

# Days and Nights in Tamara – Prisons and Tensions about Gender in Conversations with the “Women of Prisoners”\*

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## Abstract

In this study I propose a theoretical-methodological reflection on prison research from the "outside". I argue that people (mostly women) who visit spouses and sons deprived of their liberty are crucial to shaping prisons outside their walls. The relationships that "women of prisoners" establish with their family members, produced and mediated by the prison, demand that they cross prison boundaries to supply prisoners with food, clothing, care and information. This process involves movements between cities, solidarity networks, trust, suspicion and discussions that take place on the lines to enter the prison and in the rooming houses where women stay during the visiting period. The field research that informs the article took place at one of these lodgings and at the prison gate, contributing to the perspective that analysis of prisons should consider movements on the "outside". Conversations between women, visitors and the anthropologist also indicate gender and sexuality articulations in relation to the ethnographic challenges that involve the many tensions in the field.

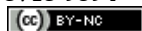
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The objective of this article is to methodologically and ethnographically explore some issues related to conducting research about prisons, in particular issues involved in research in spaces considered to be outside a prison. It also examines the complex negotiations between the researcher and interlocutors, which involve conventions of gender and sexuality current in the field. These issues are related to my research experience about prisons and my interest in the flow of people, objects and information between the inside and outside of prisons. In part of my time as a researcher – since 2015 – my ethnographic observation post has been from outside prisons, together with people, particularly women, who move through the city and state of São Paulo to be with their imprisoned friends, children and husbands. The first question that guides the reflection that I propose here is, what can we gain by studying prisons from outside their walls?

The theoretical-political perspective that guides my work is marked by feminist theory and by discussions concerning productions of categories of differentiation, or social markers of difference (Simões; França; Macedo, 2010). In other words, my perspective grants a central place to the production of differences, inequalities and forms of agency – as well as their limits – among women and men marked by prison. These differences, produced in determined social and historic contexts, are perceived in terms of gender, sexuality, race, class and generation.<sup>1</sup> In the approach that I take in this article, gender and sexuality are languages that permeate the relations of women and men not only between each other, but also with the prison institution. I argue that in this movement, both gender and sexuality and the prison mutually produce each other.

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<sup>1</sup> I recognize that these categories of differentiation are mutually constituted, and that it is not possible for their productions to take place separately from each other (McClintock, 2010). The focus of this article on the dimensions of gender and sexuality, therefore, does not ignore this reciprocal constitution – it is the possible analytical perspective for this work in particular.

The second question that I propose through the production of information shared here concerns how the researcher establishes relations in the field, participating in an interplay of mutual exhibitions that take place in the prison on its outside margin – the side outside the walls, the paths and stopping points where families interact, converse, talk and argue. At this margin, my presence is assimilated and seen as peculiar, and is part of the readings produced by the women about what it is to be a “woman” and in a certain way, about what it is to be the “woman of a prisoner” and what it is to be an “anthropologist” in that context, categories that are constantly in reciprocal tension.

The questions discussed here thus seek to conduct a theoretical-methodological reflection on research with prisons considering the disputes and productions of gender and sexuality that take place through and around the prison. I present the issues based on a study conducted in Tamara,<sup>2</sup> a city that is home to a prison and some boarding houses or bed and breakfasts where various women speak, coexist and debate. Finally, I explore one of the tensions that involve women and the anthropologist, and which in turn is permeated by different analyses about gender and sexuality.

### **Prisons in gender**

The prison is the theme of my studies, particularly considering the porosities and flows of people, goods and information between *inside* and *outside* its walls. I recognize as the broader issue that gender is central to understanding these movements as well as the regulations that operate in the relations between the prison administration, imprisoned people and their family members. I seek to advance in the discussion, particularly addressing the ways that the *inside* and *outside* of a prison are produced not only by the insides and outsides of the walls, but

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<sup>2</sup> I chose to present a fictitious name for the city and the people I found there to guarantee anonymity to the participants in the study.

also in the relations “from the outside in”, or that is, through women who maintain family or romantic relations of different kinds with people deprived of liberty.

I recognize that a prison goes beyond its physical-institutional spaces, and is also present in the neighborhoods where it is part of the creation and reconfiguration of ties and trajectories. The incarceration of a family member involves not only the absence of this being, but also the presence of the prison, which restructures relations and permeates daily dynamics. In this sense, I understand the prison as an expanded field that conceives the physical limits of the institution, but that also involves the forms of agency that occur around it – the flow of people across the institutional walls, the efforts families make to visit, the preparations in the city of origin and in the cities of the prisons, the agreements and disputes among family members that wind up involving the people deprived of liberty and vice-versa.

