

# > Textual *Coups* and Democratic Imaginings in Contemporary Brazilian Literature

> Golpes textuais e imaginários democráticos na literatura brasileira contemporânea

por **Leila Lehnen**

Doutora em literatura brasileira e latino americana, Brown University. Professora de literatura e cultura brasileira no departamento de Estudos Portugueses e Brasileiros, na Brown University (EUA). Sua pesquisa foca em questões de cidadania, direitos humanos e justiça social e ecocrítica na literatura brasileira e latino americana contemporânea. Seu livro, *Citizenship and Crisis in Contemporary Brazilian Literature* [Cidadania e crise na literatura brasileira contemporânea] examina a representação e a crítica do que James Holston definiu como a “cidadania diferenciada” na literatura brasileira contemporânea. E-mail: leila\_lehnen@brown.edu. ORCID: 0000-0003-2417-4788.

## Abstract

This essay examines how Brazilian literature has broached changes in the country's political and social scenario since 2013. Literary production has not only considered socio-political upheavals such as the 2013 protests, the 2016 impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, and, more recently, the assassination of Rio city council member Marielle Franco as well as the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic. Literature has also expanded the signification of “democracy,” broadening the democratic lexicon by employing a language of both demands and entitlements and dispute. By creating a democratic imaginary that oscillates between vindication and exigency, contemporary Brazilian literature delineates the tensions inherent to present-day democratic culture, poised between expanding rights and what scholars have called a “democratic erosion.”

**Keywords:** Democracy. Democratic Erosion. Literature. Poetry.

## Resumo

Este ensaio examina como a literatura brasileira tem abordado mudanças no cenário político e social do país desde 2013. A produção literária não aborda apenas levantes sociopolíticos como os protestos de 2013, o impeachment da presidente Dilma Rousseff em 2016 e, mais recentemente, o assassinato da vereadora Marielle Franco e a pandemia COVID-19. A literatura também tem expandido o significado de “democracia”, ampliando o léxico democrático ao empregar uma linguagem de demandas, direitos e disputa. Ao criar um imaginário democrático que oscila entre a reivindicação e a denúncia, a literatura brasileira contemporânea delinea as tensões inerentes à cultura democrática atual, equilibrada entre a expansão de direitos e o que os estudiosos chamam de “erosão democrática”.

**Palavras-chave:** Democracia. Erosão Democrática. Literatura. Poesia.

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In November of 2018 Brazil elected its 38<sup>th</sup> president, the Rio assemblyman Jair Bolsonaro. A retired military officer, Bolsonaro ran on a right-wing political platform with strong populist and neo-authoritarian echoes. Even before declaring his candidacy, Bolsonaro did not disguise his anti-democratic leanings. When he cast his vote to impeach President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, he dedicated his ballot to the former colonel and infamous torturer Carlos Brilhante Ustra. During his tenure, Ustra, who commanded the Brazilian counter-intelligence agency during the 1964-85 military dictatorship, was responsible for the death and disappearance of at least 45 political prisoners. As recently as December 2020, Bolsonaro reiterated his praise of Ustra and, as many times in the past, defended the military dictatorship in no uncertain terms.

Both Bolsonaro's campaign and his presidential term have resounded with a divisive discourse. To be fair, Bolsonaro's sectarian political rhetoric is both fuel and symptom of the national panorama. Brazil, a country once known for its *cordialidade* suddenly saw its society divided by bitter disagreements that spilled from the public sphere into the private realm. As Bolsonaro railed against an imagined communist threat ("Nós vamos, num curto espaço de tempo, mandar embora o comunismo do Brasil. Nós não aceitamos esse regime ditatorial onde o povo não tem vez. Nós somos a liberdade, nós somos aqueles que não têm medo da verdade"<sup>1</sup>) people unfriended each other on Facebook and family members no longer sat at the same dinner table. The quote above exemplifies this stance. It's rhetoric pits one Brazil against the other – on the one hand are freedom and Christian values, and, on the other, a vague, and therefore possibly even more threatening foe. Scholars of Brazilian history and culture will recognize the echoes of the discourse that generals used during Brazil's last military dictatorship (1964-85), which cast communists as an existential threat to Brazil and Brazilians. For some political pundits, the factious tone of Brazil's political discourse can be traced to two events: President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 and the 2013 June Marches (Jornadas de Junho).

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<sup>1</sup> Jair Messias Bolsonaro *apud* Estadão Conteúdo, "No Maranhão, Bolsonaro diz que vai 'mandar embora o comunismo do Brasil'", 2020, n. p.

For many, Rousseff's impeachment was a *coup d'état*, aimed at reversing the social gains achieved during the Workers' Party presidencies that lasted from 2003 to 2016. Brazilian political scientist Luis Felipe Miguel maintains that the coup had both a material and a symbolic dimension.<sup>2</sup> In material terms, the reduction of socioeconomic inequality threatened entrenched social hierarchies. Symbolically, these changes meant that previously marginalized groups, such as Afro-descendants, women, and members of the LGBTQIA+ communities, began to claim a place in Brazilian society. These groups gained access to the hallowed terrains of the middle and upper classes, such as public universities and to territories that, though technically public, were, in effect enclaves of Brazil's upper echelons, such as shopping malls and airports. The impeachment was an attempt, many say successful, to neutralize these gains.

