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Rethinking Knowledge Production on Portuguese Migrations by Bridging Arts and Academia: The Festival “A Arte de Ser Migrante”

Repensar a Produção de Conhecimento Sobre as Migrações Portuguesas Através da Articulação Entre Artes e Academia: O Festival “A Arte de Ser Migrante”

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RETHINKING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION ON PORTUGUESE MIGRATIONS BY BRIDGING ARTS AND ACADEMIA: THE FESTIVAL “A ARTE DE SER MIGRANTE”

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ABSTRACT

For a long time, knowledge production in Europe has relied on epistemologies that marginalise the body. In particular, non-visual senses have been overlooked. Building on a scholarship that foregrounds sensoriality and emotions in migration studies, this paper argues that attending to sensory experience fosters reflexivity and enables renewed understandings of the macro, meso and micro-processes shaping identity and belonging. Authored by a sociologist and a geographer with shared interests in Portuguese intra-European mobilities and creative methods, in collaboration with a photographer, the paper analyses a four-day cultural event they organised in Lisbon in 2025 that gathered artists, scholars and media professionals. The festival “A Arte de Ser Migrante” sought to step outside conventional academic formats and to pay tribute to Portuguese migrants and descendants while interrogating public narratives about Portuguese migrations. Through debates, film screenings, exhibitions, workshops, and sensorial activities involving sound, sight, touch, taste, and movement, the event assembled a heterogeneous audience and invited participants to engage with migration as a multisensory and emotionally textured experience.

Drawing on this empirical site, the paper develops three contributions: (a) a reflection on the visibility and invisibility of Portuguese migrations; (b) an examination of participatory cultural events as sites of collaborative and transdisciplinary knowledge production; and (c) an exploration of sensorial and sensitive approaches as tools for revealing blind spots of Portuguese migration research. We conclude by conceptualising the festival as both an act of resistance and a starting point for an ongoing epistemic “craft” that generates new collaborations and opens up new avenues of knowledge in the long term.

KEYWORDS

Portuguese migrations, participatory approach, cultural event, sensory methodology, memory

REPENSAR A PRODUÇÃO DE CONHECIMENTO SOBRE AS MIGRAÇÕES PORTUGUESAS ATRAVÉS DA ARTICULAÇÃO ENTRE ARTES E ACADEMIA: O FESTIVAL “A ARTE DE SER MIGRANTE”

RESUMO

Durante muito tempo, a produção de conhecimento na Europa assentou em epistemologias que marginalizam o corpo. Os sentidos não visuais têm sido sistematicamente desvalorizados. Com base em trabalhos que colocam a sensorialidade e as emoções no centro dos estudos das migrações, este artigo sustenta que a atenção à experiência sensorial promove a reflexividade e permite renovar a compreensão dos processos macro, meso e micro que moldam a identidade e o sentimento de pertença. Da autoria de uma socióloga e de uma geógrafa com interesses comuns nas mobilidades intraeuropeias portuguesas e em metodologias criativas, e de uma fotógrafa, o artigo analisa um evento cultural de quatro dias, organizado em Lisboa em 2025, que reuniu artistas, académicos e profissionais dos média. O festival “A Arte de Ser Migrante” procurou ultrapassar os formatos académicos convencionais e prestar homenagem aos migrantes portugueses e aos seus descendentes, enquanto questionava as narrativas públicas sobre as migrações portuguesas. Através de debates, exibições de filmes, exposições, oficinas e atividades sensoriais envolvendo som, visão, tato, paladar e movimento, o evento reuniu um público heterogéneo e convidou os e as participantes a abordar a migração como uma experiência multissensorial e emocionalmente densa.

Com base neste terreno empírico, o artigo desenvolve três contributos: (a) uma reflexão sobre a visibilidade e invisibilidade das migrações portuguesas; (b) uma análise de eventos culturais participativos enquanto espaços de produção colaborativa e transdisciplinar de conhecimento; e (c) uma exploração das abordagens sensoriais e sensíveis enquanto ferramentas para revelar lacunas na investigação sobre as migrações portuguesas. Concluimos concetualizando o festival como um ato de resistência e, simultaneamente, como ponto de partida para um “ofício” epistémico em contínuo desenvolvimento — capaz de gerar novas colaborações e de abrir novas vias de produção de conhecimento a longo prazo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

migrações portuguesas, abordagem participativa, evento cultural, metodologia sensorial, memória