The movement of family members to *inside* a prison can be perceived in the visits to the penitentiary units, highlighted by the massive presence of women. Data from the Secretariat for Penitentiary Administration (SAP in its Portuguese initials), the agency responsible for management of prison units in the state, indicate that they account for more than 65% of the people registered for visits in the penitentiary units in São Paulo state.<sup>3</sup> In the municipality of Tamara, where I conducted part of the study presented here, 70% of the visitors are women.<sup>4</sup> On the line to enter the prison, it seems that the proportion is even higher, that is,

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<sup>3</sup> The data are based on the year 2014, and provided by the Defensoria Pública do Estado de São Paulo [Public Defender’s Office of São Paulo] under the Law for Access to Information and were shared with me by the Núcleo Especializado de Situação Carcerária da Defensoria – NESC [Specialized Nucleus on Incarcerated Situations of the Defender’s Office], to which I am grateful.

<sup>4</sup> The data concerns the registrations from January 2017, and includes adult women. If adolescents and children are added, 77% of registered visitors are female. I obtained the data from the Secretariat of Penitentiary Administration (SAP) under the Law for Access to Information.

it is mostly women who travel to the city to visit imprisoned people.

In the relations established between the women and family members deprived of liberty, it is important to highlight the series of regulations imposed by the prison institution. These women are in a certain way institutionalized because of the privation of liberty of their loved ones: they reorganize their lives around visiting day, or even move their place of residency.<sup>5</sup> To visit an imprisoned person requires registering with SAP. For those women visiting partners, it is necessary to present a document that proves their relationship – a marriage certificate or *declaration of cohabitation*, which is a form of proof of a stable relationship. Finally, to enter a prison for a visit requires being submitted to procedures known as *intimate searches*<sup>6</sup> or body scanning.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The expansion of São Paulo state prison system, analyzed by Rafael Godoi (2015), took a considerable portion of the prison institutions to small municipalities in the interior of the state that receive prisoners from the entire state. The distance between the location of a family's residence and the location of the prison often leads family members to move to the closest cities, to facilitate visits (Silvestre, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> The *intimate searches* (which rights movements call *harassment searches*) consist in strip searches combined with cavity searches of those who enter the prison establishments under the allegation that prohibited or illegal objects (such as cell phones and drugs) may be hidden. The search requires the person to undress and expose her intimate parts – vagina and rectum – by squatting over mirrors and often coughing so that any objects fall out of the cavities. Part of the search involves passing through a metal detector that indicates that the visitor's naked body may be carrying something. My doctoral research explores the controversy about the *intimate* [or harassing] *search* which arose recently involving governments, and national and international human rights organizations and operators of the justice system..

<sup>7</sup> Lei 15.552 which prohibits the realization of intimate searches in São Paulo prisons was approved in 2014. Since then, the state prison units have been “adhering” to the law by installing body scanners that function without the need for the searched person to remove their clothes. However, visitors report that the scanners increase the waiting time to enter the prison and in some cases do not eliminate the requirement that visitors disrobe before entering. There is also concern about its health effects, particularly for children and pregnant women.

The prison institution is not the sole producer of regulations that are obeyed, avoided and questioned by the women who visit their family members. They must also be attentive to the procedures established by the Primeiro Comando da Capital [First Command of the Capital] (PCC).<sup>8</sup> These procedures are observed not only at the times when women are in the prison, in relation to their husbands, to other prisoners, and to the women who visit them; the procedures also operate in daily life, many kilometers from the city where the penitentiary is located.

The various types of limitations and regulations that involve the visits of women to prisons, as well as their conduct on the outside, reveal the porosities between being *inside* and *outside* a prison and indicate that prisons expand beyond their physical limits. These regulations are reminders that the prison institution makes its presence felt by establishing procedures and submitting bodies to intervention, in such a way as to reiterate that the “punitive systems must be relocated in a certain ‘political economy’ of the body” (Foucault, 2008:23) – independent of possible porosities and movements.

The regulations that involve family members of imprisoned people, their forms of agency and limits and the expansion of prisons beyond their institutional limits concerns a broader debate about prisons. To follow the trajectories and questions raised by those whose lives are permeated by the institution, even if they are not an imprisoned person – at least at that time – is a special analytical route, as I seek to argue in this article.

Also, the emergence of work whose reflections are produced through affects, romantic or family relationships and transnational networks that go beyond the prison experience of women, indicate that gender and sexuality are increasingly considered when discussing prisons (Padovani, 2010, 2015, 2017; Lago, 2014, 2017a;

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<sup>8</sup> The PCC arose as a group of inmates in male prisons in São Paulo state and now establishes procedures in most state prisons, for women and men, and in peripheral neighborhoods. A series of work has been proposing discussion of the PCC, its forms of operating inside and outside prisons and its expansion beyond São Paulo and Brazil; highlighted by Feltran (2018) and Biondi (2014).

