

Chapter 13

An Immigrant in America Yes, But Not an Emigrant in My Own Country! The Unbearable Weight of a Persistent Label



Graça Índias Cordeiro

13.1 Surprised by an Unexpected Category...

Boston, June 2014. I had just interviewed João Feitor, a retired, well-known Portuguese-American businessman, highly respected in the local community of Cambridge in the state of Massachusetts. With a remarkably successful career as vice-president of one of the largest American companies in its sector (UNICCO), and a life dedicated to the appreciation of Portuguese culture and to bringing together organizations of Portuguese origin, João Feitor represents the “self-made man” in the best American style, whose life has been reported in the local press as an example of the “personification of the American dream.” (Mundo Português 2000).

He had made himself available to talk to me right from the beginning and picked me up early in the morning from Lechmere station, the end of the Green Line that connects one end of the small town of Cambridge to Boston. We headed toward his home, a beautiful villa in the suburbs, 5 minutes from the station. There we talked, with his wife, Fátima, until after lunchtime. It was raining heavily and I ended up accepting their return ride to Boston, carrying a box containing a selection of documents from his personal archives that he kindly lent me so I could make copies. On the return trip, and without my having asked anything about that subject, he said abruptly:

But there is one thing I won't stand for: I don't mind being an immigrant here. In fact, I'm proud of it. That's what I am. But ... calling me an emigrant? In my own country? I don't accept that. I'm no emigrant. I'm as Portuguese as those who live there, no more or less. (Interview JF 2014-Jun-05)

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And he told me how in his hometown, Vila Franca do Campo, in São Miguel Island, Azores, the mayor, his long-time friend, had invited him one summer to the opening of a welcome party for emigrant communities with those words written on a banner, and how he had refused to attend, despite his friendship with the mayor. “I don’t wear the emigrant’s hat. I don’t feel less Portuguese than others and don’t want to be treated like that”. This was what he told his friend, explaining that it was nothing personal. The following year, a similar party was organised, with a banner bearing the phrase “welcome to the non-resident Portuguese community”...

The topic of this short conversation was unexpected for me. I was in the middle of an ethnographic study on the movement to establish the label “Portuguese Speaker” as a category of the US Census in the state of Massachusetts¹. My approach began in the place where this movement had emerged, and aimed to understand views of Portuguese-speaking immigrants and their descendants about this appeal, which was led by the Massachusetts Alliance of Portuguese Speakers (MAPS), a social-service non-profit organization (NPO) based in Cambridge. I would uncover the point of view of these “new Americans” through analysis of historical and ethnographic sources. The aim was to understand a complex process of identity construction – as well as the transformation of the category Portuguese on American soil over the past decades – in one of the states where “800,000 Massachusetts residents speak Portuguese (...) the second-most commonly spoken foreign language in this state after Spanish” (Margolis 2013, 84, 235).

Despite having gone through some excellent bibliographical references on Portuguese emigration to the United States (Monteiro 1987; Baganha 1988) as part of this study, my point of view was that of the immigrant, which made all the difference. A substantial part of my fieldwork was dedicated to understanding what it meant for my interlocutors to be American, to become a US citizen, and how “being Portuguese” or “of Portuguese origin” was part of “successful integration” into American society. Despite my fieldwork leading me to interact with different speakers of Portuguese as variously an official, native or heritage language, a closer relationship with the Portuguese-American community was inevitable. This led me to discover dimensions I had not even thought of addressing, such as the question raised by João Feitor. The sudden reference to this category of emigrant, invoked and refused outright, gained even more relevance because it coincided with Cláudia Pereira and Joana Azevedo’s invitation to participate in a colloquium on Portuguese emigration, which they organised at the ISCTE-IUL [University Institute of Lisbon], in Lisbon. I felt I was far from questions about emigration, as I was focused on the experience and local projects of immigrants and their descendants on American soil. I was suddenly faced with the obvious fact that “every immigrant is an emigrant, every alien is a citizen, every foreigner is a national”, to quote Roger Waldinger

¹ “From ethnic minority to linguistic majority: Portuguese speaking identities and urban change in Massachusetts (20–21th century)” January–July 2014, supported by University of Massachusetts, Boston and Luso-American Development Foundation through a Grant for lecturing and research in US.

