

OPPORTUNITY AND *SAUDADE*: AZOREAN-PORTUGUESE IMMIGRANTS  
IN POST-WORLD WAR II CALIFORNIA

By

Felicia Angeja Viator  
University of California, Berkeley

“You have to understand, immigrating was like dying.” Rui Silva pressed his fingers into his forehead. In his home in Tracy, in the heart of the California’s Central Valley, he sat beside his wife, Rosa Silva, who left the Azores with him nearly fifty years ago. She remembered 1957, but not for the volcanic eruption that, for months, belched lava, rock, and ash, razed the southern coastal villages on the island of Faial, and displaced thousands. Although, at the time, she was visiting family in Pico (the island nearest to Faial and only a few miles across the water), she described neither the mushroom-shaped smoke clouds that rose more than 18,000 feet into the sky, nor the terror felt by islanders as they watched a new landmass emerge and then disappear into the Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> Rosa Silva spoke instead of a visit from her sister and dearest friend, Alzira Simas, who had left for California in 1953. During those four years apart, Rosa had read dozens of her sister’s carefully crafted letters telling of a pleasant life abroad. Reunited, however, Alzira was more candid, revealing just how much she had been holding back in their correspondence. “During those first years in California she cried so much,” Rosa said of her sibling’s confession. “At night she’d soak one side of the pillow, turn it over, and then she’d soak the other side.”<sup>2</sup>

Neither Rosa Silva nor Rui Silva expected to make the decision they made in 1960. Rui had a respectable job as a sergeant for the Portuguese military and was on track to becoming an officer. Rosa was content living with her new husband and raising their young daughter on the

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<sup>1</sup> “Atlantic’s New Volcanic Island Grows Rapidly,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 October 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Rosa Silva and Rui Silva, interview conducted by the author, translated by Marlene Simas Angeja, Tracy, California, 29 March 2006.

military base in Terceira. Villages full of family members on the neighboring islands of Pico and Faial provided them with support and community. The alluring opportunity to pursue the “American Dream,” however, surfaced. In the year following the volcanic eruptions in Faial, United States Representative Harlan Hagen—a resident of Hanford, California, a San Joaquin Valley town with one of the largest concentrations of Azorean immigrants and California-born Azorean Americans in the country—sponsored legislation that granted visas to 1300 families from the devastated region.<sup>3</sup> Under the Azorean Refugee Act of 1958, and its extension in 1960 and 1962, prospective Azorean emigrants, long subject to quotas set by the United States in the 1920s, earned a rare opportunity that, for families like the Silvas, had to be considered. “Are you sure you want to do this?” Rosa remembered asking her husband. Rui had been certain. “That American ambition,” he explained later, eclipsed trepidation, and if emigration would ultimately be “a sort of death,” then the pilgrimage to America would be “like going to heaven.”<sup>4</sup>

Early patterns of Azorean emigration to the United States echoed common rhythms of trans-oceanic movement transforming the country throughout the industrial era. In the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century, captains of whaling vessels bound for American coasts skimmed the Azorean archipelago for young laborers. Upon arrival in Massachusetts and California, many of these recruits jumped ship to plant roots—figuratively and literally—in coastal agricultural lands. Families and then kin networks followed with plans to settle, raise children, and cultivate land in the United States. The belief, as Azorean American Rose Peters Emery described, that, “a man who was ambitious and willing to work could end up

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<sup>3</sup> “U.S. to Admit Quake Victims,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 September 1958.

<sup>4</sup> Silva and Silva, interview.

with something for his family,” fueled the movement of generation after generation of Azorean emigrants.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike for other immigrants who came to the United States in the twentieth century, emigration for Azoreans was not about escaping the dire consequences of industrialization, war, or natural disaster. In fact, there were a number of factors that made staying where they were a viable option. Island populations remained stable, thanks to the reliability of subsistence farming, steady birthrates, and low immigration. These same factors produced a populace that, even through two world wars, remained provincial, harbored from many of the economic, political, and social woes impacting the European mainland. National and international neglect in an era of globalization, furthermore, helped to solidify a distinct Azorean culture; geographical isolation bred tight-knit communities that encompassed whole islands, and in the case of Faial, São Jorge, Terceira, and Pico, an entire island group. These fellowships, along with island custom and shared faith, provided islanders with the tools to physically and emotionally withstand the natural disasters—such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions—that had, since discovery and colonization, factored into their lives.

Despite the advantages, isolation also nourished within Azoreans, as writer Álamo Oliveira explained, a “predisposition to dream inward” about “what lies beyond the island.” Situated in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, thousands of miles from both the American and European mainland coasts, the archipelago had long been “a place where it is possible to nourish utopia.”<sup>6</sup> When, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Azoreans chose to emigrate, it was an exotic vision of the outside world, held and passed from generation to generation and carefully weighed against fear of the unknown and family obligations, that ultimately inspired

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<sup>5</sup> Rose Peters Emery, *Footprints in the Soil: A Portuguese-Californian Remembers* (San Jose: Portuguese Heritage Publications, 2003), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Diniz Borges, ed., *On a Leaf of Blue: Bilingual Anthology of Azorean Contemporary Poetry* (University of California, Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies Press, 2003), 177.

these decisions. Although a trans-Atlantic journey was not wholly imperative—economically, politically, socially, or ecologically—restlessness and curiosity had traditionally inspired movement abroad. In fact, because Azorean civilization was built not by indigenous peoples but entirely by immigrants from the mainland, it can be understood as uniquely defined by the Portuguese tradition of exploration. “In reality,” Azorean writer Álamo Oliveira explained, “[we] are constant travelers, possessing a curious understanding of voyage.”<sup>7</sup>

For early Azorean migrants, as well as those who followed generations later, the choice to travel to the United States had as much to do with this tradition of exploration, as it did with the vague-yet-enticing notion of the “American Dream.” This was especially alluring to this group because rumor and first-hand accounts suggested that various regions of North America—particularly Northern California—bore a striking resemblance to their native land. Many of these people expected to find in the American West similar geographical elements, a nearly identical climate, and industries analogous to those in the Old Country, and they imagined all of this in the context of greater economic opportunities. Evidence offered by those who had already ventured abroad hinted that time-honored island traditions—particularly fishing and dairy farming—would not only be possible in the United States but could be vastly profitable. As Hans Howard Leder asserted in his sociological survey of Portuguese immigrant communities in California, “unlike so many other emigrant European people, [the Azorean] left his homeland not to escape from its system of values but in an effort to find a place in which he could make that system a reality for himself.”<sup>8</sup> California proved ideal for Azorean migrants who sought personal betterment not in an environment that was antithetical to the physical, social, and economic landscape back home, but in one inherently familiar.

