

“Our Brazil Has Become a Mess”: Nostalgic Narratives of Disorder and Disinterest as a “Once-Rising Poor” Family from Recife, Brazil, Anticipates the 2018 Elections

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R E S U M E N

Este artigo apresenta um relato etnográfico de uma família extensa da cidade de Recife, nos meses que antecederam as eleições de 2018, nas quais o político de direita Jair Bolsonaro foi eleito para a presidência do Brasil. A família exemplifica o setor contenciosamente chamado de “nova classe média” - os estimados 35 milhões que subiram acima da linha da pobreza durante 14 anos de governo do Partido dos Trabalhadores, mas cujas perspectivas se tornaram precárias desde então. A partir de um extenso trabalho de campo etnográfico, apresento uma série de momentos etnográficos, cada um ilustrando como as conversas informais sobre as próximas eleições refletiram e influenciaram a dinâmica familiar. Surgem nesses momentos narrativas de desintegração moral, aparente nostalgia da ditadura militar brasileira de 1964–85, a perda de masculinidades, sexualidades ameaçadoras e a regeneração de “zumbis” políticos. Adianto uma série de afirmações teóricas sobre as dimensões das afinidades políticas dos “previamente pobres” que merecem uma investigação etnográfica mais profunda. [Brasil, eleições, nostalgia, gênero, sexualidade]

A B S T R A C T

This article presents an ethnographic account of an extended family from the northeastern city of Recife, Brazil, during the months prior to the 2018 elections in which hard-right politician, Jair Bolsonaro, was elected to Brazil’s presidency. The family exemplifies the sector contentiously referred to as the “new middle class”—the estimated thirty-five million people who rose above the poverty line during fourteen years of rule by the left-leaning Workers’ Party, but whose prospects have since become precarious. Drawing from extended ethnographic fieldwork, I present a series of ethnographic

The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology, Vol. 00, No. 0, pp. 1–18. ISSN 1935-4932, online ISSN 1935-4940. © 2019 by the American Anthropological Association. All rights reserved. DOI: 10.1111/jlca.12443

moments, each illustrating how informal conversations about the coming elections both reflected and affected family dynamics. Emerging within these moments are narratives of moral disintegration, apparent nostalgia for Brazil's 1964–85 military dictatorship, lost masculinities, menacing sexualities, and the regeneration of political “zombies.” I advance a series of theoretical claims about dimensions of the political affinities of Brazil's “previously poor” that merit deeper ethnographic investigation. [Brazil, elections, nostalgia, gender, sexuality]

I'm getting ready for bed and suddenly receive a ping on Facebook Instant Messenger. It's from Dona Helena, the sixty-two-year-old matriarch of the family I'm living with while conducting fieldwork in the coastal northeastern city of Recife, Brazil. I have a quick look and find that Helena has sent me a link, with no accompanying explanation, to a YouTube clip called “Democratic Military Regime.”¹ With the anthem of the Brazilian Marines playing in the background, the six-minute clip recounts the positive accomplishments of the generals among whom the presidency rotated during Brazil's 1964–85 military regime. The chief accomplishments mentioned are infrastructure and resource-development projects (roads, oil, electricity, etc.), macroeconomic growth, and the creation of major government agencies. There are also some summary statements about how, in many respects, life was better “then” than it is “today”—for example, with respect to crime and security. The generals made people respect laws, the clip states, so there was “infinitely less” crime and greater security for the Brazilian people. Invoking the menace of communism, the clip ends with the motto, “Brazil: Love it or leave it.”

It isn't until the next evening, when I'm in the kitchen helping Helena wash the dishes, that I learn it was her second-oldest son Ednilson, who lives with his family just upstairs, who sent her the clip. “He didn't have patience to serve in the army,” she tells me. “He was promoted to corporal, [but] didn't want to return because he didn't like how the superiors order around the subordinates, you know? But . . . he's in love with the army.” I express my surprise and Helena giggles as she tells me that I should ask him about the clip. Then she sighs and, toweling off the dishes, reflects, “Back in those days, there was respect. But today, it's that shamelessness [*safadeza*], that thing. . . . Children don't respect father and mother. Our Brazil has become a mess, sadly.”

Introduction

The victory of far-right presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro over Fernando Haddad of the leftist Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* or PT) in October 2018 betrayed a certain inadequacy in how scholars from the social sciences—and I count myself among them—have understood the political affinities of poor and working-class people in Brazil. Taking seriously the effect of real and growing discontent over political corruption and violence on voting choices, many of us were nonetheless astonished that so many poor Brazilians would vote against the party that, at least officially, prioritizes the reduction of poverty and inequality in favor of a man who publicly questions whether democracy is superior to dictatorship as a form of government. As I write (January 2019), a flurry of conferences and publications come together to explain the emerging political subjectivities of Brazil's *classe popular* (poor/working-class), alternately characterized as “conservative,” “neoliberal,” or even “neofascist”—often portrayed as the most recent example of the global trend toward “populist conservatism.”

