



This is My Body: The Queer Messianic Dysphoria of *The Pink Supper*

Nando Messias

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Abstract

In this article, I offer a personal and critical analysis of *The Pink Supper*, a protest-performance created in collaboration with Biño Sauitzvy in 2019. It is written using three modes of expression: (a) critical writing, which appears in roman type, (b) internal conversations, in italics and (c) excerpts from the performance itself, in bold. In engaging three distinct voices, I take a queer approach to writing. The polyphony tears up traditional rules of top-to-bottom knowledge transmission. It abandons formal narrative structures. In their stead, I actively embrace a somewhat ‘disorganised’ rhetoric by tightening horizontal bonds with queer writers who have adopted a similar approach.

Keywords: Live art; queer performance; trans murders; The Pink Supper; Brazil

Introduction

In this article, I offer a personal and critical analysis of *The Pink Supper*, a protest-performance created in collaboration with Biño Sauitzvy in 2019. It is written using three modes of expression: (a) critical writing, which appears in roman type, (b) internal conversations, in italics, and (c) excerpts from the performance itself, in bold. In engaging three distinct voices, I take a queer approach to writing. The polyphony tears up traditional rules of top-to-bottom knowledge transmission. It abandons formal

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1. Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: Feminist Press, 2008), 11.
2. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 98. See also, Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

narrative structures. In their stead, I actively embrace a somewhat ‘disorganised’ rhetoric by tightening horizontal bonds with queer writers who have adopted a similar approach. This triangular methodology engages life writing, auto-ethnography, and, perhaps more immediately, what Paul B. Preciado has called a theory of the self, or self-theory.¹

I am mindful that writing about something as ephemeral as performance is an act of betrayal. In committing it to language, I rob it of its essence, which for Peggy Phelan is disappearance. Performance, for Phelan, constitutes ‘a unique mode of representation without reproduction’.² The multiple voices I use here merely allow me to summon up a fugitive notion of *The Pink Supper* to the reader. To fix it in place through the written word would only starve it of its oxygen. I will resist that pull.

*Caress the imagination.
Intrigue the mind.
Dance the memory of pain.*

Background

The original idea for *The Pink Supper* came to me after the presidential election of Jair Messias Bolsonaro in 2018 in Brazil, my country of birth. ‘Messias’ is Bolsonaro’s middle name rather than his family name. It is important to state this: we are not related. I do, however, use this coincidence in my creative process. The present chapter and the performance it explores are defiant acts of remembrance of all trans lives lost in Brazil and around the world. It is my obligation to spell out precisely what is happening. It is my duty as an artist, a citizen, an individual, to try to stop the normalisation of hatred and the oppression of minorities. I must begin with what I know: my birthplace.

What is happening now in Brazil is not just about Brazil. It touches all of us, whether we identify as queer or not.

3. Paul B. Preciado, ‘Trans Catalonia’, and ‘Identity in Transit’ in *An Apartment in Uranus* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2019), 110-12, 183-5.

In reflecting on my creative process, I attempt to make sense of the victories and failures it has engendered. I may not find answers, but the questions are pressing. Paul B. Preciado’s concept of nation-dysphoria³ is critical in this search as a tool of intersectional investigation, confronting patriarchal notions of self-determination, body autonomy, and nationhood. ‘Nation dysphoria’ allows me a lens through which I can investigate my sense of being in temporary suspension, of feeling politically and socially vulnerable. This reflection opens up my own sense of nation-dysphoria and the costs associated with it.

Elevated heart rate, vigilance, agitated depression, panic attacks
 Hypnosis
 Electric shock
 Psychiatric treatment
 Who knows what those quacks implanted into my brain?

The Journey

It is December 2018 when I visit Brazil to see my mother. It is a time of great reckoning for me. I travel to retrieve my past. There is a certain urgency in doing this. If I don't do it now, it might be lost forever. I am a reverse Orpheus. He looked back too soon. If I wait too long to peer over my shoulder, my past might – like Eurydice – retreat back into the shadows of the underworld and never resurface again.

I have come to collect my childhood drawings and photos. My mother has kept these safe for me in the home where I grew up and she still lives. This rescue is imperative now for two main reasons: my mother's memory (her recollection of the past is faint at best and nonexistent at worst) and the election of the right-wing president, a shock which unleashed waves of fear through the queer community.⁴

At home, I use the voice memo app on my phone to record my mother telling me stories about who appears in some of these old photographs. Time feels abstract, warped. We leave the present. We revisit the past. Me as a child and she as the mother she used to be. I still remember her. I have passing glimpses of her former self as we sit on her sofa now and laugh together. Despite the jollity, I witness her essence slowly disappearing before my very eyes. She is lost in a fog of dementia. Her ghost retreats progressively into the shadows like Eurydice, like my past. Her body remains present.

