


A Vez e a Voz da Mulher Portuguesa na Diáspora:
Macau e Outros Lugares

Actas do III Congresso Internacional

Editoras
Leonor Diaz de Seabra
Maria Antónia Espadinha

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high positions in the corporate management structure, something that is becoming ever more prevalent.

Conclusion

In the last decades Portuguese-American women have set the standard in educational achievement for the community. They have far surpassed the men in enrolling and completing university degrees. As a consequence, they are now beginning to surpass the men in income. With the exception of those men who own their own dairy farms or another type of business, women are obtaining the best paying jobs in industry and in the service sector.

This is a relatively new phenomenon, but it is already having a profound social impact in the Portuguese community. A noticeable result is that marriage within the ethnic group is in decline, while inter-ethnic marriage is on the increase, as women seek partners with similar educational attainment. A second consequence is that the "househusband" is beginning to be seen in the Portuguese community as couples decide that they can best afford to forego the husband's salary when it is time to decide who will stay home to raise the children.

The Portuguese community in California is undergoing tremendous change, and a major driving force, albeit not the only one, is the disparity in educational levels between females and males. Women are indeed setting the standard for this community as it seeks to move beyond its agrarian base to a post-industrial society where level of education is the most valuable preparation.

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Portuguese immigrant women in New England: Their history and their voices

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I

1. Brief contextualization of Portuguese immigration in New England

First, I would like to explain that with this paper I do not intend to do an exhaustive presentation about the Portuguese immigration in New Bedford, Massachusetts, United States of America (USA). I do intend to lay out a brief history of the Portuguese immigration in the region, emphasizing the Portuguese women's experience in the context of this community.

The whaling industry, main economic activity in the City of New Bedford up until the turn of the 19th century, brought to the Cape Cod region many Portuguese immigrants as crew members in the whaling ships. These fishermen, however, would abandon ship whenever they had a chance to work ashore. With the decline of the whaling industry and the establishment of the textile industries, the immigrant communities became larger, being the Portuguese one of the largest.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, about 160,000 Portuguese immigrated to the United States with higher concentrations in southern New England and California. By 1920, one of each two jobs was in the factories and nine in ten were taken by immigrant groups, being the Portuguese again the largest. The wave of Portuguese immigrants that came from the Azores and, in smaller numbers, from the Archipelagos of Madeira and Cape Verde, as well as mainland Portugal was so massive that the tax list of Provincetown showed more Portuguese names than it did of the Americans – although in New Bedford the proportion of

Portuguese immigrants was not as high, the number of Portuguese was quite significant.¹

The Depression made them return to their places of origin, disappointed with the American dream. The immigration laws to the United States became more restrictive, being Portugal subjected to a system of quotas, thus reducing substantially the number of Portuguese arriving to the US. This fact brought about the acculturation of the Portuguese communities which had chosen to remain in the United States. Their family names, for instance, had disappeared: Ferreira became Smith, Martins turned into Martin, Pereira into Perry, Silva into Sylvia, just to mention a few.

The eruption of the volcano of Capelinhos, in the island of Faial, Azores, in 1957, left thousands of Azoreans homeless. Some Portuguese-Americans took an initiative that would change the immigration laws, thus creating a window of opportunity for many thousands of Portuguese to choose the path of immigration again. Between 1960 and 1970, more than 180,000 Portuguese had immigrated to the United States. With the development of the fishing industry, in New Bedford, between the end of the 70s and the middle of the 80s, thousands of Portuguese fishermen immigrated with their families, "re-Portuguesing" the communities that little by little had become acculturated. The Portuguese presence, however, had not disappeared completely throughout the various waves of immigration. As a direct result of the increase in Portuguese population, many institutions were created in New Bedford and neighbouring towns. Institutions such as: churches, clubs, banks, schools and, on 25 April 1971, the first and only Portuguese-American public library branch in the United States had its inception. Casa da Saudade Library was this institution. I worked at Casa da Saudade from 1986, having started as a part-time Assistant, becoming its Director from 1993 until 2002, the year I did the "reverse journey"², "immigrating" back to Portugal. When I say "immigrating", I really mean immigrating because that is what it felt like.

¹ See Marsha L. MacCabe and Joseph D. Thomas (eds.). *Portuguese Spinner (special issue). An American Story: Stories of History, Culture and Life from Portuguese Americans in Southeastern New England*. New Bedford, Massachusetts: Spinner Publications, Inc., 1998.

² As Manuel Ferreira Duarte calls it in Manuel Ferreira Duarte, *Viagem ao Contrário. Crónica da travessia do veleiro "Gaivota" da baía de São Francisco às ilhas dos Açores: Uma perspectiva*. San José, California: Bridge Publications, 1995.

