

Marielle Franco and Brazilian Democracy at a Crossroads

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Marielle Franco's life and death raised questions about the limits of Brazil's New Republic. It revealed the rising stakes, particularly for women and people of color, following the 2016 coup. In this piece, urban activists Isabella Gonçalves and Natália Alves and geographer Felipe Magalhães place Franco's embodied politics as a direct challenge to the regressive policies and aggressive austerity of the current regime.

We live in times when a culture of violence is a vocal minority of the polity yet is shaping political practice. Democratic discourse is dismissed in favor of easy and quick solutions from a reinvigorated extreme right. Marielle Franco was elected in the year of the coup. She represented the counterhegemonic hope of a grassroots democratic reconstruction in Brazil through new actors and alliances. Franco's sense of justice as a black, *favelada* and lesbian municipal councilwoman and independence from lobbyists and corporate campaign-financing interests defied the current power structure in Brazil. Her election directly challenged the hate, racism, and hopelessness in politics carried by the return of putschists to power.

The 2016 coup¹ distorted institutional procedures to depose President Dilma Rousseff without her committing an impeachable offense. It illegitimately elevated Michel Temer to the presidency. Temer has coupled a regressive policy agenda with an aggressive austerity program. He recently recorded the lowest public support in Brazil's history.² Employing a cabinet of white male oligarchs, this agenda has abolished ministries, secretariats, and budgets directed to culture and human rights, and eliminated policies addressing racial and gender equality. The regime implemented a 20-year freeze on the social services budgets and guaranteed public debt payments to financiers. It accelerated privatizations, the sale of public assets, and the withdrawal of labor and welfare rights won through a long history of struggles.

The brutal execution of Franco and Anderson Gomes in Rio de Janeiro sparked deep grief across the country. People who had never heard of Franco participated in mass demonstrations in the streets of the largest Brazilian cities. Franco's trajectory of struggle is marked by the organization of women in Favela da Maré, where she grew up. She proudly defined herself as a "progeny of Maré" and as a *favelada*. Franco challenged discourses reducing the *favela* to a territory of crime and absence. From a black feminist perspective, Marielle refused to be defined by others, taking the narrative in her own hands – the power of naming one's own reality implying the power to define one's destiny. Being from the *favela* was a source of pride and, at the same time, a political platform. As in Brazilian black feminist Lélia Gonzalez's terms:

¹ See: www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/dilma-rousseff-pt-coup-golpe-petrobras-lavajato.

² See: www.correio24horas.com.br/noticia/nid/temer-tem-rejeicao-de-82-a-maior-da-historia-do-brasil.

Now, insofar as we, blacks, are in the trash can of Brazilian society, for that is how the logic of domination works, an inquiry through psychoanalysis would be fitting. [...] Why do blacks fit into that which the logic of domination attempts (and often succeeds, as we know) to tame? And the risk we assume here is that of speaking with all the implications involved. It is exactly because we have been spoken to and infantilized (infants being those who do not have their own speech, the children who are spoken of in the third person, because spoken of by adults) that in our work we assume our own speech. That is, trash will speak, and in a good way (Gonzalez 1984).

Franco fought against the violence of the state and of the militias in Rio de Janeiro.³ These militias torture and summarily execute young black people in the *favelas*. These organizations constitute a new parastatal format of territorial power beyond the scale and scope of the drug traffickers. They engage in direct rent extraction from the poor in the peripheries through a variety of means. Militia members are the main suspects⁴ in Franco's execution. They are a radical expression of the urban products of neoliberalism. In the absence of public-service provision, particularly in the welfare and social-service sectors, the opening for market growth and investment opportunities can generate a regressive state apparatus. These militias also express the state's patrimonialist logics of corruption in many different formats and scales of action – from the 2016 coup, violently assembled through different encounters between patrimonialism and neoliberalism, to the local operation of informal services that fill the vacuum left by missing public services. Militia leaders have also used political office to avoid prosecution for their activities,⁵ such as drug trafficking, while expanding operations using mundane state practices such as zoning.

