SEMIOSS TICS OF CARE AND VIOLENCE: MEMETIZATION AND NECROPOLITICS DURING THE BRAZILIAN 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE ACTION #MARIELLEMULTIPLICA

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In Brazil, memes and forms of memetic communication have become a second language, opening up new forms of expression, action and organization. These stem from increasingly polarized positions in society providing the opening for a process of endemic memetization of political discourse. For conservative groups, memes have also become a medium of political education and beyond that, images, memes and memetic gestures on social media have become the site of political tensions. For example, scholars Viviane Borelli and Herivelto Regiani, in studying the circulation of memes from Evangelic groups in Brazil, examined the ‘discursive aspects involved in the production and reproduction of memes which are re-signified through operations that involve de-framing and reframing and that trigger interdiscursivity.’ ¹

When plunged into ideological battlegrounds such as that between progressives (left) and conservatives (far-right) in Brazil’s 2018 elections that led Jair Bolsonaro to power, we see evidence of very different ways that memetization—the act of turning texts and events into memes and memetic devices through imitation, iteration, and replication—enacts this interdiscursive battle. Memetization produces political tools for mobilizing voters such that memes become pivotal characters in the ideologies and narratives each side is promoting. In the polarized landscape of the 2018 elections, both conservatives and progressives leveraged user-generated content, actions, and protests within an overall process of memetization of communication. This showed not only a shift in political communication by the candidates themselves, but also how grassroots mobilizations and activists used a wide repertoire of tactical media.² These actions were performed via an interplay of social media and multi-scalar protest actions and political rallies. When taken together, these reconfigured the relationship between the streets and the internet.

This interplay also involves the notion of circulation as formulated by Antônio Fausto Neto, who argues that circulation should not be seen as a point of traffic, but rather as a place for the constitution of multiple meanings and for the complexification and reconfiguration of interactional processes.³ More importantly, according to Gisele Beiguelman this process of

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circulation of images occurs not as part of histories of appropriation typical of art historical lineages of memes, nor of remix cultures more typical of electronic culture historiography or data aesthetics in new media art discourses. For Beiguelman, ‘the focus here is images that jump from one medium to another, from TV to social media interfaces (...) moving from screen to screen, converting to multiple derivations which imply a break with current systems of representation and their mechanisms of symbolic organization’.4

On the progressive side one can find activist approaches by ‘autonomous zones of resistance’,5 such as artistic and design collectives, alternative media outlets and multi-partisan provisional citizen constellations such as the #elenão and #MarielleMultiplica movements and Instagram profiles @coleraalegria and @designativista. Their practices of creative cultural resistance6 are built on processes of transparency, collectivity, polyvocal communication, and strong parity between online and offline tactical media advocating for social justice against Bolsonaro’s necropolitics. On the Bolsonaro side are semi-autonomous (human and non-human) digital meme cultures operating through meta-mimesis.7 That is, these cultures create texts that imitate other texts in a sort of what Achille Mbembe calls spiral transgression – ‘an oblique and iterative rather than frontal tactic aimed at destabilising existing positions and well-rehearsed moves (...), as that difference that disorients the very idea of the limit’.8 In this process of meta-mimesis, Bolsonarist communicative strategies include tactics of memetic disruption via iteration and replication, where claims from the left are imitated, inverted, de-framed, and reframed to banalize, downplay, and ultimately erase their opponents’ claims for social justice. These two widely different approaches recall Walter Benjamin’s meditation on whether radical culture could exist in contested political scenarios:9 we should ask ourselves not only what politics art (and in our case memes) represents, but the political conditions of its production, as well as its reproduction and circulation.10

As a form, memes appear particularly well-suited to take on controversial issues or polarizing claims by exaggerating them or turning them into entertaining ‘discursive fragments’,11 taking advantage of their popularity among young internet users in several social media and meme

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10 Fausto Neto, “Circulação: Trajetos Conceituais."
generating platforms. When we look specifically at the narrower genre of ‘humorous’ memes from Bolsonaro supporters, we often see memes promoting violence ‘for laughs’: for instance, making fun of city councilor Marielle Franco’s political assassination as a strategy for promoting and reinforcing Bolsonaro’s violent discourse—a discourse that has been normalized and sanctioned by large portions Brazilian society even after the electoral period.

