

# “We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For”

## The Feminization of Resistance in Venezuela

by  
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*An autonomist Marxist feminist analysis of the narratives of three women participants in Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution—women linked by their participation in the urban land committees of La Vega, a Caracas shantytown—stresses the fundamental significance of women’s struggles in this revolutionary process. By focusing on the realities of women in movement we can begin to grasp the complexity of the feminized political subjectivities being formed and the contradictions and tensions in this process. This reading seeks to rewrite, in solidarity with women in movement, the dominant patriarchal script of politics by placing their agency and rationality at the center of Venezuela’s revolution. There is an urgent need to recognize a feminization of resistance that is historically distinctive and challenges masculinist conceptualizations of political and social transformation.*

*Un análisis marxista feminista autonomista de los relatos de tres mujeres que participaron en la Revolución Bolivariana de Venezuela—las mujeres unidas por su participación en los comités de tierras urbanas de La Vega, un rancho de Caracas—destaca la importancia fundamental de las luchas de las mujeres en este proceso revolucionario. Al centrarse en las realidades de las mujeres en movimiento, podemos empezar a comprender la complejidad de las subjetividades políticas feminizadas que se están formando y las contradicciones y tensiones en este proceso. Esta lectura pretende reescribir, en solidaridad con las mujeres en el movimiento, el texto patriarcal dominante de la política mediante la colocación de su agencia y racionalidad en el centro de la revolución de Venezuela. Hay una necesidad urgente de reconocer una feminización de la resistencia que es históricamente distintivo y desafía conceptualizaciones masculinistas de transformación política y social.*

**Keywords:** *Autonomous Marxist feminism, Venezuela, Bolivarian Revolution, Women, Resistance*

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Neoliberalism has led to a feminization of poverty, responsibility, and obligation both globally and in Latin America, and this has coincided with a crisis in masculinized organized labor (see Chant, 2008; Hite and Viterna, 2005). There has been a surge in female participation in the workforce caused by neoliberal economic restructuring and mediated by assaults on the rights

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and guarantees won by organized labor in previous decades (see, e.g., Chant, 2008; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2004; Gideon, 2007; Hite and Viterna, 2005).

Often subject to unregulated and precarious working conditions, women also continue to undertake the majority of domestic labor (González de la Rocha, 2001; Olivera, 2006). Thus the decline in masculinized formal labor has been replaced not by a more egalitarian division of labor in the home but by an intensification of women's financial and emotional responsibilities and obligations. Arguably, women's inclusion in the workforce is part of a political project of restructuring capitalism involving the disciplining and division of popular struggles of the 1970s (including feminist struggles) and the breaking of the social and political power of women (Midnight Notes Collective, 1992: 320–321).

Many of these analyses also point to the contradictory consequences of neoliberalism for women's lives and the possibilities of women's resistance (see esp. Hite and Viterna, 2005; Cupples, 2005; Talcott, 2004; Tinsman, 2000). Much of this work focuses on everyday interactions and relationships, pointing out that the increasing proportion of informalized labor combined with the breakdown of the survival mechanisms of the working and informalized poor have unintended consequences. One is that the place of popular struggle has shifted from the formal world of work to the community. Because women are at the heart of the community, they become central actors in these new forms of popular politics (see Motta et al., 2011, for comparative analysis, and, for Venezuela, Fernandes, 2007 and 2010; Fisher-Hoffman, 2008; Rantala, 2009). Mothers, families, and communities have sought individual and collective ways to survive on the margins of the money economy (Federici, 1992; Hite and Viterna, 2005).

Feminist analyses therefore point to the possibilities of resistance that are created by the contradictory realities of neoliberalism, forms of resistance that are increasingly territorialized and feminized. This resistance challenges traditional Western political thought, which rests on a conceptualization of the political that excludes women and all that is represented by femininity and women's bodies (Brown, 1988; Sargisson, 1996). These analyses demonstrate that a rearticulation of women's politics is occurring in the everyday, the private, and the informalized world of work. They suggest a stretching of traditional conceptualizations of the site of political struggle away from the point of production toward the traditional script of political parties, unions, and the state (Cupples, 2005; Talcott, 2004; Tinsman, 2000).

While there has been a feminization of poverty, there is also a feminization of resistance that is reconfiguring and reimagining the nature, meaning, and subjects of political resistance and social transformation. This is notably the case in Venezuela, where women are numerically a majority of the social support base of Chavismo and where the political conjuncture has created possibilities for the development of new forms of revolutionary subjectivity (Fernandes, 2010; Motta, 2011a; Rantala, 2009). Yet such dynamics and struggles are on the margins of scholarly and political analysis. Without an analytic and theoretical engagement with these dynamics we run the risk of producing academic theory that reproduces the historical masking and delegitimization of women's role at the heart of revolutionary and popular struggle (Dalla Costa and James, 1975: 13).

The autonomous Marxist feminist framework for analyzing women's struggles in Venezuela that I develop here emerged from women's struggles in the periphery of Europe—in Italy—in the 1970s and spoke to the increasing politicization of social reproduction. These struggles reflected a discomfort with and often a rejection of a politics of representation and a praxis of revolutionary feminism that focused on the dominant script of politics. While the women whose lives and struggles are shared here do not explicitly identify themselves as feminists, often because Venezuelan feminists have traditionally reflected bourgeois liberal frames of feminism that discount questions of race and class (Fisher-Hoffman, 2008: 24–38), much of their praxis shares the concerns and themes of autonomous Marxist feminism.

