

A not so common idea : autobiographies by Portuguese emigrants in the USA

Elsa Lechner¹

This article focuses on autobiographies of Portuguese emigrants in the USA published outside standard literary circuits². The analysis draws from the materials collected during fieldwork in New Jersey³ where a surprising number of migrants' written self-portraits were found. The paper examines the autobiographies as an expression of self and social empowerment to counter the established negative stereotyping linked to the Portuguese emigrant in Portugal. The four authors under analysis emigrated during different periods of the 20th century, marked by continuous Portuguese migration flows. From the outset, as they fled from misery, poverty, and lack of perspectives, these practically unschooled e/immigrants⁴ would have been improbable writers, yet they became motivated authors of their memories and life experiences. The analysis highlights the heuristic value and social relevance of such autobiographies both in their socio-anthropological meaning, and as historical portraits of Portugal and the Portuguese migration.

1. Introduction

At the center of this paper, there are four published autobiographical writings of Portuguese emigrants in New Jersey, as follows⁵ : *Quando o Sol Deixa de Brilhar (When the sun ceases to shine)* by Ilda Pinto de Almeida (2014) ; *Freixiosa, A Minha Terra e o Museu (Freixiosa, My homeland and the museum)* by Jo Santos (2013) ; *Labirinto, Memórias de um Beirão (Labyrinth,*

¹ Researcher at the Center for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal.

² A different and more elaborate version of the analysis is to be published by *The Journal of Lusophone Studies* in October 2016.

³ Project funded by the Fulbright Commission/Camões Institute and hosted by the Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies (Brown University) and the Department of Spanish and Portuguese (Rutgers University) under the 2013 Fulbright Program for PhD researchers and professors.

⁴ I refer both to emigration and immigration in reference to the double condition of these migrants. See Abdelmalek SAYAD *La double absence. Des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré*, Paris, Seuil, 1999.

⁵ Ilda Pinto de ALMEIDA, *Quando o sol deixa de brilhar*, Lisboa, Ed. Sinapis, 2014 ; José Abrantes dos SANTOS, *Freixiosa, a minha terra e o museu*, edição de autor, Loulé, 2013 ; Tozé SILVA, *Labirinto, memórias de um beirão*, edição de autor, Newark, 2012 ; Felicidade ALMEIDA, *Quando toda a esperança é azul*, edição de autor, Newark, 2009.



Memories of a Beirão) by Tozé Silva (2012), and *Quando Toda a Esperança é Azul (When all hope is blue)* by Felicidade Almeida (2009). Most of these books, except for the first, are self-published volumes, which would habitually exclude their authors from the ordinary literary and commercial circuits. These non-literary autobiographies have attracted my interest for being self-portraits of Portuguese economic emigrants, motivated by the need to describe their migratory experiences in a published book. Since autobiography represents a genre which is well-established in the U.S.⁶ but somewhat less popular in the Iberian world⁷, these books are significant for the following three main reasons: the low education level of their authors, their exclusive self-assertive motivation to publish, and the predominantly negative image of Portuguese migrants, both in Portugal and abroad, as stated by literary⁸ and scientific works⁹.

The choice of these four books has also been motivated by the fact that two of them were written by women, and the other two by men who focus on their life stories rather than on public deeds or business activities. They are stories of migration of first generation migrants who had arrived in the U.S. in the 1950s-1980s. In this sense, the chosen books transcend the category of ethno-autobiographies¹⁰, and represent an exercise in first-hand accounts of Portuguese migration contrasting the mythical identification of *Portugueseness* with a 'universal vocation', as well as the predominant public invisibility of Portuguese immigrants in their host countries.

I consider these accounts to be an instrument of empowerment for a stigmatized group¹¹. However, according to the authors themselves, empowerment had not been their main concern.

⁶ Robert LEE, *First Person Singular: Studies in American Autobiography* (Critical Studies), New York, St. Martin's, 1988.

⁷ Paulo MEDEIROS and Sonja HERPOEL, « Iberian Autobiography », in *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 85, 2, 2008.

⁸ José Rodrigues MIGUÉIS, *Gente da Terceira Classe*, Lisboa, Editorial Estampa, 1983; Jorge De SENA, *Obras Completas* coordenadas por Mécia de SENA and Jorge FAZENDA LOURENÇO, *América, América*, Guimarães Ed., 2011.

