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The Portuguese Immigrant Experience Through Its Autobiographers

José I. Suárez

After perusing every study made available to me, I came to the realization that Nancy Baden, Francis Rogers, and Donald Warrin have produced more detailed analyses of Luso-American letters than I could possibly present here. Nancy Baden, in particular, has made two outstanding studies which provide a good picture of who's who in Portuguese immigrant literature in the United States as well as who is seriously studying the works of these artists. I am referring to "Portuguese-American Literature: Does it Exist?" and "Portuguese-American Literature: An Overview."¹ Since 1980, the year of her later study, other literary works have come into print, e.g., Onésimo Almeida's *(Sapa)teia Americana* and Julian Silva's *The Gunnysack Castle*; yet, with few exceptions, the ranks of contemporary authors included in those studies have remained virtually unchanged.

It was the essay by Maria Angelina Duarte, "Portuguese Cultural Presence in the U.S.: the Problems of Definition," which suggested a most appropriate topic for an approach to this study.² In her essay, Duarte sets forth a series of factors which help elucidate why there has been such a scant literary output by Luso-Americans; she then proposes that the "high culture" bias which treats this literature as a manifestation of a substandard culture must be overcome and new definitions, categories, and approaches must be derived if we are to determine what, in fact, constitutes Luso-American letters. Among ar-

cas to be researched, she includes the following:

Another fruitful area of investigation is that of Luso-American autobiographies, be they written in English or Portuguese. These must be studied not only as reflections of individual experiences but also as reflections of modes of perception and adaptation. Published autobiographers are, *de facto*, spokespersons or role models for their communities. What images do they consciously or unconsciously project of and for the communities to which they belong? To what extent do they participate in and identify with community values?³

The object of this study is to examine three autobiographical works written by Portuguese immigrants in the United States in order to address these questions properly and, at the same time, to point out the authors' differences and similarities as perceived through their texts. The number three was not arbitrarily chosen; rather, three is the number of the only published Luso-American autobiographies or autobiographical compositions available to me. Others of which I am aware but was unable to obtain are: Higínio Faria's *Retalhos de uma Vida Incrível*, and João Vieira's *Eu Falo por Mim Mesmo*.⁴ The three books herein discussed are: *Home is an Island* by Alfred Lewis, *The Open Door* by Laurinda Andrade, and *Never Backward* by Lawrence Oliver.⁵

These works reveal that their authors shared much in common: all three were Azorean (Lewis from Flores, Andrade from Terceira, and Oliver from Pico); all were from the same generation (actually, the three were born within four years of each other); each came from very humble origins; they demonstrated the desire to emigrate to the United States at an early age; all made the journey to this country alone, leaving behind family and friends; all three, interestingly enough, used only the English language in the composition of their stories; and last (but perhaps in what is the most striking similarity), all professed to have faith in America because, as they saw it, it was the land of limitless freedoms and opportunities.

It may be said that it was the desire to divulge this faith, along with the gratitude they felt for having been allowed to settle here, that

inspired them to write the story of their lives. In *Home Is an Island*, the only one of the three works whose action does not cover a lifespan, the proper noun "America" and its derived adjective "American" are mentioned nearly one hundred times. When we consider that the text covers only 308 pages of rather large print, this is indeed an astonishing number. As a matter of fact, this obsession with the United States forms part of a structural dichotomy which lends significance to all events within the plot: on the one hand we have the fervent, almost fanatical Catholicism of José de Castro's mother, which induces her to see life as the constant battleground between the forces of Good and Evil, resulting in her desire that her son enter the priesthood; on the other hand there is the progressive and pragmatic outlook of José's father (a product of his sojourn in America) which has been imparted to the son and has made the boy eager to follow in his footsteps.

