



Anuário Antropológico
ISSN: 2357-738X
anuario_antro@unb.br
Universidade de Brasília
Brasil

Ferreira, Letícia Carvalho de Mesquita
The thread and the stitches of the academic literature
on the disappearance of people in contemporary Brazil
Anuário Antropológico, vol. 49, núm. 2, e-12417, 2024, Mayo-Agosto
Universidade de Brasília
Brasília, Brasil

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/126ri>

Disponible en: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=599877504013>

- Cómo citar el artículo
- Número completo
- Más información del artículo
- Página de la revista en redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Sistema de Información Científica Redalyc
Red de revistas científicas de Acceso Abierto diamante
Infraestructura abierta no comercial propiedad de la academia

The thread and the stitches of the academic literature on the disappearance of people in contemporary Brazil

*O fio e as costuras da literatura acadêmica sobre o desaparecimento de pessoas no Brasil contemporâneo*¹

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.12417>

Letícia Carvalho de Mesquita Ferreira

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Departamento de Antropologia Cultural. Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro- RJ, Brasil.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8466-5904>

The recent publication of academic works on the disappearance of people in contemporary Brazil has shown that researchers from different disciplines have become increasingly interested in exploring the phenomenon, in contrast with the scarcity of academic studies on the subject in the 2000s. This bibliographical essay is a reflection on the analytic movements made by more recent articles, dissertations and books on the disappearance of people in post-dictatorship Brazil. Initially, the few academic works on the subject focused on describing and trying to define the phenomenal specificity of disappearance. More recently, though, dissertations and books have moved away from treating disappearance as a particular empirical phenomenon in favour of using the term as an analytic category. These works explore the term 'disappearance' as a tool capable of threading together, for analytic purposes, phenomena as diverse as slavery, the non-identification of bodies, mass incarceration and emigration, among others. The essay comments on this recent movement and questions its possible effects.

Missing persons; Academic literature; Brazil; Analytic category.

A publicação recente de obras acadêmicas sobre desaparecimento de pessoas no Brasil contemporâneo demonstra que pesquisadores de diferentes disciplinas têm se engajado de modo crescente com o fenômeno, em contraste com a escassez de literatura especializada sobre o tema que marcou a primeira década dos anos 2000. Esse ensaio bibliográfico é uma reflexão sobre os movimentos analíticos que artigos, teses e livros sobre desaparecimento de pessoas no Brasil pós-ditadura vêm realizando. Inicialmente, os poucos trabalhos sobre o tema tratavam de descrever e tentar definir o desaparecimento em sua especificidade fenomênica. Mais recentemente, porém, teses e livros vêm se desprendendo do desaparecimento como fenômeno empírico particular em prol da assunção do termo "desaparecimento" como categoria analítica. Essas obras exploram o termo como ferramenta capaz de reunir, para fins analíticos, fenômenos tão diversos quanto a escravidão, a não-identificação de corpos, o encarceramento em massa e a emigração, entre outros. O ensaio comenta esse movimento mais recente e o interpela quanto a seus possíveis efeitos.

Desaparecimento de pessoas; Literatura acadêmica; Brasil; Categoria analítica.



ARTIGOS

Neide fixes her deep brown eyes on mine; linear, and piercing. I'm suddenly unnerved. "You're here now, but if you were to disappear here, now, *ah meu filho* [my child] ..." she laughs, ill at ease, but full of assertion. Her gaze shifts, the focus dissipates. One day, in 2008, Neide's son, Felipe, walked out the door of their home. He said he was going to return a motorcycle with a friend of his. He was never heard from again. (Denyer Willis 2022, 1)

This scene, accompanied by a photograph of Neide wearing a T-shirt printed with a picture of Felipe and the word DESAPARECIDO, opens *Keep the Bones Alive: Missing People and the Search for Life in Brazil*, the second monograph by the political ethnographer Graham Denyer Willis set in Brazil². Released in 2022, *Keep the Bones Alive* is an ethnography of the disappearance of people in the country that shares its theme and its national setting with two other works published almost simultaneously: *Disappearances and Police Killings in Contemporary Brazil: The Politics of Life and Death* (Villenave 2022) and *Governar os Mortos: Necropolíticas, Desaparecimento e Subjetividade* (Franco 2021), both based on doctoral theses by their respective authors.

