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**NOTHING TO SAY: KEEPING THE BODY IN PLAY IN THE STRUGGLE FOR  
LGBTQ RIGHTS IN PUERTO RICO**

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On May 17<sup>th</sup> 2013, the Committee against Homophobia and Discrimination, a community-based activist group, held a march from outside the Governor's mansion to the Capitol building in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico. The day before, the Island legislature had passed the first bill outlawing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment.<sup>1</sup> Local writer David Caleb Acevedo—an out gay man and activist—attended the march and generated a considerable amount of controversy both among demonstrators and in the general public, due to the message scribbled on his poster board: “Keep your fucking god out of my body” [my translation]. For many, Caleb's aggressive tone and explicit language weren't in sync with a demonstration that sought to bring together representatives from a wide variety of social, political and religious circles, including public officials, celebrities and religious leaders. His message contrasted brutally with the

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<sup>1</sup> Senate bill 238 provides protection from employment discrimination in both government and private sector jobs. The bill, however, as signed into law suffered through several amendments that limited its reach. Among them, in its final version, the law does not define gender identity, but rather leaves it to be interpreted and defined as deemed necessary on a case-by-case basis. It also excludes employees in church-funded organizations from protection. For more information, see:

<http://www.primerahora.com/noticias/gobierno-politica/nota/enmiendasdelacamarareducenalcanceladelproyecto238-923809/> and <https://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/05/28/lgbtq-rights-in-puerto-rico-slowly-improve-step-by-step/>.

majority of slogans chanted during the activity, which mostly made reference to equal rights, diversity, tolerance and social justice. Thus, for many, Caleb and his sign did a disservice to “the cause”, inasmuch as they were unnecessarily inflammatory, divisive, immature and offensive to present and future Christian allies.

In response to his critics, Caleb published an article in a local online magazine, *El Post Antillano*. In it, he explained the motivations behind his self-proclaimed “performance” within the larger context of the struggle for equal rights for the LGBTTTQ community in Puerto Rico. According to Caleb,

Keep your fucking God out of my body is a message that seeks various objectives. First, that we cannot accomplish a separation of church and state under the auspices of “We are all equal because god loves us all the same” (please note the lower case g). Our beautiful constitution states: “No law shall be approved establishing any religion nor will any religious exercise be prohibited. *There will be complete separation of church and state.*” Second, it should be clear that diversity reigns in the country, not only within the LGBTTTTQQIA community, but in the macro. On this point, a binary was made evident within our own community: the religious fundamentalist LGBTTT [sector] and the new atheist-humanist-secular community of hetero-queer alliance. Third: I had to show the fundamentalist bullies that bullying hurts and there’s not better way to do it than by way of the law of the talion. In this life there are people with whom tact and diplomacy simply don’t work. It’s the same people that only understand when your force them to be in solidarity. After all, if we’re talking about diversity in perspectives, we should also talk about diversity in regards to disposition, intellectual capacities and languages. Fourth: my plan also was to trap those who wore masks and invite them

to fall over their swords. It's this last objective that caused the greatest commotion. That was my most transgressive act.<sup>2</sup>

As it pertains to transgressions, it might be worthwhile to note that the message in Spanish read “cabrón dios”, which I translated as “fucking god” above, due to the customary use that the term “cabrón” receives on the Island and the way in which the message was generally interpreted (i.e. damned, cursed god). However, “cabrón” actually means fucked, which, of course, implies a sexualization of god. Something along the lines of: If god can get fucked over by another, then it stands to reason that god fucks. And god, after all, is not supposed to fuck. Thus, he could only ever be fucked over metaphorically, right? So, who's god fucking anyway?

Alas, these questions strike me as impertinent, as if I were somehow trying to make light of a serious issue. Much like Caleb was thought to do, because, as the logic goes, only those not serious about LGBTIQ rights would risk annoying members of that community, its allies and the general public with a message of that nature. But it is precisely the nature of the message that deserves further interrogation. There is something to say about the fact that Caleb's message—regardless of the lack of seriousness or conviction that may have been read into it— was read in strictly political terms: Keep your fucking god out of the body of a gay man in Puerto Rico *necessarily* means respect the constitutional mandate regarding the separation of church and state. In this reading, the message is presumed to have been directed at the Christian lobbyists that sought to pressure the legislature into defeating the proposed bill<sup>3</sup>—an interpretation that coincides with Caleb's

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<sup>2</sup> Caleb Acevedo, D. (May, 2013) “Un trapo de cartel: Explicar lo inexplicable” in *El Post Antillano*. Available online at: <http://elpostantillano.net/justicia-social/5831-david-caleb-acevedo.html> (January 7, 2015) [my translation].

