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Marielle, Presente!

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Flávia Santos de Araújo

Marielle, Presente!

Thank you so much for being here tonight to mourn and protest the brutal assassination of Marielle Franco.¹ A special thanks to our Smith student, Marcela Rodrigues Guimarães, who emailed some of us last weekend and infected us with her passion, mobilizing faculty and other students to gather here tonight. Marcela invited me to share a bit about how Marielle's assassination fits into a much larger picture of transnational contexts of racism, state-sanctioned violence, and black women's struggle for liberation.

I could not be talking about Marielle under the current circumstances in any other way but from a place of vulnerability, or, as a student of mine once said, my moment of strength. And that is one of the things that transpired in Marielle all the time—one of the reasons why people connected with her leadership: she spoke from those vulnerable places of herself, from which the only thing to do is to speak truth to power. Marielle lived and fought as a black lesbian woman, a *favelada*, an activist, an intellectual, a politician, a partner, a friend, a mother, and a daughter. She was at the intersections of many struggles and she was a warrior. Let's not forget that.

Marielle knew in her very bones what it meant to be a black woman, born and raised in one of the most violent *favelas* in Rio (Maré *favela*); she knew what it meant to live under the control and threat of militarized forces of all sides from sundown to sundown. Her master's thesis completed in 2014 looked closely into the processes of police militarization and its presence in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro—a state policy of public safety

implemented in the past few years through the creation of the so-called Pacifying Police Units (Unidades Policiais Pacificadoras—UPP). Her analysis concluded that the policy “strengthens the penal state in order to contain the dissatisfied or ‘excluded,’ a group formed mostly by the poor and the black, those who have been placed in the ghettos of the cities and their prisons.”²

Marielle knew that the militarization of the police and the current military intervention of the armed forces under the illegitimate government of Michel Temer are part of the entrenchment of a long legacy of authoritarianism in Brazil. More than that, she knew that the authoritarian groups that sustained the twenty-one years of military dictatorship in Brazil are the same ones now elaborating, sponsoring, and managing the forces that brutalize black and poor people in the *favelas* of Rio and other parts of Brazil.

Marielle’s sharp critique of the current military intervention in the city of Rio was intrinsically related to her understanding of how Brazil and other countries in Latin America engaged in a militarization of the state and its police since the turn of the twentieth century—its main purpose being that of controlling and repressing the mobilization led by those who were suffering the most, the “dissatisfied or excluded.” Marielle also knew well how international military potencies, such as the United States, provided financial support and training that sustained these military regimes all over Latin America—a political intervention that is now vastly documented.

Marielle had been elected councilwoman of the city of Rio de Janeiro in 2016 with a massive vote. This outcome stunned the city’s political elite: as a first-time candidate, a black lesbian woman from Maré *favela* became the fifth most-voted candidate in the city (out of more than 1,500 candidates, 51 of them were elected). In her campaign, she used as a motto the Ubuntu philosophical principle, “I am because we are” (“Eu sou porque nós somos”). As Glenn Greenwald pointed out in his article, “That success solidified Franco’s status not only as a new political force to be reckoned with, but a repository of hope for Brazil’s traditionally voiceless and excluded groups: its favela residents, its black and poor people, and women.”³

In the United States, nearly 1,200 people were killed by police in 2017.⁴ Black people again faced the highest rates of those killings. The U.S. police

force kills more people in a few days than police in other nations kill in one year.⁵ It was this outrageous crisis of police brutality that sparked the Black Lives Matter Movement. But did you know that Brazil may lead the entire world in cases of police brutality? With a smaller population than the one in the United States, of the more than four thousand people killed by the police in Brazil in 2016, nearly 73 percent were black.⁶ Within this context, 9 out of 10 people killed at the hands of Rio's police last year were black.⁷ The social movement for black lives is as significant in the United States as it is in Brazil as these two countries share egregiously similar realities.

As of now, we do not know yet who murdered Marielle and her driver, Anderson Pedro Gomes, a worker like many of those Marielle represented. Her car was not stolen and no belongings were taken by the assassins. Early investigations determined that the bullets found at Marielle's crime scene had been purchased by the federal police in 2006.⁸ Bullets from the same lot were used in the 2015 brutal massacre in Osasco, São Paulo. Street cameras indicate that Marielle had been monitored and was followed by a car and then shot, a few minutes after she left a public event in downtown Rio—an event entitled “Young Black Women Who Are Changing Power Structures” (“Jovens Negras Movendo as Estruturas”).⁹

What we do know is that Marielle was a threat to many violent, corrupt, and powerful factions—she was herself determined to change power structures. As Shaun King stated in a recent article,¹⁰ as a black lesbian warrior activist, Marielle represents a catalytic force against global contexts where black lives too often do not matter to the state, whether it is Rio or in Ferguson, in São Paulo or in Baltimore. We must learn how our struggles are connected.

