

The poetics of Angélica Freitas in *Um útero é do tamanho de um punho*: Women's voices, body-territory /

A poética de Angélica Freitas em *Um útero é do tamanho de um punho*: Vozes-mulheres, corpo-território

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the book *Um útero é do tamanho de um punho* (2017), by Brazilian poet Angélica Freitas, from a decolonial, feminist and transfeminist perspective, drawing upon a theoretical *corpus* comprising Federici (2017), Butler (2019), Vergès (2020), among others. Through close reading and analysis, it is possible to identify a composition of voices that generates a certain polyphony in the poems, whose central discussion revolves around the ideal of femininity, stemming from social discourses on female bodies. Through sarcasm and irony, Freitas constructs a poetry collection comprised of subjects that permeate the social imaginary concerning women, while also employing stylistic devices to highlight the ways in which misogynistic and sexist social discourses remain present in contemporary life. Based on a reading of the book, this research aims to discuss respect for the condition of autonomy and the discursive perspective of the body as territory and/or dwelling, in a logic that moves from a house-body/body-house dynamic of agency to laughter as a form of insubordination, this work problematizes discourses that shape the social performance which tends to reduce the feminine in its broad complexity and plurality.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary Brazilian literature; Poetry; Women; Feminist and Transfeminist Theory.

RESUMO

O presente artigo promove uma discussão a respeito do livro *Um útero é do tamanho de um punho* (2017), da poeta brasileira Angélica Freitas, a partir de uma perspectiva decolonial, feminista e transfeminista, perpassando um corpus teórico composto de Federici (2017), Butler (2019), Vergès (2020), dentre outros. Mediante leitura e análise, é possível identificar uma composição de vozes que gera certa polifonia nos poemas, cuja discussão principal gira em torno do ideal de feminilidade, oriundo de discursos sociais sobre os corpos femininos. Através do sarcasmo e da ironia, Freitas constrói um livro de poemas composto de assuntos que perpassam o imaginário social acerca das mulheres, além de utilizar-se de recursos estilísticos para intensificar a forma como os discursos sociais misóginos e machistas estão presentes na contemporaneidade. A partir da leitura do livro, esta pesquisa se propõe a discutir a respeito da condição de autonomia e da perspectiva discursiva do corpo enquanto território e/ou habitação, numa lógica de agenciamento

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casa-corpo/corpo-casa, e do artifício do riso como forma de insubordinação. O trabalho problematiza discursos que moldam a performance social que tende a reduzir o feminino em sua ampla complexidade e pluralidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura brasileira contemporânea; Poesia; Mulher; Teoria feminista e Transfeminista.

1 Introduction

Repetition is a stylistic device used repeatedly in *Um útero é do tamanho de um punho*², whether as a mechanism to counter the way patriarchal and misogynistic discourse reverberates in society (in a naturalized and therefore repeated form), or as a way of reiterating a logic of multiplication and intensification. In this case, recurrence may also be associated with the number of women affected by the way patriarchy acts upon them, since it denotes a potential multiplicity in the subjectivities impacted.

The theoretical readings that ground the field of analysis and discussion presented here traverse the concept of “woman” of the body, but also of the vocal element as an extension of bodies. To that end, we read authors such as Judith Butler (2019) from the perspective of gender as a performative form; Silvia Federici (2017), regarding the discussion of the relationship between capitalism, primitive accumulation, and female bodies; Françoise Vergès (2020), with *A Decolonial Feminism*, enables an intersectional understanding across the axes of gender-race-social class. Moreover, with regard to an agential association (Deleuze; Guattari, 2012), the interpretation of terms such as “women-voices” and “body-territory” is understood as metaphor (Faria, 2019).

The first part of the book, “a clean woman” suggests to the reader a recurring dual presence, a stylistic device of antithesis between the terms clean/dirty; pretty/ugly; sober/drunken; fat/thin. Signs that mark a place of opposition and binarism between one and the other. The hierarchical order (clean/dirty; pretty/ugly; fat/thin) prevails across the axis that reinforces a naturalized discourse about the idea (or ideal) of femininity. As elements of problematization, the irony and sarcasm present in the poems are figures that make possible a reading that breaks with

² In an interview conducted by *Revista Trip* in 2012, Freitas says that the reason she chose the title *Um útero é do tamanho de um punho* came from what she experienced while accompanying a friend who had gone to Mexico City to have an abortion. According to Freitas, the reason that led her to seek information about the female body was that experience, since a group of women was trying to dissuade the women who were there to undergo the pregnancy termination procedure. The maturing of the idea that led to the book came out of that intervention. Content available at: < <https://revistatrip.uol.com.br/tpm/um-utero-e-do-tamanho-de-um-punho>>. Accessed: January, 2025. The book is composed of 6 chapters entitled: “a clean woman” “a woman of”, “a woman is a construct”, “a womb is the size of a fist”, “3 poems with the help of Google”, “argentina”, and “the pink book of the hearts of suckers”.

this ideal to be followed and that is expected to be performed socially. For this reason, repetition as a device used to emphasize and intensify what is socially regarded as naturalized portrays the female body tied to discourses that, to some extent, nullify or ridicule it, placing it in a position of rejection.

On the other hand, establishing repetition as a device suggests incorporating into language the way female bodies are seen/shaped or how discourses are inscribed in bodies, performed in order to meet a certain misogynistic and patriarchal order. Freitas seeks to expose such discourses, turning these issues into a source of laughter, even if, at times, the laughter does not come, remaining suspended.

