The Relational Dynamics of Becoming Popular Feminist Subjects

The World March of Women and Rural/Peasant Women’s Organizing in Brazil in the 2000s

by

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The constitution and consolidation of rural and peasant women as popular feminist subjects in Brazil are the result not only of processes internal to these constituencies but also of relational dynamics involving cross-class and cross-movement popular activist organizations. Since the end of the 1990s, organizations and activists identifying with the World March of Women in western Rio Grande do Norte and at the national scale have consciously engaged with rural and peasant women and assisted them in becoming and consolidating themselves as popular feminist subjects. Relational dynamics have also been important in the (unfinished) process of transforming, extending, and deepening the dual meaning of “popular feminism” in Brazil.

A constituição e consolidação das mulheres rurais e camponesas como sujeitos feministas populares no Brasil são o resultado não apenas de processos internos desses grupos, mas também das dinâmicas relacionais que envolvem organizações ativistas populares de classes e movimentos. Desde o final da década de 1990, organizações e ativistas que se identificam com a Marcha Mundial das Mulheres da região Oeste do Rio Grande do Norte e em escala nacional têm se engajado conscientemente com as mulheres rurais e campone-sas, ajudando as mesmas a se tornarem e consolidarem como sujeitos feministas populares. As dinâmicas relacionais têm sido importantes também no processo (incompleto) de transformação, extensão e aprofundamento do duplo significado de “feminismo popular” no Brasil.

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In 2000, the first edition of the Marcha das Margaridas brought together 20,000 rural women workers from all over Brazil to march on the capital (Aguiar, 2015). Since then, rural and peasant women have been increasingly visible in the public sphere, progressively achieving voice and legitimacy at the national scale. They have succeeded in naming their own realities, building common visions of the changes they want, and creating a national political agenda that includes a long list of demands such as the recognition of women

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as agricultural workers; labor and social security rights, access to land ownership, credit, and technical support; health care and education; and action against violence against women. Not only have they gained public visibility for themselves and for their claims but they have also gained recognition by Brazilian society in the form of the first public policies aimed at promoting rural women’s autonomy (see Ministry of Agrarian Development, 2015). Brazilian rural and peasant women have now become political subjects in their own right (Aguiar, 2015; Siliprandi, 2009).

The concept of political subjectivity “denotes how a single person or a group of actors is brought into a position to stake claims, to have a voice, and to be recognizable by authorities” (Krause and Schram, 2011: 131). Inquiring into political subjectivity implies, as its starting point, not “taking the existence of subjects for granted” (Krause and Schram, 2011: 127; also Dagnino, 1998: 42). It suggests paying attention to the processes and practices through which Brazilian rural and peasant women, as individuals and as collective actors, have come to see themselves as “subjects of their own lives, agents of social transformation, . . . sociopolitical power players” (Maier, 2010: 30), and “bearers of rights” (Dagnino, 1998: 48). The development of political subjectivities is shaped by historical and sociopolitical contexts in which it is tied to practices of constituting collective identities and subject positions in the political realm (Dagnino, 1998; Krause and Schram, 2011). Aguiar (2015) has analyzed the constitution of political subjecthood in the Marchas das Margaridas as the progressive coming together of women from different social positions. What we want to do here, rather, is to draw attention to the processes through which Brazilian rural and peasant women have come to see themselves as political subjects of a particular kind. The “coming into political subjectivity” of rural and peasant women in Brazil, it can be argued, is part of the historical constitution and consolidation in Latin American activism of popular feminism as a gender-class politics anchored in the experiences, needs, and survival struggles of women of the popular sectors.

Brazilian rural and peasant women were active, directly or indirectly, in farmers’ and rural workers’ movements long before their contribution was visible or recognized (Aguiar, 2015: 55; Siliprandi, 2009: 127). Many observers and researchers have documented that rural women’s organizing and mobilizing as “women rural workers”—that is, around a collective identity threading issues of gender within those of class—started in the early 1980s. Thayer (2010: 94–100), for instance, retraces the circumstances that led to the birth of the Movimiento de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais (Movement of Women Rural Workers—MMTR) in 1982. Deere (2004), Siliprandi (2009), and Aguiar (2015) provide historical accounts of the progressive development of such gender-class—popular feminist—politics in rural and peasant women’s organizing in Brazil.

In this article, we contend that the constitution and consolidation of rural and peasant women as popular feminist political subjects in Brazil cannot be fully understood by looking solely at processes internal to their organizing. It is also the result of the work of other popular feminist actors, coming together in cross-class and cross-movement alliances with rural and peasant women organized in both non-mixed and mixed-gender organizations. Relational
dynamics and political interplay, Krause and Schram (2011: 128) remark, are part of the processes through which political subjectivities emerge and evolve. We propose to shed light on some of these relational processes by focusing on how, from the end of the 1990s on, activists and organizations identifying with the World March of Women in Brazil consciously engaged with rural and peasant women and assisted them in becoming and consolidating themselves as popular feminist subjects.

