

# Feminist Solidarities and Coalitional Identity

## The Popular Feminism of the Marcha das Margaridas

by  
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*The Marcha das Margaridas is a mass mobilization in Brazil led by women's organizations within rural unions in alliance with other social movements and nongovernmental organizations, including transnational partners such as the World March of Women. The main political subjects are rural working women, a political identity that articulates gender, class, and urban-rural inequalities. These are foundational for the popular feminism of the Marcha. An examination of the Marcha das Margaridas guided by a theoretical discussion of poststructural feminism and postcolonial feminism on the role of political identities in building coalitions reveals that it expands the agenda of popular feminism in its relationship to historical feminist agendas and intersectional feminisms and in its coalition politics with men and the left.*

*A Marcha das Margaridas é uma mobilização de massa no Brasil liderada por organismos de mulheres dentro de sindicatos rurais em aliança com outros movimentos sociais e organizações não governamentais (ONGs), incluindo parceiros transnacionais como a Marcha Mundial das Mulheres. Os principais sujeitos políticos são as mulheres trabalhadoras rurais, uma identidade política que articula as desigualdades de gênero, classe e urbano-rurais. Estes são fundamentais para o feminismo popular da Marcha. Um estudo da Marcha das Margaridas guiado por uma discussão teórica do feminismo pós-estrutural e do feminismo pós-colonial sobre o papel das identidades políticas na construção de coalizões revela que ela expande a agenda do feminismo popular em sua relação com agendas feministas históricas e feminismos interseccionais, como também em sua coalizão política com os homens e a esquerda.*

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Black feminist activists and scholars in the United States have proposed intersectional analysis as a method that avoids erasing difference in the struggles against simultaneous forms of oppression based on gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and citizenship. The recognition that “women”<sup>1</sup> is not a universal category brings to the fore the political challenge of building solidarity across differences. Thus, the problem of coalitions becomes politically and theoretically relevant for feminism. An important aspect of this debate concerns political subjectivities in feminist coalitions, with poststructural feminists challenging identity as a basis for common political action whereas

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postcolonial, black, and indigenous activists and scholars emphasize the political strength and urgency of identity politics for the mobilization of marginalized social groups. The postcolonial feminist Chandra Mohanty (2003) criticizes the “‘postmodernist scepticism about identity,’ its narrowing of the scope of feminist politics and theory and the gap it has widened between women’s movements and academic feminists” (Conway, 2017: 209).

However, this debate has often been overstated and misrepresented. The most influential gender theories, such as those put forward by the poststructuralist Judith Butler (1999 [1990]), do not deny the importance of affirming identities to engage in political struggles. However, they disclaim the political process of constructing political identities in relation to specific struggles, in which the category as such is also open to political definition (Villa, 2012 [2003]). At the same time, prominent postcolonial scholars like Mohanty, while defending standpoint epistemologies such as that of “women of color,” are also careful not to essentialize such categories as biological or socially constructed but rather to advocate them as coalitional identities based on a political praxis of solidarity building across women situated in different contexts (Conway, 2017; Mohanty, 2003). Indeed, poststructuralist and postcolonial feminists are not homogeneously coherent and wholly distinct categories. It is thus possible to inquire from a poststructural deconstructive perspective about the processes of subject formation in coalitions, in which the affirmation of political identities informed by class, antiracist, indigenous, and decolonial as well as LGBTQ+ feminisms is key to the mobilization’s process.

Recent mass mobilizations in Latin America have brought to the fore the role of feminist solidarities and leadership in what has been called a “feminism of the masses,” in its “popular” character different from the common identification of feminism with middle-class white academic activists (Souza, 2019). Who is the political subject of these mass feminist movements, and how do they relate to the tradition of popular feminism in Latin America? In a historical reconstruction of the analytic category of popular feminism, Conway (in this issue) traces its emergence to Latin American gendered struggles against neoliberal reforms and dictatorships in the 1980s. Although the proliferation of neighborhood organizations and collective actions by the popular sectors has been widely documented in Latin American scholarship (Svampa, 2008), the key role of women in such initiatives called for a gendered analysis of working-class struggles (Schild, 1994). Popular feminism thus emerged as an analytic category for describing the struggles that articulated gender and class inequalities and called attention to the role of feminism in opening women’s movements to more emancipatory possibilities (Conway in this issue).

Since the 1990s, popular feminisms have receded because of a constellation of factors. Nevertheless, the gendered class struggles that are characteristic of popular feminism were certainly not absent during the 1990s, though perhaps they were less visible in terms of the collective action by which social struggles are usually recognized (Teixeira, 2018). Within unions, urban and rural, the 1990s were a period of strong feminist organizing and important victories such as quotas and the opening of political space that created the conditions for a new wave of social-oriented popular feminism in the twenty-first century. In the first decades of this century, while Brazilian mainstream and historical

feminism occupied spaces of participative democracy, constituting what scholars called “state feminism” (Matos and Alvarez, 2018), new expressions of popular feminism flourished. The Marcha das Margaridas is not only “popular” or working-class-based but also rural. Its most visible face is a collective action that has taken place six times (in 2000, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019), bringing between 20,000 and 100,000 women from across Brazil to stage a protest at the capital, Brasilia. While the analysis of popular feminism had historically focused on urban struggles, the Marcha draws attention to a rural history and contemporary expression of popular feminism that decenters the urban political subject of popular feminism and must be accounted for in scholarship about popular feminisms.