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<sup>7</sup> Borges, *On a Leaf of Blue*, 180.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Howard Leder, *Cultural Persistence in a Portuguese-American Community* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 130.

Azorean American Bernadine Goularte stated that many of the islands' emigrants were like her parents, who came to the United States "to own land, be their own bosses."<sup>9</sup> Others, like Gui Sequeira, Delia Mendes, and Rosa and Rui Silva, intended to utilize skills learned in the Azores to earn American comforts for themselves and to provide resources for their communities back home.<sup>10</sup> Those who placed their names on immigration "quota lists" hoping to be selected for admission to the United States understood that the work would be difficult and the transition wearisome, but they followed the path of those who had ventured across the Atlantic decades before on a quest for one basic element of the "American Dream"—unlimited economic opportunities.<sup>11</sup> The Great Depression and the Second World War had created a new American economy in which class stratification and social barriers made it more difficult to achieve the "dream" of immediate and unlimited economic success. Some individuals became aware of these conditions prior to emigrating and tempered their expectations about a new life in the United States. Still, most did not and found their "utopia" to be, at best, disappointing and, at worst, insufferable.

A study of Azorean communities in Northern California reveals this post-war shift. On the one hand, by 1940, Azorean-American dairy farmers controlled a large amount of tillable land in the Central and San Joaquin Valleys, thus demonstrating that a significant number of earlier immigrants had been successful in establishing themselves and achieving economic prosperity. Kin networks, with roots based largely in the central island group of the archipelago,

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<sup>9</sup> Lionel B. Goularte and Bernadine M. Goularte, "Reflections on the Azorean Portuguese Communities of Southern Alameda County, California," interview conducted by Donald Warrin in 2002 (Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, 2006), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Sue Fagalde Lick, ed., *Stories Grandma Never Told: Portuguese Women in California* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1998), 51-52; Silva and Silva, interview.

<sup>11</sup> Quotas for new Azorean immigrants entering the United States were extended by the Azorean Refugee Act of 1958. Although the Act was passed in response to the Capelinhos volcanic eruption, it granted visas to thousands of migrants in the decade following the natural disaster. For further detail about "quotas" and the Azorean Refugee Act of 1958, along with extensions of the Act in 1960 and 1962, see Jerry R. Williams, *And Yet They Come: Portuguese Immigration from the Azores to the United States* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1982), 103-116.

urged young men and women with the desire to work and the dream of reward to join these individuals. The possibility of land-leasing opportunities, or better still, partnership with individuals who had already established themselves, was tempting. Those who could raise the money, and were fortunate enough to be granted entrance into the United States despite strict immigration quotas, accepted the invitation. On the other hand, the reality that many post-war immigrants discovered was a highly stratified system in which Anglicized Azorean-American proprietors controlled land, cattle, lodging, and earnings, while Portuguese-speaking laborers toiled in the fields, earning barely enough to afford basic amenities. Many were driven into non-agricultural industries, including auto manufacturing and canning. In urban centers such as Stockton, Sacramento, Oakland, Hayward, San Francisco, and San Jose, they settled within poor working-class communities and faced social and economic challenges largely unfamiliar to their predecessors.

Exploration into the lives of Azorean-American immigrants in post-war California reveals complex and sometimes troubled relationships with the old and new countries. Some late twentieth-century immigrants experienced the type of “death” Rui and Rosa Silva endured upon leaving home and family in the Azores islands.<sup>12</sup> Others found new life by emigrating from, as Portuguese writer Madalena Férin describes, “the place where sadness has the deepness of a well.”<sup>13</sup> Many, however, maintained in America a mixed sense of regret and hopefulness. The past life, rooted in black rock, emerald hills, and indigo seas, as well as the brand new life after the journey bore pain. Each also carried promise. In California’s Central Valley, this contradiction informed Azorean-American identity and molded whole communities. It influenced expectations of life in the United States and it shaped the patterns of concessions that were unique to this generation of immigrants.

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<sup>12</sup> Silva and Silva, interview.

<sup>13</sup> Borges, *On a Leaf of Blue*, 102-103.

This tension gave new meaning to the Portuguese word “*saudade*.” Crudely translated, *saudade* is “longing,” but it carried deeper meaning for these Azorean Americans. Azorean immigrant writers, painters, musicians, scholars, and poets had long grappled with the term. Poet José Manuel Vicente Jorge, for instance, wrote in his poem entitled “*Saudade*”:

Yanked by a desire for better living  
and riding on the wings of destiny.  
I left...  
Thousands of miles away,  
wearing out the leather soles of my adulthood,  
I long for the basaltic cobbled stones of my youth,  
where, so many times I left the skin of my feet.<sup>14</sup>

Jorge’s verses, like Azorean-American immigrant biographies, journals, memoirs, and interviews, reveal the conflict between doubt and optimism underlying the expression of *saudade*. This product of resettlement is the central paradox that defines the modern Azorean immigrant’s experience.<sup>15</sup>

