

A Social Autopsy of the Kiss Nightclub Fire

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***Abstract:** This article offers a social autopsy of the Kiss Nightclub Fire and an exploration of the networks of trauma and reconstruction in its wake. We present a critical analysis of the social and political conditions that created this large-scale tragedy, placing these in the context of political conflict and profit-seeking in Brazil’s recent past. We explore the role of the SUS (Sistema Unico de Saude) in responding to the tragedy. We trace the trauma of the fire in a network of survivors and family members in Rio Grande do Sul and beyond, and the contrasting ways they have sought to make sense of and respond to the fire with political action and/or spiritual exploration.*

In the early morning hours of January 27, 2013, fire raced through the packed Kiss Nightclub in Santa Maria, in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil’s southernmost state. The fire ignited flammable acoustic foam on the nightclub’s ceiling, flooding the building with toxic, black smoke. Well over a thousand patrons were

crowded into a club with a capacity of under seven hundred. They rushed to the club's single exit, their progress slowed by metal barriers and narrow corridors meant to force patrons past the cashier's counter. Many became confused in the panicked crowd and the smoke-filled room, and crowded into the bathrooms, which offered no escape. Many died before reaching the exit. Dozens more died on the sidewalk in front of the club, or after being rushed to the hospital, as cyanide released by the incinerated acoustic foam poisoned them. Over 230 victims died that night, with others succumbing over ensuing weeks. 242 people ultimately died from direct causes of the fire.¹

But this was not the full toll. Hundreds more were gravely injured in the fire. Of the 636 survivors and family members of victims, many were traumatized by the fire, in ways that have changed their lives forever.² While many have forged new lives in the wake of the tragedy, incidences of suicide, divorce, depression and other indications of trauma are high among those touched by the fire. And the trauma spreads beyond

¹ The official necropsy report released in March 2013 stated the causa mortis of the first 234 who died that night was asphyxia by cyanide and carboxyhemoglobin. Parents of the deceased interviewed for our research have told us the corpses were not transfigured by severe burn marks. This is evidence, in their view, that their children are most likely to have died quickly, without much suffering. At the same time, they tell us of other marks on the bodies that suggest that there was disorientation and extreme distress among those who died, as well as among those who survived the fire.

² Several months after the fire, hundreds of survivors were reported as still suffering from different clinical conditions. Some testimonials and scientific publications (Mafacioli et al., 2016), have reported on the injuries, and their impact on the life of survivors. A study by Albuquerque et al. (2015) carried out among 270 men who underwent physiotherapy on a public health clinic in Santa Maria, stated that 70% showed respiratory symptoms -cough, fatigue, dyspnea, chest pain, among others -; in addition to neurological symptoms - persistent headache, loss of memory; paresthesia; musculoskeletal injuries; and extensive burns. While it is difficult to assess negative employment consequences resulting from health problems related to the fire, the victims' support association (AVTSM) has led a campaign for disability benefits and employment guarantees for victims of the fire.

those directly affected, deeply marking the city. The memory of the fire, its physical and emotional ravages, and the interminable legal battles that have ensued, hang like a pall over Santa Maria, a town now synonymous with tragedy.

The repercussions of this trauma spread well beyond Santa Maria, a university town that serves as a regional pole for the interior of Rio Grande do Sul. Students from dozens of small towns throughout the state died in the fire, as did others from surrounding states. Among the victims, whose ages ranged from 17 to 45, there were also military personnel who served in the local Armed Forces Bases, people who worked in different professional activities in Santa Maria and elsewhere, and members of the nightclub's staff. The fire and its legacies remain a haunting presence in these communities.

The juridical proceedings stemming from the fire present their own tangled odyssey. The criminal trial of the four principal defendants—the nightclub owners and two members of the band directly involved in igniting the fire—continues to stagger on a decade after the fire. Dozens of civil cases have played out over the past ten years, each one a miniature version of the large-scale trauma of the fire, while an indictment of the civil authorities of Santa Maria awaits the review of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The collected proceedings of these cases would yield tens of thousands

of pages of legal documents, unfolding according to the arcane and contentious rules of the legal system.

Given these complex, unresolved ramifications, how can we assess the consequences and legacies of the Kiss Nightclub Fire, or, as it is known in Rio Grande do Sul, the Tragedy of Santa Maria? What have the fire and its traumas meant for Brazil, and what do they reveal about the vulnerabilities of the country in recent times? In this article, we present a social autopsy of the fire and its legacies in an attempt to answer these questions. We argue that the fire was emblematic of Brazil in the second decade of the twenty-first century, and consider the implications of the fire as an example of failure of a complex system, indicative of larger patterns in this period.

Our research in this regard follows a growing body of work on avoidable deaths and large-scale disasters. Taken collectively, this work argues that such events are not “accidents,” but the result of policies, procedures and choices that amplify risk in order to maximize profit, and that tend to protect the powerful while imposing that risk on the most vulnerable. The title of Jessie Singer’s 2022 book, *There Are No Accidents: the Deadly Rise of Injury and Disaster—Who Profits and Who Pays the Price*, aptly synthesizes this growing body of work. The Kiss Nightclub Fire falls squarely into this pattern, in ways that help explain larger fragilities in recent Brazil.

Most of the victims were in their early twenties, many of them students at one of the seven colleges and universities in Santa Maria.³ Their parents have figured prominently in the public response to the fire. Many played a role in founding and maintaining several organizations emerging from the fire, including the *Associação dos Familiares das Vítimas e Sobreviventes da Tragedia de Santa Maria* (the Association of the Family Members of the Victims and Survivors of the Santa Maria Tragedy, or AVSTM). The AVSTM has led the political recognition of the rights of victims and family members, and the struggle for justice in the courts of law. Other parents turned away from the political realm to the spiritual realm. They have embraced Kardecist Spiritism, based on the teachings of French founder Alan Kardec, prominent in Brazil for over a century. They seek communication with victims through spiritist mediums. Psychographic letters, understood to be direct communications from departed loved ones who are now on the spiritual plane, transcribed by mediums, have become the sustaining texts of a spiritist network among parents of victims. We argue that these responses represent two differing trajectories, the politicized and the spiritist. These trajectories present contrasts but have not been mutually exclusive. Considered together, they reveal the particular agonies of the fire and its unresolved trauma.

