Muddy Hope, Maybe Love

"I do not believe in love!" the literature teacher exclaimed in one of my older brother's senior courses.

"*Ela é maluca*!" he said. "I feel for you for having her in the next three years."

Before even starting high school, I had the feeling that the literature professor and I would not hit it off, and during my sophomore year, she again explained, "I do not believe in love!"

My first reaction, guided by my older brother's judgments a few years ago, led me to think that she was, indeed, crazy. But differently, I raised my hand and asked, "Excuse me, teacher! Could you explain why?"

My life experience seems to be magical, but at the same time, it looks basic. Sometimes, I don't even believe that I am alive. The sun crossing The Rock's hard vertical glass seems strategically positioned to hit my eyes. The colorful spring flowers outside with the top of the church seem, in reality, a canva painting that fuels me with a desire to create, to run away and live. To enjoy the youthfulness that looks too short. I know I am still young, but I also know that I will live more years of my life being old than young — which simultaneously gives me some comfort and some desperate desire to be inconsequential. While its position illuminates the entire city, which I can see entirely from the fourth floor, I ponder what other people are doing out there. Each of these people is their individual human being. They have their names, stories, identities, pain, bank accounts, houses— and what do I know about them?

My life experiences seem to be ordinary. Sometimes, I don't believe that I am alive. The water coming out from different directions and getting into where I grew up seemed strategically positioned to take the lives around me. The cloudy weather outside of the windows of my apartment back home fuels me with the hopeless idea that I don't know if things will return to

normal at some point. The youthfulness is short. Yesterday, children were running and playing on the street; Today, their bodies are floating on water full of mud. While the sun hits me, people back home pray to have it back to them. Each of these people is their individual human being. They have their names, stories, identities, and bank accounts — but they don't have their houses anymore, and I—can't call it home. Not anymore.

When I was younger, I believed natural disasters were limited to Tsunamis in Florida and Earthquakes in California. I grew up thinking that nothing would ever reach me—or us because I was born and raised in *the* tropical country.

The state of Rio Grande do Sul, located in the southern region of Brazil, known for its *pampas*, grape harvesting, and wine production, and being one of the largest rice exporters to the rest of the country, received the equivalent of six months of heavy rain in just 10 days. The state, which has approximately 497 cities, currently has 400 affected by the floods. Two million people have been affected in some way, facing electricity shortages, lack of clean water, losing their homes, losing family members, and even losing their pets. Some of my friends had to be rescued while waiting on the roofs of their homes, as that was the safest place they could shelter. Others have been spending their days and nights working to help those in even more critical situations.

Thinking about a climate catastrophe may seem disconnected from some people's lives. It was for me, too—until my family became climate refugees. Packing a summary of our lives into the car, essentials for survival, and our two cats, leaving behind our home and our stories. The dining table that witnessed so many of our dinners and debriefings is empty. The walls that saw our joys, our two-year quarantine, and my departure from home to live in another country now only witness darkness and silence.

Until the beginning of May 2024, the worst tragedy to hit the city of Porto Alegre, the

capital of the state and the place where I grew up, had been between April and May 1941. According to records from the *Joaquim Felizardo* Museum, about 70 thousand people were left homeless, which amounted to a quarter of the population then. After this tragedy, when the level of the *Guaíba* River, which borders the city, reached 15.6168 feet, Porto Alegre created a mechanism to prevent floods, the *Sistema de Proteção Contra Cheias* (Flood Protection System). Built in the 1970s, it consists of dikes, pumping stations, and floodgates.

The reality is that after 80 years, neither the citizens nor the state government thought the 1941 catastrophe would repeat itself, mainly because, this time, we had a new protection system. Just over 30 years after the event, in 1974, the so called *Cais Mauá* was completed. The structure is located between the Mauá quay and Mauá Avenue, in the Historic Center of Porto Alegre, and is approximately 9.8 feet high and 1.61 miles long. The system has 14 floodgates to try to block the water from the Guaíba River. The metal doors are closed during alert moments, requiring an excavator. Sandbags are also placed to prevent water from passing through any gap. This process can take up to 40 minutes. In addition to the floodgates, the system includes miles of dikes (structures that serve as complementary barriers) and pumping stations (pools that retain water until it can return to the Guaíba River).

