

# FEMINIST INTERNATIONAL

How to change  
everything

VERÓNICA  
GAGO

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*How to Change  
Everything*

Verónica Gago

Translated by  
Liz Mason-Deese



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For Raquel, Nati, and Luci

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# Contents

*Translator's Foreword*

*Introduction: Feminist Potencia; or, The Desire to Change Everything*

1. #WeStrike: Toward a Political Theory of the Feminist Strike
2. Violence: Is There a War on and against Women's Bodies?
3. Body-Territory: The Body as Battlefield
4. A Feminist Economics of Exploitation and Extraction
5. The Assembly as a Situated Apparatus of Collective Intelligence
6. The Feminist International
7. Counteroffensive: The Specter of Feminism
8. Eight Theses on the Feminist Revolution

*Acknowledgments*

*Notes*

*Index*

## Chapter 2

# Violence: Is There a War on and against Women's Bodies?

Can we speak of *war* to name the escalation in deaths of women, lesbians, travestis, and trans people (80 percent of which occur at the hands of current or former lovers, boyfriends, or husbands)? Clearly it is not a war in the sense of a confrontation between two symmetrical sides or under clear rules of engagement. But it does seem necessary to qualify the type of conflict that today, in Argentina alone, involves the death of one woman, lesbian, travesti, or trans person every eighteen hours. That number continued to rise even after the first International Women's Strike in 2017, reaching its terrifying zenith in the month immediately following the strike. As the modalities of crimes diversify, the tendency is for them to become more and more gruesome. It is an escalation with no end.

Why do they kill us? The reconceptualization of sexist violence has been a key element of the feminist movement in recent years. This has emerged in two ways. First, we have pluralized its definition: we stopped talking "only" about violence against women and feminized bodies, and have instead connected it to a set of other forms of violence, without which its historic intensification could not be understood. Speaking of violence starting from femicides and travesticides positions them as its culminating point, but it also poses a challenge: to not limit ourselves to its necropolitical accounting, the tallying of femicides and victims.

In this sense, a recognition of the pluralization of violence is strategic: it is a concrete form of *connection* that creates *intelligibility* and, therefore, enables a displacement of the *totalizing figure of the victim*. Pluralization of the meaning of sexist violence is not only about quantifying and cataloging different forms of violence. It is much more complex; it is a way of mapping its *simultaneity* and its *interrelation*. It connects imploded homes with lands razed by agribusinesses, with the wage gap and invisibilized domestic work; it links the violence of

austerity and the crisis with the ways in which those are confronted by women's protagonism in popular economies, and it relates all of this with financial exploitation through public and private debt. It ties together ways of disciplining disobedience through outright state repression and the persecution of migrant movements, with the imprisonment of poor women for having abortions and the criminalization of subsistence economies. Moreover, it highlights the racist imprint on each one of these forms of violence. Nothing in this web of violence is obvious: to trace the modes of connection is to produce meaning, because it renders visible the machinery of exploitation and extraction of value that involves increasing thresholds of violence, which have a differential (and therefore strategic) impact on feminized bodies.

This work of weaving—and the strike is a fundamental tool for its deployment—functions precisely like a spiderweb: only by producing a political cartography, connecting the threads that make different forms of violence function as interrelated dynamics, can we denounce the ways their segmentation seeks to enclose us in isolated cells. Such a cartography implies overflowing the confines of “gender-based violence” to link it with the multiple forms of violence that make it possible. In this way, we escape the “corset” of pure victims with which they seek to pigeonhole us, to inaugurate a new political language that not only denounces violence against women's bodies, but also includes other feminized bodies in the discussion and, moreover, moves from a single definition of violence (as domestic or intimate, and therefore secluded) to understand it in relation to a web of economic, institutional, labor, colonial, and other violence.

In this political fabric we can also collectively evaluate the ways violence differentially impacts each one of us. Understood in this way, “violence” is not an enormous capital-letter word, producing that other equally enormous, equally abstract, capital-letter word: “Victim.” This is the second new element of the reconceptualization of violence: the forms taken by violence against women's bodies and feminized bodies are analyzed starting from particular situations, based on specific bodies. It is from there that a comprehension of violence as a complete phenomenon is produced. Each person's body, as a trajectory and experience, thus becomes the entry point, a concrete mode of localization, from which a specific point of view is produced: How is violence expressed? How does it take particular form in each body? How do we recognize it? How do we fight it?

This embedded understanding of violence enables a questioning that runs transversally across each space: from the family to the union, from the school to

community center, from the border to the plaza. But it does so by giving this questioning a material, familiar, corporeal anchor. While violence displays differentials of oppression and exploitation that are expressed in different concrete bodies, it also nurtures, starting from that difference, a historically novel “interclass sorority,” as the Argentine feminist sociologist Dora Barrancos has indicated.

However, an important clarification is needed: the common element is not violence; rather, the common is produced by the *situated and transversal questioning of violence*. Drawing connections between forms of violence gives us a shared perspective that is both specific and expansive, critical but not paralyzing, that links experiences. Mapping forms of violence based on their organic connection, without losing sight of the singularity of the production of the nexus between them, allows us to do something else: produce a language that goes beyond categorizing ourselves as victims.

Finally, the issue of violence proposes two other fundamental questions: What does it mean to produce feminist forms of self-defense when confronted with increased violence? And, going further: What would it mean for the feminist movement to be able to produce its own machines of justice?

## Where Is the War Today?

The war against women, lesbians, travestis, and trans people finds expression in four specific scenes, which are at the foundation of femicide today. They are the substrate prior to the production of violence, or, paraphrasing Marx, its hidden abode, where there is a logic of connection between them. This logic of connection is supplied by finance, whose specificity I will highlight throughout this book. These scenes frame a reading of the violence of neoliberalism that accounts for structural adjustment measures, as well as the way that exploitation takes root in the production of subjectivities that are compelled to precarity and nevertheless fight to prosper in structural conditions of dispossession.

