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DISQUIET: WORDS, TIMES AND RELATIONS ALONG AN ETHNOGRAPHIC TRAJECTORY*

GROPING FOR WORDS

For many of us, the impact of Veena Das's work extends beyond what we could define as a strictly intellectual inspiration. The way in which certain words, images and concepts perturb us long after our contact with them tells us that the relationships we establish with her texts are not only based on the comfort derived from the feeling of having understood something. Rather, it seems that something lingers that continues to resonate, uneasy and restless. Scenes already described are rethought, known words appear lifeless, automatic, bloodless. While the contact with her work offers us analytic paths, languages and methodological alternatives, it also immerses us in a kind of permanent disquiet over the precariousness of our words to cope with, in whatever way possible, that which is never completely expressed by them.

In a review of an article by Das written many years ago, Cavell offered the author herself the possibility of seeing “the world and [her] place in it” in another way (Das, 2020: 307). As she tells us, Cavell focuses in detail on a passage where she speaks about just how often the language of pain had eluded her. The problem was not the enormity of pain but the absence of a language that could enable the social sciences to “become textual bodies on which this pain is written” (Das, 2020: 308). Cavell (quoted in Das, 2020: 308) suggests, then, that to break this silence and render it intelligible to her peers, she needed to “to beg, borrow, steal, and invent words”.

Tolerating obscurity openly, exposing something of this way of groping one's way around words or interrupting the narrative with the observation that,

presently, it is impossible to continue any further, speak to us of a way of understanding ethnography. Rather than a quest to investigate something completely alien to us, ethnography is constructed in the work of “being-with” (Das, 2020: 308). Hence, it demands the attempt to confect territories of intimacy that nonetheless never cease to present surprises and moments of profound incomprehension. Time is undoubtedly a crucial factor in this process insofar as it simultaneously demands and enables the exercise of what she calls critical patience (Das, 2010, 2012). Nothing, though, is pre-given in this idea of time, since its meanings, rhythms, weavings and presences manifest themselves in people’s lives in subtle and varied ways.

The proposal explored here combines, perhaps in an overly elusive way at some points, three vectors of interrogation and inspiration presented to me by her work. Many others would be possible, but I have chosen to take *words*, *time* and *relations* as guides to explore the kind of permanent unease that accompanies ethnographic work. My choice responds, in part, to the seemingly obvious fact that all ethnographies must reflect on these three major themes or vectors of questions. However, the way in which Das’s work inspires and provokes us to look at each of them has nothing obvious about it.

In the paragraph that closes *Life and words*, Das tells us just how much keeping together the words of Cavell and Manjit, her interlocutor of many years, feeling the connection between their lives, configured her anthropological mode of devotion to the world (Das, 2007: 221). In *Textures of the ordinary*, meanwhile, she presents us with different dimensions of what might be called the task of retelling a story (Das, 2020: XI). The search for words thus speaks to us of ethical and spiritual choices that orient, convoke and implicate our position in the world. The comprehension that life takes place in language (Das, 2020: XIII) makes evident, of course, that our endeavour goes far beyond words. But for those of us who rely on them to be able to tell something about the world – and to make worlds in this process of telling – words are the terrain where we draw support, venture out and, frequently, stumble in myriad ways.

To beg for words, then, to use Cavell’s formula, seems to highlight both the insufficiency of the words that we have at hand to deal with pain and their treacherous and deceptive potential. It is not a question of finding the precise term for some situation but of clearing pathways to access that which gives life to words (Das, 2007: 6, 2020: 4). If we beg for them, it is precisely because they are not ours a priori: rather we appropriate them through and amid the relations that we establish. It is in the sharing of histories, times, gestures, shocks, deceptions and moments of exhaustion that we can purchase a loose hold on the life that circulates in them.

In this sense, the precariousness that marks our relationship to what is told, shown or subtly indicated to us by our interlocutors is not a failure to be overcome. Our task is not one of scrutiny but of openness to a field of possible

meanings. How do we become sensitive to the details that may matter (Das, 2020: 2)? In what way may an unexpected phrase capture our attention and carry on disturbing us for years, as though any attempt to decodify it merely produces ever more frozen narratives (Das, 2007, 2020)? How do we keep track of language's capacity to poison relations and forms of life? Or, inversely, how do we experience the capacity possessed by relations to absorb this poison in their concrete and everyday unfoldings (Das, 2021)?

These and other questions presented by Das's work have the effect of instilling certain distrust in relation to any overly totalizing assertiveness. Hesitancy may indeed be a valuable resource when dealing with contexts profoundly marked by situations experienced as involving considerable violence and suffering.¹ To hesitate is, in a certain form, a tribute we pay to the inevitable incomprehension both of the experiences shared with us and of the way in which these become transformed, absorbed and expressed in lived life over time.

In the disquieting dialogue with her formulations, I constructed this text in the form of a temporal slippage between a situation that occurred many years ago and a current conversation, based on a relatively long relation of interlocution. It explores the question of the forms of telling and retelling stories, along with some of the implications of what we think that we comprehend, or not, in different moments of an ethnographic trajectory. The two situations outlined in the following sections pertain to the same universe of research and conviviality in which I have participated over the past decade, formed by the activities of movements of relatives of the victims of police killings in Rio de Janeiro. In each situation, I strive to remain attentive to the various temporal dimensions intrinsic to ethnographic activity, but also to the role played by fleeting moments and details that rerouted the directions taken by my attention (Das, 2018, 2020). In the final section of the article, I venture some further connections between these two situations, albeit without the intention of enclosing them within any single basic argument or within the same logical thread.

