

# “I’ve Never Left Castro Laboreiro”: Ambiguity, Cultural Pride and Haunted Imagery in a Northern Portuguese Mountain Community

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## Abstract

What does it mean to be somewhere? This chapter follows the reflections and testimonies by a variety of natives from Castro Laboreiro, in northern Portugal, dubbed the *castrejos*. Among these *castrejos*, to be somewhere, both in space and in time, seems to carry a sense of belonging that transcends the transformations that the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought to mountain communities of the region. This sense of always being there in Castro Laboreiro, from the *castrejos*, is inexorably entwined with contemporary forms of economic survival and heritage-making, leading to interesting ambiguities and unending questions of truth, authenticity, legitimacy, and identity.

## Festa C(r)asteja

One could sense the familiar air of a local festivity: it’s hard to find a proper spot to park your vehicle; the single local road littered with clumped up cars and a swarm of people, walking around in groups. A surprising amount of them, both young and old, appear to be specifically dressed for the celebration: the boys and the men wearing brown pants, white shirts of linen cloth (or at least resembling linen) under sleeveless jackets, and some form of hat or bonnet; the girls and the women donning long dark skirts combined with equally sombre-toned blouses, with colourful kerchiefs covering their heads and shoulders.

It would be, for anyone familiar with folk festivities in northern Portugal, a banal or at least usual sight. These are festivity clothes: you'd don them for this purpose; they're otherwise kept at home. This specific celebration is actually very small in crowd size, comparing to other major events that one could visit in the Minho province, some of which drawing volumes of people that reach hundreds of thousands.

The food vendors, a common sight in local celebrations, serve grilled pork or chicken, wine and beer, and sweets such as cotton candy or *farturas*. One can also spot the locally produced goods and crafts, or even the wandering salesmen bringing clothes and cheap trinkets for the children. There is also a peculiar contest that's happening in a field ahead, a competition for the best specimens of a dog breed called *Castro Laboreiro*.

This is the *Festa Crasteja*<sup>1</sup>. We are in *Castro Laboreiro*, a region in the mountains of northern Portugal, which boasts a particularly distinctive cultural identity, and has been an increasingly sought-after destination for tourists seeking the natural beauty of the mountains, and the cultural panoply that's on offer by the locals.

One of those stands belongs to Sara and Manuel, two *castrejos* who currently make a business out of renting refurbished old homes for short-term vacation stays. Their stand features an assortment of stuff: a few wicker carboys and baskets, an old and worn milling stone, a hung cross-shaped support that was used to store bread away from the rats, and other assorted items that evoke a sense of rurality, of handcrafting, of agriculture and animal rearing, of an old time that's gone. These objects, though, are not for sale. They are props in a show of *castrejo* culture, a show that the visitor is welcomed to enjoy and participate in.

*Castro Laboreiro* is a name that designates a town, but also a parish region that spans almost 90 km<sup>2</sup> in area. It's located high up in the *Laboreiro* mountains, fully within Portugal's *Peneda-Gerês National Park*. The *Laboreiro* mountains feature a distinctive plateau (with the same name), over which a section the northern border between Portugal and Spain is traced. The plateau's history as travel grounds for border crossers, fleeing migrants, and contrabandists, is well known regionally (Gonçalves, 1996; Gonçalves, 2008;

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1 Though the normal spelling would be *castreja*, for this event the organizers insist on switching the R which refers to a common spoken variance of the word.

Gonçalves and Rodrigues, 2023; Silva, 2009; Aguiar, 2016); its prehistoric vestiges dating all the way back to 4000–5000 BC (Dordio, 1995; Lima, 1995; Lima, 1996), which include a complex array of dozens megalithic monuments and stone carvings, trace human occupation and circulation in the area for millennia.



Figure 1 – Manuel and Sara pose in front of their stand in August 2023. Photo by Sabrina Marques. Reprinted with permission.

The Laboreiro is old. And yet, is only one of the many ways in which castrejo representation, imagery, and narratives, plunge contemporaneity into the depths of ancestry. Narrative devices rooting castrejos and castrejo culture in deep Portuguese origins have been employed for a while (Domingues, 2023; Domingues & Rodrigues, 2007; Gonçalves & Domingues, 2023). Castro Laboreiro has been the subject of interest for 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnography, archaeology, and travel literature (Domingues & Rodrigues, 2007; Domingues, 2023). An interest that continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## To Never Leave

This chapter seeks a reflection on a sense of belonging in a mountain community that is also gone, where what is there today is dissonant with what was before, and whose people reside in this atemporal state that's both in the historical past, but also the ever-emerging present. It focuses on Castro Laboreiro, a historical and iconographic rural region in the mountains of northern Portugal, which has undergone structurally irreversible changes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

We will follow the perspectives and reflections of a few castrejos with whom I have worked over the span of a few years. Testimonies that were gathered in conversation around family photographs and other audiovisual archives kept at home. We will look over some methodological considerations of this kind of work, which is the main driving force of both the kinds of data that was gathered, and also the main inspiration for the very style in which I'm writing – an attempt to blend concrete data with a more literary, story-telling style of writing that I believe was brought to me through fieldwork with castrejos, whose own conceptions come about in a story-telling kind of way.

For this purpose, I chose to focus on a dialectic between past and present, proximity and distance, being and not being. The stage is set by a disposition of heritage and tradition as elements for tourism – the main economic incentive, currently, in Castro Laboreiro. But what I will attempt to do, by approaching contrasts and ambiguities, is to break them apart, and bring about a field of belonging that seems to be very present among castrejos.

We will see that castrejos move about along these fields of belonging, as they account for their residence among brandas and inverneiras, or they express, from afar, “never leaving” their own land. How the past is enacted in the present, as pride, loss, trauma, celebration – castrejo history itself an ever-emerging contemporality, whose elements may be added and pulled at will through storytelling.

It's an incomplete work. As we will see, castrejo forms of understanding themselves and the world is itself fundamentally incomplete. It comes about. Glimpses of possibility shine through in the telling, and, hopefully, this chapter itself will resonate with that, as I leave the door ajar for considerations and discussions which I am not able to bring here. Rather, it's here, but not here. Like castrejos, who reside where they are not residing.