³ Aproximately 85% of the deceased were between 18 and 24 years old. For a full a description of the fatal victims, see: “Veja o perfil das vítimas da tragédia em boate em Santa Maria,” *Jornal G1 RS* (2013)

We have found that both activist and spiritist parents, as well as survivors of the fire, often suggest that “*nada é por acaso,*” nothing is by chance—but they do so in different ways. The politicized, activist parents and survivors use this phrase to suggest that each painful step on their trajectory has meaning, and that this meaning is often revealed to them only through time and suffering. They use it, as well, to suggest that the support network and relationships they have forged through the struggle for justice has sustained them on this painful journey. The spiritist parents, in contrast, use the phrase as a statement of resignation and acceptance, an acknowledgment that it was time for their children to *desencarnar*, to unlesh themselves, to leave behind the physical world and enter the spiritual plane. We close the article with a consideration of these contrasting readings, contemplating them in light of the growing body of work on avoidable deaths, and the understanding that “there are no accidents.”

This article is the result of historical research on contemporary Brazil, and long term ethnographic research carried out in the city of Santa Maria, and other significant sites since 2013. “A Tragédia da Boate Kiss: Dor, Sofrimento e Evento Crítico em Santa Maria, RS”, The Kiss Nightclub Tragedy: Pain, Suffering and Critical Event in Santa Maria, RS, is a collaborative project, carried out by the two authors of this article and the anthropologist Monalisa Dias de Siqueira (Federal University of Santa Maria -

UFSM) to understand the tragic event and its aftermath. To that end we have used various research techniques, such as, participant observation in different sites and events related to the fire; formal and informal interviews with family members and friends of victims, social activists, religious agents, health professionals, legal personnel; documentary research in newspaper articles, social media posts, and bibliographic research.⁴

Social Autopsy and Swiss Cheese

The use of social autopsy as a method of interpretation of avoidable death is increasingly prominent across a range of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology and history. Our understanding of social autopsy reflects the synthesis presented by Timmermans and Prickett: “The social autopsy takes the death of a set of individuals in similar circumstances as its starting point and then critically and systematically interrogates social and political conditions to explain these deaths...Instead of turning inward to anatomy and psychology, the social autopsy turns outward to social institutions and policies to explain the social patterning of death....” (Timmermans & Prickett, 2021)

⁴ For details of the project and publications based on the ethnography, see Siqueira and Victora, 2017; Siqueira and Victora, 2018; Victora and Siqueira, 2019.

Klinenberg's sociological study of deaths resulting from the 1995 Chicago heat wave was particularly influential in this regard, demonstrating the accumulation of risk factors among vulnerable populations, leading to high rates of mortality (Klinenberg, 2002, second edition 2015). Following this and other examples, Timmermans and Prickett advocate for the use of social autopsy as a social research method to analyze patterns of deaths attributable to complex phenomena, potentially spread out in both time and place, such as deaths resulting from COVID-19, Black deaths at the hands of police, or migrant border deaths. They note that, "The assumption undergirding the social autopsy is that excess mortality is socially patterned and that political and social factors put some individuals and communities at higher risk of premature deaths" (Timmermans and Prickett, 2021).

These understandings apply equally well to deaths from large-scale disasters, such as the Kiss Nightclub Fire. Our understanding is shaped in particular by Bryant Simon's analysis of the 1991 Hamlet Fire in Hamlet, North Carolina. Simon's analysis of the multiple ways in which deeply embedded patterns of racism, coupled with rising emphasis on deregulation and neoliberal efficiency, amplified risks and transferred to them to Black, predominantly female workers at a chicken-processing plant, which

demonstrates the usefulness of the social autopsy as a method for interpreting such disasters (Simon, 2022).

Like Simon (2022) and Klinenberg (2002), we seek to explain how social, political, juridical and economic factors amplified risk in the Kiss Nightclub and imposed that risk on staff and customers, increasing their vulnerability. Our social autopsy aims to show Brazil's political and historical context was implicated in the Nightclub Fire. In doing so, we also draw on the concept of layers of social protection as slices of Swiss cheese, a metaphor widely circulated in the context of initiatives to slow transmission of COVID-19. The understanding is that each element of protection (social distancing, masking, vaccination, testing, etc.) is a slice of Swiss cheese. Each slice has a hole in it, but as more layers are added, the possibility that the holes will align decreases. By the standards of Brazilian law, the Kiss Nightclub should have been operating with numerous layers of protection, including fire-resistant materials, multiple emergency exits, functioning fire extinguishers, capacity limits, etc. The absence of these various layers exacerbated risk. It is important to highlight that a social autopsy is not the same as an official investigation on the causes of the fire. It is a sociological approach to the tragic event. Our social autopsy offers an explanation of

why all these layers of protection were either entirely absent or so riddled with holes as to be meaningless.

If autopsy is concerned primarily with cause of death, social autopsy also considers other implications of avoidable death. Our social autopsy thus considers the legacies of the Kiss Nightclub Fire, among survivors, grieving family members and the broader population of Santa Maria and its surrounding region. In that regard, we emphasize that, as a regional economic and educational pole, Santa Maria has a crucial importance for surrounding towns. Over half the victims of the fire were from outside Santa Maria itself. The trauma of those losses has been felt particularly keenly in small towns in the interior of the surrounding region, many of which lost multiple children to the fire. The legacies of the fire thus reach throughout the state of Rio Grande do Sul and beyond, like tentacles across the map of Brazil.

In addition to the perspective of social autopsy we have also been inspired by the medical anthropological literature about disasters, and tragedies in relation to critical events. The trilogy *Social Suffering, Violence and Subjectivity*, and *Remaking a World* by Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman et al. (Das et al., 2000; 2001; Kleinman et al., 1997) address the complexities of inhabiting a world broken by war, political violence, displacement, and terror. Notwithstanding the differences of context, some of the questions they ask

are similar to the ones we ask here: how do these overwhelming experiences enter everyday life? How do survivors and family members carry on, and carry the meanings of these experiences with them, and within them?