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge production in Europe is largely based on a non-sensorial and non-sensitive epistemology¹. The body as an instrument of knowing, its perceptions and emotions have long been marginalised in academia (Deluermoz et al., 2023). Even the most recent “visual turn” (Boehm & Mitchell, 2009) has left aside other senses (Bal, 2003) and their interconnection (Howes, 2021), as well as other non-Euro-centric epistemologies of the senses (Low, 2023). We argue that sensoriality is highly significant in migration research (Azevedo, 2025; Desille & Nikielska-Sekuła, 2023; Nikielska-Sekuła & Desille, 2025) and its recognition opens venues for renewed understandings of the migration experiences, not only to uncover micro-, bodily experiences but also to access

¹ We use “sensorial” to refer to the role of the body and the senses in knowledge production and “sensitive” to refer to affect, emotions and ethics of care.

meso- and macro-processes of belonging, boundary-making, and exclusion (Desille & Nikielska-Sekuła, 2023; Nikielska-Sekuła & Desille, 2025). The role of emotions has also gained wider recognition in migration research, for example, understanding how emotions shape migration experiences and transnational connections has become important (Wise & Velayutham, 2017). In addition, we argue that reflexivity and intersectionality are key to producing a deep meaningful knowledge that accounts for the “textures of the ordinary” (Das, 2020).

The authors of this paper are two social scientists — a sociologist and a geographer — who met in 2018 and soon realised that they had shared academic interests in multiple circulations rooted in intra-European Portuguese migration, as well as in creative methods, and a photographer whose visual archive formed the starting point for this paper. Following an initial academic collaboration, we were willing to explore avenues on migration and engage with professionals from other sectors, especially the arts.

It was in this context that we began conceptualising a festival that we titled “A Arte de Ser Migrante” (The Art of Being a Migrant; <https://www.artedesermigrante.org>). Our aim was to step outside the academic realm and to pay tribute to the Portuguese diaspora, while reflecting on the richness and challenges of multiple migratory trajectories from and to Portugal. The festival took place in April 2025 in Lisbon, in the cultural space Jardins do Bombarda run by Largo Residências, a local community association.

We planned the four-day-long festival as an invitation to a heterogeneous public — including fellow scholars, artists and journalists, as well as the general public, migrants and non-migrants, Portuguese and non-Portuguese — to reflect on the forms of knowledge circulating in the public sphere about migration, and notably about Portuguese migrations. The aim was to highlight the fissures within sedimented knowledge and, through a participatory process that mobilised senses and emotions, intellect and body, to assemble a new site for knowledge production, a collective patchwork that would cut across disciplines and bring together emic perspectives. This process allowed us to gather the fragmented stories from festival attendees who shared their experiences and accounts of migration. Layers of complexity appeared, and different geographical contexts and historical periods, connecting past and present, here and elsewhere, and highlighting multiple forms of circulation echoed.

Portuguese migrations were chosen as a point of entry and as a pretext for a broader epistemic journey whose destination we do not yet know, given that the festival “A Arte de Ser Migrante” is indeed a “craft”, intended to continue, with further replicas currently under development.

The first part of the paper focuses on the theme of the festival, (a) Portuguese migrations, and their visibility and invisibility. It then addresses (b) the potential of participatory cultural events as sites of knowledge production, but also (c) a sensory and sensible approach to reveal the blind spots in the scholarship. The discussion (d) is articulated around three subsections: curatorship at the intersection of academic production and artistic creation; the festival as an act of resistance; and the festival as both an arrival and departure point. Short conclusive notes complete the paper.

PORTUGUESE MIGRATIONS, BETWEEN VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY

From the 1960s on, France became the main destination for hundreds of thousands of Portuguese leaving the dictatorship of Estado Novo, at the time involved in the so-called “colonial wars”, for economic and/or political motives (Pereira, 2009). In the 1970s, Luxembourg and, in the 1980s Switzerland too, became important destination countries (Beirão, 1999; Marques, 2008). Today Portuguese are the first foreign population of Luxembourg, and the third in France and Switzerland (or even the first when considering a regional scale rather than a national). Yet their presence often goes unnoticed, particularly within the media, and in the socio-cultural and political spheres (Antunes da Cunha, 2013; Fibbi et al., 2010; Santos & Ferreira, 2024).

