

The Mothers of Boate Kiss: Political, Social and Rhetorical Considerations

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Abstract: *The present article examines the overlapping political, social and rhetorical functions of the category of “mother” in various contexts related to the January 2013 Boate Kiss fire in Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Supported by theories of social suffering and ethnographies of violence, as well as poststructuralist notions of identity and gender, the analysis focuses on the medium-transcribed letters, newspaper articles, journalistic nonfiction, and social media posts related to two social movements that would coalesce among the affected in the tragedy’s aftermath: collectives for justice and groups ascribing to Kardecist Spiritism, both inscribed within the regional and national history of mothers in movements. Attending to gender also highlights the long-term political import of then-president Dilma Rousseff’s emblematic visit to Santa Maria on the day of the tragedy.*

Introduction

Dear mommy Adriana and my dad Assan, I ask God to guide my hands in this very difficult moment, in which I appear in a place where suffering is a common point in everyone's hearts...Mom, Matheus and I did everything that was possible to try to save ourselves, but you can imagine how difficult any escape was...we tried escape and possible salvation, but it was not possible" (Betega, 2015, p. 11)¹

So begins Daniela Betega Ahmad's *carta psicografada*, a missive received on June 13th, 2013, that her parents and others believe she communicated from a spiritual plane. According to Kardecist spiritist beliefs, the souls of the departed can communicate with the living via medium-transcribed letters like this one.² Six months prior, Daniela, "Dani", and her boyfriend, Matheus Brondani, had been among the crowd at the Kiss nightclub in the early morning hours of January 27th, 2013. At around 2am, pyrotechnics meant for outdoor use ignited a highly inflammable acoustic foam inside the then over-crowded nightclub, a favorite amongst college students in Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. In the tumult and confusion that followed, 225 people died, including Dani, Matheus, and many others who, within minutes, succumbed to the effects of the toxic smoke produced by the burning foam. The weeks and months following the fire would claim seven more victims; meanwhile, the tragedy become a metonymic symbol for the small city.³

The figurative significance of mothers in the aftermath of the Boate Kiss tragedy is notably evoked by Dani's letter, addressed to her own mother with the affectionate diminutive of "mãezinha." It is her mother that Dani's message tries to convince of her

¹ "Querida mãezinha Adriana e meu pai Assan, Peço a Deus que me guie as mãos nesse momento tão difícil, em que compareço num cenário, onde o sofrimento é ponto comum no coração de todos...Mãe, fizemos eu e o Matheus, tudo o que foi possível para tentar nos salvar, mas a senhora deve imaginar o quanto ficou difícil qualquer fuga tentamos a fuga e a possível salvação, mas não foi possível (Betega, 2015, p. 11). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author's own.

² For more on Spiritism, including its French origins and subsequent adaptation to the Brazilian context, see Almeida et al. (2022), Hess (1994), Isaia (2020), and Warren (1968).

³ For an overview of the events of January 13th, 2013, a timeline of the ensuing legal battles, and an analysis of the fire's legacy, see *Zero Hora's* special edition dedicated to tenth anniversary of Boate Kiss fire, *Gaucha Zero Hora* (2023).

efforts to escape the nightclub that night. The political and rhetorical functions of the category of “mother” in the various social movements that arose out of the Boate Kiss fire come to the forefront when placed within a larger regional and Brazilian context of theory and history. Through a close reading of texts that speak to the positionality of grieving mothers, including medium-transcribed letters, newspaper articles, journalistic nonfiction and social media posts, the category of “mother” emerges as a locus of affectual experience with political and social resonances.

Using Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Margaret M. Lock, Mamphela Ramphele and Pamela Reynolds’ concept of “remaking a world,” that is, the iterative process of restoring meaning to everyday life in the aftermath of tragedy, the present paper analyzes two distinct but overlapping groups that formed after the Boate Kiss fire, namely the group that turned to social activism and the group that turned to Kardecist spiritism (Das, 2001). After contextualizing this cultural studies approach alongside relevant anthropological and linguistic research in the same vein, as well as defining social anthropological understandings of suffering, I trace a trajectory of mothers in movements both within Brazil and regionally before analyzing the roles of mothers in both groups.

The first group, addressed in the following section entitled “Remaking their world - The fight for justice,” looks at the families and loved ones that took up social activism as a way to reclaim the memory of the departed and seek justice for their untimely deaths. Specifically, I look at the coalition of the Mães de Janeiro (Mothers of January), the only activist group to explicitly call on motherhood as an organizing concept. The Mães de Janeiro took inspiration from the Argentine Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, with whom they also met in solidarity.⁴ As these groups demonstrate,

⁴ The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo is a human rights organization that was formed in 1977 by the mothers, grandmothers and other family members of the victims of repression by the Argentine military dictatorship, which lasted from 1976 to 1983. The Madres famously marched in the public square outside of the Argentine presidential palace to demand the return of their disappeared loved ones. The example of the Madres is a

motherhood as a private category is given new salience in the public sphere as an identity around which political and social activism can coalesce.

The second group to form in the aftermath of the fire found solace in Kardecist spiritism. As recorded in *Nossa nova caminhada*, a collection of medium-transcribed letters believed to be communicated by victims of the Boate Kiss fire, Kardecist spiritism maintains that the spirit lives on in another plane after the body's physical death (Betega, 2015). The possibility of continued communication with these spirits helped family members recontextualize the pain of loss, in much the same way that others found purpose and continuity in social activism and calls for justice.

Finally, in the last section, I take up then-president Dilma Rousseff's public role in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy in Santa Maria. The discussion of mothers in movements permits a vindication of sorts for Dilma, an opportunity to rethink the legacy of Lula's hand-picked successor in light of her response to Boate Kiss. Such a reading is achieved through an analysis of her speeches and her portrayal in regional and national media at the time. In all three of these main sections, Brazilian journalist Daniela Arbex's nonfiction narrative account of the Boate Kiss fire, *Todo dia a mesma noite*, provides further examples of the salience of the category of mothers to understanding the cultural ramifications of this critical event.

Studying the Boate Kiss fire

The Boate Kiss fire has drawn the attention of scholars from such diverse fields as public policy and public health, fire safety, psychology, anthropology, epidemiology

powerful one, extending in cultural importance beyond Argentina itself. As discussed later, the group Mães de Janeiro took direct inspiration from the activism of the Madres. In 2014, the Mães de Janeiro travelled to Buenos Aires to meet with the parents of the victims of a similar nightclub tragedy, the Cromañón fire of December 30, 2004, in which 194 people lost their lives. As a part of their visit, the Mães also met with the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and were inspired by their tireless commitment to justice for their children.

and linguistics.⁵ Evaluating from a cultural studies perspective the extent to which the socially constructed category of motherhood helps illuminate our understanding of the aftermath of the Boate Kiss fire finds resonance with existing research in anthropology and linguistics. For example, Monalisa Dias de Siqueira and Ceres Víctora have explored through participatory ethnography the relationship between grieving bodies and public spaces in the protests organized by families and friends of victims, connecting the micropolitics of emotion to macro social narratives of justice (Siqueira and Víctora, 2017). Siqueira and Víctora also explore the way spiritist practices and social activism allow the grieving to reconceptualize the pain of loss (Siqueira and Víctora, 2018). Similarly, anthropologist A. P. Arosi's work investigates the intersections between the Santa Maria do Luto á Luta movement and representatives of the state (Arosi, 2017). Arosi connects anthropological understandings of suffering to Santamarienses' perceived neglect by the government, arguing that the contrast between the two is what undergirds the formation of an activist cause. Taking up the same debates surrounding grief and victimization in the public sphere that concern Siquiera and Víctora, Arosi describes articulations of suffering as political positionality and observes the formation of subjectivities in these exchanges.

