Gender and the Semiotics of Political Visibility in the Brazilian Northeast

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Introduction: political imaginaries on gender and the environment

Brazilian regionalist literature and popular narratives since colonial times have too often depicted the semi-arid environment as being too harsh for femininity. Women have been constructed with masculine traits, as is the case for a myriad of fictional characters and real historical figures. Perhaps the most prominent cases are Maria Bonita, wife and member of the band of Lampião, the most famous criminal of the Brazilian semi-arid at the beginning of the 20th century; and Luzia-Homens, a character from the novel by Domingos Olimpio (1903) depicted as muscular and with a hairy body, which caused local men to say that “[s]he doesn’t even look like a female woman” (Ibid.: 12). And there is the case of women who engaged in activities reserved to men, like Guimarães Rosa’s fictional character Diadorin (1956), or in real life such as Antônia Alves Feitosa, both of whom had their hair cut and dressed in men’s clothing trying to pass as vaqueiros (cowboys) or as combatant males (Duarte 2003).

In the field of formal politics, few women managed to obtain recognition as political leaders until the last decades of the 20th century; those who did usually played the role of being “tough landlords.” Those cases have been conveyed as exotic in local historical narratives, exerting an immense symbolic power over local cultural imaginaries throughout the 20th century (Queiroz and Holanda 1990). One remarkable example in the northeastern state of Ceará is that of Fideralina Lima, who lived during the second half of the nineteenth century. After the political murder of her father and the death of her husband, at the age of forty-two and with twelve children, she alone took control of the family lands and private army. Popular imaginary attributes to her a rosary of ears taken from the enemies she had ordered killed. Over her rosary of ears she supposedly prayed every night accompanied by her female slaves (Queiroz and Holanda 1990, Duarte 2003). Popular poet Zé Pinto chronicles the relationship between Fideralina and other powerful figures of the region:

O Belém manda no Crato
Padre Cícero em Joaizeiro
em Missão Velha, Antonio Rosa,
Barbalha é Neco Ribeiro,
das Lavras Fideralina
quer mandar no mundo inteiro.2

Belém rules in Crato
Father Cícero in Joaizeiro
in Missão Velha, Antonio Rosa,
Barbalha belongs to Neco Ribeiro,
From Lavras Fideralina
wants to rule the whole world.

1 This article is based on data collected in the state of Ceará, Northeast Brazil, during a series of visits to the region between 2002 and 2005 that amounted to more than eighteen months of fieldwork. Ana Laura Gamboggi offered insightful commentaries on many drafts of this article. Zulma Amador also provided constructive critical commentaries on an earlier version of this paper. This research was supported in part and at different moments by the National Research Council of Brazil (CNPq), by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, by the Ruth Landes Memorial Fund, by the International Research Institute for Climate and Society, and by the Comitas Institute for Anthropological Study. Quotes were translated by the author. Author’s contact: taddei@iri.columbia.edu.

2 This is a popular song from the northeastern state of Ceará, Brazil, which tells the story of Fideralina Lima and other powerful figures of the region.
In the rural world of the Brazilian Northeast, there seems to have been little space for women in traditional narratives on political leadership, if these women did not replicate behaviors locally seen as masculine. In this region, narratives on politics have historically had a close connection to narratives on family life, as politics is usually a family matter for local wealthy groups (Queiroz and Hollanda 1990; Lemenhe 1995, Marques 2002). Consequently, descriptions of local customs and everyday contexts that included depictions of women’s roles and traits, in popular culture narratives, followed the same pattern described above, although with two main variations. On one side stand narratives communicating that to live in such a harsh environment requires, from men and women alike, an unmatched degree of endurance and bravery. “Of these women a display of strength, courage and fearlessness is required in order to live in this place full of misadventure and suffering” (Duarte 2003: 236). From such narratives, possessing masculine characteristics becomes an inevitable outcome of such hard life. In the words of historian Albuquerque Júnior, the structuring idea in those narratives is that

Only a macho man could confront such hostile nature; only an exaggerated dose of virility in order to survive such a burning, dry, rough, arid, crude nature, characteristics that are identified with masculinity itself. For this reason, even the hinterland woman was masculinized, due to the brute contact with the hostile world that required bravery, fearlessness and resistance. Only the strong won in such a land. Northeastern masculinity was forged in the ceaseless fight against the elements, in which only the most potent, the largest bodied, the wiriest, men that never buckled, that never softened in front of any difficulty, could win. The weak, feeble, delicate, impotent, fragile, effeminate men had no place in such a land; they could not survive. To be macho was, well, the very nature of the Northeasterner (2003: 187).

At the other end of the spectrum, we find a type of narrative in which the natural environment, agency and gender are also related, but now the existence of feminine activities implicates the exclusion of women from the main economic arena. It is still implied here that in such a difficult natural environment, subsistence requires strong masculine action. But, differently from the case mentioned above, where women are seen as economically active and are portrayed as possessing masculine characteristics, now they are seen as feminine and portrayed as having no more than a marginal importance in the struggle for subsistence. Female economic activities are overshadowed by women’s sexual roles, and the myriad of subsistence activities carried out by women of all ages in this drought prone region is condensed, in popular narratives, to a romanticized portrayal of women doing renda (lacework) while waiting for their husbands to return home from their daily activities – men who are idealized by the stereotypes of the cowboy and of the fisherman, the two local icons of bravery in human resistance to the climate’s inclemency. This can be seen in the verses of a popular song that reads: “Ole lacer woman/Ole woman lace/You teach me how to lace/And I will teach you how to date”\(^2\). Recent anthropological and sociological works (Thayer 2001, Esmeraldo, Aragão and Pinheiro 2003) point to a strong presence of the ideological association between the biological and the social roles of women, even among the local female rural population, in which marriage and

\(^2\) In Duarte 2003: 241. Crato, Joaçaro, Missão Velha, Barbalha, and Lavras are some of Ceará’s municipalities; Belém, Father Cícero, Antonio Rosa, Neco Ribeiro and Fideralina are local bosses.

