

ARTIVISM, AFFECT AND BRAZIL'S NECROTRANSPOLITICS

Transphobic violence and audiovisual celebrations of travesti and trans life



Ativismo, afetos e necrotranspolíticas do Brasil: Violência
transfóbica e celebrações audiovisuais da vida travesti e
trans

Alvaro (Carmen) Jarrín
College of the Holy Cross

Sociology and Anthropology Department | Worcester, Estados Unidos
ajarrin@holycross.edu | ORCID iD: 0000-0001-5963-089X

Resumo

Este artigo descreve o poder afetivo do ativismo dentro do movimento trans e travesti no Brasil. Defendo que, ao utilizar a expressão artística, particularmente a performance musical, para fazer ativismo político, artistas como Linn da Quebrada e Jup do Bairro, entre muitas outras, são capazes de inverter a violência geralmente sofrida por indivíduos de gênero variante. Seus vídeos musicais, letras e performances são uma resposta poderosa e eficaz à "necrotranspolítica" (Benevides, 2022) do Estado brasileiro, e toda a violência estrutural que ela implica, pois permitem criar espaços alternativos de esperança e novos horizontes políticos.

Palavras-chave

ativismo; política; transgênero; violência; música.

Abstract

This article describes the affective power of activism within the trans and travesti social movement in Brazil. I argue that by using artistic expression, particularly musical performance, for the aims of political activism, artists like Linn da Quebrada and Jup do Bairro, among many others, are able to invert the violence usually suffered by gender nonconforming individuals. Their music videos, lyrics and performances are a powerful and effective response to the "necrotranspolitics" (Benevides, 2022) of the Brazilian State, and all the structural violence it entails, because they allow these artists to craft alternative spaces of hope and new political horizons.

Keywords

activism; politics; transgender; violence; music.



Artivism is the use of artistic expression for the explicit purpose of political activism – art has always had the potential to transform society, but artivism makes that goal an express aim of artistic production. Many social movements around the world have adopted artivism as a formidable way to communicate their messages to a wider audience, embracing both the sensory impact of art and its pedagogical nature. Artivism targets both the hearts and minds of people, moving them affectively and inviting them to join a particular cause. For oppressed social groups that have had a difficult time getting their message across to a majoritarian public, artivism can cut through the noise and craft a more receptive audience. Artivism can also reenergize the social movement itself, inspiring people within the movement to keep up the good fight by creating iconic representations of the movement itself, which helps people identify with the collective aims of social transformation and the sacrifices that have to be made in its name.

The AIDS crisis in the United States, for example, inspired a wide variety of activist projects (although they did not use that term to describe themselves), from the AIDS Memorial Quilt to Tony Kushner’s Tony Award-winning play, *Angels in America*. In a context where the U.S. government was largely ignoring the AIDS crisis, and society was just reacting to the epidemic with a renewed stigma against queer people, activist projects became political venues to fight back against denial, ignorance, and shame. According to the sociologist and former ACT UP activist, Deborah Gould, the LGBTQIA+ movement itself had a difficult time in the early years of the AIDS epidemic, as people were overwhelmed with grief, fear, and anxiety. As an organization, ACT UP was able to transform those paralyzing feelings into anger, mobilizing queer activists to engage in acts of civil disobedience, which frequently borrowed from artistic expressions. For instance, the iconic political poster with a pink triangle and the message “Silence=Death,” which became a

rallying cry for ACT UP, began as a guerrilla art project in New York City but spread quickly as people found it was a politically effective way to communicate the urgency of the situation. ACT UP was similarly inspired by forms of guerrilla theater when they staged a “die-in” at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, in New York City, in order to protest the Catholic Church’s opposition to the use of condoms to curb the spread the AIDS. These political initiatives cultivated a new “emotional habitus” that shed the respectability politics of earlier forms of LGBT activism and engaged in a more radical and defiant sexual politics, creating a strong sense of community among activists and inspiring them to keep up the pressure for social change (Gould, 2009).