As state deputy Marcelo Freixo's aide, Franco was an active participant in parliamentary investigations into the action of militias in the state of Rio de Janeiro in 2008. These led to several arrests but did not result in strong action against these criminal organizations, which have managed to dodge investigation and extend their state influence. Franco knew who the bosses were and how they acted. She was not afraid to use her position to directly attack and denounce the actions of these violent organizations.

Franco embodied the many generations of struggle of the poor and black people, of resistance of the peripheries and, mainly, of organization of black women. Her words and actions came from this place. In recent years, black women have been political protagonists who are transforming the basis of Brazilian politics and society. The community organizing work of black women, along with the mobilization of black feminist thought, has been building towards a praxis and a social theory of state decolonization. Black feminist theory was essential in highlighting racism in Brazil and in constructing a political program at the intersection of struggles in the feminist and black movements. It also helped organize and guide black women taking a leading role in these struggles.

The current black women's movement, by bringing to the political scene the contradictions resulting from the articulation of the variables of race, class and gender, promotes the synthesis of the struggle flags historically raised by the black and women's movements of the country. It does this by, on the one hand, blackening the demands of women, thus making them more representative of all Brazilian women, and, on the other hand, promoting the feminization of the proposals and demands of the black movement (Carneiro 2003).

Black women have built a potent claim to political participation beyond theory. Their growing presence in politics and their claim that "yes, representation matters," mobilized thousands in the 2015 black women's march to Brasília.⁶ It led to the successful election of women in Brazilian capitals such as Talíria Petrone in Niterói (who received death threats⁷ after Franco's assassination)

³ See: www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/opinion/rio-janeiro-terrorize-militias.html.

⁴ See: www.irishtimes.com/news/world/murder-of-rio-councillor-marielle-franco-linked-to-militias-1.3464958.

⁵ See: www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/o-poder-da-milicia-nas-eleicoes-do-rio-de-janeiro-1597.html.

⁶ See: www.brazilusaneews.com/slideshow-blacens-march-2015.

⁷ See: <https://blackwomenofbrazil.co/2018/03/22/councilwoman-taliria-petrone-of-niteroi-a-friend-of-marielle-franco-has-received-numerous-death-threats-by-phone-armed-man-invaded-partys-headquarters-threatening-to-kill-her>.

and Áurea Carolina⁸ in Belo Horizonte. The presence of these women in spaces dominated by an overwhelming majority of white men breaks centuries of practice and allows them to verbalize a central and previously silenced cry from the communities: “Stop killing us! Stop killing our children!” At the same time, such politics make clear the limitations of political institutions built on slavery, patriarchy, and the political and social exclusion of the vast and diverse majorities of the country. These pillars of Brazilian democracy faced total subversion in a sole body: that of a black, lesbian, *favelada* and activist woman who conquered the formal space of power in the institutional domains that inherently exclude and attempt to render invisible such bodies.

The assassination of Franco and Gomes occurred 130 years after the abolition of slavery and 30 years after the Federal Constitution marked the transition from a military regime to a democracy. This event raises the questions: What end of slavery? What democracy? In 1988, Lélia Gonzalez presented prescient critique:

[... F]or the Black Movement, the moment is much more of reflection than of celebration. Reflection because the text of the law of May 13, 1988 (known as Lei Áurea), simply declared slavery abolished, repealing all opposing provisions and... nothing more. For us, black women and black men, our struggle for freedom began long before this act of legal formality and extends to the present day (Gonzalez 1988).

