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Sanjurjo, Liliana

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Our Dead Can Speak:

Social Displacements, Affects, and Political Action in Comparative Perspective

Liliana Sanjurjo

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências Sociais,
Rio de Janeiro/RJ, Brasil

Abstract

Grounded in ethnographic research with activist organisations—families of the victims of state violence in Argentina and Brazil—this article seeks to critically reflect on the relationships between gender, kinship, and the politics and social practice of memory, together with devices for the management of life and social order in specific ethnographic situations. Using a comparative approach, the article argues that relationships established between these groups enable the construction of shared strategies of political action and the production of shared meanings in the face of overlapping confrontations with inequalities and violence. The central problematic questions how these activists’ displacements (often transnational) disseminate practices, skills, experiences, and repertoires of political mobilisation that compose a field of action directed towards the construction of memories, the rendering visible of victims, and the denunciation of previous regimes of selectively perpetrated violence.

Keywords: Memory, Politics, Kinship, Violence.

Nossos Mortos Tem Voz:

Deslocamentos Sociais, Afetos e Ação

Política em Perspectiva Comparativa

Resumo

Com base em pesquisas etnográficas sobre o campo de ativismo de coletivos de familiares de vítimas da violência de Estado na Argentina e no Brasil, este trabalho busca refletir criticamente sobre as relações entre gênero, parentesco, política e práticas sociais de memória, bem como sobre os dispositivos de gestão da vida e da ordem social em contextos etnográficos particulares. A partir do enfoque comparativo, o artigo pretende argumentar como as relações estabelecidas entre esses coletivos permitem a construção de estratégias compartilhadas de ação política, bem como a produção de sentidos comuns frente as desigualdades e violências sofridas. O intuito é problematizar em que medida os deslocamentos (muitas vezes transnacionais) destes ativistas, colocam em circulação práticas, saberes, experiências e repertórios de ação política, conformando um campo de ação que se dirige a construir memórias, visibilizar as vítimas e denunciar a seletividade da violência perpetrada.

Palavras-chave: Memória, Política, Parentesco, Violência.

Our Dead Can Speak:

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Faced with the increase of policies that criminalise poverty and effect population displacements through summary execution, forced disappearance, imprisonment and the expulsion of people (Sassen 2014),¹ the emergence of collectives of relatives of the victims of violence has been observed in several national spaces. These collectives articulate their demands in the language of kinship and human rights, adopting the feminine, the maternal bond, family ties and the affects that derive from them, as imperative for public/political action and the denunciation of what is understood as *state violence*.²

Grounded in ethnographic research on activist movements involving relatives of victims of institutional violence in Argentina and Brazil, in this paper I seek to critically examine the relationships between gender, kinship, politics and social practices of memory, together with devices for the management of life and social order in specific ethnographic situations. My starting point is an ethnography on the movement of relatives of the disappeared of the Argentine military dictatorship (1976-1983), a movement shaped by people who define themselves as “*directly affected by state terrorism*”³, in order to reflect on a more recent case study conducted in Brazil. In the latter, I accompanied groups organised during the period of democracy whose members are relatives of the victims of police violence in the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, respectively, the *Movimento Mães de Maio* [Mothers of May Movement] and the *Rede de Comunidades e Movimentos Contra Violência* [Network of Communities and Movements Against Violence].⁴

Using a comparative approach, I argue how the relationships established between these collectives allow for the construction of shared strategies of political action, and the production of shared meanings in the face of the inequalities and violences suffered. The central problematic questions how these activists’ displacements (often transnational) disseminate practices, skills, experiences, and repertoires of political mobilisation that compose a field of action directed towards the construction of memories, the rendering visible of victims, and the denunciation of previous regimes of selectively perpetrated violence.

1 Saskia Sassen (2014) has indicated the existence of a key problem in the contemporary global political economy: the increase in the number of people, enterprises and places forced out from the heart of the current social and economic order. The author draws attention to this process, highlighting the growth of what she calls new “brutal forms of expulsion”, which are expressed in the increase of populations displaced by wars, armed conflicts, agricultural enterprises, mining, environmental disasters and mass incarceration policies. For a critical understanding of the concept of social displacements, see also Feldman-Bianco (2015).

2 See the following examples: *Madres del Dolor* (Argentina); *Agrupación de Mujeres Organizadas por los Ejecutados, Secuestrados y Desaparecidos de Nuevo León - AMORES* (Mexico); *Mujeres de Calama* (Chile); *Damas de Blanco* (Cuba); *Mães de Acari, Mães do Pinheiro, Mães da Cinelândia, Mães de Manguinhos, Associação dos Parentes das Vítimas e dos Sobreviventes da Chacina de Vigário Geral* (Brazil); *Madres de la Candelaria* (Colombia); *Saturday Mothers* (Turkey).

3 *Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas, Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and H.I.J.O.S. (Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio)*.

4 In the Argentinian case, ethnographic research was conducted intensively in the City of Buenos Aires between 2009 and 2011, and included: participation in activities engaged in by groups of relatives of the disappeared (meetings, acts, public events); analysis of material and testimonies produced by/about these human rights organisations; conducting interviews with activists; and follow-up of judicial hearings in the Federal Court of Buenos Aires in reference to crimes committed during the dictatorship. In the Brazilian case, ethnographic research has been conducted intermittently since 2014, with more intensive research in 2015, by monitoring certain activities engaged in by the collectives of relatives of victims in the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (events, public events), conversations with activists and analysis of documentary material produced by/about these collectives made available in different media (videos, films, testimonies, reports, manifestos, etc.). I am immensely grateful to all of the interlocutors of this research, particularly the relatives, to whom I owe much and to whom I dedicate this work. I would also like to thank the reviewers of this text for their critical readings, which have allowed for substantive improvement of the analysis. Finally, I would like to thank Bela Feldman-Bianco for her ever-relevant critical dialogues and Adriana Vianna for her suggestion to look at the “transits” and “circulations” of Brazilian activist mothers, a suggestion that led me to reflections in this text.

