

"Heritages of Migration: Moving Stories, Objects and Home"

Buenos Aires, 6-10 April 2017

Abstract

Terra de si? Autobiographical writings of Portuguese immigrants in the USA.

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In the Portuguese community of New Jersey, USA, one can find a large number of autobiographical writings. These are mostly self-published books by immigrants who went to the USA during the second half of the twentieth century.

These men and women migrated for economic reasons to escape the misery of pre-democratic Portugal, the colonial war, or the fascist regime that kept most of the population undereducated. The hardships of migration and the existential longings of those who feel both deeply connected to their homeland but also importantly related to the context of immigration, led them to start writing about their experiences and feelings of belonging, regardless of their mastery of language and writing.

In this paper I present the work of some of these authors by approaching their books and contents as submerged voices of Portuguese emigration. This is an unrecognized heritage of Portuguese culture and language that is starting to be visible in the public sphere through the publication of autobiographies in literary circles or in self-publications. These stories constitute a territory of self-reinvention between the multiples belongings of their writers: But they are also demonstrative of a heritage of Trans-Atlantic encounters made by common people, economic migrants who portray not only their ways of crossing distances, but also the ways in which their migration memories build new identities, new world visions, and new senses of self in an interconnected world.

The pieces of autobiographical work that I stress will also enable the analysis of testimonial or private accounts as material and symbolic empowerment of migrants. They are surely an exercise of freedom that was (and is) denied in multiple ways to most working class migrants.

Terra de si? is a question that answers to an overarching biopolitical issue solved by the life, pain, and creativity of these authors.