Rousseff's removal sparked protests from both supporters and detractors. Demonstrations in favor of her impeachment were predominantly white and consisted of high- and middle-income urban sectors. Many marches featured signs expressing support for military intervention. Supporters of the removal evoked the 1964-85 military dictatorship in nostalgic terms. As mentioned previously, this idealization of the dictatorship has reared its ugly head during Bolsonaro's campaign and continues in his presidency. Opponents of the impeachment also employed language that conjured the 1964-85 authoritarian regime, albeit in a negative tone, calling it a coup. Not surprisingly, one of the refrains against Rousseff's impeachment was "Não vai ter golpe."

Besides mobilizing sectors from both the left and the right, the impeachment also produced a series of cultural commentaries. In May 2017, Maria Augusta Ramos' documentary *O processo* was released. In June 2019 another documentary, Petra Costa's *Democracia em vertigem* premiered on Netflix and was nominated for an Oscar. In literary production, two texts directly addressed the impeachment. The online volume *Golpe: Antologia Manifesto*, which was released in 2016 and *Sessão* a book of poems by the *carioca* poet Roy David Frankel that reworks the speeches that members of the chamber of

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<sup>2</sup> Luis Felipe Miguel, "A democracia na encruzilhada", 2016, 31-38.

deputies gave during the session that decided whether to move forward with Rousseff's impeachment proceedings. Other books, such the anthology of poems *50 poemas de revolta* published in 2017 by the prestigious Brazilian publishing house Companhia das Letras also touch upon the country's political developments since 2013, positing these incidents within Brazil's larger political and literary framework. *50 poemas* contains both recent texts that directly address the 2016 *coup*, such as Laura Liuzzi's poem *Ressaca de 17 de abril de 2016* and older texts that, nonetheless, speak to what scholars have called a democratic erosion, as for example Hilda Hilst's *Poemas aos homens dos nossos tempos*.<sup>3</sup> Online platforms such as Facebook also featured publications against Rousseff's impeachment in pages such as *Poemas contra o golpe*.

Of course, since Dilma Rousseff's removal from office in 2016, other occurrences have left an imprint on Brazil's socio-political landscape, and, much like the impeachment, have percolated into cultural production. Among these, one can name the politically motivated corruption scandal Lava Jato, which prompted the Netflix series *O mecanismo*. Directed by José Padilha, the two-season series, which premiered in 2018, follows federal police officer Marco Ruffo (Selton Mello) and his sidekick Verena Cardoni (Carol Abras) as they uncover a massive corruption scandal that involves some of Brazil's biggest businesses and reaches into the country's highest political echelons. *O mecanismo* is inspired by the goings-on of the *Lava Jato* operation and most of its central characters are modeled on real people. Marco Ruffo and Verena Cardoni were based on former police chief Gerson Machado and police deputy Erika Marena respectively. *Lava Jato* was recently unmasked being part of a political motivated scheme that – successfully – aimed to impede the election of former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to the presidency in 2018 and led to the electoral victory of Jair Bolsonaro. Lula's imprisonment, in turn, begot *LulaLivre LulaLivro*. Published in 2018, the year of Lula's imprisonment, the limited-edition anthology (200 copies) was organized by authors Marcelino Freire and Ademir Assunção. *LulaLivre LulaLivro* contains a medley of texts such as poems, raps, short stories, letters as well as visual entries such as cartoons, graphic poems, a poster of sorts. All entries

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<sup>3</sup> L. J. Diamond, "Is the Third Wave Over?", 1996, p. 20-32.

comment on the former president's incarceration as a result of *Lava Jato's* graft inquiry. In 2018, Brazil also witnessed the brutal assassination of Rio council woman Marielle Franco, which remains unsolved. Finally, as national tragedies go, since 2020 Brazil has been one of the global hotspots of the COVID-19 crisis, which, as I write this article, has claimed the lives of more than 400 thousand Brazilians (and counting).

In this essay, I look at how contemporary Brazilian political poetry integrates the discourse of democracy via specific themes and tropes. I maintain that literature not only assimilates a democratic vocabulary, but that literature's engagement with language and with the creation of meaning enriches our understanding of democracy by taking it beyond the institutional realm. The absorption and rendition of a democratic lexicon into contemporary Brazilian literature allocates new meanings to this discourse, illustrating Antonio Candido's dictum that the value of a literary work lies not in that it reproduces life; instead, a literary text, to quote Candido, "invent(s) a new life, according to a formal organization that is as novel as possible, which the imagination imprints onto its object."<sup>4</sup> If one considers Candido's words, literature, in a manner, adds new layers of meaning to the word *democracy*. Literature makes possible *new imaginaries* and new imaginations of democracy. Furthermore, considering Brazil's recent democratic erosion since 2016, literature becomes a forum in which to, at least to a degree, safeguard democratic reflection and commitment. Literary texts become repositories of democratic dialogue and contestation. Of course, one also has to ask oneself what the limits and limitations of this type of mobilization are.

Democratic discourse in recent literary production tends to favor certain tropes. In particular, texts that reference democracy in Brazil since 2013 either directly or metaphorically tend to employ the trope of dissent in different iterations. Dissent points to some integral elements of democratic culture: the respect for and, within limits, the inclusion of dissensual points of view and citizens' involvement in the social, political and not least the cultural life of the

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<sup>4</sup> Antonio Candido, *Direitos humanos e literatura*, 1989, p. 8.

nation. According to Jacques Rancière, dissent is a struggle over what he calls the “distribution of the sensible”<sup>5</sup> that which is visible, sayable. Dissent can effectuate an expansion of the sensible, allowing the invisible to be made visible. In other words, dissent can reveal the exclusions and violences that characterize any social formation. While dissent continues to be a powerful trope in literary production, since 2018 we also note that literary output increasingly evokes the specter of democratic crisis. Authoritarianism is the central theme in novels such as Bernardo Kucinski’s *A nova ordem* (2019) and in the short story collection *Contos brutos: 33 textos sobre autoritarismo*, which also appeared in 2019.

