

What Can an Open Body Do?

A Decolonial Reading of Brazil's Biopolitical Landscape

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Abstract: The challenges imposed by the political agenda carried out during the first hundred days of Jair Bolsonaro's administration confronted Brazil with its own suppressed past. Keeping in mind the historical revisionism of the dictatorship proposed by Bolsonaro's government, and building from Maurício Lissovsky and Ana Lígia Leite's notion of "historical short-cut," this article approaches the actualization of the colonial wound in our historical present by interrogating what biopolitical markers are animated when historical loopholes are open. What resulted from this endeavor was a constellation of images, each of which has an affective as well as a historical significance for reading the present in articulation with the past. More than a linear construction, this emergency curatorship focuses on how images confront us with short cuts to memories as loopholes in historical accounts of time, an openness that points towards a decolonial reading of Brazil's current political landscape.

Keywords: colonial wound; vulnerability; Brazil; gender; race

A Moment of Danger

That which we call progress, is *this* storm.

Walter Benjamin

The tradition of the oppressed," German Philosopher Walter Benjamin once wrote, "teaches us that the 'emergency situation' in which we live is the rule" (5). His final essay, written when the author tried to cross from Spain to Portugal while escaping the Nazi persecution—an event that culminated in his suicide on September 26, 1940—calls out for "a real state of emergency" in the fight against Fascism. "On The Concept Of History" is dedicated to a careful analysis on the importance of history in securing humanism during authoritarian times. For Benjamin, history offers "a revolutionary chance in the struggle for the suppressed past" (10), and the ultimate subject of historical cognition is necessarily "the battling, oppressed class itself" (7).

It is still uncertain whether to call Brazil's new government an authoritarian regime would be premature or inaccurate. However, the challenges posed by the political agenda carried out during the first hundred days of Jair Bolsonaro's administration confronted Brazil with its own suppressed past, a thread that started to take shape during the 2018's presidential campaign, in the context of an intense dispute of narratives between the spectacularization of the "Bolsonaro myth" and the opposition that would not dare speak his name, a denial manifested in the hashtags #EleNão and #EleNunca. On one side of the political dispute, Brazilians encountered a vibrant praise of nationalism

and a “dictatorship-democracy” thesis, the persecution of historically subaltern subjects and a hand raised high in the shape of a gun. On the other, a political class astonished after numerous accusations of corruption, unable to articulate neither its public or juridical defense and especially slow in perceiving the here-and-now of the political atmosphere taking shape before it.

The opposition strategy to “unname” Bolsonaro by the use of the aforementioned hashtags during the campaign prove to be mistaken, since social networks’ algorithms select what content we have access to by measuring its quantitative presence on the web. Every time the opposition would refrain from mentioning Bolsonaro’s name, it left a wide and free space to be occupied by his followers’ narratives, a tendency best observed by the recent studies on data manipulation and social media. During most of his campaign, Bolsonaro was able to manage his presence on the Internet as he pleased, since so little “bad content” was being directed towards his potential voters.

Building from Mauricio Lissovsky and Ana Lúcia Leite’s notion of “historical shortcut” (35), this article approaches the actualization of the colonial wound in our historical present by asking: What biopolitical triggers are pulled when historical loopholes are opened? What new perspectives can we gain access to when entering these liminal spaces? How can they inform our ability to pose questions about the political future of Brazil? In a time when algorithms determine what narratives we have access to on the web, finding these loopholes becomes a task of vital importance for securing the present’s historical index. Starting from former President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment, the execution of congresswoman Marielle Franco and focusing particularly on the Bolsonaro’s government attempt to impose a revisionist reading of the Brazilian history, this analysis gestures towards a decolonial reading of Brazil’s current political landscape. What resulted from this endeavor was a constellation of images, each of which has an affective as well as a historical significance for reading the present in articulation with the past. As Benjamin observed, to articulate the past historically “does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was.’ It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a *moment of danger*” (4, emphasis mine). More than a linear construction, this form of emergency curatorship of seemingly dispersed, yet poignantly related, images focuses on how they confront us with shortcuts to memories as loopholes in historical accounts of time.

