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Marginality, security, surveillance, crime, imprisonment: reflections on an intellectual and methodological trajectory

Catarina Frois

This article engages with contemporary anthropological and ethnographic methodological debates by reflecting on the challenges of conducting research in contexts related with marginality, deviance, surveillance, and imprisonment. It examines the tensions surrounding access, researcher subjectivity, and the positionalities negotiated in the field, emphasizing the epistemological relevance of long-term ethnographic engagement. Rather than treating obstacles, disruptions, and moments of unpredictability as mere hindrances, it considers them as integral to the ethnographic process and as productive sites for generating insight.

KEYWORDS: ethnography, marginality, security, crime, imprisonment.

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AS PRESENTED IN THE INTRODUCTION TO THIS SPECIAL ISSUE, THE emergence and gradual strengthening of populist drifts that has bolstered the public advocacy for more severe and restrictive punitive measures often rely on securitizing rhetoric and epiphenomena of violence in which the “other” is an agent of fear. The discussion I present in the following pages seeks to illustrate how the “social enemy”, described by Michel Foucault (2018) concerning the emergence of the “criminal”, reverberate in the meta-narratives I have come across in the course of a 20-year research trajectory conducted in diverse settings.

Building on this extensive ethnographic journey, this article explores how the anthropological endeavor – especially when situated in settings marked by control, exclusion, and punitive rationalities – produces unique methodological and theoretical challenges. These environments test the adaptability, ethics, and reflexivity of the ethnographer, revealing the complex interplay between institutional power, public discourse, and lived experience. Ethnographic work in such contexts requires heightened sensitivity to the ethics of presence, the asymmetries between researcher and interlocutor, and the co-production of knowledge under conditions shaped by surveillance, mistrust, and constraint.

My objective is twofold: firstly, to present contexts, actors, and methodological strategies for understanding and problematizing anthropologically issues such as vulnerability, social exclusion, stigma, securitization policies, experiences of incarceration, discourses, and narratives of fear and insecurity. Secondly, to provide a critical and theoretical framework that may serve to demonstrate how the cumulative practice of empirical knowledge and close proximity of the ethnographic gaze and gesture (Biehl 2013; Pina-Cabral 2017) enables us to grasp the ambiguities, ambivalences and contradictions that comprise the very fabric of the reality we experience and try to make sense of.

Moreover, this article interrogates the role of the ethnographer as both observer and participant in environments where narratives of threat and security are dominant. It asks: how do methodological approaches shift when the field itself is constituted by practices and discourses of criminalization and exclusion? In what ways do the affective dimensions of fieldwork – uncertainty, discomfort, exposure – contribute to the analytical depth of ethnographic knowledge? By addressing these questions, the article advocates for an understanding of unpredictability and rupture not as methodological setbacks, but as moments of epistemological potential that challenge and enrich the ethnographic process.

DELVING INTO AND FEELING THE PAIN

The path my research has trailed since 2003 was initially directed at groups of individuals experiencing alcoholism, addiction, stigma, and social exclusion. In this study, which led to my doctoral dissertation, I wanted to analyze the

different strategies adopted by members of 12-Step associations (such as Narcotics Anonymous, Families Anonymous, and Alcoholics Anonymous) in their self-presentation to others: both those whom they shared a past and stigma with, as well as “others,” whom they sought to blend with and be recognized by as equals, but from whom they concealed their trajectory (Bateson 1972; Fainzang 1996; Goffman 1963). Those years allowed me to observe how illness and narrative became integral aspects in a process of identity reconstruction, and how their enactment in daily life implied a dialectical negotiation of what to reveal and what to withhold from a past history intertwined with alcohol and drug consumption.

The methods I used for studying these groups consisted in following their meetings, thematic festivities or conventions, holding semi-structured interviews, gathering life histories, case studies and setting up a small survey. Although these groups hold meetings that can either be “open” and “closed”, after obtaining permission to attend a first meeting, there was usually no objection to my weekly attendance, regardless of whether visitors were allowed or not (Frois 2009). Another strategy was to follow participants’ interaction outside the meetings. In some cases, members formed small groups before or after meetings, often in a café, occasions that offered invaluable insights to how relationships were formed, maintained, or negotiated. At times, offering someone a lift home also allowed for a degree of intimacy with members and access to information not directly related to their involvement in the associations.