Analyzing the speech acts and other rhetoric for socially constructed understandings of gender and grief also aligns with linguistics' attentiveness to language. Analyzing a relatively small sample size of six op-ed articles that appeared in the immediate aftermath of the fire in the *Diário de Santa Maria*, the local paper, and *Folha de S. Paulo*, a news outlet in the state capitol, Lucas Saldanha da Cruz and

⁵ Public policy and fire safety research largely hopes to propose measures to prevent similar tragedies by seeking to understand the crowd dynamics and physical barriers that prevented nightclub goers from being able to escape the indoor fire that night (Durso, 2013; Sutherland, 2013; Caron and Souza, 2019). Other public health research, meanwhile, dovetails with that of psychologists evaluating the crisis response provided to survivors and the aggrieved in the form of large scale and long-term psychological community outreach (Noal, 2016; Gonçalves, 2018; Parente and Ramos, 2020; Ribeiro and Freitas, 2020). Epidemiologists and health scientists have analyzed the chemical makeup of the toxic gas produced by the burning acoustic foam, its fatal effects, and the lung trauma experienced by those who did not succumb to the poison (Pasqualoto, 2015; Avelar 2022).

Cristiane Fuzer perform a linguistic analysis using the framework of systemic functional grammar (Cruz and Fuzer, 2015). The media is seen as a space in which social actors construct and represent their understanding. Cruz and Fuzer find that metaphors and euphemisms for death were more common in the local *Diário de Santa Maria* than that of the regional *Folha de S. Paulo*, which tended to seek to inform a wider public and represent victims without the same emotional register as local op-ed authors. This discrepancy speaks to the proximity of *Diário de Santa Maria* op-ed authors to the lived experience of the fire.

Moreover, the present article's attentiveness to language in media with a focus on mothers specifically adds to the work of the only other gendered analysis of Boate Kiss, Alice Bianchini Pavanello's "As injustiças passaram a gritar dentro de mim': Práticas de consumo do Facebook por mães de vítimas da Boate Kiss às vésperas das eleições 2018," part of the 2019 Congresso Internacional de Direito e Contemporaneidade at the Federal University of Santa Maria. Pavanello analyzes the Facebook activity of four mothers of victims of the Boate Kiss fire, revealing how the fire as a critical event transformed the mothers' political awareness (Pavanello, 2019). Continuing in this vein, Twitter posts in the days and months leading up to the contentious 2022 Brazilian presidential election similarly provide the present study with an opportunity to reevaluate ex-president Dilma Rousseff's legacy.

As a backdrop to this approach, the figurative resonance of mothers and motherhood is expansive. As a fertility symbol, the source of life, mothers are emblematic of the future and its potential, not only of their own wombs, but of the community and the nation at large. Tasked with ensuring that morality is passed down to future generations, the mother's place is traditionally in the home with her children, evidence, too, of the patriarchal norm that governs this category. In terms of religious connotations, present are the symbols of Christian religiosity in the benevolence and

grief of the Virgin Mary, especially relevant in the majority-Catholic nation of Brazil, as well as the religious connotations of motherhood within Afro-Brazilian religions, such as the powerful role of *mães de santo* and the role of the home as an ontological and cosmological space in Candomblé, Umbanda, and Quimbanda traditions.⁶ With this symbolic backdrop, this category has been mobilized by social movements for political purposes.

As in many contemporary movements, the complex relationship between the personal and political is what structures the translation of a category like motherhood into the political space. For example, in the work of Adriana Vianna and Juliana Farias in Rio de Janeiro, in their article entitled “A guerra das mães: dor e política em situações de violência institucional,” the authors place their work in this same personal/political dichotomy:

Far from being an isolated fact, the use of motherhood as an element of moral authority in political acts tells us about important movements in contemporary settings: between personal pain and collective causes; between suffering and rights; between the distinct forms and dimensions of mourning, here taken as an inextricably individual and social process (Vianna and Farias, 2011, p. 83).⁷

Indeed, the mothers of victims of institutionalized violence invoke their motherhood as a political act within a long tradition of doing so.⁸ As such, their positionality as mothers confers the “moral authority” that is the imperative for their political claims. They navigate the space between the individual and the collective, between personal pain and the rights of citizenship.

⁶ Umbanda is in fact a syncretic mixture of the Yoruba religious tradition, Spiritism, and indigenous spiritual practices (Isaia, 2020).

⁷ “Longe de ser um fato isolado, o acionamento de condição de mãe como elemento de autoridade moral em atos políticos nos fala de trânsitos relevantes em cenários contemporâneos: entre dor pessoal e causas coletivas; entre sofrimentos e direitos; entre formas e dimensões distintas do luto, aqui tomado como processo inextricavelmente individual e social” (Vianna and Farias, 2011, p. 83, emphasis added).

⁸ See Vianna and Farias (2011) for how the authors situate their work alongside other research in Brazil and Argentina.

Vianna and Farias also highlight the socially contextualized nature of individual emotions, a concept based on the work of Veena Das and other social anthropologists (Das, 2007). Similarly, in “Na sequência da tragédia: sofrimento e a vida após o incêndio da Boate Kiss,” Ceres Gomes Víctora and Monalisa Dias de Siqueira argue that “[E]motions and feelings [...] are delimited by social contexts that provide them with form, meaning, and reason” with reference to Veena Das and her collaborative work with Arthur Kleinman (Siqueira and Víctora, 2018, p. 181; Das, 1995; Das and Kleinman, 2001).⁹ In their book *Remaking a world: Violence, social suffering, and recovery*, editors Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Margaret M. Lock, Mamphela Ramphele and Pamela Reynolds collect long-term ethnographic studies that seek to answer how communities shaped by collective or structural violence are able to rebuild their everyday lives after tragedy. These studies reveal that “the recovery of the everyday, resuming the task of living (and not only surviving)” is an on-going, but iterative process also that is fraught with contradictions (Das and Kleinman, 2001, p. 4). For these authors, the sociality of individual emotions means that there is no single experience or definition for feelings like loss, grief or even joy. Indeed, these mutable states are both context-dependent and corporified, that is, experienced in the individual body.

