



Article

Nomadic Bodies: From Their Intermittent Invisibility to Their Permanent Persistence—The Story of a Nomadic Cigano/Roma Family in Its Transit through Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal in (Post)Pandemic Times

Agostina Del Valle Nieves

Institute of Social Sciences (ICS), University of Lisbon, 1600-189 Lisboa, Portugal; agos.nieves92@gmail.com

Abstract: The present study entails an ethnographic investigation of nomadic Cigano/Roma families in Portugal, examining their living conditions and corporeal experiences. The study centers on families that are forcibly moving throughout the Alentejo region of Portugal, with a particular focus on the relationship between geopolitical/urban space and corporeality. The movement of these families is motivated by a search for a safe place to camp and earn enough money to sustain their family group. The research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the struggles and challenges that these families face in their daily lives, drawing on ethnographic and visual data to explore their experiences. Through an analysis of their voices and experiences, the study highlights the difficulties of finding better living conditions and the everyday struggles of life under tarps, without access to basic necessities such as water, energy, and sanitation. Ultimately, this research offers insights into the complex interplay between geography, social and economic structures, and the corporeal experiences of marginalized communities.

Keywords: corporality; nomadism; poverty; Cigano/Roma families; ethnography; Portugal



Citation: Nieves, Agostina Del Valle. 2023. Nomadic Bodies: From Their Intermittent Invisibility to Their Permanent Persistence—The Story of a Nomadic Cigano/Roma Family in Its Transit through Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal in (Post)Pandemic Times. *Social Sciences* 12: 196. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12040196>

Academic Editors: Manuela Mendes, Stefánia Toma and Nigel Parton

Received: 14 January 2023

Revised: 17 March 2023

Accepted: 21 March 2023

Published: 25 March 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

This paper reports on a fieldwork project that commenced in December 2020 as part of a doctoral study titled “Liminar Bodies/Nomadic Subjectivities: An Ethnography on the Body and Power in Nomadic Cigano/Roma Families in Évora and Montemor-o-Novo”. The study involves participant observation and informal dialogues with nomadic Cigano/Roma families, with a focus on a specific nomadic family group in transit through Montemor-o-Novo and their experiences of forced and permanent mobility. The central research question driving this study is how homeless Cigano/Roma families live their daily lives under extreme urban poverty and how their bodies express social and housing inequalities. The hypothesis is that racial and state discrimination force Cigano/Roma families to remain nomadic, leaving physical and symbolic marks on their bodies due to a lack of protection and political precarity.

The choice of this particular family history is significant because there are various forms of nomadism among this ethnic minority (Bauman 1999; Pereira Bastos 2012), each requiring particular attention and study to reflect on the social condition of nomadic Cigano/Roma in Portugal. Nomadism, largely forced, acquires multiple meanings depending on various factors, such as families who feel connected to a particular place but are constantly displaced by municipal authorities, families with children enrolled in school and social security but without a permanent place to camp¹, and groups without official registration and with children who simply seek a minimum possibility of a fixed campsite. The presented ethnography is the latest characterization of the conditions that many families face daily in their struggle for places to live (Castro 2013). Housing issues in Portugal are linked to racism and territories available to impoverished populations, as demonstrated by

anthropologist Ana Rita [Alves \(2022\)](#). A cartographic approach to nomadism is employed to reconstruct the family history centered around their ways of inhabiting the city and the accompanying narratives.

1.1. About the Study Case

The current example pertains to a family group of twelve individuals, including a baby on the way, at the commencement of the investigation. This group consists of eight minors and four adults who have been traveling in two cars for as long as they can remember. The eldest member of the family, Susana, is 36 years old², a humorous and articulate woman who recalls living under tarps in the Beja area, where she and three of her six children were born. The only times Susana remembers sleeping under a roof were when she was hospitalized for various reasons, which will be discussed later. Susana expresses that the hospital was the only place where she and her children received regular meals and could sleep soundly. In addition, Roberto, a 27-year-old man, spends little time in the camp during the visits since he is responsible for asking for money/food at the exit of supermarkets along with Marta, his 25-year-old partner and daughter of Susana. They are also parents of three children from the family nucleus. Moreover, Catarina, Roberto's sister, started living with them after the pandemic began, following the death of her husband and father of her two children. Susana lives with two more children, Daniel (17) and Margarida (15), who will soon be a mother along with 17-year-old João. During the initial meetings with Susana, Catarina, and Margarida, who were cooking in the camp, it was asked if the family always moved together, to which they replied in the negative. There were times when some of them stayed with other relatives or camped in Évora or Beja. For several years, Susana moved with Marta, Roberto, and their three children. Susana and Margarida typically care for the children while other family members spend long hours at supermarket exits to ask for money/food. They oversee cooking and organize items in carts after sleeping, as they must always be prepared in case of police intervention. In addition, they collect water for themselves and the horses, and in summer, they must have one or two large bottles of water as a reserve since public water points are often not operational. Susana emphasizes the importance of water in Alentejo, stating that without food, one can survive for a long time, but without water, survival is impossible³. Through the meetings, the women of the family illustrated segments of their daily lives and the various practices that enable them to survive in conditions of extreme poverty and inequality. The study aims to explain and reflect on the implications, changes, and effects of bodily becoming in this context. The paper provides a brief state of the art on Roma studies in the Portuguese context and the construction of corporality, which is the focus of the doctoral research. Additionally, the paper reports some of the extensive exchanges with Susana's family, which are part of the theoretical-methodological construction of this work ([Cabrera 2015](#)).

