

# PRIDE, PREJUDICE AND POLITICS: PERFORMING PORTUGUESE FOLKLORE AMID NEWARK'S URBAN RENAISSANCE

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This essay examines the role of expressive culture in the renovation of stigmatized people and places. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and oral histories, this study places revivalist folklore performance center stage within Newark, New Jersey's dramatic narrative of multicultural conciliation and post-riot transformation. Imbricated in processes of urban restoration, social healing, immigrant adaptation and political empowerment, *ranchos folclóricos* cannot simply be read as the nostalgic hankering for an originary homeland. *Ranchos folclóricos* perform double duty to both sending and receiving contexts, proactive in demonstrating to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic that Portuguese immigrants, sometimes maligned for having "ditched their country," have harnessed the nineteenth-century traditions of rural peasants to contemporary agendas of incorporation, community building and urban renewal.

In June 2003, New Jersey's celebration of Portugal Day reached its zenith at Drumthwacket, the Governor's mansion, where two *ranchos folclóricos* from Northern New Jersey entertained an audience of 400 guests.<sup>1</sup> These folklore troupes, *Sonhos de Portugal* and *Os Sonhos Continuum* animated the large blue-stone patio in sweeping circles of movement, while the crowd of Luso-American entrepreneurs, politicians, teachers and construction workers swayed to the music of up-tempo accordions. At home in this elegant setting, a tiny dancer began an impromptu performance at the edge of the patio. Teetering on the outskirts of the action, a replica of the older dancers, dressed in an ornate embroidered costume of red, gold and green, the colors of the Portuguese flag, was Jacqueline McGreevey, the toddler daughter of NJ Governor James McGreevey and his Luso-American wife Dina Matos. Raising her arms in emulation of the *ranchos* choreography, with an occasional dip and twirl, little Jacqueline performed the nineteenth-century peasant traditions of her mother's homeland on the landscaped greens of the governor's mansion, a testament to the peculiar power of expressive culture in negotiating hybrid identities.

The diminutive Jacqueline, embodying both the Portuguese emigrant and the American immigrant, performed double duty in a symbolic economy

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of old world cultural preservation and new world incorporation. Bridging both sending and receiving contexts is encouraged by the Portuguese government which, since the 1974 revolution, has intensified its focus on emigrants living abroad (Baganha 2001, Feldman-Bianco 1992), urging far-flung countrymen to both stay connected to Portugal while assimilating into adopted homelands through increased naturalization, civic engagement and political participation. The government's appeal to Portuguese emigrants to become "Americans" without abandoning ties to Portugal marks a shift in official policy. During the early years of the *Estado Novo* regime (1926-74), emigrants were largely viewed as traitors, and dictator António Salazar maintained strict literacy requirements for those seeking passports, attempting to stem the tide of agricultural laborers fleeing Portugal for better living conditions abroad.<sup>2</sup>

Today, however, the Portuguese government recognizes the geopolitical value of its 4.5 million emigrants. Not only do they serve as incubators of Portuguese language use across the globe, they also contribute to the Portuguese economy through remittances, consumption of Iberian exports, and as the target market for "*turismo de saudade*."<sup>3</sup> During decades of visits to the US, Portuguese government officials have reiterated a well-oiled message of duality, citing folklore performance as the perfect means for "keeping the umbilical cord tied to Portugal" (Mano 2003: 8) while contributing to the cultural vibrancy of new homelands.<sup>4</sup>

The animated performances of New Jersey's 16 *ranchos folclóricos* have also been conditioned by post 1965 US immigration policy and the ideology of US multiculturalism. As a result of legislation such as the 1965 repeal of the National Origins Quota Act, the passage of the 1974 Ethnic Heritage Act and the general valorization of post civil rights era multiculturalism, the United States has witnessed a proliferation of "ethnic celebrations, a zeal for genealogy, increased travel to ancestral homelands, and greater interest in ethnic artifacts, cuisine, music, literature and, of course, language" (Halter 2000: 5). *Rancho* dancing participates in this trend, revealing New Jersey's Portuguese population as "exotics at home, hidden in plain sight" (Leonardo 1998). These performing "exotics" not only reflect US and Portuguese federal level policy, but more importantly for the purposes of this paper, participate

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<sup>2</sup> Caroline Brettell (2003) has argued that despite *Estado Novo* policies seeking to limit emigration, António Salazar turned a blind eye to the high incidence of clandestine departure in order to reap the economic benefits of emigrant remittances.

<sup>3</sup> According to recent studies of Portuguese tourism, "ethnic tourists" comprise an increasingly important market. Currently, up to two million emigrants return to Portugal annually (Mano 2001: 10). For broad coverage of these statistics made public during the IX International Conference on Tourism, see *Mundo Português* (2002).

<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this dual message and the way it has shaped the NJ emigrant community's transnationality, see Holton (2004).

in localized strategies for celebrating difference and fostering inter-ethnic harmony in Northern New Jersey.

According to the 2000 US Census, New Jersey is home to roughly 72,000 Luso-Americans, with the majority of this population concentrated in Newark and surrounding towns such as Kearny, Elizabeth, Union, Harrison and Bellville. In a recent study of Portuguese influence on American society, Newark is listed as one of nine US cities with the greatest density of Luso-Americans relative to the rest of the population (Vicente 1999: 70). As such, Newark's Portuguese immigrant community is an important swathe in the rainbow of ethnic groups that populate the city. Through the celebration of its ethnic neighborhoods and the expressive traditions kept alive there, the city has pinned much of its hopes for urban revitalization on the "marketing of ethnic heritage," a late twentieth-century phenomenon anthropologists theorize as constitutive of American modernity (Leonardo 1998, Halter 2000).

