

## DISPOSSESSION, VIOLENCE AND TRANSFORMATIVE POWER: AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO EVICTIONS

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### Abstract

*The present article takes the following question as its starting point: What does it mean to think about eviction and its consequences based on the narratives of women who have faced these processes? By examining the narratives and thoughts of women who have either undergone eviction or are living under its threat, it is possible to highlight dimensions of the process that may otherwise go unnoticed by analyses that focus on other dimensions, and which do not appraise the characteristics of those being evicted and what this represents in terms of the totality of the phenomenon. By shedding light on the multiplicity of impacts resulting from the eviction processes, it is possible to return to the conceptual notion itself, so that it may be formulated from the bottom up, i.e., from the various experiences that comprise it. Ultimately, what is eviction? What does it mean to live under the threat of losing your home?*

### Keywords

*Dispossession; Eviction; Intersectional Feminism.*

## DESPOSSESSÃO, VIOLÊNCIAS E A POTÊNCIA TRANSFORMADORA: UM OLHAR INTERSECCIONAL SOBRE AS REMOÇÕES

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### Resumo

*O presente artigo parte da seguinte questão: o que significa pensar a remoção e suas consequências com base na narrativa de mulheres que enfrentam esses processos? Ao recuperar as narrativas e as reflexões de mulheres que sofreram remoção ou se encontram em situação de ameaça, é possível iluminar dimensões do processo que podem passar despercebidas ou ser encobertas por análises cujo enfoque recai sobre outras dimensões, que não passam por uma reflexão sobre as características de quem está sendo removido, e sobre o significado disso diante da totalidade do fenômeno. Ao lançar luz sobre a multiplicidade dos impactos decorrentes dos processos de remoção, pode-se retomar a própria noção conceitual para, então, formulá-la desde baixo, quer dizer, a partir das várias experiências que a compõem. Afinal, o que é remoção? O que significa viver sob a ameaça de perder o lugar onde se vive?*

### Palavras-chave

*Desposseção; Remoção; Feminismos Interseccionais.*

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## 1. Introduction

There is a growing understanding among researchers working with the victims of housing evictions in the Global South that within these processes, in addition to class, there is also a clear dimension involving gender, race and age woven into these dispossession processes, thereby shaping them in different ways.

But what does it mean to think about eviction and its consequences based on the narrative of women who have faced these processes? We would wager that by examining the narratives and reflections of women who have either undergone eviction or are living under its threat that it is possible to highlight dimensions of the process that may otherwise go unnoticed by analyses that focus on other dimensions, and which do not appraise the characteristics of those being evicted and what this represents in terms of the totality of the phenomenon. Notwithstanding, by shedding light on the multiplicity of impacts resulting from the eviction processes, it is possible to return to the conceptual notion itself, so that it may be formulated from the bottom up, i.e., from the various experiences that comprise it. Ultimately, what is eviction? What does it mean to live under the threat of losing your home?

This paper aims to discuss housing evictions in the São Paulo Metropolitan Region employing an intersectional approach, seeking to put forward new ways with which to view dispossession processes, bringing to visibility the consequences felt by the different bodies and territories onto which they fall. It uses experiences, results and hypotheses linked to research led by the *Observatório de Remoções*

(Evictions Observatory), a Brazilian action-research network established in 2012,<sup>1</sup> and in which the authors are or have been associated.

While there has been an effort to make visible the processes that are threatening and evicting thousands of people in large Brazilian cities – which, in itself, represents a huge advance –, there are nonetheless still points that need to be addressed in order to understand the consequences on the different bodies and territories in which they occur.

In this paper, we propose to reflect on evictions from a situated viewpoint (HARAWAY, 1988): one that is based on the narratives of women threatened or evicted by forced displacement processes in the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo, experiencing displacement within a field constructed mostly by western white men and, consequently, by their perspectives. As a method, and for the composition of this text, we seek to revisit and juxtapose the bibliography mobilized through fragments of collected statements and the low-income territories visited and experienced through research by LabCidade and partners.<sup>2</sup> As well as visits in time, which placed us in contact with other statements and low-income territories through literature – such as the accounts of life in the Canindé Favela contained in the books *Quarto de Despejo* (Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus) by Carolina Maria de Jesus,<sup>3</sup> and *Becos da Memória* (Memory Alleys) by Conceição Evaristo<sup>4</sup> – in an exercise to reconstruct these experiences.

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1. The *Observatório de Remoções* is an action research network that, since 2012, has undertaken a collaborative mapping of threats and evictions with partners in other Brazilian universities and cities – such as Belo Horizonte, Fortaleza, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Salvador –, involving different methods and data sources (MARINO, A.; ROLNIK, R., 2019; LINS, R. D.; ROLNIK, R., 2018; ROLNIK, R.; LEITÃO, K. COMARU, F; LINS, R. D., 2017). For more information, see: <http://www.labcidade.fau.usp.br/observatorio-de-remocoes/>. Viewed on April 15, 2020.

2. The fragments of interviews and field observations originate from research carried out by Observatório de Remoções and by LabCidade: those from the survey *Formas de Morar* (Forms of Living) were collected between May and November 2019; the excerpts referring to the ethnography carried out in the North Zone of São Paulo are part of the research project *Territórios populares* (Low-income Territories), which started in April 2018 and are still under development. The fragments referring to the Helenira Preta occupation are part of the *Observando de perto* (Observing Closely) axis of the Observatório de Remoções, and were collected in the workshop held on February 15, 2020, by researchers from LabJuta/UFABC.

3. Literally translated as *Eviction Room*, although published in English under the title *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus* (1960), the diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus, brings an account of the miserable life of the paper picker in the *Canindé Favela*, located on the banks of the Tietê River, in São Paulo. For a reflection on the potentialities of Carolina's work, see Pereira (2019). PEREIRA, G. L. *Corpo, discurso e território: a cidade nas dobras da narrativa de Carolina Maria de Jesus*. 2015. Tese (Doutorado) – Programa de Pós-graduação em Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade Federal da Bahia, Salvador, 2015.