My mother's mind is no longer the great repository of my childhood memories. Her wardrobes and drawers, on the other hand, still contain precious clues about what I was like as a child. It is in these same wardrobes that I would find her high heel shoes as a little boy. I especially remember a pair of pale blue, marabou-lined mules – way too big for my tiny six-year-old feet. I would secretly put them on and mince around the house feeling every inch the princess. Despite my efforts to disguise the act, I suspect my parents always knew.

I stand on the same threshold from where I used to watch my mother do her makeup, repeating her beauty rituals before the mirror in preparation for work. I can still recall her gestures: suck cheeks in to apply rouge, blink on index finger to remove excess mascara, rub lips together to even out lipstick. Standing at this same threshold now, I watch her as an ageing mother. I can feel myself ageing with her. This threshold is like a portal, a liminal point between past and future. At my age, this visit marks the beginning of my transition into the second half of my life.

4. Tom Phillips and Anna Jean Kaiser, 'Brazil must not become a "gay tourism paradise," says Bolsonaro', *Guardian*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/26/bolsonaro-accused-of-inciting-hatred-with-gay-paradise-comment> (accessed August 30, 2022) and Kaspar Loftin, 'Jair Bolsonaro's Victory Sparks Fears in Brazil's LGBTQ Community', *HuffPost*, February 11, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jair-bolsonaro-lgbtq-brazil_n_5bdc9ade4b04367a87c8fa6?gucounter=1&gucereferer=aHR0cHM6Ly9kdWNrZHVja2dvLmNvbS8&gucereferer_sig=AQAAADec5mWekjKB0lhwcRXH1i6liVT6J9U6ZVQC-QJIMnbGhNzKcEXEKpu0XyY1SGnDp5aiyFF3FWAoehHqsWgLiCyIDBTnCWmNpsfU3h_YcUVA0nCyU NKRLrEFi5yIL0-BrY5MLp1Xuy36yxUGOuWo-sf_pLtzilviZ PUBOTglDhGXz (accessed August 30, 2022).

In my mother's wardrobes, as well as childhood photos and drawings, I find my birth certificate. It states my gender – 'male' – and my race – 'white'. Two decades have passed since I looked at this document. I am surprised to read that it lists my race as well as my gender. Why? I wonder. I question the legitimacy of what it appears to authenticate as legal fact.

Am I really male?

Am I truly white?

My father once told me his great-great-grandfather married a black woman

Who produces these definitions of terms: race, sex, nationality?

Who has access?

Where does one draw the line between black and white, male and female, past and future?

Do ordinary citizens have any chance of rewriting them?

How to redraw the line?

How to delete it, even?

Yet, as Preciado reminds us, 'making a body, bearing a name, having a legal and social identity, is a material process: it requires access to an ensemble of socio-political prostheses (birth certificates, medical protocols, hormones, operations, marriage contracts, identity papers)'.⁵ In the eyes of the law, I am what these papers say that I am no matter what I think. I do not fit these definitions. Here is a clear example of how my nation-dysphoria manifests itself. It comes with a price.

Amongst all these keepsakes, I find my early school reports. Always top of the class. Perhaps being a 'straight' A student was my way to regain some of the dignity and respect I had lost for being the bullied, effeminate boy I was.

Also here are my baby vaccine cards and booklets registering assorted doctor's appointments. These booklets seem crucial to my understanding of who I was as a child. They give insight into who I have become as an adult. Sessions with psychiatrists, hypnosis and what I even remember as being electric shock therapy – or 'electro-convulsive therapy' (ECT) to give it its 'proper' medical term – are recorded here. Both the psychiatrists and the electric shock, I assume – and partly remember – are forms of treating my effeminate behaviour, my so-called gender dysphoria.⁶ I received a non-invasive form of this treatment, which upon further research I discovered is used to treat a variety of conditions such as anxiety, depression, and headaches. There is little evidence of effectiveness for this therapy.

Another one of these booklets is from a place called *Mens Sana*,⁷ a treatment centre founded by a Catholic priest. 'Conversion therapy' is not named in these booklets but the treatment seems consistent with its methods. I question my parents' judgment in taking their young child to an evangelical psychologist. I am hurt that they did not fight

5. Preciado, 'Our Bison' in *An Apartment on Uranus*, 236.

6. 'Gender dysphoria' has been used since 2013 (DSM-5), which replaced 'Gender Identity Disorder' to avoid the term 'disorder' and associated stigma. GID itself replaced 'Homosexuality' in 1973 according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys', in *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 154-64. See also Preciado, 'First Names: Paul Beatriz, Request 34/2016' in *An Apartment in Uranus*, 192-3.

