

*On Home Is an Island, by Alfred Lewis*

Gilberto Pereira

While *Home Is An Island* appears to be a fictionalized sketch of Lewis's formative years on Flores in the early 1900s, his accounts are nearly identical to my experiences in New Bedford during the 1950s and 60s. But he lived on a tiny remote island in the middle of an ocean, and I lived in a city of 100,000, in an area populated by a few million. Our experiences only differ materially in that I wore shoes, and it wasn't necessary for me to emigrate to America.

While my immediate family wasn't overly religious (we went to Mass on Sundays and Holy Days, but not much more), my extended family was very religious. My father's three aunts, each born on São Miguel around 1900, were knock-offs of Senhora de Castro, particularly on matters of the Church, and they were not shy about advocating for the necessity of it being central to our lives. On the other hand, my father, who was very attached to his aunts since his mother died when he was a teenager, filled the role of Senhor de Castro, frequently coming up with excuses for not being able to join us at Mass, or for not going to confession.

I was José de Castro. Among thirteen cousins (7 boys and 6 girls), I was the best student, the quietest, and the most compliant of the boys, which of course imprinted me with the label "he's going to become a priest", even though the thought never crossed my mind. I did serve duty as an altar boy, but much like Father Corvelo, the priests in our parish were somewhat indifferent about my future. However, one of my elementary school teachers, a nun, served as my Professor Silva. As he did for José, she encouraged me to think and to learn and to be my own person; rather than scold me for mediocre homework or questionable behavior, she would instead say "Gilbert, you're better than that." So as time passed, I allowed the family to speculate on my future in the priesthood, but I was always headed in a different direction, much like José de Castro.

And I should add that I, too, had a Maria da Serra, although she wasn't Portuguese and she wasn't even Catholic. We met when I was 13; she stayed in town while I, like José, migrated west, not to California but to New York and then Toronto and then Minneapolis; but I DID return, and 62 years later we married.

So there you have it. Despite vastly different geographies and vastly different opportunities, my home was an island, too; a Portuguese one in an American ocean!!!