4. *Memory Alleys* (2006) tells the story of the inhabitants of a favela, the target of a de-slumming plan. For more information on the life and legacy of the author, see Oliveira (2013). OLIVEIRA, M. A. de. Entre becos e memórias, Conceição Evaristo e o poder da ficção. *Estado de Minas*, Caderno Pensar, Belo Horizonte, 5 out. 2013. Available at: <http://www.letras.ufmg.br/literafro/resenhas/ficcao/68-conceicao-evaristo-entre-becos-e-memorias-conceicao-evaristo-e-o-poder-da-ficcao>. Viewed on: June 4, 2020.

Combining literature, data collection from the *Observatório de Remoções*, interviews and workshops with vulnerable women, and the literary works of Brazilian writers, this paper aims to develop an intersectional concept based on the analysis of evictions. While highlighting how racialized women are the major victims of these operations, the paper establishes its argument around three axes. The first axis analyzes the dispossession processes, focusing on the central role that debt has played since colonial times on the American continent, especially in Brazil, mobilized, at the end of slavery, as a way of updating and reproducing the subjugation of recently freed Black peoples. The continuous and slow violence of housing dispossession is the focus of the second axis. It examines at the deep psychological marks that these processes leave, the deeper consequences they have according to gender and race, and how gendered family roles play a central part in the lives of the evicted women. Lastly, the third axis brings together contemporary debates on social movements and women's leadership in the struggle against dispossessions.

Thus, more than an academic paper with well-defined theoretical-methodological lines, which lead to conclusions and recommendations, we understand this exercise of writing and collective reflection as an ongoing essay in constant (re)construction, which brings together readings, analyzes and a diversity of fragments, posted here in perspective, in order to lead us to other questions and possible paths of investigation and reflection.

## 2. Intersectional approach

The proposal presented herein requires reflection based on feminist theories that have built an epistemology, which seeks to displace the neutrality of science and production of knowledge, bringing theories closer to the social realities experienced by the individuals (SILVA et al., 2017). Among the diverse feminist theories,<sup>5</sup> intersectionality has gained increasingly more space, and has taught us to think about the dimensions of gender, race, class and sexuality (and others) as an interconnected system of oppression, shedding light on the differences between the experiences of women, crossed by these systems that are the foundations of relationships within our society, based on racism, sexism and capitalism (AKOTIRENE, 2019; GONZALEZ, 1984). In view of the origin of this approach, an analysis based on race is required, intersected with other identities that are not limited to gender.

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5. For a debate on the fundamental differences between different feminist theoretical currents, see Silvia et al. (2017) and Hollanda (2018). HOLLANDA, H. B. *Explosão feminista: arte, cultura, política e universidade*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2018.

In addition, it is a collective, theoretical and political effort, in order to build another epistemology, another way of reflecting and placing oneself in the world (COLLINS, 2017), which challenges the production of academic knowledge, by assuming intersectionality as a knowledge project in all its epistemic and political power. For Hill Collins (2017), the ideas that are at the origin of intersectionality changed in form and purpose when they were “translated” to the academic world, that, very often, puts aside their political character and emancipatory objective. Therefore, for many of us, it is still a challenge to assume intersectionality as a knowledge project in all its epistemic and political potency.

Hence, we have learned from Black intellectuals, that another epistemic lens is needed, capable of escaping from generalizations and producing analytical tools to consider and focus on multiple and complex social processes, such as those of evictions. Essentially, if we admit that society is organized according to these social markers of difference, we may not assume that the processes that affect these bodies are neutral and do not vary according to the social realities experienced by the individuals. Urban experiences are also inscribed there.

Desmond’s work (2014) may be read as an example of the magnitude of this challenge – or as an “imperfect translation” of intersectionality, if we use the words of Hill Collins (2017). The research carried out by the author led him to the conclusion that Black women were the most penalized in eviction processes due to a combination of factors, ranging from earning the lowest wages and the number of children through to the very gender dynamics between male owners and female tenants.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Desmond argued that the causes of the evictions went beyond purely economic issues, pointing out the importance of structural racism combined with hierarchical gender structures so as to obtain an understanding of the process. However, if, on the one hand, the author brought important reflections on the contours and dimensions of the evictions, on the other hand, his research has been severely criticized due to the lack of dialogue with the individuals in the territories,<sup>7</sup> thus reinforcing a way of producing academic knowledge that reproduces hierarchies and exclusions.

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6. Unlike the Observatório de Remoções, which focuses particularly on the collective processes of forced displacement, Desmond was analyzing the evictions that, in the case studied by the author, assume massive outlines, given their size: on average, 16 families were evicted each day in the city of Milwaukee annually (DESMOND, 2014).

7. Among the criticisms regarding his work and research group, the Eviction Lab, see Aiello et al. (2018). AIELLO, D.; BATES, L.; GRAZIANI, T.; HERRING, C.; MAHARAWAL, M.; MCELROY, E.; PHAN, P.; PURSER, G. *Eviction Lab misses the mark. Shelterforce: the voice of community development*, Aug. 22, 2018. Available at: <https://shelterforce.org/2018/08/22/eviction-lab-misses-the-mark/>. Viewed on: April 29, 2020.

In Brazil, there is still little information on the eviction processes organized with information on the profiles of the affected people. Some of this work will be reviewed here in the light of the research axes proposed below.

In an attempt not to separate the empirical material from our theoretical discussions, we have organized these fragments into three axes of dialogue with feminist literature and with the production that addresses eviction processes as an expression of structural and historical dispossession processes. From this theoretical-political exercise, we hope to build an epistemic tool that enables us to understand eviction through the experiences of different women. This is not just a matter of verifying the differential effect of eviction on bodies, but of a broader understanding of the process itself as another dimension of accumulation by dispossession in its contemporary forms.

