Portuguese in Toronto: Interplay between present, past, and future

Ken Smith

Portuguese immigration to Toronto began in earnest in the early 1950s, and continued through the late 1960s and early 1970s. Canadian census data suggest that the Portuguese immigrants to Toronto settled in the downtown west end of the city with a core between College/Bathurst at the north/east and Dundas/Dufferin on the south/west. In this neighborhood, to be called “Little Portugal,” Portuguese immigrants created an “institutionally complete” community, which became one of the most visible ethnic neighborhoods in Toronto (Teixeira and Da Rosa, 2009). By the mid-1980s, the streets of “Little Portugal” represented a vibrant district replete with moments reflecting the life of this community. It was in this milieu that these photographs were made.

In 1984, while studying photography at York University in Toronto, Ken Smith undertook an informal project to document the street life emanating from this neighborhood. The photographer’s style draws on the traditions inherent in the work of the American photographers Walker Evans and Robert Frank and the Europeans Eugene Atget, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and André Kertész. His images capture subjects in candid situations within public places: they emanate from a place where human activity can be seen, a place to observe and capture social interaction.

The black and white images in this collection neither intend to celebrate or glorify the community nor to chronicle it as such; rather they attempt to capture the dynamics between people and the places they inhabit. Smith’s aesthetic is rooted in the spontaneous relationships between the environment, the subject, and the unobtrusive camera; life unfolds and in doing so reveals patterns of visual organization that give it meaning.
This collection exhibits an underlying juxtaposition between the young and the old in the subjects represented. Though not intentional thematically, an impression of inter-generational dynamics and relationships can be derived from the collected work. Children present a repeating theme, both depicted independently from the adults and in context with them. Viewing the collection, one can discover a strong interplay between present, past, and future: a present represented by the moment of the photography; the past inherent in the adult subjects; and a future to be defined by the children depicted. Insofar as a cultural connotation can be levied against the images, we can read this as a remark on the nature of the cultural change; the first generation adults providing a cultural anchor to the homeland they left; the children embracing and helping to define the new culture in which they will participate.

These images help to edify and consolidate our history but as with all photography, they capture a time lost to memory: the Toronto of the 1980’s has changed; the Portuguese community has evolved; and the people depicted here have grown older. As the eminent photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson once said:

We photographers deal in things which are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished there is no contrivance on earth can make them come back again. We cannot develop and print a memory.

Works Cited
Photographs
Ken Smith has post-graduate degrees in Media Studies, Education, and a Doctorate in Cognitive Sciences. For many years he has photographed Portuguese cultures, including testimonials from the Azores Islands. His photographs have been exhibited internationally at academic conferences and galleries.