And yet, the claim that a conservative political subjectivity has taken root across Brazil cuts corners for its presumptions about the *extent* and *quality* of affinity for Bolsonaro. Here, Bolsonaro's decisive win over his opponent in the second-round election (55.1 percent of valid candidate-directed votes over Haddad's 44.9 percent) needs to be qualified with the clarification that 28.8 percent of the electorate (more than forty-two million people) abstained from voting, spoiled their vote, or voted in blank, with the proportion who spoiled the vote (7.4 percent) rising 60 percent over the level from the 2014 elections (the highest level of spoiled votes since 1989).² Indeed, 60.8 percent of eligible voters opted *not* to vote for Bolsonaro, and nearly half of these opted not to vote *for anyone*, suggesting political subjectivities that are as *ambivalent* and *disinterested* as they are “conservative.” Moreover, it is crucial to remember that the overall, national voting pattern was inverted in Brazil's northeast—historically Brazil's poorest region and home to the country's largest concentrations of Afro-descendant Brazilians—where nearly 70 percent of voters chose Haddad over Bolsonaro in the final elections. These are, of course, top-down observations that inevitably leave us with a thin account of how families like Helena's—Northeastern, nonwhite families whose financial situation, access to formal employment and higher education, and access to consumer goods improved during the PT years—have lived through and made sense of the more recent period of intertwined economic and political crises bookended by Bolsonaro's election. They are also ill suited for understanding the deep ambivalence of nonideological political sensibilities like those of Helena.

The preceding period of growth already seems a distant memory. Circa 2010, Brazil seemed a country on the rise: With the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics secured, Brazil's international reputation as an emerging world power

with firm democratic and economic foundations seemed assured. After decades of economic instability, the years following the 2002 election of PT President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva saw economic growth and a massive reduction of poverty (Neri 2014; Souza 2012). During Lula's two terms in office and the first term of his PT successor Dilma Rousseff, an estimated thirty-five million people rose above the poverty line. The emergence of this demographic sector—christened the “new middle class” by economists, policymakers, and marketers—was celebrated as evidence of Brazil's entrance onto the world stage as a modern nation. While there is some debate about who gets the credit for this extraordinary transformation, most agree that both macroeconomic factors (especially rising Chinese demand for Brazilian exports) and government initiatives in the form of social-welfare programs, increasing minimum wage, greater access to higher education, and the expansion of elderly pensions were all crucial. There is little doubt, however, that without PT social-welfare initiatives such as Bolsa Familia (the world's largest conditional cash transfer program), the scale of poverty reduction would have been massively diminished. In this sense, then, Brazil's “previously poor” could be said to owe much of their mobility to the PT.

The optimistic moment ended abruptly in 2013, when demonstrators protested increased bus fares, bloated expenditures on the World Cup and Olympic Games, and diminishing social support from the government. In 2015 and 2016, greater numbers of protesters mobilized against corruption and called for President Rousseff's ouster. Incited by the conservative national media conglomerate Globo, the protests were marked by expressions of rage against Lula, against Dilma, and against their party, the PT. By the time Rousseff was impeached in 2016, Brazil was facing the highest unemployment rate and the worst economic recession in twenty-five years. In April 2018, Lula himself began a twelve-year prison sentence after he had been found guilty on a personal-enrichment corruption charge. Meanwhile, former excitement about Brazil's “new middle class” evaporated as many members of this demographic group fell back below the poverty line.

This article presents an ethnographic narrative of the trajectory of one extended family—Helena's family³—through the eighteen months leading up to the first-round elections on October 7, 2018.⁴ Helena's family—whom I refer to as the Pereiras—live in a classe popular neighborhood I call *Morro Doce* (sweet hillside), home to about thirty thousand residents and situated about forty-five minutes by bus from Recife's downtown Centro. I first became familiar with Morro Doce in 2016, when I began a three-year investigation of lifeways and political subjectivities among Brazil's “once-rising poor”; the neighborhood was one of four selected for a structured baseline survey carried out with four hundred households.⁵ When planning the methodology for the project's second year—a detailed community ethnography of family life and political subjectivities—I remembered the positive experience in Morro Doce from the previous year and decided to base the

ethnographic study there. A member of my survey team from the previous year grew up in Morro Doce and, knowing I intended to reside there for fieldwork, thought of Helena—a close friend of his mother—as someone who might be interested in renting a room to me. Soon after an initial meeting, at which I clumsily explained my project and we agreed on rent, I moved into the small room directly opposite Helena’s own. The idea was that her household would be a base for me as I conducted my research—not the focus of the research per se—though of course I hoped Helena and her family might be interlocutors and friends as I faced the inevitable doubts and uncertainties of fieldwork. In the weeks ahead, as Dona Helena’s extended family welcomed me into their daily life routines, I began to write about their complicated and fascinating stories and, with their consent, decided these narratives deserved their own platform.