2 A Woman; a Woman of

We direct the discussion toward a few specific chapters of the poet from Rio Grande do Sul's book, namely: "a clean woman", "a woman of", "a woman is a construction" and "a womb is the size of a fist", since they map out the female body and the performance of discourses surrounding these bodies and subjects.

Let us see:

a fat woman
bothers many people
a fat and drunk woman
bothers even more

a fat woman
is a dirty woman
a dirty woman
bothers
even more

a clean woman
quickly
a clean woman (FREITAS, 2017, p. 16)³

³ The translations were done freely. For the sake of staying faithful to the original, we provide the full text in Portuguese: uma mulher gorda/ incomoda muita gente/ uma mulher gorda e bêbada/ incomoda muito mais/ uma mulher gorda/ é uma mulher suja/ uma mulher suja/ incomoda/ muito mais/ uma mulher limpa/ rápido/ uma mulher limpa (Freitas, 2017, p. 16).

The relationship between beauty and cleanliness, beyond being characteristics associated with the ideal of femininity, is also a way of instilling and promoting the continuity of the myth (of femininity, of beauty) as an instance to be followed. Who benefits from the servitude carried out by female subjects? Not only a servitude to the act of doing associated with cleaning and caring, but a servitude related to the act of serving demands, precepts, norms, etc. In the poem, the binary relationship established links (and makes an association between) “fat”, “drunk”, and “dirty”, as if such adjectives served as classificatory effects for exclusion or for delimiting a devalued position. This associative relationship, in turn, is concerned above all with a devaluation of subjectivity itself tied to deeply essential issues: health, income, class. The discomfort emphasized by the lyrical voice has much more to do with a reflection marked by stereotype and prejudice, and very little — or nothing at all — to do with bodies that break with the pre-established standard: thinness, for example.

In an intertextual play between the poem and the children’s song that repeats and escalates the line “one elephant bothers a lot of people”, it is possible to associate the two through similarity, evidently. In the poem, “one elephant”, present in the popular children’s song, is replaced by the adjective “fat”. Such an association is attributed to the woman who departs from the ideal of femininity, so as to highlight in herself another form of femininity (Kehl, 2008) that is not the idealized one, becoming the target of others’ “discomfort”. In fact, “discomfort”, in this sense, becomes a word that contains countless others, such as: rejection, ridicule, contempt, mockery, attacks (direct or indirect), violence. From a children’s song, the linguistic game established in ascending order (the more elephants, the more discomfort, according to the song), the poem highlights the growing wave of this violence that affects female bodies (subjects).

Even though it is sarcastically constructed, the poem presents a lyrical speaker who reiterates a social discourse, including by repeating terms in the verses. The constant repetition highlights the process of naturalizing socially instilled discourses and practices, so that the female subject’s voice is muffled, silenced, and what stands out is the other’s limiting and prejudiced discourse as a social sphere. However, since this discourse is sharply sarcastic, it does not function as a reiteration of what has been naturalized, but as a tool of dissent; it functions as a form of mirror.

From a decolonial perspective, Françoise Vergès argues:

Billions of women take care of cleaning the world every day, tirelessly. Without their work, millions of employees and agents of capital, the state, the army, and cultural, artistic, and scientific institutions could not use their offices, eat in their cafeterias, hold their meetings, or make their decisions in clean spaces where wastebaskets, tables, chairs, armchairs, floors, toilets, and restaurants have been cleaned and made available to them. This work, indispensable to the functioning of any society, must remain invisible. We must not be aware that the world we move around in is cleaned by racialized and overexploited women. On the one hand, this work has been considered what women must do (without complaint) for centuries; women's caring and cleaning work is free labor. On the other hand, capitalism inevitably creates invisible work and disposable lives (Verges, 2019, p. 1-2)⁴.

Curiously, the labor performed by these women goes unnoticed when care is not recognized as work. On the other hand, invisibility ceases to operate in its very definition of not being seen when a shock occurs and the naturalization of feminine subjectivity is disrupted. We highlight Françoise Vergès's quotation in order to emphasize the relation of superexploitation of racialized female bodies, as well as the mediating relationship between capitalism and disposability. Returning to the poem, when the lyrical voice points out that "a fat woman / is a dirty woman / a dirty woman / disturbs / much more" (Freitas, 2017, p. 16), it reveals, to some extent, a body that does not become docile; bodies that, within a regime of social control, are troubling because they do not respond to that control—on the contrary, they unsettle it. On this matter, Susan R. Bordo argues:

They no longer tell us what "a lady" is or what femininity consists of. Instead, we learn the rules directly through the body's discourse: through images that tell us which clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior are required (Bordo, 1997, p. 24, emphasis added)⁵.

⁴ Bilhões de mulheres se ocupam incansavelmente da tarefa de limpar o mundo. Sem o trabalho delas, milhões de empregados, de agentes do capital, do Estado, do Exército, das instituições culturais, artísticas e científicas, não poderiam ocupar seus escritórios, comer em refeitórios, realizar reuniões, tomar decisões em espaços asseados onde lixeiras, mesas, cadeiras, poltronas, pisos, banheiros restaurantes foram limpos e postos à sua disposição. Esse trabalho *indispensável* ao funcionamento de qualquer sociedade deve permanecer *invisível*. Não devemos nos dar conta de que o mundo onde circulamos foi limpo por mulheres racializadas e superexploradas. Por um lado, esse trabalho é considerado parte daquilo que as mulheres devem fazer (sem reclamar) há séculos – o trabalho feminino de cuidar e limpar constitui um trabalho gratuito. Por outro lado, o capitalismo produz inevitavelmente trabalhos invisíveis e vidas descartáveis (Vergès, 2020, p. 24-25).

