

# “I’m alive, and this is my life now”: territory production and existence conditions in a prison’s daily life

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**Sara Vieira Antunes**

University of São Paulo | São Paulo, SP, Brazil  
saravieira@usp.br | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4407-4285>

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## ABSTRACT

From the experience of two imprisoned people in a female penitentiary in São Paulo, this text reflects on the means of producing territories and existence conditions in a prison's daily life. The creative and tactical ways of adapting the environments to make it home, so as the support networks, favors and affections woven over the years are juxtaposed with the forms of domination and institutional attempts to annul the imprisoned subject. In extreme situations, the body becomes the resistance's last territory, from which escape routes are put in movement to produce war machines against the State, making life possible. Through narratives that allow us to see different ways of producing territories for livable lives, I seek to discuss the boundaries between subjugation, resistance, and creation in a prison reality.

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## KEYWORDS

Prison, territory, tactics, resistance, daily life

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## "Deliverance" among Christians and the anthropological concept of ritual

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Out there, in the world, people are used to think about us, who are imprisoned, and imagine that we have no life, that our time here is null. However, here is where I've lived most of my life. I was eighteen when I was arrested, now I'm almost thirty. This is where I got in love for the first time, where I married three times, made my friends, learned almost everything I know about life, discovered who I am. For the rest of the society, we are dead, no one care what happens with us. But I'm alive, and this is my life now.

Pereira

This phrase was announced by Pereira<sup>1</sup>, a *dyke/trans man*<sup>2</sup> imprisoned for over ten years in the São Paulo penitentiary system. Through the *boqueta*<sup>3</sup> [small hole] of a solitary confinement<sup>4</sup> cell at the Female Penitentiary of Santana (FPS), where he spent about sixty intermittent days locked in a space of eight square meters, Pereira talked about the life he had built in prison. A life marked by confinement in rectangular cells, by regulated traffic through certain corridors and by the control of hours lived in concrete floors. Life surrounded by high walls, barbed wire, iron railings and surveillance booths. But not a *null life*. Imprisoned for over a decade, Pereira does not think that his youth years were lost or delayed by the endless craving for something that could only be lived outside prison. What he seemed to say through the small hole of the solitary cell is that life also happens there. Or, that it *needs* to happen so that the years lived between bars could be possible.

The starting point of my master's research, developed at the FPS, was substantially changed by the triggering effects of this phrase. Initially aligned with a certain thematic approach to prison, which privileged crime dynamics, the search was gradually leveraged by this set of words, leading to the formulation of other questions, adjacent to them: how, then, could it be possible to produce life in prison? How to make endure what is continually relegated to the minimum necessary to prevent death? How to make what is designed to be a null time, something worth to live?

These questions only came up when I left the ones that led me to research the prison system in the first place. I started the fieldwork in 2014, driven by the academic boom of studies that, in the 2000 decade, was looking to the performance and organization of the First Command of the Capital (PCC)<sup>5</sup>. I wanted to understand the dynamics of this crime organization in a female penitentiary considered *dominated*<sup>6</sup> by it. I was interested in identifying the positions occupied — like *discipline* and *sector* — relating to the *Party*<sup>7</sup> organization, the population's relationship with other *dominated* prisons, the dynamics between people imprisoned, their relationship with the staff and other problems related. After months digging answers to my own questions, I was overcome by tiredness. The PCC was *my* problem, not theirs. Their interests and concerns were moved by other things. They wanted to talk about the prison's daily life, the *perreco*<sup>8</sup> that circulated, the difficulties they face in daily

1 | All proper names mentioned throughout the text are fictitious.

2 | Sapatao [dyke] is an emic term, most common in female penitentiaries (PADOVANI, 2017), used to refer to people who embody attributes socially related to masculinity. Although the article assumes the presence of trans men, I will use the universal feminine as a standard to refer to the prison population.

3 | Small opening in the cell door

4 | Cells for the isolation of people who, according to the warden, committed a disciplinary offense. The isolation in this unit varies from ten to thirty days, without permission for sunbathing.

5 | The beginning of the 2000s was marked by the popularity of academic research focused on the emerging phenomenon of the PCC: Adorno and Salla (2007), Telles and Hirata (2007), Biondi (2009), Marques (2009), Feltran (2008), Dias (2011), Mallart (2011), Godói (2010), Malvasi (2012) and Lima (2013) were important references on this subject.

6 | It refers to institutions of liberty deprivation whose population is guided by the precepts and values of the First Command of the Capital (PCC). On this phenomenon, see Mallart (2011).

7 | *Party, Movement, Fifteen* and *Command* are emic synonyms for PCC.

activities, the *affairs* and *disaffections* with other people, the family they left "out there" and the family they made "inside". They wanted to talk about jail life. Life broadly, not *crime life*.

This "dazzled effect" that came from Pereira's phrase was not immediate, but happened in retrospect, after several visits to the field notebooks, in search of connections and preliminary analyses. Strathern (2014) warns that fieldwork should be seen as an anticipatory exercise, since it is not possible to know in advance what later may be significant. According to the author, the relationship experienced and observed in the field "must be valued for their own sake. Any resulting information is a residual — often initially unknown — product" (:354). This immersion and openness to the field allows later, when writing and systematizing the field data, that some elements appear as "revelations", producing a surprise effect. Amid the notes on the *sisters* who underwent *solitary cells* and the diverse opinions about the *Party's* support or rejection, Pereira's phrase emerged as a powerful articulator of several problems that sprang up from the field and extrapolated the PCC. Inhabiting a *dominated* prison certainly involved being immersed in the codes and crime dynamics, in modes of life dictated by the *Command*. However, what Pereira and so many other interlocutors showed me is that the PCC was just one side among others that shaped the ways of making life in prison.