Although lauding America plays a principal role in Andrade's *The Open Door*, it does at times share this honor with two other concerns: throughout Part One, there are constant remarks regarding the subordinate status of women in a male-dominated society, e.g., "School was not compulsory, and very few children attended school, especially girls" (p.35); and "As far as Laurinda's mind could grasp it then, all that masculine superiority was just a myth, a fairytale" (p. 44). For the remainder of the book, though not entirely abandoning this concern, Andrade becomes almost obsessed with demonstrating that a strong religious conviction coupled with an unrelenting desire to persevere are the ingredients required for success in our society. Comments such as these abound: "But the spirit, tempered in faith and driven by the persistent sense of responsibility, dragged me...According to Daniel Webster, 'Failure is more frequently from want of energy than from want of capital.' With no intention of contradicting Mr. Webster, I would substitute his 'energy' for [sic] the more spiritual and all-encompassing word "faith" (p. 159).

In *Never Backward*, as the title suggests, Lawrence Oliver does not reflect much upon his life on the islands. This is not out of shame for his birthplace, but because the aim of the book is to illustrate how he, a foreigner with very little education, was able to prosper through hard work, honesty, and a little business sense. However, as is often the case with this type of individual, Oliver chooses to relate every detail, no matter how unimportant, in respect to the amassing of his fortune.

Here is a typical example: "After I bought my 2,200 acre ranch at Descanso, in 1942, I not only transferred the small herd of English Devon cattle which I had kept at the Camp Kearney ranch, but I increased my herd; and developed an interesting and successful hobby of cattle-raising" (p. 159).

Yet, as Nancy Baden points out, it is "the sincerity of this hardworking man [which] shines through this somewhat simple, naive work."⁶ We indeed receive the impression that Oliver is not relating these facts in order to boast or to relish his success; rather, his step-by-step account reflects an effort to guide and counsel any aspiring entrepreneur, to provide him/her with a "business handbook."

What, then, are the modes of perception and adaptation exhibited by these works? Before answering this question, we must state that these writers belonged to a wave of immigrants which reached our shores in the early years of the present century. Generally speaking, these were individuals who abandoned their homelands for economic betterment. Their perception of the United States (or "America," as it is commonly called in the Old Country even today) was that of a land where material wealth was plentiful, where opportunity knocked at one's door, where, in short, "the sidewalks were paved with gold." This ingenuous view was created by friends and relatives alike who, having returned from the United States (either permanently or temporarily), gave only positive and often exaggerated accounts of what they had experienced in the New World. Those who did not return likewise painted in their correspondence a rosy picture of America in an attempt to justify their move.

Both Lawrence Oliver's father and Alfred Lewis's father had spent time in the United States; Laurinda Andrade had an uncle who lived in California. It is in *Home Is an Island* where several characters convey this utopian vision thus: "America is full of money" (p. 106); "You work all day in America. And it does you good. Makes you strong, and besides, you make lots of money" (pp. 210-11); "America is full of dollars" (p. 212); "Yes, a great place it is, America. Money. So much of it over there" (p. 282); "The boy will pay his indebtedness. The riches of America will do that" (p. 288). That wealth and the United States are virtually synonymous, as these excerpts demonstrate, was and is the prevalent impression among Portuguese who aspire to emigrate.

However, once passage has been safely made to this side of the Atlantic, another reality confronts the newcomer, as Laurinda Andrade and Lawrence Oliver so candidly reveal in their respective works. Soon after taking up quarters in a boarding house, as many single immigrants are forced to do, Andrade perceives that Mamie, the housekeeper's daughter, is attracted by her friend and fellow boarder Manuel. Since the housekeeper wants this match, she is unable to conceal the mistrust felt towards our author, a worthy rival in her eyes. Andrade arrives at this realization once she understands her predicament: "So this too, was America—an America of deceptions, frustrations and disappointments" (p. 84).

Upon receipt of her first salary, Andrade is shocked by an amount which would not even cover the cost of her room and board. Then, while re-evaluating her situation, she understands how unrealistic her expectations had been: "My imaginary America had promised me all I would ever need to realize my precious dream of freedom and independence. I had neither anticipated nor conceived those naked facts of reality, in the building of my castle in the air" (p. 85).