As for me, here's what I would like to say to the warrior:

Querida Marielle,

I had been there with you and watched your fierce, gracious, and brilliant participation in what would be your last public appearance. Someone on Facebook was streaming the event live, and I was lucky I had learned about it.

I saw when you opened the panel acknowledging the importance of creating spaces where black women (particularly those at the outskirts of society) could share knowledge and strengthen their activism in their fight against

erasure. The whole event was a pure display of democratic conversations with multiple perspectives and one shared desire: the one for a new, possible, just world.

I was there when you ended the event with a quote from Audre Lorde, one that you read in both Portuguese and English (in a thick accent that we both share!): “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.” It was clear to me why you chose to end that event quoting a black lesbian warrior poet. You shared with Lorde that title. You lived that life and you fought for that freedom from all of our shackles.

If we had met in person, we would have talked for long hours about Audre Lorde, about her legacy—the one you had the courage to honor as your life’s purpose. We would have shared a bottle of very cold beer on a hot day at one of those many *botecos* in Rio, seated on the sidewalk as we listened to an old samba tune of sorrow and hope: “O Sol há de brilhar mais uma vez / a luz há de brilhar nos corações / o mal será queimada a semeste / o amor será eterno novamente . . . ”¹¹

We would have talked about what it means to hope as we honor our pain in struggle. You would have taught me so much. We would have listened and tended to each other’s pain and we would have appreciated the sunlight on our faces as a sign of possibility. We would have talked about the challenges of our motherhood in these dark times of hatred and tragedy. And we would have offered each other the comfort of our company, walking our boundaries, as Lorde said, “both stunned that sun can shine so brightly / after all our pain.”¹²

I honor you as a whole in your many selves, black, woman, lesbian, mother, friend, daughter, brilliant, warrior, Marielle. I am because we are. You are here.

Marielle, Presente!

Northampton, Massachusetts, March 21, 2018

Notes

- 1 This text was delivered at the event “Marielle PRESENTE: Gathering to Mourn and Protest Marielle Franco’s Assassination” at Smith College on March 21, 2018. The event was organized by Smith student, Marcela Rodrigues Guimarães, in collaboration with several members of the faculty. I felt honored to be able to collaborate with such a fierce and bright student such as Marcela and to share my perspective and my heart with a room filled with genuinely kind and

brave humans. Special thanks to them and to my colleagues at Smith who directly supported the event: Prof. Marguerite Itamar Harrison (Portuguese and Brazilian Studies Program), Prof. Michelle Joffroy (Latin America and Latino/a Studies Program), and Prof. Carrie N. Baker (Program for the Study of Women and Gender).

- 2 Marielle Franco, “UPP—A Redução da Favela a Três Letras: Uma Análise da Política de Segurança Pública do Estado do Rio De Janeiro,” 2014, master’s thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA, <https://app.uff.br/riuff/bitstream/1/2166/1/Marielle%20Franco.pdf>.
- 3 Glenn Greenwald, “Marielle Franco: Why My Friend Was a Repository of Hope and a Voice for Brazil’s Voiceless, Before Her Devastating Assassination,” March 16, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk>.
- 4 These numbers are available online at <http://www.killedbypolice.net/kbp2017>.
- 5 Statistics reported in the article by Jamiles Lartey, “By the Numbers: US Police Kill More in Days Than Other Countries Do in Years,” *The Guardian*, June 2015.
- 6 See “Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2017,” <http://www.forumseguranca.org.br/atividades/anuario/>.
- 7 Data compiled by the Instituto de Segurança Pública do Rio de Janeiro.
- 8 See article by Leslie Leitão, “Munição Usada para Matar Marielle é de Lotes Vendidos para a Polícia Federal,” March 16, 2018, <http://g1.globo.com>.
- 9 See “Câmeras de Segurança Mostram Possível Perseguição a Marielle,” *Folha de São Paulo*, March 17, 2018, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2018/03/cameras-de-seguranca-mostram-possivel-perseguiacao-a-marielle.shtml>.
- 10 Shaun King, “The Assassination of Human Rights Activist Marielle Franco Was a Huge Loss for Brazil—and the World,” March 2018, <https://theintercept.com>.
- 11 Samba composition by Nelson Cavaquinho entitled “Juízo Final” (1973).
- 12 Poem by Audre Lorde entitled “Walking Our Boundaries” (1978).