⁹ Leo PAP, *The Portuguese in the United States: a Bibliography*, New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1976; Martina MATOZZI, *Portugueses de torna-viagem. A representação da emigração na literatura portuguesa*, Tese de Doutoramento, Universidade de Coimbra, 2015.

¹⁰ Laura BROWDER, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*. Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 2000; Elsa LECHNER, *Enfants de l'eau: la reconstruction de l'identité en situation d'immigration, le cas des transmontanos en région parisienne*, Sarrebruck, Éditions Universitaires Européennes, 2010.

¹¹ Francisco FAGUNDES, « Portuguese Immigrant Experience in America in Autobiography », *Hispania*, Vol. 88, N° 4, pp. 701-712, 2005; Elsa LECHNER, « Migração, pesquisa biográfica e emancipação social: contribu-

They were rather guided by the need to pass the memory of their lived experiences to future generations. In fact, none of them mentions a need to gain public recognition. Instead, the authors see their writing as a form of self-accomplishment while addressing their peers (family, neighbors, the Portuguese community), as opposed to claiming the status of renowned authors. Nonetheless, since every published autobiography represents an implicit contract between the author and his/her potential readers¹², these books bring about the not-so-common (even rare) pact between Portuguese emigrant authors and Portuguese readers, expressed in Portuguese. The effect of emancipation becomes, in a way, redoubled : by publishing memoirs/autobiographies of migration, their authors promote a less-known literary genre in the Iberian world, while their readers have the chance to witness and get to know concrete experiences of Portuguese migration. Portuguese readers in Portugal and across the various diasporic communities can access a different version of that common story which is the old and vast saga of Portuguese migration. **After all, those stories are an inheritance of Portuguese migration history, invisible and silent in the multiple, other untold experiences of displacement and resilience.** Once written, these memories make the long history of Portuguese migration more humane, material, alive and concrete ; once published, they acquire the symbolically powerful form of a printed book among a largely unschooled community.



2. Resilient stories of poverty and mass migrations

Emigration has been a structural feature of Portuguese society since the 16th century¹³. Regardless of the differences between imperial, colonial and economic movements of population, the 'migratory experience' as a topic has been explored in Portuguese literature since the period of the *Discoveries*¹⁴. According to Martina Matozzi, there has been a superposition of themes

tos para a análise dos impactos da pesquisa biográfica junto de migrantes », *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 85, 2009, 43-64 ; Carmen Ramos VILLAR, « Janus and the Portuguese Emigrant: the autobiographies of Portuguese immigrants in the United States », *Luso-Brazilian Review*, University of Wisconsin Press, 49 : 2, 2012, pp. 232-250.

¹² Philippe LEJEUNE, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.

¹³ Joel SERRÃO, *Emigração Portuguesa: Sondagem Histórica*, Lisboa, Livros Horizonte, 1974 ; Vitorino Magalhães GODINHO, « L'Émigration Portugaise (XVe. – XXe. Siècles) - Une Constante Structurale et les Réponses au Changement du Monde », *Revista de História Económica e Social*, (1), 1978, pp. 5-32.

¹⁴ M. MATOZZI, *Portugueses de torna-viagem. A representação da emigração na literatura portuguesa, op. cit.*, p. 9

representing Portuguese migration within literature (ex. the topic of historical ‘adventure’, imperial ‘expansion’, and ‘escape’ from colonial war, from fascism or ‘exile’) which has only apparently eroded the subject of migration in literature. Also, the emigrant figure has been considered by some authors as a post-imperial image of the so called ‘universal vocation’ of Portugal¹⁵: that of *expansion*, *discoveries*, and *conquista*. Meta-historiographical fictions have replicated this mythical representation of the Portuguese identity which is further reproduced in clumsy appropriations by most Portuguese migrants and associations¹⁶. As a ‘key symbol’ of Portuguese national identity¹⁷, the emigrant is mostly represented as a remnant of a distant empire and a representative of the poor, rural, pre-democratic and undeveloped country that Portugal had been until the late quarter of the 20th century.

