

UNIVERSIDADE DE TRÁS-OS-MONTES E ALTO DOURO
DEPARTAMENTO DE LETRAS, ARTES E COMUNICAÇÃO
CENTRO DE ESTUDOS EM LETRAS

Revista de Letras

Série II
N.º 11

Dezembro de 2012
Vila Real

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REVISTA DE LETRAS

Revista de Letras / ed. Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Departamento de Letras, Artes e Comunicação; Centro de Estudos em Letras; dir. Carlos Assunção; org. Armindo Mesquita, Luísa Soares, José Barbosa Machado, Teresa Moura; Comp. Maria da Felicidade Morais – Série II, n.º 11 (Dezembro de 2012) - Vila Real: UTAD, 2012 - Continuação de: Anais da UTAD.- Contém referências bibliográficas. – Anual.

ISSN: 0874-7962

ISBN: 978-1494303242

I. Assunção, Carlos, dir. / II. Mesquita, Armindo, org. / III. Morais, Maria da Felicidade, org. / IV. Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro. Departamento de Letras. Centro de Estudos em Letras, ed. Lit./

1. Linguística - - [Periódicos] / 2. Literatura Portuguesa - - estudos críticos - - [Periódicos] / 3. Didática - - [Periódicos] / 4. Cultura Portuguesa - - [Periódicos] / Comunicação - - Didática.

CDU: 81 (05) / 821.134.3.09 (05) / 37.02 (05) / 008 (469)(05) / 808.56 (05) / 37.02 (05)

ÍNDICE

LINGUÍSTICA

A imagem e o imaginário da identidade regional num texto inédito do <i>Auto de Santa Catarina</i> <i>António Bárbolo Alves</i>	7-20
Primeiros Ecos de Ferdinand de Saussure na Gramaticografia de Língua Portuguesa <i>Evanildo Bechara</i>	21-27
<i>Un parcours de vie: les mots de Cavaco Silva</i> <i>Ana Clara Birrento, Maria Helena Saianda & Olga Baptista Gonçalves</i>	29-46
O ensino da língua portuguesa nos manuais gramaticais: uma proposta de reformulação <i>Telma Maria Barrias Maio Coutinho</i>	47-65
As edições da Arte da Grammatica Portugueza de Pedro José de Figueiredo <i>Sónia Duarte</i>	67-104
La presencia del marcador conversacional “¿me entiendes?” en los corpus lingüísticos CREA e Mark Davies como indicador de culturas de alejamiento o de acercamiento <i>José Manuel Giménez García</i>	105-118
Argote e o pioneirismo em variação linguística e dialectologia em Portugal, séc. XVIII <i>Rui Dias Guimarães</i>	119-131
Subsídios inéditos para o estudo das primeiras gramáticas portuguesas do século XIX <i>Rolf Kemmler</i>	133-143
Aspetos da Sintaxe do Português Falado no Sul de Moçambique <i>Diocleciano João Raúl Nhatuve & Maria do Céu Fonseca</i>	145-156
Étude de quelques particularités du vocalisme oral du dialecte vulgairement parlé dans la municipalité de Fundão (Castelo Branco) <i>Maria Celeste Nunes & Paulo Osório</i>	157-174

LITERATURA

Poesia e Compromisso em Vladimir Maiakovski – Criação e Construção <i>António José Borges</i>	177-191
A vida sem qualidade: o efeito catártico da Literatura Gótica <i>Maria Antónia Lima</i>	193-199
Representações do direito em Aquilino Ribeiro <i>Carlos Nogueira</i>	201-211
Notas breves para uma reflexão sobre as relações entre literatura e meio ambiente <i>José Eduardo Reis</i>	213-218

Leituras intermitentes e releituras circunstanciais <i>Celina Silva</i>	219-234
Um olhar sobre o humanismo e o telurismo da poetisa angolana Alda Lara <i>Maria Luísa de Castro Soares</i>	235-253
Em busca do sentido do homem e da arte: Pensamento e palavra nas letras europeias <i>Nair Nazaré de Castro Soares</i>	255-282
António Cabral, o suor da tradição: Apontamentos para uma abordagem ao autor transmontano <i>Elisa Gomes da Torre</i>	283-290