\(^3\) *Olê mulher rendeira/Olê mulher rendá/Tu me ensina a fazer rendá/Que eu te ensino a namorar.* *Renda* is typically seen as a female activity. *Namorar* in Portuguese is a word with many possible meanings, and it is not clear which is the one used in the song. Other meanings of *namorar* could be “to date” or “to go steady”; in some uses it can also refer to sexual intercourse.
motherhood are depicted as the natural and dominant structuring elements of adult female identity.

Contrasting with such trends in the ways women’s roles are represented in popular narratives, recent research documents the fact that women hold a central role in the production and distribution of subsistence goods forming part of the local economy in this part of Brazil. Women are the main nodes in many local social networks (Ramalho 1995, Thayer 2001: 246). They manage the household’s limited income and maximize it through accessing networks of relatives who previously migrated and now live in urban centers, and also other women in the community, local religious leaders, health service agents, and local politicians. These networks have been documented to be the most effective local drought mitigation mechanism available (Branco 1995, Lemos et al. 1999, Melo 2001, Fisher and Albuquerque 2002). Some services provided by state agencies, such as education and health services, are usually coordinated by local women.

The myth of the passive and subordinate woman is also challenged by the local statistics. In 1999, 26.4% of households in Ceará were headed by women (IPLANCE 2002: 31). Empirical observation points to the fact that these numbers are underestimated, as the amount of households with an absent male head, due to work related migration, is much higher. The **drought widows** constitute an already widely recognized phenomenon: women who stay home while their husbands and sons migrate in search of employment (Ramalho 1995, Melo 2001). These women are left with the responsibility of feeding the family and taking care of the property and of the animals in usually the worst possible climatic circumstances. In the words of Ramalho, these women are:

> Abandoned to their destiny, managing the home, taking care of what is “left”, seeing the weakened animals die of hunger, suffering with the kids crying because they do not have enough to eat, fighting with all their energy, feeding themselves with what was previously considered unacceptable for human consumption, organizing themselves, forming real excursions to ask the authorities from the nearest municipalities for help, reaching the point of looting markets (1995: 38).

Therefore there are deep contradictions between the ways the female universe is depicted in the dominant narrative genres and the vital importance of women’s activities in the local socioeconomic realm. Many of the features of the female ways of being in the region are invisible in dominant narratives, which, as noticed by several authors (Branco 1995, Ramalho 1995, Melo 2001, Thayer 2001, Fisher and Albuquerque 2002), has serious consequences in the realm of public policy, such as those directed towards drought mitigation, for instance.

In this paper, through the application of an analytical approach taken from linguistic anthropology, I will argue that the principal element behind this invisibility is the way in which local sociopolitical rituals and performances privilege and reproduce specific symbolic configurations, emphasizing those locally associated to masculinity and underplaying the ones linked to feminity. It is natural that all discourses simplify the complexity of the world; our intent is to suggest that through processes of semiotic regimentation, in what concerns collective ideas on gender in Northeast Brazil, this simplification takes place in a way that certain gendered configurations of the local political imaginary are sustained, despite being in blatant contradiction, in terms of content, with the diversity and importance of the activities not featured in those narratives, carried out by local women. Through this application of a socio-semiotic theory called **metapragmatics** (Silverstein 1993, 1998, Lucy 1993), I intend to contribute to the theoretical effort to understand how meaning-making practices are related to power configurations in the region, suggesting that the use of socio-economically effective strategies does not grant a group political visibility, if this group does not find ways to act upon the
semitic configuration of the context where actions will unfold, that is, upon the local dominant interpretive genres.

I will base my argument on the presentation of ethnographic data, with special focus on the analysis of a situation where the profound economic and political disorganization of a community, brought about by the displacement occasioned by the construction of a dam, also disorganized the reproduction of the semiotic regimentation of gender symbology in local sociopolitical dynamics, opening space for a network of female leaders to gain unprecedented visibility and decision power.

Gender, language and political performances

Political performances in many cultural traditions around the globe are constructed in order to index behavior perceived as masculine with leadership. According to Hill (2000), for instance, political campaigns in the U.S. are deliberately constructed and staged to index masculine language with leadership. She exemplifies through the case of George W. Bush's use of ‘street’ vernacular to dramatically represent himself as a thorough and determined political leader, and not a “wimp”. In Hill's analysis, the personalism that so strongly marks American political genres finds its performative efficiency in the local notions of personhood in the American cultural panorama.

In Northeast Brazil, leadership, masculinity, and personalism are also usually connected in both narratives and political rituals. As mentioned in the opening of this text, the climate is used as a structuring element in local imaginaries on leadership; the historical circumstance of the occupation of the region by people of European descent is another common theme. Local political power in the semi-arid northeastern hinterland has been based, from the late seventeenth century onwards, upon the holding of large land concessions given by the Portuguese crown, and on the creation of social networks based on patron-client relationships in which ‘pacified’ or ‘converted’ (i.e. catechized) natives, and some free individuals, exchanged work and loyalty for protection and land for agricultural use, in a political environment filled with family feuds and violent encounters between whites and ‘wild’ natives. African slaves also formed part of this social universe, although not to the same extent as in the sugar cane regions, in the eastern part of the Brazilian Northeast. In this way, political power has been based upon the social use a leader made of his property and resources at hand, including the capacity and ability to wage war and make use of violence. All this, associated to patriarchal trends in family and political organization brought from Portugal, became part of local political genres that enacted a connection between leadership, straightness of character, masculinity and violence.

