

SOME CARRY ON, SOME STAY IN BED: (In)convenient Affects and Agency in Neoliberal Nicaragua

ELYSÉE NOUVET
McMaster University

Mita is sixty two and strong on the good days: on the days her kidneys don't feel like they're on fire, cutting her inhalations short and turning her face to ash.¹ Mita grew up in the city, helping her mother earn a living by taking in laundry, doing seasonal plantation work, and gathering firewood. When Mita began to have children, she continued to live at home. Her "husbands" were "malos" (rotten), coming and going as they pleased. Like herself, Mita's children started working at a young age to help sustain the family, never attending school. When Mita's mother died in the mid-1980s, the small family home went to Mita's older sister. After squatting in the city for several years, Mita was finally granted a subsidized mortgage from the municipality for a plot of land in Barrio los Heroes.

Today, Mita has made ten cordobas (US\$0.50) doing laundry for a neighbor. It is 1 pm. She doesn't have enough for dinner. She is hungry and worried about her grandchildren.

Her muscular legs walk steadily down the road that is cut like a river between fields. She knows each farm she passes. Mita has worked on most of them, planting and picking cotton. Now the big business here is peanuts. Machines, not people, work the land.

She arrives by 2 pm under a scalding sun. There are only two other women sifting through the adjacent fields. She scans the line of eucalyptus trees to the east. No sign of any guard. Mita kneels at the beginning of the first row. She slides her fingers through the dusty sand-like earth, expertly scanning with hands and eyes for good peanuts the machines

have left behind. They can't be too light or they're dry and bitter. They can't have discolored shells or they're rotten.

Slowly, methodically, Mita shuffles down each row on hands and knees. There is enough. A few dried branches, half buried, yield a dozen bulbous peanuts each. They'll be good with salt and chili tonight.

When the sun's light is golden, Mita's hair, clothes, and skin are swept with the earth's dust. Her back, neck, and knees are sore. She sits back on her heels for a moment. Her lungs ache and she coughs hard. Then, she raises herself up, pushing hard on her knee for momentum. Standing, she looks excitedly into the rice sac. It's a good-fifth full. Four, maybe three pounds? She twists the bag shut and places it on her head. Surrounded by the evening calls of songbirds, she takes her time making her way back, picking up some dead branches for the fire along the way.



Figure 1. Scavenging for peanuts. All photos by the author

From April 2008 to March 2009, I conducted fieldwork in Barrio los Heroes, a shanty in what Leon's city officials and NGO workers refer to as the city's *cinturón de miseria*, or belt of misery.² I had begun doing fieldwork in Nicaragua in 2000, at the height of neoliberal restructuring in the country. Through the ensuing years, as I returned to the country for further research, documentary film projects, and to visit family, I was struck by the constant experience of hardship, menace, and pain in day-to-day life for the working poor and unemployed. The

Nicaraguans I met were often angry, depressed, sad, frustrated, anxious, and exhausted as they struggled to survive in the category many defined in their everyday conversation as that of the *jodido* (fucked up) poor.³ I set out to explore the social impact of the restructuring on entire segments of the country—families, but also neighborhoods—feeling pushed to the limits of what they could take.

NEOLIBERAL LIFE IS HARD

“If you pay the beans you don’t pay the tortilla. If you pay the tortilla, you don’t have for the rice. Either way, we are screwed!”

—Roland, Barrio los Heroes resident, June 2008

Twenty-one years after the publication of Roger Lancaster’s (1992) award-winning ethnography, *Life is Hard*, life remains tough in Nicaragua. As one critic caustically put it, Nicaraguans “lead democratic lives on less than one dollar per day” (Fischer 2006, 127).⁴ At the time of my research in Barrio los Heroes, fifty-five percent of Nicaraguans were unemployed (INIDE 2006). Estimates put illiteracy in the country at twenty-two percent between 2005 and 2008 (UNICEF 2009), or nine percent higher than thirty years ago (Fischer 2006, 57). Wages, for those who earned them could not keep up with inflation, which hit eighteen percent in 2008 (Pérez Solís 2008, A1). Food has become increasingly inaccessible to the urban poor in the new millennium (*ibid.*). With the country’s economy focused on producing exports, small industries have suffered (Babb 2001), and Nicaragua has grown dependent on expensive imports for its food needs. The struggle for survival weighs heavily on women in the country. Many Nicaraguan women work double or triple shifts and have done so for much of their lives, in accordance with cultural expectations that responsibility for the family’s well being is a woman’s natural duty (Bradshaw 2002; Lancaster 1992). This is not only to satisfy their family’s increasingly unaffordable basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing, but also to compensate for the state’s crumbling social infrastructure (Fernández Poncela 1996, 55). For over two decades now, loans and development aid to Nicaragua from the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the World Bank have been conditional on the Nicaraguan state reducing social spending. Affecting healthcare, daycare, education, and water services, these cuts have hit women the hardest (Bickham Mendez 2005; Cornia, Jolly, and Stewart 1987; Cupples 2005; Fernández Poncela 1996; UNICEF 1988).