The Context

The Kiss Nightclub Fire happened at a pivotal moment in Brazilian history, when a long period of economic growth, diminishing inequality and consolidation of civil rights gave way to a period of economic decline, political turmoil and rising inequality. The fire was emblematic of and contributed to that transition.

As Brazil emerged from two decades of military dictatorship in the 1980s, it entered a period marked by democratic consolidation, economic growth and declining inequality. Progress in each of these three areas—democratic consolidation, economic growth and declining inequality—was halting, characterized by setbacks, scandals and disappointments. But achievements were nonetheless undeniable, yielding a changed political and economic landscape.

Santa Maria itself reflected this trajectory. The city was long a pole for regional development, with important rail connections linking the cattle ranches and farms of the interior with Porto Alegre, Pelotas and Buenos Aires to the south, and São Paulo to

the north. An army base and subsequent air force base consolidated the city's importance to the federal government, and the middle class, largely conservative core of its population. The establishment of the Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM) in 1960 put Santa Maria at the leading edge of research and academic growth. Student-led opposition to the military regime at the UFSM and smaller colleges and universities in the city also brought political diversity to the city. The military bases and federal university guaranteed a high level of public health services in the city—its hospitals were outstanding. Santa Maria prospered in the agroindustrial boom of the 1990s and early 2000s. Before 2013, it was considered an outlier among medium-size cities of the Brazilian interior—prosperous and modern, with a large middle class and unusually high rates of post-secondary education. Due to the large student presence, it was also considered a party town, with a handful of booming nightclubs. As 2013 began, Kiss was the most popular.

In retrospect, improvements at both the national and local level were fragile. By 2013, Brazil's agroindustrial sector faced steep decline, as international demand for Brazilian products cooled. Diminishing trade receipts disrupted a governing political coalition dependent on growth. Unsuccessful attempts at policy recalibration triggered a wave of massive national protests beginning in June of 2013.

At the local level, the Kiss Nightclub Fire obliterated illusions of shared prosperity six months before the wave of national protests. The fire and the contorted judicial wrangling in its aftermath provided stark evidence that Santa Maria's prosperity was fleeting and unaccompanied by either a strong social safety net or procedures for political and juridical accountability.

System Failure in the Kiss Nightclub Fire

The Kiss Nightclub Fire offers a case study in system failure. In theory and by law, multiple layers of protection should have prevented the outbreak of fire, or at least prevented massive casualties. But, like slices of Swiss cheese, each layer of protection had a hole in it. And due to the apparent negligence of key actors, those holes lined up. The singer of the headlining band at that night's concert, aided by a roadie who ignited the device, held aloft a traffic flare, sending sparks shooting up towards the ceiling, igniting the fire. What were the key factors that turned this act of stupidity into large-scale disaster?

The nightclub owners had lined the ceiling with inexpensive, flammable acoustic foam. Neighbors had been complaining about the noise from the club since its opening two years earlier. In an amateurish attempt to muffle the noise, the club owners opted

for the flammable acoustic foam, rather than a slightly more expensive flame-retardant equivalent. The toxic foam exponentially exacerbated the lethality of the fire. The nightclub owners had also sealed off windows in the bathrooms, in a similar attempt at noise-reduction. This also contributed to avoidable deaths.

The nightclub was operating at close to double its legal capacity, as it did every weekend. This was widely known in the city, including by the Fire Department and other public officials.

The traffic flare used for the pyrotechnical display was clearly labeled as inappropriate for indoor use. The roadie, who had purchased the device, opted for the outdoor flare, rather than a slightly more expensive model designed for indoor use.

There were several complicating factors stemming from the club's focus on controlling and extracting profit from patrons. There was only one door, used for both entrance and exit. There was no emergency exit. A series of iron barriers bolted into the floor, along with narrow corridors, prevented patrons from moving directly to the exit. These features were designed to funnel patrons past the cashier's counter. Like most nightclubs in Brazil at the time, Kiss used a *comanda* system: upon entrance, patrons were given a card, approximately 20x10 cm, with an itemized list of menu items. Patrons presented this card to waiters and bar staff through the evening, who kept a

running tally of consumption on the card. Patrons then presented the card to a cashier upon exit, paying the total bill.

The *comanda* system enabled club operators to centralize payments, funneling patrons past a highly-supervised cashier's counter. This removed waiters and bar staff from financial transactions. This system required tight control over exits. Like many Brazilian nightclubs, Kiss eliminated emergency exits in order to reduce risk of patrons walking out on their bar tabs. The iron barriers and narrow corridors function to control and direct checkout lines, and to keep exiting patrons clearly separate from those entering, enabling security guards to easily spot any violators. All these factors contributed to the mortality of the fire.

In each of these examples, club owners and band members sought to maximize their own profit, while ignoring precautions that might have cut into their margins, however minimally.

City and state officials also failed to uphold minimal standards. From its inception, Kiss Nightclub never operated under fully legal, regular conditions. It was always out of compliance with either city or state regulations, usually with both. City officials were responsible for conferring the commercial operating license. The permitting process required the club to meet basic hygiene, safety and noise-control

standards. Numerous complaints from neighbors had led to unenforced sanctions on the club. At the time of the fire, the club was operating under an expired provisional license.

The Fire Department, a militarized organ of state government, was responsible for certifying the club's fire safety. Fire Department inspectors checked the club before opening, and conceded an initial safety permit, despite numerous irregularities that should have prevented the granting of the permit—most obviously the lack of an emergency exit. Subsequent reforms by the club, including the installation of the flammable acoustic foam and additional barriers to exit, voided the initial permit, but neither state nor city officials acted in response to these violations.

These conditions were widely known. Kiss was the most popular nightclub in a small city, with crowds and taxis regularly filling the street in front of the club multiple nights a week. Local TV news and print journalists granted favorable coverage of the club's opening and redecoration. City officials were keenly aware of ongoing complaints against the club, but both city and state officials opted not to interfere with a highly successful business.

