

RESEARCH

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*: Immigration, Ecocriticism, and Otherness

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This essay aims at revisiting Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), especially the episode in chapter X, "Baker Farm," where Thoreau introduces the reader to an Irish immigrant, John Field. A hard-working farmer, Field thinks he is moving his way up the American social ladder and, presumably, dream, when, in fact, Thoreau tells us he is toiling just to feed unnecessary body needs. Whereas Field views his coming to America as a blessing for he could purchase these commodities, Thoreau notes that "the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these."

This episode will assist me in my discussion of Thoreau's environmental concerns by way of focusing on Otherness – in this case, an Irishman, a victim of the Hungry Forties. I will attempt to show Thoreau as a man complicit with racial stereotyping considering that in this passage he viewed the Irish as slovenly, dirty, imbecile, and good-for-nothing. Throughout the nineteenth-century, such racial stereotyping would be extended to other ethnic minorities arriving at the turn-of-the-century and a subject of inquiry by ethnologists and sociologists. The Irish, who had to fight for their whiteness, were not alone in this battle considering that Southern Europeans – with the Portuguese, in particular – were said to possess "some negro blood," as Donald Taft has argued in *Two Portuguese Communities in New England* (1923). This rhetoric would be later on fine-tuned during the Eugenics movement in the 1920s and culminating in the Holocaust during World War II. My contention in this essay is that Thoreau was complicit with America's paranoia about the boundaries of whiteness.

Keywords: Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*; Henry David Thoreau and Immigration; Henry David Thoreau and Ecocriticism; Henry David Thoreau and Otherness

O presente ensaio propõe-se visitar a obra de Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, publicada em 1854, sobretudo o episódio no capítulo X, "Baker Farm," onde Thoreau nos apresenta um emigrante irlandês, John Field. Um trabalhador incansável, Field julga estar a subir a pulso na vida na sociedade norte-americana e, presumivelmente, a concretizar o sonho americano, quando, de facto, Thoreau diz-nos que ele está simplesmente a labutar para satisfazer necessidades corporais desnecessárias. Enquanto Field entende que a sua vinda para a América foi uma bênção, na medida em que agora podia adquirir estes géneros, Thoreau comenta que "a verdadeira América é unicamente aquele país onde se tem liberdade para que se possa seguir o estilo de vida que nos permita passar sem eles."

Este episódio proporciona uma análise das preocupações ambientalistas de Thoreau, por via das suas perceções do Outro, nomeadamente a de um irlandês, vítima da fome no seu país (década de 1840). Tentaremos demonstrar como Thoreau foi conivente com a utilização dos estereótipos racistas na medida em que neste trecho descreve os irlandeses como sendo pouco asseados, sujos, imbecis e sem grande iniciativa. Ao longo do século XIX, estes estereótipos raciais também seriam aplicados a outras minorias étnicas, que chegavam à América em finais do século, assim como um tema de pesquisa para etnólogos e sociólogos. Esta luta em serem tratados como brancos não se aplicou somente aos irlandeses na medida em que se dizia que os povos

da Europa do Sul – nomeadamente os portugueses – possuíam “algum sangue negro,” tal como afirmara Donald Taft na sua obra, *Two Portuguese Communities in New England* (1923). Mais tarde, esta retórica tornar-se-ia mais acutilante durante a vigência do movimento da Eugenia durante a década de 1920 e culminando, deste modo, no Holocausto durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial. O argumento principal neste ensaio é que Thoreau se revelou como cúmplice da paranoia norte-americana relativamente as fronteiras do que se convencionou ser-se de raça branca.

Palavras-Chave: Henry David Thoreau e *Walden*; Henry David Thoreau e a emigração; Henry David Thoreau e a ecocrítica; Henry David Thoreau e o Outro

This essay aims at revisiting Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), especially the episode in chapter X, “Baker Farm,” where Thoreau introduces the reader to an Irish immigrant, John Field. This episode will assist me in my discussion of Thoreau's environmental concerns by way of focusing on Otherness and to show Thoreau as a man complicit with racial stereotyping.

Thoreau's concern for nature and environmental issues, too, will assist me in ascertaining how these matters evolved, were modified by, adjusted to and updated by immigrants in North America when growing a garden or farming. Issues ranging from how did older canonical texts written by mainstream American writers adequately represent the Portuguese immigrants in their interaction with nature and American soil while farming to how such matters are dealt with in contemporary Portuguese-American fiction and poetry will be explored in this piece. From Thoreau's husbandry in an unpolluted American landscape, how did the Portuguese deal with nature, farming, and gardening and how are they represented in the available writings?

By observing Otherness and how certain ethnic groups, especially the Portuguese, interacted with nature, often replicating the farming landscapes they had grown up with in the Old World, such practices allowed for bodily and spiritual sustenance while maintaining their Portuguese identity. As with Thoreau, who viewed nature as a retreat into the primitive, for these immigrants nature – via gardening and farming – was a means to retreat from the alienating conditions imposed by the factory, commercial fishing, the whaling or dairy industries or intensive farming Portuguese immigrants engaged in in their areas of settlement in the United States. For these Portuguese immigrants caught in this industrial, back-breaking, and alienating web, retrieving their dignity and ancestral culture via the ethnic garden or farming was their way of becoming human once again.