The evolving nature of the experience of emotions that have both individual and collective resonance is evidenced by the fact that the two main groups that seek to remake their world after the tragedy of Boate Kiss are not at odds, but instead overlap. Siqueira and Víctora found that there is no clear divide between those mothers who seek the judicial reckoning of those held responsible for the tragedy and those who instead turn to Kardecist Spiritism: “...we have clear indications that many people ‘travel both roads,’ with greater or lesser intensity, at the same time, or at different

⁹ “...emoções e sentimentos...são delimitados por contextos sociais que lhes fornecem forma, sentido e razão” (Siqueira and Víctora, 2018, p. 181).

times” (Siqueira and Victora, 2018, p. 198).¹⁰ The fluidity of these categories is echoed by the fluidity of the experience of loss and grief.

Not only are these emotional states and coping strategies ever-changing, but the subjective self that precedes them is also in a constant state of flux. In *Life and words: violence and the descent into the ordinary*, Veena Das underscores the mutability of the category of self. She explores the philosophical underpinnings of her ongoing ethnography of violence, and, basing her conceptualizations on Wittgenstien’s notion that “the subject does not belong to the world; rather it is the limit of the world,” she concludes that the subject is in constant state of formation (Wittgenstein, 2014; Das, 2007, p. 5). Critical events, i.e., acts of violence, are constitutive of the limits of the self; thus, “...ethnography of violence...is not seen as bearing an objective witness to the events as much as trying to locate the subject through the experience of such limits” (Das, 2007, p. 5). Our subjective self is shaped by critical events and any social scientific student of that experience deals more with process than with product. For example, Pavanello’s analysis of Facebook as integral to social activism underscores how the nightclub fire and loss of their children activated some mothers’ political awareness: “It starts from the idea that mothers became political subjects when they transform the death of their children into a symbol of the struggle for justice and social change” (Pavanello, 2019, p. 2).¹¹ The Boate Kiss fire as critical event thus becomes a hinge point in defining subjectivities post-tragedy.

The discursive importance of a gendered category in subject formation after experiences of violence brings to bear the post-structuralist work of Judith Butler. In *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of ‘sex,’* and other works, Butler develops an epistemology of gender that conceives of the body as a text on and in which society’s

¹⁰ “temos claras indicaoes de que muitas pessoas percorrem as duas vias, com maior ou menor intensidade, ao mesmo tempo, ou em momentos diferentes” (Siqueira and Victora, 2018, p. 198).

¹¹ “Parte-se da ideia de que as maes se tornaram sujeitos polıticos no momento em que transformaram a morte dos filhos em bandeira de luta por justica e mudanca social” (Pavanello, 2019, p. 2).

hegemonic norms can be read. The performativity of gender, in that “gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed,” underpins the present theoretical discussions of the gendered category of mother in a political context (Butler, 1993, p. 1). Illustrating this fact, Priscila dos Santos Peixoto highlights the discursive significance in the naming of the group *Mães de Janeiro*, an activist and solidarity group of mothers formed in the summer of 2013:

The Mothers of January movement appeals to the value of motherhood. In the words of one father: ‘if for us, fathers, the pain is incalculable, imagine for a mother who gave birth and carried her (child) for nine months in her belly?’ (Peixoto, 2014, p. 77).¹²

Later, Peixoto coins the term “pirâmide social da dor” (“social pyramid of pain”) to describe the socially constructed hierarchy of grief based on relationship to the victim, with mothers occupying the top, followed by fathers, siblings, other family members, friends and so on (Peixoto, 2014, p. 87). These two examples illustrate one aspect of the social expectation of normative motherhood, namely, as stated by Pavenello, “Even today, mothers are still seen as the greatest representatives of love for their children” (Pavenello, 2019, p. 5).¹³

“A culpa é da água?” – Reframing loss

Despite being marked by the same tragedy, not all those affected by the fire came to see the event in the same way. In the immediate aftermath of the fire, grief was accompanied by a desire to understand how the unthinkable had occurred and who might be responsible. As early as January 29th, a *Correio Brasiliense* profile of a young

¹² “O movimento *Mães de Janeiro* tem o apelo para o valor da maternidade. Nas palavras de um pai: ‘se para nós, pais, a dor é incalculável, imagina para uma mãe que gerou, carregou por nove meses na barriga?’” (Peixoto, 2014, p. 77).

¹³ “As mães são tidas, ainda hoje, como representantes maiores do amor pelos filhos” (Pavenello, 2019, p. 5).

woman who died taking her mother's place at work in the nightclub demonstrates an attempt to negotiate blame for the fire. Revealingly, the victim's mother herself does not blame any one person for her daughter's death, instead proclaiming: "Someone drinks water, chokes, and dies. Is it the water's fault? No. It was God who wanted that person by his side" (*Correio*, 2013).¹⁴ The victim's brother, in contrast, is more direct, calling the nightclub owner's motivations into question: "É muita ganância. Se fosse o filho dele que tivesse perdido a vida assim, o que ia pensar?" (*Correio*, 2013).¹⁵ This bifurcation previews divisions between the victims' families, some of whom would coalesce around a social movement that agitated for justice through judicial channels, and some of whom would see the divine predestination of God's will in their loved ones' deaths.

Though seemingly at odds, these two groups were not exclusive: some victims' parents participated in collectives for justice and concomitantly pursued spiritist contact with the departed. Kardecist spiritist beliefs refer to a branch of Spiritism codified by French author Allan Kardec, variously rendered in Portuguese as *espiritismo*, *doutrina espírita*, *kardecismo* or *espiritismo kardecista*. Spiritism more generally can be defined as a:

...belief in the possibility of communication with the spirits of the departed, and the practice of attempting such communication, usually with the help of some person (a medium) regarded as gifted to act as an intermediary with the spirit world (Griffin, 2003, p. 428).

The term *carta psicografada* or *psicografia* refers to one of several "mediumistic phenomena" by which "souls, or spirits, of deceased persons...are capable of communication with the living" (Negrão, 2005, no page). For the purposes of the present discussion, and for disambiguation from the English-language marketing term

¹⁴ "A pessoa está tomando água, engasga e morre. A culpa é da água? Não. Foi Deus quem quis essa pessoa ao seu lado" (*Correio*, 2013).

¹⁵ "There's a lot of greed. If it was his son who had lost his life like that, what would he think?" (*Correio*, 2013).

“psychographics,” the translation “medium-transcribed letter” will be used in place of *carta psicografada* and *psicografia*.

Dani’s medium-transcribed letter quoted above is presented alongside testimony from her parents in *Nossa nova caminhada*, a compilation of the letters of eight victims of the Boate Kiss fire as transcribed by mediums of the Kardecist spiritist practice (Betega, 2015). After being introduced to Kardecist beliefs by other victims’ families in the months after the fire, Dani’s parents Adriana Betega Ahmad and Assan da Silva Ahmad traveled to a spiritist center in Uberaba, four states away in Minas Gerais, cautiously optimistic that they would receive a message from their daughter.¹⁶ Their almost 1700-kilometer journey to Uberaba was rewarded during their very first visit. After receiving several more medium-transcribed letters on subsequent visits, they refer to the experience as a watershed:

As for the medium-transcribed letters we received from Dani, which made us take such a big step in our understanding of life and spiritist doctrine, we can say that they formed a dividing line in our lives (Betega, 2015, p. 6).¹⁷

The letters mark a new before and after in their lives. Alongside the before and after of the nightclub fire, a “critical event” in Das’s terms, Dani’s parents now perceive an additional before and after in their own understanding of that same event. The opportunity to reframe their loss marks a turning point in their grief.