The interactions I consider in this article are a thread of sorts and move through three ethnographic moments, each moment in some way addressing prospects for and impediments to ongoing mobility for the family—and for Brazil. While not presuming that Brazilians who experienced socioeconomic mobility during the PT years are homogeneous with respect to consumer practices, political attitudes, life aspirations, or class identifications (Klein, Mitchell and Junge 2018), I nonetheless contend that the Pereira family’s story—their hopes and frustrations in times of growth and crisis, and the intergenerational dynamics shaping their conversations around key political events and periods—typifies patterns for many families from Brazil’s *classe popular*. As such, this analysis contributes to a more nuanced account of the political affinities of Brazil’s “once-rising poor” during a moment of deepening economic precarity and political cynicism. And, although this article does not prioritize exploration of class identifications (e.g., with the categories “middle class” and “new middle class”), my account does identify important directions for ongoing anthropological research along these lines.⁶

To be clear, I am not seeking to predict voting behaviors—let alone to explain Bolsonaro’s triumph in the elections—and I do not analyze here macroeconomic and institutional factors that have no doubt influenced the political affinities of poor and working-class Brazilians.⁷ Neither am I investigating the origins of the various discourses reflected in my informants’ narratives (e.g., from broadcast and online media sources, political campaigns, fake news, etc.), though these all certainly deserve attention. Rather, I aim to map out in an exploratory manner how conversations about Brazil’s current situation, and of course the elections, have both reflected and affected family dynamics.

For families like Helena’s, references to past political–historical moments appeared repeatedly in informal conversations during the 2018 campaign season. As I show, they reflect a particular way of remembering or imagining the past—notably the PT years (2003–14) and the earlier years of the military dictatorship (1964–85)—to draw a contrast with the insecure present (Karner and Weicht 2016).

While complementary to a cultural memory project, I am aiming for something different: Rather than a cultural account of how the past is remembered (and how states promote different ways of remembering), I focus here on how the past (or some representation of it) is sometimes invoked by individuals and families to make sense of the present.

With inspiration from the recent “methodological turn toward the event” in anthropology (Kapferer 2010), my analysis draws from the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari (1988) to highlight the “openness” and unfixedness of the forms of meaning-making around politics I see taking shape in the family interactions I recount. Specifically, I treat the conflictual situations populating my three ethnographic moments as “plateaus of intensity” in which “the intransigencies and irresolvable tensions ingrained in social and personal life . . . [boil] to the surface and became, if only momentarily, part of public awareness for the participants as well as for the anthropologist” (Kapferer 2010:3).

This article is structured as follows. After providing additional background on the Pereiras, I present the three ethnographic moments in sequence, each followed by a series of provisional claims about important dimensions of the political affinities of Brazil’s poor and working classes. I conclude with final reflections on nostalgic formations as a feature of these affinities—and for their importance in ongoing anthropological studies of the years leading up to—and following—the election of Jair Bolsonaro.

The Pereira Family

A widow for three decades, Helena has worked as a community health agent in Morro Doce for many long years. The proverbial matriarch, she commands obedience from all of her children (if not always from their spouses). Helena’s oldest child is Sônia (age forty-two), who, along with her second (and current) husband, are the family’s only Evangelicals. Helena’s oldest son, Gabriel (age forty), is an army sergeant whose relatively high salary funds many of the extended family’s comings and goings and gives him a certain authority in family matters. Gabriel’s wife is Patricia (age twenty-nine), who is close to finishing a doctoral degree in agricultural sciences. Helena’s second-oldest son—the one who sent her the military-praising YouTube clip—is Ednilson (age thirty-eight), who takes courses toward a mechanical engineering degree by day and works evenings as a cashier on a city bus. He’s married to Luzimar, with whom he has one biological son, Ewerton (age seventeen), and who has a son from a previous marriage, Carlinhos (age twenty-five). Helena has two daughters: Kátia (age thirty-three), who lives in Switzerland where she is married to a Portuguese man. Finally, Helena has a recently married adopted son, Ronaldo (age thirty-two). With the exception of Kátia,

Helena's children all live with their families within the same labyrinthian house, located on Morro Doce's main thoroughfare. If prodded to identify themselves in terms of the Brazilian census categories for race and color, all of the Pereiras would select *pardo*, a catch-all mixed-race category seldom used in daily life. (None of them identify as *branco* [white] or *negro* [black].) There is a strong solidarity in this family; they socialize together and celebrate birthdays and other milestones together. The grandchildren, now teenagers, are addicted to their smartphones and, until recently, were losing sleep over whether they would pass their university entrance exams. In this family, only Helena is old enough to have clear memories from the military years. At the same time, I have asked her about those years and her responses tend to emphasize how she rarely left the Morro Doce neighborhood, almost never saw the military, and how, despite being less developed, Morro Doce was a much safer and quieter neighborhood then than it has become today.

