Twentieth Century Travel Narratives: Portuguese Writers’ Impressions of the US

Francisco Cota Fagundes, University of Massachusetts - Amherst

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Twentieth Century Travel Narratives: 
Portuguese Writers’ Impressions of the US

Francisco Cota Fagundes 
University of Massachusetts Amherst

As a seafaring nation and a discoverer of lands and sea routes, it is not surprising that Portugal should have a rich tradition of travel literature. Camoens’s *The Lusiads* (1572), Fernão Mendes Pinto’s *Peregrination* (1614), and the largely anonymous *Tragic History of the Sea* (1735[-]1736) are but three of the best known examples. Pinto’s *Peregrinação* was, of course, masterfully studied by Dr. Rebecca D. Catz in her doctoral dissertation, “Iconoclasm as literary technique: a study of the satiric devices used in the *Peregrinação de Fernão Mendes Pinto*” (UCLA, 1972), which was later published by Prelo Editora of Lisbon, Portugal as *A sátira social de Fernão Mendes Pinto: análise crítica da Peregrinação* (1978). To Dr. Rebecca Catz, whose memory this lecture honors, we also owe the translation of the unabridged version of Pinto’s masterpiece together with a monumental critical apparatus: *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1989.

The subject of tonight’s lecture are not works of literature having travel as one of their main focuses, such as *The Lusiads* or the *Tragic History of the Sea*,¹ but rather the modern travelogue or travel narrative, or what the French call the *récit de voyage* and the Germans designate as *Das Reisebuch*. As my title indicates, I will concentrate on some

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¹ For a difference between travel in literature and travel literature, see Seixo, Maria Alzira; Cristóvão, Fernando (note 2); and Born, Jan, “Defining Travel: On the Travel Book, Travel Writing and Terminology,” in Hooper, Glen, and Youngs 13-26.
impressions of the US in twentieth-century travel narratives by Portuguese writers. Although Portuguese travel narratives about the United States are not particularly abundant, nevertheless about a dozen or so of these works, covering almost the entire span of the twentieth century, remain extant and fairly accessible today, even though they have received very scant critical attention. A number of them, including the two I have chosen for closer perusal in this lecture, are by well-known authors. They are Natália Correia’s *Descobri que era europeia—impressões duma viagem à América* (I discovered that I was a European—impressions of a trip to America; 1951), and Ilse Losa’s *Ida e volta—à procura de Babbitt* (Round trip—searching for Babbitt; 1960).

It has been claimed that the travel narrative, a genre that attained prominence especially since the fifteenth century, experienced its waning phase at the end of the nineteenth. That is the span of time that the Portuguese theoretician and critic Fernando Cristóvão concedes to the travel narrative, attributing its alleged demise to the profound alterations in the three basic factors that had always sustained it: the elimination of distances due to the development of modern means of transportation; the absence of novelty as the world became smaller and smaller; and the spread of tourism due to the enlargement of the middle class, which made the number of “witnesses” to distant places and events much too numerous in most cases for the travel narrative to retain its viability.

However much truth there may be in Fernando Cristóvão’s assertion and explanations, it is undeniable that in the last thirty or forty years there developed a renewed interest in the travel narrative—if not necessarily in Portugal, at least

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2 For a definition of travel narrative and its basis on the description modality, see Rueda, Carizo, Sofia M.
3 Fernando Cristóvão, “Para uma teoria da Literatura de Viagens.” In Cristóvão, Fernando, 35.
elsewhere—inspired in large measure by the intellectual climate that also brought about postcolonialism—a theoretical and critical discourse that interrogates, among others, the kinds of ideologies that sustained empires, colonies, nationalisms, traditional ethnography, and diasporas.

I am particularly interested in the concept of *ethical representation of the other*—from their physical appearance to their habitudes to their social institutions—in the two travel narratives that I propose to study. I will borrow a couple of far-reaching concepts from a theoretical work that may be placed within the conceptual orbit of postcolonialism: Syed Mansurul Islam’s *The Ethics of Travel: From Marco Polo to Kafka* (1996). The two concepts are *sedentary travel* and *nomadic travel*. I will maintain that the first work under consideration here, Natália Correia’s *I discovered I was a European*, approximates the category of *sedentary travel*, and that Ilse Losa’s narrative, *Round Trip—searching for Babbitt*, exemplifies to a considerable degree the concept *nomadic travel*, to be discussed at the appropriate time.

