

The diary of an inmate: female uses of writing in prison environments

Diário de uma detenta: usos da escrita por mulheres em espaços de encarceramento feminino

Diario de una detenida: usos de la escritura por parte de las mujeres en espacios de encarcelamiento femenino

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ABSTRACT


This article investigates the literacy practices of women who are deprived of freedom in order to understand their uses of writing regarding their experience in prison environments. The number of publications signed by female inmates is small compared to that of men, which grew larger after the rap hit “*Diário de um detento*” by Racionais MCs. This qualitative study is based on feminist epistemology, documentary research on specific data collection procedures, and content analysis to address the issue of women’s autobiographical texts. Based on new studies in the field of literacy, the results indicate that the authors recognize the relationship between language and power by choosing which topics to address and which topics to omit. These women are aware that their immediate readers have the power to assess who is fit for regime progression. Within these writing conditions, these inmate women aim to sensitize criminal enforcement operators in their search for freedom.

Keywords: Literacy. Prison Environments. Uses of Writing. Deprived of Freedom Education.

RESUMO

O artigo investiga as práticas de letramento de mulheres privadas de liberdade, a fim de compreender os usos que elas fazem da escrita acerca da sua experiência de encarceramento feminino. É pequeno o número de publicações assinadas por detentas em comparação com o de homens, maior desde o sucesso da música “*Diário de um detento*”, dos Racionais MCs. O estudo qualitativo situa-se na epistemologia feminista, na pesquisa documental quanto aos procedimentos de coleta de dados e na análise de conteúdo para abordar os textos autobiográficos das mulheres. Com base teórica nos novos estudos sobre letramento, os resultados mostram que as autoras reconhecem as relações entre linguagem e poder, ao eleger os temas a abordar e a omitir. Elas têm consciência de que seus leitores imediatos são os que detêm o poder de avaliar quem está apto à progressão de regime. Nessas condições de escrita, elas almejam sensibilizar os operadores da execução penal em busca da liberdade.

Palavras-chave: Letramento. Encarceramento Feminino. Usos da Escrita. Educação em Contextos de Privação de Liberdade.

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RESUMEN

El artículo investiga las prácticas de literacidad de mujeres privadas de libertad, con el fin de comprender los usos de la escritura por parte de mujeres sobre su experiencia de encarcelamiento femenino. El número de publicaciones firmadas por reclusas es pequeño en comparación con el de los hombres, mayor desde el éxito de la canción *Diário de um Detento*, de Racionais MCs. El estudio cualitativo se basa en la epistemología feminista, la investigación documental sobre los procedimientos de recolección de datos y el análisis de contenido para abordar los textos autobiográficos de las mujeres. Con base en nuevos estudios sobre lectoescritura, los resultados indican que los autores reconocen la relación entre lenguaje y poder, al elegir los temas a abordar y cuáles omitir. Son conscientes de que sus lectores inmediatos son quienes tienen el poder de evaluar quién está apto para la progresión del régimen. En estas condiciones de escritura, pretenden sensibilizar a los operadores de la ejecución penal en busca de la libertad.

Palabras clave: Literacidad. Usos de la Escritura. Educación en Contextos de Encarcelamiento.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this article refers to a song by Racionais MCs entitled “*Diário de um detento*” [An inmate’s diary], which was a hit in 1997, when the album *Sobrevivendo no inferno* [Surviving in hell] was released. The lyrics describe a day in Carandiru, October 1st, 1992, on the eve of a massacre known as the Carandiru Massacre. It was inspired in the diaries of the inmate Jocenir, who wrote it in prison. Racionais MCs’ visibility helped boost the publication of a book of the same name (Prado, 2001), and then several other ones written by Carandiru’s inmates or ex-inmates (Mendes, 2001; Ramos, 2001; Rap, 2002; Indarte, 2003).

Since the colonial period, many men have written autobiographical narratives about the experience of being deprived of freedom and life conditions within the prison system, at this and other historical moments (Poli Junior, 2009). But what about women writers? Has anyone written “The diary of a female inmate”? When observing what women wrote in the same period — the 2000s — when men produced their narratives about the experience of deprivation of freedom, I found only two works, and in them the women were narrated by others. These documents were testimonies from third parties, people who did not experience incarceration, but who witnessed it, acting as supportive witnesses¹ (Salgueiro, 2015). These testimonies recorded the conditions of survival in women’s prisons in a documentary (Sulzbach, 2005) and a book of chronicles inspired by life stories collected in Brazilian prison units (Prado, 2003).

When reviewing academic research on testimonial narratives² of people deprived of freedom in Brazil, women were also absent. The writing of women who live or have experienced incarceration rarely appears in academic production: they are limited to studies by Bezerra (2004) and Pavani (2009) on the book *Inventário do medo*, by Lara de Lemos (1997), or the biography of Pagu (Teixeira

1 According to Salgueiro (2015): “A testimony is the report, the statement, the document, the record (written, oral, pictorial, filmic, etc.). The witness, above all, is the one who lived the experience, a superstitious — survivor. There are other degrees of witness: there is the testis, which stands as testis (a third party) —who witnessed, who saw, who ‘testified’. Moreover, with the expansion of testimony studies, the supportive witness is also taken into consideration (...)” (p. 123-124, our translation).

