

GRAÇA CAPINHA

**FEMALE VOICES IN THE POETRY
OF PORTUGUESE IMMIGRANTS**

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OFICINA DO CES

Publicação seriada do

Centro de Estudos Sociais

Praça de D. Dinis

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The present interest in themes such as immigration and identity is clearly a result of the globalization of the world economy which is re-locating at the centre of our attentions the question of mobility in labour market and, more importantly, the question of social exclusion related to it. The vast populations that nowadays move 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*², 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 the 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 make the whole process more complex and ambiguous. I am referring to variables such as nation, race, class and, of course, gender.

Identity does not exist outside language, as we all have learnt from people like Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Hobsbawm or Bhabbah, amongst many other. And this means, of course, that identity is built within the powers and hierarchies that structure language. What I am basically saying here is that, when dealing with the question of identity, one must unavoidably deal with a process that is

¹This paper was delivered at the **3rd European Feminist Research Conference — Shifting Bonds, Shifting Bounds: Women, Mobility, and Citizenship in Europe**, held at the University of Coimbra, Portugal (8-12 July 1997).

²Balibar, Etienne and Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities*. London: Verso, 1991.

simultaneously linguistic and literary. And this is the position that I depart from when trying to understand the question of identity in the poetry written by immigrants. I find in this poetry a process of intersection between two different hierarchies of power in discourse: the subject's power (The "I" speaking) and other powers within language (the "I" being spoken). This intersection is always a contingent and conditional process: an ecological and, therefore, contextual process that, in the case of immigration, is always being built — ambiguously and sometimes paradoxically — between two different spaces (here and there) and two different times (now and before), between the desire for assimilation and the need for cultural resistance — with the resulting production of "frontier-effects" in discourse. As Stuart Hall puts it, when discussing the *Questions of Cultural Identity*³: "Identities are [...] points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us". Directly confronting the reality of exclusion in the process of globalization, post-colonialism and immigration, immigrant poets cannot avoid the sense of "dislocation" and cannot, therefore, avoid asking themselves "who" is imagining (or has imagined) these diverse discursive practices identifying them, and "why". Dwelling in a space and in a time that is "inbetween", it is possible to identify in these poems the diverse "imagined forms" struggling for a dominant position in a discourse "inbetween" different hierarchies of power: 1) different forms of imagining the Nation — inbetween the memory of a Portugal that was once the centre of an Empire and is nowadays an exporter of immigrants; 2) different forms of imagining the Portuguese and the Portuguese immigrants — inbetween the image of poor workers and the substituting presence in the world of the great Discoverers; 3) different forms of imagining the reception countries (my case studies being Brasil and the USA) — inbetween images of the centre, the periphery and the semiperiphery; 4) different forms of imagining the language — inbetween cultural difference and cultural sameness; 5) and different forms of imagining the women's role both in the family and in the society — inbetween images of traditional mothers

³Hall, Stuart and Du Gay, P. (eds). *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, 1996.

and spouses and images of factory workers, administration experts, family official intermediaries between two cultures, and recognised poets of their immigrant communities.

I would like to start with the case of Brasil because, compared to the case of female immigrant poets in the USA, Brasil feels more like a space of transition than of a real difference. First of all, let me tell you that the vast majority of the poets that I have worked on, both male and female, told me in their interviews that they only started writing after abandoning Portugal (or, more accurately, the Algarve, or S. Miguel, or Costa de Lavos, and so forth, and so on. The local instead of the national identification of Portuguese immigrants has already been dealt with by people like Maria Beatriz Rocha-Trindade or Boaventura de Sousa Santos⁴). What is really important here is the fact that it was "dis-location" that lead most of these people to write poems — because they were lonely or could not speak the language, but, more importantly, because they felt it as a need to resist the total dissolution of their identities and dignities. And they understood — in their being "dis-located" — that they needed to write in order to "re-locate" themselves in language (and I have heard the most amazing things about poetics and the nature of language from people that were sometimes almost illiterate!...).

In Brasil, and being extremely reductive and generalizing, we could say that the role of Portuguese immigrant women is not that different from the one that they experienced in Portugal. Class, however, is extremely important in the very strict and hierarchical social reality of Brasil and the attitudes of these female poets were necessarily determined by this variable, contrariwise to what happens in the USA, where ethnicity is definitely the most important variable to observe.

⁴Cf., for instance, Trindade, Maria Beatriz Rocha- e Rodrigues, A.D. "La pratique symbolique des migrants: Résistance à la désappropriation ou mémoire communautaire" in *Cadernso. Revista de História Económica e Social*, nº 1-2, 1981, and Santos, Boaventura de Sousa, *Pela Mão de Alice*. Porto: Afrontamento, 1994.

In Brasil, these women would usually tell me that "in here" they were "helping their husbands", meaning that they were working in the family little business (the bakery or the groceries store). Socially and economically, they all felt that their roles had changed "a little" and that both their families and their communities recognised that. But, more importantly, it was their recognition as poets that really made the difference: they all feel that they represent the community and that they are important in their writing and, through it, their keeping of the community experience and of the memory that gives shape to it. The community newspaper is a very popular form of diffusion but, in Brasil, it is the community radio station that really makes these poets famous figures.