(2015, 37), and that the ambivalent relationship between these two categories is the source of the tension revealed clearly in the way John Feitor disclosed his feelings.

Inspired by this short conversation, I have accepted the challenge of thinking about this ambivalent and tense relationship between being simultaneously immigrant and emigrant, being Portuguese in the host society and American in one's homeland. Hence, my purpose is to help to clarify the paradoxical fact with which I was faced: why is "being Portuguese" in the US seen as an inclusion factor in the host society, according to many reports, while being an "American emigrant" in Portugal appears to be an exclusion factor among domestic residents who are considered "more" Portuguese? More specifically, the reflection that follows explores the relationship between these two statuses – which, while equally ambivalent, have moved in opposite directions: that of the emigrant, with prevailing negative connotations constructed over many years, perhaps even centuries, in a country characterised by a long history and experience of emigration; and that of the immigrant, which has much more positive connotations and is particularly prominent in certain regions and cities of a "nation of immigrants" (Kennedy 1963). Because they are relational concepts that can only be properly grasped from a certain point of view, this reflection takes the standpoint of the city of Cambridge, MA, where the most important Portuguese community in Greater Boston has been building its life and its history for more than a century.

13.2 Ambivalences and Stigmatizations

In the USA, Portuguese-Americans are proud of being immigrants or descendants of immigrants, seeing themselves as a small part of the endless process of building this huge nation of immigrants. In the city of Cambridge, MA, whose city mission is "value and support racial, socio-economic, cultural and religious diversity", and which has been led since 2008 by the "nation's first black, openly lesbian mayor (and the first Black female mayor in Massachusetts)"², this sentiment is even stronger. In the early 1970s, Gilberto Velho, a reputed Brazilian anthropologist who did fieldwork among the immigrant Portuguese community in this city, noted that even then Cambridge stood out for its "dominant ethos characterised by an appreciation of "individualism of difference" (...) with a deliberate effort to build a unique style" (1994, 42). The positive meaning of the immigrant status in a city like Cambridge, which is intensely cosmopolitan, is something explicitly assumed by those who live in or frequently visit this city.

On the contrary, emigrant status does not seem to fit well with the self-identity of Portuguese immigrants. The word emigrant seems to be an imposed hetero-classification, which is often contested, and even refused, by Portuguese immigrants – especially when they visit their mother country. The contrast between the uses of immigrant status – which is chosen and thought to connote integration – and

²<https://www.cambridgema.gov/CityCouncil/citycouncilmembers/denisesimmons>

emigrant status – which is imposed and thought to connote exclusion from other Portuguese people – deserves our attention. The short exchange with John Feitor made me aware of other stories I have heard about social interactions between Portuguese residents and non-residents that show how uncomfortable Portuguese non-residents are with this stigmatised label.

Just as in the US (the nation of immigrants), in Portugal (a nation of emigrants³), there is also a deep ambivalence about everything related to the theme of immigration (Martin 2011, I). This theme triggers ambivalent feelings and judgments. In both countries, immigration concerns the incorporation of some “others” regarded as foreign – either because they are of foreign origin, or because they choose to live/reside in a foreign country. This type of mobility – which is not only residential but also, and above all, social – raises attitudes and discourses that can be positive and even myth-making, and which extol the migrant’s success and capabilities. But these attitudes and discourses can also be negative and even stigmatizing, loading onto the migrant the weight of being an “outsider” with fewer rights than those “established” in the land they arrived in or the land they abandoned (Elias and Scotson 2008). This apparently simple ambivalence shows the complexity of socio-spatial mobility phenomena that must be defined and analysed from a relational perspective (Stock 2006) and not from an essentialist and dichotomous one (Leeds 1975). Choosing to examine the point of view of those who are moving, their self-perceptions, their experiences, their self-identification – rather than the field of imposed ascriptions – is the way to get closer to this relational perspective. This is a valuable strategy for understanding the construction of complex and multiple identities (Noivo 2002, 258).

I cannot help but think of Paulo Filipe Monteiro’s words which, in 1980, took their perspective as a source of reflection on emigration studies in Portugal, emphasizing the ambivalence of the emigrant’s situation: “The phenomenon of emigration, even more than most social phenomena, seems to present great ambiguity and variability as its principal features” (Monteiro 1994, 55).