## Images of Heritage

I arrived in Castro Laboreiro as part of an ongoing effort to seek out photographs and other audiovisual archives located in people’s homes. The goal was to gather and safeguard a potentially significant legacy of images that would otherwise run the risk of being lost or destroyed. It was, in a sense, a conservation effort, though not necessarily concerned with a preservation of a culture but, rather, to draw attention to the richness and depth of life stories which can be reached through these archives.

My first incursion was in 2014, when I conducted a survey for photographs relating to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese exodus to France. It was a limited exchange then, a few visits over the span of two months, since the goal was to reach the wider Melgaço region. Over the following years, I ended up returning to Castro Laboreiro through a few invitations to follow ongoing heritage-making efforts<sup>2</sup> for a particular kind of local carnival costume known as the Farrangalheiro (see Maciel, 2022) as well as to consult and reflect on the local customs of widows and their associated black clothes (Maciel, 2023).

However, my real in-depth dive into Castro Laboreiro happened with a project named “Who Are We Here?” Starting in 2018, this initiative aimed specifically to allow for personal accounts to take prominence, and for aesthetics, testimonies, and life trajectories that emerge from these archives to lead a descriptor apparatus. It was, I would say, a form of applied anthropology: working within the organization of a local film festival (MDOC - Melgaço International Film Festival<sup>3</sup>), for the purposes of expanding Lugar do Real, a nonprofit, online, public database<sup>4</sup> of photographs, films, and other audiovisual materials relating to local, popular culture and heritage. Common results from this project are recorded interviews, exhibitions, publications, roundtables, and other public installations.

“Who Are We Here?” is a nomadic initiative, moving from parish to parish within the Melgaço municipality. As of writing this chapter, I have travelled and collected photographs along four different regions in four different

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2 For a discussion on heritage-making in Portugal, see Antunes (2020).

3 A reference to the project can be found on the Festival’s website, here: <https://mdocfestival.pt/en/quem-somos>

4 [www.lugardoreal.com/fotomemoria](http://www.lugardoreal.com/fotomemoria)

periods of time<sup>5</sup>. Towards this goal, I start with establishing a fieldwork period of at least five months in residence. The search for photograph collections begins with a local mediator, which leads me to meet people through their own network of relationships (usually, the local parish council president, the priest, a representative of a local cultural organization, or someone who's also an active participant in the project). Seeing as the Melgaço parishes are usually small in size and population density (no more than a few hundred people actively residing in each village<sup>6</sup>), after about one or two weeks I start to gently introduce myself into the community.

I employed a methodology that allies practical strategies of collection-building for the Lugar do Real archive with anthropological approaches to fieldwork, including extended periods of residence in the territory. This allows, on the one hand, for a deeper understanding of the photographs and other audiovisual archives gathered, including the context in which they were produced, the stories that they contain, and the personal, historical, and communal significance that they might carry (which a detached perspective could miss). On the other hand, it allows establishing close-knit relationships with locals that ensure comfort and consent with the collection process.

The time spent in fieldwork, then, is divided between periods of gathering, cataloguing and digitizing photographs, deep conversations about the local people, the stories of their lives and of the land, and participation in whatever communal event may be happening at some point. All of this information is fuel for a series of filmed interviews, in which participants talk about their photographs and trace their biographical trajectories; it also informs the design for on-site photography exhibitions that feature selected materials from personal archives; and the eventual publishing of photography books, which also feature written contributions from local authors, as well as my own brief account of my stay in the parish.

A phase of more intense immersion into people's life stories, though, hap-

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5 Locations: Parada do Monte and Cubalhão (2018), Prado and Remoães (2019), Castro Laboreiro and Lamas de Mouro (2020–2023), Alvaredo (2023–ongoing).

6 The population disparity in Melgaço would be the subject of a different reflection entirely, that's too vast to include here. Due to a multiplicity of factors that range from a shortage in employment opportunities, lack of access to services such as schools and hospitals, and a history tied to migration, many Melgaço natives reside outside of the region, either abroad (France being the greatest host of Melgaço migrants), or dislocated to major Portuguese cities. As we will see, this underlies contemporary *castrejo* socialities as well.

pens while collecting the photographs. As a rule, I spend a significant time looking through albums and photograph piles, going over the stories behind them, identifying people and places, or hearing stories that are, in different degrees, associated with the pictures. The time spent going over these materials varies greatly from person to person, their availability, and openness to conversation; it also depends on the depth and size of the archive. Sometimes, this process happens in group; in rare occasions (following clear and comfortable consent), I have recorded these interactions for my own personal archive. I find that there's a profound potential to this process, both from the perspective of recounting life stories and memories, and of talking about contemporary issues by drawing from personal narratives, mediated by pictures and documents.

This is, essentially, a way of doing photo elicitation, a form of information gathering that, according to Harper (2002; see also Auken et al. 2010), is embedded in classic forms of ethnographic methodology, but not generally assumed as such:

... only a small number of published studies have relied on photo elicitation. It may be photo elicitation takes place informally in routine field work and that its impact is not formally realized. (...) Thus it may be the case that anthropologists often use photographs in interviews but that few of these are written up as photo elicitation studies. Anthropological studies that rely primarily on photo elicitation, however, are few and far between. (Harper, 2002, p. 15)

Forms of photo-elicitation are used in a multitude of research fields, and shift from use of pictures that are researcher-generated, participant-generated or decontextualized (Richard & Lahman, 2015), in varying degrees of experimentation and abstraction. For my research, elicitation comes about as a natural extension of the gathering and cataloguing process, as the information is gathered from photographs that are digitized from people's personal archives – photo albums, scattered findings in drawers and boxes, hung in walls. As such, access to these materials is contingent on a continuous, trusting relationship between myself and the collection owners.

Throughout this research, I have been compiling testimonies, reflections, documents, and other materials. These include recorded interviews (audio

and video), assorted videos and photographs taken with my smartphone or camera during certain events, observational fieldnotes or other notes taken during conversations and events, and even digital interactions through social media, e-mail or phone / internet messages. This is the kind of data that I draw from in this chapter, from which emerge the themes that I'm discussing. I'll refer to things that have been said to me, or reflections by people I've talked to – these are registered, usually, on a field diary, in the form of quick notes or musings, taken during conversations around photographs or from other interactions with locals.

