



Rural Women Redefining Care and Agency in the Argentine *Pampas*

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ABSTRACT *This article provides an ethnographic analysis of the agency of women who reside in the rural areas of the Argentine Pampas, based on their promotion and production of agroecological family horticulture. The recognition of these women's agency through care – care of their children, global care, and green care – offers a significant challenge to some metrocentric and Eurocentric feminist perspectives that claim care work can only be oppressive for women. The first of these types of care empowers women to improve the nutrition of their children. It also relates to another underlying type of care, which is to provide a sufficiently robust education as to ensure their children have a better and alternative future. The second type of care has the power to socially transform the territorial space of the district's countryside and its marginalized populations which, through care, acquire greater public and political attention. The third type of care empowers women to transform and care for the environment, and is exercised by not using pesticides in horticultural production and by disseminating knowledge on the matter. In line with discussions of postcolonial feminism (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Mahmood, 2001; Suárez Navaz, 2008), I argue that certain properties that are attributed to women relative to caregiving – by way of a dichotomous view of gender relations – fuel their agency: for these women the cultivation of vegetables is a form of agency that actively combats food, training and labor inequality.*

KEYWORDS care; Argentina; rural; women

Introduction

Is care work always oppressive for women? The central hypothesis of this study is that for women in the context of this study, caregiving is a form of agency, even if it does not seek to intentionally subvert gender relations nor achieve individual autonomy. This paper is based on an ethnographic field study carried out between 2014 and 2017 in rural Buenos Aires Province,

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Argentina. The field study followed the coordinators and participants of an initiative that promotes agroecological family horticulture in a district that is structured around the cultivation and trade of soybeans.¹ The soyification of the *Pampas*, which includes Buenos Aires Province, had impacts on economic and domestic life, and the new productive dynamic enabled a transformation of the agency of women. At the same time, community development initiatives such as the one investigated as part of this study also influenced women's agency through contributing to women's incorporation as political subjects. It can be observed that it is mainly women – who care for their children, for people from the surrounding neighborhoods and lands, and for the environment – who propose alternative moral repertoires for the life of the community in transformation.

This paper begins by presenting the theoretical framework, explaining what agency means and what has been said regarding care, agency and oppression by diverse feminist scholars. This is followed by describing the methodology used in the study and the socio-productive profile of the rural district where it was carried out. A characterization of the agroecological horticulture promotion initiative under investigation and an analytical description of its coordinators' and participants' activities is then developed: during the call to action; while selling at the market; and at the agroecological training. The final main section of the paper presents an analysis of the three types of what I call *broad-spectrum care*.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist organizations and feminist thought have been studied on numerous occasions in Argentina (Barrancos, 2008; Di Marco, 2010; Masson, 2007; Nari, 2004; Tarducci & Rifkin, 2010; Trebisacce, 2013). The emancipatory movements that strengthened since 2015, in favor of the decriminalization and legalization of abortion and the heterogeneous movement “*Ni Una Menos*” against femicides and gender violence, were also addressed widely (Felitti, 2014; Gago, 2018; Rosales, 2016; Vázquez Laba & Masson, 2018).

Beyond these specific works, it is also important to note that the diversity of political dynamics becomes evident when registering the differences that exist between organizations and movements in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas of the country. Taking this into account, and starting from the heuristic dialogue with the theories and practices of my field interlocutors who understood their practices in terms of care, I decided to dialogue with feminist studies of care to account for some not explicitly “emancipatory” repertoires

¹ Agroecological agriculture is part of an agricultural production system that provides food without agrochemical residues, but its certification is so called “social” (i.e. there are no private or public certifying agencies with fixed standards as in organic agriculture: people who work alongside and are not external to the community are the ones who certify the way that production is carried out).

of socio-political action – as *Ni Una Menos* – but with strong presence in the experiences of many local rural women of the Pampas. Emic theories and practices have allowed me to nuance, question and analytically challenge some of the approaches within feminist studies that equate agency with resistance: I argue that what I call the *power of care* provides agency not necessarily understood as emancipatory or anti-patriarchal. However, it is a valid type of agency in the ethnographic context presented in this study and therefore deserves to be analyzed.

An important part of feminist care studies is concerned with problematizing the sexual and unequal division of “domestic work,” which assigns men as priority actors to the public spheres and women (and feminized identities) to the private spheres. In my work, however, this will be nuanced. In the first place, I sustain that some supposedly domestic care practices can also be public and political practices. Production and reproduction can take place in spaces that are not clearly differentiated. Secondly, a perspective and description of what I call *broad-spectrum care* will be developed. The spectrum is broad because it aims, in its analysis, to go beyond home, that is, to exceed the scenarios that are typically designated as care settings.

