

Azorean Authors and Their Role in Shaping Our Understanding of the Islands

We have studied multiple literary works by authors of Azorean descent in the course, ranging from short stories through excerpts from novels to poetry. Each of these writers has a unique and passionate voice, and together, their stories converge to form a kaleidoscopic image of Azorean identity. The works we studied early in the course focus on the beauty and hardship of life on the Azorean archipelago, while the short stories and essays introduced recently discuss the immigrant experience of the Azorean diaspora and of the Portuguese Canadian community as a whole. This essay will examine a few examples of literary works studied in the course and the glimpses into “Azorianity” that they provide.

The term *açorianidade* was coined by the Azorean writer Vitorino Nemésio who, although he was educated in Lisbon and built his literary and academic career in mainland Portugal, never stopped feeling defined by his Azorean roots. Best known for his novel *Mau Tempo No Canal*, Vitorino Nemésio is an example of an Azorean who left the archipelago to take advantage of the better opportunities for professional growth in mainland Portugal but carried the spirit of his native island of Terceira through his life and work.

Another example of a quintessentially Azorean author whose literature we have read is Dias de Melo, the austere *baleeiro* so eloquently described by Professor Dodman. The excerpt from his novel *Dark Stones* that was included in our course pack paints a grim but awe-inspiring picture of life on his native island of Pico where whaling used to be a major source of subsistence. His writing captures the atmosphere of hardship and constant struggle for survival that defined the daily life of an average Azorean. He also emphasizes the resilience and determination of Pico’s inhabitants, their toughness and character. There are very evocative descriptions of Pico’s landscape and, above all, of the sea. Dias de Melo’s writing is infused with the salty breeze of the ocean and captures the complex relationship between the islanders and the Sea – a source of both constant danger and life!

Professor Maria Dodman, who gave us a moving and personal account of her admiration for Dias de Melo and all that he represents, also wrote a biting essay that ridicules the divisions she perceives to this day between Azorean expats and people who came from mainland Portugal. In her essay, she emphasizes the inadequacy of the widely held stereotype that all Azoreans are alike, speak with an “Azorean” accent and have less education or potential than their mainland counterparts. She expresses hope for a recognition of the diversity among the nine islands and a more tolerant relationship between the many different members of the Luso-Canadian community.

Aside from Professor Dodman, we were fortunate enough to hear from two other contemporary authors who write about the Portuguese experience in Canada: Emanuel Melo and Anthony de Sa. Emanuel Melo’s moving short stories “Avó Lives Alone” and “The Cottage Visit” focus on the older generation of Portuguese immigrants to Canada. In both stories, we see an elderly person who has lost their spouse, whose children have assimilated into Canadian

society, and whose grandchildren, even if much loved, are essentially foreign to them because of the language and cultural barrier. These stories are poignant in their portrayal of the vast chasm between generations that often results from immigration. They capture the loneliness and isolation that can be the price of leaving one's leaving one's homeland in search of a better life.

This idea that it is children and grandchildren of immigrants who really reap the rewards of life in Canada was echoed by Anthony de Sa in his guest lecture. He talked about his upbringing in Toronto in the Portuguese neighbourhood around Queen subway station. His short story "Urban Angel" from the anthology *Barnacle Love* shows the strain and the sacrifices endured by his parents in order to give their children a bright future in Canada. His father would try himself at many jobs and toy with constantly changing ideas for small business ventures while his mother struggled to raise her children in a foreign country and comply with her husband's strict "English-only household" policy.

Anthony de Sa's short story "Urban Angel" also raises the issue of tradition versus integration: Antonio's father does not want his children "kissing the Pope's ass," while his mother insists on partaking in the Portuguese community's Catholic celebrations. It also brings to light the way Toronto, including the Portuguese area, was in the 1960s: more seedy and dangerous than today. The narrator, telling the story from the perspective of a child, has a complex and realistic relationship with the Portuguese community: one that mixes tenderness with embarrassment, belonging with condemnation.

All of the literary works that we have studied this term, although very different, share a common love for the Azores, whether seen as the locus of daily reality or as a distant, half-mythical homeland.