Artivism is a formidable tool for social movements because it fosters “structures of feeling or affective states [that] can shake one out of deeply grooved patterns of thinking and feeling and allow for new imaginings” (Gould, 2009:27). If politics is the art of the possible, then artivism is the politics of the impossible – artivism traffics in political utopias and helps people *feel* that a different future is attainable. As Jorge Ignacio Cortinãs reminds us, following Marcuse:

The “largely” autonomous characteristic of the aesthetic dimension becomes in itself a protest of existing social relations because it demonstrates, first of all, that a rupture with the status quo is possible... In this rupture Art estranges us from the current, stultifying reality - it doesn’t show us but transports us into new, wider horizons (Cortinãs, 2022).

These “new, wider horizons” are particularly important for queer and trans social movements, because to fight for queer and trans rights is to imagine a radically different society beyond cisheteronormative standards. José Muñoz points out that “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on the potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Muñoz, 2009). Queerness and artivism, therefore, are modes of being in the world that seem to be intimately invested in envisioning new futures, and thus queer artivism – particularly Black queer artivism – is a locus of

pure political potential, one that resists a politics of respectability or assimilation and instead insists on what Ashon Crawley calls an “otherwise.” The Black radical traditions that propose alternatives to the anti-Blackness of racial capitalism, and the queer radical traditions that reimagine kinship, love, and belonging, come together through art and performance because it is in the artistic realm that we can be transported into these otherwise modalities of being (Crawley, 2020).

This article will examine Black trans and travesti activism in Brazil as a paradigmatic example of how doing politics through art calls into being new horizons and new political futures. The Brazilian context is particularly cruel towards gender nonconforming individuals, curtailing their opportunities for flourishing and exerting physical and structural violence on their bodies and identities. In the first section, I will examine the structural nature of transphobic violence in Brazil, and will point out how the government of Jair Bolsonaro reaffirms the most awful aspects what Bruna Benevides, echoing Achille Mbembe calls a “necrotranspolitics” – a political impulse to erase, exclude and obliterate Black trans and travesti life (Benevides, 2022). In the second section, I will analyze how Black Brazilian musicians who identify as trans and travesti make music that is joyful, rebellious, communal and which, most importantly, focuses on being alive as a form of resistance. The focus on joyful life, as opposed to death, is a very purposeful political tactic, one that seeks to counter the necrotranspolitics of the state with a defiant Black trans joy. Unlike American trans activism, which has unfortunately been too focused on mourning and remembering trans death (Westbrook, 2020), Black trans and travesti activism show a different path for denouncing the violence of transphobia and yet offers a more hopeful vision of the future for gender nonconforming individuals in Brazil.

Responding to Brazil’s Necrotranspolitics

Being openly gender nonconforming in Brazil means risking your life, every day, as you navigate public and private spaces. According to the National Association of Transsexuals and Travestis, ANTRA, hate crimes (including murders) against gender nonconforming folks rose drastically after Jair Bolsonaro's victory (Benevides and Nogueira, 2021), as his followers felt emboldened to follow up his rhetoric of hate with actual physical violence. As many trans and travesti activists will point out, the violence got worse but it has been a constant issue for anyone who is gender nonconforming in Brazil. In fact, some global statistics describe Brazil as the country that kills most trans people in the world, and Brazil has topped that list for 13 years in a row (Trans Murder Monitoring Update, 2021), a sad fact that has become a galvanizing force behind trans and travesti activism. This current wave of violence is reminiscent to the wave of violence that gender nonconforming people in Brazil suffered under the Brazilian dictatorship (Benevides, 2022), as echoes of the sexual moralism of the dictatorship are evidently present in Jair Bolsonaro's rhetoric and the anti-LGBTQIA+ policies enacted by his government (Cowan, 2016).

