

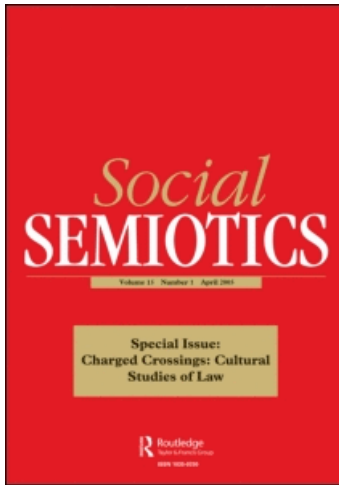
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender and the semiotics of political visibility in the Brazilian northeast

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This article analyzes how local narratives on political leadership in Northeast Brazil make use of gender ideologies. Previous research, and ethnographic work, suggests that there is a deep contradiction between women's central roles in local social and economic activities, and the ways in which they are depicted in dominant narratives. Through the analysis of ethnographic material and the case of the displaced community of Jaguaribara, we argue that local political rituals function as meaning-making practices that affect the political visibility of women, through the manipulation of local gender ideologies and local perceptions of society and the environment. We further suggest that awareness of such a state of affairs and the pragmatic strategic use of cultural prescriptions do not grant a group political visibility, if this group does not find ways to act upon the semiotic configuration of the context where social actions unfold; that is, upon dominant local interpretive genres.

Keywords: gender; politics; visibility; semiotics; Northeast Brazil

Introduction

Feminist anthropology has successfully challenged universalizing connections between the domestic realm and the role of women in social life (Ortner 1972, 1996a,b; Rosaldo 1974). Women participate in all aspects of public life; yet how different sectors of the public sphere produce social representations of power is not only gendered but more often than not detrimental to the public recognition of leadership styles and forms of political organization that depart from forms of political leadership seen as “masculine.” In the political sphere, this makes many forms of female organization invisible. Using an ethnographic example from rural Northeast Brazil, in this paper we 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 with masculinity and underplaying the ones linked to femininity. It is natural that all discourses simplify the complexity of the world; our intent is to suggest that through processes of semiotic regimentation, in regards to collective ideas on gender in Northeast Brazil, this simplification takes place in a way in which 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 that local women carry out. We intend to contribute to the theoretical effort to

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understand how meaning-making practices are related to power configurations in the region. We also suggest that the agentive use of pragmatic strategies to circumvent gender inequalities in the political arena does not grant political visibility to a group. For this to happen, the group would have to find ways to act upon the semiotic configuration of the context where actions will unfold; that is, upon local dominant *interpretive genres*.

Fieldwork was carried out by the authors in the Jaguaribe Valley, in the state of Ceará, between 2003 and 2006. We will make use of ethnographic data collected, paying special attention to 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.

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 of 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 twentieth century; and Luzia-Homem, a character from a novel by Domingos Olímpio (1903) depicted as muscular and with a hairy body, which caused local men to say that “[she] doesn’t even look like a female (sic) woman” (Olímpio 1903, 12). Other examples include women who engaged in activities reserved to men, like Guimarães Rosa’s fictional character Diadorin (1956) or, in real life, 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 twentieth century; those who did usually played the role of being “tough landlords.” These cases have been conveyed as exotic in local historical narratives, exerting an immense symbolic power over local cultural imaginaries throughout the twentieth century (Queiroz and de 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 42 years and with 12 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 to kill. Over her rosary of ears she supposedly prayed every night accompanied by her female slaves (Queiroz and de Holanda 1990; Duarte 2003).

In the rural world of the Brazilian Northeast, there seems to have been little space for women in traditional narratives on political leadership, unless these women 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 has historically been a common family matter for local wealthy groups (Lemenhe 1995; Marques 2002; Queiroz and de Holanda 1990).