On one of the many occasions I went home, one of my best friends and I went out for Açaí. The sunny and hot day with no forecast of rain encouraged us to wear our lightest clothes and enjoy the sunshine outside. And that's how Porto Alegre is. In a moment, everything can change. When we looked out the window, the streets were already flooded. Being the state's capital, it's a place where floods are common. Trash and the amount of tree leaves accumulate in the storm drains, making it difficult for water to pass through and causing the streets to flood—but nothing that rises above knee height. We are used to this, and perhaps this familiarity

led the mayor of the city and the state government to neglect the warning received three months later on April 27, 2024, stating that areas in the *Rio Pardo* Valley, in the central region of the state, were already experiencing heavy rains and hail.

The region of Rio Pardo and its connection with the Guaíba River in Porto Alegre hold significant geographical importance as the *Rio Jacuí*, which ultimately flows into the Guaíba River, forms a complex hydrographic system. The Guaíba River, which reached a historical level of approximately 16.4042 feet during the week of the disaster, experienced a breach in the floodgate. The sandbag system, improperly assembled by the city's public administration, failed to prevent water from flooding neighborhoods along the riverbank, leaving the town without electricity or potable water.

Climate negligence and denialism with aggressive neoliberalism is a dangerous combination that exacerbates catastrophes like the one that Rio Grande do Sul is currently experiencing. I still remember back in 2021 when the city's current mayor was taking office, and one of his main government plans was to destroy the Cais Mauá because one of his "specialist" friends had calculated and announced that floods like those of 1941 would only happen in every 1,500 years. The disasters in Porto Alegre are happening due to negligence and lack of planning. A report from 2015 that cost R$3.5 million reais (approximately $700,000.00) called "Brasil 2040" predicted that the rain and flooding in the South would happen, but when the report was published, many called it alarmist; after all, when water floods the city, it inundates proletarian and student neighborhoods, indigenous communities, and quilombolas—not the wealthy.

In high school, my community was incredibly proud of *bairrismo* in Rio Grande do Sul. It may be due to a lack of knowledge about the historical roots of the term or due to the cultural heritage associated with it. During a very traditionalist event at school, one of my classmates,

when we were 9 years old, stated, "Singing the state anthem is more powerful than singing the national anthem." The bairrismo, this regional pride and loyalty towards the state, is deeply rooted in the state's history and can be observed in various political movements, as during September being designated for celebrating *Gaúcho* tradition. It ensures that no state resident forgets its history and the separatist movements (of some) to make the South region independent from the rest of the country.

As someone born and raised in the state, I'm just one of many who learned the state's history from first grade to senior high school, and one thing I clearly remember is that there are several historical and cultural reasons for the emergence of Gaúcho bairrismo. Rio Grande do Sul has a unique history within the Brazilian context, with predominantly European colonization, influenced mainly by Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and German immigrants—alongside African and Indigenous peoples. These ethnic groups brought their traditions, languages, and customs, contributing to the state's cultural diversity, but they are not the same. During the state's climate crisis, I couldn't help but think about how denialism, bairrismo and separatist movements are connected to the history and political ideals of the state colonization.

When I learned about denialism, applied to the context of Rio Grande do Sul, I was still too young to understand that it refers to the minimization of certain aspects of the state's history, culture, or identity, often driven by conservative ideologies. I see this conservatism as an excessive attachment to the "alpha" culture—one that values masculinity, bravery, and Gaúcho tradition, often at the expense of other perspectives and identities that deny certain historical events, minimizing culturally divergent aspects from the dominant view, or even rejecting social and political changes that go against local traditions.

