A HISTORY OF INHABITING IN FEMININE
Redefinitions of the Domestic in The Autobiography of María Elena Moyano and the Women’s Organization of Villa El Salvador

A space dedicated to care – as reproductive labor – is undoubtedly the domestic space. However, these tasks can weave networks that surpass the domestic limit, positioning themselves as systems of resistance and community building at the collective and neighborhood scales. The autobiography of María Elena Moyano, Peruvian political activist, gives an account of how care can become a tool of political constitution and social mobilization, reworking and expanding both the domestic scale and its roles in favor of a community.

The autobiography of María Elena Moyano, published posthumously in 1993, is a testimony of one of the most important experiences of women’s organization revolving around an agenda of care in Perú’s history. Moyano, leader of the women’s organization in the district of Villa El Salvador, social fighter, and political activist, left the manuscript incomplete after being violently murdered by the Sendero Luminoso terrorist group in February 1992. The autobiography, which is simultaneously an intimate document and a political manifesto, weaves a story where the domestic overcomes the isolation of the family home, contesting it and making it overflow into city life, where it is transformed into the center of a political and social project.

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The City Without Walls

On May 14th [1971] newspapers announced that the government, as a sign of its commitment to the revolutionary process initiated in 1968, ordered the relocation of 2,300 families in the Tablada de Lurín area, 20 kilometers south of Lima. A large popular urbanization would be built, a “model city” that would then be called Villa El Salvador. (Blondet, 1991:29)

That day, the villagers arrived in Army trucks at a desert plain disconnected from the city, a few kilometers from the sea border. It was a territory to be conquered; empty, deserted, dry, and sandy. The only reference resembling a city configuration was a plan, a grid of regular rectangles, cabinet-drawn several kilometers away, which had to be superimposed on the sand’s indefinite surface. An identical plot of 7 by 20 meters was allocated for each family. Following the invisible grid, the first huts were erected on the desert floor.

In the evening we just finished setting up the hut. There were four mats like a square and another one on top. I remember it was very windy and at night the mat roof almost came out. It was all dark and only the whistle of the wind could be heard. We didn’t even have a candle. My sister and I couldn’t sleep all night. I, just like my other siblings, told my mother that this was horrible, we said “what do we do now?” but my mother only thought that finally no one was going to throw us...
out of the rented houses and that we would build our own house here one day. (Moyano, 1993:63)

However, for the inhabitants of Villa El Salvador, their brick and mortar ‘own houses’ would have to wait a few years. Meanwhile, they had to live in a sort of camp settlement, a city without walls formed by woven cane huts. The mat-and-stick constructions were unable to establish a clear separation between the ‘house’ and the ‘street,’ between interior and exterior. In these structures, wind and sand, heat and cold, light and sound, slipped through each crack of the woven walls. The same thing happened with the domestic life involuntarily exposed to the outside world. Conversations, smells, domestic scenes, and material goods were left vulnerable to the other inhabitants of the desert. In mat-and-stick constructions it would not be necessary to speak of openings, doors, or windows – elements of control in the relationship between what enters and leaves the space. In its place, there was a porosity, a gradient of openings and closures, which operated largely outside the will of the inhabitants of the hut.

In the early years of Villa El Salvador, we find a material condition that does not conform to the modern city model since it does not establish a definite separation between the public and the private. On the contrary, its system of porous walls remind us of other models of settlement. In Spanish, we tend to consider the words ‘muro’ [wall, barrier] and ‘pared’ [wall, partitions], which today we almost use synonymously but which originally have differentiated functions. ‘Muro’ – which comes from the Latin murus – was used to refer to the wall that enclosed the medieval city. Its military protection function produced a sharp separation between the inside and the outside, between ‘us’ and the other. On the other hand, ‘pared’ – which comes from the Latin paries – accounted for
all the vertical partitions of the built fabric of the city, whether interior, exterior, structural or non-structural. Over time, the connotation of exclusion and protection of *murus* was transferred to the boundaries of family property, thus, 'us' was redefined around family rather than community. The *paries*, which made up the interior of the city, retreated to refer to the interior partitions of the buildings and, from the sixteenth century, acquired even more internal connotations, being used to this day to also define the limits of the body's organs. This meaning is, perhaps, the closest to its original definition as a diffuse, porous, and permeable boundary, that resonates with the material situation of Villa El Salvador's original settlement.

