

## My American Journey

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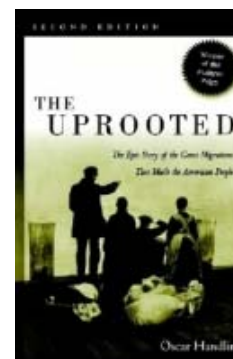
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Michael e Steven Borges



capa do livro Uprooted

### RESUMO

This is a letter to my sons with some humble, disordered thoughts about my Portuguese-American experience. Thus, here are an amalgam of contemplative points that deal with language, culture, democracy, exile, alienation, and acculturation. It is an honest attempt to explicate my feelings about a tumultuous, yet enjoyable journey in the American *melting pot*.

### CONTEÚDO

## My American Journey

*Meus Queridos Filhos:*

I was thinking about how to explain to both of you why I ended up in this unique cultural position that you see your father daily. One who is a language teacher in the United States living, many times, the life of an *outsider*. Why, you might ask, do I continuously embrace a culture and an amalgam of traditions and beliefs that are considered different, strange even, in the "land of the free and the home of the brave"? Why do I persistently live my life between two cultures, two language, and two worlds? Why do I feel in the periphery of the American society?

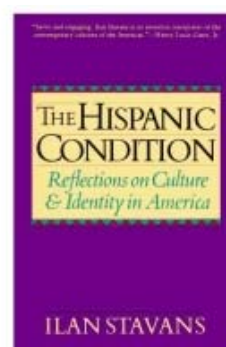
I obviously do not have the answers for all these questions. What follows, *meus queridos*, are only some humble, disordered thoughts about my Portuguese-American experience. Thus, here are an amalgam of contemplative points that deal with language, culture, democracy, exile, alienation, and acculturation. It is an honest attempt to explicate my feelings about a tumultuous, yet enjoyable journey in the American *melting pot*.

Yes, I was ten when your grandparents decided to embark into an American pilgrimage. Amongst tears and agony they left their parents, the security of their home and their friends, and boarded a TWA jet that took us from a tiny archipelago in the middle of the Atlantic, the islands of the Azores, to the "New Eldorado—the land of milk and honey". But, to us, America wasn't a total stranger. I remember sitting down with my grandfather, your great grandfather, Manuel Ferreira Lourenço and hearing some of the most adventurous stories about this far away and intriguing place called: **America**. An excellent story teller, grandpa Lourenço lived in California for eighteen years. It was here that he made his small fortune and then returned to his homeland. He would talk about the vastness of a land that in his eyes never seemed to end. He would mention the

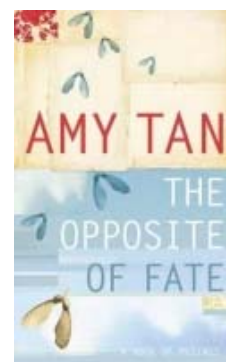
transformation that he, and others, had to go through. To him, America was a place you went to make your fortune. A place you didn't go to stay. He would mention how some of his buddies had decided to settle and had changed tremendously. "They even changed their names" he would tell me with anguish. "If you stay for long you don't know who you are", he would say in a forceful voice, to anyone who would seek advice about immigrating to the United States.

Grandpa never studied alienation or acculturation processes, but his eighteen years in California gave him a sense that in order to survive one must be subject to a metamorphosis that strips you of your own, unique self-identity. And when the bags of clothes arrived from America (our relatives were generous with their old clothes) we would devour them like hungry cats. We were bewildered by the strange and exotic smells of America. And grandpa would caution: "Be careful, it is like drinking wine" he would say "if you have too much you lose your senses, you become someone you don't recognize". Without any formal education grandpa knew the feeling of estrangement he lived in the States and he would tell us, with a lump in his throat: "I had to come back to the island, I didn't know who I was there." And when my mother, your grandmother, told him that we were immigrating to America, he lowered his head and said: "It is a land of many opportunities, but be prudent, don't stay too long—don't change". However, till this day I still think that deep down grandpa knew that we would never return home, and he also knew that we would never be the same.