CULTURA

Autobiography: A Text of Life in a New Landscape <i>Ana Clara Birrento</i>	293-304
O direito à informação no Estado de direito: aspetos da sua efetivação <i>António Francisco de Sousa</i>	305-326

COMUNICAÇÃO

A importância da inovação na tomada de decisão na microempresa: o caso TOK BOLSAS <i>Gilbert Angerami</i>	329-338
Os blogues corporativos como meio de comunicação organizacional <i>Álvaro Cairrão, Galvão Meirinhos & Joana Costa</i>	339-377
Comunicação não verbal: a influência da indumentária e da gesticulação na credibilidade do comunicador <i>Maria de Fátima Ribeiro & Galvão Meirinhos</i>	379-405

DIDÁTICA DAS LÍNGUAS

Leituras com Arte: da literacia crítica ou da arte de ler o mundo <i>Maria da Graça Sardinha</i>	409-414
Leitura, literacia e escola: construções (im)perfeitas <i>Maria da Graça Sardinha & João Machado</i>	415-427

VÁRIA

Recensão: Alexandre Parafita, <i>Antropologia da Comunicação. Ritos, Mitos, Mitologias</i> . Lisboa, Âncora Editora, 2012. <i>Carlos Nogueira</i>	431-433
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Autobiography: A text of life in a new landscape

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Abstract

Positoning myself in a critical agenda that reads autobiography not as the life of its authors, but rather as texts of that life, I consider that we can analyze these texts as a geography of the possible or as knowable community, in Elspeth Probyn's and Raymond Williams's words, respectively. Autobiographies are maps of possibilities of the self, landscapes of the self, where authors, simultaneously subjects and objects of their own discourse and representation, create conditions of possibility for their individual, social and political existence.

Resumo

Posicionando-me numa agenda crítica que lê os textos autobiográficos não como a vida dos seus autores, mas antes como textos dessa vida, considero que podemos analisar esses textos como uma geografia do possível ou como uma comunidade conhecível, nas palavras de Elspeth Probyn e de Raymond Williams, respetivamente. As autobiografias são mapas de possibilidade do eu, paisagens do ser, onde os autores, simultaneamente sujeitos e objetos do seu próprio discurso e representação, criam condições de possibilidade para a sua existência individual, social e política.

Positioning myself in a critical agenda which reads autobiography not as life itself, but rather as a text of life, I consider that we can read autobiography as a 'geography of the possible' or as a 'knowable community', using Elspeth Probyn's (1993) and Raymond Williams's (1970) concepts, respectively. Thus, my proposition is to read autobiography as a map of possibilities of the self, where the author (subject and object of the autobiography) and the reader move and acknowledge conditions of possibility or plausibility (Sinfield 1992) for an individual and social existence. To do this we have also to bear in mind some questions concerning representation and memory, as it is by means of these that experiences are reshaped and the self recreated in a new landscape.

In order to understand the autobiographical self we need to position it in relation to the absence and to the presence of such opposing concepts as: truth, confession, experience, immanence, private and public, individual and universal, masculine and feminine, as well as to the problem of the author who sees

himself as subject and as being looked as a subject: a subject who talks about himself and who knows that the present is different from the past and is not repeated in the future.

In the process of rewriting the self we tell a story, by definition not a recounting of experience as it was, but a fiction of the self, a selective and imaginative construction of who we have been and who we are. An autobiography is, in Freeman's formulation in *Rewriting the Self, History, Memory, Narrative* (1993), a story we weave out of those tangled threads we believe to be responsible for the texture of our lives. To understand the autobiographical writing as a geography of the possible or as a knowable community is to understand it as the consciousness of the author in choosing and in selecting the ways how and what should be represented in the autobiographical text, leaving to the reader the task of knowing and of discovering the identity who knows itself and who materializes itself through discourse; of discovering the identity who chooses strategies, practices and technologies to represent itself as a cultural construction of power, through discursive alliances and in a network of voices and positions.