Before proceeding with the proposed analysis, some clarification is required. Herein, the comparative framework does not directly compare distinct “contexts” (Argentina and Brazil / *Madres* and *Mães*, which presupposes an understanding of societies and social collectives as well defined entities, or as systems or structures, wherein a comparative framework is created through the concept of context, as argued by Strathern (2013). On the contrary, following Cardoso de Oliveira (2006), I explore the potentialities of a device known as “explanatory comparison” in the treatment of ethnographic data as an exercise of the “understanding of meaning”, favouring the “lived experience” of the distinct respective semantic horizons, in order to mutually elucidate them.

As a corollary, my intention to contradistinguish research data from Argentina and Brazil seeks to understand the social processes that lead to the production of shared political practices. And although the groups of relatives analysed here are located in different national spaces (Argentina and Brazil) and refer to distinct organisational traditions, temporalities and political situations (dictatorial past and democratic present), it seems fundamental to render how these activists perceive themselves as they share very similar experiences (state violence), from the same place (the field of activism by relatives of victims) and within a common political struggle for “*Memory, Truth and Justice*”. The contrast, therefore, derives from the comparative framework undertaken by the family members themselves, who situate their actions in a field of transnational activism, constructing relationships between the past and the present, between the centre and the margins, and establish dialogues and partnerships that are not limited by localities or national boundaries.

Memory, Truth and Justice

“First, we looked for the disappeared. First, we looked for them, because we couldn’t imagine that so many thousands had died, that they had killed them [...] Later, when we realised that we couldn’t find them, then we began to claim them as militants, revolutionaries, socialists.”⁵

“In June 2012, the body of the “*guerreiro*”⁶ Edson Rogério was exhumed at the Areia Branca cemetery in Santos (SP). Even though he was a road sweeper and had worked that day with a sick note, he was nevertheless assassinated during the Crimes of May, 2006, in Santos, by extermination groups directly or indirectly linked to the Military Police of the State of São Paulo. His mother, the “*guerreira*” Débora Maria da Silva, is one of the founders of our *Mães de Maio* movement. The exhumation was a partial victory for Débora, our movement and all those who fight against the Genocide in the *Periferias*⁷ of Brazil [...]. The request for exhumation could (and still can) be an important step in the struggle for the Right to Memory, Truth and Justice in the case of Edson and for all the victims of the Crimes of May 2006. “*Mães de Maio*” believe that this “victory” could encourage the federalisation of the Crimes of May, such that the Public Prosecutor’s Office and the Federal Police could investigate the assassinations committed by the police. In addition to the important creation of the National Commission of Truth and Justice for the Crimes of the Democratic State against Poor, Black, Youth of *Periferias* (1988 to present). June 13th, 2013, *Mães de Maio* Movement of Brazilian Democracy.”⁸

5 The testimony of Nadia de Ricny, member of *Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. The interview was recorded by the author on July 12th, 2007 in Buenos Aires. Nadia’s son and daughter-in-law disappeared on July 21st, 1977.

6 “*Guerreiro*”, which translates into English as warrior, is the term used by activists to describe both the mothers and their murdered children, in reference to the quality of these family members as activists, the value of their political struggle, and when remembering the struggle for the lives their children led before being executed by the police. I opted to use the term in Portuguese in this text, since this is the designation given by the movements of relatives discussed here.

7 “*Periferia*” is the term used to refer to the urban territories where the most impoverished populations of Brazilian cities reside, particularly in São Paulo. The term “*favela*”, which has been translated as slum, ghetto or shantytown, has similar meanings to “*periferia*” and refers to this same type of urban territoriality in Rio de Janeiro. Again, I opted to use the term “*periferia*” in Portuguese in much the same way “*favela*” is used in the current literature, and because these terms appear in the activists’ narratives.

8 Text from *Mães de Maio* Movement, on June 13th, 2013 (only in Portuguese). Available at: <<http://maesdemaio.blogspot.com.br/>>. Accessed on: Sept. 10th, 2013.

The first witness is the testimony of Nadia de Ricny, a member of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, a collective composed of mothers of the political disappeared during the last Argentine civil-military dictatorship (1976-1983). What is evident in the *madres'* narratives is the centrality attributed to the political trajectory of their children. They mobilise categories – *militant*, *revolutionary*, *socialist* – to locate them on one side of the field of political debate, and resignify the ideals defended by them, including social justice. These *madres* assert their children's political struggles as their own, enjoining as a necessity, the continuity of the ideals for which the disappeared have fought (and died) for. Through this manoeuvre, they transform affects, kinship and the imperative of memory into an explicitly political action.

Since April 1977, when they began to protest weekly in the *Plaza de Mayo*, the centre of Argentine political life, *Madres* and other relatives have sought to make public a problem that the military authorities insisted on hiding: the existence of thousands of political disappeared throughout the country. After decades of ceaseless activism, their demands for “*Memory, Truth and Justice*” regarding the disappearances and violations committed during the dictatorship, have widened and gained social legitimacy. They demand criminal conviction of those responsible for *crimes against humanity*, clarification of the *truth* concerning the fate of the victims, *restitution* of the identity of illegally *appropriated* children of the disappeared⁹, vindication of the political ideals defended by the fallen, and the construction of a collective memory on the dictatorship. Far from there being a consensus concerning these demands, they constitute a permanent field of political debate in Argentina, particularly regarding the meanings attributed to the dictatorial past and the disappeared, as well as to the institutional policies that ought to be implemented to redress the legacy of violations.

The second witness refers to a text published online by the *Mães de Maio Movement* in Brazil, a collective composed of mothers of young residents of the *periferias* of the City of São Paulo and in the Baixada Santista, who were victims of police violence in the episode known as the *Crimes of May*. The so-called *Crimes of May* refer to homicides and cases of forced disappearance between May 12th and May 20th 2006, committed by the military police of the State of São Paulo. Under the justification that the City of São Paulo was under attack by the criminal organisation *Primeiro Comando da Capital* [First Capital Command] (PCC), the military police executed around 600 of these young inhabitants of the *periferias*.¹⁰ Similar to the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina, though in response to a distinct historical and social context (period of democracy and the *periferias* of Brazilian cities), the members of the *Mães de Maio Movement* of São Paulo transformed affects and family ties with the victims of repression into an imperative for political action and public denunciation of what they designate as *state violence*.