2 To Salgueiro (2012): “The notion of testimony comes from the so-called ‘holocaust literature’, marked by reports of survivors of the Second World War such as the (...) narratives of Primo Levi and the poetry of Paul Celan. The expansion of this notion also includes its use regarding the past, such as, for example, in relation to the genocides and massacres against indigenous and black peoples; or in relation to misery and oppression, economic inequalities, ethnic and sexual prejudices in everyday life around the world” (p. 291).

and Ferraz, 2010), which contains the text “*Verdade e liberdade*” (“Truth and freedom”) Pagu (1950).³ Why is it so? Are they the only female authors to write about female incarceration?

Impelled by these concerns, I carried out a qualitative study based on documentary analysis of books written by women deprived of freedom in Brazil, with the aim of understanding the uses of writing by these women in narrating their incarceration experiences. I initially looked for works written by women who were deprived of freedom or had been released from the prison system.

The survey showed few works produced by women: considering the 56 works cataloged until June 2023, women wrote only five works and published texts in 13 book collections, of which six texts were written by men and women and seven texts were written exclusively by women.⁴

The scarcity of books written by women about their experiences in prison, together with the scarcity of academic productions about their writings, highlights the segregation and silencing of this social group, even though research on female incarceration has increased in recent years (Ribeiro and Godinho, 2021). This silence surrounding the experience of female incarceration adds to the isolation imposed by bureaucratic obstacles that the prison system creates for researchers and human rights activists to access it, as Pastoral Carcerária frequently denounces.⁵

To study the topic, set in the field of education, I looked for new studies on literacy and popular education. The investigation is situated in the qualitative paradigm and was based on document analysis procedures. To select the corpus, texts written during imprisonment in female incarceration spaces were selected. For data analysis, content analysis was adopted (Bardin, 2016) in order to decode and interpret the thematic units of the works that make up the study corpus.

The article is organized into five sections: in the first, I present the study method; in the second, I discuss female writing in prisons as a literacy practice, from the perspective of new studies on literacy and popular education; in the third, I contextualize the production conditions of the texts analyzed based on the reality of Brazilian female incarceration and the educational proposals in which the texts were produced; in the fourth, I develop a thematic analysis based on the categories that emerged from the texts and how they allow us to understand the uses of writing by these women in the analyzed texts. In the final considerations, I indicate some contributions and gaps in the article to the debate on the relationship between literacy and the right to education in spaces of female incarceration.

METHOD

Guided by feminist epistemology, articulated with intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2002), I consider that the production of knowledge is crossed by inequalities and oppressions of gender, race, and class, which influence the entire research process by committing to the fight against this types of oppression and violence. This influence is evident in the definition of the research problem, aimed at understanding the uses of writing about female incarceration by women deprived of freedom. This view is linked to the understanding that countless experiences of oppression are faced by women. Therefore, incarcerated women’s narratives give us clues about the specificities of violence and rights violations experienced by groups whose fundamental rights are historically neglected by the State, with the connivance of society in general. This epistemological point of view is close to what Carvalho and Mayorga (2017) consider one of the feminist contributions to the study of female incarceration.

3 Pagu is considered the first Brazilian political prisoner, according to Lúcia Teixeira, her biographer (2022).

4 Collections of texts written by women are the result of workshops and writing projects carried out by universities, publishers or by staff of the prison or public jails where women were deprived of freedom.

5 To learn more about it, I recommended the reading of prison pastoral reports available at <https://carceraria.org.br/mulher-encarcerada>. Access on: June 17, 2023.

Analyzing and understanding the growing female incarceration from a feminist perspective can allow us to understand the imperatives of selectivity and control that characterize our penal system, forging naturalizations and covering up socio-historical processes that contribute to the incarceration of certain women, without, however, restricting to it. In this context, we can state that feminist theory is not a theory about women. It is a theory about society based on the experiences of women. In such experiences, it is possible to identify the effects of power relations, sustained by masculine, classist, racist and sexist views and logics that produce subjectivities (Ochy, 2007), contributing to the imprisonment of an increasing number of certain women. (p. 110, our translation).

The research on which this article is based is set in the qualitative paradigm, and follows a document analysis method. Cellard (2008) defines “document” as

(...) everything that is a trace of the past, everything that serves as testimony, is considered a document or ‘source’, as it is more common to say nowadays. These can be written texts, but also documents of an iconographic and cinematographic nature, or any other type of recorded testimony, everyday objects, folklore elements, etc. (p. 297, our translation).

Texts written by women deprived of freedom are one of the few sources that show the experiences and ways in which these women attribute meaning to what they experience in prison units. Therefore, the books analyzed in this article are a type of document that remains “(...) the only testimony of particular activities that occurred in the recent past” (Cellard, 2008, p. 295, our translation).

All these aspects converged to choosing documentary research as “a procedure that uses methods and techniques for the apprehension, understanding and analysis of documents of the most varied types” (Sá-Silva, Almeida and Guindani, 2009, p. 5, our translation).