Influenced by the work of Gilberto Freyre (1959), many authors argue that the socio-historical nexus for such narratives concerning the nature of Northeasterners lies in the fact that they were socially constructed by local traditional elites as a reaction to the their loss of prestige in national political arenas to southern elites, who historically have been identified with industrialism and modernity (Albuquerque Júnior 1999, 2003, 2004, Duarte 2003, Vojniak 2003). While southern industrial elites have historically been politically opposed to Northeastern rural oligarchies, for the Northeastern elites, “modern” ways of being in the world – such as transformations in clothing, in manners, in patterns of consumption and etiquette in the urban centers of the country - were seen as a de-virilization of society. In the face of a larger political order, in which the power of Northeastern patriarchal oligarchies are in frank decay, the “quintessential Northeasterner” – on the one hand, macho, rude and adapted to the harsh environment; on the other, honorable and faithful to local traditions - is constructed by local Northeastern elites as a conservative hero, “a regional type capable of standing up against historical ‘feminizing’ social transformations taking place since the beginning of the century, and that have been a menacing force to drive the region into decline” (Duarte 2003: 237). The feeling of marginalization subsists among northeastern elites, and is ratified by official statistics that show that, with a population of
25% of the country, the region concentrates half of the national population below the poverty line\(^4\); in the rural areas of Ceará, the average per capita income is under the national poverty line (IPLANCE 2002).

On the other hand, urbanization processes that took place throughout the 20\(^{th}\) century, the centralization of power in the federal government that weakened local oligarchies in the 1930s, diverse “modernization” programs designed and applied somewhat intermittently from the 1950s to present times, and social movements that organized segments of civil society, together helped to reduce the power of local rural oligarchies and isolated them to distant rural enclaves. But to a great extent the marks of masculinity, toughness and aggression have remained as important features of what is perhaps the most usual political genre in the Brazilian Northeast. Fernando Collor de Melo, for instance, elected president of Brazil in 1989, who originated from the northeastern state of Alagoas, repeated many times during his campaign that he was born with a “purple scrotum,” which is taken in his home state as a sign of masculinity, a future macho sign in a boy. From a different political group, Ciro Gomes, elected governor of Ceará in 1990, made extensive use of his image as an aggressive political leader, associating himself with the notion of productivity and administrative competence; his distinctive personality was rhetorically linked to his tendencies towards political centralization and power control, and presented as a personal virtue (Diógenes 2002: 113). He has demonstrated these characteristics many times throughout his political career, mainly through the use of aggressive language. For instance, in 1993 he attacked the former president of Brazil, José Sarney, saying he was a fruoco (a wimp); some months earlier, he had commented on separatist movements in the south of Brazil saying that “behind all discrimination there is a homosexual bias,” and in doing so generated contestatory manifestations from Brazilian gay movements (Ibid.: 117-118). Tasso Jereissati, a businessman and senator who was governor of the state of Ceará for three terms (1987-1990; 1995-1998; 1999-2002), is taken to be the personification of the political party he represents in the state, the PSDB, which is taken as the political organization of the local business elites, acting in favor of local industrialization. Although less vocal than Ciro Gomes, of whom he is considered to be the political “godfather,” Tasso Jereissati is seen by local political analysts as someone with extreme centralizing tendencies (El-Hay 2002: 105, Bonfim 2002: 58). In this sense, according to sociologist Diógenes, “local politics incipiently discuss political projects, and within this, personalism is a central element in the conduct of political party life” (2002: 116). Tasso and Ciro are the most successful political figures in Ceará since the end of the last period of military dictatorship, in the mid-1980s, having become prominent in national political arenas, the first as senator, and the latter as a minister under President Lula\(^5\).

The semiotic manipulation of meanings

Discourses have the capacity to represent, but also to regulate, other discourses (Bauman and Briggs 2000). Particular modes of producing and receiving texts are imbued with authority, and the legitimization of certain metadiscursive practices, at the expense of others, generate hierarchical rankings of discourse, something with the potential to deeply impact local social hierarchies. We are interested in this theoretical direction due to the way in which it throws light upon the mechanisms through which semiotic regimentation generates configurations of perceptibility that are strategically created and used in sociopolitical processes (Ortner 1973, Taddei 2005).

Silverstein introduced the term metasemiotic regimentation to account for the processes of stipulating, controlling or defining the contextual, indexical or pragmatic dimensions of the function of signs in discourses, through the construction of fixed interactional texts (Silverstein

\(^4\) Roughly US$1.50/day per capita in October 2005.

\(^5\) President Lula is himself a northeasterner from the state of Pernambuco.
According to this author, such regimentation processes may be related to institutionally enforced symbolic arrangements that regulate the range of acceptable interpretations for specific actions or events, which can be achieved through explicit metasemiotic framing (such as when one says that “the meaning of $A$ is $B$”), or by creating an implicit systematic representational world that privileges specific groups and silences others. Or, in the process of ideological regimentation, they may result from the creation of a relatively decontextualized atmosphere of perception, knowledge, and expectation in the world, through a metasemiotic discourse. In the words of Parmentier, “[w]hereas institutional regimentation controls the interpretability of specific discourse forms in context, ideological regimentation operates to create a presupposed cultural theory of semiosis” (1994: 128). Parmentier also suggested that these regimentation processes can be extrapolated from linguistic phenomena in order to also “describe normative constraints on social behavior and understanding deriving from sociopolitical forces” (Ibid.: 127).