### 3. Coloniality and debt imprisonment, dispossession

June 25... I went back to my filthy shack. I looked at the aging hovel.  
The black and rotten slats. I thought: it's like my life!  
When I was getting ready to write, that Orlando came over and said  
he wanted the money. I gave him 100 cruzeiros.  
- I want 250. I want a deposit.  
- I do not pay the deposit because it has already been abolished by  
the Light Company.  
- Then I'll cut off the current.  
And he cut it. (DE JESUS, 2019, p. 175)<sup>8</sup>

Housing became a commodity in Brazil with the Land Law (BRASIL, 1850), a regulation associated with the end of slavery. With the abolition of slavery, formally dated 1888, the transition from an economy based on slave and compulsory labor to a wage economy enabled the emergence of a labor market linked to the land and housing market. However, inherited racial segregation has reproduced – and continues to reproduce –, and has resulted in socio-spatial segregation (SOBRINHO, 2017, p. 27), considering that ex-enslaved people and immigrants had no access to land, the commercialization of which was restricted to only a few people: a small number of white men, landowners who were heirs to the colony, who then occupied parliament. The Land Law<sup>9</sup> “recreated the conditions of work that would disappear with the end of captivity” (MARTINS, 1981, p. 28).

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8. N.B. For direct citations, the English version was used of JESUS, C. *Child of the dark: the diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*. Translated by David St. Clair. New York: Penguin Inc, 1963.

9. Land Law No. 601 of 1850.



Land went on to become the main form of property, no longer the number of slaves, and became the element that distinguished and hierarchized social groups between landowners and non-landowners, maintaining the condition of subjection, even in this supposedly free new market. Machado and Ariza (2019) indicated that, after guaranteeing their own freedom from the purchase, negotiation or judicialization of their freedom from the mid-nineteenth century, Black women in the city of São Paulo took on debts that consumed their lives in order to obtain freedom for their children. This process undermined the emancipatory power of work for these women who, in the city, were able to earn income from the sale of manufactured products, delicacies and the provision of other services.

The prohibitions on the family and maternal autonomy of the freed women and slaves were very specific expressions of female challenges and experiences in the process of emancipation. In addition to these, the permanent investment of savings and work in their freedom and that of their families, leading them to enter the world of formal freedom in conditions of continued exploitation and enormous poverty, and the various barriers imposed on their autonomy, profoundly impacted not only the terms of their exodus from slavery, but the very substance of the freedom they conquered (MACHADO; ARIZA, 2019, p. 53).

The debt also gained centrality due to the racist policy of “whitening” in Brazil, perpetrated by the Crown and by the republican governments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by encouraging European immigration from 1818 (CARVALHO, 2015). This context inserts a new form of exploitation into the Brazilian scenario: “debt slavery” (GAGO, 2020). Subjection becomes structured by a division into two parts, in which the colonist exercised the agricultural activity, giving part of the harvest as payment for the rent of the house, whose values were not always sufficient, thereby forcing the settler deeper into debt and, therefore, tied to the land, in a new process of slavery structured by debt.

Some authors, in order to think about current processes, have reexamined the mobilization of debt as a new form of coloniality. The idea of debt as a new form of colonization was developed by Fields (2017), who observed that, after the American mortgage crisis in 2008, a large corporation bought many properties from those who were unable to pay their mortgages and those who were evicted (without mortgages) began to rent the same house they owned, in a relationship similar to the abovementioned division, which resulted in the extraction of capital from individuals and families for finance.

The interviews conducted by Fields with those affected were undertaken with the aim of understanding how the awareness of their situation could give



space to collective organization with the potential of transformative power. Just before the crisis spread, the groups interviewed by Fields were too embarrassed to share their personal experiences, however, by listening to one another, the focus of the narrative shifted toward the systematic similarities between their experiences. These individuals shared the fact that they had been encouraged to take on more debt than they could afford and had been pressured into signing documents with loan terms that were different to those originally agreed. They felt that they were powerless to negotiate in government decisions and financial institutions that affected their lives. They shared a sense that the government was unwilling to support them, on the contrary, it had a strong interest in directing bribes to large corporations instead of helping Americans to release themselves from debt (SAEGERT; FIELDS; LIBMAN, 2009).

Other authors have also developed work on the relationship between debt and capitalism and are worthy of further research. Chakravartty and Silva (2012), for example, examined the racial logic of capitalism that is based on debt. Silva (2019) developed this argument from the subprime mortgage crisis in the USA, understanding it as one of the elements to elaborate a much deeper reflection on modernity – as an ontological, epistemological, ethical and material construction – through the mobilization of the figure of unpayable debt: “an obligation that one owns but is not one’s to pay” (idem, p. 154).<sup>10</sup> For Silva, the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 revealed how raciality occurs in the global power.

The author argues that the African American and Latino populations, those most affected by the crisis, have acquired an unpayable debt because subprime loans were designed to extract value from the “financial deficit” of the people who took them out, operating as tools of colonial and racial subjugation, since it was precisely their inability to obtain and pay loans that made their mortgages a valuable financial instrument. Thus, in this relationship, such individuals were not considered as “moral entities”, i.e., as persons, but as financial instruments in themselves, with no moral status: “Economically, the borrowers ought not to pay back the loans precisely because it was their inability to pay that made them valuable instruments in the first place.” (SILVA, p. 157).<sup>11</sup> The mortgage crisis is mobilized by the author as a means of illustrating the continuity of “displacing” the Black body in modernity, in which the racial dimension is combined with the colonial dimension and capital, in the foundation and perpetuation of the capitalist system.

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10. N.B. For direct citations, the English version was used of SILVA, N.A. DA. *Unpayable Debt*. Online version: [https://anthropology.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/MORRIS%20CARDS/Boas/Unpayable%20Debt%20-%20d14%20Reader\\_Ferreira%20da%20Silva.pdf](https://anthropology.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/MORRIS%20CARDS/Boas/Unpayable%20Debt%20-%20d14%20Reader_Ferreira%20da%20Silva.pdf). Viewed on July 22, 2022.