Memeing Necropolitics

One of the main characteristics of Bolsonaro and his political allies’ electoral campaigns in 2018 was how they actively promoted a necropolitical discourse12 to win conservative supporters through overtly racist, misogynistic, homo/transphobic, anti-human-rights statements—reactions ranged from cheerful approval from his supporters to complete outrage from his opponents. According to Achille Mbembe, necropolitics is the sovereignty that resides in the power to ‘dictate who may live and who may die’, and the ‘material destruction of bodies and populations’ in a politics of ‘selective elimination’ or negation of bodies that the state machinery considers resistant or redundant to its workings and policies.13 By working with this concept from political philosophy in a communicative context, we see discourses that re-emphasize the promotion of erasure, dispossession, and death, and their integral function in political realities.

In Brazil, it can be argued that necropolitics has been a continuous political reality, especially from the perspective of racialized populations, since colonial times. However, in the 2018 elections Bolsonaro’s ‘necropolitical turn’ not only mirrored Brazil’s long history of Black and indigenous genocide, but also venerated practices of torture and institutional violence from the military dictatorship by re-articulating these practices against contemporary identity politics such as feminist, LGBTQIA+, human rights, and anti-racist social movements. There have been numerous articles about how Bolsonaro has used militaristic-nationalistic rhetoric as part of a ‘hybrid war’ to fully implement a death-glorifying state of systemic violence in which this necropolitics gained full expression in a communicative ‘war of maneuver’, to put it in Gramscian terms. This is best illustrated by tracing the circulation of a specific artefact which became a pivotal memetic device—a street sign created as part of mobilizations demanding justice for the political assassination of city councilor Marielle Franco. Studying this artifact demonstrates how the phenomenon of memetization, a hallmark of digital culture in the 2010s, functioned across necropolitical and anti-necropolitical discourses during the 2018 elections.


13 Mbembe, Necropolitics.
An Unsolved Murder

The unsolved political assassination of leftist Rio de Janeiro city councilor Marielle Franco and her driver Anderson Gomes, ambushed by armed militia on March 14th, 2018, is one of the most significant events of 2018 in Brazil that precipitated a memetic battle between conservatives and progressives. Marielle Franco has been touted by conservatives as the symbol of everything that was unwanted by their rising hegemony: an educated, democratically elected, Black, LGBTQIA+ woman from the favelas who was not afraid to denounce the effects of mass killings and ongoing human rights violations in poor areas of Rio de Janeiro controlled by paramilitary groups with strong links to the Bolsonaro family. In her short political life, Franco was able to connect feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements with the devastating effects of militarization and police action in favelas, deploying a decolonial feminist understanding of violence, class and gender inequality produced in a state of ‘colonial difference.’ But, to the surprise of her conservative political opponents, in her afterlife Franco became a martyr for all minorities who are victims of long-standing necropolitical practices of the Brazilian state, and an international symbol for anti-fascist resistance.

Fig. 1: September 14th, 2014, Cinelândia, Rio de Janeiro. Monica Benício, Marielle Franco’s widow, raises the Marielle Franco-street sign during a memorial act.

14 The militia in Rio de Janeiro is a well-established paramilitary group that controls territories in favelas and poor areas in the city and is strongly represented in local politics, the police force, and the judicial system. Jair Bolsonaro, his sons and far-right political allies are strongly connected to these groups, owing their political careers to the rise of the militias after the military dictatorship (1964-1985).


On September 14, 2018, when the first round of the general elections was in full swing, a memorial action was held in downtown Rio de Janeiro to honor Franco’s memory six months after her killing. During the event, a commemorative plaque in the form of a street sign ‘Rua Marielle Franco’\textsuperscript{18} was placed by her widow Monica Benício on top of an existing street sign in front of the City Council Chamber in Cinelândia square, downtown Rio de Janeiro. This symbolic gesture of Debordian \textit{détournement}, combined with the Black Panther fist gesture held up high, was witnessed by thousands of her supporters wearing T-shirts saying ‘Who killed Marielle Franco?’ and holding up protest material decrying Bolsonaro’s necropolitics. This received a lot of media attention in the press, as well as on social media. From this point on, the street sign circulated widely as a symbol of resistance and solidarity and would become a pivotal character in the ‘interdiscursive battle’ which I follow across several social media platforms (mainly Instagram and Twitter), meme generating sites, and meme repositories. Its appearance in both pro and anti-necropolitical discourses in the hashtags #MarielleMultiplica #MarielleVive and #MariellePeneira helps to unpack the process of \textit{memetization} as an intrinsic feature of this interdiscursive battle of antagonistic narratives in politics-at-large.