2. My own experience and first impressions

I always had a fascination for other languages and other cultures having therefore decided to study English and German as a student at the University of Coimbra. Although my departure from Portugal, in November of 1985, was painful because I was leaving behind my family, my friends and the security of a quiet life and, at the time, a secure job as a teacher of English, I felt pulled onward by the insatiable curiosity to know what life was really like on the other side of the Atlantic. My first contact with New Bedford had been as a tourist, in 1983, and one of the most impressive things I was confronted with was related to the encounter with so many Portuguese points of reference there: Melo's Fish Market, Lima's Travel Agency, Colmeia Bakery, Fernandes Supermarket, Madeira's Feast, Club Faialense, Casa Velha Restaurant, Casa da Saudade Library. I was also surprised by the fact that many Portuguese spoke in a language which was neither Portuguese nor English, with terms which were totally unknown to me. I later found out that linguists called that pidgin, "Portenglish". I recall that many Americans were stunned by the fact that, although I had just arrived, I was able to speak English!...; and many Portuguese were surprised by the fact that, although I spoke Portuguese, I did not know the "Portenglish" vocabulary! ... In New Bedford, you are supposed to know terms such as "palharause" (pilot house), "estoa" (store), "fishmaketa" (Fish market), and "béga" (bag) or "páps", this last term originated by the need to refer to a small bread known in Portugal as "papo seco".

What I was more stunned about, however, was the way the Portuguese were perceived by the so-called "Americans", although, at the time, more than 60% of the population in New Bedford was of Portuguese ancestry. The lack of political power (or of any other kind of power) was outstanding! There were very few Portuguese "names" in top positions at the level of the local and regional government or institutions, and the few names that one encountered were simply that: "just names", elected by the Portuguese on account of their Portuguese names. And, of these "names" even fewer were women. I recall listening to friends of mine who told stories of how, because they were just Portuguese girls or simply daughters of Portuguese immigrants, although they excelled in school, they were discouraged to pursue their education by school counsellors – who happened to be Portuguese as well (!): these girls should "suffer"! They should join the production lines of the local textile mills. Their place was in the factories or at the counter of some local store. Or get married, have children and finally, of course, fulfil the role of splendid

housewives. A job as a bank teller was in itself a great promotion within or outside of the community. If the Portuguese immigrants are subjected to a double discrimination, within and outside the community, the Portuguese immigrant women are subjected to yet another one: the gender discrimination. They are subjected to living double and parallel lives: one, within the family and the Portuguese milieu, and another as professionals in the American world.

I fully recall the first job interview I had. Two months after I had arrived in the US, I applied for a job as a secretary in an institution which served the Portuguese immigrants; however, I was not hired because I had not "suffered enough". Although I was overqualified, with a degree from the University of Coimbra, according to the vision of some of the board members, first, I should work in a factory and "suffer" as they did – as did all of those who came before them! ... I remember thinking: "With time they will understand that there is no need to suffer!" However, almost ten years later, this path of discrimination continued. They continued to encourage immigrant women, who had attended the University in Portugal, to look for a job in a factory. What for? To make money, to buy a car, to buy a house, to help their husbands or parents. Anything else except an investment in themselves! Anything else except the support they needed to maintain self-esteem, encouraging them to pursue their education. Anything else except the opportunity to take advantage of the opportunities of the "American dream". And this was/is, of course, their way of creating fear. Why? Because the recently arrived immigrant will lose the capacity to affirm him/herself and to act, thus allowing themselves to be manipulated by those who are already settled. No one must overshadow them. The most important thing, I thought (still think), is to focus onward, and never be scared by some of the already settled powers.

3. Success stories

In 1988, encouraged by some friends and by the, then, Director of the New Bedford Free Public Library, institution of which Casa da Saudade was a part of, I decided to enrol in the Master's Degree in Libraries and Information Science. This decision was the jump to start a new and gratifying adventure which would determine my professional and personal path – which led me to meet other immigrant women, coming from Portugal (Portuguese women? I wonder [?] ...) Each one of them with a fascinating life story! Women such as Dineia, who in her role as a Library Assistant grabbed every opportunity to incite all

youngsters of Portuguese origin to pursue their education; Elisabeth, who in her role as the oldest child became the coordinator of the family life inside and outside home; Glória, who against all odds (after a divorce which left her fulfilling the role of both mother and father) managed to raise two children while pursuing her education, having completed her PhD in one of the most prestigious universities in the USA; Helena, who started as a Secretary at the Immigrants Assistance Centre, became its Director; Maria, who after a brilliant career as the Secretary to one of the State Representatives, became the Election Commissioner, thus establishing the difference in a world of American politicians; Paula, who in her role as Director of an organization which promoted education, managed to create the community dynamics which allowed for the implementation of programs to redefine careers and further knowledge of the Portuguese immigrants; Sandra, who (after a complicated life story) managed to complete her Master's degree and pursue a career as a Psychologist, becoming one of the key staff at the hospital where she is currently working; and, last but not least, Zelinda, a fisherman's wife, who having only concluded 6th grade in Portugal, managed to obtain a degree in translation while maintaining, throughout many years, a close connection to the cultural/political dynamics of the community.