The four scenes of violence to which I refer are:

- 1) The implosion of violence in homes as an effect of the crisis of the figure of the male breadwinner, and his subsequent loss of authority and privileged role in relation to his position in the labor market;
- 2) the organization of new forms of violence as a principle of authority in popular-sector neighborhoods, rooted in the expansion of illegal economies that replace other modes of provisioning resources;

3) the dispossession and looting of common lands and resources by transnational corporations, and thus the deprivation of the material autonomy of other economies; and

4) the articulation of forms of exploitation and value extraction for which the financialization of social life—particularly through the apparatus of debt—is a common code.

I would like to propose that there is an organic relationship between these four dimensions. Next I will return to the characterization of “war,” and then go back to the beginning: What sort of force responds to this offensive? In what sorts of economies is the autonomy of women, lesbians, travestis, and trans people inscribed? Here it will be necessary to return to some elements of the feminist strike. Finally, I would like to suggest that a displacement occurs here: it is because there is war *on* the body of women and feminized bodies that there is war *against* women.

### *The implosion of the home*

It is male “dignity,” sustained by what Silvia Federici calls the “patriarchy of the wage,” that is in crisis.<sup>1</sup> For men, the wage has served as an “objective” measure of their dominant position in the labor market, even as more women participate in the waged labor force. In this sense, it has functioned historically as a political tool: it ensures both the control of “obligatory” and “unpaid” work in the home for which women were responsible, establishes a representative of the boss within the household, and affirms hierarchy within the labor market. It is not that the patriarchy of the wage no longer operates by seeking to exercise that power and monopoly over the management of money. But its crisis runs deeper: today, for the majority, the wage is not guaranteed as a means of reproduction. Due to the collapse of the wage as an objective measure of male authority, sexist violence becomes “excessive” or “beyond measure” in the home: masculinities are no longer contained by the value that the wage provides them, and so they find compensatory affirmation of their authority in other ways. The crisis of unemployment, precarization, and increasingly harsh conditions of exploitation make it so that domestic violence structures the patriarchal domination previously mediated and measured by the wage (even if domestic violence was always a legitimate, albeit latent, element for “internal” discipline).

At the same time, a greater desire for autonomy is expressed by women who do not feel contained or constricted by domestic ideology, since they have

already accumulated experiences of extra-domestic work (badly paid and undervalued, but functional as a way to desert the domestic mandate), and generations of youth that have cultivated forms of contempt for the patriarchy of the wage or have directly experienced its decline. The accumulation of disobedience, intensification of autonomies, and depreciation of the figure of the waged male provider destabilize the structured modes of obedience in the monogamous, heteronormative family. In light of this situation, devalued masculinities find themselves in a desperate and violent search to relegitimize themselves. Illegal economies, especially those linked to drug trafficking and recruitment into (illegal and legal) security forces, provide that promise of masculinity.

### *New violence in the territories*

Where does the “civil war” between labor and capital take place today? Marx identified it in the working day, but now we see it broadened in both spatial terms (beyond the factory) and temporal measure (beyond the recognized working day). What violent forms does this civil war take under today’s neoliberal conditions if we look at it from the perspective of social cooperation, in which the illegal and a-legal, migrant and popular economies, as well as domestic and community work, are the key elements of new proletarian zones?

Over the past decade, unprecedented forms of violence markedly reorganized social conflict, driven by new forms of territorial authority linked to illegal economies in collusion with police, political, and judicial structures. These new forms of territorial authority confronted the popular, highly feminized economies, which were structured on the basis of social movements. It was finance, with its high level of abstraction, that took charge of this articulation, from below and from above, of subjectivities that had to procure prosperity without taking for granted the privilege of the wage as their main income. In Latin America, this was produced in connection with a neo-extractivist type of insertion in the global market (I will return to this in the following chapter). The new forms of violence are translated into an intense segmentation of hierarchized spaces based on differential access to security, which promotes a “civil war” for the defense of property between peripheral neighborhoods and the wealthy areas, but also within the more popular zones. The use of public and private security forces seeks to constrain all of those who, under the effects of the stimulus to social inclusion by means of consumption through debt, do not

have equal conditions of access to property or its defense.

Today, illegal economies “organize” the vacuum left in many spaces by the retreat of wage labor. They provide employment, resources, and belonging, as well as a mode of affirmation of male authority, all of which are confirmed through territorial control on a daily basis. This supposes an accelerated passage of the thresholds of violence that structure the everyday. It is not a coincidence that the other path of recomposition of that male authority is through recruitment in state security forces—the only widely available work in Argentina. In this way, legal and illegal forces of confrontation substitute for the majoritarian model of waged authority, decisively contributing to the increase in violence and the implosion of homes discussed above, as the violence of those security forces spills over into the home. There is one more “economy” that must be accounted for, one that is booming and growing: the churches that offer access to employment, and promises of prosperity, as they manage to weave together a network of resources in increasingly critical everyday situations. Illegal economies, on one hand, and the theology of prosperity or charity, on the other, forge different modalities of an economy of obedience in a context of everyday impoverishment.

### *The dispossession and looting of community land and life*

Understanding the offensive of agribusiness and extractivist industries on the continent requires an analysis of the ways Latin American countries have been inserted into the global market. Here, Rosa Luxemburg’s analysis stands out for its contemporary relevance: the formulation of colonial capitalist expansion against what thinkers of her era called the “formations of the natural economy”—what we might describe as the advancing march of capital’s frontiers. This means the advance of the frontiers of capital through the dispossession of lands to put an end to the self-sufficiency of peasant and Indigenous economies. She emphasized the mortgage debts of US farmers, as well as Dutch and British imperialist policy in South Africa against Black and Indigenous populations, as concrete forms of political violence, tax pressure, and introduction of cheap goods.<sup>2</sup> Diverse struggles have started to use the concept of body-territory to situate the resistances against neo-extractivist attacks primarily led by women. Such is the case of Berta Cáceres, whose murder the movement has named as a “territorial femicide.”<sup>3</sup> This point not only connects to a notion of the body as more-than-human, but that also refers to the question of

nature from a non-liberal point of view. That is, it is not about an abstract conservationism, but about confronting the modes of dispossession of the material possibilities of life—ones that today structure a direct antagonism between multinational companies and states, and the populations that are looted, displaced, and redirected in new dynamics of exploitation.

