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In the Line of Fire: Sex(uality) and Gender Ideology in Brazil

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The so-called gender ideology was a decisive tool for Jair Bolsonaro and his followers during the Brazilian presidential elections in 2018. By mobilizing gender and sexuality as a moral discourse to dispute power in the country, enemies could be both efficiently crafted and violently attacked in the name of the nation, of Christianity and of traditional values such as the heterosexual nuclear family. By now, Brazil's far right government has completed its first year in office. Its aggressive gender and sexuality politics, however, still resemble the election campaign. The president exhibits a (mostly intended) bumbling management of ecological disasters, unemployment, increased armed violence, and the deep crisis of public and social institutions. Similarly, Damares Alves, evangelical pastor and head of the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights, opts for ideological rhetoric and conservative politics instead of progressive strategies for the protection and empowerment of women, LGBT and other discriminated or historically disadvantaged groups. Alves became known soon after the inauguration of the new government, when she declared in a video that "the new age has begun, and now boys wear blue and girls wear pink" (Alves 2019). Out of a yearning for an ostensibly lost traditional gender order, Alves not only orchestrates both religious and secular voices that criminalize abortion – an illegal practice in Brazil as in most Latin American countries. Also, her Ministry supports national psychological associations that defend the 'cure' of LGBT people and advocate for sexual abstinence in order to prevent undesired pregnancy and sexual transmitted infections among teenagers.

Since the beginning of the Bolsonaro government, Brazil has witnessed the dismantling of administrative structures aimed at promoting public policies for LGBTs and women, amidst a paternalistic state authoritarian discourse that defends and promotes a rather narrow view of the family. It follows the implementation of austerity and neoliberal politics, where universal services are seen as prejudicial to public accounts, transferring to families – and women – the obligation to do care work. These destructive policies accompany governmental statements of evident symbolic weight that postulate the non-recognition of LGBT as subjects of rights. They attack defenders of gender equality precisely in the fields aimed at confronting violence against women and LGBT and the promotion of the rights and autonomy of these populations. The field of culture has become a prominent target, since federal and state powers started to intervene in the circulation of movies and books with content that touch LGBT issues. Furthermore, education has turned into a similarly attacked field (Facchini/Rodrigues 2018), because schools and universities are suspected to be the production sites of gender ideology and communism.

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In this short essay, we strive to shed light on what gender ideology means in the actual Brazilian political and social context. We ask how it is being directly or indirectly mobilized by different actors and groups that participate in a profound struggle about morals and freedoms of sexual rights and expressions. Going beyond the sometimes crushing powers of conservative political forces, we also briefly address the role of culture and the arts, especially the field of popular music, through which recent LGBT and feminist movements are radically opposing the government's discourse.

Mamadeira de piroca: The Symbol of Gender Ideology

The spread of a supposed gender ideology has been an integral device of conservative upswings in Latin America (Viveros Vigoya/Rondón 2017). At first hand, it has been established in retaliation for the international recognition of gender rights and sexual diversity – the recent successful action of feminists and LGBT activists in the region to build public policies that guarantee rights, reduce inequalities, and combat violence against women and LGBT people. Today, the notion of gender ideology is one of the pillars of a new conservative activism, particularly related to the Catholic church's role in defending what it considers the 'natural' role of men and women within the family and reproduction. Ultimately, it was built as a denunciation of an alleged international plan carried out by feminists and LGBT activists to end family and gender differences, especially corrupting children. In Latin America, both religious and conservative groups have – quite successfully – used this image of morally threatened children in order to mobilize public anxieties of a society being threatened as a whole. Since the beginning of the last decade, moral claims on gender and sexuality entered the Brazilian public debates about education plans from local to national levels. As in the example of the polemic "Kit Gay" in 2011[1], conservative forces required the suppression of the categories gender and sexual orientation, and policies started to focus on schools throughout Brazil. At that time, the fight against the supposed gender ideology enabled the creation of a broad alliance between politicians – some religious, some not – of different parties, priests, Pentecostal pastors and other conservative forces, succeeding eventually in removing gender and sexuality categories from education plans. At the level of universities, gender and sexuality studies were accused of being ideological, so as if they were a product of opinion, and disallowed as consolidated fields of research aimed at facilitating more inclusive public health, human rights, and social policies.

