

Portuguese Sounds in American Spaces. Music of the *Grandes Festas* in New England

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Abstract: How does public space become ethnically marked by sound? What work does genre do to express collective identities during the outdoor summer festival *Grandes Festas do Espírito Santo*? **This paper explores the diversity of musical performances in New England's** Lusophone community during the summer festival season as a sonic occupation of public space. Sonic occupation involves not only music, but also the sounds of crowds, floats and speech amplified by sound systems. Building on fieldwork conducted in the Portuguese neighbourhoods of Cumberland, Rhode Island and Fall River, Massachusetts in 2015, I extend this inquiry into the constellation of Portuguese genres that contribute to the *feira* soundscape. In terms of genre, I focus on the music of *ranchos folclóricos* (multi-generational music and dance troupes that perform folk repertoires) and *bandas filarmónicas* (marching wind bands) that contribute to music of *feira* processions, thus filling New England neighbourhoods with Portuguese sounds. I also look to the dance music of the *arraial*, or open-air party that occurs after the procession has ended. Drawing **on Gerd Bauman's (1990) theory of multiculturalism, I explore the ways in which ethnic identity is** presented in relation to religious, Catholic identity through music and movement in Portuguese New England.

Keywords: ethnicity, genre, processions, Catholicism

Every summer, Azoreans from all over New England come to Fall River, Massachusetts to celebrate the *Festa do Divino Espírito Santo* (locally referred to as *Grandes Festas*) — a religious celebration of the Divine Holy Spirit. It is the pinnacle of the summer feast season that extends from May to September in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, a busy stretch of parties, processions and performances that celebrate the Holy Spirit, saints days and, above all else, Portuguese culture. Taking place in Fall River, the American city with the highest percentage of people of Portuguese descent (nearly 50% as of 2008), the *Grandes Festas* have an undeniable religious element to the festivities that culminates in **Sunday morning's solemn mass at St. Anne's Cathedral and the subsequent religious** procession through downtown Fall River. While explaining his understanding of the Holy Ghost feast during the livestock auction that raised over \$30,000, a man from northern **Continental Portugal said with some distance, “os açorianos são tão religiosos” —** Azoreans are very religious, emphasizing the religious and ethnic connection forged through the celebration.

Fall River's *Grandes Festas* are an end-of-summer destination for Azoreans from all over the Northeast United States, Southern Ontario and even Montreal. The range of activities is extensive, featuring: a parade and procession through the city, as well as outdoor concerts, folklore festivals and vendors in the *arraial* (or outdoor party area) in Kennedy Park. Some elements are particular to Holy Ghost Feasts, including the livestock auction on Sunday and the distribution of soup and bread to whoever needs or wants it. I focus on **two particular elements of Fall River's** *Grandes Festas* that I attended this August, the Saturday morning parade and the Sunday morning religious procession. There is a stark **distinction between Sunday's religious music of the** *banda filarmónica* (marching band), and, conversely, the traditional and **popular music of Saturday's secular** *parada etnográfica* (or ethnographic parade). Ethnographic, of course, here relates to folklore, or what is associated with the culture of rural Portugal and now comprises a system of symbols that relate to all things Portuguese.

I also look to other symbols of identity on parade floats and in the *arraial* (or post-procession party space). The 5-day-long event is overwhelmingly Portuguese, rich in symbols including: flags (of the United States and of Portugal, including Madeira and the Azores), icons of Portuguese places, and religious imagery that centres on the Holy Spirit as a white dove. Musically, the event showcases a diversity of Portuguese music, with an emphasis on religious *bandas*, secular folklore groups and contemporary Portuguese dance music. In this paper, I draw out some of the musical examples of Portuguese ethnic display (via folklore) and of Portuguese Catholic identity (via the music of the marching band). Such displays are in relation to one another and maintain a foothold in contemporary multicultural America.