The main political identity associated with the Marcha is rural working women, although this category has been evolving to include “women from the land, the forests, and the waters” (Secretaria de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais da CONTAG, 2015). Its formation reflects an articulation of gender, class, and rural difference that is foundational for the popular feminism of the Marcha (Motta and Teixeira, n.d.). At the same time, in its organizational bases and networks, the Marcha emerged as a coalition led by rural unions in coordination with other movements of the agrarian poor and feminist nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) committed to gendered-class demands (Lebon, 2013). This article is concerned with the political subjectivities emerging out of the political practices that sustain the mobilization of the Marcha, which are articulated in its coalitional identity. In this sense, it aims to contribute to the feminist literature on political subjectivities that establish solidarities across difference. I combine a position within poststructural feminist scholarship that links decentering the political subject in coalition politics with a postcolonial stance in defense of affirming identities. A second contribution of the article relates to debates on popular feminism and follows Conway’s provocation about the utility, limits, and possibilities of the analytics of popular feminism for understanding contemporary forms of feminist mobilization. It addresses the questions How central is the political identity of rural working women to the coalitional identity of the Marcha? How does the coalition politics of the Marcha expand or reproduce the historical limitations of popular feminism, such as its ambivalent position on core feminist agendas and intersectional feminisms? How does it relate to the broader left and relationships with men in the context of a mixed-gendered movement? How are these power differentials reflected in the coalitional identity of the Marcha?

I draw on archival materials from 2000 to 2019 and fieldwork conducted in March 2017 during the national congress of the Confederação Nacional de Trabalhadores e Trabalhadoras Rurais (National Confederation of Rural Workers—CONTAG), when I observed a meeting of its Women’s Secretariat, in September 2018, when I took part in a Margaridas caravan from Minas Gerais, and in July and August 2019, when I joined the preparatory activities and the March itself. The political scenario, with the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil in October 2018, must be considered to contextualize the last edition of the Marcha. First, Bolsonaro explored a scapegoat rhetoric rife with misogyny, homophobia, and racism but also an antipoor, antiwelfare discourse that resonated the most with the privileged establishment—reflecting

the interests of the “markets” and those of rent-seeking elites. Second, with a military performance and a discourse of war on crime, he addressed the feelings of insecurity among allegedly “good citizens” and “decent people” and thus was able to win the support of the lower classes and the black population, who are mostly victimized by crime and violence but also the most likely to be affected by state violence and punitive policies. Third, his rhetoric also targeted activists, in particular activists for land reform, and environmental NGOs, attending to the demands of one important interest group: the landed elites and agribusiness. He promised arming rural landlords to shoot agrarian and environmental activists, lifting monitoring and sanctions against environmental crimes, suspending the demarcation of indigenous and *quilombola* lands and land reform, and legalizing land grabbing. Finally, similarly to other right-wing leaders, Bolsonaro deployed the concept of “gender ideology” to fight feminisms and relied on the political, economic, and media power of Neo-Pentecostal churches.

The article proceeds in six steps. I start by reconstructing a genealogy of feminism in the emergence of the Marcha, highlighting its form as a coalition. Then I undertake a conceptual discussion of poststructural feminist scholarship and postcolonial theories on coalitions and political identities. Next, I draw on my field observations of the negotiations about the coalitional identity of the Marcha. I assess the expansion of popular feminism and the politicization of racial, ethnic, decolonial, and sexual differences since the first edition of the Marcha in 2000. Then I analyze the coalition politics of the Marcha in its relationships with the left and with men. In the conclusion, I address the main questions raised about the role of mobilizing identities for building political coalitions and how the Marcha expands or reproduces the historical limitations of popular feminisms.

## THE GENEALOGY OF “POPULAR FEMINISM” AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE MARCHA

The history and antecedents of the Marcha das Margaridas have been well documented through interview material, secondary literature, and long years of participant observation (Aguiar, 2015; 2016; Pimenta, 2013). Tracing the roots of the political organization of rural working women that would culminate in the Marcha, Aguiar (2016) identifies a confluence of three collective actors—the new Catholic left organized in pastorals (the Comissão Pastoral da Terra [Pastoral Land Commission—CPT] and the Christian base communities), the new and oppositional forms of unionism that arose out of divisions in the workers’ movements, and feminism influenced by liberation theology and the emphasis on the poor.

The Christian base communities created an infrastructure for women’s political participation based on their religious character, acting as a transition zone between the private and the public. The new forms of unionism that emerged from rifts within the traditional corporatist unions, which led to the creation of the Central Única de Trabalhadores (Unified Workers Central—CUT) in 1983, challenged and critiqued the conservative and nondemocratic structures of the

CONTAG, which joined the CUT in the mid-1990s in a more inclusive politics. Women grew attuned to these challenges, and a myriad of women's movements emerged across various regions whose mobilization was successfully translated into constitutional rights in the democratic constitution of 1988 (Deere, 2004; Pimenta, 2013). Feminism was also an influence, with a feminist theology emerging out of a dialogue between feminist and religious activists (Aguiar, 2016: 269) and arguing that women's participation was different because of their daily experience as poor women. Organized rural women had different ways of entering into contact with feminism, and through deliberate occupation of the public space they developed their own feminist agenda, in which they articulated the gender dimension of struggles for land and against the exploitation of labor. The 1990s were characterized by women's organizing either in autonomous movements or in mixed-gender movements and unions. In addition, rural women broadened and added complexity to their political work by incorporating the diversity of identity positions and the demands of indigenous people, *quilombolas*, extractive workers, fisherwomen, and coconut breakers (Aguiar, 2016: 277; Siliprandi, 2015).