While literature as a representational practice can reinforce the *hegemonic order* (what Rancière calls the *police*), by using dissent either as a rhetorical device or as subject matter, literature can also challenge this structure.<sup>6</sup> Literature that broaches dissent either thematically or stylistically can partake in democracy by expanding the symbolic realm, thereby altering the concept of the demos (of the people) to include different voices. At the same time, literary texts that deal with authoritarianism perform the imaginative work of both thinking about the crisis of democracy while also upholding democratic culture. Borrowing from the preface of *Contos brutos*, one can say that literature engenders a democratic terrain, because it:

não dá respostas únicas, sobretudo por que os autores partem de premissas e perspectivas diferentes. É possível, inclusive, que os textos [dessa antologia] despertem mais perguntas do que respostas para que o leitor se enverede por elas e construa suas reflexões. Os textos partem do autoritarismo para elaborar uma simbologia que expõe nós e desafios, embates e inquietações<sup>7</sup>.

Though authoritarianism is the basis that fertilizes the volume’s narrative terrain, the stories’ varying approaches to this motif counteracts thematic/narrative absolutism and, therefore, the impetus to impel a single word-view.

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2000, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65

<sup>7</sup> Anita Deak, “Apresentação”, 2019, p. 7, tradução minha.

This essay looks into how contemporary Brazilian poetry contests the neo-authoritarian tendencies that have become normalized in the nation's social and political arena and that are, increasingly, also spilling into the cultural realm via initiatives such as “Escola sem Partido.” Literary production does this by deploying an aesthetic of challenge, confrontation, dissent – this is to say, a rhetoric of democratic engagement. Why poetry, one might ask (instead of film, music, visual arts etc.). According to Brazilian author Alberto Pucheu, the operating principle of poetry is ambiguity and aporia; as such, the genre is inherently political. Like no other genre, poetry broadens meaning. As such, in the words of Pucheu, poetry “a poesia realiza uma abertura de possibilidades”<sup>8</sup>. This expansion of the possible is intrinsically political in that it allows us to think about alternative interpretations, to envision other futurities, to anticipate other modes of sociability and of engagement. Poetry's utopian potential serves as a counterpoint to the encroachment of a reality that countermands dissent.

My discussion of a democratic imaginary focuses on select poems from the volume *Golpe: Antologia Manifesto* (2016). *Golpe* emblemizes a specific moment of Brazil's socio-political life and manifests how democracy – as well as its weakening – has become a keyword in the country's literary discourse. In this sense, the anthology gains relevance beyond the happenings of 2016. As suggested by André Vallias' entry in the collection, the volume addresses the past, present and future. Vallias, whose poetry is strongly visual, inserted the sentences “O Brasil do Golpe de 64” and “O Brasil dos 64 golpes”<sup>9</sup> on opposite ends of a brown and yellow checkboard. The two lines are almost mirror-images of one another and point to the persistence of anti-democratic culture in Brazil. Vallias' poem conjoins Brazil's numerous military dictatorships, the erosion of democratic norms represented by president Rousseff's removal from office, and the potential consequences of both the past and the events of 2016 (i.e. the multiplication of anti-democratic political overtures).

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<sup>8</sup> “A poesia realiza uma abertura de possibilidades.” Alberto Pucheu, “A poesia em tempos de terrorismo”, 2017, n. p., tradução minha.

<sup>9</sup> André Vallias, “Sem título”, p. 43. In Ana Rüsche, Carla Kinzo, Lilian Aquino & Stefanni Marion (Orgs.), *Golpe Antologia Manifesto*, 2016.

As Jacques Rancière notes “If words confound things, it is because the struggle about the meaning of words is tied to the struggle about things”<sup>10</sup>. The symbolic dimension of democracy – and the role that culture plays in this domain should not be underestimated, as the short-lived extinction of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture by the interim government of Michel Temer suggests. After assuming office, Temer briefly transformed the MinC into the “Ministry of Citizenship,” which merged the ministries of sports, culture, and social development into one office headed by Osmar Terra. Terra did not have any experience leading cultural institutions. Temer’s move prompted an outcry from cultural agents across the country and led to the reinstatement of the office. Gaspar Paz interpreted the merger as an attempt to weaken Brazil’s democratic culture, which was broadened by the MinCs’ increasingly diverse and inclusive agenda.<sup>11</sup> MinC’s program in part reflected a growing inclusivity in other sectors of Brazilian society, such as higher education and cultural production. An example of the greater diversity is the growth of so-called peripheral literature since 2000 as well as the greater visibility of Afro-descendant and indigenous cultural agents and their output. Especially the latter two phenomena remain strong, despite the recent setbacks in policies aimed at fomenting cultural diversity. Tellingly, in 2019, the Bolsonaro government again extinguished the ministry of culture. It exists now as an office under the aegis of the ministry of tourism.

