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The seeds of Marielle Franco: Afrodiasporic agency at the online-offline nexus

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ABSTRACT

Based on our fieldwork with Rio de Janeiro favela activists and social movements, this paper looks into how Black female activists, during the COVID-19 pandemic, engaged with multimodal resources and practical sociolinguistic imaginations that yielded forms of agency within an unequal social matrix. While engaging with a critique of the liberal model of agency as the triumph of individual autonomy, this paper ethnographically looks to modes of agency that unfold at the online-offline nexus as a capacity to act that emerges from pain and suffering, within limits of the language that wounds, and in the context of surviving capitalist inequities. This modality of agency becomes visible in the mourning movement for Marielle Franco, a Black favela councilwoman brutally murdered in 2018. Ethnographically, we discuss the Afrodiasporic agency of mourners as ‘watering Marielle’s seeds’, that is, as expanding Marielle’s sociolinguistic imaginations of language diversity, access to semiotic resources, and Black Atlantic cooperation.

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Introduction

This article draws on our fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro favelas, and discusses how Black women activists, during the COVID-19 pandemic, engaged with practical sociolinguistic reasoning and built forms of agency ‘at the borders of the unsayable’ (Butler 1997, 41) and within practices of ‘shared pain’ (Asad 2003). In 2012, with Adriana Facina, we began fieldwork in Complexo do Alemão, a group of favelas in Rio de Janeiro. Favelas are neighbourhoods built by residents, in the face of almost non-existent housing policies for the descendants of Brazil’s harsh slavery regime (1535–1888) and for migrants from the Northeast region. Although favelas are disproportionately securitised (Rampton, Silva, and Charalambous 2022) and have less access to public services, they are vibrant sites of artistic production, solutions for daily life, and political activity (see Facina and Palombini 2017; Lopes 2011; Machado da Silva and Menezes 2019; Valladares 2019).

In 2018, our work with activists was crucially impacted by the assassination of councilwoman Marielle Franco. A personal friend of Adriana and part of the extended network of activists connected to Daniel, Marielle Franco was born in Complexo da Maré, a group of favelas contiguous to Complexo do Alemão. Although she was only 39 years old and serving her first term as a councilwoman, Marielle had been striving as a human rights defender for twenty years. As we write this article, more than four years after her assassination, it is still not known who solicited the murder of Marielle and Anderson Gomes, who was driving the car when it was ambushed. This tragic event has been crucial to Brazilian politics far beyond the progressive sectors where Marielle built her influence. On Brazil’s far right, led by incumbent president Jair Bolsonaro, Marielle’s figure has

been invoked as an icon of the ‘perversion’ of the left – the enemy against which Bolsonaro’s conservative, anti-gender, and anti-communist crusade gathers traction (see Cesarino 2020; Silva and Dziuba 2023). In the left, Marielle appears as a figure of ‘present’ immanence (Silva and Lee 2021). Since her assassination, a huge movement of struggle for justice has emerged across the world. Typical of contemporary interactions, which usually do not unfold in ‘bounded’ online or offline modes, but at the intersection of both, the protests for Marielle Franco have taken place at this intersection, which Blommaert (2019) has termed the online-offline nexus. While using the affordances of digitalisation in its intersection with offline events, mourners have invoked Marielle’s ‘presence’ and her discourse of social justice. Further, Anielle Franco, her sister, Luyara Franco, her daughter, and other family members created the Marielle Franco Institute – whose declared mission is ‘fighting for justice, defending Marielle’s memory, spreading her legacy, and watering her seeds’ (Instituto Marielle Franco 2022).

This excerpt articulates some of the main tropes of the mourning movement. Different constructions about language, temporality, and space are embedded in mantras like ‘Marielle is a seed’ and ‘Marielle, present’ that mourners have chanted since her murder. Marielle is narrated as someone whose struggle goes beyond biological finitude and chronological temporality: like a seed, she is being multiplied in the action of other Black women who are inspired by her, including the city, state and federal representatives who have been elected after her tragic death (Silva and Lee 2021). As a ‘specter’, Marielle’s geographical scope now goes beyond the spatial boundaries of her lifetime: for instance, ‘Marielle Franco Street’ signs have been placed in several streets, homes and social media posts across the world, as a reaction to Bolsonaro supporters’ breaking of the plate at a political rally (Silva and Dziuba 2023). Further, Marielle’s spectral presence is sociolinguistically oriented: the spread of her legacy implies a valorisation of vernacular registers, including the *papo reto* activist register (a register of slang used in activist circles to demand human rights and economic redistribution; see Silva 2022), gender inclusive language (Borba 2019a), and the transnational multimodal tropes of Black feminism (hooks 1989). Importantly, the movement of mourning for Marielle Franco has reached both a wide national and transnational reach due to its digital dimension. The continuous crisscrossing of digital and offline affordances – that is, the online-offline nexus (Blommaert 2019) – has thus been central to the sociolinguistic practice of expanding Marielle’s political pedagogy into wider domains and publics.