My analysis builds upon the concrete synergies between autonomist Marxist feminism and contemporary Venezuelan women's and feminist politics. One of the most notable is the dialogue between Global Women's Strike and Venezuelan Socialist feminists such as Nora Castañeda, head of the Women's Development Bank. This dialogue has nurtured a feminist struggle that has contributed to, for example, the inclusion in the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution of Article 88, which recognizes housework as producing social benefits and economic value, and the development of *Misión Madres del Barrio* and the Women's Development Bank (see Alva and Castañeda, 2009: 119–132; Fisher-Hoffman, 2008: 24–38).

The engagement between autonomist feminist Marxism and women's struggles in contemporary Venezuela is framed by border thinking (see Anzaldúa, 1987; Mignolo, 2000). Border thinking seeks to break down conceptual and theoretical categories of knowledge by speaking from the epistemological margins of modernity, be they within the margins of the West or on its margins in the global South. It encourages dialogue between and within places but also reminds us to take seriously the place of enunciation of a theory/concept—the position in relation to capitalism and colonialism that determines who can speak, how one can speak, and what is heard and how (in terms of the subjects and nature of knowledge and the possibilities and limits of social transformation).<sup>1</sup> Women's struggles in Italy and Venezuela come from the underside of patriarchal capitalism. They are the voices of those excluded and delegitimized by the universalizing and violent power dynamics of patriarchal colonial capitalism. The places of enunciation of their theories are similar in that they speak against marginalization and delegitimization but different in that they speak from different places on the margins: one from the margins of the center and the other from the margins on the periphery. This suggests the possibility of dialogical translations between the locally embedded epistemologies of women on the margins in Latin America and the critical epistemologies that emerge from within the margins of Europe. This dialogue does not ignore differences in context or fall into the trap of hegemonic feminist representations of “poor” Third World women that overlook the concrete agency and experience of those subjects (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988).

This particular analysis is part of a broader project of dialogical decolonizing research (for Venezuelan feminist conceptualizations of such a project, see Espinosa Miñoso, 2009, and Celiberti, 2009). As a mestiza single-mother feminist researcher, I also exist on the margins of the academy and of society. I write

from a reality of marginality as an outsider/insider within the academy and an insider/outsider within movements such as Venezuela's urban land committees<sup>2</sup> and other feminist autonomist movements in the UK and Colombia. My praxis of border thinking occurs in the messy spaces in which bodies connect, engage, and develop alternative logics of being, creating, loving, and thinking otherwise.

My work with the urban land committees has involved a popular educational pedagogical praxis collectively constructed in a series of workshops designed to forge translations between their experiences and experiences of collective struggle in Europe and other parts of Latin America. It has also involved the development of textual work that reads the practices and critical theories of open Marxism<sup>3</sup> and post-left anarchy produced in the margins of the West from the practical theories of the urban land committees in search of resonances and dissonances that may help develop the objectives and strategies of both (see Motta, 2012, for an example of such border thinking in textual form). Additionally, it has involved sharing the experiences and theories of urban land committee women with feminist groups and collectives in which I participate in the UK and Colombia. This translation between intensely locally embedded epistemologies (and their logics) on the margins of Latin America and Europe transforms both. I hope that it will help create a plurality of forms of knowing that ruptures the epistemological politics of patriarchal capitalist coloniality. I offer it as a fragment, to be read, reread, critiqued, taken apart, and put back together in a multiplicity of ways in which the process of review can itself be read as an element of this rereading and critique.<sup>4</sup> As Lillian Suárez Navaz (quoted in Celiberti, 2009: 82) argues, "Decolonization implies working in hybrid alliances—multiclass, transnational—to foster a transformative feminist movement that can counteract with organization, solidarity, and strength the dramatic effect of neoliberal capitalism on the lives of women."

## AUTONOMOUS MARXIST FEMINISM

Autonomous Marxist feminist analysis, developed by Federici (2004), Mies (1986), and Dalla Costa and James (1975) and built on in the contemporary Venezuelan context by Fisher-Hoffman (2008), examines the link between patriarchy and capitalism. As Mies (1986: 38) argues, the "goal of this system, namely the never-ending process of capital accumulation, cannot be achieved unless patriarchal man-woman relations are maintained or newly created. Patriarchy constitutes the invisible underground of the visible capitalist system." These theorists argue that a critique of capitalist political economy and revolutionary and autonomous women's struggle requires beginning with the female experience (Dalla Costa and James, 1975: 5). In their struggle to call attention to and build women's social power and autonomy during the feminist struggles of the 1970s, autonomist Marxist feminists produced a theory of the productivity of labor that pointed to women's labor in the private sphere of the family and community and a historiography from below of primitive accumulation that demonstrated the construction of gendered subjectivities based upon a sexual division of labor articulated through the state and social institutions, most notably the nuclear family.

Conceptually this work proceeded through a critique of the orthodox Marxist claim that the capitalist family does not produce for capitalism and is therefore not value producing, thus framing women's struggles as secondary (linked to oppression and not exploitation) to anticapitalist struggles in the workplace (see Dalla Costa and James, 1975: 10–11). Autonomist Marxist feminists argue that the family and community produce value through the unpaid labor of the housewife, the commodity produced being the laborer himself. As Dalla Costa and James (1975: 5) explain,

This is a strange commodity for it is not a thing. The ability to labor resides only in a human being, whose life is consumed in the process of producing. First it must be nine months in the womb, must be fed, clothed and trained, then when it works its bed must be made, its floor swept, its lunchbox prepared, its sexuality not gratified but quietened, its dinner ready. . . . This is how labour power is produced and reproduced. . . . To describe its basic production and reproduction is to describe women's work.