Moment 1: "Democratic Military Regime" (July–August 2017)

August 5, 2017

I am at Helena's family's humble country house, a couple of hours outside of Recife. Most of the family is sitting at a big table; Ednilson is cooking meat on the barbeque and the *cachaça* (a distilled spirit made from fermented sugarcane juice) is starting to flow. This is my chance to ask about the clip he had sent to his mother and he responds as follows:

If you've been following what's happening with the president of Brazil today, it's shameful. In Recife, it's a mess. You leave Recife to take the roads to [nearby city] João Pessoa, the streets are great [and] who did that was the army. It was the best period for Brazil, when a lot of things developed, Brazil grew, workers had rights, roads were built, hospitals were built. It's just that politicians don't want this, [they] want to steal.

Then Ednilson makes what seems to be a sarcastic remark: "And the military can't take power in Brazil anymore, because if they did it would be considered a coup. If you ask 99 percent of Brazilians, they would want the military to take over again in Brazil. That's why I sent that video [to Helena] to show that, in those days, those military days, then it was good."

Ednilson's claim about most Brazilians wanting the military generals to take power meets with immediate resistance from everyone else at the table, and he easily retracts the claim. This leads me to the perception that he is being *playful* here—intentionally provocative and not fully "serious." In the ensuing conversation, there's more talk of respect and the familiar themes of violence and security.

In those days there wasn't anarchy in the street. But nowadays, if a group of kids got me alone at night in the street, they could [beat me up]. Back in the military

dictatorship, this didn't happen—at ten o'clock everyone was asleep, you know? When we used to go to school, before entering the classroom we had to sing the national anthem, each with his hand on the other's shoulder. There was respect for the teacher.

There is a rather fascinating moment in the conversation where Ednilson deploys a notion of “regeneration”: “In those days of the military, people who were imprisoned . . . today are governors, they're the president, they're a congressman. So back in those days they got a prisoner to actually get there and regenerate.”

When I hear it, I find this zombie-rhetoric striking—Ednilson's impromptu attempt to understand someone like Dilma Rousseff, an ousted president who was once an imprisoned, tortured Marxist rebel who, at the time of this conversation, contemplated a return to national politics as a candidate for senator for Minas Gerais.⁸

As the conversation proceeds, I conclude that Ednilson does not actually want the military to take over. Rather, he is so fed up with corruption that he just craves a complete bulldozing of the entire political structure. It is a strong but nonspecific desire, and the image of military generals in control satisfies that craving (at least in the context of an informal conversation with friends and family involving alcohol).

The conversation lasts nearly three hours and involves several other family members and friends. Among these are Ednilson's older brother, Gabriel, the army sergeant. The only one of Helena's children who does not have children of his own, Gabriel articulates the strongest critique of the status quo and focuses on *moral crisis* as the principal source of the problem. “Brazil [has become] very soft [*frouxo*] and corrupt,” he tells me, and this has led not only to a moral unraveling but also to a weakening of ambition and goals among the younger generation. Gabriel recognizes that opportunities for education and work are limited for poor Brazilians. But rather than structural reforms (such as affirmative action) to recalibrate access to these forms of mobility, his concern is with the “softness” of today's youth, which leads him to the conviction that a more structured, hierarchical form of education is the key to cultivating the respect and discipline that Brazil so desperately needs.

Ednilson's wife, Luzimar, is also at the table, and she too laments the dissolution of Brazilian morality, making heavy use of the notion of “rigor” (*rigor*)—a solidity of moral values that no longer exists. The examples she gives almost always concern the behavior of today's teenagers, as when she exclaims: “These days the kids go out [looking like] however they want.” Here, Ednilson playfully responds, “Just look at Andreia's hair!” Andreia, who is not participating in this conversation, is the seventeen-year-old daughter of Helena's oldest daughter, Sônia. Andreia recently cut her hair very short, and other than her cousin Ewerton (and me), no one much likes the new look.

An hour or so into the conversation, a nonwhite, teenaged friend of the family named Felipe begins to contribute his opinions. As I pay closer attention, I notice that Felipe is following Gabriel's every word. In hindsight, he was, in this moment, in the midst of something akin to a conversion experience, frustrated especially by limited opportunities for himself in the formal work sector and with growing violence in Morro Doce, which in turn increased his interest in the proposal of making it easier for ordinary citizens to own guns to protect themselves. A few months later, Felipe joined the army and became one of Morro Doce's most public Bolsonaro supporters.