A similar lack of attention is also evident in their country of origin. Portuguese migration was overlooked during the commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution, despite its significant intertwinement with the political and colonial history of Portugal. Similarly, the contributions and impact of the Portuguese diaspora on the country’s development are frequently disregarded, contrasting with the positive role conveyed in official discourses: examples include the statements that “Portuguese emigrants are ambassadors of Portugal” (Agência Lusa, 2022) and that “Portuguese communities around the world are one of the most important strategic assets of the Portuguese Foreign Policy” (Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, n.d., para. 1; see also Malheiros, 2011).

However, there is a widespread perception among Portuguese living abroad that the country shows little interest in them. Artists report that they find it difficult to exhibit their work in Portugal and that they feel ignored. Similarly, a few days after the festival ended, a participant, who is a descendant of Portuguese exiles, complained: “when we came on holiday, there was no space for us to talk about our concerns. Our family in Portugal wasn’t interested in knowing about our lives; only their own worries mattered” (personal communication, April 2025). This testimony illustrates how limited is the space for migrants and their descendants to articulate emotions of sadness, loss, pain, and suffering.

Despite the need for such dialogue, opportunities for in-depth discussion of the diversity of migration experiences and their multiple individual and collective consequences remain scarce. All too often, Portuguese migration is approached in a superficial and uncritical way, overlooking its complex layers and underlying tensions. This results in many Portuguese people whose lives have been shaped by migration feeling neglected and underrepresented in the public sphere. In the public discourse, Portuguese migration to Europe is often represented in a polarised manner, which simplifies and homogenises complex realities, obscuring the diversity of migratory experiences over the past 60 years. On one hand, attention focuses on the exile preceding the democratic transition, primarily directed towards France, and on the “old emigration” of so-called “unskilled” labour migrants in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, for a long-time Portuguese migration was discussed mainly in the summer, when migrants and their offspring returned for their holidays. Typically, this migration became visible in inland Portugal through the “casas de emigrantes” (emigrant houses), the cars they brought on holiday, the French accent and the *pimba* sounds of emigrant festivals. On the other hand, public narratives emphasise

the “new emigration” of “skilled young people” who left in significant numbers following the sovereign debt crisis.

Since the 1990s, Portugal has been widely portrayed as a country of immigration in both political and media discourses, with claims that it had ceased to be a country of emigration (Malheiros, 2011). However, the substantial out-migration following the 2011–2014 austerity programme (the so-called “Troika period”) exposed a persistent but overlooked reality: emigration never stopped; but until then, it was rendered invisible and silenced in dominant narratives. These biased representations had tangible consequences for knowledge production: research funding for studies on immigration was prioritised, while studies on Portuguese emigration and diaspora communities were largely neglected, reinforcing epistemic gaps and shaping public perceptions in ways that hinder a nuanced understanding of Portuguese migration, its long-term continuities and the complex circulations between origin and destination countries (Azevedo et al., 2022).

The four-day gathering, which aimed to share perspectives and experience migration in many ways — through hearing and seeing, but also touching, eating, drinking and dancing — filled this gap. An emerged part of the iceberg has been shown through a multisensory experience that did not only enable to turn visible, transnational lives, but also to amplify its sounds, their materialities, odours, flavours and textures, their kinesthetics, and the multiple displacements and emplacements of people, their sensing bodies, and the things that accompany them (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *The ball*

Credits. Estelle Valente, 2025

We were also eager to push academic boundaries and bring methodological innovation into Portuguese scholarship by bridging perspectives. Our approach is not only interdisciplinary but also cross-sectoral, transnational, and transgenerational. We designed the event as a space for “entanglements”, where disciplines, practices, and countries could intersect. It indeed became a site of dialogue between the visual arts, literature, creative arts, media, and social sciences (notably anthropology, history, geography, sociology, and media studies). Artists, journalists, and academics whose lives had been shaped by migration — particularly Portuguese migrations — gathered and worked together for several days in Lisbon. They came from France, Luxembourg, and Switzerland, traditional destination countries within Europe that continue to receive significant numbers of Portuguese migrants to this day. This geography was chosen as a first point of entry for broader ongoing research that can be enlarged to other countries and continents in the future.

PARTICIPATORY CULTURAL EVENTS AS SITES OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The festival was conceived as a site of knowledge production where we brought together different and complementary perspectives to “excavate” beneath the surface of the hegemonic representations of Portuguese migration and its diaspora.