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Manuel Simas immigrated from Pico, Azores to the United States following World War I. By the 1930s, he had found success raising cattle and processing milk products for the California dairy industry by depending largely upon a nexus of Portuguese farmers, businesses, religious institutions, and social organizations. Hundreds of Azorean immigrants like Simas managed to reap the benefits of California agriculture during the early years of the Great Depression. They escaped the disappointment and destitution suffered by so many other American laborers and landholders by relying almost exclusively on Portuguese networks. Virginia Silveira, a child of Portuguese dairy farmers, recalled the generosity of an immigrant

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<sup>14</sup> José Manuel Vicente Jorge, “Saudade,” from *Raposo Poems* (date unknown), <http://www.azores.com/azores/imigr.asp> (accessed 3 June 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Katherine Vaz in *Fado & Other Stories* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997) describes *saudade* as, “More than longing. More than yearning.”

community that looked out for its own, providing kitchen staples, farm supplies, and livestock for slaughter to those most in need. She stressed, “No one went without.”<sup>16</sup>

Defying the economic shackles of the 1930s—dismal business prospects, scant employment opportunities, and limited resources—Manuel Simas, with the support of his neighbors, purchased a farm, gradually expanded his dairy herds, and supported a small labor force. By the early 1940s, he had made a small fortune. Proud of his work, he was anxious to share the stories of his success with his parents and siblings back home. Silva made the journey from his estate in Manteca, California to Terra Alta, his family’s village on the island of Pico, Azores. He returned to his place of birth an American citizen, boasting of his grand accomplishments and urging his young brother Rafael to leave the small village for a better life with him in California.<sup>17</sup>

Rafael Simas considered the offer. The single, young man in his early twenties had planned to develop a modest homestead in the hills of Santo Amaro and construct a cheese-making facility on the land to support himself and, perhaps one day, a family. Many relatives and neighbors had chosen a similar path, and their successes encouraged him to think this was a sensible plan. His brother’s proposal, however, excited his imagination. What could be earned on the island, it seemed, paled in comparison to what could be gained in California. Dreaming of a business partnership and hoping for plentiful rewards, Rafael submitted an emigration application to the American consulate in São Miguel.<sup>18</sup>

Nearly a decade passed, and there was no response from the consulate. By the end of the 1940s, Rafael had all but forgotten his request to be added to the list of prospective emigrants. He had courted and married Alzira Neves, a young woman from the same village, and their first

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<sup>16</sup> Silva and Silva, interview.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

child was born in 1950. With paternal responsibilities and a fresh perspective on his future, Rafael had virtually forgotten about his American emigration scheme. But in 1952, he received word from the American consulate that he and his family would be granted admission to the United States in the following year. The opportunity to begin anew fell into his lap, and Rafael felt he could not cast it aside.<sup>19</sup>

While Rafael wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to emigrate, Alzira resisted. Throughout her youth she also had listened to returning relatives delight villagers with anecdotes of American life and tales of immigrant profiteers. She heard little, however, that convinced her that going to the United States guaranteed a prosperous future. Her life in the small Santo Amaro parish, among her parents, godparents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends, brought her comfort and contentment. She could hardly fathom living away from the intimacy of the village, the vitality of island festivals, or the conveniences granted by the coastal landscape. What greater fortune could the United States offer? Yet, in the end, she trusted her husband's convictions and agreed to go. In the spring of 1953, Alzira, pregnant with her second child, accompanied her husband and daughter on a plane bound for America.<sup>20</sup>

For nearly two centuries, Azoreans like Rafael Simas chose to leave their island pastures for the ambiguous promise of greater prosperity. Early voyagers followed trails blazed by mainland emigrants and settled in Portuguese colonies in Cape Verde, Goa, Mozambique, Angola, and Brazil. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, several thousand Azorean laborers and their kin had rejected offers to work in these territories and instead poured into the Hawaiian Islands, many recruited by sugar proprietors. Others, especially families from São Miguel, joined small immigrant networks in Canada to work in the railroad industry and in

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<sup>19</sup> Silva and Silva, interview.

<sup>20</sup> Alzira Simas, *Daily Journals* [translated by Marlene Simas Angeja and the author] (Manteca, California, 1954-1956); Silva and Silva, interview.

agriculture. The vast majority of Azorean emigrants—over 200,000 by 1950—touched down in the continental United States and settled, primarily, in two coastal states: Massachusetts and California.<sup>21</sup> Whalers and miners were the first groups to assess the viability of life in these regions. Once gold fever subsided and the introduction of improved uses for petroleum effectively demolished the whaling industry, settlers sought new fortunes in agriculture.

This was particularly true in California where, as tenants, farmers gradually accumulated small plots of land. Rose Peters Emery, daughter of early-century San Ramon ranchers, remembered that her father had “taken great pride in all that he had achieved since his penniless arrival from the Azores.” With her mother’s assistance, “he had made of himself a man of property, a respected member of the community who need not be subservient to anyone.”<sup>22</sup> With diligence and frugality, these early Azorean Americans amassed property and power. They established produce farms and dairies that they often bequeathed to children or passed on to other Portuguese tenant farmers—often siblings, acquaintances, or fellow travelers from the Old Country. Azorean-derived networks sprouted in rural regions throughout the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys, in Alameda, Contra Costa, and Santa Clara Counties, and all along California coast. Portuguese fishing communities thrived in San Diego, Santa Cruz, Half Moon Bay, and Monterey. By the 1950s, some 300,000 Azorean immigrants and their descendants factored into California’s booming population. The vast majority of them were engaged, as they and their ancestors had been on the islands, in agricultural pursuits.

The concentration of Azorean Americans in particular enclaves along the California coast and in agrarian valleys neighboring lakes and rivers reflected centuries-old settlement patterns on the archipelago. In fact, many kin, village, and island threads remained unbroken in

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<sup>21</sup> August Mark Vaz, “The Azorean-Portuguese Migrations to California,” in Tony P. Goulart, ed., *The Holy Ghost Festas: A Historic Perspective of the Portuguese in California* (San Jose, Portuguese Chamber of Commerce: 2002), 17-27.