Negretti, 2015; Bumachar, 2016). Other studies discuss the privation of liberty of transvestites and transsexuals, also considering the effects of this imprisonment on prison policies (Zamboni, 2016, 2017; Sander, 2016). Gender dimensions in the prisons have also been extensively worked with in other contexts, as in discussions about communications and circuits between neighborhood and prison in the prison experience of Portuguese women (Cunha, 2003), and in the analysis about affections across the walls in relations among family members and imprisoned people in the United States (Comfort, 2007) and France (Ricordeau, 2012).

A systematization has also been conducted of contributions that allow recognizing the centrality of gender in prison, whether by dialoging with studies based on this perspective, or by conducting a reading “against the grain” of studies about the prison universe (Lago; Zamboni, 2016). It is important to affirm that I understand this work as an effort to construct framings that discuss prison from perspectives that grasp gender in its relational dimension; in this sense, it does not involve considering these works as contributions in the realm of female prisons or about femininities in prison, but as contributions in the field of studies about prisons.

I refer to this literature to argue that the perspectives that articulate gender, sexuality and prisons are not exclusive to research that I conduct and are part of a broader field of researchers, in Brazil and abroad, who address the prison question and consider its tensions with gender and sexuality – without failing to reveal gender and sexuality issues in male prisons, generally considered to be a-gender. I refer to the idea, at times present in prison studies, that questions of gender and sexuality concern women – female prisons, and the families of prisoners. From this perspective, it would not be possible to address male prisons from a perspective informed by gender and sexuality. Even if some readers may find that my work reiterates this perspective, I reaffirm that I understand gender in its relational dimension, from the production of femininities and masculinities and in the regulations, limitations and agency that result from it.

Now that I have presented a reflection on conducting research on prisons from the outside, I will describe part of the work that I conducted in the city of Tamara. The situations and dialogs among many women present there indicate the tensions in the relations between *women of prisoners* and are part of the argument that to look at prison from the outside provides analytical returns to the debate about prisons. Meanwhile, the tensions and questions that involve subjects who move outside the prison, particularly “gender problems” among women, also include the researcher.

### **Days and nights in a rooming house**

I arrived at Tamara at eight in the morning. The bus, which had left from Barra Funda at 10:30, was full of people who got out at the many stops. Celina was on the same bus, I had met her the year before, and she visited her husband regularly. At the bus station at Tamara, we said hello again. I had called to have Flora come get us, so we waited together – she would also take a ride with Flora. Flora was the owner of a rooming house that took in family members, a business she ran with her husband and daughter Fabiana. I asked if she [Celina] would be staying at the rooming house and she said no, that she preferred to stay in a hotel where she had her own room and the women were more *discrete*. She said that at Flora’s house there was a lot of confusion, she did not like this *mixture*, but liked Flora and always went there to talk. When Flora and Fabiana came to get us, Fabiana, who was having a birthday that day, got a present from Celina. I commented “that’s great Fabiana, congratulations! You’re turning 18 right?” Celina said “yeah, now Fabi has to be careful, because she can be arrested”. Flora responded that this was what she had been saying to her daughter since her birthday (Field diary, 2015).



I first visited Tamara in 2014.<sup>9</sup> The city is located in the region of the state called “Nova Alta Paulista” or, as prisoners and their relatives say, *fundão* [the bottom or the pit].<sup>10</sup> The name is not fortuitous. The cities of the *fundão* are hundreds of kilometers from the state capital, near the border with Mato Grosso do Sul state. Many of the small municipalities in the region have at least one prison. Tamara has close to 20 thousand residents and one penitentiary.

Reaching the city, I visited the rooming house, located in a central neighborhood. Flora, the owner, ran the business nearly alone at that time, with the help of Fabiana, her oldest daughter, who was then an adolescent. Her husband, Ítalo, had been arrested on a charge that had still not gone to trial, and that was not his first incarceration. Flora moved from São Paulo to Tamara at the time of his previous detention; she wanted to stay closer to her husband and went to live in the city.