“From an ethical perspective,” writes Syed Mansarul Islam, “sedentary travel hardly deserves to be called ‘travel’ at all. Of course it involves a movement across geographical and textual space, but it settles for a representational practice that scarcely registers an encounter with the other. Consequently, it seems that the movement of sedentary travel is driven by the need to secure a vantage point from which to carry out a representation of difference.” And Islam adds: “Inevitably, then, sedentary travelers, burdened as they are by the need to establish essential difference on a binary frame and to

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4 See Tim Youngs, “Where Are We Going? Cross-border Approaches to Travel Writing.” In Glen Hooper, and Tim Youngs. Youngs provides a useful “Select Bibliography” of travel theory/criticism as well as travel writing, including recent travel narratives: 181-192. In the list “Recommended Titles,” Casey Blanton also provides an excellent annotated list of travel narratives, including modern ones.
capture otherness in knowledge, obsessively bring into existence a rigid boundary which
separates them from the other” (Islam, “Preface” viii). As Islam states, his book was
written in the spirit of Franz Kafka’s ethical writings, but also under the influence of
Gilles Deleuze, Pierre-Félix Guattari, Frantz Fanon, and Wilson Harris.

Natália Correia (1923-1993) was born in São Miguel, Azores, but moved to the
Portuguese mainland at age 11, where she resided until her death. Poet, novelist, essayist
and anthologist, she is also a noteworthy translator of medieval Galician-Portuguese
cantigas into modern Portuguese. She is mostly known, however, for her surrealistic and
mystic verse, much of it with deep roots in Azorean experiences and themes, such as the
sea and insularity, also shared, albeit in different ways, by poets such as Antero de
Quental and Vitorino Nemésio. At the time of her first visit to the US, Natália Correia
had published three books, including a children’s novel, Grandes aventuras de um
pequeno herói (Great adventures of a little hero; 1945), and Anoiteceu no bairro
(Nightfall in the neighborhood; 1946).

In the preface to her travel narrative, Natália Correia makes two statements that
one might find unusual in a work that attempts seriously to characterize a country and a
people. One of the statements pertains to the self-characterization of her own outlook as
an artist. “This book is at times incoherent because it is true,” Natália Correia states. And
she adds: “What yesterday was blue through our tedium, today is red through our hope. It
[her travel narrative] is the photo album of a country, revealed in the dark camera of my
sensibility in accordance with my cafard or my casual love of things” (I discovered 10).

The other statement, also very elucidating for my critique of this travel narrative, is
actually a confession, probably meant to excuse herself for her representation of America
and Americans: “Perhaps this book has too much of me and little of what I should say. Someone who read it in manuscript called my attention to a pronounced egocentrism from the first to the last page. It is very possible. I do not know how to do things otherwise. I am a bird who only knows how to fly in all the amplitude of the space that her own love created.” (*I discovered* 10).

Natália Correia’s visit to the US, in the company of her husband William Creighton Hylen (an American from Maine, who resided in Portugal and who is never mentioned in the book), took place in June of 1950.\(^5\) The couple was supposed to extend their visit beyond the month of June to go to California, but were forced to cancel that leg of the trip due to the need to return home.\(^6\) Correia’s itinerary starts in Boston, where she spends a few days, and is followed by a trip to Thomaston, Maine. Afterwards, she travels via Providence to New Bedford, where she spends relatively little time. Most of her time is actually spent in New York, with side trips to Washington, D.C. and to Alexandria, Virginia. She then returns by bus to New York, where she spends a few more days before the trip back home.

Among the highlights of her visit is a meeting with the editor of the *Boston Globe* (which published an article on her visit, illustrated by a picture of Correia and her husband). Another important moment was her attendance at a press conference with President Harry Truman, and another press conference with the Secretary of State Dean Acheson. She also met with historian Arthur Schlesinger, and with Margaret Chase

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\(^5\) The month of June is provided by the author herself in the narrative. The year of Natália Correia’s travel to America is given as 1949 in the cover flap of the 2\(^{nd}\) edition that I am using. Onésimo Teotónio Almeida, based on references contained in the book, concludes that the trip took place in 1950, not 1949.

\(^6\) Although this detail is only of marginal interest for purposes of this paper, Natália Correia never once in her narrative mentions her husband, from whom she was divorced before the publication of the book, originally written for and published in a Lisbon newspaper. Cf. Onésimo Teotónio Almeida’s unpublished article included in the Bibliography, 3 (note 13); 4 (note 14).
Smith, the Republican Senator from Maine who, in 1964, would be the first woman in history to have her name placed in nomination for the Presidency of the United States. Correia also met with a literary critic of *The New York Times*, as well as other prominent individuals.

Nowhere in the narrative is there an announcement of her plans for the trip. The narrative is (in)formed by visits to iconic sites and monuments in the major cities she visits and describes. The text is perhaps best characterized, however, as a series of impressions based on the sites and the people watched and encountered, with special emphasis on the representation of Americans in their physical appearance, their habitudes or modes of behavior, commentaries on gender roles and differences, and expressions of opinion on social and moral issues. Natália Correia also expresses views on American culture (literature, the visual arts) and politics. Despite her short stay and her relatively circumscribed travels, she cannot resist the temptation of making sweeping generalizations about America and Americans.