The socio-economic profile of 20th century Portuguese migration is well attested in historiographic works and statistical data : most representatives came from rural areas, with low levels of education and low-skilled jobs, politically disengaged or indifferent¹⁸. The very same features characterize the Portuguese community of New Jersey, with one extra : many of its members are *retornados*, i.e. Portuguese former colonists fleeing Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau after the decolonization. Yet these colonists shared socio-demographic characteristics with economic emigrants and dispersed mainlanders of the colonial Empire¹⁹. In fact, Portugal has exported, so to speak, millions of economic migrants across the centuries. Political ex-

¹⁵ Victor PEREIRA, « ‘Portugalidade’ para exportação ? Emigração e ‘Comunidades Portuguesas’ », in Bruno MONTEIRO and Nuno DOMINGOS (dir.), *Este País não existe*, Lisboa, Deriva, 2015, pp. 23-32.

¹⁶ The great majority of Portuguese associations in New Jersey (like in Paris, or other important migratory destinations), assume a public image and organize their calendars around traditional icons/imperial imageries of Portuguese history and culture. See, namely, Daniel MELO and Eduardo Caetano da SILVA, *Construção da Nação e Associativismo na Emigração Portuguesa*, Lisboa, ICS, 2009.

¹⁷ Caroline BRETTELL, *Anthropology and Migration: Essays on Transnationalism, Ethnicity and Identity*, Walnut Creek, CA, AltaMira Press, 2003.

¹⁸ Marie-Christine Volovitch Tavares shows how Portuguese immigration in France was the largest “illegal” 20th Century European migration movement, and how big was the contingent of Portuguese workers in parisian *bidonvilles* (14.000 only in Champigny-sur-Marne in the 1960’). See Marie-Christine VOLOVITCH TAVARES, “Les phases de l’immigration portugaise, des années vingt aux années soixante-dix », *Actes de l’histoire de l’immigration*, 2001 ; M.C. VOLOVITCH TAVARES, *Portugais à Champigny. Le temps de baraqués*, Paris, Autrement, 1995.

¹⁹ Cláudia CASTELO, *O Modo Português de Estar no Mundo. O Luso-Tropicalismo e a Ideologia Colonial Portuguesa (1933-1961)*, Porto: Afrontamento, 1998.

iles and persecuted intellectuals have been a great minority²⁰ among a massive exodus of low-qualified migrants.

So, the chain of untold stories of Portuguese migration is one of ‘submersed biographies’, similar to those analyzed by Camilla Cattarulla among Italian migrants in Argentina and Brazil²¹. All these stories relate the topic of migration to the issues of cultural education, national and intercultural identity, or education in adulthood. Each one is a personal account of a collective biography shaped by socio-historical events. They put forward a “right to education” that seems to be a key motivation for their humble writers. Following the inauguration of a movement that Eduardo Lourenço called ‘Portugal experiencing itself’, these writings achieve a future that most Portuguese could have only imagined in their homeland : « From the real and symbolic space of an oral culture »²², these migrant authors take the first steps towards a new identity and destiny where literacy becomes possible. Through these personal accounts the Portuguese self-image becomes more concrete and less hazy too, as Lourenço said, distancing itself from a history of drift and escape ; a national destiny of nostalgia and self-estrangement made tangible in the word *saudade*²³.

The concreteness of these biographical narratives and life stories demystifies the fuzzy neo-imperial representation of Portuguese identity, making specific in the public sphere the massive poverty and migration movements of Portuguese contemporary history. So, when we read the four chosen books, we get to know the very personal ways in which their authors have carried their Portuguese origins through their lived experiences as immigrants in the USA.

In *When All Hope is Blue* Felicidade Almeida describes her childhood of poverty and family abuse in Murtosa (Aveiro)²⁴, which she leaves behind as she migrates on her own as a young woman, hoping to accomplish her dream of self-realization while overcoming the victim condi-

²⁰ Most escaped the authoritarian regime of Salazar (1933-1968), the colonial war, and participated in clandestine political activities against the regime. Many were imprisoned and tortured also.

²¹ Camilla CATTARULLA, *Di próprio pugno: aotobiografie di emigrante italiani in Argentina e in Brasile*, Diabasis, 2003.

²² Eduardo LOURENÇO, *Portugal Como Destino*, Lisboa, Gradiva, 1999a, p.81.