Against the idea of null time, Pereira proposed a different way of reading the time lived in jail: a time in which he had fell in love, married, made friends, found out who he was, and managed to build, despite countless constraints, a path for himself. Therefore, this life was not submitted to continual "mortification" attempts, as Goffman would say about life in a total institution, such as prison. For Goffman (1961), the totality of institutional control is such that people subjected to it gradually become depersonalized and mortified. Its ability to act would be restricted to small adjustments in the face of a rigid, stable and self-contained institution. However, Pereira and other interlocutors showed that the tactical and creative use of some tools made it possible not only to resist to the "mortification of the self", but also to produce new prison territorialities, — thinking prison as a porous and constantly changing structure.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of territoriality, developed by Perlongher (2008) in his ethnography of masculine prostitution in São Paulo, brought important contributions to think about the modes of life production in prison. Inspired by the reflections of Deleuze and Guattari (1997), Perlongher thinks about territoriality as a subjective and fragmented formation, not restricted to a specific space, nor fixed by relationships or stable in time. The idea of territoriality highlights the subject's inherent segmentarity, fragmented by relationships and by the spaces they circulate. In other words, there would not be a stable identity of a subject closed within itself, but continuous movements of territorialization, which consist in the appropriation of subjective

8 | Jobbery, gossip.

9 | Against the idea of an institution closed on itself, Cunha (2003) calls attention to the prison overflow beyond its walls, since the prison experience is also experienced by the population of the peripheral neighborhoods who, through intense criminalization processes and police repression, end up becoming preferred customers\* of the prison system. In this sense, Godói (2015) suggests that the people flow, things and ideas that connect the "inside" and the "outside" of the prison - called by the author "communicating vein" -, far from being marginal to the institution operation, they constitute essential elements for its maintenance. The perspective adopted by the authors sees the prison as a malleable and porous institution, that is, whose limits go beyond its walls and whose ordinary operation is maintained through the flows between the "inside" and the "outside".

environment where the individual feels “at home”.

As Zourabichvili (2004: 23) explains in Deleuze's Vocabulary, the territory is what “circumscribes, for each one, family and bonding connections, which show the distances in relation to others, and protects them from chaos”. The author explains that the territory is the region of permanence where the individual appropriates and, therefore, produces identification. However, Deleuze and Guatarri (1997) highlight the instability of this appropriation, always subject to scape, abandonment, or expulsion, creating spaces for the production of new territories. Thus, territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization are movements that are continuously alternating, making what the authors call the refrain, a territorial assemblage constituted by these three aspects.

I suggest that institutional efforts to nullify the existence of imprisoned people, to produce processes of “mortification of the self”, which we could call forced and persistent deterritorializations, are disputed by reterritorialization movements, by the reappropriation of family and bonding domains. To reterritorialize oneself, it became necessary to make not only adjustments in relation to the supposedly stable structures of domination (physical and subjective), but a series of tricks, bricolages, and technologies, capable to produce escape routes, points of deterritorialization that allow the reterritorialization in other domains, where it can be possible to produce “at home”.

The strategy concept presented by Michel de Certeau (2014) in *The practice of everyday Life*, seemed to contribute to the reflection on the ways to produce life in the prison's daily life. The author proposes the strategy/tactic pair to think about consumption practices in the articulation between mass production and private consumption, rejecting a deterministic view of consumption modes. In this scheme, strategy is presented as a calculation (or manipulation) of power relations from a proper, privileged and distant place from the “battlefield”. The tactic, on the other hand, once deprived of its own place, is forced to improvise within limited conditions on an imposed environment, totally exposed. Having no way to maintain distance, to stay in a safe place for forecasting and planning, the tactic is configured as

movement “within the enemy's vision field”, as Bullow would say, and in an environment controlled by the enemy. (...) What it earns is not kept (...). It has to use, vigilantly, the flaws that the particular circumstances open up in the vigilance of the exclusive power. Then go hunting. Create surprises there. It manages to be where no one expects. It is cunning. (...) In short, tactics are the art of the weak (DE CERTEAU, 2014: 95).

The agonistic relationship between tactics and strategy, proposed by the author, was criticized by Kasper (2006) in his ethnography on the practices of homeless people in the city of São Paulo. According to Kasper, the tactical-strategy pair is

presented by De Certeau in a strictly reactive perspective, since the first appears as an action without a project, pure counter-dependence, based on a dynamic restricted to the attack and counter-attack poles. Despite this, Kasper postulates that the agonistic character of this relationship is precisely what makes it productive to think about the ways of existence of those who live on the street, "beings without a 'self', whose life unfolds entirely within the field of the enemy vision" (KASPER, 2006: 22). In the wake of this thought, it seems pertinent to approach the prison's daily life from the war perspective. Incarcerated people, once deprived of their own place, subjected to surveillance and regulation of their daily activities, are effectively on a battlefield for the maintenance of their lives. It is plausible, therefore, to speak in agonistic terms. Staying alive, refusing to have years of their lives, even decades, subject to being "null", is to effectively resist the judicial-penitentiary extermination strategies. Disputed in a field of permanent deterritorialization, where imprisoned people are subject to constant displacement and dispossession, these tactics produce movements of reterritorialization that persist producing livable territories, life possibilities.