The Ahmads’ testimony, thus, bears out Ceres Victora and Monalisa Dias de Siqueira’s observation that, according to Kardecist spiritist beliefs, “death as finitude

¹⁶ Uberaba is significant as the long-time home of influential spiritist medium Chico Xavier (Rocha et al. 2014).

¹⁷ “Quanto as psicografias que recebemos da Dani, que nos fizeram dar um passo tao grande no nosso entendimento sobre a vida e a doutrina espiritica, podemos dizer que elas formaram uma linha divisoria em nossas vidas” (Betega, 2015, p. 6).

does not exist” (Siqueira and VÍctora, 2018, p. 191).¹⁸ In other words, death marks only the loss of our Earthly bodies, not a true loss:

People are always alive because life is in the spirit, not in the body. The body is just a shell that holds the spirit during periods of incarnation. In this sense, the nightclub fire was a moment of disembodiment for 242 spirits (Siqueira and VÍctora, 2018, p. 191).¹⁹

Desencarnação, or disincarnation, conceptualizes death as merely physical. In Dani’s case, her true life is lived by her spirit, carried by her physical body for the 20 years she was predestined to live on Earth as Adriana and Assan’s daughter. Dani and the other 241 victims of the fire were released from their physical experience that night, but not lost in the same way non-Kardecists understand death. Beyond providing the spiritual rationale for the possibility of receiving medium-transcribed letters, Siqueira and VÍctora also argue that this worldview reframes the pain of loss in a meaningful way.

Moreover, Adriana’s Kardecist beliefs allow her to continue being a mother despite her daughter’s physical death. Her relationship with Dani can live on in the sense that her daughter’s spirit lives on. This stands in stark contrast to the conceptualizations of mothers of other Brazilian social movements, who say they have been unjustly denied the “right to be a mother” as a consequence of their children’s untimely deaths. In their ethnographic work alongside the Rede de Comunidades e Movimentos contra Violência, Vianna and Farias observe this right to be a mother in speech acts and the rhetoric on signs used in public protests: “Me tiraram o direito de ser Mãe” (“They took away my right to be a mother”) (Vianna and Farias, 2011, p. 81).

¹⁸ “a morte como finitude não existe” (Siqueira and VÍctora, 2018, p. 191).

¹⁹ “As pessoas estão sempre vivas porque a vida está no espírito, não no corpo. O corpo é apenas um invólucro, que comporta o espírito nos períodos de encarnação. Nesse sentido o incêndio da boate foi um momento de desencarnação de 242 espíritos” (Siqueira and VÍctora, 2018, p. 191).

This notion of the loss of the “right” to be a parent harks back to decades of social justice movements against state violence in Brazil and was taken up by some of the families of the victims of Boate Kiss. Ultimately, social activism the fight for justice becomes a new way for these parents to reframe their lives post-tragedy. These divergent views on how to conceptualize the loss of a child are inherently undergirded by the nature of the parent-child relationship, but also specifically by the role of now-grieving mothers.²⁰

Mothers in movements – Regional historical trajectory

Any movement of mothers in a contemporary Latin American space necessarily calls to mind the Asociación de las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo which brought together mothers searching for their children who had been “disappeared” by Argentina’s military dictatorship of 1976 to 1982. María Virginia Morales in *De la cocina a la plaza: la categoría “madre” en el discurso de las madres de Plaza de Mayo y su repercusión en la esfera de lo político* chronicles the trajectory from 1976 to 2001 of this iconic group. According to Morales, the madres’ physical occupation of public space “burst onto the political scene, politicizing motherhood and shifting the dividing line between public and private” (Morales, 2010, p. 22).²¹ This theme has been taken up by Brazilian social movements that take to the streets in their search for justice.

The rupture of the category of mother into a public discursive space does not represent a breakdown of the gendered category so much as a resignification of its salience. As social scientist Mariana Valenzuela Somogyi notes in her analysis of the figure of the mother in the case of woman presidents of Latin America:

²⁰ For more on the importance of Spiritism in grieving and mourning, see Peixoto, Borges and Siqueira (2016), and Parente and Ramos (2020).

²¹ “irrumpió en la escena política politizando la maternidad y produciendo un desplazamiento de la línea divisoria entre lo público y privado” (Morales, 2010, p. 22).

Unlike European and North American feminist movements that claimed an image of the feminine emancipated from family ties, 'in Latin America, motherhood and domesticity acquired a lasting moral and political significance,' becoming axes of representation for women in politics (Chaney, 1992 cited in Valenzuela Somogyi, 2019, p. 68).²²

The moral transcendence awarded to mothers justifies the presence of a private category in a public space. This stands in contrast to feminist efforts elsewhere to expand the possibilities of gendered experience beyond the limitations of reproductive potential.

Unfortunately, there are many such movements of mothers now embroiled in similar fights for justice. In perhaps the most culturally symbolic example for Brazilians, the political mobilization of grieving mothers resonates strongly with the story of Zuzu Angel, fashion designer turned activist in her fight to uncover the truth about her son's disappearance, torture and assassination by the Brazilian military regime of 1964 to 1985 (Carvalho, 2006). Post-dictatorship, groups led by mothers continue to mobilize against structural, state and police violence. For example, the mothers of victims of gendered violence committed against boys between 8 and 15 years of age in Altamira, Pará, between 1989 and 1993, banded together in the face of institutional apathy. In "O sofrer, o narrar, o agir: dimensões da mobilização social de familiares de vítimas," Paula Lacerda underscores how the gendered understanding of these mothers' responsibilities towards their children brings their mobilization to the forefront over fathers or siblings who were also involved: "The lack of attention to the feelings of guilt felt by the victims' parents and sister, who also mobilized, reinforces the view that, in our society, the responsibility for protection is socially expected from *mothers*" (Lacerda,

²² "a diferencia de los movimientos feministas europeos y norteamericanos que reivindican una imagen emancipadora de lo femenino de los lazos familiares, 'en América Latina la maternidad y la domesticidad adquieren una trascendencia moral y política perdurable', constituyéndose como ejes de representación de la mujer en la política" (Chaney, 1992, cited in Valenzuela Somogyi, 2019, p. 68).

2014, p. 54, original emphasis).²³ Recalling Butler's characterization and Peixoto's social pyramid, Lacerda observes that mothers carry an additional socially constructed burden beyond the expectation that they will educate their children morally: it is also a mother's responsibility to protect her child. This social expectation not only compounds the grief of a mother who loses a child, but it can also propel them to seek to protect their child's memory even after their death.