In addition to hosting researchers interested in the movements provoked by the prisons, the rooming house took in women who spent the weekend in the city to visit their imprisoned husbands, brothers and sons. During this first weekend I spoke with some of the women who were visiting family members, I spent time with Flora and Fabiana, and accompanied their work running the lodging and another small family business, a stand at the prison gate to sell pre-ordered meals, snacks, beverages and in times with more money, clothes purchased in Brás, in São Paulo – particularly leggings, tee-shirts, and tops, all chosen according to the strict prison rules for clothes permitted during visits. The rooming house was therefore a location through which women passed who left São Paulo and other cities in the interior to visit their imprisoned relatives. Its owners had a trajectory marked by

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<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank Rafael Godoi for inviting me to accompany him on my first visit, during his trip to one of the cities that is part of his doctoral study (Godoi, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> The words in *italic* are expressions used by people with whom I spoke in the field. Statements from these contexts are in quotation marks.

prison and earned their living from income coming from life around the prison.

Since my first trip to Tamara in 2014, I had explained that I was conducting a study with women who had incarcerated family members because I wanted to understand what a prison is like from their perspective.<sup>11</sup> Flora and her family, therefore, knew about the study. She made a point of presenting me to her lodgers as the *researcher from São Paulo* who wants to know about the *difficulties* in your lives. At various times, Flora and Fabiana took the role of co-researchers, either by indicating people with whom I should speak, or by asking “impartial” questions to the women, questions that had them speak about points that – the two knew – were of interest to me. Some women wanted to know more about the study and spoke with me about their movements and relationships in discussions during the weekend – in the kitchen and in rooms of the rooming house, in the city’s outdoor market, or at the prison gate. Others agreed, but were not interested in the study and take care of their many tasks.

There are a number of ways to get to Tamara. I always took a regularly scheduled commercial bus route, which was more expensive than the transportation generally used by the women visiting their family members imprisoned in the region.<sup>12</sup> Some chartered vans and buses took relatives of prisoners to the *fundão* for half the price as the commercial bus company, and are organized by *guides*, who are women whose husbands are also in prison and who are responsible for assembling the list of passengers and seeing that the trip occurs without problems.

Celina, who was presented in the field notes at the beginning of this section, has more resources for the trip and lodging in the city. She traveled in the more expensive bus, and preferred *not to*

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<sup>11</sup> I returned to the city at other opportunities to accompany weekend visits between 2015 and 2016.

<sup>12</sup> The bus trip costs some R\$350 roundtrip, which is added to expenses for lodging, and in the case of families, the costs for food, clothes and personal hygiene products that are taken during the visits – the so-called *jumbo*.

*mix* with the women who stayed at Flora's rooming house, and chose another lodging with more *discrete* women. The differences between the women who came and went from Tamara began in the transportation that took them to the city and involved the choice (or lack of choice) of where to stay.

Beyond Flora's lodgings, there are hotels and bed and breakfasts in the city that also receive women who visit inmates. All, however, are more expensive than Flora's rooming house, which costs between R\$30 and R\$40 per night. It functions in a house whose configuration allows Flora to have five guest rooms, as well as a large living space and two kitchens – the larger one is used by the owners of the boarding house to cook pre-ordered meals and prepare fast snacks that are sold at the prison gate; the smaller one is rented to guests who want to cook the food they take to their husbands and sons. The rooms are not individual. They are for two to four people, and there is a collective room with six beds. In addition to the rooming house and foods that they sell, the family earns money by transporting guests with Ítalo's wagon. He was usually responsible for taking and picking up the women on trips to and from the rooming house, the prison gate, the supermarket, the bus station and any other *trip* they may have. When Ítalo could not make the *trips* – for example, when he was in prison, or when he was ill – Flora drove the wagon.

The conversations with the women took place at the prison gate, while they waited for their number to be *sung* by the *line monitor*. But they also took place in the rooms of the lodging – in the kitchen, while preparing meals; on the veranda, while smoking; in the rooms, while assembling the *jumbo* – the large bag with food, hygiene and cleaning products, clothes and cigarettes that they took each visit. They removed wrappers from hard candy and soap and put them in clear plastic bags, combined various packages of cookies into one sack, counted chocolates to not go beyond the permitted amount. All this preparation was required by the prison administration – which set rules ranging from the type of plastic bag accepted for the *jumbo* to the color of the soap that could enter the prison – only white. It is important to speak with

other visitors about the rules, to assure that products purchased will reach the inmate and avoid the *hook*, the term used for the punishment established by the prison administration to visitors who allegedly do not comply with one of the many rules. These rules vary according to the prison administrations. Therefore, when a husband or son is transferred to another prison, the visitors must become familiar with the requirements of the new unit that, if not obeyed, impede the entrance by the visitor and the provisions that she takes with her.