It bears noting, in this regard, that Mayor Cezar Schirmer was, at the time, a member of the Movimento Democrático Brasileiro, a centrist party allied with the

entrepreneurial sector. State Governor Tarso Genro—an alumnus of UFSM and former resident of Santa Maria—was, in contrast, a key figure in the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), or Workers’ Party. Mayor and governor represented rival political coalitions. But neither showed any inclination to regulate a prosperous local business. Reproducing patterns evident at the national level, political leaders from both coalitions opted against enforcement of regulatory standards at the local level, particularly when doing so might have slowed growth.

The SUS as a Counter-example

The execution of the SUS (Sistema Único de Saúde, or Unified Health System) stands in notable contrast to this list of profit-seeking short-cuts and omissions. The response of health officials was heroic, well-organized and highly effective. Within minutes of the first reports of the fire, ambulances were on their way to the nightclub. Medical personnel throughout the city, then throughout the state, mobilized to provide intensive care. Military and civilian healthcare providers cooperated to perform triage on site and to send hundreds of victims to hospitals around the city. They quickly diagnosed the cyanide poisoning resulting from inhalation of fumes from the burning acoustic foam, and provided all available treatment.

Those who died on site or in hospitals in the hours after the fire were taken to the Municipal Sports Center, where volunteer medical staff laid out the victims in rows on the gym floor. Teams of nurses and psychologists ushered parents into the gym one-by-one, accompanying them in the traumatic process of identifying the bodies of their children. Within a matter of hours, all victims were identified.

Inevitably, this process was chaotic for family members of victims, who initially struggled to locate hospitalized and deceased victims over the next twelve hours, in many cases going from one hospital to another in search of loved ones, before finally turning to the Municipal Sports Center, dreading the outcome. Without disregarding the pain of those hours of confusion, both the treatment and the organization of the medical response were exemplary.

Victims requiring more specialized treatment for severe burns were flown to the state capital of Porto Alegre, where some spent months in one of Brazil's finest burn units. Follow-up care for victims after release from hospitals was also very good, including continued treatment for injuries, psychological therapy and prescription drugs. In contrast to the US, for example, this treatment neither required private insurance nor left victims deep in debt. The trauma of the fire will follow these victims

and their families forever. But the medical treatment provided by SUS was critical in preventing further casualties and more severe chronic pain and debilitating injury.

It bears noting that the Fire Department was part of this emergency response. Firefighters arrived quickly, and did what they could to extinguish the fire, carry victims to the street and assist in the emergency medical response. Firefighters were criticized for not cordoning off the club, allowing some patrons who had exited to return to the club in attempts to aid rescue efforts. Some patrons died in these rescue attempts. Given the nature of the site, however, with hundreds of patrons exiting the club and gathering in the street, searching for friends and attempting to use anything they could get their hands on to break a hole in the front wall of the club in order to rescue victims, this criticism seems undeserved. After failing miserably in inspecting the club and enforcing basic fire safety standards, the Fire Department performed admirably in aiding rescue and triage efforts.

The effective performance of the SUS sheds additional light on the regulatory failures of city and state government, as well as the short-sighted, profit-seeking practices of the band members and club owners. The SUS was designed to function effectively, and it did so. City and state regulatory bodies were designed to facilitate growth, and they did so—until those practices proved disastrously counterproductive.

Sadly, much the same can be said of the judicial process governing the criminal and civil cases arising from the fire. These judicial struggles are central to the fire's legacies of trauma.

Networks of Trauma and Reconstruction

“Foi uma tragédia terrível que juntou um amor incrível”; it was a terrible tragedy that brought together a tremendous love.⁵ This is how the mother of one of the victims described the tragedy that brought together families and friends who lost loved ones in the fire. This is not just her individual opinion, but a general perception voiced by different people after the tragedy, recalling the importance of mutual support for surviving the devastating long days and sleepless nights that followed. In the next sections we will describe two pivotal networks of families and friends that, despite having different goals, helped to bring meaning and motivation to the disrupted lives of participants after the tragedy (Viktora & Siqueira, 2015). One network has a more overtly political orientation, and the other a more overtly religious orientation, but our

⁵ This is a quote by Rose, a mother of a fatal victim of the fire in the context of a group interview with six mothers conducted by anthropologists Ceres Victora and Monalisa Dias de Siqueira, in 2016. This interview and other research materials about the tragedy are part of the data bank of the ethnographic project “A Tragédia da Boate Kiss: Dor, Sofrimento e Evento Crítico em Santa Maria, RS”. For more context, and content of the interview see Viktora & Siqueira, 2015.

research suggests that, for participants in both, politics and religion became intertwined.

The Victims Association (AVTSM) and the Vigil Tent

Eight days after the tragedy, precisely on the day of the funeral mass, Aderbal Ferreira, Jennefer's father, urged fellow parents to start a victims' Association. "Em uma associação a gente poderia compartilhar nossa dor"; in an Association, we could share our pain, he told a reporter of a local newspaper a few months after the fire, when asked about the founding of the Association (Carvalho, 2013). He also feared that if family members did not join forces immediately to pressure local government for clarifications surrounding the circumstances of the tragedy and responsibilities for the tragic outcome, the case would soon be forgotten. The motivation "para que nunca mais aconteça" (so that it never happens again) played an important part in organizing and legitimizing the movement. Their children were gone, the families said, but it was not too late to prevent other tragedies from happening, by pushing for stricter fire preventive regulation and legal penalties for those who they claimed were responsible for the tragic outcome. Together, they founded the Associação das Vítimas da Tragédia

de Santa Maria (AVTSM, now known officially as the Associação dos Familiares das Vítimas e Sobreviventes da Tragédia de Santa Maria).

What they could not anticipate in that moment was the extent to which their private lives would become entangled in a web of antagonistic relations, judicial processes, political accusations and personal defamations that caused more suffering on top of their already almost unbearable pain. Parents and friends of victims told us that within a few months of the tragedy, they began to suffer a series of hostile and humiliating situations, as other city residents were already pressing them to move on, in the name of “not stopping the city’s progress” and “going back to normal life.”

