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“Holding the Dream”: Women’s Favorite Reading Matter in a Portuguese Prison

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Abstract The reading practices of women, mediated by a prison library in Portugal, constituted an interesting case study. In Santa Cruz do Bispo prison, female prisoners were increasingly aged and excluded from social groups, less literate, and educated. Many were first-time library users and some were beginning readers. This research aimed to understand their reading practices and preferences, their self-assigned meanings, and the roles of reading in prison. Having become aware that industrial literature romance novels were the most requested items, a critical comparative analysis of the three most requested titles was contrasted with readers’ favorite passages to foster a deeper understanding of their preferences and sustain an integrated analysis. Furthermore, a consensualized definition of a “good read” is presented. The results from ethnography and interviews to readers and staff are analyzed taking into account class, gender, ethnicity, age, occupation, and education of the detainees. Conclusions address the fact that although the prison’s educational service and imprisonment conditions propitiated an increase in reading generally, the library was oriented by educational targets and irresponsive to certain demands expressed by readers. Secondly, women readers were using the available top-selling romance novels to sustain their introspective and prospective work, while reckoning with their past and planning for their future. In addition to this reflexive stance, escapist entertainment and knowledge building were important reading purposes.

Keywords Female Prisons; Reading; Women; Prison Libraries; Light Literature; Romance Novel; Popular Romance; Cultural Tastes

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The Special Penal Establishment of Santa Cruz do Bispo, a female prison created in 2004 within the Porto metropolitan area, is jointly run by the Ministry of Justice and the Santa Casa de Misericórdia of Porto, a Catholic charity. The municipality of Matosinhos held a protocol with the penal establishment which allowed a few women, under a special

detention regime, to work as unskilled aids outside the prison. The establishment relied on the mobile municipal library to supplement their book offer.

The prison’s education service, with a director appointed by the Charity, comprised a library. One convict was responsible for maintaining the library and assisting readers. Unlike most Portuguese public library readers and beyond their sex, these readers had specific traits: they were predominantly working-class and possessed a low schooling capital. A recent decrease in schooling capital was explained by the rising numbers of incarcerated aged women, a social group still imprinted by illiteracy in Portugal in a peculiar crossing of class, gender, and age (Ávila 2006; Lopes 2011). Added to this, an over-representation of Roma women (Gomes 2003) reinforced my expectations of finding an incarcerated population with much lower literacy levels than those of the general population. However, library visits were frequent, according to the preliminary information provided by the education service. With a new daily time allocation and freed from (at least some of) their usual domestic tasks, literate women were expected, on the other hand, to have more time to read while in prison.

Starting this research, my aim was to understand women’s reading practices within the scope of the prison library, their motivations and the meanings self-assigned to those practices, and how they experienced reading in confinement.

From Theory to the Research Questions

To design an adequate approach for this case of a female prison, I sought a theoretical framework to

inform and orient my initial concerns and insecurities. On the one hand, prisons remain a controversial research ground (Wacquant 2002). On the other, women’s reading practices and preferences, even in other contexts, are a terrain for speculation and biased statements, but not much research in recent years. A sustained gender perspective deepened the complexity of this framework, all the more so since gender would be a structural dimension not only to address the imprisonment of women but also the reading modes of the inmates. Prison as a gendered institution and women’s reading in prison are the theoretical topics I shall address next.

The Gendered Prison System

The growth of the prison population in recent decades in some Western countries bears no apparent connection to an intensification of criminal acts, but is rather a penal response by neoliberal states to the conflicts arising from poverty and the deflation of the cushioning effect provided by social welfare (Wacquant 2010). Recent research in Portugal refers to a growth in the female prison population, along with an increase in total incarceration rate (Fonseca 2010; Ribeiro 2014).

Beyond figures, Portuguese female prisoners had evidenced particular demographic traits: women were often convicted following drug seizures by the police, specifically directed at social housing estates (Cunha 2002). The concerted workings of the penal and penitentiary systems thus eventually established a process of mutual reinforcement among the prison, the housing for the working-class poor and the traffic of illicit drugs (Cunha 2010). Many

of those who worked outside the home, in formal or informal economic activities, were not benefiting from any social protection. Foreign women were frequently convicted as drug couriers (Fonseca 2010).

The type and duration of penal punishment enforced upon Portuguese women has a gendered imprint, ensuing from gender role expectations, which reflect both on an unequal weight in sentences, especially when offences contradict a docile natural female condition (Matos and Machado 2007; Fonseca 2010), and on the centering of rehabilitation being placed on housewifery (Cunha 2002).

At this point, it is interesting to recall that the history of the modern prison in Europe, starting in the late seventeenth century, is a gendered history from its inception and one clearly shaped by patriarchal standards of female sexuality. Morally dangerous women could be detained in hospitals. While most were prostitutes, others were kept in punitive or preventive custody requested by ascendant male relatives to protect family reputations, especially if women were left unsupervised at home for a long time. Then, reformation was enforced through forced female labor and religious predication (Bosworth 2000)

Reading in Prison

Some literature has been produced about reading by women incarcerated in the United States. Megan Sweeney (2008) mentions how prescribed reading was meant to have bibliotherapeutic purposes at a time when the penal system discourse was constructed around the social rehabilitation of inmates.