It is common for feminist scholars of care to point out the invisibilization and oppression that women suffer because they are in charge of “innocuous” tasks, or tasks that are socially undervalued, such as care (Federici, 2018). Caregiving practices are usually performed by women or by people seen as feminized, and who are therefore dehierarchized and seen as deserving no or little remuneration (Folbre, 2006). I argue that it is precisely this supposed innocuousness of care that gives agency to women in a conservative social context that defines them as women-mothers-caregivers, with certain values and ethics. Caring is “a woman’s thing,” it is not highly valued socially, but it justifies extra-ordinary actions on the part of the women participating in the agroecological horticulture activities I have followed.

On the other hand, women’s agency is often studied as resistance from perspectives that historicize local feminist movements or from historical perspectives that are too broad, commonly under metrocentric perspectives. In dialogue with the native perspectives I found, I propose a definition of women’s agency that is not synonymous with resistance. For the women who are part of this study, caring is a form of productive agency, which does not intentionally seek to subvert normative gender relations, nor does it seek to achieve women’s individualized autonomy; it is a relational agency, inherently linked to their relationships with others, and interstitial, where the capacity for action sneaks through the twists and turns of what is possible in situated contexts. Agency is understood as the capacity for action that relations of subordination enable and create in a given historical context. That is to say, the meanings and senses of agency of a given population cannot be defined before the ethnographic work is carried out. Moreover, it is desirable to understand agency as that which can also aim toward continuity, stasis and stability, and which is present in the lives of women whose universe has been constructed in

communities that are not markedly liberal (Mahmood, 2001). That is why Mahmood, and her postcolonial feminist approach, proposes that the notion of agency must be decoupled from liberal feminist projects, because prioritizing women's agency as a subversion of gender norms ends up being politically prescriptive and invisibilizes the totality of women's possibilities for action. This paper, for example, shows how caring can potentially empower women in the context of unequal and asymmetrical relations.

Beyond the particular agency of women, at a more general level Giddens (1976, 1981) and Sewell Jr. (1992) explain that agency is not opposed to social structure but constitutes it. The social structure shapes people's practices, and at the same time people's practices constitute and reproduce structures. Therefore, it is necessary to put an end to the Western fantasy of the free and autonomous agent. That is to say, for the case of this paper, the agent (rural women) is not necessarily understood as opposed to patriarchal structures, because women's agentive capacity is the fruit of their immersion in patriarchal structures with their associated limits and possibilities. This paper explains that the studied women's *power of care* is intelligible only within that structural framework, with the particular conditions and fields of possibility (Grimson, 2011, p. 172) that enable it, by the political subjects produced by the power relations of that same framework. Intersectionally speaking, that is why perspectives that state that care practices are mere oppressions neither represent nor understand the emic points of view of *all* women.

Neither is it a question of thinking of care as a case of infrapolitics (see Scott, 1987, 1990), because I avoid speaking in terms of resistance, but Scott's approach is worth highlighting as it allows us to consider other ways of understanding politics. In turn, Ortner (1995) observed that much of the literature on resistance practices lacks "density." For their part, Abu-Lughod (1990) and Gutmann (2012) warned about the risks of romanticizing the term resistance, as it implies a reductionism of theories of power, promotes an inconsistent hope regarding the failures of the systems of oppression, and exalts "resistant heroes." Sahlins (2002) pointed out that resistance expresses, above all, the values of the position of the speaker (i.e., the analyst).

It is not possible to understand the *power of care* without reflecting on the materiality of soybean monoculture, the displacements it causes, the consequent housing problems of migrant populations, and public policies such as the promotion of agroecological gardening studied here. To there we go then.

An Ethnographic Approach to *La Laguna*

This research is part of a much larger investigation on women and agency in the Argentine Pampas region (Kunin, 2019), for which the ethnographic field work was conducted between 2014 and 2017. This work involved a group of

women that promotes agroecological family horticulture,² with whom I conducted more than 40 formal interviews; I also had many informal conversations with the coordinators and participants of the initiative. The group is composed of approximately 25 women market gardeners and five agricultural technicians, whose ages range from 25 to 50 years. As part of the research, two years were spent observing the bimonthly agroecological horticulture market held by the women at the main square, and observations were also made of the participation in a year-long training course held for the women as part of the initiative. In addition, the interactions of the group were followed on the social media platform, Facebook, as well as in closed WhatsApp chat groups. Furthermore, particularly with the coordinators, there were opportunities to participate in the daily social lives of group members (especially coordinators) at home, at work, and in exchanges with different social actors at a variety of different events. Interviews were also held with actors who interact in different ways with the coordinators and participants; these included politicians, government officials, social workers, trade unionists, teachers, residents of the surrounding areas, and others. Before describing the initiative that is the focus of my research, it is important to have an understanding of the territory where it took place.