\textbf{Trophy Images}

\textit{Fig. 2.1: The meme-video—October 2nd, 2018, Amorim (left) and Silveira (right) film themselves taking down the Marielle Franco-street sign. Note the ‘thug life’ dark glasses filter and Amorim’s clenched fist as a Bolsonarist gesture.}

\textsuperscript{18} The original ‘Rua Marielle Franco’ street sign follows the exact design of street signs in Rio, where many streets are named after martyrs or important historical figures. The sign was created and installed by a lesbian activist and anarchist photographer working under the pseudonym Ana Archis, and became a symbol of resistance and disobedience, a cry of ‘You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us’. It was meant to be used at the exact place of her killing in a location near downtown Rio, where the first memorial acts were held in her memory in late March 2018. It wasn’t until this event on September 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2018 where the street sign became ubiquitous in all actions regarding Marielle Franco and the struggles she represented. \textit{Arquivo Compa}, https://www.arquivocompa.org/colecoes/placa-rua-marielle-franco/.
Fig. 2.2: The image-trophy —October 3rd, 2018, Silveira (left) and Amorim (right) tear up the sign in a political rally in Rio de Janeiro. Note the yellow and green colors of the Brazilian flag used to signify patriotism.

Two weeks after its placement, the street sign was removed by Marielle’s political opponents Daniel Silveira and Rodrigo Amorim, two of Bolsonaro’s political allies who were at that point running for state and federal office. Their act of removal was filmed in a 30-second video with Silveira’s and Amorim’s electoral campaign graphics and published on meme sites where dozens of Bolsonarist memes can be found. The video ends with both candidates holding the removed sign with the ‘dark glasses’ filter (which meme fans recognize as ‘thug life’ or ‘deal with it’) accusing thousands of Marielle’s supporters of vandalism while promoting themselves as doing ‘public good for the benefit of God and Brazil’.

The next day, Silveira and Amorim tore up the street sign in a political rally, exhibiting it as a war trophy in front of cheering crowds. Viral photographs of the two muscled white men wearing Bolsonaro T-shirts and holding the torn sign circulated widely in the press and quickly became symbolic of the progressive x conservative narrative. This ‘trophy-image’ of tearing up the name of a Black woman in public recalls horrific scenes of public whipping of Black enslaved people in public squares during colonial times, images of which are deeply entrenched in the subconscious of former slave societies like Brazil. Seeing the torn sign for the first time felt as if they were killing Marielle Franco once again. The image crystallizes the narrative and semiotic battle between the progressive side that stands for a politics of care, justice and solidarity, and the conservative side that champions a politics of death and elimination of ‘undesirables’, using symbolic actions and their resulting images in a strategy of dispossession and dehumanization. In the article ‘Necropolitical Screens’, Marina Gržinić provides a chilling definition of what trophy images become in what I call a process of de-humanizing memetization:

What is then the emblematic image of the digital necrocapitalist mode of production? (…) I argue that the emblematic image of the time we live in is the *trophy image*. It implies that the historical formats of global capitalism ground their regime of affect, vision, and perception not in the space-time paradigm but in the violent and direct modes of governmentality and dispossession.²⁰

Trophy images such as the one in Fig. 2 are made in, this case, with a trophy body. In the same article, Gržinić uses Perera’s definition of trophy bodies, which I find pertinent to cite in full:

According to Perera,²¹ trophy bodies are characterized by their condition of being seized, caught, captured, affixed, and immobilized within the violent regimes of visibility and power. As they are crafted within an order of bodies ‘as political flesh and affect,’ trophy bodies are the product of complex economies (visual, discursive, aesthetic, and scientific) that situate them as a specific genre among an exemplary brand of the nonhuman.²²

![Fig. 3: October 4th, 2018 - A Black women’s collective Nós, Mulheres da Periferia (We, Women from the Periphery) posts a counter-meme on Facebook. The post reads ‘A photo has been circulating of two PSL candidates with a street sign in honor of city councilor Marielle Franco, broken. Of all images, we prefer this one. We continue. #mariellepresente’. Note the comment on the post with a link for the crowdfunding for printing and distributing ‘Signs for Marielle’. Author’s translation.](image)

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²⁰ Gržinić, “Necropolitical Screens,” 104.
#MarielleMultiplica

