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Times of Far-Right: The Construction of Heroes in the Brazilian Electoral Campaign

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Abstract

This paper explores a key phenomenon in the process of political identification during Brazilian elections of 2018, where sympathizers embody their leaders in a way that the borders between leader-followers are diluted; where the self is momentarily suspended, and where national heroes and villains are represented in the candidate's performance. I analyse this process through three ethnographic key events: the stab of Bolsonaro, articulating the slogan of "we are all Bolsonaro"; the multiplication of Marielles Franco plaque and the sentence "here we are thousands of Marielles"; and the prison of Lula that and the sentence: "Lula is an idea". The research method is the participant observation. Through the theoretical framework of Propp's structural narrative and Palmeira's concept of "Time of Politics", the article concludes by showing that during the electoral campaign, these political leaders acquired the traits of narrative heroes, in a special time, characterized by the performativity and acceptance of forms of heroism in political discourse.

Key-words: #Far-right, #Brazil, #Politicalcampaign, #Heroism, #Ethnography, #Performance

1. Introduction

The electoral campaign for the federal elections in Brazil started in the context of a huge political polarization and radicalization of anti-establishment discourse. The formal start date was set for August 6, 2018, with a first round of voting on October 7 and a second round of voting on October 28, 2018.

The analysis draws on fieldwork undertaken during the presidential elections. In the words of the different voters, "these elections [were] a major campaign for Brazil" in which three national heroes were detected: Jair Messias Bolsonaro, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva ("Lula") and Marielle Franco.¹ This period of high dramatization allowed the most relevant political figures to be attacked and defended as representatives of specific projects, highlighting their attributes of fame and celebrity. These three characters symbolized the struggles of the various actors and served to articulate under their image the various disputes.

This paper shows how the main political leaders reproduced elements of the heroes of the folklore stories as part of the construction of their charisma. This form of charisma, beyond the classical literature, and as I explain below, refers to a form of construction of political attraction in which elements of performativity are exalted, and which is only possible in specific moments of liminality, such as electoral moments, understood as ritual times in which this form of exercising leadership is in itself a specific and particular form of charisma. Whether or not this is part of a larger populist phenomenon would be the subject of another research.

This is a very specific approach to analysing the leaders of Brazilian politics in 2018, using ethnography as a methodological tool and inductively extracting representations of “heroism” and the stories articulated around it. The period during which the research was carried out was during the 2018 election campaign, which gave victory to Bolsonaro. Thus, between the months of August and November 2018, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews and event accompaniments, which highlighted the ethnographic moments found as key and representative moments in the construction of the heroism of these political leaders.

There are, of course, multiple approaches that could be taken to analyse an electoral period, such as through nationalism, symbolic constructions, or populist theory. The approach taken here was chosen specifically to show the representations of the diverse “heroic” journeys that the main political leaders constructed for themselves during liminal moments (political campaigns) – some in a personal way, others by adapting themselves to the environment – and went through.

The paper begins with the theoretical framework of the relation between liminal moments (“time of politics”) and narratives in political representation. It is followed by a description and ethnographic analysis of the character of these three political figures. The narrative elements present in the construction of the “heroes” is explained through the theoretical framework and these ethnographic cases. The paper concludes by explaining that these charismatic heroes fulfilled a symbolic function: they were “characters” that enabled voters to make their problems explicit, through diverse diagnoses that had not been formulated before the beginning of the electoral campaign.



Figure 1: From left to right: Jair Bolsonaro, Lula da Silva, and Marielle Franco (Source: Wikimedia Commons/Creative Commons)

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Time of Politics: dramatization and ritualization in the Brazilian electoral period

The theoretical contribution of this article is to show how structural narrative theory can be used to analyse electoral narratives. Electoral periods, as liminal moments², are accompanied by narratives that structure and organise transitions to new forms of social and political organisation (Turner & Soucy, 2000). In this way, through the ethnographic method, I theoretically analyse the construction of structural narratives that support the development of these liminal moments.

For some academics (such as Laclau, 2005; and Mouffe, 2007), the moments of high dramatization and personalistic exaltation such as the period before the elections would be catalogued as populist moments (idem). However, I avoid that analytical category in order to focus on the intersection to be explained between time of politics-Charisma-Hero³. In this way, I analyse the construction of the stories during a specific time, when a political figure acquires traits of heroism through his or her actions and rhetoric, which gives him or her a particular charisma that he or she is unable to produce or reproduce outside this specific time of liminality (Durkheim & Fields, 1995). In the last decade, studies on personalism, supremacy, and populism and its relation to the far-right phenomenon in Latin America have deepened⁴. These studies have focused on problematising the concept of populism, understanding its regional particularities in their specific historical, social and political contexts (see Gidron, & Bonikowski, 2013; Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019; Leidig & Bayarri, 2022). Studies on personalism and supremacism have sought to understand the weaknesses of public institutions and presidentialist constitutionalism in the emergence of different forms of authoritarianism in Latin America (see Hawkins, 2010; Horowitz, 2012).

