

The New Blue Islands: Azorean Immigration, Settlement, and Cultural Landscapes in California's San Joaquin Valley

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Abstract

We examine the settlement patterns, immigrant networks, and cultural landscapes of one of the most unique migrations in California, Azoreans who relocated to the San Joaquin Valley. Like many settler groups, Azoreans that moved to California brought along customs and traditions associated with their homeland and adapted these practices to new environments. Azoreans were first drawn to California by the whaling industry and the Gold Rush, but soon settled in California's San Joaquin Valley to engage in agriculture. During the early twentieth century, the rural communities of the San Joaquin Valley emerged as important destinations for subsequent waves of Azorean immigrants. Today, the San Joaquin Valley supports a vibrant Cal-Azorean landscape. Moreover, frequent travel between valley communities and the Azores connects immigrants to family and community in the homeland. This transnational connection maintains ethno-heritage ties and immigrant networks that continue to shape the cultural landscapes of both California and the Azores.

Introduction

CALIFORNIA HAS LONG SERVED as a destination and permanent home to people from all corners of the world, and the state's vibrant communities represent many cultures. We explore Portuguese migration to California, with a specific focus on the emigration from the Azores to California's San Joaquin Valley. Our research investigates the contemporary patterns and flows of the Azorean Diaspora in a regional California setting and proposes the emergence of a California-Azorean landscape. At present, the U.S. Census indicates that 276,683 Californians claim Portuguese ancestry and that nine of the state's fifty-eight counties show at least five percent of the population

asserting Portuguese ancestry. While these numbers may not seem large against the backdrop of recent immigration to the state, they are significant when one learns that the majority of Portuguese settlers came to California in the early decades of the 1900s and were later reinforced by subsequent migrations in the 1960s.

The Azores is an island archipelago of nine distinct islands that lies approximately seven hundred miles west of Portugal. At first glance, it might seem an unlikely place for a population exodus to California. Azoreans faced many hardships that led to emigration from their homeland, including high birthrates, lack of available land for farming, and economic adversity stemming from a decline in prices for exported goods. Additionally, emigration was spurred by natural disasters on several islands and by young males throughout the Azores who departed to evade military conscription (Nunes and Ferreira 2011, 48–52; Williams 1982, 65).

The spatial patterning of Portuguese immigrants is unique among European settler groups in California. Earlier studies of the Portuguese in California indicate that they prefer to settle in rural areas. They were also reluctant to join other national origin groups by relocating to the state's growing cities. In fact, the Portuguese preference to live on rural farms was four times that of other national origin groups in 1930, and six times greater in 1960 (Graves 1977, xv).

We employ a variety of methods to investigate Azorean migration and settlement with archival and census materials, field investigation, landscape analysis, and participant observation providing the bulk of data. We participated in a variety of social gatherings and cultural activities, and we met local church and Portuguese community leaders. The information obtained from these sources provides a contemporary view of immigrant sources and destinations, allowed us to observe the engagement of migrants in the community, and supported our subsequent research activities in the Azores. Our Azorean research benefitted extensively from personal conversations with California-Azorean community leaders, who provided invaluable information and logistical support during our visit to immigrant sending communities on the Azorean islands of São Jorge and Terceira.

Migration Flows, Settlement Destinations, and Immigrant Networks

Portuguese first came to the United States in the 1820s. The primary focus of migration was southern New England and California, where mainly Azorean immigrants were hired as crew members on whaling ships. Traditionally, Azoreans were not a seafaring culture; however, they were in demand by whaling companies because they could be hired for lower wages than domestic laborers. Because of their participation in shore whaling, Azoreans were privy to news of the discovery of gold in California and, not surprisingly, they can be counted among the state's earliest gold-seekers. With the demise of the whaling industry, immigrants were redirected into the fishing and shipping trades in Boston. A second wave of migration coincides with the late 1800s. Azorean immigrants were eventually drawn to the textile mills of New England, which helped to solidify earlier immigration destinations, and a new immigrant stream made its way to Hawaii working as laborers in the sugar plantations (Williams 1982, Santos 1995).