The diverse residents of Newark and the traditions these communities possess have helped catalyze what some term "an urban renaissance." According to the narrative of rebirth proffered by Newark's municipal leaders, diversity and arts development work cooperatively in the construction of a new image for Newark, mitigating the legacy of the 1967 race riots and greasing the wheels for real social and economic gains in the areas of outside investment, jobs creation, and housing.<sup>5</sup> It is through the performance of folklore and other expressions of ethnic identity that the Portuguese legitimize Newark's "salad bowl" claims to enrichment through multicultural tolerance and festivity.

This paper examines the role of folklore performance in the renovation of stigmatized people and places. Foregrounding Newark's reputation as a "pariah city" (McNeil, Fitzsimons, and Murtagh 1995), this essay examines the ways in which arts development – from the large-scale New Jersey Performing Arts Center to the Portugal Day Parade – contributes to the city's narrative of renaissance. Portuguese folklore performance participates in Newark's narrative of rebirth giving credence to the claim that a new peaceability exists among Newark's diverse residents, allowing for the healthy proliferation of multicultural traditions. This paper also examines the role of folklore performance in renovating "pariah citizens." Once seen as traitors to their homeland, Luso-American immigrants in New Jersey today bolster social standing both in the US and in Portugal by manifesting their knowledge of native traditions through performance. Making visible a "double

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<sup>5</sup> Some scholars of the violent clashes which broke out in US cities during the civil rights era oppose the use of the word "riot" due to the way in which it obscures the social, economic, and political injustices and racism which provoked these conflicts and the gains that some of the uprisings produced. Although I agree with this critique, I have retained use of the word riot because this is the terminology present in the sources I cite.

duty” to both sending and receiving contexts, folklore performers battle the negative stigma conferred to the figure of the “*emigrante*,” by participating in public celebrations of ethnic pride and Luso-American political enfranchisement.

This article is based on four years of ethnographic fieldwork (2000-03) in the Portuguese-American communities of Northern New Jersey. In addition to participant observation of numerous NJ *rancho* rehearsals and performances, I have conducted ethnographic interviews with folklore dancers, musicians, directors and festival organizers primarily from the *Roca-ó-Norte rancho* of Newark, NJ the *Sonhos de Portugal rancho* of Kearny, NJ and the *Danças e Cantares de Portugal rancho* of Elizabeth, NJ.<sup>6</sup> This article is also informed by research at the Rutgers-Newark archive of the Ironbound Oral History Project (IOHP), a store of primary audio, visual and textual documents containing over 150 interview transcripts with Portuguese-speaking immigrants of Northern New Jersey<sup>7</sup> and the Newark archives of the *Luso-Americano* biweekly newspaper. Finally, this research into NJ folklore performance is consistently ghosted by my long-term ethnographic investigation (1993-present) of *ranchos folclóricos* and political change in twentieth-century Portugal.<sup>8</sup>

## Once a pariah city: Newark’s rebirth and the performance of ethnic difference

The Newark riots cast a long shadow over the city’s late twentieth-century history. In official discourse describing Newark’s renaissance, these events, although never explicitly invoked, act as an opening frame and a generative backdrop to Newark’s narrative of transformation. Unpacking the discursive arguments that locate demographic diversity as central to Newark’s new

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<sup>6</sup> As is the case in Portugal, many NJ folklore performers move from *rancho* to *rancho* throughout the course of their performance careers. Reasons for leaving a *rancho* can include personality conflicts with fellow performers or *rancho* directors, a desire to join friends, spouses or other family members in a neighboring *rancho*, or geographical relocation. Several of the performers I interviewed had been members of other groups, including the *Rancho Folclórico de Barcuense* of Newark, NJ before joining their current *rancho*.

<sup>7</sup> The Rutgers-Newark Ironbound Oral History Project was founded by the author in 2001 as means to document the Portuguese-speaking population of Northern New Jersey, a community which has received little scholarly attention. To date 71 student researchers have conducted and transcribed over 150 oral history interviews with Portuguese speaking immigrants residing in Northern New Jersey. These semi-structured interviews, typically 1-2 hours in duration, contain information as to the date and reasons for migration, strategies for adaptation, plans for return migration, expressive manifestations of ethnic and cultural identity in the US, conflict and collaboration within the Portuguese speaking community of Northern New Jersey, among other topics. The archive is currently housed within Rutgers Newark’s Department of Classical and Modern Languages and Literatures and is in the process of being digitized for public access online through the John Cotton Dana Library.

<sup>8</sup> See Holton (1999, 2003a, forthcoming).

identity requires an understanding of the riots, a time when racial strife brought the city down, just as now, according to Mayor Sharpe James, it is Newark's multi-racial population which is bringing the city back to life.<sup>9</sup>

In the summer of 1967, John Smith, an African-American cab driver was pulled over for allegedly driving past a double-parked police car in Newark's Central Ward. Smith was dragged from his car and later beaten by police. Residents from a public housing project located near the precinct where Smith was being held began gathering in the streets. Despite community leaders' pleas for calm, the crowd erupted in violence, sparking five days of armed clashes with police and the National Guard. These events resulted in 26 deaths, 725 injured, 1500 arrests and 10 million dollars worth of damage to city property.<sup>10</sup> The deadly clashes of 1967 reflected growing unrest among the city's African American community, as a response to incidents of police brutality, rampant unemployment, poverty, substandard housing, residential displacement at the hands of "urban improvement" projects, and a lack of interest representation within Newark's primarily white municipal government.