Turning Marielle Franco into a trophy body via that memetic display of dehumanization did not remain uncontested. In an immediate response to the torn sign, the satirical left-wing online newspaper Sensacionalista decided to crowdfund the production of one hundred ‘Rua Marielle Franco’ street signs like the one that was torn down to be distributed in a ‘flash mob’ memorial act in Cinelândia square on October 14th, 2018, seven months after Marielle’s death. An Instagram post by a feminist grassroots movement (Fig. 3) reads ‘they tear up one, we create one hundred’. The initial crowdfunding exceeded this modest number, and with the help of digital art platform Revista Caju and independent printer Sidnei Balbino more than three thousand signs were distributed by volunteers in a direct action that came to be known as #MarielleMultiplica, or ‘Multiplying Marielle’. Thousands of supporters showed up to express their grief and rage against Bolsonaro’s necropolitical discourse, hoping to mobilize voters for the opposing candidate while continuing to demand justice for the murder.

On the day of the action, Sensacionalista posted guidelines for the action, such as not flaunting the sign in public transportation on the way to the demonstration site and offering onsite pro-bono legal support for protesters in the case of violent reactions from Bolsonaro supporters. During the rally, thousands of people held up the Marielle Franco-street sign simultaneously, creating a spectacular landscape of blue signs that instantly flooded social media and hit the pages of many national and international newspapers. Hundreds of people and celebrities such as musical icons Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque, who were also targets of Bolsonaro’s ‘cultural war’, posted pictures of themselves on Instagram holding the sign under the hashtags #MarielleMultiplica, #MarielleVive (Marielle keeps on living) and #MariellePresente (Marielle is present). Soon enough, even Bolsonaro’s opponent Fernando Haddad and other politicians from the Worker’s Party (PT) appropriated the sign as one of the symbols of their campaign.

23 See https://revistacaju.com.br/.
24 See Balbino’s Instagram profile https://www.instagram.com/sbalbino/.
Fig. 4: Top Row: Post by revista Caju asking for people to tag their pictures #marielleMultiplica on images of the street sign everywhere signed ‘love is power’; Press image of the #MarielleMultiplica action on Sensacionalista’s Facebook page; Instagram posts with #MarielleMultiplica Celebrity endorsements. Bottom row: Website ruamariellefranco.com.br and a post by a Brazilian abroad showing the sign we hung outside the Brazilian embassy in Stockholm on October 29th, 2018.

In the days that followed, requests for thousands of street signs came from many cities in Brazil—as well as internationally by emerging anti-Bolsonaro movements organized by Brazilians living abroad—flooded Balbino’s inbox, wishing to be part of simultaneous demonstrations around the world. I was one of them. Through a link to a public folder with downloadable files provided by Balbino himself, my friends and I in Stockholm proceeded to print the plaque, create public demonstrations, and make impromptu shrines in front of Brazilian embassies on election day. We both wanted to keep the memory of Marielle Franco alive by memetizing this action (imitating the gesture of holding the sign, making our own iterations and replicating the content) as much as possible and try to turn votes against Bolsonaro at the last minute. At the same time, the ruamariellefranco.com website was set up by volunteers in the spirit of copyleft to facilitate downloads, posts, and mapping the action across the world.

At this point, Franco, who was largely unknown to most people outside of Rio de Janeiro, quickly became an international anti-Bolsonaro symbol of care, justice, and intersectional
solidarity, which helped to consolidate many previously loosely organized groups with a common agenda. Marielle street signs pop up in virtually every anti-Bolsonaro demonstration to this day.

Fig. 5: Left: @Designativista — images of the Instagram feed containing Marielle’s effigy repeated in several illustrations and graphics, as well as illustrations where it is possible to see a cutout of Monica Benicio and a Marielle Franco-street sign. Right: Banner by @coleralegria with Marielle’s effigy and ‘Stop killing Black Lives’. Source: Instagram.

All throughout the election, #MarielleMultiplica signs were one of several examples of visual activism and creative cultural resistance which took over our lives on social media and on the streets. Besides the street sign, countless illustrations of Marielle Franco’s effigy were posted on the Instagram profile @designativista, started by a newly formed collective of graphic designers who decided to use their talent and resources to help with the political mobilization effort. Marielle Franco, possessing a stately appearance and distinct visual style, was established as a pop cultural icon whose image was imitated, iterated, and replicated in hundreds of graphic variations. These include illustrations, graphics, poster art, and memes created to be shared, reposted, remixed and Insta-storied all throughout the election, and which keep reappearing on every anniversary of her death ever since.