One of the main mechanisms through which the regimentation process happens is the strategic use, by individuals and groups, of ideologies related to the social use of language, deploying them against relevant cultural backgrounds (Kroskrity 2000: 18). Returning to the discussion about genre narratives in Northeast Brazil, there we can see multi-dimensional regimentation processes operating a semiotic manipulation in the meaning of leadership, in a way that projects specific styles of action and of verbal performance against the links between gender and the environment in local imaginaries, resulting in the iconization of political leadership with masculinity, and of masculinity with aggression and violence.

This is complemented by another semiotic manipulation. Symbolization in local political life privileges charismatic individualistic leaders, something that has historically marked local rural oligarchies. Partisanship to local powerful families, themselves congregated around the cult of the personality of the leading patriarchal figure, is usually locally preferred over political organizations centered on more horizontal political institutions. In most municipalities of the hinterland, political parties are traditionally seen as just another way to organize the long history of rivalry between local powerful bosses belonging to elite families. In Morada Nova, for instance, one of the most important and rich municipalities of Ceará’s hinterland, political disputes historically involved the Girão and Castro families. Both families are symbolized by local birds: the first with the coruja, owl, and the latter with the caboré, another local wildfowl. When consulted, local individuals systematically associated themselves with one of the two families by referring to their animal counterparts. The political party each family represent in the municipality was often not remembered.

Therefore, it is the nodes within political networks, and not the links, that gain visibility through symbolization. Although vertical hierarchies can only exist due to the large networks of support structured around patron-client relationships, the political rituals through which symbols are created and reproduced – elections, the inauguration of new dams or other infrastructure works, and ceremonies for the distribution of drought relief funds, for example - are structured around good deeds and on the legitimacy of current leaders, and draw focus to them as individual figures. This projection of a feature of the local structure of elite family groups towards other

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6 Iconization is a process of semiotic manipulation proposed by Susan Gal and Judith Irvine, working upon Peircean semiotics and the metapragmatic theory (Gal and Irvine 1995, Gal 1998, Irvine 1998, Irvine and Gal 2000). It refers to the process by which linguistic differences, indexing social contrast, are reinterpreted as icons of these social contrasts (Gal 1998: 328). In this process, ideological representation fuses some of the group’s linguistic qualities with some supposed qualities of the group, and it is then perceived that one is the cause or inherent essentiality of the other. “Participant’s ideologies about language locate – and sometimes even generate – linguistic phenomena as part of, and as evidence for, what they believe to be systematic behavior, aesthetic, affective, and moral contrasts among the social groups indexed” (Ibid.: 328). The process includes other classes of phenomena that are not necessarily verbal, in which an iconic relationship may be established between certain behavioral patterns and represented essentializations.
levels of the political organization of society, as in the case of the networks of organized women, constitutes a process that Gal and Irvine called *recursiveness* (Gal 1998: 38).

These two characteristics of local political semiotics – the *iconization* of masculinity with legitimate styles of ruling, and the focus on personalistic leadership rather than on its networks of social support – frequently prevent the recognition of women’s social activities as also forming part of legitimate political organizations, turning them invisible to the local dominant genres, despite their fundamental importance in the social organization and survival of the local population, especially during times of hardship.

*Agentive use of cultural genres and the political efficacy of symbols*

Obviously we must avoid exaggerating the pervasiveness of the patriarchal ethos in the Brazilian semi-arid hinterland. Throughout the entire history of the region, and especially during the last three decades, women’s groups found ways to successfully perform in local social arenas either by acting through, or by exploiting disjunctures in the local cultural prescriptions and the symbolic ordering they reproduce (Thayer 2001); this adds to a growing body of ethnographic evidence that challenges totalizing conceptualizations of hegemony and domination (Scott 1985, 1990, Briggs 1998, Bond 2000, 2002). This phenomenon also suggests the existence of some degree of awareness regarding the ways symbols are played out in local arenas. What I want to point out, nevertheless, is that for the problem we have here, being able to pragmatically use the symbolic configurations of dominant discursive genres in strategic ways, does not necessarily grant visibility to those doing so. Two examples, taken from ethnographic data, provide interesting cases for discussion.

Silva, a local historian from the region of the Jaguaribe Valley, provides an example related to family relations and describing young women making agentive use of local cultural prescriptions that represented women in passive roles. He describes a strategy used by young couples, throughout the whole 20th century up to the 1980s, to avoid arranged marriages imposed by their families. The case refers to young men that, rejected by the family of their desired girls, enacted a performance locally known by the name of *carrying*, used as an attempt to soften the girls’ parents into accepting their union. Such cases were particularly usual when the young man was perceived to belong to a family of less wealth and prestige than that of the girl’s, as this frequently prompted opposition from the girl’s family. The performance mimics a kidnap: the young man takes the girl in his arms and carries her to the house of someone locally seen as a respectful citizen.

The couple planned their escape taking with them a respected citizen, leaving the girl in the house of another also respected citizen, with the hope of sensitizing her parents into accepting the marriage. It was a manner of exerting pressure upon her

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7 The semiotic process of *fractal recursivity* (or *recursiveness*) involves the projection of an opposition characteristic from one level of a relationship onto another. For example, intra-group distinction can be projected onto inter-group relations, or vice versa. “[T]he dichotomizing and partitioning process that was involved in some understood opposition (between groups or linguistic varieties, for example) recurs at other levels, creating either subcategories on each side of a contrast or supercategories that include both sides but oppose them to something else” (Gal 1998: 38).