According to Flick (2009),

When deciding to use documents in a study, one should always see them as means of communication. Researchers should also ask themselves: who produced this document, for whom, and for which purposes? What were the personal or institutional intentions with the production and provision of a document, or a type of document? Documents are, therefore, not just simple data that can be used as a resource for research. Once they start using them, researchers should always focus on documents as a research topic: what are their characteristics? Under what specific conditions were they produced? And so on. (p. 232-233, our translation).

The criteria for the selection of documents adopted in this perspective, were:

- Regarding authorship — only texts written by women deprived of freedom were selected and, therefore, books published by third parties about inmates’ life stories were excluded. These primary sources, defined by Sá-Silva, Almeida and Guindani (2009), are “original data, in which there is direct access to facts that will be analyzed, in other words, it is the researcher who analyzes it” (p. 6, our translation);
- Regarding accessibility — the selection included only public documents available in printed or digital books, by publishers or printers;
- Regarding the writing context — the selection only covered texts written during the prison sentence.

Text selection was done in library collections, and search tools such as Google and Bing, with the following descriptors: *writing, narratives, literature, women, inmates, prison, prison, prison system* (in different intersections using the Boolean operators AND and OR). The result obtained in searches carried out from March 2019 to June 2023 was:

- Collection of autobiographical texts written exclusively by women in spaces of deprivation of freedom — 4;
- Collection of autobiographical texts written by women and men released from the prison system — 3;
- Books by single authors:
 - Diaries written by women released from the prison system — 1;
 - Books of poems written by women released from the prison system — 1;
 - Novels written by women released from the prison system — 2;
 - Autobiographical text (chronicle?) — 1.

These texts by women who live or have lived incarceration are of different genres: short stories, chronicles, letters, autobiographical accounts, diaries and novels.

To compose the corpus of the study, I selected books containing text(s) written by women who were in spaces of female incarceration at the time of writing. There are 98 texts distributed into six collections: four present texts written exclusively by women and two display texts written by men and women (from these, I have selected only texts written by women).

I analyze these publications because I am interested in understanding what women deprived of freedom write about prison while they are living this experience, which is marked by surveillance and interdiction of speech. Therefore, I have excluded from the scope the works written by former prison inmates — *Verdade e liberdade* (Galvão, 2010), *Inventário do medo* (Lemos, 1997), *Quem saberia perder?* (Trajano, 2021), *Quem saberia perder? — vol. 2* (Trajano, 2022) and *Minha carne* (Ferreira, 2020), although the latter was partially written during confinement.

For the data analysis, content analysis was used in order to decode and interpret the thematic units of the works that make up the corpus of study. Content analysis is defined by Bardin (2016, p. 48) as a set of communication techniques of analysis aimed at obtaining, through systematic and objective procedures for describing the content of messages, indicators (quantitative or not) that allow the inference of knowledge about the production and reception conditions (inferred variables) of these messages. The analysis was divided into three phases: pre-analysis; exploration of the material; treatment of results, inference, and interpretation.

In the pre-analysis, the first reading of the materials gathered in the survey was carried out. Bardin (2016) defines this phase as “floating reading” for the selection of the corpus of study. In this process, the rules of exhaustiveness, representativeness, homogeneity and relevance apply. Once the corpus is defined, we moved on to the formulation of hypotheses and objectives, the elaboration of indicators and the preparation of the material, which consists of making records about the texts and seeking additional data on the educational projects or activities in which these writings took place.

In the phase of material survey, “coding, decomposition or enumeration operations are carried out, depending on previously formulated rules” (Bardin, 2016, p. 131, our translation). Coding, according to the author, “corresponds to a transformation — following precise rules — of the text’s raw data. This transformation happens through cutting, aggregation, and enumeration, and allows the achievement of a representation of the content or its expression (...)” (p. 133, our translation).

In this process, it is necessary to establish the registration and context units used to encode the corpus. The recording units were based on genre, as materials were coded according to their genre (stories, poems, and autobiographical reports), and their theme, once the thematic analysis was carried out. The context unit, in turn, corresponds to the “unit of comprehension to encode the unit of record” (Bardin, 2016, p. 137, our translation) and, in the research that originated this article, is related to the educational project or activity that requested or prompted writing by the inmates.

The last phase, that of processing and interpreting results, contains a comparison of coded materials with the hypotheses and the study objectives. It draws up inferences of two types: specific inferences and general inferences. According to Bardin (2016, p. 170, our translation), inferences “can be obtained from one or more of the following indices: lexical units, lexical co-occurrences, syntactic structures, diverse formal characteristics, pauses, errors, gestural expressions or postures”.

WRITINGS BY WOMEN IN PRISON

The theme of writing by women deprived of freedom has been intriguing me for some time. Since I began developing research and university projects in women’s prisons, I have sought to understand the uses of reading and writing by women deprived of freedom as a literacy practice, which, according to Kleiman (1995), refers to “(...) a set of social practices that use writing as a symbolic system and as a technology, in specific contexts, for specific objectives (see Scribner and Cole, 1981)” (p. 18-19, our translation).