Building on our academic work on Portuguese migrations and our interest in creative methods such as video, photography, and drawing — Amandine Desille’s postdoctoral research work on return migrants in northeastern Portugal (mainly from France) and Liliana Azevedo’s PhD on ageing Portuguese returnees and transnational mobility between Portugal and Switzerland —, we wanted to dig, question, and deconstruct established narratives, and expose blind spots. We wanted to achieve this collectively with individuals who have produced knowledge on Portuguese migrations in Europe in various formats (books, films, pictures, papers, news), but who have rarely had the opportunity to engage with one another.

This “throwntogetherness” in an open, freely accessible cultural and community association site like Jardins do Bombarda proved to be a fruitful exercise. This was Amandine Desille’s second attempt at

bring[ing] together actors outside of the academia [and] invite participants from different social worlds (while thinking of these social worlds as porous i.e. an artist could be an activist) to be involved, favouring notably multi-voice communications, enabling a bigger diversity. (Bacon et al., 2021, p. 220)

The idea behind it was to consider knowledge production outside the walls of the university and traditional scientific events, where knowledge is commonly confronted and debated. In fact, these scientific events are framed by conventions. “Who participates, who makes her voice heard, on which issue, how the lecturer presents, how the audience reacts (...) all these elements form an ‘exchange culture’ (Badouard, Mabi, & Monnoyer-Smith, 2016) or a ‘public culture’ (Cefaï, 2007)” (Bacon et al., 2021, p. 218).

Nevertheless, it is important to underline that an alternative to authorised spaces of knowledge production does not automatically lead to the co-production of knowledge, and can eventually reproduce power relations, and extractivist practices. Therefore, a participatory and sensory methodology was brought forward.

During the festival, we hoped that the authority of knowledge would be (re)negotiated. For this purpose, different formats for sharing experiences were considered, including projections, exhibitions, and book exhibits; roundtable discussions and more intimate conversations with artists; more immersive experiences such as a creative workshop, embroidery, and leaving a personal object at the collaborative exhibition. There were also moments of mingling, including lunch and dancing. This multisensory environment favoured various levels of interaction between the guests, between the guests and the public, and among the public itself.

The audience was extremely heterogeneous, comprising colleagues and friends, as well as curious passers-by, migrants and former migrants from various geographical areas, ranging from students to retirees. It enabled us to “level” the assigned value of the memories, experiences and practices of these different groups, creating a more horizontal relationship and attempting to demystify the authority of historians and sociologists. The variety of viewpoints, which we valued as collectively-produced knowledge, enabled us to escape the “danger of a single story” (Ngozi Adichie, 2009), by adding complexity in terms of time, space, and class relations, while also disrupting the normative representations of Portuguese people living abroad. This participatory setting eventually can produce social change, “both through the research as a relational and pedagogical space, and through the co-production of epistemologies that bring original viewpoints” (Moralli, 2024, p. 13). As per Becker’s (1986) scientific mosaic: “each piece added to the mosaic enriches our understanding of the whole picture a little more” (p. 106).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As described above, the festival comprised various spaces for encounters, as diverse as roundtables and an embroidery workshop. Before each session, the authors clarified their dual roles as researchers and curators of the festival, as well as their own positionality: like many of the guests invited to present their work, Liliana Azevedo has a similar migration background, whereas Amandine Desille is a French national living in Portugal. Sessions were recorded with participants’ consent, and a repeated announcement was made about the photographic record, enabling people to move out of frame. Both sounds and images have been disassociated. They are stored under a password-protected drive, and excerpts of the transcripts have been shared after anonymisation (including in this paper).

Similarly, the objects, stories, notes, drawings, embroideries and other artefacts collected through the collaborative exhibition and the diverse participatory workshops were physically collected or photographed, and stored by the authors. Participants were explicitly given the context of their production, and the knowledge “crafting” process we followed.

While some of these strategies may resemble academic practices, we believe that the co-production of knowledge does not release researchers from their responsibility to create dignified and ethical datasets (Desille & Nikielska-Sekuła, 2025).

Finally, the images presented in this article resulted from a transversal activity of the festival entitled “Those Images That I Carried Within Me” performed by Estelle Valente. She is a photographer born in France in a Portuguese family and has been living in Lisbon since 2010. The photographs produced were edited in accordance with the principles of “ethical fabrication” (Al Shrbaji, 2025; Markham, 2012; Prieto-Blanco, 2021). All photographs were presented at the closing session of the festival, and received positive feedback from the guests portrayed. Yet we reiterated the consent process for this article.