Natália Correia employs one of the most common representational techniques generally used by travel narrators: the dialogue with a cicerone, an acquaintance or friend, a fellow countryperson, an academic or dignitary. Many of her criticisms of the US are actually comments that she places in the mouths of some prominent Americans.\(^7\) More than any other of the Portuguese travel writers included in the bibliography of this paper, however, Natália Correia is the author whose narrative derives most of its content

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\(^7\) To give but one example, Natália Correia quotes Miss Olive Homes, of the Foreign Policy Association, whom she met in Washington, the following words about the United States: “The great evil is that we are a prosperous country and, at the same time, do not have a civilization. The proof that we do not have a civilization is the fact that we do not have a national cuisine. We are lacking the three elements without which no civilization can be considered such: our own philosophy, our own music, and our own cuisine” (*I discovered* 97)
from impressions of America and its people from direct observation and deduction, not from encounters and dialogue. In these observations, differences between the culture she represents—the European culture explicit in the title of the narrative, even though never defined—and the host country are emphasized.

Natália Correia is a consummate portraitist and caricaturist. Although she has some humanizing portraits of personages she meets—for example, portraits of Senator Margaret Chase Smith (*I discovered* 144) and Truman’s Secretary of State Dean Acheson (*I discovered* 155)—the overwhelming majority of her portraits are cruel caricatures which not only render the other person or persons exotic, but actually objectify and dehumanize them. Zoomorphic imagery often prevails in these caricatures, of which the limitations of time will only allow me to quote a few examples.

Still en route to the US, here is how the narrator of *I discovered I was a European* represents an American employee of TWA:

> The blond gentleman’s ugliness is beyond verisimilitude. His coat is too short for his apelike arms. His face has something of a skinny bulldog. And since he bears on his lapel the tag TWA, I conclude he is a dog. However, still on account of the tag, I withdraw from him the privilege of being identified with that type of animal and classify him as a mere ‘stray dog,’ a label that fits like a glove his raging air of a common dog in search of his tail… (*I discovered* 16)

When tired of strolling the “monotonous” streets of Manhattan, she heads to Chinatown for dinner. Her description of the people walking the streets of Chinatown, once again with recourse to a zoomorphic image, would impress even Edward Said as an example of far-Eastern Orientalism:

> Groups of Chinese, with parched faces, assembled on street corners. Chinese girls went by smoking, dressed in Western garb, with long strides as if they could traverse on foot the length of the African continent. Where had they left the subtlety of the stride restrained by the kebaya dress? Don’t these people realize that out of the mold of their oriental attire, made for their anatomic proportions, they turn into a type of amphibian, neither of the land nor of the water? (*I discovered* 78)

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8 All translations of Correia’s and Losa’s texts used in this paper are my own.
Natália Correia admits that these remarks regarding her preconceived notions of what the Chinese—she never refers to them as “Chinese Americans,” or as “Americans of Chinese descent”—“were dictated by my selfishness and I was perfectly conscious of that.” And then she adds: “But it was difficult to accept the disillusionment that my search for the typical [sic] Chinese had suffered” (I discovered 78).

She strolls to Greenwich Village and walks into a nightclub: “The nightclub was decorated as a barn.” “In a coop,” she writes, “an unhappy rooster [a nightclub singer] was attempting flights that perished in his feeble wings” (I discovered 79). Later on, the famous Radio City Music Hall Rockettes seem to her like “highly trained animals” (I discovered 82). She also has a unique image to describe the Billie Rose Girls: “extremely beautiful fancy horses two meters tall” (I discovered 90). At a cocktail lounge where she meets with Miss Olive Holmes, of the Foreign Policy Association, whom she finds attractive, she surveys the floor of the lounge where, as Correia puts it, “the feminine element prevailed.” And what was her impression of that “feminine element”? The reader is not sure whether Correia means to characterize only the women at the lounge, or whether her characterization is meant to apply to groups of American women in general speaking an American version of the English language: “The voices of assembled American women produce a din very similar to a nocturnal symphony of restless she-cats in heat” (I discovered 93). At a Chinese restaurant in Washington, Correia has another opportunity to describe a group of American women, one of her favorite topics:

I felt I was at a zoological park. It was a real pageant of bad taste and ugliness: fat old ladies in tube socks, pouting lips, little angels one might see in the procession encased in starched ruffles, unkempt hairdos in pretentiously sensuous negligees, extremes of bad taste, wrong dresses, hats that were not right, shoes that did not match. And they had bared their backs and shoulders, as if they did not know that to bare one’s back and one’s shoulders requires a special sense of esthetic bearing. (I discovered 136)
Not surprisingly, the relatively few people whom she actually meets are described in humanizing terms. Those whom she only observes on the streets or in public establishments, which constitute the majority, are often *othered* to the point of dehumanization.