In this article, we build two case studies discussing forms of agency that have been constructed as a process of ‘watering Marielle’s seeds’, that is, as expanding Marielle’s sociolinguistic imaginations and her projection of Afrodiasporic signs. We specifically look into some features of Marielle’s discourse, to the activism of the Marielle Franco Institute, and to some Marielle’s ‘seeds’ in Complexo do Alemão. The forms of agency that we depict challenge accounts of agency as free will (see Ahearn 2001). A durable expression of such accounts is the liberal model of agent as a humanist subject endowed with ‘autonomy and self-expression’ (Mahmood 2005, 8), who, ‘given [their] essential freedom ... and [their] own desires and interests, ... empower themselves, and choose pleasure’ (Asad 2003, 71). Most certainly the women and men we engage with below seek to empower themselves, and pursue affects such as ‘pleasure’, but the conditions on which their action takes place are not those undergirding liberal models of subjectivity (Ahearn 1999; Borba 2019b; Milani and Levon 2016). A great deal of social suffering, police abuse, and economic inequality has disproportionately been inflicted on Blacks and the poor in Brazil (Alves 2018; Caldeira 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this harsh scenario was intensified. A risk measure study by Nassif Pires, Carvalho and Rowet (2021, 42) estimated that ‘when COVID-19 started to spread locally in Brazil, racialized and low-income populations were at increased risk of being exposed to the virus.’ Further, some human rights violations reached a peak during the pandemic. In 2021, the Rio de Janeiro police staged their deadliest raid in history. Officers raided Jacarezinho favela, disregarding a supreme court ruling that prevented police invasions during the pandemic. The military police alleged that their aim was to ‘rescue’ minors lured by drug trafficking, and killed 29 people (Phillips 2021).

Here, we look into on- and offline communicative practices that evidence the discursive construction of agency in the face of a bleak scenario. As opposed to agency seen as a purely individual and sovereign modality of action (see Ahearn 1999; 2001; Asad 2003; Butler 1997; Mahmood 2005), we embrace a view of agency as ‘the socioculturally mediated capacity to act’ (Ahearn 2001, 112) that may emerge within limitations. Some of the most conspicuous elements that at once constrain and enable particular forms of agency are the language that wounds (Butler 1997), that is, the performative use of language that may inflict pain while placing the subject in a vulnerable position; contexts of pain and suffering (Asad 2003), whereby individuals in and across communities may share hardships and trauma; and the collective survival to capitalist inequities (Heller and McElhinny 2017), which echoes centuries of colonialism and racial violence. Agency here is also seen as a modality of action within unequal regimes of language (Kroskrity 2020), such as Brazil’s white-centred politics. Agency emerges as a social aptitude to act within such constraints – a social capacity to act that affects others (and oneself) and is subject to evaluation (Duranti 2004, 453).

In what follows, we first build a theoretical section discussing that Black activism has been on the move for at least four centuries in the Black Atlantic. We also outline a sociolinguistics of globalisation ‘from below,’ in which the online-offline nexus is prominent. We would like to emphasise upfront that while we have been involved with the community since 2012, the case studies focus on more recent times in the era of COVID because this was the time where the Afrodiasporic agency of women became all the more evident, especially as they have been the main agents of the frontline work against the deadly consequences of the virus. This is a central feature of the data we have gathered in 2020 and 2021, and therefore this will be the main timeline focused on here. In the first case study, we analyze the Marielle Franco Institute study *Violência política de gênero e raça no Brasil em 2021* (‘Political Violence of Gender and Race in Brazil in 2021’; Instituto Marielle Franco 2021), and discuss its expansion of Marielle’s sociolinguistic imaginations and its call for action vis-à-vis threats to the security of Black women in politics. The second case study addresses a 2021 workshop in the favela that discussed the centrality of Black women at the frontline of COVID-19 prevention. We conclude by situating this sociolinguistic production of agency vis-à-vis the debate of differential citizenship in Brazil (Feltran 2015) and the academic critique of liberal agency (Ahearn 2001; Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005).

Afrodiasporic signs

Sea, movement, and hybridism are metaphors that give life to the poetics of contemporary Black culture. This culture has been fundamental in shaping the modern Western world, but it is also interwoven with violence – produced by enslavement, plantation capitalism, mass incarceration, brutal policing, and economic dispossession. Yet Afrodiasporic culture is also irreducible to these forms of violence. Its origins lie in the voyages of ancient ships. Music, dance, style, labour, and political consociation are some traces of this culture – which defies imaginations of nation-states and their aspirations of homogeneity and bourgeoisie esthetics. Dissemination is the shape of its trajectory. Diasporic is the style of its identity, which can only be understood in the plural (Gilroy 1993; Gonzalez 1988; Hall 2018; Lopes 2011).