The origin of the Marcha must be understood in the context of women's struggles in a mixed-gender popular movement of rural workers formally organized at the municipal, state, and national levels within the CONTAG. While important social movements emerged among the rural poor in Brazil in the 1980s and 1990s, the CONTAG system dates back to the 1960s and is characterized by highly bureaucratic and institutionalized forms of action. From the start, it was a male-dominated movement in which women's contribution was often invisible. In the 1980s and 1990s, women gained the right to join unions as members, to participate in national congresses as delegates, and to run for political office, and participation quotas for federations, unions, decision-making bodies, and political formation activities were approved and implemented (Teixeira and Motta, 2020). While these victories represented landmarks, they soon revealed their limits. Women's demands were not prominent within the confederation, and women leaders neither held positions of power nor participated in policy negotiations. It is in this context that the idea of staging a broad mobilization of women arose. However, this required the approval of the CONTAG Council, and for that the action needed to be more than a mobilization of women for policies specifically targeting women. Women leaders decided that the action would take place in August in protest against impunity in the trial of the killer of Margarida Maria Alves, a union leader murdered in 1983. The case had been dragging on in court for years, but now a verdict was soon to be reached, and this is why the Marcha was named after Margarida Maria Alves. The CONTAG Council's approval of the Marcha, upon which administrative and economic support was also conditioned, meant that the women's organizing had gained strength and allies from within. Thus negotiation within a mixed-gender movement has informed the popular feminism of the Marcha from its inception: its demands combined gendered demands with other agendas of the rural unionist movement.

At the same time, the women leaders of the CONTAG were aware that they needed the support of other women's movements to organize a mass action. Leaders of the CUT and the feminist NGO *Sempre Viva Organização Feminista*

(SOF) facilitated this convergence, and the Marcha became the inaugural and key mass action of the World March of Women in Brazil in 2000. The Women's Secretariat of the CONTAG led the mobilizing process in coordination with a coalition of social movements, feminists, women's movements, unions, and international organizations. The Movimento de Trabalhadoras Rurais do Nordeste (Movement of Rural Working Women of the Northeast—MMTR-NE), the Movimento Interestadual de Quebradeiras de Babaçu (Interstate Movement of Coconut Breakers—MICCB), the Conselho Nacional dos Serigueiros (National Council of Rubber Tappers), the Brazilian chapter of the World March of Women, and the CUT were part of the Marcha coordination from the beginning. In 2019, 16 organizations coordinated the Marcha. In this sense, it was not only a network of solidarity but a coalition collectively constructed in partnership and in constant negotiation with a series of movements. In sum, the Marcha das Margaridas was a collective action led by the CONTAG Women's Secretariat and, while it depended on the formal support of this mixed-gender, male-dominated movement, was coordinated with a number of other movements and organizations. Thus, it can best be described as a coalition that was semiautonomous in relation to the CONTAG.

Since 2003 the Marcha has been held every four years. This meeting of the marchers in Brasilia is the culmination of a long organizational process. More than a street protest or an instance of collective action, it is understood by its organizers as a permanent action that involves mobilization, formation, and claim making. Its official organization starts more than a year before the street action. A number of political formation meetings at various levels take place before the march itself. On the day before the street action, debates, workshops, exhibitions, and other formative activities are held. The Marcha targets the rural union movement, demanding internal democracy, the state, demanding public policies benefiting women and the working classes while attending to the specificities of rural working women, and the society, seeking changes that establish gender egalitarian relations.

### COALITIONAL IDENTITIES IN FEMINIST THEORY AND PRAXIS

In the cross-fertilization between activism and theory building, postcolonial/decolonial feminism, critical race studies, and poststructural feminism, identifying the political subject of feminism and the category of "women" in women's and feminist movements is an ongoing conversation. Gender and queer theory has criticized essentialist feminist debates about the universality of the identity of women as a category for political action (Butler, 1999 [1990]). Either by conceiving of universal structures of masculinist oppression, femininity, and maternity or by assuming common epistemological standpoints or articulated consciousness, coalitions based on the category of "women" are, according to Butler, normative and exclusionary because their insistence on unity leaves out the "refused multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' [is] constructed" (19). Butler defends a form of coalitional politics that is not foundationalist (not based on an assumed given identity) or teleological because the coalition is an emergent

phenomenon with no predictable form and unity is not its goal. Politics is possible as “a set of dialogic encounters by which variously positioned women articulate separate identities within the framework of an emergent coalition” (20). Insistence on unity of identity and goals causes more fragmentation and prevents coalitions from forming. Indeed, she understands coalitions as processes in which solidarities are built and that therefore cannot have solidarity as a prerequisite and involve dealing with contradictions, tensions, and splits. She is concerned about the fact that identity categories potentially exclude, ruling out many potential collaborations: “Without the presupposition or goal of ‘unity’, which is, in either case, always instituted at a conceptual level, provisional unities might emerge in the context of concrete actions that have purposes other than the articulation of identity” (21). Political identities might thus emerge as a result of coalitions and include many that would not identify with the categories of “women” and “feminist.” Her criticism of identity politics does not mean, however, a rejection of the importance of identities for the articulation of political subjects in political discourse and action *tout court* (Villa, 2012 [2003]).