The social movements to come out of the Boate Kiss fire also do so in the wake of the Mães de Acari. In 1990, eleven young people from the Acari favela in Rio de Janeiro were kidnapped by self-identified policemen and then never found. Their mothers, a group of "black women and women from the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro," formed the "Mothers of Acari movement, which demanded answers and denounced the crime on a national and international level" (*Correio*, 2020).²⁴ Jurema Werneck, director of Amnesty International Brazil, credits this group with creating "a methodology that is repeated to this day when family members of the victims of state violence seek clarification or justice" (*Correio*, 2020).²⁵ It is from these examples that the mothers in movements committed to justice for the victims of Boate Kiss find their models.

Remaking their world – The fight for justice

For many, losing loved ones in the Boate Kiss fire marked the beginning of a long period of social and political activism which, in light of the jury annulment of August 2022, continues to this day.²⁶ The only major group to coalesce around the identity of

²³ "A não tematização dos pais e da irmã das vítimas, que também se mobilizaram, a respeito de sentimento de culpa reforça a leitura de que, em nossa sociedade, os compromissos de proteção são socialmente esperados por parte das *mães*" (Lacerda, 2014, p. 54, original emphasis).

²⁴ "mulheres negras e de periferia do Rio de Janeiro," formed the "movimento Mães de Acari, que reivindicou respostas e denunciou o crime em âmbitos nacional e internacional" (*Correio*, 2020).

²⁵ "uma metodologia que se repete até hoje quando familiares de vítimas de violência do Estado buscam esclarecimentos ou justiça" (*Correio*, 2020).

²⁶ The four accused, two affiliates of the band and two nightclub owners, were found guilty by jury in December of 2021. Notwithstanding, this judgment was overturned in court in August of 2022, just a few months shy of the tenth anniversary of the fire. The Associação dos Familiares de Vítimas e Sobreviventes da Tragédia de

motherhood, however, was the Mães de Janeiro. According to Peixoto, the solidarity group formed and chose its name in the aftermath of a June 2013 political action in which various social groups occupied the Santa Maria Municipal Assembly chambers:

...the mothers thought of strategies to attract the attention of public institutions and remembered the 'Madres de la Plaza de Mayo,' a movement of mothers and grandmothers of the politically disappeared during the Argentine military dictatorship, and their protests, including 'caserolas,' or popular protests in which demonstrators bang pots, which are known worldwide (Peixoto, 2014, p. 112).²⁷

Choosing the month of the fire and styling their name after the emblematic Argentinian group, the Mães de Janeiro would join the activism of the Associação de Familiares de Vítimas da Tragédia de Santa Maria and the Movimento Santa Maria do Luto à Luta.

An *O Viés* interview with Maria Aparecida Neves, a founding member of Mães de Janeiro, reinforces the transnational connection to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo:

And we met the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo...there. A lady of about 72 years old has been looking for her son for 38 years, she doesn't know if he's alive or dead, and she's still there fighting for justice in the square. And that was a shot in the arm for us, because we're just going on two years (*O Viés*, 2014).²⁸

Santa Maria (AVTSM) continues its activism in favor of justice. Notably, AVTSM representative Flavio Silva frames this imperative in terms of his parental relationship: "É uma promessa de pai lutar pela dignidade do nome e da memória dos nossos filhos. Lutamos com o sentimento de amor, é o que nos move" ("It is a parent's promise to fight for the dignity of our children's name and memory. We fight with the feeling of love, it's what moves us") (Maggioni and Carvalho, 2023).

²⁷ "...as mães pensavam em estratégias para chamar atenção dos órgãos públicos e veio a lembrança das 'Mães da Praça de Maio', movimento da mães e avós dos desaparecidos políticos da ditadura militar argentina e suas ações como 'panelaço', entre outras, que são conhecidas mundialmente" (Peixoto, 2014, p. 112).

²⁸ "E a gente conheceu as Mães da Praça de Maio...lá. Uma senhora com 72 anos, mais ou menos, há 38 anos não acha o filho dela, não sabe se tá vivo ou se tá morto, e tá lá firme lutando na praça por justiça. E aquilo foi uma injeção de ânimo pra nós, porque a recém vamos fazer dois anos" (*O Viés*, 2014).

As they approached the two-year anniversary of the nightclub fire, years away from any real legal action to hold guilty parties accountable, Neves and the other Mães de Janeiro draw strength from the example of endurance demonstrated by the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo.

Another member of the group, Ligiane Righi da Silva, explains how the Argentine example shaped her own understanding of the political imperative that her loss became: “Just for a minute, think about being without your child. We won’t be reunited with our children. Since we are going through this, we are going to fight bravely. That mother from Plaza de Mayo was the greatest example and encouragement for us” (*O Viés*, 2014).²⁹ Silva also echoes the findings of Vianna and Farias (2011) in that she asks her interlocutor to imagine a mother without a child, an oxymoron of sorts that recalls the claims of other mothers that the violence suffered by their children has taken away their right to be a mother.

Daniela Arbex also takes up the overlapping experiences of public tragedy, private grief, and collective action in *Todo dia a mesma noite: A história não contada da Boate Kiss*, a narrative, non-fiction treatment of the events of January 27th, 2013.³⁰ Neither in line with the objective accounts from journalists nor the sensationalist exposés of tabloids, Arbex adopts an emotional narrative style that recreates the dialogue and internal monologue of a diverse selection of those affected by what happened at Boate Kiss. The narration embodies the voices of medical professionals, good samaritans and, especially, parents and families of the victims, recreating their confusion, pain and courage in a palpable and vivid account.

²⁹ “Um minuto, pense em ficar sem teu filho. Nós não voltamos a ficar com nossos filhos. Já que estamos passando por isso, vamos lutar bravamente. Aquela mãe da Praça de Maio foi o maior exemplo e incentivo pra nós” (*O Viés*, 2014).

³⁰ Speaking to the effectiveness of Arbex’s style and the enduring legacy of the fire in Brazilian collective memory and popular culture, *Todo dia* has been subsequently adapted by Gustavo Lipsztein into a miniseries, *Todo dia a mesma noite: o incêndio da Boate Kiss*, which aired on Netflix on January 25th, 2023 (IMDB, 2023).

