

Democratizing the body and politics - transexual and peripheral perspectives on democracy and dictatorships

Gilmara Cunha
Graham McGeoch

| Brazil |

translated by Shawn Provost

A conversation between a theologian and a transgender woman who met each other in Maré.

Graham - Democracy is fragile and it must be constructed daily. This is not to speak of representative democracy, which frequently represents the financial elite, centers of power and heterosexual bodies. This is about participatory democracy, or “insurgent democracy,” to use the phrase of James Holston. An insurgent democracy from the unrepresented voices. It starts in the “abandonment zones” (borrowing the concept of Ivan Petrella) and articulates strategies, forms of resistance and innovations. The insurgent democracy is not a totalitarian democracy (it is true, democracies can be dictatorships in questions of the body and politics), but it is a democracy of the peripheries that problematizes and invites a transcendence of the representative democracy of the elites, of the centers (of power) and of heterosexuals.

Gilmara - I am a transgender woman and favela resident, and I have dreams.

My name is Gilmara Cunha. I am resident of the set of favelas of Maré. I am 33 years old and am a specialist in LGBT subjects of the favelas. I was born in the Geral de Bonsucesso Hospital, am the daughter of a marvelous mother who works in custodial services and come from a humble family. I live in Maré, and have lived here since I was born. Life really started for me at fourteen, when I had to work selling food with a neighbor of

mine at the São Cristóvão market where I worked until I was nineteen, without having had any opportunity to study.

When I was twenty I began my trajectory in the LGBT social movement, and I have been fighting for the betterment of the lives of the LGBT population of the favelas since. I was the first transgender person to receive the Tiradentes Medal - the highest Fluminense honor - recognized by the Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ALERJ) for services provided to the community. I also was the National Youth counselor.

I took the college-entrance prep courses at *Redes de Desenvolvimento da Maré*¹ a prominent civil society organization and NGO located in Maré and today, everything that I have I accomplished tooth and nail. It's hard to think that I am here "fighting to exist," because my dream is to graduate, and it is already an honor and pride to be a transgender woman from the favela enrolled in college. I want to be a woman who has graduated, able to help more and overcome this cancer of society called prejudice. I want to change the reality of my community, which is why I returned to study and realize my dream to be a university student, black, poor and trans.

Graham - In Brazil, as in many other countries, the preferred tool for the construction of representative democracy is human rights. The "Direct (Elections) Now" movement against the dictatorship positioned itself within the discourse of human rights. And in a re-democratized Brazil, in general, human rights have guided the fight of the peripheries forgotten in the "abandonment zones." The democratization of the body and of Brazilian politics is in fact the result of the struggles and victories of social movements (LGBTI + and others) in dialogue - resistance and innovation - with totalitarian democratic spaces. As such, "abandonment zones" are also a zone of radicalization of the democratic insurgency of bodies and politics.

Gilmara - **We have a mission to think of the peripheries from the perspective of democracy and of mobilized bodies.**

The group Conexão G (the G connection) was born with the mission of creating a long term

project for Maré and other favelas. Its conceptual axes are the perspectives of human rights and the promotion of the health of this population in the community space. Conscious of the necessity to mobilize a significant number of competent people for this huge task, Conexão G, as the name suggests, seeks to organize a collective and articulated action: to build a high impact project to combat the incidence of low-esteem in the trans population. This is centered in the goal of transforming our local reality and the realities in other spaces within the favela. The Conexão G group works to guarantee and promote citizenship and human rights for the LGBT population of the favela and in other popular spaces, especially in the city of Rio de Janeiro. With a headquarters in the favela of Nova Holanda, in Maré, the Conexão came about as part of an initiative developed in partnership with the Promundo Institute called Youth for Gender Equity, focused on workplace environments (interferences, inequalities, etc). The organization directs its work to the LGBT population, combining innovative and relevant elements in the prevention of HIV/AIDS and the promotion of human rights. All this was founded, directed and managed by the public and LGBT youth to influence public policies to promote citizenship, equal rights and respect for sexual diversity.

The group Conexão G was part of the national youth council, raising the banner of the LGBT populations of the favelas, seeing as necessary the creation of spaces for dialogue among marginalized youth. Within the scope of the Conexão G Group, there is a group that is formed by LGBT youth that discusses the issue of violence, gender inequality, racism, public security and other cross-cutting themes -- all of these lived everyday by this population that is destined to die in the favelas. In other words, themes such as racism and the extermination of the youth contribute not only to the existence of this work, but also make up its existence and mobilization in Rio de Janeiro and other cities and states throughout the country, seeking to promote a culture of peace and the guarantee of rights.

Graham - Totalitarian democracy kills trans people. They have no right to exist, to dream, or to embody (incorporate) experiences that destabilize elites, centers of power or heterosexual bodies. Trans bodies are associated with areas of abandonment and cry out against (democratic) security forces, (democratic) hetero-human rights, and call for an insurgent and indecent democracy (to borrow the concept of Marcella Althaus-Reid).

Gilmara - My body is political and it involves political change.

Indeed, because all of my actions involve the politics of change in some way, I consider my body to be political since I was born. The life goal for trans people is to make it to 30 years old. Today I am 33, I overcame the statistics and I continue in the fight for an inclusive country.

But I do not see political achievements. Therefore I speak of a place where we do not have any specific public policy for LGBTQ+. The challenge is to EXIST with the political regression and with the increase in murders of trans people. I am not able to see a favorable scenario for our segment of society, but I do think the only form of participation is at the ballot box and in our daily struggle. I understand the we, the trans population, must be inside the buildings that shape the policies that affect us.
