

## *Da Gama, Cary Grant and the Election of 1934*, by Charles Reis Felix: The Portuguese Exodus on the American East–Coast

*Da Gama, Cary Grant and the Election of 1934* de Charles Reis Felix: o êxodo português na costa leste americana

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### The Writer, his Title and his Genre

Charles Felix Reis was born in New Bedford (Massachusetts – USA) to continental Portuguese immigrant parents. He attended the local high schools and entered the University of Michigan in 1941. In 1943 he enlisted in the American army. *Crossing the Sauer: A Memoir of World War II*, published only in 2002, is an everlasting souvenir of that period. After the war Charles Félix Reis attended the prestigious Stanford University (California – USA) studying history, but became a primary school teacher in the Golden State. His very experience there, besides some other very interesting remarks on Portuguese immigration in the USA, is the subject of yet another memoir, namely *Through a Portagee Gate* (2004). *Tony, a New-England Boyhood* (2008) in a sense completes Charles Felix Reis' experiences, generically leaning towards the (semi) autobiography. Furthermore, his (integrated?) collection of short stories, or his novel in stories, *Da Gama, Cary Grant, and the Election of 1934*, ought to be classified as such. The title already announces a possible strange composite genre, while the juxtaposition of an American film star and a Portuguese discoverer, leaves a strange impression, especially when completed by the term “the Election of 1934”. Right from the start, the reader is triggered to try and make sense of the apparent disparities: a strong Portuguese icon Vasco da Gama is placed directly near to an all-American film star Cary

Grant, while the term election sets forth a prediction of a democratic process and the year 1934 references the Great Depression.

*Da Gama, Grant and the Election of 1934* is indeed the story (or rather, an account) of the election of a mayor for the Gaw municipality. Gaw is to be read as a metaphor for New-Bedford and the events are seen through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy named Seraphin, who belongs to the second generation of Portuguese immigrants on the East Coast. However, the composite novel, the novel in stories, represents something more than merely a collection containing the report of the election; it is exactly therefore that the genre chosen is a loose novel or a collection of integrated stories making it possible for the author to digress while treating different, yet very similar themes which the reader will accumulate during the reading process. Besides the main narrative, supposedly being the election, it is also the story of how a young protagonist, a six grader, is faced with influences both challenging and contradicting the received heritage (from his parents, Portuguese immigrants). What he has learned at home will be contrasted with the other immigrants' ideas and opinions, who found themselves placed in a similar situation: the Polish, the French (French-Canadians), the Irish and especially the Jews. What is exciting here to bring into the story, and to take into account as the story unfolds, is the date in the title, namely 1934. It means that the story took place at the height of the depression, the crisis which eventually would lead to World War II and consisted of a major challenge to America's advertisement to Europe's poor and its affirmation as "the Land of Make Belief".

## Capturing the American Experience

Charles Reis Félix captures this essence of immigrants in "hard times" and there is a striking juxtaposition of old world and modern change within the text suggesting the dual representation of how we witness the notion of exodus and post- exodus, more than just a physical journey, or physical removal from what is known, but equally as a continued episodic view of life as viewed alone or as a full complete experience. Each episode or short story in the collection serves to illustrate a particular impression of what it was like to be portuguese during the Depression in America as the invisible immigrant. Each story has value and impact upon the experience either separately or as a part of the larger landscape. Felix captures the dual nature of old world, family ties and conservative views but he also presents Seraphin as a character being on the verge of great change not only as coming of age but also in a time considered a defining moment in the sociocultural context in America, namely the Great Depression.

The magic of writing is found in intertextuality and the building up of hidden meanings within the dual constructional comparison of old world values, family and culture found in maintaining heritage after exodus from the land of what is known. Two clear references here serve as an illustration: the making of wine at home by Seraphin's father and the wearing of black garments by widows of portuguese descent. I opted for the second example as it is more interesting for Seraphim's change in identity after his micro exodus to the outskirts of Gaw.