⁵ Não nos dizem mais como é 'uma dama' ou em que consiste a feminidade. Em vez disso, ficamos sabendo das regras diretamente através do discurso do corpo: por meio de imagens que nos dizem que roupas, *configuração do corpo*, expressão facial, movimentos e comportamento são exigidos (Bordo, 1997, p. 24, grifo nosso).

In this case, the configuration of the body, as noted by Bordo (1997), concerns the way the body tends to be shaped/modified to the detriment of a social logic that endorses and repeats a homogeneous discourse, culminating in the perpetuation of patterns to be reproduced performatively.

In the poetics of *Um útero é do tamanho de um punho*, we observe more the presence of the lyric self's perception — sometimes observant, often sarcastic — of female subjects' bodies than the presence of a voice that presents the subject herself. For this reason, it is fair to say that the lyric self's perception is itself a representation of the social gaze on women in vulnerable states, or even on women's bodies, and also, to some extent, represents a misogynistic, exclusionary, sexist discourse that is "cut through" by the sarcastic figure that stands out in the poem.

By marking the preposition "of", we highlight some poems from the second part, "woman of", in order to continue the analysis. In this second moment, "woman in red" opens the chapter by once again emphasizing the idea of femininity and of an aesthetic realization. In the poem "woman in red", there is the presence of (apparently) masculine voices that reiterate the misogynistic and sexist social discourse about women's bodies. In the social imagination, the color red⁶ connotes, in certain contexts, passion; fury; anger; desire, since it is a warm hue associated with intense emotions.

In the poem that follows, the sarcasm lies in the construction of the poetic language used to highlight the way social discourse prevails. The lyric self, in this case, represents the personification of the misogynistic, sexist subject:

woman in red

what could she want
this woman in red
she wants something, surely
to have put on that dress

it can't be
just a casual choice
it could have been yellow
green, or maybe blue
but she chose red

⁶ Moreover, the idea associated with the shade of red is often linked to what can be interpreted as something that should be punished/castigated.

she knows what she wants
and she chose a dress
and she is a woman
so based on these facts
I can already state
that I know her desire

dear watson, elementary:
what she wants is little old me

I'm the little old me she wants
it can only be little old me
what else could it be? (Freitas, 2017, p. 31)⁷.

Right in the first verse, “what could it be that she wants”, in addition to signaling the lyric voice’s uncertainty about the desire of the female subject described only as “this woman in red”, it also suggests, even without any explicit established bond, the idea of closeness and the possibility of mutual response. The lyric voice continues: “she wants something/ to have put on that dress/ it can’t be just/ a casual choice”, which produces a projection: the idea that desire itself belongs to the other as well. Even the choice implies a suggestion fed by fantasy: “it could have been yellow/ green or maybe blue/ but she chose red”, so that, alongside fantasy, the associations made intensify the projection: “she knows what she wants/ and she chose a dress/ and she is a woman/ so based on these facts/ I can already state/ that I know her desire” (Freitas, 2017, p. 31, our emphasis). Such certainty, the line “I know her desire” evokes what would be capable of understanding what belongs to the intimate, the subjective sphere. More than that, it is also a game of infantilization or even control, since it shows itself convinced that it knows the other’s desire, in order to offer what is assumed that this woman wants.

Referring to the stories about Sherlock Holmes’s investigations, by Arthur Conan Doyle, in a parodic play carried out by the author, the lyric voice signals: “dear watson, elementary:/ what she wants is little old me/ little old me is what she wants/ it can only be little old me/ what else could it be” (Freitas, 2017, p. 31). What interests us, beyond a critique aimed at discussing the way the female body is inscribed in a place of control and restriction, is the way the female subject’s process

⁷ **mulher de vermelho/** o que será que ela quer/ essa mulher de vermelho/ alguma coisa ela quer/ pra ter posto esse vestido/ não pode ser apenas/ uma escolha casual/ podia ser um amarelo/ verde ou talvez azul/ mas ela escolheu vermelho/ ela sabe o que ela quer/ e ela escolheu vestido/ e ela é uma mulher/ então com base nesses fatos/ eu já posso afirmar/ que conheço o seu desejo/ caro watson, elementar:/ o que ela quer sou euzinho/ sou euzinho o que ela quer/ só pode ser euzinho/ o que mais podia ser (Freitas, 2017, p. 31).

of subjectification is treated and seen as something that must necessarily be managed under another's authority. Usually, that "other" is a man or even the State.

On the other hand, what we see in the poem "woman after", present in the same chapter, is an articulation in which the lyric voice is itself the female subject who speaks; the voice we recognize and attribute to the construction of a body that not only authorizes itself to speak, but also authorizes itself to be who it truly is. Let us see:

woman after

dear dad and mom
I'm writing from Thailand
it's a fascinating country
it even has elephants
and some really nice beaches

but I'm here for other reasons
though I love sightseeing
dad, remember when you used to say
I looked like a girl?
and mom would ask, cut it out?

well, now I've become a woman
I had surgery and became a woman
you don't need to accept me
you don't even need to look at me
but now I am a woman (Freitas, 2017, p. 35)⁸.