We understand the agency of Marielle Franco and her mourning movement – and their demands for economic redistribution and identity recognition (Fraser 1995) – as part of the Black Atlantic political struggle. Gilroy (1993:, 3) heuristically termed the Black Atlantic the multilingual and multimodal forms ‘originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering.’ Since the brutal enslavement of Africans under European colonialism, the Black Atlantic has been an important site of political creativity and resistance. Gonzalez (1988) identifies complex modes of linguistic, cultural, and political creolisation carried out by enslaved populations and their descendants in the Americas, a territory she calls ‘Amefrica.’ Mamigonian (2017) discusses the import of the organised resistance of enslaved Africans in Brazil to their liberation. An

empirical case of this resistance is offered by Graden (2020), who traces the trajectory of Black Will, Alexandre, Fernando, and Felipe – four Africans illegally enslaved alongside 54 others in 1845 on a ship off the coast of Cape Lopez (present-day Gabon). The British navy had intercepted the ship on the high seas. Yet due to bad weather conditions, the vessel was diverted to Maranhão (Northeast Brazil), where the Africans were eventually kidnapped, with the complicity of local authorities. By 1845, the transatlantic trade of enslaved people from Africa had become illegal in Brazil. However, Graden (2020: 317) documents that only in the 1840s, ‘traffickers disembarked at least 440,000 Africans on Brazilian shores ... , more than the total number brought to colonial North America and independent United States (1619–1808).’ Crucially, Graden’s (2020) paper offers evidence and nuance about the networks built by the four enslaved men who managed to escape captivity and, through multilingual collaborations and an ingenious geo-political literacy, helped denounce the violation of international treaties against slavery that Brazil was a signatory to.

Almost two centuries later, Marielle’s positioning vis-à-vis these Black Atlantic multilingual and multimodal networks is notable. Like most Black and working-class people in Brazil, Marielle had not had access to socialisation in English at school. But the councilwoman was taking English classes because she wanted to engage in dialogue with North American Black feminists. In a debate at Casa das Pretas (House of Black Women), held hours before her tragic murder, Marielle commented that her English teacher had asked students to talk about a female reference in their lives. Marielle contextualises her response:

E aí eu no lugar de mulher, negra, bissexual, hoje casada com uma mulher, mãe de uma filha, [eu trouxe para a professora] a frase da Audre Lorde: ‘Não sou livre enquanto outra mulher for prisioneira, mesmo que as correntes dela sejam diferentes da minha. I am not free while another Woman is a prisoner, even though her chains are different from mine.’

Our translation:¹

And then I, as a woman, Black, bisexual, now married to a woman, mother of a daughter [brought to the teacher] Audre Lorde’s phrase: ‘Não sou livre enquanto outra mulher for prisioneira, mesmo que as correntes dela sejam diferentes da minha. I am not free while another Woman is a prisoner, even though her chains are different from mine.’

After translingually enunciating the words of Audre Lorde, an American Black feminist icon, Marielle was cheered by the audience. Marielle primarily emphasises the collective struggle of Black women: ‘I am not free while another Woman is a prisoner.’ In linguistic-ideological terms, Marielle explains that learning English would help her ‘occupy other spaces’ – for example, the place of dialogue with Black feminists.

As a political leader, Marielle used to emphasise different signs of Blackness, for instance by using turbans on her curly hair, wearing clothes with African motifs, and constantly elaborating on the agency of Black women within the legacies of colonialism and slavery. Following Gilroy (1993), we call the historical transatlantic travel of these multimodal signs of Black agency ‘Afro-diasporic signs.’ And while in the excerpt above Marielle drew from Audre Lorde to ground her own Black feminism, the circulation of Afrodiasporic signs in the movement of mourning over her loss goes beyond the connections between Brazilian and North American peripheries. Marielle’s image and agenda have circulated across Latin America and around the world. In Buenos Aires, for example, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, leading icons of the struggle against Argentina’s brutal dictatorship (1976–1983), have contributed to disseminating her legacy in Argentina (Antunes 2018).

In sociolinguistic terms, this travel of Afrodiasporic signs can be characterised as a ‘globalization from below.’ In other words, we look at a sociolinguistics of globalisation (Blommaert 2010) not only as a scenario of intense mobility of semiotic resources, where linguistic differences are quickly turned into inequality, but above all at forms of semiotic globalisation where the dispossessed of capitalism build alliances in surviving inequality, contextually turning difference into access (Heller

and McElhinny 2017, 227–260). Marielle was aware of her peripheral status in the market of English – the unequal semiotic regime that turns an indexical fragment of English (the variety idealised as standard) into a lucrative commodity (Huang 2021; Park 2021; Silva and Signorini 2021). Along these lines, Marielle said: ‘I’ve got a scholarship at Cultura Inglesa and I’ve been suffering for two years with English ... because I think one has to know all the terms of the feminist movement and draft them in English.’ But her confessed suffering was in learning a variety other than that which is idealised as standard English – namely, a multimodal resource that we might call ‘peripheral feminist Black English’ and that involves performing English resources alongside corporeal signs of Blackness (Windle and Afonso 2021). In Windle et al’s (2020) terms, Marielle valorised a ‘transperipheral’ cooperation, which is critical of the commodified globalisation of artifacts such as standard English.