She huddled against the fence like a crow. In the loose folds of her dress, her body had no curves, no shape, no sex. From the streetcar window Seraphim stared down at her. Her face sent a chill down his spine. Her face was frozen in immobility, staring straight ahead, not even glancing at the streetcar. Her face was set in eternal gloom. No laughter or the hope of laughter would ever crinkle that face. No joy or the hope of joy would ever illuminate that face. No happiness or the hope of happiness would ever glow on that face. A pall settled over Seraphim. As a possibility in life, her face terrified him. The joylessness, the blackness of spirit he saw in that face filled him with dread. He had observed about him that melancholy disposition peculiar to the Portuguese, but that didn't prevent them from laughing. This was something different, something much more terrible and final and overwhelming. (Felix, 2005, pp. 37-38)

When it comes to food, there is even a semi religious scene: chickens are not bought pre-packed but buyers' witness how they are killed and plucked. The citation which follows is rather lengthy, nevertheless necessary as it can be read as a *vignette* showcasing the liveliness of the immigrant milieu on the east-coast.

The chickens were being delivered to the Portagee chicken store, so Seraphim stopped to watch. The farmer stacked the crates on the sidewalk and then left in his junky old truck. The Portagee chicken man was yelling The crates were filled with live chickens. This was because the Portuguese liked fresh chickens. They wouldn't buy the dead ones hanging from hooks in the butcher market. "Who knows how long they've been hanging there?" they'd say. So they came to the chicken man, and picked out a live one, and the plucker would take it into the backroom, kill it, pluck the feathers, and bring it out front, show it to the customer, and then wrap it up. Of course, when they were very busy, like on Saturday night, you never saw the plucker. He stayed in the backroom, killing and plucking a mile a minute. Then he wore a rubber apron and big rubber boots, because he used lots of hot water. On Saturday nights this store would be incredibly busy, with all the Portuguese ladies getting a chicken for Sunday dinner. The chicken man's wife and little kid worked here Saturday nights, helping out. (Felix, 2005, p. 1)

However, contrary to what happened in the bible, Jaweh has not given the Portuguese a tabernacle and a set of stringent laws to live by in the new country. And more than that, they are not the only ones, nor even the first ones to arrive in "the land of milk and honey". There are other ethnicities also present with the same dreams and hopes to make the land of milk and honey theirs... and probably only theirs. And the laws seem to evolve from the mechanics designed by the famous invisible hand. All show (off) their own ethnic markers but obey the same rules present: hard work and presumably democratic elections. Seraphim finds thus himself much like Cary Grant in *Gunga Din* faced with many challenges while surrounded by the unknown and possible hostile forces (sing-sing in chapter 1, e.g.), wildness of dreams but also a sense that within this new reality, the old rules in the form of imported customs from the original homeland are slowly fading. How Felix weaves and builds the intertextuality through possibly invisible mechanism like themes, imagery and symbols from the Bible and old rules to have further meaning for Seraphim's new reality of the American Dream

and the Golden Calf allows for romantic overtone but also a sense of loss as to adopt a new home and culture means possibly letting go of some deep rooted characteristics of the old world. Within a Biblical sense, such a switch of physical flight, hardship and Passover to arrive in Canaan also begs to wonder if the Land of Milk and Honey is worth the sacrifice? To mirror the experience of the Jews' flight out of Egypt that can be seen as similar to so many dueling immigrant nationalities of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century struggling to cultivate new fruit as a Melting Pot, leads one to see many connections in the text. Still this theme of melting cultures, of taking the old and applying to new also brings to mind how conflict and change are characters throughout any story. How the new reality becomes an American Dream (or nightmare) representing abundance, or failure thereof, also pulls from common themes found in both the Bible and Hollywood films promoting escape.

The exodus out of Gaw leads to the real promised land, to the land Seraphim has discovered through his reading in the Library and as he can perceive it on billboards and pictures in the glossy magazines. The exodus will furthermore take on the nature of an "exodus within the exodus", namely the street car trip with his friend Chimp Silva (notice the animalistic alias Chimp). The real world will be seen as an exercise in "life imitates art," for what he had seen and craved for in the library and in the advertisements of the magazines suddenly becomes a tempting reality:

They were parked in front of a house that instantly reminded Seraphim of a book he had read. It was a fairy – tale book and it had wonderful printed illustrations, printed in full color on glossy paper. One of the illustrations was of a gingerbread cottage in the woods and he had spent a lot of time studying and enjoying that picture. It was a magic cottage, and this house was like that. The tenement houses were usually painted a drab gray or brown; this house was painted a gleaming white [...] the house was set way back on the lot, not practically touching the sidewalk, like the tenement houses. There was an immense lawn in front of the house and around the sides and it went all the way to the pathway [...] there were flower beds by the house. There were no fences of any kind. [...] A father and his daughter were playing croquet on the lawn [...] (Felix, 2005, p. 44)