From Patronizing Otherness to a Rhetoric of Eugenics

In chapter ten, Thoreau introduces the reader to an Irish immigrant, John Field. A hard-working farmer, Field thinks he is moving his way up the American social ladder and, presumably, dream, when, in fact, Thoreau tells us he is toiling just to feed unnecessary body needs. Field tells Thoreau that his coming to America had been “a gain...that here you could get tea, and coffee, and meat every day” (Thoreau 1960, 141). For Field, immigrating to America was a blessing for it enabled him to purchase these commodities. Thoreau wraps this episode up noting that “the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these, and where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery and war and other superfluous expenses which directly or indirectly result from the use of such things” (Thoreau 1960, 141). In Thoreau's view, this man toiled like a slave to satisfy his corporeal needs and, in the process, was paying taxes on these products to support slavery and America's war machine – institutions Thoreau disagreed with.

Moreover, this episode stresses Thoreau's impressions of this Irish man and his family as shiftless, without a purpose in life, and imbecile. His youngest son is referred to as a “poor starveling brat” (Thoreau 1960, 140) and the house where Field lived with his family was unkempt and needing repair:

There we sat together under that part of the roof which leaked the least, while it showered and thundered without. I had sat there many times of old before the ship was built that floated this family to America. An honest, hard-working, but *shiftless man* plainly was John Field; and his wife, she too was brave to cook so many successive dinners in the recesses of that lofty stove; with round greasy face and bare breast, still thinking to improve her condition one day; *with the never absent mop in one hand, and yet no effects of it visible anywhere*. The chickens, which had also taken shelter here from the rain, stalked about the room like members of the family, too humanized methought to roast well. (italics added; Thoreau 1960, 140)

Field tells Thoreau about “how hard he worked ‘bogging’ for a neighboring farmer, turning up a meadow with a spade or bog hoe at the rate of ten dollars an acre and the use of the land with manure for one year, and his little broad-faced son worked cheerfully at his father’s side the while, *not knowing how poor a bargain the latter had made*” (Thoreau 1960, 141). Thoreau, in turn, teaches him how he can also live in a “light, clean house, which hardly cost more than the annual rent of such a ruin as his commonly amounts to; and how, if he chose, he might in a month or two build himself a palace of his own; that I did not use tea, nor coffee, nor butter, nor milk, nor fresh meat, and so did not have to work to get them” (Thoreau 1960, 141). The italicized passages reflect Thoreau’s impressions of this man and his family as imbecile, untidy, and shiftless, stereotypes which, as we will see ahead, were applied to the Irish as a group. As we all know, *Walden* reflects Thoreau’s attempt to teach us how to liberate ourselves from falling prey to capitalism by simplifying our lives, but his views of the Field family as simpletons, however, undermines this goal while highlighting his bias towards this Irish family and, presumably, the Irish as a whole. This stereotype would later be applied to individuals composing another pattern of immigration to the United States, mostly Southern Europeans and Turks, especially during the Progressive era of the 1920s and in the heyday of the Eugenics movement. This boiled down to the enactment of immigration quotas in the Immigration Acts of 1917–1924, which barred access to the US for these peoples. For the purpose of this essay, the Portuguese, after the Irish, as we shall see, were a case in point.

Like hundreds of thousands – or even millions – of other destitute Irish farmers, Field may have been one of those who was affected by the “consequences of the emergence of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland on January 1, 1801,” which widened “the breach between Catholics and Protestants.” The negative economic consequences of this union “were exacerbated by the disastrous famine of 1846–51, and over 2,000,000 people emigrated” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 6, 380). This occurred when “the potato, the staple food of rural Ireland, rotted in the ground through the onset of blight in the mid-1840s” and “thousands died of starvation and fever in the Great Famine that ensued, and thousands more fled abroad” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 21, 965). On American soil, they were once again victimized and stigmatized by a ruling WASP mainstream as they had previously experienced by the Anglo colonizer back home:

Irish immigrants, however, fared poorly; too poor to buy land, lacking in skills, disorganized members of a faith considered alien and even dangerous by many native Americans, the Irish suffered various forms of ostracism and discrimination in the cities, where they tended to congregate. They provided the menial and unskilled labour needed by the expanding economy. Their low wages forced them to live in tightly packed slums, whose chief features were filth, disease, rowdiness, prostitution, drunkenness, crime, a high mortality rate, and the absence of even rudimentary toilet facilities. Adding to the woes of the first generation of Irish immigrants was the tendency of many disgruntled natives to treat the newcomers as scapegoats who allegedly threatened the future of American life and religion. In the North, only free blacks were treated worse. Most Northern blacks possessed theoretical freedom and little else. Confined to menial occupations for the most part, they fought a losing battle against the inroads of Irish competition in northeastern cities. The struggle between the two groups erupted spasmodically into ugly street riots.” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 29, 223)

This grouping together of both ethnic groups, suggests Howard Zinn, had already started when these immigrants were fleeing from Ireland and were packed into old sailing ships. “The stories of these ships differ only in detail from the accounts of the ships that earlier brought black slaves” and later on Germans, Italian, Russian immigrants (221). Or even the Portuguese, as José Rodrigues Miguéis narrates in his short story, “Gente da terceira classe.”