As part of their strategy of political struggle for the recognition of rights (and here the emphasis is on the *right to life*), the *Mães de Maio*, and other groups of relatives of victims of police violence in contemporary Brazil, put into action public performances and mobilise narratives, categories and notions that form part of the repertoire of militancy of family members and victims of military dictatorships in Argentina and Brazil. They demand criminal accountability for state agents accused of human rights violations, clamour for “*Memory, Truth, Justice, Freedom and Reparation*”, and affirm the existence of a *genocide*, specifically “of *poor and black periferia youth*”. They propose the establishment of a “*National Commission on Truth and Justice*

9 *Appropriation* [*apropiación*] is the native category used to refer to a group of approximately 500 children, sons and daughters, of the politically disappeared, who were kidnapped and illegally adopted during the military dictatorship, while *restitution* [*restitución*] is the name given to the process of identifying and uncovering the *Truth* of their biological origins. In other works, I have explored the controversies surrounding the *restitution* process regarding the identity of these missing children, examining how blood becomes a critical tool for affirming memories and truths with regard to the dictatorial past in Argentina. See: Sanjurjo (2013; 2014).

10 It should be noted that estimates of the number of victims of the Crimes of May continue to generate controversy and disagreement regarding the dead that should be counted and the reliability of the available sources and statistics.

for Crimes of the Democratic State against Poor, Black, Periferia Youth” (1988 to present)”¹¹. Thereby, the *Mães de Maio* Movement seeks to challenge the State and society by invoking the same language that confers social and political capital to the families of victims of civil-military dictatorships.

However, while the movement of relatives of disappeared highlights the political identity of the victims to explain state violence in Argentina – during the dictatorship the definition of the “enemy” was distinctly political¹² – in Brazil, the *Mães de Maio* and other collectives of relatives of victims of police violence in the democratic period seek to politicise these killings, emphasising the racial (black), age (young), class (poor) and territorial (*favelas/periferias*) criteria of the repression perpetrated¹³. Despite the differences, in both cases, it is the field of struggle for “Memory, Truth and Justice” that these activists, based on the family ties they have with the victims of institutional violence, seek social recognition, affirm narratives, memories and identities, and open legal pathways for criminal accountability of agents of the State accused of violations.

The meanings and values of the dead and violence

The endeavour undertaken in the reconstruction of the memory and trajectory of the fallen, as well as the *symbolic cleansing* of the victims (“my kid was not a terrorist” or “my kid was not a thug”), seems to be one of the guiding axes of the actions and experiences of family members of victims of state violence in Argentina and Brazil.¹⁴ Through the work of mobilisation, these relatives seek to impart specific meanings to the events of violence suffered, signifying them either as episodes of exceptional violence or as part of the routine and daily violence committed by the State against specific groups of the national population. Moreover, concomitant with the relatives’ struggle for “justice”, moralities are placed in contention, imparting valuations to the victims and perpetrators, such that the moral judgment of the parties in conflict is central to the construction of memories and truths, to the vindication of the person of the victim, as well as for redefining the meanings of death itself.

As I have discussed elsewhere, both during the military dictatorship and under the current democratic regime, the governments make use of evaluative statements to justify, particularly morally, state security policies and repressive acts perpetrated against those categorised as their “internal enemies”, updating devices for the management of life and social order in contexts strongly marked by violent death. Therefore, management, to a greater or lesser extent, includes assassination as a possibility and culminates in processes of categorisation, hierarchisation, and the construction of social boundaries.¹⁵ Thus, different levels of intelligibility are constructed publicly and conjunctively, allowing for the justification of lethal measures by the State, both legal and illegal, against those considered enemies that must be fought.

11 In February of 2015 the ‘*Mães de Maio*’ Truth in Democracy Commission was established at the Legislative Assembly of the State of São Paulo (ALESP). A similar articulation was promoted by the Commission on Human Rights and Citizenship of Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ALERJ) in early 2015, and the ‘*Mães de Acari*’ Subcommittee on Truth in Democracy was subsequently established, with the objective of investigating serious human rights violations in the state of Rio de Janeiro between 1988 and 2018.

12 As Feierstein (2007) indicates, unlike the Guatemalan case, where racism against the indigenous population articulated the ethnic-political figure of the “communist Indian”, in the case of Argentina’s dictatorship, the figure of the “subversive delinquent” was devoid of any ethnic reference or racial identity.

13 For in-depth analyses on the activism of mothers of victims of police violence in Rio de Janeiro, see: Araújo (2007; 2014), Birman (2004), Catela & Novaes (2004), Farias (2007; 2008; 2014), Leite (2003; 2004), Soares, Moura & Afonso (2009), Vianna & Farias (2011), and Vianna (2013).

14 Machado da Silva (2008) highlights how the social stigma surrounding residents of *favelas* forces them to make a prior effort to acquire social recognition, a process he denominates “symbolic cleansing”. The need to demonstrate being “a good person or from a good group” is a necessary condition to be able to access the public debate on life in Rio de Janeiro. See also Machado da Silva & Leite (2007).

15 Aspects of the reflections presented here were initially outlined in another text, in dialogue with Gabriel Feltran. I am immensely grateful for the critical analyses we developed together. See: Sanjurjo & Feltran (2015). See also Feltran (2011; 2014) for an analysis of the relationship between violence and politics, as well as between forms of government and death management in the *periferias* of São Paulo.

Such measures have been couched in terms of “*combat and war against subversion, and national security*”, in the case of military dictatorship, or in terms of “*fighting crime, the war on drugs, and public security*”, under the current democratic regime¹⁶.

One of the main consequences of this type of discursive production, derived from a moral distinction of the population as a whole in terms of the war of good versus evil, is the suspension of the validity of the life of subjects and groups whose political status (and often their legal status) is suspended. According to Butler (2004, 2009), it is pertinent to inquire into the circumstances and perspectives that mean certain lives are publically mourned and grieved, while others are not, since these are understood to be lives animating bodies that must fall in a “just war” (they are *terrorists, delinquents, subversives, traffickers, members of organised crime*); bodies displaced from humanity, considered by power as unimportant, superfluous, lives that should be corrected or that did not deserve to be lived.