²³ E. LOURENÇO, *Mitologia da Saudade*, Lisboa, Gradiva, 1999b, p. 91.

²⁴ Portuguese emigration in New Jersey is mostly from continental Portugal, while in other US States the Portuguese communities come mainly from the Azores Islands. In particular, the Newark community is from central Portugal (Beira Litoral, Beira Interior). Murtosa is a coastal village near Aveiro with significant emigration to New Jersey. See, for example, the Town Twinning Official Agreement between Murtosa and Newark, <http://www.cm-murtosa.pt>.

tion. Felicidade's experience of migration included a marriage of convenience so that she could continue living in the U.S. Her story is of much suffering, loneliness, family betrayal, sickness, hard work and sacrifice. In her book, Felicidade states clearly that her reason for passing her life story on was one of resilience : « to never lose hope, never stop dreaming »²⁵ in face of great obstacles.

Ilda Pinto de Almeida in *When the sun ceases to shine* also reveals her desire to « give the message that it is possible to overcome obstacles even when all seems lost » (personal communication, August 2014). Ilda, together with her husband and daughter, had moved first to Switzerland, where they had lived for three years when other Portuguese emigrants reported her to the police for not having a residence permit. She was imprisoned and deported to Portugal, only to depart some months later for the U.S. via Canada. She was able to cross the border into the U.S. with help from a Portuguese family with whom she had been put in contact. Besides this, before leaving for Switzerland Ilda had managed to complete high school and had attended an accounting course at a technical school in Portugal. As a result, she would become a statistical rarity - an educated Portuguese woman, trying to get to the US as an economic migrant.

In his turn, Jo Santos published²⁶ his autobiography as a kind of ethno-historical document in which he describes his life mission of preserving the values and humble culture of his motherland, the rugged countryside of Mangualde in the inland Portugal. Apart from having dictated his autobiography to Baldomiro Soares (who happen to have written his own autobiography), Santos had gathered photographs and collected farm instruments to open a rural museum in his home village of Freixiosa, which gives the book its title. He had wanted to tell his story from the role of an inhabitant of that very same poor village while respecting his origins and preserving his rural culture.

Like Felicidade Almeida, Tozé Silva speaks of his book as a lifegoal accomplishment of his 'childhood dream'²⁷. His daughter, who had largely been behind his decision to emigrate, encouraged him to write the autobiography. Born and bred in Beira Interior, a mountainous region in the inland Portugal, Tozé did not have the opportunity to study as much as he had wanted to. And, like Jo Santos, he had managed to complete his primary education. Writing, even with grammatical errors, means 'living that dream' for him. For Felicidade, publishing her book was

²⁵ Felicidade ALMEIDA, *Quando toda a esperança é azul*, op. cit., p. 5.

²⁶ Dictated to Baldomiro SOARES, *Freixiosa. A minha terra e o museu*. (Comendador José Abrantes dos Santos). Newark, Loulé, Edição de autor, 2013.

²⁷ Tozé SILVA, *Labirinto. Memórias de um beirão*, Newark, Edição de Autor, 2012.

the fulfilment of a desire : « I remember my childhood dreams as beautiful, spectacular things for me, unlike what life actually offered me. Reality doesn't always reflect our dreams, but dream by dream we build the reality of our lives »²⁸. Over the years, Tozé, like Felicidade, still regretted having to leave school so early but became a spirited writer of his own story. Felicidade had never made it to complete the compulsory education : she had got expelled from school in the 3rd grade for absenteeism, having to help her family around the house.

In 1970, before the transition to democracy, and decades after Felicidade had attended her classes, the illiteracy rate in Portugal was almost 40 per cent among women and approximately 35 per cent among men²⁹. For someone like Felicidade, then, writing her autobiography in the USA was not only a refutation of her poor schooling in the 1940s' Portugal, but a bold statement for the other women in the Portuguese diaspora³⁰. The same applies to men from humble backgrounds that would hardly appear to be interested in writing a simple note, let alone the story of their lives.