As Jay Sosa points out, it is extremely difficult to monitor transphobic and homophobic violence in Brazil because no state authority tracks these numbers closely, and state agents are frequently complicit in this violence. Thus it is up to non-governmental organizations to attempt to track violence through self-reporting mechanisms and by combing through police reports and newspaper articles. The uncertainty around these numbers, however, do not undermine what Sosa calls the "affective certainty" about the violence suffered by LGBTQIA+ populations in Brazil (Sosa, 2022) – people know, in a very visceral way, that their lives are endangered. If an individual who identifies as trans or travesti is not answering the phone, their friends immediately worry about their physical safety. Gender nonconforming people give each other tips about how to remain safe when they go out, and they try to gather in

groups so they can protect each other if trouble arises. Trans women and travestis who have been elected to important political positions, like Erika Hilton, Erica Malunguinho and Benny Briolly, have suffered countless death threats after a few years of public service. Benny Briolly had to even leave the country for a while, demanding better police protection before she returned to her role as city councilor in Niterói (O Globo, 2021). Erika Hilton, city councilor in São Paulo, once told me in an interview that she is never sure if she will return home from a day of political work for the trans and travesti cause, but she does not let that fear stop the important work she is doing.

These forms of violence are clearly linked to the culture wars fomented by Jair Bolsonaro, which portray gender nonconformity and alternative sexualities as threats to the nation, specifically as threats to children supposedly “seduced” by LGBTQIA+ identities (Jarrín 2021). In fact, his administration is truly dedicated to further demonizing gender nonconforming individuals, with the pastor Damares Alves, now Minister of the Family, Women and Human Rights, frequently touting the dangers of a so-called “gender ideology” that is invading schools and telling children that “there are no longer any men, there are no longer any women” (Reis and Mello, 2022). The Minister of Education, Milton Ribeiro, made a similar declaration recently that “we will not allow teachers to say in school that they were born a man, but if they want to be a woman, they can be a woman” (Carta Capital, 2022). According to Fernando de Figueiredo Baileiro, this rhetoric has the effect of producing a moral panic surrounding children, hyperbolically associating any art or any educational materials that address gender and sexuality with pedophilia and with the downfall of the nuclear family (Baileiro, 2018). As William Mazzarella argues, the truth of such political statements matters very little – what matters is the strong emotions they generate, because “whipping public affect into a state of normalized crisis is an elemental form of statecraft” (Mazzarella, 2019:46).

Jair Bolsonaro won the 2018 election in part due to this political strategy (Vencato and Corrêa Vieira, 2021), and he seems to be doubling down on this rhetoric for the 2022 presidential elections.

The rhetorical violence suffered by gender nonconforming people in Brazil cannot be analyzed separately from the epistemic violence that denies them the right to self-affirmation and dignity, by making it extremely difficult for them to assert their identity in private and public venues, and from the structural violence that denies them access to housing, employment and health services. These exclusions intersect with race and class, as trans and travesti individuals who are also poor and Black are particularly vulnerable to compounded levels of discrimination and violence. Trans and travesti sex workers (sex work being one of the few professions available to them) are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, as their profession lacks enough protections in Brazil and puts them in situations that expose them to violence, including police violence. Transmasculine people, on the other hand, are particularly vulnerable to suicide, as their gender identity frequently leads to rejection and isolation, but they do not have easy access to counseling services. On top of all that, during 2021 and 2022, gender nonconforming individuals were disproportionately lost to Covid-19, as the pandemic (which Bolsonaro constantly dismissed as unimportant) took a hard toll on this community. All these problems are structural in nature, facilitated by what Bruna Benevides calls a “necrotranspolitics” – a very purposeful neglect from the Brazilian government towards gender nonconforming individuals, making the State complicit in their deaths (Benevides, 2022).