As a contemporary phenomenon, the globalisation of Afrodiasporic signs is largely influenced by digitalisation. Access to smart phones and the internet has been increasingly facilitated in the peripheries of capitalism (Nemer 2022). Jacquemet (2019) argues that the broader sociolinguistic landscape is ‘being transformed by digitalisation – that is, the restructuring of social life around digital communication and media infrastructure.’ He adds that ‘digital communication technologies are much more than enablers of people’s interactivity and mobility: they alter the very nature of this interactivity, transforming people’s sense of place, belonging, and social relations.’ Further, as Blommaert (2019) consistently argued, digitalisation did not mean that we completely repurposed our routines to online modes of interaction. Rather, our offline activities are increasingly layered and influenced by digital technologies, to the extent that we may speak of an ‘online-offline nexus.’ However, we should also note that the transformation of sociolinguistic life brought about by today’s hyperconnectivity has not only yielded ‘new conveniences and excitements but also ... new anxieties and pathologies’ (154).

Among the ‘anxieties and pathologies’ that we observe ahead is the digital dimension of violence against Black female candidates and members of parliament. The circulation of hate in digital networks has been observed around the world. The reactionary populism of figures like Trump and Bolsonaro is largely afforded by social media infrastructure. These are sites for communicating with, and constituting, electoral ‘bases’ (Stolee and Caton 2018), and at times for supporting violent acts such as the Capitol invasion (Newell 2021). In Brazil, a documented digital guerrilla warfare (Cesarino and Nardelli 2021) has been waged against Black female candidates and other minorities (Signorini 2021). On the face of it, the Instituto Marielle Franco has mapped strategies to curb the circulation of hate and misinformation ahead of elections. In the following analytical sections, we document this and other lines of action against gendered and racial violence in Brazil that the seeds of Marielle Franco have enacted.

Vulnerable seeds

In Brazil, 56.2% of the population is Black (Whites are 42.7%, and Asians and Indigenous people are 1.1%). Black women are 27.8% of the population – the largest demographic group in the country. However, their representation in politics is low. Only 2% of seats in the federal congress and senate are currently held by Black women. In municipal legislatures, Black women make up only 6% of seats (Oxfam Brasil 2020). The disproportionate presence of Black women in decision-making spaces was a central concern for Marielle. She was the only Black woman in Rio’s city council – out of 7 women and 44 men. In her talk at Casa das Pretas, Marielle elaborated on the significance of her being elected:

Today I am in this field and I am happy about my trajectory and my life condition, which cannot only be an individual construction. It comes long before this one year and a few months of mandate, because our steps come from afar, right? Ten years before we got into the City Council ... , there was Jurema (Batista). And ten years before Jurema, Benedita (da Silva). We cannot wait for another ten years or think that I will be there for ten years. We need to set up working groups, meetings, and strengthening to build this agenda.

Marielle stated that she might not be in the chamber for another ten years. (While retrospectively this claim could be read as ‘prophetic,’ some of her aides told us that she had plans to run for other houses of parliament and possibly the state government.) Marielle was convinced that she should not be the only Black woman in the house – an echo of the solitary (but fundamental) presence of Jurema Batista and Benedita da Silva, Black women who preceded her. Further, Marielle summoned her audience to take action to increase the representation of Black women in politics: ‘We need to set up working groups, meetings, and strengthening.’ Elsewhere in her talk, Marielle said that the presence of Black women in politics would not only benefit Blacks, but the population at large: ‘only with more Black women in politics, in the decision-making spaces, will we have a qualified public policy.’

Two semiotic elements are notable in Marielle’s talk: she references herself as a collective (‘my trajectory ... cannot be just an individual construction’) and temporally orients her discourse to the past and future of Black women (i.e. she acknowledges the importance of her Black predecessors while indicating that other Black women need to occupy that place). The mourning movement and the Marielle Franco Institute expand this collective and temporally situated orientation – semiotically, this is performed through a number of resources, including through the metaphor of ‘watering Marielle’s seeds’, that is, elaborating on her political rationalizations and making them grow. Silva and Lee (2021) point out that Marielle’s sociolinguistic imaginations in politics were also pedagogical – they were aimed at teaching others about the Afrodiasporic reorientations of a violent past that she embodied. Therefore, ‘seeds’ is a metaphor that centrally highlights the pedagogic and scalable dimension of Marielle’s political activism. Fundamentally, through engaging with Marielle’s seeds, the movement of mourning for her loss has grappled with the vulnerability of the Black female body in politics. Given the threats that Black women have been suffering, whether in digital media or at their offices or homes, the Marielle Franco Institute produced the aforementioned study ‘Political Violence of Gender and Race in Brazil in 2021,’ based on data of violence and interviews with eleven Black female legislators (see Instituto Marielle Franco 2021). At the outset, the study recognises that the Institute emerges as response to the brutal attack on Marielle and that, given the risks to the lives of other Black women, it is necessary to design a strategy:

Marielle Franco’s election in 2016 as the fifth most voted councilwoman in the city of Rio de Janeiro became a symbol of the occupation of politics by Black women, peripheral, favela, and LGBTQIA + populations. Her assassination influenced a historic increase of candidacies of Black women, who have been considered Marielle’s seeds. However, despite the historical process, the conditions for the safe permanence of these women in the spaces of power is a great impediment in their daily action in the chambers throughout the country. The Marielle Franco Institute was born out of this brutal political violence and continues denouncing it and fighting for efficient mechanisms of protection and safety for Black women, whether cis, trans or transvestite, who put their bodies at the service of change in institutional politics (Instituto Marielle Franco 2021, 16–17).

In this excerpt, violence is a central marker in the trajectory of Marielle, the Institute, and other women in politics. But neither does their action get paralyzed in the face of violence, nor do these agents allow themselves to be defined by violence. The excerpt points out, for example, that after Marielle’s assassination, the number of elected Black women increased. Additionally, the Institute aims to create ‘efficient mechanisms of protection and safety for Black women’, and, through these political agents, effect ‘change in institutional policy.’ In short, the study presents important theoretical definitions, such as the notion of gendered political violence; investigates the instantiation of this violence in Brazil and beyond; compares legislative efforts against gender and race-based political violence across Latin American countries; maps civil society initiatives to counter the spread of hate in politics; and suggests courses of action for different state institutions. The report cites the definition of gender-based political violence in the Inter-American Model Law on Political Violence against Women: ‘any action, conduct, or omission undertaken ... on the basis of gender, that causes harm or suffering to one or more women and whose purpose or result is to hinder ... their political rights’ (13).

Some of the attempts to interrupt women in politics in Brazil became visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two women interviewed in the study were the target of violent attacks. One of them was Laura Sito, a Black councilwoman in Porto Alegre. In October 2021, anti-vaccine protesters stormed the City Council, which was due to vote on the adoption of a COVID vaccine passport. Some of them wielded Nazi swastikas and were verbally violent. Against Laura Sito, one protester shouted: 'I am blonde, beautiful, and you are trash.' Another Black legislator targeted by violent attacks is Erika Hilton, who in 2020 received the most votes in Brazil for a city council. As a Black transgender woman, Hilton explains to the Institute that episodes of violence are not uncommon in her trajectory:

I am an activist from the Black movement, from the transvestite movement, I come from the prostitution in the streets, so violent attacks are not so rare in my life, unfortunately (29).

The report further explains that Hilton was eventually 'attacked by an employee of the São Paulo City Council and had to hide inside her office for fear of threats that were first posted on social media and then became real' (48). The employee chased Hilton with a knife. Currently, given this case and other threats, Hilton is under armed escort.

Note that violence against Hilton was perpetrated in the online-offline nexus: the councilwoman received online threats, which were then translated into an offline attack. Recognising the centrality of digitalisation for political life, the Marielle Franco Institute also maps the initiatives of NGOs and collectives that seek to curb the online circulation of hate, particularly against minorities. One of the platforms cited by the study is TRETAqui, 'which collects denunciations of candidacies that attack and/or are attacked through hate speech and misinformation' (76). In addition to collecting, systematizing, and channelling denunciations, TRETAqui also offers regular reports on denunciations and provides manuals for the public on how to deal with information entropy, how to fact check, and how to denounce.

Crucially, the Marielle Franco Institute study points out that despite on- and offline threats, Black women activists have been crucial in confronting COVID-19. The study underscored that, in a previous study, '62% of interviewed Black women activists said they were directly active in some action to counter COVID-19' (24). However vulnerable, these Black women echo the self-formation of their ancestors, who built their territories and sought solutions for income, leisure, and culture (see Caldeira 2017; Valladares 2019). They agentively constructed their own ways of life at the borders of the negligence of the State, which is present in favelas mostly in its police and penal facets (Wacquant 2009).

Importantly, the agency of Black women that we discuss here emerges on the peripheries of Brazilian cities in response to a durable social construction of racism and criminalisation of Blacks. As we commented in section 2, Brazil was the country where slavery persisted most extensively, and the traces of a society founded on violence against the Black body persist in various dimensions of social life, including in the gendered and racialized political violence described above. Caldeira (2017) has termed 'autoconstruction' the process whereby residents construct their own houses and, consequently, global peripheries. Caldeira suggests that, in the process of autoconstruction, many residents 'make themselves into citizens and political agents, become fluent in rights talk, and claim the cities as their own' (3). Inspired by Caldeira's inferences, we could say that the modality of agency that Marielle Franco and later the Institute nurtured are 'autoconstructed', that is, it is socioculturally mediated by a process of agentively responding to a state that has for centuries denied citizenship and political rights to Blacks. To say that this modality of agency is autoconstructed does not mean that it unfolds 'independently' from the state – after all, Marielle and the Institute were invested in participating in the state through politics. As we will discuss in the next section, these modes of autoconstructing (the space and the self) are a response to an enduring denial of Blacks as subjects having the right to life – what Mbembe (2003) calls necropolitics, that is, politics as decision about which lives deserve to be lived. In the next case study, we present additional dimensions of the centrality of Black women in the autoconstruction of political agency.