Leigh Gilmore in *Autobiographics* (1994) argues that autobiographies are positioned within discourses that construct identity and power, adding that inasmuch as the individual is a discursive formation, autobiography is one of the major discourses through which it is produced. Writing autobiographically is an act of interpretation, where the lived experience is shaped, constrained and transformed by representation to which the self owes its existence and in which it evolves and finds expression.

Representation, according to Stuart Hall (1990), implies the positions from where one writes or speaks - the enunciative positions which constitute the self as a new kind of subject and not merely as a reflection of me; although one speaks of itself, in its name and about its experience, who writes or speaks, who determines the identity of the narrator and of the subject about whom it is spoken or written, is not identical and is not in the same place. We write and we speak from a particular time and place, within a specific history and a culture: what we say is always contextualized and positioned.

The position we occupy in a social space, the practices and the identities are not separated categories in a deterministic or hierarchical relationship; they inform each other mutually, creating a dense and detailed texture of narratives, of relationships and of experiences. The self, as Probyn (1993) argues, is a set of techniques and practices based on daily life. But, it is not only the writers who are influenced by the social world, as the readers, by bringing their horizons of expectation to their reading, also construct a narrative. As a matter of fact, the different horizons of expectations, the different readings and different interpretations of each reader are determined by already constituted social differences, which, in turn, construct the experiential context in which the readers appropriate the text.

In this dialogical space, both author and reader build a knowable community, in an attempt to unite the subjectivity of the different selves in the process, selves who, simultaneously, acknowledge the otherness of the others. A knowable community is constructed in the production of plausible interpretative contexts of experience, which contain what is written and read.

Either representing a public realm or a private, more intimate one, autobiography draws a terrain where both authors and readers move and where they recognize conditions of plausibility for the representation of their experiences. Representing the self in a filigree of ontological, epistemological and organizational principles of identity, the autobiographical text can be read as a geography of the possible where the self is represented by means of several technologies of power and several trajectories, establishing a dynamic relationship between author, text and reader. This means that the identification of the reader's text with the writer's text is the result of their triangulation with ideology; by identifying with an autobiography, the reader constructs an 'imaginary relation' to the situation the text depicts (Gilmore 1994).

As a form which invents, in its fictional representation, an identity which only exists in the common and shared space of the narrative, the autobiographical text is the product of the writer's consciousness and capacity to invest in affective elements which, in turn, allow the reader to 'feel' that space as a knowable space of relations, drawing maps of meaning. In 'knowable', we can find not only the subject – the theme which is yet not known, because the consciousness of the moment never precedes the art of creation, but also the author's capacity to communicate, to make knowable to the other(s) that same experience, bringing it to the process of communication. What is knowable, Williams writes, is not only a function of objects – of what is there to be known; it is also a function of subjects, of observers – of what is desired and needs to be known. By sharing his experiences, the author conveys them to others in such a form that they are actively recreated – not contemplated, not examined, not passively received, but by responses to the means, actually lived through, by those to whom they are offered (Williams [1961] 1965:51).

To read autobiography as a knowable community is to understand the tripartite nature of it: on the one hand, the reality of the identity there represented, on the other hand, the reality of the reader as long as he makes sense of what is written and creates an interpretative context, and last but not least, the reality of the writer in the poetic act of writing. Furthermore, when considering autobiographical texts, for which the interpreter is at once subject and object it becomes clear that the meanings one arrives at are in some sense as much made as created and found, in a new poetic configuration. By choosing and selecting the moments and the facts from where he creates, the autobiographical self is not only representing his own experience, but he is also bringing to the fictional space of communication what he wishes and wants to be known, revealing the past by the forms he chooses.