It is through this set of questions and concepts that I seek to discuss, in this article, the life tactics mobilized to inhabit the prison. The experiences of Pereira and Vanda, presented below, not only triggered a series of research questions, but continued to guide the entire writing process, taking the foreground. The fragments shared about their daily lives, what they chose to show and talk about their trajectories between bars, provided clues to think about the boundaries between subjugation, resistance and creation. Thinking about these frontiers meant, above all, to refute analytical lenses that reduce the imprisoned subject to passive receptacles of a power that deprives, mortifies and incapacitates them. Here, therefore, an attempt was made to take Pereira's phrase seriously when he said that prison did not represent a null time in his life, but a time lived, a time in which he was an agent in the construction of a territory that he had made livable.

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My enter in the Female Penitentiary of Santana, located in São Paulo city, was made possible by the Prison Ministry (PCr), an entity of the Catholic Church that provides religious and legal assistance to prisoners throughout the country. In 2014, I joined the "Letters that set free" project, coordinated by Vera, a university professor and a volunteer at PCr. Together, we carry out weekly visits to the so-called FPS Observation Regime (OR) pavilion, for two years. The pavilion follows the same format as the other three in the unit: the cells are given out over three floors in a U shape, so that it is possible to have a panoramic view of the cells from the pavilion entrance. On the ground floor, people undergoing clinical or psychiatric treatment are allocated; on the first floor, on one side, there are people who were temporarily in the unit (in the

so-called *temporary cells*) and, on the other, people who pay for a disciplinary offense in the *solitary confinement* (also known as *the hole*). Finally, on the second floor, people who serve sentences in a permanently isolated cell, the so-called *maximum-security facility*.<sup>10</sup>

10 | In these cells are the people who ask for protection in relation to the rest of the prison population, remaining separated during their stay in the prison, or while there are signs of risk regarding their interaction with others.

The rhythm of the OR pavilion, even with the shouting in between the *solitary* and *temporary cells*, was qualified by its residents as calm, having as a reference the other unit pavilions. It was because of this calmness that Vanda, with no physical or psychiatric diagnosis to remain in the OR (considering it was a place formally destined for treatment and recovery), requested her transfer to it after five years living in pavilion II of the FPS. She was approaching the end of her sentence and said she could no longer stand the crowded and frenetic coexistence of the other pavilions; she wanted the tranquility of the smaller number of people that normally occupied the OR.

Imprisoned for eight years, she said that she became a sector when she moved to the OR. Any conflict or intercurrent was reported to her who, often looking tired, spent most of our meetings on Fridays solving issues between the inmates and meeting several demands. The position of sector of the pavilion, legitimated by the organization of the PCC, made it responsible for delivering the *bóia*<sup>11</sup> in the cells, keeping the corridors clean and organized, as well as making the communication between inmates and prison staff.

11 | Food supplied by the institution, delivered individually to the cells

On days when there wasn't much to do, Vanda would sit with me and Vera in one of the cells that had been made available for us to carry out the reading project. Once, she began complaining about her memory, saying that she didn't remember things anymore, that she wanted to see a doctor to find out if she had any problems: "*I no longer remember what the solitary food is and what is temporary ones, I keep forgetting everything, I've lost track of time and things in here. I need to take care of my head*". Faced with Vanda's anguish, Vera suggested that she start writing her life story little by little — she said that, like a muscle, her memory needed to be exercised frequently, to strengthen itself; in time, it would gain vigor again. Excited about the suggestion, Vanda readily accepted and asked Vera to write her story. In addition to Vanda's handwriting difficulty, her knowledge of Vera's profession, as a university Language professor, made many come to her with doubts and requests regarding her role as a "Portuguese teacher", as well as her assistance in writing letters. Therefore, we agreed that Vera would write the letter and I would participate as an interested listener, with her permission to put the story "in the book I would write about prison life." Vanda said: "*This is going to be my life testimony to the people outside*".

Whether through the "book that I would write", or through the work of the Prison Ministry, she wanted us to take her story "to the world", as a life testimony.

The following week, as agreed, we sat together, and Vanda told her story:

I lost everyone on the slaughter day, right, my entire family, almost everyone died there. My father was a drug dealer, he did everything at home. We lived in a farm, where one day some guys came to collect, settle some debts. They arrived shooting, the first one I saw falling was my mother, three shots in her back. My daughter ran away, then the guy went after her, shooting her in the head. He killed two of my brothers and my father, but those I didn't see. When I ran to protect my son, I was shot twice in the back, and then fell on top of him. After that, I don't remember anything... this story became known, it was in the newspaper and all, many people died in the same house, right. Until I fall, I remember everything, like a movie in my head. Then I was in a coma for a long time, I don't even know how long it was. When I woke up, they told me everything, that I was the only one who survived that day. The worst thing is that I don't even know where my children were buried, to this day I don't know where they were buried...