The publication in close proximity of three works all exploring the theme of missing persons in contemporary Brazil is a noteworthy event. Fifteen years ago, when I began my ethnographic research, the virtual absence of academic studies on the topic was one of the few recordable facts about disappearances of people in the country, along with the dearth of statistical data, legal provisions or public policies to confront the problem. 'Enforced disappearances of persons' under dictatorships, popularly known as 'political disappearances,' have long been the subject of systematic analyses, mainly by historians, but also by anthropologists like Catela (2001).³ It is worth recalling that Catela's work, which deals with political disappearances under the Argentinian dictatorship, coined the expression 'inconclusive death,' widely cited by scholars of the theme given its evocation of the slippery nature of people vanishing.⁴ Yet despite the visibility and frequency of research like Catela's, very few studies had turned their attention to disappearances happening outside the framework of totalitarian regimes, seeking to analyse what would come to be called 'civil disappearances' or those simply unclassifiable as 'enforced disappearance.' When it came to thinking about the phenomenon in Brazil, works on this theme appeared non-existent, a fact recurrently documented like a refrain in all the theses and dissertations on the topic that began to emerge in the mid-2000s.

My principal motivation for this essay is to explore this contrast between the scarcity of works encountered in the past and the observation that today researchers from different disciplines, including scholars working in other countries, have become increasingly engaged in studying the disappearance of people in Brazil. Setting out from this contrast, I discuss academic works produced on the topic in the social and human sciences over the last decade and a half, seeking to delineate and interrogate the main direction that these studies currently seem to be taking. I

1 A preliminary version of this essay was presented at the Roundtable 'Ethnographies of disappearance: Practices, materialities and meanings,' at the XIV Mercosul Anthropology Meeting in August 2023. My thanks to Liliana Sanjurjo, Desirée Azevedo, Fábio Araújo and Eva Muzzopappa for the excellent debate on the occasion.

2 Graham Denyer Willis is also the author of *The Killing Consensus: Police, Organized Crime and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil* (2015). This work was based on his doctoral thesis, awarded the prize for best dissertation by the Brazil Section of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) in 2014, among other distinctions. The author is a professor at the University of Cambridge and presents himself as a 'political ethnographer' on his website (<http://www.grahamdenyerwillis.com/>).

3 The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, a document published in 1998 and recognized in Brazilian legislation in 2002, defines the 'enforced disappearances of persons,' to which it attributes the status of a crime against humanity, as follows: 'the arrest, detention or abduction of persons by, or with the authorization, support or acquiescence of, a State or a political organization, followed by a refusal to acknowledge that deprivation of freedom or to give information on the fate or whereabouts of those persons, with the intention of removing them from the protection of the law for a prolonged period of time' (see Jardim 2011, 14). In November 2010, in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights' judgment concerning the disappearances in the case known as the 'Guerrilha do Araguaia,' Brazil was ordered to classify this crime. To date this classification has yet to be done. Araújo (2012, 107-109) discusses the content and processing of



ARTIGOS

do not intend to conduct a systematic review of the literature but to reflect instead on a significant selection of works that have endeavoured to make the disappearance of people in contemporary Brazil an object of study.

Based on this selection, I argue that recent works on the theme have demonstrated a particular theoretical-conceptual shift: they have moved away from disappearance as a specific empirical phenomenon and towards the assumption of the term as an analytic category. Denyer Willis's ethnography is the most emblematic example of this movement. His work takes 'disappearance' as a conceptual tool to explicate a political rationality that not only operates empirically in situations in which the term is employed as an emic category but more generically. In contrast to the first works on the phenomenon, which involved multiple attempts to identify and describe its specificity, studies like Denyer Willis's opted to use 'disappearance' as a category to be explored not through its particularity but, on the contrary, through its capacity to analytically thread together phenomena as diverse as slavery, the non-identification of bodies and mass incarceration. I reflect on this option and raise some questions about its effects.

The main thread

The pioneering work on the disappearance of people in Brazil outside the historical context of the dictatorship was the thesis by Dijaci Oliveira (Oliveira 2007), which analyses how the phenomenon is perceived by the family members of missing persons, police officers and public policy administrators. His main argument is that the family is the main producer of disappearances in the county, due above all to the gender and generational hierarchies, conflicts and forms of violence that pervade the family institution. The contribution for which his work is most remembered, however, is its conceptual proposition. Responding to the polysemy of the notion of disappearance and the heterogeneity of situations that it encompasses, Oliveira advances the category *desaparecido civil*, 'missing civilian' or generically 'civilian disappearance,' which aims to differentiate the wider and more varied set of cases of disappearance that interest him from both 'enforced disappearances' and those examples in which the fate of the vanished person is known, such as those lost to environmental catastrophes or proven cases of running away. By *desaparecido civil*, Oliveira means

someone who has left a family environment or some emotional-affective reference group – like a circle of friends – to undertake some everyday activity without announcing any intention to leave and never return. For no apparent reason, the person vanished without trace. In this case, at least three immediate problems arise: 'knowing what happened,' 'knowing what to do,' 'knowing who to turn to'. (Oliveira 2012, 11)

In the same year that Oliveira presented his doctoral thesis, another work would become essential reading for those interested in the topic: the dissertation

a law bill to classify the crime in the Brazilian Senate, also mentioned in the work by Leal (2017, 27).