In a different yet convergent vein, Mohanty (2003) has provided a sharp criticism of analyses that consider “women” a universal, stable general category. In particular, she analyzes the problematic deployment of general categories of Third World women that reduces women to their gender and the colonial difference. This not only obstructs a contextualized analysis of relations of ruling that situate different women in specific historical, cultural, economic, and geopolitical contexts but also implies a dichotomous understanding of power in which women are simply victims and oppressed. Mohanty’s concern is to go beyond critique and deconstruction to think about the potentialities of such a contextual analysis in building solidarity. Coalitional identities must be informed by an intersectional analysis of power relations to account for simultaneous forms of oppression such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, and citizenship. In contrast to global sisterhood, as suggested by “Western feminism,” based on universalistic assumptions, Mohanty and other U.S.-based postcolonial scholars have proposed instead “Third World women” as a political and coalition project open to contestation and conflict—a normative call to “the possibility of transnational feminist solidarity that was also anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-capitalist” (Conway, 2017: 208).

Indeed, the social mobilization and political praxis of various feminist groups among black women, Chicana women, and migrants in the United States and Britain have resulted in the formation of powerful coalitional identities such as Third World feminisms and women of color. Activist-scholar-writers such as Lugones (2003) and Anzaldúa (1999 [1987]) have elaborated the *mestiza* identity as the political subject of coalitions.<sup>2</sup> *Mestiza* consciousness is provisional, constantly transforming as part of a political, feminist process of learning its history and building a new unfolding history in which a new activist subject results (Saldívar-Hull, 1999: 8). In specific contexts, affirming identities is part of a process of political transformation and mobilization.

Much more than an essentialist position, this scholar-activist perspective is aware of the political work involved in crafting such coalitional identities. This is not only a matter for academic debate. Many political misunderstandings

can arise out of removing coalitional identities from their contexts and using them elsewhere without historicizing their political construction and situatedness. This question has been taken up by Alvarez and colleagues (2014) in a project on “translocalities” in which they inquire how feminist discourses and practices travel. They understand the translocal as a politics of location that takes into account multiple mediations of social and power relations producing subject positions and situated knowledge along axes of difference. This politics of location further links geographies of power of various scales to subject positions (Alvarez et al., 2014: 1–3).<sup>3</sup> In her chapter in that compilation, Blackwell (2014) problematizes what happens when coalitional identities travel and meet other contexts, in what she calls “uneven, aligned geographies of difference.” She claims that the category “women of color” means different things in different places and cannot work in contexts like Latin America, where racialization assumes different dynamics from those of the United States. Also, LGBTQ+ identities differ according to the histories of struggles of the marginalized groups and their relations in each context. “*Translenguaje*” becomes key “to recogniz[ing] how power is structured in each context, and negotiates rather than glosses over power differences and requires a critical practice of translation of everyday political meanings, practices, and organizing logics” (Blackwell, 2014: 317). Blackwell provides an understanding of coalitions that also highlights difference: “We do not have to be each other (or labor under the fiction of sameness) to work together politically.”

From this theoretical reconstruction, I would like to retain two main lessons. First, there is a need for recognizing power differentials through the affirmation of political identities. Second, because coalitional identities are open-ended and process-based, it is necessary to understand the political subject as being under constant political construction.

### THE MARGARIDAS AS A COALITIONAL IDENTITY AND THEIR POPULAR FEMINISM

In order to “be a Margarida,” how important are the situated perspective of the rural poor, the class identity as a working woman inherited from unionism, self-identification as a generic woman, and self-identification as feminist? How has the popular feminism of the Marcha das Margaridas evolved, and in particular how does it incorporate new popular agendas, relate to core and historic feminist agendas such as sexual and reproductive rights, and recognize intersectional inequalities and political identities such as indigenous and black women in the coalitional identity “Margaridas”? I have heard leaders and observers comment that many women who come to Brasília are not aware of what it means to be part of the Marcha das Margaridas. This was expressed in an understanding way, as a part of an assessment of the infinite process of political formation involved. Many women who come to Brasília have never traveled so far before in their lives, and the Marcha is a way of visiting the capital of Brazil. Some women come because the union offers them seats on a bus and is required to fill those seats without their having been involved in the preparatory discussions of the platform of demands. For some the trip to



Brasilia may indeed signify a moment of political formation and change their political engagement. Living in a rural context and being a member of the union may be enough for women to get seats on a bus and participate in the Marcha das Margaridas, but do all of these women identify themselves with the political subject of “Margaridas”? Returning to Mohanty, I would argue that these women inhabit common contexts of struggle in which relationships of the domination of class, gender, and rurality intersect, but their resistance cannot be automatically translated as political engagement in processes of feminist solidarity building and with the left.