Vanda starts to cry, Vera and I try to comfort her, we stop for a while. In the meantime, she was called by a prison guard to take her psychiatric medication. There were several. After taking the medicine and, now calmer, she continued to tell:

So, after I left the hospital, I was confused, I had nowhere to go, so I went out into the street. I only had two brothers alive who weren't on the day of the slaughter, but one was in prison and the other on the street, he was an alcoholic. Then I went out on the street too, right, I started using a lot of drugs (crack), I slept on the street, anywhere, I didn't have hygiene, care, nothing. I was supposed to have gotten sick, taken something, by the way I lived. I spent two years on the street like this, selling drugs to consume, I lived for drugs... until one day I got arrested. I took ten years. One of these days I realized that I've been here for eight years. It is too long in this place, I think that's why I don't remember things anymore, we get sick in the head. It's hard, you see, from time to time it gives me a panic, you know, I don't know what my life will be when I leave here. There's no one waiting for me outside. My brothers never came to visit me, I've sent a letter, they don't reply, I've already given up. I only have a letter from my brother, from six years ago. (...) It's like that, in jail it's us and God, only He doesn't abandon us. My brother, when he was in prison, I went to visit him every month, even when I was seven, eight months pregnant. But since I came here, no help, no letter, nothing. That's right, this is jail.

Without the valuable help of the *jumbos*<sup>12</sup>, Vanda sought to keep some formal work in prison, to acquire enough *pecúlio*<sup>13</sup> to cover primary expenses like toiletries, clothes and some food. When, by chance, she was not employed, she performed informal services for the population itself<sup>14</sup>, which payment is made with packs of cigarettes - the money from the jail, as they say: washing clothes for other people, making and selling crochet pieces for use and decoration from the shacks and or

12 | Bags with food, toiletries, cleaning products, clothes, cigarettes (among other things) taken by visits to people serving time.

13 | The annuity "works as a banking system within the prison system, through which each prisoner is endowed with a kind of account in which they will deposit either the salaries of those who work, or the resources provided by their families" (...). "The administrative sector sends a list of allowed goods among prisoners", (Godói 2015: 75), goods that are not allowed to enter by jumbo.

14 | It concerns the entire prison population, except for those under *seguro* [maximum-security facility]

make exchanges with cell phone and/or drugs, even though she tried to avoid this, it in order not to fall into *confinement cells*.

Since she went to the OR, she considers that her life in jail has improved. She started working as a sector, she was farther away from the *mess*, the *crowding* and the *chatting about crime all day long*. Despite being quite busy with her duties, she said it was nothing like the coexistence of nearly five hundred people on either side of the other three pavilions. Since she arrived in the OR, she has been able to remain in the same cell, sharing it occasionally with different people over the years.

At the entrance to her shack, we can see a flowered cloth used as a curtain for the door. According to Vanda, the cloth suits to keep privacy inside the shack when the cells are open, but also when they are closed, since the opening of the *boqueta* allows a partial view of the cell interior, for those who pass through the corridor. In this way, even when the doors are closed, it is the tissue that seals the division between the watchful corridors and the domestic and private space of those few square meters. On the outside of the *boqueta*, Vanda left a crochet towel with pockets sewn out to put the breads that were delivered for breakfast. As in the other cells in the OR pavilion, the toilet and sink were on the left side, right in front of the bed. At about 8 m<sup>2</sup>, most things stacked vertically. The floor was primarily occupied by two narrow concrete beds under a thin single mattress; among them, a handmade crochet rug, a material currently made and sold within the prison. In addition to the rug, there was a sort of shelf made of the same material, where Vanda would put folded clothes and some toiletries.

In the opposite side of the entrance was a long rectangular window, shaped by closely juxtaposed iron bars. On that pavilion side, the windows overlooked a huge concrete wall, marked by cracks and small fissures apparently caused by bad weather. Windows that, in Vanda's shack, were covered with a white sheet with embroidered flowers, attached at their ends to the wall and covering the gray view of their bars. In front of the other person's bed, who, at that time, shared the shack with Vanda, a small television remained on, with the low sound that made up the background of voices broken through the pavilion's corridors and floors. Composing the environment sound, a radio was on during the entire period of our meetings. The sound, often accompanied by the locals singing, varied with remarkable tranquility from gospel songs to country music and funk. Mixed with that, so many times we heard the screams that came from the first floor, saying lady!!! (an expression used to address the prison guards), to ask favors for the pavilion sectors, or to talk animatedly between the *boquetas*— factors that, at the first time I entered the prison, demanded double effort on my side to comprehend individual conversations.

Screams, parallel conversations, the metallic noise of bars and keys, the sound of the radio and television made up the sound of the OR, which, at times shrill, at times mild, according to Vanda, was not comparable to the multitude of simultaneous



sounds among the approximately five hundred people in each block of the other three pavilions. For eight years imprisoned in the same penitentiary, Vanda seemed to have meticulous knowledge of the environments and the different rhythms of the pavilions in which she lived. As we talked, she seemed to make out clearly and quickly the shouts that were addressed to her, those that indicated confusion to come, and the common chatter between the cells. At times, our conversation had been abruptly interrupted by her going out into the corridor to find out why the voices had gone up; I, on the other hand, could not tell the difference between their usual screams and those that put Vanda to act.