In the absence of the wall, in its early years, Villa El Salvador was constituted as a large interior subdivided by permeable walls of mats. In the mat-and-stick camp, the interior did not belong to the house but to the whole complex. This material condition, added to the need of building a minimum urban infrastructure to inhabit the desert, as well as other political and economic factors, consolidated close community ties that surpassed the traditional family organization of society. This material condition was one of the reasons that allowed women to 'leave' the house and have a significant role in neighborhood organizations. The absence of the house's 'wall,' not only led to women entering the public sphere but also turned family problems into neighborhood problems and, therefore, into public problems. In their early years, neighborhood organizations gained authority over public issues – such as the supply of drinking water, electricity, and the asphalting of roads – and over the domestic intimacies of their inhabitants' lives (Blondet, 1991:73). This is evident in the testimony of Bertha Jáuregui (EnMovimiento, 2021).

Again, because machismo was a norm. You weren't allowed to go out. If you left and returned after six in the afternoon, it was already a problem in every household. And María Elena had the ability to gather us and give us the instruction that, for example, if a woman was being abused, we had to warn the rest with a whistle, because through the mats one could hear the violence, not only verbal but also physical, against women.

The sounds of abuse and the whistles that denounced them, traveled through the mats and the emptiness of the sand unobstructed, forcing the community to
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recognize these situations as a problem for everyone. In this landscape without walls, the stage was set for the irruption of the domestic into the public sphere and for the formation of alliances, networks of care, and solidarity among women that allowed them to overcome the traditional isolation of the domestic interior and even begin to question it.

The Layout of the Beautiful House

I used to remember when we were evicted from the last house and had our furniture seized, I used to have more strength to endure and hope to have a nice house with a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom and bedrooms. (Moyano, 1993:63)

In each hut of the sandy plain dwelled the ghost of the ‘ideal house’. The main motivation of the women of Villa El Salvador for leaving the city and enduring the harsh conditions of inhabiting the desert, was the illusion of building a house of their own, far from the anguish of rent, embargoes, and slums (Blondet, 1991:61). However, the dream house was not limited to a property status. The descriptions reveal that it is associated with a very precise idea of home. It is a house that contains a known number and type of rooms; a house in which the mother, without any professional knowledge about design, was able to trace on the sand and that all the participants of the conversation would recognize a ‘beautiful house.’ The house described corresponds to the modern single-family house typology, organized from spaces defined by their function and by the social scheme of the nuclear family.

The house Moyano and her mother dreamed of is an artifact that has its own “origin and purpose,” as Robin Evans (2005:70) would point out. The modern single-family house, the one they describe, originates along with industrial capitalism and is defined from two completely new separations from traditional domestic architecture. The first is a sharp separation between the public world of work; and the domestic, private and resting sphere of the worker. The second establishes a gender separation that defines the public sphere through the masculine and the new private connotations of the house through the feminine (Heynen, 2005:9). In this way, the modern house redefines the woman as a subject to which corresponds
only the domestic interior, isolated from the city. The ideal house demands for a type of family, and particularly, a type of ‘modern woman’ who will have to fill, care for, and maintain it. In the case of the women of Villa El Salvador, the dream of this ‘natural’ house and their role within it, will always be in tension with their conquests of the public sphere.

I lived during eight months in that apartment, playing the ‘ideal mother and wife,’ but I couldn’t stand the people’s indifference. Everyone lived their life; I didn’t even talk to anyone. I would only wake up to take care of my son and wait for my husband to come back home. (Moyano, 1993:72)

In this excerpt, Moyano recognizes that the ideal family only corresponds to one definite type of physical space: private and separate from other nuclear families. The ideal family lives in a house of walls. The experience of this space, in her story, is accompanied by an isolated condition which meant an essential conflict between her desire to be the ideal mother and wife and her aspirations as an individual and social leader. This isolation contrasted with the experience of public life that she shared with the women of Villa El Salvador, and which transcended the limits of the modern single-family house that she had always dreamed about but never inhabited until that moment.

The Occupation of Pachacútec

From then on, this stage of my life marked me a lot. I no longer lived in my house: I lived in the school, the ‘Pacha.’ Left my family. During the whole strike I had another family. My mother was the ‘Comandante Cero’ and my brothers the teachers, students and cheerleaders who were in this school. It was our home. (Moyano, 1993:68)

In 1979, the Sindicato Único de Trabajadores de la Educación (SUTEU), as part of a series of strikes demanding wage improvements, took over multiple

4 María Elena Moyano con el Rey Juan Carlos de España, 1987. Ceremonia de entrega a Villa El Salvador del premio Príncipe de Asturias de la Concordia. Fuente / Source: Asociación Amigos de Villa