Newark's riots, among the most severe of the period, devastated the city's social fabric, economic base and material infrastructure. Until recently, Newark's process of recovery has been slow and inefficient due to political corruption, faulty urban planning, and the persistence of socio-economic problems which had sparked the riots in the first place. Not only has Newark fought the social and material scars left by 1967's bloody events, but it has also battled a widespread reputation common to many post-industrial urban areas regarded as "pariah cities" (McNeil, Fitzsimons, and Murtagh 1995). Within regional and national parlance, Newark has been labeled "the car-jacking capital of the US," "the armpit of the east" and the nation's "most unhealthy city" (Galishoff 1988), among other unflattering monikers.

In recent years, however, Newark has begun to transform itself, attempting to turn a history of racial strife into a platform for image-overhaul, where tropes of peaceability between diverse ethnic groups form the foundation of a new post-riot identity. Diversity is a buzzword which dominates the discourse of Newark's governmental, educational and cultural institutions. In his "Welcome Statement" on the city's web page, Mayor Sharpe

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that several high profile community leaders and politicians disagree with Mayor Sharpe James as to the extent of Newark's recovery. Cory Booker, for example, a rising political star who ran against James in the 2002 mayoral race and who has worked in Newark's Central Ward for years, asked, "How do you measure a renaissance? If you measure it in health indices, it's not a renaissance. If you measure it by unemployment, there's been no appreciable difference. If you measure it by median income, there's been no real change" (Purdy 1999). For a cogent analysis of the debates regarding Newark's recovery, see Stevenson (2000).

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent multi-media portrayal of the Newark riot, its causes, witnesses and victims, see Max Herman's website at <<http://www.67riots.rutgers.edu>>.

James describes Newark's demographic heterogeneity as the key to the city's post-riot recovery. He states, "Our greatest strength lies not in bricks and mortar, but in our rainbow of peoples and cultures whose diversity and energy have fueled our rebirth and growth. Sample our restaurants, visit our culture attractions, meet our diverse people" (James 2004). This emphasis on the socio-cultural riches born from heterogeneity extends to the institutions of higher learning in Newark's University Heights neighborhood. Rutgers University-Newark, for example, has been voted most diverse US campus seven years in a row according to the *US News and World Report*, a title proudly announced at official Rutgers gatherings and displayed in countless admissions brochures, university websites and on banners decorating administrative buildings.

Newark's growing arts scene reflects this diversity, and the city's purported renaissance has been tied to the development of large-scale arts infrastructure (Strom 2002, forthcoming) as well as the proliferation of smaller scale ethnic festivals and parades (Holton 2003b). The lynchpin in Newark's arts-driven recovery is the \$180 million New Jersey Performing Arts Center which opened its doors in 1997 amid a sea of doubt from naysayers who feared that patrons from the suburbs would never brave the mean streets of Newark to attend events, especially with New York City's more rarified venues just steps away (see Fig. 1). Contrary to these pessimistic forecasts, NJPAC, located in the heart of downtown Newark, has consistently surpassed expectations beginning with its first season when attendance exceeded anticipated numbers by 25 percent (McGlone 1998). NJPAC has also catalyzed other culture-related development projects around military park, where the Newark Art Museum, NJPAC, the New Jersey Historical Society and Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art anchor a burgeoning arts triangle.<sup>11</sup>

Part of NJPAC's success is attributable to the delicate balance achieved in its cultural programming. NJPAC highlights the diverse communities resident in Newark and the surrounding areas by organizing events which relate directly to the myriad cultures which populate the city. Past seasons have included West African drumming, Asian martial arts performances, Cuban popular dance, Kwanza and Chinese New Year celebrations, African-American hip hop, salsa, Brazilian samba and Portuguese fado. This wide-ranging selection of cultural fare not only reflects a desire to represent Newark's diverse inhabitants, but also to attract these populations into the concert halls. Other Newark arts organizations employ a similar strategy. Aljira Center for Contemporary Art, for example, recently unveiled an exhibit entitled "The

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<sup>11</sup> The area around Military Park has flourished in recent years with the relocation of Aljira Center for Contemporary Art to Broad St, the creation of the Robert Treat Hotel, as well as the creation of an annual outdoor concert series called "Sounds of the City" and Newark's first farmers market, which runs weekly from spring through fall.



Fig. 1 – New Jersey Performing Arts Center. Newark, New Jersey, 2005.  
Photo by Tim Raphael (used with permission).

Crystal Land Revisited: New Art in New Jersey” featuring up and coming artists, all residents in New Jersey representing a rainbow of ethnicities. The press release for this exhibit describes Newark’s diversity as key to its value as a locus of innovative artistic production. Curator Raul Zamudio states, “New Jersey is not simply a place west of New York City, but its own destination rich with inspiration for artistic expression” (Aljira 2004). Isabel Nazario, the driving force behind Transcultural New Jersey, a statewide initiative tied to the exhibit, states, “The goals of Transcultural New Jersey are to showcase our state’s rich diverse cultural communities and in so doing, gain insight into our diverse populations. The show at Aljira masterfully achieves them” (Aljira 2004).