The labor of social reproduction, they argue, is qualitatively distinct from that of waged labor not only because it is invisible and unwaged but because it is premised upon the isolated labor of the home, which is never-ending. "To the extent that [the woman] must in isolation procreate, raise and be responsible for children . . . she is always on duty, for the machine doesn't exist that makes and minds children" (Dalla Costa and James, 1975: 12). The community and the family therefore become the other half of capitalist organization, the hidden source of surplus value, through their role in producing the laborer. Different aspects of social reproduction such as health, education, housing, child care, sexuality, fertility, and the family are all relationships that make possible the reproduction of the laborer and, therefore the reproduction of the capital relation. The private and the personal thus become power-ridden and political.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, they are also key axes of women's struggle that can disrupt the smooth flow of capitalist reproduction. Central to that struggle is breaking out of the social isolation of the labor of social reproduction, developing demands that enable the freeing up of time for women's struggle and the formation of solidarities among women and between women and men (Dalla Costa and James, 1975: 21–24).

At the same time, these scholar-activists developed alternative historiographies from below of poor women's experiences and struggles that revealed primitive accumulation to be the creation of a particular sexual and gendered division of labor. This division is constructed around binary gendered relations of men and women, with the former concentrated in production (public sphere) and the latter in social production (private sphere) (Federici, 2004). These historiographies have demonstrated that over the "last four or five centuries, women . . . were externalized, declared to be outside civilized society, pushed down and thus made the invisible as the under-water part of an iceberg is invisible, yet constitute the basis of the whole" (Mies, 1986: 77).

Thus autonomist Marxist feminism enables us to perceive a multiplicity of axes of domination but also potential axes of resistance through its conceptualization of the web of relations between men and women, masculine and feminine, mind and body, private and public, and production and reproduction that are constitutive of capitalist social relationships. As Fisher-Hoffman (2008: 12)

explains, “from a theoretical perspective, this implies that women experience capitalist relations in distinct ways from men; and on a practical level this carries implications for women’s movements and class struggle.”

This framework suggests the need for concrete historicized analysis of women’s struggles that looks to poor women’s experience and histories of struggle as an avenue for exploring the gendered and classed social relations of domination and resistance. This is particularly salient in the Venezuelan context, where histories of popular struggle have been marginal and histories of poor women’s struggles, lives, and experiences even more so (Huggins Castañeda, 2010: 182–187; Tovar Nuñez, 2010: 11–24; Vargas Arenas, 2010: 43–44). When women have been written about they have been individual elite women linked to powerful men. Illustrative of the continuity of this gendered historiography in Chavismo is the focus on great (mostly male) leaders in the official revolutionary historiography (Vargas Arenas, 2010: 58).

Methodologically, epistemologically, and politically, therefore, this analysis is anchored in the experiences of three women protagonists in the struggle for social justice and democracy in La Vega. Here “personal” should not be equated with “individualized,” the personal being a site through which the social relations of capitalism are embodied. Therefore the analysis of these individuals’ experiences provides keys to understanding the potential, limitations, and complexity of their role in social reproduction and transformation.

### THE FEMINIZATION OF RESISTANCE IN VENEZUELA

The women subjects of this analysis are now all participants in the urban land committees and residents of La Vega, a shantytown with a half century of history and a population of up to 250,000. Situated in the southwestern hills surrounding the valley in which central Caracas stands, La Vega is paradigmatic of the conditions of exclusionary patriarchal capitalist development of the Punto Fijo period (1958–1998). The Punto Fijo pact between political elites of Acción Democrática (Democratic Action) and the Partido Social Cristiano de Venezuela (Venezuelan Social Christian Party) maintained a formal power-sharing democracy fueled by oil rents that excluded the political left. Although certain class-based groups were allowed in the party system, civil society remained under the control of a male-led and male-dominated political culture and system, “democratically excluding women from power” (Friedman, 1998: 90; Rantala, 2009: 6). Thus the key social subjects of this pact were capital and labor, and the practices of politics were highly patriarchal, reproducing a caste of men as the economic and political elite through a corporatist system of tightly controlled union and sectoral movements. When middle- and upper-class women did participate, it was by consigning their housework to other women (such as those from La Vega), and they were often confined to traditionally feminized roles as political “housewives” (Carosio, 2007; Friedman, 1998: 115–128; Rantala, 2009: 25–36). The rights that they won were often liberal bourgeois and excluded the needs and demands of poor and black women (Huggins Castañeda, 2010: 182–187). When women participated in left-wing popular politics such as the guerrilla movements of the 1960s and 1970s, their political practices often reflected the gendered and patriarchal norms of the Punto Fijo elites.

A patriarchal political practice was often mirrored in the social and cultural realm. Here gendered characteristics were clearly marked. Machismo for men was identified with power, rationality, and the public sphere of politics and the economy. Women were represented as the carriers of family and community, playing their roles in the domestic private sphere through a desexualized and dependent articulation of mother, daughter, and wife. Yet, as in many other parts of Latin America, the nuclear family never took social root in working-class urban communities, and many poor urban families were headed by women relying on extended-family networks. As Giovanna Dalla Costa (1995: 96) notes, “the key figure in the family was the mother, who was the only real reference point, while the father was an inconstant and unpredictable figure.” Women-headed households, informal unions, and single motherhood were common, and such households tended to be among the poorest even during the petrodollar boom of the 1970s. This system began to disintegrate with the economic downturn initiated by Black Friday in 1983. Poverty rates climbed, and by 1996 65 percent of Venezuelans lived in poverty. The implementation of neoliberal policies after 1989 reinforced the gendered nature of inequality and exclusion and, in Venezuela as elsewhere, resulted in a marked and increasing feminization of poverty (Rantala, 2009: 6).