The formal and structural construction of the poem, in the form of a note or even a letter, has two addressees: "dear dad and mom"; however, the distance established geographically expands into a distance of consciousness and affection. The lines, "dad, do you remember when you used to say / I looked like a girl? / and mom would ask: cut that out?" (Freitas, 2017, p. 35), imply a certain aversion to the lyrical self's behavior in the face of subjective and performative expression. The father is presented, albeit briefly, as a figure who reproaches, representing a patriarchal, conservative logic that points out to the lyrical self what she "looked like". In this sense, being characterized as "masculine", the lyrical self displayed feminine mannerisms, and for that

⁸ **mulher depois/** queridos pai e mãe/ tô escrevendo da Tailândia/ é um país fascinante/ tem até elefante/ e umas praias bem bacanas/ mas tô aqui por outras coisas/ embora adore fazer turismo/ pai, lembra quando você dizia/ que eu parecia uma guria?/ e a mãe pedia: deixem disso?/ pois agora eu virei mulher/ me operei e virei mulher/ não precisa me aceitar/ não precisa nem me olhar/ mas agora eu sou mulher (Freitas, 2017, p. 35).

reason the father's statement reads as a reprimand. Meanwhile, the mother, as a figure of appeasement, is presented as someone who does not order but asks, "cut that out". The plural form of the word "cut", evoked by the maternal figure, includes the lyrical self, since the request is directed at both of them. By doing so, the request, which also asks the husband to stop reprimanding, extends to the lyrical self as well, as if, in other words, it were saying, without saying, that the father's reproach stems from her performative action, and that once she stops performing a feminine logic (the associations with femininity), the reprimands will stop, as if it were possible to intervene in a life force that pulses in a singular way and manifests itself in its most genuine version.

At the end of the poem/letter, the following lines are attributed to transition, in relation to transness: "because now I have become a woman / I had surgery and became a woman / you don't need to accept me / you don't even need to look at me / but now I am a woman" (Freitas, 2017, p. 35, our emphasis). Simone de Beauvoir's statement in *O segundo sexo* (2009, p. 361), "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", is established as a process of construction, in becoming with oneself and with the plural circumstances arising from political, social, and cultural structures. Even though the philosopher is not addressing the process of transness, Beauvoir's maxim applies to the terms discussed here, since the transition process is directly related to the movement of coming into being, of becoming, and, in this case, of transitioning.

In the poem, the lyrical self reiterates the words "you don't need to accept me / you don't even need to look at me / but now I am a woman" (Freitas, 2017, p. 35), attesting to a distance that is established from the moment the father compares the lyrical self to "a girl", indicating a rejection of the lyrical self's behaviors, mannerisms, and, above all, subjectivity. The highlighted lack of acceptance supports a discussion that this is not about anyone else's approval or endorsement — even when it comes from family positions — but about oneself, as the lyrical self emphasizes through the verb "to be": "am." In this case, "but now I am a woman" appears as a mobilizing force around who one is, by appropriating this place and asserting oneself as a woman. For this reason, we highlight what Simone de Beauvoir argues about the construction of womanhood as an acting force in becoming, in a process of change and articulation with what comes to make sense for the subject, but which, to some extent, authorizes a rupture with another construction: the idealized, homogeneous, and sickly one. In this sense, the aphorism here, even if anachronistically and from a different premise, allows for a possible relational reading: a body open to change, including its own.

“Woman after” symbolizes a break with the patriarchal and conservative system, but it also signals a break with naturalized ideals within the family sphere, perpetuated through discourses that limit, silence, and annihilate the subject (symbolically and metaphorically). The most important break is inscribed in the skin itself, on the body itself, in a process of metamorphosis and becoming, open, to some extent, to desire itself, becoming audible, alive, and possible. The poem/letter written in Thailand, a country that makes the transition process more flexible and is more accessible to trans people, reverberates through the operation as a legitimization of change, as shown in the line “I had surgery and became a woman” and, even though the transition does in fact occur through the surgical process, “becoming a woman” is tied to change, but the most important thing converges in self-affirmation and self-authorization, from “now I am a woman”. On the other hand, it is important to note that what legitimizes the lyrical self being named — and naming herself, first and foremost — as a woman should not come from the surgical and operative, transitional process. A body still carrying marks of what is categorized as masculine does not mean a body that is masculine, that is determined by the masculine gender. What legitimizes a body as who it is is the subject itself, regardless of whether a transition process has taken place or not. In this sense, “because now I am a woman” also marks a reductionist position, since the lyrical self was already a woman, already saw herself as such, even if she had not yet undergone physical transition.

3 The Woman as a construction: Body-Territory

The discussion of the idea of gender as a social construction (Butler, 2019); of being a woman as a “becoming”, in process, is present in “the woman is a construction”, also in Freitas’s book:

the woman is a construct

the woman is a construct
must be

the woman, basically, is supposed to be
a housing complex
all the same
all plastered over
only the color changes

personally, I am a woman
of exposed brick
at social gatherings, I tend to be
the worst dressed

I say I'm a journalist

(the woman is a construct
with too many holes

it leaks

[...]

(do you like being Brazilian?
being named virginia woolf?)

the woman is a construct
makeup is camouflage

[...]

nothing is going to change –

nothing will ever change –

the woman is a construct (Freitas, 2017, p. 46)⁹.