8 In the aforementioned work of Gal and Irvine, this constitutes a process of *erasure*. Erasure refers to a situation in which an ideology simplifies a sociolinguistic field, by directing attention to specific parts of it, therefore rendering some linguistic forms or groups invisible, or recasts the image of their presence and practices to better fit an ideological scheme (Gal 1998). Irvine and Gal’s erasure is a semiotic operator that generates what Lyotard (1988) called *différant*, the situation in which there is no possible communication between two parties, because the terminology that one recognizes as being proper and with which they can identify is defined as illogical or as unintelligible by the other.
parents], because once the girl had been “carried” by a man and if the marriage did not follow, she ran the risk of being bad talked about by local society, becoming a good candidate for someone “left to be an auntie,” a popular expression used to describe girls who did not marry while young. Such girls rarely had another chance for marriage due to sexist prejudices (Silva 1999: 8-9).

The respected citizen to whose house the girl was taken had then the role of communicating to the parents of the girl that she had been *carried*. She would then stay there until her family explicitly manifested their approval of the marriage. Over time, when carrying started to lose its strong symbolic power over the social identity of young women, it became normal for parents to ask their daughter if the young man “owned her in some way,” meaning if he had forced sexual intercourse. If the answer was yes, then in order to preserve the girl’s and the family’s honor, there was no possible alternative other than marriage. According to Silva, girls usually participated integrally and actively in the planning and setting up of the whole *carrying* performance, in which they would play the role of a passive and subordinated female. Some girls even lied about the sexual intercourse, saying that it had happened when it had not.

The second example refers to the strategies used by women in formal political arenas. During fieldwork interviews, women in leading roles systematically expressed their anxieties when asked about their participation in formal political rituals. Mareleide Cavalcante, for instance, dean of a school in the Jaguaribe Valley, manifested her perception of the local organization of gender roles with the following words: “We end up being ‘massacred’ when we invade the masculine space.” Damiana Negreiros, a municipal councilwoman (*vereadora*) in the municipality of Jaguaribara, explains that in order to succeed within formal male-dominated political arenas, female politicians have to work a great deal backstage, constructing and manipulating political alliances inside but especially outside the institutional realm of formal politics. Only after “cooking” (that is, creating political space for) their projects through “articulating” (making alliances) they feel confident to present their projects in formal sessions of the local Municipal Council (*Câmara Municipal*). According to Damiana, that is a strategy used by many female politicians in order to avoid the verbal confrontations that mark the sessions of the council; through negotiations and the construction of alliances outside of the sessions, they manage to get their projects approved with a minimum of exposure to a communicative environment they perceive as being verbally aggressive.

Damiana therefore believes that there is a “female style” of political activity, which is growing in popular recognition and acceptance: “women understand each other better; they try to solve problems effectively, and are not restricted to formalities. Women look towards female politicians because their work has the additional characteristic of social work, and [the female population] appreciates that.” Jesus Jeso, a director of the Association of Neighbors of Jaguaribara shares a similar view: “Thank God there are more women in politics now. I believe they are more cautious, down-to-earth, have a greater aptitude for work… I see a great demand for women in politics due to their simplicity and the way in which they conduct their activities, with more dialogue.” Jeso’s reference to what he perceived as women’s “simplicity” in reality echoes Damiana’s point of view when she refers to women politicians not structuring their activities around the formalities that characterize local male-dominated political rituals.

A great deal of politics occurs through rituals, which constitute arenas of central importance for the cultural construction of authority and the dramatic display of the social lineament of power. According to Tambiah, the political power of rituals come from how they “symbolically and/or iconically represent the cosmos and at the same time indexically legitimize and realize social hierarchies” (1985: 155). But not everything that is political is subject to the same regimenting devices. Since, as we discussed above, many rituals are enactments of political ideologies that

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*“Mal falada”: denigrated.*
restrict the space of women, it is not surprising that most women in the political world of the Jaguaribe Valley have to instead create legitimacy for their roles as political leaders in other realms and times, as members of church groups, teachers, or health agents.

From the two cases above, we can see that the results of the agentive use made of the very cultural genres that restrict the visibility of female agency, in family spheres or in formal political rituals, tend to have pragmatic effects but do not create any effective pressure towards changing configurations of visibility. Using terms proposed by Bailey (1969), on both cases we see women making use of pragmatic strategies in order to use normative rules according to their interests. But these alternatives for action are explored without any attempt to transform the semiotic structuring of the formal rituals in question, that is, without any effect towards transforming the semiotic ordering of factors that define the major trends in the local interpretive environments.

Although the cases presented here are useful for making explicit the semiotic mechanisms we argue are part of the ways symbolic configurations are related to political processes in the region, we don’t mean to imply that there are not attempts to confront such a state of affairs. There have been numerous efforts towards explicitly changing local political rituals and social norms, with varied levels of effectiveness. The recent growth of the presence of left-wing political parties in traditionally conservative rural areas (mainly due to the success of the Worker’s Party in national arenas), plus the activities of the Rural Landless Movement (MST), the Land Pastoral Commission (CPT) of the Catholic Church, Caritas International, the Movement of those Affected by Dams (MAB), along with many feminist NGOs, are positively affecting the level of civil society organization in the Brazilian Northeast and creating space for the rise of female leaders. These organizations point to the deleterious effects of patriarchal practices (Costa, Kottak and Prado 1997, Thayer 2001, Kenny 2002), and have sown the seeds for some improvement of the political conditions of women in the semi-arid hinterlands. But naturally this is a slow process, and in this way, different political genres exist side by side within this complex region of Brazil. Although there have been recent marked advances in the rural northeast in fields like women’s health, education, legal protection, and social security, formal political structures linked to municipal government have changed little in comparison, and the association between masculinity and political leadership is still a dominant element in rural political imaginaries.