This choice determines the type of story one wants to tell. As a matter of fact, the author participates in that fictional space of communication before the reader, as what the former gives to the latter to read is his interpretation, as an active agent in the choices of what is fictionally created. But this is an illusory process, an illusion which, according to Gusdorf (1980), begins in the moment when the narrative gives a meaning to the event, which when it occurred might have had several meanings or even none. This postulation of a meaning to a past event, in Gusdorf's words again, dictates the choice of the facts which we want to retain and the details which we want to preserve or forget according to a preconceived intelligibility. It is in this choice that the faults, the lapses and the deformations of memory take place; and these faults, in spite of not being the product of a physical cause or of mere hazard, are the result of a conscious choice of the author who remembers and who wants to gain recognition of a revised and corrected version of the past.

The obstacles to a full reconstruction of the past turn visible and inevitable that there is the creation of a new past, similar to it but also different from it; in spite of all the efforts of truthfulness, the truth any autobiography produces is always necessarily restructured, corrected and revised in its telling, a mixture of past and present, a process of self-invention. In this reconstruction of the past, memory is a fundamental tool, or in Foucault's (1988) words, a technology of power; memory selects the images which the subject wants to transmit according to the place and the time of the enunciation. Memory helps creating a story or a discourse about an original experience and seems to be the solution for the human preoccupation in being able to translate the knowing in the telling, that is to say, in giving form to experience.

To be known, to be constructed, to be discovered, created or revealed is a dilemma, which according to Freeman (1993) all human beings face, a dilemma which cannot be solved. While we have to be able to confess our interpretative participation in the rewriting of the self, we have to be humble enough and to acknowledge that the past that has culminated in that rewriting is excluded. By means of a process of choice and selection, the author creates his conditions of possibilities, the coherent knots and the insertion in the real. Past has no other existence besides the representation not of facts withdrawn from memory, but by the words based on the residual images of memory, as they are the only appropriate means of communication, the verbal configuration of reminiscences. No matter how inclusive an author wants to be, in the end he has to make choices, and by doing them he turns many of the reminiscences irrelevant.

To tell a life is to represent what no longer exists, it is a means to deal with the irrecoverability of the past (Eakin 1992), it is a representation which extends itself in time, like a succession of signs. Memories and the different voices by which the author enunciates himself allow him to convince the reader of the existence of another level of abstraction, the one of his individual being. This ontological position is articulated with an epistemological project, to the extent

that while a sphere of the being is proposed it is based on an historical context. Under the disguise of showing himself as he was, the autobiographical author exerts the right to recover the possession of his existence then and now. To represent a past experience means to reflect it in the present. However, we cannot forget that the present reproduction of the past only has a meaning in its structural relation to the previous experience (Pickering 1997).

Autobiography is never the final and fixed image of a life, as the image of the self is always constructed, since memories look for the essence beyond existence, and, by doing it, they create that essence. To represent a life only reveals an image of that same life, an image which is, obviously, distant and incomplete, distorted by the fact that the subject who remembers is not the same who as a child, as an adolescent or even as a young adult lived the past, showing thus that change is the operative metaphor in the autobiographical discourse (Barros 1998). The image of childhood and adolescence to which the reader has access is but an imagination of those phases of life.

Memory produces a narrative subjectivity, working upon consciousness, dissolving it and fragmenting it, diluting the frontiers between past and present. The passage, in memory, of the effective experience to consciousness constructs a kind of repetition of that same experience and helps changing its meaning. The remembered past loses 'its flesh and bone', using Gusdorf's image, but gains a new and more intimate relation with individual life which, after having been dispersed, can be discovered and reorganized in a no temporal way. The inclusion of all the memories and meanings in an autobiographical text, with the aim of making sense of the structure of the past, is nothing else than the construction of a fiction, an imaginative, selective and literary construction of who we have been and of who we are. (Freeman 1993).