REVEALING THE BLIND SPOTS IN SCHOLARSHIP THROUGH BOTH A SENSORY AND SENSIBLE APPROACH

Hegemonic forms of knowledge production tend to privilege only a limited range of senses and are marked by visual dominance and the omission of the researcher’s embodied experiences (Bal, 2003; Desille & Nikielska-Sekuła, 2023). Yet scholars are increasingly calling for research approaches that move this epistemic hegemony (Low, 2012) by recognising both sensoriality and emotions as key to how knowledge is produced (Genova & Zontini, 2023), both from the researcher embodied position, and from the research participants’ sensory experiences. Various “vignettes” retrieved from the festival explain well how the body, senses, affect and emotions enabled us to both receive and produce knowledge on migration issues.

Embroidery was one of the many activities offered at the festival. Participants and the public were invited to choose a word they associated with migration and to embroider it. This exercise was often carried out in small groups: as fingers slowly guided the needle through the fabric, tongues loosened, and people began sharing experiences of their own migration or that of their families. Linking gestures to words and body to intellect, the embroidered pieces were then hung from a tree, forming a temporary exhibition of (key)words that revealed subjectivities and personal experiences (Figure 2 and Figure 3). Evolving throughout the duration of the festival, this collective display was far more than a simple assemblage of words; it unveiled a political geography of migration.



Figure 2. Political geography of migrations and collective assemblage

Credits. Estelle Valente, 2025



Figure 3. Silence surrounds Portuguese migrations

Credits. Estelle Valente, 2025

Attached to a tree where the outdoor activities of the festival took place, the presence of the words “silence”, “home”, “fly”, “mosaic”, “love”, “suitcase”, “migrate”, “diversity” stands in sharp contrast to the invisibility and social and political absence that many Portuguese experience daily in destination countries, and rooted in persistent class-based and ethnic stereotypes (Santos & Ferreira, 2024).

The theme of silencing recurred across many debates and proved to be a transversal thread linking several of the works presented. From the very first day, it became clear that the event offered a unique platform to break the silence surrounding the multiple experiences of Portuguese migration; experiences that participants had either lived themselves or inherited, and that continue to resonate across time and space. Second and third generations of migrants are gradually unveiling the past and “repairing” it through artistic work. Hidden traumas and intergenerational taboo surrounding Portuguese migration were notably present in books and documentary films that were exhibited and discussed at the festival (Figure 4 and Figure 5). Illustrator Madeleine Pereira created the comic *Borboleta* (Butterfly) based on her father’s reluctance to share his story. She interviewed his friends and relatives, delved into visual archives and eventually travelled to Portugal to uncover the taboos and traumas surrounding her father’s journey and those of other men and women of his generation. Journalist and writer Charlotte Frossard also expresses the “imperative need to retrace the path of exile; to go back in time and retrace my family’s journey through a very long dictatorship” when talking about her book *Sur le Pont* (On the Bridge; edited by Encre Fraiche, 2022), which is a tribute to her grandparents who were exiles in Switzerland.



Figure 4. Relational, multi-scalar and spatio-temporal process

Credits. Estelle Valente, 2025



Figure 5. *In-betweenness, neither from here, nor from there*

Credits. Estelle Valente, 2025

Among the testimonials collected from participants on the last day of the festival (April 6, 2025) that were recorded in a notebook, we found: “[this festival] lifts me out of loneliness and connects me with others, whose paths are sometimes not so different. Thank you for helping to right some wrongs”; “how grateful I am to you for bringing together all these wonderful people who are walking in the same direction”, and “you can’t imagine how much I was looking forward to this festival”.

The event aimed, above all, to create the conditions to open up discussions around taboos that persist both in society and within families — there is still much left unsaid between migrant and non-migrant family members, and between migrant parents and their adult children. This was also one of the reasons we chose to organise this event in a central location in Lisbon: to grant the topic of Portuguese migration the centrality it ought to hold in a society structurally shaped by long-standing patterns of emigration, return, and multiple circulations.