What is the apparent gender of most people (making the protest) in the favela?

As discussed above, the Marielle Franco Institute study points out that Black women were key on the forefront of confronting COVID-19. Indeed, it is now globally known that the Bolsonaro administration acted intentionally to promote mass contamination by COVID-19 (Alves 2021; Ventura and Reis 2021). Bolsonaro was advised by a committee of doctors – dubbed the ‘shadow board’ – who helped him design this strategy (Camelo 2021). This team believed that the free circulation of the virus would lead to a supposed herd immunity. These doctors have also defended the so-called ‘early treatment’ – a treatment for COVID-infected people with drugs with no proven effectiveness, such as hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin. Bolsonaro’s administration was also against the vaccine, and ignored repeated offers from Pfizer, which wanted to make Brazil a global case study (Boadle and Marcello 2021). The motivations for Bolsonaro were various – from his populist anti-science discourse, to his military advisers’ economic interests in manufacturing hydroxychloroquine, to pressures from business segments for ‘resuming economic activity as quickly as possible and at any cost’ (Ventura and Reis 2021, 3). In short, Bolsonaro’s management of the COVID-19 pandemic is a prototypical example of necropolitics – ‘politics as the work of death’ (Mbembe 2003, 16).

An important question for political science and sociolinguistics is: what does a population do when the state intentionally acts to infect it with a potentially deadly virus? The response to Bolsonaro coming from progressive segments has been multidimensional: for example, opposition parties have created a commission of inquiry, to investigate crimes by the federal government during the pandemic (Alves 2021); Indigenous peoples and the senate have filed requests at the Hague International Criminal Court to investigate Bolsonaro’s responsibility over more than 600,000 COVID-related deaths (Pontes 2021); residents in favelas and peripheries have created crisis committees, to assist people through the severe hunger, unemployment, and health crisis that has ensued (Cruz, Loya, and Sánchez 2021). In this section, we address more centrally an agent who engaged with the historic self-formation of peripheral communities (Caldeira 2017) and collectively responded to Bolsonaro’s necropolitics: Joice Lima, a Black woman who worked in a crisis committee in Complexo do Alemão. Joice is a researcher at the Raízes em Movimento Institute, a local NGO that articulated, together with the Fiocruz Health Research Foundation, an ongoing action in the favela to prevent COVID. One of the lines of action was to distribute baskets with essential food items for the population in need.

Daniel’s interaction with Joice took place during two classes on gender and sexuality that she taught in May 2021 to participants in the Faveladoc workshop. Promoted by Raízes em Movimento, this workshop is another element of favela agency in the context of Bolsonaro’s necropolitics. Conducted in hybrid mode (on- and offline), Faveladoc was a workshop that offered training on documentary filmmaking to young residents. Students learned about both documentary filmmaking and political topics including militarisation of favelas, race, and gender.

In her first class, Joice suggested thinking about gender and sexuality in a militarised context. In Brazil, police surveillance and violence disproportionately affect favelas and peripheries (Machado da Silva and Menezes 2019). According to the Brazilian Forum for Public Security, in 2021, the police killed 6,416 people (Bueno and Lima 2021). Of these, 78.9% were Black. Compare these numbers to the total number of people killed by the U.S. police in the same year – 1,041 people (Washington Post 2022) – and you will realise that these numbers are exceedingly high. Brazilian securitisation (Rampton, Silva, and Charalambous 2022) has followed a model of attacking the ‘enemy’ – the ‘*bandido*’ (criminal), usually a Black person, perceived as a drug dealer or mugger. This model suspends laws of democracy in securitised territories (Charalambous et al. 2020, 107) while ignoring for the most part intelligence and investigative practices (Proença Júnior and Muniz 2017). Given this scenario, Joice presented an image to the class (Figure 1) of people protesting in the Jacarezinho favela against a police raid that killed 29 people days before. After acknowledging the powerful image of protest captured by Mauro Pimentel, she asks: ‘What is the apparent



Figure 1. People protesting after police massacre in Favela Jacarezinho – Mauro Pimentel, AFP Rio de Janeiro, 2021.

gender of most people (making the protest) in the favela?’ Fundamentally, it is important to note that the workshop was carried out partially through online meetings due to physical isolation restrictions. Joice was teaching one of these online classes, and her resorting to a picture that circulated on Twitter is another element pointing to the centrality of the online-offline nexus in a participant framework where activism was being taught.