4 Ludmila Catela's thesis examines the Argentinian context but was produced in Brazil, where it is widely known. The work was presented on the Graduate Program in Sociology and Anthropology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) in 2000 and awarded the ANPOCS Prize for best doctoral thesis (Catela 2001a) and the ABA/Ford Award for Anthropology and Human Rights (Catela 2001b).



ARTIGOS

by Fábio Araújo (2007) on the relationship between mourning, sociability and politics in the wake of the massacre known as the 'Acari case,' which involved the disappearance of the bodies of eleven youths. The author explores the mourning of their mothers, experienced amid the difficult process involved in making a public denunciation of the case, which took the form of what the author calls 'justice-demanding mourning practices.' The work, which was recognized by an award from the Brazilian Anthropology Association (ABA), analyses the moral dimension and the political idioms adopted by the 'Acari Mothers,' shedding light on the importance of the symbolic universe of motherhood for the public justification and legitimisation of the demands of these women in response to what happened to their children.⁵

Mothers of missing people are also at the centre of the dissertation by Sandra Rodrigues (2008), which investigated the general impacts and emotional effects of the disappearance of a child from the viewpoint of the mother. Unlike Araújo's dissertation (2007), which sheds light on the public dimension of the mourning of the 'Acari Mothers,' the work by Rodrigues (2008) analyses the individual narratives and emotions of mothers who are not activists, focusing her attention primarily on the effects of the disappearance on intra-family relations and the domestic environment. The author based her research around a specific age group and interviewed the mothers of missing children exclusively. Soon afterwards, Marcelo Neumann (2010) also based his study on one specific age group in a thesis that sets out to understand the attitudes of those involved in disappearances of children and teenagers based on the care records of the Caminho de Volta (Way Back) Project.⁶ Most of the study, however, is dedicated to a reflection on the concept of disappearance and, in the author's terms, its 'social determinants.'

The year after Neumann presented his thesis (2010), I also completed a doctorate on the disappearance of people in Brazil (Ferreira 2011). My work was an ethnography focused on two fronts involving the production and bureaucratic administration of the phenomenon: the administration of individual cases by the Rio de Janeiro Civil Police and the (attempted) construction of disappearances as a social problem, based on the National Network for the Identification and Localization of Missing Children and Teenagers (ReDesap).⁷ Years later, I incorporated a third front to the research begun in the thesis: the administration of cases of missing children and teenagers by social assistance services (see Ferreira 2019). My involvement in the field has always been in public departments and my central questions have revolved around state practices designed to respond to the disappearance of people in Brazil.

In 2012, Fábio Araújo resumed and expanded the study begun in his dissertation and defended a thesis on the experiences and political activism of the families of victims of enforced disappearance in contemporary Rio de Janeiro. In this work, he highlights the creation of moral, emotional and political communities that are founded on the suffering, pain and terror experienced above all by the mothers of missing children. Among other contributions, the thesis made evident

5 Araújo's dissertation received the same award received in 2000 by Ludmila Catela for her aforementioned thesis: the ABA Award for Anthropology and Human Rights, granted to Araújo in 2008. In 2014, two other doctoral works addressing the question of disappearance, though not as the central research problem, also won the same award: the study by Líliliana Sanjurjo (2016) about the field of political activism of the Human Rights associations and organisations formed by relatives of disappeared persons under the Argentinian military dictatorship and the thesis by Paula Lacerda (2016) on the relationship between violence, the state and forms of activism in the so-called 'case of the emasculated boys of Altamira,' which involved the murder, mutilation and disappearance of various boys from the municipality in Pará. I highlight this fact to suggest that the ABA Award for Anthropology and Human Rights (called the ABA/Ford Human Rights Award in its first editions) has been an important space for the recognition and dissemination in Brazil of research on missing persons.

6 As Neumann describes, 'in September 2004, the USP Faculty of Medicine created an initiative to confront the disappearance of children and teenagers called the 'Way Back Project,' which combines molecular biology, bioinformatics and psychosocial care in its intervention process. The project's innovative aspect is the systematic integration of data through psychosocial interviews, the referral of families for specialised assistance and the collection of biological material from family members to determine their DNA – an essential element in identifying the origin of the located children/teenagers. This information is added to the database and later used as a basis for comparing the identificatory data of family groups' (Neumann 2010, 6).