NJPAC, the Newark Art Museum and Aljira have all reached out to the Portuguese community over the last ten years. NJPAC dedicated its first season to Portuguese culture, flying top tier artists from Lisbon to Newark for US performance debuts. NJPAC also named its outdoor café “*Calçada*” – the Portuguese word for cobblestone road, inscribing its relationship with NJ’s Lusophone community onto its corollary businesses. In 1997, the Newark Art

Museum curated a large show dedicated to Marian iconography in Portugal, and Aljira mounted an exhibit of photographs featuring images of Portuguese fisherman and winemakers.<sup>12</sup> For Portuguese American emigrants, a community often labeled “invisible” (Ribeiro 2000) due to a historic lack of participation in US civic culture, such attention has not gone unnoticed. Many Portuguese emigrants interviewed for IOHP mentioned NJPAC’s solicitous overtures when describing a positive relationship to the city of Newark and general sense of feeling “*bem recebido*” in the US.

In the cases above, artistic production is employed as a catalyst for new post-riot sociability between the diverse inhabitants of the city. Art and performance become the conciliatory means for healing old wounds. The cheerful white and lavender flags which adorn Military Park lampposts articulate this message in iconographic form. Two women, one white and one African-American, share tea and company at a scrolled iron table while the city’s slogan, “Meet and Greet,” looms large over their amiable interaction.

NJPAC is the most visible example of Newark’s attempt at social healing and economic recovery through the vehicle of arts development. However, other smaller arts organizations, ethnic parades and concert series also contribute to the growing arts scene in Newark and its celebration of multiculturalism. The largest of these initiatives, the annual Portugal Day parade, has attracted over half a million people to the streets of Newark’s East Ward in recent years, and the parade’s vibrant display of *ranchos folclóricos* figures prominently in Newark’s arts-driven revival. The parade, first organized by Ironbound businessman Bernardino Coutinho in 1980 as an attempt to unify and animate the Portuguese community, has always placed special focus on the role of *ranchos folclóricos* as an expression of immigrant identity, entrepreneurship and commercial success. Early in the festival’s development when audiences numbered a cozy 20,000 people, *ranchos* would perform the songs and dances of a particular Portuguese region alongside groups of immigrants from the same town carrying municipal flags in a performative cartography of migratory provenance (Santos 2004). As the Portugal Day parade evolved from a “local event to an international event” (Coutinho 2002), the municipal flags disappeared as the programming cast a wider net, including not only *ranchos* flown in from Portugal and an increasing number of New Jersey troupes, but also jazz musicians, African-American step groups and marching bands from Newark’s South and Central Ward high schools. What was once a provincial festival oriented toward the specificity of originary sending contexts, expanded to include the expressive traditions of the adopted homeland in a ritual dramatization of immigrant incorporation.

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<sup>12</sup> For more information on this exhibit, see Fink (1997).



The fact that Portuguese folklore has thrived in Newark in tandem with Luso-American commercial success and political empowerment serves as a testament to Newark's post-riot transformation. *Ranchos* forward an image of Newark as a city that welcomes diversity and encourages its varied immigrant groups to maintain autochthonous traditions within Northern New Jersey's hearty regional embrace. Portuguese folklore troupes help legitimate Newark's claim to have put racial and ethnic animosity to rest during its new phase of cultural awakening. The organizers of the annual Portugal Day parade underscore the cooperation and support of Newark's municipal government. Alberto Coutinho, son of the parade's founder, states,

Without a shadow of a doubt, the city of Newark, both with Mayor Gibson's administration and Mayor James' administration, they've always been tremendously supportive of the Portugal Day Festival... The annual operating budget is approximately \$600,000, but of note is that about \$350-\$375,000 of that was services in kind provided by the city of Newark... We could not speak more firmly, that if it wasn't for the city of Newark, we would not be able to have the Portugal Day Parade" (Coutinho 2002).

According to Coutinho, the festival is not only an opportunity to unify the Portuguese immigrant community and form coalitions with municipal leaders, it is also a forum for demonstrating the ability of the Portuguese community to integrate into American society. Responding to the often repeated critique by some ethnic insiders that the Portugal Day parade has become too inclusive to the detriment of authentic Portuguese traditions such as *ranchos folclóricos* which are drowned out by other performances of non-Portuguese culture, Alberto Coutinho argues,

As far as some people say, "oh well, you know, its only supposed to Portuguese," I think they're in the wrong country. They have no idea what being a real American is all about. A real American is being happy about who you are and respecting the rights of others [...] the rights of anybody to participate. Yes, we want it to be authentically Portuguese because that is the major reason for our success... [but] the goal of the [festival organizers] is to integrate the Portuguese community into American society, and to do that American society has to accept us. So obviously the large presence of non-Portuguese at the festival is a sign that the Portuguese have been accepted. People are comfortable with us being here. It's not like they want to kick us out. They want to be a part of us, to celebrate with us... we need to have open arms to all ethnic groups (Coutinho 2002).

The debate to which Coutinho alludes over who should participate in the parade, underscores larger tensions concerning assimilation and the dissolution of the tight-knit Ironbound enclave. Coutinho's ideas of balancing

“authentic” display of Portuguese culture through *ranchos* performance on the one hand, and the open embrace of Newark’s diversity on the other, is in full accordance with the multicultural “rebirth” discourse proffered by the municipal government and large-scale arts organizations.

Luso-American culture is key to Newark’s renaissance narrative in part because Portuguese immigration to the city has accompanied Newark’s period of social unrest and post-riot recovery. Although Portuguese emigrants began arriving in New Jersey in the mid nineteenth century, Newark’s current Portuguese community is largely the product of Portugal’s “third wave” migration dating from 1960-80 (see Fig. 2 and Table 1).