Cadu, one of the students, immediately responded: ‘Women.’ Joice then elaborated that, in a context of militarisation and ‘war on drugs,’ male and masculinised bodies are ‘the easiest targets of bullets, they are the bodies that are directly murderable.’ And female and feminised bodies are ones that operate on the frontlines of protest and care, but are also subject ‘to other kinds of violence and abuse.’ Interactionally, Joice and the participants produced intelligibility about gender differentiation and inequality in a militarised context. Joice centrally addressed the importance of women – and especially Black women – in taking action against food insecurity during the lockdown. The excerpt below is notable:

1	Joice:	Moving away from that context to another type of violence. Which is the
2		fight for food, right? And we know that it is a project of slow death that
3		gradually degenerates people. It is not a quick death like a bullet. It is a
4		process of degeneration of the peripheral body in a slow manner. In
5		Raízes, we did an action (of assistance and prevention to COVID).
6		Cadu was there with us in some moments ... And we donated food
7		baskets ... And who were the main characters in this assistance?
8	Cadu:	Now I've realised that most of the people who went to do the
9		interviews ... with the social workers were women. And ... the person
10		who would assist them was also a woman, right?
11	Joice:	Yes, the majority ... were predominantly women. And then when I talk
12		about the role of men in this space, I talk about the general context of
13		patriarchy. Men will never be in a place where they feel diminished,

14 right? And this is what society tells us. Isn't that what we see every day?
 15 Men have a privileged place in relation to women. In other words, men
 16 cannot be in a place of subjugation, and I am not saying that this position
 17 in the fight for food, in the search for donations, is in fact a subjugation,
 18 okay? It is an obvious need in our context. Women came to get the
 19 baskets, and men followed them. Usually, men stood on the other side of
 20 the street ... waiting for their wives to help them carry this food. Hardly
 21 ever were these men placed in the frontline. And then we start to
 22 delineate in a very clear way these roles. And we can see a discussion of
 23 gender, of men and women, that is specific to the periphery, of how the
 24 state imposes these roles on us, and we reproduce them in a context of
 25 militarisation. And there is the macro-context that is patriarchy itself.
 26 Which places in the minds of men that they're superior to women.

This stretch of talk is interesting for observing the construction of agency through projecting particular kinds of epistemic and moral positionalities vis-à-vis gender inequality in a context of militarisation. Note that Cadu responds to Joice's question in line 7 ('who were the main characters in this assistance?') by elaborating on his emerging perception of the gendered nature of frontline work in the crisis committee (lines 8–10; note especially the phrase 'Now I've realized ...', which indexes his perception of gender roles as contingent on Joice's remarks). Cadu had also collaborated in the crisis committee. Yet he says that up until the discussion, he had not realised that most of the people on the frontline of assistance were women. In other words, some of the main agents working to save lives during the pandemic were *gendered agents*. A few minutes later, another male participant, Ricardo, also commented on his emerging perception about this particular gendered configuration of agency. For him, Joice's talk was 'disconcerting' as it 'challenges' certain view that debating gender means talking about women: 'Your talk disconcerts, or at least very much challenges ... the model that a least the majority of people have that looking a gender is looking at women. But you expand it.'

As C. Goodwin (2007, 67) and other interaction analysts have robustly documented, 'the interactive organization of participation frameworks [is] a primordial locus for the constitution of human action, cognition and moral alignment.' In the case at hand, this participant framework produced indexicals about emerging perceptions of gender inequality – such as Cadu's 'now I realized' and Ricardo's 'it's disconcerting' – that exemplify the situated construction of forms of agency within the constraints of patriarchy (see also below). Further, the fact that Joice led this 'reorientation of knowledge' (Miyazaki 2004) and that she herself worked on the frontline of a health crisis committee evidences the centrality of Black women in this situated production of agency.

Finally, we would like to address Joice's suggestion of two symbolically and materially violent constraints that undergird the construction of agency in that participant framework. For Joice, the first constraint is the hunger suffered by the population. The capacity to act that Joice discusses – i.e. people's mobilising for addressing food safety – emerges in a context of extreme necessity. The activist draws attention to the necropolitical character of hunger under the current government: 'it is a project of slow death that gradually degenerates people' (lines 2–3). Unlike bullets, which have been killing more Black people in the conservative turn of Brazilian politics, food insecurity is a 'process of degeneration of the peripheral body in a slow manner' (line 4).

The second constraint that Joice points out is the very interference of a patriarchal matrix in the situated action against food insecurity and in broader life in a militarised context. The activist comments that at the delivery of food baskets, 'men stood on the other side of the street' (lines 19–20), probably so as not to feel 'diminished' (line 13) or 'subjugated' (lines 16–17) in receiving humanitarian aid. She further points out that in a patriarchal context, male identities are discursively constructed amidst expectations of masculinity as a space of 'privilege (or superiority) over women' (line 15). Joice comments that this socially constructed privilege ultimately places an even greater burden on Black women (e.g. on domestic care) and positions them in an inferior gendered space. Note that in lines 23–25, Joice initially singles out the object of her discourse as a 3rd person (i.e.