From this perspective, the women who take part in the political formation activities of the Marcha have the opportunity to discuss the situated perspective of the poor and to take part in the political expansion of the category of rural working women. This includes careful contextual analyses of power relations and the particular struggles that mobilize different rural working women. During the preparatory activities in 2019, the National Commission of Women debated which themes affected each region the most so that the banners of each theme would be carried by the region that most identified with that context of struggle. As a result, the representatives of Minas Gerais expressed their wish to be assigned the theme “energy sovereignty” because of the environmental crimes of mining companies in Mariana and Brumadinho, while the topic “common goods” was a demand of the *quilombola* women coconut breakers, who needed free access to *babaçu* palms, mostly in the region of Maranhão, and the representative of the Amazon called attention to the increased deforestation since Bolsonaro took office.

These debates were very insightful with regard to understanding the negotiation over the content of the popular feminism that informs the Marcha das Margaridas. The discussion highlighted the need to defend democracy with popular sovereignty and social justice, equality, and an end to violence, the slogan that led the march. Among the 10 topics on the agenda for 2019, the topic elected to be presented first was “Land, Water, and Agroecology,” reaffirming the situated perspective of rural working women. This choice expanded popular feminism to incorporate issues near and dear to the rural poor such as access to resources for production and an alternative model of rural development for an agrifood system that is fair and ecologically sound.<sup>4</sup> Long debates ensued, revealing the importance of all of the mobilizing topics to each participating region. Consensus also existed about welfare-state policies in health and education and the pension system, all of which are under attack in Brazil. The women were aware of the gendered dimensions of the reforms, since the burden of care work would fall on their backs. This showed the strength of the Marcha das Margaridas as a mass movement of resistance vis-à-vis the limitations of the broader left in mobilizing for protest. In this sense, the Marcha recovers historical demands from popular feminisms in the fight against dictatorship and neoliberal structural adjustments while emphasizing feminist leadership in organizing mass resistance. Popular feminism becomes an expression of collective power against the destruction of the welfare state and the dismantling of democratic institutions.

Some remarks on the ambivalence about topics that are core to the historical feminist agenda are necessary at this point. My impression was that there was

consensus around the topic of violence against women not only among leaders but also among the rank and file.<sup>5</sup> I noticed no mobilization of motherhood as basis for women's political engagement but, on the contrary, the problematization of gender roles and the limitations that motherhood imposes on the political work of women and the need for men to share care work as a common reason for Margaridas to travel to Brasília. Sexual and reproductive rights made for a popular workshop during the activities of the Marcha on August 13. Still, given the religious composition of the grassroots of the Marcha—both Catholic and Neo-Pentecostal—a strong rejection of abortion rights was more often heard than a defense of them. Nevertheless, some marching women from partner organizations carried banners reading “We Need to Talk About Abortion.” Banners were prepared covering all the themes debated during the preparatory document discussions. Upon arriving, the heads of the delegations registered their groups and received their kits and a number of banners. Notably, all the banners except those devoted to abortion rights were taken.

Finally, determining whether the popular feminism of the Marcha incorporated demands from intersectional feminisms requires taking into account racial inequalities and ethnic inequalities affecting black and indigenous populations. Tracing the development of the political subject “rural working women” that forms the core of the Margaridas' political identity, Teixeira and Motta (2020) have analyzed the Marcha archives for 2000–2019 and suggested that gender, class, and rurality built a central intersection of political identification, whereas race, ethnicity, generation, and sexuality were mentioned as axes of inequalities but did not participate in subject formation. The novelty in the 2019 Marcha was the collaboration with the first March of Indigenous Women, when 3,000 indigenous women came to Brasília August 9–14 to protest. The two marches articulated their alliance during the plenary session at the National Parliament, in the opening ceremony, and through marching together in the streets. On August 14 all the marchers went past the indigenous women's camp. It was a beautiful meeting, and many Margaridas and indigenous women took photos of and with each other. While some indigenous women were also part of delegations to the Marcha, it seemed to me that the Margaridas base spoke of “them” and “the indigenous women.” The Marcha das Margaridas welcomed the March of Indigenous Women, but the coalitional identity of the Margaridas, rather than fully incorporating indigenous women as an axis of difference within its political subject, subsumed their indigeneity under their position as rural political subjects.

The presence of the March of Indigenous Women highlighted the absence of an organized black feminist movement that could give visibility to black women. Why was the March of Black Women, organized since 2015, absent? Usually this march organized decentralized activities on July 25, the International Day of Afro-Latin, Afro-American, and Afro-Caribbean Women, the National Day of Tereza de Benguela (a quilombola leader who fought against enslavement in the eighteenth century), and National Black Women's Day. The marches of indigenous women and Margaridas took place only about three weeks later, and I have wondered why there were no official moments of joint efforts. One of the reasons may be that the Black Women's March has no centralized national organization. The *Coordenação Nacional das Comunidades*