A few months after the establishment of the AVTSM, some of the families assembled a plastic tent in the city’s central square, describing it as the *Tenda da Vigília*, or Vigil Tent. The *Vigília*, as they called it in short, is a gathering space of about four meters squared, frequented mainly by families and friends of the deceased, but also by visitors and passersby who stop by to view the photos, posters, banners and messages written for the victims. As we have seen a few times during our ethnography, people who came in were usually ready to share stories about the day of the fire, and/or to tell premonitory dreams they had about the tragedy. Over the years, the *Tenda da Vigília* has functioned as a place of quiet reflection and/or prayer, and also as a space where

families have celebrated special occasions, such as the deceased children's birthdays. In the first year after the fire, the plan was that each family, one at a time, would hold a vigil of twenty-four hours at the tent. At times a place of mourning, at times a place of celebration of life, or a place of mobilization and assistance, the *Tenda da Vigília* was conceived as a safe space for sharing memories and moral support to everyone—"...the psychologist's office," as described by Andrielle's mother, Ligiane in an informal interview carried out by the authors in 2023.

Regardless of the good intentions of its founders, the tent has been the target of criticism from different people in the city. One of the accusations is that the tent interrupts pedestrian flow by occupying "public" space for "private" purposes. Such claims have led to failed attempts by the city's administration office to remove the tent from the central area of the city. Social movements and the local media supported the AVTSM and the families of victims. The multipurpose space has become a symbol of the "resistance" of families and friends, who say they will not rest until "justice" is served.

Within weeks of the fire, three other organizations were formed - the NGOs "Santa Maria do Luto à Luta" (Santa Maria from Mourning to Struggle), "Para Sempre Cinderelas" (Always Cinderellas), and the movement "Mães de Janeiro" (Mothers of January). Although each had different purposes, each emphasized "memory" and

“justice” as guiding values. According to Peixoto et al., (2016) organized families of about thirty fatal victims congregated at the *Tenda da Vigília*. This was the start of a support network and, in the name of their shared experience of bereavement, they collectively built different meanings and strategies that were crucial for them to remain alive after the tragedy.

As mentioned before, many victims’ families were not based in Santa Maria. Their children were university students, interns, or military personnel in Santa Maria, while the parents remained living elsewhere. Some families indicated that the long distance between their homes and Santa Maria prevented them from taking a more active role in the association.⁶

Other families, from Santa Maria or elsewhere, did not engage in the organized political movement for other reasons. The expressions “nada vai trazer meu filho de volta,” nothing will bring back my child, or “não foi culpa de ninguém,” it is nobody’s fault, were arguments used by some to justify their scarce interest in the organized protests, or their voluntary parting with the activist parents. In their view, there was no point in publicly protesting against something that “was meant to be”. “Deixem os mortos descansarem”, let the dead rest, was repeated by some who were against the

⁶ This is not to say that they were never part of the AVTSM, or did not engage in any protests or spent hours in *Tenda da Vigília* in the company of families from Santa Maria. They did that occasionally, especially on anniversaries of the tragedy or when they had a chance to be in town for another reason.

street protests, or “eles não deixam os mortos descansarem”, they don’t let the dead rest, was used as an accusation against the activist families.

Notwithstanding these variations in participation, it is worth noting the role of *Tenda da Vigília* in building networks of trauma and pointing in the direction of renewal and reconstruction. (Peixoto, et. al., 2016) An article suggestively titled “The Announced Farewell” acknowledged that the *Tenda da Vigília* was the home of an important support network, where families and friends revisited and revised memories, and reinterpreted signs construed as death omens, communications through dreams, and psychic messages. Beyond the belief in an unquestionable superior design, frequently expressed in terms of “God’s plan,” and beyond the tensions between, and within, the social organizations in the first months, families formed a strong emotional bond, based on the assumption that the pain of losing a child in such circumstances can only be truly understood by those who have had the same fate.

In the context of that emotional community (Linch, 2016), a number of families and friends slowly came to inhabit another world. In this other world, they say, they have embodied other versions of themselves, a version that focuses on “what really matters” in life (Kleinman, 2006), less “selfish,” less “materialistic,” and more focused on “love,” “family” values and “community” well-being.

Kardecist Spiritist Network

Some parents and family members turned away from social activism, towards more spiritual involvement. We carried out ethnographic research among families who followed the principles of Kardecism, a Spiritist tradition in Brazil. One crucial aspect of this tradition is the idea that death as finitude does not exist, because life is eternal and sits in the spirit. The body is nothing more than a casing that holds the spirit in periods of incarnation. In between periods of incarnation, spirits live in an invisible and nonmaterial world, until it is time to incarnate again. The time and circumstances of a specific bodily presence on earth are impossible to predict or explain by those who live in the material plane, as they are thought to be part of a much larger divine plan that involves the existence of an immortal spirit. In the case of the Kiss Nightclub, the Kardecists see the fire as a moment of the “disembodiment” of 242 spirits who have completed the duration of one specific incarnation. They do not consider the fire to be a “tragedy,” or an evil event, because nothing could be done to avoid the passing of those children from one incarnation to another. As Adriana, one of the Kardecist mothers, told us in an interview in 2016: “how long did it take for ‘spirituality’ to bring them all together ...?” Her words reflect a perception about the improbability of a casual accident

and the complex and lengthy work of the “spiritual world,” required to gather together all 242 victims in the same place and time. In this interpretation, the suggestion that “there are no accidents” means that there was intention, agency and reason that led to the event, not just for those who departed, but also for the more than 600 survivors, the injured, the families, the nightclub owners and all the other subjects who were affected. Even though the Kardecist families feel the pain of losing a child just like any other, they do not approach the tragedy in the same way, insofar as they view passing to the spiritual plane as positive.