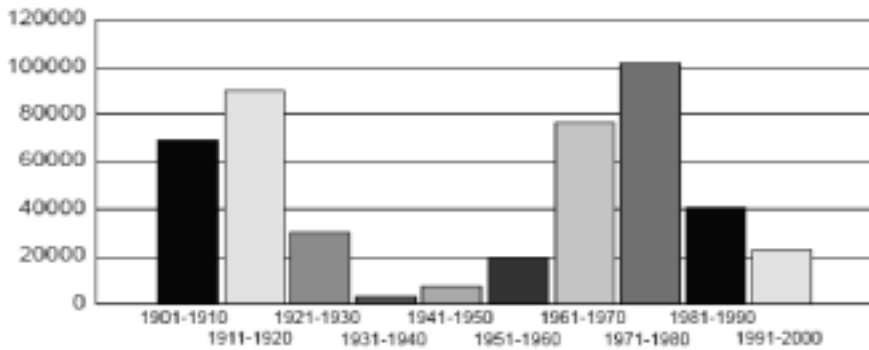


Fig. 2 – Portuguese immigration to the United States by decade (1901-2000).  
Source: Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2002.

Place of Origin	Foreign-Born Population of NJ	1975-80	1970-74	1965-69	1960-64	1950-59	Before 1950
Azores	219	15	84	50	16	25	29
Continental Portugal	28,234	7,520	9,788	6,021	1,886	1,126	1,893

Table 1 – Citizenship and year of immigration for New Jersey’s foreign-born persons by country of birth, 1980. Source: 1980 US Census of Population, Detailed Population Characteristics.

Fleeing poverty, military service, and an increasingly unstable political environment, third wave emigrants left Portugal primarily destined for France and other northern European countries, and secondarily for the US and Canada (Baganha and Góis 1998). As the tables show, Portuguese immigration to New Jersey coincides with Newark’s 1967 period of civil unrest and its aftermath. As Portuguese emigrants moved to Newark in increasing numbers, the city’s established white population sped up their post-WWII

exodus to the suburbs, seeking to escape social tension and deteriorating economic conditions caused by the riots. Newark's Portuguese neighborhood, called the "Ironbound" for its enclosure within train tracks and other major transportation arteries, began to flourish during Newark's very nadir. Taking advantage of emigrant credit unions and other Portuguese assistance organizations, Luso-Americans slowly began purchasing and renovating properties in the East Ward.<sup>13</sup>

Today, the Ironbound is a bustling hub filled with ethnic restaurants, bakeries, Portuguese banks, and mom and pop establishments selling everything from Portuguese ceramics to grape presses. Home to Portuguese, Brazilian and Central American immigrants where Portuguese is the dominant language of both commerce and sociability, the Ironbound is enlivened by urban gardens featuring agricultural produce from the old country, cobblestone sidewalks, and older two and three flat buildings sporting Mediterranean tile and brickwork. In recent years, the Ironbound has garnered increased attention from beyond its insular confines as a destination for New York City and suburban foodies seeking ethnic cuisine and an exotic change of pace. Prior to the 2002 mayoral election where Mayor Sharpe James failed to carry the Ironbound vote, the largely African-American municipal leadership lauded the Portuguese contribution to Newark's built environment and cultural vibrancy. "You stuck with us in our darkest hour, and you are part of our bright future," Mayor James told a gathering of Portuguese-American college students in spring 2002 (James 2002).<sup>14</sup>

### **Once pariah citizens: folklore performance challenges emigrant stereotypes**

In February 2001, the highbrow Portuguese newspaper, *Expresso*, ran a front-page article in its *Vidas* magazine recounting the tale of Newark's Luso-

<sup>13</sup> Some Portuguese residents interviewed for the IOHP recalled fearing for their lives in the summer of 1967, Maria Rebelo reports, for example, "Well, after I was here for about a year, we had the Newark riots, so that was kind of scary. I guess I was eight years old at the time and I remember vividly like it was yesterday. I remember looking out the fourth floor window [...] and I saw a little boy get shot in the foot and I still remember that to this day. My dad used to sleep with a mattress against the door and we weren't supposed to go by the window. There was only a certain time we were allowed to go out, most of the time we stayed in the house until all that was over" (Rebelo 2004). Generally, however, the East Ward was spared most of the violence and destruction. The East Ward bounced back in part due to its peripheral location relative to the central core of the riots and consequent absence from the redlining practices which prevented large sections of largely minority owned businesses and residences from rebuilding.

<sup>14</sup> Although the scope of this paper does not allow for a discussion of the issue of race and the Portuguese immigrant community, it is important to note that throughout most of the twentieth century, the Ironbound has been known as an isolated largely "white ethnic" enclave in the midst of an increasingly African American city. The Portuguese habits of social conservatism, endogamy and insularity as well as the language barrier have led some to conclude that this community does not want to "mix" with the populations of other neighborhoods. Taken to its furthest point, this dynamic of Portuguese insularity has led to charges of racism. Most of the Portuguese residents of the Ironbound interviewed for IOHP vehemently oppose such a characterization.