As the efficiency of rehabilitation programs was questioned in the 1970s, such an instrumental approach to reading was undermined and a new impulse, according to Barone (1977), was given to a demand of the right to read, on its own, independently from those programs, a right envisaged as the main rationale for prison libraries.

Taking women's own point of view as a narrative source, present-day imprisoned women are considered as investing in reading for different, varied purposes; according to Sweeney (2004; 2008), reading is a means to regain the humanity of which the institution robs them, to reassess their personal histories, to deepen self-awareness, to attribute new meanings to their lives through the experiences they live vicariously while reading, and to experiment with new subject positions through processes of projective identification. To enhance self-esteem and improve literacy are other purposes reported by Perez Pulido (2010).

Departing from this theoretical framing, social class and gender were construed as analytical dimensions along with ethnicity and education.

The Research Process

Acknowledging both the features of this readership and of their reading led me to consider this prison's library an interesting context to construct a single case study (Burawoy 1998) of female reading in confinement. A flexible research design was drawn to accommodate the expected uncertainty in the actual field of research. A qualitative approach was adopted, comprehending ethnography, in-depth in-

interviews, and focus group sessions. Empirical work was done from February to May 2012. A theoretical sample was constructed to reflect the perceived diversity of social class, age, education, ethnicity, occupation, and frequency of visits to the library. To acquire this perception, I requested and was granted access to some internal statistical data collected by the educational service of the Penal Establishment. In spite of the willing cooperation of interviewees, the traits of the life-cycle in prison, including the duration of detention, did not allow for a full and deep follow-up of each of the nine women initially selected for the sample, only six were constant participants during the period I visited the prison library—their data will be informed in further footnotes—others had an irregular presence. Issues raised in individual interviews were supplemented and deepened in focus groups sessions where eight to fourteen prisoners participated.

Reading practices were researched through a set of tools. Ethnographic observation was focused on the library and extended through occasional visits to the adjacent educational services facilities, the social services wings, and one visit to the cell blocks. I visited the prison library several days a week and used it to read and take notes, while observing prisoners’ reading modes, how they chose and commented on their reading, and both their expectations and desires as to the library’s range of books. I also focused my attention on their reading practices inside the library and asked them about their reading inside the cells. Furthermore, I could also engage in informal conversations with prisoners visiting the library, both borrowers and non-borrowers, and prison guards. I had several meetings with social service

professionals, and one with the education service manager.

During this process, the fact that some education service staff expected these women to be more easily attracted to gain reading habits through light literature novels led me to question this view and address it while observing their reading practices. To do this, even if tentatively, I organized a reading group with twelve women, including the aforementioned six. The prisoners and I collectively read and commented on a short story that did not fit the genres they were familiar with (Pires 2006).

Finally, I presented and debated the main results with most of the participating readers and with the social assistant who was assigned by the Establishment to accompany my research. The prison director was unavailable during my fieldwork. The names of prisoners used in this text were self-chosen for anonymity.

The Penal Establishment

The prison facilities are located in a small town near Porto, in a region with some manufacturing companies, several small scale and subsistence agricultural fields, which is now mostly marked by big supermarkets and large commercial and logistic areas. Another prison, for men, is located in a neighboring parish.

The building has a functional design and good quality materials. Courtyards, some decorated with green flower beds, are used by young children to play and to stroll. Prisoners may work for

companies under a special contract with the prison's management for a few hours a day, usually in unskilled tasks with very low pay. Convicted women are distributed among four wings, one with special cells for mothers with children, and an internal daycare center in a separate area of the compound. Cells are frequently personalized with televisions and radios, occasionally with vividly colorful curtains.

Visitors may have their image of a penal establishment shaken, as the whole compound appears strikingly normal, exhibiting an efficient and utterly clean space. This space is still clearly marked by the watch tower and barbed wire on the outside and security procedures at the entrance hall, while inside, gates, guards, and the pace of routines are constant reminders. Loudspeakers calling prisoners by given numbers punctuate intervals of silence. The real prison, a stricter space, for prisoners and guards only, begins beyond a further gate. Above it, the label Penal Establishment indicates the separation between staff, social care, and educational areas and the cell blocks. Inside the cell blocks, visual control is assured from ground level, and the two upper levels of cells, serviced by a mezzanine, open onto a common space in which sound resonates.

Characterizing Women Prisoners

Socio-demographic data from the prison's statistics relating to 2011, national statistics relating to women during the same year (in brackets), and data from Fonseca's study (2010) on this very prison were all used for comparison and comprehensiveness of this study. Data from a previous decade and another lo-

cation—Tires, Lisbon county—were also taken into account (Cunha 2002).

Santa Cruz inmates have a certain social homogeneity as far as age and social class are concerned, according to internal data and to Fonseca (2010), which is in line with the findings from other female prisons (Cunha 2002).