‘men and women’) and then she rephrases this object to a 1st person plural: ‘we reproduce [these roles] in a context of militarization.’ Here, as in other moments of her talk, Joice recognises herself as participating in the dynamics of reproduction of the patriarchal matrix in the militarised specificity of the favela. Other participants also recognised their reproduction of gender inequities, such as in jokes. To use the terms of our discussion, being an agent here could mean, among other things, recognising one’s own role in the reproduction of durable hierarchies – possibly an important precondition for pursuing change of action.

Conclusion

This paper drew from our fieldwork on Rio de Janeiro favelas and social movements. Through analyzing situated text and talk, the online-offline nexus, and multimodality (e.g. Marielle’s conspicuous valorisation of bodily signs of Blackness; Joice Lima’s drawing from a image on Twitter of protest to teach about Black women’s agency), we looked for evidence of the construction of agency within a context of securitisation, structural racism, sexism, and homo- and transphobia. The capacity to act in the case studies – that is, in Marielle’s sociolinguistic imaginations, in the Marielle Franco Institute’s expansion of these imaginations and pursuit of protecting Black women in politics, and in Joice Lima’s building of a participant framework to discuss gender inequities within militarisation – does not unfold *against* an otherwise unjust framework but *within* this framework. The complete rejection of this framework is ultimately – or at least currently – impossible, given its durable strength and ramification in Brazil. Marielle Franco, for instance, was assassinated because her sociolinguistic imaginations challenged a white-masculine centred status quo. In other words, the agency that surfaces at the online-offline nexus of multimodal interactions does not follow a model of agency as expression of free will (Ahearn 2001). Critics of this model of agency have variously defined it as ‘a historical project whose aim is the increasing triumph of individual autonomy’ (Asad 2003, 71) or ‘as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)’ (Mahmood 2005, 8). The classic Weberian notion of the state as the agent that owns the monopoly of violence in society is another cornerstone of this liberal model of subjectivity. Given that violence would be external to society – as the state would be the entity monopolising its use and preventing it from affecting citizens and their institutions –, the subject would be able to realise its agency and its resistance in a relatively safe realm of protected rights, such as free speech. When conditions are adequate, acts of resistance would therefore instantiate ‘the humanist desire for autonomy and self-expression’ (Mahmood 2005, 8).

Yet the case studies that we presented demonstrate that, in Brazil, for Blacks and other minorities, conditions are ‘never adequate.’ Instead, subjects realise a particular modality of agency – one that surfaces within necropolitical conditions. Anthropologist Gabriel Feltran made the following remark about the multiple regimes of governmentality in São Paulo:

It took me a while, but after fifteen years of research in São Paulo’s peripheries, I understood that we do not have only one justice system, or only one law, operating in São Paulo. That we neither have a democracy, nor a dictatorship, nor do we live in neoliberal totalitarianism, but that all these regimes coexist, depending on the population you look at, and the different situations that are presented to them. The fact that the rule of law is formally democratic does not prevent a portion of the population from living at war, and I believe that this war has spread to broader and broader segments of the population. (Feltran 2015,n/p.)

These modes of differential citizenship have reached staggering results under Bolsonaro’s management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortly after the World Health Organization declared that COVID-19 spread was a global pandemic, Bolsonaro produced a video downplaying the severity of infections and stating that due to his athletic condition, an infection to his body would be at most a ‘little flu’ (Miller 2020). His necropolitical strategy meant that the ‘strong ones’ would survive while other segments of the population should be left to die.

Given this scenario, we looked at empirical materials that demonstrate people pursuing socio-linguistic imaginations for surviving necropolitics. The sociolinguistic strategies were diverse: for instance, while multimodally valorising embodied and verbal signs of Blackness, Marielle thought of her trajectory as ‘collective’ and as iterating longstanding agentive signs from the feminist Black Atlantic; she also desired to be proficient in vernacular varieties of English; the Marielle Franco Institute produced a study documenting risks to the wellbeing of Black candidates; starting with the interpretation of a multimodal sign – an image of protest – Joice Lima produced an online participation framework where reorientations of knowledge about gender and sexuality emerged. These agents differently grappled with sociolinguistic resources – including Black transatlantic alliances, multimodal resources, on- and offline interactions, and valorisation of Afrodiasporic signs – to flourish as agents within ‘limitations in language, [somehow knowing that] limitation is not fully negative in its implications’ (Butler 1997, 41).

Note

1. Due to space constraints, all citations of Marielle’s talk and other texts originally published in Portuguese will be presented only in our rendition to English. The exception is this excerpt, due to the significance of Marielle’s translingual quote of Lorde for our argument.

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