Approximately 1061 families and 9500 inhabitants live in Barrio los Heroes (ASB 2005, 4). Life here is exemplary of Nicaragua’s seemingly permanent state

of crisis in the post-revolutionary neoliberal period. This is a place where eighty percent of men are unemployed. The majority of women work but on the black market, earning about two dollars per day, a sum that does not come close to satisfying basic household needs for food and clothing. The literacy rate, when last measured systematically, was fifty percent. There is no sewage system in the shanty and toxic water flows in small streams through the streets. Twenty percent of homes are made of plastic and wood (ibid.). Many homes experience leaking at best, and total collapse at worst, during the rainy season from May to November. Only a handful of residents can afford legal water-connections in the face of an exponential rise in fees over the last fifteen years, with the result that ENACAL, the national water company, provides some water daily to all residents but on an irregular basis. Families and neighbors are acutely aware of each others' shortages and suffering: a brother feeds his baby powdered milk in secret while his sister and her four kids have had no milk for days; kidney problems flare up forcing a grandmother to lie still in bed when her daughter was counting on her for child-care to go to work; a tortilla maker lets her niece and nephew "steal" pieces of raw dough off her work table knowing there is no dinner for them at home.

Poverty and structural inequality characterize the everyday for the residents of Barrio los Heroes. In Nicaragua, how those who are economically and socially marginalized live this marginalization is of particular historical and political importance. Nicaragua is famous for its collective, grassroots organizing and struggle for social justice. This is a country where, in 1979, a massive, largely popular, insurrection defeated a brutal forty-two-year dictatorship that spanned three generations of the Somoza family. In the decade that followed, Nicaragua underwent dramatic political, economic, and social restructuring aimed at uprooting historically-entrenched class and social inequalities. It was only in 1990, when the fatalities and economic ravages of a U.S.-funded contra-revolutionary war could no longer be borne, that the Sandinista party and its leader, Daniel Ortega, were voted out of power. Nicaragua continues to boast a well-documented contemporary landscape of community movements and activists (Bickham Mendez 2005; Guevara 2008). That said, many Nicaraguans are not involved in any community movements. This is the case for the majority of residents living in Barrio los Heroes. Here, the work of survival seems to consume residents' energies and days. I did not meet a resident of the Barrio that did not find the country's inequalities unfair and cruel, but very few found the time or the energy to join a social organization or group that overtly critiqued and worked to transform inequalities in Nicaragua.

What is made possible and/or impossible in Nicaragua's urban landscapes of pervasive hardship? Is there potential for social critique and social transformation when one is pushed to one's limits and surrounded by others pushed to their limits? How does chronic suffering animate or undermine imaginings and related potential for social transformation in today's Nicaragua? What do affective formations materialized in contexts of structural violence do to power? In other words, how is agency—which I approach here following Elizabeth Grosz (2005, 72), as “the capacity to make the future diverge from the patterns and causes of the present”—generated, blocked, or otherwise impacted in Nicaragua by the stressful precariousness of urban life? What qualifies a mode of living, pushed to the limits in a context of social suffering, as “critical” of the status quo or as fodder for political transformation?

At the heart of these questions is the body pushed to its limits, and the implication that this materiality under duress matters. My work is influenced by the scholarship on social suffering in anthropology, with its focus on the unequal geography, and social and political work, of distress in particular contexts. I depart from this scholarship, however, by approaching corporealities of structural violence as material and affective forces: formations that give form to and (re)create the grounds for their emergence in the “folding-in of external influences and simultaneous unfolding-outwards of affects” (Braidotti 2007, 156). While focused on social formations of suffering, I draw on Elizabeth Povinelli's (2006, 2010; Povinelli and DiFruscia 2010) theory of carnal materialities and affect theory to open ways of thinking about the relationship of bodies under pressure to social change.

AFFECTIVE CORPOREALITIES OF STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Over the past twenty years, many anthropologists have approached bodies in distress as cultural idioms or roadmaps to social tensions and inequalities (see for example, Adelson 2005; Bourdieu et al. 1999; Bourgois 2003; Desjarlais and Kleinman 1994; Farmer 1997; Green 1999; Janes 1999; Kleinman 1986; Kleinman, Das, and Locke 1997; Quesada 1998; Scheper-Hughes 1992). This work on social suffering has emphasized that states of distress—including mental and physical pain, stress, medically-diagnosed illness, unemployment, and discrimination—are never equally distributed in society: they are overwhelmingly present among economically or socially marginalized individuals. Whether or not particular bodies gets pushed to their limits, and how persons and groups live, communicate, and recognize (or ignore) these exertions, reflects and often reinforces

social inequalities. Following from this analysis, understanding what forms of distress mean in a particular context implies studying how discourses of power form incidences, experiences, and responses to suffering. The suffering body is socially significant in this scholarship as a discursive object: it crystallizes, and is a window into, culturally and historically specific power relations. The feminist/queer scholarship on which I draw sustains this focus on corporealities of violence, but it adds to the analysis new ways of thinking about the social importance of the body under duress.