Gender, environment, and political power have been linked in local narratives in two different ways. On one side, there are narratives that suggest that living in such a harsh environment requires, from men and women alike, an unmatched degree of endurance and bravery. “From 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 . . . To be a macho was the very nature of the Northeasterner. (Albuquerque Júnior 2003, 187)

At the other end of the spectrum, the “feminine” (locally understood according to Mediterranean gender role ideologies brought to Brazil by Portuguese settlers) is not erased, but its presence implicates the exclusion of women from the main economic and political arenas. It is still implied here that subsistence requires strong masculine action; women, depicted as feminine, are portrayed as having no more than a marginal importance in the struggle for subsistence. In this case, female economic activities are overshadowed by women’s sexual roles. Many authors (Esmeraldo, Aragão, and Pinheiro 2003; Rebhun 1999; Thayer 2001) have pointed to a strong local presence of the ideological association between women’s biological and social roles among female rural populations, in which marriage and 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, a growing body of research documents the fact that women hold a central role in the production and distribution of subsistence goods that are part of the local economy in this region of Brazil. Women are responsible for the effective functioning of many local social networks (Ramalho 1995; Rebhun 1999; Thayer 2001, 246). They manage their 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 one of the most effective local drought mitigation mechanisms available (Branco 1995; Fisher and Albuquerque 2002; Lemos et al. 1999; Melo 2001). Some services provided by state agencies, such as education and health services, are also usually coordinated by local women.

The myth of the passive and subordinate woman is also challenged by local statistics. In 1999, 26.4% of households in Ceará were headed by women (IPLANCE 2002, 31). Ethnographic research has shown us that these numbers are heavily 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 (Melo 2001; Ramalho 1995).

Therefore there are deep contradictions between the ways in which the female universe is depicted in dominant narrative genres and the vital importance of

women's activities in the local socioeconomic realm – as seems to be the case in all societies with marked gender role divisions. 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; Fisher and Albuquerque 2002; Melo 2001; Ramalho 1995; Thayer 2001), have serious consequences in the realm of public policies, such as those directed towards drought mitigation, for instance.

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 (Holmes 2005). According to Hill (2000), political campaigns in the United States are deliberately constructed and staged to index masculine language with leadership. She exemplifies with 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 local notions of personhood in the American cultural panorama.

In Northeast Brazil, leadership, masculinity, and personalism are also usually connected in both narratives and in political rituals. Besides the climate, the historical circumstance of the occupation of the region by people of European descent is another structuring element in local imaginaries on leadership. Local political power in the semi-arid northeastern hinterland, from the late-seventeenth century onwards, has been based on 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 were also 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 was 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 with 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 sociohistorical 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 their loss of prestige in national political arenas to southern elites, who have been historically identified with industrialism and modernity (Albuquerque Júnior 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, manners, consumption patterns and etiquette in urban centers of the country – were seen as a devirilization of the society. In the face of a larger political order, in which the power of northeastern patriarchal oligarchies is in frank decay, the "quintessential northeasterner" – who is on the one hand, macho, rude and

adapted to the harsh environment; and 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 showing that, with a population of 25% of the country, the region concentrates one-half of the national population below the poverty line;¹ in the rural areas of Ceará state, for instance, the per-capita average income is under the national poverty line (IPLANCE 2002).

On the other hand, urbanization processes that took place throughout the twentieth 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, helped to reduce the power of local rural oligarchies. But to a great extent, the marks of masculinity, toughness and aggression have remained as important features of what is perhaps the most common political genre in the Brazilian Northeast. Fernando Collor de Melo, a northeasterner from the state of Alagoas elected president of Brazil in 1989, 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. 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 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 former Brazilian president José Sarney, saying he was a *frouxo* (wimp); some months earlier, he had commented on separatist movements in the south of Brazil saying that “the people who defend that have a homosexual deviation” [*sic*], generating outraged manifestations from Brazilian gay movements (Diógenes 2002, 117–118). In this sense, according to sociologist Diógenes, “local politics incipiently discuss political projects, and in this arena, personalism is a key element in the conduct of a political party life” (2002, 116; similar point made by El-Hay 2002 and Bomfim 2002).

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, which have the potential to deeply impact local social hierarchies. We are interested in this theoretical direction due to the way it throws light upon the mechanisms through which semiotic regimentation generates configurations of perceptibility that are strategically created and used in sociopolitical processes (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 1993, 1998; Parmentier 1994). 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. Parmentier 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” (1994, 127).

One of the main mechanisms through which the regimentation process occurs 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). In Northeast Brazil, 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*² 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 political groups is exercised through the cult of leading patriarchal figures, and that is usually preferred over a more horizontal political organization. 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 patrons belonging to elite families.

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 one feature of the local structure of elite families (the patriarchal rule) towards other levels of social political organization constitutes a process that Gal and Irvine called *recursiveness*³ (Gal 1998, 38).