7. *mens sana in corpore sano*, a Latin proverb: 'a sane mind in a healthy body'.

a diagnosis of gender pathology. In 2019, a senior jurist of the Federal Supreme Court in Brazil suspended a lower court's decision to allow psychologists to perform 'conversion therapy'.⁸

These booklets are record that my parents did indeed know about my wearing my mother's clothes. They are also proof of how they felt about it. To them, I was a pathological child who needed curing.⁹ It is no wonder that I wanted to leave home when I got older.

8. See Lucas Ramón Mendos, *ILGA World: State-Sponsored Homophobia 2019: Global Legislation Overview Update* (Geneva: ILGA, December 2019).

9. For arguments against the gender pathologisation of children, see José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Preciado, 'Who Defends the Queer Child?' in *An Apartment in Uranus*, 54-58; Sedgwick, 'How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay'.

How could I have forgotten the EST sessions?

Mummy and Daddy didn't love me as I was

Mummy and Daddy wanted to correct me

Mummy and Daddy wanted to protect me from the world

Who knows what those quacks implanted into my brain?

They killed the little girl who lived inside of me

I was just a boy

Six years old

Now she's gone

Arriving in Brazil

Things in Brazil were much worse after the 2018 election. In the fifteen years since I left the country, it had only moved backwards.

As soon as I step off the airplane, the memory of oppression attacks me. I am reminded of the reasons that led me to flee this country. I am invariably welcomed by what I have come to call the 'elbow brigade'. They are my non-welcoming committee, nudging each other to call attention to my presence, demanding with that gesture that their companion gaze at me. They gape. They glare. They gawk. Their conspicuous performative act is designed to *Other* me.

When will you get tired of making me the Other so you can be yourselves?

In these lands, my body is made public. It no longer belongs to me. The elbow brigade thinks itself discreet. It thinks I can't see their mocking gestures, can't hear their taunting words – '*vicha*', '*voiola*', '*marica*', '*veado*'. Their words of violence enact deeds of violence. 'One need only consider the way in which the history of having been called an injurious name is embodied', Judith Butler has argued, 'how the words enter the limbs, craft the gesture, bend the spine'.¹⁰

The animosity is familiar but now, in 2018, it feels significantly more dangerous. The elbow brigade don't seem to care if anyone notices their bigotry. They don't even try to hide it. They take pride in it, in fact. Bullies and haters have a champion in the figure of the newly elected president.¹¹

10. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 159.

11. The rise of populism is not confined to Brazil. Right-wing populists in office at the time of writing include Orbán (Hungary), Salvini (Italy), Janša (Slovenia), Duda (Poland), Erdoğan (Turkey), Trump (USA), to cite a few.

12. Eduardo Michels, *Mortes Violentas de LGBT+ no Brasil—2018: Relatório do Grupo Gay da Bahia* (Salvador: Editora Grupo Gay da Bahia, 2019), 3.
13. *Brazil Events of 2019, Human Rights Watch World Report 2020*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/brazil> (accessed on August 30, 2022).
14. Ibid.
15. Zing Tsjeang, ‘Brazil’s New President Once Told a Politician She Was Too Ugly to Rape’, *Vice*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/j53wx8/jair-bolsonaro-elected-president-brazil> (accessed August 30, 2022).
16. *Brazil Events of 2019, Human Rights Watch World Report 2020*.
17. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 4.
18. ‘The environmental policies of President Bolsonaro’s administration have effectively given a green light to criminal networks that engage in illegal logging in the Amazon and use intimidation and violence against Indigenous people, local residents, and environmental enforcement agents who try to defend the rainforest (...) Preliminary data show that from January to October, deforestation in the Amazon increased by more than eighty per cent, compared to the same period in 2018’ in *Brazil Events of 2019, Human Rights Watch World Report 2020*.

I want to shout

‘I have the right to live in a place where I’m not constantly in fear of discrimination and violence!’

I refrain

We all know that place is not here

That is why I left

Bolsonaro is known as ‘the Trump of the tropics’, a moniker he wears like a badge of honour. He publicly declared that he ‘would rather have a dead son than a gay son’.¹² The Human Rights Watch report ‘Brazil Events of 2019’, published in 2020, concludes that ‘President Bolsonaro has made homophobic statements and sought to restrict the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people’. ‘During his first year in office’, it continues, ‘President Jair Bolsonaro has embraced an anti-rights agenda, pursuing policies that would put vulnerable populations at greater risk’.¹³

Human Rights Watch goes further: ‘President Bolsonaro said in April that Brazil must not become a “gay tourism paradise”’.¹⁴ ‘In August’, the report continues, ‘he said that families are only those made of a man and a woman’. Mercifully, in September, Brazil’s Supreme Court reaffirmed that same-sex unions are families.