A Disrupted Memory

...filho de Lula e não de Ustra

Baco Exu do Blues

In March 2019, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, the recently elected President of Brazil fired an order to the Ministry of Defense calling for “celebrations to be

carried on accordingly” to commemorate the 55th anniversary of the coup that installed a brutal military dictatorship in the country from 1964 to 1985. Casting himself as the leader of a revolutionary class, the former Army captain followed up with a feeble attempt to introduce a new national calendar¹ for Brazil. Bolsonaro’s order imposed an unprecedented monument of historical revisionism by calling into question the terms of the “memory pact” (Lissovsky and Aguiar 25)—a political pact established during Brazil’s long transition to democracy, and responsible for suturing the rifts relating to the very memory of the dictatorship and its victims. The majority of the population received Bolsonaro’s order with shock and disapproval (Marques 2019), especially because it was followed by a declaration from the new Minister of Education, stating that all history textbooks should be reviewed and rewritten in order to positively portray the 1964 coup and the 21-year military dictatorship, which the Minister called “um regime democrático de força” (“Brazil’s textbooks”). After the controversy, Bolsonaro stated that the objective of his order was actually to “remember,” not “celebrate,” the military date (Fernandes).

In contrast to other South American countries such as Argentina and Chile, Brazil has launched very few initiatives regarding public memory over its past. As observed by Lissovsky and Aguiar, the “dictatorship had come to be seen as a tragic interlude in the history of Brazil and Brazilians” (25). The authors explain:

The question of the “memory” of those “years of lead” or of what happened in the torture chambers of the dictatorship was a marginal item on the agenda of political parties and human rights organizations (whose priority was to ensure that the rights guaranteed by the 1988 Constitution were upheld). Thus, for decades, the creation of spaces of memory and monuments has not been the object of significant social or political mobilisation, being equally far removed from the priorities of the left-wing political parties and the civilian presidents who governed Brazil after the end of the dictatorship. (24)

This reality began to change in 2011 with the creation, by law, of the National Commission of Truth, an initiative responsible for investigating the political crimes and human rights violation under the military rule. The commission was faced with tremendous controversy, since it threatened to remobilize a memory long dislocated to obscurity. As investigations proceeded, remembrance

1 In Benjamin’s XV theses on the concept of history, the author writes: “The consciousness of exploding the continuum of history is peculiar to the revolutionary classes in the moment of their action. The Great Revolution introduced a new calendar. The day on which the calendar started functioned as a historical time-lapse camera. And it is fundamentally the same day which, in the shape of holidays and memorials, always returns. The calendar does not therefore count time like clocks. They are monuments of a historical awareness...”

reanimated old artifacts and places—including a photo of a young President Dilma Rousseff (Fig. 1) facing a military tribunal in 1970.



Fig. 1. Former president Dilma Rousseff before a military tribunal in 1970.
Courtesy of the Public Archive of the State of São Paulo.

At the age of 22, Brazil's first female president faced judgment after a ten-month imprisonment in army quarters, during which she was submitted to torture for three consecutive weeks. The photograph, which quickly reached the front pages of the main newspapers, magazines and social forums of the country, depicted a resilient young female body, contrasting with the visible constraint of the military agents. A constraint manifested by the gesture of concealing their faces in fear of being identified. As observed by Lissovsky and Aguiar, in the photograph, Rousseff's body posture showcases a "lack of modesty...no less a serious affront than the defying gaze with which she stares her accuser in the eye" (35). Lissovsky and Aguiar classify this gaze as the gaze of someone who "has been undressed innumerable times by her torturers." As noted by the scholars, this photograph was responsible for imprinting in Rousseff's figure "a mark of 'revelation' and of 'concealed memories,' creating a "historical short-cut" in Brazil, a direct "mental link between [Dilma's] administration and the [memory of the] dictatorship."

