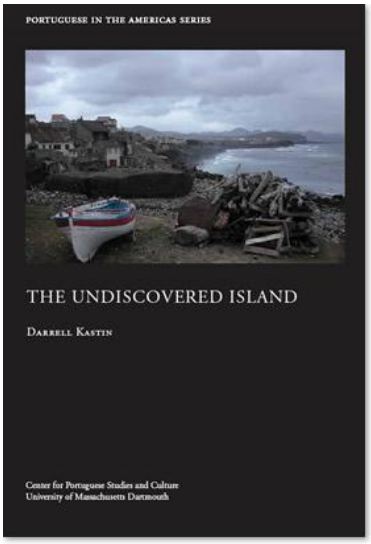
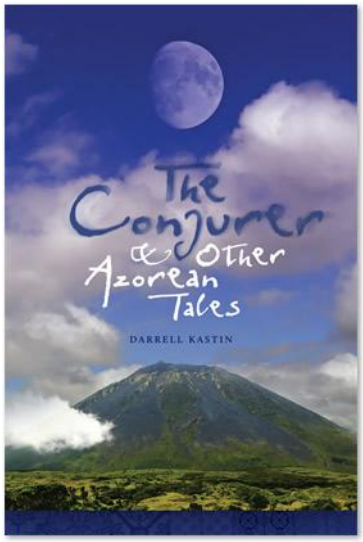
PORTUGUESE-NORTH AMERICAN WRITING

INTERVIEWS, ESSAYS AND ARTICLES





Darrell Kastin: Q & A with a Luso-American Author

By Tamara Kaye Sellman

INTRODUCTION

I met Darrell Kastin in a previous editorial relationship—I was putting together the "Voyage to the Village" edition of *Margin* in 2006 and published his story, "Constanca's War with the Elements," which is about a woman who sleeps for seven years, prompting her husband's infidelities and her subsequently "meteorological" reaction. Without realizing it, I loved his story for its ready association to much of the themes of Luso-American magical realism (popularized by writers Katherine Vaz, Frank X. Gaspar, Jose Saramago and Joao de Melo, among others). I had no idea he was of Azorean descent himself, and so I'm thrilled to see that Kastin has published his first novel, *The Undiscovered Island*, which is set in the Azores and which captures so much of what makes magical realism come alive for me.

INTERVIEW

Tamara Kaye Sellman: You write both short fiction and novels, among other things. How do you describe the difference between the short story and the novel to a nonwriter in terms of your writing process? Is one easier for you than the other? Is it comparing apples to oranges? Do you prefer one form over the other? What do you prefer as a reader?
Darrell Kastin: Short fiction and novels. First, I don't really see much difference between the writing of either. Except that one takes just this side of forever and the other can be satisfied by demanding a few years from my life. With a short story I sometimes have only a beginning, sometimes an end, sometimes the entire story. Often I plod along, having no idea where I'm

headed until I get there. I am often quite surprised. It'd be akin to moseying along the beach at Santa Cruz and suddenly finding yourself in Texarkana. Strange. How did I get here?

With the novel, I usually know where I'm starting and where I'm headed. I have the ending, but sometimes it's not exactly the ending I originally had in mind. My second (as yet unpublished) novel*, The Accomplice,* is a case of this. I was sure I had a perfect ending, but then a couple of new characters came in out of the blue, and as a result I had to change it, slightly, but enough to once again surprise me. Therein lies the fun of it all, never knowing what to expect, or what you'll find.

Whether I'm writing a short story or a novel my writing process is like dredging up an artifact from a deep murky bog, or better yet chipping away at one encased in some kind of material that has become like rock. I chip away at what is visible, and believe I am seeing the complete artifact hidden beneath. Yet further digging reveals there is more, and more. It is this continual process of digging and bringing up new aspects of the story that for me keeps me guessing, as well as surprised by what I find. But it is also frustrating, in that, like I said, it sometimes takes many years until the entire story or novel is whole. I'll get ideas after years of working on something, and ask myself, why the hell didn't I think of this before?

I enjoy novel writing as well as writing short stories. And I enjoy reading both. I'm hard to please when it comes to reading either, but particularly short stories. I want something to happen, but I don't want to know what will happen; I want characters I can believe in. I like humor, too. There's nothing like a perfectly wrought short story, like the stories of Miguel Angel Asturias or Twain, or Tommaso Landolfi, Dino Buzzati, John Collier, Shirley Jackson, Saki, Peter S. Beagle or Angela Carter at their best.