Reflections

Within the interactions making up this first ethnographic moment, several recurrent themes and logics stand out, beckoning further anthropological investigation and theorization. First, in statements by Helena, Gabriel, Ednilson, and Luzimar, there is manifest frustration over the dissolution of parental authority in part due to the disintegration of morality and respect among the younger generation and parents' inability to control their children outside of home space. Second, within expressions of frustration there is a strong tendency toward reductive binary logics. For example, permeating Ednilson's talk is an implicit contrast between *politicians* (who are opportunists, thieves, or "zombies") and the *military* (represented as the guarantor of rights, services, and security). There are also binary logics contrasting the present with *naquela época* (back then), when Ednilson *imagines* and his mother *remembers* life to have been better with respect to the moral rigor they—as well as Luzimar and Gabriel—find so lacking today. Third, there are different constructions of "corruption" invoked in these narratives, ranging from Helena's and Ednilson's emphases on the shameless behavior of politicians to Gabriel's more expansive construct encompassing moral disintegration as well. The complaints of Luzimar and Ednilson about today's youth also suggest a particular anxiety about the breakdown of gender norms insofar as they each express discontent with unmasculine men and—in the case of their niece with close-cropped hair—unfeminine women. Finally, the importance of gendered dimensions to emerging political affinities resurfaces with Felipe's contributions to the conversation, in so far as his call for easing restrictions on the possession of firearms among ordinary citizens can persuasively be read as a claim to a masculinity grounded in the man's capacity to protect his family and felt to be under threat in recent years.⁹

Moment 2: "Son, You Are My Greatest Gift" (January 2018)

January 28, 2018

Today, Ednilson posted to Facebook an image of João Figueiredo, a military-general president from the dictatorship years. Below the photo is the following quote:

The world will see what they will do with so much democracy. They'll throw the Nation into a quagmire of continental dimensions, where people will sink into corruption, into robbery, into murder until social chaos sets in, followed by an inevitable civil war. The people will cry out in the streets, for the Democracy we implanted in 1964.

Four people (none of them family members) “liked” the post, a tepid response given that Ednilson has nearly four hundred friends and usually gets a good response to his periodic postings. I knew that Ednilson’s despair and frustration about Brazil’s prospects had been growing lately; just four days ago, on January 24, an appeals court upheld a corruption conviction against the former president Lula, dashing his hopes to win a third term in office and raising chances that Lula—a cherished cultural figure among Northeasterners like Ednilson—could be behind bars when ballots are cast in October.

But then, something unexpected happens: two days later, on January 30, Ednilson learns that his son Ewerton has passed his college entrance exam on his first attempt—getting in through the affirmative action program initiated by the PT during the Lula years, which prioritizes nonwhite and poor applicants—and will soon begin an undergraduate course in graphic design at the city’s prestigious federal university. Everyone in the family knows what a bright and hardworking student Ewerton is, but I do not think anyone expected him to get in on the first attempt. Later in the day, Ednilson posts the following on Facebook:

Son, you are my greatest gift. Yesterday was a great day, for you and for all of us. It was a day of celebrating the achievement of someone who with great determination begins a new journey. It's the end of long days of [preparing for the] college entrance exam, the end of hard days of insomnia, anxiety, uncertainty and the beginning of preparation for a brilliant career! Your getting in was not by chance or by accident. It is the result of much effort, employed in your tireless quest for the realization of a dream. After these, many others will come. Congratulations for [passing] the entrance. Towards success, always!!!

Immediately following Ednilson’s post, the “likes,” “loves,” and “wows” pour in, with dozens of comments. The content of these comments divides along generational lines: People Ednilson’s age or older focus on the achievement as an example of God’s blessing and of a parent’s pride; Facebook friends Ewerton’s age are more muted—no surprise since many of them have either not yet heard for themselves or have received bad news.

Reflections

When I read Ednilson’s congratulatory post on Facebook, I had no doubt about how genuinely proud he was. I was struck, however, at the contrast with his earlier post of Figueredo’s prophetic quote. And yet, the apparent disconnect between these two posts—one overflowing with cynicism and implying that life might have been better under an authoritarian regime, the other a redemptive meritocracy narrative that hard work might actually lead one to a better future—characterizes the consciousness of millions of poor and working-class Brazilians today. To understand this consciousness, theoretical priority needs to be given to the particular forms of frustration, disillusionment, and voting patterns that, for “once-rising poor” Brazilians, accompany *dashed hopes after experiencing significant upward socioeconomic mobility*—the particular kind of resentment that surfaces when, after the awakening of hopes and plans for the future, those aspirations fall into deep precarity.

