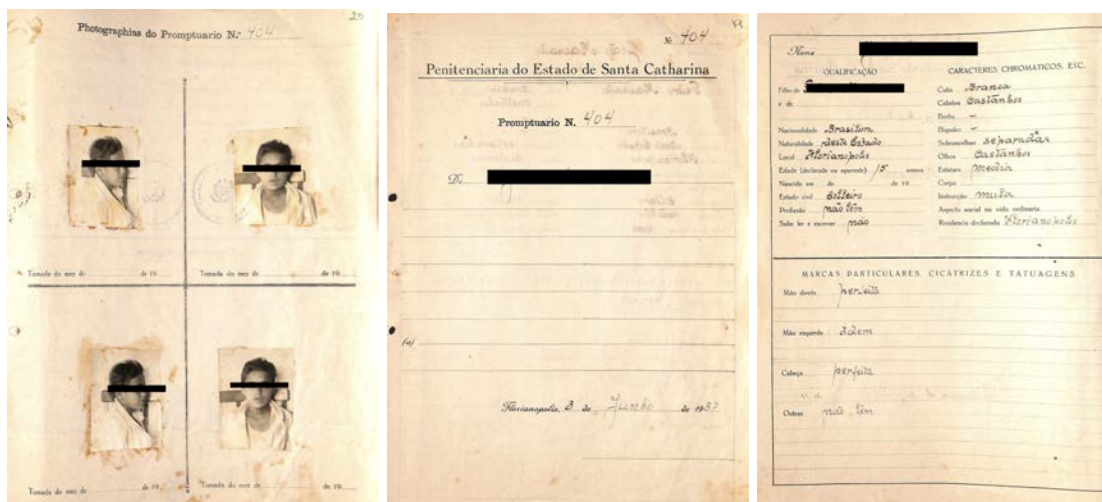


Dangerousness Across Borders: Criminology and Social Control in Brazil and Puerto Rico

Carolina Wanderley Van Parys de Wit

What does it mean for a society to consider someone “dangerous”? In the first half of the twentieth century, Brazil’s answer to that question was shaped by a concept known as *periculosidade* (dangerousness). More than a legal category, it became a medical, juridical, and political tool that allowed the state to intervene not only when individuals broke the law but also when they were considered in *danger of becoming a criminal*. My research examines how this notion, rooted in positivist criminology, justified the surveillance and confinement of people deemed threats to society, especially those coming out of working class and racialized youth.



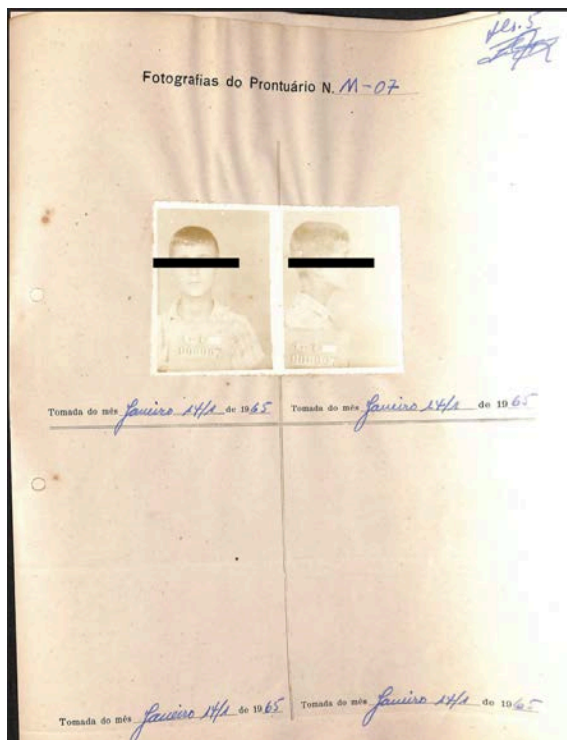
Prison file 404 from the Santa Catarina State Prison donated to the Santa Catarina State University by the *Projeto Arquivos Marginais* (Marginal Archives Project). (Photo courtesy of Carolina de Wit.)

Originally, I proposed a research trip to Brazil to consult archives that hold vital records of this history. My plan was to study the prison files of incarcerated minors, psychiatric evaluations, and the writings of leading criminologists to trace how law and medicine merged into a system of control. But like much historical research, the project had to shift. Last semester, due to uncertainties surrounding international travel, I was forced to make a difficult decision: to

pause my on-site archival work in Brazil. After discussions with the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS), I redirected my efforts, adapting the project without losing sight of its core questions.

Remote Research, Unexpected Breakthroughs

Instead of traveling, I used the grant funding to hire three research assistants in Florianópolis, Brazil. These assistants digitized 197 juvenile prison files from the Santa Catarina State Prison Archive. The documents contain personal histories of teenagers labeled as “in conflict with the law” between 1930 and 1963. Through them, I have begun to build a database of inmates’ backgrounds, judicial decisions, and medical assessments, data that sheds light on how the Brazilian state defined, tracked, surveilled, and punished “dangerous” youth.