We do not find in these four books the same political awareness that Cattarulla has found in the autobiographies of Italian immigrants in Argentina and Brazil. Similarly to the Portuguese ones, the Italian authors refer the will to study and acquire cultural education in the context of immigration³¹. However, they also add a social statement to their biographical accounts : they put their narratives of migration at the service of a collective consciousness. Those statements represent an incorporated biopolitical power that Portuguese emigrants still do not seem to have, unless they are intellectual migrants or political refugees. Most Portuguese emigrants were economic migrants whose humble origins did not allow for a political project of mass education or even the higher education of their own children. Indeed, statistical analysis across the Portuguese diaspora shows how second generations follow mainly technical trainings and commercial professions. Even in Portugal, in 2008, about 70 per cent of the active population had not com-

²⁸ Felicidade ALMEIDA, *Quando toda a esperança é azul*, Newark, Edição de Autor, 2009, p. 17.

²⁹ By region, according to www.caminhosdamemoria.wordpress.com, the illiteracy rates were 58.3% for Viseu in 1970, 46.9% for Aveiro and 59.8% for Guarda.

³⁰ Few are studies of Portuguese autobiographies written in diaspora communities. However, a note should be made of the work of Clara Moura LOURENÇO, dedicated to Portuguese women writers in France and Canada, 2008.

³¹ C. CATTARULLA, *Di próprio pugno: aotobiografie di emigrante italiani in Argentina e in Brasile*, op. cit., p. 29.

pleted the 3rd cycle of compulsory education³². So, emigration may have served to escape the misery and poverty but did not necessarily result in greater education.

3. Autobiographies as performative, *glocal* empowerment

Each of the four books describes the personal journey of their authors, opens with a description of their birthplace, family and childhood, documents their travels to other migratory destinations in the history of pre-democratic Portugal (France, Switzerland, the former African colonies) and their lives in the United States. Ilda's book ends with her illegal entrance in the USA. The books written by the women have titles indicating the question of time (*When all hope is blue*, and *When the sun ceases to shine*), while the two men indicate the spatial dimension (*Freixiosa*, and *Labirinto*).

Time and space, as existential measures of each reported life, become the narration's factual and psychological references, whilst guiding the text's autobiographical identity, understood as a historical and cultural artifact, i.e. stories of migration. The references to time and space written in diaspora acquire an even greater significance since the reported life experiences are marked by geographical rupture (where they came from, where they went to, and the places they lived on the way), as well as by the temporalities of migration (the before and after, the time here, the time there, nostalgia, a present life lived in suspension or rooted in new/old identities, future projects, and linguistic and cultural transmission within the community). As s/he revisits such paths, the emigrant becomes a writer acquiring - in the very act of writing - a new social awareness, as well as new linguistic competences. Writing becomes a voyage of self-discovery while sewing the past into a new narrative identity or a new discourse about migration.

Thus, space is not only what is occupied by the body of the migrant narrator, bringing ethnic identity to the concrete geographical territory of the host country, but is also a place associated with relations, exchange, dialogue and confrontation, geopolitics, inventiveness, interiority and exteriority, adaptation and the reinvention of senses of belonging³³. Writing becomes the space

³² <http://observatorio-das-desigualdades.cies.iscte.pt>. Escolaridade da população ativa portuguesa. Viewed in February 2016.

³³ Elsa LECHNER, « Subjectivity, Displacement and the Ethics of Ethnographic Representation », in Thuomas HUTUNEN, Kaisa ILMONEN (ed.), Janne KORKKA, Elina VALOVIRTA (eds.), *Seeking the Self. Encountering the Other : Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Ethnographic Representation*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 333-348 ; Elsa LECHNER, « Para deixar rasto na geografia onde passam os meus

of self-reinvention, and there we may find agency and negotiation of meanings, or the capacity for human action and creation over one's 'destiny'. Theories of agency refer to various notions of the subject and subjectivities, but the main concern in our analysis in this regard lies in the (trans)formative action of the subjects on their own lives. Self-transformation begins with self-knowledge ('the technologies of the self' as analyzed by Michel Foucault³⁴), and an understanding of the ways in which the different life contexts shape biographies, as well as re-write the biographical accounts. A poem by Ilda Almeida expresses these various elements of memory, space, body, experience, time, identity, and agency as follows :

THE FORCE OF A PLACE³⁵
To remember my land
Is to give life to thought
It is to remember the mountains
And forget the suffering

When I was just a little girl
I wanted to be a star
To make poetry
With a warm evening glow

