is often animated by the affective force of injury. Anthropologists make

a similar error when we assume victimhood as the sole provenance of marginalized groups.[9] It is important to emphasize that movements across the political spectrum—those that champion the popular sectors and those that criminalize them—cast themselves as citizen-victims struggling against injustice.

The primacy of wrongs marks a methodological starting point for thinking about the punitive turn and democratic subjectivity in times of populist upheaval. It is not a point that I am setting out to prove; it is, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), something that I take to be axiomatic. What snaps into view when we approach crime and punishment through the lens of wrongs is a terrain of political struggle—of mobilization and countermobilization—that conventional accounts tend to obscure.[10]

My interest in populism and the political force of wrongs grows out of nearly three years of ethnographic research alongside crime journalists in Caracas, the bulk of which was carried out between 2007 and 2014.[11] For much of this period, the media formed the symbolic epicenter of opposition to the Chávez government. This meant that a handful of television stations and newspapers were, arguably, more important to the opposition than any single party or political figure. It also meant that crime news was understood in explicitly partisan terms. For that reason, reporters lost access to most of their official police sources (who were tied to the Chávez government) and so decided to turn to a new source of crime news—the families and friends of homicide victims. During the course of my fieldwork, I encountered thousands of grieving relatives. Many of these encounters took place outside the central morgue in Caracas, where families of homicide victims waited to claim the bodies of loved ones. The point of working alongside crime journalists was not to get close to suffering or the supposedly authentic experience of crime, but to understand how the aftermath of crime victimhood was mediated for a national audience.

Within just a few weeks of research on the Caracas crime beat, it became clear that the figure of the crime victim functioned as a channel for political mobilization, a fact that seemed to fly in the face of conventional wisdom on reactions to crime. Most of the scholarship on this subject assumes that crime victims are passive, fearful creatures.[12] At least in theory high rates of violent crime should have gone hand in hand with a retreat from public space, a distrust of strangers, a demobilization of the populace, and a defensive posture toward the future. Visitors to Venezuela would have observed these behaviors. However, foregrounding fear of crime would mean neglecting other responses to urban violence that were equally if not more significant. In particular, it would mean ignoring how the figure of the

crime victim linked demands for protection to structures of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic domination, something particularly evident in the Mónica Spear case.

THE POLITICS OF CRIME

Spear was not just any beauty queen turned actress. She was a former Miss Venezuela, which in a country obsessed with beauty pageants made her akin to royalty (Ochoa 2014). At the time of her death, Spear had reached the apex of her stardom thanks to leading roles in several internationally popular telenovelas. She played the exquisite protagonist of *La mujer perfecta* (The Perfect Woman; 2011), the dutiful heroine of *Flor salvaje* (Wild Flower; 2012), and the tormented lead of *Pasión prohibida* (Forbidden Passion; 2013). All this made Spear a success story and a symbol of national pride even though she lived in the United States. News coverage of her death made this symbolism explicit. "Mónica was in love with Venezuela," her father told the press (Castillo and Shoichet 2014). "What happened should never happen to anyone else in this beautiful country. We must work together to make the country safe. We must disarm the people. We must make it so we can go out at night, like we did before."

No sooner had news of Spear's murder broken than President Maduro and his administration hurried to contain the fallout. That morning the president made a lengthy statement to reporters from the state television channel. Maduro acknowledged the murders as a national tragedy, one that united all Venezuelans. He discussed details of the crime, announced plans for a new security initiative, and asked that the case not be used for political ends. Most notably, though, Maduro passionately promised to respond with an "iron hand [*mano de hierro*]." This pronouncement underlined a dramatic shift in the government's anticrime discourse—a shift that was justified, at least in part, by nearly a decade of political pressure (Antillano 2012).

From 2006 to 2012, insecurity ranked as the top voter concern in Venezuela (PROVEA 2012; Sanjuán 2013). Violent crime inspired hundreds of protests large and small. During my fieldwork, I observed scores of blockades, marches, and demonstrations against crime. Various bus and taxi unions, whose members were vulnerable to violence and accustomed to collective action, organized many of these protests. Neighborhood associations or student organizations were behind others. In almost every instance, a homicide served as the catalyst for these mobilizations, and the central actors were relatives or friends of the murder victim. These victims were, in turn, linked to a larger landscape of political struggle.

The most dramatic example of anticrime protests roiled Caracas in early 2006, when thousands took to the streets in response to a series of high-profile kidnappings-turned-homicides. Many of the people who joined these protests were veterans of the struggle against the Chávez government. In this regard, the protests represented a continuation of the opposition's earlier mobilizations, including the failed coup d'état (2002), the massive oil strikes (2002–2003), and the presidential recall referendum (2004). They differed, however, in at least one important respect. Anticrime protests were ostensibly apolitical. Demonstrators could credibly argue that crime affected people across the political spectrum, and as such they could also claim the protests as a spontaneous expression of the popular will. This made for a powerful claim. It was so powerful, in fact, that the first wave of anticrime protests momentarily threatened the stability of the Chávez government by weakening the bond between *chavismo* and the popular sectors.[13]