If the President’s ostentatious homophobia were not grave enough, there is his misogyny too. Before being elected president, he publicly declared a fellow congresswoman ‘too ugly to be raped’.¹⁵ Later, as the aforementioned report shows, his administration ‘instructed its diplomats to argue that the word ‘gender’ means ‘biological sex: male or female’. ‘In July’, it reveals, ‘it criticized a UN resolution on violence against women for including a reference to ‘sexual and reproductive health care services’, declaring that the expression ‘has become associated with pro-abortion policies’.¹⁶

Bolsonaro’s words are distressing for me to even contemplate, never mind to write down. Words, as Butler argues, are not simply words. A word does not simply signify a thing. Rather, it enacts the thing it is supposed to signify. Violence, according to Butler’s Austinian reading, can be enacted through speech as well as through deeds.¹⁷ This is not to say, however, that the power to incite is not unequally distributed.

*What is happening now in Brazil is not just about Brazil. It touches all of us
The Amazon is burning.¹⁸ What a metaphor.*

*This crisis is a world crisis; it is about people who look like me but don’t
have the privileges that I have.*

The Pink Supper

This is the context out of which *The Pink Supper* was created: a personal coming-to-terms with my reasons for leaving my native country. Reasons which included not only how society treated me but how my family ‘treated’ me as a result of my gender expression. To these personal insights are added Bolsonaro’s administration’s shameless rejection of international standards of basic human rights.

Despite its image as a sexually liberal, loving, partying nation, Brazil is the number one country for trans murders in the world.¹⁹ I remember in my body what it felt like to live as a gender non-conforming, trans person in such an environment. I suffered verbal abuse on a daily basis. The moment I stepped out of my front door, I would brace myself for the insults, the abuse, the micro-aggressions, the elbow brigades around every corner. Most of the time, the violence was wielded through words, looks, derisive laughter, and pointing fingers. Sometimes through spits and shoves. On a handful of occasions, the abuse was physical and I was beaten up.

I once had to run for my life in stiletto heels as a gang yielding clubs chased me. As they pursued me, they shouted that they were going to kill me when they caught me. Luckily, providence intervened and a taxi driver stopped and hailed me in. ‘That was a lucky escape’, he said with eyes seemingly bulging out of his head – I with my heart in my mouth. ‘They would have killed you’. His comments confirmed I was not just having a paranoid phantasy. His taxicab was my pumpkin coach. He, my Prince Charming. Did I lose a crystal slipper?

I write this account not to portray myself as a victim. I know I am not. My intention, rather, is to convey what living in Brazil was really like for me and remains for those who continue to live there. I should not have to sugarcoat my lived experience. The truth is: I *had* to leave. The average life expectancy of a trans person in Brazil is 35.²⁰ I am lucky to have lived longer. Even though I survived, I still remember those who have not and I feel guilty for merely being alive.

19. José Marcelo Domingos de Oliveira, *Mortes Violentas de LGBT+ no Brasil–2019: Relatório do Grupo Gay da Bahia* (Salvador: Editora Grupo Gay da Bahia, 2020), 13.
20. Danilo Thomaz, ‘Reduzida por homicídios, a expectativa de vida de um transexual no Brasil é apenas 35 anos’, *Época*, Jan 30, 2018, <https://epoca.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2018/01/reduzida-por-homicidios-expectativa-de-vida-de-um-transexual-no-brasil-e-de-apenas-35-anos.html> (accessed August 30, 2022).
21. Grupo Gay da Bahia have been compiling reports for 40 years. In the performance, I quoted the number of homicides of trans people in 2018. The total number of deaths of LGBTQI+ people that year is 420. The report concludes that ‘one LGBTQI+ person was killed in a violent way every 20 hours in Brazil that year’. Michels, *Mortes Violentas*, 1.

I can face the anger of being forced to leave my own country because the choice for me there was always going to be between life and death, either at the hands of my enemies or at my own. Yes, I can put a brave face on it but the truth is that I find it hard to push through the internalised anger. I turn it against myself.

In 2018, there were 369 homicides of trans people registered around the world

Out of those, 167 cases were in Brazil alone. Nearly half.²¹

In February alone, there were 22 murders in Brazil

Almost one a day

February is the month of carnival—you know, samba, joy, happiness,

22. Again, I am stating the number of deaths of trans people. The total recorded deaths of LGBTQI+ people is 46—more than one a day in February 2018.

party, party, party²²

Victims were:

Social workers

Hairdressers

Students

Teachers

Sex workers

Community leaders

They were murdered in:

Bars

Nightclubs

Hospitals

Their own homes

The streets

Shot

Stabbed

Beaten to death with bats, with bottles

Drowned

Stoned

Run over by a car

Strangled

Burned

Asphyxiated

Poisoned

Mutilated

Undressed

Tortured

Beheaded

Had their faces disfigured

It is horrifying to read the graphic accounts. It is also utterly crucial to name what is going on now. No sugarcoating. I should not have to filter my experience to a non-queer, European audience in order to make it palatable.