Paradigmatically the autobiographical writing implies a certain distance of the self in relation to his other self, in order to reconstitute it as a unity and as an identity throughout the times. The process of self-comprehension is reminiscent, in the sense that it gathers together all the dimensions of the self, the dimensions which had been until the moment of writing, unarticulated, dispersed, scattered or lost. This reminiscence is a critical active process which combines emotions and moments of self-reflection and which gives access to omitted experiences, allowing memory to see the events of the past in a new way, in a new landscape. The order given to the events is not an order inherent to the events themselves, but rather an option of the author and a reflection upon himself; it is to give what he thought and lived to a possible reading, shaping events into a story with an end; this strategy, according to Timothy Robbins (1995) effects a closure on time, on knowledge and on the self.

Since the autobiographical representation cannot be apprehended as an instant form, it has to give to the readers, when they finish their readings, the notion that the horizontal telling of a life, enables him to perceive a vertical and a unitary image of the teller (Sturrock 1993), as someone who is outside that life

and thus, not totally identifiable with it. So being, the relation established between the past, the present and the future of the autobiographical text occurs in the present moment of writing, a moment which has already determined the beginning and the end of the story, as well as the mode how the self is represented and has developed throughout the times. The whole autobiographical process is therefore the product of a choice, as the teller benefits from a privileged situation of knowing the end right from the beginning. The act of telling is in itself a trick, as it gives us the idea that it starts at the beginning, when, in fact, it starts in the end of the story; there is a relation between past, present and future, in which the end is implicit in the beginning and the beginning is the product of the present. The time of the autobiography moves in the opposite direction to the real, linear time, as to live and to tell are different phenomena, incorporated in the context of a plausible narrative order. The beginning and the end of an autobiography are united by the process of writing, a poetical act in which what has once been present is represented as a story of the past.

Although the present time cannot be experienced, because the experience is a succession of events, it is only in the present that one can represent the lived experiences and conceive the past and the future, in a temporal dynamics (Pickering 1997). The juxtaposition of the plane of the past with the plane of the present of writing is what makes autobiography possible; the materials of memory are put into a matrix from where they are only dissociated by analysis. As a text of life autobiography represents an effort of integration of a past life and a present self, it represents an effort of creation of a form only apprehended by means of a present vision which, acting upon the process of looking back, gives new form to what is produced by this retrospective process; it represents the before and the after of a self who suffered in any way a transformation (Barros 1998). In the act of remembering the past in the present, the autobiographer imagines the existence of another person, of another world, none of which being real and under no circumstance having a possibility of existing in the present.

In a general sense, what distinguishes autobiography from other narrative *genre* is to acknowledge that what is meaningful in a specific past, is itself determined by the past experience whose meaning it reveals. By means of backward and forward movements, the past and the present structure and restructure themselves mutually (Pickering 1997). The past is transfigured by memory and by the memory of memories (Mermin 1993) and the emotional truth is placed in an impossible space which includes the sequence of remembered moments, not being any of them. Memory draws conditions of possibility of a subjectivity produced in the autobiographical narrative.

Between the historical facts the author tells and the autobiographical act of telling them, there is a constitutive hiatus, a hiatus which constructs an identity and an agency, not identical to the identity and to the agency of real life; the

former are mere representations of the latter, or, put in other words, they are its construction. Pressed by textuality, the self owes its existence to the system of representation in which he develops and finds expression; Indeed, it is in the text that the subjective consciousness gives an order to itself and to the objective reality and allows the author to relate the known self to an unknown world, creating new patterns of relationship, while, simultaneously, constructing a self.

Autobiography is characterized by a particular act of interpretation – the lived experience is moulded, revised, contained and transformed by representation. By telling the story of the self the author imposes a certain order to the chaos and imposes a structural coherence to memory and to chronology, giving voice to silence. However, we cannot ignore that certain stories are sanctioned and others disallowed, and we cannot ignore as well that the world in which we live crosses with boundaries which dictate what can and cannot be said or done. The choices determine the kind of story we want to tell and the transgression of these dictates transforms the self from an object, prey to the constrictive power of culture, to an agent able to cast into question those stories thought to be given and to write new ones in a new landscape.