I therefore use a specific Brazilian approach to the concept of charisma which, although several decades old since its theoretical definition, is more relevant today than ever, showing the connections between reality and fiction that occur during electoral periods: the construction of charisma from the perspective of the imaginary of the stories, using characters found in the cosmology of Brazilian literature (Da Matta, 1983).⁵

This electoral period was characterized as an exceptional time, a ritual time in which the rules of coexistence and the exaltation of discourse were reopened for re-signification and re-articulation. In the words of anthropologist Moacir Palmeira, it was a “time of politics” (Palmeira, 1991). In this period of high dramatization, the most violent elements of contemporary Brazilian society came to light. In this paper, I present the main heroes who made up this time of politics in Brazil, arguing that in this exceptional time, political identification occurred in two ways: the leader embodied values and ideas among society; and sympathisers embodied the leader (Weber, 1992; Da Matta, 1983; Bayarri, 2022).

The category of time of politics, as defined Palmeira, has been highly influenced by the studies of anthropology and ritual developed at the National Museum (UFRJ) by Mariza Peirano, as well as by the anthropologist Stanley J. Tambiah. The reinterpretation of Van Gennep's concept of liminality made by Victor Turner (2017/1969) is also central to the understanding of a time of politics as being a period of transition: a period *before* elections in which social norms are altered and politics takes on a central role in people's informational universe (Turner, 2017). This is why the moments of high dramatization and ritualization in the electoral period are so significant.

The concept of a time of politics also explains the use of somewhat more risky categories like “magic objects,” “magic thinking,” “hope,” and “fair” (Geertz, 1973). In all of these cases, I am referring to a special interpretation that can only be made during the electoral period, since logic then has new ways of appropriating objects in narrative terms (Bayarri, 2022). This happens because in this period ideas and proposals are ordered through elements that facilitate understanding, elements with which society itself identifies and which it mobilises emotionally towards a new stage, channelled through these political hero-leaders (Errejón & Mouffe, 2015). For example, “normal” people can become heroes and villains. Many accusations of villainy occur in an electoral rhythm where there is no time to justify arguments based on empirical data, and violence itself can be trivialized because it is a time when the different, the magic, is justified (Palmeira, 1991).

2.2. Heroes, enemies and narrative representations

Electoral rituals are accompanied by narratives that strengthen diverse forms of heroism of political leaders. The formal time of politics began on August 6, and with it, the dispute over the construction of the heroic stories of the election – the series of tales that sanctify the characters, giving their figures a religious aspect (Williams, 1989; Propp, 1928). As in popular tales, the heroes of the time of politics are constructed as characters in a story. Ethnographic accounts of this phenomenon show how people assume that the candidates have to perform narrative representations, and the candidates themselves assume that function with their speeches (Hochschild, 2016). The work of folklorist Propp (1928) has been helpful in extracting some of the elements of these heroic stories, making explicit common structures that could be identified in the electoral campaign.

Throughout the paper, I break down the construction of the heroes who drew up the campaigns of the time of politics, unveiling the existence of recurring characters in each of the campaigns, as well as goals that were often related to the morphology of the folkloric narrative. In Brazilian social thought, the significance of relationships is, as in countless cultures, strongly affected by the way post-colonial stories have been historically constructed (Ribeiro, 1995). Narrative relationships, observed through the television, books and social networks of the culture industry, are extrapolated to real life. Thus, complex ideas about human relations are ordered in the form of metaphorical narratives (Lakoff, 2002). Heroic figures acquire relevance as representatives of particular models of nationalism, in historical formation, which reveal the plural configuration of identities in coexistence, and which finds in the heroic figures the mediation between order

and disorder in the social sphere. In the model of the Brazilian Hero as defined by anthropologist Roberto Da Matta (1983), for example, heroism ranges from the figure of the *malandro* (who is not attached to work and achieves his goals with less effort), to the *caxias* (who is compliant with the laws, and, regardless of whether or not he is a worker, forces others to work) to the *saint-resigner* (who leaves everything and goes to work for a greater cause).