In the process of organizing and digesting all this information, I have also returned to the region regularly and brought my questions and doubts back to the people that I worked with. As such, the ideas that I'm presenting in this chapter (as well as the other things I've written in other avenues) have been discussed with, and scrutinized by, the people whose testimonies are featured here<sup>7</sup>. This return usually happens in shorter visits after the more intense fieldwork periods.

I moved to Castro Laboreiro in 2020, aiming to settle into another five months of fieldwork. It was, unfortunately, coincidental with the initial spike of what would become the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant stopping my residence after two weeks, following a national social isolation mandate (Sequeira et al., 2024). The months that followed were characterized by intense public fears of wandering strangers as super-spreaders of the disease. Adding dramatic effect, the Melgaço region was one of the few nationwide that enforced a regional quarantine (in the Parada do Monte village), following a spike that led to concerted efforts to protect the local elderly population (see Vieira et al., 2020). These conditions made it very uncomfortable for any long-term fieldwork to occur, at least during periods of higher Covid-19 casualties.

As such, instead, I decided to start tracing the whereabouts of castrejos living outside of Castro Laboreiro. I was aware of the sizeable castrejo community living in the city of Braga, and, taking the window of opportunity

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<sup>7</sup> Anecdotally, one issue that was particularly challenging was the one I mentioned regarding widowhood customs in Castro Laboreiro, because of a particular common interpretation of women of migrant men being described as “widows for the living”, since they too would dress in black, which is analogous to typical widower clothing. In discussing this idea with *castreja* women, they criticized the notion, leading me to reframe the issue entirely (Maciel, 2023).

during periods of lower pandemic restrictions, I started contacting castrejos living there and exploring the subject of “Castro at a distance”, that I talk about further on in this chapter. I knew, from my previous work with Castro Laboreiro, that castrejos had a reputation for living abroad, while retaining tight-knit relationships and a proud sense of collective identity. So, during 2020 and early 2021, I was regularly talking to and interviewing a few castrejos who lived in Braga, both by visiting them in their homes, by meeting them in public spaces, or by contacting to them online.

After Covid-19 restrictions were lifted further, in 2021, I returned to Castro Laboreiro for a few weeks at a time, still under social distancing. Now, even with such limitations<sup>8</sup>, I would resume my exploration of personal photography archives. In 2022, I came back, for an additional five months of fieldwork. In total, I spent over ten months of intermittent fieldwork in Castro Laboreiro, adding to that the many visits over the years that happened before, and the return post-fieldwork trips.

My presence would unearth photographs that put into question some common representations of castrejo aesthetics. For example, I would find old pictures of women in white shirts and confront that with the understanding that castrejas dress in dark colours or simply black (as described in Geraldine [1982]); in other cases, an old photograph of a dwelling could reveal disputed elements in the landscape. Simultaneously, this collection of pictures would rouse interest among locals for its evidential power as proof of ancestry and originality – particularly when they contained information related to customs or traditions. It would bring about discussions around what is, exactly, the proper way to talk about castrejo history; in turn, bringing light to the contentious nature of this collective storytelling.

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8 In some cases, specially when someone had a suspicion of being ill, I would schedule drop-off locations for packets of photographs for me to pick up later.



Figure 2 – Unidentified group of *castrejas* heading to the Rodeiro branda festivities in the 1960's. Photo by Américo Domingues. Reprinted with permission.

These conversations evidenced a particular problem with castrejo history: while there is a robust corpus of written accounts regarding Castro Laboreiro, they often come in the form of situated observations by visiting writers and academics (Domingues, 2023). As such, I found those accounts to be disputed by castrejos, who tend to pitch in their own personal stories, or accounts passed down from parents or grandparents, as counterpoints. In this debate, I identified a fascination and interest in castrejo photographs as testimonies of “what actually happened”, or, in another light, an additional element in an ongoing effort of retelling castrejo history.



Figure 3 – Parade of *castreja* women during the Festa Castreja in the 1990s. Photographer unknown, from the archive of Dulcelina Fernandes. Reprinted with permission.

This way of using photographs as documents that “verify the real”, imposing certainty over the “ephemeral” “aspects of life”, and operating strategically as mechanisms that confirm, contain, “fix” the past into seemingly coherent narratives, has been laid out in Bloustein (2003). The way that these processes tie back together with how narratives around heritage are integrated and put to practice through photography archives, is discussed in depth in Sterling (2019). For what I wish to discuss here, I found that castrejo culture seemed to be continuously re-enacted, re-written, and re-told, following a potentially endless dive into elements of castrejo past that may emerge<sup>9</sup>.

This locally discussed history, therefore, carries imbued elements from written accounts and studies, documented evidence, orally transmitted stories, first-person accounts, and a knowledge of the territory and its people. It is, for me, difficult to parse these elements out, to separate accounts drawn

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<sup>9</sup> During a debate over the correct garb for castrejo women, I’ve registered one castrejo that argued that the clothes should be “as black as possible” and “as old as we can verify”, reinforcing this idea that authenticity (for him) relied deeply on documented verification, where ancestry is itself a form of validation.

from ethnographers from individual and shared sensibilities regarding castrejo heritage and identity. For that reason, I choose to follow a textual format that pivots among literary references, written testimony, data from interviews, photographs, and a learning inscribed in me over the time spent in Castro Laboreiro. This, way, I feel we can draw a little closer to ongoing forms of castrejo storytelling, even if in a manner that's flawed or incomplete.

## Looking Back

19<sup>th</sup> century nation-state building saw the emergence of an aesthetic paradigm of Portuguese identity among cultural elites, marked by a shift towards a romanticized idea of "rurality" that drew from the picturesque and romantic literary traditions (Leal, 2010) to seek out, among idealized and stylized fictions of peasant lifestyles seen as closer to nature, a sense of purity and originality (Domingues, 2023).

Addressing this process, Leal (2010) follows Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in considering the "second life" of cultural processes, by distinguishing folk culture "itself", that is, the mapping of behaviours, customs, ideas and aesthetics, however they may be, as an ongoing process of human lived interaction and experience, from the ways in which elements from that cultural pool are brought back into prominence as crystalized aspects, traces, and objects that become part of a nation's "identitarian kit" (Leal, 2010, p. 128). This kit is then one which can be readily "activated" (Silva, 2009) to tie the field of ethnography to politics of national identity, following two axes: that of an ethnogenealogy, meaning the employ of folk culture as evidence of a nation's genealogical – historical – depth; and that of folk culture itself as the essence of a nation's soul (Leal, 2010, p. 127).