Historical Background

Portuguese immigrants started arriving in considerable numbers in New England in the late 1800s, settling in coastal areas such as New Bedford and Fall River. Young men arrived after working on whaling ships in the Atlantic Ocean, settling with families in small towns to work in the then-thriving paper mill industry. By 1920, there were 9,000 documented Portuguese families in Fall River (Almeida 2010). The immigration policy change of 1925 severely ebbed the flow of Portuguese and other "undesirable" Europeans until a subsequent shift in 1965, under the Kennedy administration. This **welcoming shift brought about what Onésimo Almeida (2010) calls the “grande êxodo” (or great exodus)** out of the Azores, bringing families into New England. As the community grew, social clubs, businesses and cultural organisations flourished alongside Portuguese churches. These churches and organisations supported, and continue to support, musical groups like *ranchos folclóricos* and *bandas filarmónicas*. Ethnomusicologist Katherine **Brucher has commented on the local perception that “wherever the Portuguese** immigrants arrived, they first organized a football [soccer] team, followed by a band and a **café” (Brucher 2013: 100).**

Theoretical Framework

Portuguese-American (as an ethnic identity) provides a distinctive piece of multicultural New England's landscape, often thought of being historically only Irish and Italian. Following Stuart Hall (2000), **I separate “multiculturalism” as an ideal pluralist situation from the adjectival “multi-cultural” which more explicitly addresses how the co-presence of many groups has unfolded in places like New England. Being “multi-cultural” mobilizes** boundaries, making groups commensurate and comparable. One important commensurate category is religious identity, which following Gerd Bauman (1990), is often conflated with ethnic identity. In the context of Azoreans in New England, a Catholic religious identity and an Azorean or Portuguese ethnic identity become one and the same. I argue that religious and ethnic identity are differentiated from one another in the *Grandes Festas*. This differentiation is evident in the difference between 1) the folkloric Saturday afternoon parade that foregrounds ethnicized folklore and 2) the Sunday procession that foregrounds religious piety.

The *Grandes Festas*

Showcasing the community, Portuguese culture and religious devotion, the *Grandes Festas* are a huge endeavour, drawing in over 60 social clubs, businesses and associations. One integral association is the *irmandades*, or brotherhoods, that contribute

to planning smaller Feasts of the Holy Spirit in their respective churches, community centres and social clubs. Not only do *irmandades* financially support the *festas*, but they also serve as emblems of ethnic and religious social organisations that promote tradition in the Portuguese community. In this parade, the *irmandade* that sponsored the *feira* is given a central place of importance, while other *irmandades* that supported other, smaller *festas* also march, distributing *massa* (or sweet bread) to the nearby crowd.

The religious identity promulgated by the Sunday procession of *bandas* and flags foregrounding the holy dove and crown of Queen Isabel. The symbols come from a miracle story from medieval Portugal. The lore extends back to the thirteenth century, when Queen Isabel (Elizabeth) distributed *massa* (sweet bread) to the needy and, by a miracle of the Holy Spirit, tricked her husband, King Dinis (Denis), into letting her continue her charity despite his suspicions. The story goes that one day he questioned what she was carrying in the lap of her skirt. After she replied that she was carrying roses, an odd feat in December, King Dinis demanded to see them. As she let down her skirt, the bread she had originally been carrying transformed into roses — a divine miracle of the Holy Spirit that allowed her to continue her charity and become venerated **as the ‘Santa Rainha’ (Holy Queen).**

Despite the continental origin of the story, *festas* are markedly Azorean. The royal origin in conjunction with the Catholic belief system creates the base for *feira* aesthetics. The key symbol is a white dove against a red background, a semiotic rendering of the Holy Spirit — not just a key figure in the myth of Queen Isabel, but also a manifestation of the Catholic deity in the Azorean belief system. The royal lore is represented in the crowns (often appearing alongside the white dove) that are also a popular motif. More significant, however, is the *cortejo real* **(royal court) that is the highlight of Saturday’s parade and Sunday’s procession. Despite the importance of Queen Isabel in the** *Divino* lore, it is the coronation of the *King* (usually a teenage boy) that is the pinnacle of the beginning of **Sunday’s parade.**