Urban shantytowns such as La Vega have a high concentration of feminized poverty, but they also have rich histories of struggle characterized by the high participation of women—many of them single mothers facing the double burden of domestic and informal labor (Motta, 2009; 2011a; Ontiveros, 2008: 91-93; Ramírez, 2007). Through these experiences women ensured their survival and created sociability and solidarity for themselves and their dependents. The structures of solidarity formed in these struggles were characterized by suspicion and often rejection of political parties (of both the Punto Fijo and the left) and suspicion of the state for its exclusionary and gendered political culture and institutionalization of power and privilege. At the same time, they were heavily influenced by traditions of direct democracy and community-led change and cultures shaped by liberation theology and popular education. This resulted in processes that politicized the everyday, community, and family (Fernandes, 2010; Motta, 2009; 2011a). The most visible manifestation of this popular protest was the eruption of mass discontent over President Pérez’s neoliberal reform package commonly referred to as the Caracazo. This marked a turning point and planted the seeds for the consolidation of a new popular politics against neoliberalism in Venezuela and across the continent.

It is in this historical context of gendered and patriarchal political practices, descent into neoliberalism, and resistance that we can situate the lives of Isaura, Elizabeth, and Cristina.<sup>6</sup> These three women’s lives span three generations, and their experiences embody the contradictory reality of the highly gendered and classed development of the Punto Fijo period and the descent into neoliberalism and the conditions that help us understand Hugo Chávez’s rise to power.

### *“LA POBREZA Y YO,” 1958–1998*

Isaura began her life in a middle-class family but fell in love with one of her father’s workers and was forced to leave her family home. She arrived in La Vega in the late 1950s and along with other new arrivals helped found the

barrio La Independencia, where she still lives. As she recounted, “I remember when this was just rubble, old cars, shacks with no floors or bathrooms, roads that were dirt. We built our own house gradually, the first floor where we began, and now we have three floors, as you can see. It was like that for all of us.” She began community work in a context of an informal settlement in which basic services were not provided by the state. Sometimes this involved providing a shoulder to cry on for a neighbor, sometimes looking after the children of one of the many single mothers in her barrio, and sometimes organizing the community to fight for health services and water: “I have always been involved with community work. For me it is my life, of course, along with my children and family. Always, 30 years of being a housewife and a community worker. We have blocked roads, taken over the bank and the offices of the municipality.” Her experiences reflect the exclusion of the urban poor from the Punto Fijo pact but also the territorialized and often feminized solidarities that were built into everyday life.

As conditions worsened following the economic decline and the beginnings of neoliberal reform in the late 1980s, the cost of food rose and unemployment increased. Under these conditions men reproduced machista characteristics while women often took on the role of ensuring their families’ and communities’ survival: “There are always those [men] on the streets, drinking and playing billiards, but there were more, so many young men and their fathers without work, with nothing to do but drink and waste their time with women, gambling.” Of the Caracazo Isaura remembers the chaos and the deaths, sons of her friends shot, the army and police invasion. Yet she also recalls the continuing community unity as families, particularly women, helped each other to ensure that neighbors didn’t go without food, “We cooked *sancocho* [chicken stew] in a huge pot in the middle of the street. The young ones put on music. We tried to keep our community together.”

Isaura’s experiences include the solidarities and sociabilities formed through the construction of the physical space of La Vega in the 1950s and the defense of these communities through cultural and political work in the 1990s. These collective struggles were constituted against the gendered and classed exclusions of the Punto Fijo system, but they also mirrored these gendered divisions of labor, with women playing the often invisible and devalued role of caregivers and nurturers. Particularly noticeable, however, was the role of women at the heart of community resilience and resistance (see also Ontiveros, 2008; Ramírez, 2007).

Elizabeth, born in the late 1960s, is one of the best loved and best known of the inhabitants of the barrio 19 de Abril. As a child she was good at school and wanted to continue with her education. One of the ways to do this was to train as a nun: “I remember being there [in the convent]. Yes, it was clean and regular food and much discussion of sin and goodness and paradise in the afterlife. It made me feel bad when I’d go back to my house and all around me was poverty.” She couldn’t relegate her community to the next life, and one day she left the convent never to return. “I told the superior that I was very ill, that I needed time to rest, and I never went back. For me God was with my people.” She carried her Christian culture and beliefs home with her, and there she began to help organize the *comunidades eclesíásticas de base* (Christian base communities) of liberation theology and the revolutionary left. As she recounted,

"This was the time that I linked my Christian beliefs, not those of the organized church, with ideas about political and social change but change for and from the people not imposed by any cleric or politician." She began "to fight for paradise on earth for all." This involved challenging patriarchal and depoliticized forms of Catholicism by contesting a passive feminine role. At the same time, however, her commitment to liberation theology was imbued with an ethic of individual female self-sacrifice for others that mirrored dominant representations of female subjectivity (Carosio, 2007).