Towards the end of her text, Arbex asks the reader to imagine what it must be like to live with the pain of losing a loved one. Specifically, she homes in on the experience of a grieving mother:

If the memory of a tragedy is painful, imagine carrying it inside you. The mothers of Santa Maria know perfectly well what this is. In fact, only they can measure the devastation of forgetting the sound of a child's laughter...Today, Livia misses everything she experienced at Heitor's side, but especially being called a mother (Arbex, 2018, p. 152).³¹

Livia's experience of loss, mediated by Arbex, is framed by the mother-son relationship she no longer has. The phrase "carregá-la dentro de si" ("carrying it inside you") speaks to the corporification of suffering, explored by Siqueira and Vitora (2017), and the physicality of motherhood. This is echoed by the practice of screen-printing photos of the deceased onto T-shirts to be worn at public events in which families alternating convene to protest for justice or to promote the memory of their loved ones. This material manifestation has been noted by Vianna and Farias in the social movement of mothers against state violence: "trazia a imagem do filho colada ao corpo, estampada na camiseta feita para a ocasião" ("she had her son's image stuck to her body, printed on the T-shirt made for the occasion") (Vianna and Farias, 2011, p. 83). The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo are also known for carrying photographs of the disappeared. The images transmit a physical connection to the lost or missing loved one through the bodily expression of wearing or carrying. This materiality recalls the viewpoint of the unnamed father quoted by Peixoto above; mothers in a

³¹ "Se a recordação de uma tragédia é dolorosa, imagine carregá-la dentro de si. As mães de Santa Maria sabem perfeitamente o que é isso. Aliás, só elas conseguem dimensionar a devastação causada pelo esquecimento do som da risada de um filho...Hoje, Livia sente falta de tudo que experimentou ao lado de Heitor, mas principalmente de ser chamada mãe" (Arbex, 2018, p. 152).

heteronormative sense are at the top of the social hierarchy of suffering because of their physical connection to their children through the act of giving birth.

Echoing Livia's sense of identity loss, Arbex also quotes Carina, whose daughter Thanise lost her life in the fire:

The only thing I've been successful at in life is being a mother. I didn't...manage to become a social worker, the way I had dreamed, but I managed to be a good mother, I managed to pass on good ideals to my daughters, of character, of honesty, and I managed to give them a lot of affection. Why couldn't I protect them? (Arbex, 2018, p. 128).³²

Carina's evaluation of her own legacy as a mother echoes the findings of Lacerda (2011), in which mothers are primarily responsible for the protection of their children. The pursuit of justice becomes another way to retain the familial relationship severed by loss of life: "The political action to seek justice for these dead is directly linked, therefore, to the effort not to let these family stories be erased as well" (Vianna and Farias, 2011, p. 107).³³ Though the retraumatizing potential of reliving the tragedy through continuous engagement with its memory is present in political actioning, the pursuit of justice itself becomes a way to keep loved ones "alive."

Remaking their world - Kardecist Spiritism

Though joining organizations of families that agitated for justice and turning to the spiritist practices of Kardecismo to connect with the departed allowed the suffering to share in a collective processing of grief, the two narratives diverge significantly, however, in their understanding of loss. As previously explored, the Kardecists,

³² "A única coisa em que fui bem-sucedida na vida foi ser mãe. Não...consegui ser assistente social, como eu sonhava, mas consegui ser uma boa mãe, consegui passar ideais boas para as minhas filhas, de caráter, de honestidade, e consegui dar muito carinho para elas. Por que eu não consegui protegê-las?" (Arbex, 2018, p. 128).

³³ "A ação política de busca de justiça para esses mortos está diretamente ligada, desse modo, ao esforço em não deixar que se apaguem também essas histórias familiares" (Vianna and Farias, 2011, p. 107).

following the teachings of French founder Allan Kardec, understand death as the spirit's "disembodiment," a leaving behind of the physical body to move to a higher plane of existence (Negrão, 2005). In death, loved ones are not truly gone, instead they have merely left this physical existence. Therefore, "a morte como finitude não existe" ("death as finitude does not exist") (Siqueira and VÍctora, 2018, p. 192). The finality of death thus is avoided, and the departed can be contacted via mediums who record their missives in transcribed letters. Within this framework, the worldly struggle for "justice" has little significance. In fact, several medium-transcribed letters from the young departed absolve the would-be "guilty" parties of any responsibility for the event and discourage their families from participating in the marches for "justice." For example, Dani Betega Ahamad's first medium-transcribed letter expresses this hope for her parents:

I know how the subject becomes so alive and present in our memories and I truly believe that many parents, like you yourselves, have hearts full of pain and hope to forget it, but the sensationalist press, exploring every aspect it can, doesn't let us forget. But as Guilherme said, I also want to see them away from any protests, we really need to rest, to regain strength and to forget a little about the tragedy of Santa Maria (Betega, 2015, p. 11).³⁴

The message to stay away from the social movement, i.e., the "protests", is unequivocal. Dani's parents need "rest" to regain their strength, not the continued strain of reliving the violence of the tragedy. Blame is placed on an additional actor, the sensationalist press, for stirring up the unsettling emotions that accompany

³⁴ "Eu sei o quanto o assunto se torna tão vivo e presente em nossas lembranças e acredito mesmo, que muitos pais, quais vocês mesmos, estão de corações doloridos, e esperam esquecer o fato, mas a imprensa sensacionalista, explorando todos os aspectos que pode, não nos deixam esquecer. Mas como foi dito pelo Guilherme, também desejo vê-los longe de quaisquer protestos, precisamos mesmo de descanso, de recompor as forças e de esquecer um pouco da tragédia de Santa Maria" (Betega, 2015, p. 11).

remembering that fateful day. In its efforts to reframe the pain of loss, this view is in clear conflict with the efforts to organize for social change and legal accountability.

This first missive from Dani is intertextual in the sense that it references another medium-transcribed letter revealed during that same session, that of Guilherme Pontes Gonçalves, son of Ricardo Machado Gonçalves and Mariângela Pontes Gonçalves. Unknown to each other before the fire, Dani seems to know Guilherme in the spiritual plane, and as such her letter implies to her parents that she and Guilherme were able to communicate after their *desencarnação*. In their own words, “Since then, we understand the meaning of her words, which tells us that they are now in contact” (Betega, 2015, p. 10).³⁵ For her parents, this reinforces her request that they not dwell on the tragedy by getting involved in the social movement. Guilherme’s letter, also addressed first to his “mãezinha,” is even more forcefully worded in respect to the protests:

Father and mother, I would appreciate seeing you away from any protests that anyways will not bring me back. Let's remember that those responsible also have families and had no intention of causing the tragedy that occurred. Let us think of it as a misfortune and today we have already begun to understand it a little in a deeper sense, understand what concerns us from the point of view of the law of cause and effect (Betega, 2015, p. 14).³⁶

The seemingly apolitical medium-transcribed letters become highly politicized in that they denounce a tandem social movement and, in some cases, like in Guilherme’s letter above, completely absolve any potential guilty parties.

³⁵ “Desde daí, compreendemos o sentido das palavras dela, o que nos afirma que agora ele estão em contacto” (Betega, 2015, p. 10).

³⁶ “Pai e mãe, estimaria vê-los distantes de quaisquer protestos que não me trarão de volta. Vamos lembrar que os responsáveis também têm famílias e não tiveram qualquer intenção quanto à tragédia acontecida. Pensemos no fato como uma fatalidade e hoje já começamos a entender um pouco em sentido mais profundo, do que nos ocupa do ponto de vista da lei de causa e efeito” (Betega, 2015, p. 14).