Her demeaning representation of Americans attain a degree of particular virulence when she visits Coney Island for the second time. “It is necessary to go to Coney Island on a Sunday,” she writes, “in order to see, in an amplified color photo, the authentic life of the middle class” (*I discovered* 170). Armed with ideas about what and who constitutes the American middle class, and informed by the newspapers that, on that Sunday, one and a half million people would be going to the Island, she takes the train with a group of them, watches their activities, then rides the train back to Manhattan with some members of the initial group. The gallery of portraits (some of them humanized and literally striking) and caricatures (quite a number of them cruel stereotypes of ethnic groups, including Puerto Ricans and blacks) that results is truly impressive. But most impressive of all is that Natália Correia should conclude in these terms about how much she had learned, not about the middle class (which is what she had maintained before), but about New Yorkers, thus conflating “middle class” with “the people of New York”: “From this outing to Coney Island I kept the notion that for the first time I had seen the true face of the people of New York” (*I discovered* 173).

Watching others or acting as spectator leads the narrator to talking *about other(s)*, as we have seen.⁹ This *talking about* does not presuppose, nor does it lead to, an encounter or meeting with the other, but instead to *monologues about the other* shared

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⁹For a more thorough perspective on “Narrating Self and Other,” see first chapter of Casey Blanton.
with her readers. It keeps the host and the visitor separate, with the latter often grasping at straws in an attempt to understand the host or, what’s much worse, representing the host on the basis of physical caricature or gross generalization. One thing is certain: only by encountering or meeting the other is there the possibility of dialogue with. Dialogue actually happens in Descobri que era europeia in the case of the people whose representation is, not too surprisingly, fair, for example, with Dean Acheson and Margaret Chase Smith. However, such is the propensity in Natália Correia towards the monologue about the other, as opposed to the dialogue with him or her, that even when conversations occur between her and individuals of the host country, she often not only disagrees vehemently with them regarding issues she could not possibly be informed about, but actually advances ideas that she recently formulated based on scanty evidence and outrageous generalizations, thereby surprising her diegetic interlocutor, as well as flabbergasting her reader.

One single example will suffice. Natália Correia is talking with Mary, one of her hostesses in Thomaston, Maine. The Portuguese author remarks on Mary’s knowledge of Portuguese history, something quite unique about the people she met in the US. The conversation veers towards democratic versus undemocratic practices in both Portugal and the United States. Allegedly, Mary thinks it undemocratic to have maids, a common practice in Portugal. “This horrible thing of having maids provoked in her [Mary] a confused revolt” (63), writes Natália Correia. She then adds: “I explained to her an opinion that I had been accumulating in my conversations with Americans” (54). One must, of course, give Natália Correia the benefit of the doubt, and assume that those “conversations with Americans” had been taking place for at long time in this and the
other side of the Atlantic, for at this stage of her trip she had been in the US for only a few days. Correia writes: “Above and beyond being democratic, you [Americans] have the complex of democracy. In a way, I compare you to those theory-bound communists who believe that the revolution consists in not wearing a tie, in instantaneously inverting social values, and in having an ingrained phobia of all prejudices” (64)

In the give-and-take that ensues, Natália Correia surprises Mary by countering the latter’s charge that having servants was undemocratic with the surprising question: “What about subservience?” And Natália clarifies: “Yes… The worst example of all: the subservience of tipping. The superfluous form of venality, as it comes from well-healed persons” (64) Mary, then, allegedly wanted to know Correia’s impressions of “the working classes, such as porters, bellhops, servants, etc.” (64). In answer to this question, Natália Correia’s lengthy explanation is followed by a not surprising reaction on the part of her interlocutor that Natália Correia characterizes as “Mary listened to me rather disconcerted [assarapantada]” (65). Although “disconcerted” is a correct translation of assarapantada, the term “flabbergasted” might have been more appropriate. And why shouldn’t Mary be flabbergasted?

To begin with, Natália Correia’s characterization of the working class people in America applies much more to their counterparts in Portugal than in the US. Second, Natália Correia had only been in the US for less than a week, and had no basis for this kind of generalization, even if it were applicable to the American working class. Although what Philippe Lejeune calls the “autobiographical pact,” if applied to the travel narrative would require that we grant Natália Correia the suspension of disbelief, this reader does wonder whether, here as elsewhere in her book, Correia really had a
sufficient command of the English language to discourse with such easy, as her text suggests, with someone who did not know the Portuguese language. I will only quote part of Correia’s lengthy reply, starting with a characterization of those members of the American working class, which I maintain applies more to the Portuguese than to Americans so often eager to please the customer, “who is always right”:

They are unpleasant and disagreeable. They do things with an air of who is doing you a favor. I have the impression that these people are living the anguish of a moral crisis resulting from their peculiar economic situation. . . . The economic system works such as to distribute the greatest wealth by the greatest number. But that distribution is not equitable, given that you are a capitalist country. The individual belonging to the low class existing in America, whether the adepts of democracy believe so or not, reasons thus: I have a refrigerator, a car, a television set; but you have incomparably more than I do. Why this difference if we are equal before the Constitution? Hence a class hatred which translates itself into the arrogant attitudes and the cold discharge of their obligations.