Thoreau, however, had not been the only American intellectual to apply this alleged intellectual and racial inferiority to the Irish. Anna Engle has shown that, as a whole, several

Nineteenth-century American literary writers also did their part to perpetuate the idea that Irish-Americans were ethnically inferior. Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, Reuben Weiser, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Horatio Alger number among American mid-century authors who derided Irish immigrant workers as slovenly, dirty, and good-for-nothing. Unflattering images of Irish-Americans appear not only in various genres, from Weiser’s captivity narrative, *Regina, the German Captive...to Thoreau’s treatise Walden* (152–153).

Recent scholarship on ethnicity, class, and labor conditions has shown how, from the start, the Irish had to work their way up the American economic ladder and fight for their “whiteness” considering that they were equated with enslaved blacks. Noel Ignatiev is clearly a case in point. In his book, *How the Irish Became White*, Ignatiev attempts to explain why the Irish were treated as blacks in the United States, why they often interacted with each other, but needed to be treated as or become whites:

To Irish laborers, to become white meant at first that they could sell themselves piecemeal instead of being sold for life, and later that they could compete for jobs in all spheres instead of being confined to certain work; to Irish entrepreneurs, it meant that they could function outside of a segregated market. To both of these groups it meant that they were citizens of a democratic republic, with the right to elect and be elected, to be tried by a jury of their peers, to live wherever they could afford, and to spend, without racially imposed restrictions, whatever money they managed to acquire. In becoming white the Irish ceased to be Green” (Ignatiev 2–3).

The Irish, notes Justin D. Edwards, were stereotyped as racially inferior due to prevailing nineteenth-century racial theories such as those put forth by the racial scientist Nathaniel S. Schaler, who argued that “American immigration policies should privilege the ‘Teutonic branch of the Aryan race’ because its genetic constitution was better acclimatized to the North American environment.” Irishmen, he stated, “lay outside of this ‘Teutonic branch’ and therefore the Celt’s physical constitution was not given to ‘industrious’ or hard work; because of this, he argued, Irishmen were too ‘lazy’, ‘immoral’, and ‘shiftless’ to warrant access to American citizenship” (66).

To finalize this discussion of the Field family and, by extension, other Irish farmers in the United States, Matt Wray argues that these negative stereotypes regarding the so-called white trash, namely the Irish, was prompted by their livelihood and the fact they were composed of “large families” and that they often lived in “unsanitary and crowded conditions of living, small and incommensurate dwellings” but “beneath the surface we find on one hand, loose disjointed living, with attendant lack of intelligence, absence of ambition, dearth of ideals of every sort” (81). This was what Donald Taft was also saying in 1923 about the Portuguese from the Azores, especially the immigrants from the island of São Miguel.

This mindset, which Thoreau applied to the Field family, was gaining wider popularity throughout the nineteenth-century and culminating, in a full-blown manner, during the Progressive era. The Portuguese communities in New England, for example, were repulsed by the study, *Two Portuguese Communities in New England* (1923), written by the criminologist and sociologist of the University of Illinois, Donald R. Taft. The strong reaction by the Portuguese to this study is intriguing for a number of reasons. First, it suggests that the Portuguese in New England were mindful of what the dominant culture was saying or writing about them. And, second, because they had the courage to get together as a group to demonstrate and use the press to express their grievances. Taft’s study supports the exclusionary rhetoric of Progressive politics of the 1920s, which culminated in the immigration acts of 1917–1924 that all but closed America’s doors to Southern Europeans. Moreover, it voices America’s paranoia about the boundaries of whiteness. More specifically, Taft taps from the rhetoric of eugenics, which was deeply ingrained in Anglo-American thought. In addition, Taft’s application of eugenics discourses to the Portuguese supported Progressive politics by formulating an intellectual, scientific basis for this rhetoric of exclusion.

Briefly, the first chapter in Taft’s study proposes to analyze the high infant mortality rate of the Portuguese children in the urban community of Fall River, Massachusetts, and in the rural community of Portsmouth, Rhode Island – places where thousands of Portuguese immigrants settled in the nineteenth-century. While the former ethnic enclave included immigrants mostly from the island of São Miguel, the latter was composed of immigrants from Faial, who were mostly of Flemish extraction. While offering explanations for the high infant mortality rates in both communities in chapters three and five, Taft evinces a particular bias towards the Fall River community. In his view, the high infant mortality rate there was due to the inability of the Portuguese mothers to communicate in English; their illiteracy and ignorance (chapters three and five); and their darker complexion and alleged African blood (chapters two and seven). In a country such as the United States where the one-drop rule disqualified immediate access to white privileges, allegations of these immigrants as blacks are worth considering in the light of racial discourse in America.