Allen Feldman's (1991) research with political prisoners in Northern Ireland is exquisite to think about the effects of sound ambience on prison life. Based on the reports made by inmates who participated in the so-called "Dirty Protest", Feldman reflects on the different skills developed to resist the violence suffered in the prison system<sup>15</sup>. To circumvent the guards' listening, political prisoners began to communicate through shouts and writings in Gaelic, made with their own feces, on sheet curtains. In addition to the use of Gaelic, a language hardly understood by the guards, the fragmentation of sounds produced in the dense experience of prison became a necessary learning and political tool for their actions. Sound, capable of extrapolating the limitations of cell isolation, made the voice and ears "autonomous organs of political practice". In other words, attentive listening to the most subtle sound movements — and even to moments of silence — became a tactic to overcome the visual barriers that made it impossible for them to follow what was going on in the pavilion. Locked in their cells, the prisoners developed "the autonomous ear and the distorted voice, which was 'in the air', free and transcendent" (FELDMAN, 1991: 210).

Feldman's argument indicates that familiarity with the variety of movements of the sound field can make the disembodied voice a political potency of prison sociability. Based on this understanding, we can say that the "noisy background" that initially blurred my attention seemed to be fractioned by Vanda, due to her sensitive and improved qualification of sounds, capable to distinguish what could represent conflict, regular demands, or simple everyday conversations. The continued attention to the pavilion's sound variation seemed to result from the environment knowledge through extended experience, but also, as Feldman suggests, as a tactic to overcome visual barriers and remain vigilant, attentive to the flows rhythm which she had become responsible. As a sector, it was up to her mediate and be aware of the conflicts and traffic that took place in the pavilion. The "autonomous ear and the distorted voice", as Feldman puts it, is what seemed to connect Vanda with permanent, *solitary and temporary cells*, from moments of silence to the diversity of sounds, screams and outcries throughout the pavilion three floors.

However, while Vanda's sensory memory seemed attuned to the most subtle vibrations of sounds and movements, her practical memory of daily chores and the

15 | The "Dirty Protest" was a strike launched by political prisoners in a male penitentiary in Northern Ireland, who protested against the wearing of uniforms equivalent to those worn by people convicted of "common crimes". This group's resistance to the several violations made by prison officer progressively escalated, leading to such a cycle of violence that, at one point, the group began to take extreme measures. Among them, they used their feces to write messages and also to create an atmosphere of disgust that eventually forced the officers to cease aggression. I'll talk more about the strike later.

passage of time seemed to significantly fade. In her speech, she said that she started to lose track of time, to forget about things and regular activities. About her life, she knows how to tell what she considers the most traumatizing moment in her history, which makes this a "life testimony". Such testimony, raised by Vera as a "memory exercise", is brought to the present by Vanda's words through the telling of a traumatic experience, as a way of giving intelligibility to the sequence of factors that led her to jail.

Indian anthropologist Veena Das (2007), in an ethnography with women who have experienced great violence due to the repartition processes in India, talks about the subtle and silent ways of revisiting traumatic events through the daily update of (re)doing herself. Her argument is that these traumatic events are not in a distant and forgotten past, thought about as far away; on the contrary, such events involve the present as an atmosphere that needs to be overcome in the daily practice of going on with life. Through this approach, Das seeks to soften the recurring oppositions between victim and aggressor, agency and oppression, that comes from the perspective of the exceptional. Descending to the ordinary, simple actions such as to cook, to do daily chores, to organize the environments and care with the relationships, emerge as ways of silently communicating pain and, in this exercise, try to transpose it. According to the author, these are not heroic and fantastic acts of resistance, but persist in the daily subtleties of making everyday life livable.

Das indications about the different ways of manifesting and dealing with the effects of traumatic events were essential to understand Vanda's efforts to produce a life testimony and, above all, to look at the extent of these efforts in smaller practices of her daily life. Faced with the loss of a large part of family ties, the lack of material and emotional support from the siblings who are still alive, Vanda has managed, over the years, to articulate an extensive network of exchanges, favors and bartering skills that make up her shack with memories, stories, and affective feelings. The room was always spotless, the floor "*cleaned even with my own hands*", as I've been told so many times in the absence of utensils; all the decoration work with ornaments, crochet pieces, curtains and colors made up a warm and intimate atmosphere that, despite all the constrictions and forms of violence inherent to the prison, was made a home.

When trying to convert the pain of the traumatic event that involves her family's slaughter into a life testimony, Vanda seemed to create a temporal link with the past that brought her back to the present moment and to the ways in which she took care of its effects. My reading of Das' ethnography is that these traumatic events are not only revisited in their discursive expressions but are present in the ways in which people live their daily lives, in apparently ordinary practices. In this direction, we can say that the experience lived by Vanda in the past was not only updated when, sitting on the bed in her shack, she put into words the sequence of events that led her to the present; her trauma, supposedly located in the distant past of a weakened

memory, was updated in the ways in which she took care of her life: in dealing with daily relationships, in practical tasks, in the way she organized the place she lived and even in the silences of memory.

In this record, it can be said that Vanda's shack, her daily practices, as well as her testimony, spoke about the traumatic event she had experienced precisely because it showed the need to reterritorialize, to create family and bonding domains, in the material production of a welcoming environment or in the constitution of permanence ideas and security. In her prison years, she had forgotten phone numbers, her family address, any traceable references to her past. Her time in prison was ending, and apart from not being sure when her release would finally arrive, she had no prospect of what she would do and where she would go when she got free. Thus, the present moment was the palpable place on which she could keep on going, enduring an existence that had been devastated, and weaving other existential territories.