In a recently published interview, Elizabeth Povinelli (Povinelli and Di-Fruscia 2010) argues that, too often, post-essentialist analyses of the body have been so focused on bodies as power effects and discursive objects that the importance of the body as materiality has been neglected. As Povinelli elaborates, the body of an Aboriginal Australian that is chronically sick, whose life is shortened due to the biological effects of living in a system of racism and inequality with increased exposure to disease, malnutrition, poor healthcare, as well as psychosocial distress, is not reducible to the discourses it embodies. The sickened body of an Aboriginal Australian in this context also matters because it can block or enable disruptions of power. Carnalities are fleshed forms as well as discourses, and as such “matter forth” inextricably-connected environments and social relations (Povinelli 2006, 7).

The notion that bodies, weakened through structural inequalities, may non-discursively (re)generate social relations, is integral to several queer and feminist studies of affect. Affects here are pre- and trans-individual bodily formations arising through the contingent connection of a range of micro-agencies—bodies, things, events, and places (Grosz 2005, 6). There are two principal reasons affects are socially significant: first, they are contagious formations, and second, affects impact whether or not “the body’s power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked” (Spinoza 2002, 278). An explosion of affect-informed ethnographies over the last decade has drawn attention to the ways dominant power relations and political systems rely on, construct, and often intentionally orchestrate, contagious affective states such as fear, apathy, (in)security, and confusion (i.e., Auyero and Swistun 2010; Biehl 2005; Caldeira 2000; Skidmore 2003; Taylor 1997). Feminist and queer affect scholars stress the power of affects to disrupt the operations of power, as they register the abnormality of normative social relations (Ahmed 2010; Braidotti 2007; Clare 1999; Cvekovitch 2007; Gordon 2008; Grosz 2005; Nelson 2009). I have taken my cue from Povinelli and this work on affect, when I ask how various forms of distress—depression,

exhaustion, hunger—may transform relations of power, not “below” or “above” their physicality but through their physicality: as affective formations that may (or may not) impact “the power of action” of other bodies.

I focus on two residents in Barrio los Heroes, Mita and Juana, and the visibly distinct ways these women’s grinding poverty is corporealized. The contrast between these two women compelled me to question what actions and affects of bodies pushed to their limits in zones of social and economic marginality count as productive of social change. No life is *discounted* as socially *insignificant* in this process: rather, my emphasis is on increasing understanding of how the body pushed to its limits may mold the social by contributing to a sense of what feels doable or impossible, right or wrong, in need of transformation or not, in this particular Nicaraguan context.

Exploratory rather than conclusive, this research inserts itself within a growing body of scholarship exploring the affective dimensions of social relations in Central America (Dickson-Gómez 2002; Guevara 2008; Jenkins 1991; Little 2009; Moodie 2006; Nelson 2009; Reed 2004; Rodgers 2006a, 2006b; Wright 2001, 1999). This article is based on Nicaraguan research, but its questions may be relevant to other communities in the Global North and South where life is marked by structural violence.

Juana, Mita’s daughter, lives off the sale of chewing gum, mints, caramels, and lollipops.

It’s 8 am. She should be at work already but feels so tired. The kids’ school pants are filthy. All her laundry needs doing. There’s no soap. Her stomach churns. There is no money for breakfast. Juana stares at the black plastic ceiling of her shack. The boys might find some firewood to sell for food but she needs soap too. Two-year-old Wilma looks for her breast in her sleep. Juana complies, then gets up, still holding Wilma, who slumps heavily on her shoulder as Juana walks across the yard. Mother is up. She sits silently, eyes glazed in apparent exhaustion. Juana sets Wilma down on the log next to Mita. “You going then?” asks Mita. “Yes.” Juana washes her face in the rusty barrel that is the sink, retrieves her basket from a hook in the tent, and starts walking towards the town center.

Juana has walked the bus platform in downtown León since age twelve. Seventeen years selling enchiladas, water, then soft drinks, now candy.

Four children ages eleven and eight, six and two.

Two men who, like her father, abandoned the kids and left her.

“There are mornings I just don’t want to get out of bed.”



Figures 2–3. Candy sales at the bus terminal.