Possibly one of the most powerful rhetorical strategies employed by eugenicists in the early twentieth-century was to portray prospective immigrants hailing from Southern European countries as parasitic carriers of tainted germ plasm that threatened the purity of native Americans. It was believed that this contamination would weaken the fitness of Americans of Anglo stock. Like the Irish before them, these

Southern Europeans had to earn their whiteness and the Portuguese were no exception since the image of the “black Portygee” was widely present in a few narratives featuring the Portuguese, an issue I have focused on in *Representations of the Portuguese in American Literature*. This new wave of immigrants, notes Marouf A. Hasian, Jr., were said to be “permanent parasites on the American body politic, forever tainted by their blood and incapable of having their condition ameliorated” (Hasian 93). Much in the same way Thoreau had underscored the Field family's imbecility, Taft, a few decades later, views the Fall River Portuguese as superstitious and ignorant. “We may say,” he argues, “that Portuguese children die because of ignorance; Portuguese adults are exploited because of ignorance; their women continue their lives of toil and endless child-bearing because of their ignorance; their children are backward in school through ignorance; and very many of the other tragedies of their lives are the product of ignorance” (339).

Although this discussion on Thoreau's attitudes towards ethnicity and Otherness in *Walden* is insufficient to build a solid case regarding his patronizing ways towards the Irish, we often wish he had a different view on this issue considering his engagement in the Abolitionist cause, his criticism of capitalism, his positive depiction of Native-Americans in some of his writings, and the liberating effect that emanates from *Walden*. His views, nonetheless, were those of a man who was racially accommodated to the WASP mainstream, its prejudices, and values – even if he felt the need to criticize it and step aside from it during his Walden Pond phase. As with the Portuguese immigrants later on, most of whom were illiterate, their Catholicism was an additional problem as had also been the case with the Irish in the 1840s and afterwards. True, Thoreau does not refer directly to the religious beliefs of the Irish or even their illiteracy, but these drawbacks are there, nonetheless, which, if not a problem to him, to most nativists these clearly were. His Anglo prejudice towards the Irish was just a cog in the overall machinery of American racism, a discourse that was honed even further during the Eugenics movement at the dawn of the twentieth-century and later on culminating, on a global scale, with the Holocaust during World War II.

Thoreau's Environmental Concerns: Textual and Scholarly Approaches

Still practically at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we are baffled by how Thoreau's environmental concerns remain such an up-to-date issue – especially when most countries around the world have ratified the Paris Treaty on climate change and global warming. In the particular case of Thoreau, contemporary ecocriticism scholars have revisited most of Thoreau's writings in the past two or three decades to note the contemporaneity of his views regarding environmental issues. His concern with nature became a lifelong obsession which, in the course of time, he explored at length in his writings. Field is a representative of a farmer in rural America who was tilling the land and fertilizing it with manure, an environment that was still essentially clean and unpolluted. The same could be said for Thoreau when “he describes himself at work among his beans,” notes Leo Marx, where “Thoreau is the American husbandman. Like the central figure of the Jeffersonian idyll, his vocation has a moral and spiritual as well as economic significance” (Marx 255–256). In the aftermath of the industrial revolution, the subsequent generations of farmers and writers had to deal with a different reality, issues which Leo Marx has discussed in his classic study, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. These changes are reflected in the mainstream, canonical literature produced thereafter as well as in some writings crafted by the minorities through contemporary ethnic writers.

Although Thoreau “is today considered the first major interpreter of nature in American literary history, the first American environmentalist saint,” notes Lawrence Buell, this “position did not come easily to him” (“Thoreau...” 171). In this respect, Thoreau was rather self-taught considering that he, Buell further adds,

started adult life from a less advantageous position than we sometimes realize, as a village businessman's son of classical education rather than a someone versed in nature through systematic botanical study, agriculture, or more than a very ordinary sort of experiential contact with it. Unlike William Bartram, Thoreau had no man of science for a father; unlike Thomas Jefferson, he had no agrarian roots. His first intellectual promptings to study and write about nature were from books, and literary mentors like Ralph Waldo Emerson” (Buell 171).

In *The Maine Woods* (1864), Thoreau's concern was with forest ecology, namely logging and its dangers for the ecological system. In this piece, Thoreau views nature as a sacred place which is being tampered with and turned into a commodity. After several trips to these woods, Thoreau came to the realization that they were not an inexhaustible resource. The woodcutters or timber-hunters, notes Joseph J. Moldenhauer, “foreshadows the logger, a hireling, braggart, and vandal who desecrates the temple of the wilderness and tramples

its most delicate growth even as he fells its grandest pines" (132). In *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau narrates the episode in which his cousin killed a moose just for fun. For him, killing a moose and chopping down trees is like a murder. He deplored the fact that both the wood derived from the fallen trees and the leather from the deer's hide would be turned into commodities. As a prophet, Thoreau was well ahead of his time for he could anticipate the ecological disasters we have witnessed of late.

With some of these Thoreauvian concerns as a backdrop, let us now ascertain how specific groups of immigrants hailing from agrarian Old World societies dealt with nature, farming, and gardening – the Portuguese in particular.

Portuguese American Attitudes towards Environmental Concerns

Before delving into contemporary American writings produced by American writers of Portuguese ancestry, a brief historical overview of farming and gardening in the areas of settlement by some immigrants from the Azores or continental Portugal is called for. It may help us understand the world they came from and how they tried to replicate it in the United States.