Contrary to the incapacitating prison paradigm, in which incarcerated people would be subjected to total and mortifying control, permanently hostage to movements of deterritorialization, Vanda was able to (re)create physical and subjective atmosphere in which life could persevere. The buildup of knowledge about the prison and its workings was precisely what allowed her to create, in a strategic and handmade ways, better conditions to finish the years that remained until the end of her sentence.

Appropriating the prison mechanics and twisting it to her own benefit, was, in Vanda's case, a silent and discreet exercise, through which she managed to direct certain flows and produce a material and affective territory, considered by her healthier. In another case, the tensioning of prison mechanics to trigger a certain displacement, was only possible when a "war machine" was put into gear. In a systematic and violent way, Pereira spent months ingrained in the prison system, forcing an escape route that would lead him back to the territory where he chose to end his sentence time. Not resigned with the unwanted transfer to another prison, he spent long periods living in a movement of absolute deterritorialization. Next, I discuss the tactic of *playing crazy to break the system*.

#### **PLAY CRAZY TO BREAK THE SYSTEM**

Pereira was, for the third time, isolated in the *solitary confinement cell* in the OR pavilion. During the last time, he became friend with Vanessa, one of the women under psychiatric treatment who inhabited the ground floor. They spent hours talking through the *boqueta*. Vanessa often refused to bathe, complained about the bland taste of food, and sometimes went without eating for days. The precarious conditions of her shack, furnished only by a foam mattress with no sheets, a pillow and almost no personal belongings, also suggested the limits of her ability to take care

of herself. Pereira began to advise her, telling her to tidy up her shack better, take a shower and try to eat properly.

One day, Vanessa's cell lamp burned out. Days passed and nothing was done by the pavilion staff. When the sun went down, Vanessa remained locked in a dark cell for hours, until she finally fell asleep. Pereira, upset with her situation, began to demand the guards to do something, to take care of her, help her to bathe, stop treating her with indifference. Nearly the end of the thirty days of his *solitary confinement*, nothing had changed regarding the living conditions in Vanessa's cell. When Pereira finally stepped out of the *solitary cell*, followed by two guards, he could not help himself. He started to curse and accuse the guards of being responsible for Vanessa's precarious conditions, and was immediately sent back again to the *solitary confinement cell*. He awaited the result of the inquiry<sup>16</sup>, which would say how many days he would have to remain confined. However, due to his history of disciplinary faults, it was decided that he would be transferred to another prison, possibly one of the penitentiaries known for its precariousness and overcrowding.

16 | Disciplinary administrative process.

After nine years imprisoned at Santana Female Penitentiary, Pereira established a territory marked by emotional ties and relative material comfort. Restarting a life in another penitentiary would mean retracing the path of years building a place made by him familiar. The pavilion where he had lived all these years had become a safe place, where he was known and respected and whose dynamics he knew how to traffic. His abrupt transfer to another unit did not even allow him to take his personal belongings or his relatives about the *bonde*<sup>17</sup>. He would be allowed to send letters again or receive visitors only when released from the *confinement cell* of a prison he did not know.

17 | Expression that designates the transfer of prisoners between units of the prison system.

Months passed in the reading project. Vanessa kept asking when Pereira would return to visit her in the OR. However, we had no news of his whereabouts, nor did we know if he would eventually finish his sentence in another prison. One day, passing through the *solitary confinement*, I met a girlfriend of Pereira's who had shared the cell with him on more than one occasion. She brought news. According to her, Pereira would not accept being imprisoned in any other unit than the FPS. She explained that, in order to return, Pereira was *playing crazy to break the system*. Apparently, he had spent the past five months in practically every female prison in the state of São Paulo, from *solitary confinement to solitary confinement*. In every unit he arrived, he wrought such uproar and havoc that, as consequence, he was thrown into the cell of another penitentiary. Upon arrival, he broke the cell structure, set fire to the mattresses, fought with the guards, cut and threatened to kill himself, producing such a disturbance that the warden had no choice but to transfer him to another prison. With this, the time of *solitary confinement* lengthened. In the aggressiveness of his actions, the violence that returned to him was increasingly brutal.

Later, looking back on those months, Pereira talked about the time he spent from dungeon to dungeon, resisting all kinds of violence, from absolute deprivation — of

food, clothes, light, air circulation — to continued beatings by prison officers. Despite all the bad things he experienced, he asserts that the worst place he went through, where he sometimes believed he wouldn't be able to get out sane, was Franco da Rocha's "State Mental Asylum". He said that, while he was there, any manifestations of indignation or sadness were answered with the administration of heavy psychotropic drugs, orally or even through injections, applied by force. During this time, he says, he had lost track of time, he no longer knew how to measure whether he had been there for days or weeks. He spent most of his time sleeping and, when awake, found it hard to perform simple tasks, such as bathing and eating, so bad was the lethargy produced by the medications. When they gave him injections, known as "sleeper hold", he felt his body rigid and rocked by spasms that made him walk mechanically, like a robot.