For the purposes of this paper, *La Laguna* is a fictitious name I have given to one of the 135 districts that make up the province of Buenos Aires. Located 260 km from the capital of Argentina, the main activity of the region is production for the agro-export market. The district is located in the northwest of Buenos Aires Province and it is at the core of the so-called Pampas region, the most fertile region of the country. The main city shares the name of the district, and is home to approximately 40,000 inhabitants (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos de Argentina, 2010). An additional 12 towns make up the rest of the district. The population of each of these towns is seldom more than 1,000 and some of them have fewer than 100 inhabitants.

The typical sociability of these towns means there is a great deal of interconnection between the inhabitants. The leading farmers carry socio-political weight that influences the decisions of the district, and family as a social institution is important for social cohesion and integration. They are agricultural towns as defined by Albaladejo (2013); that is to say, they are units composed of a main town and the rural space that surrounds it. The main city of the district is the hub around which the agricultural activities and the rest of the productive and service sectors (industry, administrative, judicial, etc.) that constitute the dynamics of the territory revolve. Since the 1990s, the Pampas have undergone a transformation from being an emblematic area for mixed production of diverse crops and cattle ranching, to being an area dominated by a genetically modified soy monoculture. As Giarraca and Teubal (2006) state, this new agri-food model is expanding on a global scale with the support of

²In order to protect the identities of those involved in the study, the name of the group has been rendered anonymous, and the name of the informants, the city and district where the field work was carried out have been changed.

large international agribusiness corporations. The use of new inputs and technologies developed or driven by these large companies is expanding, with the rationale that an increase in the scale of production must go hand-in-hand with more intensive agriculture. Thus, since 1996 Roundup Ready soy, that is soybean cultivation using genetically modified seeds combined with a no-tillage system and the use of pesticides such as glyphosate, has gained prominence. The use of these pesticides represents a proven danger to the population, as they lead to the development of cancer, allergies, genetic damage and other serious diseases.³

The concentration, foreign ownership and vertical integration of the country's agri-food system is increasing, and contract farming is on the rise. It is a production system that has had two important consequences: it has contributed significantly to the disappearance of a number of farms, and it is oriented almost entirely towards exports.

According to Giarracca and Teubal (2006), the disappearance of hundreds of rural towns, the loss of small- and medium-sized farms, the exodus of many inhabitants, and unemployment in rural areas, are some of the consequences of this "agriculture without farmers" model (p. 81). There has been significant movement of the population from the countryside to the main city of the district and its surroundings. There are areas where the lack of local jobs generates daytime migration patterns where (male) workers travel to neighboring communities for their work activities. They include fathers, family members and partners of some of the women who form part of this study.

Women who used to dedicate themselves to the reproductive work of their domestic unit in the fields, and to performing unpaid productive work as "help" to their husbands or by performing occasional cooking and cleaning tasks for their husbands' employers, stopped doing so when they went to live in peri-urban agglomerations with their children. As much of the land is held by sowing pools,⁴ there is no longer a landowner family living at the productive unit for whom the women can occasionally work. Women have also begun to have more fluid contact with metropolitan ideas through social and development initiatives, such as the agroecological family horticulture promotion initiative that is in the center of this study. As will be shown, this new dynamic enabled a transformation of women's agency, job and training prospects, and family dynamics. What follows is an analytical description of three moments in the promotion and production of agroecological family horticulture to better understand the relationship of care and agency of these

³See Kunin and Lucero (2020) for an analysis of the proven dangers of toxic agrochemicals such as glyphosate in the Argentine countryside.

⁴According to FAO (2004) the "sowing pools" (*pooles de siembra*) are speculative investment funds. They provide financial management, commercial and agronomic, for the large-scale production of cereals in Argentina. They contract land to third parties with a mix of crops and regions in order to have geographical diversification and reduce the climatic and price risks. The aim is to give investors returns that are superior to those of other financial options. On the scale at which it operated, the acquisition of inputs such as fertilizers could be effected at the wholesale level.

women: the call for action, the market, and the training.

Marina's Call to Estelita

Marina is a middle-class teacher at a rural alternating school,⁵ and Estelita is a former student at the same institution who graduated 11 years ago. Estelita, who is 30 years old, visited her former school to offer some tomatoes from her own garden; she had produced so many that she could not get rid of them all even by making sauce for the winter or giving them away. Marina, the teacher, suggested she should take them to the market. Estelita lives in the rural countryside on land that belongs to her husband's employers; he works as a *parquero*, or caretaker.⁶ Neither Estelita nor her husband knew that there was a agroecological horticulture market every two weeks in the square of the district's main city.

Estelita did not consider her way of producing to be "rocket science." To her, it was just simple to work without *remedios* (herbicides).⁷ Her family had never had money to buy them – they were always expensive, imported, and at prices pegged to the dollar – so she cultivated her *quinta* without them,⁸ and she was able to grow enough for her husband, son and herself to eat.