Responding to this violence is key to the trans and travesti movement in Brazil, but it is not easy by any means. Activist organizations like ANTRA attempt to monitor the situation by publishing yearly dossiers about anti-trans and anti-travesti violence, which helps raise awareness, but the information they provide falls mostly on deaf ears under the openly transphobic government of

Jair Bolsonaro. Additionally, activists and scholars like Bruna Benevides point out that providing more visibility to this violence does not necessarily address it, as it can simply reaffirm the usual place of abjection for gender nonconforming people within Brazilian society. In a news article about transphobic violence, Benevides argued, “we need a visibility that leaves behind that paradigm of pain and of violence... It’s a process that involves the whole of society... Trans people who are assassinated are viewed as already guilty, independently of what happened to them” (Oliveira, 2022). Preconceived stereotypes about travesti and trans individuals, in other words, push people to dismiss the violence they suffer as inevitable or as a punishment that is well deserved. As the authors of *Trap Door* argue, trans visibility is a double-edged sword because it can allow for recognition, but it can also accommodate “trans bodies, histories and culture only insofar as they can be forced to hew to hegemonic modalities” (Gossett, Stanley and Burton, 2017:xxiii).

Trans and travesti activists in Brazil have answered the call to reshape this political landscape by producing audiovisual art that challenges stereotypes and seeks to change how people *feel* about gender nonconforming individuals and the violence they suffer. If the moral panic promoted by Bolsonaro is meant to cause fear and rejection of gender diversity, trans and travesti activism seeks to reframe those negative affects with new narratives that rehumanize and validate gender nonconforming experience. As Brian Massumi argues, affect is central to power structures, which should more accurately be called “*powered* structures,” because they come into being through affective fields that can crystallize into very rigid social structures that reinforce what he calls “microfascism,” but which are never absolute. People who are aiming to destabilize these *powered* structures can “trigger counter-amplifications and counter-crystallizations that defy capture by existing structures, streaming them into a continuing collective movement of escape” (Massumi, 2015:105), thus leading to social change. In Brazil, gender nonconforming musicians and performers

use their platforms to communicate a direct rejection of the necrotranspolitics of the Brazilian State, replacing it with new narratives about trans and travesti joy, community, and self-care. Their musical self-representations openly critique the mediatic fascination with travestis as dangerous Others who are simultaneously eroticized and criminalized. Trans and travesti artists deploy their art to challenge these stereotypes, crafting new affective landscapes and thus new political horizons for trans rights.

Audiovisual Celebrations of Travesti and Trans Life

Music has long been central for youth from the Brazilian peripheries as they assert their citizenship and their rights over city spaces, a form of doing politics that Leonardo Cardoso aptly calls “sound politics” (Cardoso, 2019). Brazilian rap and hiphop, for example, have been central to Black subjectivities from the periphery in São Paulo, providing a venue to celebrate negritude and critique the structural racism of the city. Until recently, according to Derek Pardue, Brazilian hiphop and rap were deeply invested in reasserting a “hard” masculinity, and feminist musicians found it difficult to break into this scene (Pardue 2010). Highly respected Black male cisgender rappers like Criolo and Emicida, however, have recently embraced gender and sexual diversity head-on. Criolo’s song “Etérea [Ethereal]” released in 2019, talks about “the need to break norms, the need to open discussions... and accept different types of love without impositions” (Criolo, 2019). The music video for the song featured eight queer and trans artists dancing and performing for the camera, including two gender nonconforming dancers from the Brazilian ballroom scene, Zaila and Akila Avalanx, and two travesti performance artists, Fefa and Transalien. The “making of” for the video specifically points out the extreme violence against LGBTQIA+ people in Brazil and alludes to the homophobic and transphobic policies of the Bolsonaro government, but focuses mostly on the dignity of survival and resilience through activism. For example,

Fefa describes how she was threatened with a gun by her own father, but she says that “when you are really on the edge of everything, on the abyss, you throw yourself and instead of falling, you fly. Our oppressors don’t realize our bodies can fly” (Monetti and Inoue, 2019). With this powerful image, Fefa inverts that moment of potential violence into one of hope and empowerment.