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would bring about further efforts in mapping, cataloguing, and defining the different aspects of Portuguese folk culture and aesthetics – continuously reaffirming its relationship to a reigning political and ideological ruralism (Alves, 2007). These accounts were, directly and indirectly, and in varying degrees of intentionality, fundamental for the ideological grounding of Portuguese nationalism and fascism. The Es-

tado Novo (New State) regime, which lasted from 1933<sup>10</sup> until 1974, brought along a profoundly intentional project to map the country through an array of individualized cultural manifestations, including regionalized forms of song, dance, and clothing (Medeiros, 2003). Contemporary academics are in the process of dissecting the ideological underpinnings of these early ethnographic accounts and how they persist in the present day (see, for example, Alves [2007], Godinho [2018], Neves [2010]).

The Carnation Revolution of 1974 brought along many changes to the Portuguese cultural landscape, but, until recently, very little effective criticism towards the folklorist apparatus inherited from before (Coelho, 2020). In fact, a defence of Portuguese cultural identity that finds its legitimacy in claims of “lost in history” ancestry is still vibrant today (Medeiros, 2003; Godinho, 2018). Festivities that evoke a sense of material and immaterial heritage, alongside customs and aesthetics more or less associated with them, abound in Portugal, with a strong and widespread prevalence in the northwestern region of Minho, where a pride for cultural heritage has taken an increasingly central position, including a constant revitalization of folklore dance and music groups, a scattering of contemporary arts practices that borrow from folklorist aesthetics, and a powerful tourism-centered cultural apparatus that draws from, and feeds into, this ongoing agitation (Godinho, 2018; Silva, 2009; Antunes, 2020).

According to authors such as Paula Godinho (2018), such agitations have found footing in situated and bound festivals and festivities, where intensified forms of identity celebration meet up with focused markets around arts, crafts, and gastronomy, to the backdrop of stage and street public displays of folk and otherwise popular culture, in the form of music concerts, theatres, parades, and exhibits. This form of “festivalization” of culture (Godinho, 2018; Campos, 2021) is not a local phenomenon, and is in keeping with global trends around the celebration and promotion of culture in different countries (González, 2020; Ali-Knight, 2009; Pedregal 2008; Bendix, 2009), which in turn was already a trend noted in late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bendix, 1989).

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10 Following a military coup that took place in may 28<sup>th</sup>, 1926.



Figure 4 – *Castrejos* dance on a stage. Date is likely to be late 1980s/early 1990s. Photographer unknown, from the archive of Maria Domingues. Reprinted with permission.

It shouldn't be surprising, then, that, among the residents of hard-to-reach locations such as Castro Laboreiro, a dual engagement in hospitality industry<sup>11</sup> (Ionel, 2016; Slattery, 2002) and folklorist cultural practices comes about as a strategy for economic survival. Old forms of living off the land no longer provide an economically sustainable lifestyle – as we will see, one could argue that they never fully did.

To draw a history of Castro Laboreiro requires a compromise with factuality. *Castrejo* culture and identity is deeply tied with an imagined common history that is transmitted through oral and written accounts. It's a narrative, one that conflates written first-hand testimony by academics and travelling

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11 I chose the term "hospitality industry" over "tourism" here, to strategically underscore services that sustain tourism, but not just. In Castro Laboreiro, much of the industrial apparatus that supports tourism – restaurants, hotels and other kinds of lodging, tour guides through nature, public shows and markets, as well as the structural means of production and supply in labour and goods that such an apparatus requires – is also actively engaged upon, and used by, *castrejos* themselves. There are dynamics at play here, which Godinho (2018) explores through a reflection on the back-and-forth in these operations, from the inside-out and from the outside-in, and in this movement there's a question around the extent to which locals enmeshed in festivalization engage in a form of tourism "of themselves". I believe that "hospitality industry" is a term that better encompasses these dynamics.

writers, and information derived from late 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs and illustrations. It’s fascinating to see how these accounts themselves refer to Castro Laboreiro in a quasi-mystical fashion, even when they come from highly technical sources, such as this reference found in the original standard for the controversial Castro Laboreiro dog breed, registered in 1935:

Authors say that, in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, along those unwalkable and stony places, there still resided semi-savage tribes, having only the obligation to pay a small tribute to the kings consisting of five hunting dogs, which shows how, in those times, the dogs were already appreciated and used in hunting due to their strong abilities. (Marques, 1935, p. 9)

An imagined historical past, combined with the description of a “semi-savage tribes” (similar accounts can be found throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Domingues [2023] pointed out), underlines both the claims to ancestry in Castro Laboreiro and a kind of deprivation and poverty that was often reported among those who resided in the particularly harsher locations of the region. Reports describe blackened, soot-covered walls in houses where the castrejos would reside during the winter, huddling against the heavy snows, sleeping in hard beds under uncomfortable, thick woolen blankets. The “savagery” of the people would often come about as an indictment on the particularly harsh conditions of living (Domingues, 2023).

Castro Laboreiro (the region) is composed of a myriad villages scattered about the mountainsides. The villages located more towards the mountaintops are called the brandas, where there are fields of rye and wheat (Domingues and Rodrigues, 2007). These are the summertime lodgings. But, for the winter, the castrejos would move away from the heavy snows, down the mountain slope to the inverneiras – the winter lodging. The “Move” (*Muda*) would happen two times per year: downwards sometime in autumn after the harvests in the brandas, upwards at the end of winter (Domingues and Rodrigues, 2007).



Figure 5 – The Campelo branda, with newer houses being build. Photographed by Oliveiros Domingues, the father of Sara Domingues, whose archive this photograph is taken from. Considering the newer houses, it is likely to have been taken during the 1960s. Reprinted with permission.