Later in 2019, Estelita became one of the main leaders of the La Laguna agroecological market. She was not able to work as a domestic like her mother, as she had always imagined she would, because she had no employers to work for; the company that had purchased the farm was far away. Occasionally an engineer would visit, alone, to give orders and check on everything. The alternating secondary school she had formerly attended was still holding on. Although it had fewer and fewer students, it was supported by social actors who carried out rural development actions and tried to prevent a total exodus. The teachers believed that women were responsible for keeping the roots of the family in the countryside, and so they began to implement initiatives such as the agroecological horticulture market so that women would have something to do in rural areas. And that is where the story of Marina, the teacher, comes in.

Marina is the daughter of a farmer who follows the conventional practices of spraying and sowing (as does the sowing pool company that owns the land where Estelita lives). Marina often clarifies, as if wanting to clear her name and take ownership of her family genealogy at the same time, that "*no nació de*

⁵Alternating schools follow a pedagogy that structures the educational process between alternating periods at school and at home.

⁶A *parquero* is similar to a gardener, groundskeeper or caretaker. A *parquero* performs different tasks around a house that belongs or belonged to the landowners.

⁷*Remedios* ("remedies" or "medicines") is a term that usually refers to the resources used to solve a problem or cure a disease, usually human. Nevertheless, in the Pampas region, it is an emic term that refers to herbicides. In terms of semantics, by using this term, any suspicion of danger is removed.

⁸A *quinta* is a part of a garden or rural plot that is dedicated to cultivating agricultural products.

un repollo agroecológico” (“I wasn’t born in an agroecological cabbage patch”). She became a mother at 40 years old, which is unusually old by local standards. She graduated from Universidad de La Plata as an agricultural engineer and has worked as a teacher at the rural alternating secondary school for almost 20 years. Because there are no universities in La Laguna or other nearby towns, middle- and upper-class youth tend to move to Buenos Aires or La Plata when they are 18 years old, to study and live either temporarily or permanently. After finishing their studies, the vast majority do not return home. Marina received an education in different agroecological subjects while at the Universidad de La Plata, through a new course that had few students enrolled at the time. The agroecological approach is not dominant at the university or among her colleagues at the alternating secondary rural school who educate the children of the few rural employees and laborers who continue to work in the fields. Her coworkers at the school look down on her, as if they hold something personal against her. They believe that Marina does not like to work nor to teach the students how to “do the *real* work in the field.” Many believe that “agroecology is a crazy idea of Marina and her hippie friends.”

At the alternating school, Marina and her fellow teachers visit their students to follow up on their on-site apprenticeships. They see how students grow crops and care for animals on the land where they reside and where their parents often work as well. In this way the teachers get to know some of the daily and domestic realities their students and families may face, and which are especially complicated due to the social, job and environmental consequences of soyification.

Marina has many doubts about how to communicate the agroecological paradigm to people who are highly exploited and whose livelihood conditions are pushing them to their limits. As part of her quest to care for and collaborate with the population, she worked in the agroecological horticulture’s market. She invited families that she knew had small- and medium-sized gardens to participate. In general, those who accepted the invitation were the mothers of students or female graduates of the school, like Estelita. The male graduates and fathers were in the minority, as they were working the fields. According to Marina, that is why the women “*se engancharon*,”⁹ or got hooked into it.

The Gardeners and their Sales at the Market

It is the end of May and a cold autumn wind blows through the main square in the town of La Laguna. There must be fewer than 10 buildings in the entire town that are higher than eight floors. The rest are all low-lying homes. And so, the cold wind blows in from the fields and through the square. It is 8:00 in the morning and Estelita and her fellow market sellers – all bundled up – are

⁹ *Se engancharon* is a colloquial term used to refer to when you catch someone’s attention, interest or willingness to act.

setting their wares on folding wooden tables. Most have been awake for several hours. The dirt roads that connect the fields where they live to the main town are always in bad condition, and they have to travel slowly to reach the market. They also have to get up early to finishing harvesting and packaging the produce. The market sellers talk about their children – the littlest ones are asleep in the cars, or sometimes bundled in wool blankets in the sellers' laps – their grandchildren or how many millimeters of rain last fell. They set up their wooden tables, covering them in green tablecloths they received thanks to state funding, and they wear matching aprons in the same green to identify themselves as market gardeners. They exhibit their products, all at the same price, as agreed at the coordination meeting. The prices are never displayed in writing. They always tell them to their customers. Much of the produce remains in the wooden or plastic crates in which it arrived. The eggs go on the table, as do the canned fruits, the hand-painted pots and the scales that each market gardener uses to weigh their produce.