<sup>3</sup> Religious organizations in Puerto Rico, representatives of the Christian right, have deep ties with lawmakers, and regularly organize multitudinous marches and demonstrations on the steps of the Capitol building in an effort to impede legislation that alters the status quo

original motivation, as manifested in his article, given his praising of our “beautiful” constitution. Thus, to read sex into it would be to misinterpret the message. However, I would argue that some misinterpretation is necessary in order to salvage the political character of his performance.

In what follows, I will seek to offer an impertinent (mis)reading of Caleb’s performance within the larger context of the discourse that frames the struggle for LGBTTTQ rights in Puerto Rico. In particular, I will discuss the manner in which the body as bearer of the signs of sex and sexuality is stricken from most activists’ agenda inasmuch as it is thought of as danger zone for any serious dialogue on the matter of sexual orientation and equality on the Island.

The struggle for LGBTTTQ rights in Puerto Rico has been framed within the contours of law and love. Under the banner of “every right for every love” [my translation], LGBTTTQ activism has centered on the dismantling of the Island’s same-sex marriage ban and other related legal provisions that either directly harm or do not offer protection to, individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation. While local critics have been right to point out the particular trappings of a unitary focus on same-sex marriage—versus say, an anti-matrimony discourse— as the lynchpin of the struggle, what is particularly disturbing is the movement’s ideological dependence on the language of love and its related virtues (tolerance, acceptance, diversity), which are to be implemented in an incremental fashion thru legislation as well as in people’s everyday life by way of affective and effective

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on matters such as same-sex marriage, abortion (which still appears on the Puerto Rican penal code), adoption rights and gender perspective in education. As it pertains to the anti-discrimination bill, religious groups lobbied extensively against it and although they were unsuccessful in defeating it, they were the driving force behind many, if not all the amendments the bill sustained before being approved by both the Senate and the House of Representatives. For more information, see: <http://www.noticel.com/noticia/142379/grupos-religiosos-cabildean-a-fortaleza-para-evitar-firma-en-ley-de-238-y-488.html>.

interpersonal contact. Thus, the preeminent activist group *Puerto Rico para Tod@s* [*Puerto Rico for Everybody*], by way of its spokesperson Pedro Julio Serrano, places a premium on political lobbying and strategic alliances with public officials, as well as on reporting thru social media the countless encounters with people of all walks of life [mostly Christian and elderly] who have suddenly [usually because a loved one has recently ‘come out’] become convinced of the need for true equality [read: same sex marriage] among heterosexual and gay peoples [where trans people and others fit within the scheme is often rather fuzzy].

Caleb, in his article, rightly points out that this discourse “invisibilizes and returns to the closet non-Christian LGBTT peoples, agnostics, atheists, people with Aids, those that could never fit. It is an unnecessary attempt to whiten and disinfect, cure, sterilize the struggle.” What is intriguing is that Caleb’s recoil from Christianity is equal to his stated affection for and adherence to [something so unsexy as] the Puerto Rican constitution and local law. It seems strange to herald the supposed beauty of a document that does not guarantee equal protection on the basis of sexual orientation, for example, or to seek recourse from a legal establishment that did not decriminalize gay sexual practices of its own accord.<sup>4</sup> Thus, to read the message scribbled on the poster board as a formally political statement that uses sex as a metaphor for the trumping of religion by law, is to empty the message of all its radical potentialities. It turns the body itself—the one holding the poster board with the word ‘body’ scribbled in black, among the thousands of other bodies marching—into a mere site of contention for

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<sup>4</sup> As a U.S. colony, Federal law and jurisprudence is applicable in Puerto Rico and takes precedence over local law and jurisprudence. Thus, Puerto Rican women have a right to abortion under *Roe v. Wade*. Similarly, *Lawrence v. Texas* grants protection to sex acts between persons of the same sex. These rights and protections, therefore, were not granted by local lawmakers. Moreover, they have been interpreted as an imperialist imposition. As such, both abortion and sodomy continue to appear in the local penal code, despite considerable opposition from feminist groups.

competing ideologies. In this fashion, the march—the occupation of public space by the bodies of those that have felt slighted by both law and religion—is discounted as an event, a moment, a happening in and of itself that may usher in its own political consequences outside the realm of the law.

According to Rancière, “a political moment occurs when the temporality of consensus is disrupted. It occurs when a force is capable of exposing the imagination of the relevant community and of contrasting it with a different configuration of the relationship of each individual to everyone else”.<sup>5</sup> In this case, Caleb’s message [in both form and content] seemed to undercut and/or contradict the harmonious gathering of representatives from diverse (and conflicting) social sectors. One could argue that while organizers sought to give the impression of a united front in favor of LGBTTQ rights, Caleb’s presence there negated any possible claim of a collective body of opposition. Rather, what his performance brought out, at least in part, is that the occupation of public space by individuals—no matter how well planned or even “curated” by an organization—is never a unitary enunciator of a single, coherent message. Rather, it is always a discontinuous, messy aggregate of the embodied thoughts and feelings of those that, for whatever reason, decided to show up. In this sense, “keep your fucking god out of my body” is also “keep your fucking poster board to yourself”. The beauty of this “threat” to a fellow demonstrator, of course, is that while it may prove impossible to reconcile one demonstrator’s poster board with that of another, they are after all held up high over their heads as part of the same event. They share the same start and end points of the march, even if they may not necessarily be marching [metaphorically speaking] in the same direction. Here I follow Butler, when she states:

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<sup>5</sup> Rancière, J. (2014). *Moments Politiques: Interventions 1977-2009*. New York: Seven Stories Press, xii.