As Lissovsky and Aguiar also point out, with this photograph "the torture victim [had] at last acquir[ed] a body and the identification of her torturers [became] a necessity...the absolute necessity of a body that demands a face" (idem). Dilma Rousseff's young violated body, now forever captured by the

photograph, conjured the past back into the present by making history, once more, a necessity.

In 2015, Rousseff had just won her second election to Brazil's highest office, but the political climate in the country had already started to escalate, in part because of the controversy surrounding the National Commission's investigation on the 20,000 people subjected to torture under the military regime—a controversy that would be used by the former military officer, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, to gain political capital, the man later to become Brazil's next officially elected President.

Notoriously known for his constant praise of the dictatorship as well as other racist, sexist and misogynistic public comments—having even said that “the error of [the Brazilian] Dictatorship was to have tortured and not killed” its opponents—Bolsonaro caused a tremendous upheaval inside and outside of Brazil for paying homage to Col. Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, Dilma Rousseff's torturer, during the public audience that led to her impeachment in 2016. Bolsonaro's public homage in parliament was broadcast nationwide only two years after the release of the National Commission of Truth's final report, which revealed with details the widespread use of torture during Brazil's military regime.

On the one hand, Bolsonaro's public comments about the dictatorship signaled that Brazil's ‘memory pact’ established in the context of an arduous process of redemocratization had begun to crack. On the other, his homage to Rousseff's own torturer marked the moment when the memory of the dictatorship *officially* re-emerged in the country's political discourse, as if it had finally freed itself from the supposedly transparent veil that had concealed it ever since the passing of the Amnesty Law in 1979. Embodied by Bolsonaro's figure, dictatorship memory re-emerged by taking gendered, sexed and racialized violence as the center of its symbolic force.²

Taking Bolsonaro's public remarks into consideration, I would like to call attention to another more ordinary photograph of the period: an image that started to circulate around the city of São Paulo, one of Latin America's most populated urban city and Brazil's most important financial center, in the months that anticipated Rousseff's impeachment back in 2016.

Created to function as a sort of sticker, the photomontage³ depicted a smiling president with oversized open legs attached around the opening of a car's fuel tank, so that when refueling the car Rousseff would be penetrated by the tube.

2 In a way, Lisovsky and Aguiar had already predicted this turnout back in 2015. However, in the midst of Rousseff's impeachment—when they had foreseen this—Bolsonaro's force as an influential political actor was only beginning to take shape, making it impossible, at that time, to effectively place him at the center of this process.

3 The mentioned photomontage, as well as other misogynistic examples of the sexist's attacks against Rousseff, can be found in Aronovitch.

The image was meant as a protest against the recent rise in gasoline prices, but the smiling face, uncharacteristic of Rousseff, and the young sensuous legs attached to it gave an extra perverse aspect to the message. The appearance of this image in the city's landscape, paraded around the streets by passing cars, recalled the judges' gaze at the sight of Rousseff's naked body. The naturalization of a rape act and the incitement of violence directed towards Rousseff's gendered body, aimed to reposition the president back into the chamber of her torturers at the disposal of their (now) unhidden gaze. Rousseff's body was being offered through the photomontage to the pleasure of her tormentors—unsatisfied voters—and this was being done through the reconfiguration of a memory that had just recently been unveiled.

As Lisovsky and Aguiar pointed out: "The Amnesty Law promulgated in 1979 was reciprocal, in other words, the past was 'erased' and all legal loopholes that could be used for 'revanchism' were closed" (23). But while the photograph of the military trial unveiled an unintended shortcut between Rousseff's violated body and the dictatorship's ashamed gaze, this other digitally manipulated image made sure that past and present were to collide again. But this time, the loopholes of this crash were to remain explicitly open.