During nearly three years of fieldwork, the only time my presence was questioned was when I first approached a Families Anonymous group. On that occasion, one of the members expressed concern that my presence might compromise participants’ anonymity or lead to the disclosure of the information discussed there. After they reached an agreement, I was presented as a “visitor” and that remained my status over the nine months I followed their meetings.

If this is the “simple”, almost ideal version of the adopted ethnographic observation and methodology, there is another side to the coin. Meetings of Narcotics Anonymous, Families Anonymous, and Alcoholics Anonymous are places of pain, confession, exposure of shame, feelings of guilt. These are spaces where stigma is revealed, yet remains concealed from those who do not share the same condition. Thus, the shared belief that the revelation and communion of pain allow them to find a “new way of life”, makes individual processes of catharsis through narrative assume very powerful contours (Good 1993; Kleinman 1988). As an observer, and as a listener to these monologues, I could not avoid suffering with the man who told the group he didn’t know his son’s whereabouts and was constantly afraid of receiving a phone call informing that he had been found dead from an overdose; it was impossible not to be distressed by the trajectories of theft, prostitution and violence that some drug addicts were agents and victims of; I could not prevent becoming distraught

upon listening to the woman who described how every night she would lay out the clothes for the next day, set the breakfast table, so she could then sit down to drink herself to sleep.

At the time, my academic background had led me to believe that personal emotions were irrelevant to the descriptive and analytical study that would result from these observations. After all, accompanying these interactions is precisely what ethnographic observation and proximity require of us (*e.g.* Atkinson *et al.* 2001). But that doesn't mean we stop being people, we never stop feeling; in other words, we are social scientists, we are human, and it is precisely this humanity Anthropology calls us to mobilize: ours and that of others (Biehl and Locke 2017; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). It is difficult to forget the day when, in one of the groups I accompanied most frequently and with whose members I had developed a closer relationship, one of the people present asked me to participate actively, that is, to "share" my personal story. She put it very explicitly, in the middle of a meeting: "You also have to show yourself, to share. After all, we come here every week to do a striptease!"

For the first time, I felt confronted with my own role there – what was I giving of myself to others on an intimate level? Ultimately, it made me reflect deeply on my involvement and emotional response. My awkward response, trying to explain a sense of discomfort talking about personal issues, was especially challenging since they did not relate to the same kind of experiences being discussed there, and was met with a new argument: "This is a philosophy of life, here we expose our weaknesses, our anxieties. Surely you can relate to these concerns." Despite the unease and my reluctance to "share", the situation was nevertheless very significant, even paradigmatic, of what doing ethnography really entails.

While conducting this research on marginality/margins (Das and Poole 2004; Frois 2024; Tsing 1994) and deviance (Becker 1963), I also began exploring the issue of "anonymity" from a different perspective, namely in view of an international context characterized by increased surveillance and permanent monitoring (Lyon 2001; Norris and Armstrong 1999). This opened up another line of inquiry, this time focusing on the political programs and media discourses – both closed link with questions of power – that legitimized the introduction of video surveillance in public spaces in Portugal.

VIDEO SURVEILLANCE:

UNANTICIPATED LEVELS OF ACCESS AND OPENNESS IN THE FIELD

Following this second line of enquiry, between 2008 and 2012 I carried out in-depth research into the uses of CCTV (closed-circuit television) in public spaces in Portugal (Frois 2013). At the time this was a recent phenomenon: it was first legislated in 2005, following major trends in various parts of the

world, where security and surveillance gained a global dimension in the wake of the New York terrorist attacks of 2001 (*e.g.* Lyon 2003; Monahan and Wood 2018; Lindau 2022).¹

It was a period of sharp and deep shifts, where security and surveillance policies were in constant transformation, allowing an observer like myself to follow its various stages as they unfolded; to engage with its various actors and discuss their perspectives; assess the accomplishments and shortcomings of a government policy as it unfolded in the public sphere. For this study, my interlocutors covered a wide range of actors from different institutions, from members of the Parliament, to police officers, members of local authorities and civil protection, as well as other agencies such as the Data Protection Authority. It quickly became clear that I was dealing with a multifaceted phenomenon whose significance was deeply intertwined with the diversity of stakeholders with decision-making power.