The autobiographical writing operates a conversion, a reworking of the self, as we have already seen, and in this reconfiguration of the self through enunciation, the author converts the past, changing it into a story which does not exist outside the autobiographical text; only the enunciative subject does have a full knowledge of the experiences, only he does exert a dominion over his memories and converts them, creating in the communicative space between author, text and reader a hypotext (Sturrock 1993), where what is given to the reader is a pre-textual reality.

By textualizing that reality, by converting the experience of a life into a shared and symbolic order which is the language, the author turns knowable, verbalizes the reassessment of his experiences of life. The author shares with other people what normally is called the creative imagination, the capacity to find and to organize new descriptions of the experience. All human being feels the need to describe his experience, and by doing this he remakes himself, beginning a creative change in his personal organization, a change which includes and controls experience (Williams [1961], 1965).

The subjective choices done by the author are also influenced by several exterior factors, as, for example, the structures of power and of culture. In the production of the text all these factors concur to the sense that a certain perspective fits into the horizon of expectations of the reader, creating processes of signification, which, according to Sinfield (1992) develop both identity and ideology.

Williams writes that the author shares with his public the creative imagination, the capacity to find and to organize new descriptions of experience. According to him ([1961] 1965) every human being needs to describe his experiences because in this description he remakes himself, beginning a creative

change in his own personal organization, a change which includes and controls experience. This is a change that frees the self, that is to say creates another self, freeing the one subjected to the determinative power of culture, creating an empowered subject, able to recreate both culture and his place in it, paving the way for a geography of the possible.

To give a narrative order to experience implies that the writer creates conditions of possibility or plausibility for the story he is telling, constructing a coherent story from the tattered remains of experience. It is the reader's role, before a text of life, to produce the narrative and its historical consciousness, as he is a powerful cultural element in the construction of the structures of meaning of the story told. Thus, the conditions of possibility depend as much on their creator as on who reads them in certain interpretative contexts, since a knowable community or a geography of the possible is constructed in the production of plausible and appropriate interpretative contexts. As it is constituted by language and directed toward a contemporary audience, autobiography speaks through metaphors that are held in common and that are shared by the readers, the texts and the contexts that surround it.

According to Probyn (1993) there is a need to find a balance between the meaning to express the experience of the self, in its physical and mental component and the way how that experience is verbalized, given to the others in its conditions of possibility in the contexts of social experience. Still according to this critic, we need to find a theory of experience which allows us, as active subjects in the process of communication and cultural construction, to participate in the texts, to interpret them according to our own structures of feeling, to be ourselves within the cultural theory. In Lawrence Grossberg's opinion (1997) this concept of audience describes a relationship, simultaneously produced and productive, as well as constitutive, of the communication as a social practice.

The epistemological use of experience proves the interrelation of structural determination and the individual relationships. If at an ontological level experience postulates a separate realm of existence, called by Probyn 'the immediate experiential self', at an epistemological level the self reveals itself in its conditions of possibility; here we have a discursive experience, an experience used, sometimes, to politicize the ontological. The experiential self and the politicization of experience are important conditions of possibility to find alternative enunciative positions in a cultural theory.

Accepting the idea that autobiographies produce a cultural work while simultaneously try to represent the self, we have to bear in mind, when discussing texts which tell lives, that we must discuss the ways how the subject, the discourse and history articulate themselves in the construction of a fictional self who has no existence prior to the text and who does not coalesce with its creator. We cannot forget that the autobiographical self simultaneously names the historical person, the textual construction, and the author – all of which describing different functions in the autobiographical act. To articulate this

triangulation of autobiographical selves (Gilmore 1994) is to look for conditions of possibility of a critical enunciation that, by means of processes of subjectification, creates subjectivities which, in turn, do not contain the subject alone.

