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Immigration Detention and the Coloniality of Gender

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

Esposito, F. (2021). Immigration Detention and the Coloniality of Gender. *MÉLANGES DE LA CASA DE VELÁZQUEZ*, 51(1), 271-275 [10.4000/mcv.14768].

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/1000849> since: 2025-01-11

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.4000/mcv.14768>

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# Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez

Nouvelle série

51-1 | 2021

Stratégies et procédures d'identification des étrangers

Actualité de la recherche

Débats. Reflections on the Interplay between Race, Ethnicity and Migration



## Immigration Detention and the Coloniality of Gender

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<https://doi.org/10.4000/mcv.14768>

### *Texte intégral*

1 In the past few decades<sup>1</sup>, as some scholars have pointed out, «borders and borderings have moved from the margins into the centre of political and social life<sup>2</sup>». As a consequence, a growing body of scholarship has been produced in this field, thus highlighting the interconnections between mechanisms of migration control and everyday processes of racialisation and ethnicisation, as well as the genealogies of these interconnections.

2 In this contribution I will try to unveil the connections between practices of border control, processes of racialisation and histories of racist violence in the work I conducted with women detained under immigration powers in Portugal. In doing so, I will also highlight the key role in this process of colonial histories and mindsets. As several postcolonial and decolonial scholars have brilliantly highlighted over the years, rather than as a finished period in the past, colonialism can be understood as a living history that informs and shapes the present. I will add to this analysis another layer of complexity, which has to do with the effort of including sex and gender in this complex arithmetic. As Cassidy, Yuval-Davis, and Wemyss have contended<sup>3</sup>, 'situated intersectionality'—as defined by Yuval-Davis<sup>4</sup>—is central to research on borders as it allows us to better grasp the operation and impact of contemporary bordering practices. According to this claim, I place intersectionality at the centre of my work on women in detention. In particular, I focus my analysis on the relation between colonial archives, bordering practices, and the operation of gendered and racialised



constructions.

3 In Portugal, over the past years, anti-racist groups and movements led by Black and Roma communities have put the country's colonial past and participation in the slave trade at the centre of public debate<sup>5</sup>, thus challenging the enduring effects of this neglected history of violence as well as the mainstream rhetoric of Portugal as 'um país dos brandos costumes' (literally, *a country of gentle customs*)<sup>6</sup>. This critical work has been crucial for my comprehension of the mechanisms of power at stake in daily life in detention.

4 Despite the great heterogeneity of nationalities and trajectories, the large majority of the people I met in the detention site where I conducted my fieldwork were people of colour, and many of them came from a background of poverty. Furthermore, a considerable proportion of the detained population came from former parts of the Portuguese overseas empire, such as Brazil or Cape Verde<sup>7</sup>. According to the latest statistics provided by the Portuguese Immigration and Borders Service (SEF)<sup>8</sup> Brazilian citizens are by far the largest community of foreign nationals residing in Portugal (25,6 %) as well as the group most affected by forced deportation operations, followed by nationals from Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau and Angola. As a result of this scenario, the majority of the women I met and interviewed during my fieldwork were Brazilians. Most of them also had experiences in the sex industry.

5 Brazilian feminist and critical migration scholars—such as Adriana Piscitelli<sup>9</sup>, Beatriz Padilla<sup>10</sup> and Mariana Selister Gomes<sup>11</sup> amongst others—have long argued that a persistent imaginary that associates Brazilian women with a hypersexualized and an available body marks the daily experiences of these women in today's Portugal. This imaginary, as these scholars well illustrate, harks back to Portuguese colonial history and the related ideology of lusotropicalism, which was mainly elaborated by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre between 1933 and 1961. As recently highlighted by Claudia Castelo indeed, miscegenation was «a key concept in Gilberto Freyre's thought about the formation of Brazil, Portugal's 'national character' [*o modo Português de estar no mundo*, my addition], and the peopling of the spaces of Portuguese colonisation<sup>12</sup>». Portuguese openness towards miscegenation, understood by Freire as a positive process, was particularly proved by their «special aptitude for having sexual intercourses with women of different colours<sup>13</sup>». This centrality of miscegenation in Portuguese colonial ideology, especially from the mid-1950s, illuminates the close relationship between colonial and masculine sexual dominations in the construction of the Portuguese imagined community. It is therefore in the context of this relationship, and of the ways colonial hierarchies were re-elaborated over time that the sexualised and sensual image of a mix-raced Brazil, as well as the role of Brazilian women who migrate to Portugal today, especially those working in the sex industry, are structurally located<sup>14</sup>.

6 Many of the women I met in detention had been apprehended by the police during their night work. For instance, Emilia<sup>15</sup> told me that the police caught her while she was working in a night bar. During all the nine years she lived in Portugal, Emilia, like the majority of the other women I met, struggled to legalise her situation but without any success. As she explained: «I always tried to legalise myself here too, I always tried but the chances were very small...». Unable to achieve a regular status, she continued to make her ends meet by working in the sex industry. During her interview, Emilia emphasised the disrespectful and discriminatory behaviour adopted by state actors, including the judge who assessed and validated her detention and the immigration officers who apprehended her. As she told me:

Francesca: And the fact that you are a Brazilian woman, did you feel discriminated against for that?