Departure Date: First of January 2019

For us, queer people, death looms over our shoulders

Our sexuality is pathologised, demonised, criminalised

Sometimes the penalty is death

Sometimes the threat is more veiled

23. Mendes, *ILGA World: State-Sponsored Homophobia 2019: Global Legislation Overview Update*.
24. Preciado, 'The Son' in *An Apartment in Uranus*, 268. The fear of not being allowed to return to Brazil becomes more concrete with the closing of borders during the coronavirus pandemic. In a press address in November 2020, Bolsonaro declared that he was sorry about the COVID-19 deaths but 'we have to stop being a country of faggots' ('tem que deixar de ser um país de maricas').
25. Preciado, 'I Would Like to Live' in *An Apartment in Uranus*, 233.

I left Brazil this last time on the first of January 2019, Bolsonaro's inauguration day. I planned my return to Britain for this very day, afraid of the consequences of staying for even a day longer. Who knows what could happen? I could be thrown in jail for being a homosexual. This, I know, is paranoid phantasy. At least at this point in time. Prison, as we know, was a real threat for generations of homosexuals, including those living in Britain until 1967. Homosexuality is still a crime enshrined in law to this very day in sixty-eight UN member states. In twelve of those, consensual same-sex sexual practices is punishable by death.²³

Bolsonaro and what he represents frighten me. If I manage to leave the country, I might not be allowed back in. Like Preciado, I also, 'contemplate not returning. Deserting the family, the way you desert a war'.²⁴ Refusing to come back to Brazil would be my form of protest. In deserting this quasi-battlefield, I am aware that, once again like Preciado, I would be also deserting my family. I would miss my mother even though she is no longer the mother I remember having.

Although I acknowledge some of these fears might be paranoid (even if the evidence suggests otherwise), the fear I have for sexual and gender minorities in Brazil is real. 'History', says Preciado, 'teaches us that the most absurd, most brutal thing has always been politically conceivable'.²⁵ I know this from my own personal experience.

In my hand luggage, I carry the souvenirs I have come to fetch. As I stand on the threshold of the airplane, I am reminded of Carlota Joaquina, Queen Consort of Brazil (1816–1822). She famously hated the country, forced as she had been to escape there from Portugal with the royal family just days before Napoleonic forces invaded Lisbon. 'From this country', she allegedly said as she embarked on the ship back to Europe, striking the soles of her shoes together with her hands, 'I don't want to carry anything, not even the dust'. Should I throw all my memories of this country out too before stepping onto the airplane? Should I too rid myself of this country's dust? Why am I carrying all these distressing relics from my past?

I identify with Carlota Joaquina.

This makes me feel ashamed.

I have internalised the voice of the coloniser.

But how could I not?

My memories of this place are harrowing.

Regardless of my remorse for replicating the voice of the coloniser, I am aware of my reasons for it. I could never find my place in this nation. But then again, borrowing Preciado's words once more, I wonder

how to talk of 'nation' when some of us have been refused the right to be born? How to speak of a land when we have been placed outside of what should have been our house? How to speak of a mother tongue when no one

26. Preciado, 'My People are the People of the Ill-Born' in *An Apartment in Uranus*, 253.

27. Even those who would otherwise have chosen to stay have had to leave under pressure from Bolsonaro's administration. Jean Wyllys, one of the president's main political opponents and advocate of LGBTQI+ rights, 'resigned his seat in Congress in January 2019 after receiving death threats and fearing for his life' in *Brazil Events of 2019, Human Rights Watch World Report 2020*. Wyllys currently lives in exile. He was replaced by 'David Miranda, who, like Wyllys, is openly gay and has also reported receiving death threats'. Ibid.

28. Literally 'for the English to see' but used to mean 'making things look a certain way'. For instance, when Brazil hosted the Olympics in 2016, homeless people were moved out of city centres to temporary accommodation to 'sanitise' the urban landscape. This move didn't address social inequalities; it merely removed them from view.

wanted to listen to what we had to say? Since the medical powers diagnosed me as gender-dysphoric on the pretext that I didn't identify with the gender assigned to me at birth, I claim today to be nation-dysphoric.²⁶

Along with my memories, I carry the weight of my guilt. I can get on a plane and leave the traumatic reality of Brazil. Others are not so fortunate. They seem trapped. I am ashamed of my privilege just as I am ashamed of having internalised Carlota Joaquina's voice. What can I do to help those who are left behind?