The point is not to ignore the violence, but to affectively reframe it by focusing on survival. In the same making-of video for “*Etérea*,” Transalien says “There’s no way to erase a whole population, even with all the fascism and racism that we are facing, nothing that is going on is new to us, we have lived with this violence from the start” (Monetti and Inoue, 2019). The violence is portrayed as structural and constitutive of the Brazilian trans and travesti experience, but also something that is knowable and ultimately unsuccessful in its attempts to erase gender nonconforming populations. Many trans and travesti activists point out the echoes between the fascism of Bolsonaro and the fascism of the Brazilian dictatorship, which targeted trans and travesti sex workers for extermination, and celebrate the fact that people survived in the past and will survive whatever comes their way. In 2017, for example, the trans singer and actor Verónica Valentino covered an anti-dictatorship song from the 1970s, “*Sujeito de Sorte [Lucky Guy]*” by Belchior, connecting that historical moment to the present. She put particular emphasis on the central chorus of the song, “*Tenho sangrado demais/ Tenho chorado pra cachorro/ Ano passado morri / Mas esse ano não morro [I have bled so much/ I have cried endlessly / Last year I died / But this year I will not die]*” (Belchior, 1976) which acquires particular significance in the context of gender nonconforming experience. Valentino added an activist message to that song by carrying a sign that said “*Eu (r)existo! Sou trans [I resist/exist. I am trans]*” (Moda Sem Crise, 2017). By changing the temporality of death and placing it in the past, and by adding a message about how pride in trans identity becomes an effective resistance to violence, the song carries a very powerful message that

creates a continuity between gender nonconforming resistance during the dictatorship and today. These bodies, the song implies, cannot ever be erased from existence, despite all the violence.

According to the documentary “Emicida: AmarElo – É Tudo Pra Ontem,” the Black male rapper Emicida was inspired by Valenttino’s performance to cover the same song, and to invite the Black nonbinary singer Majur and the famous drag queen artist Pabllo Vittar to sing that famous chorus (Ouro Preto, 2020). The music video portrays Emicida, Pabllo Vittar, and Majur as equal partners, since they are all granted similar airtime, and the music video does not exoticize Pabllo Vittar’s or Majur’s gender difference. Majur is proudly showcasing her nonbinary self, wearing nail polish, feminine clothing, and feminine jewelry, but she is also baring her more masculine torso since she is shirtless under her jacket. Pabllo Vittar is wearing her usual drag makeup and feminine attire, but with an urban twist that makes her seem visually at home in the poor urban community, Complexo do Alemão, where the music video was filmed. In general, the music celebrates a very diverse vision of Blackness, from people with disabilities and students to fashion designers and ballet dancers – everyone, including Majur, Pabllo Vittar, and Emicida are celebrated for their resilience and survival in the face of anti-Black violence (represented briefly at the start of the video by the voice of a young man crying on the phone, in despair, as he describes how depression has taken a hold of him). Gender nonconforming people are portrayed in the music video as a central part of the community and as conduits of Black joy (Emicida, 2020). It seems politically significant that Emicida’s version of the song became a huge hit and an anthem for progressive politics, including anti-transphobia, anti-racism and a general rejection of Bolsonaro’s policies, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Of course, these close collaborations between Criolo, Emicida did not necessarily grant full control of musical production to trans and travesti artists they

invited to appear in their songs. When these artists are given the chance to produce their own music, the results have a more clear political bent. Linn da Quebrada is a gender nonconforming musician well-known for her politically-conscious music, as a self-described “gender terrorist” whose work frequently addresses the travesti experience. One of her most well-known songs, “Mulher/Blasfêmea [Woman/Blasfemme] celebrates the most common occupation for travestis in Brazil, due to lack of other opportunities: sex work. The lyrics of the song directly address the stigma suffered by these sex workers, and turns it on its head:

Ela é diva da sarjeta, o seu corpo é uma ocupação
 [She is a diva of the gutter, her body is an occupation]
 É favela, garagem, esgoto e pro seu desgosto
 [She is favela, garage, sewer, and to your disgust]
 Está sempre em desconstrução...
 [She is always in deconstruction]
 Ela tem cara de mulher, ela tem corpo de mulher
 [She has the face of a woman, she has the body of a woman]
 Ela tem jeito, tem bunda, tem peito, e o pau de mulher!
 [She has the ways, the bum, the breasts, and the dick of a woman!]
 Bato palmas para as travestis que lutam para existir
 [I applaud travestis who fight to exist]
 E cada dia conquistar seu direito de viver, brilhar e arrasar
 [And every day conquer their right to live, shine and conquer]
 (Quebrada, 2017)

Linn da Quebrada describes travesti bodies as an “occupation” and as being in constant “deconstruction” in order to portray the ways these bodies are fleeing the male gaze, the stereotypes and the easy judgements of transphobes. The song mocks the assumed “disgust” of the transphobe and affectively reframes the travesti body as one that should be celebrated and “applauded” for its difference and for its resilience. When Linn da Quebrada sings this song live, she usually puts particular emphasis

on the phrase “the dick of a woman,” almost shouting it at the audience.

The music video, written and directed by Linn da Quebrada herself, makes similar moves as the lyrics. The music video starts with Linn da Quebrada praying on a traditional Catholic pew, when a naked, Black saint/orixã (the music video purposely blurs the distinction between the two religious traditions) appears in front of her, wearing a lit candle in place of a strap-on. With Bach’s hymnal from St. Matthew’s Passion playing in the background, the candle wax drips onto Linn da Quebrada’s body, mimicking semen, and we see Linn da Quebrada in religious/sexual ecstasy. The music video is purposely sacrilegious, blurring queer sexual practices with religious practices, thus mocking the religious transphobia that usually buttresses the necrotranspolitics of the Brazilian State. The music video shifts tone and becomes more realistic, as we see Linn da Quebrada walking the streets at night, and the voice of her mother on the phone, asking her to please be safe. As the song starts, we soon realize we are witnessing several travesti sex workers walking the city streets at night, chatting with each other and smoking as they wait for clients. Linn da Quebrada portrays one of these sex workers, and she is initially flirting with the camera as she sings, but when she gets to the lyrics about the “dick of a woman,” she is suddenly attacked by two men who grab her forcefully and seem to be poised to harm her, in what seems to be a transphobic attack based on the realization she is a travesti. Instead of reasserting the violence against travestis, however, the music video again inverts it, as a large group of women, both cisgender and gender nonconforming (many of them famous trans and travesti activists and artists), stop the attack on time and hit the assailants, as the lyrics talk about travestis who “live, shine and conquer.” At the end of the video, the same large group of women is seen celebrating together the next morning, ritually cleansing each other and joyfully singing lyrics about no longer needing men in their lives: “Eu to correndo de homem/ Homem que consome, só

come e some [I am running away from men / A man who consumes just fucks and leaves]” (Quebrada, 2017) Visually and lyrically, then, the song turns transphobic violence into a feminist celebration of self-reliance and mutual care.

Another music video by Linn da Quebrada, “Oração [Prayer],” similarly focuses on travesti and trans joy and self-care. The music features Linn da Quebrada and 13 other well-known trans and travesti musicians, actors, poets, activists and scholars, all of them dressed in white and occupying an abandoned church, covered in graffiti. The white clothes symbolize the spirituality of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions, once again blurring the distinction between the abandoned Catholic building and the Afro-Brazilian religious traditions that were once forbidden by enslavers. The gender nonconforming women pray, dance, sing, embrace and hold hands in this Church, clearly rejoicing in their celebration of their community. When asked about the symbolism of the video, Linn da Quebrada said that it was less about religion and more about portraying the strength of the travesti community:

If people consider that religion comes from the word *religar* [retie] then those are the religious aspects I want to build with *as minhas* [the women in my community]. It’s with them that I reconnect in order to reconnect with myself as well, in a profane sense... The act of our gathering was to propose that we be together, to propose that we celebrate our lives amongst ourselves, and register our lives, our meeting as evidence of what we can accomplish when we are together, when we join forces. We propose our gathering as a process of healing, you know? (Sanchez, 2019)

The music video demonstrates how travestis and trans women can support, uplift, and heal each other by coming together, keeping the violence of society at bay. The music video also asks the viewer to celebrate with these women and rethink any stereotypes they might have about them, as the lyrics make a direct request, “amem as bixas... amem as travas [love the queers... love the travestis]” (Quebrada, 2019). The violence of the State briefly haunts the video, as a police car makes two quick

appearances, appearing next to the fourteen women in a street outside the church, but the women seem to overcome this violence because they keep their gaze on the camera, ignoring the police car. The appearance of this police car in the video was based on a real negative interaction with the police that these fourteen women suffered as they were filming the video. The police showed up to demand what they were doing in the abandoned church and whether they had all the proper permits to film there, which of course they did, but it did not diminish the police harassment or its repercussions, like limiting how much time they had to film (Sanchez, 2019).

One of Linn da Quebrada's closest collaborators, Jup do Bairro (who appears in the two previous music videos), wrote a song that also confronts the violence of transphobia in order to challenge it. The song, titled "Corpo sem Juízo [a play on words that implies both a Senseless Body and a Body Without Judgement]" begins with the voice of an older woman explaining how she has accepted her daughter's transition, but as she narrates her love for her she discovers her dead body, and in anguish asks who has done this – "O pai? Eu? Vocês? [Was it her dad? Me? You all?]." The mourning mother implicates the listener in the structural violence that allows transphobia to persist but also points out how impersonal this violence is. Jup do Bairro argued in an interview that family members or neighbors that reject gender nonconforming folks are not the enemy: "we have to understand that it was the State which made people to think like this, that it was the State which finances these deaths and makes it so people do not have empathy with these bodies" (Giusti, 2021). As soon as Jup do Bairro begins to rap, she begins to tell an alternative, more hopeful story about violence:

Eu decidi explorar as potências do meu corpo

[I decided to explore my body's potential]

Por isso, unha, cabelo, e tal tal tal

[That's why (I did) my nails, my hair, etc. etc. etc.]

Explorando as potências do meu corpo, eu fiz esse trabalho

[Exploring the potential of my body, I did that work]

De acordo com toda a violência que eu sofri...

[Based on all the violence I suffered...]

É sobre ser quem eu quero ser, é sobre liberdade...

[It's about being who I want to be, it's about liberty...] (Bairro, 2019)

Jup do Bairro is defiant, speaking of how violence pushed her to explore the full potential of her body. Violence here is a productive force, one that allows those who survive it to rise above the fray and craft new realities. Jup do Bairro seeks liberty and dignity by transforming who she is and allowing her body to become a “body without judgement,” a body that simply exists and is loved by others for what it is, rather than a body that remains “senseless” or illegible to others, and thus an object of violence.

When asked about the meaning of the song title (also de album title), Jup do Bairro responded that she wanted to explore the meaning of a travesti, nonbinary body like hers, that does not seek to pass as cisgender. This pushed her to write about a *corpo sem juízo*, “a body in that non-place, a body that disobeys the norms yet looks for a type of belonging... Because I felt I did not belong to the spaces being offered to me, I had to create a place that was possible for me” (Vasconcelos, 2020). The lyrics of the song explore the pure political potential of crafting that new space for oneself:

É como estar diante da morte e permanecer imortal

[It's like being faced with death and remaining immortal]

É como lançar à própria sorte e não ter direito igual

[It's like pushing my luck and despite not having the same rights]