Through the theoretical approach to new studies on literacy, it is possible to affirm that women deprived of freedom form a social group whose use of reading and writing is influenced by their context of incarceration. Given the low level of education of the majority of the prison population, it is presumed that these literacy practices do not correspond to those of educated groups. These differences require from researchers a critical view of the autonomous literacy model (Street, 2013; 2014), focused on mastering reading and writing skills typical of schooled groups and based on what Graff (2016) defined as the myth of literacy.⁶

In opposition to this model, new studies on literacy represent “a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1985)” (Street, 2013, p. 52). Furthermore, they represent a break with the ethnocentric approach, present in many studies, which devalues cultural diversity by establishing as universal the practices of dominant social groups, while other groups are made invisible, and their practices are judged as non-literate. In this way, they confirm the naturalization of hierarchies that, for centuries, have justified inequalities, oppression and violence, typical of colonialism (Street, 2014).

To exemplify the autonomous literacy model, Street (2013) states:

Introducing literacy to poor, “illiterate” people, villages, urban youth etc. will have the effect of enhancing their cognitive skills, improving their economic prospects, making them better citizens, regardless of the social and economic conditions that accounted for their “illiteracy” in the first place. (p. 53)

This was the predominant conception of literacy in government educational programs in Latin America after the Second World War, according to Zamora (2019). This author considers that,

⁶ According to Graff (2016), in the first studies on literacy, conviction in the superiority of writing in relation to orality was linked to another belief: that the use of writing would bring about individual and collective cognitive changes. These ideas would base the theory of the great divide, according to Street (2014).

driven by well-intentioned naivety, many projects “fetishize books and reading, attributing to them a supposed moral and cultural superiority (Hernandez, 2006a; 2006b), given the urgency of surviving the hopelessness of these times” (p. 3).

In opposition to this approach, new studies on literacy propose an ideological model of literacy itself, which recognizes the relationship between language and power implicit in the hierarchy between orality and writing, based on the theory of the great divide. Instead, what new literacy studies propose is that there are literacy practices that vary according to socio-historical and cultural aspects. It is understood that, just as there is linguistic variation between speakers of a language, there is also variation in the uses of reading and writing — that is, a variation in literacy. In this sense, just as sociolinguistics studies linguistic variants, it is relevant to study literacy variants, thus justifying the use of the term literacies, in the plural (Street, 2013).

This theoretical framework leads to the study of the literacy practices of women deprived of freedom, according to the definition presented by Zamora (2019):

from a sociocultural point of view, being literate implies mastering a system of writing, as well as a set of values, beliefs and practices necessary for adopting and acting on an identity within specific social discourses (Gee, 2004), for example, discourses of gender, nationality, religion, ideology, politics, profession, social class, ethnicity, education, etc. (p. 5, our translation).

This approach, therefore, implies considering these women as subjects who appropriate writing as a symbolic system and as technology in a context of deprivation of freedom. According to Kleiman and Santos-Marques (2023), in order to relate education and literacy in the context of female incarceration, it is necessary to seek new ways of approaching the reading and writing practices of these women and, thus, to constitute decolonial educational processes:

To think about this pedagogy implies abandoning the conservative criteria of educational institutions regarding what counts as knowledge and admitting the possibility of other epistemologies that not only respect, for example, the speech of the vulnerable, but also makes room for it in the program as a legitimate option of expression. It is not enough to denounce what we still carry as colonized people, we also need to establish other ways of thinking and producing knowledge. (p. 5)

Additionally, these forms need to place the person being educated at the center of the educational process. In the context of deprivation of liberty, this position implies confronting stereotypes about women deprived of freedom. In this regard, the debate on education in contexts of deprivation of freedom has emphasized the importance of emancipatory educational processes, which confront these stereotypes and contribute to the recognition of oneself as a subject, without reducing her or him to the crime they have committed (De Maeyer, 2013), but rather, appropriating the knowledge and life experience of these women as an object of knowledge.

USES OF WRITING BY WOMEN DEPRIVED OF FREEDOM

Some of the characteristics of the prison context directly interfere with literacy practices in prison, as I analyzed in previous studies (Godinho and Julião, 2019; 2022):

- The ban on the use of the most popular means of communication outside prison, such as social networks, WhatsApp, cell phones, email, search engines (Google, Bing, etc.) and websites;

- Monitored communication, which takes place through the presence of criminal enforcement operators during the interactions of inmates with their family members on visiting days, with teachers during classes (in prisons where there is school provision) or by having letters sent to family or friends, as well as those received by the inmates read, which may result in the letter being retained by the security team;
- The provision of educational activities, which in the country are restricted to around 15% of the prison population — although 60% at most have completed primary education and therefore need to complete basic education (SISDEPEN, 2022). The educational profile of those who occupy the prison system indicates a significant gap between educational supply and demand;
- The emphasis on the educational offer of projects of remission through reading, which have increased (and in many units are the only educational activity available) since the National Council of Justice published recommendation n. 44/2013 (Brasil, 2013), establishing guidelines and rules for state prisons to create projects of remission of sentence through reading — similar to what had occurred in the Federal Prison System, the previous year, with the publication of *Portaria Conjunta 276/2012* (Brasil, 2012).