Upon my return to the United Kingdom, an art commissioner tells me those who stay behind are not, as I suggested, 'martyrs'. Maybe they choose to stay. Perhaps this person doesn't stop to think that this thought has already occurred to me. Of course, some people choose to stay. They are much more resilient than I am. They can fight the system from within. They are braver than I could ever become. They are valiant, courageous, and strong, but I am not talking about them.²⁷

I am talking about those who are crushed by the relentlessness of the daily abuse. I am saddened that this commissioner does not realise they are shaming me. I know they have visited Brazil and worked with disadvantaged communities there. Having done so, perhaps they feel they understand the country and its marginalised people better than I do. Their voice – not mine – is the true voice of the coloniser. They fail to grasp that their champagne visits to Brazil merely reveal a rose-tinted view of the country. What is portrayed to them is only '*para inglês ver*'.²⁸

You know nothing of my fear and shame. To have no ability to fake, to be incompetent in avoiding danger, to take an insult silently or be punched in the teeth. You don't know the reality of existing in the margins, to have fingers pointed at you. The pain gets lodged in your body as trauma. How dare you try to explain my reality to me?

I am angry

I don't know how to deal with my self-loathing and unassuageable rage

I turn it against me

I am sad

I am agitated and depressed

I need jolts of emotion to make me feel alive

I look for cheap thrills in the wrong places

Quick, futile moments of intense feeling

Yes, I belong to moments

Not people

I can't feel anything
I don't know if I can go on

I pick fights in my head
Maybe a punch would help me feel again

I'm self-righteous and unkind
I am a coward

It strikes me now as I write this that I never actually said any of these words out loud to the art commissioner. I am astounded to contemplate my fear in this situation. If I speak up, I might be excluded, banned, rejected. I might never get work from them again and so I remain silent. The power dynamics are clear.

Despite this commissioner's opinion of me, I know that I escaped with courage and fear, with dread and panic. Perhaps I was a coward. It was a choice I had to make between leaving the country or dying there. I chose life. I am lucky to have exceeded the average life expectancy of a trans person but where are my elders? I have lived longer than they did.

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa
My fault, my fault, my most grievous fault

Catholic Upbringing and an Evangelical Brazil

In recent years, Brazilian politicians have engaged religious rhetoric in order to dehumanise and strip LGBTQI+ people of their human rights. The Brazilian Minister of Human Rights, Family and Women between 2019 and 2022, Damares Alves, is an evangelical pastor. The climate of religious discourse and moralising values sits uncomfortably in a secular country and amongst its social practices.

At the time of her nomination, I was especially bewildered by one of Alves's pronouncements. 'From now on, in Brazil', she declared, 'the policy will be that *boys wear blue and girls wear pink*'. This seemed so childish and naive. So petty. Alves's declaration triggered all sorts of reactions in me. None more painful perhaps than the one experienced from the perspective of the wounded little boy in me. The one who wore his mother's shoes and dreamt of being a girl in pink. He, who was diagnosed as dysphoric. He, who according to this new government in Brazil, would be seen as sinful too.

Bolsonaro's and his evangelising cabinet ministers' hypocrisy granted me inspiration for my protest-performance. Their fighting words kindled a fire in my stomach. They sparked my imagination. Herein lies my power. I dreamed

an artistic response based on the tropes of religion and the colour pink. This is how my queer version of the Last Supper had its genesis.

The iconography of the Last Supper felt strangely relevant even though I had refrained up to this point from using religious content in my work. The story has added personal value in that my surname ‘Messias’ means ‘Messiah’ in Portuguese. Being Bolsonaro’s middle name, I wanted to talk back at him too.

In this fabulous world I created, everything had to be pink: the set, the costumes, the makeup, the props, the napkins, the food, the drinks. Nothing but pink was allowed to exist. I even created and decorated with my own hands a set of thirteen pink plates with images of twelve of my own queer icons plus a self-portrait. This dinner service sat as an installation outside the performance space. Meanwhile, inside the performing area, I made space around the table for twelve queer disciples – artists, activists and followers of my work who, like me, identified as exiles in some way.

The feeling of being in exile from my motherland for my so-called ‘gender dysphoria’ is one more thing I share with Preciado. ‘The trans person’, he has written, ‘is represented as a kind of exile who has left behind the gender that was assigned to him/her at birth (the way you’d abandon a nation) and who is now seeking recognition as a potential citizen of another gender’.²⁹ ‘In politico-legal terms’, he concludes, ‘the status of the trans person is comparable to that of the migrant, the exile or the refugee’.³⁰ We are doubly exiled.

I confess that I have never really liked the colour pink. Maybe the little girl I wanted to be liked it. Maybe my apparent dislike of the colour is really just a symptom of an internalised prejudice. The truth of the matter is that I became completely obsessed by pink during this creative process. I compulsively bought every single item of pink clothing, pink accessories, and pink makeup I came across for months. As long as I could afford it, I had to have it. This baffled me. Why invest so much in a colour I seemed not to appreciate? Looking back, I realise I wanted to construct this pink reverie not for myself but for my inner child, for that little girl inside me who was never allowed to grow. The pink was an homage to her.

I buy too much
I spend too much money
I am jealous, vicious and unkind

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa

I wonder what I was trying to find in all these dresses and shoes and makeup and stuff ... I suppose I needed company. They hung in studio with me like ghosts.