1.2. About Cigano/Roma Studies in Portugal

The debates concerning corporality, specifically those related to families of Cigano/Roma origin, have garnered particular interest due to the disaffiliation and crisis of sociality that characterize contemporary society ([Castel 2004](#); [Picker 2017](#)). Inequalities and corporality are two interrelated phenomena, driven by complex processes such as the flexibilization and precariousness of work, territorial exclusion ([Castro 2006](#); [Lopes 2008](#); [Mendes 2005](#)), and inequities in access to urban infrastructure, opportunities, and quality of life ([Magano 2010](#)).

Historically, Cigano/Roma families have been itinerant, nomadic communities governed by their own modes of organization. Works on the territoriality and mobility of these families ([Correia 2012](#); [Brazzabeni 2012](#)) as well as their occupation of urban spaces ([Castro 2004](#); [Sama Acedo 2003](#)) have problematized the ways in which they live and interact with contemporary urbanity from a sociological perspective. Debates around ethnicity, race, and multiculturalism have traced continuities and ruptures between Cigano/Roma communities and non-Cigano/Roma citizens ([Duarte 2005](#); [Guerra 2008](#); [Okely 1994](#)). Moreover, studies on the constitution of the Cigano/Roma people and their relationship with Euro-

pean colonization (Coelho 1996) have highlighted the social and political (re)configurations that these communities have undergone, resulting in their exclusion and invisibility.

Recent research has focused on the construction of public problems and policies that can provide more equal opportunities for Civic minorities in public discussions (Magano and Mendes 2014), such as access to education (Sama Acedo 2003; Casa-Nova 2008) and employment opportunities (Pereira 2016).

In this work, I propose to investigate and problematize the construction of corporality (Frangella 2010) in nomadic communities in Évora and Montemor-o-Novo. Anthropological investigations focusing on the (Cigano/Roma) body as a locus of production and enunciation of their experiences and living conditions are scarce. Focusing on life stories allows for the definition of the corporality of the Cigano/Roma community as nomadic subjectivities, constituted by precarious bodies (Frangella and Rui 2017). Nomadic subjectivities refer not only to geographical territoriality but also to sociopolitical and symbolic processes and impacts (Peralta 2019) that affect Portuguese Cigano/Roma. The body reveals marks such as the state of cleanliness of the clothes, the complexion of the skin, the teeth, the hands, the feet, and the smells, which result from a lack of access to basic hygiene conditions necessary for a minimally healthy life. However, in such abject conditions, these precarious bodies still manage to generate agency, find food every day, dream of having a house, produce music (Llera Blanes 2008), and play with their children. The story of Susana and her family will be explored in-depth to gain insight into their daily lives, the problems they face, and the alliances that allow them to move forward.

2. Material and Methods

Over the course of several months, the researcher engaged in an ethnographic study of nomadic Cigano/Roma families who pass through Montemor-o-Novo. Fieldwork with Susana's family in particular began in July 2021 and is ongoing. Visits to the families occur three times a week, unless the families are expelled from the area by the police. Susana's family spent at least three weeks in Montemor-o-Novo between 2021 and 2022, but often camped for shorter periods before being forced to move on due to police intervention. The family's routes typically include Beja, Évora, Montemor-o-Novo, Vendas Novas, Alcáçovas, and Arraiolos, all located in the Central Alentejo Region. The decision to travel to a particular area is influenced by the level of police surveillance, which is communicated through phone networks among nomadic Cigano/Roma.

Fieldwork consisted of ethnography, as defined by Fabian (2014), Nader (2011), and Sanjek (1996), and involved observing and conversing with subjects for extended periods, lasting over three hours, to create detailed field notes on central topics of conversation and exchange, as outlined by Emerson et al. (1995) and Sanjek (1990). Behar (2003, p. 16) notes that ethnographic research seeks out unexpected stories that challenge prevailing theories.

Regarding Susana and her family, Montemor-o-Novo was not a place for long-term settlement. They attempted to set up their tent in the industrial zone but were not allowed by other families due to overcrowding. This would have resulted in regular police intervention. Instead, they temporarily camped beside National Highway 2, in close proximity to the researcher's residence, facilitating engagement. Initially, establishing a fluid conversation with the women of the family proved difficult as their primary concern was receiving financial assistance or aid with daily necessities. Additionally, the family found it peculiar that someone from abroad (Derrida 2006) expressed interest in their daily struggles, memories, and lives.

One of the primary challenges I faced during my fieldwork with the Roma community was how to establish a relationship with them that acknowledges my role as a researcher while also showing empathy towards their plight. As a researcher, my political positioning was not straightforward. I had to make it clear that I was interested in their present ways and conditions while at the same time empathizing with the difficulties they face. However, during my visits, I often faced a barrage of requests from the women and children, leaving me with little time to respond to all of them. While I tried to explain that I could not solve

most of their problems, I attempted to give them my time to listen and bring visibility to some of their issues.