California Beckons

Like many of California's newcomers, Azoreans were drawn from their island archipelago to the gold fields of the Sierra Nevada. In California, the post-gold rush economy drew many immigrants, including Azoreans, to new areas of the state. Resource-led development including timber harvesting, fishing, and agriculture opened up and directed new settlement in the state. Throughout this period, Azoreans relied on the established migration routes and settlement patterns of their predecessors. Over time, distinctive immigrant social networks were created that would provide similar pathways to later arrivals. Until 1900, Azorean settlement was primarily focused in the East Bay counties of Alameda, Contra Costa, Santa Clara, and, to a lesser extent, San Francisco and Marin Counties. Taken together, this five-county Bay Area region accounted for fifty-five percent of all foreign-born Portuguese in the state in 1900. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the California Portuguese population doubled, numbering 33,025 in 1920. During this period, Alameda County represented a main destination for new arrivals, and specific Azorean immigrant communities could be found in Humboldt, Monterey, and San Luis Obispo counties. By the early 1900s, truck farming and dairying emerged as key industries in the state, and Azoreans gravitated to Sonoma, Alameda, and Stanislaus counties (Graves 1977, Williams 1982).

New Blue Islands: Emergence of an Ethnic Archipelago in the San Joaquin Valley

The early 1900s also witnessed the emergence of new destinations as Portuguese settlement began to shift away from the coast to the state's San Joaquin Valley. New arrivals were initially drawn to the region because of the opportunity to engage in ranching. In particular sheepherding, an often forgotten occupation in California, provided an early path to social mobility for Azorean immigrants. According to Donald Warrin, sheepmen like Enos and John Gomes, Azorean immigrants from Fajã dos Vimes, São Jorge Island, engaged in the age-old practice of transhumance. During the winter months, they kept their sheep flocks in the San Joaquin's warm inland valleys and then drove them into the mountains for the summer season (Warrin 1997/1998).

Portuguese were relatively unique in their preference for settling in rural locations in California. According to an early study of the Portuguese in California, over fifty-four percent lived in rural areas and farms. A typical settler would work as a day laborer until he earned enough to buy land for cash. Women and children typically supported the family by raising small livestock and tending to a kitchen garden. By 1920, only foreign-born Italians and Germans owned more California farms than the Portuguese, who owned 3,440 farms totaling nearly 438,000 acres (Brown 1944, Baganha 1995).

A detailed analysis of the pioneering efforts of Azoreans in the San Joaquin Valley found that immigrants generally entered the workforce as milkers and shepherds in the region's emerging dairy industry. Azoreans in particular depended on livestock in their island homelands. Dairy work did not require skilled knowledge of machinery, and immigrants with little or no English could manage quite well in a dairy economy. Moreover, dairying was a family affair, utilizing the labor of the entire family and newly arrived cousins and relatives. The growth of dairying was also aided by a precipitous decline in California's wool industry that had initially drawn and employed a large number of Portuguese sheep herders in the southern San Joaquin Valley. As a result, many displaced sheep herders turned to dairying. By the 1930s, word about the success of Azorean dairying had spread throughout the immigrant community, and within three decades the Portuguese had achieved a numerical majority in the dairy industry. The Portuguese imprint in agriculture is apparent today as evidenced by one study that found two-thirds of

dairy farmers in Merced, Kings, and Tulare Counties had Portuguese surnames (Graves 1977, Warrin 1997/1998).

After 1920, anti-immigration laws led to a decline in Portuguese migration to the United States and California. By the late 1950s, a third wave of emigration from the Azores was underway. The (1957–1958) eruption of Capelinhos on the island of Faial prompted changes in U.S. immigration policy. It resulted in the Azorean Refugee Acts of 1958 and 1960 to assist Azoreans impacted by the volcanic eruption. Refugees from Faial who were directly impacted by the natural disaster, as well as other Azorean citizens, benefited from this temporary legislation and made their way to United States. Subsequent natural disasters, including the 1964 and the 1980 earthquakes on São Jorge Island and the island of Terceira, respectively, led to additional immigration reform, including the elimination of the national origins quota and increased support for family reunification. The numbers of Portuguese immigrants increased substantially during this period, with more than 150,000 coming to the United States between 1961 and 1977, representing thirty-five percent of the total Portuguese immigration to the country since 1982 (Williams 1982, 96). Population geographers James Allen and Eugene Turner estimate that twenty percent of this number relocated to California, and that nearly thirty percent of all the Portuguese ancestry group live in California (1988, 120).