In the 1980s and early 1990s she became involved in the political organization of her community. It began around culture, whether it was cooking in the street, organizing festivals to celebrate the history of the neighborhood, or holding classes for young people and children. She was at the center of struggles for health, education, and water, acting as a charismatic community leader and symbol and placing her body in the way of police and tanks. As a neighbor told me, "Elizabeth isn't frightened of anyone, whoever they say they are, with whatever arms they come with. She will stand right in front of them, stand her ground to protect her community." As economic crisis and neoliberal restructuring intensified in the 1990s and her husband lost stable employment it became ever more difficult for Elizabeth to feed, clothe, and school her four children. Additionally, her public combativeness was not well received at home, especially as the house became a center of community activity and discussion: "Most of the time he [her husband] stays out of the way as long as food is cooked and the house is clean, but then sometimes he can't take it any longer and that's when everything blows up."

Elizabeth's experiences illustrate the connection between religion and resistance in poor women's struggles, in which the spiritual becomes an everyday religiosity linked to concrete struggles for health and water as opposed to a transcendent afterlife. The tensions she experienced in her private life call attention to the contradictions between women's public roles in community organization and the gendered norms of female subjectivity in the family realm (see Stephen, 1992, on similar tensions and contradictions in women's involvement in popular politics in Mexico).

Cristina, the youngest of the three women, bears witness to the way exclusion from the Punto Fijo pact facilitated solidarities and collectivities (see Carosio, 2007; Tovar Nuñez, 2010; Vargas Arenas, 2007: 36). She remembers walking with other youngsters to the cement factory to collect water: "We'd play on the way up. It was a number of kilometers, and we'd take these huge carriers that we'd fill up with water. That generation, now at the heart of the struggle for change, built relationships through our childhood experiences of everyday poverty." She recalls that politicians came to her neighborhood at election times: "I found it hard to work with the politicians. They wanted power for power's sake . . . not for the community." Born in the early 1970s, she grew up during a time of intense political activity. Having joined the revolutionary left *Bandera Roja* as a young teenager, she left it after a few years, disillusioned with its corrupt elitist practices, which mirrored those of traditional politicians and excluded women: "They had a different understanding of change and transformation. They told the people, wished to lead the people. They were somewhat closed, lacking organic links with the community they claimed to represent. I wanted to work with my community so that we can be our own

autonomous agents of change." Throughout the 1990s she continued working for water and education and engaged in cultural activities as a way to strengthen community collective consciousness. However, her strong independent will often came into conflict with conservative traditions and family expectations: "I love my community, my family, but it has been hard for me sometimes as I have not followed the traditional path."

The experiences of these three women help us to piece together the popular histories of resistance and domination as lived by the invisible female inhabitants of the shantytowns. The reproduction of their gendered roles as mothers and housewives was not merely passivity and subordination or a defense of a female identity in isolation from other elements of their gendered and classed lives. Rather, it involved them in the struggle for health, water, community, and life. In the process family, womanhood, and motherhood became a terrain of resistance, potentially transcending the limitations of patriarchal capitalist gendered relationships and roles, breaking down social isolation and creating solidarities. However, the politicization of their role as ensurers of the reproduction of the family and community, which came at great personal cost, also reproduced more traditional gendered representations of the women as self-sacrificing caregivers. As Carole Gilligan (quoted in Carosio, 2007: 166–167) argues, it is necessary to distinguish between a feminine ethic of self-sacrifice and a feminist ethic of care and responsibility for the other and oneself. The Venezuelan feminist theorist Alba Carosio (2007: 171–172) explains that this involves a politics of care understood as the politicization and transgression of the caring maternal role. It implies collectivizing care of oneself and others. Historically, therefore, family, community, motherhood, and womanhood became a place of struggle that contested gendered relations of capitalist patriarchy by collectively organizing for water, land, and dignity but reproduced these relationships through women's individual self-sacrifice.

Religion was central to the politicization of community and family. The contradictions of the Catholic Church's rhetoric and practice, combined with the reality of impoverishment, resulted in the politicization of everyday culture and beliefs. These contradictions were not passively received and reproduced but contested and became the site for resistance in which the beliefs and principles of Catholicism were embedded in an everyday religiosity intimately intertwined with political struggles for liberation and paradise on earth. Yet as some elements of traditional Catholicism were contested and then reclaimed, others were reproduced and created conflicts in the politicization of family and community. These conflicts became visible around the gendered articulation of everyday culture, which contested relations of passivity and submission in public but expected women to reproduce these relations in their private lives.

These women's histories also help us to understand certain trends in the popular politics at the heart of Chavismo. The exclusion of the informalized poor, particularly women, from the Punto Fijo pact and the reproduction of elitist and exclusionary politics by the revolutionary left led to suspicion of the representational politics of political parties and the state on the part of a significant segment of Chavismo's urban social base. The development of solidarities based on the experience of women collectively providing for water, food, health, and education, combined with traditions of direct democracy and

community-led change, resulted in feminized cultures of resistance that politicized the everyday, community, and family, stressing direct and participatory forms of democratic life.

### CHAVISMO: ¡AHORA SI!

It is in terms of these hidden resistances and feminized solidarities and political cultures that we can interpret the rise to presidency of Hugo Chávez in 1998. Recognition of the feminized base of community struggle before Chávez helps explain the interaction between politics from below and the growth of his *Movimiento V República* (Fifth Republic Movement—MVR). Chávez represented the underside of politics, speaking to and with the excluded using colloquial language and popular myths and symbols. The movement he headed was the result of intense political work building on pre-existing political traditions in the *barrios* and in other excluded communities throughout the 1990s. The intense symbolic, affective, and embodied solidarities and loyalties formed between Chávez and women in movement have been evident at a number of crisis moments since his election. The most noticeable of these was the attempted coup of 2002, when *barrio* women and men streamed down from the hillsides of the shantytowns to the presidential palace to demand with their bodies, tears, and voices the return of their democratically elected president (Rantala, 2009).