While Brazil's national policy after the dictatorship had operated through mechanisms of memory suppression, both images of former president Rousseff reignited this debate for allowing the crash between time and history, past and present, repression and remembrance to gain center stage. Memory, as observed by the historian Lilia Schwarcz (2012), operates as a "shaman of time" that "gives continuity to what is discontinued and disrupted" (53). Through the images' intended or unintended loopholes, we gain access to this disrupted space where time becomes a nonlinear portal for the present. Once opened, a loophole threatens to redistribute past objects, affects and even bodies back to the presents' sensible landscape, for a loophole operates as a passage, a way in but also a way out. It materializes the short cuts of history, the very moments when temporal and historical dissonances are intertwined.

As observed by Schwarcz (2019), history becomes an object of political dispute in authoritarian times for evading the past while naturalizing violent realities. As Schwarcz remphasizes, this dispute was not strange to Brazilian history. Brazil's strategic suppression of memories becomes even more evident as a national grammar of forgetfulness when thought alongside its heritage of slavery—a past still referred to as a racial democracy, even though historical and juridical evidences point otherwise. The appropriation of the past by means of "forgetfulness" renders Brazil "a country without memory," making national history an especially fragile territory in times of political turmoil.

If the election of Bolsonaro for the presidency of Brazil marked the (official) moment when history was summed back to the present by placing gendered, sexed and racialized violence once more at the center of the political discourse,

a closer look at Brazilian history will reveal, in fact, that the contemporary far-right authoritarianism embodied by Bolsonaro's rhetoric has more long-standing antecedents in the country's colonial past.

A Reoccurring Image

As revealed in Chapter 10 of the Final Report of the National Commission of Truth, sexual violence was practiced “extensively throughout the repression under Brazilian military dictatorship” (“Relatório”). With an immense erotic and moral charge, sexual crimes were often committed together with the use of a *pau-de-arara* (parrot perch), which served to efficiently expose the prisoner's genitals upside-down, a position that both women and men were subjugated during torture.



Fig. 2. Jean-Baptiste Debret. Overseers punishing slaves on a rural estate.

As one of the oldest documented forms of torture in Brazil, the *pau-de-arara* is a technology of torture known for its uses in the punishment of the enslaved during the colonial period. Commissioned by the Portuguese Court to portray life in the tropical kingdom, the French painter Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768-1848) historically registered the use of the *pau-de-arara* in a watercolor dating from 1828 (Fig. 2). The watercolor would later become part of a series of paintings entitled *Viagem pitoresca e histórica ao Brasil* (*Picturesque and Historical Journey to Brazil*). Debret's series of paintings, therefore, provide a historical account of colonialism in Brazil, meant to please a European audience with images of a far-away tropical landscape and its exotic habits: Among them, slavery. As noted by Schwarcz (2014): “se aos olhos de hoje expor em primeiro plano escravos desnudos parece tudo menos agradável, naquele contexto, como a escravidão era considerada ‘natural’, assim revelada, ela era antes exótica, quando não sensual” (160).



Fig. 3. Jean-Baptiste Debret. A Brazilian family in Rio de Janeiro.



Fig. 4. Jean-Baptiste Debret. A functionary out with his family.

Alongside supposedly pleasant images of peaceful interaction between masters and their servants, in his series, Debret ambivalently provided a critical depiction of slavery in the country as both ordinary and exotic (Figs. 3 and 4). His French neoclassical style of painting portrayed black bodies as muscular, athletic and sensuous, even when depicted wearing chains and shackles—a contrast harmonically illustrated by his paintings. The foreigner's gaze that interprets what he sees before him as everyday events naturalizes the violence of the life in the colony, as well as the erotic imaginary around black bodies.

