

Marielle Presente!

Defending the Memory and Legacy of Marielle Franco in Brazil. An Interview with Anielle Franco

Livia de Souza Lima, Julia Roth and Edith Otero Quezada¹

Anielle Franco is a teacher, journalist, and activist for Black women's rights in Brazil, born and raised in the Favela da Maré in Rio de Janeiro. In 2023, she was appointed Minister of Racial Equality in the newly elected Lula government. After the brutal assassination of her sister Marielle Franco on 14 March 2018, Anielle and her family founded the Marielle Franco Institute, which is dedicated to fighting gender, racial, and political violence in the country, in particular, as well as supporting Black women politicians and candidates. Its endeavors also include demands for justice, as this yet unresolved crime hangs like a shadow over the family and other Black women, especially those who are active in politics. In this conversation, Anielle talks with us about her trajectory and her continuous efforts to fight and defend the memory and legacy of Marielle Franco in Brazil. In the context of the systematic erasure of Black women's memory and history, preserving Marielle Franco's legacy is a strategic part of the Afro-Brazilian feminist struggle.

Tell us about the process of creating and constituting the Marielle Franco Institute.

After they killed my sister in 2018, I was thinking about creating a space dedicated to her name and memory where I could teach English, Portuguese, and Math to teenagers and young people. And when I started thinking and asking people about that, many Black women activists who already worked at NGOs approached me to say that I could do that and other things, as well. They

1 The interview was conducted on 17 September 2021.

advised me to create something bigger and more expansive because Marielle Franco, my sister, is the definition of a global leader. So those Black women who approached me before assisted us in this process, and together with my family, we sat down for a few months, working extensively on creating a concept, an idea of how we would like the Institute to be. Besides the educational front, we as a family wanted to incorporate everything that we used to do into the Institute. For example, our family was always asked to go to the police, and talk about the investigation, so we included that. There was much fake news about Marielle, and we were always talking about it, denying the false rumors, and fighting against that, as such, defending her memory. So currently, everything we do in the Institute serves the mission of spreading Marielle's legacy. For example, when we give an interview, we spread the legacy; when we deny fake news, we defend her memory, which is how the Institute was built and structured. We are also thinking collectively and structuring an advisory political council with names such as Bianca Santanna, Lucia Xavier, and Sueli Carneiro, women active in the Black women's movement, to help us out in this endeavor.

We see that the idea of memory is central for the Institute. Why do you think it is essential to defend the memory and legacy of Marielle Franco, not only for Brazil, but also from a global perspective?

I think that we, and I particularly, did not expect my sister to become known worldwide the way she did after the assassination. That made us very proud, but at the same time very sad, thinking and seeing how much more she could have done, you know? But at the same time, I understood the importance and value that Marielle had and still has for us and the mission that we now have to speak about her, not only here, but also outside of Brazil.

Defending Marielle's memory and constantly remembering her assassination goes beyond the intersection of human rights and politics, you know, I think it extends to every Black woman who works hard, every LGBTQIA+ who looks at her and wonders why they killed her. We still don't know why they killed her, and we still don't know who ordered the killing, and I think the task of finding out is going to be with us for decades to come. Perhaps I will no longer be here when they do because things like that take time in Brazil. And my family has been building this Institute, this organization, for future generations to understand how important it is for us to continue to speak about her. I think it is not only to keep her memory alive, but also to inspire other peo-

ple. These other women will follow in her footsteps, especially and specifically maybe women who believe that it is possible to be in politics and be a politician. In any country, at the same time, it is important to be alive.

You mention that your sister's case is not about just one person, that it actually represents a global phenomenon, highlighting how it can be very difficult for women to enter politics. That is why we need to start insisting on and finding justice in this case. How do you see the role of the Institute and how does the Institute help Brazil to think of an alternative political project?

We live in a time in Brazil that is very delicate; people do not respect each other's opinions right now. Our current President [Jair Bolsonaro] legitimizes this type of behavior, so I see the Institute as a place where we are going to fight for democracy, where we are going to inspire other women to continue and to follow their dreams, since many women are interested in entering politics after Marielle's murder. But at the same time, it is not only about that. I think that after her assassination, we started a movement that tried to bring back women who did not want to discuss politics or be in a social movement, which is very important. And I think the Institute has the right to do it; it is a legitimate action to think about who Marielle is and what our family represents in this context. At the same time, I think people look at us and see a possibility within civil society to inspire, discuss, and fight for rights and things they were not interested in before.

What are your visions and the Institute's vision for the role and importance of the potential of Black women for Brazilian politics? Especially reflecting on the fact that numerous Black women started to claim a position within the political institutions following Marielle's assassination.

It is huge, but some things worry me about Black women as political candidates. First, because Black women in Brazil are seen, I will use a strong word, as "nothing"! Because we are not allowed to be protagonists when we want to, and we know we can. Second, Black women do not receive any support and investment when they wish to be candidates. Third, when we talk about politics in Brazil, we only see White men on top, you know?