The novel, on the other hand, appeals to me for the prolonged journey, the desire to explore a world of the author's making. It's got to have what Chandler said makes literature: verve, wit, gusto, music and magic, but it doesn't have to do it in a mere handful of pages as a short story does. You've got more time to pull it off. It's less exacting work. And it's easier (at least for me) to forgive lapses, or digressions, etc. The novel seems the most imperfect art form. They're a dime a dozen, but the perfect ones, the flawless ones, well, how many are there? And plenty of people would disagree with the ones I would pick.

TKS: I live on an island (albeit not a tropical one!) and sense there's something unique about this experience, though I'm not sure I can be objective about it. I'm curious what you think it is, as a writer, about island life that makes it different from life on the mainland?
DK: Yes! There is indeed something quite special about an island. The isolation, the looking seaward. In the case of the Azores, that's all one can see, except for perhaps another island, which isn't quite the same as the mainland. I hope in my novel I describe the sensation and thoughts that are generated by living on an island. It certainly makes one feel closer to the sea. And I suspect that it helps awaken one's imagination, wondering what lies out there.

To my mind there's always been something magical about an island. That something like that can rise up out of the depths of the sea, molten rock, and that one usually finds fresh water springs, and surrounded by the sea, with always the threat of further eruptions, the thought lingers that perhaps the sea will reclaim what it has given.

TKS: *The Undiscovered Island* is categorically a magical realist novel. You've received some monumental praise from one of the world's best experts on literary magical realism. "After Ulysses founded Lisbon as legend has it, he sailed off into forbidden waters and landed on the isle that held the fountain of Purgatory as Dante had it. Might this have been the Azores? *The Undiscovered Island* could confirm the fact, as all of Portuguese history, so legendary as it is,

comes to a kind of culmination on these isles. Time is of no avail as its end and passage convene in this novel in what is a romp of detective story, epic, and family quest. What a great read!" ~ Dr. Gregory Rabassa, translator of *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* What did it feel like to read what Dr. Rabassa said about your book?
DK: I was thrilled! Rabassa?! The man who translated some of the world's finest Spanish and Portuguese writers? There are few people I admire and respect more. Needless to say I was greatly honored and touched. I still find it hard to believe. His words are far better than any tangible reward I could possibly receive.

TKS: The inspiration behind your novel, *The Undiscovered Island*, comes from your engagement in the cultural history of the Azores where several of your ancestors lived. What sparked your interest in traveling to the Azores? How often do you visit?
DK: My family held a reunion on the Azores in 1972. My grandmother had retired there a few years earlier, and so my aunts, uncles and cousins all gathered there for the summer. I was fifteen at the time. I felt like I'd stepped back 150 years in time. First off, the place was extraordinarily beautiful. And unspoiled. We saw many of the islands, but spent most of our time on Pico and Faial, which were separated by a mere five-mile channel. I saw men on boats heading out to hunt whales, but unlike others who hunted whales these men used hand-held harpoons. I saw (and smelled) the whaling factories. I drank from clear cold mineral spring. I ate cheese, sugar made from beets, and drank coffee––the taste of all of which I still remember to this day. I heard stories about the islands and about our family, which had lived there since around the year 1500. The islands stayed with me. I returned in 1987, and spent 3½ months there. I returned in 2003, and again this last year. If I had my way I'd go back every year, or spend a year there, soaking it up. I've always wanted to live there, and hopefully soon will have my wish.

TKS: Who are some of your favorite Azorean authors?
DK: Although I'm far more familiar with brilliant Portuguese authors such as, Luís de Camões, Eça de Queiros, Álvaro do Carvalhal, Fernando Pessoa, Florbela Espanca, Mario de Sá-Carneiro, José Saramago, António Lobo Antunes, and Lídia Jorge, there are some great Azorean writers like João de Melo, Vitorino Nemésio, and Antero de Quental. The Azorean singer/songwriter and filmmaker José Medeiros has been an influence. Luís Bettencourt is another. Then there's the poet Natália Correia. Both of my grandparents wrote poetry, articles for the newspapers, and plays. The islands are said to be full of poets, so I guess it's in the blood.

TKS: Tell me about your upcoming short story collection.
DK: My short story collection, tentatively titled: *The Conjuror & Other Tales of the Azorean Nights*, is due to be published in 2011, also by the Center For Portuguese Studies at UMASS Dartmouth. All but two of the stories take place on the Azores. The other two are about characters who have left the islands and gone to the United States to live. A number of the stories have appeared in literary magazines. They are Magic Realism––even the two set in the US. I hope they adequately capture the quirkiness of some of the Azorean characters. It's hard for me to think of these stories as fantasy, given that they mirror my own experiences, what I saw or heard. They may be of the islands, but I like to believe that these fables or folk tales also in some small way represent glimpses of the world at large. Perhaps only in something lost, or as yet not regained. I can only hope.

This interview was previously published on the Writers' Rainbow website.