Around 1880, with the arrival of Azoreans from Fayal, in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, a small Azorean farming community emerged there with "cottages closely surrounded by well-kept vegetable gardens, clustering loosely about a small Catholic church" (Pap 141), hence replicating a familiar rural scene from Portugal. With the rapid industrialization of the Northeast, most Portuguese immigrants crowded in cities and looked for jobs in the cotton mills and other local industries rather than farming even if they often grew a small vegetable garden to supplement their income.

But it was in California where the Portuguese really thrived in agriculture and in the dairy industry. Small groups of Azoreans made their way there during the Gold Rush days. With little capital to invest in mining, most of these immigrants applied their ancestral farming skills into intensive farming and fruit orchards around the San Francisco area. They usually started out renting land and gradually buying it. In Sacramento, they excelled at growing vegetables, while in Fresno County they worked at the vineyards, and in the San Joaquin Valley they grew field, feed, and grain crops. In the San Leandro area, these immigrants, while improving their land, they obtained "two or more crops from the same field in the course of the year, e.g. by planting vegetables between rows of bearing trees" (Pap 144). This agricultural mentality reflects their attempt at replicating, in California, agricultural practices from their volcanic islands in the Azores.

This mentality is quite well rendered in a passage in *The Valley of the Moon* (1913), written by Jack London. Antonio Silva, we learn, is a savvy farmer who owns a "town house in San Leandro now. An' he rides around in a four-thousand-dollar touring-car. An' just the same his front dooryard grows onions to the sidewalk. He clears three hundred a year on that patch alone" (110). One may argue that Silva is a greedy businessman maximizing whatever piece of land he owns, but one must not overlook the culture and geography that shaped this Azorean immigrant. He simply exemplifies the hard-working farmer who has brought his old mentality to America, as indicated when the lineman shows Silva's farm to Billy and Saxon:

Look at that, though you ought to see it in summer. Not an inch wasted. Where we get one thin crop, they get four fat crops. An' look at the way they crowd it – currants between the tree rows, beans between the currant rows, a row of beans close on each side the trees, an' rows of beans along the ends of the tree rows. Why, Silva wouldn't sell these five acres for five hundred an acre, cash down. (111)

This farming technique, however, leaves the land totally exhausted after a few years. These Portuguese farmers act much as does, for example, Ishmael Bush in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*, who went West deliberately to skim "the cream from the face of the earth and get the very honey of nature" (311). These farmers are denuding the land for quick returns, a practice Thoreau would certainly have deplored.

This typical Azorean way of farming is also referred to in an autobiography written by Josephine B. Korth, *Wind Chimes in My Apple Tree* (1978). Her parents were Azorean immigrants in California who made a living in agriculture. She worked most of her life as a single or married woman in the fields growing asparagus and other vegetables. Much of what she learned about farming when she was a young girl helping her father in the fields would be useful when she became a married woman. Early into the story, she tells us that "On our ranch the asparagus ferns were growing beautifully. My father had also planted beans between the rows of the asparagus which were planted about five or six feet apart" (53–54). Maximizing the farmland for a profit and securing the family's sustenance were two priorities for Portuguese immigrants, especially in California.

Doing away with this ancestral farming mentality was not discarded even if it was ridiculed by native-born Americans considering the spaciousness of these Californian farms.

Transplanted on American soil, these immigrants brought with them a culture and ways which they could not easily toss away. Doing so meant becoming de-personalized for the produce from their farms represented not just bodily and economic sustenance but an attempt to replicate the landscapes they had grown up with in the old country and this, in turn, allowed for spiritual sustenance and maintaining one's identity.

It was actually the California dairy industry than farming, New England cottage gardening or orchard-growing that brought about the relative wealth of the Portuguese in the United States. They had brought with them to the New World a centuries-old tradition in dairying. By 1915, these Azorean immigrants owned about half of the dairy land in the San Joaquin Valley.

The agricultural practices in Hawaii, however, were quite different from those in New England and California due to its climate. The Madeiran and Azorean settlers who had been transported there on ships for over a span of three or four decades (from 1878 to 1913), were engaged in the local sugar cane and pineapple industries. The owners of these plantations gave up traditional agricultural and economic ventures in pastures, cattle-raising, and woodland to clear up more and more acres of land for the mass production of pineapples and sugar for the market. This reality is well-rendered in Armine Von Tempski's novel, *Hawaiian Harvest* (1933/1990), where these Portuguese farmers, like others hailing from Asian countries, were conditioned by the mainstream's "colonial gaze" (86), as epitomized by Homi Bhabha in his study, *The Location of Culture*.

In contemporary Portuguese-American fiction, the garden is a place where one can grow vegetables and flowers; a place for preserving one's ethnic identity and ancestral rural way of life; or a retreat from the alienating conditions imposed by the factory, commercial fishing, the whaling or dairy industries, and intensive farming – activities in which the first generations of Portuguese (mostly Azorean and Madeiran) immigrants, dating back to the nineteenth-century, excelled in the three traditional areas of settlement in the United States: New England, California, and Hawaii. Mainlanders would follow them throughout the twentieth-century.