From 1820 until 1830, Debret presented to the Portuguese Crown with his account of the colony, the interpretation of a prosperous, harmonious and uneven society, marked by difference rather than equality. A hundred and sixty-four years later, Debret's paintings would be themselves targets for interpretation by Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão, as also noted by Schwarcz (2014, 161). In the two-piece series *Filho Bastardo*, Varejão transports Debret's characters into



Fig. 5. Adriana Varejão. *Filho Bastardo* (1992). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

two quite different scenes, bringing to the fore the national contradictions once portrayed by his tableau.

In *Filho Bastardo* (1992) (Fig. 5), on the left side of the oval canvas, we see a priest sexually assaulting Debret's enslaved black woman, pressed against the trunk of a tree. On the right side, two military figures—doubles of the ones portrayed by Debret—attack a naked indigenous woman whose hands are tied on a branch above her head. Unlike Debret's aesthetically harmonic pieces, Varejão's mimicry (Bhabha) composition performs the violence it portrays, as a red layered bloody cut desecrates the oval canvas, evoking the form of a wounded vagina. The violated canvas, in the particularity of the form it evokes, positions the vagina as a place of enunciation: the birthplace of the *mestiço* subject, the nation's bastard son depicted in the title of the painting, tropical and precarious, born from an indigenous and African womb, and destined to exist in the purpose of "whitening" the nation (see Munanga).

If, as Hortense Spillers has pointed out, "diasporic plight marked a theft of the body" (67), then Varejão's layered painting renders the canvas as a form of "body-flesh" (Harrison 71), restoring the materiality of the body through the opening of a wound. Relatedly, the photomontage of Rousseff exposed her body as one marked by its vulnerability—that is, its woundability—turning her gender conspicuously visible in order to provide an angle for the imbalance of power. Yet, the wounded vagina in Varejão's painting presents itself as a different loophole, an entry gateway, but also an exit site, a primarily locus of enunciation for the subaltern.

That is to say that from the wounded womb that generates the nation's bastard son, the *tropical-precarious mestiço*, Varejão renders the open vagina in the ripped canvas as a site equally or more destabilizing than the mouth itself, on which Jacques Rancière wrote as the place from which "politics comes when... the mouth emits a word that enunciates something of the common and not only a voice that signals pain" (21). According to Rancière, the refusal to consider some categories of people as political beings—namely women, enslaved, animals and children—always went through the refusal to "hear the sounds that came out of their mouths as a discourse." Viewed in this manner, the ripped vagina in the painting becomes an essentially political place, because it threatens to redistribute the visible and audible as it materializes the opening through which the subaltern colonial subject's speech can be heard (Spivak). The *mestiço* speaks through the colonial wound, for the *mestiço* embodies the wound. Not only as the product of a violation, but also as the materiality of the subaltern's speech, the living-breathing-bleeding form of life it creates.

The painting's "perturbing opacity"⁴ confronts the Brazilian historical discourse of *miscigenação* (miscegenation) portrayed as a racial democracy, evidencing it as a discursive construction built upon violence and violation, for the complex figure of the *mestiço* is a central character for understanding Latin America's specific mode of colonialism, as well as the racist ideology⁵ surrounding this word in the Brazilian context.

In order to properly understand Latin America's specific mode of subaltern production one must acknowledge the intricate lineage system—bodily fluid rather than ethno-cultural alone—that rendered the *mestiço* not only as an inscription of race in the so-called Novo Mundo, but also as a social parameter for the distribution of vulnerability. A parameter that dates back to the official birth certificate⁶ of the nation, the letter from the scrivener Pero Vaz de Caminha to the King of Portugal, D. Manuel I, telling him about the "discovery" of a new land.

Caminha writes about his first sight of the natives: "Eram pardos, todos nus, sem coisa alguma que lhes cobrisse suas vergonhas." The letter inaugurates the official colonial gaze towards the land and its people, a patriarchal, extractivist and erotized gaze—a gaze very similar to the one reproduced by Debret in his paintings. But Caminha also naturalizes this gaze, while denaturalizing the indigenous subject, one that the Portuguese man sees as a body that is constantly offering itself to him—as if it was his to take—much like all the other raw materials of the land that he, himself, offers to the King in his letter.