Negras Rurais Quilombolas (National Coordination of Rural Black Quilombola Communities—CONAQ), a partner of the Marcha, did have representatives and banners. In my observations of the demographics of the Marcha, I noticed black women in all its spaces—perhaps less in the delegations from the South and more in those from the Northeast and, in particular, Maranhão, where the organization of quilombolas is the strongest.<sup>6</sup> With this focus on quilombolas—the territorial identities of black rural communities—in the political organization of the Marcha, blackness is erased despite the fact that the large majority of people of African descent in Brazil, including Margaridas, is not quilombola. Therefore, the fight against racial inequalities is marginalized when blackness within the Margaridas is obscured as is often the case in a country where the myth of racial democracy has such a strong hold.<sup>7</sup>

In all the spaces of the Marcha on both days, there were symbols representing Marielle Franco, who was murdered on March 14, 2018, for her activism in the legislative chamber of Rio Janeiro in defense of black, LGBTQ+, and favela women. Marielle Franco has become a symbol of intersectional feminisms in Brazilian politics, where the racial dimension has greater visibility, in particular with the denunciation of the proportion of police violence against poor black youths. I also observed women variously positioned in terms of sexual politics and gender identity, including trans women, scattered throughout the Marcha. However, it is still a very long way from marked bodies of indigenous and black women and queer bodies in the Marcha das Margaridas, which might portray some “diversity,” to the political incorporation of their struggles against racism, colonialism, heteronormativity, and gender binarism. For now, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender are not articulated as an intersectional coalitional political subject. The Marcha addresses issues of racism, colonialism, and sexism in relation to rurality and rural working women but not in their own terms.<sup>8</sup>

### POPULAR FEMINISM IN MIXED-GENDER MOVEMENTS: COALITION POLITICS WITH MEN AND THE LEFT

Popular feminisms have emerged in other networks of activism, among them a peasant popular feminism within the Via Campesina and the popular feminism of the World March of Women. The popular feminism of the Marcha das Margaridas has followed a different route. It is more nationally bounded—though always in contact with the two transnational networks just mentioned. Because of its origins in rural unionism, the Marcha das Margaridas has strong ties with the more institutionalized left, including that of political parties, and relates to politics at the regional and the local level. Class identity and identification with specific forms of political organization and repertoires of action of this more institutionalized left inform their popular feminism. In addition, as a mixed-gender movement, the women’s organizations within the CONTAG aim to influence the internal politics of unions, and the Marcha not only demonstrates the strength of women’s organizing within the union but also attempts to attract nonfeminist actors to its popular feminist agenda, similarly to what Conway (2018) observed in the World March of Women. How is the popular

feminism of the Marcha addressing gender and the left? What is the relationship between the Marcha and the broader left in a highly polarized political landscape? What are the tensions and possibilities of its coalition politics with men within a highly institutionalized mixed-gender (male-dominated) movement?

First of all, it is important to highlight that the popular feminism that has been taking shape within the CONTAG and in association with the partner organizations of the Marcha over the past 20 years has inculcated a feminist understanding of power. In the very formal and bureaucratic institutions of the union movement, some men have been occupying the same power positions for decades, and women's feminist political formation challenges old leftist understandings of power. For instance, in a preparatory meeting of the National Commission of Women of the CONTAG, state representatives presented themselves with two forms of identification: as positioned at the intersection of gender, class and rurality, often as "rural working women," "family farmers," or "settled from land reform" (*assentadas*), and as elected representatives of the rural union in the municipality. It caught my attention that all of them preferred the verb *estar* to *ser* to emphasize their provisional occupation of political positions: "*Eu estou presidenta do sindicato*" (usually one would say, "*Eu sou presidenta do sindicato*." The deliberate choice of *estar* denotes a critical reflexive relation to power positions. I have observed that men do not refer to their positions in the same way; rather than occupying they tend to appropriate them.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, a feminist praxis that grew up within mixed popular movements such as the rural unions of the CONTAG challenges prevailing understandings of political power from within and reworks leftist traditions. It is also interesting to observe the deliberate choice of the female form of the word *presidente*. This has been a subject of dispute in Brazil since the first woman was elected to the presidency in the country. Dilma Rousseff wanted to be called "*presidenta*" in order to stress the fact that a woman was the officeholder. Media actors and political commentators refused to do so, choosing instead "*presidente*," supposedly a gender-neutral form. Since then, the gender choice of "*presidenta*" has signified a political positioning in the feminist field and in the left.

Many observed the greater presence of men in the 2019 edition of the Marcha, with the justification that they would "protect the women," in the new context of the election of Bolsonaro and of state governors in his coalition. There was fear of the criminalization of protest and of police repression on the day of the Marcha. The presence of men in the Marcha was an object of negotiations less about their participation in the rank and file of the march itself than about disputed political spaces. At the opening ceremony, the president of the CONTAG and important officeholders in the federation were invited to the table. Partner organizations and political allies, such as representatives from the legislature, some of whom were men, were also invited on stage.<sup>10</sup> However, it was not without tension that men were allowed in the coalition. I heard women leaders explaining that men were welcome as long as they supported women's struggles. The Marcha became an important collective action of the workers' movement over the years and even more so in the political context of 2019: along with the general strike for education, it was the main mass movement that showed the strength of popular resistance to the government. Women leaders were concerned about the increase of interest from men wanting to make speeches and about excluding those who saw the Marcha only as an opportunity to boost their

own political capital. The need for gatekeepers was clear. The message was: the Marcha das Margaridas is a women's organization action, and women decide who receives political space.