It is worth noting that Ednilson’s posting gives all credit to his son, making no mention of structural transformations that took place during the Lula years, which massively expanded access to public higher education for nonwhite people from low-income backgrounds. Given the informal communication norms of Facebook as a social-media platform, one would not expect reference to structural transformations in a father’s celebration of his son’s accomplishment. Nonetheless, in countless conversations with Ednilson and Luzimar over their son’s dedication and academic success to date, I have been surprised at the almost complete absence of acknowledgment of the PT’s efforts to expand access to higher education. In other moments, Luzimar has indicated clear awareness of the accomplishments of the period of PT rule, referring to that period as one of “equalizing years” when “everyone got more rights.” And yet, the possibility that these structural reforms might have something to do with her son’s recent achievement seems, more than ever, invisible to her and to the rest of the family. The apparent forgetting of the structural transformations that, in several respects, made the Pereira family’s mobility possible needs to be prioritized in anthropological research on political affinities of Brazil’s poor and working classes.

Moment 3: “Family and Politics” (August–September 2018)

The months leading up to the first-round elections in early October 2018 were turbulent for the Pereira family. On the one hand, life moved along as it always does, with some amazing achievements. Gabriel’s wife, Patricia, had just completed her doctorate in agricultural sciences, a huge accomplishment and one for which her husband has always been supportive. Ewerton was now in the second semester of his graphic design program, enjoying his studies and insertion into a new

community of peers. His cousin Andreia (the one who had been chided for cutting her hair) also passed the college entrance exam and had just begun a degree in economic sciences at the federal university in João Pessoa. Meanwhile, Ewerton's older brother, Carlinhos, had just completed his undergraduate degree in social sciences, winning honors for his thesis on the precarious work conditions for public school teachers. With these triumphs, Dona Helena was overflowing with pride for her grandchildren.

There was also, however, growing tension in the family. With the elections coming closer, Gabriel's support for Bolsonaro was more solid and more public than ever. Dona Helena's strong and oft-stated preference is to not "mix family and politics." And yet she does sometimes stir things up, as when in mid-September she posted to Facebook a seemingly sympathetic Bolsonaro clip (with no accompanying comment). One of her Facebook friends interpreted the post as a declaration of support for Bolsonaro, replying, "How great that you changed your vote, Helena. Congrats!" To this, she quickly responded:

I didn't change, I didn't even decide if I'm going to vote.¹⁰ Everyone promises and does nothing . . . and the government with its thieves are sinking our country. When Jair [Bolsonaro] makes these explanations . . . what I think is that nobody will be able to change [anything]. Unfortunately. I don't believe it and I do not like to see my family discussing politics or religion.

Around this time, the possibility of a politics-free family space seemed ever more elusive, and online social media was not helping. In August, Gabriel had begun to post pro-Bolsonaro slogans and images in the family's private WhatsApp group—the sacred space for announcing family events and accomplishments, for expressing love, and for posting an incessant flurry of well wishes for a good day, a good sleep, or triumph over life's challenges.¹¹ In response to their uncle's postings, Ewerton and his cousin Andreia flooded the group with counterattacks on Bolsonaro, which in turn elicited from Gabriel posted links to a range of online texts lamenting the breakdown of morality and respect in Brazilian society. The growing antagonism on WhatsApp was new terrain for the Pereira family, and it unsettled everyone. The virtual bickering in the group was a palpable contrast to the affection long characterizing Gabriel's relationship with his nephew and niece. Things got so heated that Helena—for the first time ever—removed herself from the group (though a couple days later she returned, evidently having made her statement). Around this time, Patricia posted links to several anti-Bolsonaro sites on her Facebook page (though never in the family WhatsApp group)—typically criticizing the candidate's disparaging comments about women. Her husband never once, however, responded negatively online to these clips.

Lurking in the shadows of Pereiras' growing familial disquiet was the matter of Ewerton's sexuality: he is gay. Ewerton is fully out to himself and to his close

friends. Indeed, by August he was several months into his first relationship with a classmate from the university. Ewerton is not, however, out to his family and has never openly discussed his sexuality with his mother or father. This is not to say that they, or the rest of the family, had not talked about it themselves. To the contrary, as long as I have known the Pereiras, speculation and anxiety around Ewerton's sexuality have popped up periodically in informal, discreet discussions around the house. For his part, Gabriel carries deep anxiety about the uncertain sexuality of his nephew. Ewerton's homosexuality—still an abject specter since no one speaks of it openly—is, in my view, the lightning rod linking Gabriel's interpretation of the problems facing Brazil today and his experience as the main provider for the extended Pereira family.