Juana was not hopeful about her future. Every couple of months, Juana felt she might get ahead. A few times over the course of 2008–2009, when Juana had made a killing at some religious festival, or when her gambling husband was back and seemed on track, she felt she might fix the tears in her black plastic shack or

buy some new zinc for its leaky roof. She would talk about moving out of candy sales into undergarments, and plan, perhaps for the sake of my audience, to send her two-year-old to daycare. She would laugh at her boys' invented games, and walk fast. But mostly, Juana felt and acted like her life was the pits. She did not like her work. When she went, she shuffled along the bus platform, looking bored, annoyed, and sad. At home, she often slumped on the log in the yard or looked absently over her kids playing in the street. Between long silences, she would tell me stories—invariably bad news from the Barrio:

The lady down the street who's baby was born on the clinic floor and died . . .
The neighbor who threw rotten bread over the fence into her yard: an insult . . .
The nurse at the healthcare center, who, when Juana went to request her lot be sprayed for mosquitoes, told her she wouldn't have mosquito problems if she kept her lot cleaner . . .

Anyone I asked in Barrio los Heroes who worked on the black market selling bread, cigarettes, hairclips, or water would tell me business was bad. "That's Nicaragua." They were broke and screwed. But the next day, many, especially women, would start again. Back up at 5 am, collecting their goods, arranging water bottles, or making a corn drink, walking the two kilometers to the market. Not Juana. On many days, often several in a week and several in a row, Juana would not leave home. "What difference does it make? I spend five hours, seven hours. I earn twenty, thirty cordobas. I don't even make enough for a meal." While her two year old resorted to breastfeeding, Juana and her three children would not eat on these days.

Wednesday, it is sunny. I meet Juana at the terminal and her basket is almost empty. I ask her if sales have been good. She says no, gestures angrily at the empty bus platforms, is evasive. Later, her sister-in-law tells me it's the "good for nothing" husband. He came by high and angry. He woke the babies, beat the boys, threw things. He called Juana a whore and when Juana's mom tried to tell him to get out, he pushed her down. All the neighbors saw. Juana told them after he'd left that he took the candy, but the sister-in-law thinks she must have given him everything. "Stupid!" the sister in law judgmentally adds. "That one, he likes to gamble. He won't be back."

Juana has not been out to sell for three days this past week. On the first day, I found her doing the laundry, taking advantage of rare blue skies. On the second day, she had not gone because it looked like rain: "bad sales" she explained. The third and fourth days,

I did not ask why she hadn't gone, nor were explanations offered. Sitting on the log in the yard, she seemed remote, her eyes avoiding mine. The kids looked sad. They sat quietly in the yard instead of playing, waiting for the fruit I had brought to be divided round. Cristofer, the most skeletal of the three, kicked his broken flip flop up and down, eyes glazed, sitting like a ghost in the corner of the yard.

The first time Juana refused or could not get up and go to work for 3, 6, 11 days in a row, I felt myself growing dizzier and dizzier with stress with every passing day. At the front of my mind was one thought, illuminated like on a neon sign, predictable and moralistic: The kids! There are kids! I wanted to yell at Juana: "Isn't it better to get them something to eat, however little? Isn't it better to try?" But another thought was wrapped around my throat. Is there a difference between carrying on or staying in bed in a context of acute structural violence? Is one action more productive than the other? Of what? On what basis?

For nine months, I spent part of almost every day with Juana and Mita. I was convinced their corporealizations of life in the Barrio were exemplary of the impact of social suffering on the lives of residents in the barrio, but I was unsure how to categorize the social impacts and politics of their corporealities. I did know that Juana's depressed withdrawal did not match up to what I realized were my expectations of the agent-ful social actor of the Global South. There is a division in much socio-cultural scholarship between "positive" affects, such as joy, pleasure, and enjoyment, and "negative" affects including resentment, anger, cynicism, or suffering (i.e., Brown 1995; Hage 2002; Grosz 1999; Thompson 2009). Those who stand by this division cast positive affects as a crucial energizing force of social change. Negative affects, in contrast, are to be overcome, set aside, or even forgotten: these are black holes that drain personal and social energies for affirmation and transformation, inducing passivity rather than activity (an assertion I will revisit shortly). Juana was not a happy, particularly disciplined or determined person. In this sense, she presented as a sort of anti-hero of the Global South. She did not, could not, at the age of twenty nine, muster the energy to forge a way for herself in the world *against all odds*: to be hopeful in the face of a life over-determined by poverty, lack of opportunity, violence, the pressures of motherhood, inequality, and class-based discrimination. Juana was not alone in her days of near paralysis in the face of countless challenges. Her disengagement from the social realm through exhaustion and depression did not fuel social and political change in any direct way, and yet, I felt unconvinced that her (dis)engagement was less significant than the bootstrap agency of other residents, such as that of her mother.