A back-and-forth that is justified by, once again, the harsh conditions of the mountain, both because of the heavy snows that would make brandas unlivable, and the demands of agriculture, where land availability, water access, and soil quality require the ingenuity of locals to extract as much resources as possible. Rye fields in the brandas, greens and potatoes in the inverneiras. Most castrejos would, then, reside along the expanse drawn between two villages – except for those who lived in halfway dwellings (dubbed “permanent brandas”) or in Castro Laboreiro proper (Domingues & Rodrigues, 2007).

Both brandas and inverneiras are well kept and maintained over the year. Waterways need to be cleared, houses need to be maintained, earth needs to be tilled, crops need to be planted months in advance before you do the Move. I have observed how conversations around castrejo heritage, especially among castrejos who meet outside of Castro Laboreiro, typically start out by recounting where in the region each person is “from”, which often results in the castrejos giving two names: “I am from (let’s say) Portos (branda) and Curveira (inverneira)”. A dual locality, or maybe an extended territory of belonging. One which links its meaning to the harshness of the land.

Roads and pathways, fields contoured with hand-built granite walls, water mills by the side of rivers and brooks, small dams, cottages for storing farming equipment and shelter from bad weather, small chapels and altars, stone bridges and paths, all fill the Castro Laboreiro region with telltale signs of intense occupation. One which is traced and crossed by a turbulence of humans, non-humans, weather, and spirits<sup>12</sup>. *Brandas* and *Inverneiras* dot a constellation around the center hub village of Castro Laboreiro, as focal points in this agitation. As such, they draw a cartography that’s been the subject of interest for a variety of researchers (Geraldès, 1996; Perez, 2002).



Figure 6 – Snow-covered Castro Laboreiro. Date unknown, photographed by the priest Anibal Rodrigues at an unknown date, likely during the 1960s. From the archive of Amado Fernandes. Reprinted with permission.

Archaeologists, noting the human territorial occupation that spans millenia (Dordio, 1995), have also attempted to draw comparative parallels by looking at contemporary disposition of houses and land. Lima, particularly, took on the task of mapping out all the *brandas* and *inverneiras* (Lima, 1995) and

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12 The appearance and presence of spirits of the dead is well documented in northern Portugal (see for example Pina-Cabral, 1980). *Castrejo* storytelling comes about also through the lens of apparitions, omens, and other spirits (Fernandes, 2023), as I will explain later.

contextualizing them among archaeological and other historical monuments (Lima, 1996). This mapping has been revisited by local authors Domingues and Rodrigues (2007), who contributed by developing a table of the most common connections between different sites – i. e., which brandas connect more frequently to which inverneiras. The preserved granite buildings have also drawn attention from architects (for example Salgado, 2014, and Sampaio, 2008).

If the moving about between brandas and inverneiras is one of the defining traces of castrejo heritage, one other is the sendoff of boys and men abroad for work. 18<sup>th</sup> century accounts<sup>13</sup> report waves of migrant castrejos working throughout northern Portugal as masons and labourers (Gonçalves & Rodrigues, 2023). A common reality within mountain communities in northern Portugal over the centuries, where men are often incentivized to leave while the women stay behind, caring for family, home, and land. But one that is specifically invoked as a strongly defining characteristic of castrejo identity:

There's an astounding emigration, since from the start of the month of September, every man that's older than eight years old all the way up to old age, if able to drag himself, marches off towards [the regions of] Douro, Tráz os – Montes, Beira Alta, and other parts, not returning until Easter, which is the fatal date before which they will forcefully return. (...) The land is so deprived of men, that cadavers are taken to church by women, and before that, there's a great feast in the grieviers' home for those who wish to partake, which everyone gladly does, sometimes many tens of them, which no one finds strange since it's the way of the land. (Leal, 1874, pp. 207–208)

The Laboreiro plateau, an expanse that's crossed by the border between Portugal and Spain, was a privileged border-crossing avenue for migrants (Gonçalves & Rodrigues, 2023). Castrejos themselves, from the start, were counted among the first migrants to go to France, as it was a logical progression of the custom of men to leave for work. However, the scale of 20<sup>th</sup> century migration from Portugal to France was unprecedented. Migrants being, at the

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13 A famous source for these accounts are the Memórias Paroquiais (parochial memories), a collection of inquiries made across the then realm of Portugal. See: <https://digitarq.arquivos.pt/details?id=4238720>

time, mostly men (Gonçalves, 1996). Emigration meant an economic boost for families at home, which, coupled with the enrichment that came from other booming opportunities in clandestine crossing and contraband at the border, resulted in a vast boost in *castrejo* wealth during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gonçalves, 2008; Aguiar, 2016).

Since a great number of men were working abroad, the *castrejas* at home would – as it was reported in the past – take the responsibility of managing family life, domestic labour, and agriculture (Geraldès, 1978, 1982). “*Castrejo* men have always lived outside of Castro”, one *castrejo* named Bruno once told me, to underlie the historical distinction in gender roles. A responsibility which is often portrayed as, again, an inherited pride of strong *castreja* women, masters of land and home<sup>14</sup>. An account from the 70s ethnographer Alice Geraldès would confirm as much, although cautiously advising against enthusiastic representations of a matriarchal society among *castrejos*:

Castro Laboreiro provides an excellent example of a community that has been, for over half a century, at the exclusive responsibility of women who, for that reason, have gained at the eyes of men an importance that is not coherent with a subordinate status. (...) Effectively, their freedom to act is absolute, for everything that regards the governance of the family production unit, the education, and life of the children whom until adulthood do not recognise any authority that isn’t the one exercised by the mother. (...) Not wanting to fall into the absurd situation of mistaking *castreja* society with a matriarchy, we might say that, on par with the power that women exert on several levels, they also take up the responsibility to ensure that traditional order does not deteriorate. (Geraldès, 1978, pp. 22–23)<sup>15</sup>

The enthusiastic defence of a quasi-matriarchal *castreja* society takes full effect in addressing the *castreja* garb, one which was also studied and documented by Alice Geraldès (Geraldès, 1982). *Castreja* women were often reported as dressed in almost full black: black skirt, black shirt, and a black thick wollen cape that covers her body from head all the way down to her legs. During the winter, the outfit is described to include white woollen leggings

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14 This is not a singular feature of Castro Laboreiro, but of a practice in local mountain communities (Geraldès, 1982).