When we consider experience as the most open, active and comprehensive kind of consciousness, a kind of consciousness which includes feeling and thought (Williams 1976), we have to question the social and historical formations which structure the autobiographical material – the identities by means of which the subject lives and through which it becomes an agent of change. Stuart Hall (1996) argues that identities are constructed within discourse; therefore we need to understand them as being produced by specific enunciative strategies, in specific historical and institutional locations and in specific practices and formations.

The several enunciative modalities (Foucault 1972^a) do not refer to a synthesis or to a unifying function of the subjects, but rather show dispersions, revealing the different states, places and positions which the enunciative subject occupies or is given in the moment of speaking or of writing. This is a process which Foucault (1972) calls the ‘discontinuity of the planes’ from which one speaks. Emerging from modalities of power, identities mark the difference and the exclusion, and can be understood, using Hall’s metaphor (1996^a) as points of suture, of junction between the discourses and the practices which put ourselves as subjects of particular discourses and the processes which produce subjectivities and that construct us as enunciative subjects. So, we accept the critical stance that the cultural identity is constituted in the difference, of what we are and what we become, as an experience and an identity comprises in themselves the other self, the ruptures and the discontinuities. The cultural identity is both a becoming and a being and belongs to the future as to the past, as it not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture.

To read autobiography as a geography of the possible enables the critic to read texts of life as a new landscape which contains the possibility of ways of living within the social, the possibility of new ethics, and the possibility of constructing theoretical accounts and of experiencing oneself in relation to the others in the historical present of the self (Probyn 1993). To read autobiography as a geography of the possible is to understand it as a fiction about which the reader has to make sense; it is a process of creating an interpretative context, a framework, in which the relevant information is placed. To tell a life is to construct a self and to create a space of communication of experiences: the experience of composition of the social formation and the experiences of the subject involved in the communication. To read autobiography as a geography of the possible or as a knowable community is to understand that it is both a political and a creative act of making a sense active, of communicating an organized experience to the others.

In tracing maps of identification and belonging (Grossberg 1996), remembering is a political act in the sense that what is recollected and what is obscured is central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past and thus to the terms of an individual's self-knowledge.

The centrality of the experiences produces an articulation of the text, the author and the reader, in a dynamic process of discursive alliances, as configurations of practices which define where and how people live specific relations, within the context of the social (Grossberg 1995). By validating the modes of communication of the experiences, the readers, as cooperative critics have to engage in the task of creating a space of communication and experience, in a self-reflexive attitude of acknowledging that as critics they also participate in the practices, the formations and the contexts.

Writing an autobiography can be considered a political act where the autobiographer chooses to draw a map of meanings of his life and of his self, a self that is multiply coded in a range of discourses and conditions and represented by means of several metaphors and modalities, asserting the right to speak rather than to be spoken for. According to James Olney, in *Metaphors of the Self*, these metaphors are all the points of view, models, hypothesis and myths created and chosen by the author and they are the means by which the subjective consciousness gives order to itself and to the objective reality.

To conclude, let us think further on Foucault's formulation of the 'self as possibility', (1989) opening a perspective where the self, in its autobiographical representation, is a political project and where autobiography regarded as a geography of the possible, articulates a way of life and a set of technologies and trajectories, or techniques.

Writing autobiographically is a political project of a being in transformation, or using Hall's words, it is a project of becoming, where agency, according to Grossberg (1996) comes to be the product of diagrams of mobility and placement which map the possibilities of where and how certain vectors of influence can stop and be placed; agency, still in Grossberg's words, involves the possibilities of action as interventions into the processes by which reality is continually being transformed and power enacted in a new landscape.

I would like to end with a quotation taken in one of my last visits to the British Museum, in July 2003, where I had the chance to see a photography exhibition, and where I read the following unsigned inscription: 'Memory is constantly changing, reshaping our experience of the past and present to create a sense of the future'. Indeed, memory being a technology of power, gives the possibility, in the present, to the experiences of the past of being reshaped in the future, giving them the possibility of existing in a new and recreated landscape.

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