At 8:30 am the customers begin to arrive. Most are over 40 years of age, women neighbors from “downtown.” Many come because they have heard that the produce here is flavorful and more healthy. Estelita, who is very active and easy-going, tells exactly that to every customer she sees. Mirta, a market gardener who is originally from the northeast of Argentina, is extremely timid and is learning to deal with talking to clients and keeping track of change. She dropped out in her first year of high school, more than 10 years ago, to run away with her boyfriend. Since then, she has been moving from one farm to the next. Marina and her fellows think of Mirta's presence at the market as a kind of victory. “Empowering” a woman who is timid and from “the middle of the middle of nowhere” is to them a “double empowerment.” Mirta's voice continues to tremble when she speaks, and it is hard for her to make eye contact with strangers even after two years at the market, but she continues to come, every two weeks.

People begin to line up at the stalls.

It is 10:30 am and the stalls continue to sell. The market does not have a specific closing time; it finishes when the produce runs out, or when there is little left. This is often the case as the women cannot produce enough to meet demand, because they do not have their own land. But not everything in the world of these women market gardeners has to do with sales. “Training” sessions play a key role as well.

Training to Make it Click

In 2017 Marina and other teachers (female and male) from the alternating rural schools in the province's northwest asked an agricultural engineer from the Ministry of Agroindustry of Buenos Aires province to teach an agroecological horticulture course in La Laguna. He works from the central headquarters in La Plata, but he is originally from a province in the north of Argentina. He

gives the impression of a man who is a “friend of the countryside.” This means he is adored by the teachers and producers, who invite him to barbecues and copious afternoon teas accompanied by homemade treats every time he comes to La Laguna. His course was certified by the Ministry and he teaches once a month, for nine months, at the rural school. The number of students attending each class varies between 20 and 40, and they are made up of rural teachers and female and male producers from across the entire region. The engineer presents PowerPoint slides showing photos of plants, weeds and bugs. He teaches them that there are *benezas*, or “good weeds” that can protect their horticultural output. This information opposes the moral view that glyphosate, the herbicide, is an agricultural hero, and it adds to the reputation of agroecology, where lettuce and good weeds coexist in an arrangement that is desirable and productive. The same occurs when he provides information about certain insects. “Now I understand that there are some bugs that you don’t have to kill,” says Isidora González, one of the family farmers.

Many of the producers’ grandparents cultivated their crops in an agroecological manner, but their parents’ generation grew up working in the fields using genetically modified soy and glyphosate. Old traditions of observing nature and caring for it have been lost along the way. Those who practice agroecology today are in the minority, and they are seen as troublemakers who produce without using “remedies.” At the course taught by the agroecological engineer they can speak among peers without being regarded with suspicion or contempt.

Estelita says:

Before, no one talked about this. I heard about chemicals and I accepted it and didn’t use them. Here, as an adult [she is 30 years old], I learned that they also use chemicals on the lettuce. Now if I eat something I haven’t produced myself, I eat it with distrust. This course has left a mark on me. It makes everything go *click*.

The idea of eating with distrust will have an influence on Estelita’s nutritional choices, for example, when she feeds her son. The course will also make her reconsider what happened during the pregnancy of her cousin Pablo’s wife, who had a miscarriage.¹⁰ Estelita now suspects that the fetus did not survive due to the glyphosate spraying that took place where they lived. This causes her pain and she fears for her son. The distrust, disgust and fear of non-agroecological products felt by Estelita and her companions are part of a new

¹⁰Pablo worked as a farm laborer on the same ranch where Estelita lived. However, unlike his cousin, Pablo sprayed hundreds of hectares of soybean with the herbicides that the managing engineer sent him to buy. As a teenager, he was strong and had a promising future as the lead goal scorer for the local soccer team. He dropped out of school at about the age of 15 because he was going to be a father for the first time; he got a job as a rural employee to be able to start earning money to support his family. Since then, his spirit has begun to drain: he had something similar to asthma and suffers constant skin rashes. His future son never arrived, because Pablo’s girlfriend, who was already living with him on the ranch, lost the baby when she was five months pregnant.

moral universe. A new world of senses and sensations that opened to them upon receiving this information is the source of their agency based on care.

So far I have given a brief overview of some of the moments in which agroecological horticulture has been promoted and produced: the call to action; selling at the market; and the agroecological training. We shall now see how the three types of *broad-spectrum care* practices that were analytically developed are intertwined in these moments.

Broad-spectrum Care Practices

The practices that have been ethnographically analyzed are *broad-spectrum care practices*, meaning practices that are carried out not only within the home. This idea is taken from Tronto's (1993, p. 103) notion of care, which states that care is a set of social activities that include everything we do to conserve, continue or repair the world so that we can live in it in the best possible way. This includes one's own body, one's own self, and the environment. From this perspective, three types of *broad-spectrum care* practices and work are analytically proposed: child care practices and work, global care practices and work, and green care practices and work.