ARTIGOS

the impossibility – or at least the complexity – of distinguishing between different types of disappearance; that is, of supposing that some cases are essentially ‘civil’ disappearances, in Oliveira’s terms (2007), and others ‘political.’ Enforced disappearance, as Araújo (2012) shows, is a ‘particular case of the possible’ within the general problematic of disappearances, but in a more complex relationship than the simple part/whole schema. This indicates the equal impossibility of distinguishing neatly between the different times or political regimes in which we live, and which provide a context to the disappearances, given that systematic police violence shows that there are wars in ‘normal’ times and enforced disappearances under democratic regimes.

Years later, the thesis of Eduardo Leal (2017) made fundamental contributions to the study of the subject through an approach that takes disappearance as a moral and political problem and interrogates the modes in which it is managed and lived as a social experience in Brazil. The thesis analyses with considerable originality the historical emergence and sociological dynamics of the activism pursued by family members of missing people in the country. Furthermore, he demonstrates that, in addition to their activism, the modes of subjectivation of the experience of having a child vanish, the narrative construction of ‘cases’ of disappearance, as well as the regimes of truth and the expertise of mediators engaged with the issue are all ‘forms of government’ in which the power to define the phenomenon is located, especially given its slippery, heterogeneous and multifaceted nature. Dialoguing closely with the work of Leal (2017), Paula França (2018) defended a thesis the following year centred on the public denunciation of cases of disappearance. The author demonstrates that denunciation spreads through (and sometimes even transcends) different institutional spaces, insofar as family members demand recognition of their suffering both in police departments and in the justice system, as well as through the mass media. The work also maps the moral and political grammars of the denunciations and analyses the intercession of so-called ‘social critics’ in their elaboration.

Defended in the interval between Oliveira (2007) and França (2018), the theses and dissertations cited above were fundamental to establishing the discussion on the disappearance of people in contemporary Brazil in the country’s social sciences. Together, they provide the initial contours to the still brief but already significant trajectory of the qualitative approach to the issue adopted by Brazilian researchers. Evidence of this resides in some of the questions that surface repeatedly in all the cited works, albeit treated distinctly in each, and that remain central to understanding the phenomenon. The first of these, already mentioned, is the very definition of disappearance, discussed by all the authors as a question marked by absences, lacks and/or scarcity: the lack of legal provisions, the absence of sociological conceptualization and the scarcity of systematic studies that propose precise definitions of what the ‘disappearance of persons’ is, whether taken individually or as a social problem.

Faced with these absences, while Oliveira (2007) formulates a definition of the phenomenon and proposes the use of the expression ‘civil disappearance’

7 ReDesap is a network of organisations involved in the disappearance of people in Brazil, created in 2002 but institutionalized only in 2011. The network is also analysed in the theses of Oliveira (2007) and Neumann (2010), as well as in Leal (2017) and França (2018).



as a category capable of demarcating its specificity, the other works explore the polysemy of the term and the many possible definitions emergent in diverse experiences, spaces and social practices, whether domestic or institutional. They thus emphasize the heterogeneity of situations socially designated as ‘disappearances’ in Brazil. The analytic yield of the ethnographic works (Araújo 2007, 2012; Ferreira 2011, Leal 2017) indeed stems in part from the heuristic capacity of multi-sited research, which appear especially pertinent given the dispersion of the ‘definitional power of the disappearance of persons’ (Leal 2017, 12) and its multifaceted nature. In these studies, the authors follow the lead of their interlocutors and the human and non-human agents involved in the definition, administration, subjectivation and/or incipient ‘political inscription’ (Leal 2017) of disappearances in the country. Even in the other works, however, the question of its definition occupies a considerable portion of the authors’ efforts. While taking varying methodological paths, all of them endeavour to disentangle disappearance as a social phenomenon, decomposing its internal variations and making explicit the diverse kinds of event designated by the same term. At the same time, all the authors make connections between this internal variety of the phenomenon and the many uncertainties and practical, ethical and political difficulties that characterize both the experience of having a child vanish and/or becoming an activist in the cause, and the administration of the problem, whether through police inquiries or through the management of the scant public services and policies available to deal with it.

It should be emphasized that endeavours to define disappearance are not limited to academic research. In public arenas too, in more or less formal institutional contexts, the debates and disputes around what disappearance is and how it should be conceived are intense. Not by chance, something that characterizes all the works reviewed here is the fact that many of their authors have also circulated among institutions, events and movements devoted to the cause, actively occupying the roles of ‘social critics’ (França 2018) or ‘specialists’ (Ferreira 2015).