The Spear-Berry murders recalled this earlier episode of mass protest. No one was surprised that the death of Miss Venezuela provoked an outpouring of popular sentiment, that it served as a springboard for political mobilization, or that it became another symbol of the failures of the Maduro government.[14]

CHARISMATIC SIGNIFIERS

Crime victims have a charismatic quality. This holds especially true in the case of homicides, the aftermath of which is often characterized by a mixture of pathos and outrage.[15] We are familiar with homicide victims as objects of collective grief, but we are less accustomed to thinking of them as a focal point for grievances. During my research alongside crime journalists in Caracas, however, it became clear that it was this combination of grief and grievance that made them powerfully symbolic. The sacredness of mourning shielded the relatives of homicide victims from excessive political scrutiny and lent their testimonies added weight. These testimonies frequently included angry denunciations of rampant crime, corrupt police, ineffective courts, and the failings of the government. Journalists tended to gravitate toward people who explicitly denounced such injustices. It was in this capacity, as subjects of wrong, that crime victims fulfilled a symbolic function not unlike charisma.

As a term of social-scientific analysis, charisma has a checkered career beginning with Max Weber's (2013) writings on religious and political authority. The concept is most commonly associated with the personal magnetism or superhuman agency of an individual leader. If this association is at least partially supported by Weber's work, the German sociologist explicitly links charismatic authority to the

presence of a charismatic community, rendering it unclear which takes primacy: the leader or the led. More often than not this equivocation between charisma as a property of the person or as a characteristic of a social movement is reproduced uncritically. As a result the term lacks precision. The problem is so intractable that some scholars, most notably Peter Worsley (1987), have advocated abandoning the concept of charisma altogether—a position to which I am not unsympathetic. And yet the specter of charisma persists, even flourishes, despite its lack of conceptual coherence.

Here I would like to propose that charisma's incoherence may actually account for its success and, moreover, that it lends itself to thinking through the antimonies of democratic citizenship. Martin Riesebrodt (1999) traces this incoherence back to Weber's original formulation of the concept, which was inspired—at least in part—by anthropological debates about *mana* around the turn of the century (see also Tybjerg 2007; Mazzarella 2017). This derivation is tremendously suggestive. As Claude Lévi-Strauss (1987) famously argues, *mana* is not so much an analytical category as a function of thought itself (see also Mauss 2001). More specifically, it is a function of symbolic or magical thinking. Per Lévi-Strauss, the value of terms like *mana* and *charisma* is that they fill the gap between signifier and signified, *langue* and *parole*. They are what he calls floating signifiers whose value derives from the simultaneous discontinuity (of the parts) and unity (of the whole) internal to symbolic thinking. The power of such floating or empty signifiers is their plasticity, their openness, and their availability to a range of meanings.

Most theories of citizenship eschew the magical thinking internal to democracy, which is rooted in democracy's constituent fiction, the principle of popular sovereignty (Frank 2010; Wolin 2016). Government of the people, by the people, for the people is only possible if we agree to make the leap between embodied experience and collective representation. Rather than recognizing what Teresa Caldeira and James Holston (1999) call the disjunctive and discontinuous fabric of democratic politics, normative approaches attempt to contain it within a regime of rules, regulations, and pseudoscience. The result has been a failure to foresee the current wave of populist revivals sweeping the globe. Many of these revivals are deeply troubling. A few have held out genuine promise. Either way the populist movements that have spread across the Americas, Europe, Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East are nothing less than democracy in action.

Over the past two decades, Venezuela has witnessed not one but two such populist revivals, each predicated on a series of deeply felt wrongs. In both instances certain types of victims took on the role of charismatic signifiers that

functioned to mediate the distance between those discrete bodies that constitute a body politic. The Bolivarian Revolution was the first and best known of these populist movements. Propelled by the disjuncture between the promise of fantastic oil wealth and persistent socioeconomic disparities, its emblematic citizen-victims were the poor and the racially marked.[16] The late Hugo Chávez came to embody their suffering. The second and less celebrated populist movement in Venezuela had its origins in the backlash against the Chávez government. Like *chavismo*, the opposition has been propelled by a sense of injustice and wrongdoing, albeit one more inchoate. Aside from its opposition to the governments of Chávez and Maduro, this populist revival failed to coalesce around a unifying grievance. For much of the Chávez era, the opposition was in fact a movement in search of its own charismatic signifier. Crime victims came to fill that role at certain critical junctures.