SHRAPNEL: THE WORD THAT BURSTS

It was already late at night when, summoned to return to the courtroom where the jury had been deliberating on the killing of Marcel,² we heard the guilty verdict. We were a group of 15 to 20 people following the case along with Claudia, Marcel's mother. The trial had lasted many hours. The young man had been killed by two police officers ten years previously in the favela where he lived. A first trial had taken place some years earlier, resulting in sentencing of the officers and the expulsion of both from the Military Police. Following appeals, a new trial, centred on just one of the officers, had taken place that day.

From what was ascertained from the testimony of one witness, Marcel had been killed for refusing to pay *arrego* (a bribe) to the police, who had a short time before successfully extorted money from a youth who belonged to the

local group responsible for drug trafficking. Unlike the latter, Marcel did not belong to the group and was not involved in trafficking, leading to his execution with a rifle shot to the heart. After a period of deep depression, Claudia had assumed the task of collecting every possible piece of evidence on the crime. Her combative posture, vehemence and the poignancy of her speech and determination over the years composed a perfect portrait of the *guerreira*, the female warrior and woman-mother who fights tenaciously for justice. This portrait also possessed the singularity of culminating in an extremely rare victory, namely the condemnation of the accused, attributed in an especially emphatic way to Claudia and her determined compilation of the evidence needed for the denunciation to be substantiated.

On hearing the long-awaited guilty verdict, we immediately gathered around her to celebrate. Claudia, though, exploded with rage: “Eight years? That’s what he gets for taking my son’s life? Eight years? I’m the one imprisoned, I’m going to spend the rest of my life without my son, I’m the one imprisoned!”

This scene took place almost a decade ago. It was recorded in my field notebook and formed part of a talk I gave at a seminar the following year. However, I did not actually include it in any published text or argument. I could say that it remained dormant in its own maladjustment. Here, therefore, I wish to set out from various different dimensions of this maladjustment in order to reflect on it – and on my inability to accommodate it – in dialogue with some of Veena Das’s propositions.

The first plane of discomfort that it elicits is related, of course, to our expectations concerning such a rare legal victory in a trial of police officers for murder. As a rule, these trials are marked by an immense asymmetry in the truth value attributed to the evidence of police and non-police, especially residents of favelas. This asymmetry has a legal weight since the testimony of police officers enjoys the status of a ‘presumed truth.’ Additionally, juries tend to agree with many, if not all, of the justifications given for the killings, sharing the premise that envisages favela areas as territories of violence, lawlessness and criminality. This view ends up providing a spectrum of possibilities for justifying armed police actions and their often lethal outcomes.

At one end of the spectrum, the victim might be a member of an armed group, having exchanged fire with the police, confirming the version that appears at the start of most of the trials with the record of an *auto de resistência*, an ‘act of resisting arrest.’³ At a mid-point on the spectrum, the victim’s membership of ‘trafficking’ is not openly asserted but is nonetheless strategically deployed as a cloud of suspicion, anchored in a racist vector on the similitude of bodies and ways of life. Finally, when sustaining this zone of suspicion proves impossible, explanation for the impossibility of distinguishing between guilty and innocent falls on the favela territory itself. Mobilizing another racist vector, here it is not the bodies and lives that present themselves as indistinct a pri-

ori, but the territory that makes them so. As a consequence, the semantic field of the confrontation acquires momentum, the war in adverse and – why not? – lush and wild terrain (Leite, 2012; Fernandes, 2021).

In addition, the trials last many years, amid which dense rhythms and forms of waiting develop. Here waiting takes the form either of the treacherous manoeuvring of the more powerful, exposing the affinities between the judicial and police machinery, or something akin to a test or ordeal, a challenge to tenacity and the physical and moral abrasions imposed by the *struggle* (Vianna, 2015). For all these reasons, reaching the end of a trial and, moreover, a trial that concludes with a guilty verdict is something perceived as an exceptional political and moral triumph. A triumph materialized in the *mother*, the figure towards which we all converged at that emblematic moment.

Her reaction made us stop in our tracks. An ethical and aesthetic short circuit had exploded: instead of the expected triumph over weariness and injustice, we witnessed the emergence of a kind of deep moral exhaustion. Anger, such an important tone in diverse public discourses of *mothers*, did not operate as fuel for an action of confrontation or as part of an aesthetic of denunciation and accusation. Rage and exhaustion seemed to intersect precisely in the revelation of this unexpected poison, the fact that she felt no release: “I’m the one imprisoned!”