In Brazil, the World March of Women is a national coalition of 488 women’s, feminist, and mixed-gender organizations (Lebon, 2016: 163). It emerged at the end of the 1990s under the leadership of the popular feminist organization Sempreviva Organização Feminista (SOF) and around the organizing of the Brazilian instantiation of the transnational World March of Women in 2000. The first edition of the Marcha das Margaridas was a major feature of this event, and indeed, the March in Brazil and the Margaridas were intimately linked from the outset. After 2000, the March developed in Brazil as part of the newly created planetary feminist network the World March of Women1 in which the Brazilian coordinating committee played a leading role. In 2014 its executive committee was composed of representatives of the SOF; which has hosted the national coordinating body of the Brazilian March since the beginning; the feminist nongovernmental organization (NGO) the Centro Feminista 8 de Março of western Rio Grande do Norte; the women’s sectors of the unions Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura (National Confederation of Agricultural Workers—CONTAG) and Central Única dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ Central—CUT), and two youth representatives from the March. The March in Brazil has a cross-class character, being made up of women from the middle classes and from the popular sector. The demographic importance among its membership of urban and rural unions and grassroots popular women’s organizations has ensured a large place on its agenda for the concerns of working-class, peasant, and poor women (Lebon, 2014). Finally, the March nurtures alliances with mixed-gender labor, student, and rural movements such as the Movimento de Trabalhadores Sem Terra (Landless Workers’ Movement—MST) and the Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas (Peasant Women’s Movement—MMC).

We have chosen the World March of Women for this examination of the role of relational processes in the constitution of rural and peasant women as popular feminist subjects because it is the most sophisticated (Janet Conway, personal communication) and massive contemporary instantiation of popular feminism in Brazil (Lebon, 2016), because of its decidedly cross-class and cross-movement character, which has attracted rural and peasant women as members and as allies, and because of its long-standing commitment to supporting self-organizing by women of the popular sectors and their articulation with feminism within and outside the March.

In the first section of this article, we borrow from Conway’s (2016) argument and related historical accounts to distinguish popular feminism as the gender-class politics of women of the popular sectors from popular feminism as an activist project of articulation and mass mobilization. Then, using exemplary stories, we retrace some of the ways in which the Brazilian March, which we identify with the latter project, has contributed directly or through member
organizations and activists to the shaping of rural and peasant women’s popular feminist agency and political subjectivities at both local and national scales. Our contribution to the current conversation on popular feminism is twofold. First, we account for and provide an understanding of the nature and importance of the relational dimension of the processes through which rural and peasant women have come into political subjectivity and constituted themselves as an expression of popular feminism in Brazil since the end of the 1990s. We show how, in western Rio Grande do Norte, such relational dynamics transformed individual subjectivities and supported rural women’s organizing and how embracing the March’s project of popular feminism resulted in a broadening of the geographical and political scope of popular feminism in this region. We also show how, at the national scale, relations with the March have been key to the emergence of the Marcha das Margaridas as a (collective) popular feminist subject and instrumental to its later consolidation through political dialogue and support enacted in a larger political-ethical field. Second, we hope to demonstrate the usefulness for understanding current expressions of popular feminism and their dynamics of an analytics that distinguishes, as Conway (2016) proposes, the two meanings of “popular feminism” as an analytical category. By throwing light on relational dynamics involving the March and rural and peasant women’s organizing, we show how the different meanings of popular feminism they map onto have been entwined in a generative way in the 2000s in Brazil.

This article makes use of both secondary sources and original empirical material. The section on western Rio Grande do Norte mostly uses original information gathered in the context of Elsa Beaulieu Bastien’s doctoral research on the March in this region, with data (interviews, participant observation, and documentation) collected during six months of fieldwork in 2006. Our broader knowledge of Rio Grande do Norte and of the Brazilian March draws on her involvement with March activists from Rio Grande do Norte and from the Brazilian March over a period ranging from 2002 to the present. In addition, it draws on a five-year study on solidarity building around food sovereignty in the World March of Women directed by Dominique Masson, with interviews with Brazilian activists realized in 2014 and 2016.

**POPULAR FEMINISM FROM THE 1980s TO THE 2000s**

Conway (2016: 4) contends that popular feminism has “a dual meaning” in Latin American feminist studies. As an analytical category, “popular feminism” appeared in the 1980s and has been most commonly employed since to refer to the development of a gender consciousness in the struggles of the different women’s movements in Latin America. The latter had emerged as women became involved in neighborhood, women’s, and mothers’ associations, politicized their socioeconomic hardships as residents of the poor urban peripheries of the continent’s major cities, and protested political authoritarianisms (Lebon, 2014: 152–153; Thayer, 2010: 10). Engagement in these class-based and democratic struggles took them into the public sphere, giving them “new skills and a sense of empowerment” (Thayer, 2010: 12) and weakening patriarchal norms.
It also increasingly pitted them against men with patriarchal attitudes in mixed-gender organizations. These experiences gave rise to an “awareness of gender hierarchy . . . and so this became a valuable place to identify the mechanics of gender oppression in everyday working-class lives” (Maier, 2010: 35; also Thayer, 2010). From the development of such gender consciousness stemmed the elaboration of a gender-class politics foregrounding the survival struggles and socioeconomic concerns of women of the popular sectors—rural and peasant as well as urban poor and working-class women. “In this usage, popular feminism is defined by its demographic composition, its anchorage in the life-worlds of the popular sectors” (Conway, 2016: 5), and by the gender-class feminist politics and related demands pursued by women of these sectors both within and separately from mixed-gender organizations and movements.