More or less in the same fashion is Lawrence Oliver awakened to the American reality soon after his arrival, as his own words reveal: "It did not take me long to discover that America was a good deal different from what I had pictured [in] my mind. I soon learned that the streets were not paved with gold. Instead, I discovered that, in one instance at least, they were paved with big rocks" (p. 15). He is here alluding wryly to the principal chore of his first job: breaking up large rocks on a farm near New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Because Alfred Lewis, as mentioned, excludes reference to his American experience in his novel, we must conjecture that he too, like the others, must have suffered disillusionment. Donald Warrin gives this pertinent biographical data of young Lewis's early days in the U.S.:

Desembarcou Alfred Lewis em Providence, Rhode Island no ano 1922, contando 19 anos de idade. Com 75 centavos americanos parte para a costa oeste e estabelece-se logo na cidade de Atwater, no vale de San Joaquin, estado da Califórnia. Aí, junto com o irmão mais velho, o rapaz

que entretinha ideias de ser doutor pela Universidade de Coimbra, aprende a colher batata doce nos campos da Califórnia. Do Vale, seguimo-lo até a cidade de S. Francisco, onde consegue emprego como ajudante de cozinha num restaurante português.⁷

The Land is Here, one of several novels left unpublished by Lewis, gives testimony of his revealing encounter with the real, everyday America. The novel is the continuation of *Home Is an Island*. It traces the life of José de Castro from his departure, through his settlement in California, a bout with tuberculosis and procurement of American citizenship, to his falling in love during the Great Depression.⁸

With regard to adaptation, what do these works tell about their creators' ability to coexist and succeed in their new environment? Do these autobiographers make any attempt to forsake their ethnic origins in order to be "melted" in that proverbial "pot"? In answer to the first question, there is no doubt that the two whose plots cover their American experience persistently demonstrate that, in spite of many trials and setbacks, they adapted to and adopted their new country. Both learned English (in Oliver's case, a more meritorious achievement for he was illiterate upon his arrival), they cultivated the friendship of people with backgrounds unlike their own, both fully understood and accepted the standard criteria for upward mobility in a capitalist society, i.e., perseverance and aggressiveness, and both, though adversely affected by prejudice, did not wallow in self-pity and hatred. The inexplicable yet universal nature of prejudice and discrimination is perhaps best depicted by Laurinda Andrade:

Right or wrong, prejudice and discrimination resulting in unfair treatment, with its consequential lamentable reactions, have always existed. We see them creeping even into some family units, with an accompanying anxiety, through mystifying actions by the very individuals involved. No matter how [many] economical, political, psychological or sociological reasons we may succeed in listing and utilizing to explain the causes, the dilemma is ever present and the problems continue to grow from generation to genera-

tion, always much too complex and too far reaching for our limited human solutions. Why did Cain kill his brother Abel? We may ask that question now, and always, to convince ourselves that there are reasons for everything that happens, but not always within the scope of our materialistic gauge of understanding as some of them may well be beyond ourselves. (p. 94)

None of these writers, on the other hand, ever disavows his/her Portuguese cultural heritage. Much to the contrary. Their pages are filled with pride in all things Portuguese and convey that it was not disregard or contempt for the fatherland and its customs which caused them to abandon the islands, but the desire to reach their goals in a more propitious setting – had Portugal afforded opportunities similar to those found here, these individuals would not have emigrated. That the verb in *Home Is an Island* is in the present tense is a good indication of how Lewis, like many of his compatriots, still felt about his native land despite a long absence. In the words of one of his characters: “All countries are good. We can learn to live anywhere. Only the land of our birth we remember best, somehow” (p. 108).

While on the subject, it is fitting to mention that all three authors set forth to the United States with a somewhat clear notion of what careers they wanted to pursue. Alfred Lewis, even as a child, professed a keen interest in the written word. Laurinda Andrade leaned toward pedagogy, as she demonstrated to her Azorean teacher. Lawrence Oliver’s ambition was not as precise; however, when we hear statements such as “my main thought was to make something of myself, to get a good job and make some money, to accomplish something” (p. 18), we interpret this to mean, “I want to possess as much wealth as I possibly can.”