15 Translation by the author of this text.

for extra protection against the cold. In summertime, the thick wollen cape gives way to a dark kerchief to cover the head. The black clothes would be donned to signify the absence of men – which was described to me as being a way signal that the women are married and committed. Splashes of colour, from kershiefs, scarves, or sober-coloured shirts, would be used upon the men's return.



Figure 7 – Felisbela Pereira, the grandmother of Armandina Fernandes, in a field with her flock of sheep. Date and photographer unknown. From the archive of Armandina Fernandes. Reprinted with permission.

Black-clad women huddling from the snow are the centrepiece of castrejo iconography. It is portrayed in illustrations and photographs dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It's also the aesthetic focus of the many works of documentary film and photography done about Castro Laboreiro throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and until the present day<sup>16</sup>.

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16 See, for example, the first three episodes of "O Homem Montanhês (The Mountain Man)", by Ricardo Costa, filmed in the 1970s. Available at: <https://arquivos.rtp.pt/programas/o-homem-montanhês/>

An ever-present sense of ancient rurality which would be undercut by the contrast with the cosmopolitan life of migrants abroad. With wealth, came investment. Castrejos would fund the send-off of their children, still residing in Castro Laboreiro, to the nearby city of Braga for studying. From the 70s and 80s, recently graduated castrejos would take full advantage of the opportunities brought about by democracy. These comprise many of the castrejos I have met and interviewed. Many among them are lawyers, judges, doctors, engineers, and businessmen.

Little by little, houses were refurbished from within and converted towards comfort. The Move between brandas and inverneiras became progressively less necessary<sup>17</sup>. As highly educated castrejos make a living in the city, so do their children, leading to a progressive emptying of young from the region. Which has been, conversely, replaced by a growing interest from visitors, as tourist attractions such as nature hikes and canyoning, side by side with the public reenactments of castrejo folk heritage, breed a financial incentive towards hosting tourism<sup>18</sup>. Currently, the small town of Castro Laboreiro has three hotels and four restaurants; many old houses in the brandas and inverneiras have also converted to welcome visitors. Recently, a Portuguese online influencer bought several of them in an inverneira, as part of a millionaire project for the repurposing of abandoned homes for tourism<sup>19</sup>.

In so many ways, the Castro Laboreiro that was is no longer there. Even the winters feel softer, now. The snow days are few, and short lasting. When it does snow, the region is swarmed by visitors. Filipe, a castrejo, told me of the many cars that would get stuck in the snows and ice due to lack of driver experience, and poorly equipped cars. The dangers that come from traffic jams

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17 There is still one mother and daughter pair that still do the Move today. They do it not out of necessity, but out of tradition, and under the insistence of the mother. Their willingness to Move every year is also regularly the subject of local TV reports and interviews (see, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQ00FtZcxIE>). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the same women are regularly involved in other scheduled evocation of old customs and traditions of Castro Laboreiro. I was also informed of an unrelated third person who still does the Move, but I never met them.

18 This again is in trend with broader reconfigurations of life in border and mountain communities of the region with, around, or from tourism. While I am not aware of a study that focuses the economic impact of tourism in Castro Laboreiro, Silva (2009) does broach the subject when writing about the conversion of cross-border contraband into heritage and tourism.

19 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMzCrv0\\_BVc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMzCrv0_BVc)

in the mountains that cut off access to emergency vehicles. In another conversation, a different castrejo was telling me about the changes in climate. He blamed climate change, and the building of a dam in Galicia, as primary catalysts for the softening of the winter. I could sense a tinge of lamentation in his voice. After all, the Move among brandas and inverneiras is over; the few women that still dress in black on an everyday basis are very old; the lands are barely tended for, cattle are rarely seen anymore. If the winters are also no longer harsh, then yet another structurally defining element of castrejo pride is gone, and there's not much of those left to witness.

## Castro at a Distance

There's some history between Castro Laboreiro and the city of Braga. The wealth brought about by emigration and contraband (Gonçalves, 1996; 2008) allowed for some castrejos to invest in the city, buying nearby land and setting up profitable building companies. There's a usual saying among castrejos, which states that they essentially "built" Braga (or, rather, that they built from the small city that was, into the big city that it is today). The presence of castrejos in Braga was also an additional incentive for those residing in Castro, or abroad, to feel comfortable sending their children to study there. A common thread occurred where boys and girls would be sent to christian boarding schools<sup>20</sup>, ensuring some form of surveillance over the children.

As a result, the relationship maps that would be drawn among neighbours, family, and close friends, were extended to Braga as well, in a manner very similar to the relatively close circuit of castrejo migration, which would guarantee that the clandestine crossing over to France would at least result in reestablishing connections with other castrejos there. As one person told me, "castrejos wander in packs." The extension of strong relational bonds, even if established at a considerable distance from the native land, manifests frequently in the form of marriages among castrejos, as well as intense degrees of in-group socialization.

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20 Among the castrejos that I interviewed, the common story was to be sent either to the D. Diogo de Sousa College (for boys), or the "Colégio Teresiano" (for girls, translatable as the College of St. Theresa). Both are in Braga.

Although, among the people that I met, this keeping up with local relational bonds abroad was regularly framed within the bounds of a deep adherence to old castrejo customs. To marry among other locals, rejecting connections with foreigners<sup>21</sup>, is boasted as part of a particular kind of stubborn adherence to tradition. It usually follows a deep connection to Castro, even if from afar, through social media groups for socializing and for advocating the defence and preservation of castrejo heritage.

In 2021, during periods where mandatory confinement was lifted, I went to Braga a few times to converse with some of these castrejos who, in a way, “live Castro at a distance”. In one such visit, I came to a house on the city outskirts, after contacting a castrejo man named Armandino who had agreed to meet me. Upon entering, I was greeted by a big Castro Laboreiro dog, which immediately signalled that I had been visiting the right place. Armandino is a very successful orthodontist, and he is married to Armandina, who is a prosecutor for the Portuguese public ministry. Both are castrejos. Upon entering his house, I also was greeted by Armandino’s elderly widowed mother, dressed in black, who would come over to be with her son for stretches of time.