The already mentioned *line monitor* also fulfills a role in explaining the rules of the prison unit to new visitors. Her main attribution, however, is to organize the distribution of numbers among the visitors and to *sing* the numbers at the prison gate, organizing the line of women who will be called by the employees of the SAP who check the documents of the visitors at a counter. For the weekend visits, the numbers begin to be distributed in the *monitor's* house on Thursday. On Friday afternoon, the prison administration opens the position that exchanges the number obtained from the *monitor* for the number that will actually be used on the weekend.

The *line monitor* is also an employee. But her salary – about R\$300 a week, at the time of the research – is not paid by SAP. She is contracted by the PCC and is usually someone whose husband is incarcerated in the prison where she is responsible for the line. This, however, is not a rule.

Flora and Fabiana began to say that I should not speak with the *line monitor*, because she is very annoying. She brags but also feels sorry for herself to get things from the others. “There is no reason to feel sorry for her, because she was picked by the *Comando*”. Her husband is no longer in prison here and the *monitor* kept the position because she has a *godfather* inside the prison (Field diary, December 2015).

Flora and Fabiana have squabbles with some of the women, including the *line monitor*– who was the same at that time. Flora

had been the *line monitor* at the penitentiary in Tamara, but does not miss the post: “there was too much gossip”. Considering that the decision about who holds the post comes from *inside*, the allegation that the current *monitor* has a *godfather* appears to respond to Flora’s questioning about the legitimacy of the permanence of the *monitor* in the position. Another rumor, according to Fabiana, is that the *monitor* knows things about some of the prisoners and exchanges this knowledge for the demands that they have. The rumors, (Das, 2007) circulate and produce information and behavior in these and other issues, as we will see.

Flora’s maintenance of good relations not only with the *brothers*, of the PCC, but also with the prison administration is essential. As mentioned, some of the family’s earnings come from sales made at the prison gates. Without the approval of the prison director and employees it would be difficult for the family to keep its stand at the location. One episode illustrates the efforts that the family makes to stay on good terms with the director and with prison guards: Fabiana’s Facebook page was invaded and someone published on her profile photos of prison guards accompanied by insults. As soon as he found out, Ítalo went to the police station to file a report that his daughter’s Facebook page was hacked and called the director of the penitentiary to avoid any misunderstanding. “I filed a report to guarantee”, said Ítalo. If the director did not believe Ítalo’s story about the hacked account, the police report would be a valid document in any dispute which, at worst, could threaten the permanence of the family’s stand at the prison gate.

In addition to the stand at the gate and her past as a *line monitor*, Flora has provided other kinds of services, which were only possible because of her good relations with the *Comando* – another name for the PCC. For some time she was responsible for making the *pilgrims food*, also known as *pilgrims* in other regions of the state: who are prisoners who have not received a visitor or any type of help for more than six months.

The meals enter the prison each week and Fabiana, Flora’s daughter, explained to me that “if a prisoner receives just a Sedex

[a mailed package] he can no longer eat this food”, that is, even those inmates without visitors who receive supplies by mail are excluded from the category of *pilgrim*. Flora was paid by the *Comando* to cook the meals and guarantee that they would arrive inside the prison. To do so, it was necessary to have support of women who were not carrying the maximum quota of meals that each visitor can take. One container of food would be sent with one woman, another container of food with another, all the *pilgrim's food* got in. However, Flora lost the work to make this *food* to another women in the city who also sold meals to order. Yet Flora continued to help in the distribution of the meals among visitors who could take an additional container or two of food, but she no longer earns the money she did for making the food, herself.

I would like to highlight three points here: the first is that a prison visit is a journey that composes the idea itself of prison from this broader perspective that I am proposing. To visit someone requires planning, preparation and money. In addition, there are many regulations that involve the movement of people and goods between inside and outside the prison, and they constantly change. To conduct a visit it is important to know these rules and understand who can be trusted to ask for help.

The second point is that Flora and her family – including her husband, Ítalo, and oldest daughter, Fabiana – earn a living from the prison. They are owners of a boarding house, prepare meals to order, sell snacks on line, transport women between the lodging and the prison. This is not to say that they earn a lot from the transport of people and circulation of goods; to the contrary, they are always looking for possible business around the rooming house, to produce foods and transport people to be able to earn a living. It is important to note that the family lives in a small city and that Ítalo, Flora and the daughters must live with informality of their work and the fact that they are a family marked by prison – whether by Ítalo's past incarcerations, or by the family life organized around the dynamics of the prison visits.

Meanwhile, the family members dominate the rules imposed by the administration and are able to guarantee food transport across the walls. Flora's goods are palpable on different levels: there is food and there is information, lodging and relations both with the prison administration and with the *Comando*. Even if Flora is no longer responsible for the *pilgrims food*, she is essential for guaranteeing the functioning of the mechanism, that is getting the food inside. It appears that it is not only money that is at stake, but also the maintenance of good relations with the *Comando* and the maintenance of a certain control of flows – even if this control by Flora is always at risk of being interrupted by the control operated by the prison administration.