The historical constructions of Brazilian state institutions happened not only without women or blacks occupying spaces of political power, but against women, against blacks and against the LGBT population. The first constitution coexisted with the statute of slavery. It is a place where the ideology of whitening (Osuji 2013) and false mask of racial democracy (Da Costa 2016) still prevail. Among many other forms of historically institutionalized violence, there were 553,000 intentional homicides from 2000 to 2013. Blacks represented 71.5% of murders, with a 15.4% increase in the black female victimization since 2007. In that same period, the homicide rate of non-black women fell by 8%. Brazil has the third-largest prison population in the world. One third of the prison population is incarcerated without trial, the majority of those blacks convicted of economic crimes. Thousands of people are placed in mental institutions, like those of Barbacena,⁹ for deviance from hegemonic white social norms. There is widespread exclusion both in access to land and housing and in the patterns of urbanization that are heavily segregated on racial terms.

The colonial character of the Brazilian state is carried through the entire legal system. The Civil Code, the Penal Code, and even the Constitutions that preceded 1988 deny access to land, freedom, and dignity to the vast majority of the people. It was only with the end of the military dictatorship that the poor, black *favela* people gained the right to vote in Brazil. Prior to this those who were illiterate had no voting rights. This served as a mechanism for keeping a large fraction of poor, black *favela* dwellers away from the ballot. The New Republic, established with the transition from the military dictatorship to democracy in 1985, and consecrated with the Federal Constitution of 1988, has been a period of important advances as well as many limitations to democracy. It was these limitations Franco denounced directly through her political practice. The period since redemocratization necessitated constant negotiation between the democratic restructuring of the state and military forces. The military retains power through the continuity of their doctrine of public security and the constitutional possibility of direct intervention, currently in practice in the state of Rio de Janeiro.¹⁰ The post-1985 period democratized voting and promoted a universal conception of citizenship that transformed the lives of millions of Brazilians. But it did so while maintaining oligarchies' power over important sections of the economy, legislative bodies, the judiciary, and the media. In practice, the current political arrangement maintains a large portion of the population as second-class citizens, whose basic rights are guaranteed through direct struggles in the form of “insurgent citizenship.” This requires the poor to coordinate action that is

⁸ See: <https://blackwomenofbrazil.co/2016/10/10/aurea-carolina-earns-the-most-votes-for-city-council-in-belo-horizonte-brazils-third-largest-metropolitan-area-will-propose-salary-reduction-of-city-councilors>.

⁹ See: <https://southafricatoday.net/world-news/brazilian-holocaust-bad-treatment-in-psychiatric-hospitals>.

¹⁰ See: www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/world/americas/brazil-rio-military-security.html.

simultaneously against the state and for the delivery of rights to which the constitution entitles them, such as housing.

Decolonizing the Brazilian state requires structural changes in which race, class, gender and sexuality are recognized as formative components systematically and historically denied access to resources and citizenship. Franco embodied this struggle within and across left-leaning institutions and organizations, promoting emancipatory political alliances between socialist parties (as a member of the Socialism and Freedom Party, PSOL), organizations against police violence, community associations, and the black movement. Franco represented the hope of renewed politics that could overcome the conservative regime produced during the New Republic by building practices and conceptions of democracy, inclusion, and dignity that are deeper than those currently practiced. At the same time, her execution is part of the deepening of violence and authoritarianism contained in the exclusionary reality of the New Republic's democracy. Franco lived and was executed in a time of democracy at a crossroads: between the need for renewal and transformation and the threat of annihilation.

Marielle Franco's execution did not silence hope. Her life and death have inspired thousands of women who are working, even more urgently, to overcome the coup and rebuild a strong democratic culture in the country. The culture they work for would fight for deep reforms of the political system so that more black women occupy institutional spaces and transform the relations of power. It would incorporate silenced voices and demonstrate the limitations of the democratic inclusion attempted in recent decades. It would promote transformations in the domain of public safety and welfare, transform the Brazilian judiciary, and bring the media monopolies to an end. This would be a culture in which the state is at the service of the people and not of money. In this effort, the presence of Marielle and Anderson are felt.

Marielle and Anderson live!

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