

Marielle Franco Transcending

14 March 2018, 9 p.m., the neighbourhood of Estácio, Rio de Janeiro. As she was leaving the event “Jovens Negras Movendo as Estruturas” (Young Black Women Mobilizing Structures), organized by her administration, city councillor Marielle Franco and her driver, Anderson Gomes, were shot dead in a politically motivated attack that shocked Brazil and the world. To this day, more than five years later, investigations into the case have failed to solve key questions such as: who ordered the hit? And how is this episode connected with the most powerful militia groups in Brazil?

Marielle had the fifth-highest vote count in the 2016 city councillor elections in Rio de Janeiro, having received 46,502 votes. Running as an LGBTQIA+ black woman from a *favela* and a champion of human rights, she built her campaign around two slogans: “I am because we are”, drawing on the African philosophy of Ubuntu, and “WomanRace”, insisting that the intersections of gender and race are crucial to doing politics – and this must come from bodies and perspectives that are different to those that have historically dominated decision-making.

During her 15 months in office at the city council, Marielle introduced bills that sought to fight forms of structural violence and inequality in society, and organized public hearings and meetings that filled the halls

of the chamber with a vibrant and diverse crowd of black women, LG-BTQIA+ people, and residents of the *periferia* (poorer city outskirts), with the intention of giving this space back to the people.

News of the murder spread rapidly, provoking a mix of disbelief and pain, and it was soon among the top trending topics on social media and in the headlines of every news portal.

The following day, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets and social networks all over Brazil and around the world, to utter the first cry for justice and offer the first consoling embraces in what would be a long period of collective grieving. Weeks of crowded protests, overflowing with outrage and revolt, followed.

As she carried so many political agendas in her body and so many practices of inclusion and empowerment in her way of doing politics, Marielle became a giant, capable of transcending territorial, aesthetic, and ideological boundaries.

nco Street Boundaries

Anielle Franco,
Luna Costa,
Marcelle Decothé,
Rafael Rezende

The threat that such colossal strength could pose for the conservative, colonial, patriarchal, elitist, white supremacist political project, which was assuming a hegemonic position in Brazil at the time caused fear in the leaders of this political project. Just a few hours after the brutal tragedy, they initiated an aggressive strategy of misinformation on social media, spreading fake news and hateful content, with the purpose of relativizing and even justifying the murder of a sitting councillor.

“Taking my daughter’s life wasn’t enough for them, they wanted to kill her a second time by damaging her memory”, said Marielle’s mother, Marinete Silva, cofounder of the Instituto Marielle Franco. This attempt to put an end to Marielle’s work and legacy was not successful. Alongside an effective legal and communication strategy – which identified the main authors of deceitful and violent publications and held them to account – in recent years, we have seen the emergence of a range of diverse actions that defend Marielle’s memory.





The first street sign

During one of the first protests on 20 March 2018, an independent activist, who chose to remain anonymous, carried out an intervention in Marielle's honour: she replaced the sign bearing the name of the plaza outside the city council with an official-looking street sign saying "Rua Marielle Franco" (Marielle Franco Street).

This tactic of renaming public places is often used as a way of commemorating personalities who have dedicated their lives to the struggle for a more just world, as well as removing the prestige traditionally given to dictatorial and authoritarian politicians. It is a gesture of urban poetry that claims the right to the city and to memory.

Photos of this action were circulated on social networks, and the street sign remained in place for the six months that followed.

The authoritarian response

30 September 2018, 4 p.m., Rio de Janeiro. Straight after the "Ele Não" (Not Him) mobilization organized against Bolsonaro by groups of women on the eve of the election, causing streets all over Brazil to be flooded with massive protests. Two congressional candidates and a candidate in the gubernatorial race, all from the far-right, were holding a campaign rally in Petrópolis (a city where the members of the former Brazilian Imperial Court still live), among hateful cries and fascist salutes from their supporters.

The enthusiasm of the crowd, made up mostly of white men, hit its peak when the candidates raised the broken sign of "Marielle Franco Street" (which they had torn down from the plaza the previous morning) and yelled: "This shit is over! It's Bolsonaro's time!" As expected, the video showing the sign being snapped in half went viral on social media, fuelled by the outrage of those who felt offended, and by the hate speech from those candidates' supporters.



