

California, or God's Country — Vamberto Freitas, University of the Azores

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It felt a little peculiar to be walking across the Francisco dairy yard. Paul had walked this path from his parents' home to his grandparents' innumerable times, but now it was beginning to feel foreign.

– Anthony Barcellos, *Land of Milk and Money*

The title of my text has a strange *raison d'être*. When I drove across America to Boston en route to the Azores, my California license plate raised increasing curiosity the farther I traveled from its origins. At a service station where I stopped after reaching the East Coast, one individual could not resist, after looking at it with visible admiration: *So you're coming from God's country!* I would not have entirely agreed then, but that would have had to do with my state of mind at the radical move I was making from California on my permanent return to the land of my birth — a temporary denial of my father in order to love my mother better? Perhaps it was, but with the passage of time I am moving ever closer to my unknown commenter's opinion. Here are the paradoxes: my aversion to the capitalism that had been pushed to the limits in those parts did not in any way negate the meaning of freedom — the former is precisely what leads to the latter, as neoconservatives would keep shouting at me, were I still willing to listen to them. And California's lifestyles and landscapes range from the desert to the phantasmagorical coast that serpentine down the state from north to south between lush green mountains and the crystal blue ocean.

All this relates now to my reading of Anthony Barcellos' novel *Land of Milk and Money*, a magnificent and expansive artistic take on the arrival empty-handed in the New World, and the subsequent triumph and fall, of Azorean people who — without speaking a word of English or understanding well the very culture to which they had moved — built, up and down the length of the vast San Joaquin Valley, some of the most substantial agricultural empires, which the now totally Americanized third generation would strive to dismantle through greed and/or the desire to pursue other ways of life — everything that the old immigrants had handed them on a silver platter. *Land of Milk and Money* (the wordplay refers to the well-known Biblical phrase “land of milk and honey”) possesses the quality of great novels: in the fluency of its multiple languages and voices it contains the irony and humor with which we look at the world of others, which is also that of the protagonist, here named Paul Francisco — everything he marvels at and disdains in a narrative that transports us from the end of the 19th century all the way up to 2006. In other words, it is the story of a family turned upside-down in the history of an entire diasporan people, specifically Californian — ours.

Land of Milk and Money is structured with multiple time frames, almost like a diary written after-the-fact months and years later — the reader flashing back, then advancing in the narrative as the main plotline of the novel unfolds in court, namely the disputing of a will between the Francisco and Salazar families. After the death of Azorean matriarch Teresa Maria Francisco — who, like her late husband Paulo Candido, was born in and emigrated from the village of São Bartolomeu on the island of Terceira — everything is up for grabs, from land to dairy cattle to their respective

farm machinery. It is unnecessary to recount in detail that the novel is not only about this. First and foremost, it is a universal portrait of greed and feigned love, an almost biblical retelling of the oldest of human themes, brother against brother, clan against clan: there is nothing like the dividing up of property and money to reveal all our venom and envy and, once again, the greed that drives the world of business and prosperity.

This is a first novel that displays its author's writing maturity. Within each merely descriptive brief sentence he brings into focus the inner essence of each character, practically all of them Azoreans or of Azorean descent, allowing the reader to absorb and recall them without ever again forgetting, and then waiting for certain reactions from each one to events transpiring in the halls of justice and in everyday life. The daily routine on one of these dairies: children and grandchildren who devote themselves with great enthusiasm to their ritualized chores, in which a tractor for cultivating or harvesting turns into a toy in their hands, women who rarely deny their men any and all accommodation — we predate the feminism that would later change everything, but outside these farms driven by those who thrived here, even those born here, dubbed *Americanos* — and lawyers also of our ancestry, as well as their Anglo colleagues, who take all of this in and simply shake their heads at the idiosyncrasies of the heirs and the heroic origins of their wealth.

On the other hand, the third-person narrator is alluding more to the surrounding world, not allowing us to forget that this story is perfectly set on the land that immigrants settled and developed as a result of long-ago policies like Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. All the ambiguity of our people's position in their other homeland, an almost hermetically sealed socioeconomic bubble in the midst of "strangers" on all sides, is drawn from these other devastatingly cast details. John Steinbeck, the first to fictionalize the dynamism of California's mechanized countryside, would not have disdained this narrative by Anthony Barcellos; quite to the contrary, he would likely have regarded it as the sequel, with additional words and formulations, to what he had himself established in literature from those same sources. The dénouement of the will in court, like the entire lawsuit, is truly hilarious, and *Land of Milk and Money* closes with a guffaw that says it all: the continuity and inevitable rupture of our past and present, leaving the rest open, the family now divided between those who "stay" and the example given by the protagonist, Paul, who abandons it all to become a university professor.

His middle son [second-generation family member Paulinho thinks about those who are to follow]. Three sons and only one had the least interest in maintaining the family heritage. Paulinho accepted that. Frankly, it was impossible to imagine either Paul or Alex trying to run the Francisco dairy operation, but it gave him a pang to think about it. Was this a bad sign for the future?

The omniscient narrator chooses Paul Francisco, the most creatively rebellious grandchild of the founders of the estate under challenge, to be the eyes and ears of the entire clan, due to his observational acuity and knowledge of the outside world. It is through him that we are presented the families in dispute, and their whole historic journey. Paul is like the dissident between everything and everyone. He has opted since childhood for books and solitude, leading him eventually to a career far from his origins. He endlessly resists his islander grandmother's wish for

him to become a Catholic priest, without ever denying the love and admiration he cultivates for these pioneers who one day arrived in the vast, rich spaces of California's Central Valley. He looks with *saudade* upon his past but already belongs to another America, having left behind a childhood in which the Portuguese learned at his grandparents' house was still his first language when he started at a primary school named Pleasant Hill Elementary School. Someday I shall explain why I mention the full name of this school on the outskirts of the town of Porterville, which still breathes nostalgia for the 1940s and '50s; likewise, one day I shall explain how and when I met an author by the name of Anthony Barcellos, Ph.D. in mathematics education, a college professor in his home state, a former political consultant and staffer in Sacramento's corridors of power.

So, here is another great novel of the highly consequential and successful Azorean saga in North America. We ought not wait for the translation of this or other narratives of Portuguese descendants. Behold the great trilogy of Azor-Californian modern life: *The Gunnysack Castle* by Julian Silva, *Saudade* by Katherine Vaz — and now, *Land of Milk and Money* by Anthony Barcellos.

Barcellos, Anthony. *Land of Milk and Money*. Dartmouth, MA: Tagus Press, University Press of New England, 2012.