

# The Herald News

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## New book brings to life experiences of Portuguese millworkers in New England

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DARTMOUTH – A newly released book by [UMass Dartmouth's Tagus Press](#) provides a window into how the lives of Portuguese immigrants and Portuguese-Americans were shaped by the textile mills economy, which was the main magnet for Portuguese migration to New England.

In 426 pages, the book '[Migration, Mill Work, and Portuguese Communities in New England](#)' brings together analytical research essays, personal testimonies, poems, fiction, photos and drawings to chronicle the predicaments, struggles, encounters and achievements experienced by the Portuguese under the pressures of upward mobility, racialized tensions, politics of assimilation or multiculturalism and labor and ethnic revival movements.

The latest volume in the 'Portuguese in the Americas Series,' the book was edited by [Cristiana Bastos](#), [Bela Feldman-Bianco](#) and [Miguel Moniz](#), three anthropologists with converging interests regarding the Portuguese of New England.

"We have quite a wide range of empirically grounded, well-rounded researched articles," Bastos told O Jornal. "They are not opinion articles. They're not doctrinal. They provide not only the data that they use, but an analytic angle that allows us to have a better perspective on the history of the Portuguese community."

Moniz pointed out there is a mythology in this region about why and how immigrants from Portugal and Cape Verde came to the United States, and mill workers are often overlooked because people immediately think of the whaling era and jobs connected to the sea.

"However, the reality is that over the 100-year-span between 1830 and 1930, 90-plus percent of those arriving from Portugal came to work as a result of the second industrial revolution, with nearly all of these individuals who arrived employed in low level positions in the mills, as well as laborers in industrial agriculture," he told O Jornal. "This fact would and yet still shapes the social, economic, and political life of our communities."

Moniz said the new book gains relevance since the history and importance of the immigrant low level laborers from Portugal in New England has largely been erased by other narratives.

"The whaling mythology and 500-year-old stories of Portugal's connection to the sea of course makes for a much more romantic origin narrative than the fact that our communities arrived in New England as cheap, exploitable, and expendable migrant labor to operate the region's industrial machines," he said. "This book is unique as a comprehensive reader telling this lesser examined, but central history of these immigrant laborers that has hopefully refocused both academic study as well as popular historical narratives to rethink the

prominence of this period and its impact on what we today understand as the Portuguese and Cape Verdean communities of New England.”

## **How did the book ‘Migration, Mill Work, and Portuguese Communities in New England’ come about?**

Bastos said the book has multiple roots.

One of them dates to 2010 when Bastos, who is a senior research fellow at the [Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon](#) with a research interest in the 1910s-20s period, was a visiting professor at Brown University. She was challenged by [Frank Sousa](#), who at the time was the director of the [Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture](#) at UMass Dartmouth, to critically revisit Donald Taft’s 1923 controversial book ‘[Two Portuguese Communities in New England](#).’

As discussed in what is now the first chapter of the Tagus Press book, Taft’s book contained state-of-the-art social science research methods, but it also included some commentaries that infuriated many of those who identified themselves as Portuguese in New England.

“That book is like a sandwich of a good thing with stale bread,” Bastos said. “The research is not based on racialism, but the presentation and the conclusion are terribly racist. And that’s what offended the communities. They were depicted in a way that they didn’t see themselves and that it was derogatory.”

The first chapters of the new book, which are grouped under the section ‘Deconstructing Racialist Paradigms,’ combine critical readings of Taft’s book with detailed approaches to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese communities of New Bedford, Boston, and Fall River.

“I think they’re very enlightening to understand what those communities were like,” Bastos said.

Another root for the new book comes from Moniz’s personal engagement with the local Portuguese community.

Currently an anthropologist at the [Social Sciences Institute \(ICS\)](#) at the University of Lisbon, he is a native of Falmouth, Mass., and earned his PhD from Brown University. He has focused a great deal of his research on the role of Portuguese working men and women in the labor movements.

Moniz said the book largely draws from a 2017 multi-site conference sponsored by the ‘[Color of Labor Project](#)’ that he and Bastos convened, and he organized with UMass Lowell; the US National Park Service at Boott Cotton Mills in Lowell; UMass Dartmouth’s Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture and the Ferreira Mendes Portuguese-American Archives; the New Bedford Whaling Museum; and Casa dos Açores da Nova Inglaterra. It also included ethnographic exhibits at the Fall River City Hall and the National Park’s Boott Cotton Mill Museum.

“The papers and exhibits of new research presented at the conference formed the basis of the book, along with a number of previously published texts, and expanded to other more contemporary voices and discussions of the topic,” he said.

The third root of the book came from the expertise of Feldman-Bianco, of Brazil, who was a visiting professor at Southeastern Massachusetts University (now UMass Dartmouth) and conducted ethnographic research among the Portuguese in New Bedford from 1986 and 1991. She updated it in 2008, while she held The Hélio and Amélia Pedroso/Luso-American Development Foundation (FLAD) Endowed Chair in Portuguese Studies at UMass Dartmouth. She is also the creator of the documentary 'Saudade' (1991), highlighting how Portuguese immigrants recreated their homeland's past in their everyday life in New Bedford.

Bastos said the new book would not have been possible without Feldman-Bianco's careful critical reading and commentaries, in addition to her own chapter on more recent transformations in New Bedford.