11. N.B. For direct citations, the English version was used of SILVA, N. A. DA. *Unpayable Debt*. Online version.

The idea of debt imprisonment is also investigated by Verónica Gago (2020), addressing low-income Latin American issues and territories. She introduces the idea that financial extraction involves the expropriation of communal, indigenous lands, removing all “economic autonomy, which will serve to confine and impoverish women, to make them submissive” and responsible for free domestic work (GAGO, 2020, p. 65). For her, extractivism expands with “low-income indebtedness”, associated with consumption linked to the financial sphere.

Gago demonstrates that the low-income economy is driven by women, and that these women, in order to survive<sup>12</sup> in an urban economy with increasingly insufficient jobs and wages, take on debts to the point that they end up working to pay them off, in a process that connects finances to violence and brings about precariousness as a condition that prevents them from prospering because they are constantly in structural conditions of plundering – landless, unpaid and imprisoned by debts.

Laura’s life<sup>13</sup> is intertwined with some of these elements. When we met her, in December 2019, she was taking part in a demonstration in Sé Square, in the central area of São Paulo, against the removal of Torrinha, an occupation in the extreme north of São Paulo, where she had been living for 10 months.<sup>14</sup> From the state of Bahia, and having lived in São Paulo for 15 years, she has constantly been moving from one house to another, balancing the cost of rent with her income. The mother of two daughters and responsible for providing them with a home, Laura had, at the time of the eviction, been working as a career in a family home in the Tucuruvi district. In order to avoid paying rent, she had invested around 40 thousand Reais in the house that was now under threat. When she arrived in Torrinha, although the occupation had only been established for two years, it was already facing a repossession lawsuit – and she only knew about the threat once she had spent all of her money on the house. This was not, moreover, her first attempt to become established in an occupation. Before this, she had lived in another occupied area,

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12. The logic of survival is also presented by Rolnik (2019), who calls “landscapes for life” the territories organized based on this foundation, of the needs and desires of prosperity. ROLNIK, R. Paisagens para a vida, paisagens para a renda: disputas contemporâneas pelo território urbano. *Revista Indisciplinar*, v. 5, n. 1, jul. 2019. Available at: <https://wiki.indisciplinar.com/download/008.pdf>. Viewed on: June 7, 2020.

13. A fictitious name. Interview carried out during research conducted by LabCidade FAUUSP (2019). LABCIDADE. Laboratório Espaço Público e Direito à Cidade. *Territórios populares: reestruturação territorial, desigualdades e resistências nas metrópoles*. Documentos da Pesquisa Formas de Morar. São Paulo: FAUUSP, 2019.

14. For more information on the removal of the Torrinha occupation, see: [http://www.labcidade.fau.usp.br/acao-de-reintegracao\\_de-posse-na-zona-norte-deixa-1200-familias-sem-casa/](http://www.labcidade.fau.usp.br/acao-de-reintegracao_de-posse-na-zona-norte-deixa-1200-familias-sem-casa/). Viewed on: April 30, 2020.

also nearby, but because of the drugs and trafficking, Laura had calculated the risks and had chosen to move to Torrinha. The fear of violence, caused by the traffickers or the police, was greater than the loss of housing – but the feeling of insecurity, linked to the precariousness of the ways of living, continued to accompany her. As she told us, the uncertainty surrounding the house was causing her to become sick. For months, she had only managed to sleep with prescription drugs, having been accompanied by a psychiatrist. On the day of being evicted from Torrinha, December 9, 2019, we met Laura with all her belongings which had been put into a friend's car. We exchanged a few quick words and she went on to another stop on the long and strenuous search for housing.

Through Laura's life trajectory, very briefly presented here, it is possible to glimpse the multiple dimensions of the dispossession processes, which do not end with the loss of housing. According to several authors, precariousness is built on a process considered as "spoliation and theft of land and common resources" (GAGO, 2020, p. 83) or "theft and contamination of the land by neoliberalism" (FEDERICI, 2019, p. 9). It is also considered by Schiller and Çağlar (2018) as "dispossession", who describe it as the confiscation of communal lands, precious resources and public spaces. The term "expropriation" is also used by Fraser and Jaeggi (2019) to refer to the forms of work for which capitalism does not give rewards, or whose reward is very small, and does not correspond to the value of the work of reproduction. It is, as may be observed, made up of intertwined processes of dispossession over certain bodies, ways of life and territories.

Bringing the discussion to Brazil, there are several reflections on the theme that do not only end with urban eviction processes. One of these studies is the description of a recent process of dispossession of inhabitants of a *quilombo* – a centenary place of the territories of escaped enslaved people in the region of Izidora, in Belo Horizonte –, in an area that was the object of an urban operation project to carry out a "gigantic low-income real estate enterprise", Granja Werneck, through a vast affordable housing development. This process, analyzed by Franzoni et al. (2018), was not only considered to be a spoliative class practice, but also a co-constitutive form of oppression of both gender and race (2018, p. 325).

The same territory was the subject of investigation by Natália Alves da Silva (2018; 2021) and Cruz and Silva (2019), who expressed specific views on Black women who live in these occupations from the intersection of their oral narratives, collective memory, the results of other research and official data. With regard to the urban, the notion of dispossession appears in the removal of precarious occupations and in the projects of "urban rehabilitation", which evict those who live in and use some territories (ROLNIK, 2015). Thiago Hoshino (2020) narrates

the process of dispossession of an Afro-Brazilian religious center, illustrating how religious racism guides dispossession processes: the eviction of a *candomblé*<sup>15</sup> place of worship (known as a *terreiro*) called Abassá de Xangô and Caboclo Sultão, in the Águas Espraiadas Urban Operation in São Paulo. This not only represents the removal of property, but a removal which is both symbolic and religious, considering that the idea of ownership in these processes is one that is “performed” by being fenced in, reiterating subjectivity regimes as a space of capital. However, in this case, it is the *Orixá*<sup>16</sup> who is the “owner” of a *terreiro*. Thus, it is not possible for dispossession to take place, which is not only physical and objective of this space, since the very notion of ownership in these circumstances seems limited.