We talked for hours about Castro Laboreiro. The strong social circle of castrejos in Braga, and those who “strayed away”, turned their back, and with whom Armandino lost contact. His mother would chime in by listing old customs and beliefs – such as the sightings of spirits of those who were soon to die, called the *estântegas* (Fernandes, 2023), a kind of apparition that I’ve found retold in variations of name and context, across the region, including my own home village<sup>22</sup>. Stories of commonly used crops and food, the logistics behind the Move, the black clothing of women, the travelling abroad of

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21 Entertainingly, castrejos sometimes refer to outsiders as *plicas*. Not one has given me an origin for the word. But the similar word *pelica* does exist in Portuguese, as a reference to a soft and kind skin (from the word *pele*, meaning skin). Pelica gloves were a kind of soft glove, made from very thin animal skin, used to handle delicate things. I wonder whether the given name *plica* (or *pelica*) to outsiders is a reference to them not wearing the rough and thick wollen covers that castrejos would wear, or a disparaging remark on outsiders being comically soft and frail, unprepared for the toughness of the Laboreiro mountains.

22 A procession of the dead, which I have known about since childhood, features the next to die at the tail end of the file of damned souls, and there are stories of those who were cursed to witness the event. Tales of such people who could sense those who were to die next abound. In Castro, the spirit is seen silently staring out a window or sitting at the front porch. Upon entering the house, the person’s body would be found dead.

men... they would all flow consciously and deliberately, as these are common conversations of interest to castrejos. As Armandino made clear that the tightly bound castrejo groups in Braga would regularly discuss these subjects among themselves, it was also apparent that they were fully knowledgeable of the many written accounts that were produced about Castro over the past centuries.

The conversation extended from early afternoon until the evening. There were mentions of outsider authors – writers, reporters, ethnographers, archaeologists – that talked about the land, important milestones, famous castrejos, the historical progress and changes throughout time. Of a strong awareness of castrejo heritage not just as a matter of identity and relatedness, but as an inherited monument, a powerful edifice of aesthetic symbolism, distinguished material and immaterial heritage, and a generationally inherited collective responsibility to preserve, safeguard, and pass it all on. To not forget. To prevent its death.

Armandino's children, teenagers, were born in Braga already. The parents did, however, register them as if they were residing in Castro Laboreiro at the time, with the official place of birth counting as the *branda* (for the child born in summertime) or *inverneira* (for the one born during winter) that they would be living on, should they have stayed in their native land. Still, they lived in Braga, made their friendships and went to school there, while getting to know their parents' native land through regular visits. Or, I should say, their own native land, as they seemingly identify as castrejos as strongly as their parents do. I was told in an openly prideful tone that one of the sons (whom I didn't meet), a young adult, would regularly speak in a thick local dialect<sup>23</sup> – which he learned by himself and not out of habit at home, purposefully injecting localized words and idiomatic phrasing that even most castrejos would not use.

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23 People who reside at the border speak a kind of mixed language that borrows words from the other side's language (and vice-versa). In the northern border between Portugal and the Spanish region of Galicia, which includes the span of the Laboreiro plateau, the many parishes that cover the administrative limits between countries is often referred to as the *raia*, a term that denotes the border's permeability when it comes to cultural, economic, political, and linguistic exchange between people on both sides. In Castro Laboreiro, it is also very common for locals to speak a kind of Portuguese language that's heavily inflected to a local accent and sprinkled with borrowed Galician words. For more about the *raia*, see the work of Paula Godinho (2017).

I had the opportunity to talk to Armandino's teenage daughter, who, like her brother, deeply identifies as *castreja*. She explained to me that, although her life is in Braga, she does not feel like she belongs there. That it's something to do with the way that she connects with other *castrejos*, how the same routine questions – "who are your parents?" "where [in Castro Laboreiro] are you from?" – inspire in her a sense of belonging and identity that she does not get outside of her native home.

At any given point, I felt, they were operating as temporarily displaced *castrejos*. Like the men from the past, who have "always lived outside of Castro Laboreiro", these contemporary descendants were never too far removed from where they belonged. As evening came, another *castrejo* came to visit – Américo, a man who I've met before, a prolific researcher and archivist of everything that has to do with Castro Laboreiro's history (see Domingues & Rodrigues, 2007; Gonçalves & Rodrigues, 2023), a studious agitator of *castrejo* culture, and a passionate defender of the Castro Laboreiro dog breed. I thought that I would ask both Armandino and Américo about this apparent displacement, about this condition of being *castrejos* at a distance.

Turning to a reflexive and serious tone, Américo responded: "I've never left Castro Laboreiro". He is not displaced. He is there, even if not technically *there*. I think back to the movements between *brandas* and *inverneiras*, to the travelling afar for labour, to emigration. Did *castrejos* ever leave? Could they ever leave? This sense of permanence, one that is attached to an idea of place that, although it relates to a defined administrative region, is not necessarily contained within its bounds, left me confronted with the entire historical edifice of Castro Laboreiro. The heritage, the traumatic past, and the clinging on to its preservation and survival. If Castro Laboreiro is to be gone, then there's no other place to be.

Américo's insistence of never leaving Castro contrasts with Dina's attempt to leave for good.

I've met Dina first on a café in the town of Melgaço. She was introduced to me by a mutual friend, a *castrejo* intermediary that was helping me get to know Castro Laboreiro and a variety of its inhabitants. Like many others, Dina doesn't live in Castro Laboreiro. She worked her whole life as a nurse in Braga, where she got her studies done as well. Dina was born in a *branda* that is, likely, one of Castro Laboreiro's most remote villages: Portos, a two-village

complex located high up at the mouth of the Laboreiro plateau. Nowadays, Portos is largely unoccupied, save for those few castrejos who still go there to maintain their homes.

Portos has a reputation for being remote and secluded, a place where the people were particularly set in their ways. The last place to open itself to the outside world, some have told me. Dina felt it as a child. She commented on how the black clothing was imposed upon her, how the old castrejo customs seemed to her as very demanding. In a manner congruent to the accounts of Alice Geraldes (1982), Dina saw her life mandated under the authority of her mother, whose decisions were absolute, and who imposed upon Dina strict adherence to gender normative roles.



Figure 8 – A group of unidentified people from Portos. Date and photographer unknown. From the archive of Dina Gonçalves. Reprinted with permission.