Neither the drive to survive nor the lack of such a drive in a context of chronic structural inequality is clearly disruptive or convenient to the dominant operations of power. Juana, curling up in bed exhausted, does present a case that flies in the face of two dominant social ideals in Nicaragua: that of the mother as the primary provider of subsistence to her children, and that of the active citizen who exhibits privatized responsibility for their well-being and survival. Since 1990, Nicaragua has been subject to the ravages of IMF-mandated structural adjustment plans. In the absence of safe healthcare, free education, livable wages, access to affordable water, food, and housing, the good, female, Nicaraguan citizen assumes the moral and practical responsibility for her children and family's bodily integrity. Neoliberalism touts "a return to a primitive form of individualism," one based on modern notions of free will to succeed or fail (Ong 2006, 11). Its ethic of privatized responsibility casts the individual, rather than the collective nation or community, as wholly and morally responsible for their economic success or failure (Harvey 2007). This ideology upholds a utilitarian myth of meritocracy in which hard work is cast as leading to economic, but also moral, rewards.

Juana shows no indication of buying into the promises of the current neoliberal ideology or the Nicaraguan gender system, that hard, constant work, sacrifice, and self-reliance are inherently rewarding (Bradshaw 2002; Lancaster 1992; Fernández Poncela 1996).

SUFFERING FATIGUE: What difference does it make?

"I feel so tired sometimes," Juana admits as she prepares her basket of caramels for the morning of selling. "I wake up sometimes, like this morning, and I lie there thinking: I go all the way downtown for what? I work four hours, maybe five, before I have to be back to the kids, and I earn sometimes 10, 20, 30 cordobas. Business is so bad. It's not like last year. It's rare I earn 100 cordobas (US\$5) and so I'm not refilling the basket. This work doesn't provide anything.

"But you are going to keep going?" I ask, with a tone of expectation.

Juana shrugs looking down at her goods that she keeps arranging and rearranging.

Juana's knowledge of marginalization as a constant, heavy weight undermines the normality of the system and its expectations. Her depressed states highlight a neoliberal economic system's failure to provide for the poor, and makes explicit the violence of a system that can suck anyone dry. At the same time, Juana's social status makes it difficult for the critical potential of her disengagement to disrupt the status quo. Like many of the poor throughout Latin America,

Juana is economically, socially, and politically insignificant to the state and the global economic system through which it operates. She lives on the margins, in every sense, of Nicaraguan society. In her contact with the health clinic, with wealthier residents of the city, and even amongst her own children, she is assigned a low social value. This social value emanates from her social position in a hierarchy of worthiness. Juana's illiteracy, her lack of buying power, her plastic shack, her children's ripped clothes and empty stomachs embody the structural violence of her context, but also renders her structurally vulnerable. Already a *de facto* insignificant and undesirable being according to a neoliberal system in which value is associated with one's economic productivity and power of consumption, whether Juana speeds up her biological and social disappearance matters little for the continued reproduction of Nicaragua's current moral and economic order. In a context of normalized privatized responsibility and cultural notions of motherly responsibility, Juana's lack of enthusiasm for work, the only means she has of providing food and other basics to her children, could serve to reinforce the idea of Nicaragua's poor as a lost cause, morally justifying misery in Nicaragua's margins.

How carrying on impacts relations of inequality in this context is no easier to qualify. Mita's ingenuity at finding food, close supervision of her grandchildren, and her efforts to feed and keep them clean, contradicts negative stereotypes of the poor as lazy and irresponsible. Her refusal to disappear, in the face of very challenging odds for survival, including the lack of safe medical attention, food, and adequate shelter, might in itself be read as resistance. At the same time, Mita's self-sufficiency is consistent with the neoliberal ethic of privatized responsibility that maintains citizens should accept and assume individual responsibility for their well-being (Harvey 2007). Although she accepts the charity of missionaries when they visit her street, Mita does not actively seek or expect help from anyone or any organization. She gets up every morning to work for that day's basic necessities, even if she has gone to sleep without food, even if she is feeling ill, even as her daughter sometimes lies exhausted by life in bed.

It is important to underline that Mita's resilience is necessary, rather than intentional. Mita, like many of other residents of the Barrio, applies her energy and time to the hard work of survival. Devotion to survival in a context of structural violence does not equal complicity with the unequal economic, social, and political distributions of power in this context, but it does mean these inequalities are not challenged outright by Mita and others who carry on like her

in the Barrio. When managed and survived, life pushed to its limits is also, arguably, normalized.

Mita looks over the yard in time to see that Wilma, Juana's only girl, is trying to sweep underneath the clothes Mita has just washed and hung to dry. Mita is outraged: "Aie! You're going to dirty the clothes I just washed! I'll whip you!" She makes as though to rise but the threat works quickly. Wilma slips away, down the foot-wide alley of plastic and sheet metal between her mother's and uncle's shacks.

Juana is at work. Mita's patience is much shorter when exhausted by the fever and back pain that she says comes from her kidneys and for which she won't see a doctor. "For what? They'll stick me with needles and leave me dead."