WHITE SKIN, BLACK MASKS

If homicide victims have a charismatic quality, then it is not tied to the extraordinary qualities of the person but to the symbolic operation of their death. The figure of the homicide victim was well suited to the polarized landscape of Venezuelan politics because the experience of violent crime cut across party lines. In a setting in which fundamental definitions of rights were contested, remarkable consensus existed about violent crime. Opinion held that crime was neither a *chavista* nor an opposition problem; it was a Venezuelan problem. An editor for one of the national newspapers described it to me as a question of mathematics. When I asked her why the paper paid such close attention to crime victims, she explained:

> Because people connect with them. Suppose that in Venezuela's prisons there are approximately 25,000 delinquents and suppose that there's a similar number on the streets. That makes 50,000 people. Now, I'm not particularly good with figures, but in a country with a population of 28 million it is fair to say that 50,000 is an infinitesimally small number. So, obviously, we are not as interested in talking about delinquents—I mean the majority of people are victims. Some 50,000 people are affecting 27,500,000 [*sic*] others. What I am saying is that these 27,500,000 people, *we are all victims.*

Crime victimhood was routinely depicted as an experience that united citizens. However, in death—just as in life—not all citizens were equal. The dis-

course on crime in Venezuela alternately elided or emphasized these inequalities. Like citizenship, the politics of victimhood was shaped by a dialectical tension between inclusion and exclusion (Turner 1993; Isin and Wood 1999; Holston 2008). The very practices that created a community of suffering also distinguished different categories of sufferers. Some victims were valued over others. In Venezuela, as elsewhere, crimes committed against certain kinds of people elicited more attention from the press, greater sympathy from the public, and harsher penalties from the courts.

This fundamental inequality was on display in the memorialization of Mónica Spear. Most homicide victims in Venezuela are young, poor, racially marked men from the barrios. The death of someone who matches this profile rarely draws public attention. Such victims are often dismissed as *malandros*, or shady ne'er-do-wells who possibly deserved their fate (Ferrándiz 2004). In contrast, Spear matched the profile of the wholesome *sano*, or innocent victim. Not only was she a celebrity, but she was also a dutiful mother and a white woman from a good home. Clearly, she was someone who did not deserve to die before her time. In this sense, then, Spear's victimhood became simultaneously marked and unmarked: marked in that she represented a particular social stratum; unmarked in that through her suffering this social stratum came to stand as a symbol of the nation as a whole. Given the poles of Venezuelan politics—in which elites were associated with the opposition and the popular sectors with *chavismo*—the memorialization of certain victims over others took on particular significance.

Perhaps the best illustration of how crime victimhood mediated unequal demands in the name of national unity was the grassroots campaign Project Hope (*Projecto Esperanza*). In November 2011, a group of photographers and student activists began collaborating on a photomural project that featured images and testimonies of fifty-four mothers of homicide victims. The inspiration for the project was an international campaign by the French street artist JR, who rose to prominence thanks to his work in the *banlieues* of Paris and the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. The first phase of Project Hope hewed closely to the guidelines set out by JR's *Inside Out: The People's Art Project*.[17] Volunteers plastered massive, six-by-eight-foot portraits of the mothers in various locations throughout Caracas. Each portrait was accompanied by a short testimony on the Project Hope website. The project's aim was "to promote respect for life in Venezuela through art" (Pérez Rincones 2012, 31; author's translation). Simple enough.

During the second phase of the campaign, Project Hope modified its visual strategy. Under the slogan "put yourself in her place [*ponte en su lugar*]," they in-

vited celebrities and activists to pose with mask-sized portraits of the mothers. The original black-and-white pictures were halved along their vertical axes. People then held the portraits in front of their own faces in a visually explicit merger of the identities. Perhaps the most arresting image from the campaign was a photograph of one Maria Elena Delgado—a mother who lost all three of her children—surrounded by people wearing her image. The photo recalled the famous frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Instead of the king, however, the figurative head of the body politic was the suffering crime victim.

Figure 1. Maria Elena Delgado, surrounded by Project Hope supporters wearing masks that merged their identities with hers. Photo by Project Hope.

The charisma of crime victimhood could be likened to a mask. Project Hope makes this explicit. It also provides a visual record of the racial and economic contradictions that the crime-victim-as-mask attempts to resolve. A quick look at images from the campaign reveals that most of the crime victims are disadvantaged

minorities. Most of the people wearing their images are not. This is a pattern. Homicide victims are overwhelmingly poor, young men of color, and yet on the road to collective subjectivity the figure of the crime victim undergoes a kind of whitewashing.

Project Hope's depiction of the crime-victim-as-mask demonstrates the simultaneous plasticity and concreteness essential to the success of any charismatic signifier. On one hand, it shows us the discursive underpinnings of crime victimhood. It is a reminder that collective identities are constructed and that they are always internally heterogeneous. On the other hand, it also reminds us that every telling is a doing. Identities are produced through embodied experiences and material practices. Think of this as a pragmatic modification of Philip Abrams's (1988) famous thesis from "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State." Rather than a mask that obscures political practice, we might understand masking or masquerade as one of the fundamental elements of any state-making project and the assertion of wrongs as a performative practice through which claims to citizenship become mobilized.[18]

MOBILIZING WRONGS

Crime becomes an object of populist mobilization through symbolic practices that transform citizen-victims into avatars of the body politic.[19] Protest is one example of how discrete tragedies become the flesh of a collective subject. Memorialization is another. A third practice through which wrongs become mobilized in Venezuela and much of Latin America is the use of *denuncias*. The term translates as "denunciation," "accusation," or "complaint." In much of Latin America it has two closely related usages. A *denuncia* can refer to the official report that plaintiffs file with the police or the courts to initiate an investigation or trial. In a strictly juridical sense, *denuncias* are written accusations. However, *denuncias* also refer to informal accusations that circumvent the legal system and go straight to the court of popular opinion. This kind of *denuncia* is a public grievance staged by or in the name of victims.