Under these conditions, the uses of reading and writing assume specific purposes. One of them — the object of analysis in this article — is to narrate one's own experience of deprivation of freedom and publicize this experience for a punitive society, which increasingly segregates and makes the poor, and mostly black women invisible: black and brown women represent 67.2% of prisoners in physical cells and 76% of women under house arrest (SISDEPEN, 2023).

Writing by women deprived of freedom, in this context, represents a counterpoint to the punitive discourse that tries to justify mass incarceration (Borges, 2019). Women writers show who they are beyond prison and that they have a life story prior to incarceration. This is the focus of the texts written by Câmara (2001), one of the pioneers, in Brazil, in self-writing activities in spaces of deprivation of freedom:

Life stories narrated by prisoners tend to focus on the past. This is already expected, because it allows the offender to choose the information to be printed. Remembering one's origin, family life, is a way of reinserting oneself into an isolating society. As a way of understanding the event, prisoners write to the judge, to politicians, requesting action regarding their freedom, telling their life story and sharing their difficulties with their families. Such attitudes are considered important by prisoners, since, during the investigation to form the evidence and subsequent trial, only the confession of the crime seems to matter. (p. 199, our translation)

In addition to introducing those who write, it is important to contextualize the conditions under which they write. There have been many reading and writing projects in spaces where freedom is deprived since the National Council of Justice recommended that states create projects for the remission of sentences through reading, according to a previous study (Godinho and Julião, 2022). These publications are available in bookstores.⁷ The texts were produced in prisons in Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, Paraná and São Paulo, based on non-school activities organized by different initiatives: two independent publishers from São Paulo, one non-governmental organization

⁷ The texts analyzed in this article are not part of the extension project I am developing. Therefore, it was not possible to identify some of the authors' data, such as self-declaration of race, level of education, socioeconomic conditions or whether they are cis or trans women.

(NGO), a public university, the technical team of a public women's prison and, in one case, by the *Superintendência de Serviços Penitenciários of Rio Grande do Sul* [Superintendency of Penitentiary Services of Rio Grande do Sul] — SUSEPE-RS.

To characterize the format and pedagogical guidelines present in these activities, I return to the definition of Kleiman and Santos-Marques (2023) about the project *Escrevivências de mulheres sobreviventes do cárcere* [Writings of women who have survived imprisonment], developed at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN) by the co-author of the article:

a literacy project is a didactic set up in which students and teachers are agents, each according to their own interests and capabilities. Writing has a central place: reading involves texts of interest to the participants, considering their abilities, desires, feelings and life experiences; writing has defined purposes, it is related to the socio-historical reality of the participants, it serves to solve the group's problems and support the participants' agency. (p. 12)

It should be noted that, with teams made up of professionals from different areas and various levels of training, it is comprehensible that such projects are quite different from each other in terms of their pedagogical intentionality. In any case, this is the set of material and symbolic conditions in which women deprived of freedom were faced with the proposal to write autobiographical narratives, stories, letters and poems.

The texts analyzed in this article are the result of non-school educational activities carried out in prisons. In only two cases (that of a publisher and that of SUSEPE-RS) was a competition held, and the published texts were produced spontaneously by the inmates and forwarded to the responsible sector with the mediation of the prison staff. In these cases, the book contains texts by both women and men. The publications do not mention the authors' ethnic-racial data, which prevents analysis of the representation of black women. I present each of these collections below:

1. *Letras de liberdade* [Letters of freedom] (Vários Autores, 2000). According to Braga (2000), in the book's presentation, this is the first publication of texts written by "re-educating students in the Carandiru Complex" (p. 11). On the initiative of publisher Wagner Costa, a competition with the same name as the book was held. It received 345 entries by 98 candidates, with mostly biographical and autobiographical texts (Costa, 2000, p. 9). Of the 15 texts selected, only three were written by women. In the section "Participants of the Competition", there are 11 female competitors — each submitting only one text. The competition did not propose a specific theme and, therefore, the authors wrote short stories based on autobiographical experiences.
2. *Mulheres Poéticas – a poesia no cárcere* [Poetic women — poetry in prison] (Giostri, 2017). The publication brought together poems produced by inmates at the Regional Prison of Mafra-SC, on the occasion of literary writing workshops coordinated by Alex Giostri, editor of Giostri Editora. The book has 12 authors, and each of them wrote five texts, with the exception of Maria de Lourdes Neves, who wrote 15, Roseli Camargo, who wrote three, and Tajamara Villabruna, who wrote six. The topics covered are: friendship, life in prison, childhood, family, and the future. This coincidence suggests that the literary writing workshops defined the themes that the authors should address.
3. *Narrativas femininas no cárcere — minha história de vida* [Female narratives in prison — my life story] (Giostri, 2021). Sixteen authors participated in this collection, organized by Alex Giostri based on the results of the literary workshops he developed at the Industrial Penitentiary of Joinville-SC, in 2019.