This common usage coexists, Conway (2016: 5–6) argues, with a narrower, more “politically-circumscribed meaning” of popular feminism that refers to “a positionality and praxis among left-wing feminist activists who sought to articulate the struggles and concerns of the popular sectors to the feminist movement.” Historical accounts of the emergence of popular feminism point to the role of middle-class activist women with prior experience in the left. Joining in or supporting through their own organizations the class-based struggles of women of the popular sectors, they brought with them an anticapitalist stance and a class analysis inflected by gender and the political project, informed by a socialist imaginary, of constituting a “mass movement of women in Latin America” (Maier, 2010: 35; also Conway, 2016; Espinosa Damián, 2011; González, 2018; Thayer, 2010). This project was guided by participatory methodologies, especially “popular education, women’s empowerment and services/support for poor and working-class women’s organizations” (Conway, 2016: 3).

Although the two meanings of popular feminism are analytically distinct, it is clear from the above narrative that the realities they refer to have been enmeshed. Thus “popular feminism,” understood as a gender-class politics associated with women of the popular sectors, sometimes emerged from political learning and development internal to popular women’s struggles in a context of diffusion of feminist ideas (see Thayer, 2001) and sometimes in a relational way under the impetus and with the organizational support of activists and organizations pursuing popular feminism as a more narrowly understood socialist feminist political project of cross-class mass organization and mobilization (Lebon, 2014: 153).

Pushed to the sidelines in the 1990s as a result of a series of transformations linked to democratization processes in Brazil (Alvarez, 1999; Lebon, 2014; see also 2013; Maier, 2010), popular feminism as gender-class politics reappeared in force at the national scale in the 2000s. Major expressions of popular feminism in Brazil over the past two decades have included the various editions of the Marcha das Margaridas, women’s activism in rural and urban unions, and the actions of the World March of Women. The Brazilian coordinating committee of the March has been an important site for the elaboration of popular feminist analyses articulating gender to the socioeconomic and lifeworld issues of working-class, peasant, and poor women. The Brazilian March has also fashioned its own version of the earlier socialist feminist “project of popular
feminism”: it has committed itself to supporting women’s self-organizing, be it autonomous or within mixed-gender groups, and to a politics of alliances with other progressive organizations and movements aimed at the constitution of a mass-based, feminist and anticapitalist counterhegemonic force in Brazil (Conway, 2016; Lebon, 2014; 2016).

According to Lebon (2014: 148), popular feminism “is currently a stronghold of organizing for Brazilian feminist and women’s movements,” but “it has not received the scholarly attention it deserves” in its contemporary expressions in Brazil (or elsewhere in Latin America). In this article, we seek to explore the relational politics of the development, evolution, and consolidation of popular feminist political subjectivities in Brazil in the 2000s as seen through exemplary political interactions at the local and national scales between activists and organizations identified with the March and rural and peasant women organizing in Brazil. In doing so, we also hope to shed some light on how the two meanings of popular feminism—as a gender-class politics of women of the popular sectors and as a cross-class and cross-movement political project of mass-movement building—have been playing out in this context over the past two decades.

**BECOMING POPULAR FEMINIST SUBJECTS IN WESTERN RIO GRANDE DO NORTE**

At the national scale in Brazil, the World March of Women is predominantly urban, but in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, in northeastern Brazil, organized rural women are its main driving force. In this section, we focus on slices of local and regional processes whereby rural women activists have emerged as popular feminist subjects in western Rio Grande do Norte, where the March is very dynamic and the struggles and demands of rural women are particularly important. The CF8 has been coordinating the March in Rio Grande do Norte since its involvement in the organizing of the World March of Women of 2000.

The CF8 was founded in 1993 in the city of Mossoró under the name Centro da Mulher 8 de Março (March 8 Women’s Center—CM8) by women from unions and from the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ Party—PT), as well as students and activists from the women’s health movement. Initially, the CM8 focused on violence against women and women’s health; it also aimed to raise consciousness among women of the popular neighborhoods of Mossoró and the nearby assentamentos about women’s subordination, the social causes of individual women’s lived experiences, and the rights they should be able to exercise. Its practices of popular education promoted the formation of women’s groups in these communities. Working with rural women led the CM8 to bring assistance to the concrete struggles undertaken by several local rural women’s groups for the improvement of their living conditions—better infrastructure in their villages (roads, public telephones, schools, dispensaries, cisterns, etc.). Important battles were also waged to allow the participation of women in the associations of their assentamentos. The relationship with the CM8 aided rural women leaders in coming to view feminist struggles as necessary in a context where rural women faced significant barriers to social, economic, and political
participation “posed by the sexual division of labor, by machismo, and by the impossibility of being the protagonists of their own destiny” (CF8, 2010: 86).