I believe anthropological methodologies were especially well suited to pursue a fuller understanding of the processes surrounding policy-making and institutional interactions. My objective was to gain a holistic understanding of the broader implications of implementing video surveillance in public spaces in Portugal, particularly as it marked a clear departure from an ideological framework deeply rooted in the memory of dictatorship – a framework that has long shaped Portuguese democracy and fostered a near-instinctive resistance to any policies involving monitoring and surveillance of citizens. Therefore, one of the contributions of my work to the state of the art resided in its ability to divide its attention evenly among the different actors involved in this complex process.

This fact alone indicated the aptness and appositeness of Anthropology in the study of security and surveillance, which until then had startlingly been almost inexistent. The intention was to show how anthropological methodological, interpretative and theoretical tools, applied to the study of what can be considered a “small place” (in this case, Portugal), could help to shed light on the phenomenon of (video) surveillance, a “large issue” in contemporary society (Eriksen 2023). This study was inspired by another subfield: the Anthropology of Policy, as described by Cris Shore and Susan Wright. The outlook provided by this approach is invaluable since, as the authors write, “policies are inherently and unequivocally anthropological phenomena. They can be read by anthropologists in a number of ways: as cultural texts, as classificatory devices with various meanings, as narratives that serve to justify

1 The literature on this topic is extensive and rich from an interdisciplinary perspective, I highlight here the excellent chapter on “Surveillance” written by Peacock, Bruun, Dungey and Shapiro (2023) which offers a review of foundational works and the development of surveillance studies, as well as Anthropology’s contribution to the debate.

or condemn the present, or as rhetorical devices and discursive formations that function to empower some people and silence others” (Shore and Wright 1997: 6).

At this juncture, my research began to intersect with and contribute to the emerging field that would later become established as the Anthropology of Security (*e.g.* Diphorn and Grassiani 2019; Goldstein 2010; Holbraad and Pedersen 2013; Low and Maguire 2019; Maguire, Frois and Zurawski 2014; Naucke and Halbmayer 2024).

As the first study conducted on CCTV in public areas in Portugal, during fieldwork I was confronted with my own preconceptions regarding the subject and even my interlocutors themselves. At the outset, there seemed to be a misconception that maybe it was not possible to gain access to political actors involved in these issues, expecting either to be dismissed with the justification that they didn’t have time, or to be given the same official rhetoric typically handed out to the media. Likewise, I was almost sure that my request to study documentation involving video surveillance at the Data Protection Authority would be rejected and, finally, that security forces would shut me out from their corporate cocoons. Somewhat paradoxically, I supposed that in this terrains, roles would be clearly defined and there would be little space for ambiguities and blurred lines: Portuguese authorities would definitely be strong supporters of video surveillance in public areas, given the country notorious craving to be considered “modern” and to ‘keep up’ with European countries in the field of technological development and competitiveness (Gardner and Lewis 2015; Scott 1998).

My findings defied these preconceptions. Every single one of my interlocutors was extremely generous and open to discussion. This openness, in fact, turned out to pose some ethical challenges. My interlocutors belonged to distinct groups. At the same time that each followed a particular set of internal rules, goals, methods and policies, they were closely linked by the subject at hand, making them strangely interdependent. Thus, realizing (contrary to what I initially supposed) that surveillance in public areas did not meet with consensus among the parties, implied that my management of the information, my dialogue with the different entities, and even my approach to and dissemination of the results would require a greater degree of caution.

The reason for expounding these methodological impressions stems from the need to clarify some of my own misunderstandings regarding the difficulties surrounding this type of field research. In fact, I was preparing myself for a tough, inaccessible terrain, where my presence would be considered unwelcome and thus meet with little receptiveness from potential interlocutors. However, the institutions I engaged with (in their majority public ones) presented themselves in a different light, perhaps more in accordance with an attitude of political correctness; that is, my interlocutors willingly granted me

the time for conversations that was above all intended to convey the institution's policy of transparency.

In the Portuguese case, mostly due to a political campaign of technological improvement, a lot of information was being made digitally accessible to all citizens. This effort was supposed to convey both a belief in modernization and a political investment in democracy and transparency, even if it seldom went beyond intentions (Frois 2013). The ease of access to information and persons became extremely perceptible during this stage. To give just one example, all decisions and rulings approved by the Data Protection Authority turned out to be available online on this institution's website, contradicting my assumption that this would be privileged information. Furthermore, all the bureaucratic and procedures on video surveillance, including documents from other entities involved, were made available at the Data Protection Authority's main offices.