Caminha was imbued with giving an account of the journey, reporting to the King D. Manuel about the new land's estimated potential for generating profits to the Crown, but unable to properly identify any gold or silver around, the scrivener ends up focusing his letter on the people he had encountered and their bodies, describing them as "homens da terra, mancebos e de bons corpos",

“tão limpos, tão gordos e tão formosos,” just as valued as metals waiting to be extracted. The indigenous women especially caught the scrivener’s attention, often described to the King as sensuous and exotic objects:

...E uma daquelas moças era toda tingida, de baixo a cima daquela tintura; e certo era tão bem-feita e tão redonda, e sua vergonha (que ela não tinha) tão graciosa, que a muitas mulheres da nossa terra, vendo-lhe tais feições, fizera vergonha, por não terem a sua como ela.

In another passage, Caminha returns to the female indigenous body and the double use of the word “shame” as to refer both to the body genitals as well as to the natives’ lack of constraint:

Ali andavam entre eles três ou quatro moças, bem moças e bem gentis, com cabelos muito pretos, compridos pelas espáduas, e suas vergonhas tão altas, tão cerradinhas e tão limpas das cabeleiras que, de as muito bem olharmos, não tínhamos nenhuma vergonha.

While reflecting whereas to forcibly take one of the natives back to Portugal by effect of displaying him to the King D. Manuel I, Caminha reports on the crew’s decision:

Nem eles [the indigenous] tão cedo aprenderiam a falar para o saberem tão bem dizer que muito melhor estoutros o não digam, quando Vossa Alteza cá mandar. E que, portanto, não cuidassem de aqui tomar ninguém por força nem de fazer escândalo, para de todo mais os amansar e apacificar, senão somente deixar aqui os dois degredados, quando daqui partíssemos.

In Pero Vaz de Caminha’s letter, the Other emerges as a body unable to speak or to give an account on itself. A body always at risk of being exposed, analyzed, tamed and pacified under a colonial gaze. The scrivener concludes his account by stating that the natives were “muito mais nossos amigos que nós seus,” a statement latter to be proven especially accurate since colonization brought about a savage suppression of the traditional indigenous ways and freedoms, as well as a true genocide of the indigenous population, which were enslaved and forced to work for the Portuguese Crown. Even though Caminha’s crew decided not to forcibly take away an indigenous person at that time, the same did not happen to the estimated four million black people brought from Africa to Brazil by the Portuguese during colonization—40% of the total number of slaves brought to the Americas during the same period.

The miscegenation of the three races—White European, Black African and Native South American—would inspire the image of the country as a “racial democracy,” where different cultures and races harmonically co-exist. Coined by the anthropologist Artur Ramos (1903-49), the term would be best known by Gilberto Freyre’s interpretation of it in his canonical book *Casa grande e senzala* (translated into English as *The Masters and the Slaves*). In *Casa grande*, once again we face a description of the Other through a patriarchy’s eroticized gaze, since Freyre attributes Brazil’s racial specificity to the sexual permissiveness of the colony. Through Freyre’s gaze, the black female body becomes a recipient for Portuguese desire, the ultimate producer of the nation’s specificity: the *mestiço* subject. As Denise Ferreira da Silva (2006) points out:

...enquanto o produto do desejo português, o mestiço, se torna o símbolo da especificidade do Brasil, sendo uma figura fundamentalmente instável, pois é uma incorporação temporária da brasilidade, um passo necessário para sua expressão real, o sujeito brasileiro é sempre já branco, pois Freyre, assim como outros antes dele, constrói o português como o sujeito verdadeiro da história brasileira. (63)