Many of these authors are examining usurpation processes of indigenous lands, of the riverside populations and of other peoples affected by transnational companies, most often in rural or communal territories. They insert a sobriquet in the literature regarding dispossession to the extent that, by not qualifying those who are dispossessed, colonial and patriarchal forms of exploitation are left out, and are thus invisibilized by “capitalist” or “neoliberal” categories, when not combined with other structures of oppression.

#### 4. Daily, simultaneous, interrelated violence

Whenever there's an eviction, it's always worse for women. Men sort out their lives, pack a bag, manage to find somewhere. But we don't, right? There's us and the children. We can't go on jumping from branch to branch (Statement by a participant in a workshop held at the Helenira Preta occupation, on February 15, 2020).

The woman's body has always been a condition for the reproduction of life, enabling the formation of the urban working class (FEDERICI, 2017 [2004]). Without the female work of reproducing life – in the previous quote, expressed by the responsibility of taking care of children in the phrase “there's and the children” – there is no productive work. It is possible, therefore, to affirm that there is a structural dimension of dispossession in the female body, since it is the reproductive center of the working class. Eviction is also the destruction of the reproduction space produced by women through networks that confer them with political power. Therefore, its destruction is also political.

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15. An African diasporic religion that developed in Brazil during the nineteenth century.

16. A spirit or deity that reflects one of the manifestations of God in the Yoruba spiritual or religious system.

However, there are subjectivities in the eviction processes that deserve to be addressed and that relate to the structural dimension. Some authors, with different perspectives, consider the eviction process as yet another violent process, within the various forms of violence experienced through different forms of oppression. Galiza et al. (2014), in undertaking a historical review of evictions motivated by major events and construction works in the city of Rio de Janeiro, argue that the “culture of evictions” is complemented by a “culture of suffering”, which may result in the disruption of social networks, something they associate “with emotional destabilization and an insecurity of the future of the most vulnerable groups” (idem, p. 4).

To address the urban context and life under the constant threat of housing eviction that some communities experience – a situation identified by some authors as “permanent transience” (ROLNIK, 2015; SANTOS, 2019) –, Pain (2019) reflects that this violence is built gradually, and on a daily basis, sometimes imperceptibly in its process, but that leaves deep marks on the individuals that are its target. The author introduces the idea of “slow violence”,<sup>17</sup> which comes close to the idea of symbolic violence by Bourdieu (2000), one that leaves no physical marks, and which is, for its victims, even invisible, but which is exercised through symbolic paths of communication and knowledge (BOURDIEU, 2000 apud VILLAGRÁN, 2012).

The construction firm’s tractors were digging, plowing up the northern tip of the favela. There, there was so much dust and so much anguish. Some families had already been ordered to leave and this precipitated the pain for all of us. Each family that left was a confirmation that our turn would come. They offered two options to the residents: a little material, boards and some bricks for them to build another shack somewhere, or a symbolic indemnity, a little sum of money. The last option was worse. Whoever opted for the money received an amount so insignificant that it ended up being spent right there. Then the worst came, after the period of stay, neither the money, nor the boards, nor the bricks, just nothing (EVARISTO, 2017, p. 71).

Eviction processes do not end with the loss of housing, nor are they episodic cases, events of a single day. On the contrary, these are violent, lengthy life-changing processes in the broadest spectrum – work, education, family, affective and support networks that are broken, i.e., the entire reproduction structure of life needs to be

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17. The term ‘slow violence’ is adopted by Pain (2019), although it was originated by Nixon (2011 apud PAIN 2019): “a violence that happens gradually and out of sight, is a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed through time and space, a violence of exhaustion, which is typically not seen as violence” (p. 387).

reorganized in the face of eviction. Conducting research in a significantly different context, from medium-sized cities in the so-called Global North, Schiller and Çaglar (2018) mobilized the conceptual pair of displacements and emplacements in order to shed light on the various processes of dispossession related not only to the destruction of housing, but to the precariousness of work, the dismantling of social security and the increase in indebtedness, which fall on part of the population and, at the same time, produce other processes through which displaced people rebuild their relationships and networks, including, or above all, repositioning themselves in the territory. In other words, as formulated by the authors, these are interrelated processes of restructuring space and social relations that, as they develop, produce the city – and contribute to the accumulation of capital, while, at the same time, being victims of it. The question remains: what kind of city is this, produced through continuous, varied processes of dispossession?

The occupation-eviction-occupation cycle, which characterizes the state of permanent transience, may be repeated numerous times, as in the case of Luiza.<sup>18</sup> The interview with Luiza was conducted in the vicinity of a CTA (Portuguese acronym for Temporary Reception Center), a center belonging to the Municipality of São Paulo, whose target public is families in situations of social vulnerability. For two years, Luiza has lived at the CTA with her four children and three dogs, after having gone through seven camps or occupations since 2007, when she experienced the first ownership repossession. Since 2018 – when she left the camp formed at the Largo do Paissandu, in downtown São Paulo, after the collapse of the Wilton Paes Occupation –, she has been temporarily-but-permanently occupying a room at the CTA, which has a strict disciplinary regime: food may not be taken into the building (all meals are available), nor may visitors be received. With regard to space, she complained that she is “not allowed to touch anything, nor put in a nail”. In addition, children may not be left alone nor with other people who live in the center, therefore, Luiza only manages to work during the time when the children are at school or in a nearby center, which offers activities during the periods before or after school.