Mita's son, like many of the barrio residents, died of kidney failure in the hospital. Sitting on the log in the yard, Mita coughs, heaves, and remembers. Things were better for her before her son Felix died. Felix used to pass her money whenever he could or whenever she needed it. He'd walk out into the countryside to collect firewood for sale like Don Bertram and, not being married, he'd usually have something for her. But now, Felix is dead. Her other son is married, with a kid who is often sick. It's expensive to get sick! On that note, Mita pushes herself up. The color drains from her face. I ask if she's all right and she answers: "No, but the kids are going to be bothering me to eat." She checks to see if the laundry is dry, then disappears into her tent. When she reemerges, grasping a ten-cordoba note in her hands, she yells for Juana's oldest son: "Edwin! Go get ten breads from the store."

All residents of the barrio with whom I worked faced common difficulties, including hunger, insecure housing, isolation, and illness. But, even within one household, the affects and power effects of these circumstances were neither determined nor uniform. Corporealities that emerge in contexts of structural violence are not readily analyzable as either resistant or reproductive of dominant structures of power. What living pushed to one's limits does in the context of the barrio often contains potential to both undermine *and* (rather than *or*) reinforce dominant relations. Carrying on or failing to do so can be convenient or inconvenient to a Nicaraguan and global class-system that reduces the life of the poor to bare life or survival. And yet, I want to propose that formations of social suffering in Barrio los Heroes do matter. These contribute to an affectively charged landscape of suffering in the barrio whose political consequences cannot be defined but cannot, I believe, be discounted.

In Barrio los Heroes, residents are often visibly and sensibly agitated—angry, anxious, sad, pain-ridden, desperate, depressed—as they negotiate the hardships of their lives. The violence of the everyday is distressing to people here, not normalized. In this context, Juana’s corporealization of grinding poverty, her mother’s, and that of all the residents, arises through and builds onto what seems endless layers of suffering for the poor in the barrio. This field of suffering materializes life in this place. In Nicaragua, as this weight of the everyday is felt, and as what is wrong for the poor in the barrio multiplies in countless concrete examples, so does a sense that life could be otherwise.

Approached as affective entities, states of distress are formed and reverberate through bodies and spaces long before and after semblances of “resolution.” This is not just a question of the “resilience” of violence’s effects (Green 1997; Feldman 1994; Taylor 1999). The body, pushed to its limits and thus distressed, expands across both space and time because it is recognizable to others who share conditions of marginality as distress. That Juana and Mita give form to the poverty that determines their lives in such distinct ways potentially augments the affective power of their corporealities. Whether a resident stays in bed or sets out to find food, these doings are animated by, and generative of, a sense that life for Nicaragua’s poor is pain. Considering affective forces means pursuing the possibility that even idiosyncrasies of the everyday can increase, decrease, and shape the power of action of a body, and in this manner make a difference to social relations (Braidotti 2007). While neither a plan of action nor a set of demands, Juana’s depression and her mother’s carrying on in the face of pain are social events that materialize a sense of pain that is unsettling.

Affects are trans-personal formations, gathering energies across, and multiplying impacts through, all sorts of persons, events, actions, spaces, and times (Grosz 2005). To grow affected involves, as noted at the outset, a “folding-in of external influences and simultaneous unfolding-outwards of affects” (Braidotti 2007, 156). In accordance with this understanding of how affect emerges from and forms the social, I do not propose that Juana or her mother are exerting agency. Agency cannot be found, or lamented as absent, in particular social actors within this framework. However, no resident’s giving form to their poverty in the barrio is insignificant. These formations build a field tense with human and non-human particularities: persons and opportunities, events and weather conditions, food prices, neighbors’ luck, and illnesses. The sensing of these particularities qualifies these as “micro-agencies” (Grosz 2005, 6), and in turn impact/form capacities to act. That some stay in bed and others carry on is symbolic and

representative of life in this place, but these corporealities of violence are also socially important because these are affective—they feed off and into a landscape tense with pain and yearning for less of it. There is an old man who heads out of the barrio without fail at 6 am every day to collect firewood: many residents hold him up as an example of life's cruelty in Nicaragua. An old water vendor who works with Juana never fails to depress Juana when she comes by asking for a loan for food. When Juana stays in bed, her mother has to work twice as hard to secure a meal. The community leader, an ex-Sandinista, cannot stand the current government but what seems to fuel him even more as he marches off to meetings two-kilometers away or hitches rides to national congresses are all the folk in the barrio who to him appear “resigned” and “satisfied.” Most of these people grew up like him; dirt poor, exploited on cotton plantations, trucked around from farm to farm, “herded and fed like dogs” in his words. For this leader, the ones who do not join in collective struggle only exacerbate his sense that those who can must.

Juana sets out at 7 am under clear skies, but it starts raining at 9. She returns with only forty cordobas. This is enough to buy some beans, rice, and ten tortillas, but not enough to buy soap for the laundry or provide breakfast the next day. Juana is tired. Her white, sleeveless blouse is crisp, she dons a little purple eye shadow, her black curls are neatly pinned up, but there are dark circles under her eyes. She puts the basket down on her lap and lets her shoulders sag. Her head hangs to one side.