The final aim of politics is not simply to surge forth together, constituting a new sense of the ‘people’ even if sometimes, for the purposes of radical democratic change – which I do endorse – it is important to surge forth in ways that claim and alter the attention of the world for some rather specific purposes. After all, something has to hold such a group together, some demand, some felt sense of injustice and unlivability, some shared intimation of the possibility of change, and that change has to be fuelled by a resistance to, minimally, existing and expanding inequalities, ever-increasing conditions of precarity for many populations both locally and globally, forms of authoritarian and securitarian control that seek to suppress democratic processes and movements.<sup>6</sup>

I would argue that Caleb’s performance could be read as an attempt to gauge how minimal was the ‘something’ that held the group together. What it uncovered, however, was in Rancière’s terms, the police: “an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees those bodies are assigned by the name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise”.<sup>7</sup> Response to Caleb’s presence both during and after the demonstration made evident the conditions that had to be met in order for demonstrators’ bodies and speech acts to be considered as legitimate bearers of the marks and signs of a collective struggle. This became painfully evident at the end point of the march, when demonstrators arrived at the steps of the Capitol building.

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<sup>6</sup> Butler, J. (2013). Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitions and Street Politics. In Kuzma, M. et al (eds.) *The State of Things*. Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art Norway OCA, 166.

<sup>7</sup> Rancière, J. (1999). *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 29.

The march, according to plan, was to culminate with an artistic intervention. Caleb proceeded to stand amongst the crowd of performers with his poster board to pose for pictures. Several photographers and others attempted to dissuade him from appearing in the photographs among the rest of the performers—many of which were adorned with body paint, donned elaborate costumes and posed with signs allusive to the main themes of the demonstration: inclusiveness, diversity, equality. Caleb refused. Photographers, then, attempted to take shots from angles that either avoided or minimized his presence. His body was to be stricken from the activists' own record of the demonstration insomuch as it did not comply with the unstated preconditions for enunciation in place for the march: acts must be pretty and pleasing and positive [whatever that means]. Thus, it simply was not proper for Caleb to appear as part of the event for posterity's sake. This attempt at exclusion brings to mind Butler and Athanasiou's dialogue on dispossession. In particular, the distinction Athanasiou draws between the pressure for subjectivities to "take their proper place instead of taking place"<sup>8</sup>. Caleb's refusal to move—his stated desire to ruin the picture—can be read as his refusal to stay in his proper place. Athanasiou argues:

The intertwined bodily and territorial forces of dispossession play out in the exposure of bodies-in-place, which can become the occasion of subjugation, surveillance, and interpellation. It can also become the occasion of situated acts of resistance, resilience, and confrontation with the matrices of dispossession, through appropriating the ownership of one's own body from these oppressive matrices. Acted upon, and yet acting, bodies-in-place and bodies-out-of-place at

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<sup>8</sup> Butler, J. and Athanasiou, A. (2013). *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Cambridge: Polity, 20.

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once embody and displace the conditions of intelligible embodiment and agency.<sup>9</sup>

As it regards Caleb's out-of-placeness, one could argue that his insistence on standing among the "legitimate" demonstrators is not a corrective gesture. Rather than providing a more accurate and complete picture of the bodies and voices that presently make up LGBTIQ movement in Puerto Rico, to contrast with the more stylized and therefore, policed version that organizers' sought to memorialize, Caleb's presence in the event offers a glimpse into the possibilities of acts of political opposition that hinge on impropriety as a mode of ingovernability. Insomuch as Caleb's presence in those pictures impedes a tight, harmonious narrative of the event, and thus of the movement; insomuch, as it may create doubt in the onlooker regarding the agreed upon creed and goals of the struggle, it serves as a reminder that no politics is ever fully settled.