Other temporary social aggregations such as the visual activists @coleralegria were part of a mosaic of grassroots mobilizations that produced protest textile banners collectively through workshops, dialogues, and debates, incorporating images and messages about Marielle Franco and other persons executed by the State, militias, and the police. Seen

together, these movements can be said to be part of collective as well as connective actions.\textsuperscript{29} Despite the different forms of production and circulation of all these initiatives, they shared a memetic quality in their outputs where images, icons, graphics, and words re-emerged repeatedly as imitative iterations of the same messages in protection of those lives who were already in Bolsonaro and his supporters’ line of (rhetorical) fire.

**Post-Election**

![Image of Carnival signs](image)

*Fig. 6: Carnivalesque inversions: Carnival goers create new variations of Marielle Street signs, one with the lyrics of the winning samba school of the year with Marielle as a theme (top image), and tearing up a sign with the name of Rio de Janeiro’s governor, a Bolsonaro ally who was also present on stage at the rally where the sign was torn up.*

In the post-electoral period, the Marielle Franco street-sign has resurfaced again and again. In the carnival of 2019 right after the presidential elections, Marielle Franco was the theme of the winner of the year’s carnival parade, and her effigy was printed large on flags and dancers in Brazil’s main cultural event. On the street, carnival goers embraced the symbol of the street sign, engaging in memetic disruption by displaying a torn sign with the state governor’s name, who was also present at the infamous rally. One of Brazil’s most famous conceptual artists, Cildo Meirelles, stamped the words ‘Who killed Marielle Franco?’\textsuperscript{30} on bank notes to put them back into circulation, a media intervention he had already done with the name of journalists killed by the military dictatorship decades before, thus making a chilling connection between the necropolitics of today and yesterday. As illustrated in Fig. 6, Meirelles’ intervention comes from another regime of artivism in which the relationship between art, media, and politics during the military dictatorship in the 1970s included the politicization of media via artistic interventions. In the late 2010s and early 2020s, we see


\textsuperscript{30} After Marielle Franco’s assassins had been identified and jailed (one of them was actually killed by the militias before his capture by the police), this phrase has now been transformed into ‘Who ordered the killing of Marielle Franco?’. Investigations for finding those who mandated the killing has been stopped and the political crime is yet unsolved.
another vector: politics gains an aesthetic dimension via media, and images themselves become the site of political tensions and disputed territories. Marielle Franco’s street sign traverses these two regimes, and even becomes a memetic piece of site-specific art. Congresswomen have placed Marielle Franco-street signs in front of their offices in Brasília, they have been scattered in urban and rural areas, they pop up as decorations in private spaces, as murals in countless street corners, and in impromptu shrines. Abroad, a park in Paris and a street in Berlin are renamed after Marielle, making her one of the few Brazilian politicians ever to be publicly recognized outside of Brazil in this manner. But on the home front, murals and graffiti with Marielle’s effigy and street signs keep getting vandalized and defaced, with posts of their vandalization being shown by supporters from both sides: one decrying it as a necropolitical act, the other further entrenching necropolitical narratives of revenge and dispossession.

Fig. 7: Post by the alternative media outlet Jornalistas Livres, days after Marielle Franco’s assassination in March 2018. The post reads ‘In the years of censorship (in the military dictatorship 1964-1985), fear and silence ensued after the AI-5 (a constitutional act that repealed freedom of press and freedom of expression in 1968), Cildo Meirelles became known for his work stamping bank notes with the explicit anonymous message “Who killed Herzog” (journalist Vladimir Herzog was a martyr during the military dictatorship [captured and tortured by the military in 1972]), Meirelles showed his vision of art as a medium for the democratization of information and society. In his works of the period, Meirelles usually wrote ‘the reproduction of this piece is free and open to anyone’, emphasizing the problematic aspects of private authorship, market-driven and elitization of art.’