An episode from my fieldwork with crime reporters in Caracas illustrates the practice of denunciation and its significance vis-à-vis the politics of security. It involved a macabre photograph of eleven naked corpses strewn haphazardly about the city morgue. The photo was originally published on the front page of *El Nacional*, one of Venezuela's most respected newspapers. It was intended to shock. It succeeded in creating a cascade of *denuncias* and counter-*denuncias*, all of them voiced in the name of victims.

What ostensibly provoked the publication of the morgue photo was an hour-long documentary, *The Guardians of Chávez* (*Los guardianes de Chávez*), disseminated in Latin America by CNN. The documentary linked rampant violence in Caracas to militant leftist groups associated with President Chávez. Three experts were invited by CNN to comment on the documentary the first time it aired in Venezuela. Two of the experts—Roberto Briceño Leon and Eliseo Guzman—were associated with the opposition. The third, Andrés Izarra, was a prominent member of the Chávez administration and also a former CNN correspondent. For most of the debate, Izarra appeared visibly annoyed. Early on, he reproached CNN for promoting what he called "journalistic pornography." When one of the other participants began discussing the homicide rates in Caracas, Izarra laughed derisively, clearly in disagreement with the assessment that Venezuela's capital was the most violent city in the world. It was not a polite exchange. After the segment aired, many took umbrage. They accused the ex-minister of laughing about insecurity. Izarra backpedaled. His allies made public shows of support.

The carousel of accusations about the documentary and Izarra's response offered a good example of the kind of *denuncias* that audiences expected from both politicians and pundits. Parliamentary elections were just around the corner. Given the context, the whole episode was rather pedestrian and, in all likelihood, it would have been forgotten if not for the morgue photo.

On August 13, 2010, two days after the CNN debacle, *El Nacional* published its response to Izarra. Rarely did anything so lurid appear in the press, much less on the front page of an established broadsheet like *El Nacional*. There was no public access inside the morgue, and cameras were strictly forbidden.[20] No sooner did the morgue photo appear in *El Nacional* than the national director of the investigative police announced that he was pressing charges against the newspaper for violating Venezuela's child protection law.[21] It was under this same law that the national ombudswoman filed an official *denuncia* with the courts, which led the Twelfth Tribunal for the Protection of Children and Adolescents to pass a general restraining order prohibiting all media outlets from publishing "violent, bloody, or grotesque images that in one form or another violate the psychic and moral condition of children and adolescents." *El Nacional* and another newspaper, *Tal Cual*, were hit with heavy sanctions and ordered to refrain from publishing "images, information, and publicity of any kind" that could be broadly construed as violent, provocative, or that otherwise dealt with death and dying. The wording seemed to suggest the prohibition of even the most quotidian form of crime reporting.

Rather than disappearing, the controversy gained steam. *El Nacional* used the restraining order to launch a raft of *denuncias* against both crime and government censorship. I was sitting with about a dozen reporters from various media outlets the day the restraining order was announced. Attention fixed on *El Nacional*'s defiant response. The front page of the newspaper screamed: "Publication of images and news about violence prohibited." Just below the headline, in bold red type, "censored" was written across a pair of empty image boxes. One of the crime reporters picked up the newspaper, thumbed to the editorial page, and began reading aloud, approvingly:

> When a government exhausts its capacity to lie and loses its ability to deceive a society, it resorts to violence against the media. People need to be informed and know the truth of what is happening in the country, in the city where they live, and at their places of work. One requirement of modern life is that no one has the right—be it a judge, a minister, or a prosecutor—to arbitrarily impede citizens from accessing information that they want and need.

He read on. The editorial denounced government lies, the violation of press freedom, the enrichment of a corrupt class of bureaucrats, the cynicism of state officials, and the rise of leftist extremism that was transforming Venezuela into a new version of Cuba, North Korea, or Iran.

On finishing, the reporter looked up and clapped theatrically. "Bravo! Bravo! That is exactly what they need to do." Turning to the journalist beside him, he tapped emphatically on the table, adding: "They've got to keep this up. They can't let this one go." His colleague nodded her head in agreement, observing: "One of the editors was saying that they are thinking about running headlines about insecurity every day until the election." For the next month, *El Nacional* did exactly this. It ran story after story about crime under a banner decorated with a censorship sign.

Almost overnight, the morgue photo morphed into a whole series of political demands that far exceeded the problem of crime in Caracas. More than simply a denunciation of urban violence, news coverage of crime symbolized opposition to the Chávez government broadly construed. The point is not simply that the morgue photograph was "political." Rather, it laid the groundwork for a particular kind of community that was constituted around the shared experience of victimhood, be it at the hands of violent offenders or of government censors.