To think of the house where I grew up
Was to remember how I climbed the olive tree
In its branches I was a boisterous singer
Of the poems my mind had written

The uncommon idea these four emigrants had for publishing their memories and autobiographical reflections, leads to a time and space of public affirmation that gives visibility to the value of their experiences and identity. This is an important fact that brings evidence to the empowering consequences of autobiographical works. The empowerment effect is enhanced by the

passos' : *Biografia e Transmissão na Diáspora Portuguesa em França* », in Daniel MELO and Eduardo Caetano da SILVA (dir.), *A Construção da Nação e Associativismo na Emigração Portuguesa*, Lisboa, ICS, 2010, pp. 179-192.

³⁴ Michel FOUCAULT, « Les techniques de soi », in *Dits et écrits*, 1954-1988, t. II, 1976-1988, Paris, Gallimard, 1998, pp. 1602-1632.

³⁵ Ilda Pinto de ALMEIDA, *Quando o sol deixa de brilhar*, Contos/Memórias. Lisboa, Ed. Sinapis, 2014, p. 56.

understanding that we are dealing with forced emigrants, illegal migrants, who encountered a life of much sacrifice and work in low-skilled jobs (even when they became very successful business men and women) usually unrecognized by the Portuguese society and political elite³⁶. In her study of three biographies of Azoreans in North America, Carmen Ramos Villar³⁷ views the autobiographical works as a site for *performative* empowerment, in terms of culture and identity for these immigrants or descendants of Portuguese immigrants from the Azores living in the USA. Writing in such cases becomes a bridge between two world views, two experiences and two identities. It is also an affirmation of a unified, yet mixed identity, made up of the individual's sense of belonging to two places : here and there, Portugal/the Azores and the USA.

The weaving of a new identity through writing is also a *glocal* act of empowerment that promotes, or has a potential to promote, a revitalized and more positive image of Portuguese emigrants within the public sphere, both in Portugal and the diasporic communities. This fact becomes more relevant in view of the vast, long-established Portuguese migration³⁸, structurally sustained throughout history up to the present day (when migration by Portuguese nationals is once again very high)³⁹ and literally carried across every continent in the world⁴⁰.

Such biographical narratives serve a dual purpose : on the one hand, they allow for an understanding of the forms of experience and concrete interpretations of a migrant narrator ; on the other, they shed light on the social and political meanings of the private experiences of migration. According to Idalina Conde⁴¹, the heuristic value of testimonies and biographical narratives for the social sciences depends on a guiding theory for each case study, alongside procedural

³⁶ Shame is frequently associated in Portugal with the emigrant's manners, tastes, and ways of speaking. A recent episode related to the attribution by the French government of an award/decoration to a very popular Portuguese singer among the Portuguese community in France, reiterated the difficulty that the Portuguese political elite has to recognize this population : the singer asked if the ceremony could take place at the Portuguese Embassy in Paris but the ambassador did not allow it. Journalists asked the Portuguese government about this and the Minister of Foreign Affairs (a sociologist) replied that he himself would like to do a sociological study among those fans.

³⁷ Carmen Ramos VILLAR, « Janus and the Portuguese Emigrant : The Autobiographies of Portuguese Immigrants in the United States », *Luso-Brazilian Review* vol. 49, no. 2, 2012, pp. 232-250.

³⁸ Jorge ARROTEIA, *A emigração portuguesa - suas origens e distribuição*. Biblioteca Breve, vol. 79., Instituto de Cultura e Língua Portuguesa, Lisboa, Ministério da Educação, 1983.

³⁹ According to Pordata (10-02-2014) between 2011 and 2013 more than 350.000 Portuguese left the country to work abroad. www.pordata.pt. Site viewed in February 2015.

⁴⁰ (<http://www.observatorioemigracao.secomunidades.pt>).