From my limited knowledge of Luso-American communities in this country, it appears that all three authors under discussion reflect the attitudes and values of quite a large part of these communities. Whether sharing memories of the land they left behind or describing experiences in their new country, the three always considered themselves Portuguese nationals and made no attempt to dis-

guise what they were. The change of name by the two males, ordinary among immigrant groups of the period with non-Anglo-Saxon names, was prompted in all probability not by a desire to Americanize; it was the impression that, in an America filled with animosity toward all that was foreign, it might not be a good idea to call unnecessary attention to one's self. In Lawrence Oliver's case, for example, his name was Anglicized by a teacher in California who claimed that Oliveira was too long. He never again changed it to the original, alleging that "this is what Americans preferred" (p. 20).

Saudades, the partly nostalgic, partly stoical *Weltanschauung* characteristic of all Lusitanian people, is a salient motif in *Home Is an Island*. Numerous are the "recollections of smell, sights, sounds, and customs of Flores . . ." which exemplify the emotional aspect of this view.⁹ We are also able to witness its philosophical implications in this extract from a brief dialogue between José de Castro and Professor Silva:

"I have a little present for you; I hope you will like it."

Jose opened a little book. "The *Lusiad!*" he exclaimed.

"Read a few passages everyday. Ponder its lessons well. Cultivate the nostalgia you will soon feel when you leave. That, in itself, will do you good." (p. 307)

Undoubtedly, these three immigrants echo the opinions of their communities. Had they not, their views would have been rebutted by their neighbors in the Portuguese-language media, and we know this not to be the case. It must be recalled that neither Andrade nor Oliver was a professional writer nor did either purport to be. Oliver, in fact, dictated rather than wrote his memoirs. Lewis, though considered a writer by many, was not a cultured man, as his literary style reflects.

By publishing their life stories, they were setting a positive example for their fellow immigrants. First of all they let it be known that they had "made it" in that foreign and often hostile culture

surrounding them, and each gave his/her formula for achievement so that others might also succeed. Second (and intertwined with the first), they helped sustain the logic that those who write books are educated; those who are educated do well in life; consequently, education is an integral part of success.

Finally, it must be said in all fairness that the reality confronting present-day newcomers is not exactly that of these authors and, because of this, the attitudes and actions taken by the protagonists may seem a bit obsequious and self-abasing to some. Their lesson in hard work, self-reliance, perseverance, and tolerance nevertheless remains as exemplary today as it was then.

NOTAS

* This is a slightly revised copy of a talk given in the Portuguese Minority Literature Discussion Group of the VIII Symposium on Spanish and Portuguese Bilingualism, November 17, 1984, at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

¹ Nancy Baden, "Portuguese-American Literature: Does It Exist?" *MELUS*, 6, No. 2 (Summer, 1979) and "Portuguese-American Literature: An Overview," *Gávea-Brown*, 1, No. 2 (July-December 1980).

² Maria Angelina Duarte, "Portuguese Cultural Presence in the U.S.: The Problems of Definition," *Ideologies & Literatures*, 4, No. 16 (May-June 1983).

³ Duarte, "Portuguese Cultural Presence," p. 80.

⁴ Donald Warrin makes reference to the autobiography of one Charles Peters but omits its title. See "A Literatura do Imigrante Português na Califórnia," *Horizontes U.S.A.*, No. 8 (March-April 1977), pp. 36-37.

⁵ Alfred Lewis, *Home Is an Island* (New York: Random House, 1951); Laurinda C. Andrade, *The Open Door* (New Bedford: Reynolds De Walt, 1968); and Lawrence Oliver, *Never Backward*, ed. Rita Larkin Wolin (San Diego: L. Oliver, 1972). Though it is a novel and not an autobiography, *Home Is an Island* was chosen because it is based on its author's childhood experiences in Flores. Every quotation extracted from these editions will appear with its corresponding page number placed at the end.

⁶ Baden, "Portuguese-American Literature: An Overview," p. 32.

⁷ Donald Warrin, "Alfred Lewis - Romance e Poesia em Dois Idiomas," *Arquipélago*, No. 3 (January 1981), p. 61.

⁸ For a complete commentary on Lewis' unpublished works see Warrin, "Alfred Lewis - Romance e Poesia".

⁹ Baden, "Portuguese-American Literature: Does It Exist?," pp. 18-19.