Elsewhere I have argued that denunciations of wrongdoing function as building blocks of populist movements (Samet 2017). It is through the airing of otherwise disparate grievances that populist identities coalesce or articulate (see Hall and Grossberg 1986; Laclau 2005) around a shared sense of injustice. This is exactly what happened in Venezuela during the 1980s and 1990s when *denuncias* of corruption created the conditions of possibility for the rise of Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution. In a similar fashion, *denuncias* made in the name of crime victims channeled demands against the Chávez government and propelled a disquieting shift in its approach to security.

VENEZUELA'S PUNITIVE TURN

Since the 1970s the charismatic quality of crime victims has made itself felt across the Americas. If we approach the matter from a micropolitical level, crime victimhood has been linked to a proliferation of practices that have no necessary political valence. These include the formation of victims' movements (Rentschler 2011), increased participation in voting and civil society initiatives (Bateson 2012), vigilantism and death squads (Sluka 2008), lynching (Goldstein 2004; Godoy 2006), mass protests (Moodie 2009), and journalistic exposés against crime. On the ground these practices are politically heterogeneous. Crime victims and their advocates are just as likely to make calls for forgiveness as to demand retribution (Rentschler 2011). If we approach the matter from a macropolitical perspective, however, a disturbing pattern emerges.

The figure of the crime victim has played a crucial role in what scholars describe as the punitive turn or punitive populism. In North America and Western Europe, the victims' rights movement and the War on Drugs reshaped the criminal justice system, resulting in longer sentences and harsher punishments for all manner of crimes (Bottoms 1995; Beckett and Western 2001; Garland 2002; Wacquant 2009; Alexander 2010). In Latin America, the rise of *mano dura* policies followed a parallel trajectory (Godoy 2006; Basombrío and Dammert 2013). Everywhere the plight of crime victims has helped legitimate systematic and brutal campaigns of oppression carried out against poor, young men who are racially, ethnically, religiously, or sexually marked.

Under President Chávez (1999–2013), the Venezuelan government publicly resisted the punitive turn. This changed in the 2013 transition from Chávez to Maduro. Seemingly overnight, Venezuela's national government went from espousing a humanist or leftist model of security to adopting a shock-and-awe approach that is the hallmark of neoliberal governments. This transformation became starkly

apparent when President Maduro promised a hard-line response to the murders of Mónica Spear and Thomas Berry.

> To those who killed them: How do you explain yourselves? Society is extending [you] its hand. The president of the republic is extending [you] his hand. How long will you keep killing? I say this with indignation and sadness. This is a blow to all of us and I assume ultimate responsibility. But I am also making a call: those who come to kill will receive an iron hand [*mano de hierro*] response. Iron hand. With democratic authority, with constitution in hand— but no, no we cannot accept this [state of affairs] under any condition.

The phrase "iron hand" was direct and unambiguous. With it, President Maduro announced his government's readiness to get tough on crime. A series of new security initiatives followed. The most draconian, Operation Liberate the People (OLP), was launched in July 2015.[22] Under the auspices of crime control, police and military officers conducted sweeps of the barrios. In its first six months, OLP was responsible for upward of 200 extrajudicial killings and more than 14,000 arrests (Human Rights Watch and PROVEA 2016). The program proved politically popular, but little suggests that OLP or other such initiatives did anything to curb violent crime in Venezuela. If anything, the situation worsened (Antillano and Ávila 2017).

It would be hard to overstate how radically Maduro's discourse on security departed from that of his predecessor. During his first seven years in office, President Chávez rarely spoke about crime. When forced to confront the subject, he consistently emphasized social and economic exclusion as the root cause. The best way to go about solving the problem of insecurity, he stated, was to attack poverty, inequality, and marginalization. During his first campaign for the presidency in 1998, Chávez remarked to an interviewer: "How are you going to fight [public insecurity]? With more police, more patrols, more searches, more guns on the street? No. Not without fighting the root—hunger, unemployment, abandoned children, and that has to do with the social and economic model and the role of the state" (Antillano 2012, 708).[23] More than a decade later, Chávez continued to insist that crime would diminish only if its structural roots were addressed. He was similarly consistent in his repudiation of what he called "the repressive model" of security. Chávez regularly criticized the *mano dura* or "strong-handed" vision of security even though it was popular with much of his base. Instead, he declared

himself in line with "humanist," "preventative," or (later) "socialist" ideals of public security (see Antillano 2012).

Although Chávez publicly repudiated the punitive model of security, two contradictions in his stance became progressively apparent. First, the problem of violent crime did not subside despite efforts to fight the social, economic, and political exclusion of the popular classes. Privately and publicly, the Chávez administration was forced to admit that the problem of violent crime was unlikely to simply vanish.[24] Second, there was the fact that policing in Caracas became brutally repressive under Chávez despite the president's repudiation of *mano dura* policies. The 1999 constitution overseen by the president included a number of progressive laws guaranteeing civil, political, and human rights, yet the practices of law enforcement agencies went in the opposite direction.[25] This disjuncture deepened from 2006 onward as certain actors within the government began to champion the very model of security that Chávez publicly opposed.