The counter-strategy

Hours later, an online campaign was launched by *Sensacionalista*, a Brazilian satirical political publication, to raise funds for “100 signs for Marielle”. The campaign sought to raise 2,000 Brazilian reais, and in less than 24 hours, it received more than 40,000 BRL, thanks to donations of 1,691 people. We set up a WhatsApp group to organize the delivery of the street signs, supported by Sidnei Balbino’s printing studio, the studio where the first sign had been made and which offered to print all the new signs at cost price. Until the day before the action, we had reservations regarding the possible risks, considering the tense atmosphere that prevailed in Brazil at the time, but we pushed on.

We carried out the action, handing out 1,000 street signs to the people who had queued up. After giving each person a sign, we asked that they go to an area marked on the ground with masking tape, which formed the shape of the letters spelling MARIELLE – to form a human mosaic which appeared on the cover of every newspaper the following day.

From this moment on, the “Marielle Franco Street” sign became a transcendent symbol of resistance and was reproduced in several different formats, from giant flags to intricate embroideries. During the historic 2019 Carnival parade by the Mangueira samba school, themed: “the story that history doesn’t tell”, the same independent activist who made the original sign produced copies of it in a green-and-pink version – the colours of Mangueira – and handed them out among the audience and the dancers. At the pride parade that same year, the sign was printed in rainbow colours and made into a gigantic flag. The same signs were placed on the office doors of progressive members of the Chamber of Deputies.

Transcending boundaries

A year after Marielle's death, thanks to the Chama organization – an agency/network for publicizing and organizing around political causes formed by many of Mari's friends – we launched the website *ruamariellefranco.com.br*. Through the website, anyone could print their own street sign and register its location on the virtual map, which showed their spread. During this campaign, more than 30,000 signs were printed. The campaign ceased to be purely symbolic and took on concrete forms. Organized groups all over the world started working to exert influence on legislative bodies and officially name city streets and squares after Marielle – from a garden in Paris to a metro station in Buenos Aires. The Comitê Ruas Marielle Franco (Marielle Franco Streets Committee), formed by Brazilian activists, most of whom were black women, started to band together in Berlin with the intent of renaming the street where the Brazilian Embassy is located, gaining the attention of networks in other countries with the same goal. These collectives meet up in different parts of different cities to carry out the symbolic renaming ceremony, and use these meetings to create an inclusive space for political empowerment.

Instituto Marielle Franco

Many of these initiatives have received support, validation, and encouragement from the Instituto Marielle Franco, an organization that was established by Marielle's family with the mission of inspiring, connecting, and empowering black, LGBTQIA+, and marginalized women to continue the work of forcing structural change. The Instituto maintains the website *ruamariellefranco.com.br* and functions as the main distributor of Marielle Franco Street signs in Brazil and around the world. Based on the understanding that Marielle's legacy is manifold and cannot be contained within one organization, the institute acts collectively, and its core principles express the work that her family has been doing since 14 March 2018: to fight for justice, defend Marielle's memory, foster her legacy, and water the seeds of her activism – hoping to help cultivate this broader movement.

Marielle the giant

The story we have shared here illustrates how the authoritarian attempts of erasure and violence against Marielle had the opposite effect, as they were confronted with a counter-strategy based on the principles of scalability, replicability, and creativity, helping to strengthen Marielle's image as an icon for people and movements in Brazil and abroad. We hope that the lessons we learned from this experience can inspire resistance movements and give strength to the struggle for rights everywhere.

Illustrations

- p. 103: The original Marielle Franco Street sign, independent activist, 2018.
- p. 104: Black women occupying the plenary seats of the City Council, Naldinho Lourenço, 2017.
- p. 105: Marielle and guests at the event "Awô to our ancestors", with leaders of African religions in the Chamber of Deputies, Luna Costa, 2017.
- p. 107: Human mosaic creating the name MARIELLE with the plaques, Francisco Proner, 2018.

Further reading

institutomariellefranco.org