As we saw earlier, Natália Correia did not reject one of her readers’ criticism that her book was too egocentric. Part of this egocentrism, we might grant, stems from the generically hybrid nature of the travel narrative, which often invades the territory of the memoir, the historical essay, the crónica, to mention but the most obvious affiliations. Natália Correia once refers to her text as a “diary” (I discovered 76). Some of the authors of the travel narratives listed in the Bibliography even hesitate what subtitles to attribute to their texts. Fernando Namora, for example, subtitles his Calvagada Cinzenta ‘Gray Cavalcade,’ simply as narrative. As we will see later, Ilse Losa refers to the various segments comprising her travelogue, as “letters.” The fact remains, however, that Natália Correia’s text is presented primarily as a travel narrative, and the Americans and habitudes she describes pertain not to fictional beings or customs, but refer instead to real human beings and their cultural practices.

Natália Correia herself, who was a young 27-year-old when she visited the US and whose narrative was first published in book form one year later, is perfectly aware of
her rash and biased views. Twenty pages into her book, she writes: “At first, I actually manage to convince myself that I have a bias against the United States. It is not true. That would be a feeble mental attitude for one who, like me, proposes to analyze it. I don’t want to see America through slanted eyes, skewed by rancor. But neither am I after that mirage publicized by movies, magazines, slogans or the exalted stories of emigrants, serfs in Europe, bosses in America” (I discovered 21). She is absolutely right that her reader, at least this reader, did not expect her to write a panegyric of America, or repeat the stories of the lowly emigrant who may be divided between the love—or the resentment, as the case may be—of two countries. But a reader, whoever he or she might be, is right to expect on the part of anyone who would write a travel narrative about a country and a people to adhere to a sense of ethical fair play, an understanding that reaches beyond the first impression; a separation between a humanistically responsible representation, on the one hand, and a capricious use of people for artistic purposes, on the other.

Let us listen to Natália Correia reflecting on the groups of people with whom she traveled to and from and watched on Coney Island, and referred to as examples of the “American middle class” and of “the people of New York.” Based on the same perceptions, she now enlarges upon those already broad generalizations about Americans. What she writes now betrays any hope whatsoever that she was intellectually and emotionally equipped to even begin to understand the complexity of a country like the United States, or that she had the ethical maturity to distinguish, even minimally, between a genre like the travel narrative, which owes at least some debt to verisimilitude, and the “musings of an artist,” that may or may not. She writes:
In America, the human agglomerate has, more than in any other place in the world, a multitudinous and amorphous character. It is a universe composed of infinitesimal number of atoms. But this multitude was not uniform. It did not rotate on the axle of standardization. Each and every one was a melancholy celestial body shining with its own light. They were Goyesque drawings, characters in a novel, extremely rich raw material for the musings of an artist. (I discovered 174)

Apparently for Natália Correia the pot had not melted everybody to a presumably desired level of standardization. But then, if that melting had taken place to the extreme that she now seems to imply, would be more to her liking? And what would have happened to those Chinese Americans in Chinatown whom she did not consider sufficiently Chinese-looking in their attire? And would her “artistic musings” have not been compromised if, indeed, there had been sufficient melting into a standardized human form, and she had discovered, in addition, that the human “dog” traveling on her flight, and the “she-cats in heat” in the cocktail lounge had all become European-looking and European-sounding like her? And why “European” and not “Portuguese”? We will return to this question later.

Contrary to sedentary travel, nomadic travel has to do “with [the] encounter with otherness that fracture[s] both a boundary and an apparatus of representation: it is a performative enactment of becoming-other. In the ethical sense, only nomadic travel deserves the name ‘travel’. .” And Syed Manzarul Islam adds: “Furthermore, nomadic travel offers a non-essentialist and a non-sedentary vision of living where dwelling and traveling merge into one another. And on the cross-cultural plane, nomadic travel also impels one to come face to face with the other, without the paranoia of othering that represents the other in relation to oneself’ (Islam, “Preface” vii). I maintain that this description of the nomadic travel(er) applies to the narrative and the narrator of Ilse Losa’s Round trip—in search of Babbit.
Ilse Lieblich Losa (1913-2006) was born in Bauer, near Hannover, Germany, where she attended high school and the Commercial Institute. She spent a year in England as an *au pair*, where she also took up the study of pedagogy. Upon returning to Germany, she was persecuted by the Nazis on account of her being Jewish. In 1934, she took refuge in Portugal. There she married architect Arménio Losa, became a Portuguese citizen, and went on to become a well-known writer. Ilse Losa is the author of several novels and volumes of short stories and novellas, originally written in Portuguese. She is also a noted writer of children’s literature, for which she has won important prizes. She also translated a number of German literary works into Portuguese.