Saturday morning features the *parada etnográfica*, a parade that foregrounds folkloric culture as Portuguese heritage, as well as the community organizations that promulgate it. Floats feature depictions of Portuguese landmarks, especially churches. The sounds of the street, a low din of Azorean Portuguese, English and the *portinglês* that mixes the two, intermingle with *música folclórica* ensembles. Some folklore groups appear with their musicians who play on floats behind the dancers. Recorded music also booms over **loudspeakers on floats that don’t feature musicians. The musical choices are generally** folkloric, with the addition of *banda* marches that feature arrangements of Portuguese folk tunes, creating a display of timeless Portugueseness in motion through the city.

Portuguese anthropologist João Leal (2011) has noted that Saturday’s parade features

the most “potent symbols” of Azorean identity. It also draws attention to the expansive Azorean-American community by showcasing Azorean participants, including social clubs, businesses, religious fraternities and other organizations from New England and beyond. The parade also passes through the Azorean commercial area, clustering a dense crowd **along Columbia Street (Fall River’s primary Portuguese commercial strip), especially** where I filmed parts of the parade in front of Columbia Bakery near Ponta Delgada way. Another large crowd formed at the intersection of Columbia St and Main St, near the Casa dos Açores organisation of New England.

The community-**based festivity of Saturday’s parade is extended into the** *arraial*, or celebratory area of Kennedy Park. The *arraial* serves two purposes. The first is that it marks the end of the parade route, leading the attending crowd to spend the remainder of the afternoon. **The second is that it’s a central location for the** *feira*, the primary site of activity. It is in the *arraial* that food is sold, such as Portuguese-American classics (*bifanas*, *caçõila* and *batatas fritas*). There is a maze of tents of vendors selling Portuguese pottery, CDs from Brazil, Portugal and Cabo Verde, and the emblematic Ronaldo jerseys. The main feature of the *arraial*, as at all *festas*, is the main stage, where artists such as Jorge Ferreira perform Portuguese dance music, and folklore group musicians play older, well-loved folk tunes. **Saturday’s parade features a wider diversity of** musical styles of a celebratory, upbeat and markedly Portuguese style, and the *arraial*, by showcasing Portuguese culture through purchasable items (such as food, crafts, CDs and clothing) effectively make being Azorean a point of celebration.

Being Azorean in an American **context is the central theme of Saturday’s parade and the** festivities that start on Wednesday night, expressed firstly in aesthetics of folkloric costumes and music and secondly in showcasing the full swath of Azorean businesses, organizations and clubs that structure the New England community. Saturday afternoon, from 2 PM until 4:30 there was a *Festival de Folclore* (Folklore Festival), featuring primarily folklore groups from New Jersey that had already performed in the parade earlier that day.

By **contrast, Sunday’s procession makes serious piety a point of focus. The procession** features only the music of *bandas filarmónicas* — bands in full uniform, despite the 85-degree summer heat. **The processions begin after the solemn mass at St. Anne’s** Cathedral that is given by a bishop from Braga, the archdiocese of Portugal, and is attended by *feira* participants. While there are also *bandas* **playing during Saturday’s** parade, they are the only contributors to the procession. No folklore groups play at all; bands are accompanied by Portuguese dignitaries, members of *irmandades* and band committee members. The bands, moving in two-step marches and followed by a brigade of flag-carriers, play the serious repertory of the *marcha grave* (slow march). At the end of

the route, every band plays the **“Hino do Espírito Santo” (Hymn of the Holy Spirit)** before the gigantic *coroa* (crown) in the middle of the entrance to the *arraial*.

The spatial arrangement of the route is also divergent from Saturday's parade. Saturday's procession also ends at St. Anne's Cathedral, but begins at the *Portas da Cidade* (Gates to the City), a monument of three arches on Ponta Delgada Way near Columbia Street that serves as a replica of the most famous architectural landmark of Ponta Delgada, the **capital of São Miguel. Sunday's procession begins and ends in front of the church,** creating a loop through a residential (not commercial) area of Fall River. This emphasises **the religious weight of Sunday's procession, marked in spatial movement through the city** and a marked difference in the sound in movement: there are no clubs or organizations beyond bands playing slow marches.