After a few weeks in the asylum, he met a woman in a similar situation, hospitalized without psychiatric justification. She taught him a way to escape the immediate effects of psychotropic drugs and the long-term risk of becoming chemically addicted on them. Psychotropic drugs administered regularly (except injectable, applied in situations of "excitement") were consumed orally, followed by the mouth inspection, to verify swallowing. To escape its effects, she said that she always carried a bottle of disinfectant alongside her, small enough not to attract attention, but capable of serving its purpose. She explained that after swallowing the pills and passing through inspection, she should take a big sip of disinfectant to trigger vomiting. With that, all medication would be expelled, leaving only traces of the effects of a toxic product in her system... to spare suffering, she deduced that this was a lesser evil.

When Pereira had mastered this tactic, he went through an appointment with the psychiatrist, who used to visit the unit regularly. Without the mechanical or lethargic effects of psychotropic drugs, he managed to convince the doctor of his "normality", being "discharged" of the asylum.

Months passed and Pereira could not see the end of the transfer cycle through all the state female prisons. He was sure that the method would eventually work, once that other people had already made the complete journey. Some took months, others more than a year, but they finally returned to where they started. In his case, around the sixth month breaking the system, worn out and already without energy, Pereira backed down from the undertaking. He accepted to leave the *solitary confinement*, remaining in the pavilion of the Female Provisional Detention Center (PDC) in Franco da Rocha. On that occasion, he sent me a letter telling his whereabouts, which allowed me to visit him through the Prison Ministry at Franco da Rocha.

Finally, I managed to find Pereira again. (...) I got scared when I saw him. He was thin, haggard, with a deep circle under his eyes, and his hair, once so neat, was now all disheveled. He looked tired, sad. He told me that he decided to stay in Franco da Rocha because he couldn't stand the suffering of breaking the system. He got tired and surrendered, decided to stay there, even

because he found that his sentence was near the end. Still, he finds it very difficult to spend that time there. He says there's a lot of women talking in his head all day, a lot of people together in the same space, where he doesn't have time alone... Privacy? Never. He says that there is a lot of injustice there, no work or anything to do. He showed me the cell where he was. Quite different from the two beds per cell at the FPS, there he shares the space with about thirty women, huddled between the floor, bunk beds and some makeshift hammocks (excerpt from the field notebook—12/09/2016).

After three months following Pereira on fortnightly visits to the Pavilion II courtyard of the Franco da Rocha PDC, I went to meet him again in the same *solitary confinement*, days before his birthday. He said, laughing, with irony, that he had won a few days as a “birthday gift” cell, but he was also smiling at the still uncertain news that he whispered to me with excitement: he had heard rumors that he would be transferred to the Santana Female Penitentiary. Two weeks later, I returned to CDP and I couldn't find him. His cellmates confirmed: he was back in PFS.

After months struggling in *solitary cells* of practically all state female's penitentiaries, and imprecise weeks “marching” or completely drugged at the Hospital of Custody and Psychiatric Treatment (HCTP) of Franco da Rocha — aptly referred to as “insane asylum” — Pereira finally managed to finish breaking the system.

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An important dimension of prison management is the control of people's mobility and flows, through dispersion and fixation movements. More than confining people, prison operates in a logic of circulation and concentration, capture and movement (MALLART, 2019). While it restricts rights and diminishes the most elementary material life conditions, it gives way to flows that come from family support networks to internal transits and commerce, to the relocation of people between different pavilions by criteria of coexistence, alliance and rivalry. It is an expanding gear, supported by the continuous mobilization and engagement of agents outside the state's staff: family members, social movements and voluntary entities are involved in the ordinary prison performance (GODÓI, 2015).

Godói (2015) situates prison as a device of population governance that, perversely, manages to make “the minimum of existence, the imperative and non-negotiable of life, something that depends on the continuous engagement of several participants, (...) and that converts the effects [of this engagement] into a kind of benevolent concession” (idem: 220). Far from being an institution destined to closure and absolute control of everything that involves those it imprisons, it is structured and expanded by the differential regulation of its speeds and intensities. It does not immobilize them completely, but retains and disperses; concentrates and circulates; dope and set to march.

*Playing crazy to break the system directly* outrages this managing mechanism of displacements, since it necessarily imposes a deterritorialization vector, and an ultimate destination of reterritorialization. To get into a war regime, whose nomadic ambition implies the mobilization of a violence directed against the State apparatus, that is, against the power to dispose of flows and speeds. If “the State defines itself by the perpetuation or holding of power” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1997: 20), if its main concern is to conserve and concentrate, any indiscipline that questions its hierarchy, that promotes abandonment or escape routes, which contradicts its arborescent form of power, is directed against the State apparatus.

The process of knowledge accumulation about prison mechanics led Pereira to undertake an escape route within the State apparatus, aiming at its gears to break out a certain institutional trajectory. For this, a state of continuous deterritorialization was activated by a war machine that threatened to dissolve into an abolition line, since its sanity, and even its life, remained threatened by the fragile line between acts of resistance and threat of destruction.