My interactions with the Roma community taught me that their daily ways of doing and being are shaped by social and collective practices of responsibility. Moreover, their subjectivity and the ways in which their bodies manifest themselves are mediated by society. To capture their experiences and narratives, I engaged in ethnography, which involves examining the duration and time of social processes. As Didier Fassin⁴ notes, the challenge of ethnography is to see beyond the concrete requests and modes of relationships to understand the collective machinery that shapes these practices.

In this sense, memories and narratives are critical for making visible the experiences of the Roma community and ending positions of power. The act of putting into words and passing through the body what has been lived is part of a rational and collective activity that seeks to capture the symbolic construction of experience. This experience is a shared and jointly occupied space-time territory, as Rosi Braidotti (2005, 2011) notes.

During the period of inquiry, the challenge was, and still is, to observe the unfamiliarity, as expressed by Didi-Huberman (2008). It involved entering into a world that was not known to me and acknowledging that the Roma families had their own perspectives of non-Cigano/Roma. One informant who helped me to meet nomadic families once remarked, in a positive light, that “*you never know with the Cigano/Roma, they live a reality very different from ours*”. This statement remained with me throughout my interactions with them. However, many of the planned activities did not materialize, such as a photovoice workshop that did not work out for several reasons. Firstly, the adults were not willing to have their photos taken, and the children were also hesitant because they feared that their images would be shown on television and ridiculed. Secondly, they did not have time to take pictures amidst their frequent and abrupt moves. As Susana once said, “*we have to be prepared to leave, always.*”⁵ Additionally, the Roma, in general, expressed concerns about their images or way of life being publicized and mocked.

The objective was to generate, as Rosi Braidotti (2005) describes, a politics of localization, which involves “*a process of awareness that requires a political awakening and, from there, the intervention of others. The ‘politics of locations’ consists of drawing cartographies of power based on a form of self-criticism where the subject elaborates a critical and genealogical narrative of himself, to the same extent that they are relational and depend on external scrutiny. This means that incarnate analyses illuminate and transform one’s knowledge of oneself and the world*” (p. 27). Through regular visits, telephone calls, and attentive listening to their demands and grievances, I was able to establish a space of trust that facilitated my access to their experiences and concerns. Moreover, I aimed to create opportunities for them to listen to each other, consolidate their knowledge, and recognize the value of their lives.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. “We Are Here, Tomorrow We Don’t Know, but We Always Are Present . . . ”

In the context of reflecting on nomadic Roma families in Portugal, one of the central issues is the inequality and discrimination in access to property, as well as the occupation of public places where campgrounds can be located. These Portuguese citizens not only face racial discrimination, as highlighted in previous research (Fassin 2011, 2002; Mendes 2012), but also the denial of basic human rights, such as the right to have a place to stay. Nomadic Roma families are often denied access to social housing, leading to precarious living conditions and a dead-end existence (Butler 2009). As a group of nomadic Cigano/Roma stated before a police eviction, “*They always tell us that we are not from here. That we must go.*”

In this context, the family history presented in this study illustrates the difficult conditions faced by nomadic Roma families in Portugal. The family survives, and has survived, largely due to the goodwill of people who provide coins or food outside supermarkets. They possess only what they have with them, including two carts with two horses, some utensils for cooking and sleeping, and a gas jug, which they take great care of. Susana, the family’s caretaker, was widowed three years ago, and admits that many things were easier

when her husband was alive, as he was able to conduct business to buy or sell a horse or a car, and exchange objects for food. She also notes that when he was alive, they remained fixed around Beja. When asked about the reason for their stability in Beja, she affirms:

“It was easier because Roberto would fight with the police or whoever to be able to stay in one place. He grew up on the street from a very young age and knows how things work. Being a woman, it’s a little bit more difficult. Look, I have character, but the police don’t care. If we are in a place where others can see us, they come and treat us good, but if we are in the field alone, they come to treat us badly.”

When asked about the mistreatment they face, Susana reports that they have been threatened with weapons and faced jokes about rape, with individuals saying they would not touch them because they are “dirty”. Moreover, Susana, Margarida, and Catarina state that the police frequently appear when they are alone and not accompanied by their male family members.