At this point, it might be worthwhile to make a distinction between his performance and his own interpretation of the act. Caleb's imagination as manifested on the poster board far exceeds the reasoning offered in his article. In explaining the message by alluding to legal constructs, he constricts the space for understanding the political moment he authored, reducing it to an expression of dissent in the face of the historical collusion of religion and law in Puerto Rico. This reduction, I would speculate, is intended to validate and/or justify the controversial expression, by attaching it to a generally recognized and legitimate political issue: the separation of church and state. In Rancière's terms, it serves to reestablish consensus by erasing the disruption caused by way of a corrective reading of the message. The disruption in this case is sex. Or rather, the retreat to sex, to the body, when neither religion nor law provide the necessary space for the diversity of the bodies that may come in contact with each other within the

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contours of a political demonstration and outside of it. In this sense, “keep your fucking god out of my body” could also be understood to mean “keep us out of your construction of the body [politic], we have our own bodies to look after”. Butler writes: “Bodies assemble precisely to show that they are bodies, and to let it be known politically what it means to persist as a body in this world, what requirements must be met for bodies to survive, and what conditions make a bodily life, which is the only life we have, finally livable”.<sup>10</sup>

Following Butler, perhaps the most transgressive and politically wonderful message scribbled on a poster board and held high up over a demonstrator’s head would be—to quote poet Sampson Starkweather—”watch me/ stand/ for something/ with nothing/ to say”.<sup>11</sup> Transposing this message unto Caleb’s poster board would focus the onlooker’s gaze on his body’s refusal to move, on its presumed impropriety and out-of-placeness in that march. There would be nothing to say because nothing *else* would need to be said of his “taking place”. His body would, in effect, occupy and take up all the space available for enunciation. To speak would be (almost) to explain it away. Like Caleb himself (almost) did.

Now, back to the original message and performance. Critics were particularly upset because Caleb seemed to be deriving some sort of pleasure from “ruining” the demonstration. His sly smile while holding the poster board signaled, for many, devious delight. On this point it would perhaps be intriguing (and entertaining) to stop and play. The message, in Spanish, “mantén tu cabrón dios fuera de mi cuerpo” could easily have been misread by any passer by as follows: “mete tu cabrón dios en mi cuerpo” [stick your fucking god in my body]. Thus Caleb’s protest against the undue

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<sup>10</sup> Butler, *supra*, 166.

<sup>11</sup> Starkweather, S. (2013) *The First Four Books of Sampson Starkweather*. Austin: Birds LLC, 147.

influence of religion over state action—which, in his message, was portrayed as a type of sexual aggression—becomes a straightforward invitation/demand for sex. To (mis)read Caleb in this manner is to rearticulate the terms of the proposed coalition that demonstrators were intent on making visible under the banner of LGBTTTQ rights. In this (mis)reading, the preeminent condition for coalition building is not whatever ethical-political consensus might be reached regarding the legal provisions that should be in place to guarantee equality on the basis of sexual orientation, but rather the (improper) possibility of all those people—from the religious and LGBTTTQ communities especially— coming into contact with each other “en la calle y en la cama” [on the street and in bed]. God, here, would be nothing but a play thing between sexual partners. That, at the very least, would be something to smile about. And at most, it could very well serve as that ‘minimal something in common’ among diverse groups—the body and its potential for sexual [politicized] play. Or, in the alternative, the body and the potential to make (improper) commentary regarding the sexual activity between diverse groups of people participating in the same struggle.

To misread Caleb’s message then as an invitation/demand for sex is to hint at a deeper, more provocative, and I would argue, more liberating and inspiring complicity between members of the LGBTTTQ community and their Christian allies. Inscribed in that invitation/demand for sex is the privileging of sexual freedom (and socio-political equality) above all else, including belief systems and group identity. Furthermore, “stick you fucking god in my body”, in a way, drives to the heart of the question implied in Butler’s comments above: what conditions make a bodily life finally livable? The answer, implied in both Caleb’s original message and in this possible misreading of it, is that the body [and its sexual and political needs and possibilities] trump both law (religious, state) and love. That is, if we choose to read his performance against his own stated intentions for it; as full of sexual innuendo and ripe for a ‘multifarious array’ of (mis)readings.

But sexual innuendo and commentary are not allowed within the struggle for LGBTTTQ rights in Puerto Rico. As it stands, the struggle can be neither

sexual nor sexy, for that matter. Above all, it must be loving. And tolerant. And diverse, theoretically speaking, for diversity in sexual practices as well as diversity in beliefs and modes of protest seems to be highly discouraged. But, as Elizabeth Grosz, argues:

If systems of policing, the police, are everywhere, then the point is to make our own work, our practices, as free from such policing as possible, not because unrestrained thought or action is always right (quite the contrary) but because, under scrupulous policing, nothing new can be produced, except perhaps evasions. Indeed the right to make mistakes and to be wrong is just as important—perhaps more so—than the right to be accorded the status of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

In this spirit, how about putting this on a poster board and holding it up high over your head: “Watch me stand for [this one minimal] something [in common] with nothing [else] to say”.

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<sup>12</sup> As quoted in the form of an epigraph on an unnumbered page in Bellamy, D. (2006). *Academonia*. San Francisco: Krupskaya.

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