Nevertheless, during fieldwork I did in fact encounter unsuspected problems, but ironically they derived not from any sense of restriction but, quite on the contrary, from what I found to be a rather "excessive" ease of access to public officers holding prominent institutional posts. It was not so much the potentially confidential nature of the information being shared with me that I was concerned with. But I was surprised by how readily officials shared their personal opinions, and indeed their willingness to contradict – and even criticize – the positions and activities of other institutions involved in these projects (de Goede, Bosma and Pallister-Wilkins 2019). Very soon, the initial tone of political correctness quickly gave way into one of conflict, revealing that these projects were not as consensual and coordinated as they were officially portrayed to be, even within each institution. The kind of criticisms and disagreements I am referring to were not just meant as general comments on the system's flaws but were often directed at specific persons and institutions. While I was surprised by the lack of prudence and reserve evinced, but more importantly, the freedom with which personal opinions were conveyed to me by different parties, this also had the effect of making me aware that I had to be particularly cautious so as not to incur in any misunderstandings or breaches of confidence.

Yet the most perplexing aspect of this process in Portugal emerged from the contradiction between two incongruous sets of data. On the one hand, the occurrence of crimes – as documented in statistics and data collected by various agencies – was described as below the European average, with Portugal ranking among one of the "safest" countries in Europe according to Eurostat. On the other hand, this didn't concur with allusions to public perceptions of "insecurity", such as they were being contended by politicians and amplified by the media (Frois 2011; Gledhill 2018). Ultimately, however, this contradiction was overshadowed by a political and social context in which such policies,

devices and institutional agents were justified, insofar as they targeted people who threatened general security, people being described as “criminals”, “marginals”, “bandits”, “deviants” (Vigh and Sausdal 2018).

Now, these were classifications and designations I recognized from the stories I had heard years before from the members of 12-Step associations, particularly from former alcoholics and addicts, whose histories of abuse had led them to be thus labeled by others, whether simply due to their physical appearance, or their known criminal records (such as theft or drug trafficking). It became obvious that the study of deviance, criminality, and security required a careful distinction and reflection on the relationship between the objective/material and subjective/discursive aspects involved. Put differently, while statistics served to portray Portugal as a safe country, narratives and discourses (political, media, popular) about crime and the fear of crime legitimated a political agenda that called for tangible actions (Ferguson 1990).

NAVIGATING FORMAL AND INFORMAL LOGIC WITHIN THE CONFINES OF PRISON

Now, after this long period studying, analyzing and reflecting upon the specificities and similarities of the Portuguese case in terms of the security-crime nexus, I was still left with many unanswered questions.

Who were these people, these agents of insecurity around whom the implementation of more effective security systems was discussed, whether video surveillance in public areas, community police reinforcement, or stricter laws? What did I know about their personal histories, their family, group, or community networks? What narratives did they construct about their actions, their relationship with the state, and ultimately their encounters with security forces, the courts, and the prison apparatus? (Fassin 2015, 2017). Did they see themselves as people who endangered the safety of others? And how did they live their daily life in prison, a facility which, to the outside, seems to represent a space of maximum security (with walls, bars, fences, cells, surveillance cameras), designed to protect society from the danger contained within?

Although in 2013 I had become familiar with the international literature on incarceration, from fields as diverse as Anthropology, Sociology or Criminology, I was largely ignorant of the Portuguese context, having only the work of Manuela Ivone Cunha (2002, 2008), conducted in a female prison, as my main reference. With this in mind, the option was to keep my focus as broad as possible, structuring this new investigation around a few key concepts that were somehow summed up in the title of my next research project: “Security in prison: perceptions, practices and experiences”. Initially, it was planned to last two years, with fieldwork conducted in three male prisons and one female prison around the greater metropolitan area of Portugal’s capital, Lisbon.

However, while researching security within the prison system, I discovered several types and categories of “security” that I had not anticipated. Consequently, this study turned out to be a long-term fieldwork project spanning several years and covering around twelve prisons throughout the country (Frois 2016, 2020).