These citizens experience extreme situations on a daily basis and are often subjected to institutional violence in various forms, resulting in feelings of helplessness. This violence is not limited to police actions or the Portuguese government’s failure to recognize basic rights, but this inequality is also accentuated by a gender trait (Braidotti 2005): The family group is made up mostly of women who divide the care tasks, the organization of the camp, and strategies for getting money or food. This family gets resources to survive through spending long hours at the exit of supermarkets or simply walking the city, stirring the garbage of the neighbors. Sometimes they get some donations from people who already know them. In the moments of greatest helplessness, they have stolen and have also worked in the harvest of olives and grapes. As Susana expressed to me:

“We do anything, we know how to do everything and if we don’t know, we learn it; we need to eat, we travel many kilometers in search of food, if we have to go to Spain, come on, even if it takes us days to arrive. I remember that when Roberto was still alive, we walked from Beja to Évora to work with the olives. It was two days of walking to get there and get to work and then walk back again. It’s not true that we don’t want to work . . . ”

Accompanied by tears shed by Susana and her daughters, they shared their story of resilience and determination to fight for a better present and future for their youngest family members. With regards to this matter, the women stated:

“Many times, it seems that we do not exist, because today we are here, tomorrow we do not know, but we are always there. If you look at the roads or the open places you always find a family of Cigano/Roma in the cars or camping. We are many. It seems that we do not exist, but if we are alive, we are alive for them. (While pointing to the little ones)”

Furthermore, Susana reported that in October 2020, they received an invitation to work in the olive harvest. However, they faced discrimination from other workers as they did not want to work alongside Roma people. Additionally, they were offered lower pay compared to non-Roma workers, even though they would be doing the same amount of work. Susana recounted that they had to fight with the other workers to receive fair pay, but the plantation owner ultimately used their argument as a pretext to pay them less than the agreed amount. On average, workers are paid 5 euros per hour for the harvest, but they were initially offered only 3 euros per hour. In the end, the family group consisting of Roberto, Marta, and João were paid only 1.5 euros per hour of work. After this incident, they chose to spend their time outside of the harvest season either scavenging for food or asking for donations in the city.

As they spoke, the children observed us with attention and gradually approached me. Marta explained that they are generally fearful of people outside their family, as they have had unpleasant experiences while panhandling with their older children, Antonio (4 years old) and Daniel (3 years old), at supermarket exits. It turned out that Antonio was burned with a cigarette by a man whom he had approached to ask for money. This incident led to a traumatic situation when Roberto (Antonio’s father) and Marta went to confront the man in question. The supermarket security intervened in favor of the man, while the police

were called. Roberto was detained overnight at the police station, while Marta was able to return to the camp with the children. She told me:

“You know the police saw that Antonio was burned near the eye, while he and his brother were crying because they were so scared. Things like that we must endure that people often run us like dogs from the places where we are. From that point we started to go alone, and the children stayed here with my mom and Catarina.”

During subsequent visits and meetings with Susana’s family, I inquired about their well-being and their movements. Susana explained that they had recently been in Beja because she had been experiencing frequent headaches. Initially, she attributed them to spending extended periods of time under the sun, but upon consulting a doctor, she was advised to undergo further testing. She had already scheduled an appointment with a neurologist, but added that:

“I am worried because they send the appointments by mail and text message. We have a phone that we can hardly charge the battery off and the address where I receive mail is of a lady in Beja, but walking from here to there, I do not know how I am going to do that. I hope I don’t miss the appointment. I do not know. Sometimes I feel that the doctors do not understand how we live. This doctor who attended me in the emergency told me: “we need to contact you, you will lose your appointment like this; don’t you have another way to be contacted?” and I thought, this man thinks that we love to live the way we live, that we can lose our appointments because of it. The most interested in having medical care is me, I feel bad.”

Subsequently, Susana changed the subject and requested my assistance. She asked if I could help them obtain dresses for an upcoming party, as well as makeup to look pretty. When I inquired about the timeline, they stated that the party was the next day. While I expressed uncertainty about procuring dresses on such short notice, I offered to lend them some of my dresses with the stipulation that they return them the next time they passed through Montemor. Weeks later, they returned the dresses to me.

After several weeks without seeing them, I asked how they had been. Marta informed me that they had spent most of their time in Beja and Évora and had not experienced much police harassment. This was why they had been able to stay in the area. I then asked about the celebration and how they had prepared for it. She told me: *“We danced a lot; it’s been a long time since we danced so much.”* I continued to question what they ate, what the party was about and if only relatives or other people attended. She replied: *“They made a big “feijoada” for everyone on the fire, it was the marriage of a cousin of ours, the daughter of one of my mother’s brothers (Susana), there were many of us, I think they were all family, but I do not know this for sure.”* After this Marta said: *“You didn’t notice something”* and I answered surprisingly: *“No”*. She said: *“Who don’t you see here, who is usually present?”* I started thinking and looking around while Marta looked at me with a smile. I answered: *“Margarida! Don’t tell me the baby is already born.”* Marta answered: *“Yes, we danced so much that in the middle of the morning she started with contractions, and they had to take her to the hospital while the party continued (laughs). She had a girl in the hospital of Beja. And they are still there because the girl was born earlier and underweight. I think during this week she will be released.”*

I inquired whether they were happy. In response, she conveyed that they were happy, but simultaneously concerned because it appeared that Margarida’s daughter, Maria, had been born with certain health complications, which they were still receiving treatment for⁶. Moreover, Marta informed me that they were merely passing by to obtain water and refill their bottles. Roberto and Daniel were at Lidl asking for change. Subsequently, they planned to proceed to Beja. They intended to stay in the vicinity of Beja to spend time with Margarida and João, but that depended on whether Margarida had to relocate or not. I asked Marta whether they followed any specific customs when they became mothers. Marta answered:

“We do not have a special practice. We try to ask as a family to God that the baby is born healthy, and that his/her mother stays healthy as well. We attend gospels, but we haven’t

been to church for quite some time. When we can, we light candles and ask. When I had my children my mom, an aunt and Margarida helped a lot. But you saw it for yourself, here we are many hands, there are always people who can hold the baby, even the children can help."