Da Silva analysis’s of the *mestiço* subject in Freyre’s book indicates that the author’s disregard for the female subject’s own desire—or better yet, lack of desire—in the production of this “national specificity” operates in order to reproduce the patriarchal extractivist logic of the colonizer, rendering the “racial” evidence of the *mestiço* as a “dangerous significant of vulnerability” (80). For da Silva, the *mestiço* ultimately defines the inscription of a subaltern subject in Brazil’s social order. In this sense, the *mestiço* operates as an embodiment of the political and symbolic mechanisms of social, racial and gender subjection directly inscribed into the nation’s common body—one that was already born violated—while, at the same time, embodies a challenge for the whitening of the nation’s narrative to be read as a racial democracy. Going back to Varejão’s painting, the artist’s decolonial gesture is able to rediscover this violent colonial encounter by opening a raw, bloody portal, offering to the viewer of the painting a new point of access to the colonial history: the point of view of vulnerability, the genealogy of the *mestiço* subject. Bound in a twice-vulnerable vulnerability, the *mestiço* performs the inherited subject position of the African and Indigenous’ womb in the racialized patriarchal social order of Brazil, while at the same time *gives body* to the subaltern’s subjugation.

If the wound of colonialism implies imposed injuries, painful interpellations, modes of subjugation, conflict and erasure, in all its political and affective intensities, it also indicates a way of thinking the materiality of embodied political resistance without disavowing vulnerability and the gendered, sexual, and racial

implications of “one’s bodily exposure to one another” (Butler and Athanasiou ix). If the idea of a fractured subject immediately collides with the sovereign account of agency by the unitary (Butler and Athanasiou), self-determined (da Silva 2007), transparent (Spivak) “I,” the post-Enlightenment subject that enacts the mastery over the domain of life by regulating the grammars of power that constitute the “Other,” rendering it as a product of universal reason.

When considering the “fractured subject” of the open body as a primary narrative, I mean its woundings, fissures, ruptures, lesions, and lacerations. Its ripped-apartness leads us through the abyss of the openings of the body, through the body as something that opens itself up. This body, historically inscribed, bears a mark of survival at the boundary of the social order. And unstable in its many identities written in blood, this open body transports us to an intertwined historical ground, where corporality, at the risk of survival, brings to the fore history’s suppressed rawness. In the face of this fractured existence, we must then ask: What can an open body do?

A Gesture Towards the Past

[A] forma de repressão pode ser diferente, mas a polícia que assassina nas favelas é a mesma que reprime a luta por direitos. Nesse quadro, torna-se muito importante a aprovação de propostas que alterem o viés militarista do Estado e possam contribuir para superar a visão belicista ainda predominante na cultura brasileira.

Marielle Franco (2018)

The above quote was extracted from the master’s thesis *UPP: A redução da favela a três letras*, by Rio de Janeiro’s congresswoman Marielle Franco, assassinated on March 14, 2018, after leaving a public event held at Casa das Pretas, a space created for hosting the voices of black women from the favelas.

Franco was a black lesbian woman and single mother born in Favela da Maré, a place considered one of the most dangerous favelas in Rio de Janeiro and inhabited mainly by the so-called Brazilian *mestiços*. In 2016, the same year of Rousseff’s impeachment, Franco was elected to City Council with the fifth highest vote that year for the Legislative Assembly. She believed that occupying politics was fundamental in order to reduce inequalities, the very ones she had experienced throughout her life. She was a human rights activist who constantly criticized and denounced police abuses and civil rights violations, particularly when it occurred in the most vulnerable areas of the city. Her political platform was based on the promise to give visibility to the black and peripheral minorities of Rio de Janeiro, especially women and queer people.

At the time of her death, Franco had just recently been nominated chair of the Women’s Defense Commission, whose objective was to monitor the federal military intervention that was taking place around the State of Rio de Janeiro,

but more actively inside Rio's urban favelas. On the day after her execution, more than 200,000 people gathered on the streets of Rio de Janeiro to protest and to grieve together, exhaustingly chanting the words "Marielle Presente!" and asking the question: "Quem matou Marielle?" over and over again during the entire night. More than one year has passed, but this question still haunts the streets of Brazil: Who killed Marielle Franco?

