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IDEAS

# HOW SHOULD PORTUGUESE AMERICANS BE CLASSIFIED?

The question of who Portuguese Americans are—white, Hispanic, minority, nonminority—remains unsettled.

By Jeremy Klemin



Joanne Imperio / The Atlantic; sources: John Collier Jr. / Library of Congress

**M**Y GRANDFATHER JOSÉ was a dark-skinned, thickly accented man who lived in Escondido, California, where 52 percent of the 150,000 inhabitants are Hispanic. But José, born in Portugal, was not Hispanic, at least not according to present-day federal definitions. Throughout the 60 years that my *avô* lived in the United States, such federal classifications changed constantly. He was once a minority, now not. For a while he was Hispanic, until he was white. The question of who Portuguese Americans are has become an existential debate for members of the community, with profound consequences for their daily lives.

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Portuguese Americans—and other groups that defy simple categorization—complicate America’s approach to race and ethnicity, which tends to classify people as either minority or nonminority. Whether a group is considered a minority affects how the U.S. census counts them. It can influence which

universities accept them, and whether an employer decides to hire them. It guides their eligibility for programs and policies meant to uplift marginalized groups. But for Portuguese Americans, there is no consistent answer.

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Today, Portuguese Americans are not a minority under federal guidelines, but their classification varies by state. Some states, such as Florida, categorize Portuguese Americans as Hispanic, while others, such as California, do not. In a few places, including Massachusetts, laws and regulations treat them as a disadvantaged group for at least some purposes.



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Ethnic categories aren't necessarily static; neither are the policies that make use of

them. Indeed, a looming Supreme Court decision on affirmative action could upend the government’s whole approach to assessing and addressing racial and ethnic disparities, raising anew the question of which groups are disadvantaged and how, if at all, public policy should respond.

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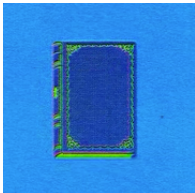
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For now, how Portuguese Americans should be classified remains ambiguous. Carlo Matos, a second-generation Portuguese American poet and writer, told me that the only label he’s comfortable using is “not quite white.” He grew up in Fall

River, Massachusetts, where more than 40 percent of the population is Portuguese, and said he had little in common with white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. Matos and his non-Portuguese friends used to make light of how strangers outside Fall River would treat him. “We had a joke—everybody called me ‘random ethnic man.’”

**I**N THE LATE 1870S, the first major wave of Portuguese immigrants began arriving in New England whaling ports from the Azores, an archipelago 1,000 miles from Lisbon. The islands were beset by overpopulation, war, and poor economic conditions. The Portuguese Heritage Society estimates that up to 90 percent of Portuguese Americans descend from the Azores. Their lives in America weren't much better. Whaling had already peaked, so many worked in New England's textile mills and factories, living mostly in squalor. Azoreans in Central California, who settled on the West Coast during the Gold Rush, fared somewhat better because available jobs in the dairy industry matched the skill set of the recently arrived.

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Over the next century, immigration from the Azores fell with the passage of anti-foreigner legislation and rose again when a volcano erupted on the island of Faial in 1957. Portuguese immigrants' experience followed some preexisting patterns. Onésimo Teotónio Almeida, a professor of Portuguese and Brazilian studies at Brown University, told me that they have the most in common with Italian Americans. Italians arrived in the U.S. as dark-skinned others—not Black, but certainly not white.

Gradually, though, Italians were absorbed into white America. The status of Portuguese Americans remains more complicated—partly because they are frequently confused with people who trace their ancestry to Spain or its former American colonies. The Library of Congress's list of Hispanic American members includes the Portuguese Americans David Valadao, Jim Costa, and Lori Trahan. Such categorization directly contradicts definitions of *Hispanic* used by federal administrative agencies. The Office of Management and Budget, from which the Census Bureau takes its guidelines, defines *Hispanic* or *Latino* as “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race.”