During my visit, I observed the women to be visibly despondent and distressed. Marta, in particular, expressed great concern for Susana, whose condition had worsened. During our conversation, Susana had fallen asleep on the floor, likely due to the oppressive heat of the day. Marta expressed the hope that they would not be forced to move at that moment. She also made a request for me to purchase diapers for José. I then noticed the boy lying next to Susana, his eyes open and fixed on a nearby tree, while flies buzzed around him. Marta expressed: *"He has been dirty for a while, he did not have diapers for days and he does not have many clothes either, because they are dirty, and I couldn't wash them."* The woman expressed her desperation as she spoke to me. I asked her to wait while I went to the supermarket to purchase the diapers for her. Upon my return, Marta expressed her gratitude, and she proceeded to play with Antonio and Daniel, who were happy and laughing as they played with a ball they had found several days prior when passing through São Cristovão⁷. These moments of joy and laughter are often intertwined with memories of violence, marginalization, and cruelty that intersect and coexist in the lives of this family and the Roma community in general. Their daily lives are characterized by a range of events and emotions that constantly shape their experiences.

Through their actions of staying together in difficult times, playing, laughing, and expressing affection, they create bonds that constitute ordinary life (Maffesoli 2004). In this section, I have shared field notes from my conversations with the subjects of this research, selecting fragments of their lives to illustrate the nuances of everyday experiences and situate the political life (Butler 2004) of this ethnic group. Next, I will examine how the bodies of nomadic Roma are constituted in response to the challenges faced by Susana and her family.

3.2. Between the Ups and Downs, There Are Bodies

In Alentejo, the life of nomadic Roma is characterized by precarity, which Butler (2009) describes as a condition induced by politics in which certain populations lack social and economic support networks, resulting in differential exposure to injury, violence, and death (p. 25). As a consequence of this precarity, the bodies of these families suffer significant degeneration, from hygiene to physical appearance. Many young people look older than their age, and adults often have missing teeth and tanned skin due to extreme exposure to the sun in summer and cold in winter (Frangella and Rui 2017). In the case of the family group studied, all except for the five young children have experienced oral infections that have resulted in the loss of teeth at a very young age.

During one of the meetings, Margarida was sanitizing herself with a cloth and a small water fence. When asked about their hygiene practices, the family explained that they rarely have access to products such as soaps, shampoos, and toothpaste. Even when asked what they need, they usually choose to ask for food rather than personal hygiene products. Susana expressed that the advantage of getting pregnant often is that she does not have to worry about menstrual periods, as resources for staying clean are scarce. In another instance, Marta shared with the researcher that Antonio had a large infection in his mouth, located in the upper lip, and they had visited the emergency room at a hospital in Évora. The doctor prescribed antibiotics and recommended treatment by a dentist. However, Marta explained that they did not have the resources to pay for the dentist or the antibiotics. Antonio expressed that the infection caused him discomfort and itching at night.

These paradoxical living conditions exemplify how the life of this family is a result of the conditions they endure. The lack of access to basic resources and healthcare exposes them to severe injuries and illnesses that perpetuate the cycle of poverty and precarity.

I present photographs depicting the tarps used by families as sleeping quarters. The photographs (see Figures 1–4) offer a glimpse of the surroundings, which include litter and

areas designated for fires to keep warm at night⁸. These images serve to expose the harsh living conditions that the families endure. They were captured during visits to the camp in the winter of 2022 when temperatures drop below zero degrees at night, making it evident that the families lack the necessary resources to cope with the Portuguese winter.



Figure 1. Cigano Camp. Photograph by Fernando Moital. January 2022.



Figure 2. Cigano Camp. Photograph by Fernando Moital. January 2022.



Figure 3. Cigano Camp. Photograph by Fernando Moital. January 2022.



Figure 4. Inside the tarps. Photograph by Fernando Moital. January 2022.

Continuing my inquiry, I proceeded to ask Marta about her emotional state after her visit to the emergency room with Antonio's infection. I observed that she appeared visibly sad, and she responded by saying:

"(. . .) I really don't know what to think anymore, I didn't want to waste time explaining to the doctor how we live, telling him that we don't have a bathroom, that we don't have a roof. I don't know what the doctor imagines, I don't care either, but at one point he told me: how did I come to have my mouth this way and I told him, we live under tarps. He just kept quiet and told me he couldn't do anything if Antonio couldn't do a prolonged dental treatment. At that point I told him, where do you want me to get the treatment?"

Before conversing with Marta, I contemplated several questions that Judith Butler proposes, which aid in reflecting on contemporary inequalities and violence: *“What counts as a human? The lives of those who counts as a life? What are the ways in which lives deserve to be lived? What lives are worth mourning?”* (Butler 2003, p. 1). The narratives shared in this study reveal the circumstances that expose the dehumanizing and exclusionary conditions that have characterized the history of this family and their immediate environment. Such settings, where the right to the city is persistently challenged and/or construed as illegal zones, as posited by Wacquant (2007), are plainly evident.