The density of this statement led me to approach it like shrapnel, an artifact of interpellation that, rather than soliciting an argumentatively solid or morally strengthening response, has the primordial quality of injuring those participating in a scene and the etiquette of the scene itself. The inversion of the condition of imprisonment, which switches from the condemned police officer to the mother, is accompanied by the rupture of the script of celebration. The shrapnel interrupts the collective movement, instils a degree of perplexity, and temporarily suspends the rules of language. After a few minutes of general bewilderment, this condition began to be reversed through comforting remarks and the attempt to offer counter-arguments, emphasizing the victory obtained and its importance as a ‘landmark’ in the painful confrontation of the violence perpetrated by police officers. However, the discomfort induced by her irruption of words continued to hover in the air in some form. This, at least, is the memory that I retain many years later.

Slightly differently to the fragments that we resort to in our writings, which relate to the incompleteness of what we see and what we can transmit, these kinds of shrapnel primarily impel us to acknowledge our temporary incapacity to respond or comprehend. What constitutes them – a phrase, a gesture – is marked by the astonishment that, keenly felt at the moment of interaction, is not entirely dissipated over time, like a splinter that demands attention.⁴ A first way of understanding this shrapnel relates to the demands that open up in a language game, in the Wittgensteinian terms so inspiringly reworked by Das.

Less than an affirmation, the shrapnel-utterance that I invoke here is an invitation to engagement or, more precisely still, an ethical and aesthetic challenge. Beyond the inversion of who is imprisoned and who is free, the shrapnel forced us to move into this unknown terrain – namely, the impossibility of finding some kind of effective satisfaction in the court verdict, one for which she had fought so hard. In this sense, its corrosive potential expanded well beyond that specific situation, haunting the collective figure of the *mother* who obstinately seeks justice as form of honouring the dead son and of protecting other black youths and favela dwellers targeted by the same policies of massacre.

So what did this corrosion contain? While Claudia's words composed a poetics of the impossibility of justice, this did not occur in just any context or before just any interlocutors. The surprise caused by the rupture of certain expectations could, in some form, be reaccommodated through the conditions present in the specific situation as a whole and in the relations sustaining it. Returning to Austin's formulations concerning the felicity or infelicity of speech acts, Das reminds us of the extent to which such conditions involve conventional procedures to spoken words, as well as to who pronounces and receives them (Das, 2020: 61; Austin, 1962). Nothing, though, is certain a priori since the anti-conventional quality of the speech act questions the trust one may place in relations. The weave that connects words, the moment in which they are spoken, who says them and who receives them, form the same ethical fabric. The possibility that the latter is not ruptured resides in the trust that the words spoken will indeed be received by those to whom they were offered, based on the "sensibilities that have been forged by participation in forms of life" (Das, 2020: 65).

Those of us in the courtroom were present, then, in the condition not of a generic public audience but as people who could received what was spoken in a deeply personal way. As Das (2020: 136) writes:

The world counts – it has a say. However, how the world counts is somewhat different when we think of the first person as taking a third-person stance and a second-person stance. In the first case, the facts that are to be taken account of are 'impersonal' facts: I am a person among other persons or I am dependent on the public nature of the words that are the only ones I have at hand. In the second case, I seek someone who can receive the words that give testimony to myself.

The peculiar intimacy that is projected in the second-person stance is thus directly related to the nature that the words assume as testimony and, consequently, to the self that is reconfigured in the scene. It is this grammatical person, as Das (2020: 21) tells us, that allows something of the opacity of the self to be revealed.

Taking inspiration from this insight, I propose that what is revealed there can be better comprehended as a refraction of the figure of the *warrior* (*guer-*

reira), a form that encompasses and delimits a repertoire of collective action, but also configures part of a deeply personal script of mourning. For this reason, instead of the more predictable response to the public figure of the *warrior*, commemorating the verdict of the trial, we saw its intimate reverse come to the surface, imbued with a suffering capable of casting doubt on the meaning of the legal sentence itself.

Before advancing further in these considerations, it is important to note that the *warrior* not only appears as a figure of identification external to the movement, it also plays a significant internal role. It provides a moral reference point that identifies the collective of *mothers* as a group sharing the same substrate, despite their differences in presentation style, family histories, and the conditions of their sons's 'cases.' The double confrontation – of the fight for justice on the public plane and of the pain of personal grief – acquires life in grammars that combine suffering, tenacity, courage and solidarity.

Within the movement, that is, in terms of the way in which this grammar is lived in those scenes not open to a wider public, there is greater space for dialogues and complaints that speak of tiredness, of bodies that weaken, of adversities of all kinds that appear too heavy to bear. In a certain way, it is as though absorbing the despondency of one woman or another is also a vital part of the collective process of *struggle*. The polysemy of the struggle, in the sense explored by Comerford (1999), is also important since it allows meanings more directly linked to political action to become interwoven with those more pervasive in “life as a whole” (Das, 2018), a life frequently depicted as a continual battle.

The intensity and, above all, the context in which Claudia expressed the inadequacy of the sentence to account not only for the expected punishment for the perpetrated crime, but also for her own mourning, now transfigured into an endless prison, went far beyond the limits of the kind of despondency regularly expressed and absorbed in the conversations internal to the movement. Returning to the image of refraction that I used above, what emerged were the precariously domesticated shadows of the *warrior*. If the latter seems always to be in movement, whether crossing the city or looking towards future justice, what emerges from Claudia's utterance is, by contrast, pure immobility. The short prison sentence given to the police officer contrasted with the eternity of her own, marking her as a prisoner in space and time.

