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From Point Zero to the Future:
Struggles over Housing and Notes
for a Feminist Grammar of Organization

Looking at the world that surrounds us and understanding it or filling it with meaning is an action that presupposes a subject: an eye that sees and composes a certain body; the territory and place of that gaze. This text seeks to describe the territories of the favelas as a fertile ground for the birth of organizational forms that can strengthen struggles toward an emancipated society, in which life is free.¹ It aims to trace the trajectory of resistance in those territories, the occupations, and evictions that shaped and continue shaping them. It highlights the feminized bodies in struggle against forced evictions of communities or carrying out occupations for housing; the conflictual recuperation of parts of the territory to construct *commons*² that nourish our resistance. This effort is necessary because we cannot look at Indigenous women—in defense of forests—or Black women—defending immaterial ancestral territories—without recognizing that the women of the favelas are the daughters of those other women, continuing their resistance and resignifying it in places that are close to us and our everyday lives.

Here I draw on my own experience as a woman who was born and raised in a favela and who has been an activist in the housing movement and carrying out urban occupations for nearly two decades. More concretely, I began my activism in the housing movement with the Santo Dias occupation in 2003, in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, joining the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST). The Santo Dias occupation was the first of many that I helped build in São Paulo and then in other states, as I worked

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on articulating the national coordination of that movement (Revelli 2007). In September 2010, due to political differences related to the concept of organization, I left the MTST to later help found, in 2011, the Luta Popular (Popular Struggle) movement, which I have been a member of ever since and that also carries out urban occupations for housing, as well as rural land occupations for housing or family farming.

Every occupation is unique because each periphery, despite suffering from common problems, crystallizes a specific trajectory of peoples and territories, giving each process its own particular characteristics. These occupations have always been in large, idle urban housing projects, generally embedded in peripheral areas of the city, that bring together thousands of people who mostly come from situations of unbearable rent that take up more than half of a family income of three minimum wages.

Homeless Women and Women of the Favelas: Who Are We?

In Brazil, we are the daughters of the encounter between women who were enslaved and impoverished by colonization, women who were dispossessed and placed in forced diasporas, who tied their bodies to this territory in dispute. Black, Indigenous, and Afro-Indigenous women—expelled from their forests, kidnapped from their continent and raped—they are the face of poor communities. They weave to protect life in the midst of destruction where, nonetheless, they reconstruct communitarian webs.

That is how the favelas and peripheries of large Brazilian cities were formed. They are territorial arrangements that arose from many clashes, evictions, and new attempts to reconfigure life in situations that are almost always getting worse. These territories enclose a juxtaposition of time in layers where each generation of women keeps alive the memory of a massacre that they survived: from chattel slavery to domestic slavery (handed over to rich families as domestic servants), from teen marriage, fleeing from hunger or thirst, to working in factories; from being abandoned in prisons to the pain of recovering the body of one's son in some alleyway, murdered by bullets in a democratic regime; to schools that discipline bodies, sexist and full of bars like prisons.

Violence is the main tool of accumulation and progress, which becomes clearer in times of crisis, although it spans centuries. Feminism has made a fundamental intervention to break with the social structures that we are accustomed to: it has given flesh and blood to concepts that are developed in our everyday lives, that stretch across all dimensions of life,

including that which has been called the domestic or private sphere, and that sustains an essential part of the reproduction of this society.

Embodying, in concrete bodies, the operation of the apparatuses that mortify us, feminism shows us to be a mosaic of Latin American women. We are colonized, mostly non-white, with different trajectories, yet linked by the common catastrophe of eviction: the dispossession that generates diaspora and uprooting. Our bodies and our territories are open to the unceasing extraction (Cavallero and Gago 2019; Gago 2019) that capital carries out to reproduce itself, pulling everything into its orbit with its centrifugal force that attempts to transform all life into something quantifiable and exchangeable, into commodities, destroying and deprecating whatever it finds.