Estelita and her Care for Children

In analyzing the promotion and production of agroecological horticulture, it becomes clear that the practices and work of caring for one's children are a primary motivation for participation. Initially, one may think that carrying out this type of care simply responds to the traditional place that women have occupied in most sexual divisions of labor. And, in part, this is true. However, it can be argued that it is precisely from this traditional division – where gendered beliefs present mothers as the best and most “natural” caregivers – that these women gain agency and the power to change or attempt to change the state of affairs in their society.

Let us return, by way of example, to the story of Estelita, the market gardener. Part of her activity as a small horticultural producer is related to inspiring her six-year-old son, Jeremias. He goes with her to the bi-monthly coordination meetings and walks around his mother's stall, playing with other little ones while the women sell their goods in La Laguna's central square. The most important activity happens at Estelita's vegetable garden, which is located inside and outside of the greenhouse she erected in the back garden of her house, thanks to her work and with materials provided by the government. Her house is located on the ranch where her husband is employed; in other words, she produces her crops, like most of the market gardeners, on land that is not her own.

Jeremías “sees a seed and wants to plant it,” says his mother proudly. That is why Estelita prepared a small plot for him to learn how to grow vegetables and herbs. She gets excited when she explains that she wants to generate in him a “fanaticism for the farm.” She says that if she works her garden and sells her produce, “her son will do it too.” Estelita wants Jeremias to have a “garden mentality,”¹¹ so that when he grows up, he does not have to work as a groundskeeper like his father, and can have an enterprise of his own far removed from any contact with chemicals. Estelita and her husband dream of owning their own land someday, leaving their jobs and dedicating themselves to horticulture on a larger scale. They do not yet know how they will do it.

Estelita’s participation in the market has generated an economic supplement to her and her husband’s activities, but her main objective is to teach her son about the world of gardening through daily learning opportunities that will provide him with employment and economic alternatives in a rural world that is increasingly concentrated and exclusionary. Childhood “fanaticism,” as Estelita calls it, is for her both proof and the result of caring for the child’s future. A garden mentality implies doing something *in spite of* the general social stigma that “having a garden is for the poor.” In fact, very few people in La Laguna grow food for themselves or for others on a small scale. Those living in rural areas are surrounded by wheat, corn and especially soybean crops that are grown for the export market. For their own daily diet, they purchase supermarket lettuce and tomatoes that are produced in other regions with the use of agrochemicals. Thus, having a garden mentality goes against the grain, as does using your hands to make food for yourself or others, and growing crops in an alternative way. This is caring and taking care of oneself.

From this story we can understand care as a formative experience: disseminating practical knowledge transmitted from generation to generation as a condition for the autonomy and shaping of subjects (in this case children) capable of self-sustainability. Estelita’s agency is expressed in how she explicitly values her knowledge and how she transmits it to her son through what Lave and Wenger (2001) call the “community of practice.” In Estelita’s opinion, knowledge about agroecological horticulture will allow Jeremias to have a better life than she and her husband, even though she recognizes that having a future in the countryside is very uncertain for her son.

Estelita’s supposedly domestic practices are without a doubt public and political practices in the broadest sense: she feeds her son and others in a healthy way, and from the heart of her home she educates her own family. The cultivation of vegetables is a form of agency that actively combats the food, training and labor inequality that are hallmarks of contemporary soybean farming, where profits are accumulated by the few. Personal gardens are also political and public gardens loaded with collective meaning even though – or

¹¹By this she means to give priority to horticulture and to work seriously to flourish in the activity.

precisely because – as Segato (2016, p. 114) says, they fall outside the “totalitarianism of the public sphere.”

In the same respect, Federici points out that when you produce food for yourself, for your own survival, for subsistence, you are producing and reproducing at the same time (Federici, interviewed in Navarro & Linsata, 2014). The separation between production and reproduction occurs only in a market economy. Federici stresses that there are territorial logics, such as those that exist in La Laguna, where production and reproduction are not separate. The argument of this paper is in line with feminist research that deconstructs the tradition of analyzing the patriarchy as a system of separate spheres. In line with Molinier’s (2013) arguments, this paper recognizes that family as an institution is political, and therefore is both a producer and (re)producer of differential subjugations in accordance with the relative position of inclusion or marginalization of an individual. Significantly, due to its political nature, the family is a potential and crucial space for the resistance and ethical subjectivation of its members.