In the Kardecist tradition, disembodied spirits may communicate with the earthly plane through specialized mediums, who pass on messages in the form of letters from disincarnated spirits. In Brazil, psychic communication sessions are usually held in Spiritist temples (Centros Espíritas) where a variable number of psychographic letters may be received in a thoroughly ritualized session, attended by dozens, sometimes hundreds of people.

Adriana and six other mothers and their families were part of the group who published a book of psychographic letters they called “Nossa Nova Caminhada: psicografias de sete jovens que desencarnaram na Boate Kiss em janeiro de 2013 em Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul ” (Betega, 2015). Victora and Siqueira accompanied this

group of mothers, fathers, friends and other Kardecist families on a bus trip throughout the state of São Paulo and Minas Gerais to *Centros Espíritas*, to attend psychography sessions. Through this ethnographic work, we have come to understand the power of this network. Some participants were already practicing Kardecists before the Kiss Nightclub Fire, while others started to study and practice the doctrine after the death of their children. All described the group as a new “family.” They consider members to be “friends from another life,” applying the principle of reincarnation to the foundation of their bonding.

We were able to see that the psychographic letters offer these families comprehensive comfort and contribute to the understanding of designs of a deeper plane of existence, in accordance with the Kardecist doctrine. The letters bring kind words and loving expressions that aim to reassure family members that the children are doing well in the other plane, that they feel no pain, study, work, meet up with deceased family members, and make new friends. Several letters mention the names of other people who passed in the fire and who they say are asking them to pass on a message to their parents. Above all, they make a plea for their parents not to be sad—even though they also miss them (*sentem saudades*), they ought to carry on with their lives. One of the first psychographic letters received by the parents of a victim of

the fire urged the parents not to take part in protest movements, emphasizing that no one was to blame for the accident. Similar sentiments were echoed in subsequent psychographic letters, some that have been published in the book, others that have been shared with us over the years, and are part of the ethnographic database. Such messages are powerful and persuasive to Kardecist family members.

As a result, this group of parents ended up not taking part in the protests organized at the *Tenda da Vigília*. That does not mean, however, that their movement does not constitute a kind of activism. We have seen this group grow in the number of adepts over the past decade, gathering hundreds of people whose deceased family members were not related to the Kiss case. The bus tours to visit Kardecist temples in other states occur regularly, taking people mainly from the interior towns of Rio Grande do Sul and neighboring countries, Argentina and Uruguay, in search of psychographic letters. The group has also become very close to one of the Kardecist mediums, who travels to the state of Rio Grande do Sul for special psychography sessions in local Spiritist Temples.

It is noteworthy that in both paths—the Kardecist and the “justice” movements—the pain is only bearable when shared with others who have experienced the same trauma. These groups have many things in common: they frequently speak of

their children who have passed in the present tense; they often say their connection with their children is very strong—“A ligação da gente é muito forte”; have internal conversations with them before making important decisions; and recount details of the personalities, of the tragic day of the fire, and of the vivid dreams they have with them as indelible proof of their righteous choice in whether they join the social movement or not.

At the same time, there are many differences in the way they understand crucial aspects of this process. Among the differences are their understanding of life, time and justice. For the Kardecists, life is eternal and the passing of time works in their favor. Each day, they get closer to their passing and, consequently, closer to reencountering their children in the superior plane. It appears that they have made peace with loss. They post messages, pictures, poems and accounts of dreams on social media, speaking of their broken heart and of the empty space that remains in their lives ten years after. But these same messages also transmit a sense of reconciliation with life.

Parents engaged in the AVTSM and its campaign for justice, on the other hand, believe their children should still be alive. These parents insist that their children had the right to go out with friends, have fun, and return home safely. They were young and had their whole lives ahead of them. The only reason they did not return is because of

the greed and negligence of individuals who should have known better. For these parents, fighting for justice is a way of reaffirming the rights that were denied to their children.

For parents in this category, the permanent state of political mobilization for more than ten years produced visible physical and emotional wear and tear. Time is a finite resource. There are reports of many family members who have passed away or are under treatment for a severe disease. But even though the slow pace of “justice” works against them, and some parents in the social movement have had to scale down their participation in the activities for health reasons, they all say they will not rest until “justice” is done. These parents have created a community, one bound by pain and suffering, but also by hope that some good will could come out from the bad.

Acknowledging the Ten-Year Anniversary

On the 10th anniversary of the tragedy, AVTSM organized a three-day remembrance event in Santa Maria’s central square. It was an opportunity to mark a decade of the fire with testimonials, debates and artistic performances, all of them attended and recorded as part of our ethnographic research.

The association also used the event to promote two new series about the fire's aftermath: *Boate Kiss— a tragédia de Santa Maria* (Kiss Nightclub—The Tragedy of Santa Maria), a documentary written and presented by journalist Marcelo Canelas, streamed by Globoplay, and *Todo o dia a mesma noite*, (Every Day the Same Night), a docudrama series based on a book by journalist Daniela Arbex. The latter series was already an enormous success, listed among the most watched documentaries in several countries. Both critics and families associated with the AVTSM praised the Netflix series. A few families criticized the series, however. According to newspapers, some families hired a lawyer to sue the streaming platform, alleging commercial exploitation of their personal trauma. (Amaral, 2023)

It is no surprise that these series caused discomfort and discontent in some audiences, as the politics of memory play an important role in assigning responsibility in controversial historical events. The details of these film productions are not relevant to this article. But it is important to point out their efforts to record the decade-long saga faced by families fighting for justice, and to acknowledge the conflicting interpretations not only of the fire, but of that saga itself.

At the ten-year anniversary event, on January 27th, 2023, in Santa Maria's central square, Tâmara Biolo Soares, a lawyer for the AVTSM, pointed out that these

documentaries helped to establish a public narrative supporting the moral condemnation of those responsible for the tragedy. In her own words: “Se a justice está de costas, se a justiça é cega, permanece cega dez anos depois, que a cultura os puna, que a opinião pública os puna, que a literatura, o jornalismo mostrem quem são os responsáveis...” (If justice turns its back, if justice is blind—still blind after ten years—let culture punish [those responsible], let public opinion punish them, let literature and journalism show who was responsible). Soares remarks were made for an audience of about one hundred people attending a panel entitled *O caso Kiss: até quando a justiça vai servir para a impunidade?* (The Kiss case: how long will justice serve impunity?) during the tenth anniversary event. The panel focused on the decade-long judicial, political, and institutional imbroglio of the fire up to the trial by jury in December 2021, and its shocking annulment by three supreme court judges for alleged technicalities, in August 2022.