5 María Elena Moyano y Michel Azcueta, 1991. Fuente / Source: Asociación Amigos de Villa
school premises in working-class neighborhoods. The teachers were supported by the community and the occupied premises became great centers of social encounter and political discussion for weeks (Blondet & Trivelli, 2004:37). The young people of Villa El Salvador, organized in singing and drama groups, visited the schools to show support for their teachers, while the women organized common pots in the premises to feed the demonstrators. Moyano participated in the teachers’ strike on behalf of the elementary education centers of Villa El Salvador. She remembers the experience as a turning point in her political history. It was the first time that she lived in a place other than her mother’s house and, despite the obvious distance between the family home and the educational premises occupied by the political demonstration, Moyano recounts the experience from a domestic scale. This family description reveals that behind the political operation there were close bonds of care between the occupiers. Sustaining the demonstration and the physical occupation of the school required several daily acts such as feeding, protecting, healing, and accompanying each other. These essential acts of care re-signified the domestic in the public sphere. In Moyano’s description, the public space of the educational premises is transformed into a domestic space and, in the same process, the domestic is redefined as something that can be public and political.

Placing things and bodies in unusual combinations, positions us in new uncharted territory. Lost in space, our cognitive mapping devices de-stabilized, we imagine a new poetics of space and time. [...] Links are made between real objects, real and imagined objects,
“In contexts where survival itself has been put at risk, the role that patriarchal society has assigned to women necessarily makes them the last bastion of resistance. Their role as caregivers and reproducers of life is directly compromised in moments of crisis; then, it is evident how fundamental their daily work is, a fact that on the contrary is almost invisible behind the walls of the private house”.

and real and imagined subjects – dreams are lived, lives are dreamt. (Rendell, 1998:144)

Trespassing the boundary between the public and the private, such as the domestic occupation of a public infrastructure, opens territories for the redefinition of subjects and objects. If the family home constructs the woman as a subject outside of public life and in charge of caring for her family, the repetition of the activities assigned to that role outside the object-house opens the space for transformation. Just as Moyano identifies this experience as a turning point in her life and her political awareness, Blondet and Trivelli (2004:37) define the participation of women in the SUTEP demonstrations as an important starting point to understand the expansion of their participation in the neighborhood organization and in particular in the new women’s organizations for food.

The Soup Kitchens

In order to respond to the problem of hunger, unemployment, and the misery that we have been suffering and, in order to survive, we have proposed alternatives. That is why we have created soup kitchens. (Moyano, 1993:27)

Common pots at the 1979 demonstrations made women aware that cooking and feeding could also be acts of collective resistance. From this experience and in the context of the economic crisis of the 1980’s, in the city of Lima – and with particular force in Villa El Salvador – appears a women’s organization around the problem of food that has had no precedent in Perú’s history (Blondet & Trivelli, 1991:96). The ‘soup kitchens’ are groups of neighboring women who come together to collectively feed their families, allowing to lower the costs of supplies while also increasing their free time for other productive activities to generate extra income. The fundamental purpose was the survival of their own families in a critical economic context that brought hunger with it.

Following bell hooks (2015:42), “since sexism delegates females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment,” in contexts where survival itself
has been put at risk, the role that patriarchal society has assigned to women necessarily makes them the last bastion of resistance. Their role as caregivers and reproducers of life is directly compromised in moments of crisis; then, it is evident how fundamental their daily work is, a fact that on the contrary is almost invisible behind the walls of the private house. When the difficulties of the outside world put the realization of their role at risk, their homes are redefined as spaces of resistance to the political and economic context. In the case of soup kitchens, an activity that was previously directly related to a private act of the family and separated from the public sphere, is redefined as a front of community defense.

The first soup kitchens functioned inside the homes of some of the members, which implied a negotiation of the limits of privacy within the house. Unlike the experience of common pots, in which the domestic space is taken to the street, in the first soup kitchens the public sphere enters through the doors of the house. The functions of kitchen and food of the soup kitchens are familiar to the single-family house, but the scale of the operation and the organization that it implies, transgresses the sphere of intimacy on which it is sustained. The kitchen, dining room or living room also become places of community work, administrative meetings, decision-making and democratic experiences of women. We can understand the operation within the house as one of repetition and recreation of its functions and, at the same time, of the transgression of its limits.

When repetition produces something similar but not quite the same as the original, it allows for changes and displacements. This procedure, which Walter Benjamin defines as a “mimetic act,”6 allows women working in soup kitchens to repeat their traditional domestic functions but subverting their private boundaries. This displaces the way their subjectivity is constructed in relation to the house.