Another issue that repeatedly surfaces in the works are the different but ever-present roles of the state in cases of disappearance in Brazil. As these studies show, the state is the agent responsible for ‘enforced disappearances’ but also possesses decisive agency in other kinds of disappearance, whether through its failure to act in response to cases that have already occurred, or its failure to provide services and effective prevention policies to avoid new occurrences. Analysing police work (Oliveira 2007, Ferreira 2011), documenting the pain and terror (Araújo 2008, 2012), comprehending the conditions for the emergence of family activism (Leal 2017) or cataloguing the public services and programs available (França 2018), all these early studies on the theme discuss the mutually constitutive relationship between disappearance and the state in Brazil. Furthermore, they show how the demands for recognition made by relatives of missing persons and their repertoires for action and denunciation, both in the individual cases of their own children and in their collective engagement in public arenas, are directed towards the state, making it the ultimate (albeit flawed) source of justice. As the works illustrate, letters to the President of the Republic or to various public bodies, citi-



zen-sponsored law bills, regular visits to official departments, homemade posters with photos of the missing for distribution in the city and persistent attempts to pressure political representatives all compose a certain ‘politics of the ordinary’ (Das 2020) undertaken with tenacity by family members, even those who do not become involved in direct activism.⁸ This politics is ultimately focused on the state both as a system of institutions (the police, the justice system, child protection and social assistance) and as an idea onto which the desire for justice, reparation and reencountering the missing person are projected.⁹

Two other issues repeated in these studies are, firstly, the importance of the ‘cases’ as a narrative form and a political-moral formula present both in the experience, denunciation and management of disappearance as a social problem and in its construction and analysis as a sociological problem; and, secondly, gender as a social marker of difference that is decisive both in the forms of subjectivation of the experience of disappearance within families and in the legitimacy of activism in the cause. Not coincidentally, the works create graphic forms to present the cases that enable their analyses (Ferreira 2011), are wholly or partially organised around a number of selected cases (Araújo 2007, 2012; Leal 2017, França 2018) and debate the significance of the elaboration and subsequent de-singularisation of cases for the public denunciation of disappearance as a social problem (Ferreira 2011, França 2018). As for gender, none of the works fails to mention the leading role played by mothers and by the symbolic universe of motherhood itself, not only for the activism in the public campaigns, but also in the intimate and often solitary process of coping with a child’s disappearance. Additionally, gender representations are strongly at work in the bureaucratic trajectory of the cases, especially in the treatment given to them by police officers and institutions (Oliveira 2007, Araújo 2007, Ferreira 2011).

Stitches and interrogations

As well as these shared questions, there is another refrain that characterizes this set of works that initially shaped the academic discussion on disappearance in contemporary Brazil: like a chorus, all of them repeatedly mention the scarcity of systematic studies of the topic. This contrasts drastically with what can be read in more recent productions. The comparative study by Paola Díaz and Jussara Freire (2023), for example, already in its first pages declares that in ‘the cases of Brazil and Mexico, there has been extensive research into mass deaths and disappearances in contemporary times’ (Díaz and Freire 2023, 4).

Along with this observation, Díaz and Freire (2023) make two other analytic moves worth highlighting here: they seek to identify the key concepts that recur in works on the subject and they construct disappearance as an object of study by associating it with another empirical phenomenon. Regarding key concepts, the authors observe that ‘biopolitics,’ ‘necropolitics,’ ‘thanatopolitics,’ ‘state of exception’ and ‘bare life’ are those most often mobilized in the research on disappearance. As for what this object is precisely, they define it as a hinge that articulates

8 ‘Politics of the ordinary’ is an expression formulated by Veena Das (2020) to account for ‘different possibilities for engagement with the state and its apparatus of governance with all the risks of success and failure’ (2020, 245) that this engagement may entail and that involves commonplace activities that are everyday for people like Das’s interlocutors in the slums of Delhi in India. Wandering between government departments, writing letters and talking to neighbours, for example, are activities of this kind that reveal how the ordinary can be the place of improvisation and transformation, although it is also marked by routine and repetition.

9 For an understanding of the state as a system and an idea, see Abrams (1988).



two phenomena: ‘mass death and disappearance in necropolitical democracies,’ already announced in the title of their article. However, the authors’ focus on key concepts and the construction of disappearance as an object by stitching it together with other phenomena are not exclusive to their study. Rather, they are central axes of what I see as a theoretical-conceptual movement characteristic of the most recent research on the topic, exemplified in the ethnography of Denyer Willis (2022). At the start of the 2020s, works on the subject in the social and human sciences have tended to theorize the disappearance of people in Brazil in the post-redemocratization period not as a specific empirical phenomenon but as a paradigmatic ‘political rationality’ (Denyer Willis 2022) or a ‘necrogovernmental logic’ (Franco 2021). Pervasive in Brazil across time, this rationality is taken to manifest in diverse social processes and historical moments of the country.