In the case of the Argentine military dictatorship, the government morally justified repression by presenting itself as a combatant of a “war” waged “*in the name of God*”, for “*national defence*”, for the “*true values of the nation*” and “*Western, Christian*” culture against the “*subversive enemy*” and “*Marxist atheism*”. Atrocities were thus justified as *sequelae, excesses, inaccuracies or misunderstandings* (facts presumably inevitable to wars) committed within the context of a legitimate action.¹⁷ “*Subversion*” became an all-encompassing category used to define the borders of belonging to the nation. The figure of the “*subversive delinquent*” then emerged as a dissonant identity of the social order. Through this manoeuvre, the dictatorship criminalised political opposition, producing a new category of person, the disappeared-detainees, who, imprisoned clandestinely and thus displaced from social life, were condemned to a silent death, having lost their political and legal status. They were corpses with no name or history, bodies stripped of identity and deprived of the right to be mourned (Calveiro 2008; Catela 1998, 2001; Crenzel 2008). When they were excluded from the death inscription systems, the dictatorship gambled on the impossibility of reclaiming the memory of the disappeared, given the absence of the body (Schindel 2002).

Through a series of political, symbolic and judicial disputes that the collectives of relatives of the disappeared were engaged in for over 30 years, they acquired social legitimacy, publicly consolidating a set of representations concerning the dictatorial past. While family members sought to depoliticise the issue of the disappeared during the 1980s (affirming that the victims were not terrorists, but rather “*decent young people, students, workers and parents*”), they are currently working to demonstrate precisely what the victims were doing *politically* that transformed them into the targets of repression. In other words, if the histories of militancy of the disappeared were silenced during the period of democratic transition, this silence must be read in light of a context of strong adherence to discourses that justified lethal violence. In order to avoid integrating the negative alterity of the dictatorship (*subversion*), the denunciation of repression shed its ideological profile, giving rise to the construction of a humanitarian narrative that turned the disappeared into “*victims of grave human rights violations*”.¹⁸ It was only in the second half of the 1990s that the memory of the disappeared began to be defined in political terms, when they were now claimed and recognised as political actors (*popular militants, socialists, revolutionaries*), assassinated because of the political projects they embodied.

¹⁶ In line with Machado da Silva (2008) and Misse (2006), it should be emphasised that the expressions *national security* and *public security* (and we could add, *urban violence*) are not taken here as analytical categories, rather as representations, insofar as they form categories of understandings that confer meaning to the experience of urban life, and consolidate representations for understanding the practices and relationships to which they refer. This distinction seeks to preserve the link between *public security* as a theme of the public agenda (a social problem under debate), on the one hand, and collective representation on the other, as also problematised by Wacquant (2011).

¹⁷ For analyses on military narratives during dictatorial repression in Argentina, see Filc (1997), Salvi (2008; 2010) and Sanjurjo (2016).

¹⁸ For an analysis dealing with disputes on the meanings of the category disappeared, see Vecchioli (2001). For a discussion on the *depoliticisation* of reports on the Argentine dictatorship during the period of democratic transition, see Crenzel (2008), Feld (2002) and Jelin (2008).

The current argument seeks to prove that the State executed a systematic plan of torture and extermination against a specific group of the Argentine population, according to previously defined political criteria. Such an understanding, summarised under the terms *state terrorism* or *politically motivated genocide*, is constitutive of the process of elaborating meanings for the disappearance and the violence suffered as a *political crime*. The process of constructing these meanings, including the endeavour to define and legally categorise the notion of *forced disappearance* as a *crime against humanity*, is part of a historical struggle waged by the movement of relatives of the disappeared in favour of the administration of “justice” and the elaboration of a narrative concerning this *critical event* (Das 1995; 2007).¹⁹

Understood, therefore, as an episode of exceptional violence, relatives seek to mark and sustain the distinction between homicide and forced disappearance. Hence, they argue for a specific penal typification—a *crime against humanity* that is imprescriptible—and stressing its particular social implications, which stem from a radical form of suppression, in which the central characterisation is attempting to physically and symbolically erase the “other”.

In contemporary Brazil, what is evident, whether analysing homicide statistics or through the denunciations of human rights organisations and collective bodies formed by relatives of victims of police actions, is that the use of institutional violence has also become a fundamental instrument of the current form of government described as democracy. It operates through direct action that criminalizes certain segments of the population, followed by displacement, expulsion, imprisonment or extermination of this population as part of administrative procedures. Homicide data and family denunciations precisely expose the selectivity of this state violence, characterised by the blatant racial (black), age (young), class (poor) and territorial (*favelas/periferias*) definition of the population predominantly victimised.²⁰

The lethal violence directed towards this population is justified and morally legitimised as unavoidable evil of *public security* policy, aimed at fighting the *crime* that disseminates in *favelas* and *periferias*. Complaints of homicides (as a direct result of police intervention, usually recorded as “resistance reports” or “death due to resistance” in Brazil) have no judicial follow-up and are publicly received with indifference or silence. Moreover, as Mallart (2014) and Godoi (2011) highlight, not only those “suspected” of being criminals, but also the process through the criminal justice system and the prison system functions as a privileged selection criterion, marking a line between those who may live and those who should die. Massacres, like the “Crimes of May” in 2006, highlight how “criminal records” and “indications of prior arrests” serve as a yardstick for lethal action and, sometimes, of forced disappearance.

As a reaction to this process, and increasingly articulated at the national and transnational level, different groups of relatives of victims of police violence progressively organise to denounce repression and seek legitimacy for their demands for “*Memory, Truth and Justice*”. The intention is to extend their capacity for public legitimisation, consolidating meanings with regard to the dead, the deaths and the violence suffered in order to ensure rights in their daily lives. The endeavour to construct the memory of the victims – expressed in the motto “*Nossos Mortos Tem Voz*” [*Our Dead Can Speak*] of the *Mães de Maio* – emerges

19 I begin from the understanding that the *forced disappearance of people* can be read here based on the notion of a *critical event* (Das 1995; 2007). In addition to redefining the history of the affected families and instituting new modes of historical action, this event lead to the resignification of numerous categories (identity, truth, nature, purity, honour) and of the meanings attributed to martyrdom and a heroic life, while intersected by several institutions: family, transnational humanitarian agencies, State, Justice, and Science. A similar understanding was argued by Araújo (2014) in his ethnography among relatives of victims of violence in Rio de Janeiro.