The story is characterised by the polarised relationship between hero and villain. The construction of such a dichotomous relationship is only possible through a process of stigmatisation and dehumanisation of the opposites (Fernández-Villanueva & Bayarri, 2021). Political adversaries are transformed into enemies, and can therefore be attacked (Hodson et al., 2014). The production of parabolic images, metaphors, analogies and resources of simplification are very powerful seduction strategies (Zlobina, 2021). This positioning, although characteristic of the entire political spectrum, is more hostile and violent on the part of Bolsonaro, in which his narrative of heroism justifies his own use of physical and verbal violence.

3. Ethnographic cases of study

3.1. “Each of you is Jair Bolsonaro”

It was Thursday, September 6, 2018, the electoral campaign had begun exactly one month ago. This day Bolsonaro was stabbed during a campaign event in Juiz de Fora in the State of Minas Gerais. Everyone agreed, both Bolsonaro's supporters and his detractors, as well as all the media, that the attack would greatly increase Bolsonaro's chances of winning the elections, although they could not explain exactly why.

A few days later, in the demonstration “For the life of Bolsonaro,” this question was resolved: the attack had crystallized Bolsonaro into a hero who faced the dangers of Brazil, and who, for his country and his people, was capable of facing death. For now, the hero had to rest, but Bolsonaro had stopped being a simple person: he had become an idea. “Each of you is Jair Bolsonaro,” Flavio Bolsonaro (a candidate for the Senate) began the event in Copacabana. The event had been announced on several social networks, and the slogan was “In favor of Bolsonaro's life.” Hundreds of Brazilian flags shone all over Nossa Senhora de Copacabana Avenue, in a gigantic exhibition of national symbols and of the construction of Bolsonaro's patriotism. Volunteers painted faces with the colors green and yellow, which flooded the event, and handed out *santinhos* (political information pamphlets) and stickers with images supporting the candidates of the Social Liberal Party (PSL).



Figure 2 T-shirts representing the heroicity of Bolsonaro (Source: Bayarri Toscano).

Supporters of Bolsonaro’s project gathered to show their support for the leader, who was still hospitalized, and the phrase that they kept repeating was “I was also stabbed,” a key idea to understand the process of building the messianic figure of Bolsonaro. Encapsulated in the metaphor “we are all Jair Bolsonaro” was an exercise of integration in which the heroism of candidate Bolsonaro as an ambivalent figure was defined, with messianic strokes, as simultaneously human and superhuman, weak and strong, close and distant (Adorno, 1950). The metaphor this was about the representation of Bolsonaro as a “Little Big Man,” the one who presented himself as superior, a strong man, capable of carrying out a crusade for traditional values, with God above all, and who recovered the nostalgia of the military past but, at the same time, weak as any of his followers: “Bolsonaro is sincere,” “Bolsonaro is transparent,” “Bolsonaro is like everyone else,” were some of the expressions used about the leader, who had positioned himself as a representation of the people. Bolsonaro was submitted to the redemptions of a paternal authority, which in his case would be a service much superior to himself, of the representation of a collectivity of all the sons gathered around his project. Bolsonaro would be the envoy in charge of superior service, a messiah who would place “Brazil above everything and God above everyone” in a clear reference to an historical crusade for the hegemony of Christian values.

The manifestation showed a political project whose collective power would provide emotional compensation for the weakness of each individual. In this way, an identity built and influenced by its opposite in Lula, began to articulate that “Bolsonaro is all of us,” “we are his soldiers” and that “each one of us is Bolsonaro.” The essence of Bolsonaro as the Little Big Man would be distributed in all the people contributing to this discourse, leading to their crystallization and passage from being a Bolsonaro’s sympathiser to a Bolsonaro activist who would be the bearer on behalf of the leader of the Bolsonaro project, fulfilling the service of “taking Bolsonaro to every house, every family, every place”, a slogan that all bolsonarist influencers reproduced.

The stabbing attack against the future president thus strengthened both aspects of the Little Big Man, since it demonstrated the fragility of a man of flesh and blood, while at the same time insisting that his destiny would give him the strength to continue his crusade. As a result of this event, the representation of the leader was strengthened among his sympathisers, who embodied the attack each time they reproduced the phrase: “I was also stabbed.” The attack also allowed the leader to focus on himself as everyman, positioning himself as one more affected by the “violence,” a victim, so that those who heard him from then on did not perceive that Bolsonaro was not discussing the programmatic issues that might interest them, but his qualifications as a leader: by admitting his weaknesses in emphasising his powers, he conveyed to his followers that they too, to a lesser extent, could become strong, that they “were Jair Bolsonaro,” and that it was enough for them to hand over their private motivations to the public movement (Carone, 2002). During the demonstration, attendees put on stickers and wore clothes and hats with different memes of the candidate. This was both a process of activism and an incorporatization of the candidate as part of that process of “being Bolsonaro,” of the collective division of the messianic act and the construction of identity in movement. The incarnation of the leader was in each of the sympathisers, who from that moment on needed only to follow the path of their hero, the Little Big Man (Ross, 1950).