Throughout the various Azorean migration flows to California, migrants followed the well-worn paths of their predecessors to form spatially concentrated settlements in the San Joaquin Valley that mirror their island of origin. Before 1900, most migrants hailed from the islands of Pico, São Jorge, and Terceira. The majority of migrants from the island of Terceira settled in Kings, Tulare, Stanislaus, San Joaquin, and western Merced Counties. By contrast, migrants from the island of São Jorge predominated in the eastern portion of Merced County, while those from Pico concentrated in the Hanford area of Kings County (Graves 1977). Later migration flows reinforced the spatial patterning of these “new blue islands” in the San Joaquin Valley (Figure 1). This geographical expression is also largely responsible for the deeply rooted migration networks that presently exist between the Azores and California. Moreover, such island-centric migration chains reinforce the intensity of these networks and immigrant communities in California that ultimately influence the Azorean cultural traditions in the San Joaquin Valley. Azorean-California networks are intense and persist due to the nature

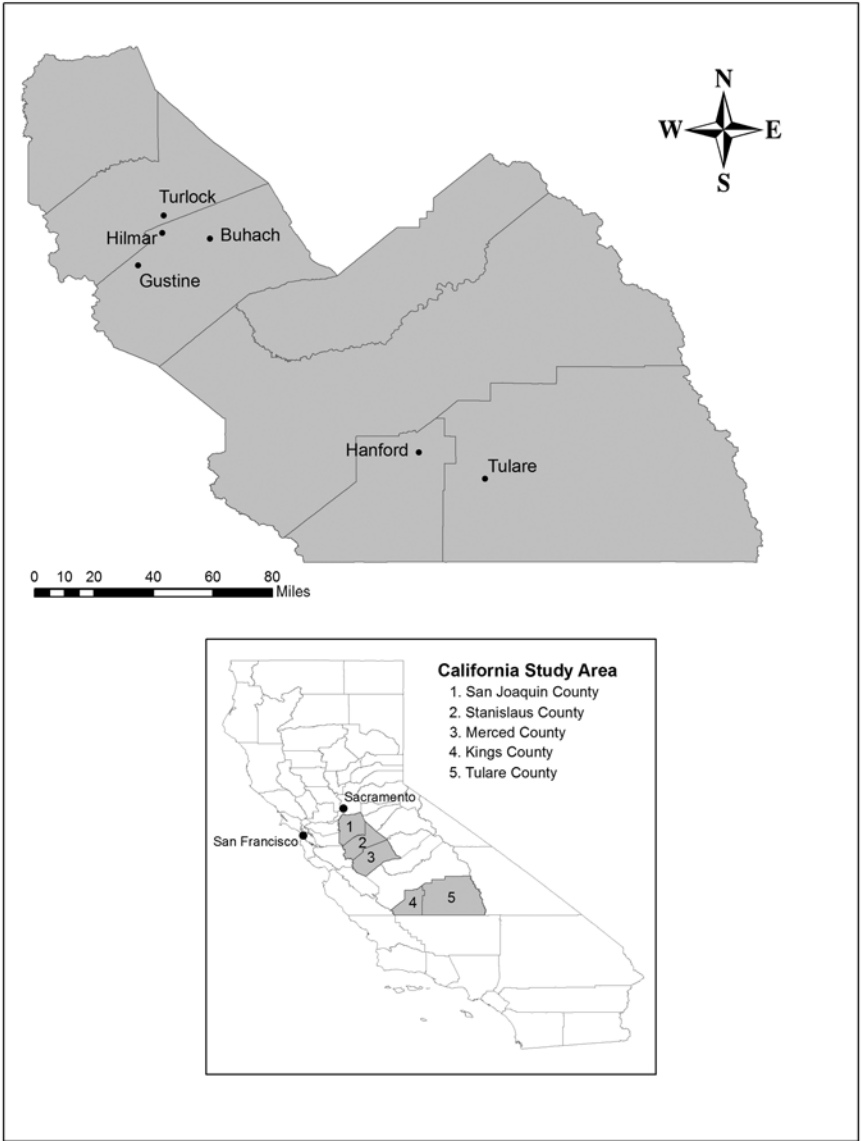


Figure 1.—Locations of the “new blue islands” in California’s San Joaquin Valley.