Until the end of the 1990s, the CM8 largely limited its action to “constructing feminism in Mossoró” (CF8 worker, interview, 2006), a feminism that, at the time, eschewed larger economic issues and alliances with mixed-gender movements. Contact with the SOF through training sessions eventually led the Center to put in place a two-year process of strategic planning, redefining its mission with the support of the SOF. Marked by internal debate around the groups’ orientations, this process eventually transformed the CM8. It changed its name to Centro Feminista 8 de Março and broadened its geographical and political scope substantially by aligning itself squarely with the popular feminism of the March. Articulating local struggles to others waged at other scales, regional, national, and international, by women and by allied movements and taking on economic issues by combining antipatriarchal, anticapitalist, and anti-neoliberal critiques became part of the CF8’s political vision: “Through our actions, we will consolidate the feminist field of action identified with the World March of Women, thereby reinforcing the organization of women from the popular sectors, as well as alliances with broader social movements engaged in the construction of alternatives to neoliberalism” (CF8, 2003).7

Most rural women’s groups in western Rio Grande do Norte were formed from the mid-1990s on and as a direct result of CM8/CF8’s commitment to supporting women’s organizing. Rural women created their own coordinating committee in the late 1990s, the Coordinação Oeste (Western Coordination). It joined the March as early as in 2000, and most if not all rural women’s groups in western Rio Grande do Norte followed suit, thus contributing to the elaboration of a popular feminist identity in the CF8 and the March that included rural women and their concerns. Conversely, membership in the March contributed to the diffusion among rural women and their organizations of its positions and politics.

Regular participation in the meetings and other activities organized by the CF8 and its member groups under the banner of the March also transformed the individual subjectivities of many rural women. During our 2006 interviews, rural women participants voiced these changes in terms of acquiring a sense of self-worth and self-affirmation, new knowledge and skills, and new ways of feeling, thinking, and acting. Such changes also included a new vision of their own place and of women’s place in the world, among them the possibility of renegotiating household relationships, being independent from men, and a desire to fight for women’s rights and against machismo. In short, our interviewees were starting to think and to experience themselves as subjects in the micropolitics of their own lives. These transformations were clearly linked to their participation in the March.

Another exemplary way in which the constitution of rural women as individual and collective popular feminist subjects took shape in western Rio Grande do Norte was through the CF8’s support for women producers’ agricultural projects. In a larger context where international development agencies and the Brazilian government were engaging in the promotion of “productive projects” (that is, income-generating projects) aimed at alleviating the consequences of the neoliberal transition—unemployment and extreme rural poverty—a demand for assistance in the development of such a project by the
local women’s group Decididas a Vencer (Determined to Succeed) in 1999 sparked collective reflection among the CF8’s activists. At that same time, the Rede Economia e Feminismo (Network Economy and Feminism—REF) and the Brazilian chapter of the continental-scale Red Latinoamericana de Mujeres Transformando la Economía (Latin American Network of Women Transforming the Economy—REMTE) were starting to develop feminist approaches to the economy. At issue for the CF8 was how productive projects could be designed in ways that helped articulate efforts toward women’s economic autonomy with a broader vision of change. A response was found by linking the CF8’s approach to social transformation, based on the local-scale collective organization of women, with the March’s global-scale struggle against patriarchy, capitalism, and neoliberalism as structural causes of women’s oppression.

In concrete terms, the CF8 started by anchoring its support to local economic projects in feminist consciousness-raising practices aimed at the reappropriation by rural women of their identity as agricultural producers. Until then rural women had been seen and had seen themselves only as helpers of their husbands in agricultural production, not as doing “a real job” but merely as complementing their husbands’ work (Deere, 2004). Being part of a collective project of agricultural production was for rural women being part of a process of claiming and achieving the status of “persons in their own right” in addition to increasing their income. Such projects not only aimed at transforming rural women’s sense of themselves but embodied a feminist alternative to the dominant neoliberal model of rural development. In contrast to the latter, productive projects aided by the CF8 were undertaken from the perspective of making women agricultural producers into feminist, solidary agents of the transformation of the economy. From the first horticultural project of the group Decididas a Vencer stemmed the idea of community-supported agriculture, with the creation of the association Partners of the Earth and, in 2003, of a solidarity store that became the Xique Xique Solidarity Marketing Network in 2004. The organizers and technical facilitators of the CF8 and the mixed-gender technical-support NGOs that helped create the Xique Xique Network were all activists of the March. Thirty-five of Xique Xique’s 50 founding producers’ groups were local women’s groups, and women occupied 90 percent of the seats on the coordinating committees (Dantas, 2005). Feminist practices were systematically implemented in the network to ensure that men did not take over the leadership and that the organization remained an emancipatory space for women and one in which new gender relations could be invented and consolidated. Most existing rural women’s groups supported by the CF8 started production activities in the 2000s, and new ones were created, all of them joining the Brazilian March. Thus, a much broader dynamic of rural women organizing as producers and being involved in a project of politicizing and transforming both gender relations and the economy emerged in Rio Grande do Norte.