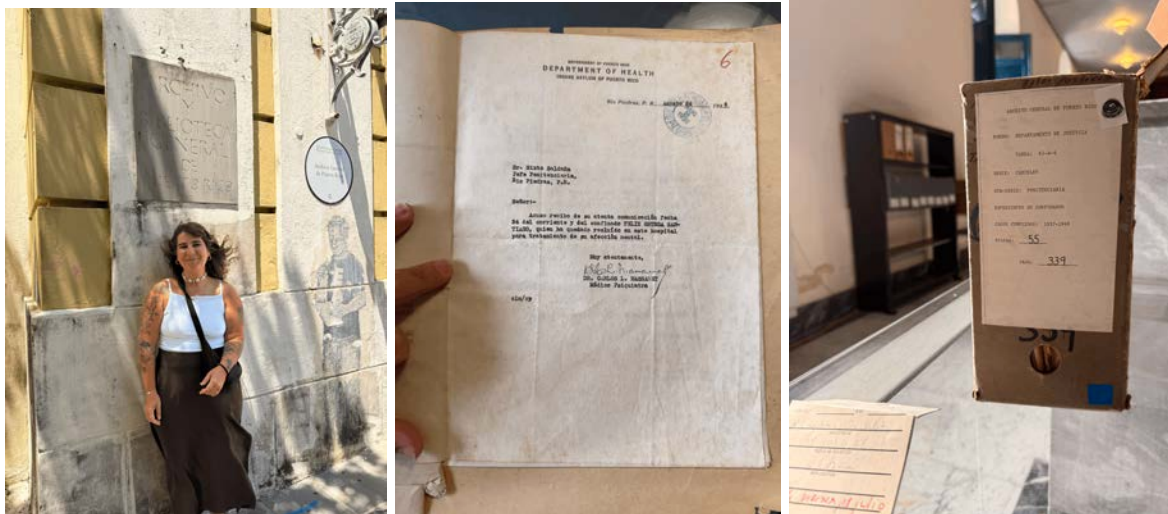
These digitized records are not just useful for my own dissertation. They will also form part of the Marginal Archives project, a Brazilian initiative dedicated to preserving and disseminating documents related to institutions of social control. By contributing copies of these files, my research is helping to make sources more widely accessible to scholars across Brazil and beyond.

Prison file M-07 from the Santa Catarina State Prison donated to the Santa Catarina State University by the *Projeto Arquivos Marginais* (Marginal Archives Project). (Photo courtesy of Carolina de Wit.)

Expanding the Frame: From Brazil to Puerto Rico

Yet archival work is never a straight line. As I processed these Brazilian sources, I felt compelled to broaden the project's scope. A lingering question kept surfacing: how did similar categories of “dangerousness” and deviance circulate across Latin America? What would happen if I compared Brazil's experience to another context shaped by racial hierarchies and nation-building projects?

Puerto Rico offered a compelling case. Like Brazil, Puerto Rico built a national identity around ideals of racial harmony, even though racial inequalities structured everyday life. In both places, the state deployed medicalized and criminological frameworks to address crime and discipline populations. Encouraged by CLACS, I reshaped my budget and plans. Instead of only doing remote research in Brazil, I traveled to Puerto Rico to conduct archival research at the Archivo y Biblioteca General de Puerto Rico. There, I examined police and prison identification cards that reveal how the Puerto Rican state, in coordination with U.S. authorities, developed practices of surveillance and classification for those deemed socially dangerous.



Left: The author researching at the Archivo y Biblioteca General de Puerto Rico, in San Juan. (Photo by Carolina de Wit.) Center: A prison report from the Archivo y Biblioteca General de Puerto Rico. (Photo by Carolina de Wit.) Right: Archival box containing prison records at the Archivo y Biblioteca General de Puerto Rico. (Photo by Carolina de Wit.)

A Transnational History of Deviance

What connects Brazil's juvenile prison files and Puerto Rico's police archives is a shared pattern: both societies used law and medicine to justify intrusive forms of social control, targeting the poor and racialized. Both drew from global criminological theories while adapting them to their local political realities. By combining the data I gathered in Brazil with the Puerto Rican materials, I aim to write an article that situates crime, youth, and medicalization within a transnational history of deviance. Rather than treating Brazil in isolation, I hope to highlight how ideas about "dangerousness" traveled, transformed, and reinforced state power across the Americas.

Looking Ahead

Archival detours can be frustrating, but they can also open new doors. My initial disappointment at having to delay research in Brazil ultimately led to an expansion of the project's scope. Today, I am not only cataloging how "dangerousness" was used in Brazilian law and medicine but also exploring how similar frameworks emerged in Puerto Rico. Together, these cases reveal a broader story of how states in Latin America built surveillance regimes under the guise of science and public health.

The ultimate goal of my dissertation is to demonstrate that the history of crime and punishment in Brazil cannot be understood without situating it within larger networks of ideas and practices that shaped the hemisphere. My archival findings, born of both necessity and adaptation, will help better comprehend that history and pattern of actions by Latin America countries.