4. *Mulheres encarceradas — quando a estrela do Natal não brilha* [Incarcerated women — when the Christmas star does not shine] (Ursi, Chaga and Silva, 2022). The project was developed at the Feminine Public Prison of Londrina-PR, and the publication features ten autobiographical texts by women in this prison unit. One of the organizers is a criminal police officer and director of the prison unit where the writing workshops were held and where the authors produced the texts.
5. *História(s) da chuva: escrevendo história(s) com mulheres encarceradas* [Stories of rain: writing stories with incarcerated women] (Concilio and Vetori, 2021). The book organizes the results of a university extension project developed at the Women's Prison of Florianópolis-SC by professor Vicente Concílio, from the Arts Center of the Universidade Estadual de Santa Catarina — UDESC, and the then master's student Caroline Vetori. Of the three sections of the book, the first contains texts produced exclusively by the inmates. These are letters produced in writing activities, in which women were asked to write to “the future, about the women they want to become” (p. 12).
6. *Mulheres possíveis: corpo, gênero e encarceramento* [Possible women: body, gender and incarceration] (Medeiros *et al.*, 2019). The book presents texts, drawings and photographs produced in the project coordinated by Medeiros. Some texts do not have a defined authorship, making it impossible to identify whether they were written by inmates or educators. Only handwritten and digitized texts, with mentioned authorship, were considered in the analysis.

Thematic analysis led to the categorization of texts into the themes: childhood; youth, romantic relationships and motherhood; prison; and expectation of release.

When reporting on their childhood, the image of their mothers as warriors predominates. Mothers are described as strong, very hardworking, and dedicated to their children. The reports describe single-parent families in which some women have a network of support formed by other women: their mothers and, occasionally, sisters and neighbors.

This characteristic differs from what Ireland and Lucena (2013) found in the biographical study of women deprived of freedom in a prison in João Pessoa-PB. The authors highlight not only the absence of the father figure, but also the absence of the mother:

In the family axis, the absence of the father and/or mother marked the lives of these women and influenced their trajectories. Almost all of them did not know their father due to death or abandonment. But the great absence was centered on the figure of the mother, who seems to have been decisive for these women to have followed different paths from those they wanted. (Ireland and Lucena, 2013, p. 123, our translation).

The data obtained by the authors also differs from the texts I analyzed regarding the reasons for the fathers' absence. In the latter ones, the absence of the fathers is not even mentioned, they simply do not exist. Rarely, in the set of narratives, women narrate a childhood marked by domestic violence and abandonment and/or experiencing homelessness to escape a violent family environment.

In some texts, there is an idealization of family and childhood, portrayed as an idyllic past, whose harmony is broken in youth, when the narrator seeks new social experiences, such as parties, romantic relationships, and greater freedom from their tutors. This is the first turning point in the narrative of a significant group of women who begin using drugs. Over time, drug addiction leads them to commit petty theft or become involved in drug trafficking.

The emotional experience of youth is full of expectations until the birth of their children, when domestic violence or the partner's involvement in drug trafficking leads to the end of the relationship or the women's involvement in drug use.

Affective relationships are narrated with an idealization and a search for romantic love. This seems to move the writing of many of these women. Even when reporting a sequence of separations and renewal of violent relationships, there is hope that the new attempt will be successful, under the argument that love overcomes all difficulties, that "love will win", as in Oliveira's text (Giostri, 2021):

One day, a friend introduced me to a boy. I thought he was very handsome, it was love at first sight. In the beginning, everything was wonderful. So, we decided to live together. That's when I found out he had just gotten out of jail. He was an ex-convict! But everything is fine! For me, it didn't matter. What matters is my point of view and not what others think. I soon became pregnant, I was very happy. (p. 18, our translation).

This is just one of the examples of relationships that have been narrated as "love at first sight" or that reproduce the idea of an ideal man, a soulmate, etc. The recurrence of these associations between relationships and symbols of romantic love raises some questions: is this use of writing linked to experiences of reading bestsellers or watching soap operas that reproduce the myth of romantic love? Or is this really the horizon of their affective experiences, in which they seek to experience romantic love, in which femininity and the role of women idealized by literary narratives of Romanticism become a source of frustration in the affective relationships experienced by women, as analyzed by Kehl (2017), from the perspective of psychoanalysis?

Due to the limitations of documentary research, this study cannot answer these questions, as it would be necessary to interview the authors to learn more about their experiences of reading and the writing process in the workshops in which they participated. In any case, I understand that the myth of romantic love influences the writing of these women, as well as their reading of the world, since the narratives often resort to the image of love as a magical element, capable of overcoming any adversity in material life as well as abusive behavior in romantic relationships.

In addition to romantic love, the idealization of motherhood is also very present in the texts of women deprived of freedom. Children and motherhood are described as women's greatest personal achievement. The authors, when they reach adulthood, show the repetition of the family model experienced in childhood: they become solo mothers, have several precarious jobs to support their children, and rely on a network of support formed exclusively or mostly by women, as well as their mothers (now performing the role of grandparents), who are now in charge of childcare. These women are sole providers for their children and, in some cases, grandchildren. When they are arrested, their family units fall apart, and concern with the subsistence and care of their children grows.