These successful initiatives attained great visibility and notoriety within the movements for agroecology (Siliprandi, 2009) and the solidarity economy, in which they contributed to the dissemination of feminist discourses and practices. The Xique Xique Network has quickly become one of the spearheads of the integration of feminism, agroecology, and the solidarity economy that is promoted by the March in Brazil and features centrally in Xique Xique’s Charter
of Principles9 and practices. Women of the Xique Xique Network and the network itself are part of and strongly identify with the March and carry its banner and the feminist struggles and ideals it represents beyond the local to the spaces of articulation of various progressive movements, the most important of them being the Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia (National Articulation of Agroecology—ANA) and the solidarity economy movement, which organize activities and forums at various scales.

Conversely, rural women from Rio Grande do Norte participate actively in local, regional, and national-scale activities within the March and thus contribute to reinforcing its commitment to the demands and struggles of rural women at the national level. Because the March is so dynamic and active in Rio Grande do Norte, rural women from that region, as well as CF8 organizers and Xique Xique women producers, inspire the March as a whole and play an influential role in its national politics. Rural women activists from the March also participate in the Marcha das Margaridas. Back in their localities, they nourish and stoke local feminist struggles with what they have learned from their participation in regional- and national-scale feminist training sessions, events, and mobilizations (Dantas, 2013).

CONSOLIDATING THE POPULAR FEMINISM OF RURAL WOMEN AT THE NATIONAL SCALE

The Marcha das Margaridas emerged from interwoven historical processes of organization within the feminist rural and agricultural union movements. As early as 1995, and more clearly during the period leading to the first global action of the World March of Women in 2000, alliances were being built between activists from the women’s section of the CONTAG and the SOF, which coordinated the Brazilian March. According to Nobre (2015), the women of the CONTAG had been organizing within their unions since the early 1970s, asking for more space, more voice, and more recognition, but felt they had hit a ceiling. They figured that they needed to achieve a public voice and had already talked about organizing a major national mobilization of rural women. The planning of the first global action of the World March of Women in 2000 gave them the political opportunity to do so. The CONTAG’s Women’s Secretariat, along with a number of other unions and women’s and mixed-gender organizations, co-organized the first Marcha das Margaridas as a major event of the Brazilian March’s national actions (Nobre, 2015; see also Aguiar, 2015: 103–104). The name “Marcha das Margaridas,” a tribute to Margarida Maria Alves, a rural worker and pioneering union organizer assassinated at the behest of landowners and industrials in 1983, was chosen to distinguish the particular voice of rural women within the March (Menezes and Gama, 2013, quoted in Filipak, 2017: 125). The logo of the 2000 Marcha das Margaridas was adapted from the logo of the international and Brazilian March, replacing the faces of the women holding hands with daisies (margaridas). The official banner of the Margaridas combined the slogan of the Brazilian March, “2,000 Reasons to March against Hunger, Poverty, and Sexist Violence,” with a call to “Strengthen the Sustainable Rural Development Alternative Project.”
In fact, the Brazilian World March of Women and the Marcha das Margaridas took shape at about the same time, and their organizational processes were closely intertwined. The CONTAG Women’s Secretariat was an important member of the Brazilian March from the beginning (Aguiar, 2015: 79, 101; Dantas, 2013). The Brazilian March was a partner in the organization of every Marcha das Margaridas (in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019), and only from 2007 on has the Marcha das Margaridas been a stand-alone entity with its own activities (Nalu Faria of the March, cited in Aguiar, 2015: 166). Alessandra da Costa Lunas, coordinator of the Marcha das Margaridas at the time of our interview, describes the proximity of the March and the Margaridas in the following terms (interview, 2016, emphasis added):

To this day some people still ask, “Is the Marcha das Margaridas part of the World March of Women?” because the actions were always very close. . . . Also, a lot of our organizations are also part of the World March of Women, but not all of them, because the range of our partnerships is very large. So it’s not quite like that. . . . But it is a very umbilical process, to put it that way.

The organization of the 2000 World March of Women thus functioned as a catalyst for the irruption, as a highly visible and massive presence, of rural women as a collective political subject in the national public sphere in Brazil. Its organizational process contributed some of the infrastructure to do so, including coordination between rural women workers’ organizations and the feminist groups and activists involved and symbols and basic elements of political discourse.

The demands around which each edition of the Marcha das Margaridas mobilizes are developed through a year-long countrywide process of participation mobilizing “a fantastic number” of women in a myriad of local, state, and regional meetings and plenaries (Alessandra da Costa Lunas, interview, 2016) organized through the CONTAG’s 27 associations of rural workers and a very large number of unions of rural workers (CONTAG, 2014). A crucial aspect of the Marcha das Margaridas is that its expanded coordinating committee involves many other partner organizations of rural and peasant women, women’s sections of mixed-gender rural movements, and groups from the autonomous feminist movement, among them the World March of Women and the União Brasileira de Mulheres (Brazilian Women’s Union—UBM).10