Its tentacles are seen in our kitchens. Food, ready to eat, appears as magic if women's labor is rendered invisible. If we broaden our view, we will see the probes in our favelas and our communities that transfer life and blood from the poor to the *official city* that, as a beautiful commodity, hides the invisible city that feeds it. These structures are similar to those that have provided some countries with civilizing power (*potencia*) and progress, hiding the invisible labor of enslaved and exploited peoples. The founding "theft" of colonization is actually permanent and ongoing.

Permanent Theft and the Favelas

Favelas and peripheries were constructed through the expulsion of peoples from *common* lands that were transformed into economic assets and commodities. The expelled populations became nomads through waves of migration. They were dragged around as a labor force for sub-waged industrialization processes, constituting cities in precarious conditions, relocating in clandestine settlements, hills, and peripheries in search of ways to reconstruct life. Plants seek sun light and life seeks a way of continuing.

From the perspective of industrialization, Brazil was a geographically immense country with an army of available workers that had absolutely nothing, because they had been liberated from their condition of slaves, but not from their condition as *second class humans*. That characteristic marks the whole working class in Brazil. From the 1960s to the 1980s, those elements that helped design our urbanization also produced its unavoidable counterpart: the favelas, the *informal city*.

The neoliberal blood bath of the 1990s combined transformations in the world of work with the crisis of union organizations. In the favelas, it was

women who suffered the violence that accompanies capitalist realignment. They wept in funerals in cemeteries, such as São Luis,³ in the southern periphery of São Paulo, while they fed whole communities alone and sheltered—as much as they could—life from the attacks of bullets, hunger, and prisons.

Struggles in defense of territory are also always struggles in defense of life. It is popular wisdom that there is no way of existing without occupying a place and that this place is constituted as our territory, where we build *community*, where we defend ourselves and remake ourselves in defense of our own. It is necessary to defend oneself from hunger and dismay, and therefore, eating and living are inevitable necessities for a life that desires to continue.

In the 1990s, as occupations increased, conflicts over urban lands intensified, attempting to stop forced displacement and removals or to demand social housing. Women, anonymous and indispensable, participated in all the conflicts.

The fog of a patriarchal understanding of what constitutes struggle, what it means to organize, and what is political and what is not obscures much of women's activism. These forms of activism that are rendered invisible—like reproductive and care work—disappear from the narrative of what is called resistance. At the same time, they transfer energies that fuel male representatives and hierarchical organizational structures, even among progressive sectors. We could consider it another moment of patriarchal extractivism, but it takes place in spaces that are supposedly forged to counteract the extractive logic of capitalism.

Before I thought about feminism, I thought about territory. When organizing in movements in the favela or urban land occupations, I was surprised to see that many elaborations about the “revolutionary subject” did not address what I was experiencing. Instead, they insisted that the factory was a more important space for organization than the neighborhood and its effects.

Territory has been treated as a secondary element in class struggle because, according to a certain reading of capital, it is not the place of production, but of the reproduction of life; and the perspective of life has not been taken into consideration by labor and development. Therefore, all the activities and relationships produced there have been ignored as (potential or concrete) political interventions and their subjects, mostly women, have remained invisible. The feminist movement is currently challenging that invisibility, which remains because, even when the importance of conflicts over urban land is recognized, that movement utilizes a certain patriarchal grammar that is incapable of benefiting from the reflections offered by reality.

The Birth of the Favelas: Occupations

Urban land occupations happen in many different ways. Pressure on household economies has made rent the main expense for millions of poor families that are trapped every month in the choice of either paying the rent or buying food. Many of those families are headed by women who either are inserted into the labor market in a horribly precarious way or support themselves through informal, unstable, seasonal, and/or ultra-precarious forms of work.

When we arrive at an empty plot of land, everything must be done. Assuming a state of permanent conflict in the disputed territory, the state is only present as a police force acting to safeguard the property rights of real estate speculators. The fetish of masculine rationality of institutions, which are shown to be exploitative, oppressive, and cruel, comes undone. Everything must be done and nobody other than the occupiers will do it. Solutions to problems of water, sanitation, energy, infrastructure, security, food, circulation, common spaces, among others, are taken into our hands through the, not always conscious, exercise of being our own government.