Chavismo is characterized by a focus on education as a tool for liberation and empowerment, direct and participatory politics as opposed to representative forms, and poverty alleviation programs (*misiones*) that combine the provision of public goods with education and political participation for those who receive them. This is premised on a conceptualization of endogenous development that includes economic, political, social, and gendered liberation and equality (Fisher-Hoffman, 2008: 51–74). Women-specific policies reinforce these principles and reflect women's struggles in the preceding decades. Venezuela is the only country in the world to recognize housework as producing social benefits and economic value. The Women's Development Bank, created on March 8, 2001, gives small low-interest loans and training to collectives of women who present proposals for investment that will generate income. One of the bank's first proposals was the implementation of *Misión Madres del Barrio*,<sup>7</sup> which remunerates women for the work they do in their own homes (Fisher-Hoffman, 2008: 85; see also Alva and Castañeda, 2009, for details on all the women-related legislation of the Bolivarian Revolution). Women are the main participants, organizers, and beneficiaries of many of the social and economic programs developed. Their histories of struggle, solidarities, and political culture give life to many of these programs, often taking them beyond their initial aims and objectives (Motta, 2011a). Thus, while a view from above helps contextualize women's role in the Bolivarian Revolution, it is not sufficient for an understanding of the nature, content, rhythm, and dynamics of this process.

Chávez's discourse embraces feminist socialism. As he has said, "Without the true liberation of women a full liberation of the people would be impossible. I am convinced that an authentic socialist also ought to be an authentic

feminist'" (quoted in Rantala, 2009: 1). However, as we have seen, the dominant representation of popular historiography is one of great male leaders, and his articulation of the female revolutionary is often embedded in a traditional framing of women's subjectivity. His 2009 speech dedicated to "the selfless, fighting Venezuela women, to the woman-mother, woman-companion, woman-daughter, woman-grandchild, to all women" (quoted in Rantala, 2009: 26) reinforces the traditional representation of the faceless (and voiceless) ideal woman tied to her role in the family and domestic sphere. Women are central to the revolution yet are cast as its reproducers and nurturers, obscuring much of their local political work and relegating them "to roles in which they provide the context but not the content for popular action" (Rantala, 2009: 25; see also Bianco, 2007; Espina, 2007: 253–254; Ramírez, 2007). This reflects and reinforces ambiguities in the gendered hierarchical division of labor in Venezuelan politics in that it overlooks women's territorialized politics, agency, and knowledge (both historically and in the present), giving authorial voice and power to the male leader embedded within the centralized state. It is only through a focus on the realities of women in movement that we can contribute to a reading from below that begins to grasp the complexity of the feminized political subjectivities being formed and the contradictions and tensions in this process.

As Chávez toured the country in the mid-1990s attempting to gather support for the MVR, La Vega was caught up in the discussions about whether to support this new movement. Isaura reports that she and many other women in the community became Chávez supporters, participating in the political campaign to ensure his election in the 1998 presidential election: "We stayed up late into the night putting up posters, preparing the details of the campaign, talking to neighbors to convince them that it was worthwhile voting and voting for Chávez. He came to visit us here in La Vega, and I remember that we didn't sleep for about three days preparing everything." An intense embodied and affective loyalty to Chávez had developed among poor women who for the first time felt that their work, struggles, and commitments were being valued and recognized. When Chávez first authorized the *misiones*—social programs in, for example, health, land, and water—Isaura was in her element as a community worker, becoming involved in the setting up of the Water Committee, the Misión Barrio Adentro I (a basic health program), and one of the country's first urban land committees. This process enabled her to formalize her informal activities of decades, giving her authority and recognition.

Isaura's energy and commitment to her community are at times superhuman. In a typical day she wakes at 4 a.m., leaves the house early to speak to neighbors about problems they have with water, goes to a meeting, talks to the engineers on a local sewage project, travels to the city center an hour and a half away to attend a workshop about popular participation, returns and makes lunch for herself and her extended family, rests a little, attends a meeting or two of the urban land committees or the local *políticos*, and arrives home as late as midnight, only to begin again the next day. Now 70 years old, she tells me, "This is my life. There is a chance for change, for us all to have water, health, housing, dignity. Men and women together, children to have education, our community not to be divided, not have the youth getting lost to drugs and drink, not having our men beating our women." The hope and energy of

women like Isaura reveal the political momentum that has developed since Chávez was elected. They represent, however, the ambiguities of the gendered nature of this political momentum as women embody the role of self-sacrificing caregiver, often with little regard for their own health and well-being, as opposed to a feminist ethic of care for oneself and others (see Carosio, 2007, and Espina, 2007: 256–258).

Elizabeth continued as a key organizer in her community, like Isaura central to the campaign to get Chávez elected and then to defeat the attempted coup against his government in 2002. This defense of their democratically elected president was more than loyalty to Chávez; it was a defense of their dignity and hope for transformation. As Elizabeth reports,

We marched to Miraflores [the presidential palace] and refused to leave until they returned Chávez to us. We elected him, and we would not let them take our elected president away from us. It was like what they always did to us, denying us our rights. . . . Well, this time we weren't going to let that happen. I remember when they brought him back in the early hours of the morning. I cried, we all cried.