<sup>22</sup> Emery, 51.

America. Bernadine Goularte noted that in the early twentieth century, most of the Azoreans in her hometown of Fremont, California were originally from the small island of Faial. Goularte, born to an immigrant from the Flamengos village in Faial and a descendant of immigrants from Feteira, Faial, explained that Azoreans tended to group according to island affiliation. With its rugged highlands and fertile lowlands, temperate climate, agricultural industries, and familial clusters, California appeared to each wave of newcomers to be an extension of, rather than a retreat from, the Old Country.<sup>23</sup>

Although the setting, at first glance, might have seemed all too familiar, post-World War II Azorean immigrants also found much in the vast American landscape to be strange and sometimes even disheartening. Social proximity, for one, was an essential characteristic of village culture in the islands. In Santa Amaro, Pico, the village from which Alzira came, homes lined narrow winding roads and façades faced one another, as if constructed to encourage conversation. While clotheslines, small vegetable gardens, and, commonly, chicken coops, stone ovens, and small storage rooms flanked many houses, livestock pens and privately owned crops and pastures rested upon hills some distance from the community. The separation of home from harvest allowed for a condensed social environment, one that resembled in many ways ethnic ghettos in urban centers such as New York and San Francisco.<sup>24</sup> Neighbors greeted and chatted with one another from their entryways, kitchen windows, and porches. Women, traditionally responsible for the home, cooking, and the care of children, paired work with socialization and, in doing so, created networks of support and influence. Pauline Stonehill explained that her godmother, Maria Linhares, treasured life in the village of Doze Ribeiras, Terceira, because there

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<sup>23</sup> Goularte and Goularte, “Reflections,” 7; Silva and Silva, interview; Tony P. Goulart, *The Holy Ghost Festas: A Historic Perspective of the Portuguese in California* (San Jose: Portuguese Chamber of Commerce of California, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the development of social structures in twentieth-century Azores, see Susana Goulart Costa, *Azores: Nine Islands, One History* (Berkeley: Institute of Government Studies Press, 2008); for a clear and detailed account of American immigration and urban development, see John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

“she had her own house made of white-washed volcanic rock with a tile roof” and many of her close and distant relatives, lived near. “[Maria] did not lack for companionship or help if she needed it,” Stonehill noted. Her parents and her brother, Jacinto, lived in the two homes adjacent to her own. “From there,” Stonehill continued, “they could look down across the green fields to the rest of the village strung along the main shore road like white beads at the grey edge of the Atlantic.”<sup>25</sup>

One could visit friends and family, buy supplies, work, play, and worship within a few steps or, at most, a short hike from the primary residence. Stonehill, remembering her cousin’s stories of typical daily rituals growing up in Terceira, described how the little girl walked to church each Sunday morning “holding her grandfather’s hand.” Stonehill stressed that they “did not take the main road, but followed a little path through the verdant, walled fields which brought them to the village Catholic Church where they visited with relatives before and after the services.”<sup>26</sup> Most Azorean island communities, well into the twentieth century, maintained this provincial essence and modernized only to enhance traditional structures and conserve social intimacy.<sup>27</sup>

A predilection for this kind of parochial living colored the first impressions of many new settlers in California’s Central Valley. Immigrants like Alzira Simas, whose life had been rooted in communalism, found a far more solitary existence in the farming towns of California. Unlike the dense clusters of open homes resting in lowlands detached from the patchwork fields above, American agricultural land seemed to envelope each single family home. Residents of adjacent farmsteads lived not steps, but often miles from one another. The isolation challenged many new immigrants, particularly women who, in the Old Country, took full advantage of daily

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<sup>25</sup> Pauline Correia Stonehill, *A Barrelful of Memories: Stories of My Azorean Family* (San Jose: Corstone Publishing, 1995), 28.

<sup>26</sup> Stonehill, *A Barrelful of Memories*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> See Costa, *Azores*.

opportunities to engage with one another, to share chores, offer food, reveal secrets, and solidify bonds. Alzira Simas, unaccustomed to the loneliness of residential sprawl, expressed great frustration in her daily journals:

February 5, 1954  
*Estive em casa todo o dia.*<sup>28</sup>

Alzira added an entry for nearly every day during her first two years in California, and it was this pointed and concise entry—“I was at home all day”—that reappeared week after week, month after month. She often chose few additional words to describe the days she spent inside the home, which she and her husband Rafael rented from her brother-in-law Manuel. On occasion, her summary writings included brief addendums to note when no letters arrived and when no visitors came. Rarely did she mention highlights:

August 9, 1954  
Doing laundry. All day in the house.

August 19, 1954  
All day in the house. My chickens began to lay eggs.

September 20, 1954  
Maria’s birthday, 50. All day in the house.

November 11, 1954  
All day stayed home just with [my daughters].<sup>29</sup>

The stretch of road separating Alzira from neighbors, and the miles to be traveled from her brother-in-law’s farm to the center of town, prevented Alzira from socializing in ways that had sustained her in recent years spent in the Azores.

Most aspects of daily life in the post-World War II Central Valley—those related to sustaining a household, to worshipping, to labor, and to leisure—depended on access to an

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<sup>28</sup> Simas, *Daily Journals*; Alzira Simas writes exclusively in Portuguese but, from this point forward, English translation is used, except where emphasis is necessary.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

automobile. New immigrants arriving with few or no driving skills, limited resources, and earning only minimal wages could not initially attain such luxuries and, thus, relied on employers and family networks—if nearby—in order to be able to complete simple tasks.<sup>30</sup> With her loved-ones' livelihood contingent on the generosity of those with greater wealth and power, Alzira often wrestled with disappointment:

December 12, 1954

We didn't go to mass. Rafael's day off. We didn't go anywhere because [my in-laws] wouldn't lend us the pickup. It upset and bothered me and I cried.