In his small and lucid book *Emigration: The eternal myth of return* (1994), Monteiro questions the idea that an immigrant is also an emigrant. The transitory nature of the “emigrant” status for those who leave, and its permanence for those who stay, clearly shows the dissociation between the two statutes: the emigrant’s point of view is, after all, the immigrant’s point of view:

The view that the emigrant is marked above all by a connection to the country of origin is the point of view of the host countries, which see them mostly for their ethnic difference; this is the Portuguese elite’s point of view, they are the ones interested in this link, and it has been the ethnographer’s, by profession: e.g., it is almost everyone’s [point of view] except the emigrants’. Studies on emigration, often ethnographic, ethnic or political, have maintained this view. (Monteiro 1994, 19)

³After a brief period from 1980 onwards – when Portugal attracted significant flows of immigrants – emigration once again became seen as a ‘structural constant’ of Portuguese society in scientific and political discussion. This trend has been particularly pronounced since 2008, with the worsening of the Portuguese economic crisis.

In another essay on the Portuguese-American community in the state of Connecticut (a neighbouring state of Massachusetts) – which unfortunately has never been published in a book – Paulo Monteiro (1987) tries to trace the route of emigrants to the USA back to the village in the Lousã mountains where they supposedly came from originally, and finds it impossible.

This led him to declare, in a later interview, “I found neither the famous Portuguese communities nor even Portuguese people; I found Luso-Americans” (Pereira 2016); or, to use a more native category, Portuguese-Americans, as Monteiro fully embraces the term these people use to identify themselves, rather than the national Portuguese categorization.

A more micro-level approach to each person’s individual experience carries the risk of observing something that only exists in the mind of the observer, and which does not correspond to the actual experience of the observed. Those thought of as emigrants in the sending society are absent, and their daily lives go on mostly in another country – that of the receiving society. Thus, the emigrant emerges as a figure imagined by those who stay, and this representation has a real impact on interaction with those who are classified as such. Those represented as emigrants not only feel they do not fit the representations made of them, but also react against such representations, discourses and related attitudes, which turn out to be discriminatory.

From a brief glance at the meagre existing literature on this topic, it is possible to see how the term emigrant carries with it a whole history of stigmatization in Portugal. This remains true despite a change in the government’s official discourse since the 1980s which was intended to alter a designation that “contained in itself a pejorative meaning, denoting an image of a second-class, poor and often illiterate citizen” (Santos 2004, 67).⁴ But while the emigrant has been accorded greater dignity in the Portuguese State’s official speeches – and while a policy of rapprochement with Portuguese emigrants, now referred to as “communities around the world”, has been implemented through the creation of services and bodies to support these communities – the pejorative use of this term is still widespread in Portuguese society. The quote below, taken from a speech by Correia de Jesus (1988), Secretary of State of the Portuguese communities at the time, clearly shows this negative meaning:

That the term has a negative meaning is recognised by us, residents, and by the majority of the emigrants themselves. If you ask us: ‘Are you an emigrant?’ – we will promptly respond that we’re not, as if refuting a slur. And I can tell you that at the end of a youth summer school for Portuguese descendants held last summer, when asked about what they liked the most in the course, one of the participants replied without hesitation: ‘they never called me the son of an emigrant.’” And when I was in Brazil, already as Secretary of State for the Portuguese Communities, the most applauded statement, in all circumstances, was that “for this government there are no emigrants, there are only Portuguese people. (Correia de Jesus 1988, 15)

⁴Exemplified by Prime Minister Cavaco Silva at the presentation of the XI Constitutional Government Program, on August 26, 1987: “Our companions who live and work abroad are respected communities that contribute to the wealth and development of the countries where they are and to magnify the name of Portugal. They are the modern expression of our universalist and humanist vocation”. See Vanda Santos 2004, 66–7.

Edite Noivo's reflections (2002) on first-person accounts of Portuguese immigrants in Australia and Canada (p. 268–9) – and even on her own experience of an interaction with a bus driver in Portugal, which ended with the shouted insult “Damned emigrant!” (Maldita emigrante)’ (266) – also carry significant weight. Which leads to the conclusion that “Most narratives about return visits to Portugal are replete with such tales of social and cultural marginalization. In the end, visits to the homeland seem to both appease and reactivate the pains of uprooting” (Noivo 2002, 268).