Throughout these years, I encountered many frustrations in establishing relationships with inmates, prison officers and other correctional treatment staff. The most significant challenge was the understaffing of prison officers, which invariably resulted in limited time and restricted access to certain prison areas (Jewkes and Bennett 2016; Wooldredge and Smith 2018). Moreover, in Portugal, scholars applying for authorization to conduct research inside prisons must specify the exact number of inmates, prison officers, and correctional treatment staff they intend to meet, along with predefined criteria, such as offence and sentence categories, nationalities and origin. The application also requires a precise definition of the fieldwork duration – one day, one week, one month?

While this information is intended to help prison authorities schedule and manage academic requests, the idea of “hanging around” and engaging in informal conversation was completely out of the question. Letting chance and circumstance to dictate the direction of my investigation (a *modus operandi* so dear to the ethnographical method) was impossible especially in restricted areas, such as cellblocks or wings, which are precisely where such methods would have been most effective and insightful, following inmates and officers in their everyday life. Therefore, whereas administrative areas were easy to access and circulate without major restrictions, permanence in areas restricted to inmates was strongly limited and strictly forbidden in the case of male prisons. In such places, access is restricted even to female staff working there on a daily basis, such as teachers, nurses, and lawyers, and even female prison officers. Thus, “for reasons of physical integrity”, related with overcrowding and short-staffed prisons, it was difficult to guarantee the security of outside visitors.

The many hours of conversations I had with inmates, prison officers and correctional treatment staff in such facilities were mostly held in the same rooms where inmates typically met with their attorneys, appeared before sentencing judges, parole hearings, or received their weekly visits, under conditions which Drake, Earle and Sloan define as “interview-based research methodologies that tend to be episodic, short-lived and often take place outside of spaces the informant routinely occupies” (2015: 3). This is not to say that such methodology lacked validity – far from it. The conversations I held in this neutral space, isolated from the usual setting where the inmate spends his/her day, promoted moments of an almost confessional nature. Nevertheless, I was well aware that such confessional space isolated certain variables, which could only

be properly relativized and contrasted with a follow-up in a more quotidian environment.

In other words, the persona that emerged in the confined space of a closed room during one-to-one interactions was different from the one habitually displayed when interacting with prison officers and fellow inmates outside of it. The atmosphere, rhythms, and demands varied drastically between these settings.

In practice, besides a few guided tours around the cellblocks, refectories, classrooms, workshops, and courtyards, during those almost two years of prison research I had gained a very limited experience of inmates' living spaces. Even when doing fieldwork at Tires (a female prison facility in the outskirts of Lisbon), where my presence as would supposedly be less conspicuous or intrusive, the overcrowding and shortage of staff restricted my movements to a small unit separated from the main blocks where most inmates were held. From this restricted experience in these environments, I was impressed especially by the noises, which provided a kind of prison soundscape, made up of constant chatter – and sometimes shouting –, the jangling of guards' key-chains, the clanking of bolts being turned and gates being closed, telephones ringing, metal detectors beeping, and the general humming noise produced by the hundreds of people sharing the same confined space.

All interviews were carried out without the presence of prison officers or members of the correctional treatment staff, and I was allowed to record them ensuring the compliance to principles of anonymity, privacy and confidentiality. At no time was I questioned about the information gathered, nor was I asked to share or submit any part of the material before its publication or presentation in public or academic settings.

In one female prison where I spent one week per month over the course of a year, I was granted greater freedom of movement: with the exception of cells, I had full access to most common spaces and was able to accompany inmates in the courtyard, cafeteria, common room or workspaces (Frois 2017). While “being inside” holds a specific, embodied meaning for inmates, for the researcher, the experience of “being allowed inside” offers an opportunity to grasp the layered nuances and the lived realities of incarceration. It is through extended and sustained ethnographic engagement that one becomes able to observe, feel, and critically situate the narratives and discourses circulating within the prison at a given historical moment. In this sense, my continued presence became a central element of the research process.

The regularity of my monthly visits helped build a sense of trust among the women, signaling a genuine commitment to understanding their lives – not only as inmates, but as individuals and as women. On more than one occasion, it was they who noted “it’s been a while since you came,” gently expressing their disappointment at my absence. At the same time, spending time with

them in spaces such as the courtyard, the dining area, or the cell block – activities that, at the time, had no precedent in that prison – rendered me, from their perspective, a witness to their everyday lives. For some, this proximity also transformed me into a confidant, someone who knew their trajectories and could make sense of their unfolding meanings.