They taught me to follow my desire, not to be caged in about my own prejudices. And so what if pink is frivolous? So what that I spent too

29. Preciado, ‘Identity in Transit’ in *An Apartment in Uranus*, 184.

30. Ibid.

much money on clothes? You mustn't be tight with these things because you are more authentic the closer you get to the ideal version you dreamt of being.

Maybe I wanted to see my life in pink, to see the world through rose-tinted spectacles ... Maybe I was trying to resuscitate that little girl inside of me, who was asphyxiated out of existence at such an early age.

Glamour can be quite an oasis amid the darkness. I wish I didn't need that many dresses and shoes to reassure me that everything is going to be ok.

I wish I were one of those artists who perform naked with no set or props. I, instead, need to construct this Baroque folly around me just to feel safe.

Whatever I was trying to find, I didn't find in those dresses. They were merely the crumbs that marked the path to my final destination: here. They keep me company when I feel I have nothing but myself. Today, I have you but tomorrow you will all be gone and I will be left alone again. Just me with my pink dresses.

I am sorry. I am so so soooooo sorry! I really am. I wish I could do something to save all these people from suffering and dying. I feel it is somehow my fault that this is happening, which is illogical, I know, but what do I need to do to make it stop? Sacrifice myself? Is that what I need to do?

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa

A Memorial Mass Service Performance

I could no longer escape the religious rhetoric. It was the last barrier. My work has always been about systems of oppression: society, the law, nation, patriarchy, hegemony, the nuclear family, medicine, psychiatry. Powers that make no room for people like me, that actively exclude us from their self-serving notions of normal, legal, healthy, straight. *The Pink Supper* was a deliberate act of freeing myself from this last taboo: pseudo-religion.

I structured the piece around recognisable tropes of a Mass service. To start, I rang a bell to announce the beginning of the performance. I then walked through the space in procession, accompanied by my fellow queer celebrants. I organised the space of the art gallery to replicate the configuration of a place of worship: a central aisle with seats on either side of it. I placed myself, the president, at the high table and gave my twelve queer disciples seats of honour near the altar with me. I gave the audience pink wafers instead of bread as part of our communion.

The wine was, of course, rosé, with pink lemonade as a non-alcoholic option.

I selected songs by what I would call queer artists with religious themes: ‘Agnus Dei’ and ‘Gay Messiah’ by Rufus Wainwright, ‘Gloria: In Excelsis Deo’ – ‘Jesus died for somebody’s sins but not mine’ – by Patti Smith and ‘Losing My Religion’ by R.E.M. My gestures and my choreography mimicked the ritualistic movements of a priest performing the transubstantiation. I symbolically offered my own body as a sacrifice in performance.

I felt I had a responsibility to respond. I had no choice. I tried to avoid it. I tried to resist it. But it’s my calling, it’s my name: Messias.

There’s some serious Saviour Syndrome issues I need to address here, I’m quite aware of that but let’s see what happens.

Since religious rhetoric is being used against us, I felt I had the right – or perhaps, more strongly, the duty – to make an artistic re-appropriation. With tongue in cheek, I even cast myself as the Gay Messiah. I needed to talk back to power, to bastardise this fake Christian argument that was being railed against us, to queer the religious tropes, to use my voice and my body to decolonise this canonic text. In using my body and my voice, I centred my lived experience at the heart of the narrative. I made this story of death, rebirth, and redemption my own. In talking back and refusing to remain silent, I regained my agency.

Having been brought up Catholic and educated in Catholic schools by Catholic priests, I believed I had a stake. I had to voice my own experience. Through my Catholic upbringing, guilt was drilled into my bones. Shame still lives inside me and continues to plague me even when I have a rational, conscious understanding that it does not belong to me.

Power Grab

As noted, religion is not one of the major concerns of my work in general. I am, however, aware that refuting the interpretations being used by populist figures as a way to incite hate gives me agency as an artist. I might not be personally responsible for the hundreds of deaths of trans people but I am responsible for the response I choose to make.

Christianity is just one more institution which, along with heteronormativity, the State and patriarchy, practises power-grabbing through institutionalised discrimination and violence. The Scriptures are peppered with texts condoning slavery, the subjugation of women, and the condemnation of same-sex love. Yet, I see it as part of my inheritance too, sometimes in rather mundane ways. For example, my father, who goes by Messias and lives in the town of Nazareth, is a trained carpenter. I cannot help but try to find meaning in this.

Neither can I willingly disconnect from previous generations of religious striving to be a ‘good Christian’. I have Jewish heritage too, which complicates things. My intersectional Judaeo-Christian religious identity amounts to internal conflict, a feeling that could be described by using W. E. B. Du Bois’ expression ‘the double consciousness’, the psychological challenge of reconciling the subordinate position with that of being a contributing member of an oppressive society. Du Bois talks about the experiences of Black people living in a racist society. His concept has been deployed to investigate other minority groups in patriarchal societies. My perspective here is from a queer position with Jewish heritage in a Christian country. I descend from Portuguese Catholics, who persecuted and even burned Jews alive in the 1500s. Those two sides – the subordinated and the powerful – co-exist in me in battle.³¹

31. See James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (London: Penguin Books, 1963). For a queer reading of Du Bois, see Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*.