*Golpe Antologia Manifesto* was published shortly after the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016. Organized by authors Ana Rüsche, Carla Kinzo, Lilian Aquino and Stefanni Marion, the online anthology employs different media to deal with what – to many – amounted to a *de facto coup d’état*. Texts – especially short stories and poems – feature prominently in the volume. Nonetheless, the collection also includes cartoons, photographs, paintings and concrete poetry, as for example the aforementioned text by André Vallias. Each submission is followed by a mini author’s bio. Most bios are also political commentaries. For example, Bruna Beber’s doodle-poem (*Gooooolpe!!!*), which

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 2006, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> Gaspar Paz, “Cultura e democracia vilipendiadas por sucessivos golpes”, 2019, p. 82.



parodies the triumphant announcement of Brazilian soccer commentators, is followed by the explanation that she “nasceu em 1984, em Duque de Caxias (RJ), e vive em São Paulo. É poeta, publicou alguns livros e, claro, não reconhece Michel Temer como presidente”<sup>12</sup>. Customary biographical details (place of origin, profession) are juxtaposed to the author’s political stance. This collation perturbs the normally cut and dry genre of the professional bio and transforms the short entries into a paratext, a Borgean footnote of sorts to the author’s main contribution.

The diverse entries and ensuing polyphony evoke democratic plurality, suggesting the notion of an agonistic textual forum. For Chantal Mouffe, agonism, in the political sphere, implies “the confrontation between conflicting hegemonic projects without possibility of reconciliation”<sup>13</sup>. While *Golpe* certainly does not advance “hegemonic projects,” we can still discern that agonism is a guiding principle of the book. Several entries reproduce – albeit ironically – the pro-impeachment stance. In a way, irony expands dissent at the level of signification. Irony plays with meaning, thereby multiplying it. I will return to this point later. Brazilian literary scholar Wilberth Salgueiro postulates that the diversity of poetic voices about the 2016 coup signals the democratic potential inherent to poetry. Salgueiro observes that “As dezenas de poemas sobre/contra o golpe exemplificam, exatamente, a diversidade de soluções formais que, por sua vez, correspondem às possibilidades de expressão de cada sujeito”<sup>14</sup>.

Márcia Tiburi’s preface to the *Golpe Antologia Manifesto* epitomizes the counterhegemonic agonism that is the book’s touchstone. Tiburi’s introduction is structured as an ongoing contradiction. Two words organize the short preamble: “poesia” and “golpe.” Both words convey a plethora of meanings. Whereas the

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<sup>12</sup> “nasceu em 1984, em Duque de Caxias (RJ), e vive em São Paulo. É poeta, publicou alguns livros e, claro, não reconhece Michel Temer como presidente”  
Bruna Beber, *Gooooolpe!!!*, p. 58. In Ana Rüsche, Carla Kinzo, Lilian Aquino & Stefanni Marion (Orgs.), *Golpe Antologia Manifesto*, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, 2013, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Wilberth Salgueiro, “O golpe de 2016 na voz e nos versos dos poetas”, 2019, p. 162, tradução minha.

*coup* is “grande”<sup>15</sup>, poetry is the small gesture that disturbs the larger narrative, the institutional violence of the impeachment that was verbalized in many pro-impeachment pronouncements. Poetry is the “o cuspe, a pedrada, o soco, o pontapé, o pneu em chamas, as vias impedidas, a greve geral”<sup>16</sup>. As the description suggests, poetry is not confined to the linguistic domain. Its signifying powers materialize in the repertoire of mutiny. Mostly, Tiburi’s preface defines poetry as the antithesis of the coup (“Não há poesia onde há golpe”<sup>17</sup>). As vocables, poetry and coup contradict and yet also complement each other. Poetry is both impossible after the coup and yet survives the coup, rebutting the imaginary that underpins the putsch, which seeks to abolish dissent, including cultural dissent. As a rhetorical device, contradiction conveys a plethora of meanings – it can suggest paralysis (“Nenhuma elaboração do golpe é suficiente, nunca entenderemos o golpe, por mais que o golpe seja contra todos, seja contra nós, seja contra cada um. Sentimos o golpe sem saber onde ele se deu”<sup>18</sup>) as well as political mobilization (“a poesia se insurge”<sup>19</sup>). Consequently, Tiburi’s text waivers between inertia, brought about by outrage, and insurgency. Multiplication of meaning communicates the extensive symbolic (but also material) ramifications of the 2016 events. Ultimately, however, the preface proposes poetry – or, more generally, artistic manifestations – as a medium to understand and counteract the erosion of democracy (“A poesia é o fora do texto para onde o texto olha a abrir com as armas perigosas da palavra a passagem para a vida revolucionária”<sup>20</sup>).

Similar to what might be called its “companion piece”, *Vinagre, uma antologia de poetas neobarracos*,<sup>21</sup> *Golpe* tries to imagine the role that cultural locution has in times of political crisis. Such interrogation might seem frivolous considering the magnitude of the events that volumes such as *Vinagre* and *Golpe*

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<sup>15</sup> “grande” Márcia Tiburi, “Prefácio”, p. 8, tradução minha. In Ana Rüsche, Carla Kinzo, Lilian Aquino & Stefanni Marion (Orgs.), *Golpe Antologia Manifesto*, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8, tradução minha.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8, tradução minha.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8, tradução minha.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8, tradução minha.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8, tradução minha.

<sup>21</sup> Both volumes were produced in the heat of the political events that they comment upon. Both were published solely online. Both contain texts by well-known and amateur writers.

(and, as will be discussed later on another poetry collection, *Um girassol nos teus cabelos*) touch upon. However, as Tiburi's preface suggests, words can be effective instruments to speak truth to power. For example, though not unproblematic, narratives of human rights abuses in autocratic regimes, including Brazil's 1964-85 dictatorship, can become effective tools to undercut said governments.