American Sheriff and his trouble with gangsters. Armando Fontoura's large toothy grin seems to jump off the page as the article begins:

It is ironic that Armando Fontoura speaks at times like the gangsters he so dislikes. "So," Fontoura says, "I called the Newark mayor and asked him, "What kind of shit are you up to? We catch them shooting people, exploding cars, beating up people. Mafia land, is that how you want Newark to be known? It's crazy! It's fuckin' crazy!" (Jenkins 2001)

The article goes on to explore Sheriff Fontoura's image management problem: he is trying to prohibit the producers of HBO's hit series "The Sopranos" from filming in Newark, fearing that it will exacerbate the city's historic reputation as a crime-ridden locus of corruption and violence. This overt crisis of representation, however, is complemented throughout the article by subtextual reference to an image-management problem of a different sort: Armando Fontoura's depiction as a foul-mouthed, rough and tumble *emigrante*, a portrayal, incidentally, bearing little resemblance to his real-life personae. In drawing the comparison between Armando Fontoura, Portuguese-American Sheriff, and Tony Soprano, Italian-American gangster, the article invokes Portugal's long history of emigrant stereotyping. The article's depiction of Newark as a "pariah city" and Sheriff Fontoura as an uncultured *emigrante* – a "pariah citizen" – is mitigated by the parallel narrative describing Portuguese-Americans' rise to political prominence within the state of New Jersey. In this complex journalistic mix designed to inform an elite Portuguese readership of the curious ways in which errant countrymen have adapted to new national contexts across the Atlantic, several vectors of analysis emerge which have come to ground my study of Luso-American folklore performance: expressive pride, social prejudice and political power.

Folklore performance not only contributes to Newark's narrative of social harmony and cultural renaissance. It also generates social prestige for performers, both in New Jersey and in Portugal, acting as a corrective to the negative valence often attributed to the figure of the Portuguese emigrant. The emigrant, a "key symbol" of Portuguese national identity (Brettell 2003), has been the object of repeated attention throughout nineteenth and twentieth-century Portuguese literature.<sup>15</sup> Anthropologists of Portuguese migration have attributed the emigrant's stigma to restrictive immigration policies during the *Estado Novo*, to a cycle of "illusion" perpetuated by returning emigrants who misrepresent their wealth (Brettell 2003), to "*inveja*" (Cole 1991), and a sense of betrayal among those left at home (Feldman-Bianco 1992).

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Caroline Brettell's (2003) chapter on "The Emigrant the Nation and the State" for an overview of archetypal emigrant characters in the work of prominent Portuguese writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In a robust class discussion with Luso-American student interviewers involved in the IOHP, the topic of emigrant stereotyping provoked the sharing of personal stories. According to these first and second-generation students, the experience of returning to Portugal is often colored by the reputation that precedes them. They report tensions surrounding the emigrant's hybrid identity and charges of betrayal and weakness. Angelo Cação, a student born in central Portugal, describes neighbors in his native village who accuse Portuguese-Americans of taking the easy way out. "They think all we care about is money. That we ditched our culture," he says. According to this argument, those who stayed in Portugal deserve respect for "doing the right thing" and not abandoning the country when times were tough. Luso-American students such as Sandy Pinto and Gabriella Pereira report gentle teasing by Portuguese cousins who mock their American hairstyles, clothing and accents. "They know immediately *que somos americanos* – by the way we look and talk," Gabriella says. Such interactions build on archetypal figures of the "*brasileiro*" prevalent in the nineteenth century and the "*francês*" in the twentieth. The portrayal of these figures, circulated in literature, *anedotas* and other expressions of the social imaginary, refer to rural laborers who left Portugal in pursuit of socio-economic mobility denied to them at home. After striking it rich elsewhere, the archetypal *emigrante* returns to Portugal in a dramatic display of conspicuous consumption, building retirement houses of dubious aesthetic integrity in native villages, periodically hosting overseas children and grandchildren who are criticized by neighbors for speaking pidgin Portuguese and behaving strangely.

Some Portuguese-Americans challenge this symbolic baggage by disavowing the very term "*emigrante*." In the Ironbound and throughout the editorial pages of emigrant newspapers, it is not uncommon to see older Portuguese men bristle at the term. One Ironbound man, Alfredo, a retired construction worker who never sought US citizenship told me that he refused to accept that label, preferring instead to be called a Portuguese citizen living abroad. Behind this rhetorical maneuver lies a distancing strategy which foregrounds an attachment to Portugal, disavowing any permanent dislocation or reattachment to other national contexts. New Jersey's folklore performance troupes, although also wrapped up in the pursuit of social prestige and the confrontation of negative stereotyping, do not generally participate in a rejection of their adopted homeland. According to many immigrant *ranchos* members, performing folklore does double duty, helping to mitigate the *emigrante* stereotype while boosting their status both within the Luso-American community and in Portugal. As one dancer explained,

We are not rude people who went away only to make money, as most people might think; we are able to cultivate forms of traditional music and dance

even better than *ranchos* in Portugal. *Ranchos folclóricos* are evidence that migrants have culture” (quoted in Carvalho 1990).

*Rancho* dancing also carries social weight within the smaller circles of Newark’s emigrant community. Parents who arrange for their children to join a *rancho* are seen as responsible caregivers who go out of their way to promote children’s physical safety and cultural education (see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). In addition to serving as a vehicle for the public surveillance of children’s courtship habits, *rancho* dancing also encourages endogamous pairing among second generation dancers and insures exposure to conservative values such as the respect for authority and the maintenance of traditional gender roles (Holton 2004, Carvalho 1990). Generally, parents whose children dance folklore receive positive reinforcement from the community, as they contribute to the preservation of Portuguese culture and the expression of ethnic identity while raising their kids responsibly. Daisy Currais, a second generation Ironbound resident whose parents both danced in *ranchos*, explained that her



Fig. 3 – *Rancho* dancer with American flag. Elizabeth, New Jersey, 2004.  
Photo by Maria Moreira (used with permission).



Fig. 4 – Second-generation performers from the *Danças e Cantares de Portugal*, Rancho Infantil. Elizabeth, New Jersey, 2004. Photo by Maria Moreira (used with permission).