Anthropological literature on the ethnographic method is vast and varied and has engaged a broad debate on whether its validity when applied to fieldwork done in remote locations can be equally transferred to investigations carried out “at home” (see Hastrup and Hervik 1994; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Melhuus *et al.* 2009). It is not my purpose to develop the discussion here; although it is widely shared amongst prison scholars that carrying out an ethnographic study inside a prison facility inherently implies a confrontation with the unfamiliar. We might almost say that, if those who live or work there for months or years never come to feel that place as “home”, how could a temporary visitor such as the ethnographer avoid experiencing a departure from the familiar, from the commonplace? Furthermore, ethnographic work in carceral settings implies an encounter with specific issues of subjectivity: empathy or repulsion towards our interlocutors – whether inmates, prison officers, or correctional treatment staff –, pity, compassion or outrage at what we are told or experience directly (Davies and Spencer 2010; Gable 2014; Feldman and Mandache 2019). The relationships that can be established are tenuous, unstable, and managing underlying asymmetries implies tact and prudence, constantly shifting between trust and suspicion on several levels.

SECURITY, GENDER, AND THE STATE APPARATUS

Departing from the premise that criminal behavior is often interpreted as a means of achieving safety and well-being, I follow Sausdal and Vigh when they state that “the very notion that crime or violence are exceptional events may be seen to rest on an ethnocentrism. Where they will often be seen as exceptional from a Western middle-class perspective, they are, in many places around the world regarded as part and parcel of daily life – not a critical event but a critical continuity” (2019: 13).

The relation between security and safety² (and how it is experienced) is ambiguous and ambivalent as a normative and subjective value; the same can be said in relation to criminalized actions (Parnell and Kane 2003). According to the written law, the criminal act is an offense and a threat to collective

2 Security: “protection of a person, building, organization, or country against threats such as crime or attacks by foreign countries” – <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/security>>. Safety: “a state in which or a place where you are safe and not in danger or at risk”. Available at: <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/safety>> (last consulted June 2025).

security. Nevertheless, I argue that for some who are excluded from this normativity, or from the structures that confer it, it can be a resource or a necessity to address the insecurity they experience. To inquire and deepen this complex relation it is paramount to consider both inmates' first-hand biographical narratives, and the institutional narratives created by state officers (social workers, the police, the court) who evaluate, classify, decide upon the lives that lie in constant tension between norm and transgression. It is thus essential to differentiate the specific meanings attached to safety and security.

Security tends to be framed in relation to institutional mechanisms – linked to the role of welfare states, the implementation of social policies, and the global rise of surveillance technologies –, all of which inform state governance and contemporary understandings of sovereignty. In contrast, safety reflects a more personal and experiential dimension, grounded in everyday concerns such as job stability, protection against violence or exclusion, and reliable access to basic rights and services including healthcare, housing, and sanitation. Thus, to confuse security, in its institutional sense, with safety (what individuals feel – where one's safety may be another's unsafety) is to contribute to the central ideological misconception that security, as perceived by hegemonically dominant entities (such as the Public Security Police), is “normal.”

This institutionally protected and valued security safeguards ways of being in the world that may run counter to what is secure for the individuals under study. “Public security” does not make them more secure, or rather, the security apparatus does not make them feel safer, quite the opposite. Conflating security in its institutional sense with safety (the feeling of being secure) as tends to occur in the Portuguese language, where both senses are expressed with the same word, “*segurança*”, fosters the ideological slipperiness that institutional security guarantees safety for all. Moreover, we could speculate whether the semantic and symbolical ambiguities already provide a pre-text for the oppressive and domineering logics within a society where a significant portion of individuals lacks the means to fulfill conditions deemed hegemonically desirable. For these persons, the security apparatus eventually reveals itself as a condition of unsafety.

Over the course of my research, I came across a wide range of unexpected interpretations of what inmates understood by security, safety, well-being, or protection. These meanings often overlapped or clashed, shaped by personal experiences with state institutions, community life, or the domestic sphere, but also regarding livelihoods, gender roles, and life expectations (Narotzky 2012, 2020; Pusceddu and Matos 2022). I often heard puzzled reactions like, “Security? Whose security?”; “Well, I can't run away, can I?... and there's the prison officers also... I suppose that means that prison it's pretty secure”; “I don't know what I'll do when I get out... I'm sure I won't have social benefits [*Segurança Social*] if that's what you mean,” were not uncommon whenever

I made an open question on the subject of “security” (Gentry, Shepperd and Sjoberg 2019; Kirsch 2024).