The attack against Bolsonaro however, was also a difficulty that the candidate had to overcome in the construction of his heroic story. Around the construction of his figure of the charismatic hero, the different testimonies demonstrated that the sympathisers detected in their explanations, characteristic forms of folklore narrative (Propp, 1928): ⁶Bolsonaro was obliged to perform the race for the presidency as a mission entrusted to him, in which a series of evildoers such as the traditional media, communism, corruption, and violence incarnate –all also the enemies of the Brazilian people - pursued the hero. The people, the church, his family, and the Constitution were required to act as auxiliaries who guided the hero in his mission, helping him in difficult moments, as has been indicated in this section, when the hero had a near-death experience, and all the supporters, following the words of their leaders, “took Bolsonaro to each of their homes.” The presidential institution acted as the prize of the adventure, since the true hero would be recognized with respect to the false heroes of the campaign, and would be rewarded in an investiture ritual in which he would be constituted as the true charismatic hero.

3.2. Lula: “A little bird came to visit me”

Luiz Ignácio Lula da Silva, known as Lula, (born October 27, 1945) had been the president of Brazil for the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers’ Party or PT) between January 1, 2003, and December 31, 2010. In the 2018 elections, Lula tried to stand again as a presidential candidate, but was disqualified according to the *Lei da Ficha Limpa* (Clean Sheet Law) by the Supreme Court of Justice. On March 4, 2018, he had gone to the Federal Police of São Paulo to hand himself over to the authorities. At the time, the former president pronounced a key sentence: “Lula is not a person, Lula is an idea.” This sentence disassociated the former president from his own person, and, as in the process of the messianic embodiment described for Bolsonaro, allowed his name to be placed as a signifier that people could use as a flag to describe various political projects brought together in his name.

On Thursday, November 1, 2018, I went to the *Lula Livre* (Free Lula) camp in front of the Federal Police building in the city of Curitiba in the State of Paraná, where the legendary former president of Brazil had been imprisoned for more than 200 days after being sentenced in the second instance in Operation *Lava-Jato* ⁷to twelve years and one month in prison.⁸

The camp, now modest, had some months before, housed more than a thousand people camped in front of their leader’s prison. On the date I arrived, Bolsonaro had won the elections, so the camp organisers were trying to rethink their camp as a form of resistance to the new Bolsonaro administration. It was a small space, surrounded by various flags representing the popular unity of the Workers’ Party, with stands selling flags, T-shirts, and masks of Lula’s face. Among its symbols were numerous references to the *Movimento Sem Terra* (the Landless Workers’ Movement or MST).

The messianic trait of the former president was latent in the way Camp Lula was organized. On a small board, the organization wrote down the visits of public figures and activities that would take place during the day. Every day, the supporters gave the “greeting to the president” in the morning, which consisted of saying “Good morning, President Lula” by pointing the finger in the form of an L and turning the arm, representing in that gesture the motto of *Lula Livre*. The ritual was repeated thirteen times, the electoral number that first Lula, and then Haddad, his substitute candidate, had used during the campaign. This same ritual was repeated at lunchtime and at night, changing the “Good morning” for “Good afternoon” and finally concluding between songs of support for the president, “Good night, President Lula,” after which people dispersed until the next day. The event was repeated seven days a week, serving to strengthen the relationships of the most faithful bases and, in the words of the participants: “to raise the spirits of our President Lula.” The participants were convinced that the ex-president could hear their voices from the window of his cell, making an emotional compensation, in which the individual put his time and energy into supporting a president who had made him identify politically with a collective.

Among the various conversations I had at the Camp, my interview with an old lady who came every day to greet the president was especially relevant. She told me a story that went around the camp:

Every day, President Lula receives a little sparrow in the window of his cell. The jailers respect our president very much, and they transmit their messages to us when they leave. The jailers told us that President Lula thinks that the sparrow is the Holy Spirit, that he goes every day to visit him, and we believe it too.