In turn, the prospect of living without her son for the rest of her life announced what we could perhaps consider an especially bleak fear: the idea that the end of the trial signalled not the opening of a new opportunity for inhabiting the world but the confirmation, in that imprecise liminal zone, of the impossibility of doing so.

Bringing up the suspicion that, at the end of years spent pursuing justice, what is found is only another form of imprisonment, carries the force of the

bitterness carefully hidden under various layers of intimacy (Das, 2018, 2020: 138). It is worth recalling once more that this possibility could be exposed and shared only because the words were circulating among people who shared a deeper understanding of their poisonous potential and also the conditions for absorbing the latter without “mutilat[ing] your words by treating them as if they were just like other objects in the world.”⁵ I now wish to turn to another layer and experience of intimacy, confected in very different ethnographic conditions, in order to return to some of the questions raised so far from another perspective.

CONVERSATION. WORDS THAT THREAD TOGETHER TIME

“We’ve known each other such a long time and I never asked you that...” This phrase or variations of it accompanied a lengthy conversation of more than three hours between Luísa and I on WhatsApp. Our cameras switched on, a dog demanding attention at one end, a cat at the other. Her grandchildren also appeared from time to time, as well as her husband. The mediation of the video was the condition for this conversation to take place during one of the most intense moments of the covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, which had also affected various members of her family network, fortunately without fatalities. Many neighbours had not had the same luck, she told me. “When they began to die, it was one after the other.”

Luísa lives in a favela in the north zone of Rio de Janeiro with her husband and the constant presence of her grandchildren. I had known her since I began to follow the social movement of victim’s relatives, Luísa being one of its most respected figures. For more than a decade, I had kept in touch with her, sometimes more regularly, at other times less so. We had been on innumerable protests together, I had accompanied two of the three trials involving the killing of her son, André, and we had taken joint part in roundtables at academic congresses and other events. We had also shared meals, prayers, tense moments within the movement, laughter. And there was the phrase... “I never asked you about that.” When we arranged our talk, indeed, I explained that this was my primary intention: to ask about things that, although always present in some way, I felt that I had no clear idea of how they had happened. Above all, I thought about her place as a grandmother, so heavily marked by the death of her son, by now many years in the past. I reminded her that when I first met Taís, her granddaughter, now a young woman about to apply for university, she had been a child accompanying Luísa on the protests. Looking at an old photo of one of these protests, I was struck by an obvious yet nonetheless intriguing fact: the time of research is never only or precisely the time of research. It is also the time of a child growing up, people aging, my own growing older.

If every ethnography is also an autobiography (Das, 2007: 17), then our conversation recognized this entanglement through both the explicitation of

my 'desire to know' and the constant presence of shared time that permeated the accounts of what had not been shared. "You know what photo I'm talking about, right?"; "I don't think I ever showed you that letter... I'll fetch it one day to show you..." and similar phrases traced the sinuous connections between what was lived together and what was not. Or between intimacy and not knowing, between the being-with and the indeterminacy that so profoundly shape the experience of fieldwork (Das, 2015: 373).

The questions asked by me, or simply the way in which the accounts were sequenced in her speech, mobilized distinct temporal layers. Some concerned our conviviality but many others related to biographical threads that she had woven together by making connections with things that had occurred after the critical event of the killing of her son. Differently, then, to the structure prevailing in public actions, in this conversation the epicentre of the narrative was not the killing. This was prompted, of course, by the fact that in the messages sent prior to our conversation, I had mentioned wanting to know what it had been like for her to be one of the people responsible for raising her granddaughter. Focus, time and narrative marks altered, therefore, as an effect of this basic displacement in personhood: the grandmother instead of the mother; the granddaughter instead of the son. If reminiscing should be understood as a moral practice (Antze & Lambek, 1996), then we must begin with the observation that, in this case, the 'elapsed time' already contained a fairly clear sign of transformation and vitality, provided by Luísa's granddaughter, now a young woman by her side.

The temporality offered two moral landscapes that I now wish to explore in a bit more detail. The first is similar to a somewhat rugged topography, not flat, riven by deep marks where doubts about what really matters had welled up at some point (Kleinman, 2006). The second was shaped more by the discrete and tenacious work of surmounting obstacles and sustaining an inhabitable everyday life. In the first case, the challenges primarily took the form of a profound physical, emotional and ethical collapse, the illnesses stemming from the brutal loss of her son and their repercussions signalling the impossibility of carrying on. In the narrative, the emergence from this state also occurred in a somewhat exceptional form through spiritual mediations. It is perceptible, however, that the line between these two moral landscapes is not a clearly defined boundary. In assuredly less dramatic fashion, but no less important, persisting with what was required everyday in order for life to be remade, as well as the immense challenges that this presented, also performed a curing role in these conditions of bodily and ethical crisis.

"You know that I became really sick, right?" she asked me. I said yes, I knew that her health had become very poor after her son was killed, a story I had already heard more than once in public accounts and in conversations among the movement of family members. "No, afterwards. After the first trial.