Although the official politically correct designation might have been transformed by replacing emigrant with “non-resident Portuguese”, the prejudice and stigmatizing image associated with the word emigrant remain. Although Portugal's accession to the European Community has transformed emigrants to European countries into European citizens, and despite all the national political discourse of whitewashing and rehabilitating the term, the negative stereotype remains: one does not grant dignity to a population group by decree or by official decision.

In fact, these two terms – immigrant and emigrant – are by no means equivalent. For ordinary individuals, these two categories seem to be two sides of the same coin, even they have completely different meanings. Their complementarity is only apparent: it is a contradictory complementarity, both in terms of their usage, the meanings they carry, the emotional support they mobilise, and even in the forms of power they reveal. Emigrant is clearly a hetero-classifying, decontextualised category imposed by others, while immigrant comes across as a self-classification normally used with a positive sense. This is one of the reasons why the category of immigrant is more inclusive than that of emigrant, even though it is used in the host country. In this sense, as Paulo Monteiro said so well, the emigrant's point of view is, after all, the immigrant's point of view. Immigrant appears as a category of self-identification used by the person him/herself, while the emigrant category is used by those external to the individuals who are thus classified.

Hence emigrant is an imposed category used to mark exclusion from the group of non-migrant Portuguese: “I might be an immigrant but I'm not an emigrant. What is this? This mania for excluding us...?, João Feitor says impatiently in our conversation, maintaining that dual citizenship (*dupla nacionalidade*) should reflect an equivalence that in reality it does not.

13.3 *My Whole Life Is Here: Belonging to a Portuguese-American Home*

The purpose of this text is just to open up a few reflections that I had during my fieldwork in the Boston area. I could not resist drawing inspiration from Maria Ioannis Baganha's critical view of Portuguese emigration statistics (1991), which stressed the higher quality and reliability of the American equivalents. In a similar sense – as an urban anthropologist more sensitive to individual experience in particular living places and to the “articulation between the place whence a migrant

originates and the place or places to which he or she goes” than to migrant flows (Brettell 2000, 98) – I would consider the perceptions of Portuguese Americans from Cambridge, MA of the emigrant category as a reliable source enabling deeper reflection on the theme of emigration.

Once again, I recall Paulo Monteiro’s statement that a Luso-American, or a Portuguese-American, is not a Portuguese person, but an American with Portuguese ethnicity (1987). Ethnic origin is one of the dimensions fundamental to the construction of American identity. Being Portuguese-American – or Azorean-American, as many from the Azores prefer – is therefore a way of being American. In a reflection on his previous study of the Portuguese-American in Connecticut, Monteiro clearly explains how this ethnic differentiation has nothing to do with the idea of “Portugality” or the myth of a “Portuguese community” or even of a diaspora. Rather, these ideas are part of the rhetoric fuelled by the Portuguese Government, “who have always been interested in the emigrants’ remittances and, therefore, very interested in feeding this idea that they were linked to us”, always implying that “they” would or “should return” (Pereira 2016). Indeed, it is clear that the notion of the emigrant is irrevocably associated with this nationalist rhetoric about “Portuguese communities spread across the world” and, in that sense, it is completely foreign to the local realities of integrating Portuguese immigrants.

We have to look at this particular place – the East side of Cambridge Street and its surroundings – so we can see the “attachments and connections between people and place” and the “worlds of meaning and experience” (Cresswell 2004, 11) of Portuguese-Americans and/or Azorean-Americans. These experiences reflect the real-life migrant’s links to particular places “such as their villages of origin and the urban neighbourhoods in which they settle in the host society (...) not the entire national territories of the countries they move from and to” (Brickell and Datta (2011) cit. in King (2012, 31). Even though being Portuguese is a multiscale form of belonging, it is not so much connected with the Portuguese nation in the abstract, as with the current life and memories of the village and/or region of origin, a place mostly visited in certain seasons, at certain moments in the migrant’s life. Migration types change a lot: permanent migration turns into seasonal migration; a return turns into a re-emigration, etc. Like the many retired immigrants who, during their working life, stayed for decades without visiting their homeland and are counted as permanent immigrants, João Feitor – who lives during the summer in Vila Franca do Campo – can now be considered a seasonal emigrant. Life-cycle dynamics challenge efforts to draw up migration typologies, requiring us to be flexible in our categorizations.