The maintenance of good relations is the third point that I highlight: while it is necessary to file a police report to guarantee good relations with the prison administration and protect the permanence of the stand at the prison gate that supports the family, it is also necessary to be careful to also remain on good terms with the *Comando*. There are constant tensions around the relations that are produced through the prison. The climate of mistrust, which comes to evoke a certain paranoia, provokes a continuous need to produce evidence that, if necessary, can serve as proof in eventual disputes involving Flora, Fabiana, Ítalo and *women of prisoners*.<sup>13</sup> To not trust anyone at the prison gate is advice constantly repeated, and the rumors appear to justify this hesitancy to trust people who circulate at the prison entrances and exits.

This climate of frequent tension and distrust is part of the relations established in the field that also involve gender and sexuality and the presence of the researcher, as I will now discuss.

### **Differences and the danger of the dyke**

A hot Sunday morning. Nearly all the women had already entered the prison. Flora was sitting on a chair napping while

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<sup>13</sup> About the category *woman of a prisoner*, see Lago (2017b).

Fabiana, Aline and I spoke. Talk would flow then drop off – we were tired. I lit a cigarette. Silence. I smoked in peace while Ítalo went to the wagon and turned on a sad song. Aline began to sing along, interpreting the lyrics, performing the suffering of a song about a prison visit: “Mom, how are things there at home? How are the guys from the hood? Tell them I said hello, give a big hug to the kids”.<sup>14</sup> While Aline sings, Flora jokes: “it seems like you are in jail, Aline!”.

Aline did not go into the prison to visit her husband that day. She arrived in Tamara on Sunday morning for a *bate-volta* [quick-trip], which was the name given to people who come to the city, visit and leave the same day. When Aline tried to go into the prison, the metal detector *rang* and she got the *hook*, a punishment that bars her from entering the prison as a visitor for a certain period determined by the administration – this time, for six months. The metal detector was especially difficult on that day according to women who returned from the visit. There were rumors that the machine had been switched for a new one that *caught everything*.

This is not the place to discuss if Aline was carrying an object that could have triggered the detector or not; in all my trips to Tamara, I heard stories of women who were barred entrance because the detector *rang* even when they had nothing on them. What was important is that Aline did not go into the prison that day and needed to wait for a ride back to her city from Flora and Fabiana.

Flora told me, the night before, that her relationship with Aline was not good. The problems began because, according to Flora, Aline did not like it when she learned that her husband spoke with Fabiana about ordering food. Aline considered this communication a potential threat, and even asked Fabiana if she

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<sup>14</sup> The song “Dia de Visita”, [Visiting Day] by the group Realidade Cruel, is available at the link: <https://www.lettras.mus.br/realidade-cruel/76549/>. Accessed on 04 Set. 2018.



had something to tell her. Fabiana got upset with Aline's lack of trust and since then the relations between them were cold.

The difficult relations between the three did not stop Flora and Fabiana from inviting Aline to wait for a ride back with them, both at the stand at the prison gate and at the rooming house. During the day, we continued to talk. Flora said that two women who were at the rooming house had been arrested the weeks before. Among discussion of the details of both arrests, told and retold in the conversations at the rooming house and on the line at the prison gate, one question was evoked either by Flora, or by whoever else participated: will they [the prisoners] *become dykes*?

The doubt was permeated by laughter and suppositions, but there was safe ground for reflection: if a woman is imprisoned, she runs the risk of *becoming a dyke*. The risk could be confirmed by the placement of the two women in the penitentiary: if they were in a certain pavilion, they would already have *become dykes*, because that was the pavilion of the *dykes* in the penitentiary where they were.

Aline participated in the conversation. She bet that one of the women *would* become *bofinho* in the prison, that is, she would be a *dyke* considered masculine.<sup>15</sup> Aline had also already been in prison. In that conversation, she said that *its very hard* for a woman to become a prisoner and not find a girlfriend, and said that *on the last day* of her prison she decided to *experiment*, but said to her partner that she would be the *man*, because she *wouldn't suck pussy*. Under the incredulous looks of Fabiana and shouts from Flora – “ooh how gross!” –, Aline said she didn't like the experience, that she thought it was *strange*. The owners of the rooming house, among laughter, told me: “Natália, be careful with Aline at your side, eh?”. Aline, to continue the game begun by Flora and Fabiana, touched my leg. I, who was already uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, was startled

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<sup>15</sup> Natália Padovani (2010) explores some classifications that circulate in the prison and involve *dykes* and other women who have sexual-romantic relations with women.

and nearly jumped out of the chair. Flora and Fabiana laughed. Aline repeated: “the touch is different, right? I thought it was very strange...”.