When they absolved him [the accused].” I say that I didn’t know. I was not following the movement yet at this time and, in contrast, in the later trials I had attended, her firmness and calmness took me by surprise. This is the theme of one of the histories with which I have had contact for a long time but about which we never talked in detail: the story of the messages she received from her son via a spiritist medium. She tells me that a lawyer who worked in the favela came to her and said that the mother of a boy who had died during a failed robbery, in a case with major repercussions, wanted to take her to a spiritist centre. This mother, a middle-class woman, defined herself as a spiritist, while Luísa says that she had always been a Catholic. At this centre, the psychographed messages came from a very respected and well-known medium, Chico Xavier, who had died a few years earlier. She decided to go. On the first attempt, she did not receive any message. On the second, accompanied by another three *mothers* and Taís, her granddaughter, she received a message and, from memory, can recite some of the phrases, although she tells me that she will track down the letter at some point because “you will have to see the psychography to understand.”

The letter was a message to her, thanking her for her love and presence there alongside Taís and emphasizing how important it was for her not be sad: “my body was riddled with bullets, I’m before you without a single mark.” The presence of slang expressions in the message, the advice to his father not to “test his luck,” referring to his drinking habit, and the information that now, “from the other side,” he understood what his father had been through in childhood, at the same time as they gave legitimacy to the psychographed message, placed her son in the role of carer for all of them. Moreover, she tells me how she felt his presence, something that she would also feel in the subsequent trials, which allowed her to deal serenely with those excruciating situations. As well as the messages received, Luísa recalls an especially striking dream in which she saw someone from behind, dressed in a white coat. She knew it was him and asks if he isn’t going to work. But he says no, he studied nursing and now works with children.

I pause at this point to explore some potential intersections with what I called the second moral landscape, deeply connected to the painstaking work of remaking relations amid and through the everyday. The selections and alignments that I make here do not follow the sequence of topics as they appeared in the conversation, which, for their part, did not follow one another in any clearly delineated way either. Ordinary and extraordinary intertwined in the stories, just as they fill the everyday (Das, 2007). The white coat that indicates the childcare performed by her son in her dream is equally a sign of the profession, nursing, that, at the very beginning of our conversation, Luísa told me her granddaughter was thinking about pursuing. Asking her about this, she tells me that she too had been startled by the coincidence. The presence of the sig-

nificant detail invites us to look attentively at the connections and transmissions that may be expressed and enabled there, following Das's valuable insights into the importance of details in ethnographic processes as a way of rendering the texture of the ordinary (Das, 2020: 2, 124-125). Generations, care, work and children cross boundaries between dream and reality, between the living and the dead, between a past that had no chance of being completed and a future that, who knows, may thus come to pass.

The oneiric dimension of the care performed by André, whether in messages or in his work as a children's nurse, echoes his role as a carer in physical life too. The fact that he had a regular job when he was killed is frequently recalled by Luísa in our conversation in a variety of ways. Sometimes she slips into the past, speaking of his serious nature from an early age and how "he didn't enjoy his adolescence." Sometimes this quality is projected into the future, materialized above all in the possibility of alimony for his daughter: "his concern was for his daughter and at least he left her supported," she tells me. She and her husband, for their part, also had regular jobs, which together composes a fairly uncommon scenario of stable resources among the nuclear family as a whole, as well as highlighting the generational transmission of moral values strongly anchored in work.

This same image of greater stability permeates her account of her granddaughter's constant presence in her home before and after André's death. In the story of the relationship between the young couple, the support given by Luísa and her husband makes itself present from the start, both through a period of co-residence, and the routine care provided to the couple's child. Very subtly, it becomes clear that the maternal nucleus is identified as less stable, whether in terms of work or in terms of relations themselves. This would have diverse consequences in the years that followed André's death, the strongest tensions perhaps deriving from the fact that Taís's mother formed a new conjugal family. At this point, though, I wish to focus on some brief passages that evoke this tension between the family nuclei and what I shall call here the ethical work of making kinship undertaken by Luísa.

Over the course of our conversation, three of Taís's birthday parties were mentioned. I had already seen some photos of the first of them, the only one where her son was still alive, since they had been used on banners or posters in protest events by the social movement. She told me that since Taís's parents were separated at the time, two parties were held, one at the home of the maternal family and the other at her own. "At her birthday at the age of two, when he had already died, everyone was there because she held [the party] at the local association." Finally, when her 15th birthday arrived, traditionally celebrated with a big party in the case of girls, only five of the 100 invitations made were sent to Luísa's family. She decided not to go, therefore, even though she had given the birthday girl's dresses as a present, since she would be unable

to invite most of her family due to the meagre number of invitations. “I’m sorry but I’m not going.”

Each birthday reveals how the endeavour of weaving kinship, confecting relationality through Taís, is sinuous and never completely assured. Firstly, the couple’s separation engendered two different parties. The crucial connection of paternity, though, meant that the division of the two family nuclei did not threaten the fundamental relationship with Taís, appearing more like a duplication of birthday parties, meaning that kinship could be experienced without harm or shadows. It is especially poignant to think that the next festival would already take place after André’s death, held at the site of a local community organization to which neither of the families was connected. Likewise, the photos from the previous year no longer formed part of family memory alone but were among the artifacts of collective mobilization.