It's challenging to think about the state's conservatism without considering the historical

aspects that shaped the identity of its people. The land of indigenous people was colonized by the Europeans, bringing a profound impact on the construction of a segregationist and denialist state, where the contributions and rights of indigenous peoples were often disregarded or actively suppressed. Since the early days of colonization, there has been a clear division between European colonizers and the indigenous peoples native to the region, resulting in conflicts, forced displacements, and systematic marginalization. Then, during the 19th century, African slave labor played a fundamental role in the region's economy, especially in the production of *charque*, which was one of the main economic activities. These enslaved Africans contributed significantly to the state's economic development but were subjected to inhumane conditions and brutal treatment.

The *Revolução Farroupilha*, which took place between 1835 and 1845, was one of the most critical events in the history of Rio Grande do Sul and had dissatisfaction with the central government of the Brazilian Empire as one of its causes, including issues such as high taxes on charque production and political centralization. However, it's important to note that the issue of slavery also played a significant role in the revolt. While the Farroupilha leaders sought more political and economic autonomy for the region, many Africans were concerned about the possibility of central government interference in slave practices.

During the Revolução Farroupilha, the *Lanceiros Negros* (Black Lancers) emerged as a significant military force. These lancers were mainly enslaved Africans who fought alongside the Farroupilhas in exchange for promises of freedom and emancipation. Their participation demonstrates that the racial issue was intrinsically linked to the political and economic conflicts of the time.

Despite the participation of the Lanceiros Negros in the struggle for regional autonomy,

after the end of the Revolução Farroupilha, the Rio Grande do Sul continued to be a profoundly segregationalist and discriminatory society. Black and marginalized populations faced systematic discrimination in various spheres of life, including access to land, education, and job opportunities. Furthermore, the official narrative about the state's history often neglected or minimized the role of Africans and their descendants in forming Gaúcho society, highlighting the complex dynamics of power, domination, and resistance that shaped the region. It contributed to the construction of a segregationist and denialist state regarding black and marginalized populations. These colonizers played a fundamental role in the formation of the early cities and established patterns of racial segregation that persist to this day.

Additionally, Rio Grande do Sul had its share of a slaveholding history, though on a smaller scale than other regions of Brazil. After the abolition of slavery in 1888, many former slaves migrated to urban areas in search of job opportunities. However, they encountered discrimination and segregation, being relegated to peripheral neighborhoods of the cities. This urban segregation is a striking feature of the urban structure of Porto Alegre and other towns. This segregated urban structure and racial inequalities exacerbate the marginalization of black and low-income communities in Porto Alegre—and we need to talk about this because these people are the ones being more impacted by the floods.

The connection to the history of colonization, segregation, and denial of rights in Rio Grande do Sul is evident when considering how these communities are often relegated to high-risk areas, such as riverbanks and hillsides, due to a lack of access to safe housing and adequate infrastructure. Political denialism, mainly when fueled by conservatism, can hinder the adoption of effective measures to address climate change in the state. At the moment, it is manifesting in rejecting the severity of climate change in Rio Grande do Sul while minimizing

the importance of actions to mitigate its effects. This lack of political will to implement adaptation policies, such as investments in resilient infrastructure and urban planning, is taking what people spent their whole lives to build.

Watching what's happening in the city I used to call "home," unfortunately, there's not much I can do. I've been thinking constantly about it. I can't hop on a plane because the airports are closed. I can't save the families still awaiting rescue on their rooftops. I can't take a boat and start rescuing animals. Although my physical body is on the other side of the map, my mind is immersed in the thought that I can do nothing from here but write. The flooding climate disaster in Porto Alegre in 2024 can be seen as a contemporary manifestation of the historical injustices that have shaped Gaúcho society, reflecting the persistence of patterns of marginalization and exclusion rooted deep in the state's history. A serious commitment to promoting racial equality and implementing public policies that address the underlying causes of social exclusion is necessary to address these challenges.