In such circumstances, mimesis is offered as a valuable tactic, since it allows women to subvert – through the double gesture of assimilation and displacement – the identification imposed on them. (Heynen, 2016:137)

In the case of Villa El Salvador, most women who participate in soup kitchens eventually join the district’s women’s organization. Many of these women would then take up leadership roles or other public office. This search to occupy new roles implies the redefining of their female role. They will continue to assume their domestic

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role but without accepting it within a relationship of mutual exclusion with public life. In the words of Mercedes Zapata (Chueca, 2016:107):

Villa El Salvador is achieving that. It is being achieved because, through the soup kitchens, we take the woman out of the home and make her participate. She realizes that, as a woman, she must go out, the service they provide in the soup kitchen does not stay just there.

Casa de la Mujer
In the 1980’s, from the experience of the soup kitchen, a centralized network of women’s organization was consolidated in Villa El Salvador. In 1983 the Federación Popular de Mujeres de Villa El Salvador (FEPOMUVES) was constituted, and the construction of its premises began in 1987, which they called Casa de la Mujer. The new building meant an important step in women’s issues mainly for two reasons: first, it gave them a place of legitimation in the public space, and, second, it produced a meeting space where they could articulate and turn their domestic concerns into a political agenda.

The name might seem redundant – weren’t all their houses, women’s houses? – but this house was different. It was not the family home. It existed in the public sphere and offered them a space outside their homes that belonged to them. It was a radical change. The construction of the Casa de la Mujer meant for women to have a public building that legitimized, in a new way, their presence in the city.

From the Casa de la Mujer, multiple social programs were articulated around a domestic agenda, around issues that affected women centrally. The direction of the Vaso de Leche’s program was obtained
– which then became exclusively women-managed –, a local and inter-district network of soup kitchens, legal rights campaigns and health workshops were organized on issues such as anemia in children or frequent vaginal diseases due to the lack of drinking water in the district. In the Casa de la Mujer, domestic issues – that is, issues of care –, were redefined as political issues of the community. The concern for the feeding of children, their education, health, and the health of other women, are issues that were at the base of an ambitious social transformation that transcended the immediate problem of subsistence, without ceasing to be domestic.

If the family home is the safe space where women reproduce care, affectivity and resistance, the Casa de la Mujer was a safe public space where collective forms of reproduction and care were developed. This meant, for the women of Villa El Salvador, to explore new ways of inhabiting the feminine, that is, of reappropriating the feminine role constructed by the house, to use it as a tool of liberation. The reappropriation of the ‘house,’ in this case, constitutes, like the kitchen soup, a mimetic strategy, but this time on a city scale. This kind of feminine reappropriation, according to Silvia Federici (2013:278), moves towards

[…] a transversal life to multiple people and forms of cooperation, that provides security without isolation and without obsession, that allows for the exchange and circulation of community possessions and above all that creates the foundations for the development of new collective forms of reproduction.

Any project that aims to reconsider the city as a space of care and solidarity, must, necessarily, reconsider the house. The modern single-family house, built under the complicity of architecture, has built a solid wall between the public sphere and the private world of domestic care. This separation has banished care – considered a minor task – from the public and political scale of the city to enclose it in the small and immediate environment of the family. In this sense, redefining the boundaries of the house will imply a redefinition of the city. The history of the women’s organization of Villa El Salvador is a valuable experience of the transgression of these limits that led them to imagine a project of social transformation from domestic care. A project that opens the possibilities of inhabiting in feminine. ARQ

Notas / Notes

1 The autobiography of María Elena Moyano, María Elena Moyano, Perú en busca de una esperanza, is divided into two parts: the first is a reconstruction of Moyano’s political views through collected interviews; the second includes two poems and an autobiographical text written by her.
2 Villa El Salvador is a district south of Lima. It was founded as a human settlement in 1971, resulting from the relocation of the inhabitants of the Pampas de la Inmaculada in Lima. It acquired the status of district in 1983.

3 A peculiarity of the case of Villa El Salvador is that it had an urban plan organized by the State. The architect Miguel Romero Sotelo was in charge of the urban design of the new settlement. The design is composed of an urban module made up of 16 equal blocks of 24 lots each, with a central communal space. This module sets up a grid that can grow indefinitely in the desert. See Romero (1992).

4 For more on the role of the wall in the history of the city, see Fontana Giusti (2011).

5 Common pots are spontaneous organizations that solve the problem of food, usually ephemeral in nature and associated with situations of extreme precariousness that challenges subsistence.

6 On the concept of mimesis in Walter Benjamin’s work see the following essays: “On Language as Such and On the Language of Men” and “On the Mimetic Faculty” Benjamin (1979).

7 El Vaso de Leche (The Glass of Milk) is a social program of food assistance for children aged 0 to 6, and pregnant mothers, inaugurated in 1983 by the Metropolitan Municipality of Lima.

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