Kinship memories and the way in which they intermingle with other policies of memory, such as those that involve diverse events and temporalities (Carsten, 2007: 5), also tell us about the ways in which presences and absences are managed. In this case, André’s absence demands the inscription of his death in a biography that is simultaneously political and affective. While more attention has usually been given to how family tales and artefacts migrate to the public sphere (Leite, 2004; Vianna & Farias, 2011), in this case I have sought to pay more attention to the dense family life of the images involved. Similarly to what Han (2015: 502) indicates in relation to her interlocutor, the work of documenting the death of the son and inscribing it in the *fight for justice* is made in close connection with an imagined future for the granddaughter. Not only the circulation of the photos but also the endeavour to obtain the documents that can, after many bureaucratic wanderings, guarantee the granddaughter’s alimony, speak of kinship as an ethical work undertaken on many fronts. The care that Luísa attributes to André, when she claims that he wanted to leave his daughter supported, is made with her own mediation, proving his status as a *worker* and, therefore, the unjustified and criminal manner of his death.

An intersecting web of care exists that unites the actions of Luísa and André and that involves the spiritual messages, the financial arrangements, the court trials and the political processes surrounding his death, and a myriad of everyday actions associated with Taís growing up. During our conversation, delicate elements of continuity between the generations are evoked, such as the taste for the same food and cakes. André’s presence is continually inserted in the flow of everyday life, tended by Luísa in the material forms with which these similarities are identified, producing a reiteration of kinship. It is the same profession that emerges in the dream; it is the same kinds of food that distinguish their tastes.

At the third birthday party mentioned in our chat the effort needed to deal with the constitutive ambiguities of intimacy and kinship becomes clearer (Das, 2007, 2018, 2020). Here, the insufficiency of the exchange is demon-

strated in the small number of invitations, which practically erases the entire paternal family network. In counterpart, Luísa's support once again is readily verifiable in the endeavour made to give the two dresses that form an essential part of the 15th birthday ritual.

Discussing this date, Luísa also told me that it was a moment when Taís acutely felt the absence of her father, with whom she would traditionally dance a waltz. She did not speak, though, of her own feeling of missing her son's presence on this ritual occasion, but we can infer something of the depth of this absence for her too in the way that she responded to the disregard shown in relation to the invitations: *eu sinto, mas eu não vou*, "I'm sorry but I'm not going."

The double sense of *sinto*, meaning both "I'm sorry" and "I feel," indicating both regret and feeling, encapsulates the play of presence and absence of Luísa and André at the party. The waltz without the father poignantly marks how much the killing stole from the daughter's life, as well as the life of Luísa and the rest of the family. The five invitations thus threaten Luísa's continual daily effort to maintain Taís's paternal kinship and, for this reason, cast a shadow on André's memory. In withdrawing from the party, though, Luísa does not withdraw from the work of kinship, a process embodied in the dresses themselves, material proof and sign of her care for her granddaughter and her son.

The way in which this story was told to me was interspersed not only with the other two birthdays cited but with many other narratives indicating how during these years it was necessary to manage the unstable and weakened kinship connecting the two families. Indeed, the form in which Luísa was able to deny her physical presence while maintaining her support for the party speaks, I think, of a confidence that the relations could now survive this tense moment. The meticulous work of managing dangerous words is also maintained by Luísa when she seeks to counterbalance the harmful potential of this situation with the idea that it was just a question of jealousy, on the part of Taís's mother and maternal grandmother, of their close relationship. Ordinary ethics (Das, 2012, 2018) are revealed here in the skill involved in containing the situation's poisonous potential, taking it as a demonstration even of the strength of the relationship with the granddaughter so assiduously cultivated over the years.

To conclude, I wish to mention another moment from the end of our conversation. Speaking about imprisonments that had recently occurred in her neighbourhood, a mosaic of violence and torture emerged in small fragments. "They took away some boys as drug traffickers when they weren't. They had only used marijuana but the police wanted them to say where they had bought it. They beat them and waited for the grandmother to leave – the grandmother who raises them too – and placed the backpack filled with drugs in the house." "They entered my neighbour's house and took her son. He was in prison for two years." "There is also the case of another neighbour who became blind because

of his diabetes in prison. They refused to allow the medicine in.” These fragments participate, in a particular way, in a type of conversation far from rare among members of the social movement, who end up having to deal not only with the killings but also with the practices of mass incarceration. The accounts reveal something that, though inscribed in the everyday life of the favelas, nonetheless reverberates with an disquieting spectre of cruelty that cannot be entirely absorbed (Das, 2020: 216).

What was surprising was how these scenes brought up others more distant in time and space. Near to the city where Luísa was raised had been a large mental asylum. She tells me, then, a story from her childhood.

One day the neighbour returned from there and spoke to nobody ever again. I was ten years old and she came back and I'll never forget. She spoke to nobody from her family and hanged herself. She spoke about the things that happened in that sanatorium. The tortures were horrible. People were sent there. From where I lived, it was less than an hour to get there. My mother would go there to buy fabrics. She spoke about terrible, terrible things. It was a long time ago now and I've never forgotten.