This episode helped to clarify conventions of gender and sexuality that circulated in my field context and that have effects on the relations of women among each other, with their male inmates and with the prison. These conventions are part of the construction of the study, because they inform how Flora, Fabiana, Aline and other *women of prisoners* produce meanings, concerning for example, the risk of becoming a *dyke* in the prison or the idea of gender. Meanwhile, these episodes created uncomfortable situations for me – when they did not make me paranoid – and were potentially disruptive of this field. I will explain.

The observations, comments and questions that some of the women in Tamara make about me concern processes of production of differences that evoke classifications about race, gender and sexuality.<sup>16</sup> What is constructed as feminine in the rooming house and on the visiting line at Tamara is permeated by women who negotiate with the rules of the prison administration and with the presence of the PCC, and who experience moments of distrust about who is a *prisoner’s woman* and who is not. To be a *prisoner’s woman* involves performing a desirable femininity; an exaggerated femininity, that of *mistresses* or *hookers*, it is a theme of distrust, when not of discussions and accusations.

This composition of the feminine in Tamara finds certain conflicts with my own presentation of gender, so to speak. Flora and Fabiana generally refer to this difference. Moreover, various questions about loving relations – and consequently, about sexuality – are raised as themes of conversations and trigger curiosity in people with whom I spoke.

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<sup>16</sup> Heloisa Buarque de Almeida (2002) reflects on the shock between the local constructions of the feminine and the concepts held by the researcher, and an “initial apprehension” that it caused.

I am a bit of a curiosity in the rooming house and at the prison gate. The clothes that I wear distinguish me from the typical clothes of the *women of prisoners*, composed of leggings, tee-shirt and sandals – the clothes permitted for entering the prison. “Those are sneakers?! It looks like a sock!”, or “You are still young, Natália, using this dress... tsc, tsc, tsc.”. Baggy clothes, longer dresses, sneakers and short hair draw commentaries and incredulous tones in the question that I heard most often at Tamara: “do you visit?”. Based on the discussion by Almeida (2002), I recognize that to be “from the outside”, to be the “researcher from São Paulo”, allowed me to use clothes considered strange for the context of Tamara.

The fact that I am *branquinha* [white] is also mentioned often, along with my eye color. *Branquinha* is part of a racial classification that also includes *morenas* and *moreninhas* – [brown-skinned women] references to people who would be considered black in certain contexts. The racialization around *branquinhas*, *morenas* and *moreninhas* operates by producing differences, but is not appropriated by the people as a nexus to discuss inequalities. The recognition that black and poor people are more persecuted by the police and courts and victimized by the prison does not exist in the conversations at Tamara.

The perspective on the clothes that I wear and of my “style” is related to a point that causes curiosity, above all in Flora, and that is always reiterated when I arrive at Tamara: my marital status and my possible romantic relations. Since the first time that I went to Tamara, in 2014, Flora asked if I was married, if I had children. I said that I did not have children, but that I had been married and was separated. She asked, then, if I had a boyfriend. I preferred to say no, I did not. The conversation, as I expected, and to my relief, did not extend to the possibility that I had a girlfriend. The presumption – which is nearly a prescription – of heterosexuality participated in that dialog.

Flora and her daughters are Evangelicals, and I thought that a more complete response to the question could cause unforeseeable effects on my insertion in the field. My responses

about eventual “affairs” questioned by Flora, are generally evasive. I am, thus, in this field, a woman, over 30, with no children and who does not have a stable relationship with a man – something different than the women who pass through the rooming house, who are married with children.

I understand that when I ask about people’s families and relationships I am establishing a two-way street that involves my family and my relationships. At the same time, this interplay operates on unequal levels in a field context in which heterosexual relations are the explicit part of the trajectories of the women with whom I spoke, and homosexuality is treated either as a danger, or comically. The episode in which Aline and Flora discussed if a woman would *become a dyke* in prison indicated a perspective about the relations of women with other women – on one hand, the difficulty of being imprisoned without at least *experimenting* with an encounter with a woman, even if limited by an imposition on which party in the relationship would play the *little man*; on the other hand, *disgust*.

The very notion of gender is disputed by Flora in this context, and indicates the repertoires she mobilized in the production of this definition – and its effects. In one of my trips to Tamara, I carried a bag with one button about human rights, another that called for an end to violence against women and a third with writing about gender equality. One of Flora’s daughters saw the bag, pointed to the buttons and asked what they were. I said that they were decorations and spoke of the first two, but did not go into the issue of gender – I thought that I should have left the button at home.