In 1958, Ilse Losa spent a few months traveling in the United States. Her itinerary starts in Silver Spring, Maryland, with side visits to Washington, D.C. and surrounding areas. She then heads south to Fayetteville, North Carolina, then Cleveland, Ohio, and after that takes a plane to Los Angeles. Subsequent to a fairly lengthy stay in the L.A. area, she travels to the San Francisco Bay Area for a brief stay, and then returns to the East Coast by train. Her train stops in Chicago but she does not see the city. Her final destination in the U.S. is New York City.

One of the unique characteristics of Losa’s travels is that she only stays at a hotel in New York City for a few days at the end of her trip. Until the very end of her journey, she stays with friends, or friends of friends, or people whose acquaintance she made during her travels. The fact that she spends most of her time in the US with friends and acquaintances, coupled with her humanistic outlook, have the profound effect of lending her narrative strikingly different characteristics from most of the travel narratives by
Portuguese writers included in the bibliography. Ilse Losa looks at the US from the inside in, instead of from the outside in.

Losa’s visit to America is more a visit to the people of America than the cities and iconic monuments of America, although she also visits many of these; her contacts with the overwhelming majority of individuals whom the reader meets in his or her reading journey of Round trip are encounters or meetings, as opposed to observations casually gathered by strolling on the streets of a city or entering a public establishment; the predominant attitude that informs Round trip is one of expectant learning on the part of the visitor-narrator. Many of the stereotypes of Americans that she brought with her from Europe crumble before the reality that she encounters—and she makes a point of acknowledging her change of opinion when there is evidence to warrant it. This narrative is not an apology for the United States, as there are many criticisms of sites, customs and people seen and met. But those criticisms, right or wrong by any objective measure, are nearly always the result of reflection and a sense of fairness. Her narrative is rich in portraits. Although a few are satirical, none is dehumanizing. Symptomatically, she ends her book with a rich and complex portrait of American composer and arranger Hall Johnson, with whom she visits Harlem, and whose personal acquaintance she made through a friend of a friend in Los Angeles.

Of all the Portuguese travel narratives about the US included in the bibliography, Ilse Losa’s is by far the richest in metanarrative comments. In one of the most notable passages, she distinguishes three types of travelers which, curiously enough, are right on target as characterizations of a considerable number of Portuguese travel narratives listed in the bibliography. First, according to her, there is the traveler who is enchanted with all
he or she sees. Second, there are those visitors who traverse the whole continent from one end to the other “with a haughty attitude, donning the starched collar of their old and ‘aristocratic’ world, always reserved, circumspect and angry because no one extends to them the servile deference to which they are accustomed” (*Round trip* 108). And third, there are those who “bring with themselves a laid-out scheme, and enclose each impression in the pigeonhole already reserved for it” (*Round trip* 108).

Ilse Losa’s narrative does not fit within any of these three categories. In fact, her narrative may be characterized as a search for the commonality, as opposed to the differences, among people. As Vamberto Freitas has pointed out in a brief but penetrating article on *Round trip*, this book “É o olhar do outro perante o outro” ‘The look of the other before the other’ (Freitas 131).” Paraphrasing Freitas, I would substitute look for encounter. “Look” can be translated as *le regard*, which in and of itself can have very negative connotations, as Sartre pointed out. Yes, part of the tolerant views of the other that this narrative exemplifies probably stem from the fact that Losa herself had experienced being an *other* in her country of origin, Germany, and had been living in another country, Portugal, for decades, where she continued to be a foreigner. Despite this, however, Ilse Losa—contrary to Natália Correia—always identifies herself as *Portuguese*. She only identifies herself as *European* once during the entire narrative. In an interchange with one of her interlocutors, she corrects Americans who use the label “European” much too liberally: “here you speak of Europeans as if all of Europe were a country with a single culture. In reality, we are terribly apart from one another, in the degree of culture, in customs and in language. A Scandinavian or a German, for example, perhaps feels greater affinities with the lifestyle of Americans than with that of the
Portuguese” (Round trip 40). Although there is no indication that Losa meant this statement to be a criticism of the author of I discovered I was a European, it fits her like a glove.

Contrary to the type of traveler who comes to the US armed with preconceived notions and dutifully registers those notions, i.e., predictably “learns” what he or she already knew or thought he or she knew, much of Ilse Losa’s narrative is dedicated to the undoing or correcting of stereotypes that she had been exposed to about Americans prior to her visit. Once again, her inside view of America and some of its denizens—a result of her placing more importance on encountering/meeting people in the US than on watching them and visiting their cities and monuments—accounts in large measure for her change of views regarding many aspects of the habitudes of Americans. In her eagerness to meet people and do so in their own milieu, Ilse Losa visits a synagogue in America, goes to a service in a black Baptist church, visits an elementary school, a high school, and travels on foot as much as possible, even in neighborhoods where she is advised not to walk.