Differently to what was narrated in the recent cases in the neighbourhood, the torture in this case marks the impossibility of the return. Although she comes back from the sanatorium, the neighbour hangs herself. The words that can refashion life did not return with her, only those that tell of the tortures suffered. Neither did a family exist to which she could return, since her family had been responsible for sending her there, once again demonstrating how kinship and betrayal are interwoven (Das, 2007; Pierobon, 2021). The town was just a short bus ride away and her mother would go there to buy fabrics. Her mother knew about the horror of the place but was able to return to ordinary life, perhaps due to the magic of transforming fabrics into clothes. The town is far away in time but, even so, is always close since it is impossible to forget.

TRACING A PATH AMID WORDS

In each of the previous sections, *shrapnel* and *conversation*, I sought to explore meanings that can be glimpsed amid the words. I say ‘amid’ because I do not take words here as a vehicle for meaning in themselves but as a woven space that sometimes invites us to seek out their possibilities, sometimes casts a shadow over what would be apparently more logical or immediate deductions. To be clear, it is not a question of revealing meanings, as though these materialize outside the multiplicity of cognitive, affective and political conditions produced by relations. Rather it is a question of seeking in the marks of interlocution something that offers itself up to comprehension. For this reason, *shrapnel* and *conversations*, more than narrative genres, are dialogical constructs. Their poetic properties, like the tone of voice that pervades them, the images that move them, or the rhythm that characterizes them, serve the reactions

that they produce in their interlocutors, at the same time that these reactions feed and shape them in turn. In different ways, I perceive both as an invitation to become engaged in the position of an active audience, meaning that the properties I recognize in each depend fundamentally on the work of producing a place for myself in this relation.

What I have sought to identify or pursue, therefore, concerns the trace of the relations in which, by listening and by my presence, I became integrated. In the case of the *shrapnel*, as I indicated, the inversion of both the expectation of a collective celebration and the attribution of the status of prisoner to the *mother* instead of the convicted officer, offered the crucial dialogical component. The suspension of the foreseen script convoked another engagement, seeming to demand from her network of interlocution the capacity to react to the profound bewilderment caused by her utterance. It was not the comforting responses emitted there that absorbed the harmful potential of those words but the fact that we were in a position to receive them in trust. As Das (2007: 6) points out, the issue is not knowing but acknowledging the other, something that is never resolved once and for all.⁶

In what I called *conversation*, the opening to acknowledgment resides in the reiteration of the questions and commonplace remarks concerning what had already been shared face-to-face or through accounts and photos. The movement here involves less the brusqueness of what was not foreseen and interrupts, as in the *shrapnel*, and more an alternating play of distance and proximity, knowing and not knowing. The questions thus had something of a mirror-like quality: after all, I was also asked whether I already knew such-and-such stories, scenes or objects. In its sinuous flow, the *conversation* conveyed topics from one point to another, produced associations and allowed itself to be interrupted, whether by ideas or by people and animals, or by the oscillating internet connection. If the first register was produced through the concentrated impact of a phrase and the specific mode of non-comprehension that it generated in me, this second register is distinguished by a time that wanders, connecting a prose slips between past, present and future.

Both situations allow us to reflect on a theme that tends to be expressed relatively consistently, albeit in different ways, by women who join these movements following the killing of their sons. This involves the very possibility of living and naming the form of life that unfolds after the death of their children. The tales about the periods of deep depression after the killings, the chronic worsening of certain illnesses or even the cases in which it proved impossible to overcome the sadness and mortification, make themselves present in both public and more intimate dialogues. When mobilized publicly, however, they are generally connected to the period immediately following the deaths. Getting out of bed, summoning one's strength and engaging in the *struggle* form a specific narrative sequence that allows the events to be told in a particular manner

that transmutes the devastation, giving it a moral direction.

But illnesses, as a language of profound doubt concerning the possibility of living amid the brutal dissolution of the everyday experience of life, can emerge at other moments, such as after a trial. “I had the illusion that they were going to admit what they did,” Luísa said to me about this moment. The trust placed in the moral response to be received through the judiciary – not by chance more commonly known as the ‘justice’ – proves to be neither merited nor sufficient. Without ignoring the social and political importance of the court trials in these cases, we can, I think, reflect on its precarious capacity to provide an adequate response to something that greatly exceeds it. “I’m the one in prison,” the shrapnel-utterance, speaks to us of this. It also speaks of the force of a time undomesticated by linearity. “The day of Shelly’s death” is always in the present, as Das highlights in speaking of the anthropoetics of Rosaldo.⁷ This present that never goes away casts its shadow cruelly over the promise of a recomposition of everyday life, filling the work of its re-inhabitation with uncertainty (Das 2020: 310).

The relationship between the sombre and definitive present time announced in *shrapnel* and the temporal undulation of *conversations*, which speak of generations, memories of the past and imaginations of the future, should not be thought of as a kind of opposition. These possibilities intersect at every instant and one is unable to expel the other definitively. Borrowing Han’s words, we can see in both how much “this labor of making a world one’s own is not simply finding again one’s place in the world but rather involves nurturing the possibility of a life together in one’s absence” (Han, 2015: 507). The presence of this other-in-absence occurs in many ways: in the form of premonitions, which speak of the impact of this deformed return of the everyday (Das, 2020: 309); in gestures and imaginary conversations that fill up the days (Han, 2015); in acts of care with other children, granddaughters, neighbours. It is in this weaving that banality and wonder mix; horror and the possibilities for cure through the skill taken to avoid something of its poison being transferred to following generations (Das, 2020: 202) and to ensure that words have a chance to find a home.