So while Venezuela's punitive turn seemed to happen overnight—in the transition from Chávez to Maduro—it was connected to a longer trajectory of mobilization and countermobilization in which both the opposition and *chavismo* played a part. By the time of Mónica Spear's murder in early 2014, demands for security had become a point of political convergence. For opposition leaders like Leopoldo López, along with news outlets like *El Nacional* and *Globovision*, the plight of crime victims served as a potent political symbol through which to voice demands for regime change. Crime allowed them to connect with the popular sectors in ways that economics did not. For President Maduro, taking the side of crime victims helped him contend with pressure from within his own political base. In both cases, the figure of the crime victim functioned as the symbolic scaffolding that mediated a series of complex and contradictory demands. If the actual injuries of crime were heterogeneous, then following the figure of the crime victim allows us to understand the outlines of a political settlement (see Mazzarella 2017) that emerged in Venezuela from 2006 onward. It also allows us to understand how and why the Bolivarian Revolution—a political project that recognized and initially rejected *mano dura* as a program of racial and socioeconomic domination—traded the hand of social justice for the gauntlet of security.

THE SUBJECT OF WRONGS

Joel Robbins (2013, 448) has observed that "the subject living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence or oppression now very often stands at the center of anthropological work." Robbins is right to argue that this turn toward

suffering was tied to a larger sociohistorical transformation. Equally perceptive is his suggestion that anthropologists working under the sign of suffering tend to erase sociohistorical differences in favor of universal humanity. These are what I see as the lasting contributions of "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good," an article that has achieved special status within the discipline as both manifesto and bone of contention. The call to rethink anthropology feels timely and urgent, but Robbins's proposal contains a pair of elisions concerning the relationship between historical transitions and political struggles. I want to examine them briefly because they cast my argument about the subject of wrongs in sharper relief.

Robbins (2013, 448–49) dates the emergence of the suffering subject to the late twentieth century, as anthropology began to shift its focus away from "the savage, the primitive, and the radically other," or what Michel-Rolph Trouillot famously called "the savage slot." This historiography makes sense, but Robbins's description of the transition from the savage to the suffering slot is curious. He argues that Trouillot and other critics of anthropology failed to outline a new vision for the discipline and that we arrived at the suffering subject like "the proverbial drunk searching for his or her keys under the streetlight because that is where it is brightest" (Robbins 2013, 450). Such a description overlooks the seemingly obvious fact that critiques of anthropology were predicated on a multitude of overlapping injuries—colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, to name just a few. Suffering was the point. The discipline did not stumble, drunkenly, into suffering. It was the grounds on which an emergent political consciousness was staged in the first place.

Robbins makes a similar leap from the anthropology of suffering to what he calls an anthropology of the good. The latter is vaguely outlined. There is a list of topics—"studies of value, morality, imagination, well-being, empathy, care, the gift, hope, time and change" (Robbins 2013, 457–58)—and the suggestion that they point to a new way of doing anthropology. Robbins tells us that the idea is not to replace the anthropology of suffering but rather to fulfill its immanent critique. If that is, indeed, the case, then I would push the analysis one step further. For an anthropology of the good to emerge, it is likely to begin with attempts to articulate the bad. From what I can see, the great contemporary questions shaping anthropology are arising out of grievances that have new urgency, things like police brutality and its relationship to forms of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic discrimination; environmental degradation; the exploitation of indigenous peoples; the spread of preventable diseases; the injuries of patriarchy and heteronormativ-

ity; acts of terrorism by state and nonstate actors; the decimation of labor and the instabilities wrought by global capitalism.

Suffering is powerful because it shapes the terrain on which political communities are established and claims of belonging/exclusion made. This relationship between injury and democratic subjectivity holds true for causes that organize both the Left and the Right. Pointing to the parallels between popular movements across the political spectrum does not mean falling victim to false equivalences. Different wrongs give rise to different expressions of political subjectivity. The citizen-victim who rises up against police brutality, for example, is qualitatively different from the citizen-victim who tacitly condones it.

When it comes to violent crime in the early twenty-first century, a strong correlation exists between demands made in the name of crime victims and the strain of punitive populism that entrenches racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic inequality. What I have described in this article is the political logic through which diffuse experiences of violent crime in Venezuela served as the basis for a collective identity that simultaneously whitened victims and criminalized the poor and the racially marked. This fits a larger pattern. As early as the 1970s, ethnographers recognized the ways in which crime was used to legitimate a right-wing populism that targeted minorities (Hall et al. 1978), and we have no shortage of contemporary examples. Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, Viktor Orbán, and Donald Trump all come to mind. Among scholars and activists who oppose such projects, our main response has been to emphasize the political nature of crime victimhood. This was precisely the tactic embraced by President Chávez. It failed at least in part because it mistook the politics of security for the lived experience of injury.

Beginning with wrongs is a bottom-up approach to democratic subjectivity, one that recognizes victimhood as the material base on which populist movements are constructed. No one in Venezuela needs to be convinced that homicide, kidnapping, sexual assault, or extrajudicial killings are real and present dangers. The failure to find substantive solutions to the injuries of crime is what created the conditions of possibility for Venezuela's punitive turn in the first place. Undoing the punitive turn in Venezuela or anywhere else does not mean disavowing the gravity of crime or downplaying demands for security. Rather, it means reconsidering how we go about rectifying a particular category of wrongs.