Mas eu resisto, eu insisto, eu existo

[I still resist, I insist, I exist]

Um corpo sem juízo, que não quer saber do paraíso

[A senseless body, that does not want to know about paradise]

Mas sabe que mudar o destino é seu compromisso

[But that knows that it is committed to changing its destiny]
(Bairro, 2019)

Faced with death, this defiant body finds immortality instead. Being a “senseless body,” this gender nonconforming body evades easy definitions, evades the male gaze, and does not conform to the usual narratives that pigeonhole trans identities as tragic figures, destined to live short lives. Instead, it is a body that resists simply by existing, and which constructs new ways of belonging in the world. Jup do Bairro also refuses the religious promise of a “paradise,” creating a different temporality and a different ethical relation to morality outside of religious norms. Her body is a “body without judgement,” and she is committed to changing the awful destiny that society wants for her, committed to a different outcome based on freedom.

Conclusion

The response that trans and travesti activists from Brazil offer to the transphobic violence they suffer is important because it differs drastically from the response to transphobic violence in other locales, such as the United States, for example. According to Laurel Westbrook, trans activism in the United States has focused almost obsessively on monitoring and mourning trans deaths, and the most visible form of yearly trans commemoration is the Transgender Day of Remembrance, an event that focuses exclusively on people who have been murdered for their gender identity or who have committed suicide due to lack of support. Westbrook argues that this focus on violence against trans folks has been a real detriment to trans rights in the United States, because it inadvertently reasserts dominant narratives that portray trans folks as tragic figures, predestined to live unhappy lives and die. Westbrook also argues that this focus on trans deaths causes real fear among trans-identified individuals, keeping them in the closet even when they are relatively privileged and able to

get away with being openly gender nonconforming (Westbrook, 2020). Ultimately, the trans cause is hurt by the exclusive focus on transphobic violence, without also creating spaces for hope. I have seen this firsthand among my own American trans students, who return heartbroken and depressed from Transgender Day of Remembrance events, defeated and scared rather than inspired by the exclusive focus on those lost to violence.

In the United States, there have been recent calls to transform those negative and frankly depressing portrayals of trans life, with popular television shows like *Pose* making strides not only in casting trans actors in trans roles but also in writing narratives that capture trans life in all its complexity, including the joys it can offer. Nonetheless, *Pose* is the exception rather than the rule in this respect, and self-representations of trans life that challenge dominant narratives are normally limited to small audiences in the United States. In comparison, gender nonconforming musicians and performers are taking the Brazilian music scene by storm. Their success is not simply measured by the sheer number of successful trans and travesti artists that produce music in Brazil – their biggest success is their ability to thrive during a political regime that partly came into power through homophobic and transphobic rhetoric. In the work of all the artists I have mentioned, the point is not to ignore this transphobic rhetoric, but to acknowledge it and renounce the power it has over people, by imagining different temporalities where trans people thrive and care for each other.

Note that none of these artists call for the State to exert justice on those who carried out the transphobic violence – most Black trans activists know intimately that more policing is not the answer to their problems. *Jup do Bairro*, for example, has collaborated with other Black artists to create music videos that denounce police violence on Black bodies. What needs to change is how people feel about gender nonconforming identities, and how society imagines them. This is why activists like Fefa, Transalien, Verônica Valentino, Majur, *Jup do Bairro*

and Linn da Quebrada answer State-sponsored violence with more hopeful images that invert the violence and create new horizons. The wide reach that these artists' performances have means that they are intervening within the public sphere and modulating the collective affect surrounding these issues. As a gender nonconforming person myself, I feel empowered and hopeful when I witness the work of these artists – their work inspires positive forms of affect on me, as opposed to the American activism that simply focuses on death and tragedy, and leaves me despondent. Powerful art is able to change how people feel, and people like Linn da Quebrada will never cease their calls for us to “love the travas too [amem as travas também]” (Quebrada, 2019).

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