20 It should be emphasised that a similar process occurs in contemporary Argentina, where the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of the populations of large cities are also the target of repressive actions by the State, in which the police/institutional violence perpetrated is also characterised by the selectivity of victims in terms of race (mestizo/indigenous), age (young), class (poor) and territory (*villas*). Clearly, a comparative analysis between the experiences of activism of relatives of victims of contemporary police violence in these two countries could yield pertinent reflections. However, this counterpoint does not fall within the ethnographic scope of this work. I recommend the excellent ethnography by Pita (2010), which examines police-involved deaths on the outskirts of Buenos Aires and, above all, on the specific ways in which family members of the victims *politicise* these deaths and organise to denounce them and demand *Justice*.

as a crucial issue of family militancy as a means to counteract the silence, impunity and indifference concerning these deaths. Faced with the increasing criminalisation of the inhabitants of *favelas* and *periferias* and the strong adherence to political and moral discourses that justify lethal violence (they were *thugs, traffickers, suspects*), family members first forged themselves as political militants, seeking to distance themselves from negative alterity constructed by the discursive regime of “*fighting crime*”. Thus, they seek to morally value the victims, by vindicating the person, affirming that their dead were “*honest people, workers, students, family men, were not involved in selling drugs*”, as analysed by Machado da Silva and Leite (2007).

More recent observations also clarify how mothers who are activists in the *Mães de Maio Movement* and the *Network of Communities and Movements Against Violence* have begun to politicise these deaths while promoting public acts, raising the notion of the *universality* of rights through speeches in which they postulate “*even if my son sold drugs, he was a citizen, he should not have been summarily executed by the police*”. Therefore, in their fight for *Justice* – apart from a stand against impunity and for the criminal conviction of state authorities and police officers involved in crimes – these women express a demand for equal access to the rights of citizenship, such as the right to freedom of movement through city spaces, to due process of law and, above all, the right to life. Through the construction of a broad network of political articulation –jurists, public defenders, researchers, social movements, national and international human rights organisations, and collectives of relatives of victims of institutional violence in Brazil and other countries in Latin America – these mothers have sought to shape public representations concerning the violences endured and, as proposed by Das and Walton (2015), are providing form and substance for the current form of government designated as “*democracy*” in contemporary Brazil.

Social displacements, affects and political action

“When one of our kids is assassinated, we give up the right to mourn; we have to get involved in the struggle. Because the police, part of society and the mainstream media always portray our kids as suspects, trying to legitimise these assassinations. We have to get involved in the struggle to show the true face of what is going on. Because it really is genocide. They are assassinations that have addresses, in the *favelas* and *periferias*. It’s very difficult because it’s not enough for the police to simply take the lives of our kids, they have criminalise them too. I carry Johnnatha’s photo close to my heart, but I’m aware that his image doesn’t only represent him; it represents many young people who are assassinated every day. I speak for many mothers and the many children who were assassinated. [...] the deaths of our kids, in the *favelas* don’t matter, there is no visibility here. So, we feel the need to go out there and cry out and give visibility to what is happening here, to show what is going on. It is important for us that the truth be shown.”²¹

With these words, Ana Paula Oliveira, a member of the *Network of Communities and Movements Against Violence* and the collective *Mães de Manguinhos*, spoke during a press conference organised in Rio de Janeiro on June 20th, 2016, together with members of the movement *Mães de Maio* and the *Fórum de Juventudes do Rio de Janeiro* [Youth Forum of Rio de Janeiro], during the reception for activists of the North American movement *Black Lives Matter*²². Moving from mourning to the struggle to combat the violence and criminalisation that affects populations living in territories of poverty, to construct the memory of the dead and to affirm that the lives of their children and the *favelas* matter, as well as to show the truth of what transpires in the daily life

²¹ Ana Paula Oliveira on June 20th, 2016. Ana Paula is the mother of 19-year-old Johnnatha de Oliveira Lima, executed by military police belonging to the *Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora* [Pacifying Police Unit] (UPP) on May 14th, 2014 in the *Manguinhos favela*, Rio de Janeiro.

²² *Black Lives Matter* is a North American political movement formed in 2012, responsible for conducting public awareness campaigns on the violence (particularly institutional) that affects the African American population, as well as on the racial inequality present in the criminal justice system in the USA.

of these communities, presents itself as an imperative for this mother, who became an activist after the assassination of her son Johnatha. Ana Paula also stresses the importance of making accusations at the international level, so that the violence suffered can gain some social visibility.

The articulation between these groups of relatives in Brazil has continually increased. The activist mothers of the *Network of Communities and Movements Against Violence* of Rio de Janeiro and the *Mães de Maio* collective of São Paulo have already integrated their work, participating in public acts, events and demonstrations in both cities, organising in memory of their dead and the episodes of violence they have experienced. In May 2016, for example, the mothers of Rio de Janeiro travelled to São Paulo specifically to participate in a series of activities organised by the *Mães de Maio* movement on the 10th anniversary of the *Crimes of May*. Similarly, *Mães de Maio* activists make periodic trips to Rio de Janeiro to participate in activities of the *Network of Communities and Movements Against Violence*. In May of 2015, they were present in an act in the Manguinhos favela in memory of the death of Ana Paula Oliveira's son.

Throughout 2015, the mothers of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro promoted numerous activities in Rio de Janeiro, including: public debates; the “*Vigília das Mães*” [Mothers’ Vigil], an event held every July since 1994, in front of the Candelária Church, by family members and by the *Movimento Candelária Nunca Mais* [Candelária Never Again Movement] in memory of the “Candelária Massacre”²³; public hearings; the event “25 Years of Acari 1990-2015”, at the headquarters of the Order of Attorneys of Brazil [OAB], to honour the victims of the “Acari Massacre” and the *Mães de Acari*, pioneers of this type of mobilisation in Brazil²⁴; participation in the launching of the report “*Você Matou Meu Filho: Homicídios cometidos pela Polícia Militar na cidade do Rio de Janeiro*” [You Killed My Son: Homicides committed by the Military Police in the City of Rio de Janeiro], which is part of the “*Jovem Negro Vivo*” [Young Black Alive] campaign promoted by *Amnesty International* to disseminate information on homicides resulting from police intervention committed between 2010 and 2014 in Rio de Janeiro. Numerous other activities that these collectives do together could also be mentioned, including those carried out with relatives in other regions of Brazil, such as the “*Reaja ou Será Mort@*” [React or Be Killed] movement in Salvador, Bahia²⁵.