“mother got a lot of shit from other mothers” for not forcing her daughters to dance folklore and allowing them to leave the Ironbound for high school and college (Currais 2004). She states:

We were rebellious teenagers. We refused. No, actually, I remember when we were little asking Mom why she never [forced us to join]. Cause all of our friends were forced into *rancho*. Like their Moms and Dads were like, “You must dance *rancho*. You must be part of this Portuguese thing.” And [my] Mom and Dad met in a *rancho*! When they were teenagers, that’s all they knew [...]. I think people who dance *rancho* now are forced, almost like “it will keep you off the streets. Dance *rancho*” (Currais 2004).

According to other second-generation teenagers, dancing folklore was a pleasurable activity and a physical outlet – akin to playing team sports. Brian Santos describes how *rancho* membership raised his social standing within a NJ public high school. Brian, a member of the *rancho* *Sonhos de Portugal* recalls a performance that took place in Kearny, New Jersey.

My friends in high school were always really interested in it. There's an international festival every year at the high school and when I was a student there, we performed. Basically, it is one day dedicated to all the different cultures represented in the school, and there are different performances from different cultures and the Portuguese is always one of the most popular. We always got standing ovations, everyone always loved it, the teachers, the students, they would always call us on stage and ask us lots of questions" (Santos 2002).

Brian's testimony shows the effects of the 1974 Ethnic Heritage Act which encourages multicultural celebration, even at the high school level and where, particularly in a diverse region like Northern New Jersey, children of emigrants raise their social capital by performing ethnic difference in a public context. Brian explains that, contrary to some of the kids in Portugal who get teased by their peers for performing in *ranchos*, dancing folklore is seen as "cool" by many of his NJ friends, Portuguese and non-Portuguese alike. His family is also very supportive of his participation in folklore because "It shows that I am involved in our culture" (Santos 2002). Brian, then, receives concentric circles of social kudos by dancing folklore starting with the most intimate social context, that of the nuclear family, radiating out into larger rings of friends, neighbors, classmates, teachers and administrators. Brian even articulates the stature of his *rancho* within a national framework,

We actually are considered professionals, we're in the Hudson County Book of Professional Entertainers, so anyone who is looking for a certain musical group can find us there. You know we're also in the Library of Congress, in Washington DC. We're documented in there! (Santos 2002)

*Rancho* director Tony Cardoso echoes this story of broad recognition and visibility.

We've danced at the Statue of Liberty... we were even invited to perform at Giants Stadium... We've also been on... the American FOX channel, you know FOX 5... it was really something for the kids to be on a major channel, to be on national TV (Cardoso 2003).

Santos and Cardoso both evaluate social prestige according to the increasingly national scope of exposure in the US. Other folklore performers, however, describe a transnational measuring stick for assessing status. Joseph Cerqueira, co-founder of the *Rancho Barcuense* and accordionist for *Sonhos de Portugal*, describes the implicit comparison to groups in Portugal as key to evaluating New Jersey *ranchos*.



In order to be good in the US, we have to be better than the *ranchos* in Portugal. It's a bigger world here. We practice harder, take our rehearsals more seriously. In Portugal, there are so many groups, they have the luxury of being casual. [In New Jersey] we have more exacting standards because there are only 10-12 groups. We have to represent ourselves, our [New Jersey] community and our native country. The governor invited us to his house. How many Portuguese *ranchos* can say that? (Cerqueira 2002)

The fact that Cerqueira measures his group's value comparatively – not so much in relation to other *ranchos* in New Jersey, but in relation to *ranchos* in Portugal – signals the way in which both the US and Portuguese contexts participate in an evaluation of social prestige and artistic worth. Akin to what has been called “defensive nationalism” (Ramsamy 2004), *ranchos* articulate ethnic identity in the US as both an affirmative response to Newark's multicultural reinvention and a defensive response to negative portrayals of emigrants as uncultured laborers who “ditched” native traditions in pursuit of foreign salaries and material wealth.

### **Epilogue: folklore performance and political enfranchisement**

In New Jersey, *ranchos* performance has been a consistent presence at celebrations of Luso-Americans' rise to political power. There has been much ink spilled in attempt to document and theorize the historic lack of political participation among the Portuguese in the United States (Almeida 1999, Barrow 2002, Marinho and Cornwall 1992, Moniz 1979). Casual debates on the topic often arrive at the same conclusion; voting is not part of the Portuguese culture due to the fascist government which stifled political agency from 1926-74. However, as Onésimo Almeida (1999) rightly points out, lack of political participation throughout Portuguese emigrant communities predates the installation of the *Estado Novo*. As recently as 1996, the authors of a proposed documentary entitled “Newark's Silent Majority: Citizens Without a Voice” describe the situation in the Ironbound:

More than fifty years ago they started coming, drawn by the hope of a promising future in a bountiful country. Today they find themselves possessing the material things the country offered, but missing the joy and power of a people who govern themselves. Newark's Portuguese-Americans don't vote [...] They have turned the Ironbound into an inner city paradise, but have never elected one of their own to the City Council. And they are bitter about it. The Ironbound is a dumping ground and its people whipping boys for cynical politicians who revel in Luso-American political impotence, never failing to ignore it (Lancellotti and Gardner, quoted in Almeida 1999).