of “islandness” in both the migrants’ homeland and within their California communities, where in both cases they are isolated from very few competing networks. A number of studies have reached similar conclusions about the level of “intensity to kinship networks” in an island setting (Williams and Fonseca 1999). This intensity

is apparent in diverse settings among virtually all first-generation immigrants who are known by, or often will know, those living in their home island. During our visit to both Terceira and São Jorge, we witnessed this phenomenon in virtually every social interaction. The immigrant-kinship network was particularly acute during travel to the Azores, when immigrants and their families first meet upon departure to the Azores. During the summer months, hundreds of Azorean-Californians board a weekly direct flight from Oakland International to Terceira's Lajes Airport. The temporary reunification afforded during the flight and throughout the summer months at numerous religious and cultural festivals reinvigorates migrant networks. This deepening of social relations and institutions over time is reinforced through family reunification and the interdependency of immigrant communities. Networks are further intensified in particular island communities through property transfer, income remittances, and periodic return visits to Azorean homelands. It is also clearly represented in the shaping of Cal-Azorean cultural landscapes in the migrant communities of the San Joaquin Valley.

Emergence of the Cal-Azorean Landscape

Carol Ann Gregory's detailed analysis of Portuguese landscapes in California rightly argues that the most authentic cultural landscapes are found in the rural areas of the state and include Portuguese halls, churches, and dairies (2004, 167–171). Our findings extend her work to suggest that *Cal-Azorean* landscapes best describe the distinctive cultural imprint in the San Joaquin Valley and that these expressions represent a unique blend of social relations and migrants networks that stem from the phenomenon of *islandness* in both their Azorean homelands and in their California settler communities. We present four unique Azorean ethnic landscapes including homescapes, *festas*, bullrings, and cultural institutions to illustrate the Cal-Azorean landscape typology in the San Joaquin Valley.

Azorean Homescapes

Like many cultures, Azoreans have incorporated features into the landscape of their homes that connect them to their emigrant homeland. There are several characteristics that distinguish California's Azorean homescapes from non-Azorean residences. Common features of an Azorean home include the use of hydrangeas, religious symbols (religious tile murals and statues of saints), and decorative volcanic rocks.

Hydrangeas are found throughout the Azores islands and are an important symbol that ties migrants to their homeland. The acidity of the soil in the Azores makes the hydrangeas a vivid blue color, and they provide colorful borders and fences, particularly on São Jorge Island. In the San Joaquin Valley, hydrangeas are often found in the front yards of Azorean migrants and depictions of the flower appear on household items and likewise adorn floats, oxen carts, and paintings (Figure 2).



Figure 2.—Float decorated with hydrangeas to represent São Jorge Island, Bode de Leite, Our Lady of Assumption Festa, Turlock, CA, September 2011.

Another common feature in the landscape of an Azorean home is the use of decorative volcanic rock. This landscape type is most common among older migrants, who use volcanic rock in their front yards, sidewalks, and residential walls. Homes in the Azores that have a front yard will also incorporate volcanic rocks into the landscape (Figure 3).



Figure 3.—Use of volcanic rock in this contrasting black-and-white pattern is common throughout the Island of São Jorge. Azorean migrants in California often use volcanic rock to decorate their yards.

An ethno-religious symbol commonly found throughout the Azores and replicated in the San Joaquin Valley is religious tile murals, located on the front exterior wall of a home. A survey of Azorean residences in the Merced County town of Hilmar, population 5,200, found a total of sixty-two homes with religious tile murals, with some homes featuring more than one tile. In Hilmar, the religious tile murals show the devotion Azoreans have to their religion and their culture. Similar to the use of decorative volcanic rock, religious tile murals are most closely associated with the homes of first-generation Azoreans who came from the islands. Moreover, the field survey found that relatively new homes in Hilmar lacked tile murals. The tiles that are found on homes in the San Joaquin Valley are purchased from the Azores. In the Azores, religious tile murals are found on a majority of the homes, with owners selecting

an image of the saint that represents their town or that symbolizes their particular island. Figure 4 shows an example of a religious tile mural in Hilmar (left side) and one in São Miguel Island (right side). As the island's namesake, the St. Michael tile found on a home in São Miguel is especially common.



Figure 4.—Left side, a religious tile mural found in Hilmar. Right side, a religious tile mural found on São Miguel Island Azores.