Adopting this approach has allowed more recent works like those of Franco (2021), Villenave (2021) and Denyer Willis (2022) to conjoin dictatorship and redemocratization, democracy and states of exception, as well as slavery, pacification in colonial Brazil and the Pacifying Police Units (UPPs) of Rio de Janeiro, drawing out the analytic consequences of this kind of conjunction. Moreover, it has also allowed these works to stitch together, using precisely the notion of ‘disappearance’ as their instrument, a diverse set of empirical phenomena seen either as an expression, a materialization or an emblem of this ‘political rationality.’ Examples of this stitching are the conjunction between political disappearance during the dictatorship and the phenomenon of the unidentified death (Azevedo 2018, Franco 2021); between summary executions of black youths in favelas and urban peripheries, the so-called ‘war on drugs’ and cases of disappearance (Villenave 2021); and, as stated above, between mass killings and disappearances (Díaz and Freire 2023). The most emblematic threading together of phenomena, however, is found in Denyer Willis (2022), who unites cases of disappearance like that of Felipe, the young man described by the author’s interlocutor in the excerpt from the opening of this essay, the enforced disappearances under the dictatorship, the rupture of social ties caused by the enslavement of black men and women in the colonial era, the phenomenon of mass incarceration in contemporary Brazil, and the management of life and death by the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) criminal organization.

The works of Denyer Willis (2022) and Villenave (2021), specifically, published in English outside of Brazil and aimed at foreign readerships, not only advance this tendency to think about disappearance as a ‘political rationality,’ but, more than this, seek to explain Brazil through this rationality.¹⁰ Here Brazil is not just a context or scale. Rather, it also emerges as a unit of analysis. In the book by Franco (2021), too, one of the central objectives is to describe the ‘contemporary subjectivity’ in force in Brazil, based on an analysis of the necrogovernmental logic of disappearance. Franco’s work takes disappearance mechanisms as ‘a paradigm for understanding subjective transformations’ (Franco 2021, 98), enabling us to understand how the governance of death and the dead is decisive to the production of a certain ‘generalized melancholization’ (ibid., 133) in the country.

10 Taking “disappearance” as a concept capable of explaining something, and not as something to be explained, is what Uruguayan sociologist Gabriel Gatti (2017) identifies as the most recent expansion of this category since its origins in the emergence of the “detenido-desaparecido” of the Argentine dictatorship. Gatti is the author of several articles and books proposing a genealogy of the category “disappearance” that can be put into generative conversation with the most current works on the disappearance of people in contemporary Brazil that I comment in this essay. Unlike this recent literature, however, Gatti’s works do not focus on Brazil.



These works have chosen to explain Brazil by illuminating not only disappearance as a political rationality but also the forces and forms of resistance mobilized in response in what Denyer Willis (2022) calls a ‘search for life,’ Franco (2021) calls ‘rebellion’ and Díaz and Freire (2023) call ‘practices of valorisation and care of lives,’ countering what they define as ‘contemporary systems of necropolitics which devalue certain lives’ (Díaz and Freire 2023, 3). In this sense, the demands for recognition, justice and reparation for the relatives of people who have disappeared, especially mothers, already a theme in the inaugural dissertations and theses, are a recurrent presence in the more recent literature too. Nonetheless, accompanying the diversification of empirical phenomena that more recent works have been studying under the umbrella term of disappearance, other forces and forms of resistance have also been explored, such as the work of independent experts, judicial activism and even quilombos, emigration or the PCC itself, as explored in Denyer Willis’s ethnography (2022).

The stitching together of phenomena under the category of ‘disappearance’ is a crucial part of the original contributions of contemporary research, enabling the demonstration that many of the social processes that historically and sociologically constitute Brazil are materializations of the same political logic and that, likewise, diverse forces and forms of resistance are equally responses to this logic. The choice of the term seems to derive especially from its capacity to designate a rationality that produces and routinizes the desubjectification, devaluation, annihilation and invisibilization of certain lives (and deaths) in Brazil, whether these are enslaved lives in the past or the incarcerated, tortured, excluded, violated, executed and hidden lives of the present. But while I recognise the analytic gain provided by this choice, some questions about it appear to me pertinent.