This story, as well as the studied image of Jair Bolsonaro, reflects the messianic character taken on by former President Lula, who would be visited daily by the Holy Spirit to remind him that he was an innocent hero, that he was the bearer of The Truth. This character also presented the features of the great Little Man, human and superhuman at the same time, fragile enough to grow old in prison while illuminated by a divine force that would remind him daily, along with his bases, that he was an innocent hero, and that he should have the strength to endure in order to fulfill a mission greater than himself. This mission related his heroic figure to a Brazilian patriotism that he shared with his antithesis Bolsonaro: both were to be the saviors of the homeland for their supporters.

According to research carried out by Ortellado and Solano (2016), Lula was considered by his voters to be close to the people: he was charismatic, different from politicians, honest. Many people interviewed during the demonstrations had voted for Lula, but were now going to vote for Bolsonaro since Lula appeared to have betrayed them, while Bolsonaro was the true, honest representative, different from the political caste (Ortellado and Solano, 2016). Often it did not seem to matter that Bolsonaro and Lula had opposing political projects: what was important was the trust that the figure transmitted to their supporters that accorded with the paternal figure that in Brazilian political culture was not only accepted but internalized and expected.

Lula's imprisonment meant that the time of electoral politics had begun with particularity in the construction of its hero, when analysed, again, in terms of folklore narrative, according to the testimonies found. The charismatic hero Lula began his mission as a victim-hero, a character who was being put to the test by being deprived of his freedom, and who would have to fight the evildoers, represented by *Bolsonarismo*, from prison.

3.3. Marielle Street

Thursday, October 4, 2018, started with sad news. It was the middle time of the electoral campaign, and several people had, that day, broken the plaque on Marielle Franco Street, that commemorated the councilwoman, Marielle Franco, who had been shot dead on March 14 of the same year, along with her driver, Anderson Gomes. The perpetrators had even taken pictures of themselves with the remains of the broken plaque.

Marielle had been a thirty-eight-year-old black lesbian, *favela* resident, a feminist, activist, and defender of human rights. She had been one of the most popular councilwomen in the city, and at the proposal of the party to which she had belonged, the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), the Municipal Secretariat of Culture of Rio de Janeiro had placed her name on a small street near the Municipal Chamber of Floriano Square, popularly known as *Cinelândia*, denouncing the murder for which they were not responsible, despite indications of paramilitary militia groups. Marielle's plaque read: "Marielle Franco Street – (1979-2018) Councilwoman, defender of human rights and minorities, cowardly murdered on March 14, 2018."

Shortly after the broken plaque incident, the identities of the people who had broken the tribute were revealed as the candidate for State Deputy, Rodrigo Amorim; the candidate for Federal Deputy, Daniel Silveira; and the candidate for the Presidency of the State of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel. All were representatives of the Bolsonaro Project. These candidates seemed to have assumed that Brazil was in a particular period, the time of politics, that had altered the meaning of sociable relations, and they expressed through this symbolic act, the construction of a new country project. The candidates allowed themselves the freedom to express the most violent facets that permeated their political project, which they attempted to legitimize through a symbolic warmongering which constructed Marielle Franco as representative of the enemy.

In this fluid time, violent passions were exalted, which resorted to a symbolic war over the construction of public space, through the naming of its streets, and through struggles between diverse projects of power, mainly between a far-right-wing nationalist project, a multicultural project for the country and a project of social-democratic developmental continuity. Marielle became the representative of a model of life opposed to *Bolsonarismo*, surpassing in a series of demands the “son of Brazil,” Lula. An often-heard phrase that represented the dimensions of this symbolic figure was: “Who ordered the killing of Bolsonaro?” This phrase began to be used after the attack on Bolsonaro, and represented the opposition that the figure of Marielle had acquired for the Bolsonarist project since they were deliberately altering a slogan that had begun to be mythical in relation to the progressive sectors: “who ordered the killing of Marielle?”

At the climax of this period of struggle, the candidates who were part of the destruction of the plaque were all subsequently elected to their respective posts.⁹ Congressman Rodrigo Amorim, once in office, hung the broken plaque of Marielle, the murdered black woman, on the wall of his new office in the Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ALERJ), as if it was a hunting trophy.