### *Finance as common code*

This analysis of the extractivist paradigm in rural settings must also be expanded to urban and suburban spaces. There, too, we find finance in multiple aspects of the “extractive operations,” from real estate speculation to mass indebtedness. In this register, it is necessary to conceptualize extractivism in broader terms, as a way that the capture of value by capital is operationalized today.<sup>4</sup> Just as capital accumulates by dispossessing peasant and Indigenous landholders, and extracting common resources from the earth, many of its leading forms in more urbanized spaces engage in a similar sort of plunder, in a retrospective capture or appropriation of socially cooperative activities that are, to some degree, autonomous from capital.

Finance thus “lands” in popular economies, long after they’ve been organized—that is, in those economies that emerged in moments of crisis, fueled by the modalities of self-management and work without a boss—and it exploits the ways in which the subaltern fabrics reproduce life in a way that cannot simply be reduced to “survival.” A multiplicity of efforts, savings, and economies are “put to work” for finance. This means that finance becomes a code that manages to homogenize that plurality of activities, income sources, expectations, and temporalities. Finance has been the most skillful and quick to detect that popular vitality and root within it a system for value extraction, one that operates directly upon the labor force as living labor. This mode of financial exploitation of social cooperation that does not have the wage as a mediating part—so crucial to understanding contemporary capitalism—therefore is best grasped as “extractive.”

### Against the Pathologization of Violence

There are advantages to accounting for the specific economy of violence against women, lesbians, travestis, and trans people as a sort of *war*, rather than via the

personal pathologies of bad men. Doing so outlines a systemic phenomenon that evades attribution to the psychological motivations of some men, which end up being understood in terms of crimes of passion. Such an interpretation ends up exonerating violent forms of masculinity, treating its crimes as exceptional, as isolated pathologies, and making a casuistry of “deviance.” This explanation based on an individualist psychology, and the very idea of “health” that patriarchy proposes for males, is questioned in the streets, is condensed into graffiti, is conceptualized in songs. It is painted on the walls: “He is not sick, he is a healthy son of the patriarchy.”

The notion of war emphasizes a dynamic of forces in conflict, and it clears away the neutralizing language of “epidemic” or “outbreak,” which would obscure that conflict. But there is another dimension to the exculpatory diagnosis of pathologization: it blames the feminist movement’s collective emergence in the streets. In their analysis of the increase in femicides, these kinds of arguments denounce the “preventive inefficiency” of massive marches,<sup>5</sup> suggesting that mobilizations do not have the capability or efficacy to prevent or diminish femicides, and therefore, that their usefulness is doubtful. They compare the increase in feminist mobilization and the increase in crimes, arguing, on the one hand, that there is a direct causal relation—that the disobedient presence of feminized bodies in the streets is itself the cause of violence. On the other, such arguments seek to confirm the “ineffectiveness” of mobilization to counteract femicidal violence.

Meanwhile, other discourses speak of a mimetic “illusion” of strength held by women, lesbians, travestis, and trans people, one that pushes them to take on “empowering” attitudes that lead to their deaths.<sup>6</sup> This argument speaks of an “effect of contagion” of the collective, claiming that rather than protecting the victims, it exposes them even more.

Those discourses attempted to read the massive #EleNão (#NotHim) mobilization in Brazil in a similar way: by trying to blame it for the subsequent electoral victory of the ultra-fascist Jair Bolsonaro. A psychologizing, guilt-producing language was also used: the march of women and LGBTQI people “awoke the monster,” they said.

The multitudinous effervescence of the movement is discredited as false, deceitful, and, above all, risky (compared to the “contagion” of a virus): it leads to trust in an experience of collective strength that is, supposedly, only dangerous and illusory—or further, counterproductive. Thus, it is a twofold strategy; these discourses attempt to make us feel guilty *and* impotent. The notion of war, on the other hand, situates us in a different economy of forces.

## The “Internal” War

Today the household has gone from being an allegedly pacified place to a battlefield marked by open, if asymmetrical, conflict. Domestic violence itself does nothing other than show scenes of a domesticity that is exploding, and the home as the site of gruesome everyday experiences. The home is no longer the warrior’s place of rest, as was proposed when the sexual division of labor assigned women the task of romanticizing the house (under the command of the “patriarchy of the wage”). Today the house is where the “warrior” (one of the classical figures of patriarchal control) seeks to wage “internal” war as a symptom of his impotence and humiliation suffered in the workplace, among other existential territories. Rather than an explosion, the image of an implosion is more apt. Violence is deployed inward. It pierces through bodies. It unravels relationships.

However, a characterization of sexist violence as something that is only connected to the domestic sphere reinforces women’s isolation in the home, confirming its borders as marking a “private” space. It is the “great enclosure” of women within the domestic sphere—something Federici speaks of, remarking that Foucault forgot to account for it among his genealogies of prisons, schools, and hospitals—that also allows for violence to be confined, as something that is suffered “inside,” in other words, privately, intimately. “I only feel unsafe when I am in my house,” explained a woman in the assembly at Villa 21–24 of Barracas, a slum in the south of Buenos Aires, in the midst of preparations for the international strike on March 8, 2018. Her statement inverts the traditional idea of the home as a space of shelter and refuge: “Luckily, when I have a problem, I tell my compañeras, who arrive before the police and are more effective than the panic button and restraining order.”

Confronting violence this way, so that it is no longer a private issue, allows us to deepen our analysis of how the webs of violence expressed “domestically” are directly linked to political, economic, labor, institutional, media, and social violence. By no longer placing our faith in solutions from the state, we alter the plane of “solutions” or responses. When we are confined to the home and the solitude that we sometimes feel when we are enclosed there, we become prisoners to the rhetoric of “saviors.” This comes not only from organizations that think solely in terms of rescue and refuge, but also from judicial and police institutions that are ineffective insofar as they are complicit in the same violence they wish to denounce. To escape confinement is to get away from the logic of rescue and refuge as the only options, and instead build denser fabrics of defense

and protection. Self-defense, thus, displaces the question to be resolved onto the organization of collective care under conditions of structural dispossession.