As the CTA is only for temporary stay, if Luiza and her children have to leave the place they have there, they will return to the occupation where they have already lived. In addition, the stigma that accompanies the family because of where they live currently accompanies the children in the form of bullying at

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18. A fictitious name. Interview carried out during research conducted by the LabCidade FAUUSP (2019). LABCIDADE. Laboratório Espaço Público e Direito à Cidade. *Territórios populares: reestruturação territorial, desigualdades e resistências nas metrópoles*. Documentos da Pesquisa Formas de Morar. São Paulo: FAUUSP, 2019.



school – they are called “shelter kids”. The head of the family is also unable to even open a bank account or get a job, which she attributes to the fact that she has to provide her address at the CTA as her place or residence. The multiple layers of violence that this process of permanent transience has on the life of this family are clear, a story that is repeated with countless other people.

Maria-Velha and Mãe Joana demonstrated confidence that they did not have at that moment. It was necessary not to embitter the children. They knew, however, that the difficulties would be redoubled. How would they come and fetch the clothes? How would they maintain the clientele? Change their way of working? Go back to work in family homes? Who would take care of Tio Totó and the children? There was fear, the unknown, animals. There was extreme helplessness (EVARISTO, 2017, p. 174).

Pain’s (2019) interest in the traumatic dimension of evictions and its spatial and collective aspect, to the detriment of the effects on individual bodies and minds, expands the effects of violence that is repeated over an extensive period, as well as the scale and depth of this trauma, thereby politicizing it. In addition, in the case of evictions and other events, such as mega-infrastructure works with major environmental impacts, this is authored by the State itself and, therefore, may use techniques of psychological violence and enjoy impunity (NIXON, 2011 apud PAIN, 2019), thereby making the established power relationships perfectly clear

The trucks arrived in the morning and until late at night were taking the families away. Everyone already wanted to leave. Life had become unbearable. Areas of the favela had become deserted. Getting from one place to another had become dangerous. People were afraid for themselves and others. Even a friend could be a potential enemy. There was real danger and imaginary danger. Women and children, to fetch water at night, only walked out in groups, and this task took until the early hours of the morning. Fear of the invisible had taken hold of us. We were not sure of anything else. [...] It was a fear that perhaps came from more concrete situations, such as moving from a place that we somehow loved and believed as ours. Fear of starting another new-same life. Fear that tomorrow would be worse, much worse than today. Fear, awareness of our weakness, our helplessness, our worthlessness (EVARISTO, 2017, p. 166).

A feminist view of these phenomena leads to what Verónica Gago (2020) suggests: in order to understand the violence that women suffer, it is necessary to make a map of the violence, which is able to account for its various forms. According to Gago, it is possible to undertake a reading of the violence in neoliberalism in



several ways, among them, by observing the “way that exploitation takes root in the production of subjectivities compelled to precariousness at the same time that they struggle to prosper in structural conditions of plunder” (idem, p. 82-83).

Debate and a collaborative mapping the impact of evictions and the threat of eviction on women’s lives was promoted in February 2020 by the *Casa de Referência Mulher Helenira Preta* (Helenira Preta Reference House for Women) and the Observatório de Remoções, in Mauá, in the ABC region of São Paulo. The House is an occupation, which receives women who are victims of violence, and since 2018, has provided legal and psychological assistance and promoted both training and cultural activities.

In addition to the new reports of occurrences, the activity resulted in recording the perceptions of women living in Mauá with regard to territorial injustices, and has also served as a tool for creating the *Rede Contra Remoções da Helenira Preta* (The Helenira Preta Network Against Evictions), which is active in receiving complaints and updates on the situation of women. The perception of women concerning their own territory was summed up in words like “risk” and “threat”. The word “risk”, in addition to a geological risk, also appeared as the risk of suffering violence, of having no vacancies at the daycare center, of having no social protection and of being unemployed. “It is a risk to go out every day to work and not know if you will return. I don’t know if our daughters will return. The work is so far away, much of it is outside Mauá” (Statement by a participant in a workshop held at the Helenira Preta occupation, on February 15, 2020).

The word “threat”, on the other hand, is more seriously charged and was used for moments when reporting police terror, very intense fear, cases of sexual violence, life threatening situations. Risk situations are manageable. Despite the risks of leaving home, it is nonetheless possible to leave home. While risk makes a dignified life more difficult to achieve, it does not completely remove the ability of women to choose. It is possible, as mentioned in the workshop, to take safer routes when leaving home, in order to reduce the risk. The opposite happens however, in threatening situations. A woman who feels threatened is unable to reduce the threat alone. “It’s scary to live in precarious housing. Fire, flood, inundation, running out of water. There is fear all the time. Many women still suffer violence and are afraid to report it. In addition to the fear of the husband’s threats”. (Statement by a participant in a workshop held in the Helenira Preta occupation, on February 15, 2020).

Threat of eviction causes fear, since the loss of a home leads to the loss of other elements, the most commonly mentioned being a daycare center. In some cases, the distance between the new home and the daycare center where children have been enrolled is so great that it is impossible to take them there. “The lack of daycare is the main barrier to having a decent life in Mauá. The lack of daycare, jobs, housing and

water is much worse for women. How can you take care? How do you clean? How can you organize things? Much of the city is like that” (Statement by a participant in a workshop held in the Helenira Preta occupation, on February 15, 2020).

The statements by participants in the workshop held at the Helenira Preta occupation illustrate many dimensions of violence. This is expressed in fear – brought on by the threat of eviction, but also by the living conditions due to the precarious housing situation, which are a constant cause of fear, in addition to the risk to which residents and their families are subjected to in the case of an unforeseeable event. These anxiety-causing events really do occur. To this is also added the constant threat of gender-based violence, perpetrated by a partner, in either a similar or even worse precarious situation of work, also the target of state violence due to the place they live, gender or race.

The gender roles of women in the reproductive space, along with men in the public space, articulate everyday gender-based violence, which was perceived in the area of the North Zone. In addition to the biological body, realizing the bonds and pitfalls of maintaining these roles is essential for understanding how evictions are experienced and faced by women, in a process that ultimately reinforces them.