Since the nation's inception – that is, with Jeffersonian and Jacksonian agrarianism – the garden and the machine have been at the heart of the American experience, and these realities have galvanized American scholars and writers. Contemporary "ecocriticism" scholars such as Lawrence Buell have called our attention to the dangers of pollution on the American landscape and its physical environment. However, in his attempt to distinguish between "green" and "brown" landscapes – that is, the landscapes of "exurbia and industrialization" (*Writing for an Endangered World* 7) – this framework is not applicable to Portuguese-American writings. In the Californian landscapes and gardens of Katherine Vaz's (1955-) fiction, and those from Massachusetts in the fiction and poetry of Frank Gaspar (1946-), Buell's "toxic discourse" does not find a congenial home. References to the ethnic garden abound in the fiction of Katherine Vaz, especially in *Saudade* (1994), and in Frank Gaspar's novel *Leaving Pico* (1999), as well as his first three volumes of poems, *The Holyoke* (1988), *Mass for the Grace of a Happy Death* (1995), and *A Field Guide to the Heavens* (1999). The gardens in these writings are not polluted with toxic waste or invaded by the ominous sound of civilization as represented by the emblematic whistle of the train in Thoreau's *Walden*.

My contention is that in Portuguese-American writing, these matters are nowhere to be seen. Instead, the gardens bring to the fore aspects that are quintessentially marked by immigrant experience. Surrounded by the hustle and bustle of public, mainstream life, the gardens often reflect aspects inherent in the private, intimate side of the Portuguese ethnic experience in the United States. In addition, these gardens are depicted as oases of tranquility, providing cultural and spiritual sustenance. Moreover, they allow for what Leo Marx views as a "retreat into the primitive or rural felicity", and a "yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature'" (6). In the context of Portuguese-American life in the United States, for those keen on growing a garden, such an activity allowed for a brief respite from a demanding work schedule – in the New England textile mills, in California's competitive dairy industry, or in the perilous whaling industry in Massachusetts – and a momentary return to a simpler way of life, given that most of these immigrants had been farmers or fishermen back in the old country. These are some of the issues that we encounter in the works of mainstream American writers of Portuguese descent. In essence, the garden functions as the liaison with the old country and as an incentive for recollection of a past that can no longer be retrieved: the stories and conversations exchanged with relatives and friends while tilling the fields, or the competition among women as to whose garden has the most variety.

While planting kale, turnips, tomatoes, peppers, onions, corn, and flowers, for example, the characters in the fictional gardens of Portuguese-American writings experience what William Conlogue defines as the

georgic mode – that is, the “earth worker, farmer” and the pleasure involved in husbandry (as opposed to the pastoral mode), meaning a “retreat into a ‘green world’ to escape the pressures of complex urban life. In a rural or wilderness landscape, the character’s interaction with the natural world restores him, and, ideally, he returns to the city better able to cope with the stresses of civilization” (6–8). Without a doubt, this is an idea borrowed from Emerson, for he, too, had been concerned with the consequences of human toil and the industrial revolution on the “body and mind,” which, in his view, have been “cramped by noxious work or company”, but “nature is medicinal and restores their tone”. He goes on to note that the “tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again” (9–10). For these Portuguese immigrants caught in this industrial, back-breaking and alienating web, retrieving their dignity and ancestral culture via the ethnic garden was their way of becoming, in Emerson’s words, a “man again” (10).

Writing about the garden, of course, has a long literary tradition in the Western world. While Virgil’s *Georgics* and Hesiod’s *Works and Days* are the anchors of gardening literature, Andrew Marvell’s poetic contributions, too, cannot be ignored. As we will see in the writings of Katherine Vaz and Frank Gaspar, there is really no need to escape into a rural area or even the wilderness, since the setting in *Saudade*, for example, is a rural community in California, while *Leaving Pico* captures Portuguese American life in a fishing community on the tip of Cape Cod. Whatever retreat there actually is, it is instead into the ancestral culture and the old habits and ways of life, and how these can be safeguarded in a new environment. Challenged and often pressured to assimilate a whole new set of values and ways, the very act of gardening has been a means through which Portuguese Americans have asserted their identity and national origin.

With these theoretical considerations on the garden, to what extent does the ethnic garden touch upon quintessential aspects of immigrant life in Portuguese American communities in the United States? And how does its representation in the fiction and poetry of Gaspar and Vaz contrast with the gardens in canonical mainstream fiction offered by Wharton, Cable, and London? The most representative poem on the ethnic garden in Gaspar’s *The Holyoke* (1988), winner of the 1988 Morse Poetry Prize, is “Potatoes.” Unlike his more recent volumes of poetry, *The Holyoke* focuses on certain aspects of the lives of Portuguese Americans in Provincetown, Massachusetts, a predominantly fishing community. It is an unusual poem because it highlights the fondness that the Portuguese evince in growing a vegetable or fruit garden in their backyards. This is an aspect that characterizes Portuguese immigrant life in the United States and shows that even in an industrial setting—as is, for example, the Ironbound section of Newark, New Jersey—the Portuguese still plant vegetable and flower gardens today. In their attempt to hold onto an ancestral way of life, they find in these gardens a spiritual connection with the old country.