The discourse of redeemers and saviors is intrinsic to the victimization of women, lesbians, trans people, and travestis. Without the figure of the victim, the framework of rescue does not work. This perspective allows us to critique how much of the focus on the trafficking of women relies on this discourse and also to understand why that approach receives support from nongovernmental organizations and international financial networks, under the spiritual guidance of the church.

Similar to what happens with migrant workers, the notion of trafficking and its connection with slavery forms a part of this whole. Based on an exceptional case that is taken as emblematic, and using images that are capable of swaying public imagination (a textile worker handcuffed to the sewing machine or a young woman tied to a bed), those discourses seek to explain what they consider to be an intrinsic, *natural* submission as a general framework for understanding trafficking. This framework leaves no room for the freedom and autonomous rationality that persists despite difficult and desperate conditions.

Understood this way, the discourse of trafficking and slave labor as a totalizing perspective leads to a paternalism that is nothing other than a way of exerting control, as opposed to a more complex idea of the autonomy of women, lesbians, trans people, and travestis in difficult, violent, and adverse contexts—situations they respond to with more than mere resignation. In this sense, the trafficking discourse impedes any understanding of such forms of violence that would allow for a more profound explanation of the issue. The problem is that their argument about violence completely leaves out (1) an explanation of the exploitation of women and feminized bodies that is not moralizing; (2) the role of international funders in creating such a focus on the issue; and (3) the complex game of desire, calculus of progress, and risk that women and feminized bodies put in motion under diverse modes of migration, as well as when young women “flee” from their home. This analysis is a necessary condition for understanding how contemporary capitalism functions at its core.

By negating the strategic rationality that many of these trajectories put in play (through planning, frustration, recalculation, learning, sacrifice, appropriation), these types of analyses underestimate any knowledge in the name of an infantilization that renews, again and again, the colonial savior logic and, above all, that shows the impossibility of giving space to the rationality and voices of those involved in such processes. This problematization does not ignore extreme cases. The question is why exceptional cases are turned into the

truth of the whole phenomenon, and proposed in the media as the indisputable totalization of a much more varied and complex reality.

The perspective of trafficking constructs the figure of the woman—and especially the migrant woman, or daughter of migrants—as the perfect victim. It moralizes and judges her actions, while it legitimizes the actions of organizations, funders, and the savior rhetoric, which makes those women completely passive. To counteract that focus, it is necessary to account for the infrastructure and logistics that organize mobilities beyond the figures of “traffickers” and “slaves,” since trafficking tends to be characterized from the perspective of this all-encompassing narrative. Trafficking is not only a normative frame, but also progressively gains strength in media discourse and political disputes, flattening a reality that is much more entangled than what the category seeks to simplify into a specific conservative orientation.

This is made even more complex in the case of young women and girls who “disappear” from their homes for a time, who reappear and leave again. This reality is increasingly common, especially in slums and peripheral neighborhoods, and it challenges the perspective of the usual—juridical and political—approach to these issues. The notion of trafficking fails to effectively understand, investigate, or politicize these situations. It is a discourse that obstructs the very possibility of recognizing how those complex economies of movement, of fleeing, of linking young women with parallel or illegal circuits, conjugate a desire of autonomy that is processed in conditions of extreme violence and precarity. Forms of domestic violence are at the root of these forms of flight. These women and girls flee from a very violent home to other forms of violence. Sometimes, they come back to the neighborhood and home, and it is not clear that they want to “return.” Search campaigns led by the family and neighborhood are often the most effective way of finding these young women and girls, for they are the only pressure that makes police and juridical denunciation effective. But when I say that it is not clear that they want to return, I want to emphasize that the place to which they return is generally one that is not desired, one from which they attempt to flee. This does not mean that the possibilities in the place to which they flee are better, but rather that they create a path, in a pragmatic way, for that desire of flight.

This “coming and going” problematizes the more traditional understanding that typifies these dynamics of flight purely as “kidnapping,” or as the irrational obtundation of the youth with promises of drugs or alcohol. As in the case of migration, it is more about flight from a “depraved trinity,” as sociologist and migrant rights activist Amarela Varela characterizes it in regard to the migrant

caravans of Central American women that have crossed borders toward the United States in recent years: femicidal violence, state violence, and market violence.<sup>7</sup>

Blame and juridicalization of young women is insufficient: investigations of the cases do not advance, dismissed because they cannot “fulfill” the definition of trafficking. This also socially “discredits” the young women: when they “reappear” in the neighborhood, they are signaled as guilty, and their very appearance is considered to “disprove” the violence in which they are then re-ensnared. So the most urgent problem becomes ignored and illegible: how their drift beyond the domestic space is appropriated, how their “escape” from violence takes place in extremely fragile conditions and at the cost of other forms of violence, and how, nevertheless, a will to autonomy persists in their flight.

Therefore, it is necessary to bring together different elements to criticize the one-dimensionality of the trafficking discourse as a rationality that simultaneously victimizes and passivizes women’s trajectories, especially those of youth and migrants (or daughters of migrants), under a biased global policy that we must stop seeing as “neutral.” As I indicated, we must register this dynamic within the circuits of the popular, informal, a-legal, and illegal economy (an intersection that is not at all clear and is increasingly intertwined in a dispute over forms of “authority” over territories). Here violence, exploitation, and also *a desire* to flee domestic spaces imploded by violence are articulated with logistics and infrastructure (of varying legalities) that make “mobility” possible for young women in conditions of extreme precarization.

I want to problematize the element of having “no will.” The forced recruitment that defines the figure of trafficking, both legally and subjectively, impedes understanding of the complexity of the majority of the actually existing situations, where the removal of will is never complete (there is an ambiguous voluntary component to flight) yet is still produced in a web of violence inscribed in the very situation of the conditions of “flight.”

