

Trauma is Just the Beginning

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Recent Brazil has been rocked by one disaster after another, from the dam collapses of Mariana (2015) and Brumadinho (2019), with their attendant human and environmental catastrophes, to the fires in the Museu da Língua Portuguesa (2015), Museu Nacional (2018), Cinemateca Brasileira (2022), with their horrific loss of patrimony, through a wave of murders of political figures—most notoriously that of Marielle Franco (2018)—and a succession of fatal plane crashes. Fires, floods, assassinations and explosions. Amidst this catalog of misery, mere political scandals of the type that used to transfix the population are reduced to epiphenomena. In comparison with a mega-disaster like Brumadinho, the irregular sale of gifts bestowed by Saudi officials on Jair Bolsonaro while he still held the office of President cannot help but appear trivial in scale.

It is not surprising, in this context, that the language of trauma and recovery have become central to everyday life, to culture, to politics. This has generated a tendency that literary scholar Karl Erik Schøllhammer has identified as “traumaphilia,”

a fascination with catastrophe and pain, and—in major media outlets—a fixation on “the scene of the crime.” In Schøllhammer’s view, this routinization of scenes of horror leads to a banalization of suffering (Schøllhammer, 2022).

And yet, to look away would be naïve and irresponsible. How then, to reckon with this series of calamities without falling prey to fatalism or sensationalism? One approach, perhaps, is to understand trauma neither as the end of the story nor an inescapable condition, but as the beginning. There are many paths through the dark forest of trauma, and in exploring and illuminating those paths, we may get occasional glimpses of what lies beyond.

In differing ways, all the articles in this issue undertake that task. The dossier on the Kiss Nightclub Fire includes five scholarly articles and two interviews, each exploring differing dimensions of the fire and its aftermath. Taken as a whole, the dossier is an attempt to reckon with the toll of the fire and its legacies. How have survivors and families of victims navigated their own trauma and sought to overcome it, or at least endure it? How have advocates, health-care professionals, and engaged citizens sought to make sense of the fire, both to diminish the likelihood of recurrence and to honor suffering through understanding, empathy and mobilization? And what do these trajectories reveal about Brazil’s current challenges more broadly?

Ceres Vitoria and Bryan McCann open the dossier with a social autopsy of the Kiss Nightclub Fire. The goal is to offer 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. Drawing on the insights of Veena Das into social suffering (Das et. al., 2000, 2001), the authors 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. This moves beyond "traumaphilia" to a more open-ended inquiry into the meanings and legacies of social suffering in the context of broader political and juridical struggles.

Diego Zenobi, Ana Paula Arosi and Camila Gonçalves delve deeper into the theoretical and social constructions of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder through a comparison of care for victims and survivors of the Cromañón Nightclub Fire in Buenos Aires in 2004 and the Kiss Nightclub Fire nearly a decade later. The authors argue that mental health responses to these tragedies were interpreted through different perspectives, with expressions and initiatives of empathy contrasting the "pathologizing" of individuals battling long-term effects. Their article demonstrates that, even in cases with profound similarities, local contexts and contrasting models of care yield different understandings and trajectories. Their approach emphasizes the

importance of careful attention to these characteristics in interpretations of collective trauma.

João Gabriel Rabello Sodré's article draws from six extensive lawsuits filed by survivors and their relatives against the State of Rio Grande do Sul and the City of Santa Maria in order to explore the civil and juridical implications of the Kiss Nightclub Fire. The author argues that the cooperative form of federalism enshrined in the 1988 Constitution enabled municipal officials to shift responsibility to the state, and vice versa, leaving profound gaps in civil protection, redress and recovery. The author also argues that low indemnification awarded to plaintiffs in these civil cases derives from a narrow interpretation of Brazil's civil legislation, and demonstrates the existence of countervailing interpretations. Rabello Sodré thus brings the attention to local contexts as advocated by Zenobi, Arosi and Gonçalves in the arena of civil law.

Maggie Dunlap's article examines the category of "mother" in the context of the Kiss Nightclub Fire and its aftermath. Dunlap draws on theories of social suffering, ethnographies of violence, and poststructuralist notions of identity and gender to analyze the medium-transcribed letters, newspaper articles, journalistic nonfiction, and social media posts created in the aftermath of the tragedy. The author's careful attention to gender also illuminates the implications of then-president Dilma Rousseff's emblematic visit to Santa Maria on the day of the tragedy.

Dani Marín and Juliane Serres take an understanding of the local context to examine the street level, mapping the tragedy and its aftermath. Their work enables the reader to grapple with the spatialization of trauma and coping strategies, through fine-grained analysis of key sites and manifestations.

After the dossier on the Kiss Nightclub Fire, the issue includes two other articles representing what might be considered two very different approaches to trauma. Janaína Junkes's article provides detailed assessment of environmental sustainability initiatives along the BR-163 highway in Amazonia. Junkes's article speaks to the national and global trauma of Amazonian deforestation. As with prior articles, however, this is not one of "traumaphilia," but of scholarly assessment of damages and prophylactic measures. Junkes offers a gimlet eye on initiatives to contain and retard deforestation. In a model of the importance of dispassionate scholarly investigation, the author offers clear and candid analysis without fatalism.

Carolín Ferreira offers a compelling critical interpretation of one of the most celebrated Brazilian films of recent years, *Bacurau* by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles. Ferreira interrogates the film's plot of slaughter and revenge, analyzing these aspects to assess the film's implications for ongoing debates on racism

in Brazil. Ferreira asks whether the film moves beyond cathartic experience to deeper analysis of racial inequality.

Taken collectively, these articles offer not only a rich reflection on the tragedy of the Kiss Nightclub Fire, but new ways of thinking about trauma, its legacies, and paths to recovery and rehabilitation at multiple levels.

Bibliography

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