In 2003 she became involved in the establishment of one of the country's first urban land committees: "They began with the community organizing around the legalization of their land ownership. During the Punto Fijo period we were invisible and criminalized. If you looked at a map of Caracas, we were part of the hills surrounding Caracas; we were not on the map. Only recently have the maps been remade to include us." The committees were shaped by the experience of many women in struggles over water, housing, and education in the preceding decades. Women like Elizabeth who had experience in facilitating collective reflection and knowledge building used this experience to facilitate discussion about the limitations of the original decree. This resulted in a collective recognition that the legalization of property rights did not solve the problems that they faced relating to housing and the environment. Their project developed through critical reflection and debate between and within individual urban land committees (see Motta, 2011b for details of the politics of knowledge of this process).

Elizabeth, as a charismatic and symbolic community figure, was central to these discussions: "We worked with our community building solidarity and attempting to encourage reflection about the problems that we faced. We developed the program of democratizing the city, built on the idea of democratic control over our environments in order to create social justice for all, with access to and control over education, health, employment, community." Her commitment to ensuring dignity and justice means that she is continually working to further the projects of the urban land committees of La Vega and nationally and dealing with the individual social and economic problems of neighbors and friends. This dedication has taken its toll. She is often ill and faces conflicts in her family life due to her commitment, which detracts from her duties as a wife and mother. Yet, as she explains, "My fight has always been with my people, against poverty, injustice, and inhumanity. To develop paradise on earth is something that we can and will do, something that I would be prepared to die for." Her embodied commitment and sacrifice for her community

challenge the gendered division of labor of traditional Venezuelan patriarchal politics. She is not a passive and isolated subject in the private sphere accepting her lot. Rather she is an active organizer, collectivizing reproduction and calling attention to women's agency and knowledge. However, her self-sacrifice also reinforces traditional practices of female subjectivity that deny the needs and desires of individual women who care for others. Thus women in movement build dignity, agency, and collective power while often having to take on the triple burden<sup>8</sup> of paid, domestic, and political work (see Vargas Arenas, 2007: 42–44, for a similar analysis in relation to women's participation in the *consejos comunales*, and Ontiveros, 2008: 96–99, on Latin American barrio women more generally).

Cristina has also been at the heart of the organization of the urban land committees in her community in La Vega. However, her role in the organization is more national than that of Elizabeth or Isaura:

I was involved in developing a methodology of participation. This methodology is a means of enabling communities to develop their collective knowledge. . . . It begins with communities discussing the common problems they face, their experiences of the urban land committees and of other elements of the political process, and then develops into a series of reflections among those same community members as to potential barriers to achieving their objectives and solutions to these problems. From this they develop plans of development and action.

Her struggle to transform her community is intimately linked to her personal life and to the social histories and gendered norms of the family and community in Venezuela. She is a single mother—a common social reality, but she chose to be one. This choice, while reflecting the construction of the woman as weak and lacking in agency, is a subversion of that construction. It represents her agency in the private sphere to decide how she will raise her child and practice her motherhood. “I find it so hard,” she says, “not only because I’m tired but because I am often judged for leaving her to continue my social work and for choosing to bring her up as I do.” She is thus acutely aware of the problem of individualism and gendered beliefs that divide communities and families against each other: “The internalization of domination is one of the biggest barriers that we face. This is based in a history of people thinking only of themselves in isolation from their communities. This bred individualism and competition and was a way to divide, debilitate, and ultimately control us.” Unsurprisingly, her experiences of the gendered practice of politics of the Punto Fijo state and the revolutionary left, which effectively excluded women or included them while reinforcing their domination, have led her to be highly critical of the tradition of vanguards and leadership (Bianco, 2007: 96–97; Espina, 2007; Fisher-Hoffman, 2008). For her any change has to come from the collective understanding and knowledge of the shantytown dwellers:

Unless we begin to rebuild from below, to articulate our needs, desires and energy into a shantytown movement, none of these structures will ever be remade. Our communities will always be dictated to, passive recipients of knowledge, resources, whatever. When we are conscious, organized, when we see our power and potential, through this process we begin to construct new structures, new relationships, a new distribution of power, a new democracy.

These women's struggles and lives testify to an advance in the development of popular resistance since Chávez's accession to power. They illustrate the complexity and contradictory nature of feminized resistance and its centrality in the Bolivarian Revolution. In different ways these three women and the other women in movement of the urban land committees are attempting to transform and subvert capitalist social relations that subjugate them as gendered and isolated individuals performing the role of provider of social welfare and social reproduction. Their struggle for autonomy and democracy is an attempt to reclaim a collective process of the provision and organization of health, education, and housing. In the process motherhood, womanhood, and family are transformed as social welfare is collectivized. The valorization of women's role in the reproduction of labor, forming solidarities and overcoming the social isolation of reproductive labor, challenges patriarchal capitalism. However, it also reinforces the representation of female subjectivity as premised on care and self-sacrifice. This potentially reinforces a gendered division of labor and political power between the male leader embedded in the centralized state and the female reproducers embedded in the localized community with little power to determine and control the overall script, practice, and representation of the revolution (see Stephen, 2001, for a similar analysis of the contradictory and contested politics of motherhood in El Salvador and Mexico).