Not all of *Golpe's* entries directly relate to the 2016 coup. Some envisage the fallouts of this event in the longer term. Ale Safra's text *Vinte anos do manifesto A Greve do Ventre* replicates the format of a news story to imagine the consequences of the "golpe das eleições teocráticas"<sup>22</sup> that took over Brazil in 2016. From there, the text apprises the reader of the dystopian reality that the *coup* created ("legalização do "estupro dos maridos"<sup>23</sup>). As a counterpoint, Safra's entry imagines a women's strike that reclaims the body as an anti-authoritarian device. Safra's story clearly dialogues with the religious fundamentalism that has infiltrated Brazilian politics through the evangelical movement. By positioning the female body, specifically the uterus as a site of resistance to repressive dogma, Safra foregrounds the competing narratives and attendant policies that surround women's bodies, and, more particularly, their reproductive capacities in contemporary Brazil. Safra's poem showcases how *zoe* is transmuted into *bios* thereby contesting the necropolitics of authoritarian misogyny.<sup>24</sup>

Much like Safra's entry, other texts in *Golpe* touch upon the underlying ideologies that propelled the impeachment. Many contributions are filled with a sense of loss, foreboding and/or outrage. Take for example Beatriz Seigner's text (pages 55-6) that enumerates some of the social and political losses in the aftermath of the *coup*: "...Sem constituição / A faca nas costas / Sem presidenta / A faca nas costas / Sem legitimidade / A faca nas costas / Sem mulheres nos ministérios / A faca nas costas / Sem negros nos ministérios / A faca nas costas / Sem LGBTT / a faca nas costas / Sem MinC, sem direitos humanos, sem

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<sup>22</sup> Ale Safra, "Vinte anos do manifesto A Greve do Ventre", 2016, p. 18, tradução minha.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19, tradução minha.

<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 1998.

desenvolvimento agrário...”<sup>25</sup>. As the quoted passage shows, each of the poem’s verses is interrupted by the refrain “A faca nas costas,” a rather obvious metaphor for the betrayal of democracy. By interrupting the catalogue of setbacks that came about with the impeachment (including the aforementioned dismantling of the Ministry of Culture during the Temer administration), the refrain denaturalizes the democratic erosion that the poem portrays. As a metaphor, the refrain also conjures violence (material and symbolic) as the underlying principle of the 2016 political maneuvering.

Such violence has become a maxim in the country’s political rhetoric. For example, during his campaign, Bolsonaro ran on a platform to liberalize gun ownership. He and his supporters transformed the finger gun sign into a de facto campaign slogan. The above quoted refrain – “A faca nas costas” – thus prefigures the aggressiveness of contemporary political oratory. Said violence becomes a speech act that spills from discourse into reality, claiming lives, such as that of Rio council woman Marielle Franco.

But within the textual fabric, the refrain of Seigner’s poem becomes an aporia of sorts. Articulated within a poetic context, the adage subtly undermines the combative tone that it emulates. Instead of signaling aggression, it questions it through both its repetition and because it highlights the democratic assault following the 2016 coup.

Reading, and thereby, literature has been cast as an antidote to the aggressive sociability of the Bolsonaro camp. During the 2018 elections, the slogan “Livro sim. Arma não” became one of the rallying calls against Bolsonaro. During the 2018 elections, artists such as Deborah Bloch, Matheus Nachtergaele and Deborah Secco took books to the ballot as an implicit protest against Bolsonaros’ combative campaign promises.

Of course, the violence that Seigner’s poem alludes to gains new connotations in retrospect as does the list of Brazil’s democratic setbacks. Many

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<sup>25</sup> Beatriz Seigner, “Sem título”, 2016, p. 55-56, tradução minha.

of the reversals that the poem tallies, such as for example the decline of access to higher education for minorities and low-income students (suggested by the verse: “Sem cotas, sem Prouni, sem Fies”<sup>26</sup>) have become even more pronounced under the Bolsonaro administration as his administration rolls back gains in education, human rights, environmental protections, among others. And the finger gun that he and his supporters touted during the campaign has transmogrified into real guns. On the weekend of February 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Bolsonaro issued four decrees making it easier for Brazilians to purchase guns and ammunitions.

In their bestselling book, *How Democracies Die* (2018), Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt suggest that unlike the military *coup d'états* of the past, nowadays, democracies often agonize by constitutional means (though military take overs continue to be an seductive option for would be autocrats worldwide). Levitsky and Ziblatt point out that democratic weakening might take on the guise of “efforts to improve democracy – making the judiciary more efficient, combating corruption, or cleaning up the electoral process”<sup>27</sup>. The rhetoric of corruption and fiscal responsibility sounded strongly in the 2016 pro-impeachment marches and was the purported cause for Rousseff’s removal. She was charged with criminal administrative misconduct and disregard for the federal budget. Rousseff also faced accusations that she was involved in the Car Wash operations – accusations that were never brought to trial.

Many of the pro-impeachment marches featured images of Rousseff and of former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in prison stripes. But, as stated earlier, although Rousseff’s impeachment overtly hinged on legal issues, the figurative dimensions of her removal from office is much more complex. Brazilian literary scholar Regina Dalcastagnè asserts that the 2016 impeachment is not limited to the political sphere but that its significance contaminates other arenas of Brazilian society. Dalcastagnè notes that the coup’s agenda stands against the

direitos das mulheres, dos negros, dos indígenas, dos trabalhadores, dos moradores das periferias, da população LGBT, dos pobres, contra sua inserção social e suas formas de expressão. Mas se estabelece, também,

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem* p. 55, tradução minha.