Apparatuses of security (laws, police, courts, prisons, and so forth) are historically contingent. They emerge out of socioeconomic conditions inherited from the past, but that does not mean their form or content is etched in stone. The provisioning of protection, punishment, and social order is open to different polit-

ical articulations. Critical scholars are right to expose right-wing and conservative projects of security that target the poor and people of color, but it is even more vital to begin imagining what a left art of security might entail.[26] Such a project was largely abandoned in the 1970s and 1980s by scholars disillusioned with the Soviet Union. What they bequeathed us is a critique of the state that repeats itself without advancing viable alternatives. It is true that the law and apparatuses of security operate as tools of socioeconomic oppression more often than not, but—as Walter Benjamin (1969) reminds us—history is not a game of chess played against structural forces destined to win every time. It is an all-too-human struggle. Taking wrongs seriously means paying attention to how political struggles over crime play out and forcefully confronting patterns of racial, economic, and ethnonational domination. But it also means starting to think about how we might go about setting things right. That is the challenge facing Venezuela and much of the world today.

ABSTRACT

This article draws on research in Venezuela to make a broader argument about the link between populism and injury. Specifically, it considers the role that crime victimhood plays in the rise of punitive populism or the so-called punitive turn. Under President Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan government publicly denounced tough-on-crime policies as instruments of socioeconomic oppression. Following Chávez's death, there was an abrupt change of course due, in part, to the opposition's mobilization of crime victims. The Venezuelan case illustrates a double bind that confronts scholars who are critical of the punitive turn. On the one hand, the figure of the crime victim mediates the body politic in a way that reproduces structures of racial and economic domination. On the other hand, the failure to substantively address the material injuries of crime victims propels grassroots support for punitive populism. Instead of focusing on the subject of rights, this article proposes starting with the subject of wrongs as a bottom-up approach to political subjectivity that can help us understand the dynamic behind punitive populism and show us a way out of the double bind. [populism; democracy; social movements; crime; violence; charisma; victimhood; injury; Venezuela]

ABSTRACTO

Este artículo se basa en trabajo de campo en Venezuela y persigue establecer un argumento general sobre el vínculo entre el populismo y el daño. Específicamente, el artículo considera el papel que las víctimas del crimen desempeñan en el auge del populismo punitivo o el giro punitivo. Durante el gobierno de Hugo Chávez se denunciaba la política de mano dura como un instrumento de opresión socioeco-

nómica. Tras la muerte de Chávez, hubo un cambio abrupto en esta práctica debido, en parte, a la movilización de las víctimas del crimen. El caso venezolano constituye un dilema para los académicos que critican el giro punitivo. Por un lado, la figura de la víctima participa en el cuerpo político de una manera que reproduce estructuras de dominación racial y económica. Por otro lado, la incapacidad para responder efectivamente a los reales daños del crimen aumenta el apoyo popular a la política de mano dura. En vez de enfocarse en el tema de los derechos, este artículo propone enfocarse en el tema de los males (o daños) como una manera de abordar la subjetividad política que podría, por un lado ayudarnos a entender la dinámica detrás del populismo punitivo, y por el otro encontrar una solución al dilema que este plantea. [populismo; democracia; movimientos sociales; delito; violencia; carisma; victimismo; daño; Venezuela]

NOTES

1. In Latin America, *popular sectors* refers to a mix of subaltern groups, most notably the urban masses and rural campesinos.
2. Authoritarian policing in Latin America has a long history. During the Cold War period, police forces trained and backed by the United States carried out egregious—in some cases, genocidal—attacks on civilian populations (Huggins 1998; Grandin 2004). The dark past of authoritarian policing in Latin America is what makes the political popularity of *mano dura* politics so troubling.
3. Invoking populism invites debate. Most scholarship on populism begins with a nod to conceptual clutter surrounding the term. That said, a general consensus has emerged, which I would summarize as follows: populism is the Jacobin logic of popular sovereignty. When dealing with populism we are dealing with a distinctive pattern of political mobilization. Every populist movement claims to represent the unmediated will of the people against the illegitimate usurpation of power. Such claims are totalizing. They are also militantly democratic in their assertions of rule by the demos. Note that populism's inalienable principle is not sovereignty, but rather *popular* sovereignty. This principle is what populism shares with both democracy and republicanism. Populism emerges under conditions in which a fictive "people" is considered the locus of political authority; as such, it is tied to a particular pattern of state formation, which became dominant during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the Americas, popular sovereignty became the standard of political legitimacy beginning with the Wars of Independence. On the history and nuances of popular sovereignty, see Canovan 2005. For an overview of the literature and debates on populism, see Laclau 2005 and Panizza 2005. Like Rafael Sánchez (2016), I prefer *Jacobin* to other descriptors like *radical*, *Manichean*, or *illiberal*.

4.   Despite the growing literature on punitive populism (e.g., Bottoms 1995; Basombrío and Dammert 2013), most scholars interested in the phenomenon have failed to engage theories of populism at more than a cursory level. This article forms part of a broader project to spell out the linkages between populist mobilization and the punitive turn.