These two characteristics of local political semiotics – the iconization of masculinity with legitimate ruling styles, 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 invisible⁴ 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

We must obviously 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 past three decades, female groups found ways to successfully perform in local social arenas either by acting through or by exploiting disjunctures in 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 1990; Briggs 1998; Bond 2002). This phenomenon also suggests the existence of some degree of awareness regarding the ways symbols are played out in local arenas. Nevertheless, what we want to point out is that, in terms of the problem we have here, being able to pragmatically use 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 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 twentieth century up until the 1980s, to avoid arranged marriages imposed by their families. The case refers to young men who, rejected by the family of their desired girls, enact 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 respected citizen.

The couple plans their escape taking with them a respected citizen, leaving the girl in the house of another respected citizen, with the hope of sensitizing her parents into accepting marriage. It is a manner of exerting pressure [upon her parents], because once the girl had been "carried" by a man and if the marriage did not follow, she then ran the risk of being "bad talked"⁵ 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 to marry due to sexist prejudices. (Silva 1999, 8–9)

The respected citizen to whose house the girl is taken then has the role of communicating to the girl's parents that she had been *carried*. She remains there until her family explicitly manifests 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. Marcleide Cavalcante, for instance, dean of a school in the municipality of Jaguaribe, 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” (i.e. creating political space) for their projects through “articulating” (making alliances) do they feel confident to present their projects in formal sessions of the local Municipal Council (*Câmara Municipal*). According to Damiana, this is a strategy used by many female politicians in order to avoid the verbal confrontations that mark council sessions; through negotiations and the construction of alliances outside the sessions, they manage to get their projects approved with a minimum of exposure to a communicative environment they perceive as being verbally aggressive.

Therefore, Damiana 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 on female 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. But not everything that is political is subject to the same regimenting devices. Since, as we have discussed above, many rituals are enactments of political ideologies that restrict the space of women, it is not surprising that most women in the political world of the rural northeast 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 visibility configurations. Using terms proposed by Bailey (1969), in both cases, we see women making use of pragmatic strategies in order to apply 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 direct effect towards transforming the semiotic ordering of factors that define the major trends in the local interpretive environments.⁶

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 do not 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, plus the activities of the Rural Landless Movement (MST), the Land Pastoral Commission (CPT) of the Catholic Church, along with many non-governmental organizations, is 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 in 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 has been recent remarkable progress 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, we noticed that the most prominent case of visible, non-masculinized female leadership, found in the community of Jaguaribara, had two remarkable features: first, it was deeply linked to an exogenous element, the fact that the community had been very 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 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 (Ferguson 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 led to 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,b). In the remaining part of this text, we will present the aforementioned case of population displacement, in which the impact was much more dramatic than in other communities of rural Ceará. In this case, we interpret the concurrence of the disorganization of the formal political structures of the community and the rise in visibility and importance of the local female leader networks as evidence to support 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 government of the state of Ceará announced the plan to construct the Castanhão Reservoir, a massive dam with capacity for 6.7 billion cubic meters of water, at the cost of \$200 million, 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 62,000 hectares; 1020 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 Eastern Ceará, was located inside the area to be covered by the waters of 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 Catholic authority⁷ at that time, news of the dam construction “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 local poet Edberto Carneiro chronicles (Associação dos Moradores de Jaguaribara/Casa da Memória 1998, 27):

<i>Jaguaribara parou</i>	Jaguaribara was paralyzed
<i>a sua evolução</i>	in its evolution
<i>pedreiro passando fome</i>	a bricklayer suffering from hunger
<i>por não ter mais construção</i>	because there is no more construction
<i>só tinha no pensamento</i>	he only has his mind full of
<i>incerteza e desilusão</i>	uncertainty and disillusion

The dam project generated fierce opposition from the local population. In such circumstances, the community had to find new ways to resist and organize itself against the destruction of their town. At first, community leaders relied heavily on local mayors for support and access to state government networks. However, they 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 were 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, had them politically immobilized and compromised their roles as community representatives.

After some 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 on a more horizontal strategy of community organization, by

aligning themselves with organized social movements. In 1987, Sister Bernardete made contact with IMOPEC – the Institute for the Memory of the People of Ceará, a non-governmental organization 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, out of the 14 seats held by the Association board of directors (two groups of seven members each), only three were occupied by men. In contrast, during this same time, out of 11 individuals who occupied seats in the Municipal Council, only one was female.