It is important to recognize this history of gender ideology previous to the Brazilian presidential elections of 2018. Bolsonaro and his allies were not the authors of this discourse, but they knew how to mobilize it as their moral soil and as fears that could affectively unite different social groups and strata. Sufficient to remember the fake news video "mamadeira de piroca" (Anonymous 2018) that denounced the distribution of a bottle whose nipple was shaped like a penis in nursery schools, and associating it with the former governments of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Tra-

balhadores, PT). As unreasonable as it seemed then and now, the piroca bottle played a decisive role in the 2018 elections that took the far right to the presidency in Brazil. Since 2017, violent and ultraconservative groups have gained media attention when demonstrating against education or art exhibitions that would supposedly (homo) sexualize children, call for pedophilia, and destroy the family. Part of these actions were the hateful attacks against Judith Butler in November 2017, when a small group of protesters would burn a witchlike doll with the philosopher's face for the sake of defending children (see Butler's proper reaction 2017). Such stagings of moral crusades via media and later on fake news intensified in 2018. They were directly channeled into the anti-petismo (anti-Workers' Party-movements) that deeply split the electorate. At the beginning of 2020, however, it is also important to remember that Brazilian researchers and scientific associations have strongly mobilized against the attacks on science and, more specifically, on gender studies, producing political articulation and critical analysis of the ongoing assaults.

LGBT Resistances in Culture, Music and State Congresses

Culture has been one of the privileged sites of hate speech against the assumed propagators of the so-called gender ideology. During the presidential elections, Brazilian pop star and drag queen Pabllo Vittar has repeatedly been a target of homophobic attacks and turned into a figure of projected moral fears. Fake news spread, claiming that his face would appear on national banknotes or that he would leave the country if the then deputy Bolsonaro was elected. Vittar never thought of leaving the country. On the contrary, he made it very clear that he would stay and that "no black person will go back to the slave quarters and no gay person to the closet" (Pereira 2018). Although some LGBT voices time and again critique that his music could be more political, he asserts: "I am a 'Poc' (effeminate young and flashy gay, NW/ILF) who takes the stage in a country that kills most LGBT people. If this is not a political act, I don't know what is" (Pereira 2018). Indeed, while Vittar may be the embodiment of moral disorder for some, for others he – and his she-drag – is a new idol and front queen of Brazil's effervescent LGBT movements.

From 2015 to today, trans, travesti and drag queen artists have conquered the Brazilian music scenes, ranging from pop, rap, funk, MPB, rock, tecnobrega to hip hop and others. Forming a cultural movement that is thoroughly critiquing the binary gender order (Wyllys 2016), its protagonists are using their mostly black and trans bodies from the peripheries to denounce not only transphobia but also racism, police violence, and the fateful constraints on gender identities imposed by the churches. Beyond the pop star Pabllo Vittar, singers and performers like Liniker, Linn da Quebrada, As Bahias e Cozinha Mineira, or Rico Dalasam are articulating voices that have historically been excluded – not only from artistic but also from broader political and social enunciation as a whole. Audiences and repercussions of this movement are manifold. For a generation of travesti and trans, representativity on the stages of

popular music is resistance and expresses the right to exist beyond the dehumanization that most of the trans and travesti population in Brazil still experiences.
The effects and actions of this broader cultural movement also include political state institutions. One example is Erica Malunguinho, the first transgender person elected to the state congress of São Paulo at the end of 2018. She is an artist and creator of Aparelha Luzia which she defines as a black cultural space and urban quilombo that strives to bring together people of African descent in solidarity. Within a storm of gender ideology and reigning desires to restitute old hierarchies, the presence of both Malunguinho in the congress and Linn da Quebrada in music are not only a form of resistance, but also symbolic for a profoundly changing political landscape.

Note

1 "Kit Gay" is the vulgar and pejorative name the then state deputy Jair Bolsonaro gave to the initiative "Escola sem Homofobia" (School without homophobia), which was composed of education materials and supposed to integrate a federal program coordinated by the Ministry of Education. Bolsonaro mobilized against the proposal by arguing that the Ministry and LGBT groups would encourage "homosexualism" and expose children to pedophilia (for further discussion see chapter 4 in Vital/Leite Lopes 2013).

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