Felix here strategically combines the "sexual" awakening with the wake – up call to reality, underscoring how an "exodus" always presupposes many layers of significance:

The girl... Seraphin stared at her. He gaped. She was his age. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen [...] she was perfectly posed. She did not even glance at the bus. Seraphin might as well have been invisible as far as making an impression on her consciousness went. A beautiful girl playing croquet on a green lawn. He knew who she was. She had stepped out of the billboard on his corner. She lived in the world of The Pause That refreshes. After this game, she and her father would sit on the front porch and have a Coca-Cola. He had never had a Coca-Cola. He often wondered what it tasted like. (Felix, 2005, p. 42)

By looking closer at the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, one can see the mastery of Felix's internal writing mechanisms that point to everyday intertextual meaning even if the media, the focus upon values have changed to reflect a broken world. For Seraphin, there are many choices as he views the world around him and the episodes represent a continuous building of reality, which much like the Bible can be read from cover to cover or allow each story to have individual impact allowing the reader to have his or her own film running through their head.

Continuing the already cited streetcar ride, Seraphin's reflections on his ethnicity are almost a proverbial rejection of being Portuguese and wanting to integrate into the new world, the worlds of white settled perfectness. A further up the page he comes to the conclusion:

He saw the easy camaraderie of the girl and the father. He knew he was looking at the real Americans. He knew he was looking at the real America that lay just outside of Gaw. The girl lived in that world, 45-46, a world of ease, pleasure, joy, leisure, gratification, luxury, happiness. [...] He wanted an American girl. He wanted her beauty and gaiety; He wanted an American Life.  
(Felix, 2005, p. 41)

The rejection of the ethnicity with the old rules and laws goes very far here:

He did not want a Portuguese girl. He did not want to spend his days pushing a baby buggy down the Avenue and looking in windows at shit. He wanted to blot out of his consciousness that portuguese face, that widow in the black shroud leaning on the fence gate. He did not want his life to be twisted back upon itself. (Felix, 2005, p. 37)

However, chances are low. Because at the same time he knows that what he wants, the girl will not want:

[...] he felt a sharp pain, for he knew the truth. She would never be his. For besides beauty, she radiated poise, superiority, impregnability. She was just a few feet away from him [...] He would never carry her books. (Felix, 2005, p. 43)

## Exodus

In the Book of Exodus Three, the Lord proclaims He will reward the suffering of His people with the spacious land of milk and honey but He tells Moses there will be many signs and much work to do to reach this new land. Felix forms the same connection of immigrant strife but also conflict of old world rules and new world values toward capitalism and creation of individual identity (esp. in the Chapter "The Ride Out). No longer is there a collective one but a mass of many people striving for the same achievement of milk and honey. An exodus from a scarred and brutal land of oppression to a new world of infinite possibility where only the sky is the limit. Except not at that very moment of depression where people threaten to commit suicide if they do not receive a job. Here the story of Fred, an immigrant from England exemplifies how also people with skilled jobs are being laid off in a region where the first industrial revolution is slowly coming to an end.

Fred was from England and he had been a weaver in the Gaw cotton mills for many, many years. Weaving is the most highly-skilled job in the mill, but when the mills started closing down, Fred was laid off and he was never able to find another job again. (Felix, 2005, p. 8)

“See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land the Lord swore he would give to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and to their descendants after them” (Deuteronomy, 2016). There is command and promise but also further blessings that in strife, there will also be fruits of labor not just the protection of the firstborn but in skills and rebuilding Canaan. Seraphim’s father time and again underscores the two basic laws: (1) work hard to save money and (2) make progress. To arrive at the new world as someone with memory of old rules takes a great leap of faith. For Seraphin’s family, there is the marked contrast between the Portuguese and other nationalities that is not unlike the Jews flight from Egypt because of the amount of sacrifice and idolized notion of fruits for labor, abundance found in the new situation. However, one can sense the conflict and resentment Seraphim feels as he starts to realize how the Portuguese are considered invisible. One begins to wonder what is worse, not being seen as a culture with impact or being seen as troublesome to a point of further discrimination and oppression. Many Irish and Italian immigrants felt the pressure to fit in but instead faced further challenges because their sense of culture was too foreign. The Portuguese were forgotten altogether but yet still saw the new world as a new Canaan. Secundo Alves, the wannabe mayor of Gaw of Portuguese descent explains rhetorically the situation very well:

The Portuguese are the unknown people. We are lost in this vast country. Nobody knows we are here. To be Portuguese in America is to be a stone dropped in the middle of the ocean. It sinks beneath the waves and vanishes without a trace. We are swallowed up in America. That is our destiny. [...] There are no Portuguese Judges in America, no representatives, no mayors. We work hard. We never complain. We die quietly. We must speak! (Felix, 2005, p. 101)

Life could be better with the physical sacrifice of passing over and leaving what is known but to a degree, the real exodus is leaving one’s old rules behind to embrace new ways of life. The separation of class remains a clear ‘us against them’ where the dominant is the upper class, powerful from on top of the hill (here, from the suburbs). How the election signifies a clear disparity between new and old also shows how powerful manifest destiny and the ideology of equality seems to shape Seraphin’s family as they navigate the unknown. Zink (2015) sees the exodus taking place within Seraphin as he relates to the new world with the context of his old world rules being applied by his parents. The election makes him sad because in a sense, his faith in the new world being a place of reinvention is lost. Sometimes one cannot deny his or her heritage but this comes at a price. The opening lines of the last chapter-story is illustrating this statement grandiloquently:

The Primary Election for Mayor of Gaw came in mid-september. Benny lost. Secundo B. Alves lost. Lawyer Grabonski lost. John “Jack” Doyle lost. Armand Langevin won. Mayor Mayhew won. It meant that Armand Langevin and

Mayor Mayhew would face each other in the Final Election in the first week of November. It was strange about the election. The coincidences. Seraphin had never seen Secundo B. Alves before in his life—and then he saw him three times during the election [...] And after that, he never saw him again. (Da Gama, 2005, p. 135)

Zink (2015, p. 303) finds exodus can be physical such as moving from one place to another but there is also the exodus of the mind and the growth that comes from being exposed to new experiences which is where Seraphim is at in shaping his future. However, with exodus comes growth but also an uncovering of reality that some people may not be able to evolve with. Holding onto the old rules means not fully taking advantage of the abundance offered in land of milk and honey. This is obvious with the frugal nature of Seraphin's family. His parents do not see the value of escaping into the picture show but yet, Seraphin sees this new world much like a film building to a climax. There is an undertone for how new media seems to be present a yearns or romance to the idea of achieving abundance and how the new world while uncertain also feeds the spirit of consumerism and creating class distinction through material gains. Yet one cannot ignore how escape also supports the new society in its level of creativity and innovation for seeking a new future. One can question, is this not the point of God promising the new land to them in the first place? The promise of a better life, a new life seems powerful but also for those like Seraphin's parents a little frightening. There is the fear that while one can escape and think in another dimension of growth, that one should not become lost in this new dimension. Possibly the land of milk and honey also presents this idea that one can want too much out of the promise and this creates an unreal picture of expectation. This is nowhere more true than in the ride on the streetcar from Gaw to one of its suburbs where Seraphim discovers the real promised land:

The girl.... Seraphin stared at her. He gaped. She was his age. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. Her eyes, nose, lips, chin, neck came together in stunning perfection. Her lustrous soft brown hair came to her shoulders. She was wearing a white dress. She chatted happily with her father. She was perfectly poised. She did not even glance at the bus. Seraphim might as well have been invisible as far as making an impression on her consciousness went. A beautiful girl playing croquet on a green lawn. He knew who she was. She had stepped out of the billboard on his corner. She lived in the world of The Pause That Refreshes. After this game, she and her father would sit on the front porch and have a Coca-Cola. (Felix, 2005, p. 45)

### Further Thoughts and Literary Analysis

While the new world remains the city upon the hill, the undiscovered country and the title of Felix's novel summarizes the contrast between what is known and what is new. There is the possibility of Hollywood, of film, and television will give flight to new dreams but also there must be common ground for Seraphim to create steps for exodus. The exodus is not just physical but mental as well encompassing his education and intellectual journey. One cannot forget the image of him and the excitement of discovering a new book at the library. One



can see the exodus taking place not in the physical but in the mind through the escape of films at the movie house or even reading a book. Felix write, "It wasn't just the excitement of finding a new book nor the pleasure of anticipation of 400 more pages of Robert Drake's further adventures. There was something about the library that always filled him with contentment. It was like being in church. So peaceful and quiet" (Felix, 2005, p. 15).