Leaving Pico is a novel about Azorean immigrant life in Provincetown, and how this community reacts to, or resists, American ways. In this novel about Josie’s coming of age, there are numerous references to the Azorean presence on the very tip of Cape Cod: the kale and potato gardens, the social clubs and club bands, the fish served during the two clambakes that take place during the course of the novel, the names on the fishing boats (most of which highlight this community’s strong Catholic beliefs—the *Coração de Jesus*, the *Amor de Deus*, and so on), the *fado* music played at parties and social gatherings, and the rituals associated with their Catholic calendar throughout the year, namely the sodalities, the festivals with their street processions, the Blessing of the Fleet, and so on.

As Clemente has noted, “Gaspar structures his narrative around two clambakes”, and most of the food consumed during both events comes either from the sea or the ethnic garden (Clemente 41). But what is actually grown in these gardens? In the episode in which the firemen and neighbors are trying to extinguish the fire in Madeleine Sylvia’s house, the narrator tells us that “Maybe everything was over in minutes. I couldn’t tell. But both yards were a mess. Our little garden had been trampled, and kale and turnips lay crushed on the wet ground” (176). With the intent of saving money on food, such a habit also highlights their rural background and way of life in the old country, and how these cannot be easily erased in their country of adoption. In addition to these vegetables, for the last clambake, which is organized to mourn Josie’s grandfather, the narrator notes that “Ernestina had already left us with a bushel of sweet corn from her garden” (206).

Writing about the ethnic garden is a theme we find in *Saudade* (1994), a novel in which Katherine Vaz captures the clash between the old and new worlds in a number of ways. *Saudade* is centered on Clara, a deaf-mute girl from the Azorean island Terceira, who inherits the property of her immigrant uncle Victor who lived in California. Through scheming, Father Teo Eiras convinces Clara’s mother, on her deathbed, to sign the deed of the land over to the church. Eventually, he becomes Clara’s legal guardian, and both sail away to Lodi, California. Through time, Clara unsuccessfully uses her sex appeal to retrieve her land. As Father Teo Eiras gradually fades out of her life, Clara befriends Doctor Helio Soares. It is during this episode

that they both build what, by American standards, looks like an unusual garden. To repay his love, attention, and companionship, Clara, we learn, begins to carry

cuttings of rosemary and seeds for blackeyed Susans to his house to start a roof garden – a legacy from being born in a small country where people planted their roofs to own more land and as a sign of the melancholy trust that one day a siege must come. Helio bought flats of basil, thyme, and petunias for her projects, and they hauled sacks of dirt up the ladder to strew on his house. Greens, yellows, and pastels soon became visible on the red roof, and from a distance Clara could see her mark like a quilt she had tossed outward from her bed. Most afternoons, when Helio returned from his patients, she was already at work, waving to invite him to ascend into the garden. A sunflower leaned against the chimney and herbs were drying on old honeycomb frames. The sun baked the hose when Clara stretched it up to the roof, and the water came out warm enough for tea. She filled a jar with water and crumbled in dried mint. Once while drinking her tea, the heat made them unwind backward, side by side, to take in the light. (206–07)

As I have noted earlier, the Azoreans' farming techniques referred to in this quote are the object of ridicule in Jack London's *The Valley of the Moon*. Before London, however, Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (which contains an account of Otherness as the Quaker City sails toward the Azores, Europe, and the Holy Land) focused on the agricultural techniques of the Azoreans on the island of Fayal (Faial), especially in chapters five and six.

This mentality is also present in Vaz's *Saudade* in the sense that the novel, apart from evincing other interests, aims at capturing the ways and mentality of Portuguese characters transplanted to American soil. Apart from the strangeness in this rooftop garden, the agricultural mentality under consideration substantiates the ancestral habit of maximizing whatever land was available, regardless of whether these fictional immigrants were now living in spacious California. As islanders, this behavior explains in part why coming from a place where land was a precious commodity and its availability for cultivation limited meant that for them no piece of land, however small, should be left bare. Back in the volcanic islands of the Azores, notes Onésimo Almeida, the plots of land were usually very small and not one single inch was left uncultivated. Land was vital for their survival and there was simply little or no room for aesthetic purposes such as having a flower garden. Whatever flowers grew, these were often planted on the corners of their properties, unsuitable locales for vegetables to grow (89). In addition, Vaz's rooftop garden stresses the vulnerability of the Azoreans who, from an historical point of view, experienced various sieges during times of political turmoil.

In the case of ethnic fiction – and in particular, that of Clara, as in most real Portuguese immigrants – growing a garden in one's backyard is emblematic of the ethnic experience in America. It allows for spiritual fulfillment – the work that their souls must have – and is a means of connecting with the old country. Momentarily, at least, these gardeners may daydream about the simpler way of life they left behind, since alienation and drudgery in their workplaces are a daily reality.