The idea of woman as a construction prompts cross-border, or even open, readings, since “construction” is a noun tied to action, whose activity is grounded in the making of houses, buildings, and so on, but which also extends to the figurative: the act of devising something, whether a project, a piece of writing, or a creation. In the second stanza, there is a play of elements that intertwine the figurative and the literal: “woman basically is meant to be / a housing complex / all the same / all plastered over / only the color changes” (Freitas, 2017, p. 46). The figurative association between woman and housing complex points to a homogeneous set, as in the line “all the same”. The next line, “all plastered over”, suggests makeup, since “plaster” is a finishing layer in a construction, like an artifice for hiding the structure — what solidifies the building — and tidying it

⁹ **a mulher é uma construção/** a mulher é uma construção/ deve ser/ a mulher basicamente é pra ser/ um conjunto habitacional/ tudo igual/ tudo rebocado/ só muda a cor/ particularmente sou uma mulher/ de tijolos à vista/ nas reuniões sociais tendo a ser/ a mais malvestida/ digo que sou jornalista/ (a mulher é uma construção/ com buracos demais/ vaza/ [...]/ (você gosta de ser brasileira?/ de se chamar virginia woolf?)/ a mulher é uma construção/ maquiagem é camuflagem/ [...]/ nada vai mudar –/ nada nunca vai mudar –/ a mulher é uma construção (Freitas, 2017, p. 46).

up, getting it ready, to use verbs linked to the act of getting oneself ready and caring for one's appearance.

In this sense, the line “makeup is camouflage”, as a perpetuation of the idea of gender as social construction, points to a logic that also highlights a discussion tied both to an aesthetic issue and to an ideal of femininity, whose premise of perfection reverberates in standards of beauty — or of what is considered beautiful. However, this discussion, though relevant, seems to remain in a place that reiterates a very limited notion of the plurality of women's experiences and lived realities. It deals with a polyphony of outside and male voices that repeat what they believe they know about women — or what has become a naturalized symbol inscribed in the feminine subject.

Makeup, presented as a way to “camouflage” oneself, going unnoticed among so many others who are “camouflaged”, is highlighted by Naomi Wolf as an element used for “youth and beauty” (1992, p. 44). Moreover, the author argues that the problem is not the fact that women use makeup, suggesting that the “real problem is our lack of choice” (1992, p. 363). Audacity, which is even privileged in nature (the reality of women must also be seen heterogeneously), is thus a process of rupture with this feminine ideal, but one that does not hold up in the face of structures that press forward against attempts at repression. It seems that the discussion engages with liberal feminism, which addresses superficial issues related to women's emancipation, and with the complexity of women's bodies, experiences, and subjectivities.

Related to lack, the idea configured as openness, making possible a logic of “leakage”, is attributed to the woman's body, whether in a psychoanalytic sense or in a social and cultural dimension. Following the lines: “(woman is a construction/ with too many holes/ leaks” (Freitas, 2017, p. 46), the reader is allowed to relate, on a figurative level, the conception of the female body as associated with openness. A leak can only occur when there are signs of gaps, cracks, fissures. In addition, the idea of leaking is usually attributed to something that should not happen, since the term “to leak” means to go beyond limits and empty out through an opening.

In this sense, it is worth highlighting the relationship between the body (the skin as a boundary, whether of what constitutes the internal — organs, tissues, bones, blood, etc. — or what pertains to the external — the world, the other) of the woman as an open subject; “with too many holes/ leaks”, the lines say. The indication of leakage as a door through which what first originates in the body can escape makes life possible. Regarding the body without organs, Deleuze and Guattari (2012) postulate an open body, a rebellious body, disobedient, one that cannot be

dominated. For this reason, we highlight leakage as a cathartic, disruptive device, since it exceeds the body's limits, making externalized visible and audible what is internal and potentially subjective.

In the poem's final verses, a skepticism emerges about a scenario in which real change takes place: "nothing will change — / nothing will ever change — / woman is a construct" (Freitas, 2017, p. 46, our emphasis). What accounts for the disbelief in carrying out actions that would make change possible? What exactly "will not change"? As the lyrical speaker, in the final verse, argues that "woman is a construct", this seems to us to be a rigid idea, both literally and figuratively, about the complexity surrounding female subjects as they are read in their respective pluralities. The idea of a housing complex is linked to the standard, to what is homogeneous; however, this discourse that defends homogeneity, reduced to generic terms and concepts, ultimately fails to take into account the fact that the myth of "woman" is nothing more than an exclusionary, reductive concept. Monique Wittig (2019), on this point, emphasizes the plural "women" in order to displace the generic, mythological, and homogeneous rule, but also to highlight the plurality (lived experiences, experiences, cultures, societies, subjectivities) that marks the subject as "woman".

Through a reading and analysis of the *Femme Maison* series (1947; 1994; 2001), by Louise Bourgeois, Faria (2019) highlights the metaphorical relationship the artist establishes by associating the female body with house forms. According to the author, Bourgeois, through inhabitable structures and figures of female bodies that have a house in place of the head, suggests that the *Femme Maison* figures "are not lacking in relation to a supposed phallic completeness" (Faria, 2019, p. 373), but rather sustain incompleteness within their complex totality: "These bodies sustain agency with domestic forms less through the accumulation of forms (woman + house) and more through a metamorphic path (woman-house)" (Faria, 2019, p. 367). To illustrate the example, we present a figure from Bourgeois's series:

Fig. 1 – *Femme Maison*, 1994, Louise Bourgeois.



Source: Ocula¹⁰.

Returning to the verses of “woman is a construction”, the interplay among “woman”, “construction”, “exposed bricks”, “holes”, and “leakage”, understood as relating to a habitable, domestic environment, shifts the discussion that reiterates the relationship between the feminine subject as belonging to the house and, in turn, promotes a correlation between body-territory; body-territory-house.