Obviously, occupations are not islands and they suffer from all the contradictions and structural problems that surround them. These are not “autonomous zones”—that lead us to being a small exercise of self-government in the midst of a geography governed by logics that operate against us. Thus, occupations function as reflections of the true face of the capitalist system: property and profit are placed above everything else, life is worth nothing to them, and the state exists to guarantee that that logic does not change.

At war against everything, occupations cannot be maintained without a practical unity that is primarily due to the imperative to stay alive. However, uniting thousands of people without a home in a common space creates a qualitative shift, displacing the housing problem from the private sphere to the recently constituted communitarian space.

The Heart Is in the Kitchen

The composition of the occupations is undeniably feminine, not only in quantity but also in terms of the level of dedication and activity. As those most concerned with the fate of their offspring, women are divided between domestic tasks, childcare, sub-employment, and activities in the occupations, imagining—in a present marked by sacrifice—a better future, where the specter of unemployment is not associated with having to live with children on the streets.

A sexual division of labor is immediately produced: while men take on the work of construction, security, coordination, “external” articulation, and representation, women settle into the work of cleaning, organization, child-care, and cooking. Since occupations demonstrate how institutions function, they also highlight how certain tasks are essential for maintaining existence, and the labor of the kitchen becomes the most important for everyone.

In the words of Aline, a young occupier, “before the occupation, I would think about how I was going to feed my children; after the occupation, we would think about how to feed a thousand families.” Without resources, women organize groups that go to businesses and markets to obtain food donations to supply the community kitchens. Work schedules are designed based on each person’s capacity to donate time and food is prepared and served to everyone.

Made from plastic or wood, the huts are extremely precarious, places reserved for resting and sleeping. Everything else happens in the common space of the land: there are no individual kitchens or bathrooms, not even individual electricity (because of the fire risk) nor running water. All of the hidden tasks of the home are on full display, in front of everyone. The kitchens—the place of constant work, the reference point around which people are fed, the place of communication, where notices and the decisions made in assemblies are posted—constitute the heart of the occupations.

Inverted Mirrors

The communal space of the occupations blurs the boundaries between the public and the private: the land does not belong to the person occupying it; the house is the land itself, the occupation as a whole, and the limits of the nuclear family are momentarily dispersed in community relationships, as an extended family (with all its contradictions). This apparent vagueness seems to facilitate women’s self-organization and allows them to feel more secure in intervening in everyday issues, simultaneously household issues and community issues.

Thus, women gradually insert themselves into almost all the collective spaces, except for those that they see as complex or ruled by external laws that they believe they do not understand, such as public representation or political or legal negotiation. They occupy all the places where life is reproduced, but they delegate to men (or are usurped) the “leadership.” Then comes a latent state of dual *potencia*: the women who sustain life-supporting dynamics do not enjoy receive recognition and the distance that women

maintain from the spaces of political representation-negotiation corresponds to the leadership's distance from the *potencia* of reproducing existence.

It is women, not the "leaders," who know the specific difficulties of each family, who know everyone's children and the violence suffered by many women, as well as men's aggressive behavior—including that of "representatives." Although men might be the narrators of the collective battle, it is women who provide the key information that enables them to articulate the discourse. In the community environment, women debate, they take positions, and advise one another about the violence that they themselves or other women suffer. By denaturalizing violence, they open the door to questioning hierarchies and the concentration of *potencia*. They will not put up with being beaten or silenced, or seeing their workmates being beaten or silenced.

A Feminist Grammar of Organization

Without a "central leadership" in which they see themselves and their needs effectively represented, women forge a new organizational grammar in which collective labor and mutual aid are more important criteria than institutional recognition. That is why women's self-organization in urban occupations and favelas has often been disqualified as depoliticized and even prohibited by male leaders that see them as "uprisings" against them. This self-organization is coherently aligned with the exercise of self-government and the questioning of the state, judicial *potencia*, and real estate speculation, which are emphasized in the act of occupying. It is men who—fueling hierarchies that reject women—act with inconsistency.