The participants’ frustration and anger regarding certain issues related to the invisibility of Portuguese migration, as well as their joy at social connection and feeling acknowledged, enabled a political act of reparation for those of Portuguese origin who are living or have lived abroad. The festival “A Arte de Ser Migrante” was also a highly emotional experience for most participants, in manyfold ways: first, because of the many resonances between the various testimonies, regardless of the geography and temporality of their personal and family trajectories — the event “burned down borders”, wrote

one participant. Second, due to “the human dimension”, the empathy that emerged, and the bonds forged through “daily encounters [which] have a truly therapeutic effect”. The cathartic effect emerged at both the individual and collective levels. The festival represented a “*heterotopia* (à la Foucault) of healing and creation — of co-creation and healing” (personal communication, April 6, 2025), wrote a 40-year-old scholar born in a migrant context and raised in Portugal, who is currently working in the field of migration in Luxembourg, in the festival guestbook.

Throughout the event, participants engaged their bodies and multiple senses, going beyond “the classic observational/hearing approach” (Mata-Codesal, 2023, p. 229). From day one, dominant sensorial perceptions gave way to other senses. Unexpectedly, the rain forced us to reconsider the spatial layout of the festival. The round table and book fair, which we had planned to hold outdoors, were moved indoors, which became the epicentre of our migratory archipelago that day. Over 40 people and four book stalls packed into the small room to discuss the history of Portuguese migration across Europe, from historical and literary perspectives. As evening fell, the rain intensified, providing a new layer of sound for Christophe Fonseca’s documentary film about memories of the Portuguese slum of Champigny-sur-Marne in northern Paris in the 1960s, and increasing the emotional intensity in the room.

Participant’s engagement extended beyond the intellectual to encompass sensory and emotional dimensions. Embroidery, dancing, and sharing meals activated sensory registers that remain largely overlooked within migration scholarship. Likewise, these activities acted as catalysts for further conversations and enabled the creation of affective memories, thereby contributing to the co-creation of a sense of community. The duration of the festival was another crucial element to enable connections among unfamiliar people, allowing them to discover shared affinities — in both their lived experiences and theoretical-practical approaches — regardless of age or geographical background.

Among the testimonials collected from participants on the last day of the festival (April 6, 2025) that were recorded in a notebook, we found: “I felt part of a community that shared experiences and emotions. It touched me deeply. After so many years of searching for a place, a home, roots and something to identify with (...) I experienced it here”, “thank you for enabling us all to discover something during the festival, and perhaps beyond? — to find a resonance with our quest for origin and belonging”.

The public ball held on the third evening pulled in a diverse crowd of all ages and backgrounds, including festival participants and casual visitors (see Figure 1). The DJ, born in Bissau and now living in Lisbon, whose musical repertoire is far different from popular Portuguese music, managed to recreate the typical atmosphere of the village festivities that take place when migrants return to visit their families in the summer. The shyer ones could be seen swaying to the music, holding a glass, at the edge of the improvised dance floor in the middle of the garden. Others danced alone or in groups, lost in memories of their youth and childhood as they listened to classic popular songs such as “Meu Querido Mês de Agosto” (My Beloved Month of August) by Dino Meira and “Um Português” (A Portuguese Man) by Linda de Suza. This emblematic soundscape of past migration was echoed by the vinyl records and music cassettes from the 1980s and 90s displayed in the adjoining room, kindly provided by former migrants in Switzerland.

The collaborative exhibition of objects approached migration from another aesthetic angle. Participants were invited to bring personal objects and, by doing so, they brought attention to sensory ordinary life of migrants and their descendants. Among the objects chosen to be shared were a guitar, tapes to learn French, books, newspaper clippings and so on (Figure 6). Participants also shared, for example, employment contracts and intimate family photos, some of which in their original frames, giving “thickness” and three-dimensionality to these visual representations (Edwards, 2012). This participatory device revealed the micro-scale of migration, highlighting the subjective experiences of migrants and their descendants. It has also triggered memories and served as a triangulation mechanism confronting the displayed sources with the accounts from the visitor-participants.



Figure 6. An ephemeral counter-archive of Portuguese migrations

Credits. Estelle Valente, 2025

This participatory exhibition on the materiality of migration — ongoing throughout the whole festival — provided insights into personal migration narratives, while also conveying the collective dimension of migration. For this to happen, we prepared the necessary framework for individuals to share and provided various formats²: a chronological line on a wall displaying incomplete historical fragments invited visitors to contribute; a frame entitled “Tell Me How It Was” with available post-its became a repository of stories of arrival and departure; shelves, hooks and extended cords with empty transparent bags

² We are grateful to Vinciane Demeure for her collaboration in producing the exhibition and adapting the available space for this purpose.