As opposed to Natália Correia who is wont to register encounters especially with important personages, Ilse Losa—who also attended a Presidential press conference, and met very important people from the professional and art worlds—pays special attention, and acknowledges, the existence and dignity of individuals from the working class. A case in point is the taxi driver who drove her from Washington, D.C. to Silver Spring, Maryland, and who spent an inordinate amount of time looking for the address of Losa’s friend and first host in America.

And I began wondering how many dollars that “trip” was going to cost me. Was I not in the country of gangsters? And that undercover gangster with his false ID card on the dashboard, cynically consoling me. “Don’t worry, Miss, we’ll get there.” And why was he calling me “Miss” if I was the calm mother of two girls? And, yes, we did arrive. And he, the gangster, unceremoniously walked into Mrs. Michel’s house. Never before had he seen the likes of her, but
still, full of patience, he sat down in the living room explaining to her the reason for the delay. And Mrs. Michel found everything perfectly natural. In the end, I paid four dollars, which was a bargain, considering how long we had been riding. I was, at last, so grateful that he was neither a 
gangster nor a cynic, and I told him: “You were so kind to me, thanks.” (Round trip 16)

In addition to deconstructing stereotypes about taxi drivers (and she does so again regarding taxi drivers in New York City (Round trip 264)), Ilse Losa also undermines preconceived notions regarding, for example, the generalized view that American women cannot cook, by providing examples of concrete experiences she had (Round trip 27). Regarding the stereotype of Los Angeles as a “monster city,” she responds: “I left Los Angeles, called the monster city where, at first, everything seemed artificial to me but where I encountered human warmth as exists everywhere and where I left unforgettable friends. In my pocketbook I carry addresses of friends of those friends, the continuation that is in everything, including people” (Round trip 225).

One aspect of Ilse Losa’s book that I would be remiss not to mention is her comparisons and contrasts with impressions of America and Americans with what she has seen and experienced in Portugal. Let me state that the majority of the Portuguese travel narratives that I include in my bibliography seldom mention Portugal. When they do, it is seldom to criticize any aspect of Portugal or Portuguese life. A few times that Portugal is mentioned, it is to point out some salient positive aspect of Portuguese life, or else to offer a criticism of some anodyne habitude. A case in point is Natália Correia’s mention that American men are more observant of gentlemanly etiquette in the treatment of women than are Portuguese men. And although one may choose to view her story about the policeman who scolded her for wearing skimpy attire while driving—a scene which undoubtedly brought to her Portuguese readers’ minds the hypocritical Puritanism of Salazar’s Portugal—nothing in Natália Correia’s book, or in any of the other books by
the other writers featured in the bibliography, comes even close to the courageous statements that Ilse Losa makes *throughout* her narrative.

As is well known, censorship in Salazar’ Portugal (1928-1974) was very severe. Newspapers and magazines censured works prior to publication. In the case of books, however, there was no prior censorship. But there was something much worse. The writer wrote at his or her own peril. Likewise, the publisher published at his or her own peril. For after publication, as happened to writers like Miguel Torga, the Portuguese State Police (the infamous PIDE) could censor your book *a posteriori*, by simply lifting it off the shelves of bookstores. So it took quite an act of courage to write what Ilse Losa wrote regarding Portuguese reality. To us living in the US today, many of her comments may sound relatively mild. For anyone who knew what it was like to live in Salazar’s Portugal at the time, some of her criticisms had far-reaching political implications—and could be viewed by the Portuguese authorities as anything but innocent.

Losa’s comparisons and contrasts point out the politically relatively mild facts that Portuguese markets do not compare with American markets in terms of cleanliness (*Round trip* 21); that she admires American informality in dress and speech, and deplores the stiffness of the Portuguese in both (*Round trip* 26; 132); that she rejoices in being able to walk the streets of New York without having all eyes on her. “And to remember,” she adds, “that I come from a land where if a washerwoman dared to don a hat, the entire city would be in an uproar” (*Round trip* 260).

Some of Losa’s comments about Portuguese reality are much more politically explosive than these, however. Repeatedly she points to dire poverty in Portugal. One little vignette is particularly illustrative. While walking the streets in Silver Spring,
Maryland, she notices two little girls by a little stand selling dolls. Thinking that they were playing at being salespeople, she joins in the fun, to soon realize that the sale was for real. Losa adds this comment: “It was not a case of little unfortunate children as one sees in Portugal, selling merchandise in cafés and on the streets in order to put food on the table, but of well-to-do little girls who lived in an elegant neighborhood” (Round trip 60). On another occasion when discussing the issue of children left alone at home because both parents work, she is asked by her interlocutor whether the same happens in Portugal, to which she rejoins that among the middle class leaving children by themselves was not common, but the abandonment of children among the working classes “was almost general, without the parents even having the possibility of leaving their children in daycare centers or schools where they could even get a meal” (Round trip 63).