Still, Alzira accomplished each day's necessary tasks. In the passenger seat of her sister-in-law's vehicle or alongside neighbors fulfilling errands, she traveled to town to buy groceries and medicine, mailed letters to the islands, took her daughters to the local clinic for vaccinations, treated her daughters to ice cream, visited friends, shopped for clothes, fabric, and gifts, and, eventually, attended Catholic Mass on a regular basis. Before she and Rafael had saved \$250 to purchase a Hudson and before she had learned to drive, Alzira built and utilized channels of support to resist the entrapments of isolation.

In addition to challenges related to mobility, language barriers only exacerbated the problem of isolation. All Azorean immigrants spoke little or no English upon arrival, but post-World War II immigrants had greater difficulty adjusting linguistically. Early twentieth-century arrivals encountered other Portuguese laborers focused on individual survival and only partially assimilated into the host community. These generations, thus, learned English from others who primarily spoke Portuguese. By the 1920s, however, as the United States emerged from world war, intolerance for foreigners grew. Rapid population increases and the stresses of armed conflict elicited widespread xenophobia. Political and economic energies that had been siphoned

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<sup>30</sup> Silva and Silva, interview; regarding the use of cars in Pico in the '30s, '40s, and '50s, Rosa Silva explains that roads connecting villages did not exist until roughly 1935, and even then cars were scarce and unnecessary. She emphasizes that only on rare occasions was it necessary to venture beyond Santo Amaro to a neighboring community, and, in those cases, people walked or traveled in a small boat along the coast.

into social programs designed to aid new immigrants and to encourage their Americanization were now focused on securing borders to curb new arrivals. From the 1920s through the 1950s, intellectuals, politicians, businessmen, and old stock citizens—fearful of the “mongrelization” of America—targeted Catholics, Jews, and blacks.<sup>31</sup> Unassimilated ethnic groups, like the Portuguese, began to feel the sting of discrimination. Immigrant families adapted to the growing wave of nativist fervor by embracing the acculturation process, and often it was children who led the way. Lionel Goularte remembered that, by the 1940s, he and his Portuguese schoolmates had begun to transform the linguistic backdrop at home by “going to school and speaking English [then] coming home speaking more English.”<sup>32</sup>

Despite these efforts, agricultural and industrial regions populated by recent immigrants and laborers were ripe for cultural confrontations. Rose Emery, who grew up in the San Ramon Valley in the 1920s, recalled that her mother “was keenly aware of the prejudice against Portuguese in some parts of the community.”<sup>33</sup> While riding on a streetcar in San Leandro, for instance, she heard a conversation between two women. One woman, Emery’s mother remembered, said, “‘This looks like a nice town to live in.’” The second woman replied, “‘Yes, but a lot of Portagees [sic] live here,’” implying with the use of “Portagee,” a widely used ethnic slur, that these foreign residents were uncouth, ignorant, lazy, and, for all intents and purposes, black.<sup>34</sup> The pre-‘50s generation of Portuguese immigrants and their descendants, who had earned economic and social clout, resisted discrimination by taking great pride in their “American-ness.” They chose to speak little of—or refused to speak—their native tongue.

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<sup>31</sup> For a classic, comprehensive account of post-Progressive Era nativism and immigration restriction in the United States, see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (Rutgers, 1955); Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2001) is a more recent examination of transforming notions of American nationality that includes a chapter on the passage of restriction legislation in the 1920s.

<sup>32</sup> Goularte and Goularte, “Reflections,” 34.

<sup>33</sup> Emery, 120.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Some, like Rose Emery's mother, embraced English because “[she] wished to deny her heritage.”<sup>35</sup> For others, proficiency in English—like wealth, land, and education—could be used to assert superiority within the Portuguese community. Post-war immigrants like Alzira and Rafael Simas, then, found that many of those who shared their heritage viewed them as inferior. Marginalized, many struggled to learn English with only those cultural aids immediately at hand—a difficult process that, for Alzira, further amplified her solitude.

Due to loneliness and linguistic marginalization, Alzira depended on daily correspondence from friends and family in the Azores and from those relatives who had settled in the American East Coast. Alzira relied on these letters to sustain her, to keep her entertained, inspired, and assured, particularly in her first two years in California:

April 9, 1955

Cleaned the house thoroughly and did laundry. Arranging things for the Islands. At night packed with Isabel. We finished at midnight. I was falling down exhausted... I'm sad and I cried because I haven't received letters from [our family].<sup>36</sup>

The often sporadic nature of long-distance postal communication may have emboldened her to nurture more proximate relationships for increased support:

May 28, 1955

Writing to Pico in the afternoon and crying. At night I walked with Helena to Laura's house.<sup>37</sup>

Both her written correspondences and, eventually, the local friendships she fostered helped strengthen her identity, which was daily challenged by her foreign environment.

In Santo Amaro, Alzira nourished social bonds in and around her home, but the Catholic Church at the center of the village furnished her with the groundwork for all companionship. Sermons delivered at weekly services provided her and her fellow parishioners

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<sup>35</sup> Emery, 120.

<sup>36</sup> Simas, *Daily Journals*.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

with spiritual goals and some deliverance from the fear that island life could inspire. The Church was her sanctuary, a place where she asked for absolution and could be cleansed of anguish. It offered her the opportunity to strengthen her relationship with her God and with the Saints she relied on for protection and guidance. The Santo Amaro Church allowed her to begin each week anew in fellowship with the entire village, but in the farm communities of the California Central Valley she could not easily find such spiritual fulfillment. “*Não fomos à missa*,” or, “We didn’t go to mass,” she penned in her journal each Sunday and many weekdays during her first year abroad. In the Old Country, the church or chapel served as the spiritual and social nexus of each village. Most holidays and social events, including feasts celebrating birthdays, engagements, births, seasonal harvests, *matanças* (ritual livestock butchering), and *Dia da Mãe* (Mother’s Day), incorporated, in some way, the Catholic Church. This meant that for immigrants like Alzira, even secular celebrations underscored the distance from places of worship and, thus, from loved-ones:

May 9, 1954  
Sunday. Mother’s Day. We didn’t go to mass. All day at home listening to Portuguese [radio] programs. I cried with *saudade* for my mother.