“Supermother:” Dilma Rousseff and the Boate Kiss Tragedy

The last way in which the category of “mother” resonates with the Boate Kiss tragedy can be seen in then-president Dilma Rousseff’s response to the critical event. In January of 2013, Dilma was in Chile for the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Summit in partnership with the European Union-Latin American and Caribbean Foundation (EU-LAC).³⁷ Once news arrived of the nightclub fire in Santa Maria and the extent of its devastation, Dilma canceled her plans for the remainder of the regional meeting, embarking for Rio Grande do Sul alongside her cabinet and arriving in the immediate aftermath on January 27. In a brief statement delivered before her departure, she emotionally expresses her solidarity with those affected:

A tragedy for us all. Those who need me today are the Brazilian people and that’s where I must be. And I asked all my ministers to help alleviate the consequences of this tragedy... I also wanted to tell the population of our country and of Santa Maria how much, in this moment of sadness, we are together. And inevitably we will overcome, affirming that sadness (Menezes, 2013, p. 51).³⁸

Though her visit to Santa Maria was not long, it was symbolically important, both then and later as her legacy is reinterpreted in comparisons to Jaír Bolsonaro, Brazilian president from 2019 to 2022. Her decisions and speech acts related to Boate Kiss are currently being leveraged in spaces like Twitter to open the possibility of redeeming the impeached president’s legacy.

³⁷ Emblematic of the political swings that characterize Brazil’s recent decades, CELAC has its origins in the Rio Group formed under former president Lula’s administration, but Brazil suspended its membership in January 2020 under Jair Bolsonaro’s leadership (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2012; *Reuters*, 2020).

³⁸ “Uma tragédia para nós todos. Quem precisa de mim hoje é o povo brasileiro e é lá que eu tenho que estar. E eu pedi a todos os meus ministros, que possam contribuir para minorar as consequências dessa tragédia... Eu queria dizer também à população do nosso país e de Santa Maria o quanto, nesse momento de tristeza, estamos juntos. E necessariamente iremos superar mantendo a tristeza” (Menezes, 2013, p. 51).

Despite her novice status in elected office, Dilma Rousseff was elected with “a majority nearly as sweeping as [her predecessor’s, Lula Ignacio da Silva,] own” (Anderson, 2019, p. 100). Nevertheless, after winning her second-term election with a narrow margin, Dilma was impeached, at least ostensibly, “on the pretext that prior to the election she had improperly transferred funds from state banks to federal accounts” (Anderson, 2019, p. 121). Perry Anderson places this turn of events at the feet of several societal factors, including the fallout over Lula’s own fall from grace, related unmitigated class tensions, and overarchingly, the weak party system in place since the military dictatorship of 1964-1985. Anderson predicts that Dilma might struggle to maintain growth while employing the same conservative economic controls Lula himself had used. Notable in hindsight for its prescience, Anderson emphasizes that material gains for the popular classes are not equal to gains in rights.

In fact, historian Andre Pagliarini, in the pointedly titled reflection “The Brazilian Right Used Anti-Corruption to Push Its Agenda,” diagnoses Dilma’s demise as scapegoating for a larger process of takeover from the new far right. Starting with the idea that “attacking corruption is an inherently political act driven by individual agendas,” Pagliarini takes issue with the notion that only the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, Brazil’s Workers’ Party) could be implicated in corruption (Pagliarini, 2021). Pagliarini’s judgment of the mass protests against Dilma and her government as rhetorically off-base does not change the reality of betrayal felt by an electorate that shouldered the effects of sky-high interest rates and austere economic belt-tightening, the opposite of Dilma’s second term campaign platform. The combination of macroeconomic factors outside the Brazilian government’s control, poorly timed solutions in response to said factors and the stain of corruption, as a scapegoat or not, were enough to impeach Dilma and remove her from office on August 31, 2016.

Dilma's response to the Boate Kiss tragedy is significant, therefore, because it highlights qualities of leadership obscured by the impeachment process and likely lost in the writing of her legacy. In her role as the first woman president of Brazil, Dilma used political rhetoric that, according to social scientist Valenzuela Somogyi, characterized her as a "supermother" who casts herself as capable of mothering the entire nation. This protective figure justifies her authority from the moral high ground of a mother caring for her offspring (Valenzuela Somogyi, 2019, p. 73). Through a qualitative analysis of the former president's political speeches, Valenzuela Somogyi borrows from Elsa Chaney's *Supermadre: La mujer dentro de la política de América Latina* to show how the constraints of this gendered positionality counterintuitively justified a woman's presence on the political scene:

[Chaney] developed the category supermother to characterize this action, in which, faced with a traditionally masculinized political field, they [female politicians] have had to 'legitimize their role as that of a mother of a larger 'house' such as that of a municipality or even as a kind of supermother to the nation' (Chaney, 1992, cited in Valenzuela Somogyi, 2019, p. 68)³⁹

In this way, Dilma positioned herself as a *madre de pueblo*, a "mother of the people" allied with the social policies of her predecessor (Valenzuela Somogyi, 2019, p. 72). In other words: "Under the figure of a traditional sacrificial mother...she was linked to a continuity and strengthening of the social protection policies of her predecessor" (Valenzuela Somogyi, 2019, p. 72).⁴⁰ In this sense, Dilma's political rhetoric that utilized the category of mother bolstered her own political claim through justifying her public presence and inserting her legacy into the timeline established by Lula.

³⁹ "[Chaney] elaboró la categoría supermadre para caracterizar esta acción, en la que, ante un campo político tradicionalmente masculinizado, han debido 'legitimar su papel como el de una madre de una 'casa' más vasta como puede ser la de una municipalidad o incluso la nación como una especie de supermadre'" (Chaney, 1992, cited in Valenzuela Somogyi, 2019, p. 68).

⁴⁰ "Bajo la figura de una madre tradicional sacrificial...estaba unida a la continuidad y al fortalecimiento de las políticas de protección social de su antecesor" (Valenzuela Somogyi, 2019, p. 72).

It is in keeping with her positioning as mother to the nation that Dilma would leave CELAC for Brazil as soon as possible. Dilma's decision to abandon an international summit in favor of a show of solidarity in Santa Maria spoke volumes, especially to those who chronicled its aftermath in regional and national news outlets and to those immediately affected by the tragedy. An interesting combination of the two groups can be found in an undergraduate thesis, delivered the same year as the nightclub fire, by Jéssica Padilha de Menezes at Centro Universitário Franciscano, one of Santa Maria's many colleges. Entitled *A presidenta Dilma, em Santa Maria, No episódio da tragédia da Boate Kiss: um estudo comparativo das coberturas dos jornais A Razão e Diário de Santa Maria*, Menezes's work analyzes two local papers' treatment of Dilma's emblematic visit. The result is both a time capsule of a community in mourning and a gendered analysis of Dilma's public figure.