This organizational makeup is the political infrastructure that contributed to creating for the Marcha das Margaridas a political identity that went progressively beyond that of women rural workers to crystallize around that of “women of the fields, waters, and forests” (Marcha das Margaridas, 2015), encompassing “women who are family farmers, rural workers, resettled landless peasants, coconut breakers, rubber tappers, extractivists, riverside dwellers, fisherwomen, and quilombolas”11 (Aguiar, 2015: 1). Beyond this diversity of women producers, the Cadernos de Textos (the political texts of reference) of the 2011 and 2015 editions of the Marcha das Margaridas also recognized differences among rural women arising from territorial specificities (the lived realities of the Amazon are very different from those of the semiarid Northeast or those of the Center-West, dominated by industrial monocultures), age (the young and the elderly), sexuality (lesbians), racialization (black women), and
indigenous identity (Marcha das Margaridas, 2011; 2015). Aguiar (2015: 243) remarks, however, that as a political subject the Margaridas remains organized around gender and class. Although other “markers of difference”—in particular racialized and indigenous differences—do appear in the *Cadernos*, they do so in generic terms and do not go as far as recognizing and representing political constituencies “with their own agendas.” Aguiar adds that she did not witness the discussion “of themes involving ethnic-racial issues” in the meetings of the expanded coordinating committee and that “there was no convergence of struggles with networks such as the National Coordination of Articulation of the Quilombola Rural Black Communities (CONAQ) or any other black or quilombola movement” (244, 246). Overall, the difference that racialized and indigenous differences makes “is still hidden in the whole that identifies them as ‘women of the fields and the forests.’” (248).

Institutionalizing the presence of partner organizations, the expanded coordination enabled the Marcha das Margaridas to adopt and defend stronger feminist positions than would have been possible if it had been coordinated solely by the CONTAG. Organizing as women, not to mention defending feminist political positions within the unions and the rural movement, is no easy task. Within the CONTAG, as in other mixed-gender unions and organizations in general, the degree of machismo is such that it is extremely difficult for women to maintain their participation and presence and even harder to defend feminist positions (Alessandra da Costa Lunas, interview, 2016):

> For us, to do feminist activism within mixed organizations . . . no one deserves this [*laughs*]. [It is] very difficult . . . Look, I’ve been in many other spaces, but the level of challenge defending the women’s space is incredible . . . Just the fact that you are coordinating women, you become a target . . . What you have to put up with every day, it’s quite something—a face of machismo that is very perverse, very difficult. They never leave you in peace. You have to prove yourself every day. You have to be very sure of what you are doing. . . . It is terrible. I always tell the girls: “the strength that these women put on the streets!” The CONTAG nowadays recognizes it publicly; they make these beautiful, wonderful speeches. But we know what we go through internally to build this.

In this context, women activists from the mixed-gender CONTAG have worked in alliance with autonomous feminist and women’s organizations to build and defend feminist positions publicly. From the initial countrywide grassroots process by which rural women identify and name the problems that they face and the changes they want, there are substantive debates and discussions in the expanded coordinating committee of the Marcha das Margaridas to define its political tone and strategy (Alessandra da Costa Lunas, interview, 2016). Lunas describes these discussions as an important political process by which feminism is learned and feminist positions are created through dialogue and in which the role of the autonomous feminist and women’s organizations is crucial. According to her, the presence of key activists from the Brazilian March is instrumental to this process: “For some of us, the fact that there is, for example, a Nalu [Faria] or a Miriam [Nobre] from the World March of Women and other companions who have a lot of experience around the table, it ends up being, I think, a great opportunity for all of us, a unique opportunity to
reflect and think together." Similarly, Aguiar (2015: 192–193) remarks that “the participation and interventions of feminist organizations, partners of the Marcha [das Margaridas], contribute to founding and building cases for controversial themes.” Because it is woven into such a web of internal and external alliances, the Marcha das Margaridas has been able to defend positions that would never be endorsed by the CONTAG (Alessandra da Costa Lunas, interview, 2016, our emphasis):

If I wrote a document in the name of the leadership of the CONTAG, it would have to go through board screening, and themes like abortion, for example, would never be cited. . . . If it weren’t for the partner organizations, our political platform would not be half of what it is today, in part because of internal machismo. But with women’s strong unified force, the unity with all the other women’s organizations, they don’t have the nerve to stop us.

The popular feminism of the Margaridas thus features a specific type of gender-class claim, one that draws from the lifeworlds of the constituencies of both the CONTAG and its partner organizations representing other constituencies of rural women, as well as from dialogue with cross-class and cross-movement feminist networks such as the March and the UBM. It is a popular feminism that connects gender as a political analytics to the realities and needs of a diversity of women producers in rural areas and that keeps evolving over time under the combined influence of the CONTAG’s constituencies and of its allies in autonomous feminist and women’s movements.