Economic development as symbolic disorganization: the case of Jaguaribara

During fieldwork, when analyzing different cases in which women held positions of political visibility in the Jaguaribe Valley, I noticed that the most prominent case of visible, non-masculinized female leadership, found in the community of Jaguaribara, had two remarkable features: first, that it was deeply linked to an exogenous element, the fact that the community had been deeply negatively affected by a governmental economic development project, having gone through a traumatic process of displacement due to the construction of a dam; second, exactly because of the way the displacement disorganized the local political life, for a relatively long period the usual political rituals lost their relevance for the political life of the town. Economic development programs have the power to destabilize, sometimes radically, established local practices (Fergusson 1990). Development encounters have had diverse impacts on different social groups in Northeast Brazil, and the reorganization of the economic spaces along capitalistic lines has usually caused wealth concentration and the disorganization of small scale agriculture in rural areas (Thayer 2001), in what some local authors call “a process of excluding modernization” (Elias 2002a, 2002b). In the remaining part of this text, I will present the

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10 In the words of Waterman, “the construction of resistance at any level that is predicated on structures of oppression or suppression at other levels or is contained through them is problematic from the start” (2001: 4).

11 I thank Ana Laura Gamboggi for having shared with me a great amount of her ethnographic material and analyses on the Jaguaribara case. For a complete account on the Jaguaribara case, see Gamboggi 2004.
aforementioned case of population displacement, in which the impact was much more dramatic than to other communities in rural Ceará. In this case, I interpret the concurrence of disorganization of the formal political structures of the community and the rise in visibility and importance of the network of local female leaders as evidence in support of the argument that a great deal of the local invisibility of female political organization is produced by the regimenting power of narratives enacted through formal political arenas.

In 1985, the State Government announced the plan to construct the Castanhão Reservoir, a massive dam with a capacity for 6.7 billion cubic meters of water, at the cost of two hundred million dollars, with funds provided mainly by the World Bank. The dam project was first presented in 1910, as a strategy to mitigate drought effects in the state, and since then it has become a highly controversial issue. The area to be covered by waters for the Castanhão Reservoir was sixty-two thousand hectares; one thousand and twenty buildings were located in areas to be flooded.

Jaguaribara, a small and predominantly rural municipality located on the right bank of the Jaguaribe River, in the eastern part of the state of Ceará, was located inside of the area to be covered by the waters for the Castanhão Reservoir. After the announcement of the dam construction, Jaguaribara experienced a dramatic process of political and economic disorganization. The fact that the city was to be flooded led to a radical reduction in the intensity of local economic life (Santos 1999: 16, IMOPEC 1995). Landlords were affected by the migration of their tenants, and because of this, their economic activities were destabilized. Although the local political elite held more assets, including houses in the state capital of Fortaleza, and received financial compensations for their lands, many members of this group left the local political arena, moving either to neighboring municipalities or to Fortaleza. According to Sister Bernardete, the highest local religious authority at that time, the arrival of the news of the construction of the dam “generated huge impoverishment because people would not take care of their property, wouldn’t fence their land, and wouldn’t cultivate it, as everyone knew that the waters were coming.” The town was disconnected from long distance telephone systems; banks stopped giving loans to local producers. As a local poet Edberto Carneiro chronicles (Associação dos Moradores de Jaguaribara 1998: 27):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Jaguaribara parou} & \quad \text{Jaguaribara was paralyzed} \\
\text{a sua evolução} & \quad \text{in its evolution} \\
\text{pedreiro passando fome} & \quad \text{a bricklayer suffering from hunger} \\
\text{por não ter mais construção} & \quad \text{because there is no more construction} \\
\text{só tinha no pensamento} & \quad \text{he only has his mind full of} \\
\text{incerteza e desilusão} & \quad \text{uncertainty and disillusionment}
\end{align*}
\]

The dam project generated fierce opposition from the local population. At the same time, the state was flooded with intense official propaganda sponsored by the government, with the intention of legitimatizing the dam’s construction before the state’s public opinion. Official rhetoric presented the project as a wonder of modernity: the Castanhão Reservoir was referred

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12 Most of the critics of the project point to the fact that the main problem in this region of Brazil is not lack of accumulated water, but the social distribution of water resources, which tend to benefit the wealthy at the expense of the poorer sectors of the population. For more details see Taddei 2005.

13 In 1999, the total population of Jaguaribara was eight thousand and fifty-four; 53% of which lived in rural areas. Most rural houses were made of adobe. The urban center was organized around a cathedral in the central square, and other public buildings were located close by.

14 The local priest had been relocated to positions in more important surrounding municipalities. Mass was given on the third Sunday of each month, directed by priests who came from other parishes.
to as “the redemption of the semi-arid”, and Nova Jaguaribara, a new town to which the population to be displaced would be transferred, was labeled the “Brasilia of the hinterland,” making reference to the modernist national capital planned by architect Oscar Niemeyer in the 1950s. During the official inauguration of the new town on September 25th, 2001, Lúcio Alcântara, a senator from the state of Ceará 15 said that the Castanhão Reservoir was “a great achievement for the population of Nova Jaguaribara and for all the people of Ceará, because it represents one of the main solutions for areas that suffer from drought in the interior of the state” 16.