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Portuguese Americans themselves have divided views on how to self-identify. In 1973, more than 500 Portuguese and Portuguese American community leaders gathered for the first annual Portuguese Congress in America. There, they discussed whether to push for local and federal recognition as a legal minority. Almost all, including Almeida, the Brown professor, voted for the Portuguese to be considered a minority; only three members dissented. Although some Portuguese Americans saw themselves as white, many voted for minority recognition in order to reflect the “difficulty of social integration, social marginalization, and discrimination” that Americans of Portuguese descent faced, according to Miguel Moniz, an anthropologist at the University Institute of Lisbon who studies Portuguese racialization.

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Claiming minority status, however, is not the same as identifying as Latino or Hispanic, though federal guidelines sometimes conflate the two. In 2013, the Department of Transportation included Portuguese Americans under its definition of Hispanic, leading Portuguese advocacy groups to worry that the Census Bureau would adopt that same definition in the 2020 count. The Portuguese American Leadership Council of the United States surveyed community members about whether they identified as Hispanic. According to Dulce Maria Scott, an Anderson University sociology and criminal-justice professor who oversaw the research as a PALCUS consultant, 90 percent of the 6,000 respondents rejected the label.

In her survey for PALCUS, Scott notes that during the early 20th century, Japanese and Indian immigrants lobbied hard to be considered white. The takeaway is not about who is or is not white—a term that, again, is social rather than scientific—but that these groups had a vested interest in others seeing them as such. Scott told me that this could partially explain why the Portuguese Americans she surveyed did not want to identify as Hispanic. For many Portuguese immigrants, “adaptation and integration into the U.S. was very painful,” she said. “I think that not wanting to repeat that is, in part, what’s under this rejection of the Hispanic label.”



Others are reluctant to claim that label in contexts where it might benefit them unduly. Although Matos, the poet, feels confident that “Hispanic” captures his experience better than “white,” he remains conflicted about using it. “Half the time I [mark myself as Hispanic], and half the time guilt overcomes me and I say no,” he said.

In Rhode Island, Massachusetts, California, and Florida—states with large Portuguese American populations—Portuguese American household income today modestly exceeds state medians. In 2018, a Superior Court judge in Boston ruled that although Portuguese businesses are not “minority-owned,” and thus cannot receive benefits earmarked for government contracts, they do have “Portuguese business enterprise” status in Massachusetts, which makes them eligible for special consideration on specific projects.



In Rhode Island in 2020 and 2021, the then–state House member Anastasia Williams tried to ban Portuguese Americans from eligibility for minority-business-enterprise programs. (Williams said in a 2020 legislative debate that the current guidelines identified “Portuguese as a racial minority when in fact they are not,” arguing that Portuguese Americans tend to identify as white.) PALCUS, the same organization involved in preventing Portuguese Americans from being grouped under “Hispanic” on the 2020 census, adamantly opposed the legislation. After Williams’s first attempt, PALCUS released the following statement: “In our view, this is a blatantly DISCRIMINATORY action against the Portuguese people of Rhode Island. At 9.7% of the population, the Portuguese are clearly a minority, can be of any race, and are part of the immigrant population of the state.” Even if Portuguese Americans don’t identify as Hispanic, surrendering the minority label would disqualify them from receiving certain financial benefits—which may explain why some would want to keep that status.



If Portuguese Americans are indeed following the assimilation journey of Italian Americans, then maybe in years to come they, too, will simply fall under the umbrella of pan-European whiteness. But perhaps this binary between white and nonwhite misses a more nuanced reality. When my *avô* was still alive, people often asked him what his background was and where he was from. “I am Portuguese, from the country of Portugal,” he’d reply. His response rarely satisfied those who asked, because their implicit question was more about race than geography. But for my *avô*, it was the only possible answer.

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Jeremy Klemin is a writer and translator from Southern California.

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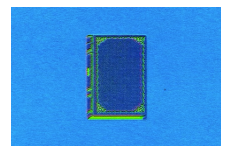
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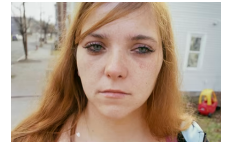
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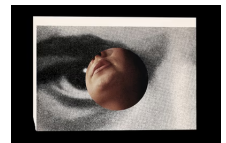
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