Throughout one year of fieldwork in a female prison I followed the daily lives of women convicted of various types of crimes, with different ages, nationalities, ethnicities, and diverse socio-economic backgrounds. In our daily interactions, I sought to gather insights into their lives, their family trajectories as children, adolescents, mothers, daughters, and partners. Sometimes, their narratives centered solely or almost exclusively on certain moments that marked their biographies, not necessarily related to their involvement in criminal activities, but almost invariably connected to traumatic events, such as sexual abuse, family violence, or ethnic-racial discrimination that led them to feel they were in danger, insecure, unsafe (Gomes and Duarte 2018; Haggerty and Bucerius 2020; Merry 2008; Singli and Purewal 2018).

For example, in cases involving women convicted of killing their partners in the context of prolonged domestic abuse, they often started recounting their lives with a brief description of the early years of their marriage when “everything was fine”, followed by a long narrative about the first time they were subjected to physical abuse and verbal threats. From that point on, their entire history was built around that moment, in a continuum of violence and mistreatment that accumulated over several decades. Physical and emotional insecurity was constant, and in some cases, this was invoked to explain why they killed their husband/partner. They described how they “feared for their own life”, or felt “anger”, “resentment”, and “shame” to have to ask for help from their families. In cases where they had actually reported the abuse to the authorities, they expressed “frustration” at not having been provided with any protection after having clearly stated and written down that they felt “unsafe in their own home”, and discovering that their complaints were not followed up, but that by exposing themselves, they felt even more unsafe now than before.

For most of the women I met in Portuguese prisons, feeling unsafe corresponds to experiences of real and tangible insecurity, that is, where the conditions for reproduction of what is considered a good and proper life (including the minimal levels of bodily subsistence) are not met. While welfare state institutions offered a degree of economic security, this support was frequently inadequate to meet basic subsistence needs. For those operating outside the formal labor market, even when some form of state assistance was available, activities such as drug trafficking or robbery emerged as alternative income strategies. The risks associated with these practices were often perceived as outweighed by the potential to maintain livelihoods and ensure economic survival. The experience of safety (or rather, the lack thereof), is deeply related to the motives underlying crime perpetration. During the period when criminalized activities are carried out, there is a shift in a

woman's identity framed by a change in her relationship with the state. This analytical complexity enables us to discuss power relations and hegemony while situating the person as an agent who intervenes and determines those same relations, thus moving away from the passive subject or victim of an inevitable oppressive outcome.

Observing how transgression is mobilized in the effort to achieve a given standard of normality, I emphasize personal agency as a constitutive element of this normality, from which a person may feel cast out but is inevitably a part of and wishes to integrate and belong to. The status of women as perpetrators of criminalized activities, as well as their role as interlocutors and representatives of their family, community or social group when engaging with state support systems and social welfare institutions, raises questions that go beyond crime, but which situate them in historically, socially and morally engrained categories and classifications. I believe there is an evolvment in how the exposure to insecurity affected my interlocutor's lives. To achieve safety, in the first instance they resort preferentially to welfare and state mechanisms as well as family and community support. In some cases, a point is reached when the support afforded by these formal and informal mechanisms is exhausted. When motivated to find security by breaching the rules that determine crime, they come to be themselves sources of unsafety to others.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article engages with contemporary anthropological and ethnographic methodological debates by addressing key tensions around access, subjectivity, and researcher positioning in the study of marginality, surveillance, and imprisonment. Responding to longstanding concerns within Anthropology, I show how fieldwork in familiar yet regulated environments requires renegotiating foundational principles like immersion, observation, and engagement. In line with recent calls for a reflexive and situated ethnography, I emphasized the significance of emotional reflexivity, institutional dynamics, and the ambivalences of access not merely as obstacles to overcome, but as data that shape and deepen our understanding of the field.