Although João Feitor has lived in a comfortable villa in Medford, a suburb of Cambridge, for some years, he explains that it is almost as if his house were a hotel “because my whole life happens in [central] Cambridge”. It is there that he continues to be the director of the Filarmónica de Santo António Inc. Cultural Centre and of Cambridge Portuguese Credit Union (CPCU). He is the person who says the first words before the Saint Anthony procession and is the one who makes the solemn speech accompanying the raising of the flag on June 10, the Day of Portugal and the Communities. Boston’s flag-raising event used to be held at the Cambridge City

Hall in the Mayor's presence – in recognition of the fact that Boston's Portuguese community live mostly in this nearby town and not in Boston itself – but today it takes place at the City Hall in Boston⁵ proper. João Feitor is a reference point, not only because he is a true ethnic entrepreneur with a remarkable capacity for achievement, but also because he has helped numerous Portuguese and Cape Verdean immigrants obtain work, a home and even US citizenship. Moreover, he was at the heart of the resumption of Portuguese traditions in Cambridge in the 1970s and 80s – part of the process of creating a Portuguese ethnicity, which today is part of the multiculturalism so particular to this small town. Renowned for his leadership skills, JF is part of a small, particularly active group, which in recent decades has set up clubs and associations, and resurrected dormant festivities such as the *Impérios das Crianças* (Empires of the Children), the *Festa de Santo Cristo* (Festival of Holy Christ), and the Saint Anthony's Day festivities. They have invented celebrations like the Portugal Day Parade, and supported the creation of the Portuguese school and folkloric dance group *Corações Lusíadas*⁶ (The Lusiad Hearts), not to mention coordinating the collective effort to build the modern church of Santo António in several stages, which an entire community came together to pay for in full. These activities took place in the context of the renovation of dilapidated houses in an old working-class neighbourhood in the far east of Cambridge, which was densely occupied by one of the most intense waves of Portuguese immigrants to the US nearly 40 years ago.

This neighbourhood remains the most important cluster of Boston's ethnic Portuguese community – containing all the Portuguese restaurants, travel agencies, funeral directors, bakeries, the Saint Anthony church, the Valente's library branch, shops – and is referred to in a Boston local gastronomic guide as the "Portuguese boulevard" (Morgenroth 2001). All these activities continue to be supported by many former residents of these few blocks, which neighbour MIT and are now undergoing an accelerated process of gentrification.

Pride in being an immigrant and the valorization of Portuguese descent are clear signs of full integration into American society. The American citizenship which João Feitor is so proud of makes him an American in body and soul. It allows him to leave behind the transition period during which he had a green card, which granted him various rights as a US resident but not the desired US citizenship with all rights, whose acquisition entailed (until 1981) relinquishing Portuguese citizenship. Feitor's pride in being an immigrant is, in this case, not only the pride in having built a successful career from scratch – as a newcomer from his native island in the Azores – but also in having contributed to the construction of a Portuguese-American community that values both citizenships in this town.

⁵The Boston Portuguese Festival – held since 2004 under the auspices of the Boston Consulate General – resumed some of these activities initiated by the Cambridge Portuguese community, with some minor changes. One of them was the transfer of the Portugal Day Ceremony, along with the hoisting of the flag, to the City Hall in Boston instead of Cambridge.

⁶Directed by Sérgio and Fátima Soares.

Along with Villar, I agree that “the Portuguese-American community is a strategic and positive space that belongs to both societies at once” – a kind of “public home which provides a synthesis for this either/or” (Villar 2012, 242). As this author pointed out based on the analysis of three Portuguese-American autobiographies, this sense of community “emerges as the site where a performance of self-representation takes place” (ob. cit., 234) – a performance connected with local cultural memories and not with political discourses of national identity in either country. Moreover, local cultural memories operate on both sides of the ocean – in receiving and host societies alike – in many different ways. Beyond the image of two sides of the same coin connecting two countries, two cultures, two different languages, we come across a place/community collectively created through a historical process of creative synthesis between two or more experienced and practiced places (Stock, op. cit.). These places are locally rooted in concrete spaces, and are considered by all concerned as the Portuguese-American or American-Azorean home, where the immigrant category is welcome, but where the emigrant does not fit.