enabled to leave objects. The room dedicated to the collaborative exhibition became an ephemeral counter-archive of Portuguese migrations. It is interesting to note that in the months following the festival, two Lisbon academic institutions opened similar exhibitions: one entitled *Asian Lives in Europe — A Visual Journey*, connected to the *ASPIRE* project (<https://asianlivesineurope.iscte-iul.pt>) and co-produced with the participants, which weaves photographs, video diaries, objects, and personal memories; and the other exhibition, entitled *Movements: Revolution, Circulation, Borders*, organised by the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon's Migration Hub, which proposes "to immerse visitors in a sensory landscape composed of images, words, sounds, and objects, engaging them in exploring the country as a space of transit, permanence and distinction, marked by multifaceted borders" (Universidade de Lisboa, n.d., para. 1).

This resonates deeply with current discussions related to ethical considerations in migration studies. With the participatory and sensory dispositive that we favoured, we come closer to fulfilling the promise of decentring knowledge production and embrace polyphonic (Desille et al., 2025) and pluriversal (Desille & Nikielska-Sekuła, 2025) modes of doing science, as well as an "ethics-aesthetics of representation" (such as the one proposed by Al Shrbaji, 2025). Hence the micro-politics of the festival extend from a politics of presence of Portuguese migrants and their descendants, to an act of resistance to neoliberalising academia (Figure 7).



Figure 7. *The poetics of polyphony*

Credits. Estelle Valente, 2025

DISCUSSION

CURATORSHIP AT THE INTERSECTION OF ACADEMIC PRODUCTION AND ARTISTIC CREATION

“Four days to see, hear and discuss Portuguese migrations” was the motto of this event, which aimed to explore the submerged part of the iceberg and make people aware of the diversity of experiences rooted in migration from and to Portugal (Figure 8). Our premise was that bringing together different artistic and scientific perspectives would lead to a more plural and nuanced understanding.



Figure 8. *The many layers of migrants' lives*

Credits. Estelle Valente, 2025

The curatorial work involved conducting extensive research and collecting dozens of titles of books, music, films, academic papers and other materials on a transnational scale. Matching artists and scholars whose work addresses issues related to Portuguese migration was key. Additionally, we aimed to highlight the connections between these issues and more recent migratory dynamics in Portugal. For example, Pedro Rodrigues's photographic portrayal of Portuguese hotel workers in the Swiss village of Zermatt has triggered a conversation about the labour conditions of migrant workers in Portugal's tourism industry today. Christophe Fonseca's film about the self-built neighbourhood of Champigny enabled us to draw parallels with the housing practices of African migrants in the Lisbon metropolitan area. Melanie Pereira's film engages with current debates on

homemaking, identity and belonging through a dialogue between the mythical figure Melusina and four Luxembourgish women with migration backgrounds.

The curatorial practice underlying this festival was guided by an effort to reconfigure ecologies of sensing and ethics of care. We knew that fostering connection and mutual understanding was essential, so we made every effort to build respectful and close relationships with our guests, most of whom we had not met beforehand. Encounters — both online and on-site — have taken place since the festival, as we continue to foster this transdisciplinary “community of practice”.

THE FESTIVAL AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE

By mobilizing sensitive and sensorial approaches, the festival sought to cultivate empathy between migrants, their descendants and the wider public. In this sense, the festival operated as a form of resistance to neoliberal academic logics of publish or perish, proposing instead a slower, relational, and embodied mode of knowledge production (see Desille et al., 2025).

Conceived as a patchwork that takes shape over time, the festival followed its own rhythm — aligned with the principles of slow science that we defend — emerging *in situ* and extending beyond the event of April 2025 through subsequent encounters and conversations. Ultimately, this process will culminate in an online catalogue composed of texts, photographs, illustrations, sounds, and music: a collective collage that embodies the festival’s commitment to shared authorship and to a sensorially and ethically attuned understanding of migration. This will contribute to counteract policies that instrumentalise the diaspora and practices that marginalise their voices and creations.

The festival provided a space to produce counter-hegemonic discourses, the presentation of alternative representations, and the construction of polyphonic collective memories of Portuguese migration. These memories were embedded within a mosaic of languages (Portuguese, French, German, Luxembourgish, and English), black-and-white and colour images, and tangible objects, all of which were incorporated into interdisciplinary, intergenerational, and transnational dialogue.

By bringing together multiple individual efforts of breaking the silence, a strong collective sense of belonging emerged and helped descendants who have found it difficult to belong to a country that considers them the absent “emigrants” find their place in Portugal.