⁴¹ Idalina CONDE, « Problemas e virtudes na defesa da biografia », in *Sociologia Problemas e Práticas*, n° 13, 1993, p. 45.

theories or theories of practices. As it represents more than a general theory of the subject - which is partial and problematic yet applicable to each and every one of the studies of life histories - biographical research functions through contextualized theories of the subject, thus becoming a theory of its subjects. The value of its contribution to social analysis, therefore, lies in the intense and more profound understanding of a given theme (along with the assessment of its multidimensionality), guided by a theoretical/practical objective clearly defined from the outset. This is the case with many of the anthropological studies of migration which make use of interviews and biographical accounts of migrants to understand transnational movements, transcontinental family dynamics or post-colonial migrations⁴². Literary studies, in turn, analyze autobiographical texts to discover and understand senses of belonging or cultural identity.

For migration studies, biographical testimonies provide the necessary information on the migratory experience of real individuals within a given migratory context (international, inter-regional, or transcontinental), whilst also informing each narrator and respective listener/reader of the conditions for a possible discourse on concrete – non-mythical - experiences of migration. This is a discourse brought into the public sphere, which alone corresponds to the real access to a certain power⁴³. In this sense, autobiographical texts become the empowerment of their narrators and eventual public, by simultaneously fostering awareness about these new writers and about the collective dimension of their individual experiences. The autobiographies analyzed here portray a historical, sociological reality of emigration from Portugal to the US over several decades. In this way, they fulfil the civic and political function of informing a vast anonymous public of the history of two countries across the globe. The respective visions are necessarily partial, but the experience of each one is *total* in the sense proposed by Ferrarotti : a synthesis between individual and collective history, a synthetic praxis of a historical content by one single individual/an existential expression of a shared space-time context⁴⁴.

It is of course relevant that these works have come into existence through authors that are close to the heart of the Portuguese communities they belong to. Although they started or con-

⁴² Nina GLICK-SCHILLER & Georges Eugene FOURON, *Georges woke up laughing : long-distance nationalism and the search for home*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2001.

⁴³ Jack GOODY, *The Power of the Written Tradition*, Smithsonian Institution Press : Washington and London, 2000.

⁴⁴ Franco FERRAROTTI, « On the autonomy of the biographical method », in Daniel BERTAUX (dir.) *Biography and society : the life history approach in the social sciences*, London/Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1983.

tinued working in manual labor, cleaning jobs, services, construction, factory or retail work in the U.S., the authors maintained personal, family or professional relationships with clubs, associations and well-known businesses in the Portuguese community. Jo Santos was president of the Portuguese Sports Club of Newark, and Tozé Silva is a member of ProVerbo, a cultural association belonging to the same club. Felicidade Almeida was the mother-in-law of a well-known Portuguese businessman, the owner of a chain of supermarkets and restaurants in Newark. Ilda is a member of the Portuguese Instructive Social Club of Elizabeth, and the Portuguese Evangelical Church of The Good Shepherd (*O Bom Pastor*). It was through the church that she began to write and was encouraged to publish. This institutional and community support (even if only moral) reinforces the idea that authorship alone is not enough to ensure publication ; the community is also needed as a base and as a means of giving authority to the writer. Anthropologists show that more than literary or rhetorical ‘competency’ is needed to speak for oneself : ‘authority’ is also needed or for the voice of someone to be heard and recognized⁴⁵. Such an authority is beyond the reach for the great majority of people in the world even in our digital era. In this context, self-publishing represents a first step towards gaining the public competency and authority.

So, while the sociological profile of the Portuguese biographies fits perfectly into the general pattern for Portuguese emigrants who arrived in the USA during the 20th century, the very fact that these autobiographies are published is far from typical. Several researchers have studied the Portuguese communities of the US, its general characteristics as a culturally and linguistically distinct group in the North American mosaic⁴⁶. Other authors are specifically interested in poetry written by the Portuguese in the USA⁴⁷ and view it as a semi-peripheral cultural production struggling against forgetfulness, or complete domination by the ‘culture of the center’. Graça Capinha sees the poetry produced in diasporic communities as the forefront of the Portuguese

⁴⁵ Daniel FABRE, Jean JAMIN, Marcello MASSENZIO, « Introduction : Jeu et enjeu ethnographiques de la biographie », *L’Homme*, Paris, 195/196, 2010, p. 10.