Faria (2019, p. 367) notes: “In classical Greece, therefore, the idea emerges that an empty womb is a dangerous, animalistic womb, which should necessarily be overseen by the masculine”. The etymology of the word “womb” comes from the Latin *utērus*, which, in turn, is related to the origin of the Greek word *hystera*, matrix, womb (Belintani, 2003), and for this reason, the association of the womb with hysteria. Regarding the origin of the Greek myth that consists in the creation of the first woman, Pandora, as discussed by Faria, the author argues, in turn, that the myths surrounding the imaginary of Eve and Pandora are linked to a fear of finitude (but also, we add, to a fear of the idea of evil associated with the feminine). In this way, the idea of all evils and annihilation is related to the feminine subject, as Faria (2019, p. 377) highlights when discussing the feminine in Bourgeois's work:

¹⁰ Content available at: <[https://ocula.com/art-galleries/xavier-hufkens/artworks/louise-bourgeois/femme-maison-\(1\)/>](https://ocula.com/art-galleries/xavier-hufkens/artworks/louise-bourgeois/femme-maison-(1)/>). Accessed: March, 2023.

It is by sustaining a completeness with openness that the feminine has so often been relegated to the dimension of lack; as if, by excluding the feminine, there could remain a way of existing impermeable to finitude and alterity. But the malignant feminine, as a uterine metaphor, brings something crucial onto the stage: the fact that the self must have limits for the other to have a place in the world.

It is no accident that the feminine has historically been associated with madness, and that this madness has so often been described under the name of hysteria. In this sense, madness would be any alterity to be purged in order to sustain phallogentric grammars that want nothing to do with the divided dimension of existence.

In this perspective, the body's catharsis, labeled as madness, hysteria, hysterical neurosis, etc., would be a way of expunging (leaking out) what the body condenses as unbearable within a logic that revolves around "phallogentric grammars" (Faria, 2019). On this subject, Maria Rita Kehl (2008), in a critical line of argument, discusses how ideals of femininity and the feminine, whose foundations were laid through the direct and effective conservative participation of philosophical, scientific, and medical discourses, were gradually constructed to serve the bourgeois precepts of the time, whose purpose was geared toward maintaining a family logic that would respond to the control of female bodies in favor of sustaining and continuing the capitalist system, expropriating not only their wombs, as Federici (2017) argues, but also their bodies, their desires, their lives.

What has historically emerged, across the centuries, between pathology and women's bodies is, to some extent, discussed in Freitas's (2017) book as an agency that prefigures a disruptive movement. The lyrical self in the poem that shares its title with Freitas's book ironizes the pathological and social discourse, provoking not exactly laughter as a cathartic fissure, but dissensus:

a uterus is the size of a fist
chairs can fit in a uterus
all the doctors fit in a uterus
which is no small thing
one person has already fit in a uterus
it doesn't fit in a fist
I mean, it does fit
if the hand is open
which does not imply gender
[...]

who can say, I have a uterus
(the doctor) who can say that it works (the doctor)
i midici

the fear that it won't work
what is a uterus for when you don't have children
[...] (Freitas, 2017, p. 59, our emphasis)¹¹.

The symbolic association between womb and fist emphasizes a discussion of resistance. In the first line of the poem, “a womb” is closely linked to “a subject that gives birth to life”¹². As in a process of resistance to countless adversities, this subject, if read in a way that embraces Freitas's idea of the book, with women as the central element, contains within it a force and a capacity for creation, struggle, and life. The line suggests that a woman's strength is proportional to her movement of resistance. Curiously, if in the line where we see “all the doctors fit inside a womb”, that is, all the doctors passed through this place where they were gestated within a body other than their own, the lines of the following stanza allow for an ironic reading of this process: “who can say I have a womb/ (the doctor) who can say it works (the doctor)/ i midici” (Freitas, 2017, p. 59). The lyrical voice develops the question “who can say I have a womb”, only to immediately follow it with “(the doctor),” a correlative answer to a collective voice that highlights medical discourse as a way of legitimizing who can or cannot say that they can—and want to—give birth to life. However, “the doctor” appears in parentheses, so the answer is emphasized not only as a possible response to the question “who can say”, but also as something that could be removed from the line—and would not be missed. There would therefore be no answers, only questions that, to some extent, seek external legitimation: “who can say?” Medical, scientific, and philosophical discourses have grounded the idea of pathologizing the female body (Khel, 2008), an idea that was gestated and rooted in social discourse long before then (Federici, 2017), and is related to the naturalization of subservience not only to the family, but also to religion and the State.

In the final lines of the highlighted stanza: “the fear that it won't work / what is a uterus for when no children are made” (Freitas, 2017, p. 59). We emphasize the line “the fear that it won't work” as a voice distinct, for example, from the voice that asks, “who can say I have a uterus”. Highlighting fear brings out the voice of a lyric self that knows what may happen if the uterus does not “work” for what it is “naturally” assigned to do. In this way, if on the one hand the lyric self seems

¹¹ um útero é do tamanho de um punho/ num útero cabem cadeiras/ todos os médicos couberam num útero/ o que não é pouco/ uma pessoa já coube num útero/ não cabe num punho/ quero dizer, cabe/ se a mão estiver aberta/ o que não implica gênero/ [...] / quem pode dizer tenho um útero/ (o médico) quem pode dizer que funciona (o médico)/ i midici/ o medo de que não funcione/ para que serve um útero quando não se fazem filhos/ [...] (Freitas, 2017, p. 59, grifos nossos).