13.4 Final Remarks

There is no doubt that the Portuguese migrant experience in Massachusetts is a transnational process. Migrants are living in “trans local spaces” within their own personal and institutional networks that span the Atlantic Ocean, connecting places in the Azores or the mainland with neighborhoods in New England cities in several ways. This so-called transnationalism involves migrant activities which, as Portes says, “are not limited to economic enterprises [such as sending and receiving remittances or setting up a business back home], but include political, cultural and religious activities as well” (Portes 1999: quoted by King 2012, 25).

In fact, those in the Portuguese-American community “transgress geographic, political and cultural borders”, in the words of Caroline Brettell (2000, 104), combining in a single social field “home and host society as a single arena of social action” (Margolis 1995, 29, cit. in Brettell 2007, 104). The many forms of mobility and communication between Cambridge – the focus of the sense of Portuguese-American belonging in Greater Boston – and the island, city, village or parish that he/she belongs to, nurture this sense of dual membership, which is framed by the welcomed status of dual citizenship.

Portuguese-Americans like to be Portuguese in Portugal as well as American in the US – or Portuguese-Americans. They have positive feelings of attachment simultaneously to their homeland and to the host society. But they agree that they don’t like to be emigrants in their own country and we can anticipate, along with Edite Noivo, that there is a “risk of a sense of cultural homelessness” because the

“migrant sense of belonging is dissociated from the perceptions prevailing in the homeland” (Noivo *ob. cit.*, 259). As she pointed out:

...residence abroad is being reconstructed by residents in Portugal as a boundary between the ‘fully Portuguese’ and ‘contaminated Portuguese’ as if the ‘territorial boundaries of Portuguese nation are superimposed on to social boundaries in ways that fragment the community by projecting a form of otherness onto the non-resident population. (Noivo 2002, 265)

Accordingly, “foreignization” of the emigrants is part of a process of “othering” which creates a powerful label used in every dimension of social life, including careless uses of them in social media, political discourses and, even, scientific texts. This process deserves a wiser reflection about the meanings of being an emigrant as well as its impacts in everyday life.

“Migration is too diverse and multifaceted to be explained in a single theory” (King 2012, 11). It is thus necessary to overcome categories used in the study of complex forms of socio-spatial mobility (Stock *ob. cit.*) – categories that are inextricably linked to strictly national perspectives (Glick-Schiller 2005). We must also diversify the scales at which we view “kaleidoscopic phenomena” – to use the term Ulf Hannerz employs to characterise the cultural diversity and heterogeneity of the city, where “the multitude of parts again and again take on new configurations” (1980, 15). For this reason, looking “closely and within” (Magnani 2002) the meanings of being an immigrant from an individual perspective no doubt help us think about the various effects of population classifications and their real impact on social and labour integration in specific towns. As Brettell said, “managing migration is as much a local issue as it is a national and global issue” (2007, 54) and should be more about managing integration than managing flows (*ob. Cit.*, 53).

In the Portuguese case, the blurred image of emigration (Baganha 1991), the myth of return and its financial function (Pereira 1971, 56 *cit.* in Monteiro 1994, 8), as well as the naturalization of a phenomenon looked as if it were obvious by common sense, have all contributed to conflating the “rhetoric of the State” and “the rhetoric of the emigrants”. This has left in the shadows “the shockingly understudied other side, which refers to what [emigrants] actually do, the many paths they have followed, where and how they have organised and organise their work, investments, family, housing and social lives, what they have lost and what they have won” (Monteiro *ob. Cit.*, 59). With this brief reflection on the immigrant category – a reflection that arose from a concrete case – I hope to have contributed to the study of the social construction of the “emigrant” category in what has been called the “Portuguese diaspora”. I also hope to have enriched a Portuguese-American history whose undiscovered and unworked sources harbour a wealth of diverse experiences that remain under-explored.

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