5.   Approaching populism as a political logic that is internal to—although not necessarily synonymous with—democracy means setting aside the outcomes of populist movements and focusing instead on the populist imagination. Such an approach avoids many of the normative (usually negative) assumptions about populism, for example that it appeals to base emotions, promotes unreason, or paves the way for authoritarianism. It also has the advantage of recasting democracy as something inherently unstable, simultaneously promising and perilous. On the relationship between populism and democracy, see Panizza 2005.

6.   This is, namely, that democracy can be reduced to a series of bureaucratic institutions, technologies, and procedures.

7.   In his *Philosophy of Right*, G. W. F. Hegel (1967, 64–74) describes abstract right as the by-product of concrete wrong. Jacques Lacan (1976, 17) makes a similar point: "What is social is always a wound." Lacan, in turn, influenced thinkers like Wendy Brown (1993), Jacques Rancière (1999), Ernesto Laclau (2005), and Slavoj Žižek (2014).

8.   It was Émile Durkheim (2014) who first observed the relationship between crime, punishment, and social consciousness (see Greenhouse 2011).

9.   We confuse normative claims about whose victimhood should be recognized with descriptive accounts about the experience, perception, and mobilization of injury.

10. The mobilization of crime victimhood was just one of several factors that contributed to Venezuela's punitive turn; however, we learn much about this phenomenon by scrutinizing how certain victims are transformed into political subjects.

11. The bulk of my fieldwork was conducted in two stints: August 2007 to July 2009 and December 2011 to May 2012. Participant-observation was augmented by a range of ethnographic and textual methods, including more than one hundred interviews with key figures in the press, the field of security, activists, and politicians on both sides of the political divide.

12. The punitive turn owed much to a shift in the discourse on security, a discourse that coalesced around fear of crime. Before the mid-1960s, fear of crime was invisible as either governmental problem or object of social scientific inquiry. It emerged out of a particular conjuncture in U.S. history (Lee 2007). The rise of victim surveys, the violent backlash against civil rights, and blatant political opportunism combined to make fear of crime an object of fascination for criminologists and policy makers alike. In a short time, fear of crime became a cottage industry linking government to the social sciences. Today, fear is the predominant sensation that scholars associated with crime, which tends to obscure how crime functions as a tool of political mobilization.

13. The Chávez government was aware of the threat. One political figure with access to internal polling data told me that he believed the government's failure to address crime and other problems confronting the barrios led to Chávez's defeat in the 2007 constitutional referendum.

14. Crime was just one of many issues behind the 2014 protests. Its importance is highlighted in a widely circulated YouTube video from this period, "What's Going on in Venezuela in a Nutshell," which can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rw7xT_HsEKc&t=27s.

15. In the discourse on violent crime, homicide came to stand in for a host of other offenses including kidnapping, sexual assault, carjacking, armed robberies, and even petty theft. Homicide was to crime what Monica Spear was to crime victims. Here, see Sanjuán 2013.

16. Venezuela is one of the world's largest exporters of oil. Rents from oil and gas production account for well over 90 percent of GDP. Venezuela's democratic contract is, largely, based on the promise to redistribute and reinvest oil wealth in a way that grows the nation as a whole (Coronil 1997).

17. The project can be accessed at http://www.insideoutproject.net/en.
18. By "performative practice," I am suggesting that masking is an act that constitutes sub-jects in ways similar to those described by Judith Butler (1997) or Thomas Blom Hansen (2001).
19. The term *citizen-victim* is borrowed from Susana Rotker's (2002) writings on violent crime in Venezuela.
20. This is standard protocol in morgues throughout North America.
21. The Organic Law for the Protection of Children and Adolescents (Ley Orgánica para la Protección del Niño y Adolescente; LOPNA) was passed by the Venezuelan National Assembly in April 2000. It contained a number of provisions that ostensibly protected children from inappropriate content and unsanctioned representation. In practice, it functioned to check the power of the press.
22. The initiative's official name was Operación de Liberación y Protección del Pueblo, but it is usually referred to as Operación de Liberación del Pueblo, or OLP for short.
23. This stance against state repression was tied to the conditions that gave rise to the Bo-livarian Revolution. Chávez attributed his political awakening to *el caracazo*—the 1989 uprising against neoliberalism that was violently put down by the Venezuelan military on the orders of President Carlos Andres Pérez. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of civil-ians were murdered. Here, see Coronil and Skurski 1991.
24. Such an initiative was begun in 2006 with the National Commission for Police Reform. Andrés Antillano (2016, 629) has described some of the reasons for its failure.
25. Persons murdered by the police were not categorized as homicides but as cases of resist-ing authority (*resistencia a la autoridad*). The number of such cases jumped precipitously beginning in 2000, when 943 such cases were recorded. It spiked at 2,305 in the year 2003, began to decline gradually, and then spiked again in 2010, when nearly 3,500 cases were reported (PROVEA 2012).
26. The phrase "left art of security" is borrowed from James Ferguson's (2011) essay "To-wards a Left Art of Government." On this notion, see also Zeiderman 2016.

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