¹² We emphasize the choice of “subject” because of the plurality of bodies that hold the multiple possibilities of becoming pregnant.

to embody conservative precepts, on the other hand it is also presented as one that recognizes the socially constructed discourse, over the centuries, around the appropriation of the female body. The use of the verb “serve” indicates being used to provide service, which culminates in the question: “what is a uterus for when no children are made”, as if the uterus were in the service of others and existed to “make children”; in this way, the expropriation discussed by Federici (2017) occurs, and it is also a discussion related to the issue of abortion.

To some extent, the discussion turns to the body as an attempt not only to appropriate it, but also to fight against power structures that manifest themselves in different ways, through a lens of perpetuated colonization. In this sense, turning the discussion to the uterus, present in Freitas’s book (2017), should not be reduced to a single perspective on what it means to be a woman, nor to what legitimizes the power of a body that gestates lives in its broad and complex form of manifestation. Continuing the analysis of the poem:

famous wombs:
Frida Kahlo’s womb
Golda Meir’s womb
Maria Quitéria’s womb
Alejandra Pizarnik’s womb
Hillary Clinton’s womb
[Diadorim’s womb]

Kahlo in the waiting room
Meir with her golden eggs
Quitéria with Modess in the war
Pizarnik, surely Tampax
Clinton is not afraid
of speculums on the cold exam table
[but Diadorim never went
to the gynecologist] (Freitas, 2017, p. 60)¹³

The “famous wombs” mentioned by the lyrical voice range from women known worldwide to Diadorim, a character from one of the greatest Brazilian novels, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, by João Guimarães Rosa. The lyrical voice places all of the figures mentioned as if they shared what is common among them: the fact that they are women and have wombs. However, they do not all

¹³ úteros famosos:/ o útero de Frida Kahlo/ o útero de Golda Meir/ o útero de Maria Quitéria/ o útero de Alejandra Pizarnik/ o útero de Hillary Clinton/ [o útero de Diadorim]/ Kahlo na sala de espera/ Meir dos óvulos de ouro/ Quitéria de Modess na guerra/ Pizarnik decerto Tampax/ Clinton não tem medo/ de espéculos na maca fria/ [mas Diadorim nunca foi/ ao ginecologista] (Freitas, 2017, p. 60).

share the experience of motherhood, even though the fact that they come from different places is not limited to that one factor. In this regard, we can take the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) as an example. Because of her physical condition, the victim of a tragic accident, Kahlo suffered miscarriages. Her work *El Aborto (Frida and the Miscarriage)* (1932), a lithograph, contains deeply symbolic anatomical references¹⁴. Another example presented is the reference to Maria Quitéria, who, like Diadorim, dressed in clothes characterized as masculine in order to occupy certain social positions of power within their respective private and social contexts. In the case of Diadorim, the lyrical voice cites her in brackets as a kind of intervention in a character who, throughout the narrative, is described as the image and likeness of a male figure, and only when she dies is described in the narrative as a woman. Under the weight of the gibão, the jagunços' cloak, "[Diadorim never [could go] / to the gynecologist]"; she could not be revealed, because she was the representation of a feminine figure. Once dead, as Marcia Tiburi (2013, p. 199) points out, "she embodies the impossibility of a woman existing in the male world".

While emphasizing "famous wombs", the lyrical voice also highlights that "a womb expels obvious eggs / red = / all good! / isti tidi bim / vici ni isti grividi" (Freitas, 2017, p. 60). The presence of menstruation signals relief for those who do not intend to become pregnant, nor desire to be mothers: "red = / all good!" Ironically, in other contexts, red indicates the presence of an injury; blood that should not flow, but does, indicating that something—the body itself—is not right. The final lines, written in the "i language" (characteristically used by children to replace all vowels with i in words, producing a phonetic effect that makes immediate understanding difficult but also creates humor¹⁵) in the stanza, indicate the correlation between everything being fine and "vici ni isti grividi" (you are not pregnant):

a uterus is the size of a fist
inside a uterus there's room for chapels
there's room for pews, wafers, crucifixes

¹⁴ "One of only six known impressions from this experience, *El Aborto* (alternatively meaning in Spanish either abortion and miscarriage) is the only significant print she ever made. It is graphic in its anatomical references to her miscarriage, but powerful in its symbolism. Biographer Hayden Herrera observed that in the print Kahlo's body is divided into light and dark halves, revealing the two sides of her psyche; it would seem that for her, making art must take the place of making children. (Karin Breuer, 2022)". Content available at: < <https://www.famsf.org/artworks/el-aborto-frida-and-the-miscarriage> >. Accessed: March, 2025.

¹⁵ In an interview with *Revista Continente*, Angélica Freitas says: "I liked writing funny poems because, well, my first encounter with poetry at age nine was with children's poetry, and it usually has wordplay and sound play that, in fact, I think never really left me". Full content available at: < <https://revistacontinente.com.br/edicoes/239/rser-poeta-e-uma-maneira-de-estar-no-mundor> >. Accessed: March, 2025.

there's room for limp-dicked priests
there's room for nuns with quiet breasts
there's room for Catholic ladies
who don't use contraceptives
there's room for Catholic ladies
demonstrating outside clinics
at 6 a.m. in Mexico City
and there's room for their husbands
sleeping at home
there's room, there's room
yes, there's room
and then they go
buy bread (Freitas, 2017, p. 61)¹⁶.