Festas (Festivals)

Every Sunday from May through October, it is common to come across a group of people walking through small towns in the San Joaquin Valley either dressed in traditional Azorean clothing, carrying statues of saints, or marching in a band. The gathering and associated celebrations represent one of the most important festivals in Azorean-Portuguese culture in the region and throughout the state, the Holy Spirit *Festa*. The Holy Spirit has played a vital role in the Portuguese culture, and its origins can be traced back to the time of Queen Isabel in the early 1300s. Queen Isabel was known for taking bread from her own table and giving it to the poor. One day, her husband, King Diniz of Portugal, asked her to show him what she was hiding. When she opened up her cloak, roses fell out instead of bread (Azevedo 1990). Figure 5 shows a statue of St. Isabel

that is used in Holy Spirit *festas*. When the feast for the Holy Spirit first started in Portugal a meal was given and the poorest person at the feast was deemed to be king of the feast and wore a crown.



Figure 5.—Statue of St. Isabel at the Our Lady of Miracles Festa, Gustine. Photo by E. Machado.

The *feira* was very popular among Portuguese and was introduced to the Azores upon their settlement of the islands. Likewise, the Azorean immigrants who settled in California brought along the *feira* tradition to the San Joaquin Valley. In the San Joaquin Valley, the first Holy Ghost *feira* was held in Buhach in 1900 (Goulart 2003). Currently, a total of thirty-one Holy Spirit *festas* regularly take place in the San Joaquin Valley. *Festas* are initially started by groups of Azoreans in a community that share an interest in celebrating and

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continuing their Azorean ethno-religious identity and traditions. In honor of Queen Isabel, the tradition of giving bread to the poor is still practiced in California. Every Holy Spirit *feira* has a feast of *sopas* (bread, meat, and cabbage) that is free to the public, and it is estimated that more than 200,000 free meals are served by Azorean volunteer-based organizations every year (Goulart 2003).

One of the most popular *feitas* in the San Joaquin Valley is Our Lady of Miracles (OLM) in Gustine. The brainchild of the Portuguese-American Club, the OLM festival was initiated in 1932 and was known as the *Festa da Serreta* because it was closely patterned after the festival honoring *Nossa Senhora do Milagres* in the village of Serreta, Terceira Island (Gayton 1948). The festival's founder, Manuel B. Sousa, a resident of Gustine, was inspired to recreate the Serreta festival after witnessing the original celebration during a visit to the Azores. The *feira* recently celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary (September 2011), and every year it draws Azoreans from all over the state (Figure 6). This year's celebration included sixty-four Portuguese queens and queens from past *feitas* to commemorate the anniversary (OLM website). The *feira* has played an important role in connecting Gustine to the Azores and strengthening the social relations between the island of Terceira and the San Joaquin Valley, as evidenced by the 2002 agreement to authorize sister-city status between Gustine and the work heritage site of the city of Angra, Terceira Island.



Figure 6.—The procession of Portuguese queens, Our Lady of Miracles Festa in Gustine 2010.

Festas in Gustine and Serreta create ethno-religious linkages among migrants and provide a shared identity with communities in the Azores. We were fortunate to attend *festas* in both Gustine and in Serreta and see how the celebrations share important similarities and differences. Both *festas* draw participants from outside the local community. In the Azores, thousands of devotees from all over Terceira Island participate in the religious celebration, with many choosing to walk in the form of a modern-day pilgrimage to Serreta. Portuguese “queens,” who represent St. Isabel by carrying the Holy Spirit crown, are a prominent feature of Gustine’s *feira*, as well as all California festivals, but they do not exist in the Azores. When *festas* first started in California, they were similar to those in the Azores; however, by the early 1900s, queens rather than kings would wear the full regalia (cape, gown, and crown) during the processionals.

Another common feature that is associated with the Holy Spirit festa is *imperios* (chapels) located on the property of the Portuguese organization that holds the event. *Imperios* are found in nearly every small village throughout the Azores. In the past, *imperios* would be the place where food would be stored to feed the poor. Now, both in the Azores and in the San Joaquin Valley, *imperios* are used to store the Holy Spirit crown. Two types of *imperios* are common in the San Joaquin Valley. One finds both the traditional, decorative type found in the Azores (Figure 7) and others are designed to blend in with other structures located on the property.



Figure 7.—Turlock Pentecost Association imperio compared to a typical imperio on the island of Terceira.