These women in differing ways consider it essential to connect the personal with the political. At times this becomes a critique of the internalization of relations of domination in their everyday relationships, but this internal domination is often rearticulated in their private lives, in which they are expected to play the traditional role of wife and mother. The lack of politicization of the socialized norms and practices of gendered subjectivity at the level of the state and in community praxis results in the formation of a multilayered and contradictory political subjectivity. While creating dignity, agency, solidarity, and collective power women also carry the triple burden of paid, domestic, and political work. The contradictions of their position concretize the links between struggles against patriarchy and struggles against capitalism. They result in the gradual development of a feminist revolutionary praxis among shantytown women that is reflected in the recent upsurge in Venezuelan feminist analysis and reflections in popular movements (Briceño and López, 2010)

## CONCLUSION

My autonomist Marxist feminist analysis of the narratives of three women participants in Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution has revealed a multiplicity of lines of domination but also potential axes of resistance. It has pointed to the development of a historiography and an analysis from below that begin with women's experiences and struggles. I have used their realities as an opportunity to engage in solidarity with the complexity of feminized political subjectivities being formed and the contradictions and tensions in this process. This reading contributes to the rewriting of the dominant patriarchal script of politics by placing women's agency and rationality at the center of Venezuela's revolution.

The choice of an autonomist Marxist feminist analysis developed by feminist activists in Italy to engage with women in movement in the urban land committees in Venezuela is a consequence of my commitment to the development of a decolonizing praxis as a researcher, teacher, activist, and mother. It is embedded in a methodology of border thinking that privileges those on the margins (whether in the center or in the periphery) without reifying or homogenizing their positionalities and struggles. It suggests the necessity of creating dialogue between different places and experiences on the margins as a means to further, in solidarity, our struggles. As we move into the unknown borderlands, as Gloria Anzaldúa and Ana Louise Keating (2002: 3) put it, we “loosen our borders, not closing off to others. Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without.” To bridge in this way we open the way for connecting our experiences, struggles, theories, and lives, transgressing the borders of capitalist coloniality that seek to divide us. This border thinking leads to a reimagining and remaking of the possibilities of planetary transformation of our communities and ourselves.

These women have faced the harshest forms of alienation, oppression, and exploitation, and this has resulted in a territorialized struggle to determine their social reproduction in a way that ensures the dignity and development of their community. This struggle has increased their power and autonomy. It has involved a challenge to the gendered, individualized forms of social welfare and reproduction characteristic of (neoliberal) patriarchal capitalism. Distinct from Latin American leftist and revolutionary struggles that focus on the workplace, the party, and the state and on representative politics, it presents a challenge to masculinist theories of political praxis and social transformation.

In the process motherhood, family, and community have become sites of resistance, transformed and rearticulated in forms that challenge and at times transgress the social isolation of the labor of social reproduction, the everyday realities of competition and survival, and the separation between women's struggles and revolutionary struggle. However, these sites of resistance are contradictory with the traditional roles of wife and mother rearticulated in the home and the gendered politicization of Chavismo, which casts women as caregivers and nurturers, providing the context but not the content of the revolution. Women's self-sacrifice can lead to a neglect of their individual needs and desires. They are increasingly conscious of this tension, however, and the way in which it is resolved will have a major impact on the development and progress of the Bolivarian Revolution and provide lessons for other women in movement across the globe.

## NOTES

1. At the same time, it warns us against representing Venezuelan and Latin American feminist voices as homogeneous and authentic. In fact Venezuelan and much other Latin American mainstream and dominant feminism is arguably dominated by elite Southern feminists who speak for Southern subalternity, enacting a speaking for and over (see Spivak, 1988, and Mohanty, 2003, and, for the Venezuelan case, Espinosa Miñoso, 2009: 38–42, and Celiberti, 2009).

2. The urban land committees (*comités de tierras urbanas*) were created by presidential decree for land reform in 2002. Each committee is made up of 100–200 shantytown families who are allowed to petition for land titles on self-built homes. After acquiring tens of thousands of titles,

the urban land committees—of which there are more than 6,000—have extended their efforts to include quality-of-life issues such as water and sanitation. In moving beyond the specific remit of the presidential decree, they seem to be signaling their autonomy from the central government while at the same time transforming themselves from land acquisition organizations to a national grassroots social movement.

3. Open Marxism, represented by scholars such as Holloway (2002) and Bonefeld (2003), is a heterodox Marxism that engages with the politics of autonomy and autonomous social movements. It emphasizes the processual nature of capitalism and the centrality of alienation to everyday life in capitalist societies. Capitalism is analyzed as a totality in which alienation has spread throughout the social structure. In open Marxism the state is not a fixed site but part of these processes of alienation as a form of the capital relation (Bonefeld, 2003: 201–218; Holloway, 2002: 142). The political orientation of this approach is to construct nonalienated subjectivities by bringing (political) subjectivity, class struggle, and social relations to the center of our understanding of domination and resistance.

4. The reviewers have been pivotal in helping me to connect this piece with the broader decolonizing project that I am committed to. Their rigorous comments have also resulted in my enriched engagement with Venezuelan feminist analysis and praxis and opened up possibilities for deepening my understanding of decolonizing praxis. I am deeply grateful.

5. This analysis coincides, if from a different conceptual starting point and content, with the long history of feminist thought and critical theory of the twentieth century that brings the private and the personal to our attention.

6. The names of the three women have been changed in order to protect their privacy and ensure their security. Isaura's and Elizabeth's narratives are based upon a number of conversations and two in-depth recorded interviews; Cristina's is based upon my notes on a number of in-depth conversations.

7. The objectives of the mission are to guarantee permanent social security for mothers, include mothers in extreme poverty in sociopolitical activities, encourage gender equity, and integrate poor mothers into other social missions.

8. Moser (1993), for example, argued that under current development conditions women had to take on the triple burden of reproductive, productive, and community labor. While at the level of language this identifies the same three areas, it does so from a different conceptual and epistemological viewpoint, looking at what happens to women in development as opposed to beginning from poor women's struggle as a means to conceptualize how their politicization and collective organizing can lead to the unintended consequence of having the third burden of political work.

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