According to the prison records, 281 women were incarcerated by the end of 2011, one third preventively. Almost two thirds were in the 30-49 years age group. Almost 15% were foreigners (compared to a national total of 3.9% foreign residents). About 14% were illiterate (6.8%, nationally), 60% had 4 to 6 years of basic schooling (35.4%, nationally), and fewer than 4% held a university degree (13.6%, nationally in 2010). The majority worked outside the home, others were housewives or unemployed, and a small number were retired. The most common economic activity outside the home was that of a peddler or stallholder at markets.

As for ethnicity, inmates were mostly White, while the Roma/Gypsy¹ population accounted for 17% (against an estimated 0.6% in society at large) and the Black population for 1.6% of the total. A large majority lived in the north of the country. Drug and drug-related offences accounted for 58.5% of convictions, while 35.9% were recidivists. The vast majority were mothers. Though allowed to have intimate visits once a month, married or not, only 9.6% actually gained access to this privilege (Fonseca 2010; Campos 2011; Nogueira 2013).

¹ Gypsy is the term chosen by this ethnic community in Portugal to designate itself, the reason why I have kept it.

Family ties were always present in the interviewees’ narratives and children were especially mentioned. Even in prison, as a particular gender trait, women continue to have an important care-giving role (Cunha 2002; Zaitzow 2003). In Santa Cruz, several women working inside the prison used to send a substantial part of the little they earned to their families. Relatives have their visiting time on Sunday afternoons.

The Prison Atmosphere

The prison resembles a hospital with its long corridors and clean facilities. Female guards watch over the cell’s wings, male guards are responsible for the general security tasks.

The atmosphere is strangely calm, especially out of the cell’s wings. However, emotional responses to incarceration are still noticeable. Constrained emotion and depression emerge in many faces; at times some women walk by with eyes red from crying.

Learning how to interact and behave is a permanent challenge. Inmates complained vehemently about an extensive row of prohibitions regarding conduct—to their knowledge all tacit and permanently changing—a reason for a permanent state of alert and instability. According to Jim Thomas (2003:3), behavior control in prison may be achieved through a multiplicity of devices, from the enforcement of rules and uniforms, to unusual schedules, and to paternalistic attitudes from managers and staff, driving inmates to a state of “learned helplessness.” Medication and occupational therapy are also commonly used to modulate behaviors in Santa Cruz.

Revolt and resentment at unjust treatment appear to be more common during the first months of incarceration, especially for those claiming to have been unfairly sentenced. It is very likely that these women have suffered prior abuse from parents or male partners—at least half, in studies from the U.S. (Ferraro and Moe 2003; Sweeney 2004). One social worker stated that, from her empirical knowledge, the same applies in this prison, although women may not, themselves, conceive of those situations as abusive. The female guard servicing the library area provided some advice to counteract what she interpreted as the expression of deep sorrow or depression: “Now, you wipe your tears, make your face up, and I don’t want to see you in such a state again,” “Be aware, don’t get involved with the wrong kind of people here!” “Take this book, read it, and go to the gym, you’ll feel better.”

Besides school, arts, and handicraft workshops, library attendance—all from Monday to Friday—and occasional reading groups promoted by the education department, other scheduled activities are limited to the morning religious instruction and Sunday Mass. Prisoners are awoken at 7h00 and locked back in their cells at 19h00. Common areas, such as the school, the workshops, the library, or even the adapted chapel—the use made of the gym on Sundays—are places for discreet conviviality as conversation among prisoners, other than in the context of an organized activity is not allowed. Prison routines enact another form of incarceration.

The prisoners’ discourse of atonement is frequently marked by a religious tone, absent in other conversation contexts. They may be voicing the prescribed,

legitimized speech of their custodians. Suspicion is a current defense tactic: I was clearly aware of the mistrust my presence triggered on occasion. Compliance with and subjection to the system are facets of prison life. Prisoners may end up internalizing the staff's speech in a defensive way when questioned. At some moments, many interviewees expressed regret, their present condition being frequently voiced as an "opportunity" for betterment. Additionally, and in a most striking paradox, imprisonment may be experienced as a relief, compared to their prior living conditions (Zaitzow and Thomas 2003; Matos and Machado 2007), as some confided. Now they have easier access to education and medical care—on the premises—which is particularly important for the many drug addicts or for those in need of dental care.² Manuela³ explained that she would probably have died, if she had not been treated for drug addiction in prison. She got control over her life back and she was also proud that her personal achievement might constitute an example for her children. By having arts and crafts classes, acting in a play, women discover, as I was often told by Celeste⁴ and Margarida,⁵ forms of creativity and expression which "they didn't know they had in them." "There are gypsy women who are able to read!" Maria, a 55-year-old Roma woman, assured me with a confident, proud smile. The Roma women referred to the opportunity of getting a secondary school certificate, after facing a gendered barrier to school attendance imposed by fathers—Maria her-

self—or husbands—as in the case of Dayara.⁶ Helena⁷ said: "The only good thing I'll be leaving with is schooling; apart from that, our brain gets slower and slower, day after day after day. I feel increasingly distanced from society, more and more afraid of what I'll find outside. Because it's too long! Isolated. But, who am I to go against the system? So I have to endure." This mixed ambience of vigilance, intimacy, deprivation, and powerlessness produced a curious resemblance, in Maria João's⁸ mind, to that of the "Catholic boarding school" she unwillingly lived in during her adolescence. Surprisingly, the difference she retained from her memories is that the boarding school had much stricter rules and was even more oppressive.