The breaking of the plaque was a symbolic example of the exaltation of this time of politics, of the struggles between diverse projects for power and over the dominion of space itself, but the act also indicated the symbolic force that Marielle’s image had acquired, as a charismatic hero representing diverse demands. On October 14, ten days after the Marielle Franco plaque had been broken, thousands of people gathered in the same square, carrying more than a thousand copies of the street plaque obtained through a crowdfunding project. “Here we are, thousands of Marielles,” shouted a woman, raising her plaque high. This event offered a snapshot of the different collectives and spaces that had been articulated under Marielle’s image into a struggle of “the poor” against “the oligarchies.” Unlike Lula, although without losing the matrix of poverty, the figure of Marielle had always strongly incorporated the struggle of the identity policies that had characterized the new demands of citizenship after the military dictatorship had ended, representing Brazilian feminism, the racial question, and LGBTQI+ collectives. Marielle’s campaigns since 2016 had been strongly influenced by African-American philosopher and activist Angela Davis, author of the book *Women, Race and Class* (1981): her electoral slogan was “Woman-Race.” After her murder, Davis stated at a conference at Princeton University, that: “Marielle’s black feminism was about changing the world.”¹⁰ During the demonstrations for *Ele Não!*

(“Not him!”),¹¹ which represented the feminist struggle against *Bolsonarismo*, the figure of Marielle Franco was used to represent these collectives.

On this day, October 14, Cinelândia Square hosted the symbolic dispute of space and representation of the murdered councilwoman. It was an act against Marielle’s attack, in the same square where her coffin had been paraded and a memorial had been held, and against the breaking of her plaque, which added, with her name and her history, new meanings to the symbolic construction of this Square, reinforced by the time of politics. Patiently, several hundreds of people lined up that day waiting to pick up their plaques, which embodied for those present the model of a democratic and pluralistic life, which in addition to being murdered, could be humiliated and torn out. Many people wore purple T-shirts, representing the feminist struggle that was being strongly highlighted during the campaign. The *Lula Livre* T-shirt was also recurrent, and badges saying “*Ele Não*” were pinned to them. Among the messages that were embodied in clothing and flags, people explained their reasons for attending the event. A young black man said:

I am here because I believe that Marielle represents everything that is hidden in Brazil: the relationship with the women, the black people, the slum dwellers... this Brazil is about hiding under the rug, a Brazil that does not want to be recognized, but that is the real Brazil, the Brazil that represents us. Marielle represents that synthesis, the one of a Brazil that is denied, hidden, it is a taboo... in spite of everything, I see a lot of hope, in spite of the growth of fascism I see an insurgency, and even if it is not as big as the culture of hate that has been installed I see hope.

In the square were, in the words of another assistant, “thousands of Marielles” orienting their plaques in different directions, shaking them fast in the wind, and then stopping them.



Figure 3.3: Marielle Plaques. At left: MP Marcelo Freixo (Source: Wikimedia Commons/Creative Commons)

Everyone demanded to know who had been responsible for Marielle's death. The event ended with a speech by Monica Benicio, an activist and Marielle's widow, who exclaimed: "Keep as a memory, as a resistance, you are Marielle's legacy!".

As with the previous candidates, I have analysed the construction of Marielle Franco's heroism through folklore narrative according to the testimonies of people who were present. Marielle's heroic story was consecrated by her death. Around her symbol, a network of characters articulated her story in the time of politics. Marielle's death was not metaphorical, but real, and her image was so powerful that the Bolsonarist candidates broke her symbols trying to hurt her heroism, but at the same time consecrated her as a living character of the time of politics. Marielle began her electoral narrative journey induced by diverse movements that defended civil rights and that sent her towards her mission: to defend all these collectives, such as the feminist movement, LGBTQI+, and the anti-racist movements, against what they called "fascism" winning the elections.

The wrongdoers of this electoral story were the enemies of these collectives, represented mainly in *Bolsonarismo*, who caused violent damage to their symbols, and with them the collectives they represented as the reincarnation of the woman-race. The mission of Marielle's electoral story was frustrated by Bolsonaro's victory, however, the strength of the discourse she represented consecrated her image as a heroine defender of civil rights, renewing and reinterpreting her figure as a representative of these collectives, and taking on some of the charisma that had been monopolized by the hero, Lula, during the last decade.

4. Discussion: The construction of heroes

The collectives that expressed themselves through the figure of Marielle Franco were often not distinguishable from those that expressed themselves through the figure of Lula (both projects intertwined elements of multiculturalism and developmentalism, to different levels of influence), and both symbols personified the progressive project opposed to the *Bolsonarismo* project. In this way, the construction of a political identity can be analysed in terms of confrontation: *Bolsonarismo* (represented in Jair Messias Bolsonaro) against "progressivism" (represented in Lula and Marielle Franco). The time of politics was configured as a battlefield constituted by this duality. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that behind these character-figures, there were specific and rational agendas supported by various actual actors. The heroes did not walk alone but defended specific interests, such as the case of Bolsonaro and the defence of an ultra-liberal economic project, independent of violent rhetoric.