In Torrinha, another occupation located in the Tremembé district, and removed in December 2019, Yolanda,<sup>19</sup> 28, says she went from door to door trying to rent somewhere before the eviction took place, which was set to come some eight months later. But she was unsuccessful. The reason for this was not only economic, despite the burden that the R\$ 800 would have made on her budget: the main obstacle to closing any kind of deal was the landlords’ veto on animals and children. “I think they are afraid of the child destroying the house” she says. The responsibility for supporting and maintaining the family thus emerges as an example of the gender roles that, in different ways, imprison and condition the lives of women, and also affect the relationship with and in the territory. In the São Paulo Metropolitan Region, women are the sole head in 18% of households and with children or grandchildren, and men head only 3% of the same family model (SEADE, 2020).

## 5. The transformative power of daily resistance

It is possible to state from feminist studies that several have striven to highlight, recognize and stimulate the processes of social mobilization of which

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19. A fictitious name. Interview carried out during research conducted by the LabCidade FAUUSP (2019). LABCIDADE. Laboratório Espaço Público e Direito à Cidade. *Territórios populares: reestruturação territorial, desigualdades e resistências nas metrópoles*. Documentos da Pesquisa Formas de Morar. São Paulo: FAUUSP, 2019.

women are at the center, taking daily resistance as the core of transformation, as transformative power within a context of profound contradictions and conflicts. Disputes involving housing, or other dimensions of the reproduction of life, are commonly played by women, who take up the front line in cases of resistance or in demonstrations for collective demands (MONTEIRO; MEDEIROS; NASCIUTTI, 2017; SANTORO, 2007; BLAY, 1994).

In São Paulo, the fact that women have been at the center of demands for structuring and qualifying low-income territories has been observed over several decades by authors who have examined the *Clubes de Mães da Zona Sul* (Mothers' Club of the South Zone) (1972), and the *Movimento Contra o Aumento do Custo de Vida* (Movement against an Increase in the Cost of Living), among others. At least since the 1970s, women have led the way in making demands that have been included on the political agenda to guarantee adequate housing, daycare centers, public health, garbage collection, installation of sewage systems and bus lines (GOHN, 1982; SADER, 1988). They have also been responsible or making up the basis of the housing movement (BLAY, 1994; HELENE, 2019).

It was also with women taking up the front line that a resistance movement was formed against evictions, which put an end to three occupations in the Jardim Flor de Maio, North Zone of São Paulo. In July 2018, a repossession action left around 400 families homeless, in an action which lasted two days, and involved disputes, tensions and violent actions.<sup>20</sup> In several moments of conflict, either with the bailiffs or with the military police, the women took up the front line. Vilma and Sônia<sup>21</sup> were part of this group. Even in the face of losing their homes and with the need to seek another alternative, they stayed for the two days following the entire process, and became involved in it. Sometimes they acted in direct confrontation in the discussions and negotiations on the terms of the eviction, other times, they organized protests, such as when they put together piles of rotten wood and rubble as if this were the belongings of a resident's move. A simple action, but one that expressed the revolt of the two women, who never, at any moment, stopped supporting the other families that were being evicted.

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20. A more detailed account of the action that resulted in the removal of the three occupations was published at: [http://www.labcidade.fau.usp.br/flor-de-maio-reintegracao\\_de-posse-na-zona-norte-deixa-250-familias-sem-casa/](http://www.labcidade.fau.usp.br/flor-de-maio-reintegracao_de-posse-na-zona-norte-deixa-250-familias-sem-casa/). Viewed on: June 3, 2020.

21. Fictitious names. Interview carried out during research conducted by the LabCidade FAUUSP (2019). LABCIDADE. Laboratório Espaço Público e Direito à Cidade. *Territórios populares: reestruturação territorial, desigualdades e resistências nas metrópoles*. Documentos da Pesquisa Formas de Morar. São Paulo: FAUUSP, 2019.

The response to the action of these women, however, was that of violence. At various times, the two women, both Black, were met with violent racial slurs from police and employees of the company responsible for the moving trucks. At one moment, one of the truck drivers was coming towards them so aggressively that the police quickly removed him. At the end of these two days, it was the networks maintained by the two women that guaranteed them an alternative, albeit temporary: Sônia went to the home of relatives, while her things were kept in the garage of the pastor at the church she attended. Vilma, in turn, was part of a group that organized another nearby occupation, continuing the dispute over land, which has characterized this part of the city (UNGARETTI et al., 2020).

Similarly, also in the context of evictions justified by major sporting events in Rio de Janeiro,<sup>22</sup> several studies have examined the leading role played by women in resistance to evictions (NASCIUTTI, 2016; SOBRINHO, 2017). Monteiro, Medeiros e Nasciutti (2017) investigated the significance and impacts on the lives of women under threat of eviction and in view of the violent dynamics of the destruction of the affected communities.<sup>23</sup> According to these authors, women have more reasons to lead the resistance since the loss of the home would also mean the destruction of their arrangements that, among other things, make their sources of income possible and the care-sharing of their children, plus the elderly and the sick, almost always considered the exclusive responsibility of women.