Entering an American school at the age of ten was an experience that has marked and stayed with me. It



Capa do Livro The Hispanic Condition



livro de Amy Tan



Torre Angra do Heroísmo na cidade de Tulare-Califórnia

was my first empirical feeling with what grandpa had so eloquently talked about. I was in a strange setting, with people who looked different and talked a different language. There wasn't a bilingual education program and I was put side by side with students who knew the material and the language. I remember that for the first time in my life I didn't like school. I would go to sleep at night hoping that I would awaken next to grandpa in the Azores. In my homeland I had been in school for four years, and although I was put in the fourth grade I felt like this was my first encounter with education. For nearly six months, until I began to grasp the language, I felt like a true stranger: labeled as different, rejected, misunderstood and stupid. At ten I didn't comprehend what it was like to live a complete life on the hyphen. And I didn't know that as Oscar Handlin wrote:

The life of the immigrant was that of a man diverted by unexpected pressures away from the established channels of his existence. Separated, he was never capable of acting with the assurance of habit; always in motion, he could never rely upon roots to hold him up. Instead he had ever to toil painfully from crisis to crisis, as an individual alone, make his way past the discontinuous obstacles of a strange world.

( Handlin, 271)

As time passed my alienation also transformed from an outer into an inner stage. I was now in my rebellious teenage years and thought all too American to associate with my Portuguese roots. The isolation I had felt during my childhood was now transformed into total assimilation and a dislike for any association with my community and my countrymen. I felt that in order to be American I had to abdicate my cultural ties to the country and the people I had grown up with. I wasn't about to feel like a marginal member of society. I saw how some of my Portuguese-American friends were treated and didn't want to be considered different. During these years I totally dedicated myself to a change that, through my teenage eyes, would possibly take me into a realm of true Americanism. I didn't want to speak the language of my parents. I didn't want to attend Portuguese-American functions. I didn't want to associate with people of my cultural background. And I felt ashamed of my Portuguese connections. I didn't want my parents to speak to me in Portuguese, although they didn't speak another language. And because society insisted on mainstreaming, I felt that to be Portuguese was to be incomplete or imperfect. Much as Amy Tan explains in her engaging essay "Mother Tongue":

When I was growing up my mother's 'limited' English limited my perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her. (Tan, 136)

This feeling of imperfection, of awkwardness, implemented through an alienation process where the main, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant believes are above all else, instigated within my most recondite inner feelings the thought that to be different was to be less, inferior, undesired. During your teens, when one wants to be accepted by one's peers, being from a different cultural background can be a painful experience. Our *melting pot*, and its forceful homogenous idiosyncrasies, alienates the immigrant's image. This process of total miscegenation permeates a segregation of thoughts and ideas. Although one may live next to the Anglo-Saxon majority, we were segregated through such realities as: lack of language; different social and religious practices; and a sense of a lower, total misunderstood socio-economic class. As a teenager I wanted to desperately be totally American. To me, this was only achievable by renouncing my Portuguese heritage, culture, language and even family. As Ilan Stavans mentioned in his book *The Hispanic Condition*:

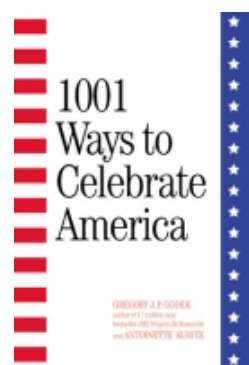
Is the American dream accessible only when one denies one's own past? Once again, the young people are pushed to the margins, their journey from the barrio to the classroom is marked by



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melting-pot nos EUA

depression. What's wrong is a lack of genuine interest by the institutions themselves. This country's Eurocentrism excludes Spain and Portugal as pillars of Western civilization... (Stavans, 183)