Due to ambivalence about their prison experiences, women were often confronted with a need for deep self-reflection and a constant reassessment of their past acts.

Deprived of freedom, dealing with guilt, regret, solitude, rage, homesickness, they resisted the dehumanizing process of imprisonment and they voiced it through their life narratives. Affective life is improved through investment in individuation practices such as detailed attention to clothing, make-up, and cell decoration. "Inside here, under detention, we feel everything in a stronger way," Margarida explains, "twice as much," Celeste cuts in, "We live everything more intensely!," says Maria João, nod-

² The Public Health system does not provide for dentistry.

³ 50 years, White, lower-class, taking secondary classes.

⁴ 43 years, White, clerical technician, lower-middle-class, upper-secondary education, educated abroad.

⁵ 41 years, White, industrial technician, lower-middle-class, upper-secondary education.

⁶ 30 years, Gypsy, peddler, taking secondary classes.

⁷ 18 years, White, did not complete her 9th year at school, worked in a shop owned by her lower-middle-class family.

⁸ 54 years, White, artistic professional who studied abroad, with an academic degree, lived frequent moves from middle- to lower-class.

ding in agreement. Going to school, reading previously unknown authors, they get glimpses of realities and emotions that widen the horizons of their expectations. These activities reinvested them with the humane, sensitive traits of which their condition as prisoners deprived them, and could give way to appreciation and recognition from others within and outside prison, as was the case of a theatrical performance staged outside the prison which gained media coverage.

This does not mean that they assumed justice was being done, which was even more clear as many of those surveyed represented prison as a “crime school.” Profiting from every single opportunity to combat solitude and to collect skills and resources, whether cognitive or emotional, was a form of resisting the depersonalization and the stigma associated with imprisonment and of grasping the hope of a better future, one important facet of life in prison.

Reading and Library Practices Before and During Prison Time

Books in the library were shelved by subjects and genres. No catalogue was used and, instead of browsing, readers usually sought advice from a co-prisoner, Celeste, who performed the duties of a library assistant. “Read this, it will do you good!” was the phrase with which she would frequently dismiss them. She was by far the *reference system* most invoked by prisoners, closely followed by their teachers’ suggestions.

In contrast to the noisy cell wings, the library is felt by prisoners as a quiet place. Though officially not

allowed, it is occasionally used as a place for concealed conversations. Most of the reading is done within the cells with borrowed books, when there are no programmed activities, and since prison nights “last long.”

Reading the only daily newspaper title was a habit for a very few library frequenters, most of whom said they preferred to watch the news in their cells to keep informed. The available magazines were not much appreciated either, except for handicraft magazines. In most cases, they were carelessly browsed just to pass the time. Some popular women’s magazines focusing on the lives of socialites were the object of scorn by two of the youngest interviewee prisoners, who felt those lifestyles were alien to them. In a total of 8000 books, several thousand monographs are mostly left untouched: the books on art, literature, or science sections, especially targeted at an academic, specialized audience, donated by a philanthropic foundation, are neither browsed nor promoted. In stark contrast, the sections classified as *Novels*—romance novels, *Life Stories*, what book sellers would designate as *Misery Books*, and *Self-Help*—present very worn books, a few of which have duplicate copies. A poetry title is especially coveted, as I will refer to further on. Teachers working under the adult secondary school certification program bring in and suggest some other books specifically for school assignments. The most requested books were sometimes hidden from view by the assistant, in an—unfruitful—effort to draw attention to the rest of the collection. On the other hand, as readers tended to enquire as to what was most requested, this practice eventually reinforced the overuse of some titles.

Younger women indulge in computer games, only occasionally, on the two computers available. Internet access is only possible in the classrooms and under the supervision of the teachers. A few dozen CDs and video cassettes were displayed. Video watching was an appreciated group activity and a specific purpose for some frequent visitors, including some who do not read books.

Personal Histories of Reading, Library Usage, and Preferences

“Each case is just one case, we’re all equal and all different, that is, we’re all equal because we’re all in the same situation, we’re all different because each one of us has our own kind of reading,” thus did Celeste summarize the basis of her recommendation procedure, a procedure she contends is based on prior detailed feedback given by readers.

According to personal histories, most visitors had not been closely acquainted with books before imprisonment. Among the interviewed, I met only one frequent library user and a few occasional ones. Almost all declared that, when living with their families, they could not find the desired free time to read. Additionally, some made a point of saying that books were unaffordable for their families of origin or constituted ones. Those who were frequent readers previously now devoted more time to reading. The library had revealed authors and titles which they would have missed in their usual course of life, some added. On the other hand, those few who used to be and were frequent readers had their relatives bringing in books upon request.