People interpreted this electoral time in terms of stories, defining characters based on the cosmological universe of Brazilian folklore. The candidates, aware of this, tried to strengthen specific features of their leadership. To achieve this, they, as heroes, also had to go through a series of prescribed actions throughout their projected stories, with an introduction to the campaign consisting of their life trajectories and their projects at risk. The three heroes performed as if they had received a divine call to adventure: in the case of

Bolsonaro, to put “order in the house” with respect to a series of dangers that had been built into the collective imagination. In the case of Lula and Marielle, the call to adventure would have been provoked by another trigger: the candidacy of Bolsonaro himself. The difference between Marielle and both Bolsonaro and Lula was that she had not voluntarily sought to build her heroism: it was imposed upon her as, after her death, people reconfigured her as an heroic symbol to bring their demands together. Lula and Bolsonaro, on the other hand, were well aware of how their heroic journey was taking shape since they had a hand in it.

Nevertheless, each of these heroes went through a dangerous journey, in which any one of them could have experienced death or prison. However, each hero began election day in a different way since their stories had been affected in a decisive way by their previous biographies. In the case of Bolsonaro, in March 2018, months before his official registration from deputy, he had asked for a vote to form what he had called “the machine gun block,”¹² and in August he had conducted his first official campaign activity in a maximum-security theater, showing his bulletproof vest, and thus denouncing the danger of being attacked by the *Movimento Sem Terra* (Landless Workers’ Movement), with whom he associated the PT, while at the same time preparing for it. Lula was a hero who presented himself as a prisoner in the middle of his campaign, but generated a story in which he explained that prison would be one of the many difficulties that any savior-hero had to overcome as part of their greater call: the mission that was above himself. Marielle had already lost her life, but her symbolic strength allowed the feminist movement to use her image as a hero who would overcome adversity and stand for an end in which the danger of fascism would be defeated.

After this first call to adventure, in a second act, the heroes had to untangle the knots of a series of intrigues that were spectacularized in a hard day of campaigns, television debates and physical and verbal attacks, overcoming the adversities with a greater objective than themselves: to win the elections. The heroes had to experience the dangers, to see death or deprivation of freedom coming. Bolsonaro suffered the assault that was describe in earlier in the present paper, Lula was shot at during his caravan and was subsequently imprisoned. Marielle herself was killed, although her disembodiment did not mean her failure, but rather an imposing mark of the struggle for the campaign of the collectives she represented.

Finally, in a third dramatic act in which the rhetoric of the campaign was severely intensified, the political debate was placed into the categories of opposites: dictatorship against democracy; order against chaos. As in a musical escalation in crescendo, Lula and Marielle were to defend democracy against the enemy: the dictatorship. In Bolsonaro’s case, he had to re-establish the lost order, the nostalgia of the past, to end the chaos represented by the PT government and the enemies of the nation.

Thus, in the climax of these campaign narratives, Bolsonaro fulfilled the mission entrusted to him, though not without difficulties and stories of injustice that supposedly went as far as electoral fraud, to finally be crowned as a savior. He was configured as a semi-human hero, who with the help of the Bible, the Constitution, and the army had saved Brazil, re-signifying the symbols of its spaces and establishing some warlike parallels in the confrontation of its allies against its enemies. He could safely return to his home and celebrate the salvation of

Brazil at the entrance of his house. As hero, he had learned on the way, and was returning with scars that made him worthy of the mission he had achieved. Even though the story ended at this point with his election, the reality of Bolsonaro's political management had yet to begin. However, at the time, nobody seemed to think of that: the power of the story of his heroic journey during the campaign had seduced the population, who had accompanied him day by day in his social networks, in his interviews, in his electoral events.

5. Conclusions

Political heroes offer the people a cure for their ills (Hochschild, 2016). The hero integrates the sympathiser into a structure that reconciles the sympathiser's passivity with heroic activity and overflow. In this complementarity arises the cure for the country's disease. Hero and sympathiser establish a system of passages from one to the other, creating a coherence of the psychic-narrative universe between the two, which allows the hero to embody the carnality of the sympathiser, as well as the sympathiser to embody the divine traits of the charismatic hero. This system of affectivities generates a concrete projection of the social universe: it allows the creation of desires and expectations.