⁴⁶ See the historical and dated Leo PAP, *The Portuguese in the United States : a Bibliography*, New York, Center for Migration Studies, 1976 ; or more recent studies published by Onésimo ALMEIDA, *O Peso do Hifen. Ensaios sobre a experiência luso-americana*, Lisboa, ICS, 2010 ; or Kimberly DaCosta HOLTON and Andrea KLIMT, *Community, Culture and the Makings of Identity : Portuguese-Americans along the Eastern Seaboard*, Dartmouth, University of Massachusetts Press, 2009.

⁴⁷ Graça CAPINHA, « A produção poética na semiperiferia : a condição da bruma », Coimbra, *Oficina do CES*, 1988.

cultural resistance, since it is written in Portuguese in North America⁴⁸. In this context, the look on the publication of autobiographies by the authors who are deemed most improbable within the Portuguese panorama seems most interesting and noteworthy. The impact these books may have on their readers still remains to be addressed in further research, particularly because they are written in Portuguese outside Lusophone spaces. This poses a challenge for younger generations of Luso-descendants with higher levels of education who might not be as proficient in reading Portuguese as they are in reading English⁴⁹. However, it may enable Portuguese readers to learn differing versions of the Portuguese history of emigration, as well as allow the new generations of Luso-Americans to discover the story of their parents and grand-parents.

4. Conclusion

Following the theoretical assumption of the empowering dimension of autobiographical writing, and the heuristic value of biographical accounts - which enables the analysis of life experiences as portraits of concrete societies and historical times-, this paper examines autobiographical books written by 'common people' or non-literary authors of the Portuguese Newark community. These Portuguese language books were self-published in the USA by Portuguese emigrants who reside in the US, with one exception - one of the autobiographies was edited by a Portuguese publishing house in Portugal.

Based on the fact that the autobiographical genre is rare in the Iberian world but common in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, the article proceeds to the analysis of the migrants' written works as a more or less conscious form of resistance to the stereotypes associated with the Portuguese emigrant figure, who is typically portrayed as uneducated and disinterested in literary culture or so-

⁴⁸ Bela FELDMAN-BIANCO and Graça CAPINHA, (dir.) *Identidades : estudos de cultura e poder*. São Paulo, Huitec, 2000.

⁴⁹ Dulce Maria SCOTT, « Structural Integration and Selective Acculturation : Luso-Descendants in America », Institute for Portuguese and Lusophone World Studies at RI College, 2010 ; Dulce Maria SCOTT, « The Education of Luso – Descendants : Theory, Data, and Recommendations », in *Human Rights and Quality of In the Portuguese Speaking Communities in the U.S. and Canada*, Proceedings from an International Symposium, Cambridge, MA, USA, November 2011, pp. 285-315, Direção Regional das Comunidades, Government of the Azores.

phisticated arts. Mostly, these books are the materialization of a future that the humble origins of its authors inhibited.

Even though the sociological profile of these authors fits and confirms the general characteristics of 20th century Portuguese migration (both to the U.S. and other destinations), the very fact that they managed to write and publish their autobiographies is anything but typical. In no other field site than in the US could we find the significant number of autobiographical publications by Portuguese emigrants, resulting in the valorization of migrant and personal experience in the public realm. The context helps empowering people but the time has also come for Portugal to ‘reinvent itself’, as stated by Eduardo Lourenço in the 1990s.

As these authors dared to escape a destiny of what we can call “literary illiteracy” and confront the Portuguese canons of literary adequacy (both in content and form), they represent an empowerment that deserves attention from any scholar interested in Portuguese migration or culture. Not only were they deemed as improbable authors in the Portuguese scene, but they remain uncommon from within a larger history of emigration that has characterized Portuguese society across centuries. Even though the Portuguese presence around the globe is significant, the experiences of Portuguese migration are rarely validated beyond the imposed and incorporated clichés.

This paper has attempted to draw attention to these unlikely and rare cultural productions while calling for further research on autobiographical testimonies of emigration in written, oral, or virtual/digital supports. The books in question are shown to exemplify a local empowerment (in relation to Portugal and the diasporic community they belong to) of the improbable authors in the Portuguese publishing world. They also contain the potential for a global empowerment as they represent concrete expressions of self-valorization countering the predominantly negative stereotypes associated with the Portuguese emigrants. As such, they represent a *glocal* resistance and strength of the real people who are often ignored and undervalued within the dominant discourses, despite the fact that their experiences reflect an extremely important and still present feature of Portuguese history and society.