<sup>27</sup> Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 2018, p. 5.

contra o Ensino público, contra a liberdade de expressão e de cátedra,  
contra o pensamento crítico, contra nossos sonhos de justiça<sup>28</sup>.

Even as *Golpe* does occasionally touch upon the legal dimensions of the 2016 coup (as seen, for instance, in Seigner's poem), most texts focus – as might be expected – on the impeachments' symbolic facets.

Several of the texts ironically reproduce the discourse of the pro-impeachment sectors or, in the case of Anita Deak's text "Tô morrendo de vergonha do Brasil,"<sup>29</sup> the complacency of an armchair left who railed against the coup from the comfort of their social media accounts. Echoing other texts in the anthology's, Deak's text parodies both Brazil's "esquerda caviar" and "esquerda avatar" as not only ineffectual, but ultimately harmful.<sup>30</sup> In Deak's composition, the poetic voice alternates image of a typically middle-class consumer sensibility: individuals who send their children to private schools, are label conscious and have access to private healthcare with the refrain "I did not back the coup."

Ah, não vamos no mercadinho, não... Bora num supermercado / maior...  
tem mais opções de marcas. / Eu não apoiei o golpe. / Não dá pra colocar  
ele na escola pública, baby. Que tipo de / formação ele vai ter? / Eu não  
apoiei o golpe. / Não esquece de pagar o plano de saúde, amor<sup>31</sup>.

Enjambement and colloquial language ("bora," "baby") establish a conversational timbre that pulls the reader into the text, suggesting identification and/or complicity. Though the refrain interrupts the tete a tete, it does ultimately not disturb the flow of quotidian life, and of bourgeoisie comforts. An example is the verse: "No whatsapp: linda, compra óleo de soja, por favor"<sup>32</sup> that seems to directly address the reader and their lived experience. As the last verse suggests, the political drama plays itself primarily in the virtual sphere ("você viu meu post sobre isso no Facebook?"<sup>33</sup>). Deak's poem thus ironically uncovers inaction as an antidemocratic practice. For Brazilian cultural critic Alfredo Bosi, resistance is the opposite of complacency. Bosi postulates that resistance is the

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<sup>28</sup> Regina Dalcastagnè, "O que o golpe quer calar: Literatura e política no Brasil hoje", 2018, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Anita Deak, "Tô morrendo de vergonha do Brasil", 2016, p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> Such as, for example, Caco Ishak's entry.

<sup>31</sup> Anita Deak, "Apresentação", 2019, p. 51, tradução minha.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51, tradução minha.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51, tradução minha.

Momento negativo de um processo dialético no qual o sujeito, em vez de reproduzir mecanicamente o esquema de interações onde se insere, dá um salto para uma posição de distância e, deste ângulo, se vê a si mesmo e se reconhece e põe em crise os laços apertados que o prendem à teia das instituições<sup>34</sup>.

In Deak's text, the lyrical I speaks mostly in the first person singular. Nonetheless, in the penultimate verse, the poetic voice shifts registers. The short sentence "Pois, é" disrupts the textual flow and summons a third subject of enunciation who – for a brief moment – assumes a critical stance, achieved through the punctuation. The combination of comma and period generates a pause in diction, separating the sentence from the rest of the poem. The brief sentence offers the possibility of (critical) reflection. Of course, the poem's ironic stance might also be directed at itself. One might draw comparisons between the Facebook post that the poetic voice mentions and literary output itself, which remains encapsulated within a limited domain.

While Deak's poem sardonically exposes the nexus between passivity and democratic erosion, other texts confront the intrinsically antidemocratic culture that, some scholars argue, permeates Brazilian society since colonial times. According to Brazilian philosopher Marilena Chauí, Brazil is, in its nature, an authoritarian society because it views citizenship as a class privilege and "social and personal differences and asymmetries are directly transformed into inequalities and consequently, into relations of rank, command and obedience"<sup>35</sup>. Laws are used to maintain privilege, and, conversely, to repress. Emblematic is the saying "Para os amigos tudo, para os inimigos a lei" that proposes law not as a means of protection, but as a punitive device. Protection (including from the law) lies within the realm of personal relations. Signs of authoritarian sociability are abundant in Brazilian everyday life, from the lack of people of color in fashionable advertisements to the unapologetic killing of Afro-descendant men. In a recent article, Brazilian social scientists Mariana Chaguri and Oswald E. Amaral pointed out how the authoritarian frame of mind transverses Brazilian

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<sup>34</sup> Alfredo Bosi, *Literatura e resistência*, 2002, p. 134, tradução minha.

<sup>35</sup> Marilena Chauí, *Between Conformity and Resistance: Essays on Politics, Culture, and the State*, 2011, p. 173.

society.<sup>36</sup> Recently this mindset has found expression in the figure of Bolsonaro, who according to Chaguri and Amaral resorts to the performance of a *coup* (“encenação golpista”) to energize his supporters. The authoritarian spectacle “busca a mobilização cotidiana de um imaginário em torno de um país “sem bagunça”, ordenado e saneado pela ação das Forças Armadas. Isso aparece tanto na reiterada insistência em celebrar o golpe de 1964 quanto nas ações do presidente contra os outros poderes” (“Índice de autoritarismo”). Bolsonaro’s performance does, nevertheless, transcend the realm of the spectacle as both he and his supporters act to destabilize democratic norms and institutions (“Índice de autoritarismo”).