These women, due to their entrepreneurial spirit, became true community mediators: they are the ones mediating with schools; they are the administrators of the family relations within the community and outside the community. These are women with whom I shared fantastic moments of community dynamics. We created the first "Day of Portugal Scholarship", to be granted to an outstanding student of Portuguese origin; the "walkathons", to raise funds for the New Bedford Hunger Commission, thus producing impact that went beyond the Portuguese community; the "Portuguese-as-Second-Language (PSL) classes for American adults"; the first "Book Fair of the Portuguese Immigrant Author"; the "Story-Hours for the Portuguese elderly", immigrants who were confined to the nursing homes, thus allowing them to share their life stories; and the implementation of many other community activities that were not the mere reproduction of the "foods and drinks" of the popular fair.

All of these are success stories – not necessarily economic – as they are the accomplishment of personal projects and individual struggles. For this success to have a stronger impact we would need a collective effort, not possible in the context of the Portuguese feminine immigration, at the time. These women were, however, able to challenge and change the power structures in the key community institutions which used to

have only Portuguese immigrant men in top administrative jobs. The stories of some of these women are fascinating because, against all odds, they have managed, little by little, small step by small step, to establish a difference.

In conclusion, in the United States, we are neither “Portuguese immigrant women” – because we did not fit the traditional profile pre-established for us (factory worker, obedient, invisible, excellent homemaker) –, nor American women – due to our own origin. As for myself, after the experience as an immigrant for seventeen years, I feel I am not only Portuguese. Now that I live in Portugal in what I call “a reversed immigration journey”, it is as if I belong neither there nor here and, at the same time, I feel that I belong to both places.

II

The incidents of 1 May 2007, at Macau and in many other places, concerning the exploitation of migrant workers and the ensuing unemployment of local people, show how the globalization of the world economy must again re-locate at the centre of our attention the question of mobility in the labor market and, more importantly, the question of the social exclusion related to it. As all the TV channels made clear during those incidents, the vast populations moving across the international space are the ones more acutely experiencing the meaning of this exclusion. As Etienne Balibar argues, in *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities*, forced to immigrate because they were “external” to the economic centre, these people find themselves “internally excluded” in their new geographical space. The problematics of identity, created in this process of deterritorialization and consequent reterritorialization, is mainly a result of this “double exclusion” – and it plays with a number of variables that contribute to making the whole process more complex and ambiguous.³ I am referring to variables such as nation, race, ethnicity, class and, of course, gender – what has been already mentioned as “another exclusion”.

Identity does not exist outside language, as we all have learnt from many post-Freudian theorists (like Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Hobsbawm or Bhabha, to name but a few). And this means that identity is built within the powers and/or the hierarchies that structure language. What I am basically saying here is that, when dealing with the question of

³ Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein. *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities*. London: Verso, 1991.

identity, one must unavoidably deal with a process that is simultaneously linguistic and literary. This is the position that I depart from in my study of poetry: trying to understand the question of identity in the poetry written by Portuguese immigrants in general – and by Portuguese immigrant women in particular.

The anthropologist Michael Taussig uses the expression “phantom objectivity” to refer to the invisibility of the social construction that language is.⁴ The “naturalization” of language covers and/or veils what language really is – an artifact, historically and socially built by the different hierarchies of power that produce the hegemonic order of discourse: the order where the definitions of nation, race, ethnicity, class, and gender are created. According to Taussig, however, under certain circumstances, this “phantom objectivity” stops being a “phantom”. According to my research, dislocation and/or immigration is one of these circumstances. This “phantom” becomes objective, and one feels the presence and the pain of what this anthropologist calls, after Deleuze, “the amputated limb” of language. The demonstrations on 1 May 2007, in Macau, were a good example of what it means to feel this “amputated limb” – and thus workers used their voices to make apparent what is hidden beyond the word “globalization”.

Immigration means the dislocation both of the body and of the body of language – of a body of language whose artificial, non-natural, character becomes unveiled. In the accelerated process of (re)building their identities, Portuguese immigrant women learn that they have two bodies of language to destroy: two national and cultural bodies of language that are permeated by phallogocentric representations both of what “Portuguese women” are, and of what kind of “American women” they should become. Poet Elizabeth Figueiredo, from New Bedford, spoke about this “amputated limb” type of pain and of the ambiguities that result from it. In one of her interviews, she told me:

That was because I was neither in one culture, nor in the other. There was a moment when I abandoned myself to the fact that I couldn't know, couldn't have a clue, of what it meant to grow up and become an adult woman in Portugal (...). But after finishing high-school, I don't know why, I felt the need to go back. Of all the people! Myself! Who had never felt “saudades”, a Portuguese different and special kind of nostalgia. I guess it

⁴ Michael Taussig. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980.