What should be highlighted here is the importance of this network of articulation in the growth of the legitimacy and public visibility of its demands. More recently, these mothers have been expanding their field of action at the transnational level, carrying out denunciation campaigns in other countries. Through the “Young Black Alive” campaign promoted by *Amnesty International*, for example, the *Mães de Maio* travelled to New York in early 2016, where they made contact with the American movement *Black Lives Matter*. Later the same year, as mentioned above, they received activists from this movement in Brazil, as well as groups of relatives from other parts of the Americas, like the reception for *Caravana 43 Ayotzinapa*, in June 2015, made up of relatives of some of the 43 students who disappeared in 2014 in Iguala, Mexico.²⁶ The mothers of the cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and relatives of the Mexican students met in the Maré favela (Rio de Janeiro) to denounce forced disappearances and state violence in different regions of Latin America, and debate mobilisation strategies.

23 The episode, known as the *Chacina da Candelária*, culminated in the execution of eight youths in the street by military police. The massacre took place near the Candelária Church, in the centre of Rio de Janeiro, on July 23rd, 1993.

24 The *Chacina de Acari* occurred on July 26th, 1990, when eleven young people, residents of the Acari favela and surrounding areas, in the northern part of the City of Rio de Janeiro, were abducted by military police and taken to small farm in Magé, RJ. The bodies of the victims were never found. In their search for their children and for justice, the mothers of the disappeared youths became known as the *Mães de Acari*.

25 The *Reaja ou Será Mort@* campaign began in 2005, integrating movements and black communities of the State of Bahia. Currently, the campaign articulates nationally with organisations that fight against police brutality, for anti-prison activism, and for reparation policies for the families of victims of the State, death squads, militias and extermination groups.

26 The 43 students of the *Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa* (a higher education institute for poor, rural students) have been missing since September 2014, following police repression at a demonstration in the Iguala, State of Guerrero, Mexico. Local authorities and members of the security forces are said to be primarily responsible for cases of forced disappearance.

Thus, the displacements of these activists (often transnational) put into circulation practices, knowledge, experiences and repertoires of political action. Largely mirrored in the struggle of the Argentine *Madres* and *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* – which the *Mães de Maio* came to know through the group *Tortura Nunca Mais* [Torture Never Again] of São Paulo,²⁷ serving as inspiration for the designation of the movement –, the Brazilian collectives of relatives also emerged on the public scene asserting their demands for “*Memory, Truth and Justice*” in the language of *kinship* and *human rights*, anchored in the relations of consanguinity and affect that its members retain with the victims of violence. Thus, they seek to query the State and denounce the violations committed during a fully democratic government to the national and international community.

Their actions are based on the recognition that they share a primary bond (kinship) with people assassinated and disappeared at the hands of members of security forces, mobilising (affectively and strategically) representations of gender, the feminine place, the maternal bond and of family ties in social life. And if it can be said that the figure of the mother is associated with the idea of affect, the natural, the domestic, and with the care and generation of life, the image that these activists emphasise is that of the “*mother*” who leaves her “*natural*” domestic space to occupy public spaces, where their denunciations can gain meaning and social repercussion.

Making use of rhetorics and performances similar to those used (and consecrated) by the organisations of relatives of the disappeared in the Argentine and Brazilian dictatorships²⁸, these activist mothers also invoke the figure of the “*victim*” (Sarti 2011), kinship ties, body metaphors, and the narratives of pain, suffering and mourning.²⁹ They present themselves as carriers of a “*silenced truth*”, forging a narrative and a reactive memory to impugn the discourses that justify lethal violence, emphasising their own moral qualities, those of their dead and of the youth of the *periferias*. On the one hand, the mothers claim their dignity and their political place as “*mães guerreiras*” [warrior mothers] who, despite their pain and suffering, fight and tirelessly engage so that “*justice is done*”, so that the homicide cases of their children are subject to judicial follow-up. On the other hand, they stand against criminalisation, in vindication of the dignity of their dead and the youth of the *periferias*, so that the value of these lives is socially recognised and their rights of citizenship are respected.

In much the same way as kinship, pain emerges as a structuring axis, strengthening the bonds between these mothers. When disseminated as value, pain helps to legitimise and ground their moral authority (Pita 2005), revealing the meanings and values that underlie the actions of family members, who express their demands for “*Memory, Truth and Justice*” in terms of moral, familial and political obligations. As Das and Randeria (2015) point out, when violence and poverty are intertwined, lives depend on new ethics and aesthetics through the re-elaboration of categories like kinship and community.

Furthermore, in a process denominated *strategic essentialisation* (Brah 2001), these mothers have been serving, and exploiting, the political potential of the notion of *Human Rights*,³⁰ giving rise to the construction of a humanitarian narrative, which convenes the interlocutor to raise awareness, “*as a human*

27 The *Tortura Nunca Mais* [Torture Never Again] movement began in 1976, with the aim of denouncing dictatorial repression (forced disappearances, torture, executions). Integrated in part by relatives of the dead and disappeared of the Brazilian military dictatorship, currently the *Tortura Nunca Mais Group* is an entity dedicated to the defence of human rights, which emphasises the fight against all forms of violence practiced by the three branches of government and agents of the State.

28 For an ethnography that deals with the mobilisations of relatives of the dead and politically disappeared during the dictatorship in Brazil, see Azevedo (2016).

29 For works exploring the links between pain, emotion and political action among relatives of victims of violence in Rio de Janeiro, see Araújo (2014), Freire (2010), Leite (2003), Vianna (2013) and Vianna & Farias (2011). For different ethnographies on the Argentine case, see examples by Salvi (2010), Pita (2010) and Zenobi (2014). See also Lacerda (2015) for an ethnography that explores the links between suffering, kinship and politics in Amazon Region (Brazil).