Nonnormative sexuality appears elsewhere in the Pereira family as well. Ewerton's cousin, Andreia, declared herself to be bisexual in mid-2017 and, according to Ewerton, received support from her Evangelical mother (though coupled with the request to see a psychiatrist as soon as possible). Further, Helena's half-brother, who lives in the nearby city of Paulista, is gay and lives with a lesbian couple, one member of which is a cousin (once removed) of Helena. Finally, I myself identify as gay and have mentioned my sexuality to nearly everyone in the family at one point or another. When I first chatted with Helena about this—a couple of days after moving in with her in 2017—she responded calmly enough, telling me that “it's a sin” but that she has little problem with *homossexuais* (homosexuals). Rather, her anxiety around the topic stems from her disapproval of effeminate men and her fear that she might lose a lesbian or gay relative to homophobic violence.

In short, nonnormative sexuality hovers in different corners of the extended Pereira family—sometimes named openly, but more typically left in the shadows undiscussed—and this has generated anxieties around proper gender comportment (as for Helena), about the possibility that harm might befall family members (also Helena), and about the moral unravelling homosexuality indicates (as for Gabriel). That the grandchildren who identify as gay and bisexual are exemplary in their educational achievements and treated with incessant affection by the rest of the family only creates a particular kind of background, dissociative ambivalence in the family dynamic.

Reflections

First, I underscore the obvious importance of online social media and digital communication platforms as interactive sites where political affinities take shape. Family WhatsApp groups (which by now are nearly universal in Brazil) are particularly important to examine in ethnographic research.¹² On the one hand, they represent a “public” of sorts—a seemingly open space for the sharing of information and opinions. By the same token, family WhatsApp groups are closed in the

strict sense (i.e., accessible only to family members) and are therefore vulnerable to becoming echo chambers. Since comfort and facility posting to the family's WhatsApp group varies among the Pereiras (with the grandchildren most nimble-fingered in their ability to text), styles of interactions within the group take on different forms than those in in-person encounters. As such, the group has come to represent a virtual sphere of interaction that family members "carry" with them (as they carry their cell phones) even when in each other's presence.

For the Pereiras, there is more at play here than concerns over the moral disintegration of Brazilian society. In my reading, Ewerton's sexuality also complicates the status of his membership in the family since as a gay man he will always be, in some ways, an outsider: he will never be fully *within* the family. This is unsettling to Helena, for whom the publics in which her grandson now circulates are unfamiliar, and to Gabriel, for whom Ewerton's homosexuality undermines his vision of himself as the guarantor of stability and order within the family. (Gabriel's awareness that Ewerton's successful access to higher education—and to the transgressive worlds the university campus might afford—was made possible through the affirmative action programs of the PT era perhaps fuels the anti-PT sentiment that complements his manifest support for Bolsonaro.) Moreover, there is a strong resonance between Gabriel's vision of his role within the family—as the guarantor of order and stability—and his desire for a national leader he believes will restore order and stability to Brazilian society.¹³ My reading of Gabriel's understanding of his unique role in the family of course has gendered dimensions and may reflect a longing for a masculinity grounded in a man's ability to provide for this family—a masculinity undermined with the expansion of public discourse around the rights of LGBT Brazilians emblematic of the PT years (and, of course, in conditions of deepening economic precarity). In this sense, the turn toward Bolsonaro can be seen as a move to restore a patriarchal gender order that fell into disarray during Brazil's "pink tide" period (Pinheiro-Machado 2019).

Final Considerations

In this account, I have sought to map out in an exploratory manner how informal conversations about Brazil's current situation, and of course the elections, have both reflected and affected cross-generational family dynamics. In my interpretations of how the Pereiras talk about the crisis, I have identified a certain congealing and dissolution of fixed political sentiment—moments when conflictual situations (e.g., disputes in the family's WhatsApp group) constitute "events" in the sense proposed by Deleuze and Guattari: "plateaus of intensity" through which sociopolitical identities and affinities become visible, and new dynamics between family members (e.g., a "virtual" antagonism between nephew and

uncle) take shape. Though the Pereiras invoke in their interactions different cultural vocabularies, different political discourses, and different personal future aspirations, there is a recurrent (and, I contend, widespread) characteristic I would like to reflect more on here. This is the sense of *feeling precarious* and “out of place.” Having been promised a future of continuing upward mobility—a promise now utterly stalled—families like Helena’s feel precarious with respect to opportunities for ongoing advancement, and therefore ambivalent and cynical toward the politicians and parties they understood to have promised a safe and secure future. Feelings of precarity permeate gendered and sexual subjectivities as well, as for men like Gabriel and Felipe, who long for a masculinity they perceive to be under threat, and, of course, for nonheterosexual members of the family like Ewerton and Andreia, who feel more frequently out of place when among their relatives.