Two musical groups that I had been working with participated, the Banda Nova Aliança de Pawtucket and Grupo Raízes (or Roots Group) of the Casa dos Açores da Nova Inglaterra. The *banda*, of course, played both days, featuring strikingly different repertoires. Grupo Raízes, which is a band of eight members that performs folklore-inspired songs composed by the group, played only on Saturday. They played three songs **in rotation, all of which related to Azorean emigration, whaling (“Navegar”) and folklore (“Chamarrita”). Nova Aliança provided** the music for a marching group from another community center, the Amigos da Terceira, dressed in bright folkloric costumes from the Azorean island of Terceira. On Sunday, they played a drastically slower repertoire with **titles such as “Mãe da Pureza” (Mother of Purity) and “Quinze de Agosto” (fifteenth of August, the day of the Virgin Mary's ascension).** Rather than the bright, syncopated melodies of their Amigos da Terceira march, the *marchas graves* feature slower, more stately *rapsódias*.

This stark distinction, though not unique to *Grandes Festas* in the United States, merges with the idea of ethnic identity and religious identity on display to contribute as a piece of a multicultural puzzle, showing the Azorean element of the ethnic landscape of New England. **While Saturday's parade emphasizes the cohesion of the community, then Sunday's showcases religious devotion. Religious identity here becomes commensurate** with ethnic identity, an aspect of contemporary multiculturalism highlighted by Gerd Bauman (1990) **as the multicultural “riddle” or a problem whose** *terms* must be redefined in order to be truly understood. Portuguese anthropologist João Leal (2011) has observed **the parade's representation of community organizations, from New England and from** abroad, and re-inscribes the importance of organizations and businesses in strengthening the community. This emphasises cohesion within the community in a particularly American situation — the *parada etnográfica* of Saturday is not celebrated to the same degree during *Grandes Festas* in the Azores. I extend his observation, saying that the *American*

community is foregrounded in its cohesion and celebration of Azorean identity. The feast situates within American multiculturalist logic, given the history of immigration to New England and the emphasis religion and ethnic identity in creating a space for Portugueseness in the American cultural landscape.

The distinctive American element of the *festas* is clearly demarcated in the presence of the American flag that every group carries. The flag marks the Americanness of the entire spectacle, or the embeddedness of the feast in a distinctively American context — a patriotic element that is not present in the *Festa do Divino Espírito Santo* celebrations that I attended in Toronto, Ontario and Florianópolis, Santa Catarina. Furthermore, the Banda Nova Aliança has one *rapsódia* (or medley) that features thirty-**two measures of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” a march that associated far more with the American Civil War than** with standard Portuguese band repertory. While that particular *rapsódia* **wasn’t played** during the *Grandes Festas*, it appears in other processional and parade events, including ones that I played second trumpet for, such as the Feast of St. Vincent in Pawtucket, RI and the anniversary of Our Lady of the Rosary Nossa in Providence, RI.

Conclusion

Displays of American identity (including flags or the inclusion of American melodies in Portuguese *marchas*) could be understood as hybridity or hyphenisation (the blending of American and Portuguese identity). I find it more generative to think about what aspects of identity are foregrounded to fit within *specifically American* cultural values. In this case, religious identity (Catholic) and ethnic identity (Azorean) are celebrated in New England as commensurate. Religious identity, juxtaposed against folkloric celebrations of Portuguese identity, contributes to this process by pushing ethnicity and religion to the fore in uniting the community in celebration. The question here becomes what is it particularly about the situation of Azoreans in New England that leads them to promote Catholic identity in this way, and how personal identity fits into or comes up against the Catholicism put on display during mass and processions. Ethnic and religious identities that are celebrated on different days of the same event create an Azorean piece of an American multicultural whole. Here, we see a piece of multicultural America displayed in pride, maintaining a space in the middle of New England for something particularly Azorean.

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