The terminology of “trafficking” and “slavery”—which emphasizes the extreme side of that involuntary condition—and the merely legal acceptance of the calculation that the trafficking framework supposes,<sup>8</sup> discredit other rationalities that have to do precisely with a way of fleeing domestic violence, abuse, and poverty in the home. Above all, it isolates a problematic in which what is at stake is a very concrete dispute over the normalization of hyper-exploitation that characterizes contemporary capitalism. In the case of the young women and girls, this is seen in the patriarchal appropriation of their desire to

flee. The critique of violence cannot be made by denying the action of these youth who, in desperation, exercise their desire, taking an extreme risk, but by calculating that it is important not to submit to an initial violence—that of the household—and where autonomy is confronted with more complicated forms of its appropriation and exploitation.

## War as an Interpretative Key

Michel Foucault proposed war as a principle of analysis of the relations of power and, more precisely, the model of war and struggles as a mode of intelligibility of political power. He also argued that there is a sort of permanent war, a constant fixture behind all order, such that war is the “point of maximum tension of the relations of forces,” but also something that is itself comprised of a web “of bodies, of cases, and of passions”: a true entanglement over which a “rationality” is assembled that seeks to appease the war.<sup>9</sup>

Silvia Federici often speaks of “a state of permanent war against women,” in which the common denominator is the devaluation of their lives and work by the current phase of globalization. Federici’s theoretical coordinates are set by the intersection of a Foucauldian perspective with feminism and Marxism. Federici argues that capitalism, since its transatlantic beginnings, has persecuted and fought “heretical” women with ferocity and terror. That is why, in her book *Caliban and the Witch*, she ties together three concepts: *women, the body, and primitive accumulation*. There she asks fundamental questions about that emblematic figure of rebellion: Why does capitalism, since its foundation, need to make war against women who hold knowledge and power? Why is the witch hunt one of the most brutal and least remembered massacres in history? Why must friendship between women be made suspicious? What did they seek to eliminate when they burned those women at the stake? How can a parallel be traced between witches and the Black slaves on plantations in the Americas?

The war against women, as Federici characterizes it, is an “original” moment that is *repeated* in each new phase of “primitive accumulation” of capital: in other words, that which is deployed over the social field, prior to a time of extreme instability of the relations of command-obedience and exploitation. The idea that there are historical moments when violence becomes a productive force for the accumulation of capital, as sociologist Maria Mies argues in her book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, is fundamental for understanding the current phase of dispossession at various scales.<sup>10</sup> Carrying

out war against women and their forms of knowledge-power is the condition of possibility for the beginning of capitalism, Federici argues, but we are left with the question of what this means in the present. We must test the hypothesis of an updated witch hunt, mapping the new bodies, territories, and conflicts of its contemporary iteration.

Historically, reactionary violence against women responded to their growing power and authority in social movements, especially the “heretical” movements and guilds. Federici identifies a “misogynist reaction” to that massiveness, to the reproductive control that women practiced among themselves, their techniques of accompaniment and complicity. “Clean sex between clean sheets”: that was the objective of the capitalist rationalization of sexuality, which sought to turn women’s sexual activity into labor at the service of men and procreation. Additionally, it was a way of making women sedentary. Federici argues that it was much more difficult for them to become vagabonds or migrant workers, because nomadic life would expose them to male violence, precisely in the moment of the capitalist reorganization of the world when misogyny was on the rise. However, as she insists, such violence was not only a hidden story of its beginnings. That is why her image still feels so relevant, at a time when all female nomadism, from taking a taxi at night to abandoning a partner or leaving the home, is increasingly the occasion of sexist violence.

Women’s bodies, Federici continues, came to replace spaces held in common (especially lands) following their enclosure in continental Europe. All at once, women were submitted to a new form of exploitation that would give rise to a growing submission of their work and of their bodies, which were increasingly understood as personal services and natural resources. The women *privatized* in this way were those who took refuge in bourgeois marriages, while those who remained out in the open were turned into a servile class (from housewives to domestic workers or prostitutes).

But to regard such women as “rebels” does not refer to any “specifically subversive” activity. “Rather, it describes the *female personality* that had developed, especially among the peasantry, in the course of the struggle over feudal power, when women had been in the forefront of heretical movements, often organizing in female associations, posing a growing challenge to male authority and the Church.”<sup>11</sup> The images that portrayed them—in stories and caricatures—described women mounted on the backs of their husbands, whip in hand, and many others dressed as men, ready for action. In this sequence, friendships between women also became an object of suspicion, seen as counterproductive to marriages and as an obstacle to the mutual denunciation

promoted, once again, by male authority and the church.

Many of these scenes continue to resonate in the present; I identify at least three dynamics that call attention to how this framework persists in our conjuncture: (1) the relationship between feminized and dissident bodies and common lands/territories, both of which are understood as surfaces of colonization, conquest, and domination; (2) the criminalization of collective actions led by women, as the energizers of rebellious social movements; and (3) male and church authority as a key that is constantly present for the call to order of capitalist accumulation.

## The Colonial Dimension

“New forms of war” are what Argentinian anthropologist Rita Segato calls the current modes of violence that take women’s bodies as their target. They are “new” because they update a geometry of power that goes beyond the nation-state, since it is often other actors who exercise violence, overwhelmingly linked to illegal capital. At the same time, a connection to the past persists amid the novelty, especially in its colonial dimension. That dimension is expressed in the properly colonial methods of murdering women (such as impalement, acid, and dismemberment), but above all in the exercise of the affirmation of authority based on the ownership of bodies. This classical form of capitalist conquest (authority = property) today requires something extra: an intensification of scales and methodologies. In other words, it is what Segato defines as “a world of lordship,” what we might think of as a regime of appropriation that radicalizes the colonial form.<sup>12</sup>