Lancellotti and Gardner's depiction of Newark's Portuguese in 1996, however, no longer reflects the reality of the community in 2004. In November 1998, Augusto Amador became the first Portuguese-American councilman elected to office in the history of Newark. In May 2002 with the election of Governor James McGreevey, Dina Matos McGreevey, a Portuguese-American activist, became New Jersey's First Lady. In November 2004, as Richard Cody took office as acting New Jersey Governor, Luso-American Sheriff Armando Fontoura was named as one of Cody's three most trusted advisors (Golway 2004). The Portuguese government even recognized this change during a 2003 "Seminar on Participation and Citizenship" in Lisbon, citing the increase in Luso-Americans elected to office as a model upswing in civic engagement (*Luso-Americano* 2003).

Since the late 1990s, as NJ Luso-Americans have raised their political standing, *ranchos folclóricos* have served as the expressive mascot of Portuguese ethnicity in action. Many of NJ's 13 *ranchos* have performed at voter drives, election parties and alongside campaign speeches. The Portugal Day celebrations hosted on the lawn of Governor McGreevey's home illustrates the symbiotic blending of folklore performance and political empowerment. In May 2002, the newly elected governor hosted a party at his mansion in celebration of Portugal Day, marked by the performances of three Newark *ranchos*. Reviews and color photographs of these *rancho* performances made their way into the local press, announcing, in the words of several journalists, the political arrival of the Portuguese.<sup>16</sup> With hundreds of Luso-American community leaders in attendance, *ranchos* marked an historic marriage (literal and figurative) between this immigrant constituency and the upper reaches of state government.

The final celebration of Portugal Day at the Governor's mansion on June 6<sup>th</sup> 2004 featured performances by Newark's *Rancho Folclórico A Eira* as well as fado performances by local Luso-American musicians. The event's *grande finale*, however, was reserved for a *rancho folclórico* that had flown in from Portugal. As the emcee made clear, this troupe, the *Grupo Folclórico e Etnográfico da Vimieira*, had been chosen in honor of First Lady Dina Matos McGreevey whose family had emigrated from the Vimieira region. After twenty minutes of performance and a round of hearty applause, the troupe's director approached the microphone with a basketful of gifts. Dina Matos McGreevey left her perch beside political dignitaries and uniformed members of the Portuguese American Police Association to receive the gifts – municipal flags, a brass plaque, local delicacies – mementos from her originary home across the sea. Dressed in peasant garb, the *rancho* director beamed at the audience, relating stories of Mrs. McGreevey's largesse in donating funds for

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, *Luso-Americano* 2002.

public works projects in the Vimieira region. “We are so proud of Dina,” the *rancho* director said within a “hometown girl makes good” narrative, as the elegant First Lady bowed her head to receive the compliment, giving the *rancho* performer heartfelt *beijinhos*. The visit of the Portuguese *rancho* was a homecoming of sorts – the symbolic integration of local Portuguese origins and new immigrant horizons, brokered and enacted by thirty adults and children performing the songs and dances of nineteenth-century peasants.

Bernardino Coutinho, owner of a chain of NJ bakeries and founder of Newark’s Portugal Day parade, closed the ceremony with an impassioned speech. Consistent with the rhetoric of the Portuguese government, Coutinho urged the Luso-American public to commit to their lives in New Jersey by voting and participating in the Luso-American voluntary organizations. In my field notes, I recorded a portion of his words,

Coutinho said, “Forget about building those retirement houses in Portugal! Our lives should be lived here. Look around you. We have been welcomed into the home of the governor of the state of New Jersey. Governor McGreevey and our First Lady Dina have opened up their home to us. They have fed us and entertained us and made us feel that their house is our house. Let’s face it, we’re treated better here than in Portugal. We have to continue investing in our community and we will continue to be rewarded [...] like this,” he says with his arms outstretched toward the elegant grounds. Off in the distance, the Portuguese flag flies alongside the American.

In his statement, Coutinho argues implicitly for the continued rehabilitation of the “pariah citizen.” The key to rehabilitation, according to his speech, is through community activism and political participation. By balancing “dreams of Portugal” with US action and engagement, Luso-Americans can leave a mark on their adopted homelands, perhaps even participate in the decision making machinery of state and local government – achievements, Coutinho implies, nearly impossible to imagine within the rigid hierarchies of Portuguese society where, he argues, emigrants are “poorly treated.” Committing to the US, not through deracinated performances of total assimilation, but through the expression of ethnic identity within local contexts of difference, allows the Portuguese community of Newark to participate in the city’s cultural “comeback” (Grogan and Proscio 2001), while treading a path toward political empowerment and social recognition.

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## Kimberly DaCosta Holton

### ORGULHO, PRECONCEITO E POLÍTICA: O FOLCLORE PORTUGUÊS NO RENASCIMENTO URBANO DE NEWARK

*Este artigo, baseado em trabalho de campo etnográfico e em histórias orais, examina o papel da cultura expressiva na renovação de lugares e populações estigmatizados, centrando-se no papel desempenhado pela performance do folclore português na narrativa dramática da conciliação multicultural e das transformações que se seguiram aos motins e distúrbios em Newark, New Jersey. Os ranchos folclóricos portugueses, envolvidos em processos de renovação urbana, regeneração social, adaptação imigrante e aquisição de poder político, não podem ser simplesmente interpretados como manifestações de um anseio nostálgico pela terra de origem. Esses ranchos procuram antes demonstrar, prestando tributo quer ao contexto de origem quer ao de acolhimento e para audiências situadas nos dois lados do Atlântico, que os imigrantes portugueses, por vezes acusados de terem "abandonado" o seu país, tiram partido das tradições oitocentistas do campesinato rural ao introduzi-las em agendas contemporâneas de integração social, construção da comunidade e renovação urbana.*

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