The identification of the Marcha with a "power field" on the left is reaffirmed in different ways, but because of the shifting political context and the various local realities in which unions act it does not go unchallenged. For instance, the positioning vis-à-vis the national left was made explicit in the discussions about the inclusion of activities of the Lula Livre (Freedom for Lula) campaign.<sup>11</sup> The main issue at that moment was the management of the full agenda. However, two issues were in the background: positioning the Marcha clearly in the polarized political landscape in Brazil and not yielding political space to any issue that could distract attention from the struggles of the Margaridas. The national coordinating committee said that it had sent a letter to former president Lula and that, if he had been free, they would have wished him to be present at the Marcha and he would surely have welcomed it.<sup>12</sup> It was not that there were any direct objections or a large debate, but this was a moment that needed justification. One leader said, "We are a leftist movement; . . . we have already positioned ourselves and there is no way back." Another said that it was clear that, while they were a leftist movement, they were not partisan. Yet another, by contrast, was reluctant to express openly the Marchas' alignment with the left for fear of retaliation from the right and of the conservative politicians who were supporting the Marcha at the local level; in her view, it was not necessary to declare themselves leftist. This was evidence of the complicated politics of alliances with institutional politics that the unions had established at the local level. The situation was resolved pragmatically, leaving local groups free to decide on their alliances, while the Marcha in Brasilia was decisively an act of identification with the left.

Finally, coalition politics with men and the broader left—with nonfeminist others—also had implications for debates around political subjectivities. I observed that the leaders of the Marcha were trying to adapt the coalitional identity of the Margaridas to include men. One debate was the choice between *margaridas* and *cravos* (cloves)—the former being feminine and the latter masculine in Portuguese—and between Margaridas and Margaridos. Many women explained that one should say "Margaridos" (the masculine form of "Margaridas"). In the collective spaces of the pavilion at the Parque da Cidade<sup>13</sup> and during the march itself, one could see the male partners and sons of many Margaridas, but the clear majority of participants were definitely women. In sum, these negotiations about the inclusion of men or those not identified as women in the Marcha das Margaridas made it clear that its coalition politics was open for allies from the left but aimed at the left's acquiring a feminist consciousness.

## CONCLUSION

The genealogy of the mobilizations that culminated in the Marcha das Margaridas is situated in the tradition of the popular feminisms of the 1980s and 1990s. There are strong similarities to the World March of Women (see Conway in this issue) as a form of popular feminism that is clearly differentiated from the dominant transnational feminist field in being grounded in and oriented toward the lived experiences of poor women and led by their

organizations. In line with most analyses of the World March of Women, the Marcha das Margaridas, while counting on the participation of middle-class professional collaborators and activists, distances itself from the class-identity organizational logics and action repertoires of transnational feminist networks that rely on NGO-ization, policy advocacy, lobbying, and expertise. The genealogy and the political and social composition of the Marcha das Margaridas differ, however, in that they start from the perspective of rurality, unsettling the dominant popular-sector bases with urban organizations. The affirmation of rural working women as political subjects is crucial for their engagement in the struggle and for the construction of their political consciousness. In this sense, the Margaridas resulted from a long process of which the affirmation and mobilization of political identities was a necessary condition. At the same time, the need of women in mixed rural unions to build alliances with partners to strengthen their collective power in the internal politics of the unions and therefore their access to rights meant limits on the political subject "rural working women." This is how the Margaridas emerged as what I have identified as a "coalitional identity."

The coalitional identity of the Margaridas is an open invitation to all who want to identify themselves with the popular feminism of rural working women. Although rural working women have been the main mobilizing identity, they are by no means the basis of the coalition or its telos. Drawing on Butler, this is a nonexclusionary starting point. The goal from the Marcha's founding has been to build the alliances and solidarities necessary to strengthen the struggles of rural working women. To start with, the category of "rural working women" is scrutinized in moments of collectively making sense of the political context and specific struggles in the immense variety of rural settings in Brazil. These developments can be understood as practice translating what it means to be a "rural working woman" in different territorial contexts and paying attention to the uneven geographies of difference highlighted by Blackwell. Following her thought process, the category of Margaridas travels well because it becomes a *translenguaje*. Margaridas as a coalitional identity lays bare the spatial boundaries of citizenship and access to the state and its public policies in urban space. By articulating the rural difference as the main intersection of its struggle and allowing it to be translated into various contexts, the political subject of Margaridas decenters the dominant urban basis of popular movements.

As the Marcha grew in collective power as a mass movement, it increased its potential to mobilize nonfeminist others/actors for feminist struggles. The alliances with the left are not, however, free of tensions; the participation of leftist male leaders is tolerated as a means of bringing nonfeminist actors into contact with feminist agendas. The political practices around coalitional politics include reflections on the articulation of political subjectivities, showing that the coalitional identity "Margarida" is an open-ended process of articulation. What is at stake here, as the women leaders of the Marcha have repeatedly stressed, is the need to make power relations and differentials explicit (as argued by Mohanty) by reaffirming the political identity of rural working *women* as those who are affected in different ways and those who have been mobilizing to make the Marcha what it has become. In this sense, the coalitional identity of the Margaridas and its organizational form as a coalition function as shields

against the constant threat of setbacks in a male-dominated mixed-gender structure. Thus they give women leverage against gendered power relations within the CONTAG system, as was intended as the Marcha emerged in 2000.