Claudia’s phrase, which ruptures the contours of the *warrior mother*, gradually became incorporated, in another way, into her public speeches, recombined with the narrative on the importance of the legal victory. The work of kinship realized by Luísa extends to other children, half-siblings of Taís, who, though not her biological grandchildren, treat her as a grandmother. “I don’t stop acquiring grandchildren,” she tells me smiling. Groping for words, in the way I have sought to do here, can perhaps be understood therefore as this endeavour to seek out situations in which they momentarily appear to become quiet. But it can also be guided precisely by the indices of its maladjustment, the instants and scenes that reveal the limits of this quietening. At one point

in our conversation, following the tales about the mental asylum near to hometown, Luísa told me about another case that occurred in the neighbourhood:

The lad who lives nearby who became a bit crazy from drugs, his sister had him hospitalized and he returned and doesn't speak to his sister. He says he won't go back there. I make him coffee and bread. He tells me about the tortures he suffered.

Madness, kinship and torture once again become interwoven in the account, as well as the decision to stop speaking to those who have betrayed the trust that the person deposited in them. Recounting the tortures experienced is only possible with someone who confects a space of trust, inseparable from the coffee and bread offered. Quiet and disquiet run in parallel, indicating that words only rest amid the encounter, listening and the gesture that re-establishes, even for a moment, the everyday as a territory of care.

If I conclude the text with this scene, it is because it seems to me another way of speaking about the 'being with' that marks fieldwork. The shared coffee, the chat, the memory that suddenly surfaces and the incommensurability of horror become mixed in this scene and in so many others in which, one way or another, we take part. It is not a question of giving them a meaning but of understanding, as Das (2020: 319) emphasizes, that our concepts are not produced in the "frictionless space of pure thought" and that it is this fact that helps us "reinhabit a broken world". Writing is not, then, an attempt to logically, politically or existentially transcend this broken world, but a way of situating oneself amid it, with all the fragility, insecurity and hope that pervade it.

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NOTES

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- 1 As Lotte Butte Segal (2015: 55) points out: “This compelling juxtaposition of hesitancy and argument is one of Das’s gifts to anthropology, particularly concerning ethnographic engagements with contexts suffused with violence in its different forms”.
 - 2 This and all other personal names in the text have been changed.
 - 3 See, among others, Misse et al., 2013; Vianna & Farias, 2011; Farias, 2020.
 - 4 Some initial elaborations of the relationship between fragments and shrapnel were made in dialogue with the work of Fabio Mallart, contained in the afterword to his book (Vianna, 2021).
 - 5 To provide a slightly longer citation: “I do not know and cannot know how to go further, but I do know the difference in the aesthetics of kinship in this kind of world between trusting your words to the care of the concrete others with whom you have shared this kind of past, this kind of laughter, these kinds of tears, and releasing it to a public that might mutilate your words by treating them as if they were just like other objects in the world” (Das, 2020: 138).
 - 6 In Das’s words: “I read this as saying that the question is not about knowing (at least in the picture of knowing that much of modern philosophy has propagated with its underlying assumption about being able to solve the problem of what it is to know), but of acknowledgment. My acknowledgment of the other is not something that I can do once and then be done with it” (Das, 2007: 6).

- 7 “When I first read these poems, I was struck by a curious feeling: the title that kept coming into my head, unbidden, was, “The day Shelly died,” but, of course, “The day of Shelly’s death” is what captures the event. It is not “the day Shelly died,” which might gesture to a pastness, to a memory. “The day of Shelly’s death” hits you with the force of a presence, for the day is everywhere, beyond and above the divisions of past, present, and future” (Das, 2020: 310; Rosaldo, 2014).

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DESASSOSSEGO: PALAVRAS, TEMPOS E RELAÇÕES EM UM PERCURSO ETNOGRÁFICO

Palavras-chave

Veena Das;
palavras;
tempos;
violência.

Resumo

Em diálogo com reflexões de Veena Das, este artigo explora algumas dimensões presentes em um percurso etnográfico centrado na relação com familiares de vítimas de violência do Estado. Palavras, tempos e relações configuram o eixo em torno do qual duas diferentes situações de pesquisa são elaboradas. A primeira delas é pensada a partir da imagem do *estilhaço*, fragmento que surpreende e produz a sensação de falta de compreensão sobre o que se desenrola. A segunda situação se constrói sob o regime da *conversa*, permitindo refletir sobre diferentes dimensões de intimidade e desconhecimento que atravessam uma relação de pesquisa e confiança.

DISQUIET: WORDS, TIMES AND RELATIONS ALONG AN ETHNOGRAPHIC TRAJECTORY

Keywords

Veena Das;
words;
times;
violence

Abstract

In dialogue with reflections by Veena Das, this article explores some dimensions present in an ethnographic journey centered on the relationship with family members of state violence victims. Words, times, and relations set up the axis around which two different research situations are elaborated. The first of them is thought of from the image of the *shrapnel*, a fragment that surprises and generates feelings of bewilderment towards what is unfolding. The second situation is built under the regime of *conversation*, allowing for reflection on different dimensions of intimacy and not-knowing that permeate a relationship of research and trust.