30 For analyses that examine the anthropological debate between cultural relativism and the formulation of a universal notion of human rights, see Messer (1993) and Rapport & Overing (2000).

being”, of the violences endured.³¹ Converting the motto “*Nossos Mortos Tem Voz*” [*Our Dead Can Speak*] into a crucial question of their militancy, mothers react to violence with their voices and their bodies. They wear pictures (photographs of the dead) and evoke memories to restore *Truth*, relationships, life projects and rights, to shape a material and immaterial culture directed towards transmitting memories and *vivifying* the dead and disappeared. Thus, they make bodies, affects and objects available to represent the victims and to denounce *state* violence.³²

Apart from the construction of shared strategies and repertoires of political action, it is also important to highlight the extent to which the displacements of these activist mothers and the articulations established between these groups of relatives lead to the production of common meanings in the face of the inequalities and violences suffered. Débora Maria da Silva, the main spokeswoman for the *Mães de Maio* movement, told me that Brazilian mothers only began to use the term *state terrorism* after meeting with the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. Moreover, the notion of *genocide* was only then widely mobilised to signify and politicise the violence experienced contemporaneously on the Brazilian *periferia*. However, in Brazil, this notion gained new meanings through the voices of these relatives, when they repeatedly denounced in their public acts and discourses that “*genocide in Brazil has a colour (black), an age (young), a class (the poor), a gender (male), and an address (favelas/periferias)*”.

Nowadays, the action of these movements is directed at denouncing that the “*dictatorship never ended for the poor*”, that during a fully democratic regime, populations living in *favelas* and on the *periferias* of cities experience both exceptional violence through massacres – such as the *Crimes of May*, which have victimised more people than repression during the actual dictatorship, when only officially recognised victims of the dictatorship are counted³³ – and daily violence, which takes place in the routine actions of security forces in the territories of poverty. Furthermore, these collectives, along with numerous other political actors, draw attention to the impacts of militarisation and the effects of the penal state on the lives of the populations from the *favelas* and *periferias*. Therefore, “*Freedom*” is added to the demands for “*Memory, Truth and Justice*”, in reference to the increase in the prison population and the policies of massive incarceration. Thus, they seek to demonstrate that the idea of “*genocide of poor, black, periferia youth*” is not an abstract idea, but encounters materiality through diverse methodologies, such as drug policy, incarceration, forced disappearance and summary executions.

31 In his endeavour to explore the boundaries between morality and politics, Fassin (2008; 2013) identifies a contemporary phenomenon that is part of a historical reconfiguration of moral values and sentiments in politics: “humanitarian reason”. This process is inscribed in a broader scenario, which he proposed designating the “compassionate moment”, in which the development of notions like “suffering” and “exclusion” gain prominence in reference to social and political inequalities. Fassin faces the challenge of seeking to understand how, at present, the “social question” became a predominantly “moral question”.

32 As Veena Das (1995; 2000; 2007) points out, a close relationship exists between pain, body and memory: pain can represent a form of inscription of memory in the body to the extent it marks the individual, transforming into an obstacle to forgetting. In this sense, pain is not only a testimony to the moral life of the subject, but also (through the mediation of the body) becomes a vehicle for remembering and a sign of belonging to a moral community.

33 During the Brazilian military dictatorship, violence was applied massively to populations considered threatening, and selectively against politically dissonant voices. Forensic archaeologists and researchers are dedicated to identifying the remains of the political disappeared in the mass graves of Perus Cemetery, in São Paulo. When analysing the number of skeletons deposited there against the archives of the São Paulo Coroner’s Office (IML/SP) (autopsy reports, death certificates, and photo books of victims), they uncovered evidence of the existence of a mass of “unknown deaths”, victims of the security forces during the military dictatorship, which have never been remembered, counted or considered worthy of public mourning.

Final considerations

Through the construction of networks of solidarity and political action with collectives from other parts of the Americas (e.g. *Black Lives Matter*, and the relatives of the disappeared students of *Ayotzinapa*), the collectives of mothers of victims of police violence in Brazil forge transnational communities predicated on identities of race, class (*poor black people*) and operating from a common position of marginality/subalternity (expressed by the term *periferia/periférico*). This leads us to problematise, in line with Gupta and Ferguson (1992), how difference and inequality should not only be mapped in their physical territorial location, but also realigned by considering multiple grids in order to understand how connection and contiguity can vary considerably by factors such as class, gender, race, and sexuality.

It is therefore pertinent to question to what extent the differences between the *centre* and the *margins* (*periferias*) tend to be redefined contemporaneously, according to parameters that are not strictly geographical (Calveiro 2012). Insofar as the centres of wealth in countries considered *central* and *marginal* (*periféricos*) are connected transnationally, the foci of marginalisation in so-called core economies also grow, while the margins (*periferias*) of distinct parts of the world establish their own global connections.³⁴ Throughout the activities of “*Julho Negro*” [Black July], organised for the visit of *Black Lives Matter* activists in Brazil, it became clear how Brazilian activist mothers began to vindicate that “*struggle and solidarity is international, without borders*”, while emphasising the importance of dialogue to learn to face problems that are common among such activists. As Brittiní Gray, a *Black Lives Matter* activist, stated in Rio de Janeiro, “*The racism might look different, but our ancestors are one. We come from resistance; it is in us to fight back. Our life depends on our solidarity. We will not be exterminated*”.

Thus, these collectives of mothers seek to construct the processes of criminalisation and violence experienced as a global social problem, as numerous researchers seek to do, though from another place of speech. While analysing state violence, its new modalities of penalisation and punishment, and the political economy of the bodies produced by neoliberal democracies, Calveiro (2012) emphasises how, in actuality, the specific forms that assume the use of the institutional force show conformity with forms of organisation of political power, social representations and current values that make them morally acceptable. The *war on terror* and the *war on crime* (the two great battles that are currently articulated and constituted) enable a warlike scenario, facilitating forms of state violence, through judicial and penitentiary reorganisation, which is directed at ethnic, political, cultural, and peripheral “others”. The definition of the “enemy combatant” and the expansion of the regimes of confronting crime thus serve to justify the occupation of territories and the elimination of lives, as well as allowing for a kind of overlap between the Rule of Law and the State of Exception. This gives way to a judicial duplicity, one that delimits the boundaries “of the right to have rights”, and even denies certain people the possibility of accessing the statute of “victims” (Piscitelli 2016).