In fact, Losa raises the comparison and contrast between one’s homeland and the countries one visits to an ethical component of the travelogue. She writes, “Yes, as a matter of fact, we all have the tendency to judge things in a foreign country based on appearances, and make sweeping judgments without making comparisons and, if we make them, we do so with little objectivity. Our first encounter with a foreign land ought to simultaneously be a re-encounter with lands already familiar to us, and even with ourselves” (Round trip 216-217).

Foreign visitors who have published accounts of their impressions of the United States number in the hundreds. They include, on the side of those whose impressions were positive, and even laudatory, Hector St. John Crevecouer, Alexis de Tocqueville, Winston Churchill, and the Portuguese Alfredo de Mesquita, whose América do Norte
(2nd edition 1917) constitutes a panegyric, and António Ferro’s two books, *Novo Mundo Mundo Novo* (A New World in the New World; 1930), and *Hollywood—capital das imagens* (Hollywood—the images capital; 1931), both of which also constitute largely positive impressions of the US. Other Portuguese writers authored fairly positive, or at least balanced, views of the United States. They include, in the order of publication, Ferreira de Castro’s *Estados Unidos da América* (1951), Joaquim Paço d’Arcos, *A floresta de cimento: claridade e sombras dos Estados Unidos* (The Cement Forest: light and shadows of the United States; 1953), João Alves da Costa’s *América em carne viva* (America in the raw; 1974), Dias de Melo’s *Das velas de lona às asas de alumínio* (From the canvas sails to the aluminum wings; 1990), and Clara Pinto Correia’s *The Big Easy* (1992)

The number of visitors, including luminaries, who have visited the United States and gone on to write scathing indictments of the US is much larger, however. As far back as 1864, in the preface to his *America and its Commentators*, Henry T. Tuckerman wrote:

> Numerous as are the books of travel in and commentaries on America—ranging from the most shallow to the most profound, from the crude to the artistic, from the instructive to the impertinent—so far is the subject from being exhausted, that we seem but now to have a clear view of the materials for judgment, description, and analysis. (Tuckerman vi)

In 1971, in the Introduction to his anthology of travel narratives about America, *Broken Image: Foreign Critiques of America*, covering the period from 1770 to 1970, Gerald Emanuel Stearn could still write the following:

> My concern here is with the unattractive, the dismal, the dark sides of America. Selections have been made with a desire for thematic relevance, using the 1960’s as a watershed in American history, so that earlier foreign quibbles often become prescient, incisive and revealing observations today. Consequently, many of these essays are brutal, even gory. Some lack delicacy and restraint and appear to have been written simply to offend Americans. Several contributors are openly bigoted, sharing the distorted values of a people they observed in order to condemn. Rumor, myth and fantasy often mingle in these essays with embarrassing fact. (Stearn xii)

Stearn’s anthology lists, among many others, famous accounts by authors as well-known and well-regarded as Charles Dickens, José Martí, Paul Bourget, Maxim Gorky, H. G.
Wells, Sigmund Freud, George Duhamel, and David Holbrook—all of whom wrote scathing reports on the US on topics ranging from slavery and racism to the extermination of Native Americans to violence to gross materialism and lack of interest in culture.

Among the Portuguese who wrote fairly negative accounts of the US, one must count Fernando Namora whose *Cavalcada cinzenta: narrativa* (Gray Cavalcade: narrative; 1972) is based on a five-day visit to New York City. A more complete list of negative impressions of the US would have to include travel narratives by some of America’s own native sons, including Henry James, whose *The American Scene* (1907) heavily criticizes America, among other things, for its materialism and for its more recent immigrants; and Henry Miller, whose *The Air Conditioned Nightmare* (1945) is, as its very title suggests, another strong indictment of many aspects of life in his country of birth. Both of these writers based their impressions on visits to their native country after twenty years of living abroad.

In conclusion, I chose to speak of the two narratives by Natália Correia and Ilse Losa not so much because they exemplify negative or less negative views of the US—Correia has several positive things to say about the US, and Losa does offer some criticisms of the United States—but because these two writers and their works exemplify, to my mind, something even more important than negative or positive views about a country—arrived at by legitimate observation, reflection, and understanding (hopefully in the sense of *Verstehen*, in Max Weber’s acceptation of ‘interpretive understanding’). There will always be as many views or impressions of a country or of a people as there are visitors who reflect on what they saw and experienced. More important to me than the
conclusions, are the representational processes utilized to characterize a country and, more important still, a nation or a people. As Syed Manzurul Islam rightly states, “an ethical undertaking should not lead to a surrendering of the critical discourse” (Islam, “Preface” ix). One can accept that a country or a people be fairly criticized for their failures or shortcomings. Most hosts would probably even welcome or invite constructive criticisms. The readers (not to mention the people whose countries and cultures are represented in travelogues) also have a right to expect, however, that any criticisms be themselves based on an ethically minded representation of the other.

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