Spiritual isolation had heightened Alzira’s already powerful desire to immerse herself into the surrounding community and cultivate friendships. The transition was gradual, but, finally, after over a year missing weekly Catholic services and confession, Alzira began regularly attending masses in Stockton, Manteca, and Tracy, often invited and transported by new neighborhood companions.<sup>38</sup>

In the summer months, new immigrants acclimating to California had opportunities to devote their energies to expressions of faith and camaraderie with fellow Azorean immigrants and their descendants. Beginning on the fourth weekend following Easter Sunday and extending

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<sup>38</sup> Simas, *Daily Journals*; Silva and Silva, interview.

through September, each of the California Portuguese-American communities participated in public religious celebrations—*festas*. Early settlers first cultivated the elaborate events—rooted in both island and mainland rituals—in order to preserve memories of the Old Country and to strengthen immigrant networks developing throughout the state. Based in the devotion to the Holy Spirit, *festas* included a Catholic Mass, a procession marked by a symbolic coronation of a queen, distribution of gifts to the poor, a communal meal, and musical entertainment. The festivals were widely attended and grew in size and relevance with each new wave of arrivals.<sup>39</sup> “The *festas* became so popular,” Rose Emery remembered, “that one was held somewhere in Northern California almost every weekend from Pentecost to September.”<sup>40</sup>

By the 1950s, proponents and organizers of *festas* had succeeded in bolstering the social elements of the Portuguese-American celebrations in order to better link scattered communities and to provide a much needed respite for men and women focused on work.<sup>41</sup> Large numbers of individuals who were part of extended kinship networks attended, many to play a role in performances of devotion to the Holy Spirit and to transform ordinary foodstuffs, including beef, bread, and wine, and household items, such as embroidery and beeswax candles, into ritual objects. Others came to reunite with loved ones, to meet potential mates, or to flaunt financial achievement.<sup>42</sup> Many parishes collaborated with one another in order to draw scattered congregations together for, as Ellsworth Quinlan described, “a grand reunion of family and

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<sup>39</sup> For a detailed account of religious customs in Portuguese-American communities throughout California, see Goulart, *The Holy Ghost Festas*.

<sup>40</sup> Emery, 127.

<sup>41</sup> Census reports show that by the late twentieth century approximately 359,000 people of Azorean descent resided in California and, of those, the vast majority lived in cities and towns with high concentrations of Portuguese Americans. In the San Joaquin Valley alone, the number of Azorean-Portuguese ethnics exceeded the combined populations of the central island group—Pico, São Jorge, Faial, Terceira, and Graciosa—from which most of these Californians had originated; U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 3, American FactFinder, <http://factfinder.census.gov/> (accessed 25 June 2006); U.S. Census Bureau, 2002 American Community Survey Summary Tables, <http://factfinder.census.gov/> (accessed 25 June 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Goulart, *The Holy Ghost Festas*.

friends, and a gay and memorable time of merriment, dancing, barbeques and religious parades.”<sup>43</sup>

In his book *Becoming Mexican American*, George J. Sánchez explores the role of religion in the development of Mexican-American identity in pre-World War II Los Angeles. “Cultural adaptations,” he writes, “marked the transition to a Mexican American lifestyle. Catholic religious practice, for example, increasingly narrowed to the province of women, and became less a community function and more a set of rituals performed at home.”<sup>44</sup> Like Mexican Americans, Azorean Americans worked to mold Catholic religious traditions to fit with new economic, linguistic, social, and physical environments. Azorean-American communities, however, augmented religious rituals, particularly *festas*, to glorify the public nature of these traditions. Organizers planned grand processions with elaborate displays of spirituality and national pride. The men and women responsible for the feast following the *festa* Mass procured donations of beef, kale, bread, and wine from local Portuguese farmers to feed hundreds—or, in some cases, thousands—of people from the surrounding communities. Posters announced the events and local guests as well as visitors from hundreds of miles outside the city attended. Portuguese Americans amplified Azorean island customs that brought the sacred outdoors. In California, these customs were key to binding the state’s diffuse Portuguese communities to one another.<sup>45</sup>

Those with vivid memories of life in the islands, however, experienced the California *festas* as elaborate reminders of what had been lost with emigration:

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<sup>43</sup> Ellsworth Francis Quinlan, “From under the artichoke bush: typescript, reminiscence about Half Moon Bay,” Unpublished manuscript (Bancroft Collection, Berkeley, c. 1970).

<sup>44</sup> George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 11.

<sup>45</sup> Goulart, *The Holy Ghost Festas*.

June 7, 1954

Sunday of the Holy Spirit. Went to Mass in Manteca with Laura and Isabel. I cried a lot remembering our festivals back home. Afterward we went to lunch in Stockton. I saw Ana who had just arrived from the islands. At night we had dinner together with Diniz.<sup>46</sup>

American versions of Azorean-Catholic rituals had the power to soothe the Azorean immigrant by diminishing the pain of isolation, heightening the sense of fellowship with one's neighbors, and fortifying ethnic pride in a new and often prejudiced social environment:

July 10, 1955

Sunday. Manteca Festa. We went—just our family—in the Hatsan [Hudson]. We took Elvira. Rosa Maria was maid to the little queen. It was a beautiful parade but exhausting. We went to the festa mass. I took communion. I took a lot of photos. Saw many people from Santo Amaro—Tia Costa, M. Ferreira, Julio Nunes, Maria Adelaide, Luzia, etc...<sup>47</sup>

Although these celebrations could ease the process of acculturation, they also had the power to reinforce the boundaries separating new immigrants from their more Anglicized countrymen and women. For many new immigrants, California *festas* were often simultaneously antithetical and vital to social fulfillment.