Marina: Global Care Practices Through the Creation of Spaces

Global care work and practices imply the power to socially transform the territorial space of the district’s countryside and its marginalized populations which, through care, acquire greater public and political attention.¹² Marina, the agricultural engineer and rural teacher, develops her agency through “creating a space” in the main square of the district capital of La Laguna. Together with her companions, she succeeded in having the women gardeners’ market held every two weeks. The owner of a chain of greengrocers and several notable neighbors complained to the municipality that selling produce at a “social price” (that is, cheaper than the greengrocer) was not an appropriate activity for the most important square in the city. Marina and her companions confronted these opinions by presenting letters containing several dozen signatures in support of their efforts, and speaking with the City Council and several officials. The municipality also tried to make the market share their location with another market, the *Feria Franca* or Artisan’s Fair, which takes place in the same square on weekend afternoons. To prevent this from occurring, Marina and her colleagues had to explain to the municipality that agroecological produce cannot be sold in the middle of the afternoon, because the market gardeners harvest their crops the night before market day, or even early in the morning on the day of the market. After harvesting, they have to transport their products from the fields to the main square. The production would spoil if it was harvested under the midday sun or at *siesta* time. The municipal secretary of production did not understand that changing the time of

¹² By global care I mean territorial or community care. I call it “global” as it is a *broad spectrum care* performed outside women’s homes, when they look after impoverished or marginalized communities as a whole, that is to say “globally.”

the market would affect the market gardeners in all of these ways. Marina and her colleagues had to explain the logic that governs the agricultural work of small agroecological horticulture, as part of her global care for the workers and to protect them from the changes the municipality wanted to make.

Agency based on global care often involves taking actions in a timely manner, not only in terms of *doing*, but also in terms of *preventing*. Through their promotion of agroecological horticulture, Marina and her companions want families to continue living in the countryside and to confront the soybean model that is driving them out. They believe that the will of women to act is fundamental to this occurring, as women are the ones that “root” the domestic unit to the rural environment; that is, they are the ones that anchor the family to the countryside, in emotional, cultural and economic ways. In many cases, even if Marina and her colleagues denounce the closure of rural schools and criticize the negative consequences of the socioeconomic model of agribusiness, they believe that families move to the periphery of the main city due to the lack of desire and tenacity of the women-mothers of the family group to remain in the rural environment. Soy does not bring economic promises or expectations of improvement to families; rather, it closes or fumigates rural schools and it is the protagonist of a production model that results in male workers ending up living on their own at the farms far from their families, or with their families in urban outskirts from which they have to commute daily to work. According to Marina, in these contexts women’s will guides the decisions regarding where their families reside. In these circumstances, the agentic global care of Marina and her companions involves preventing family groups from moving (and the consequential separations of residences) and trying, when possible, to obtain land for farming families, though the latter has not yet been successful.

The notion of commitment is crucial to understanding the emic concept of global care as agentic care. In this sense, the use of the coordinators’ domestic spaces to work constitutes a commitment for them. For example, Marina receives farmers at her home at 7:00 a.m., while still wearing her pajamas, and without them having made an appointment. They simply knock on her door to tell her that their greenhouse was blown over by last night’s thunderstorm, or they take advantage of a trip to the city for some paperwork to pass by her house and tell her what has happened, or about the things that worry them, or to see if she can help solve their problem. Others seek her out because they don’t know how to issue an electronic invoice, or how to register online so that they can pay their taxes and pensions as small rural producers. Or they come by because they have to do an online transaction and they do not have a computer or internet access where they live. Marina helps with all the necessary arrangements. She is under no formal agreement to give this type of support from her home, where the boundaries between public and private blur. A quick look at Marina’s work day suggests that, like many women throughout the world, she takes on a double or triple burden, working days that are two or three times longer than a typical paid workday. It could be said that

Marina operates in a context of labor flexibility, or flex-time, where her workday never ends, as often occurs under contemporary neoliberal working conditions. This is partly true, but not the only explanation.

Zelizer (2009) shows that there are ties between the economic and emotional spheres of our everyday lives, that human lives encompass a number of different, yet “connected” spheres (p. 26). In the same vein, feminist anthropologists have criticized the separation between the “public” and “private” for decades.

Micaela, Marina and Green Care Work and Practices

Finally, the third type of care studied, which has been analytically defined as “green care practices and work,”¹³ provides the power of transformation and care for the environment. The dynamics of the group promoting and selling agroecological horticulture fosters two types of green care, one that is pragmatic-emotional and practiced by those who work the land. It involves day-to-day practices and relationships with the humans and non-humans associated with them, where the former humanizes the latter. The other type of green care is the ideological-intensive care exercised by those who organize or promote information or awareness-raising activities, but who do not personally get their hands dirty.

Let us first examine and analyze the pragmatic-emotional group of green care practices and work exercised by the women market gardeners. Micaela is a small agroecological market gardener from a town of 2,000 inhabitants in the same district. She often posts photos of her lettuce and tomatoes on her social media, as if they were photos of her children. On her social media and WhatsApp groups, she posted one photo that was extremely striking; it showed her holding a 6-kilogram squash as if it were a baby. The sheer size and weight of her vegetables make her proud, and she posts about them as often as she can. Micaela does not spray pesticides and she fights pests using natural formulas, which involves a lot of manual work based on daily observation and patience. This kind of dedication deepens the emotional relationship between producers, their vegetables, and the land. That is why Micaela sometimes feels like crying when she sees her garden empty. It is not easy for her to transform her intimate possessions into merchandise: “it is hard for me to cut the lettuce I harvest [to sell]. It makes me very sad to see my row of crops empty [after harvesting and selling at the market].”