Later I went out with Flora to put gas in the family wagon and go to the supermarket. At the gas station she pointed to two girls who walked by and told me “I don’t know what it’s like in São Paulo, but here the GLS<sup>17</sup> are more women”. I responded with a question: “why would there be more women here?”. She avoided an answer and said that today the GLS don’t call themselves this

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<sup>17</sup> In Brazil, GLS refers to gays, lesbians and sympathizers.

way, that now they are called *gender*. I understood that she had heard the conversation about the buttons. Before I said anything, Flora's daughter, who was with us, asked "what is GLS?" Flora, quickly, responded: "look on Google!", and added that this story about *gender* was in the Congress, but that they would stop it; that schools today can no longer celebrate normal days like Mother's Day and Father's Day because of *gender*. I commented that I understood gender a bit differently, but she did not show interest. She concluded her argument praising the negative comments of an evangelical singer about gender. I understood that the discussion about gender and sexuality was permeated by religious debates that excluded the possibility of a frank conversation between us about this issue.

I mention these two moments because I think that they suggest conventions about women who relate with women, in and outside prison. The speculation about the probable *dyke* and the idea of gender linked to sexuality that Flora expressed presented forms of dealing with sexual diversity that define a limit to my presence: these discussions produced in me a sensation similar to paranoia that became instilled in relations around prisons.

I must urgently find other [prison] lines. I am afraid of my face, if my face will denounce me. I think that the paranoia is becoming impregnated in my skin (...). (Message sent to a colleague about the research at Tamara, December 2016).

I present the above excerpt because I think that it helps to express the fear that I felt the last time that I was in Tamara, during the conversation about the *dyke*. The danger of the *dyke* in prison produced a sensation of fear in me, while in the field. The incarceration of the two women triggered, in the conversations, the dimension of risk involved with sexuality that is performed through prison. In addition, the discussion about this risk triggered the sensation that my expression of gender, sexual orientation or even my opinions about sexuality could be read on my face and agencied against me. It is quite possible that Flora, Fabiana and Aline had no idea of the fear that I felt in the conversations

involving the possibility that the two women would *become dykes*. But it is what triggered the fear that “my face would denounce me”, my body would denounce me”.

### Final considerations

In this article I sought to argue and ethnographically demonstrate the possibility to explore the world of prisons through their surroundings, particularly through the movements and elaborations produced by women who visit their incarcerated husbands and sons. The rooming house located in Tamara appears as an extension of the prison that receives family members and the various preparations needed to pass through the gate and place oneself on the inside of the prison institution.

The ideas about gender and sexuality presented by Flora and by other women with whom I spoke indicate some of the bases upon which are constituted the femininities that circulate in Tamara in the context of the prison. These femininities are deeply relational: they are materialized in the interactions around the prison, of the women with their husbands, among the women, in friendships and disputes. The latter involve issues of the line at the prison gate and of the rooming house, or even a reading about the nature of the dialog between a woman and another woman’s husband, as in the tension in the relations between Flora, Fabiana and Aline – which, however, did not lead to a complete break. The relational production of these femininities also involves the researcher, whose presentation of gender is generally faced in a playful perspective.

In the context of Tamara it is not desirable to be *GLS*, or to *become a dyke*. It should be noted that these visions are not exclusive to women of Tamara, nor exclusive to *women of prisoners* or to the women who visit family members in prison. I do not want, by raising this portion of the study, to present this ethnographic context as being exotic. After all, positions that can be read as homo- or lesbophobic are not restricted to prison gates. These visions circulate in many other spaces and are at times

mobilized, as in the case of Tamara, by religious perspectives that define gender as “ideology” (Carrara; França; Simões, 2018).

Meanwhile, these episodes instigated a tension in the field. Tensions are part of any study, but they are not always discussed by researchers. When giving preference to a positioning that allows speaking with those who enter and leave a prison and that allows accompanying relations that are produced through prison, the life of the researcher is part of the information that circulates and that produces relations. To deal with this is part of the negotiations, which are always tense and delicate, of any ethnography.

However, at the prison gate, and at the rooming house, there are regulations and negotiations that originate in various vectors – particularly the prison institution and the PCC. These negotiations, always reiterated, create an environment permeated by the need to constantly attest their conduct and to produce proofs that support their word in case of argument. The researcher was not the first and will not be the last person to be careful about with whom to speak, in whom to trust, what information to share, like anyone else at the prison gate. It is very probable that I was not the only person afraid on that weekend.

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