In political arenas, the government adopted the strategy of recognizing as legitimate only those arguments grounded in technical or development discourses. As is usual in small and poor states in Latin America, the majority of technicians and engineers in the water infrastructure sector work directly or indirectly for the government. So, at the same time that Jaguaribara was implicitly represented as backward, vulnerable, underdeveloped and in need of “modernity”, the communicational arena in which the conflict unfolded was structured in a way that the discursive forms of the community were dismissed as not relevant for the problem at hand 17.

In such circumstances, the community had to find new ways to resist and organize themselves against the destruction of their town. At first, community leaders relied heavily on local mayors for support and access to state government networks. However, it was later realized that the instability of local political institutions was overcoming any advances gained with considerable effort over time: local politicians, the majority of whom was linked to the political party in control of the state government, saw themselves in a difficult situation, and distanced themselves from the conflict. Political obligations held by local politicians with the state government, as a result of clientelistic relations 18, had them politically immobilized and compromised their roles as representatives of the community.

After unsuccessful moves, the community, led by Sister Bernardete, gave up on using local politicians to gain access to the vertical political hierarchies of the state, and decided for a more horizontal strategy of community organization, by linking themselves with organized social movements. In 1987, Sister Bernardete made contact with IMOPEC – the Institute for the Memory of the People of Ceará, an NGO located in Fortaleza, headed by female historian Célia Guabiraba. Guided by IMOPEC, the community founded the Association of Neighbors of Jaguaribara. The Association brought together the main local community leaders, most of them women. Between 1989 and 1993, of the fourteen seats held by the board of directors of the Association (in two terms of seven members), only three were occupied by men. In contrast during this same time, of eleven individuals who occupied seats in the Municipal Council, only one was female.

Between 1985 and 1995, it was hoped that, through negotiations and protest, the government’s decision to construct the reservoir would be reverted. Then, on November 16th, 1995, the construction of the dam began, signaling a blow to the community in the conflict.

In 1998, in association with IMOPEC, the Association of Neighbors created the House of Memory (Casa da Memória), a cultural institution that houses an exhibition of objects that represent the culture and traditions of the city that was to be destroyed. In terms of political significance, the formalization of the House as an institution, as is also the case for the Association of Neighbors, was a symbolic move with the intention of sending to the government the message that the community leaders wanted to play the game in arenas restricted to formal institutions. Representatives of the Association became members in many local commissions,

15 He later became state governor in the 2002 elections.
17 Eventually some engineers became associated with the cause of Jaguaribara. See for instance Borges 1999.
such as the Commission for the Allocation of Water in the Jaguaribe Valley as well as other local water committees. As strategy, though, it did not bring major results for the case of the community.

But the House of Memory also played a different role. There, IMOPEC started to organize artistic workshops, which included acting, photography, literature and poetry, and regional dance. These pedagogical activities were directed towards children and teenagers in order to help them cope with the traumatic experience of displacement. The formation of a local theater group channeled the creativity of local writers, who wrote a number of plays about the trauma and suffering caused by the displacement. Soon the House of Memory became a center for narrative production concerning the dam, the destruction of the old town, and anxieties emanating from the construction of the new one, which was being planned with very little consultation with the community (Gamboggi 2004). IMOPEC published and distributed plays and poems created by local artists; local historians like Silva and Santos received incentives to publish their works (Associação dos Moradores de Jaguaribara/Casa da Memória 1998, Santos 1999, Silva 1999).

In Jaguaribara, many experienced the contradiction between the community’s perception of their displacement and the content and intensity of the official propaganda as a kind of semiotic violence, fruit of a disguised economic model structured to work as a form of internal colonialism. This experience created the need to form some kind of resistance against these official semiotic regimentation mechanisms. Conscious that they had limited chances to be heard in arenas dominated by technical or development discourses, the group congregated around Sister Bernardete decided to reach public opinion through a different strategy. The cultural production of the House of Memory was then transformed into weapon in a war of representations concerning the dam. An important play written by local authors and entitled Jaguaribara Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow (in Silva 1999: 70), for instance, was performed a number of times around the state, with the goal of presenting a different take on the nature and effects of the dam.

Taking advantage of the visibility created by the recurrence in which the Castanhão Reservoir was discussed by the local media, these communicative efforts were successful in calling the attention, not only of regional TV stations, but also of the two major daily newspapers in the state, which repeatedly ran stories on the community’s displacement throughout the years. The national press eventually reported on the suffering of the community.

The visibility achieved through the media put Sister Bernardete and the leaders of the Association of Neighbors in a new political stand, giving them a better position to negotiate. At that moment, although the formal political structures of the municipality were officially working, the most relevant local political issue, the fate of the community, was being discussed by other individuals and in other places: governmental officials and the community leaders associated around Sister Bernardete, in a large number of meetings that took place in Fortaleza and in Jaguaribara. Sister Bernardete had previously established contacts with the Brazilian Movement of People Affected by Dam Construction (MAB), and organized commissions to visit communities that had also suffered displacement due to dam construction and learn from their experiences how to best manage the situation. The Association of Neighbors then created a list of demands, of which the most important were: 1) the church in the “new” town should be a precise copy of the church to be destroyed in the “old” town; 2) the spatial distribution of families had to be maintained so that the same neighbors would be retained in the new town; 3) each family would closely supervise the exhumation of their deceased relatives, and their transfer to the new cemetery; 4) town improvements should be evident in the new project, such as the inclusion of a court house. Community members also wanted autonomy to decide the geographical location of the new town (Gamboggi 2004).