Suely Rolnik emphasizes the colonial dimension of aggression against feminized bodies, proposing the category of the “colonial-capitalist unconscious.”<sup>13</sup> This term refers to the traumatic effects of the “fear and humiliation” of colonial processes—in their various phases and repetitions—which organize “operations” of subjectivation that are “more subtle than the macropolitical movements that resulted in independence from the colonial statute.” I want to extract and specify three premises from Rolnik’s argument.<sup>14</sup> First, the colonial unconscious operates by producing a “dissociation between the political, the aesthetic, and the clinical.” In other words, it disciplines and creates hierarchies between knowledges that are taken as “separate.” Then, this dissociation condemns us to despising the body’s knowledges and structures as “colonial repression”: “the object of that ‘repression’ is the body itself in its

ability to listen to the diagram of forces of the present and the paradoxical dynamic of its frictions with the dominant forms of reality, an aptitude from which it extracts its power of evaluation and its potencia of action.” Lastly, “the abolition of the ‘repression’ of the body’s knowledge and the actions in which it is updated” become a fundamental practical dimension on the horizon of transformation.

Power of evaluation and potencia of action are two essential practices of subaltern knowledges and feminist epistemology. They confront that division, which is so patriarchal and always in fashion, between those who *think* and those who *do*, those who *conceptualize* and those who *struggle*—in short, between stereotypical notions of comfort and risk. The colonial element of this division is what stands out, in which *knowledge* is an overvalued power of the elite and *doing* a modest resource of the subaltern.

On the other hand, considering practices based on both their power of evaluation and their potencia of action mobilizes a key element against the colonial-capitalist unconscious. The knowledges of the body of which Rolnik speaks today become the new object of suspicion and repression when they produce forms of socialization between women, lesbians, trans people, and travestis, becoming true political technologies of friendship, trust, rumor, and authority.

The misogynist and violent reaction also rises in response to these knowledges of the body. Therefore these knowledge-powers express the rupture of “minoritized” subjectivities (historically relegated and unappreciated) that flee from submission through recognition, from pure identity politics. In the case of women, lesbians, travestis, and trans people, a slogan such as #EstamosParaNosotras (#WeStandForOurselves) implies, among many other things, an impulse to stop adapting to heteronormative desire whose unilateral and violent deployment is the foundation of sexist affirmation. More precisely, the decomposition of the minoritized body, Rolnik says, dismantles the “scene” in which the dominant body is constructed, and in which the violent reaction is the attempt to maintain the stability of that scene, at any cost. The war against women could thus be rethought as a war against feminine and feminized characters who turn the knowledge of the body into power. It is no coincidence that she concludes with a discussion of the figure of the “witch” as a mode of existence that provides an “ethical compass,” positioning knowledges of the body as acts of subversion against the colonial-capitalist unconscious. Those knowledges operate in concrete situations (over which they are evaluated and over which they act), and they bring us face to face with the borders of a regime

of power whose colonial structure contains fundamental clues both for evaluating its failures and the possibilities of flight. It is against those rebellious knowledge-powers that colonial war has been waged. They are powers and knowledges that are strategic, both in defensive withdrawal and in the persistent desire to disobey.

## Beyond Victimization

Segato has developed the precise diagnosis of a “pedagogy of cruelty,” a term that has since become common parlance. She has analyzed gender-based crimes as “expressive violence,” leading her to interpret the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez as violence that sees the female body as a tapestry on which to write a message.<sup>15</sup> Commenting on Segato’s work, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar and I argued: “There is a novelty, even in its repetition. War takes on new forms, puts on unknown clothes. The textile metaphor is not a coincidence: today its main canvas is the female body. It becomes the privileged text and territory for marking violence. A new type of war.”<sup>16</sup> We also spoke about the “opacity” of a social conflictiveness in which femicides are inscribed. This opacity is not simple confusion, lack of information, or the impossibility of interpretation, and it is not a coincidence. Such opacity should be analyzed as a strategic element of that newness: as a truly counterinsurgent dimension that seeks to dismantle the rebel capacity of certain body-territories.<sup>17</sup>

In Latin America, the reality of femicide demands that we return to the question of its meaning: What message is transmitted by these crimes that, now, seem no longer to be circumscribed by the home, but take place in the middle of a bar, a day care, or on the street itself? It exercises a “pedagogy of cruelty,” which is inseparable from the intensification of “media violence” that operates by spreading that aggression against women, distributing a message, and confirming a code of complicity between a mode of practicing masculinity. This is what Segato is referring to when she speaks of femicide as carrier of an “expressive violence” that is no longer only an instrumental violence.

The prevalence of such violence against women, lesbians, trans people, and travestis (which takes multiple forms, from dispossession to harassment, abuse to discrimination) is key to understanding a line of interconnected violence, one that has to do with the ways exploitation and value extraction are reconfigured today. Moving beyond the perspective of violence as victimization does not take us away from the problem of violence, nor does it free us from understanding its

specificity. To the contrary, it relocates it. I already spoke of a strategic displacement: it is the intersection between gendered violence and economic and social violence that allows us to go beyond enclosing violence in a limited gender-based perspective. Its specificity emerges from that connection, not from a process of isolation. This specificity stems from a situated perspective that facilitates an understanding of the different forms of violence as a totality in movement, and each of them as a partial synthesis.

This connection allows us to build and move ourselves on a plane of intelligibility that gives meaning to violence to the extent that it links the domestic sphere with the world of work and the exploitation of our precarity, as well as with new forms of financial exploitation that are assembled beyond the wage. It is this connection that explains how the impossibility of economic autonomy leads to immobility in homes that become hell, and how migration becomes a line of flight that is worthwhile, even as its risks grow ever greater.

The material possibility of making a critique of contemporary violence, then, has three intersecting elements: (1) a map of the world of work in a feminist register that allows us to reevaluate non-waged economies; (2) the emergence of a political ecology from below that deploys a non-liberal comprehension of the earth and resources, in a broad sense, because it emerges from struggles in favor of communitarian life; and (3) struggles for justice, understood as an extension of the work of collective care.

Therefore, we avoid, as I indicated above, the thematization of domestic violence as a “ghetto” that determines corresponding “responses” and “solutions,” which are also isolating: a new secretariat (of the state), or a new section (of a union), or a new program (of health care).