As various cars roam the streets of Porto Alegre displaying the sticker "O Sul é meu País" (The South is my Country), the federal government proposed suspending Rio Grande do Sul's debt payments to the Union for three years, providing relief of R$11 billion to the state's public accounts. Without federal financial support or donations from the rest of Brazil, Rio Grande do Sul would no longer exist today. The place that made me who I am wouldn't be able to recover, and even with this help, it's doubtful if we'll ever return to who we once were.

My right thumb is already tired, and the phone screen is marked with the same movements, showing me there's still much to see, read, and hear. But my head can't take it anymore. I feel selfish about being where I am. I feel useless. While the sun smiles at me, the clouds weep over the Rio Grande do Sul. It seems that whoever operates the weather is very

upset to us—and there is nothing we can do but wait. We are not good. Looking at these blossomed spring flowers seems unfair compared to what my loved ones are experiencing—the worst climate crisis of their lives, and I—I am here. We need to politicize the catastrophe. It was possible to avoid this pain. The lack of system maintenance and the systematic abandonment of recent years reflect that we're unprepared.

Perhaps I also don't believe in love.

What's happening in Rio Grande do Sul is a profound lesson about how capitalism increasingly shapes how we see the world. From here, it's hard not to notice how private monopolies, with their influence over government policies and public opinion, often prioritize profit. These interests may push for policies that favor their gains margins, even if it means ignoring the negative impacts on the environment and local communities.

Effectively addressing climate issues within the context of capitalism means promoting significant changes in business practices and corporate governance. This may include implementing stricter regulations to protect the environment, establishing incentives for investment in clean energy and sustainable technologies, and strengthening corporate accountability for their actions.

But the city government? They didn't apply to get a penny for disasters. When we understand that municipal and state government policies play a fundamental role in shaping the place we live, we also realize that these institutions have the power to perpetuate or break patterns of injustice and inequality, but—we need to vote consciously.

Meanwhile, love for one another is a fundamental value that often clashes with the capitalist mindset of self-interest and competition. Solidarity reminds us of the importance of acting together to confront shared challenges like climate change and of considering collective

well-being in our economic and political decisions, and today—it's the people for the people. People like my friends are crowdfunding, going to the supermarket, and going to the shelters to give to the affected people.

Being away from home while a climate crisis unfolds is realizing that many political decisions are driven by corporate profit rather than ethical and humanitarian considerations. Many claim to love, but this feeling only occurs when their pockets are full of money. This lack of belief in love directly results from political and social structures shaped by capitalism, the neglect of public services, and the privatization of essential sectors that directly impact how people interact and relate. Financial difficulties and lack of access to quality services put additional pressure on relationships, making it harder to connect meaningfully with others.

Maybe, believing in love is a privilege taken from us since they always destroy the little we build—that's why this hurts so much.

My literature teacher wasn't crazy; she was just an adult who had lived long enough to understand that life can be a magical yet ordinary experience. Love isn't just exaggerated romanticism but a multifaceted political experience. The voracious capitalism permeating our society promotes a culture of individualism and rampant exploitation. The climate crisis is a direct manifestation of this mentality. The relentless pursuit of economic growth at any cost has led to unprecedented environmental imbalance, threatening our well-being and all life forms on the planet.

Polarization, corruption, and a lack of empathy in many political systems are symptoms of a society that has lost sight of the fundamental value of solidarity and mutual care. By the end of the day, we are in the same boat. As we navigate the complexities of adulthood, it becomes evident that our journey is not solely about personal success but about fostering deeper

connections and embracing a broader sense of responsibility. Yet, in our pursuit of collective well-being, we confront formidable obstacles, including the erosion of solidarity and empathy within our political frameworks. The remedy lies in individual action and collective mobilization towards a more compassionate and inclusive society, which may be understood by love.