The library offered the possibility to choose among genres and types of documents such as poetry, romance, historical or detective novels, self-help, biographies/misery books,⁹ cooking, newspapers, magazines, videos, allowing for some individuality in tastes within what might be classified as easy-reading. In comparison to an ordinary public library collection, however, past or present canonical literature was barely represented. Teachers occasionally offered romance novels they had read and thought would be suited for the prisoners’ reading skills and tastes. Some benefits and shortcomings of the library’s reading offer were apparent. First of all, the library actually propitiated more reading to many: those who entered the prison as frequent readers had developed more intensive practices, and some who had not previously acquired that disposition had experienced new and enjoyable opportunities. Secondly, observing actual usage of the library unveiled how the opportunity to read diversely was not being fostered by the institution. Some foreign convicts expressed disappointment at the absence of canonical authors they were familiar with. Kadija,¹⁰ born in Guinea-Bissau, regretted not being able to find any title by Mia Couto: “I like African authors.” A South-American woman confirmed in surprise: “You don’t have any Benedetti?!” Similar requests were barely or tardily met by a municipal mobile library with decreasing routes, apparently due to staff shortages.

⁹ A book marketing category which consists of supposedly factual life stories in which protagonists endure long and extremely painful, deprived life conditions.

¹⁰ 51 years, Black, domestic servant, recent descent into lower-class, taking secondary classes.

As to collection criteria, there were no explicit, institutional reading promotion policies. Reading was instead functionally oriented by teaching targets and tacitly shaped by the representations, framed by class and gender, of what education and social service professionals considered suitable reading contents for women who would most probably be under-schooled, excluded, and poor. Judging from other experiences during this research, I would also contend that leisure reading, reading as a pleasurable activity, was not inscribed in the institutional, disciplinary frame of the prison.

Secondly, and beyond reading frequency, the imprisonment experience produced dispositional shifts in the reader subjects, ensuing from emotional, social, power deprivation (Skeggs 1997), which led to the resignification of the practice, even while rereading known texts. While denying that their reading habits changed after detention, these women actually claimed to remain unspoiled by an environment morally constructed as negative and denied the stigmatization of the prisoner condition, as became clear in other conversations. Some women regained intimacy with reading or discovered motivation to read anew, in a condition of affective deprivation: “Here, I have found myself again in literature,” says Manuela. Margarida asks: “Do you know who my best lover is every night? It’s a book because I sleep with that book and I have lots of emotions!” “We need beautiful things! Who doesn’t love love stories?,” declares Celeste, jumping into the conversation.

Thirdly, and, in my view, however pleasurable, these experiences were actually produced with the

books that were within arm’s reach in everyday life. If pleasure was not a foreseeable purpose for reading in prison, choices were actually limited by the sameness of the collection, not counting the erudite and study books.

Representations and Significance of Reading

Projecting into romance characters’ identities, vicariously living their experiences, gauging their own past deeds against those of fictional characters, as if rehearsing alternative lives, were strategies frequently mentioned during the interviews. These strategies are a fundamental part of the intensive, introspective work performed by women reckoning with their past and planning for a future (Sweeney 2008).

Discussing what reading means in the focus group provided some clarification: “I’m going to see if I’m a good mother,” Maria João said, by reading a book recommended on television. “We are always expecting there’ll be passages, there are phrases, [that come] to identify with our lives,” she explains. Manuela declared similarly: “I’m already 50, [but] such an alternative had not come to my mind, and if I had planned the alternative I found in the book, maybe the solution would’ve been different” and she would not have been convicted. Margarida nodded in agreement. Going from everyday life to romance and back was a constant journey, the literary narrative coupled with the self-narration of personal lives, as novels could provide models for world-interpretation (Meretoja 2014). Memoirs were also appreciated. Reading the story of

Christiane F.¹¹ made 18-year-old Helena feel “good” about her accomplishment, as she herself had “managed to get off drugs.” Having an important affective role by facilitating emotional work, reading is frequently represented in these readers’ discourse as a “sacred remedy” to ease them to sleep, as “therapy,” “consolation,” “escape.” On the other hand, it may also be a form of “adrenaline,” fostering the “excitement” of which a totally routine and structured life is devoid. Romance novels “don’t have to be true,” in Celeste’s opinion; this awareness did not deter them from reading eagerly. Reading and writing became intimately associated. “Making our stuff” in the workshops, writing, and drawing may, for Margarida, “become almost an addiction” while in prison.

Reading was also represented as instrumental to improving writing skills for those schooled abroad or barely schooled, and for non-native speakers of Portuguese.

Briefly, representing reading assumed different contours. The most evoked representations were grounded in emotional work—a search for balance, for excitement—or grounded in questioning of identities—self-assessment, projection onto characters, prospective exploration, and the consideration of alternative ways of life. Additionally, representations emerged as being grounded in escapism (Pereira, Pimenta, and Miranda 2011) and entertainment, and, for the less literate, on knowledge building. For heavier and more experienced readers, with a more

diversified, cumulative reading mode, associations were more complex, mixing several representational images.

Analyzing Favorite Titles and Genres

A list of most requested titles was checked against the personal preferences of frequent library visitors, and especially of active participants in this research.

Teresa Machado’s *Con-sensual-idade*,¹² an erotic poetry book, was probably the most requested. Readers picked verses to compose love letters, in a process similar to those informed by Álvarez and Álvarez (2011) and Sweeney (2010).