To ask "Who killed Marielle Franco?" is to single out an agent, a face for the State's necropolitics and its para-military apparatus. Most importantly, it transforms Franco into a signifier that demands reparation, for it allows us to see Franco's wounded body as another historical loophole. Her death triggered a new wave of activism in Brazil, an activism engaged in the crossroads of gendered, racial, feminist and necropolitical struggles. Symptomatically, it was precisely the speech against the so-called "gender ideology" and "minority claims" that underwrote the rise of far-right politicians like Bolsonaro and his political ally, the recently elected-Governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel.

Appropriating Bolsonaro's violent discursive strategy, Witzel became famous after being photographed at a campaign rally celebrating the breaking of a street sign with Marielle Franco's name, which had been placed as a tribute to her memory. The reaction to his gesture came rapidly, when more than a thousand street signs with the councilwoman's name were collectively funded and distributed, not only replacing the sign that had been broken, but also multiplying its presence throughout the city of Rio de Janeiro, later the country and abroad (see Lovink).

This multiplying effect also explains the election of three former secretarial advisors from Franco's cabinet to the Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro in 2018, a place that Franco herself had previously occupied. This electoral endeavor was first thought of as a way of securing the continuity of Franco's political agenda, but its outcome ultimately contributed to a significant increase in the number of seats occupied by black women in congress.

It is important to note that, although those actions were carried out independently from each other, the bullets that opened Franco's body triggered all of them. In this sense, the grassroots movement mobilized by the repetition of the utterance "Marielle presente!" is not a matter of reckoning with the precarious lives that become visible only in the moment of their death. Franco broke this pattern herself when she was elected to office, when she was announced as runner for the vice-governor post in the upcoming election the following year. Rather, the utterance's repetition is a twofold gesture: it encompasses at once the disavowal towards the state and the demand for Franco's death to be recognized as an act of ethical violence. This war-cry conjures the past into the present, as if the repetition of this phrase prevented the present's march of progress, its

ability to move forward without being disturbed by Marielle Franco's memory and the violence that yielded her death.

If the street sign with Franco's name functions as a monument to memory, a symbol that holds the memory of a body that has lived and died, it is because we transfer to it, to its materiality, the very visibility of this body and its survival *in spite of all*. In breaking the sign, breaking it in half, Witzel and his supporters were not only destroying a memory, but the performativity of this act sought to prevent Franco's body from surviving through different modes of visibility, to prevent it from exerting power over the public sphere by exposing its vulnerability, its "breakable" ontology. The breaking of the sign thus imposes a second death to Franco's body, destroying the "survival" of it so to foreclose its wayward symbolic force. This destruction aims to relegate the life and death of Franco to a zone of invisibility by destroying the conditions of possibility of its public appearance. Furthermore, Witzel's action is an act that claims for itself the power to ordain the sphere of public visibility, repelling Franco's memory and its potentiality as a signifier; as if by breaking the street sign Witzel's far-right allies could restore the symbolic domain of the social order previously disrupted by Franco's memory insistence on surviving, her body's refusal to disappear.

The utterance "Marielle presente!" and its chants in the streets of Brazil marks an ontological reflection on presence and our own accountability towards historical time. By conjuring a memory into the present, "Marielle presente!" signals the present's impossibility of progress without a sense of answerability, an ethical as well as a political claim. This is precisely why Franco has become such an important political actor in Brazil even after her execution. Against President Bolsonaro's signature gesture, a pointed finger in the shape of a gun as threat, a reminder of our inescapable vulnerability, the multiplying effect of Marielle Franco, the insistence of her body to re-emerge, and to act to prevent the present's march toward progress, forces us to look back so that we may move forward.

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