Throughout the next few years, into my early adulthood, mine was an existence of ambiguities and misinterpretations. I felt that in the American world, even though my sense of direction was totally embarked in that perspective, I was an outsider. Even though I spoke the language, used blue jeans, and frequented the same social institutions, I remained, within my most intimate feelings, an outsider. In the Portuguese-American community, I felt that the archaism of rituals and customs didn't play a significant role in the new world. And I was constantly reminded of such thoughts by society at large. As Stavans eloquently affirms: "To become full U.S. citizens, we need more than a passport; we need to reinvent ourselves, to rewrite our history, to reformulate the paths of our imagination" (Stavans, 190). It is this reinvention that as my adulthood progressed, I had to do. It was this process that permitted a new look at my unique existence between two different spheres. Without it I would be lost in a world of alienation and frustration. But this transformation also has its costs: Again, Stavans states:

This metamorphosis includes many losses, of course, for all of us, from alien citizens to full-status citizens: the loss of language; the loss of identity; the loss of self-esteem; and, more important, the loss of tradition. Some are left in route, whereas others forget the flavor of home. But less is more, and confusion is being turned into enlightenment. In this nation of imagination and plenty, where newcomers are welcome to reinvent their past, loss quickly becomes an asset. (Stavans, 18)

It is this invitation for a successful life in the total American status that promotes one to leave behind all the other idiosyncrasies. The losses that come within the theory of the *melting pot* are forms of estrangement that leave the immigrants on top of a bridge without knowing to which side he or she really belongs. And most importantly, this alienation tells you, categorically, that you must not belong to the two worlds. It is a constant reminder that one is a foreigner. To assimilate is to break off from the mother land, language and culture. To become truly American is to lose your ethnic tradition. If one chooses such road then one becomes integrally confused with one's status. And there isn't a harsher feeling than not belonging to any society. The Asian-American writer Amy Tan writes masterfully displays and explores these ambiguities in her extraordinary novel *The Joy Luck Club*:

I think about our two faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other. It is like what happened when I went back to China last year, after I had not been there for almost forty years. I had taken off my fancy jewelry. I did not wear loud colors. I spoke their language. I used their money. But still, they knew. They knew my face wasn't one hundred percent Chinese. They still charged me high foreign prices.

(Tan, 304)

The subculture I am now comfortable living with is a direct result of many years filled with disconcerts and challenges. It was only through the world of education and literature that I learned to outgrow the humility I once felt from being Portuguese-American. The humility imposed upon me, and others, as a form of alienation, starting with having parents who, in the eyes of the mainstream, were different, and thus, less than. From having to hide my linguistic heritage with a prepared and artificial accent that made my words sound funny in English and phony in Portuguese and from having to lie about being born in the United States for I didn't want to be considered anti-American. It was the world of education and literature that liberated my fears of living on the burden. Through



Aspecto dum salão do ES na Califórnia



Estátua da Liberdade em Nova Iorque



The American Way



poema de Emma Lazarus



Escola Tulare Union High School--local onde o autor dá aulas de português



Alto do autor, baseado no trabalho do artista político E.H.A.

and American. It was the world of education and literature that liberated my years of living on the hyphen. Through this transmutation I not only rediscovered my roots, my language, my history, my culture, myself, but also learned to cope with alienation in a different light. I began to feel part of an American system that must be multicultural, forever embracing all cultures and ethnic groups. My Portuguese heritage wasn't a hindrance and I began to proudly display my differences. Through education and the world of literature, both in English and in Portuguese, I felt rejuvenated and reborn. I felt a new sense of self-esteem and worth.

Living on the hyphen has given me the ability to embrace the two worlds that compose my cosmos. Taking the alienation and turning it into a process of self-discovery has allowed a new respect for my past and for the historical past of all other ethnic groups. By living life on the hyphen, and breaking with the dogmatic principles of the *melting pot*, I was able to acquire a better understanding of the contrarities that comprise our two worlds. Today I feel much more American and much more Portuguese. It is possible to live two cultures and two languages. If life on the hyphen, politically speaking, means living on the periphery, then I choose to always be on the periphery of the American society.

Yes, *meus queridos*, these are simple, humble thoughts of what it is like to be part of two worlds. The journey can be arduous, but also very stimulating. Whatever road you choose to travel through, never let alienation put you in an ambivalent state. Let it be a decisive tool in guiding you into the multiple labyrinths that shall continue to compose, and enrich, the American experience.

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