The family configurations narrated by these women are similar to the life stories of inmates in the metropolitan region of Minas Gerais, as transcribed by Ribeiro and Godinho (2021):

Responsible for raising their children, women express one of the most reported reasons for criminal involvement: financial need. The drug theme is present in all but one of the stories. In them, drug use and trade, addiction and trafficking are shown to be sides of a complex phenomenon that is difficult to distinguish. (p. 505, our translation)

Just like in the stories transcreated by the authors, the texts I analyzed also mostly present a family context that is related to involvement in illicit acts. In this aspect, Ribeiro and Godinho (2021) relate the feminization of poverty with the increasing female incarceration:

The life trajectories of different women are equally permeated by structural inequalities, lack of access to social resources, to individual, social and political rights — including work protection, social security, justice, physical integrity, political existence, and coexistence with their loved ones. By reading their stories, it possible to glimpse how the feminization of poverty is personified in practice, and how the criminal justice system, and penal policy constitute important mechanisms for its reproduction of inequalities. (p. 505, our translation)

Another turning point in women's lives is the moment they enter prison, which represents the end of a life, and it is necessary to "start from scratch". Women who were the only adult in the family have their family nucleus ended the moment they are arrested. In these cases, these women not only lose the right to come and go, but also the right to housing and the custody of children, who usually move in with a grandmother, an aunt, or are sent to institutional care. This dissolution of the family nucleus and getting separated from their children is mentioned by authors of all the collections analyzed as one of the main concerns and causes of suffering:

My world collapsed, I didn't have the courage to give in, my daughter was a child and depended on me for everything. She was breastfed, and I had been an outlaw for two years, working as a hairdresser at home and at some clients' homes. I spent more than two years like that and what I wanted most was to resolve my situation, because I think a lot about my daughters, their future. They are my life, my reason to live. (Maria, 2022, p. 120, our translation)

Abandonment by partners and family members is also recurrent in women's reports. Rejection causes regret and shame towards the mother, or the parents. The feelings triggered by this context reinforce the data obtained by Ribeiro and Godinho (2021): "The stories reveal ambivalent perceptions of the prison experience: penance, reflection and change; revolt, humiliation and lack of rights. The most negative reports reside, in fact, in the prison system itself" (p. 15, our translation).

The search for psychological support to overcome the distance from their children leads many women to religion and to worshiping God as salvation. This is a turning point in the narratives, in which despair is alleviated by hope in God's intervention for their freedom. This characteristic is accentuated in the book *Mulheres encarceradas*, in which the conclusion of nine out of ten texts describes a request to God or the hope of being released to spend Christmas with the family. The following excerpt presents this idea:

I am praying for God to bless everyone who is helping me, believing in me. I will certainly not disappoint them. May God soften the hearts of the prosecutor, the judge, and the court members. It's all in God's hands, and I trust him. With redemption, good behavior, and all the support I'm getting, everything will be fine, and I'll spend this Christmas with my two beloved children. (p. 64, our translation)

Other appeals are explicitly addressed to judges and criminal enforcement operators. The use of the vocative as an appeal for the authorities to reconsider their process is recurrent, as in: "Look at us, judge" (Dreher, 2015, our translation); "Gentlemen of the law, while I was in prison, I always behaved well, I worked in the kitchen" (Scheibel, 2021, p. 37, our translation). In this way, they

demonstrate an understanding of two central aspects of the writing process: the intentionality of those who write, and the interaction between author and reader. By assuming who will read her text, the author defines a specific objective for her writing and selects what to say, as well as decides on what to keep silent, and which elements to emphasize in order to achieve this purpose.

The expectation of leaving is mentioned in stories, poems, and autobiographical accounts. It is associated with the hope of being seen by the authorities, who are responsible for deciding whether they can progress in the system of rules or be released. With rare exceptions, the texts highlight their desire to fulfill the roles that are socially attributed to women, that is, of mothers and wives, that are restricted to the domestic space. Thus, the authors highlight what feminist criminology considers as a feature of the mechanisms of women's oppression in a punitive society:

we have observed that a double punishment is imposed on women who dare to commit practices classified as crimes: criminal sanctions foreseen by laws and codes, and also the imperatives of gender norms, with their definitions and prescriptions of what is — or should be — a Woman. From capital punishment to deprivation of liberty, many women have been judged for their actions, but condemned for their passions, their instincts, anomalies, illnesses, inadaptations or even heredity. (Carvalho and Mayorga, 2017, p. 102, our translation)

By linking their perspective of the future to caring for their children and fulfilling the roles assigned to women, these women affirm that the prison accomplished its function and, therefore, they are ready to return to social life. Among various examples, I highlight a letter of one of the participants in the project by Concilio and Vettori (2021):, written to a future version of herself:

For your future. It was worth going through all the obstacles and difficulties you went through, because only then did you learn to value people and the little things, especially life. Today I am a good daughter, a good mother, I have made all my dreams come true and I will never make the mistakes of my past again. (p. 50)

By highlighting what she has “learned”, the author suggests that she is resigned to fulfilling her role. However, this projection of a return to the family sometimes implies rebuilding the family nucleus, which has been dissolved with her arrest. In some cases, this return is unfeasible, as loss of custody of the child/children occurred before or during imprisonment.