In Karina Biondi's (2010) research in male penitentiaries, the expression “*playing crazy*” also appears in her interlocutor's speech as a certain attitude towards adverse situations. *Playing crazy* would basically consist of “*trying its luck*” (BIONDI, 2010: 123) by triggering improvised tactics and risking situations to achieve the desired goal. The author retrieves one of its interlocutor's narratives about an escape plan that had fail due to an unusual improvisation attitude. The plan involved the group's passage through the infirmary sector; however, the member responsible for opening the infirmary did not show up at the scheduled time. Thus, Karina's interlocutor resolved the situation by abruptly cutting its own lips and staging a faint, so that it could be quickly taken to the infirmary and, thus, able to continue with the escape plan. The author emphasizes that, although these sudden attitudes seem random and impulsive, they are the result of a long learning process, a laborious and creative work to deal with life adversities in a control and confinement context:

Improvisation involves at the same time mastering the body, speech, sensory faculties, and reasoning ability. Here, body, mind and senses are inseparable from the construction of a skill that is reactive, but which is also learned, worked on the result of training, creativity, imitation, intuition, and lots of practice (BIONDI, 2010: 126).

The knowledge about the prison functioning, combined with the mastery of his own body, was what gave Pereira the confidence to *play crazy* and reach the desired goal: return to the PFS. Through a kind of suffering economy, he calculated that the anguish and violence to which he would be subjected, by making this rout, was inferior to the possibility of ending his sentence last years in another penitentiary. In the middle of his journey, however, he backed down from the initial plan, conforming to the idea

of staying in the overcrowded cells of Franco da Rocha's CDP. His tired body suffered the cumulative effects of a crushing trajectory. Thin, deep dark circles, haggard features, bumps and cracks in the skin spoke of hard paths. The several *solitary confinement* cells he went through over the months also kept the texture of his clashes against the State apparatus.

The ethnography carried out by Feldman (1991) with the prisoners in Northern Ireland, mentioned above, shows the potential of the body as a political artifact of struggle and resistance. In the context of the "Dirty Protest", the insurgency of prisoners against violations perpetrated by prison officers had as the ultimate tool the use of their own bodies. Unprovided of other materials and of any communication channel with extramural space, they turned their bodies into an eschatological war machine against prison violence.

The strike began with the refusal of a political prisoner's group to wear the same uniforms as "usual prisoners". The group's first demonstration was followed by the violence intensification applied to them during searches in their uniforms. As a response to this, the prisoners began to refuse using any cloth, remaining naked and covering themselves only with the sleep blankets, a fact that made them known as "The Blanket men". From then on, the body searches increased. The violent approach of prison officers in the rectal inspection and hygiene procedures became recurrent. Reportedly, the prison officers "shave the prisoners' heads and body hair, exfoliate the skin with hard brushes that even tear the skin" (FELDMAN, 1991: 189). The response to these violations took the shape of a "cleaning strike", in which prisoners refused to bathe. Over time, they began to urinate and defecate in their own cell, to prevent the prison officers to use the collective bathrooms to perpetrate violence. The creation of what Feldman calls an "eschatological ecology" of bodies and cells was responsible for creating an abjection mask that created disgust on the prison officer's side, discouraging them from continuing inspections. Through this abjection atmosphere, the prisoners turned their cavities and the cell itself into "protective recesses and shelter that repelled the optical deepness of the prison regime" (FELDMAN, 1991: 199).

The refusal to bathe and the production of a daily life immersed in bodily excrement began to cause the death of prisoners because of the diseases that began to spread. Thus, their bodies were not only subjected to degrading and infamous conditions, but to the imminence of death. The body, the ultimate resource of resistance, became an instrument and subversive mimesis of power. In these situations, where the deterritorialization of life forms is such, the body seems to become the ultimate territory from which it is possible to redirect and reverse the circuit of force, producing escape routes that can eventually become abolition lines, creating regions where life is no longer possible.

The reflections brought by Feldman help to think about the practices of *playing crazy to break the system*. Both in Biondi's ethnography and in Pereira's account, *playing*



*crazy* appears as a resourcefulness capable of creating daring solutions in the face of extreme situations. Differently from the tactics used by Vanda to create a bonding and restorative territory to move on with her life, the tactic of *playing crazy* happened, in the two cases mentioned, in extreme situations, where the body was the only territory for action. When there are no means or minimum platforms for (re)acting in the face of adversity, the body becomes a primordial instrument of resistance, the ultimate territory where it is possible to make life persevere.

*Playing crazy to break the system* approaches the tactics mobilized during the Dirty Protest by using unusual solutions that blur the boundaries between life promotion and death drive. To oppose oneself to the violence and destitution of State operations, one will travel through liminal regions, where the body can become the only shelter, even if fragile and worn, to reverse force vectors and produce a way of existence considered worthy, even if it means to put an end to their own life.

From the *boqueta* of the solitary confinement at the Santana Female Penitentiary, Pereira said that the time he lived between bars was not a null time, because there, despite all adversities, he managed to create ways to inhabit, to love, to belong. Being transferred from the penitentiary where he lived for the last eight years, in the final stretch of his sentence, would mean making that remaining time a null time: days of life endured while waiting something else. For him, *playing crazy* for months, destroying, breaking, cutting himself, sleeping and marching, in a permanent escape route, became a way of staying alive, within what he considers to be a livable life.

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**Sara Vieira Antunes** has a Master's Degree in Social Anthropology from the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) and is a doctoral student in the Postgraduate Program in Social Anthropology at the University of São Paulo, USP (FAPESP scholarship). She belongs to the Nucleus of Law Anthropology (Nadir-USP) and is currently researching the following topics: prison, madness, security measure, justice system and power technologies.

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