Various entries in *Golpe* parodically reproduce Brazil’s authoritarian mainstays. One example is Caco Pontes’ poem *verdeamarelista ou a voz do comprimido*.<sup>37</sup> Like Seigner’s contribution, Pontes’ text resorts to humor to undermine several of the socio-political narratives that propelled not only Dilma’s impeachment but, subsequently, also Bolsonaro’s election and its attendant democratic loss. As the title suggests, humor exposes both the vitriol and the absurdity of this discourse. The heading plays with the putative patriotism that pro-impeachment citizens touted as they appropriated the green and yellow colors of the national flag for their cause. In the poem’s title, the substantivized colors are mocked by the subtitle: “ou a voz do comprimido,” a parody of the well-known maxim “a voz do oprimido.” “Comprimido,” in this context, can mean repressed or pinched, conveying the idea of suppression, which, as we will see, reoccurs throughout the text. But the word can also signify pill or drug, suggesting an altered cognitive state. Comprimido thus engages the meanings of the pharmakon – drug, poison, or scapegoating.

Pontes crafts a collective poetic voice that recurs throughout the poem in the capitalized noun “Gente” (“Folks”). Capitalization, in this framework, signals to an imagined superiority of this collectivity, a primacy that is presumptively under threat, as implied in the first verse of the last stanza “Vamos lutar pelos

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<sup>36</sup> Mariana Chaguri and Oswald E. Amaral, *As bases sociais do bolsonarismo*, 2021, p. N/A. In Forthcoming in *Latin American Perspectives*.

<sup>37</sup> Caco Pontes, “verdeamarelista ou a voz do comprimido”, 2016, p. 68.



nossos direitos.” Of course, the rallying cry, which echoes the poem’s subtitle, becomes oxymoronic when one reads the following verses: “em time que tá sempre ganhando / num se mexi.”<sup>38</sup> Throughout the poem, humor undermines authoritarian language. For instance, the dissonant juxtapositions between the declaration against ignorance and the proliferation of orthographic errors (including in the spelling of the word “ignorance,” as in the poem’s first and third verses: “xega de corrupisção / .../ da iguinorançia”) pokes fun at the perceived supremacy implied by the lyrical I (the “verde amarelista”). Likewise, in the third stanza, parody sabotages certain common dictums of everyday sociability and unequivocally exposes Brazil’s authoritarian culture.

Historian Lilia Moritz Schwarcz traces the countries autocratic substratum to different facets in its formation. Among these she cites slavery, racial prejudice, social inequality and patrimonialism. Schwarcz ascertains how these factors are interlinked both synchronically and diachronically. Slavocrat violence, for instance, is resurrected in police violence.<sup>39</sup> Needless to say that both types of abuse uphold a white, patriarchal and heteronormative status quo. Accordingly, Pontes’ text juxtaposes racialized and police violence. Enjambment connects the third and fourth stanzas, while the third and fifth segments are coupled lexicographically through the repetition of the verb “we know” (“a gente sabe”).

In the fifth stanza, the lyrical I lays bare the authoritarian culture lurking in everyday life. Here the poetic voice evokes the Brazilian police’s motto, “to serve and to protect” only to immediately undermine it. Everyone knows “que as polícias são pra defender o povo - e descer cacete nos vândalos –.” Though these verses do not specify what distinguishes the former from the latter, the fifth stanza clearly defines the term: “a Gente sabe há mais de kinhentos anos que preto e pobre não tem vez num é, Gente?”<sup>40</sup>. The reiteration of “gente” at the beginning and the end of the stanza creates a binary that explains the legacy of violence and discrimination that becomes actualized in police brutality.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> Lilia Schwarcz, *Sobre o autoritarismo brasileiro: Uma breve história de cinco séculos*, 2020, p. 157.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68.

Pontes' choice of the term "vândalos" is interesting. Among other things, it conjures the repression of political activity during the 2013 demonstrations against the 20 cents increase in bus fares in different Brazilian cities. Alleging destruction of public property, the media initially called the protestors "vandals" (full disclosure: public – and private property such as banks were damaged. But these acts were carried out by a minority of demonstrators). The lexical reference traces an implicit genealogy between the suppression of political rights in 2013 and the democratic depletion of 2016. "Vândalos" in Pontes' poem also intimates an intertextuality between *Golpe* and the e-anthology *Vinagre*, which was organized by poets Fabiano Calixto and Paulo Tostes and came out during the heat of the 2013 June Marches. Much like *Golpe*, one can argue that *Vinagre* purports to channel the oppositional spirit of the demonstrations and to establish, on a literary level, a participatory sphere in which Brazilians could express dissent and make demands via poetic expression. Both *Golpe* and *Vinagre* advance the notion that literary or, more broadly speaking, cultural iteration has a role to play in promoting democracy, or, concomitantly, in resisting authoritarianism.

Let me conclude this section by briefly looking at Carla Kinzo's poem *grito*.<sup>41</sup> In her text, the shouted word is both a thing, a weapon ("uma coisa"), and a rebellious speech act. The two facets of the word entwine so that language becomes both the act of resisting and its tool ("a palavra como coisa / dura, cheia de pontas"). Kinzo's contribution illustrates how poetic ambiguity translates into democratic comportment. Much like the proliferation of meanings, democratic engagement cannot not be confined to a single paradigm or action. It should overflow the constraints of institutional politics and become part of everyday life. But democratic engagement should also become part of our cultural vocabulary and praxis, pointing towards other possible futurities ("tentando dizer desse tempo /ou do que não há de durar /como ela") that both encompass and transcend anti-democratic trends.