The self-help books were shelved close to the misery books with an exotic nuance¹³ and to memoirs having prison or drugs as a central theme. Some of the most read romance novels also contained a self-help facet, delivering advice and accentuating forms of conduct. Light literature, also known in academia as industrial literature or para-literature, was the core genre of the most used library section. It should be noted that some of these novels may be commonsensically referred to as kitschy or tacky. Within academia, these best-selling genres are not frequently researched, and likewise a current academic categorization for these book trade labels is difficult to trace. On the other hand, categorization was irrelevant for readers who used the library’s signage labels to communicate.

¹¹ “H.”: *Autobiography of a Child Prostitute and Heroin Addict* by Christiane F., Susanne Flatauer, Kai Hermann, Horst Rieck. London: Arlington Books, 1980.

¹² Wordplay with *Consensualidade* (consensuality) and *Com* (with or in a), *sensual, idade* (age).

¹³ E.g., *Sold: A Story of Modern-Day Slavery; Burned Alive*.

Having identified the most requested titles and comparing them with the interviewees’ favorite titles, one particularly requested genre attracted my attention: the romance novel. This led to a number of secondary research questions: how and why did these women value specific titles, and what were their most valued traits. Answering these questions would allow me to understand not only why they read but also the kind of reading they would call a good book.

In dialogue with the interviewees, three titles were selected among the most read in the library: Nora Roberts’s *Holding the Dream* (2005), Paulo Coelho’s *Eleven Minutes* (2007), and Sveva Casati Modignani’s *Ed infine una pioggia di diamanti* (2006).¹⁴ These titles were then analyzed, focusing on plot and narrative structure, theme and/or ideological background, character building, stylistic devices, and language level.

All three authors are known to write so-called light literature novels. The authors themselves may classify them differently; Modignani designated her works as rose-tinted novels,¹⁵ Paulo Coelho seemed to prefer esoteric or self-help novels, and Margarida Rebelo Pinto made a point of calling them pop novels (Sousa 2006).¹⁶

For the readers, the novels were, nevertheless, a single category, all possessing the criteria for a favorite read, which were debated during our focus group

sessions: first, a story with characters they could empathize; second, a story written according to their literacy skills; third, a pleasurable reading experience—“not a bunch of misfortune,” “we already have enough of that”; unless compensated for by the fourth condition, that of a repairing, but not necessarily happy ending.

The interviewed readers were asked to extract two or three favorite passages from their own favorite titles.

At this point it should be stressed that consensus was not uncommon during group sessions on matters of taste and related issues, and that convergent answers were also obtained from individual interviews. Alongside the previously mentioned social homogeneity, interaction with detainees also revealed that reading tastes are a subject for conversation and that a negotiation of meanings occurs, along with peer recommendation, as part of their socialized reading process.

First, I shall briefly analyze each title selected and compare the main common characteristics. Second, I shall address the reasons stated by the readers for their preferences for such titles and such passages.

Nora Roberts’s *Holding the Dream*

Holding the Dream pertains to a series of three books, the serialization becoming patent from the shared use of the word *dream* in the titles.

A girl is adopted by a rich family, her father having died after being accused of embezzlement. As an adult, she will be the target of a similar accusation,

¹⁴ *And Finally a Shower of Diamonds* , apparently not translated into English.

¹⁵ Literally translated.

¹⁶ Margarida Rebelo Pinto, best-selling author, declared that light literature is a derogatory classification, preferring to use “pop” to designate her novels, stressing that she objects to the use of an intellectual, academic stance in her writing.

and will have to fight to prove her innocence. Being depicted as an independent, rational, tough woman (an accountant), she eventually gives in to a marriage proposal by a man who patiently pursues her, thus eventually breaking down her emotional defenses and leading her to admit to being in love, too.

The characters are described within their groups of close friends more as types than as individuals: *Margo's going to be a sex fiend, you're going to search for love, and I'm going to bust my ass for success. What a group.* Occasional similes are trite: *soft baritone voice that flowed like honey*—"baritone" apparently being a commonly used adjective by the author to qualify male voices in other books. The male protagonist has an aristocratic touch to his name, Byron DeWitt.

Ideologically, what first struck me was the blatant, unquestioned use of gender role stereotypes. The female hero has personality traits which are initially depicted with emotional distance—a successful career woman who appears not to be feminine enough—only to be cherished by the author's script when she overcomes her reticence and accepts the idea of getting married, that is, when she is soothed into femininity by the hand of a wiser, experienced man. Along with this, social class ascendancy is presented as a natural reward for a hard-working person, the accomplishment of a dream for a girl of lower-middle-class origin. Both aspects constitute the happy ending's essence.

Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes*

A naive young woman, raised in a small village in Brazil, immigrates to Switzerland, and ends up as

a prostitute who makes a great deal of easy money. Following her amorous disappointments during adolescence, she embraces her profession unquestioningly, only deciding that, to be strong, she must be the best. That there is no explanation for the way the universe works, that one should surrender to life's course and accept one's own future is the motto of the plot. Eleven minutes was the usual duration of sex sessions with clients. The protagonist admits to feeling attracted to a painter—Hart, seemingly a wordplay with heart—who is capable of seeing the "inner light" in her, yet incapable of experiencing sexual pleasure. After indulging in sadomasochism with a client according to a pristine ritual, a new path to pleasure is revealed to her through emotional rebirth. When finally making love to the painter, he is also driven to an emotional awakening, both finding true love in sacred sex.