To rethink the corporality and affectivity of bodies living in extreme poverty and territorial exclusion as experienced by nomadic Roma families, it is necessary to take a global perspective on the problem, connecting various key issues. On the one hand, it involves the struggle for access to dignified housing, which this family does not have, and on the other hand, the physical deterioration of their bodies due to untreated illnesses and lack of hygiene, which is not among their priorities. During meetings with the family, new problems constantly emerged, such as children returning to the hospital due to respiratory problems, skin infections from flea and tick bites, burns from extreme exposure to the sun, and dehydration caused by limited access to water.

Susana asked me one day: *“You work at the university, don’t you?”* I answered that I was in fact studying and working with Cigano/Roma families in Montemor-o-novo and Évora. She then asked me:

“Can you help us to have a house, it can even be a piece of land, where people can stay. Or try to see if you can help us to rent a house, because nobody wants to rent us anything. Maybe you know someone here and you can talk about how we are good people, we are many, they can rest assured. I’m tired of walking around from here to there, I don’t have the strength to move anymore. This on top of the headaches, having to deal with doctors who always try to find reasons to let me know what to change. They kind of let me know that I waste my time going to the emergency room every time I can’t get over the pain.”

Subsequently, I took my leave from the encampment, informing them that I intended to visit again that afternoon or the next day. Susana expressed her willingness to receive me at any time, but when I returned later that afternoon, I discovered that the family had left. I inquired with a local resident and worker in Montemor-o-novo, who lived across from the encampment, about the family’s whereabouts. He informed me that they had been forced to leave by the Republican National Gendarmerie (GNR) approximately three hours earlier. Consequently, according to Braidotti (2005):

“Being a nomadic, living on the street, having been exiled, having refugee status, having been a victim of rape during a war, being an emigrant without a fixed place of residence or being an illegal immigrant are not metaphors. As some critics of nomadic subjectivity teach us, lacking a passport or possessing too many is not equivalent or merely metaphorical, they are geopolitical and historical locations, extremely specific; in other words, stories tattooed on bodies.” (p. 15)

After that particular afternoon, I did not have any further communication with them for at least a month or possibly a bit longer. This family is among those with whom I have no telephone contact, so I can only meet them in Montemor-o-novo when they happen to be passing through. In addition to the recurrent expulsions, some families provide their telephone contacts, through which it is possible, to some extent, to reconstruct their geopolitical maps of movements. However, some families like Susana’s do not share their telephone contacts. Therefore, it is only possible to track their routes when they pass through Montemor-o-novo and I manage to find them. At times, they camp in the Industrial Zone instead of the land along the National Highway 2, which makes it difficult to locate them. Nevertheless, I can still obtain information from other families who share the information with me.

During my interactions with them, one thing that caught my attention was how much they care for and laugh with each other. They are very close and their alliances (Butler 2015)

give them the vitality to endure through all the adversities they face. The support that exists between them allows them to survive because they are a space of appearance where each of them knows that they are not alone. This is not a trivial detail, particularly in a context where poverty and forced nomadism hinder the proper functioning of their bodies (Fassin 2003). During my conversation with Susana, I could sense the exposure of her suffering body and her narratives of mental ailments that resulted from unmet physical needs, such as permanent headaches. I also perceived the mental burden of having to navigate the Portuguese medical system as a nomadic Cigano/Roma. According to Didier Fassin: *“But more than the visible body, it is the invisible body that is the experience of social suffering. And more than the body shown, it is the body told in a life story often reduced to biographical fragments”*. (Fassin 2003, p. 63)

The nuances observed in Susana’s family reflect the fragility and vulnerability of the body (Fassin 2003, p. 63), where their history marked by shortcomings and failures is a manifestation of their limited access to fundamental rights (Castel 1995). Fassin (2003) further argues that poverty undermines the proper functioning of the body, highlighting the interplay between social circumstances and corporeality.

4. Conclusions

This study presents an ethnographic account of the living conditions of nomadic Cigano/Roma in the Central Alentejo Region, Portugal, with a particular focus on the experiences of Susana and her family. The aim is to provide a detailed description of their daily life and the dynamics that govern their existence, in the context of extreme poverty and social and racial inequality. The article seeks to foreground the voices and stories of the protagonists themselves, as a form of “people’s knowledge” (Foucault 2004, p. 25).

One of the main themes that emerges from the family narratives is the pervasive anti-Roma racism that characterizes contemporary Portugal (Powell and Van Baar 2019). The Portuguese State’s failure to recognize the nomadic way of life has led to a systematic exclusion of Cigano/Roma families from housing and social services. Municipal authorities in the Central Alentejo Region do not accept nomadic Cigano/Roma, and they are often expelled from the councils and denied social housing due to the requirement of a fixed address for at least two years.