Differences between new and long-acculturated generations exacerbated by *festas* reflected some of the contrasting ideas about returning to the native land. Long-established Portuguese-American immigrants and their children had countered the intolerance of anti-immigrant sentiment by assimilating linguistically, culturally, and socially. As early-century spokespersons for the American melting pot hoped, these men and women effectively “yanked the hyphen” from their dual identities and learned to think of themselves as “American.”<sup>48</sup> For those most committed to adopting American values and traditions, the notion of returning to the native land ran counter to the goal of assimilation. Bernadine Goularte explained that her

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<sup>46</sup> Goulart, *The Holy Ghost Festas*.

<sup>47</sup> Simas, *Daily Journals*; underlined in the original source. Alzira Simas followed strict Catholic guidelines for receiving the Eucharist in Mass. She only participated in the Sacrament if she had gone to Penance that same week and had been granted absolution by a priest. When she wrote “*Não fomos á missa*” on a weekday she likely meant she could not attend Confession and, thus, would not be able to take the Eucharist on Sunday.

<sup>48</sup> Chase C. Mooney and Martha E. Lyman, “Some Phases of the Compulsory Military Training Movement, 1914-1920,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 38 (1952), 41.

immigrant father “always thought of [the Azores] in a pleasant way” but that he remained focused on the opportunities available to him in his new country. She noted he rarely considered “going back,” chose not to visit the islands until late in his life, and then, only visited once before his passing. “He thought of himself very much as American,” she said.<sup>49</sup>

Growing up in Fremont in the 1930s and 1940s, within a well-established Portuguese farming community, Goularte recalled that, like her father, few Azoreans spoke of returning to the islands, and fewer actually made the journey. As an adult, however, she noticed a subtle shift in conceptions of nationality and ethnic identity. More in her community began to speak openly about their desire to revisit the Old County, largely to share the experience with children and grandchildren.<sup>50</sup> It helped that, by the mid-twentieth century, with the construction of modern airports and the availability of flights from California to the archipelago, the apprehension about the 5000-mile journey began to dissipate. Old stock immigrants, many of whom had arrived via ship and were likely unfamiliar or uncomfortable with air travel, would have found the long-distance voyage to be impractical. When, in the 1960s, Bernadine Goularte’s parents finally decided to visit their native villages in Faial, the journey itself marred their memory of the trip. At the time, no airport had yet been constructed on Faial so passengers with that destination had to fly into Santa Maria, take a ship to São Miguel and, then, another ship to Faial. The return journey was equally trying. “If you didn’t have good connections,” Goularte explained, “you had to stay overnight in Santa Maria. Coming back home, [my parents] did have to stay a couple of nights [there] before they could actually get on to the plane to get back home. So that was a little traumatic for them, they always remembered that.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Goularte and Goularte, “Reflections,” 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 8.

Post-World War II immigrants, more familiar with complications related to modern trans-Atlantic travel, may have been better prepared for island sojourns, but financial barriers proved insurmountable for some of those willing to tackle the physical and emotional stress of cross-Atlantic travel. “They never went back,” Aileen Gage said of her elderly parents, who had immigrated to California in the 1950s. They grieved for the old country and had hoped to save enough money to return but, ultimately, “they couldn’t afford to.”<sup>52</sup> Others were fortunate and thrifty enough to save the funds necessary to travel thousands of miles east. In 1957, four years after emigrating, Alzira Simas, frustrated with many aspects of her life in Manteca, California, and mourning the recent death of her father, boarded a plane to the Azores with her three daughters:

Under great heartache and with fear of never again seeing my mother - there left Alzira with her 3 little girls on August 20, 1957, Rosa Maria was 7 years old, Marlene was 4, and Helena was 3. Rafael stayed behind to earn the money for the tickets and he joined his family in February of 1958. There we all stayed together until August of that year, 1958. That was when we returned once again to California to begin life anew.<sup>53</sup>

The trip, planned in part to visit the grave of her father and to spend time with her elderly mother, was meant as a respite from rather than a rejection of her American life. Although her first years in California had been burdensome in many ways, and although she had reason to long for her former island existence, she now had three daughters. During that year spent in Pico, Alzira had the opportunity to immerse her children in the cultural, spiritual, linguistic, and physical environments she held most dear. Ultimately, however, the family would return to the United States where Alzira and Rafael knew opportunities for their daughters

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<sup>52</sup> Lick, 47.

<sup>53</sup> Alzira Simas, *Travel Journals* [translated by Marlene Simas Angeja and the author] (Sacramento, California, 1973-1995).

would be most plentiful. Alzira returned with her husband and children in 1958, committed to her family's new life in California.

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"We weren't forced to emigrate," Rosa Silva explained referring to her and her sister Alzira's departures. "That American ambition" delivered them to the land of "unlimited possibility," but, ultimately, she said, "we were both very disillusioned by America when we arrived."<sup>54</sup> Delia Mendes, who left her native Pico in 1966 at the age of nineteen, also expressed some initial dismay about California living. She explained that homes in the Azores "are built out of rock and cement, very big and tall, like two and three story houses." Upon arrival in Sacramento, California, she found "the houses were like sheds. I thought I couldn't breathe in them because everything is so packed. I don't know how to explain it. At home, we opened the windows."<sup>55</sup> Gui Sequeira, who also relocated from Pico to Sacramento in the 1960s, struggled with loneliness despite settling near her American in-laws. She spoke little English, feared driving, and longed for her Azorean family. She also missed working as a teacher, the job she held on the island, and found that she had few work skills she could utilize in the United States.<sup>56</sup> Rui Silva, too, discovered that his employment options were limited. In Terceira he had been a sergeant in the Portuguese military, but in California in the 1960s he settled for arduous labor, first in a cannery in Stockton, then in shipping for a Sacramento supermarket, and later in Hayward for a drug company, mixing chemicals for hair-care products—substances that caused him severe migraine headaches.<sup>57</sup> Jane Rose, a child of an Azorean couple who immigrated to California in the 1950s, lamented her mother's toil within the home. "There's no such thing as

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<sup>54</sup> Silva and Silva, interview.