The lyrical self, in the verses that emphasize a discussion about abortion, even without naming it directly, uses devices to indicate the proposed subject, namely the presence of Church intervention: “in a womb fit chapels/ fit pews hosts crucifixes” (Freitas, 2017, p. 61). We call attention to the presence of “[in a womb] fit Catholic ladies/ campaigning outside the clinics/ at 6 a.m. in Mexico City/ and fit their husbands/ at home sleeping” (Freitas, 2017, p. 61), so that in the womb, in this place called a matrix, a place that is also associated with the myth of Pandora (which points to the fact that all evils arise from the female subject), this is the place that generates, that makes a form of reproduction possible, but that is also the center of debate and coercion in the discourse of Catholic women who, in an invasive way, try to intimidate or coerce women into not carrying out the procedure. The verses of this stanza conclude in a comic, ironic tone, that yes, “yes, there's room/ and then they go/ buy bread”, in a correlation that would not be common if it were not in fact real, by using persuasive language, steeped in fear and guilt, associated with religion, to dissuade the women who were/are there, and then go back to their lives, going off to “buy bread,” as if nothing had happened. Such discourse suggests a violence of enormous proportions in the naturalized process of controlling female bodies.

Federici (2017) discusses the persecution of women known as the “witch hunt”, carried out by the State and the Church, in a study that links the body and primitive accumulation, highlighting the way women's bodies were expropriated to serve conservative structures. In order to instill control over female reproduction, both state and religious spheres acted to combat women's

¹⁶ um útero é do tamanho de um punho/ num útero cabem capelas/ cabem bancos hóstias crucifixos/ cabem padres de pau murcho/ cabem freiras de seios quietos/ cabem as senhoras católicas/ que não usam contraceptivos/ cabem as senhoras católicas/ militando diante das clínicas/ às 6h na cidade do México/ e cabem seus maridos/ em casa dormindo/ cabem cabem/ sim cabem/ e depois vão/ comprar pão (Freitas, 2017, p. 61).

attempts to break free from this control, such as abortive methods. According to the author, the associations between “abortion and witchcraft first appeared in the Bull of Innocent VIII (1484)” (Federici, 2017, p. 324), which, in turn, argued that witches acted against reproduction, and this was the moment when accusations linking them to the reproductive crime unleashed true massacres against women.

At another point, Federici (2017, p. 326) also emphasizes that in the seventeenth century, “the population in Europe began to decline again, raising the specter of a demographic collapse similar to what had occurred in the American colonies in the decades following the Conquest”. Thus, the author advances the hypothesis that “the witch hunts were, at least in part, an attempt to criminalize birth control and to put the female body—the womb—at the service of population growth and the accumulation of labor power” (Federici, 2017, p. 326). Although this is a hypothesis, what the author firmly and unequivocally reiterates is that the witch hunts were driven and encouraged by a “political class” that “was concerned about the decline in population, and motivated by the conviction that a large population constitutes a nation’s wealth” (Federici, 2017, p. 326-327). In this way, amid the associations imposed on women—accusing them of witchcraft, superstition, attempts at reproductive control, and also linking the infant mortality of that period (the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) to witchcraft practices, when in fact it was due to poverty, lack of access to basic hygiene conditions, and malnutrition (Federici, 2017) — what lay at the heart of the discussion was control and the expropriation of their bodies in order to serve the State and the pursuit of capital accumulation. What has changed in contemporary times if such ideas still continue to fall upon women’s bodies? Are the discourses of control operating on a much more religious than economic logic? Even so, they occupy a political place of repression and control.

Final thoughts

Freitas highlights how female bodies are permeated by socially constructed discourses. On the one hand, “woman is a construction” speaks directly to Simone de Beauvoir’s premise, taking into account the becoming-state of the female subject: open to transformation. On the other hand, this construction is intertwined with the way macho, misogynistic, sexist (conservative)

discourses become naturalized, inscribing female bodies with marks of subjection, violence, and abjection.

The voices that permeate the poems of *Um útero é do tamanho de um punho* are multiple and antagonistic. Irony and sarcasm, sharply deployed, give poetic discourse a way to provoke dissent and make it possible for social, naturalized discourse to be returned to society itself. Even though such discourses are rooted in and fed by patriarchal social structures, it is necessary to rely on opposing — and at times subtle — forces, such as creative and literary construction itself. Perhaps this is because it is essential to use one's own tools and limitations to establish in life (and in the discourses surrounding it) possible forms of change, movement, and creation. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the practice of imagining that yes, something can change, after all, "woman is a construction".

The discourse that prevails socially and politically takes shape in Freitas's poems from a place that is at times ridiculed, and this is the resource used as a tool of discursive (re)construction or friction: dissent. Humor in the poems, to some extent, produces a break in expectation with discourse; it suggests "a cut" in misogyny and sexism. The voices that condense patriarchal and misogynistic ideals instill violence; the multiplicity of women's voices, for the most part, suggests catharsis, change, modification, transformation: around themselves and around the world. There is, therefore, a mobilization that drives life and creation.

In turn, the interplay between the agency association "voices-women" and "body-territory" conveys an idea of the extension of female subjectivities. Knowing the silence that still prevails over certain subjects, voice becomes a resource that repels—prevents—the perpetuation of this symbolic place of erasure and silencing. Just as "territory" is a term associated with something to be conquered and dominated, it then comes to be seen as a conceptualization of habitation in becoming with the subject, in this case, with women. The point, therefore, is to problematize certain discourses and performative practices that tend to persist over time, bringing them into focus through mechanisms of resistance. In this sense, dissent, as an articulation and resource, mobilizes and unsettles, generating ways of seeing oneself and positioning oneself in the world as a force under construction.

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