Walk Back, Look Ahead, a Chronicle

By Richard Simas
This essay was written for the *Escritas Dispersas, Convergência de Afectos* Conference, Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, October 2009. Revised, 2011, 2012.

A literatura é mais um dos locais onde o espírito humano deixa transparecer muito do mundo que subjaz aos seus criadores. E, como nenhum deles é uma ilha, embora possa viver nela, reflecte de algum modo algo mais do que apenas o seu eu.
~Onésimo T. Almeida, "Açores, Açorianos, Açorianidade" (1)

I am relatively new to this question of "Scattered Writings," Azorean literature, Luso-American literature, Diaspora writing, etc. The struggle to name and define a subject fascinates me. I am not an academic, a publisher, or a translator, however if anything, I am a "scattered writer," and having landed here on this island, I assume that I am approximately in the right place. Scattered, is to say that I have written about different things in various mediums, one of which was an essay on Azorean marching bands, Espírito Santo, and immigration. Scattered also in that I have never been able to be interested in only one thing at a time. That has its problems, but as such, I am for once totally qualified to be where I am.

As I attempt here to open my mouth to speak, (writing is also speaking, the music is just a little different) the filmmaker Frederico Fellini's comment about his work comes to mind: "Even if I wanted to make a film about codfish, it would still be a film about me." Fellini was Italian, still what he says is so true and there is the question of his choice of fish, the cod. And his films are extraordinary. I've come to think recently that had he been Azorean, we would have an extraordinarily revealing canon of cinema about the islands and its people. We don't. I

would hope to say something useful here about your subject of *Escritas Dispersas, Convergência de Afectos*, but I warn you that it will still be about me, or someone who is like me and is writing this text. So I will do what perhaps I do best: exaggerate. This is who I am and why I am here. I am a cultural immigrant.

1. *movimento*

Years ago, I left a small, beautiful town on the warm coast of California and moved to cold, fascinating, bilingual Montreal in Quebec, a distance of 3982 kilometers depending on the route you take. People told me that it was a crazy thing to do. There had just been a referendum on separation in Quebec. There would be another some years later. I learned a new language, French, and years have gone by. It was all a choice, and in the exquisite blur of hindsight, not that crazy. Now I am learning an old language, Portuguese, also a choice and something more, but not that crazy either. I am walking back to discover the steps left behind me or I am moving forward to discover where they will lead. Both of course.

As a teenager, my father, along with six brothers and his American-born Azorean parents, left a sharecropper farm near a river levee on the central coast of California and moved 21 kilometers into town to run a family business. It was a strategic choice in a time called the "Roaring Twenties" and resulted in swapping planting beans and milking cows on someone else's land for renting rooms, pumping gas, and keeping a small grocery in his homemade motel called the "Ideal." Though there was nothing "roaring" about their small enterprise, they prospered in a modest way, and I never heard anyone say it was a bad move. My father understood the old people when they spoke Portuguese, or so he told me, but he did not speak himself nor did he attempt to teach me. "We spoke American," he would say, "I had no idea you would be interested in learning Portuguese." He also said, "You won't find us standing in a welfare line."

The "us" was the essential word in his statement and meant "Portuguese." It all seemed significant to me, though at the age of 7, I wasn't sure how or why. In parallel, the only sentence I learned in Portuguese as a kid, taught I believe by an Azorean maid at the motel we took over from my grandfather, was *Cala a boca, cala a boca, tu não sabes falar* (Shut your mouth, shut your mouth, you don't know how to speak.) Perhaps the poor woman was tired of our incessant chattering and thought teaching us a bit of the old tongue would be a way to quiet us. Maybe it wasn't teaching at all. Instead, we drank her words, sang them like a song, and thought ourselves wise and special at our Ideal Motel. I flaunted my Portuguese along with some unsavory words in Spanish. So much for a polyglot education. Decades later, I am here on this island trying to open *a boca calada*.

Conceived, but not yet born, my grandfather's first voyage was the longest one he would ever make. It occurred in what I have to assume was the warm comfort of his mother's womb, a woman whose name contained the word and notion of his own presence, Conceição, common to the women of the islands. His conception was, importantly, the result of his own father's brief but fertile return to Pico to fetch his wife and two older children, after having immigrated three years earlier to California. The word 'Diaspora,' coming from the Greek, indicates a scattering of seed. This trip was the beginning of their dispersal, as it was for a boatload of others. Carried along in Ana Conceição was another seed, my grandfather, and it was thus that the destiny of two diasporas were intimately joined, grains flung to sprout elsewhere. The distance from Lajes do Pico to the Central Coast of California was about 8000 kilometers, all totaled, over assumingly a chilly and rollicking Atlantic ocean and then across

frontier North America where cavalries where still chasing the last native Americans away from the railroad tracks. It was fifteen years before the 20th century.