The primary goal of the 2000 Marcha das Margaridas was for rural women to claim legitimacy, visibility, and recognition in the public space, overcoming the constraints imposed on them by the sexism prevalent in the unions (Aguiar, 2015: 86–87). Another was to establish a process of dialogue and negotiation with the Brazilian state (Aguiar, 2016: 280). The Margaridas denounced a model of rural development that confined rural women to “a life of impoverishment, discrimination, violence, and social exclusion” (Marcha das Margaridas, 2000). It demanded rural development policies that attended to rural women’s needs and specificities, respected their rights, and promoted gender equality in rural areas. It advocated the construction of an alternative rural development project, one that would be sustainable and “based on principles of justice, social participation, equality, preservation of the environment and respect for diversity” (Marcha das Margaridas, 2000). The main claims that were common to the first four editions of the Margaridas were the recognition of women as agricultural workers, women’s access to land, labor and social security rights, public health care and education, and the prevention of violence against women (Filipak, 2017: 125). From 2007 on, new themes were introduced or gained more importance, such as the critique of the agribusiness development model, and related environmental concerns for land, water, biodiversity, sociobiodiversity, and the commons were given more centrality (Aguiar, 2016), with food sovereignty and agroecology as the proposed alternatives (Filipak, 2017: 125). Themes previously framed under poverty and access to income were increasingly addressed in terms of women’s economic autonomy and associated with demands for women’s access to landownership, credit, support for their production and commercialization, and technical assistance (Dantas, 2013).
The irruption of rural women as a collective political subject on the national scene in Brazil in a favorable political context brought recognition from the Brazilian authorities, and the state response made rural women into subjects of public policy. Many observers affirm that the various public policies that the PT governments (2003–2016) adopted through their Ministry of Agrarian Development to promote the autonomy of rural women are a result of the Marcha das Margaridas and the work of rural women’s and feminist movements (Alessandra da Costa Lunas, interview, 2016; Dantas, 2013; Filipak, 2017; Nobre, 2015). The most prominent of these policies are PRONAF Mulher, a credit line for rural women launched in 2003, a program for rural women’s access to formal identity papers (a condition of access to any previous or subsequent public policy) launched in 2004, a program supporting rural women’s organization and collective production launched in 2008, technical assistance and rural outreach since 2004 and the formal inclusion of gender equality in this policy in 2010, and specific quotas for women beneficiaries of and resources allocated to women’s projects introduced in 2013. Other important measures were adopted in the areas of women’s participation in rural and territorial development and agrarian reform, access to land and to credit, and government buying programs as outlets for rural women’s production (Filipak, 2017; Ministry of Agrarian Development, 2015). In addition to the policies aimed specifically at rural women, two general policies adopted following the 2011 edition of the Marcha das Margaridas include rural women’s autonomy as a priority: the National Plan for Agroecology and Organic Production (2013–2015) and the National Plan for Sustainable and Solidary Rural Development (2014). Some of these policies and programs have been implemented with the direct participation of feminist movement actors. For instance, the Program for the Productive Organization of Rural Women’s national advisory committee counts among its members the Xique Xique Network, the Women’s Working Group of the ANA, and the REF (Dantas, 2013: 113). In western Rio Grande do Norte the Xique Xique Network and the CF8 are among those responsible for implementing the program (Dantas, 2013: 25).

Thus, it is largely through becoming political subjects of a particular kind—“popular feminist” political subjects centering gender and class—with the sometimes important and sometimes more modest assistance of feminist organizations and activists affiliated with the World March of Women working across class and across movements that rural women in Brazil have become, individually and collectively, both political subjects in their own right and subjects of public policy.

CONCLUSION

The emergence on the public scene and the strengthening of the Marcha das Margaridas as a “popular feminist” political subject is the result, Lebon (2016: 160) argues, of “women’s and feminist movements’ long, slow, and painstaking work of empowering individuals as citizens across this vast country and building a popular feminist collective identity.” Indeed, part of this work has occurred in processes internal to rural women’s organizing, as shown, for instance, in
Aguiar’s (2015) account of the constitution and evolution of the Marcha das Margaridas or, at more individual and local levels, in the documentary Mulheres rurais em movimento, featuring women of the Movimento de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais do Nordeste (Movement of Women Rural Workers of the Northeast) (Prévost and MMTR-NE, 2016). However, our study shows that the constitution of rural women as popular feminist subjects at the local and national scales in Brazil is also due to relational processes involving other organizations and movements. Our focus on exemplary stories enables us to draw conclusions on the role of the March and its member organizations in these processes; it also furthers our knowledge on the nature and importance of relational dynamics in shaping contemporary practices of popular feminism in Brazil.

In Rio Grande do Norte, for instance, relational dynamics involving initial contacts with March member groups, subsequent membership in the March, and participation in its activities offered opportunities to the CF8 and to newly created rural women’s organizations and producers’ groups such as the Xique Xique Network to define (or redefine, in the case of the CF8) themselves as specific kinds of popular feminist subjects by embracing the March’s version of popular feminism as a political project. The latter invited a broadening of both the geographical and the political scope of popular feminist practices. Thus, being part of the March incited the CF8 and rural women organizing in Rio Grande do Norte to engage in a popular feminist politics that went beyond individual consciousness raising and local efforts at enhancing women’s livelihoods by favoring the collective construction of feminist alternatives aimed at transforming both gender relations and the economy and to enter into alliances, at the local scale and beyond, with other, progressive mixed-gender movements involved in agroecology, community-supported agriculture, and the solidarity economy.