Like others, after reaching a certain age, Dina was given the opportunity to leave for Braga to further her studies. It was at that point, she said, that she decided to leave to never return. It was a radical transition: Dina used to be as deeply involved in castrejo cultural life as one can. However, she shed her black clothes and a demanding life that she was inheriting from a time of harsh deprivation, and she embraced urban living and relative cosmopolitan liberation.

But the years have passed, and Dina is now a defender of castrejo pride. She enthusiastically helped me go through her old family photos, over the many customs of old and the beauty of the land. I would broach the subject of traumatic history – her early refusal to don the black clothes that are typical of castreja expression. At one point, she explained to me that “after a time, you create your own sense of what it means to be castreja”. Her return was one towards a Castro Laboreiro of her own, one whose significance is very personally defined. There’s a game of affective distance and proximity. Somehow, a sense of belonging that requires this creative play, which shapes the very land one chooses to root oneself in. A land to live in, which is not not the land that you lived in. There, but not *there*.

Arriving in Castro but taking up the route all the way down the road, towards a viewpoint that presents a valley of scattered *inverneiras*, a curious visitor could stop by a group of humanoid metal silhouettes. The work of a local artist, the sculptures feature dark figures of head-covered and black clad women that mark the castrejo iconographic landscape. They are featureless. Unidentified, vague, as enigmatic as a dark shade on an empty field. These covered women can be found all over the small town: in photographs that decorate the few restaurants and cafés, in dolls and figurines that carry approximated replicas of the standardized garb, and in the few older women who still choose to dress accordingly on a colder day.



Figure 9 – “Capa Castreja” (Castreja cape), public sculptures by Madalena Lima in 2025. Photo by Daniel Maciel.

Figures that somehow plunge or collapse a current sense of place and time into the immemorial past, or maybe the cold and harsh atemporal mountain. They are set to evoke a time of movement against hunger, of strife against the elements, but one of prideful heritage and strength. There's a spectral quality to the blackness of clothes and to the ambiguity of being in a place that's there, but not *there*. Both in the one gesture that grasps towards sensible and structural meaning, like in the many accounts recounted by writers and *castrejos* in unison, and the other which remakes the land itself into a place finally worth living in.

When I found Sara in her tourism stand, she was fully donned in what would be described as typical *castreja* festivity clothes. These are the clothes that she regularly wears to promote her family's tourism endeavour in the Pontes *inverneira*, wherein they set up a cluster of comfortable houses. However, in previous conversations, she often expressed doubts and ambiguous feelings regarding these clothes.

When clearing one of the old houses they would rebuild and refurbish for tourism, Sara found, stuffed into a hole in a wall (possibly to stamp out the cold), a deteriorated cape. I touched it: it was harsh, tough, and thick, as one would expect from old accounts of the strong coverings that *castrejos* would wear to protect from the snows. These are made from a material called *burel*, which is the result of wool being boiled and beaten to an impenetrable mass by stone hammers that are powered by water mills. None of those contraptions exist today, as far as I know, in the territory surrounding Castro Laboreiro. The cape itself evoked to me a sense of age, from old mills and the bygone people who could make it.

Sara imagined that it was over one hundred years old, maybe more. She showed it to me by a stand that she and her husband Manuel set up beside their house, where other trinkets and artisan crafts that they find are stored. And she told me "look, this is the actual colour of the clothes people used to wear." A dark brown, the natural colour of the sheep the wool was sheared from. Could a people that experienced so much material deprivation afford the tinctures that are required for black capes to be dyed that way? Geraldes had her own suspicions that the truly black clothes (rather than dark shades of other colours, namely brown) were only made popular after the wealth from emigration allowed women to purchase those kinds of clothes (Geraldes, 1982).

It’s hard, of course, to say for sure. It’s not unreasonable either to imagine that different people would dress according to their means. But I was more interested in understanding why Sara herself would dress in ways that caused her doubt. After all, her performance of castreja identity is one that requires a claim of authenticity. At the time of this conversation, she had recently appeared on television alongside other castrejas, to promote their home in a contest for the most beautiful Portuguese village (Castro Laboreiro did not win). Some discussion was going on among those women over what and how to wear, what was said and how correct it was. Representing your community is a problematic affair, one where your every word, behaviour, worn clothes, or accessories can be picked apart, scrutinized, and criticized.



Figure 10 – Staged promotional photograph of Sara Domingues enacting a rural scene, wearing traditional castrejo black clothing. From the archive of Sara Domingues. Reprinted with permission.

For Sara, however, pushing through her own doubts regarding the authenticity of the representation she is employing is a necessity. “If I don’t do it, someone else will do it for me.” The ambiguity of whatever spectres may emerge when confronting the uncertainty of evoked past is collapsed in this present-day pragmatism, which requires reclaiming the authorship of one’s own self-representation. She knows tourism, she knows that she can’t stop

the boat from moving downriver, so, she might as well put her hands on the rudder.

After joining her in looking through some old photos, Sara produced a small pouch that's big enough to hold two portrait-sized photographs. In it, she keeps two of herself as a teenager. On the left side, somber looking, she wears a dark sweater, and her hair is straightened down. On the right, she's looking upwards, her hair is flowing, and her shirt is of a light, striped pattern. "I keep this to not forget the difference", she told me. "On the left, it's me here, in Castro Laboreiro. I was sad. On the right, it was the same year, but I was in Braga to study. It was a new world."



Figure 11 – Sara's two portraits both taken during the 1970s. Photos in booklet shared with permission. Photo by Daniel Maciel.

The difference in moods wasn't that perceptible for me. I imagine that it lies somewhere in the same spectral quality that haunts the black clad women of those sculptures from before. On the untold depths of what remained behind the land of Castro Laboreiro, which was, but no longer is as it was, although it is in ways that *castrejos* make it be. There, but not *there*. The trauma and strife, the pride and resistance. Heritage, whatever that may mean.

Sara would once tell me, when we were talking about the symbolic weight of the donning of black clothes, that they were an imposition, but not one that would dampen the spirit. “My mother would dress in black to work the fields, and she would sing.” Dina, in her most recent reply after I told her I was in Portos, said “Portos, my cradle”, adding three heart emoticons. The task of taking on a monument that’s as old and as big as a mountain is not one that I envy, nor one that I imagine anyone would take lightly.

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