The festival actively sought to challenge existing power relations: between different types of knowledge, between academic disciplines, and between migrants and non-migrants’ narratives (Figure 9).



Figure 9. *Plurality of viewpoints*

Credits. Estelle Valente, 2025

THE FESTIVAL AS BOTH AN ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE POINT

The festival was conceived as a dynamic process that would continue after the event. The first stage was intended to showcase artistic and research-based works on migration issues. The second stage was designed to be an ongoing process of co-producing knowledge. The third stage sought to forge connections, resulting in new projects and collaborations.

One of those projects was initiated by Estelle Valente, who was challenged to think visually about topics that would resonate with her own migration background. As a result, she created textured portraits that reflect the multiple layers of individuals with roots in Portuguese migration and incorporate archival or symbolic images that held special significance for each person. Her photographs act as an additional, sensitive layer of meaning within the text.

This work makes visible the intertwining of personal narratives and intergenerational relations. Valente's sensitive approach enabled her to establish a close connection with each person. By engaging them in conversation about their personal stories, she captured their inner self. She then superimposes this portrait with images linked to their (family) migration story.

This visual overlap in a single photograph reveals collective memories conveyed by individual subjects, and combines aesthetic, poetic, and affective dimensions. This approach explores the gap between the explicit and the implicit (Figure 10).



Figure 10. *Bringing lights to blind spots*

Credits. Estelle Valente, 2025

CONCLUSIVE NOTES

This paper highlights the sensitive dimensions of a festival situated at the intersection of science and the arts, while contributing to the literature on sensorial approaches within migration studies.

Hosted in a well-known cultural venue in the Portuguese capital, the event brought together a heterogeneous audience — including migrants, non-migrants, and relatives of participants — and engaged with the topic through diverse temporal and geographical perspectives and through multiple formats such as debates, film screenings, exhibitions, workshops, and book presentations. The four-day gathering invited participants to experience migration sensorially — through hearing and seeing, of course, but also touching, eating, drinking, and dancing — thereby expanding conventional modes of engagement with public migration debates. The senses were conceived as modes of knowledge.

The festival presented artistic and academic works by Portuguese migrants and their descendants that addressed political exile, economic migration to Europe, fragmented identities, intergenerational cultural transmission, the affective complexity of belonging and transnational connection. Beyond showcasing multiple works on Portuguese migrations, the event fostered interdisciplinary, intergenerational, and transnational dialogue, enabling collaborative knowledge production on migration and supporting community-building across borders. A further contribution lays in creating conditions for structured and participatory debate, constituting a significant step toward processes

of reconciliation and reparation. As one participant, a French man in his 30s whose father is Portuguese and who moved to Lisbon to explore his origins, commented in the festival guestbook: “you can’t imagine how much I was looking forward to this festival” (personal communication, April 6, 2025).

This paper explored the cultural, political, epistemological and aesthetic dimensions of a festival that combined a variety of forms of expression and perception. It emphasised the intricate layers and underlying tensions between presence and absence of migrants and descendants in destination countries and Portugal. While combining sensoriality and sensitivity has enabled us to expand our understanding of Portuguese migration, we acknowledge that there are still blind spots that need to be addressed. In particular, the concept of “postcoloniality” in relation to Portuguese migration in Europe needs to be examined — a topic that Tavares and Vieira (2023) refer to as “lusophone migrants in ‘third space’”. Generally speaking, research on Portuguese migration is race-blind and still very White-centred. Therefore, adopting an intersectional lens is key in research on Portuguese migration. Furthermore, as we have argued before (Azevedo, 2024), migration researchers must adopt a reflexive stance in order to challenge blind spots and advance the field.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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Estelle Valente is a photographer born in Paris, a city with which she maintains strong ties. She adopted Lisbon as her home some 15 years ago and cannot do without its sunshine. In 2012, she started working with fado singer Gisela João and continues to do so to this day. Between 2015 and 2024, she collaborated with the São Luiz Municipal Theatre (Lisbon), photographing shows and creating images for its campaigns. Her first solo exhibition, *Carla no Papel* (Carla on Paper), 2018, in Setúbal, featured actress Carla Maciel reinterpreting the great divas of classic cinema. She completed an artistic residency at Espace Cardin in Paris and, on the 20th anniversary of José Saramago's Nobel Prize, Anabela Mota Ribeiro invited her to illustrate *Por Saramago* (By Saramago). Since

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