We have a few women who are just now entering institutional politics. I think their role is vast, but at the same time, we do not receive the instruments necessary for us to be in the place where we should be or we have to be. For

example, Marielle wanted to be a Senator, and many people said no, that was not the time for her to do this. I don't know if it was the time or not; maybe she could have been one. At the same time, we understand that it is essential to have Black women in those spaces of power, where they can represent us; we know that it is tough for us to get there. So I think that is the kind of role that we have to work together, with women who offer their bodies with much courage and say: "Hey, I am going to be a candidate". On the other hand, the Institute has to help them and speak about security, financial resources, and protagonism, and not silence Black people.

We also understand that the Institute's mission is to inspire and empower women and the LGBTQIA+ community. What does this mean in practice? What activities and projects are you promoting to work with this mission?

We have many projects going on. In 2021, it was the first municipal elections after Marielle's assassination; we created a campaign called: Plataforma antiracista nas eleições (PANE- Anti-racist electoral platform), an anti-racist action where the candidates could access and sign an endorsement to express a public commitment with Marielle's ideas. Many people who wanted to vote in those elections would consult our website to check if their candidates were committed to Marielle's ideas.

We were working on building this kind of influence. Another example of action: the Institute posted and shared the names of the candidates that people could vote for. We were not doing publicity for candidates, but provided a space where people could identify what political projects we endorsed.

And we are doing another project similar to this for the 2022 elections, which we are still working on. Because this time, we will vote for the President, and governments, so it is going to be a little different, but we will do something.

We are also committed to fighting against political violence, doing research about it, speaking about the topic, holding events, meeting with politicians who have already suffered political violence, and generally discussing this topic extensively. We are working on a project called Marielle Franco schools where we would like to bring in intellectual Black women to speak to teenagers, and we are currently constructing a Memorial Center. And in everything we do, we try to specifically bring Black women to join our efforts.

How are your projects received? And what are the challenges or impediments you have been facing as you are making things happen and working with your missions?

The reception by like-minded people and supporters of the Institute has been excellent. But [...] as I said before, we are facing a time in Brazil where there is much hatred because of the President [Bolsonaro (2021)]. Sometimes we get threats, we get cursed, well [...] once when I was walking in the streets with my daughter by my side, someone spit in my face, just because, you know, I am Marielle Franco's sister. They think they get to be very rude to us. It is not easy and we don't always get full support for our launch projects. It is challenging.

Are you finding support within the political community?

No, no law in Brazil can give us support because we are an NGO. Maybe if we were politicians, it would be easier. Sometimes they share what we post, sometimes they ask to speak about it, but that is it.

Do you have support from entities outside institutional politics or social movements?

Yes, social movements are always with us because we are part of them. So besides sharing, we are also discussing, writing for newspapers, sometimes we hold events together. Sometimes when we need financial support, they might know how to help us and tell us where to go.

Does your Institute collaborate with other feminist groups outside Brazil? Are you in dialog with them?

Yes, we do. We have met with three or four groups these past months. With Brazilian women who are living in the USA or in Europe. There are at least four collectives that we have been speaking to and with whom we have considered projects for the next year or so.

Do you have other forms of exchange with Black Lives Matter or Ni Una a Menos, or any other of these movements?

Yes, we do. We had a couple of trips scheduled for this year and the past year, but we could not do them because of the COVID-19 pandemic. But we do have plans to resume these trips and maybe open up more significant and global avenues for the Institute.

Do you consider it necessary for the Institute's work to be more visible?

Yes, definitely, because every time we do things in Brazil, and even if we go out of the country and share this in the news, we gain more visibility. Once, we went to France and Paris to meet and speak with the French President, which was all over Brazil's news. So we already understood that the more visibility we get outside the country, the better we do inside Brazil.

Looking back to Brazil and maybe other places, how do you relate your work and your struggle and practices to the history of feminism in Brazil and maybe in the Americas more broadly? I know there is a long tradition of Black feminisms in Brazil.

I think there are many ways we connect and see the movement in general, but especially for Black women, since this life is a struggle from day one. Many decades ago, we had so many Black women feminists who wrote extensively and inspired us. I think Marielle and my family are just one more example of what feminism and feminists, and Black women have faced for so long. When you have Angela Davis come to Brazil and compare what she used to do with what our family is doing, this is very important; this is big. When you have Angela Davis saying: You are looking out at me, but you have to pay attention to Lélia Gonzalez, who is so vital for us. I think we all have connections. We use a term in Brazil, which is "dororidade," coined by Brazilian Black feminist Vilma Piedade. She says that Black women are connected by their pain, losses, and struggles. On the other side, you have bell hooks, who is not Brazilian, saying that we also connect by love and seeing each others' pains, solidarity, compassion, etc. I think it is essential to be able to have these connections because, yes, we do have feminism for White women and all the others, but we also have Black feminism. I don't believe we can construct a better world if we don't come together collectively.

But there is also a solid indigenous women's movement in Brazil.

Yes, of course, quilombolas and indigenous. And this is what I always say: We do have to come together; otherwise, we will have only struggles and no results.

What message would you like to pass on to the international feminist community?

I think I would repeat what I have just said. Because it is tough to understand what people go through without putting yourself in that position. So I believe that even if you are US-American, English, or Brazilian, it is essential for us to come together and always have empathy for what is happening to many different women in other parts of the world. If I could say something to the international feminist community, I think that would be it. We are doing – we can do – whatever we want, and we can go even further if we come together and construct things together, if we fight together.