What are the effects of this relative detachment of the notion of ‘disappearance,’ now conceived as a political rationality, from the concrete phenomenon that leads mothers and other family members to resort to police stations, social services or forensic institutes to make a complaint, a search, an outcry? Considering that, ever since the first works on the theme, authors have also performed important public roles as ‘specialists,’ what can the current conceptual approach offer in terms of a political contribution to the demands of family members of people whose disappearances are not easily encompassed by any of the other phenomena analysed as instantiations of this political logic – neither ‘enforced disappearance,’ nor ‘administrative disappearance,’ nor ‘summary execution,’ nor ‘police violence,’ nor ‘mass incarceration’? How can we affirm and encounter analytic, ethical and political space for the particularity demanded by the mothers of disappeared children who have appeared in the works on the theme since the beginning of this academic trajectory – women like Arlete Caramês, Ivanise Espiridião and Vera Ranú (see Leal 2017, 75-83)? How do we affirm the specificity of disappearances like those of their children, reference cases in which the emic category used in activism and at the level of a ‘politics of the ordinary’ (Das 2020) is ‘disappearance’ and ‘disappearance’ only? It was not a coincidence, after all, that the principal shared endeavour of the inaugural works on the theme was to



question, identify and/or elaborate this specificity in the face of the dispersed and heterogeneous nature of the phenomenon. Nor was accidental or incidental that Neide's t-shirt in the first photo of Denyer Willis's book is emblazoned with the word DESAPARECIDO next to Felipe's photo.

'Disappearance is a phenomenon under dispute and in the process of being political inscribed' (Leal 2017, 18), which, from the viewpoint of the families of the disappeared, is far from sufficient. Despite the emergence of activism in the 1990s, the creation of ReDesap at the start of the 2000s, the effective public denunciation of some cases with a major impact nationally and the creation of some public services and programs to confront the problem in various localities, as documented in the dissertations and theses reviewed here, it is still a blatant fact today that the construction of disappearance as a social problem fails to reach even the minimal levels demanded for decades by mothers like Arlete, Ivanise and Vera. As the pioneering literature on the topic has already shown, time is a fundamental component of disappearance, which 'works' in mourning and in the articulation of mothers of the victims (Araújo 2012) as well as in the administration of the cases in Brazil's public services (Ferreira 2019). For this very reason, with the passing of time, cases like those of the children of Arlete, Ivanise, Vera and so many other mothers become increasingly distant from any solution and closer to a certain zone of mystery and fiction.

As happens with what some activists and some researchers call 'long-term disappearances' (França 2018, 41), when cases that occur daily in Brazilian cities cannot be associated with other phenomena linked to disappearance in the contemporary literature, like police violence, the alleged 'war on drugs,' international human trafficking or mass incarceration, all that remains for them is to be relegated to a barely tangible universe of rumours, enigma and even fabulation or fiction. Moreover, the more enigmatic a case appears, as I have shown elsewhere (Ferreira 2011, 94-111), the more sparse, innocuous and ineffective the police investigations tend to become. It does not seem accidental, indeed, that many of the initial works on the subject explored the role of the mass media in shaping disappearance as a problem in Brazil, acting sometimes as allies in the search and mourning of the families, but frequently spreading rumours and sensationalist narratives on cases, drastically worsening the suffering of the missing person's relatives. Nor does it seem accidental that one of the contributions of the thesis by Leal (2017) was to show the decisive role of a TV soap opera in the emergence of family activism in the country. The soap opera's plot revolved around a fictional case of disappearance and gave a whole new visibility to the problem at national level.

On one hand, it is notable that the relative detachment promoted by the most recent literature is the factor that has enabled the authors to shed light on the politics of terror established by the logic of disappearance in Brazil, and demonstrate the close articulation between phenomena as disparate as slavery, torture, enforced disappearance, police violence against black and peripheral bodies, clandestine cemeteries and the deaths of the destitute. It has also enabled these works to show that this articulation is linked to the historical continuity of a gov-



ernmental rationality that, if it changes, only changes to remain the same in terms of its racist foundations and its reproduction of inequalities. On the other hand, though, it seems important to ask whether this detachment does not further obscure disappearances in the country that, unsolved, remain consigned to a certain novelistic imaginary of mystery and fiction, with all the damage this can cause to the incipient political inscription of the problem, so well described and denounced since the earliest works on the topic. Returning to the central thread of this production is an exercise that can help, if not for us to find answers, then at least to keep on asking questions.



About the author

Letícia Carvalho de Mesquita Ferreira

Associate Professor in the Department of Cultural Anthropology (DAC) and the Graduate Program in Sociology and Anthropology (PPGSA) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). She holds a doctorate and a master's degree in Social Anthropology (Museu Nacional/UFRJ). Email: leticiacarvalho@gmail.com

Author's contribution

Letícia Carvalho Ferreira conceived the research on which this article is based, and was also responsible for carrying out it out and writing this text.