Juana's brother walks by as he heads to his welding station at the back of the lot. Juana gestures towards her brother's home angrily: “They might get wet but no matter what happens there's this.” She flips her hand towards her mouth, making the sign for food. She leans in towards me. “He just bought three huge bags of milk. Huge! Three! They have,” she rubs her fingers together, making the sign for cash. She follows her brother with her eyes. He has resumed his work welding cages for fighting cocks.

If we recognize how a wide range of acts blur into one another in their affective constitution, we can usefully broaden our imaginings of when and how political transformation may arise. Whether occurring in the space of seconds, minutes, or days, to animate places and bodies with the sense of things being wrong, without necessarily saying how these can be righted, constitutes a stretching away from the grip of structural violence and inequalities. The social work of Juana's and Mita's corporealities of violence is ambiguous. Affective corporealities are live with “ands,” “what ifs,” “what abouts,” and “what could be.” Depression,

hunger, and pain matter to social relations not because of their measurable outcomes or failures, but because of the way they materialize life in the barrio, and “charge up” spaces, bodies, and the current historical period in Nicaragua “by the sheer surge of things in the making” (Stewart 2000, 1016). Is this affective charging up of a Nicaraguan shanty, or even of a hundred or a thousand shanties, a precondition for political transformation in Nicaragua? It may or it may not be. The question more readily answered is, should we ignore orientations to hardship such as carrying on or staying in bed on the basis that these corporealities resist translation into acts or words that clearly support or challenge structures of power?

TRANS-PERSONAL AGENCIES AND THE BODY PUSHED TO ITS LIMITS

Agamben (1998) and Rancière (2004) both suggest that states and zones of exception are the grounds for new political possibilities. These scholars underline the political potential within the cruel production of humans reduced to mere survival. For Rancière, it is in the act of rising up, of speaking out, that those excluded from politics can disrupt the normalcy of their separation from the state. Agamben, in his theory of bare life, is less specific about what a political action emerging from the no-go zones of the world will involve in terms of organization and expression, but is more specific about the significance of the location of emergence of this politics. For Agamben, the fungible subject, or the subject of prolonged dying, can become a particularly subversive and effective political agent—where agency is defined as the potential to “make the future diverge from the pattern and causes of the present” (Grosz 2005, 72)—because of the subject’s location in zones of politically-defined erasure, invisibility, and indifference. These sites or zones, where life is at once heavily subjugated by structural violence but also left alone (to die), allow rare opportunities for imagining and experimenting with political transformation.

While Rancière and Agamben usefully unbound ideas of where and through whom political imagination can be reinvigorated, neither acknowledge that the pushing of bodies to their limits may itself imply new formations of agency. In their writings, it is the body as symbol, the metaphysical body, rather than the living of bare life, that fuels or will fuel social transformation. Political imagination, as the fuel of political transformation, has nothing to do with flesh, blood, and nerve beyond how these represent a violent post-Second World War biopolitical order. The dying, killeable body does not, as a physiological reality,

matter. Thus, the political imagination directly shapes biowelfare on the political and economic margins of society, but not vice versa. They do not acknowledge that living reduced to bare life plays a role in whether or not, to what extent, and how, political re-imaginings of the status quo emerge in zones of marginality. Bare life and its attendant suffering—psychological, social, biological—is in this sense ignored: the political agency of bare life assumes a form that is no different than the political agency of the human who escapes such sacrificial status, save that according to Agamben and Rancière, it may be more effective in impacting the social order.

It would be too lengthy a digression here for me to take issue with Rancière's and Agamben's apparent suggestion that the most downtrodden are our hope for a new world. What I want to draw attention to within such an assertion is the idea that the only political hope for the oppressed lies in their exhibition of what Povinelli (2010) calls "bootstrap performativity": the lauded capacity of the oppressed to overcome crushing conditions of violence to assume the role of "anywhere" political agents. I share Povinelli's concern with the expectation of, and perhaps even search for, a *carpe diem* attitude among subjects of ethnographic research whose lives are marked by structural violence. Such an expectation is consistent with another generalization about how socially-transformative acts take shape in the affect literature. Although this is changing (Ahmed 2010; Butler 2004; Cvekovitch 2007), recent theorizations of affect are replete with the equation of positive affects with positive agency. For example, Wendy Brown (1995, 54–55), whose analysis of subaltern politics in the mid-1980s was seminal in its recognition of affects as central to politics, critiques the fetishization of the wound among marginalized groups as limiting political horizons. Ghassan Hage (2002, 171), in his highlighting of the political potential of hope, suggests that not being joyful is reactionary, as such a state reproduces the endless deferral of happiness in a capitalist system. James Thompson (2009) suggests that only the affects of pleasure, passion, and enjoyment can inspire social change as they connect us to one another in new ways. Elizabeth Grosz (1999, 21–22) writes against cynical predictions of the future by scholars, and urges more attention be granted to the critical affirmations enabled by the "joyous open-endedness of the future." Joyousness, hopefulness, pleasure, and enjoyment: through this scholarship, there appears to be an implication that certain affective corporealities harbor stronger potential than others for social transformation.