Bolsonaro, Lula, and Marielle were heroes who brought to the plane of their sympathisers' collective consciousness the reasons for their individual anguish. They expressed them in form, creating new fears and associations in the process of becoming aware, embodying them as enemies of their stories. The myths that each hero formulated may or may not have been experienced by supporters, such as the case representing violence for the Bolsonarists, or intolerance or hunger for the progressive field. The imaginary of Brazil was not produced by the supporters, but co-produced by its heroes, who provided the myth, the discourse, and the interpretation, while the supporters actively carried out the indicated operations. The heroes articulated a magical thinking that collaborated to explain the goals of their divine characters, such as the salvation of Brazil, that helped people to understand the origin of the country's problems. In short, the charismatic heroes fulfilled a symbolic function: they were *characters* in a drama who helped voters to explain their problems, through various diagnoses that had not been formulated until the beginning of the electoral campaign.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest with this article.

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Footnotes

1. I will refer to these figures in the same way they are colloquially called in Brazil: Bolsonaro, Lula and Marielle. [↵](#)
2. The concept of liminality appears in Van Gennep's work (1960) in his treatment of the rites of passage. In it, he affirms the generalized existence of a type of rituals that socially mark the passage from one stage to another. [↵](#)
3. The 2019 *Annual Review of Anthropology* suggests that, although there is no “anthropology of populism” as a discipline, anthropology has been actively working on the phenomenon of populism, but using different categories to refer to specific features of populism (Mazzarella, 2019). From this perspective, this paper uses some categories worked on in the broader studies of populism, specifically in the study of political personalism, such as charisma, leadership, and heroism. Nevertheless, the paper does not use the term “populism” in order not to confuse the reader. [↵](#)
4. The author acknowledges the value of David Landau's work and his collection of relevant literature on populism, personalism and supremacy in *the 2020 Annual Review of Law and Social Science*. [↵](#)
5. Unfortunately, due to spatial limitations, I will leave for another article the very important and original works that we partially incorporate in this text. When we look at the case of the global south, and especially the Brazilian case in the Latin American context, the "Boom" of studies after Bolsonaro's victory has been led by a series of authors: the works developed by Solano, Rocha, Ortellado, Kalil, Pinheiro-Machado and Caldeira are central, their research allows us to understand the motivations of various segments of the population, as does Nicolau's work on the profiles of Bolsonarista voters. Goldstein's work builds this bridge between the PT and the new phenomenon, but also draws on structural elements. In addition, Moreira's work makes a connection between the Bolsonarist phenomenon and Brazilian evangelicalism. One of the main academic debates in Latin America, and specifically in Brazil, is about the reformulation of populist theories to new digital forms. In this sense, the recent work of Cesarino (2020) is fundamental, as she develops the concept of "digital populism" in Brazil. [↵](#)
6. Propp argues that there are constant values in the actions and functions of the characters, and variable values in the names and attributes they present. [↵](#)
7. Operation Car Wash (*Operação Lava-Jato*) is the largest anti-corruption operation in Brazilian history. Dogged by repeated corruption scandals, the PT tried to insist that it was being victimized by the national press, the judiciary, and the increasingly organized right wing. However, groups to the left of the PT also attacked the party, depriving it of its strong base of support and of important allies. Criticisms and defections also weakened the party's structures, undermining attempts to counter the emerging conservative rhetoric. [↵](#)

8. Lula was released on November 8, 2019, a day after the Supreme Court found the arrest in a second instance unconstitutional. The resolution established that the execution of a sentence can only take place after all the appeals have been assessed. Lula is currently a defendant in eight lawsuits, but none of them is currently with all the resources exhausted. The former president is at liberty, but with his assets blocked. ⇐

9. However, on June 11, 2020, The Legislative Assembly of Rio de Janeiro impeached the governor of that Brazilian state, Wilson Witzel, on suspicion of committing crimes of responsibility linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. Witzel was removed from the chair for a maximum of 180 days, during which a so-called *Tribunal Processante* of eleven members – legislators and magistrates – were to decide whether to remove him permanently. ⇐

10. Source: HuffPost Brasil. https://www.huffpostbrasil.com/entry/angela-davis-marielle-franco_br_5c8c0031e4b0d7f6b0f351df?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAKEHpY_6umV8OseWUG4Ax1lAsVlrzWuJnwTfpbw1CDMFkqMx3407wDbdHbbTOowZ4gUg43lT5K8LWVWjdEL96HWQYs76s4ssYXpplYS_GSXzgx8aYqRYt0WT7e1zt2VGOXmQgIfZsbEKXJDgbsBGcDNVKT_xk-2itCK2BhmOKJpSo. ⇐

11. The slogan was in reference to Jair M. Bolsonaro, but without explicitly citing his name. ⇐

12. Source: El País. https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/03/08/politica/1520481606_121225.html ⇐