In a political context of the dismantling of rights and threats to democratic institutions in Brazil, the popular feminism of the Marcha das Margaridas becomes an expression of collective power to resist. But does it reproduce the historical limitations of popular feminism? Is it a renewed version of itself in a similar context? Definitely, the feminisms that converge in the Marcha das Margaridas have incorporated many lessons, some more than others, of the variety of feminist agendas of the past decades. The first lesson is to reject an a priori definition of “feminism”; if the political subject of “feminist” is open to debate, why not also its core demands? The Marcha das Margaridas is far from fully incorporating the agenda or the right to abortion and sexual and reproductive rights, but it has advanced in maintaining these as agenda topics. The topic of violence against women, by contrast, has gained increasing currency in the context of increasing femicide rates fueled by political hate speech against women. In relation to popular feminism’s historical protest against hunger, the Marcha also advocates for a much broader environmentalist agenda and specifically food sovereignty. In relation to intersectional feminisms, there are new developments regarding indigenous movements, while alliances with black movements are not seeming to advance as much. LGBTQ+ feminisms do not have much visibility, although they are not excluded or absent.

Drawing on my field notes, I have shown that the mobilization of the Margaridas is built and sustained in a political praxis that is continuously open to debate the inclusion of others in the construction of the political subject. All in all, I claim that the Marcha das Margaridas relies on identity politics based on articulations of class, gender, and rurality in the political identity of rural working women while actively negotiating with others a coalitional identity around the category “Margaridas.” The more inclusive it becomes, the stronger it becomes: the coalitional identity Margaridas, even if not restricted to rural working women, deeply reaffirms their selfhood, just as, according to Anzaldúa, does the Chicana identity as a form of becoming—forming a feminist consciousness. As a result, the Marcha das Margaridas provides space for the development of a progressive politics that continuously expands the boundaries of popular feminism and of progressive politics itself in a context where coalition building is a difficult task.

## NOTES

1. I refer to “women” not as a universal category but rather as including the plurality of experiences of being women, including trans women and women in various struggles.

2. Although the *mestiza* is the most elaborated coalitional identity in Anzaldúa’s (1999 [1987]) work, other identities such as homosexual, queer, and *transfronteira* are important in it. Above all, the new culture crafted in coalition is a feminist one. It is important to distinguish Anzaldúa’s use of “*mestiza*” from the more familiar and common term “*mestizaje*” in Latin American political and cultural discourse. The latter obscures indigenous and black people’s differentiated histories of exploitation in the formation of a supposedly harmonious and homogeneous national identity in which all differences are erased in a “melting pot” or “racial democracy.” Anzaldúa’s “*mestiza*,” by contrast, refuses any oneness of categorical belonging and retains its multiple allegiances and identities.

3. A second meaning of *translocalidades* relates to intensified multidirectional crossings and movements of borders in Latin American migration, in which subject positions change as one travels across different locations and cultures (Alvarez et al., 2014: 1–3).

4. In Brazil, agroecology—defined in three dimensions, (1) as scientific knowledge about ecological food production practices, (2) as traditional practices and knowledges of ecological food production, and (3) as a social movement and political project for transforming social relations oriented in terms of equality, respect, and care—brought together emancipatory transformations in food production in a meaningful way and became a sign of gendered and feminist struggles.

5. The data from hundreds of questionnaires are being analyzed. My preliminary impression is strong disagreement with statements legitimizing different forms of male violence against women and disagreement with most statements regarding conventional gender roles.

6. In the political formation activities of the Margaridas caravan in September 2018 in Minas Gerais, some participants presented themselves as rural working women and quilombolas.

7. This is not to state, however, that the Margaridas believe that there is no racism in Brazil. As mentioned in note 5, our survey data is under analysis, but my initial impression is that there is a strong disagreement with the myth of racial democracy.

8. I thank Janet Conway for her insightful remarks on the difference between the presence of marked bodies and the politicization of race and colonialism.

9. Not surprisingly, the rule of rotating offices in the rural unions is more often than not followed for the positions occupied by women, while there are a number of cases of men who have been in the same posts for consecutive terms. Women have never occupied the higher posts within the CONTAG.

10. This issue also points to the absence of women deputies elected by the rural workers' movement and the need for women's organizations within the CONTAG and the Marcha das Margaridas to think about electoral strategies.

11. Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, of the Workers' Party, was president of Brazil for two consecutive terms (2003–2010). His government was marked by an unprecedented reduction of poverty and increase in the minimum wage, improving the lives of the poorest, while at the same time not conducting structural reforms. He was indicted for corruption in two problematic legal suits that did not respect due process and in which the evidence was very poor, mostly counting on "informing for reward." He was arrested on April 7, 2018.

12. Positioning oneself as pro- or contra Lula Livre has become a main indicator of political cleavage in Brazil in a time of extreme polarization. The Marcha included "Lula Livre" banners, and Fernando Haddad, who ran as the Lula candidate during the presidential elections in 2018, read from Lula to the Margaridas.

13. The pavilion served as accommodation for the Margaridas coming from all over Brazil. The official program of the Marcha on the first day—the workshops, the opening ceremony, and the cultural activities—took place there.

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