Between 1985 and 1995, it was hoped that through negotiations and protests, the government's decision to construct the reservoir would be reverted. Then, on 16 November 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 represents the culture and traditions of the town that was to be destroyed. There, IMOPEC started to organize art 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 on 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 community consultation (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).

Taking advantage of the visibility created by the recurrence with which the Castanhão Reservoir was discussed in the local media, the activities organized by the Association of Neighbors at the House of Memory were successful in calling the attention, not only of regional television stations, but also of the two major daily newspapers in the state, which repeatedly ran stories on the community's displacement over 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 on a new political stand, giving them a better position to negotiate. At that moment, although the formal political structures of the municipality were officially operating, the most relevant local political issue, the fate of the community, was being discussed by other individuals and in other places: government state officials and the community leaders gathered around Sister Bernardete, in a large number of meetings that took place in Fortaleza and in Jaguaribara. Sister Bernardete had previously made contacts with the Brazilian Movement of People Affected by Dam Construction (MAB), and organized commissions to visit other communities that had previously suffered displacement due to dam construction, in order learn how to best manage the situation from their experiences. The Association of Neighbors then created a list of demands, of which

the most important were: the church in the “new” town should be a precise copy of the church to be destroyed in the “old” town; the spatial distribution of families had to be maintained so that the same neighbors would be retained in the new town; each family would closely supervise the exhumation of their deceased relatives, and their transfer to the new cemetery; and 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, who performed this task through its member networks. The Association also gained the right to establish a financial compensation scheme for the lands to be flooded, and, in terms of the new town location, the community was asked to choose one of three options proposed by the state government.

On 25 July 2001 the population of the old town started being transferred to the new location. Government tractors destroyed the buildings that formed part of the old town, due to fear of re-occupation. Images of saints were transported in a 50-kilometer-long procession from the old to the new church. Human remains were exhumed and transferred to the new cemetery.

The intense rains that fell throughout the region in January 2004 caused the most extreme flooding ever 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 are no records 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 regimentation⁸ – 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 arenas previously reserved for formal politics. That is, supported and inspired by 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 felt that, to a certain degree, they avoided the reproduction in their community of stories of brutal negligence by state planners that tend to fill narratives concerning population displacements resulting from dam constructions.

Concluding remarks

In this paper we have described how dominant political genres in the Brazilian northeast have encoded ways to understand the role of women in society and politics, and how this is related to the meaning making qualities of political processes. We

have argued that the *iconization* of masculinity with legitimate ruling styles, and the emphasis on personalistic leadership rather than on social support networks, frequently prevent the recognition of women's social activities – marked by more horizontal organizational patterns – as also forming part of legitimate political organizations, which make them invisible to local dominant genres, despite their importance in the socioeconomic organization and survival of the local population.

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 manipulation can become the object of attention and contestation (Gal 1998, 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 this reason, in many cases, successful pragmatic usage of fractures and disjunctures in those gender ideologies have little power in the transformation of visibility configurations if they do not act towards transforming the semiotic ordering of factors that define major trends in local interpretive environments; that is, if they do not gain some control over dominant meaning making practices and their metasemiotic organization.

The case of Jaguaribara exemplifies this: 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 of the municipality. We take the concurrence of that with the rise 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.”

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

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Notes

1. Roughly US\$1.50/day per capita in October 2005.
2. *Iconization* is a process of semiotic manipulation proposed by Susan Gal and Judith Irvine, working upon Peircean semiotics and the metapragmatic theory (Gal 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 other supposed qualities of the group, and it is then perceived that one is the cause or inherent essentiality of the other.
3. The semiotic process of *fractal recursivity* (or *recursiveness*) involves the projection of an opposition that marks one level of a relationship onto another. For example, intra-group distinction can be projected onto inter-group relations, or *vice versa*.
4. According to 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 recasting the image of their presence and practices to better fit an ideological scheme (Gal 1998; Irvine and Gal 2000).
5. "*Mal falada*": denigrated.
6. 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).
7. The local priest had been relocated to more important municipalities. In Jaguaribara, mass was given on the third Sunday of each month, conducted by priests who came from other parishes.
8. 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 female participation in social movements. See Thayer (2001).

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