Despite her sense of unease, Micaela is encouraged when she cultivates relationships with the customers at the market. Receiving the recognition and gratitude of those who consume her vegetables for their healthy qualities also comforts her and makes her proud:

¹³Although it is denominated here as “green care,” this does not refer to the practice of “green-washing,” a term used to refer to the practices of some companies wherein they present a product or proposal as being environmentally friendly, even though it is not.

A customer asked me how to know whether they are buying [something] healthy. 'I will show you,' I said. And I showed her the holes in the lettuce. 'If it didn't have any holes, it wouldn't be healthy,' I said. And the next week she asked me for lettuce with holes in it. (Micaela)

The holes are a sign that the vegetable has not been sprayed with chemicals, because it has been attacked by small pests. This reverses the hegemonic reasoning that leads one to believe that the most "beautiful" vegetables and fruits are the brightest, most perfect, or uniformly colored. For Micaela and her customers the "ugliest" fruits and vegetables – the ones with the most holes – are healthiest, the tastiest; holes and good taste are evidence of the naturalness of the production process. The aesthetics and appearance of the horticultural products are of great importance in the agroecological world; evaluating these conditions implies a moral criterion and agency related to green care.

Let us now turn to ideological-intensive green care, looking at the case of Marina, the rural teacher and coordinator of the market gardeners' initiative. Marina began to bring up the issue of the dangers of pesticides and the advantages of agroecological production in the teachers' room at the rural school, and at the school council meetings between teachers and parents. For the majority, Marina is a "crazy woman" and they fail to see any reason to criticize the "countryside that provides work." However, Marina takes care of this by using her teaching modules for "rural development" to promote the market, and by organizing the training course for the market gardeners at the school.

Marina and Micaela's agentic care gives them the power, or at least the will, to transform the environment in La Laguna. However, unlike other women's social organizations in Latin America today – many of which are led by indigenous women – the leaders of this project do not engage in nor identify directly with ecofeminist language (Mies & Shiva, 1993; Plumwood, 1993), which usually relates the gender oppression of women to the oppression of nature. Nor do they identify with other movements that fight for the land, such as those resisting capitalist extractivism (Gago, 2017; Navarro & Linsata, 2014; Ulloa, 2016). As reiterated throughout this paper, it is from within and even through taking advantage of patriarchal structures that women like Marina and Micaela promote care practices to improve their world. Through what I term the *power of care*, women increase their agency, working for and with their family, on the fields, their communities, and the environment.

Conclusion

Views that point to care practices and work as being mere oppressions neither represent nor understand the emic points of view of *all* women. These practices, which are supposedly domestic, can also be public and political practices. Production and reproduction can take place in spaces that are not

clearly differentiated. So-called domestic spaces can be powerful and crucial spaces for the resistance and ethical subjectivation of their inhabitants. In this specific case, a feminism that is not intersectional will not be capable of understanding the perspectives of rural migrants that are displaced by soybean production, nor the perspectives of some of the middle-class women of La Laguna who return from experiences in metropolitan areas with the desire to care for marginalized neighborhoods, the countryside and the environment.

This paper thus shows a dynamic that is at times triangular, which is often presented as purely dichotomous. On the one hand, there is the hyper-modernizing agribusiness paradigm, which displaces those who live in the countryside. On the other hand, there is the alter-modernizing paradigm of the many coordinators who want the displaced to become “ecological-ideological.” But there is a third vertex, the paradigm of the desires, logics and possibilities of the inhabitants of the countryside: in this case the agroecological market gardeners. There are points of contact between the three; they are not irreconcilable options. The third alternative seems to imply other positions beyond the first two dichotomous ones that the local conservative and liberal classes usually hold. We must account for the gray areas between these seemingly contrary and irreconcilable perspectives.

In the same way, there is an apparent form of reproduction (care performed by women or feminized subjects) that is not contradictory to social change, even if it is not a subversive, revolutionary or structural change.

I have aligned my work with postcolonial feminist literature to seek explanations for the existence of women’s collective actions, at times seemingly contrary to the assumptions of some feminisms. As Suárez Navas (2008) explains, “behaviors that reproduce and even fuel the subordination of women have been explained either as false consciousness, or as a search for women’s own spaces, from which cultural practices are subverted in a feminine key” (p. 57). Here, the analytical approach to the three types of care studied and their related agency is linked to the latter view, without failing to recognize the emancipatory possibilities that feminist discourses have opened up for many women in the region, or the oppression suffered by women and feminized and dissident identities.

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