The situation of nomadic Cigano/Roma families in the Alentejo Region is marked by institutional violence, exercised by the GNR (Republican National Gendarmerie) and municipal councils that prohibit them from camping. The study documents the story of Susana’s family, one of the many families estimated to be over 200 in number, who are forced to live as nomads. However, due to the lack of official census on these groups, many remain undocumented and without legal protection.

Funding: This research was funded by FCT-Foundation for Science and Technology, Portugal, Scholarship 2021.06510.BD.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: To Fernando Moital, an activist and friend who has fought until his last breath to denounce and make visible the conditions in which compulsively nomadic Roma families in the Alentejo region of Portugal.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ It should be noted that the nomadic Roma families that are registered (and there are very few) is thanks to the goodwill of citizens who provide the management of their homes so that they can make the income to social security to obtain family subscriptions, what the Portuguese State calls, Abode of suitability. On top of that, much of it cannot access social housing because, in the case of Évora, the Habévora regulations 2021 Specifies, in the article 9, which People must have a minimum of 2 years living

permanently in the place and with a registration verifiable. In the case of Montemor-o-Novo there is no current legislation on social housing No discussion about it. Families with children and adolescents enrolled in school can camp only during the school period, in the moments of recess, they are thrown out by the Police who respond directly to the orders of the Municipal Chamber. It should be noted that They are families living in conditions of extreme poverty and segregation social.

2 All the proper names of the family that will be read throughout this work were altered to keep the identity under protection.

3 The place where this family camps is a strategic point, since, at 200 m About National Route 2 A turner is located public water that was taken out during three weeks in the first confinement by the municipality, but then at the request of the neighbors it was put to work again.

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNsG5wDWmhw> (accessed on 1 December 2022)

5 Also Words of Fernando Moital, a tireless activist who worked for 25 years with nomadic Roma families and who, has a very large photographic archive of these families. Some of these photographs will be used in this paper.

6 Altered name.

7 A village 22 km from Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal.

8 Photographs taken by Fernando Moital (Coletivo Solidário com as Compulsively Nomadic Families).

References

- Alves, Ana Rita. 2022. *Quando Ninguém Podia Ficar. Racismo, Habitação e Território*. Lisbon: Livraria Tigre do Papel.
- Bauman, Gerd. 1999. *The Multicultural Riddle. Rethinking National, Ethnic and Religious Identities*. London: Routledge Press.
- Behar, Ruth. 2003. Ethnography and the Book that Was Lost. *Ethnography* 4: 15–39. [CrossRef]
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2005. *Metamorphosis. Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Madrid: Akal Editions.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2011. *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brazzabeni, Mexico. 2012. De bairro em bairro: Uma família cigana em Vila Real de Santo António entre discriminação burocrática e social e possíveis formas de vida. In *Portugueses ciganos e Ciganofobia em Portugal*. Edited by Jose Pereira Bastos. Lisbon: Edições Colibri.
- Butler, Judith. 2003. *Violence, Mourning and Politics. Icons Journal of Social Sciences, Number 17*. Quito: Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, pp. 82–99.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*. London and New York: Verse.
- Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War. When Is the Life Grievable?* London and New York: Verse.
- Butler, Judith. 2015. Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street. In *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cabrera, Paula. 2015. *Anthropology of Subjectivity: A Study from Bodily Alchemies, Rituals and Habitus. PRI 2009–2011 Resolution (CD) No. 4807*. Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires.
- Casa-Nova, Maria Jose. 2008. Tempos e lugares dos ciganos na educação escolar pública. In *Minorias*. Edited by Maria Jose Casa-Nova and Paula Palmeira. Lisbon: Ministério do Trabalho e da Solidariedade Social, pp. 7–55.
- Castel, Robert. 1995. *The Metamorphosis of the Social Question*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidós.
- Castel, Robert. 2004. *The Traps of Exclusion. Work and Social Utility*. Buenos Aires: Topia.
- Castro, Alexandra. 2004. Ciganos e itinerância. Uma aproximação à realidade concelhia e às suas formas de hospitalidade. *Cidades, Comunidades e Territórios* 9: 55–69.
- Castro, Alexandra. 2006. *Ciganos, Territórios e Itinerância. Análise de um Questionário Enviado aos Postos da Guarda Nacional Republicana, Texto Policopiado, Produto do Projecto “Ciganos e Territórios: Mobilidade e sedentarização no contexto urbano português”*. Lisbon: CET.
- Castro, Alexandra. 2013. *Na luta Pelos Bons Places. Ciganos, Visibilidade Social e Controvérsias Espaciais*. Lisbon: Olhares 9.
- Coelho, Adolfo. 1996. *Os Ciganos de Portugal. Com um estudo do calão*. Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, First published in 1896.
- Correia, André. 2012. A gente não tem casa, é um dia aqui um dia além, somos ambulantes pronto!». A produção social do “nomadismo” cigano. In *Portugueses Ciganos e Ciganofobia em Portugal*. Edited by José Pereira Bastos. Lisbon: Edições colibri.
- Derrida, Jaques. 2006. *Hospitality*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor.
- Didi-Huberman, George. 2008. *When Images Take Position. The Eyes of History I*. Buenos Aires: Machado libros & ediciones.
- Duarte, Isabel. 2005. *Os Ciganos Vistos Pelos Outros: Proximidade Social em Espaços de Coexistência Interétnica*. Lisbon: CET/FCT.
- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 1995. In the Field: Participating, Observing and Jotting Notes. In *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 17–38.
- Fabian, Johannes. 2014. Ethnography and intersubjectivity Loose ends. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4: 199–209. [CrossRef]
- Fassin, Didier. 2002. Ethics of Survival: A Democratic Approach to the Politics of Life. *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 1: 81–95. [CrossRef]
- Fassin, Didier. 2003. *Governing by the Bodies: Policies of Recognition towards the Poor and Immigrants in France*. Cuadernos de Antropología Social N° 17. Buenos Aires: Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, University of Buenos Aires, pp. 49–78.
- Fassin, Didier. 2011. Racialization. How To Do Races with Bodies. In *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, 1st ed. Edited by Frances E. Mascia-Lee. Paris: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Foucault, Michel. 2004. *“Society Must Be Defended”: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*. London: Penguin.