Emilia: I felt it obviously. The way he [the judge] laughed, he didn't have any manner. Witnessing my feeling of depression and [hearing] my request 'can you leave me until the end of the month? Can you let me go home to pack my things in order to leave [the country]... And he was slouching in the chair, laughing... I said, 'there is no respect at all for human beings here?! This is not a Court, this is a circus! [...] my lawyer also witnessed this, everyone saw him [the judge]



slouching in the chair [and saying]: 'My wretched [desgraçada] wife is in bed, hungry.' And in a hurry to leave, scribbling our papers. I argue: Is this the attitude of a judge?!

- 7 Similarly to other participants, Emilia also connected her experience with immigration enforcement to the gendered and sexualised stereotypes affecting Brazilian women in Portugal. In particular, she claimed:

Where I live... they [Portuguese people] don't say good morning, they don't say good afternoon, some... some [Portuguese women] they look at Brazilian women, [they think] they're whores and I'm tired of telling many Portuguese people [that] every Brazilian who works, they are not whores... they are prostitutes... they work to earn their money ... whores are many Portuguese [women]... Sorry, but do you know that there are many [Portuguese women] who go to Alto da Penha [mountain/wooded peak near Guimarães, in the North of Portugal], they have a boyfriend, then the week after they have another boyfriend, [they] have sex...

- 8 In putting forward this claim, Emilia challenged the disparaging vision of Brazilian women, reasserting their dignity as 'women' and 'workers'. Yet, she did so by proposing, in opposition, a moralising view of Portuguese women's sexual freedom.

- 9 Not all the women I spoke with displayed the same assertiveness and self-confidence as Emilia. For example, Carla had a different attitude. She had endured poverty and domestic violence in Brazil, and had been living in Portugal for nearly five years. During this time, she had worked as a maid and occasionally supplemented her earnings with sex work. No one in her family knew about it. In her interview she explained that working in the 'nightlife scene' was very much related to her difficulty in finding a stable and well-remunerated job. In her own words:

I worked now and then, cleaning at a friend's house, then [...] you know, to earn a little more [...] I worked in this life, the 'night life', in the bars...

- 10 Carla also recounted to have been in a romantic relationship with a married Portuguese man for the past three years. Her hope was that he would have now divorced his wife and married her, also to prevent her deportation. Indeed, detention was difficult for her. She had not been expecting to be confined and she felt isolated and suffocated inside the centre. Above all, she struggled to make sense of why her liberty had been taken away.

- 11 Despite their individual differences, the accounts of the Brazilian women I met in detention all pointed to the salience of the hypersexualisation imaginary concerning Brazilian women in Portugal. As Piscitelli notes<sup>16</sup>, the sex and marriage markets (and their frequent overlapping) are the main industries in which the racialized notion of 'sensuality' associated with Brazilian femininity becomes embodied. For those women I interviewed, such hypersexualisation was also intertwined with a criminalising rhetoric about people on the move. As a result, the general imaginary of migrants as 'a threat to national security' intersected with the gendered and sexualised imaginaries stemming from the Portuguese colonial archive, such as the idea of Brazilian women as a threat to the «national moral order<sup>17</sup>».

- 12 To conclude, women's accounts amplify their experiences of intersectional oppressions and overall show how the border control system in general, and the immigration detention system in particular, work to maintain a racialised and gendered social order in our Western societies. All the women I met mentioned the efforts they made to actively achieve a documented status. They described several actions that they triggered over the years for this purpose, but those actions ultimately proved to be unsuccessful, revealing the structural and systemic violence inherent to the immigration system. In Diana's words: «we tried several times, but it just didn't work out».

- 13 In detention, gendered and racialised 'figures of race'<sup>18</sup> stemming from the national colonial archive played a key role in the everyday life of women, especially but not exclusively Brazilian ones. This is what some scholars have defined as the 'coloniality



of gender<sup>19</sup>. This evidence overall shows how migrant women are differently constructed (from men) as a threat to the «white body of the nation<sup>20</sup>». Interestingly, not only have these racialised, gendered tropes served to uphold the immigration and detention system and legitimate their existence, but they also helped institutional actors, and at times women themselves, to make sense of their experiences and advance their claims.

## Notes

1 This contribution is based on a recent article I published with Raquel Matos and Mary Bosworth: ESPOSITO, Francesca, MATOS, Raquel, BOSWORTH, Mary (2020), «Gender, vulnerability and everyday resistance in immigration detention: Women's experiences of confinement in a Portuguese detention facility», *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 9 (3), pp. 5-20, DOI: 10.5204/ijcjsd.v9i3.1588.

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14 PADILLA, Beatriz, GOMES SELISTER, Mariana, FERNANDES, Gleiciani (2010), «Ser brasileira em Portugal: Imigração, género e colonialidade», in Flávio CARVALHO, Maria BADET SOUZA, Manuella CALLOU, Mar RUBIRALTA (dir.), *1º Seminário de Estudos sobre Imigração Brasileira na Europa*, Barcelona, Coletivo Brasil Catalunya, pp. 113-120.

15 All real names have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants.

16 PISTICELLI, 2008, *op. cit.*

17 GOMES, 2018, *op. cit.*

18 GIULIANI, Gaia (2018), *Race, Nation and Gender in Modern Italy: Intersectional Representations in Visual Culture*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.

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20 GIULIANI, 2018, *op. cit.*

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## ***Pour citer cet article***

### *Référence papier*

Francesca Esposito, « Immigration Detention and the Coloniality of Gender », *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, 51-1 | 2021, 271-275.

### *Référence électronique*

Francesca Esposito, « Immigration Detention and the Coloniality of Gender », *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* [En ligne], 51-1 | 2021, mis en ligne le 15 mars 2021, consulté le 16 janvier 2025. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/mcv/14768> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/mcv.14768>

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