Just as I am unable to voluntarily negate my ancestral religious makeup, I am unwilling to detach from my secular efforts to be a good and liberated queer human being, to act morally and ethically. My main goal in creating *The Pink Supper* was therefore to define my own terms, to create my own narrative, to be my own saviour, since being officially normal, legal and sane has never been a privilege that I could afford – not as a child, not as a teenager, not as a young adult. In my middle age, it is still not a privilege I am granted.

I may name the problem but I don't have answers.

We need to survive

I need to survive

The freedom of humanity is the freedom of the individual is my
freedom is your freedom

The Pink Supper is not only an act of protest and remembrance. It is also an act of contrition where I deal with my guilt and shame for having left my blood family and trans siblings behind. It is a performative act of atonement. I confess and repent of my sins. I perform my death, offer my body and am resurrected as the Gay Messiah.

My choice to leave the country was a political act. It was an intersectional protest against transphobia, the burning of the Amazon rainforest, the institutional and systemic racism and the colonial, pro-capitalist mentality of a developing country that cannot help but repeatedly shoot itself in the foot. Some of these attitudes, I realise, are deeply entrenched within me and so the performance is also an act of coming to terms with my own colonial views and unconscious biases.

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa

Conclusion

I'm judgemental and jealous
I have lost my youth

I am fighting my own destiny
I can't win
I know it
I keep fighting

But I am alive
Plagued by guilt
Drowning in anger
Fear burns my face like a hot wind

I wish I could say that through the process of creating *The Pink Supper*, I resolved my anger, that I have atoned for my sins, that I have let go of my unplaced guilt. I wish I could say I have a solution to the violent deaths suffered by LGBTQI+ people every year in Brazil and abroad. In reality, I have resolved nothing. Instead, I have more questions now than when I started.

I see my parents not as perpetrators but rather as victims of a system. They belong to a society unable to deal with difference, a society with no provisions for those who cannot or choose not to live according to oppressive rules. Working on this piece has allowed me to understand that I am oppressed from within by shame. That insight has gifted me the ability to let go of self-imposed tyranny and to create my own narrative where I am the protagonist.

I have learnt that remaining passive and silent is not a solution for me. It is never too late to become the person you have always dreamt of being despite what others say or think. I have the right to self-determination and to a life free from fear and violence.

The idea of creating this piece was to challenge the status quo, to stand up for the human rights of trans people who, like me, suffer daily violence. Although my intervention addresses the specific context of a transphobic Brazil, it cannot help but touch on an increasingly transphobic United Kingdom, where I have come to live and work and contexts further afield where trans people are exposed to violence and discrimination.³² *The Pink Supper* is a visual experience in resistance and protest. It goes beyond the visual, in fact. It is haptic, embodied, felt, olfactory. We drink the wine and eat the bread. It is about desire as much as it is about protest. *The Pink Supper* is a way to say that the way things are is not the way things ought to be.

I still have my fading childhood drawings, my disappearing memories, my family photographs. For some reason, I also kept the doctor's appointment booklets. They give me strength to carry on with my

32. For more information on transphobic discrimination in the UK, see 'Joint Statement on the Rights of Trans People in the UK', Human Rights Watch, May 17, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/17/joint-statement-rights-trans-people-uk> (accessed on September 28, 2022). For statistics on transphobic violence and discrimination in other countries, see 'World Report 2020', Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020> (accessed on September 28, 2022).

work. With the insight I gained, perhaps I can continue on my journey to try to help ameliorate the living conditions of trans people who are still struggling to survive. All I know is that I can continue to speak out.

I exit the stage of *The Pink Supper* wearing a pink-sequined mini dress. In my hand, I hold a torch whose light gloriously projects the hot pink luminosity of the dress onto the walls. My pink sequins illuminate the way ahead. In harnessing my introjected shame, I transform it into light and project it onto the walls. Hopeful, I make an exit. The light shows me the way.

Good evening. Welcome to *The Pink Supper*. I am thrilled to see you all here.

This essay is dedicated to the LGBTQI+ victims of violent crime in Brazil and the world.

Notes on Contributor

Nando Messias is a Lecturer of Contemporary Performance at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama University of London. Their work straddles performance art, dance and theatre, combining beautiful images with a fierce critique of gender, visibility and violence. As well as a practitioner, Nando is a researcher of queer theory and performance. They were the recipient of 2019 Library of Performing Rights-LADA (Live Art Development Agency) Commission for which they developed *The Pink Supper*.