Besides Soares, the panel also featured Pedro Barcellos Jr. and Paulo Carvalho, both prominent figures in the AVTSM in different capacities. Barcellos is a criminal lawyer who assists the accusation team working for the families and the AVTSM,⁷ and Carvalho, the juridical director of the association. Barcellos Jr’s short address focused

⁷ See an account of his experience in an interview with him in this issue.

on what should be expected from the legal process and his views on the controversies surrounding the judgment of the annulment by the Supreme Court.

In his presentation to the public, Carvalho summarized two compelling arguments: first, that the “tragedy” actually started three years and eight months before the fire, when the nightclub was allowed to open in irregular conditions on July 31st, 2009; and second, that naming the fire a “tragedy” misleads the fact that it was, in fact, a “crime”.

Carvalho, father of the victim Rafael, started by tracing occurrences over the years, pinpointing critical moments on a timeline. One of the moments he recalled was the public prosecutor’s office’s legal process against parents who voiced their disagreement with its proceedings. This was undoubtedly one of the darkest episodes of the judicial process involving activist families. This case was at the core of the Netflix docudrama series mentioned above.

At the ten-year anniversary event, Carvalho addressed the audience directly:

Boa tarde a todos. É muita emoção. É muita emoção. Foram 10 anos e nós ainda estamos buscando justiça. Por quê? Porque têm canalhas, porque têm sem-vergonhas, porque tem irresponsáveis, pessoas que não têm respeito à vida. E mesmo não tendo respeito à vida, poderiam, pelo menos, ter agido de acordo com as normas, com as leis. Mas não. A ganância, a ganância e a omissão... Ela é o que provoca tragédias. Já foi

falado aqui em tragédia. Mas não é tragédia.[...] uma tragédia você poderia evitar. Deveria evitar. Mas ninguém fez isso. Então é um crime. Isso é um crime. Aconteceu não por fatalidade, todo mundo sabe. Poderia ser uma única vítima. Podia ser o filho do Paulo. O filho de qualquer mãe, qualquer pai. Essa [já] poderia ser uma perda absoluta, porque alguém deixou de fazer o que devia ser feito. Essa tragédia [vai] além da omissão. Ela é maior porque houve muitas falhas humanas e criminosas e, conseqüentemente, perdeu-se muitas vidas. [...]"

Good afternoon everyone. There is so much emotion. So much emotion. It has been 10 years and we are still seeking justice. Why? Because there are scoundrels, because there are people who have no shame, because there are irresponsible people, people who have no respect for life. And even though they have no respect for life, they could, at least, have acted in accordance with the regulations, with the laws. But no. Greed, greed and omission... That is what causes tragedies. People have spoken of a tragedy. But it's not a tragedy. [...] A tragedy you can prevent. [You] should prevent. But nobody did. So, it is a crime. This is a crime. It wasn't a chance occurrence, everyone knows. It could [have been] a single victim. It could [have been] Paulo's son. Any mother's [son], any father's son. This [in itself] could be an absolute loss, because someone failed to do what had to be done. This tragedy is more than an omission. It is more because there were many human and criminal failures and, consequently, many lives were lost. [...]"

On many occasions we have heard families and friends speak of a lack of respect.

Ligiane Righi da Silva, Andrielle's mother, gave us examples of how the lack of respect for the families' pain pervades everyday life, on the streets, in the *Tenda da Vigília*, and

on social media interactions. In a recent Facebook post, she writes: “Carregar a dor de perder um filho fica mais dolorosa quando lidamos com a frieza das pessoas. Quando nos dizem que devemos ‘esquecer,’ como se isso fosse possível; quando julgam... Cada um sabe da sua dor! Só peço Respeito!”; “Carrying the pain of losing a child becomes more painful when we have to deal with people's coldness. When we are told that we must ‘forget,’ as if that were possible; when they judge... Each one knows his or her own pain! All I ask is Respect!” Repeated attempts to take down the *Tenda da Vigília*, and the judicial action against the parents by the public prosecutor’s office, have also deepened the sense of being disrespected on the part of families of victims.

It is worth noting that the word “respect” has multiple meanings and implications. Paulo Carvalho, for example, in the above-cited statement, speaks of another kind of respect: “respect for life”. “Irresponsible people who have no respect for life”, he says, were those who did not act according to the regulations. For the family members of victims, a fundamental disrespect for the lives of clients and staff of the nightclub before the fire has now been compounded by contextual disrespect for the humanity of family members in the wake of that tragedy, thus compounding their suffering.

Nada é por acaso: Contrasting Interpretations of Fate and Inevitability

Nine years after the fire, four defendants were tried, found guilty of *crime doloso* (willful crime) and sentenced to eighteen to twenty-two years in prison.⁸ The activist families, survivors, friends and supporters expected the trial to be the end of the most painful stage of the tragedy. The sentencing of the four defendants meant the end of a chapter of their uphill struggle to show that, if no one was punished, other tragedies could happen in the future, as they had happened in the past, in Rhode Island, in the State of Romania, in Buenos Aires, and others. The end of that chapter would bring them a sense of accomplishment.

After the trial, as the families expressed a shared sense of relief, they were informed by their lawyers that the defendants had the right to appeal to change their sentences. They were made aware of the fact that the defendants' lawyers would try to decrease their number of years in prison. But they could not imagine the complete annulment of the trial.

Six months later, however, the State Court accepted an appeal from the defendants, nullifying the sentence based on technicalities, such as timeliness of legal

⁸ For more about the judicial system in Brazil and its implications on the trial, see Rabello's paper and Barcellos interview included in this special issue.

filings in the long judicial process. When that annulment was announced, it opened wounds that had just begun to heal.