The relationship with need is what defines the issues of the *favela*, because the solutions that arise from within the favela, from the community, are generated through need. This is a case of the problem generating the solution, right? And in the life of the woman who lives in the community, this happens too. It's very different, for example, for a woman who has money, right? She does not have that social bond because she has money, so she pays for a nanny, she pays for a cleaner. Her link is with capital. But the woman who lives in the community, she has a bond with collectivity, because she has a bond

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22. Other work has focused on the impacts of major sporting events in Rio de Janeiro, such as Prata Preta, which provided an unprecedented mapping of tenements in the region of the Porto Maravilha Urban Consortium Operation exposing the unforeseen, or disregarded, consequences of the ongoing urban restructuring. It shed light on an invisible social reality of those affected: a mostly male population, from the Brazilian Northeast, or foreign immigrants, many of whom are in an irregular situation in the country, working in the informal work circuits of the region (LACERDA et al., 2017). LACERDA, L.; WERNECK, M.; RIBEIRO, B. Cortiços de hoje na cidade do amanhã: notas sobre a pesquisa Prata Preta e o levantamento de cortiços na área portuária do Rio de Janeiro. *Revista e-metropolis*, 30, Rio de Janeiro, 2017. Available at: [http://emetropolis.net/system/artigos/arquivo\\_pdfs/000/000/229/original/emetropolis30\\_especial.pdf?1508981680](http://emetropolis.net/system/artigos/arquivo_pdfs/000/000/229/original/emetropolis30_especial.pdf?1508981680). Viewed on: April 30, 2020.

23. For more information on the resistance to eviction at the Vila Autódromo, see, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4P8dQJTSBA&t=35s>. Viewed on: April 30, 2020.

with those people. Without those people, how am I going to manage now? Alone in the world? The biggest problem of eviction for me is loneliness (...) (MONTEIRO; MEDEIROS; NASCIUTTI, 2017, p. 15)

The moment of eviction is a disruptive event with the violence involved in knocking down houses, in the rubble scattered along the way, in the people rushing by with their belongings. However, violence is also expressed in breaking the reproduction strategies of life, which need to be rearranged in the face of a new situation that appears after the eviction – and the consequent reorganization of strategies is only possible thanks to the networks into which those being evicted are inserted.

According to Butler (2018), it is possible to understand these networks and alliances that support them based on her understanding of *precariousness*. For Butler, precariousness is the result of the unequal distribution of the precarious condition – that shared by all human beings –, i.e., as a result of a situation induced by various processes of dispossession, involving the deterioration of social and economic support networks, which fall upon certain groups and populations. However, she also states that precariousness also appears as a place of alliance among those who experience and share this situation, bringing together people who would not otherwise have much in common. Thus, Butler encourages us to consider the networks of material and immaterial relationships that condition human and non-human life and brings this idea to the discussion in the field of urban studies, since urban networks and meshes come to be seen as an interwoven part of life, side by side with social and solidarity networks.

In turn, Gago entitled her book *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (2020), placing desire as a force that drives what is perceived collectively. She proposes strike action as a lens and catalyst for reading the political and subjective process that is driven by this desire, as a multitudinous expression. A reading of these ideas in order to think about the eviction processes brings the image of resistance to this action as a “strike”, in which the urban and life precariousness to which families are subjected is made visible. For Gago (2020), strike action also enables displacement in relation to the position of victims and the excluded, and its practice – organization and realization – is the redefinition of a powerful form of struggle. In several excerpts from the book, the author takes up the theme of the assembly in order to describe that the process of organizing feminist strike action, through preparatory assemblies, has led to the understanding of what invisible work is and how it may be seen in strike action, even by women who wanted to stop, and could not.

Butler (2018) also uses the term “assembly”, among others, to give a tangible character to the questions that deal with the dimensions of politics. According to the author, it functions in two fundamental ways: i) on the one hand, due to the fact of being present, gathered, in assemblies, strikes, vigils and occupations of public spaces, literally giving form to them; and ii) on the other hand, when these bodies are the very object, the central theme of the manifestations of the precarious condition and the uneven distribution of precariousness. For her, there is a body that, along with others, in an alliance, gives visibility to the various forms of “precariousness” to which they are subjected.

Thus, in its conception, “precariousness” is the rubric that unites women, queers, transgenders, the poor, those with different skills, and the stateless, but also ethnic-racial and religious minorities, who are the target of processes of dispossession: it is a social and economic condition, but not an identity, which, in fact, crosses through these categories and produces potential alliances between those who do not recognize that they belong to one another (BUTLER, 2018).

These bodies together claiming for “rights when one has none”, that is, they claim for the very power that is denied them, so as to expose and fight against this denial, “it is a question of acting, and in the acting, laying claim to the power one requires.” (BUTLER, 2018, p. 65)<sup>24</sup> This is how the author understands performativity, also as a way of acting from precariousness and against it.

Several of these authors seem to recognize that the processes of dispossession, including the processes of eviction, are also potent processes of transformation – in all their contradictoriness and conflictuality –, inscribed in the reconstruction of the relationships and networks of dispossessed individuals, including, or above all, through their repositioning in the territory, involving processes of restructuring space and social relations (SCHILLER, ÇAGLAR, 2018). Furthermore, it is these restructuring processes that are mobilized by the female leaders and their struggles, as may be observed in the statements of the women participating in the Observatório de Remoções workshop in Mauá:

Did we need to have more daycare centers? We created a daycare center. There had to be more inclusion! We included. We do everything that the city hall should do, and yet it doesn't even install a water network here.

The main public policy that exists for women in the city does not come from the public authorities; it comes from the popular authorities.

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24. N.B. For direct citations, the English version was used of BUTLER, J. *Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics*. University of California, Berkeley. Online version: <https://www.aibr.org/antropologia/04v03/criticos/040301b.pdf>. Viewed on July 23, 2022.



Management is not committed to the city's working and poor population. Helenira enables us to do things that the city does not allow us to do. We study, we read, we graduate.

The collective struggle is what will save us. It is the only thing that can save us. Our mothers, our sisters, our friends. We need more Heleniras in the city, in the world.

The housing issue should be managed in a responsible manner. Those who rule in Mauá feel responsibility toward women. Managers do not even look at the youth, at women.

The construction of the popular alternative is the solution. Mainly led by women. (Statements from the workshop held in the the Helenira Preta occupation, on February 15, 2020).

Women are creating a daycare center, studying, producing, sharing; are forming and participating in the collective struggle, which is what may save us. As they themselves say, we need more 'Heleniras' in the city, in the world!

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