## **How does the book bring to life immigrant experiences of Portuguese millworkers?**

Combining articles written by scholars scattered across three continents, the book starts with a section dedicated to 'Deconstructing Racialist Paradigms.'

In the first chapter, Bastos addresses how Taft conducted his research among the Portuguese in New England and what triggered the angry reactions to his book.

In chapter 2, Rose P. Rodrigues writes about the Portuguese in New Bedford during the transition from whaling to the textile mill economy.

Graça Índias Cordeiro analyzes the representation of the Portuguese in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century greater Boston in chapter 3.

In chapter 4, Paula Novera confronts the assumptions and stereotypes of 'uprootedness' applied to the immigrant communities, following the agency of the Portuguese in Fall River.

The next section addresses Portuguese 'Participation in Labor Movements.'

Philip T. Silvia assesses the persistent production of stereotypes and stigmas affecting the influxes of 'new' immigrants during the local cotton mill era in chapter 5.

Daniel Georgeanna and Roberta Hazen Aaronson address the six-month-long strike of '28 in chapter 6.

In chapter 7, Penn Reeve reinforces how the Portuguese were actively involved in labor organizations.

Moniz focuses on the effects of racialist typologies on the classification and positionality of the Portuguese in chapter 8.

According to Moniz, to understand how Taft's book was so polemical in the Portuguese communities one needs to keep in mind that it was published as the US Congress was passing laws to restrict the entry of Portuguese coming into the country, which was based on their racial classification.

"From 1911, the US Congress was involved in heated debates and public data collection, published as the 20-plus volume 'Dillingham Commission Reports' about what was called the 'immigrant question,' Moniz pointed out. "Those called to testify and submit reports contributed to debates over whether or not to grant citizenship

status and voting rights, etc., to the immigrants that had arrived to work in the turn-of-the-century explosion of American industry.”

He said that Taft is often held out as the central scholar writing about Portuguese racial classification and pushing discourses about Portuguese non-white identities, but Thomas H. Huxley analyzed Portuguese racial identity in 1870. He added that other scholars also wrote about the Portuguese using broad racist tropes in the decades before Taft was published, including Frederick Bushee and Edward Ross.

“The debate over Portuguese racial classification was a debate over whether or not they would be able to be citizens; and a consensus in the Dillingham reports, writing by other scholars, and the popular press, was that the Portuguese were non-white,” Moniz said. “Although this is not how they are usually popularly understood, a group’s racial classification is a political argument; it is not a scientific fact. So, Taft’s influence on these arguments, would have had practical implications for the Portuguese of New England.”

The poem ‘At the Portuguese Feast’ by literary scholar Nelson Vieira provides a transition to the next section titled ‘Memories of Life and Work,’ combining commentaries on literary expressions and direct testimonies of lives in Fall River, New Bedford, Lowell, and Providence.

In chapter 10, Carmen Ramos Villar critically examines Joseph Conforti’s ‘Another City Upon a Hill’ about life in mid-20th century in Fall River.

In chapter 11, Kady Phelps-El Mernissi provides direct testimonies of Portuguese workers in Lowell, Mass.

Camilo Viveiros provides three accounts of life stories in chapter 12, reporting how the Capelinhos volcanic eruption in the Azores led to a new wave of migration into New England.

Onésimo Almeida’s short story ‘Adriano(s)’ makes up chapter 13.

The next section, titled ‘The Making of an Academic Field,’ depicts the emergence of the scholarly field of Portuguese Studies in New England, including interviews conducted by Bastos and Feldman-Bianco with Nelson Vieira of Brown University (chapter 14), and Frank Sousa of UMass Dartmouth and later UMass Lowell (chapter 15).

The last section, titled ‘The Changing Positions of Portuguese Americans,’ addresses the reconfigurations of the communities into the present day, adding analytic engagement to matters of gender, race, and place.

In chapter 16, Glória de Sá confronts Taft’s depictions of the Portuguese in New England, challenging his assumptions and providing a comparative analysis of women’s occupational structure all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the last chapter, Feldman-Bianco analyzes the aftermath of the 1983 Big Dan’s rape case.

The book also features Lewis Hine’s photos of cotton mills in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Filipe Leal de Faria’s watercolors capturing the materiality of mill-centered landscapes and Anthropology Professor Andrea Klimt’s project of Fall River portraits revealing how some of these mill spaces have been reutilized.

“Most articles are substantial,” Bastos said. “They have the voices of the community and interpretations that are completely accessible to anyone. A 10-year-old can read it, I think. But an advanced graduate student can also use it.”

## **The impact of the book**

In the book’s introduction, the editors stress that “learning about the past may empower us a little bit more to act upon the future.”

Moniz told O Jornal that listening to today’s rhetoric from the far right about immigrants, “one realizes this is just regurgitated language from the early 20th century - language that in this region was also directed at the Portuguese.”

“This book provides perspective on this past, and underlines that racist, anti-immigrant rhetoric against vulnerable workers is part of an ugly political playbook for more than the past century,” he said. “Knowing that history, we can understand how politicians tell lies to scapegoat immigrants to cover up their lack of solutions and understanding of the real problems we face as a society.”

## **Where can you buy the book?**

‘Migration, Mill Work, and Portuguese Communities in New England’ is available through University of Massachusetts Press, Barnes and Noble, Amazon and Bookshop.