Once this displacement and linkage of different forms of violence produces a feminist diagnosis that starts to become common sense, we see how the neoliberal and conservative reaction attempts to recodify the violence. That reaction interprets violence as insecurity and, therefore, as the need for greater control. In general, governmental institutions attempt to respond to femicides through punitive, racist, and sexist reprisals: that is how the political system recodifies these forms of violence, in order to include them in a general discourse of *insecurity*. This reinforces classist and racist stereotypes (e.g., that men are dangerous in accordance with their class and their nationality), while it proposes the request for a “heavy hand” as the only way out. The solutions of punitive demagoguery thus appear as magical proposals.

## Excursus: The War on Women's Bodies

The war on women's bodies, which I want to talk about here, can be understood in relation to those heterogeneous ways in which autonomy and contempt expand the limits of what a body can do.

Thinking about what type of war is being developed against women, lesbians, travestis, and trans people allows us to understand capital's current offensive to relaunch its control. But, before that, in terms of method and political perspective, we must account for the type of autonomy that is being deployed if we are to understand the magnitude of the misogynist reaction against it.

A widely circulated photo from Chile's 2018 feminist mobilizations for democratic and feminist education showed a masked youth with a patch sewn on her ski mask that read: "I am at war." When the balaclavas go from the jungle to the streets of the metropole, what sort of war are we talking about?

Being at war is a way of taking on an array of forces. It means finding another way of living in our bodies. It makes visible a backdrop of violence that differentiates "terminal" bodies from others in that weft. To be at war is to liberate forces that are experienced as contained. It is to stop covering up the violence.

In that sense, to be at war means assuming that we are being attacked, and there is a decision—which is a common force—to no longer pacify ourselves in the face of everyday violence. It has to do with a way of traversing the fear, not simply believing that it ceases to exist.

If the writer Simone de Beauvoir said that one is not born a woman, but becomes one, it was in order to reveal the historical construction of the female nature that *limited* us to certain tasks, functions, and obligations. Becoming, in *The Second Sex*, expresses a negative process of which we have to become conscious: it is the way in which becoming women emerges as synonymous with turning into *non-free* subjects. Becoming is a process of subjection, especially to maternity.

The French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari gave it the opposite meaning (but one that would be impossible to understand without de Beauvoir's precedent): becoming-woman is to leave one's assigned place, to get down from the family tree, to escape the patriarchal mandate. In this sense, becoming has nothing to do with progressing or adapting, nor with enacting a model or reaching a goal (there is no evolution, as the philosophers say). Becoming, to the contrary, "is the process of desire."<sup>18</sup>

However, the becoming-woman alerts us to a theft. They rob us of a body in order to produce a two-part, binary organism, thus making us into a body that is not our own. First they rob the young girl of her body: “Don’t use that posture”; “You’re not a girl anymore”; “Don’t be a tomboy.” Thus, becoming-woman is a type of youthful movement: not because of age, but due to the capacity to circulate at different velocities and in different places, to go through passages, until turning into the process itself. Becoming-woman is the key of other becomings: a start, a rhythm, a vertigo that is opposed to the majority, which is understood as a state of power and domination.

“Becoming what you are”: if we had to identify an origin (or better, invent one provisionally) for the issue of becoming, we could go to this sentence from Friedrich Nietzsche. Lou Andreas-Salomé—the philosopher’s interlocutor and lover—wrote about the *impulse of transformation and change of opinion* as two key elements of his thought: thus, her reading highlights a process of transforming one’s self—that is, becoming—as an indispensable condition of all creative force.<sup>19</sup> The aphorism “We should all become traitors, exercise disloyalty, constantly discard our ideas” functions as a call to a materialism whose fidelity is no longer to convictions or ideals, but to the process of transformation itself. In any case, what would a fidelity to becomings *be*?

Salomé—who would later become a friend of Freud and one of the women precursors to psychoanalysis—makes an interpretation of the philosopher that gives special emphasis to the emotional tone of his thought, to highlight “the subtle and secret sentimental relations that a thought or a word can awaken,” and also how intuition and truth are intertwined in his work to the point of producing a towing effect, an increase in energy. The relation between intuition and necessity, elaborated in this way, nourishes a new objectivity.

These knowledges—Salomé indicates—are linked to artists and women because they are the ones who “produce the impression of the fullness of force, of the living, of the full spirit, of the invigorating.” Becoming turns into war. “Eternal war that *one is*”: each person as composed of opposing elements, from which a higher form of health can sprout. As Nietzsche would say, “The price of fertility is to be rich in contradictions”; you just have to have the strength to bear them. Premises that are fundamental for a certain feminist perspective emerge from here: First, the idea that “everything is *non-truth*,” that is, that the violence of the totality is a suppression of concrete situations and partialities; therefore, there is no absolute truth, only *perspective*. Second, the notion that there is a certain preponderance for affective life to overtake intellectual life: the content of truth is considered secondary in respect to its content of will and feeling, such

that becoming involves an economy of forces. In that passage, truth is no longer discovered; it is *invented*. But there can be no truth without a declaration of war.

These premises are common knowledge to survivors. In her *Cancer Journals*, the Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde is a survivor who says she needs to not write as a survivor.<sup>20</sup> She does so, rather, as a warrior who has not abandoned fear. Who goes from the biopsy to the detection of a tumor in her right breast. Who is fighting battles and victories in the face of death. Who deals with the vertiginous fantasies of a disease that can assault the entire body. Who resists the ups and downs before and after the decision for a mastectomy. She investigates her body as a battlefield where a combat between very different powers plays out: that of the erotic and self-care, against the cosmetic and surgical machinery; that of racist and aesthetic prejudices and the fear of not being desired, or of herself losing the desire to make love, against the healing power of a network of friendships. They are powers, Lorde shows, that require self-training. And a language that is also like a new skin.