Recebido em 29/03/2024

Aprovado para publicação em 02/05/2024 pela editora Sara Santos Morais (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1490-1232>)



References

- Abrams, Philip. 1988. "Notes on the difficulty of studying the State." *Journal of Historical Sociology*, no. 1: 58–89.
- Araújo, Fábio Alves. 2007. "Do luto à luta: A experiência das Mães de Acari." Master's dissertation, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.
- Araújo, Fábio Alves. 2008. "'Falta alguém na minha casa': Desaparecimento, luto, maternidade e política." In *Antropologia e Direitos Humanos 5*, edited by Regina Reyes Novaes, and Roberto Kant de Lima, 166–225. Brasília: Booklink.
- Araújo, Fábio Alves. 2012. "Das consequências da arte macabra de fazer desaparecer corpos: Violência, sofrimento e política entre familiares de vítima de desaparecimento forçado." PhD thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.
- Azevedo, Desirée Lemos. 2018. *Ausências Incorporadas. Etnografia entre Mortos e Desaparecidos Políticos no Brasil*. São Paulo: Editora Unifesp.
- Catela, Ludmila da Silva. 2001a. *Situação-limite e memória: A reconstrução do mundo dos familiares de desaparecidos da Argentina*. São Paulo: Hucitec; Anpocs.
- Catela, Ludmila da Silva. 2001b. "Desaparecidos e Direitos Humanos: Entre um drama nacional e um dilema universal." In *Antropologia e Direitos Humanos*, edited by Regina Reyes Novaes, and Roberto Kant de Lima, 208–66. Prêmio ABA/Ford. Niterói: EdUFF.
- Das, Veena. 2020. *Textures of the ordinary: Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Denyer Willis, Graham. 2022. *Keep the bones alive: Missing people and the search for life in Brazil*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Díaz, Paola, and Freire, Jussara. 2023. "Mass Death and Disappearance in Contemporary Necropolitical Democracies: Brazilian and Mexican cases." *Vibrant*, no. 20: 1–19.
- Ferreira, Letícia Carvalho de Mesquita. 2011. "Uma etnografia para muitas ausências: O desaparecimento de pessoas como ocorrência policial e problema social." PhD thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.
- Ferreira, Letícia Carvalho de Mesquita. "Pesquisar e participar da formulação de uma causa pública: Notas etnográficas sobre o desaparecimento de pessoas no Brasil." *Campos (UFPR)*, no. 14: 195–216.
- Ferreira, Letícia Carvalho de Mesquita. 2019. "Notas sobre a rotina: Tempo, sofrimento e banalidade do poder na gestão de casos de pessoas desaparecidas no Rio de Janeiro." *Antropolítica: Revista Contemporânea de Antropologia*, no. 47: 118–42.
- Franco, Fábio. 2021. *Governar os mortos: Necropolíticas, desaparecimento e subjetividade*. São Paulo: Ubu.
- França, Paula Marcela Ferreira. 2018. "Onde está o meu filho? A denúncia do desaparecimento de pessoas." PhD thesis, Universidade Federal de Goiânia.
- Jardim, Tarciso Dal Maso. 2011. *Brasil condenado a legislar pela Corte Interamericana de Direitos Humanos: Da obrigação de tipificar o crime de desaparecimento forçado de pessoas. Textos para discussão*, no. 83. Brasília: Centro de Estudos da Consultoria do Senado.
- Lacerda, Paula. 2016. "A nossa 'luta por justiça': Violência, trajetórias de mobilização e a pesquisa antropológica contemporânea." In *Antropologia e Direitos Humanos 6*,



edited by Claudia Fonseca, Ana Lucia Pastore Schritzmeyer, Eliane Cantarino O'Dwyer, Patrice Schuch, Russell Parry Scot, and Sergio Carrara, 15–46. Rio de Janeiro: ABA; Mórula.

Leal, Eduardo Martinelli. 2017. “A dúvida mais persistente: As formas de governo do desaparecimento de pessoas no Brasil.” PhD thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

Neumann, Marcelo Moreira. 2010. “O desaparecimento de crianças e adolescentes.” PhD thesis, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo.

Oliveira, Dijaci David. “Desaparecidos civis: Conflitos familiares, institucionais e de segurança pública.” PhD thesis, Universidade de Brasília.

Oliveira, Dijaci David de. 2012. *O desaparecimento de pessoas no Brasil*. Goiânia: Cânone Editorial.

Oliveira, Sandra Rodrigues de. 2008. “Onde está você agora além de aqui, dentro de mim? O luto das mães de crianças desaparecidas.” Master's dissertation, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

Sanjurjo, Liliana. 2016. ““Los juzga un tribunal, los condenamos todos’: Memórias e verdades em disputa nos tribunais argentinos.” In *Antropologia e Direitos Humanos* 6, edited by Claudia Fonseca, Ana Lucia Pastore Schritzmeyer, Eliane Cantarino O'Dwyer, Patrice Schuch, Russell Parry Scot, and Sergio Carrara, 47–107. Rio de Janeiro: ABA; Mórula.

Villenave, Sabrina. 2022. *Disappearances and Police Killings in Contemporary Brazil: The Politics of Life and Death*. London: Routledge.