The various settings and actors explored throughout these pages sought to reflect on the relevance of ethnographic methods for understanding and "deciphering" discourses, narratives and subjectivities inherent to phenomena related to vulnerable or marginalized populations; policies aimed at addressing situations of insecurity/security – whether real, imagined, or performed; and state apparatuses that regulate, shape, and modulate the offender, the deviant, or those who represent risk. Here, it is worth emphasizing the proposition made by Veena Das and Deborah Poole when they state that "an anthropology of the margins offers a unique perspective to the understanding of the

state, not because it captures exotic practices, but because it suggests that such margins are a necessary entailment of the state, much as the exception is a necessary component of the rule” (2004: 4).

Such a perspective invites us to shift the analytical focus from the institutional center to the edges where state power is not absent but differently articulated – often through ambiguity, fragmentation, and improvisation. These margins are not merely spaces of exclusion, but sites where the state is actively made and unmade through everyday encounters, informal governance, and contested meanings of legality, health, and morality. In this sense, ethnographic attention to these “border zones” allows us to apprehend how state authority operates not only through formal mechanisms of control, but also through the subtle disciplining of subjectivities and the regulation of visibility. It is in these interstitial spaces that one can observe how discourses of danger, deviance, and rehabilitation are entangled, shaping both institutional practices and the lived experiences of those who inhabit the margins. In the case of 12-Step Associations, the presence of these individuals in public spaces was practically invisible due to their “anonymous” nature, yet the issues addressed there often generated fear: people who steal, who use drugs, who cause disturbances in public order, who are not productive for society, in an ambivalence between being “wrongdoers” or “ill”.

In the case of video surveillance, the issue of security was constantly being invoked as the main rationale for this technology as a tool *par excellence*, not only as an instrument of prevention and deterrence, but also in the active fight against criminality, even though the occurrence of crimes – as evidenced by statistics and data collected by different entities – was characterized and consensually perceived as low relatively to other national contexts. These data seemed not to align with references to a so-called “feeling of insecurity among the population” reported by politicians in their parliamentary interventions or reinforced by the media. Regardless of the number and severity of recorded crimes, the dominant political discourse in Portugal (framed within an international rhetoric of “war on terror”) emphasized that acting preventively and ensuring the well-being of the population had become a priority. The role of the media was not neutral, as it warned and bolstered the imminent dangers of crime and violence, supposedly escalating and in need of urgent eradication. This disjunction between empirical crime data and the pervasive narrative of insecurity reveals how emotions and perceptions are mobilized as political tools. Rather than reflecting lived experiences or measurable threats, the “feeling of insecurity” operates as a productive affect – one that legitimizes surveillance technologies, expands state control, and reshapes public space under the guise of protection. In this context, security becomes less about responding to concrete dangers and more about managing collective anxieties and reaffirming state presence in everyday life.

And it is precisely the embodiment of these categories that I found in male and female prisons. Once again, only through a holistic and prolonged study was it possible to integrate into the same analytic proposal the experiences of individuals – through a biographical trajectory – with the institutional narratives created about them, whether in their role as lawbreakers or as “transgressors” of social codes and normative and hegemonic values. These narratives, often shaped by judicial processes, institutional reports, and correctional routines, tend to fix identities and reduce complex life trajectories to static categories of danger, deviance, or pathology. However, long-term ethnographic immersion allowed for the emergence of counter-narratives – accounts that challenge official representations and reveal the contradictions, silences, and negotiations that mark the everyday life of incarceration. Through sustained interaction and trust-building, it became evident that imprisonment is not only a mechanism of punishment, but also a space of identity reconfiguration, where women continuously oscillate between imposed labels and self-perceptions shaped by memory, guilt, resistance, and hope.

By foregrounding the tension between institutional narratives of transparency and the lived experiences of those subject to securitization, my aim was to highlight the methodological limits and possibilities of ethnographic research in highly structured environments. In doing so, this article contributes to key debates on ethnographic authority and the politics of knowledge production, particularly in contexts where the state’s power is both visible and diffuse. The ethnographic practice described here challenges the conventional assumption that depth of understanding is solely a function of proximity; instead, it reveals how formalized encounters, constrained spaces, and even “hanging around” (or the lack thereof) yield valuable insights into institutional logic, narrative construction, and embodied experience. Ultimately, it argues that ethnographic knowledge is not merely produced through access and observation, but through the ethnographer’s capacity to navigate ethical dilemmas, institutional performances, and the unspoken dynamics that structure everyday life in spaces of control.

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