31 Beiguelman, “Políticas da Imagem.”
32 Parc Marielle-Franco was inaugurated in September 2019 in the 10th arrondissement in Paris, and Marielle-Franco Strasse was inaugurated in late 2019 in Neukölln in Berlin. Countless other symbolic renaming of subway stations, parks and streets appear around the world especially in 2019, mostly orchestrated by collectives and resistance groups of Brazilians abroad. See Arquivo Compa and França, 2019.
33 The Marielle Franco Institute, initiated by her family members, has since created a network of collectives, groups and activists and strengthens the ‘Marielle Agenda’ which supports political candidacies by Black and minority women to increasingly occupy political spaces and continue Marielle’s legacy. See www.institutomariellefranco.com.
Retaliations

![Memes by Bolsonaro supporters, with the street sign and image of the pothole street as a metaphor for her assassination with several gunshots on her ambushed car in Rio de Janeiro on March 14th, 2018.](image)

As a response to the #MarielleMultiplica action and to Marielle Franco’s worldwide fame, Bolsonaro supporters circulated countless memes of Marielle Franco’s effigy studded with gun shots using the metaphor of the ‘sieve’ (#MariellePeneira) to signify her body and her car studded with gunshots. In one of these purposely crude memes is a low-res image of a street full of potholes with the ‘Rua Marielle Franco’ sign clumsily pasted on top of it. It resituates the street sign at the crime scene, as if gunning her down again and again. The pothole can also be synonymous with a grave, or several graves, of all those buried at the hands of state-commissioned and state-sanctioned violence, with the complicity of passive onlookers who guarantee impunity for the culprits and, like the crowds watching the sign being torn up, cheer the violence on. Other memes used well-known meme genres such as the ‘three-part dialogue’ to further ridicule and dispossess Marielle Franco’s image within the logic of the necrocapitalistic meme economy. Examples include a remixed Marielle effigy pasted on top of a shop that sells sieves; the most common instances use image-macros that act as discursive fragments in the overall discourse of memetization.
Fig. 9: Meme found on the Brazilian meme generating website www.gerarmemes.com.br — It reads ‘Several people are murdered every day and no one says anything. Stop annoying us with the nagging Marielle. She will not rise from the dead.’

Against the #MarielleVive (‘Marielle keeps on living’) hashtag which is commonly used to signify keeping her memory alive, #MarielleViveEnchendoSaco (#Marielle keeps annoying us) was used in several memes as a way of saying that her death was a nag and overplayed in the media. In the most semiotically loaded meme in this series, we see a white middle-aged woman wearing a #MarielleViveEnchendoSaco T-shirt overlaid with the ‘thug life’ dark glasses filter, alongside a text containing several anti-culture, racist, and pro-torture texts. This condenses the most radical messages of necropolitics seen in pro-Bolsonaro media in a single image. Other memes argue that leftist supporters profited from a dead Black woman’s body for propaganda, or banalize Marielle’s death as a ‘common death’ like the hundreds of Black persons daily killed by police violence. The list of memetic dispossession and dehumanization goes on. While the Marielle Franco mobilizations used memetic actions as symbols of her martyrdom and claims for justice against impunity for the assassination of Black and HBTQIA+ lives, the memetic inversions, disruptions, and meta-mimetic texts of the far-right became a medium of revenge against the left at the expense of Marielle Franco as a disposable, not grievable, body. Regardless of the controversy surrounding the symbolic street sign, Marielle Franco Street was finally made official in downtown Rio de Janeiro in 2021: a sign that Silveira and Amorim cannot tear down as easily.

Fig. 10.1: Daniel Silveira and Rodrigo Amorim posing with the framed fragment of the Marielle Franco-street sign they tore up in public in 2018, celebrating Silveira’s release from prison in April 2022. @ rodrigoamorim.

Fig. 10.2: Silveira supporters paste a plaque on the official Marielle Franco-street sign in Cinelândia, downtown Rio. The sign reads: ‘Federal Deputy Daniel Silveira (1982) — Heterosexual white man, police officer, and human rights defender. Unfairly sent to jail on February 16th [2021] for defending our liberties.’
Nonetheless, Silveira and Amorim, now known as ‘the guys who tore up the street sign’, never left the interdiscursive battle. Elected with a record-high number of votes as a state deputy for Rio de Janeiro, Amorim still appears in press images and tweets with half of the Marielle Franco-street sign ‘trophy-image’ framed on his office wall hanging between portraits of Bolsonaro and machine guns. In 2021, Silveira—the most truculent of the two—was accused of corruption and breach of order for making anti-democratic claims against members of the Brazilian Supreme Court on social media. During his trial, Silveira’s supporters pasted a street sign with his name on top of Marielle Franco’s official street sign, demanding justice for his imprisonment and perversely mimicking Benício’s symbolic memorial gesture years before. Silveira was later seen in countless photographs at an infamous Independence Day rally on September 7th, 2021, holding up his own street sign in a gesture of victory and hashtagged #somostodosdanielsilveira (#wearealldanielsilveira, an appropriation of the #je suis memes). A few supporters were visible, appropriating the memetic gesture of holding up the sign with flexed biceps, but this effort did not manage to replicate the thousands of signs of #MarielleMultiplica years before. Sadly, an anti-Bolsonaro activist infiltrated the crowd holding up the Marielle Franco-street sign and was beat up by Silveira’s supporters. Here, this memetic action embodies the real violent effects of this semiotic battle of care versus violence, social justice and necropolitics. In this period, murals honoring Marielle Franco in several Brazilian cities were vandalized by Bolsonaro supporters, then cleaned up again, and vandalized again, and again.