It is said that young Amazon women remove their right breast to be better archers. Lorde brings the image of these determined fifteen-year-olds to her pages several times, almost as unexpected mythological allies. Or perhaps they are not so unexpected for this woman, who writes that “growing up as a black, fat, almost blind woman in the US” also requires knowledge of the bow and arrow to survive.

Lorde says that, as opposed to the (idealist) illusion of the end of fear, it is about recognizing fear as part of one’s own nature, precisely in order to stop fearing it. To familiarize oneself with it is to disarm it. To refrain from assuming it will magically disappear, so as to avoid paralysis when it arrives. To traverse it. To coexist with it to the point where one can guess its tricks. In this sense, the diary that she writes stops being intimate; in other words, it radicalizes her intimacy to the point of making it a political manifesto, the interpellation of a foreign sister or a wise teacher, of whom Lorde sometimes. From there, a direct question arises: What are the words you still have not found? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow every day, and that you attempt to make yours until they make you sick and you die from them, still in silence?

- 21 See Colectivo Situaciones and MTD de Solano, *Hipótesis 891: Más allá de los piquetes* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2002).
- 22 See, for example, E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1970); Mario Tronti, *Operai e capitale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966); Antonio Negri, *Marx beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991).
- 23 See Silvia Federici, *Wages against Housework* (Bristol and London: Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, 1975).
- 24 Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*; Peter Linebaugh, *The Incomplete, True, Authentic, and Wonderful History of May Day* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).
- 25 Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, “Women’s Struggle against All Violence in Mexico: Gathering Fragments to Find Meaning,” Liz Mason-Deese, trans., *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117:3 (July 2018), 670–81.
- 26 Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).
- 27 Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
- 28 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
- 29 Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1972–1973*, Bernard E. Harcourt and Graham Burchell, eds. (New York: Picador, 2018), 3.

## 2. Violence

- 1 See Silvia Federici, *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2020).
- 2 See Section 3 of Rosa Luxemburg’s “The Historical Conditions of Accumulation,” *The Accumulation of Capital*, Agnes Schwarzschild, trans. (New York: Routledge, 1951 [1913]).
- 3 Berta Cáceres was an environmental activist, feminist, and Indigenous leader, cofounder of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), and winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize. She was assassinated in 2016, with investigations pointing to the involvement of military officials who received training at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia.
- 4 See Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra, “A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital: Toward an Expanded Concept of Extractivism,” Liz Mason-Deese, trans., *Rethinking Marxism* 29:4 (October 2017), 574–91.
- 5 See the position of the jurist Raúl Zaffaroni in his article “Femicide,” *Página 12*, May 18, 2017, [pagina12.com.ar](http://pagina12.com.ar).
- 6 See “El efecto contagio de Ni Una Menos,” *Revista Noticias*, February 15, 2017, [noticias.perfil.com](http://noticias.perfil.com).
- 7 See Amarela Varela, “La trinidad perversa de la que huyen las fugitivas centroamericanas: Violencia feminicida, violencia de estado y violencia de mercado,” *Debate Feminista* 53 (2018), 1–17; Varela, “Notes for Anti-racist Feminism in the Wake of the Migrant Caravans,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119:3 (July 2020).
- 8 See Verónica Gago, “The Strategy of Flight: Problematizing the Figure of Trafficking,” Liz Mason-Deese, trans., *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117:2 (April 2018), 333–56.
- 9 See Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, David Macey, trans. (New York: Picador, 2003), 44–51.
- 10 Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 1999).
- 11 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York:

- Autonomea, 2004), 184.
- 12 See Rita Segato, "Patriarchy from Margin to Center: Discipline, Territoriality, and Cruelty in the Apocalyptic Phase of Capital," Liz Mason-Deese, trans., *South Atlantic Quarterly* 115:3 (July 2016), 615–24.
  - 13 Suely Rolnik, *Esferas de insurrección. Apuntes para descolonizar el inconciente* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2019).
  - 14 These could also be thought about in relation to Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe's use of Frantz Fanon in *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
  - 15 For the concept of "expressive violence," see Segato's *Las estructuras elementales de la violencia: Ensayos sobre género entre la antropología, el psicoanálisis y los derechos humanos* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2003). For her analysis of Ciudad Juárez, see *La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez: Territorio, soberanía y crímenes de segundo estado* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2013).
  - 16 Rita Segato, *Las nuevas formas de la guerra y el cuerpo de las mujeres* (Puebla: Pez en el árbol, 2014), 5–13.
  - 17 See Dawn Paley, *Drug War Capitalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2014).
  - 18 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
  - 19 Lou Andreas Salomé, *Friedrich Nietzsche en sus obras* (Barcelona: Minúscula, 2005).
  - 20 Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2006).

### 3. Body-Territory

- 1 Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Claudia von Werlhof, *Women: The Last Colony* (London: Zed Books, 1988).
- 2 Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books, 1986).
- 3 See Marie Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 2014); Laura Junka-Aikio and Catalina Cortes-Severino, "Cultural Studies of Extraction," *Cultural Studies* 31: 2–3 (2017), 175–84; Alberto Acosta and Ulrich Brand, *Salidas del laberinto capitalista: Decrecimiento y postextractivismo* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón and Fundación Rosa Luxemburgo, 2017).
- 4 The political theory of the possessive individual that Macpherson traces in British political thought between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries conceives of society as a set of relations of individual commercial exchange. Each individual is thus understood as "free and equal" to others and relates to them as the owner of their own person or capabilities without owing society anything for them. See C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962).
- 5 Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013).
- 6 See Claudia Korol, *Las revoluciones de Berta* (Buenos Aires: América libre, 2018).
- 7 Cited in Francesca Gargallo Calentani, *Feminismos desde Abya Yala: Ideas y proposiciones de las mujeres de 607 pueblos de nuestra América* (Bogotá: Desde Abajo, 2017).
- 8 Verónica Gago, *Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies*, Liz Mason-Deese, trans. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- 9 Marxa Chávez and Claudia López, "Women Rebel in Tariquía in Southern Bolivia: The Fight for Dignity and against Oil Interests begins with Women," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 50:4 (2018).