On the other hand, with their permanent activism and invoking a particular place of speech – that of mother, of victim, of one who suffers “in the flesh” –, supported by testimony, by voice and by body as *locus* of political manifestation, these collectives of Brazilian mothers and relatives seek to construct not only memories for their dead, but also to analyse politics and, critically, the state violence they experience, just as they claim there is

“[...] a system that was made to destroy us, the layer of impoverished in society. Being poor is not a crime, but we are criminalised, and so are our kids. And I’m not here to cry out for my dead. I am here to cry out for all the dead of the past and present. [...] Because being a mother does not depend on the Law or on a Day, being a mother is legitimate. We want

34 In this case, it is also worth noting that the term “*periferia*” appears here as a category impregnated with valuation. Whether it is mobilised to denounce the criminalisation of certain segments of the population, or to vindicate the rights of citizenship, dignity and highlight the resistance of those who identify themselves as “*periféricos*” (Feltran & Cunha 2013), that is, *from the margins*, and *from the city outskirts/slums*.

the memory of our kids. We give birth, we give life. And no one will make us forget the piece they took from us. A mother does not have to prove that her son was not a drug dealer, that he was not a thief. It doesn't matter. What matters is that they were human lives and in Brazil, there is no death penalty. [...] We cannot accept that a country that is supposed to be democratic and follow the rule of law has a militarised police. [...] We denounce that there is a mass grave in Perus, there is a memorial to the period of the dictatorship, but it is much worse in this democracy, where the mass graves continue, where massacres continue, where the poor are exterminated and thrown into unmarked graves. And we cannot accept this culture; even though it may have been 500 years ago. The dictatorship has not ended, because the periferia is militarised. For us, the periferia is the slave quarters, for us, the prisons are the slave ships, and the whip has become the bullets that kill our children in this democracy.”³⁵

Grounding themselves in a demand for the recognition of their words and their dead, these mothers transform affects into a political instrument for condemning violence. Thus, they engage in actions that bring them closer to a fundamental political issue present in Judith Butler's (2009) critical and propositional thinking: the need to wage a struggle against the forces that seek to differentially regulate public affect and mourning. If the absence of public mourning and indignation at the deaths of their relatives are moral reactions controlled by regimes of power and forms of regulating affect (directed towards supporting the war effort and limiting the capacity to feel and mourn the loss of these lives), because the capacity for affective responses are mediated and achieve certain frames of recognition and interpretation, what these mothers seek to do is precisely to question these interpretive frames and offer affective conditions for social criticism.

Consequently, these “*mães guerreiras*” [warrior mothers] seek to denounce discursive regimes that appeal to the *common good* to wage war or to kill in the name of *democracy* and *public security*, and condemn the existence of differential forms of considering populations and of reacting affectively and morally to certain forms of violence (horror, indignation *versus* moral superiority, triumphalism, indifference). Mobilising affects (anger, suffering, indignation, a mother's love/pain, hope), they cry out for the recognition of the lives of their dead children, who should also be worthy of defence, courage, mourning and memory. And if, as Butler (2009) affirms, war sustains its practices by acting on the senses, anesthetising affects, and restricting what we can feel so that we can apprehend the world selectively, the mothers also recognise that social indifference to the violent deaths of their children is due to this differential regulation of affects. Hence, if “*The tacit interpretive scheme that divides worthy from unworthy lives works fundamentally through the senses, differentiating the cries we can hear from those we cannot, the sights we can see from those we cannot [...]*” (Butler 2009: 51), what *Mães de Maio* and other mothers of victims of police violence seek to do is ensure that the deaths of their children are seen, heard and felt by others. In the motto “*Nossos Mortos Tem Voz*” [*Our Dead Can Speak*] this intention is condensed, expressing a form of resistance against violence, inequality of rights and indifference.

Thus, we perceive how these mothers imprint meanings on the violence suffered and forge themselves as political actors through a daily process of articulation with agents and people who help them deal with knowledges, information and resources. By connecting locally and transnationally, these women engage in struggles, as well as learning languages and means of dealing with state institutions, laws and bureaucracies in order to ensure rights in their daily lives (Das and Randeria 2015). In their political actions – resorting to justice, the available laws and networks of national and transnational solidarity – activist mothers are providing form and substance for the current form of government designated as “democracy” in contemporary Brazil (Das and Walton 2015). The Brazilian State is constituted as a different modality

³⁵ A speech by Débora Maria da Silva, member of the *Mães de Maio* movement, made on June 11th 2015, during the event “*Indignos de Vida: extermínio e resistência*” [Unworthy of Life: extermination and resistance], which brought together activists from the *Mães de Maio*, mothers of the *Network of Communities and Movements against Violence* and representatives of the *Tortura Nunca Mais* Group.

for the inhabitants of the *favelas* and *periferias* throughout the country: a “*genocidal State*”, as denounced by the *Mães de Maio*. Thus, we see how the practices of government and the governmental devices of territorialisation, assigned to control spatial mobility and the hierarchisation of certain social segments, are lived and thematised by these collectives of relatives of victims who reside on the “margins of the State” (Das and Poole 2004), whose lives are subject to daily police intervention on the grounds of “pacifying” or “controlling” territories that are under the dominion of “criminal violence”.

* Text based on doctoral research, conducted within the Post-graduate Program in Social Anthropology at Campinas State University (PPGAS/UNICAMP), with funding from the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), with a post-doctoral research, conducted within the PPGAS of the Federal University of São Carlos (PPGAS/UFSCar) and currently within the Post-graduate Program in Social Sciences of Rio de Janeiro State University (PPCIS/UERJ), with funding from the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). See Sanjurjo (2013).

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Liliana Sanjurjo

PhD in Social Anthropology from PPGAS/UNICAMP, post-doctoral student at PPCIS/UERJ and associate researcher at the Centre for International Migration Studies (CEMI) of the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences (IFCH) at UNICAMP.

E-mail: lilisanj@yahoo.com.br