The words carry that much power but also paint a picture of how the town becomes unachievable and its rewards almost disappointing. There is a long passage about Seraphim's disappointment with the election and comparing the outcome to a car. How he bore witness to the political process and what achievement means in this new culture. It is almost as if so much struggle and conflict within the Melting Pot may encourage one's ability to create a better life but at what cost? It leaves many people with a bittersweet feeling of having more material goods than family or love. For Seraphim, one sees how he appreciates getting lost in a book and seeking the library as a common, public place anyone can use. The unfortunate reality is that even with the ability to achieve the American Dream, there is still loss to the family structure, the amount of time granted to the family, because people are too wrapped in escaping the new reality or buying things that will allow them to feel better about the choices they have made about their heritage and memories of the past.

The American Dream can quickly become the American Nightmare of growing disparity between culture and race, gender and social status which starts to divide people to a point of dramatic isolation and separation from what was once valued and known. This is the modern implication today. What this represents is that even through the struggle to 'fit in' and find a place in Canaan, there is still the feeling of being watched from those who believe themselves better and who live higher up on the hill. No amount of escape to the movies can promote equality or respect but yet neither can fatten the calf. While one can see the Melting Pot far from Jaweh, one can also see how shifting tides has created a Passover, if not in physical exodus but in intellectual or pursuit of knowledge. This is exactly what the library means for Seraphim.

For today, the implication of such episodic stories are meant to compel the reader to find more profound knowledge and understanding of the many different inter-related stories of people today and how even in the former memory of old rules comes a reawakening of new rules we all must play by. This is the essence of Secundo Alves the Portuguese running to become mayor. When he sees he will lose the election asks by giving a speech about the glorious past of the Portuguese to nevertheless give their votes to Mayhew, representing the new American rules of doing business in politics. Seraphim's father will then tell his son the very essence of immigration and communicate the true nature of what Exodus stands for:

"Yes, they [Portuguese immigrants] are simple-minded," Pa said. "Because they are living in America and they think they can live the same way they did back in Portugal. It can't be! This is a new country with new way. If you want to live with the old ways, then you should to stay [sic] in Portugal. Only a fool would come to a new country and expect to live the same way he lived in the



old country. This Alves he goes around telling people he misses the religious processions of his village on St. Michael. Jesus comes walking down the street with His cross and all the people throw flowers from end to end. And he's mad because nobody in American throws flower on the street. If you want to throw flowers on the street, then stay on St. Michael. Don't come here." (Felix, 2005, p. 108)

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## Abstract

Contrary to what happens in the Bible, where "the Passover" takes up the major part of the story, in Charles Felix Reis' collection of stories *Da Gama, Gary Grant and the Election of 1934*, it is the settling itself which is carefully mapped: what after Exodus? What if many undertook the same Exodus, pretending to have the same rights? How should one live together and should one stay true to the identity (the original Ten Commandments) developed before the Exodus, or assume a new identity valid only in the promised land? What does it mean in present-day America for a smaller ethnicity (the Portuguese) to live on Canaan's side? And how is the status of "the land of milk and honey" which the USA has promoted for centuries assessed by various European emigrants while the memory of their very own Ten Commandments, however vague, is still lingering on?

## Resumo

Ao contrário do que acontece na Bíblia, onde "a Páscoa" ocupa a maior parte da narração, na coleção de histórias *Da Gama, Cary Grant and the Election of 1934*, Charles Felix Reis trata cuidadosamente da instalação de vários "povos" num país novo. A questão apenas parcialmente resolvida na Bíblia que aqui surge é a de "E, depois do êxodo?". E se muitos seguiram o mesmo êxodo? Como então viveriam juntos? E devem se manter fiéis à identidade (os Dez Mandamentos originais) desenvolvida antes do êxodo, ou assumir uma nova identidade, a do pós-êxodo, só válida na terra prometida? O que significa na atual América para uma etnicidade menor (a Portuguesa/ lusófona) viver ao lado de Canaã? E qual o estatuto da "terra prometida", que os EUA têm promovido ao longo dos séculos, sobretudo quando é avaliado por vários emigrantes europeus quando a memória, às vezes ainda vaga, dos mandamentos originais entra em jogo?