In the favelas, women are found in health clinics, the entrances and exits to day cares and schools, churches, gardens, and markets, in search of charity and inexpensive food. In occupations, they are in the kitchens, marches, cleaning work, assemblies, and conversation groups around nocturnal fires. Their communication has always been disqualified as gossip and is not limited to officially extraordinary moments: it is constant communication that does not claim a sole source of diffusion, it is communication through different dynamic points of contact without establishing one moment, space, or person as the only legitimate source of information.

As they do not find themselves in bodies of "*potencia*" and in the official communication narrative, women are pushed to organize and act, producing networks and non-conventional models of organization that escape hierarchies and function semi-clandestinely, at the margin of political superstructures. That is why, beneath the radar and without a model, we can

weave indigenous responses based on organically rooted common necessities. These responses are new *commons* generated by our struggles.

This operation creates a political grammar in which health care, childhood, old age, basic education, healthy and sufficient food, care policies, evictions, and violence in impoverished territories are central themes. This is seen in how women are the main spokespeople in the struggle against genocide and imprisonment: battalions of mothers, sisters, and daughters of men who have been murdered or incarcerated, as control over poor populations grows and deepens, to try to stop them from rebelling.

All of these issues—marginalized in the masculine grammar of labor and development—are the prime target of the capitalist reorganization that we are experiencing today. That reorganization leads to increasingly deeper levels of exploitation and oppression to sustain the profits of the dominant classes.

Although capitalism is essentially patriarchal, it recognizes the danger of this organizational grammar and dispute, attempting to co-opt, domesticate, or repress feminist movements. It also intensifies violence against the wall of women in the favelas that, in defense of life, acts as a barrier to the expansion of capital and its privatization and structural adjustment measures. Moreover, impoverished women, although they do not identify as feminists, when they are violently stripped of almost everything, their bodies touch *point zero* and they emerge defending what remains of themselves and what appears as the substance that must urgently be rendered visible and radicalized in all anti-capitalist struggles: the defense of life.

It is only possible to defend life in its totality if one is in constant contact with it, its contradictions and everyday invisible dimensions. Therefore, it is impossible to concentrate *potencia* legitimately: concentration requires distancing and distance is an obstacle to legitimacy. Sometimes this logic also leads to questioning women who want to legitimize themselves through class privileges and hierarchies, or the defense of a supposed “rationality and political pragmatism” that turns a blind eye to the reproduction of sexist mechanisms by male leaders or organizations.

These feminist grammars and networks make it necessary to name and render visible all the labor available to serve their existence, challenging hierarchies between tasks and arguments of “technical authority” or “theory.” Once the fetish is dismantled, they are allowed to legitimately speak about problems experienced by all women, expanding the feminist network beyond places that identify as feminist, rooting its appearance in reality and renewing it with the new contradictions and responses added by each new moment of organizational expansion.

Revisiting—from the perspective of this grammar—the praxis of women in favelas and occupations is another step that aims to remake the unity of subordinated life, connecting women and diverse perspectives in ways that are unthinkable within the anachronistic forms of organization that have been impermeable to the changes that have impacted us as exploited people throughout recent decades. Our formulation embraces increasingly more dimensions of life and the translation of this organizational grammar, as a living and contradictory development, is affirmed in our search to *construct narratives and tools of struggle that can be changed, understood, and operated by any working woman, favela resident, or mother.*

—Translated by Liz Mason-Deese

Notes

- 1 This work is inspired by the work of Beatriz Nascimento about the *Quilombo* and its continuities. A Black intellectual who was assassinated in the 1990s, much of her work still remains unpublished, but for an introduction to her work see Nascimento 2018.
- 2 The ideas of the commons and point zero in this text are inspired by the work of Silvia Federici (2012).
- 3 Since 1981, 227,000 people have been buried in the Cemetery Jardim São Luiz. The majority are young, Black, or Afro-descendants. It is located next to another district of neighborhoods, Jardim Ângela, which, in 1996, the United Nations declared the most violent region in the world due to the number of homicides.

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