- Frangella, Simone. 2010. *Corpos Urbanos Errantes: Uma Etnografia da Corporalidade de Moradores de rua em São Paulo*. São Paulo: Campinas, Annablume, Fapesp.
- Frangella, Simone, and Tanielle Rui. 2017. Corpos precários. Apontamentos para a relação entre Corpo e Cidade. *Política e Trabalho Revista de Ciências Sociais* 4: 23–38. [CrossRef]
- Guerra, Isabel. 2008. A cidade multicultural e multiétnica. Gestão da diversidade e procura da democracia. In *Portugal: Percursos de Interculturalidade*. Edited by Artur Teodoro de Matos and Mário Ferreira Lages. Lisbon: ACIDI, pp. 97–118.
- Llera Blanes, Rui. 2008. *Os Aleluias. Evangelical Candlesticks and Music*. Lisbon: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- Lopes, Daniel. 2008. *Deriva Cigana. Um estudo etnográfico sobre os ciganos de Lisboa*. Lisbon: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- Maffesoli, Michel. 2004. Youth: The time of the tribes and the nomadic sense of existence. *Journal of Youth Studies* 8: 28–41.
- Magano, Olga. 2010. Tracejar vidas normais. Estudo qualitativo sobre a integração social de indivíduos de origem cigana na Sociedade Portuguesa. Tese de doutoramento, Universidade Abeta, Lisboa, Portugal. Available online: <https://repositorioaberto.uab.pt/handle/10400.2/1750> (accessed on 1 December 2022).
- Magano, Olga, and Maria Manuela Mendes. 2014. Ciganos e políticas sociais em Portugal. *Sociology, Revista da Faculdade de Letras de Universidade do Porto*. Available online: <https://repositorioaberto.uab.pt/handle/10400.2/4043> (accessed on 1 December 2022).
- Mendes, Manuela. 2005. *Nós, os Ciganos e os outros. Etnicidade e exclusão social*. Lisbon: Livros Horizonte Universitário.
- Mendes, Manuela. 2012. *Ciganos: Identities, Racism, Discriminação*. Lisboa: Caleidoscópio Edições.
- Nader, Laura. 2011. Ethnography as theory. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 1: 211–19. [CrossRef]
- Okely, Judith. 1994. Constructing Difference: Cigano/Roma as “Other”. *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures, Anthropology and Ethics* 3: 55–73.
- Peralta, Elsa. 2019. A integração dos “retornados” na sociedade portuguesa: Identidade, desidentificação e ocultação. *Análise Social* 54: 310–37.
- Pereira Bastos, Jose. 2012. *Portuguese Ciganos e Ciganofobia em Portugal*. Lisbon: Edições Colibri.
- Pereira, Isabel. 2016. Ninguém dá Trabalho aos Ciganos! Estudo Qualitativo Sobre a (des)Integração dos Ciganos no Mercado Formal de Emprego. Tese de Mestrado em Relações interculturais, Universidade Aberta, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Picker, Giovanni. 2017. *Racial Cities. Governance and the Segregation of Romani People in Urban Europe*. London and New York: Routledge Press.
- Powell, Ryan, and Huub Van Baar. 2019. The Invisibilization of Anti-Roma Racisms. In *The Securitization of the Roma in Europe*. Edited by Huub van Baar, Ana Ivasiuc and Regina Kreide. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 91–113.
- Sama Acedo, Sara. 2003. La movilidad como forma de vida en la comunidad Gitana de Évora: Mitos y realidades. In *Retóricas sem fronteiras*. Edited by Jorge Freitas Branco and Ana Isabel Afonso. Oeiras: Celta Editora, vol. 1, pp. 53–70. ISBN 972-774-178-9.
- Sanjek, Roger. 1990. A Vocabulary for Fieldnotes. In *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*. Edited by Roger Sanjek. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp. 92–121.
- Sanjek, Roger. 1996. Ethnography. In *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Edited by Alan Banard and Jonathan Spencer. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 193–98.
- Wacquant, Loic. 2007. *Los condenados de la Ciudad. Gueto, periferias y Estado*. Buenos Aires: Argentina Siglo XXI Editores.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.