Vovó Isaura, who was ninety-two at the time when I interviewed her in São Paulo (three years ago), told me: "When 'they' meet me they hug me and tell me how happy they are now that they have finally seen me! I am very famous in the community. 'They' like me. And that is really what makes me go on writing."

She published some poems in *Voz de Portugal*⁵(a community newspaper) but once incidentally substituting for her son, who directed the program "Portugal, Trilha Nova", in the radio station ABC⁶, she decided to read some of her poems, "to help him, you know...". She was so successful that she never stopped doing it. This was thirty-two years ago. Her poems, clearly within the Portuguese oral and folklore tradition, are very lyrical and about "saudade", nostalgia for the Algarve (where she is originally from), and about the Portuguese history and myths. Here is an example:

O Algarve, my dearest
Where once I was born
My life became "saudade"
In remembrance of you, always
(...)

⁵*Voz de Portugal*, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil.

⁶One of the Portuguese Radio Stations in São Paulo.

I remember your beautiful bay
Second in the whole world
From Sagres departed King Sebastian
And we still awaiting him in a misty dawn.⁷

But there are other poems by Vovó Isaura that are about the feeling of dislocation and the multiplicity of the identity:

(...)
You live not knowing you path
People are not aware of you
To you, who belong to every path
No love and no tenderness

Sometimes, and curiously, the memory of Portugal as the centre of the Empire becomes, especially in the context of the Portuguese-Brasilian historical relations, "too contemporary" and thus revealing a neo-colonialist discourse. However, this is also, and ambiguously, a way of resisting class and/or ethnic discrimination:

You abandoned your dearest Motherland
And now live in this
Calm and subtle atmosphere
(...)
You live in this great country, her son
That we love, our dearest Brasil.

These images of origins are also present in the men's poetry, but instead of Portugal as "Mother", we find the image of a male and virile force inaugurating the existence of Brasil. Of course, the ambiguity (in the possessive "her" and "our") is

⁷The poems' translations are mine, since all these poets write in Portuguese.

King Sebastian disappeared in the sixteenth century in a battle in the North of Africa and some Portuguese people are still waiting for him to come back and save the Empire.

extremely relevant, both in post-colonial and in immigrant terms: hierarchies of power in discourse struggling for a dominant position. It is on this struggle space that the immigrant identity must be negotiated.

Let me now give you another example, this time from the Portuguese community of Taunton, in Massachusetts, USA. Maria Ilda Gomes Lourenço, like Vovó Isaura, came to the USA following her husband, but as it usually happens with the Portuguese immigrant women in this aerea, she started working immediately — and out of the house for the first time in her life — as a factory worker. Both in the poems and interviews and during the months that I spent living with the community, I was struck by the fact that there was always an irreconcilable paradox in the discourse of these women. They are in charge of most of the family things, not only because men work more hours at the factory but also because most of them are fishermen and are at sea most of the time. So, women learn English first (most men do not even bother doing it, because more than 60% of the population in that aerea is either Portuguese or of Portuguese descent), women go to school, take care of bills, banks, insurances, doctors, etc., etc. And they know that they are now more powerful within the family structure. In the USA, they really have, economically and socially, very different roles from the ones that they had in Portugal. And, in fact, women are the ones who refuse to come back to Portugal when the possibility exists.

On the other hand, female poets are also extremely critical of the American way of life. There are many poems that resemble Vovó Isaura's, but there is a large number of them concerning, for instance, the bad conditions and the long hours in the factory. Maria Ilda told me, responding to my surprise: "To immigrate is to be born again. One must learn everything again. We need guidance. And our parents are no longer here (...) Over there (in Portugal) I didn't write at all... Over there, I felt happy." In one of her poems, she writes:

We are under machine surveillance
The passing of the hours torturing us

(...)
And, already in the winter of life
Already bowing my head
Life withering
The boss growing.

Her daughter, Manuela Costa, a poet too, and an adolescent in high-school when her parents decided to immigrate, told me she used to hide from her former schoolmates that she was now a "shoemaker". For many members of the younger generation, immigration meant a social degradation already. Her poems are all about the immigrants' reality of work and discrimination:

We were born the many
And God knows how
Early we learned life.
Promises without a source
Made us prisoners there
Of this promised land
And before the death of our fury
We left the many

And more in the mask
Than in the joy
We Trust. With the same folly.

In Brasil, the younger generation, and because the language is the same, became part of the mainstream culture although — and this is especially the case of women — always trying to keep some distinct characteristics that resist the disappearance of the Portuguese identity: usually in a lyricism that still mingles Portuguese myths with love poems. Manuela Costa, in the USA, once told me: "You know, people ask me how come I, being a woman and everything, don't write love poems. And you know what? It never crossed my mind! Once I wrote one, on

purpose, but I had to go to my teenager's journals. I never felt the need. But I do feel the need to tell my experience as an immigrant. It is important to me. And to other people. Maybe..."

Like Manuela, I do believe this poetry is important: because it builds and keeps the history of these women in their communities — clearly locating poetry and its social relevance at its original and bardic source. And it is important because these voices do help us understand our reality of multiple powers and multiple identities at struggle in discourse.

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