Whereas for Vaz's father and grandfather, gardening was a pastime and supposedly a marker of identity brought from the Azores, in other Portuguese-American communities, gardening provided food in times of need. Such was the case in Gloucester, Massachusetts, a small fishing town where the Portuguese had settled—"Portagee Hill," as the streets located on the upper part of this fishing town are often known. In an eyewitness account of life in this fishing community, Arthur K. Rose notes that despite the families' economic difficulties, they would often "get together and go on picnics over to Braces Cove, a barren strip of beach on the Back Shore" (2). Instead of buying their provisions at the local grocery stores, they "would pack baskets and even washtubs full of food, mostly from their gardens, and beer and homemade wine" (2). While the sea provided them with fish and their gardens with vegetables, these fishermen and their wives were extremely self-reliant. Without a doubt, these traits had been acquired in the Azores where people, before emigrating, had fared no better. Although during the Depression, they (like everyone else across the nation) had faced hard times, they had arrived in America, so to speak, well-equipped to face such hardships. "Most of the people," Rose notes,

grew their own food in the backyard. What one didn't have, the other did. Corn, potatoes, kale, carrots; you name it, they grew it. They raised chickens for the eggs as well as for food, and sometimes families would get together and buy a pig. That was an all day event in itself; when it came time to get the pig, the families would go to the farm and have the pig slaughtered. (4)

Evidence of immigrant communities attempting to preserve some of their rurality within a cityscape can also be found in the novel by Canadian writer, Hugh Garner, *Cabbagetown* (1968), set in the Toronto neighborhood known as Cabbage Town. It is a story of the impoverished lives intertwining in Depression-era Toronto, a place of great sadness and resignation. Both in Gloucester and Toronto, the ethnic garden was a response to the availability of green spaces in immigrant neighborhoods in America or Canada. In New England and the Middle Atlantic states most houses have a backyard. Rose also points out that harvest time and the “fall months” were an “especially fond time” for him. “That’s when [his] family would put up their fruits and vegetables in preserving jars for the coming winter” (4). Moreover, it “was a lot of work to put the food up in jars, but when it was all over they felt a sense of pride and they knew they had enough to eat for the long New England winter that was facing them” (5). Possessing these survival skills was a plus in such harsh New England conditions. But such expertise, so to speak, had already been acquired in similar, if not worse, economic conditions in the old country during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The ethnic garden in Portuguese-American writing instead mirrors the idiosyncrasies of this particular ethnic background. Ranging from the Catholic fervor to the ancestral rural origins of most Portuguese Americans, in the fiction and poetry of Vaz and Gaspar, the theme of the garden in a way allows for an ethnic rewriting of the fables in which the busy ant or bee is constantly providing for the long and harsh winters. In Portuguese-American literature, the so-called pioneer generations in these writings—that is, the first- and second-generation fictional immigrants—are portrayed as obsessed with creating the conditions for a better life in a new country even if they, like the ants and bees, have to toil night and day. And, clearly, during the phase of rapid industrialization and intensive farming in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, Thoreau’s and Emerson’s views on nature and spirituality were overlooked as most of America’s landscape became a toxic wasteland. Thoreau, as we have seen, has called for a profound appreciation and respect towards nature. Worth mentioning, nonetheless, is the movement to protect America’s forests from the onslaught of industrialization in the latter part of the nineteenth-century. At the time, national reserves and parks were created so as to counteract the toxic wasteland. A case in point was Frederick Law Olmsted’s militancy on behalf of the idea that all American cities should have green areas. His essay “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns” (1870) is an important contribution to that. Apart from our current interest in environmentalism, ecocriticism, and a greater respect for nature, nature is no longer perceived as a locale for Emersonian pantheists. Whatever spirituality Emerson had noted in nature, it is quite evident that these Portuguese immigrants (and others from rural societies as was the case with the Italians) had grasped and updated it when working in their vegetable gardens. Once here, they became human – an Emersonian man – once again, temporarily free from the alienation imposed by the factory or the fisheries while reconnecting with their ancestral culture, living momentarily as spiritually fulfilled beings. A contemporary of Emerson, Thoreau’s writings on nature are like the sounds of a friendly, cautionary foghorn resounding into the future, warning future generations about the toxicity of the industrial revolution and its consequences on nature and human beings.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Reinaldo Silva was educated in both the United States (Ph.D., New York University, in 1998; M.A., Rutgers University, in 1989) and Portugal (*Licenciatura*, University of Coimbra, in 1985) and holds dual citizenship. He has lectured at several American universities and is currently a Professor of English at the University of Aveiro. His teaching and research interests include nineteenth- and twentieth- century American literature and contemporary emergent literatures, with a special focus on Portuguese American writers. At this point, he has published about seventy essays, sixty of which in international peer-reviewed journals, encyclopaedia entries, chapters in books, and has also authored two books: *Representations of the Portuguese in American Literature*, published by the University of Massachusetts in 2008, and *Portuguese American Literature*, in the United Kingdom, by Humanities-Ebooks, in 2009. He co-authored *Neither Here Nor There, Yet Both: Portugal and North America In-Between Writings*, in 2016, and has also collaborated in the translation of Adelaide Freitas’ novel, *Sorriso por dentro da noite (Smiling in the Darkness)* into English, which is scheduled for publication in October of 2019, in the USA, by Tagus Press. His forthcoming book is tentatively titled, *Hybridity in Portuguese American Literature*.

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