The current president of AVTSM, Gabriel Rovadoschi Barros, a survivor of the fire, spoke to the newspapers about how the families felt after this unfortunate turn of the events:

Eu quero declarar que nós nos sentimos extremamente desumanizados pelo resultado. A nossa humanidade foi profundamente ferida pela decisão e aqui eu não falo pela decisão pelo mérito do julgamento, pelos critérios que foram tomados. Eu falo de um sentimento nosso de desumanização, porque enquanto os condenados gozam de vida nesses anos que se passaram, todos nós tivemos que lidar com a vida sem um fechamento de sentido pra isso.”

I want to state that we feel extremely dehumanized by the result. Our humanity was deeply wounded by the decision and here I am not speaking about the merit of the judgment, or the criteria adopted. I speak of our feeling of dehumanization, because while the convicted enjoy life [in freedom] all these years, we have all had to deal with life without a closure for [the tragedy].

The annulment added another layer to the pain experienced by survivors and family members. They had hoped for closure through the judicial process, and for a chance to carry on with their lives. Instead, the annulment made them feel that they were still trapped in the ongoing trauma. They appealed the annulment, but their

appeal was denied in September of 2023. A new trial has been scheduled for March, 2024.

For the survivors and family members active in the AVTSM, the fire was no accident. Any mention of either divine fate or of casual accident is disrespectful, given the evidence of criminal negligence they see in the choices made by different social actors. Had those people chosen differently, there would have been no tragedy. Therefore, in their view, the fire was no accident. It was a crime, and crimes demand punishment. That is why they fight for justice.

The spiritists, on the other hand, make sense of the fire through the lens of the Kardecist doctrine. For these family members, if there was any wrongdoing, if anyone should be blamed for the event, this will be resolved in the natural flow of life and time. They draw a distinction between justice carried out by men—*a justiça dos Homens*—and justice carried out by God—*a justiça de Deus*. In their understanding, only the latter is truly important. As a result, they do not feel moved to spend time and energy fighting for the former.

Both the spiritist and the activist family members invoke the statement that *nada é por acaso*, nothing happens by chance. But their interpretations of the meanings of that statement are in stark contrast with one another. For the spiritists, nothing happens by

chance, because events follow divine plans and flows, beyond human, temporal understanding. If it happened, it was because it had to happen. For the activists, nothing happens by chance, because humans, through willful negligence, create the conditions that make disaster inevitable. If you pack too many people into a nightclub with woefully inadequate fire safety protocols and flammable, toxic acoustic foam lining the ceiling, and then set off fireworks, tragedy will ensue. This is not an accident, but a predictable consequence of discernible choices.

These activist family members often face accusations that they are “not letting the dead rest”. As they await a new trial, this accusation seems ever more illogical. For parents—both the activists in the social movement and the Kardecists—their children are resting in peace. Both the activist and spiritist parents see this in their dreams, and experience this in their internal conversations with their departed children, made possible by the “strong connection” they continue to feel. It is the family members who, denied closure, are not allowed to rest.

Final considerations

In the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave explored by Klinenberg (2002), and the 1991 Hamlet Fire explored by Bryant Simon (2020), the majority of victims were

working-class African-Americans. The social autopsies performed by these authors illuminated the social, economic and political structures that made these victims particularly vulnerable. Similarly, prominent anthropological studies of “social suffering” have revealed the social and political forces implicated in “critical events” and the structural violence towards vulnerable minorities (Scheper-Hughes, 1993; Das, 1995; Kleinman et al., 1997).

In the Kiss Nightclub Fire, in contrast, the majority of the victims were white and middle-class. Not all of them, to be sure: the staff members who died in the fire were mostly working-class people of color, as were some of the local students. Many of the students from outlying, interior towns were of relatively humble social status. But most of the victims hailed from families that had benefited from Santa Maria’s steady economic growth. Before the fire, they would have been considered relatively privileged by local and national standards. Unlike comparable cases explored by prior authors, this was a fire that did not discriminate by class: it came for the relatively wealthy, the strivers and the low-wage workers alike.

What are the implications of this striking lack of class inequity in the fire’s mortality, precisely in a country notorious for its inequality? Our interpretation is that this illuminates the fragility of Santa Maria’s prosperity, and by extension that of Brazil

in the 1990s through the early 2010s. Even these children of the middle class were left unprotected. Even these families were denied justice in the wake of the tragedy. For those lacking these advantages, how much worse were the vulnerabilities?

Sadly, the Kiss Nightclub Fire was only the first of several large-scale disasters to rock Brazil in the 2010s. It was followed by the Mariana dam collapse of 2015, the Museu Nacional Fire of 2018 and the Brumadinho dam collapse of 2019. The Mariana and Brumadinho disasters were more like the cases explored by Klinenberg and Simon, inflicting the greatest mortality and collateral damage on working class and poor Brazilians of color. The Museu Nacional fire had no human victims, but its social and cultural damages were incalculable. These large-scale disasters overshadowed dozens more, each an individual tragedy with its own local causes, all unfolding in ways that revealed the fragility of Brazil's regulatory protections. (As in the Kiss Nightclub Fire, the SUS was a counter-example in several of these cases, holding fast and providing medical aid while other protections disintegrated).

The Kiss Nightclub Fire, then, was atypical in the profile of the majority of its victims, but a harbinger of subsequent disasters. It helps to illuminate what Kleinman has described as the "violences of everyday life" (Kleinman, 2000). In an inspiring paper about the multiple kinds of violence, Kleinman urges scholars to explore the "hidden or

secret violences,” those that, metaphorically speaking, burrow new holes in the slices of the swiss cheese, and can only be perceived when those holes align.

We also hope to add to the literature on social autopsy by analyzing the aftermath of the fire, as well as its causes and mortality. By drawing attention not only to the causes of death, but also to the burden of living after the tragic event, we aspire to offer a symbolic reconstitution of the social body that was torn apart by the tragedy. A social autopsy concerned with the aftermath, we suggest, opens new questions to be addressed in future articles.

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