For example, de Menezes quotes from a January 28 *Diário de Santa Maria* piece entitled "Tragédia sensibiliza autoridades:"

President Dilma Rousseff's emotional embrace of a family member of one of the victims of the fire that claimed hundreds of lives, in the early hours of last Sunday, symbolizes the feelings of thousands of people around the world...With tears on her face, the president walked around for around 15 minutes among the dozens of bodies that succumbed after the accident and consoled parents who were unable to hug them for the last time (cited in Menezes, 2013, p. 40).⁴¹

According to de Menezes, the newspaper's highlighting of Dilma's displays of emotions positions her less as a head of state and more as a "humano com fragilidades" ("human being with frailties") (Menezes, 2013, p. 42). Tellingly, de Menezes

⁴¹ "O abraço emocionado da presidente Dilma Rousseff em uma familiar [sic] das vítimas do incêndio que ceifou centenas de vidas, na madrugada do último domingo, simboliza o sentimento de milhares de pessoas em todo o mundo...Com lágrimas no rosto, a presidente circulou cerca de 15 minutos entre as dezenas de corpos que sucumbiram após o acidente e consolou pais que não puderam abraça-los pela última vez" (cited in Menezes, 2013, p. 40)

reconstructs the supermother rhetoric as she concludes ultimately that Dilma acted from her place as a “mulher/mãe afetada pela dor de tantas perdas” (“woman/mother affected by the pain of so many losses”) and not as president (Menezes, 2013, p. 57).

To reconstruct some of Dilma’s movements that day, it is evident she spent time inside the gymnasium where, due to the sheer volume of victims, bodies were taken from the scene of the fire to be identified postmortem. In Arbex’s *Todo dia a mesma noite*, Dilma’s presence in the aftermath receives special mention. According to Arbex’s reconstruction, before spending 15 minutes in the gymnasium referenced above, Dilma spent time with victims’ families. Importantly, though, Dilma did not use her authority to bypass the long wait of the large-scale postmortem; she stayed with the bereaved gathered outside. An interesting example of Arbex’s own rhetorical choices is revealed in the invocation of the category of “mother” and all its significance to create contrast between politicians like then-president Dilma and others who entered the gymnasium to view the victims before even the bereaved families were allowed to:

Ignoring the pain of all those people, the authorities and their entourages had access to the gymnasium, opened for them before the parents entered...With the exception of President Dilma Rousseff—who preferred to wait outside the gymnasium, close to the mothers who were waiting for the difficult moment of identification (Arbex, 2018, p. 72).⁴²

Dilma eschews the politicization of the tragedy and is cast as a woman/mother in the retelling.⁴³ Menezes supports Arbex’s version of events by also pointing out that

⁴² “Ignorando a dor de todas aquelas pessoas, autoridades e suas comitivas tiveram acesso ao ginásio, liberado ante da entrada dos pais...À exceção de presidente Dilma Rousseff—que preferiu esperar do lado de fora do ginásio, perto das mães que aguardavam o duro momento do reconhecimento” (Arbex, 2018, p. 72).

⁴³ The ability of the category of mother to englobe all others affected by violence has also been noted by Vianna and Farias: “As mães tornadas protagonistas políticas, capazes de englobar simbolicamente todos os outros ativistas do mesmo movimento, sejam familiares ou não de vítimas, homens ou mulheres, falam, assim de uma insurgência política definido em estreitas conexões com as construções—sempre em processo--de gênero” (“Mothers turned political protagonists, capable of symbolically uniting all the other activists of the same movement, be they family or not of the victims, men or women, speaks not only of a political insurgency closely connected to social constructions—always ongoing—but also of gender”) (Vianna and Farias, 2011, p. 93).

Dilma did not offer interviews that day in Santa Maria: “She stated that her arrival had been focused simply on providing assistance to those who were suffering from the pain of so many losses” (Menezes, 2013, p. 57).⁴⁴ Seemingly, Dilma’s emotional response trumped any sense that this could be a moment for her to advance politically. The local media and subsequent analysis read her restraint as solidarity with the victims and survivors.

On January 31 *Diário de Santa Maria* ran the title “O mundo olha para Santa Maria” (“The World Looks to Santa Maria”). Going beyond Brazil to neighboring Argentina, the piece interestingly quotes Eleonora Gosman, identified as a correspondent for Argentine newspaper, *Clarín*: “One difference I notice is that in Argentina, in 2004, Néstor Kirchner, who was president, did not go to the site of the disaster. Here, Dilma (Rousseff) came” (cited in Menezes, 2013, p. 42).⁴⁵ Referencing a strikingly similar nightclub fire that took place on December 30, 2004, at Cromañón in Buenos Aires, Gosman is impressed by Dilma’s presence in contrast with former Argentine President Nestor Kirchner’s absence.

Her presence and empathy in Santa Maria have more recently been intentionally juxtaposed against Bolsonaro’s apparent crassness in the face of thousands of COVID-19 related fatalities. Especially on Twitter, photos of Dilma overcome with emotion in Santa Maria are juxtaposed with Bolsonaro riding a jet ski during the worst months of the pandemic (Figure 1, Ferreira, 2020). In the recurring image, Dilma stands in the gymnasium, looking away from the camera and pursing her lips, clearly in a controlled effort not to cry (Figure 2, Sosa, 2021). Posts with hashtags like #Lula2022 place this juxtaposition within the PT’s comeback story leading up to the October 2022 elections. By turning to the Boate Kiss tragedy as emblematic of Dilma’s qualities as

⁴⁴ “Afirmou que sua vinda tinha sido meramente focada em prestar auxílio àqueles que estavam sofrendo com a dor de tantas perdas” (Menezes, 2013, p. 57)

⁴⁵ “Uma diferença que percebo é que na Argentina, em 2004, Néstor Kirchner, que era presidente, não foi até o local do desastre. Aqui, Dilma (Rousseff) veio” (cited in Menezes, 2013, p. 42).

leader, is possible to consider rewriting the legacy of the nation's first woman president, even if doing so might reinforce the hegemonic gender narrative of women as more emotional beings.



Figure 1: Ferreira, 2020



Figure 2: Sosa, 2021

Conclusion

By considering the category of “mother,” its socially constructed nature at times conflated with that other category of “woman,” it is evident that the symbolic weight of its invocation as a speech act or positionality can confer authenticity and moral authority to whoever wields it. With the backdrop of movements of mothers nationally and regionally, the overlapping social movements of Kardecist Spiritism and the efforts of the Associação de Familiares de Vítimas da Tragédia de Santa Maria, the Movimento Santa Maria do Luto à Luta, and the Mães de Janeiro all provide opportunities for exploring the gendered experience of navigating grief and the creation of political subjectivities. While the mother-child relationship is in a sense preserved by Spiritism’s understanding of the possibility of communication with the spiritual plane, mothers involved in political activism are forced to re-signify their parental role as a continuous

fight against forgetting and for justice. The individual experience of motherhood resonates strongly in the public sphere not only for victims' families, but also for our understanding of then-president Dilma Rousseff who positioned herself as a "supermother" and whose legacy in a highly contentious political period seems to be being read with the same gendered lens.

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