At the national scale, the Brazilian March played a central role in the consolidation of the popular feminism of rural women, especially at the outset, with the intertwining of its organizational history with that of the Marcha das Margaridas and the Brazilian March’s provision of discursive, symbolic, and organizational resources to the Margaridas. Tracing this relationship reveals broader relational processes with regard to the internal elaboration of the Margaridas’s claims. In this context, the March was an important although not the only popular feminist influence in the larger “ethical-political field” (Dagnino, 1998: 46–47) constituted by the Margaridas’s expanded coordination, in which, through dialogue and political support, feminist and women’s movement partners helped develop, reinforce and defend their popular feminist agenda.

The popular feminism of the Margaridas is thus the product, at least in part, of a “confluence result[ing] from the intermingling of influences that takes place within a common ethical-political field” (Dagnino, 1998: 46) in which the March participates. Moreover, relational dynamics worked both ways. Involvement with rural women’s organizing in Brazil and the increasing weight of rural and peasant women’s organizations among its membership in the Rio Grande do Norte and at the national scale transformed the popular feminism of the March, contributing to broadening its political discourse to rural and agricultural issues and extending its politics of alliances to nonfeminist women and mixed-gender agrarian movements. This “dialogical” and “open-ended” construction of
popular feminism in the March, which remains committed to a socialist feminist project of mass mobilization, breaks with the historical, more vanguardist praxis of popular feminism as a political project (Conway, 2016: 14).

Finally, our exemplary stories show how the meaning of popular feminism as a gender-class politics of women of the popular sectors has been transformed, extended, and deepened in contemporary mobilizations of rural women workers and producers by a combination of internal and relational dynamics. The latter can be seen in the stories of Rio Grande do Norte’s producers’ groups, in the workings of the Margaridas’ expanded coordination as a site of political dialogue, and in the increased diversity of claims put forward by the various editions of the Marcha das Margaridas to reflect these relational dialogues and account for the diversity of “women of the fields, waters, and forests.” Absent from these processes at the time of writing, however, are politics and claims genuinely articulating the racialized and indigenous differences that also mark rural and peasant women as a constituency. This raises the question of the conditions necessary for popular feminism as a project and a political practice of women of the popular sectors to mutate into a progressive politics that is not limited to gender and class.

NOTES

1. The World March of Women is present in approximately 60 countries and territories and on all continents. At the international scale, it expresses a new form of feminist internationalism, professes a popular feminism anchored in the lived realities and place-based struggles of women of the popular sectors and partakes of the anticapitalist critique of the antiglobalization and social justice movements.

2. This five-year research project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

3. Lebon argues that popular feminism remained alive through the 1990s in Afro-Brazilian women’s organizing and in the work of women activists in urban and rural trade unions, as well as in a smaller number of local popular women’s groups and organizations such as Sempreviva Organização Feminista (SOF) in São Paulo (Lebon, 2014: 155–156, 160–161; also Castro, 1999).

4. The Brazilian March maintains alliances with unions of rural workers and with movements that mobilize the identity of “peasant.” Although the latter are also present in the Rio Grande do Norte, the unions are predominant and rural women organize primarily around the identity of “rural workers.” Other identities, such as “indigenous women,” “black women,” or quilombolas, that appear in the Marcha das Margaridas’s Cadernos de Textos in 2011 and 2015 were not mobilized politically in Rio Grande do Norte at the time of our fieldwork (2005 and 2006).

5. Villages created alongside the redistribution of land linked to agrarian reform.

6. In the assentamentos, agricultural development activities are coordinated by a local association that serves as an interface between the peasants, certain public policies, and governmental programs, technical assistance NGOs (which support the practical implementation of agricultural production projects), and the banks that operationalize agricultural credit access programs. For local women’s groups, participation in these associations meant having a voice in local development decisions.

7. All translations of texts or interviews originally in Spanish or Portuguese are ours.

8. From the name of a plant native to the semiarid regions of northeastern Brazil.

9. See http://redexiquexique.blogspot.ca/p/principios_1.html (accessed April 3, 2018).

10. In addition to the Women’s Secretariat of the CONTAG, the representatives of the regional coordinations of the CONTAG and the regional representatives of its Women’s Secretariat, the members of the expanded coordination of the Marcha das Margaridas in 2011 were “CUT [the United Workers’ Central], . . . the Worker’s Central of Brazil (CTB), the Articulation of Brazilian Women (AMB), the Brazilian Union of Women (UBM), the World March of Women, the Movement
of the Women Rural Workers of the North-East (MMTR-NE), the Women’s Secretariat of the Council of the National Council of Tappers (CNS), the National Movement of Women Coconut Breakers (MMNQC), the Articulated Movement of Amazonian Women (MAMA), the Confederation of Organizations of Family, Peasant and Indigenous Producers of the Greater Mercosul (COPROFAM), and the Network of Women Rural Workers of Latin America and the Caribbean (REDELAC)” (Aguiar, 2015: 137).

11. The *quilombos* were communities founded by escaped Afro-Brazilian slaves before the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888. Today, as a result of mobilizations in the late 1990s and early 2000s, they are recognized more generally as self-designated communities formed by black peasants.

12. One could also see these relational processes extending to the international scale of the March, as well as to a broader context of leftist political organizing, including the consolidation of the antiglobalization movement following the various editions of the World Social Forum that took place in Brazil (in 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2009, and 2012). Tracing these less direct and, in the case of the left, nonfeminist influences is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

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