Fig. 9: Marielle meme depicting tearing up Daniel Silveira’s sign on Reddit. ‘Daniel Silveira convicted. Elected after breaking the street sign of someone killed by the militia. Nothing like a day after the Other.’ Note the word ‘AI-5’ referring to the institutional act of 1968 which prohibited freedom of expression and of the press in 1968. This is a signifier of the pro-torture and anti-freedom rhetorics of Bolsonaro supporters. The AI-5 legitimized the torture and killing of dozens of journalists, cultural workers and dissidents during the military dictatorship (1964-1985).
When Silveira was finally convicted in early 2022, hundreds of memes with an illustration of Marielle Franco tearing up Silveira’s street sign flooded the feeds, showing yet another memetic inversion, de-framing, and reframing in the pervasive form of ‘payback culture’. But when Bolsonaro signed an edict absolving Silveira, the memetization of the street sign continued with Congressmen protesting the President’s decision by holding up Marielle Franco-street signs in plenary sessions. What happened to Amorim, the guy with the framed broken sign in his office? In July 2022 he was accused of transphobic crime and death threats against Benny Briolly, a Black trans city councilor who needed to flee the country to protect herself from sharing Marielle Franco’s fate. Allegedly, the deputy insulted Briolly in a public plenary session in an enraged speech, which hopefully compromises his political chances in running for the next election.
Making Sense of Memetization

A few patterns emerge out of this interdiscursive battle for and against necropolitics, visible in the contested memory of a Black lesbian feminist leftist politician through the pivotal memetic object of the street sign. These patterns include dynamics of quality, transparency, authorship, and aspects of a ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ which corroborate both the progressive and the conservative narratives. While the graphics in #MarielleMultiplica and @designativista present a high artistic standard with high-resolution graphics, Bolsonarist memes often have a crude ‘deep-fried’ style which mostly used ready-made meme templates from sites such as makeyourmeme.com, imgflip.com, gerarmemes.com.br, and others. In terms of production, while the progressives tend to create original graphics and artworks such as the street sign itself and the @designativista graphic design pieces, the extreme-right uses automated technical protocols and readymade templates of rapid production within well-established and easily recognizable meme genres, well-suited for high-speed retaliations. These are optimal for messages that promote more shock value and violence ‘for laughs’, disguising this violence as humorous memes. This contributes to online radicalization into far-right extremism, as already detected in several national contexts.36

Bolsonarist authors are concealed by proxy names which obscure any evidence of a human backstage in the production of the memes. By using pre-fabricated meme generating protocols, a kind of digital equivalent of fast food, all we are allowed to see is the frontstage. This shows that the modus operandi of Bolsonaro supporters builds on a unified collective identity, opacity and remixing, the opposite of the originality, individuality, quality and transparency of the progressives. In fact, one of the derogatory denominations for Bolsonaristas by the left is the metaphor of ‘gado’ or ‘cattle’ which is represented in an entire category of memes that differentiate the ‘ignorant far-right’ from the ‘critical left’. There is equally an over-production of memes of far-righters accusing the left of ‘mimimi’: a criticism of being oversensitive and pouting, especially regarding identity politics and the rhetoric of solidarity and care. In all of this, we see the triumph of the far-right’s disdain for identity politics and their insistence on dismantling democratic institutions, opposite the left’s efforts at self-defense from this conservative hegemony.

By contrast, in many progressive Instagram posts under the #MarielleVive and #MarielleMultiplica hashtags, one sees both backstage and frontstage images of Marielle’s supporters. For example, posts by Sidnei Balbino, a collaborator in the #MarielleMultiplica action, depict him proudly showing the printed plaques in the print shop, with a clear identification of those who create the actions and those who participate in it, as in the

memetic gestures of celebrity endorsements. I consider the transparency of the process expressed in this backstage visibility as an act of strong vulnerability, showing that care and non-violence is a strength of grassroots mobilizations.