Bloodless Bullfights

Another tradition that has been carried from Portugal to the Azores and now to California is the Portuguese bullfight. During most of the week, the eight bullfighting rings in the San Joaquin Valley are deserted and seemingly abandoned; however, on Monday nights during the *feira* season these arenas fill to capacity with bullfighting fans and aficionados. The largest bullfighting ring, with a capacity of 3,500 people, is located in the town of Stevinson (Merced County). Bloodless bullfights are unique to the California ethnic landscape in that they are allowed to occur because of their association with a religious celebration. In the Azores, there are two types of bullfights—those held in a ring (*tourada da praça*), and those held in a street (*tourada à corda*). In a *tourada à corda*, literally “bulls on a rope,” the bull is tied to a rope that is held by five skilled handlers while the bull runs through a blocked-off street. The *tourada à corda* is uncommon in California but can be found in Gustine and the city of Tulare; however, it is quite common on the island of Terceira during the summer months, with nearly every village on the island holding a bullfight event (Figure 8).



Figure 8.—A *tourada à corda*, Altares, Terceira Island, September 2011.

Azorean Cultural Institutions

Cultural institutions such as the *Casa dos Açores* in Hilmar serve as a focal point for Azoreans living in the San Joaquin Valley. It offers services and activities to a wide range of community members, including English-language classes for Azorean immigrants, Portuguese language classes for youth, viola (Portuguese guitar) lessons, and instruction in traditional folklore dancing. The organization also acts as a social venue for Azoreans in the community who want to watch Portuguese soccer games, play Portuguese card games, or simply to socialize. The facility was founded in 1977 with the intention of helping the Azorean community preserve its heritage and to promote Portuguese cultural activities. Situated near the junction of Highways 165 and 99, *Casa dos Açores* is a large, bright blue building that is not easily missed in the small town Hilmar (Figure 9). It is centrally located among a high concentration of Azorean residents, and it is also easily accessible to Azoreans from neighboring communities such as Gustine and Turlock.



Figure 9.—*Casa dos Açores* located in Hilmar, California. Photo by E. Machado.

The San Joaquin Valley has one Portuguese National Church, Our Lady of the Assumption (OLA) Catholic Church, located in Turlock (Figure 10). The Church is located on the rural outskirts of Turlock and is a commanding presence among the agricultural fields that surround the facility. The Church grounds are imprinted with various Azorean-Portuguese cultural symbols, including Ave Maria arches that frame the walkways, windows featuring Portuguese navigational crosses, navigational crosses embedded in the stone sidewalks, Helzer and Machado: The New Blue Islands

religious tile murals, and directional signs in both English and Portuguese. Like *Casa dos Açores*, OLA provides many services to the Portuguese community. The Church organizes its own *feira*, supports a Portuguese Cultural Center, provides social services (VALER) to help community members become United States citizens, and runs one of two Portuguese language schools in the San Joaquin Valley.



Figure 10.—Our Lady of the Assumption Catholic Church, Turlock.

The establishment of Portuguese-language schools and classes offered at public schools is key to the future maintenance of Portuguese-Azorean cultural in the region. In Hilmar, the elementary school offers a Portuguese enrichment program, and Hilmar High School offers Portuguese language classes. Jorge de Sena Portuguese School is held every Monday at Our Lady of Assumption Church in Turlock. The school offers a K–8 curriculum to a total of 100 students. A second school, the Portuguese Language Academy in Hilmar, is part of the STARTALK program, a project of the National Foreign Language Center and federally funded by the National Security Language Initiative. The four-week summer immersion is offered to fourth- through twelfth-grade students of Portuguese descent. In addition to language and writing classes, students are exposed to a wide variety of cultural traditions and events in their communities,

including visits to Portuguese bakeries and restaurants, listening to the traditional Portuguese music genre known as the *fado*, visits to a bullfight arena, and participation in a traditional Azorean *feira*.

Conclusion

The findings of this research extend our knowledge of the dynamic processes of Azorean migration, settlement, and cultural landscape change in California's San Joaquin Valley. Our field work in both California and the Azores revealed that the Azorean community relies on extensive migrant networks and social relations to maintain ties between Azorean and California homelands, that these island-centric networks impact settlement patterns in the San Joaquin Valley, and that they shape the region's Cal-Azorean landscape. The notion of *islandness* is suggested as a way to explain the character and persistence of Cal-Azorean landscapes. The stability of Cal-Azorean ethnic landscapes and the recent flourishing of cultural activities and programs such as the Portuguese language school may indicate that the San Joaquin Valley is emerging as California's most thriving and vibrant Azorean archipelago homeland.

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