<sup>55</sup> Lick, 51-52.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>57</sup> Silva and Silva, interview.

vacations [in America]. There's no such thing as Easter. You work night and day, seven days a week." Rose added, "I don't think my mother ever went anywhere. How could she?"<sup>58</sup>

Immigrants from earlier waves felt the sting of disappointment as well, but the availability of land and booming markets created undeniable opportunities for economic advancement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rose Emery suggested that the "good years" enjoyed on her family's San Ramon ranch from 1905-1923 "must have been compensation to [my parents] for their long, hard, early struggles."<sup>59</sup> After nearly a century of Azorean entrepreneurialism in California, with the closing of the western frontier in the 1890s, and rapid suburban growth beginning in the 1950s, available acreage quickly disappeared. Markets, too, stabilized, controlled largely by self-made Portuguese-American elites. Little room remained for newcomers to experience the "American Dream," and many struggled to wrest even marginal success from their economic and social circumstances. This meant navigating an American-made class structure, one that existed within and without the ethnic communities they entered into in the post-World War II era.

Did those from later immigrant waves eventually adapt to the strangeness of their new home? Were they able to navigate social and economic hierarchies to maximize opportunity? Did they ultimately achieve the "American Dream" or, at least, some version of it? The answers to these questions depend on changing definitions, or more accurately, concessions made regarding the "dream". While the Simas family was ultimately able to purchase their own piece of real estate in 1987, they spent three decades counting every dollar spent and saved in pursuit of that goal:

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<sup>58</sup> Lick, 63.

<sup>59</sup> Emery, 20.

June 7, 1954

All day working. Got a letter from Aurora and her husband thanking us for the things [a barrel sent with gifts]. Sent a letter to Mom with 5 photos. Bought shorts for Rafael, \$13.30. We went to the cinema, two stories, very beautiful and dreamy and simple.

Jan 1, 1955

Saturday. We didn't go to mass. We went to watch the Pasadena parade of roses on television with Maria, her husband, Manuel and Isabel... Spent time writing to the Islands. We have \$850 in the bank.<sup>60</sup>

April 14, 1987

Bought property and built a home in Santo Amaro - \$14,000<sup>61</sup>

Like earlier generations, many post-World War II immigrants in California hoped to earn land proprietorships and greater wealth but, as these luxuries appeared more and more difficult to obtain, many new immigrants focused their energies on more immediate objectives: building social networks, securing employment, saving to send children and grandchildren to college, and maintaining correspondence with people back in the Azores. In accomplishing these goals, new immigrants could enjoy some American comforts—some true satisfaction—and send money, gifts, and, ideally, themselves, back to the Azores.

Rui and Rosa Silva, on the other hand, appeared disappointed in their American existence. In their forty-six years living in California, the couple raised a daughter and played key roles in the lives of their two grandchildren. They lived comfortably in a home that they purchased in Tracy, and they visited the Old Country once every few years. Yet, they were somewhat regretful of their decision to emigrate. The Silvas revealed a significant obstacle for twentieth-century Azorean immigrants: the strain that came from the perpetual comparison between the old home and the new. In some cases, the problem of reconciling one's "American-ness" with the longing for the native land left the immigrant in a state of limbo or, as Gui

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<sup>60</sup> Simas, *Daily Journals*.

<sup>61</sup> Simas, *Travel Journals*.

Sequira explained, “You are a gypsy, and you do not really belong anywhere.”<sup>62</sup> For so many others, it was ultimately about belonging to two lands—one, materially, and the other, metaphysically.

This dichotomous relationship between hope and sorrow that infused so many aspects of the new immigrant’s life reminded some of the paradoxes of island existence. Isolation was at once peaceful and paralyzing. Letters and visitors provided relief from, yet also intensified, longing. Community and kin networks bestowed favors yet reinforced vulnerability and dependence. Social events bound people together yet also affirmed one’s remoteness. Prayer, too, had the power to soothe but could remind one of all that had been forsaken:

October 25, 1955

I turned 31 years old today. Received a letter from Manuel, from Maria do Carmo, and Natalia. All of them speak of Dad [who passed away] and that Mom is sick. All day I cried and stayed in the house alone and sad. Isabel had lunch here. She gave me bathroom stuff and \$10. At night I cried so much and fought with Rafael.<sup>63</sup>

The details revealed in the personal journals of Alzira Simas illustrate the complexities of an immigrant’s metamorphosis. Central to this transformation is the development of the sense of *saudade*, that is, the melancholy related to the longing for the Old County that compounds the struggle for livelihood in the new.

Azorean-American immigrants in late-twentieth century California were challenged daily to reconcile their new life with the old. They did so by relying on Portuguese networks for help securing employment and moral support, by joining religious and social organizations, by participating in and organizing Azorean cultural festivals, by logging their experiences in letters

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<sup>62</sup> Lick, 236.

<sup>63</sup> Simas, *Daily Journals*.

to family and in daily journals, and by choosing when—or if—to travel back to the islands. Some, like Gui Sequeira, Delia Mendes, Alzira and Rafael Simas, and the parents of Bernadine Goularte and Rose Emery, ultimately achieved their own version of the “American Dream.” Yet, the islands continued to represent for these Americans, as writer Gabriela Silva explains, “the certainty of a desired return [and] the incapacity of leaving definitely.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, the modern Azorean-American immigrant reality demonstrates the enduring—and paradoxical—relationship between the new home and the Old Country, and between opportunity and *saudade*.

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<sup>64</sup> Gabriela Silva, “Ilha Maldita” in Borges, *On a Leaf of Blue*, 68-71.