The psychological portrait of the characters is feeble: the consecutive transformation from a naive girl into the most requested prostitute and then into a sacred one, ending up as a true lover, follows a fuzzy process, mostly left unaccounted for. Sudden switches in locations and psychological atmosphere are frequent. The succession of arousal and disgust, due to the intense and voyeuristic S&M sex scenes, is delivered in close resemblance to the roller-coaster metaphor used to depict life's course and the impossibility, or inefficiency, of individual choice. This emotional stirring and disorientation precedes the spiritual turn offered by the happy ending. Since moral advice is instilled by the plot and made explicit by the narrator's commentary, this novel may also, to a large extent, be considered of the self-help type.

Sveva Casati Modignani’s *A Shower of Diamonds*

Despite being born into a rich family and becoming poor, a man dies leaving a huge fortune to quarrelling descendants, including a handful of diamonds hidden in a place known to none of the living. A family imbroglio is plotted around the struggle for the multi-millionaire’s wealth. The main female character, sexually abused as a child, abhors coital sex. Born poor, and now a successful fashion model profiting from her seductive looks, she is an independent, intelligent woman who is introduced to high society by the hand of a rich man she does not love. Overcoming a reluctance to acknowledge she too has fallen in love, she re-encounters him, after he has been castrated by mobsters, which makes him more suited to her desires. Upon his death, and reacting to the heirs’ greed, she eventually discovers the secret spot based on a unique comprehension of his mind, leaving the diamonds untouched only to be found by chance after her death.

The plot is confusing and baroquely intricate, characters lack psychological definition, appearing to be purposefully constructed in a retrospective fashion to fulfill their roles. Suspense is not achieved, as the location of the diamonds becomes quite obvious early on in the narrative.

Coldness, suspicion in interpersonal relationships, and a tactical alliance with a rich man together with a twist of fate are presented as a recipe for upward social mobility and success. Aversion to a lower-middle-class status is clearly stated in utterances such as: *Would she be able to escape that ob-*

tuse mediocrity of the village’s well-off? References to a lesbian and a gay man are occasionally dropped and ridiculed, while stereotypical gender roles are ascribed to the main characters.

Preferred Passages

Selecting preferred passages was an uncomfortable exercise for some of the interviewees as they were confronted with the effort of both reflexivity and documenting their preferences, which required occasional clarification and incentive. Not unsurprisingly, the most educated, avid readers were enthusiastic.

Almost all of the passages were selected for an alleged similarity to self-lived experiences. Contrary to a purely escapist reading mode, they were instead actively and selectively focusing on vicarious experiences as part of a process of identity re-building. Along a frequent purposeful selection of titles as appropriate for introspection, the selection of passages reflected a reading mode oriented to self-assessment, projection onto characters, prospective exploration of alternatives for future life stages. The importance assigned to emotivity and excitement in reading was activated by reasoning about their present condition and an expectation of empowerment to plan ahead (Meretoja 2014).

As for stylistic devices, a single expression was selected: “a warm gush of tears,” considered more refined writing than a plain “cry.” While imprisonment had enhanced readers’ emotivity, which might account for a need for emotional stimulation and its naturalization, similar devices were not as

commonly used in their favorite reading, as I had anticipated.

Another selection was a maxim of magical nature considered to convey wisdom, extracted from Paulo Coelho's *The Valkyries: Everything that happens once can never happen again. But everything that happens twice will surely happen a third time.*

Responding to a Proposed Dissimilar Narrative

Further to clarify the mentioned criteria for a good read, I proposed to a group of twelve women that they read and debate a short-story, known to none. The renowned award-winning writer Jacinto Lucas Pires (2006) resorts to, and humorously surpasses a soap-opera-like plot, countering the slant of a commodified narrative. A football celebrity and his capricious lifestyle are the center of a narrative with a most unexpected turn, and a striking, darkly comedic end, written in a mix of elaborate literary and quotidian language. Seated in a circle, participants took turns reading the story aloud, which was smoothly understood, vividly commented on, and appreciated. Additionally, my questions were addressed and answered straightforwardly. Commentaries developed from condemning the lifestyle of the male star as too obsessed with success and money and who disregarded his family, and the approval of moral values such as reciprocity and family support. The author's uncommon style was acknowledged, the gory details of the closure comprehended as appropriate for the context. The absence of a stereotypical happy ending was allegedly overcome by a captivating narrative and by the eliciting of shared moral values.

Comparing Titles: An Updated Recipe for Commercial Success

Comparing the three selected novels, some common traits emerge. The formulaic features of the three novels are evident: the narrative is centered around a woman, in an upward social trajectory reached through matching with a wealthy, older man. Love—a synecdoche for heterosexual love—naturally happens at first sight following a sequence of mishaps, at times threatened by sexual issues, only to be overcome by true love. Female heroes, even if depicted as independent and reluctant before the ties of love—in consistency with the individualistic, competitive successful woman role model (McRobbie 2009)—eventually give in, as beings who eventually find completeness in marriage and maybe in motherhood. Male protagonists are mature, both in age and in mind, calm and strong and, being rich, provide perfect financial and emotional support. Blurred psychological and/or physical portraits facilitate the readers' emotional projection.