This strength is inversely perceived as an Achilles heel by the extreme-right, and opportunistically subverted as a tactic in this ‘hybrid war’. The extreme-right reacts by substituting messages of care with messages of violence, deploying clumsy metaphors and inside jokes or diminishing the importance of this political crime by erasure or dispossession, questioning Marielle’s political reputation, and worse, re-enacting the crime scene as a metaphor for state-sanctioned violence. Perhaps one of the most gruesome memes occurred deep into the COVID-19 pandemic, where Marielle memes were created using the Ghanaian coffin bearers. No analysis of memetization and necropolitics can be restricted to formal aspects, however, as this would itself be an act of depoliticization. As Beiguelman has suggested, the image should be seen as a memetic battlefield that reconfigures the relationship between the street and the internet. Such memes lay bare the extent of Brazil’s necropolitical state, which has overseen more than 600,000 COVID deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fig. 14: Several anti-Marielle memes. Note the use of typical meme templates.

After the ‘Memetic Turn’

Before the ‘memetic turn’ that peaked in Brazil in 2018, electoral periods in Brazil and elsewhere were spectacular episodic events that relied on specific media genres. But after the ‘memetic turn’ electoral campaigning strategies continue long after elections are over. Actions such as #MarielleMultiplica—though initiated in the heat of the electoral campaign through grassroots mobilizations—have survived the electoral period. They have either been subsumed into more permanent movements and cultural expressions or evolved into bigger mobilizations that are already conceived with the phenomenon of memetization in mind. Nonetheless, memetic communicative elements keep returning even within a more permanent state of necropolitics during the Bolsonaro administration as a way of both enforcing the normalization of violence in media discourses and against their relentless destructive memetization.

The interdiscursive battles on the internet, as seen in the memetization of necropolitics through the Marielle Franco-street sign, allow us to understand the extent to which memetic communication is an intrinsic part of necropolitical discourse and plays a part in retrenching discourses of social justice. It also sheds light on how social media reconfigure the limits of representation and our conception of the ‘human’ in digital visual cultures that take advantage of meme sub-cultures. It is important to understand the power of mobilization generated by actions of creative cultural resistance like the #MarielleMultiplica action. But, equally, we must assess their fragility, efficacy, and whether they can resist efforts of depoliticization over time.

The street sign as a memetic device enables the extension of biological deaths into a productive symbolic ‘after-life.’ It offers opportunities for mourning, affect, solidarity, identification, and mobilization in the light of longstanding histories of oppression, thus helping to form a digital necroresistance. However, such opportunities also need to be assessed not only as a symbolic gesture of catharsis, but also as an enabler of agency and change, despite the risk of depoliticizing the core issue.

Such depoliticization can be observed, for instance, in the commercialization of the street sign in user-generated merchandise. The Marielle Franco-street sign is reproduced in countless objects on Amazon as a souvenir, which paradoxically contributes—despite its digital-capitalist form—to the continued visibility of the demands for justice. In a sense, such practices act as an extension of Marielle’s martyrdom beyond the activist impulse that started the movement. Curiously, in apolitical commercialized settings ‘activism’ already appears as a product category. On one e-commerce site, pairs of flip flops printed with both pro and anti-Bolsonaro

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38 Meireles, “A (Pós)Vida Política de Marielle Franco”.
messages can be found. This further demonstrates the memetization of protest messages and political ideologies circulating in everyday life: why restrict oneself to only half of the buyers when businesses can profit from activist trends for everyone? The fact that one producer prints merchandise that satisfies all sides of the political spectrum may be good for business, but also points to an emptying out of these political messages, reifying all that can be memeified as image-trophies within a digital necroeconomy. We must ask, then: does hypermemetization still serve the cause?

Nevertheless, in Brazil’s 2022 elections, the Marielle Franco-street sign will probably continue to be held up high as a symbol for democratic resistance. Four years after #MarielleMultiplica, the movement is now much more robust. Several Black trans politicians have been elected to different state constituencies, the left has had time to reorganize, and the Marielle Franco Institute is promoting the ‘Agenda Marielle.’ This supports 81 intersectional political candidacies for office in order to multiply Marielle Franco’s legacy in a far-ranging political movement that is meant to change politics from the inside: not only speaking Marielle, but ‘doing Marielle’. Enabled by material struggle, but also the dynamics of memetization, a simple street sign from an anarchist artist enraged by a brutal political murder has, in fact, helped this movement forward.

References