In all collections, writing is influenced by the awareness that the texts can be read by the prison's management team. Consequently, when writing, each author seems to have taken into account these possible readers. Telling a story to those who have the power to authorize or interdict their regime progression has certainly been one of the main factors considered in each of these authors' decision. What can be said and what is risky to say? Why write? These inner questions, to some extent, have helped shape the texts. This is possibly one of the reasons why the authors prioritize:

- Narrating their life stories up until the moment of their arrest;
- Remaining silent about their life story from the moment they were arrested;
- Omitting their experiences of being deprived of freedom; and
- Moving from memories of the past right to the expectation of freedom.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, in projects developed by independent editors, silence regarding conflicts and mistreatment in prison has been broken. The reporting of mistreatment in the prison unit is an aspect that differentiates these two books from the others, as these women authors

felt confident to narrate some situations of conflict, punishment, and transfers that prolonged their punishments (Vários Autores, 2000; Giostri, 2021).

In these independent editions, women narrate aspects of daily life that are silenced in other books: violence, punishments, and other human rights violations, as well as conflicts between inmates' factions. One of the most serious complaints is that of Cruz (2021), who reports a sequence of punishments, such as the suspension of food, and a mattress that had to be shared by five women:

I had been deprived of sunbathing for six months, I was spaced-out inside the grid. I was demented, thin, crazy, but all I wanted was to be in a better place. It was then that the Judge of Tijucas, on a visit with the director, entered the punishment room and I explained what was happening to me (...). It was then that, 28 days into my punishment, at 1 pm, I was taken out to speak to the director, who asked me if I would be interested in working in the kitchen, and if I was, she would arrange for me to stay in Tijucas. (p. 41)

What the author narrates is a clear violation of rule 31 of the Bangkok Rules:⁸ "31. Corporal punishment, placement in 'dark secret' as well as all cruel, inhuman or degrading punishments must be completely prohibited as disciplinary sanctions" (CNJ, 2016, our translation). Although complaints like this are frequently made by human rights activists, they are rare in texts produced during incarceration, especially in books organized by criminal police or managers of the state prison system. In these books, the situations experienced in prison are few and are restricted to mentioning work and visits.

The silence about overcrowding, hazardous conditions, and human rights violations indicates that these authors are aware that their readers include the technical team, management staff, the judge of Crime Court, and possibly criminal police officers with whom they interact on a daily basis. In other words, they avoid the risk of sanctions for what they write. There is no doubt that many projects are based on political-pedagogical principles and guidelines of popular education and decolonial education. However, surveillance has already been incorporated by women (Foucault, 1997), and incarceration has taught them that confidentiality and privacy are not part of the daily lives of those who are incarcerated. Therefore, there is no control over which hands their texts can end up in.

Under these conditions, writing is a dangerous exercise. It may anticipate or postpone transition to a semi-open regime, affect access to benefits or cause more punishment, according to the topics chosen and the way of approaching them. The purpose of writing, therefore, is to respond to the request of mediators or educators — as obedience is an important value in the system of privileges of total institutions (Goffman, 2015). At the same time, writers try to ensure that their texts will touch their first readers, so they emphasize commitment to resocialization, and the desire to restart family ties, damaged by separation — which often implies the dissolution of the family nucleus as children are sent to the homes of family members, friends, institutional care or adoption.

This observation is not intended to question the legitimacy of these women's suffering or to cast doubt on the sincerity of their writing. What we want to emphasize is that one of the main uses of autobiographical writing by women deprived of freedom is to raise awareness among criminal execution operators. The target audience of these texts, therefore, is not the general reader who can purchase books but, rather, people who have the power to reassess their conditions for regime progression.

8 United Nations (UN) document establishing minimum rules for the treatment of women prisoners, to which Brazil is a signatory.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Understanding the uses of writing by women deprived of freedom allows us to comprehend some elements of their experiences, marked by abandonment, separation from children, and loss of the family nucleus. These uses of writing also describe the precarious survival conditions of people whose lives are marked by the omission of the public power in relation to fundamental rights. The low level of education of the majority of the Brazilian prison population, including the authors of the texts analyzed in this article, make explicit the negligence of the State, society, and family in guaranteeing the right to education in childhood and adolescence for these women — even though the paradigm of full protection as supported by the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* [Child and Adolescent Statute] has been in force in Brazil since 1990.

This article does not end the discussion on this topic. On the contrary, it raises new questions to be explored in future studies, such as: how does the exercise of autobiographical writing influence these women's reflections on their own life experiences? Does writing provoke reinterpretations of the past, the present, and themselves?

With the reflections developed in this article, I hope to contribute to the production of knowledge and the elaboration of emancipatory pedagogical practices with women deprived of freedom, which encourage the recognition of themselves as subjects of human rights and as people, beyond the stereotype of criminals.

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