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<sup>41</sup> Carla Kinzo, "grito", 2016, p. 75.

By way of conclusion let me look briefly into how Brazilian literature processes the country's ongoing democratic erosion. On March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018 Rio city councilwoman Marielle Franco and her driver, Anderson Pedro Gomes, were gunned down in downtown Rio de Janeiro. Marielle Franco hailed from the low-income community of Maré. She was a black and bisexual woman whose race, gender, sexual orientation and class defied Brazil's hegemonic social and political order. Even as her murder remains by and large unsolved, Marielle Franco's life – not her death – has achieved global prominence. In September 2019, the city of Paris inaugurated a garden in homage to the slain politician. The same year, the Portuguese street artist Vhils, in partnership with Amnesty International, created a mural honoring Marielle Franco in the newly renovated Miradouro Panorâmico do Monsanto, in Lisbon. Vhils' painting reverberates in numerous murals in multiple Brazilian cities that depict the slain councilwoman, usually with her trademark smiling countenance. Several Brazilian cities, including Marielle's native Rio de Janeiro and Fortaleza, in the Northeastern state of Ceará, have named streets after Marielle Franco. And in 2020, Globoplay ran a documentary on her life.

Immediately after her murder, poems about Marielle started to appear on social media platforms such as Facebook. These contributions were compiled into the volume of poems *Um girassol nos teus cabelos. Poemas para Marielle*, published in 2018 through the literary collaborative Mulherio das Letras. The anthology contains “50 voices, 50 times for Marielle.” Contributors include well-known names such as Conceição Evaristo, Mel Duarte and Tatiana Nascimento. Entries oscillate between the celebratory, the defiant, and the denunciative. The anthology's organizing principle is the slogan “Marielle presente!” that became synonymous with anti-authoritarian resistance in the aftermath of the council woman's assassination. In other words, even if many of the contributions touch upon Marielle Franco's tragic death, mostly the texts honor her legacy and celebrate her life. Various of the collection's texts incorporate the maxim as part of the verse. The poems are a means to “presentify” Marielle Franco's legacy and localize it within a democratic compendium.

Though several of the texts merit further examination, I will only discuss one poem briefly. My choice is informed by the thematic correspondences between this poem and some of the texts from *Golpe* that I examine above. Such analogies reveal a common lexicon underpinning the trope of democracy in contemporary Brazilian literature. But beyond this, the poem that I consider highlights gender as an important construct in the literary imaginary of democracy. Of course, as Ale Safra's text *Vinte anos do manifesto A Greve do Ventre* indicates, gender has become a lynchpin in both Brazil's political and the cultural spheres. Shortly before Michel Temer assumed the nation's executive office, the weekly publication *Veja* published a feature about soon to be first lady Marcela Temer with the headlines "Bela, recatada e do lar." It goes without saying that the headings occasioned much blow-back and quite a few humorous quips (An example was the parodic reworking of the caption into "Bela, recatada e do bar"). *Veja's* title highlighted the prevalence of conservative gender norms that increasingly encroach on women's lives in Brazil. Against this backdrop and the ongoing erosion of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights *Um girassol nos teus cabelos* assumes a special poignancy. The volume's often defiant texts activate an imaginary of hope and intersectional insubordination that contradicts the stifling racialized patriarchal imaginary. Micheline Verunsch's untitled composition is emblematic of this stance.

Reinterpreting Caetano Veloso's well-known (though problematic) song, *Um índio*, Verunsch's poem memorializes not only the woman and politician Marielle Franco, but the many Marielle's that are the mainstay of democratic struggle. Similar to Veloso's ballad, the poem has an incantatory, prophetic quality effected by the verb in the future tense in the refrain "uma mulher descera o morro"<sup>42</sup>. Much like Veloso's song, the poem juxtaposes a rather bleak present ("os muros arames que separam o morro") to what may lay ahead ("esta mulher ninguém poderá parar"). In the interstices of the now and what might be, the poetic voice imagines a country that, though anti-democratic in the present tense, nonetheless has the potential to refute this counter democratic imagination. Verunsch's poem resorts to a varied imaginary that ranges from candomblé

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<sup>42</sup> Micheline Verunsch, "Untitled", 2018, p. 8.

“seu vestido é a tempestade,” a reference to the orixá Iansã) to the dystopian present (“e pisará o chão deste país sem nome.” The country’s anonymity suggesting the erasure of humanity within its boundaries). Through heterogeneous metaphors, the poem touches upon the different themes and histories that Marielle Franco’s death evokes: the obfuscation of entire populations from Brazil’s social contract and from its history (“desse país que interminavelmente não há”), its repertoire of violence against Black female bodies (“e ainda que seu sangue caia / ferida incessante no asfalto do Estácio”) as well as the recent spike in anti-Black, anti-LGBTQI+ violence that is (not always implicitly) condoned by state actors (“e ainda que anunciem sua morte [e sim, ainda que a comemorem]”). Nonetheless, despite the bleak allusions, Verunsch’s verses also propose a utopian imagery that, as noted above, reverberates in the future tense verbs. In Verunsch’s verses, Marielle Franco becomes an emblem. She is transformed into both a noun and a verb. Though this verb evokes authoritarian encroachment (portended by her tragic death), mostly Marielle Franco is a synonym of hope in the democratic grammar that Brazilian literature actualizes even as it faces new challenges to institutional democracy and democratic culture.

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