Work and money-making are surrounded by omissions; fortunes just happen to accumulate even under adverse circumstances. Social issues are absent or named just to be dropped (war, in Modignani's novel) or ridiculed (street demonstrations, in Coelho's).

Narrative structures are filled with inconsistencies—according to posts on sites such as Goodreads, personal blogs, or online bookstores, fan readers detect them. The same applies to the repetitiveness of plots and situations which prison readers sometimes acknowledged, but by which they felt undeterred.

Both inconsistencies and repetitiveness are the consequences to be expected from massive output, as authors may deliver several titles a year. Characters may be serialized, as in Modignani’s “Dream” series, much like televised serials.

Many of these traits are coincidental with those underlined by Amorós (1968) when referring to the *novelas rosa*, published from 1946 up to 1968 by Corin Tellado, a top selling author of pulp literature for women in Portugal during those decades.¹⁷ The contemporary light novel incorporates permanences such as the repetitive formulae, the stereotypical plot, theme and characters, the emotional stock of the Tellado novels, to mention an author familiar to many Portuguese readers.

A most striking difference is that contemporary women protagonists are invested with a stronger character; it is women who are now endowed with some masculine traits, being averse to marriage or deep emotional investment. Fifty years later, women are re-framed as secundarized subjects, angled from a conservative perspective that recovers traditionalist values of femininity, via a repackaging of narratives which tacitly outdates emancipatory ideas passed off as unnecessary in a post-feminist society, as McRobbie (2009) suggests.

The bourgeois upper-class’s (supposed) mode of life appears to be a model for the social aspirations of middle-class women, the marketing target for these industrial literature novels.

¹⁷ These novels were published in Portugal by different imprints until the end of the 1990s.

However, addressing an issue ignored by Calinescu (1987), I align with Radway’s (1984) and Sweeney’s (2010) standpoint that reading is also an instance of agency and resistance, and that readers may appropriate narratives to different ends, as this empirically based research has unveiled and confirmed. As Olalquiaga (1998) puts it, recalling Walter Benjamin, in times of crisis, the symbol is emptied of its significance and allegory takes its place, as an external form which may take on new meanings in the process of appropriation that reading is. In her view, kitsch is a response assuming the form of a sensibility of loss, building on the re-creation of memories or fantasies of an idyllic past. Moreover, dispositions and satiety claimed by readers may be interpreted as preceding and succeeding an aesthetic engagement which does not exclude yet requires reflexivity (Felski 2011).

Appropriations, as Certeau (1984) stressed, are the tactics of the weak, not denying dominance relations, but corroborating them instead: in this case, readers appear to be either picking or overlooking pieces of the romantic narrative which they assemble in purposeful, reflected, and pleasurable modes of reading, their choices being socially framed and conditioned, last but not the least, by the actual offer of books inside the prison.

Although other genres and styles might fulfill the mentioned list of criteria for appreciated reading—with the likely exception of that typical happy ending—it is light literature titles that are massively present in the library and that are

promoted, even if unthinkingly, as suitable for a readership conceived of as socially and educationally limited. Commercial availability, aggressive marketing campaigns, and affordability encourage the purchase of industrial literature in society at large. The prison library's offer is not exempt from this constraint, a tendency recently also signaled and the object of criticism in some public libraries.

Conclusions

An unusual allocation of time, and the double opportunity to access books and schooling have increased reading among the women detained in Santa Cruz. Reading preferences vary, spanning through several genres, within individual tastes. Light literature books are the most appreciated, especially as providers of support for the emotional well-being and reflexive work required by readers reckoning with their past and projecting their future. Escapism, along with knowledge acquisition, also plays an important role among reading purposes.

I do not contend that the prison library—or any other—should prescribe taste and eliminate light literature, especially being aware that such a judgment may derive from class or gender prejudice. The library should, nevertheless, promote a diversification of genres and authors in order to facilitate and inform taste formation and to foster pleasurable reading, while compensating for the disadvantages of a homogenization that conceals, while it reinforces, a disregard for social, cultural, and linguistic inequalities. Group reading should

also be favored, beyond individualized practices, both to compensate for and accommodate diverse levels of familiarity with literature and to promote a collective critical analysis of texts.

This case study analysis leads me to stress that these women workers, salaried or not, some with low literacy levels, revealed preferences that are not too far from a majority of book buyers who have been consuming romance novels, thus giving way to the term best-seller.

What is currently labeled light literature may be considered as a successor to the kitsch and *rosa* novel. This literature has very clear commercial targets, and the ideology many of these books bathe in may be characterized as regressive. And it should also be stressed that reading purposes, which elicited mixed rational and emotional responses, along with aesthetic engagement, all reflect detainees' tactical and meaningful appropriations of light literature as a readily available means to cope with their life in prison, a place where social markers are present and made salient by the very distance from their original places of fabrication.

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