The association between positive affects and positive social outcomes in this strain of affect-informed writings has never sat well with me. My unease stems,

at least in part, from working in a country where widespread suffering, lived day-to-day as exploitative labor-norms, severe class-discrimination, and political oppression, exerts a powerful force, alongside hope and joy in the making of the Sandinista Revolution. Ethnographically, it does not make sense to foreclose the possibility that the subject who lives in pain might contribute to social-political transformation, at least to some degree, through their pain rather than in spite of it. As affect theorists such as Butler (2004), Braidotti (2007), Ahmed (2010), and Cvekovitch (2007) have warned, there is no natural correlation between positive social or personal outcomes and specific affects. Hope and happiness can facilitate structural inequalities and violence (Ahmed 2010), but these can also negate an apathetic resignation to the status quo (Hage 2002). Shame can reproduce oppressive social divisions, but it can also empower us “to repair the failings or limitations of our human endeavors” (Braidotti 2007, 200). Pain can suck us in, produce a collapse into oneself—disconnecting us from the world and therefore from the possibility of political action. But pain is also often, if not normally, an indication of connection to the world. In Judith Butler’s (2004) work on mourning, she exposes the connections between our capacity to remain unmoved by violence done to others, and our capacity to do violence. “Coming undone,” according to Butler, is crucial to political consciousness, as it is in the act of feeling vertigo in the face of violence done to others that we can and do break through senses and discourses of otherness to form political community.

I have no definite conclusions to offer regarding what a sense of pervasive hardship will accomplish, politically and socially, in the context of my research in Nicaragua. My conclusion is that there is no inherent politics to carrying on. There is no inherent absence of politics in feeling painfully overcome by the weight of the world. Bootstrap efforts at survival versus depressed withdrawal from life struck me at one point in my ethnographic research as containing radically opposed potentials for social transformation, but on careful consideration, the differences between such engagements have grown blurry for me. Still, the inconclusive impacts of Juana and Mita’s corporealities do not justify my excluding their lives from an account of social transformation in Nicaragua. Understood through an affect-informed lens, how Juana and Mita exist in the world is more than a representation of social relations: what these women do and feel contributes to the constant (re)generation of what feels, and thus might become, doable or impossible. Regardless of what Nicaragua’s political and social future holds, that future will be shaped by the corporealities of countless residents such as Juana and Mita who are angry, depressed, sad, frustrated, anxious, aching, and alarmed

in the face of their day-to-day lives. As these Nicaraguans take in and leak hardship in innumerable ways, they make present and feel an anarchic sense that their lives of constant hardship do not make sense. Their suffering is not strategic; it is not a plan. Nevertheless, it is possible that feeling pain and seeking relief—some food, more rest, less insults, less rain—even when the body is not literally speaking or organizing, speaks to power as it desires, and thus insists another better existence is possible. Such non-discursive, non-strategic carrying on and curling up may hook into more traditional forms of social critique, stirring others to public and collective political action. Or they may not. They may generate new apathy and normalize the violent casualties of global, national, and local inequalities. Either way, materializations of the poor's *jodido* life in Nicaragua cannot be discounted in an analysis of when, how, and why political and social change may or may not occur.

ABSTRACT

What is the significance of feeling unbearably weighed-down by everyday life on the social and economic margins of a Central American city? What are the politics of a mother feeling there is no longer any point in showing up for work given the limited impact it makes for the everyday needs of her family? Relatedly, what is the significance of another woman carrying on with the business of survival as a member of Nicaragua's urban poor majority? In this article, I question the differences and connections between two women's engagements with poverty in a shanty on the outskirts of León, Nicaragua's second biggest city. Subject to isolated analysis, each woman's corporealization of poverty appears ambiguous in terms of what they do to the inequalities that structure their existence. By engaging these corporealities as affective forces—trans-personally constituted and constituting forces that impact human action—they can be understood as agencies capable of impacting the future. The impetus to carry on and to curl up in bed may represent seemingly contradictory engagements in (or away from) social life, but they both animate a sense of the present's painful inadequacy, which may be socially transformative. Approaching bodies pushed to their limits as affective forces complicates individual-centric notions of agency, and, I argue, is crucial for understanding how and when social and political transformation becomes imaginable and achievable (or not) in particular contexts. [affect; agency; suffering; the body; violence; Nicaragua; inequality; social transformation; neoliberalism]

NOTES

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1. All place and personal names in this article are pseudonyms.
2. This research complies with AAA ethics guidelines and was approved by the sponsoring university's Research Ethics Board.
3. I was commonly told, or heard in conversations between poor Nicaraguans, that "*Nosotros los pobres somos jodidos*" (We the poor are fucked).
4. Author's translation.

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