For the Pereiras, a sense of precarity also manifests in the form of feeling *out of time*—that is, not fully at home in the cultural moment to which fourteen years of PT rule gave rise. Each in their own way, Helena, her children, and grandchildren occupy different “contemporaries” with different horizons for what is possible in life and, indeed, what might constitute a good life. Generation also figures prominently in how the family members refer to both military years and PT years. While beyond the scope of this ethnographic account, I speculate that these generational differences may reflect a failure of the educational system to promote critical dialogue about the dictatorship among Ednilson’s generation. In contrast, Ewerton’s generation seems, overall, more knowledgeable. In other words, the possibility that a YouTube clip entitled “Democratic Military Regime” might be viewed and circulated widely in a country less than four decades out of an authoritarian regime in which Brazilians lost all civil rights may reflect a failure of the postauthoritarian state to encourage cultural conversation and shared cultural memory regarding the military years (Atencio 2014).

This story ends as it began—with a “ping” from Dona Helena on Instant Messenger, which arrives unexpectedly a couple of days after the final election on October 28, 2018. It is an image-meme wishing a “blessed day for all of us.” I quickly respond, asking Helena how things have been since Sunday’s election and she replies: “I’m so happy! I’m so tired of my family bickering. But now things can get back to normal. For me, family is everything and I’m glad now I can get back to normal.”

As I am reading Helena’s words, a WhatsApp message arrives from Ewerton. With none of his customary greetings, his text says only, “These elections have forever changed my perception of people close to me.”

To understand the political affinities of poor and working-class Brazilians, as much attention needs to be given to women like Helena who manifest extreme disinterest in politics and men like Ewerton for whom the 2018 elections created more feelings of disconnect and out-of-placeness than solidarity within his family,

as it does to men like Gabriel who more obviously cultivate a “conservative subjectivity.” And, despite powerful invocations of “the family” as the grand unifier of conflict (as in the narratives of Gabriel, Helena, and Luzimar), anthropological attention shouldn’t lose sight of how the contrastive trajectories of the different branches of families shape the voicing of political opinion, sometimes bringing on a plateau of intensity in which sociopolitical identifications congeal and endure. The future of the Pereira family—and for Brazil, of course—meanwhile hangs in the balance.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges support for research and writing from the National Science Foundation (Division of Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, Cultural Anthropology Program, grant no. 1534606), the Brazil Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, the Fulbright Commission of Brazil, the School for Advanced Research, and the State University of New York at New Paltz. The author is grateful for the helpful comments on earlier versions of this analysis by Charles Klein, Sean Mitchell, Moisés Kopper, Russell Parry Scott, Brodwyn Fischer, Jeffery Rubin, Mark Ungar, Bryan McCann, Paulo Sotero, Anna Prusa, Lara Picanço, and Nick Burns.

Notes

¹This clip is available on YouTube. Gina Rocha, “Regime Democrático Militar,” YouTube video, posted June 6, 2017 (<https://youtu.be/1foxsUld3lM/>).

²Complete official election data were released by the Supreme Electoral Court through their website <http://divulga.tse.jus.br/oficial/index.html>, accessed January 15, 2019.

³I use pseudonyms for all individuals and neighborhoods mentioned in this account (excepting elected politicians).

⁴This account does not include family interactions between the first- and second-round elections on October 28, 2018.

⁵For more information about the broader study, see Klein, Mitchell, and Junge (2018).

⁶For anthropological and historical studies of the lifestyles and identities of Brazil’s longstanding, affluent middle class, see Owensby (1999) and O’Dougherty (2002). For broader discussions of the history and politics of Latin America’s middle-class populations of the twentieth century, see Jiménez (1999), Lomnitz-Adler (1993), and Muir (2015).

⁷For historical studies on the evolution of the category “working class” from the mid-twentieth century period under populist President Getúlio Vargas to the foundational period for the Workers’ Party in the late 1970s and 1980s, see Weinstein (1996) and French (1992), respectively. For focus working-class identities under Lula’s presidency, see French and Fortes (2012).

⁸Among many other examples of “regeneration” among prominent national politicians in Brazil, President Fernando Collor de Melo stands out, impeached in 1992 for personal-enrichment corruption and currently serving as senator for the state of Alagoas.

⁹This resonates with trenchant observations by Rosana Pinheiro-Machado about the links between popular support for Bolsonaro, antifeminism, and a broader crisis of masculinity in Brazil (Borges 2019; Pinheiro-Machado 2019).

¹⁰Voting in Brazil is compulsory for all literate citizens aged eighteen to seventy. Those who abstain are charged a penalty fee and denied access to a range of government resources.

¹¹I was not an internal member of the Pereira family's WhatsApp group; however, family members regularly shared postings with me (either showing the posts to me or describing them after the fact).

¹²For recent work on WhatsApp-based political discussions and family dynamics in Brazil, see Caetano et al. (2018), Camargo and Oliveira (2017), Oliveira and Barbalho (2017), and Silva (2017).

¹³For a historical account of moral panic around leftist subversion coalescing around sexuality and gender during the 1964–85 military regime, see Cowan (2016).

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