After many unsuccessful attempts, the government transferred the task of surveying the inhabitants of the municipality to the Association of Neighbors, which did it through the established networks of its members. The Association also gained the right to establish the
financial compensation scheme for the lands to be flooded, and in terms of the location of the new town, the community was asked to choose one of three options proposed by the state government.

On July 25th, 2001, the population of the old town started being moved to the new location. Government tractors destroyed the buildings which formed part of the old town due to fear of re-occupation. Images of saints were transported in a fifty kilometer-long procession from the old to the new church. Human remains were exhumated and moved to the new cemetery.

The intense rains that fell throughout the region in January 2004 caused the most extreme flooding that has been documented in historical records for the Jaguaribe Valley. The Castanhão Reservoir’s water level rose much faster than predicted. Emergency schemes were developed to rescue isolated people and animals caught by surprise. Although there is no record of human deaths, a large number of animals drowned. The ruins of the old town of Jaguaribara were submerged much sooner than state planners and local population had expected.

In summary, the political and economic disorganization caused by the displacement also led to disorganization in the political structures responsible for reproducing semiotic regimentation of established gender role ideologies. Sister Bernardete, along with Célia Guabiraba from IMOPEC in Fortaleza – both of whom are to some extent “outsiders” of the local female population subjected to that semiotic regimentation19 - took advantage of this situation by exploring the fissures and disjunctures in the state’s political universe, and managed to extend their spheres of influence to areas previously reserved for formal politics. That is, with support and inspiration from Guabiraba, Sister Bernardete and the group of individuals who directed the Association of Neighbors of Jaguaribara were allocated the role of being the individuals appointed to speak on behalf of the community, in what was probably the most important moment in the history of the town: the negotiations that defined its destiny. As a result, despite the high level of suffering and the sense of loss caused by displacement, the members of the Association of Neighbors of Jaguaribara feel that, to a degree, they avoided reproduction in their community of the stories of brutal negligence by state planners that tend to fill bibliographies concerning population displacements resulting from dam construction.

Concluding remarks

In this paper I have described ways through which dominant political genres in the Brazilian Northeast have encoded in them specific ways of understanding the role of women in society and politics, and how this is related to the meaning making qualities of political processes. I have argued that the iconization of masculinity with legitimate styles of ruling, and the emphasis on personalistic leadership rather than on its networks of social support, frequently prevent the recognition of women’s social activities – marked by more horizontal organizational patterns - as also forming part of legitimate political organizations, what make them invisible20 to the local dominant genres, despite their importance in the socioeconomic organization and survival of the local population.

19 Sister Bernardete is also not affected by other kinds of regimentation, as those related to the role of women in the local patterns of family organization, which can have a negative impact upon women’s participation in social movements. See Thayer 2001.

20 In the aforementioned work of Gal and Irvine, this constitutes a process of *erasure*. Erasure refers to a situation in which an ideology simplifies a sociolinguistic field, by directing attention to specific parts of it, therefore rendering some linguistic forms or groups invisible, or recasts the image of their presence and practices to better fit an ideological scheme (Gal 1998). Irvine and Gal’s erasure is a semiotic operator that generates what Lyotard (1988) called *différend*, the situation in which there is no possible communication between two parties, because the terminology that one recognizes as being proper and with which they can identify is defined as illogical or as unintelligible by the other.
Semiotic operators, and the way in which they can transform categorical distinctions and collective perceptions of time, space, and group borders, can produce the naturalization (or misrecognition; Bourdieu 1989) of discursive authority, and the achievement of political legitimation through the use of specific strategic representations in sociopolitical processes (Gal 1998). On the other hand, due to the metasemiotic capacities of language, these processes of symbolic regimentation and semiotic manipulations can become the object of attention and contestation (Ibid.: 329). This relates to cases where women act strategically and in agentive ways inside symbolic fields dominated by gendered ideologies that portray them as passive or subordinate. Yet it is important to note that effective action is not necessarily visible action, and the reproduction (or transformation) of political imaginaries depends on a semiotics of visibility enacted through local rituals. For that reason, in many cases, successful pragmatic usage of fractures and disjunctures in those gender ideologies have little power in the transformation of configurations of visibility, if they don’t act towards transforming the semiotic ordering of factors that define the major trends in the local interpretive environments, that is, if they don’t gain some control over dominant meaning making practices and their metasemiotic organization.

The case of Jaguaribara exemplifies this, although in an unexpected way: what transformed the metasemiotic organization of local political practices, and with them configurations of political visibility, was the radical disorganization of the local politics by the displacement of the population from the municipality. We take the concurrence of that with the increase of a network of female community leaders to the most politically relevant position during the displacement process as evidence for our argument: both phenomena are part of the same process, in which the enactment of ideologies in gender roles and the symbolic regimentation they produce were dismantled with the disorganization of local political rituals, opening space for local female leadership to advance over territory previously understood as “masculine”21.

As a conclusion, the analyses presented here suggest that when the political processes are dependent upon symbolic configurations produced by metapragmatic regimentations, successful dissidence requires more than strategic participation in the pragmatic arena: it is possible only if, by chance or design, one can find the means to act on metasemiotic levels.

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21 A question that remains is whether the projection achieved by Sister Bernardete and the leaders congregated at the Association of Neighbors will have long lasting impacts on the formal political rituals of Nova Jaguaribara. The community leaders decided not to run for office at the 2002 municipal elections; but for the first time in the history of the municipality, Jaguaribara elected a woman for mayor, Ms. Maria Emilia Diógenes Granja, filiated to the Socialist Party (PSB). The number of councilwoman at the Municipal Council also grew from 18% to 33%, reaching the number of three out of a total of nine seats.