To my knowledge, no one in our clan wrote nor had any interest in formal literature. My grandfather memorized baseball statistics, read "The Sporting News," and loved watching television Westerns. He played the *viola da terra* on a Saturday afternoon for his Pico friends and I saw him as the benevolent patriarch of a generous family of willing storytellers and jokers, inclined to hyperbole and garrulous mythmaking around a barbecue fire. His funeral, I thought, was a national event, and for proof I counted the cars double-parked in a circle around the church. For a child, this was decent entertainment. For a curious adult it makes getting the real story straight very complex, if there is one and it's even necessary to do so. These people, the "us", were neither sober nor somber and a memory of them is willingly, perhaps dangerously, romanticized with time. But we are, after all, subjects not objects, and in our wildest dreamings we make movies about codfish. Pretending to balance these perspectives is another reason I am here. That is the sum of what I knew about Azoreans or the Portuguese until a couple of years ago.

I have no other details about "our" Diaspora move across the ocean, and I constantly doubt those that I recount, since accuracy was not as sacred an attribute for us as hard work. What I've told already sounds too biblical when in fact it was most likely tedious, and banal, similar to so many other immigrant stories. Still. My interest in genealogy is in fact secondary because words and literature are as much family to me as people are. That's really why I am here. I am searching for the ancestral roots of my words, their dates and details, their figures and faces. I want to know who was born from those words, how they lived and where. Not bones, but the sounds and souls. What did they do with their lives? I want to touch my cheek to the burial stones of those words, mourn the dead babies, follow shadows and whispers, walk their steps, hear their jokes and stories, and stoop through the low doorways of their old homes. My own name means very little in comparison. I want to meet the surprising cousins of that language, touch the faded images, know how the in-laws' blood has mixed, and stand amazed at how time has changed them. I want to eat a meal with the family of my own words because I am absolutely nothing other than them. Us. Dust, codfish, scattered islands. For my own sanity and wonderment I have to trace the routes from their beginning to my own uttering, and there is only so much time to do so.

I know that none of this is unusual and that you've read and heard it all countless times. So have I, but whenever I think it's mere repetition, I see that the story has changed and this is why I go on. Its endless reconfigurations and variations sing to me a music towards which I am helpless to resist moving. Sometimes the story grows so faint I fear that it will become inaudible. I am here to hear. Another wandering soul shoves off from an (I)-land into dark waters, drifting away in a small boat with a bundle of possessions and a tense heart.

2. *impureza*

Unless one adheres to the purest and most anachronistic notions of race, culture, and ethnicity, it's easy to admit that we are all immigrants, culturally and otherwise: one single nonstop mix and remix. Genetic technology research is telling us that we can all eventually be traced to a single unruly family: Uncle Napoleon, Aunt Cleopatra. As with mingled blood, the *metissage* of cultural influences is as much a reality in a globalized world as it was in a colonial or the imperial ones preceding it. The notable contemporary differences are possibly the rapidity and extensiveness in which the mix occurs now and the influences circulate. Pretense

to purity is a myth and most people know its dangers. We are collective variants of what and who preceded us, unique only as a moment in the long process. The Russian Petrushka dolls are an interesting but inaccurate metaphor unless you notice a slight mutation from doll to doll. One can view much of the worlds' conflicts surrounding the question of identity. How do you accept the essential momentum of life itself, history, and its natural resistance to purity, its imminent mutations and yet still preserve identity? Scatter more seeds. Plant new words. Write forward. Spread the wealth of existing Azorean and Diaspora literature and embrace the inevitable mutation of identity and language for the creative potential it promises.

Change in the ocean, change in the sea
Come back baby you'll find a change in me
Everybody, we ought to change sometime
Because sooner or later we're goin' down in that lonesome ground.
-Sleepy John Estes, black American blues singer

I began playing in an Azorean marching band in Montreal. Everyone was from São Miguel. They assumed some part of me was also, and so I was immediately welcomed into the group even though I kept timidly trying to correct the false impression by murmuring, "Pico." One has to start searching somewhere, and while trying to get my feet to move correctly to the beat, I decided to write about the experience, the people, and the community I was discovering. I attempted to untangle my steps while asking the irritating questions that come with living a contemporary life: where is the past, where are we going, what are we made from? Does "global" mean we own it all or we own nothing? In search of answers, I wandered with a marching band and crashed straight into a gold mine of Azorean writing via the Gavéa-Brown publications: translations, poetry, essays, memoirs, bilingual editions, commentary, and interviews. This led me to other sources, names, stories, and the vein was struck. Eureka! It was like hearing a riotous marching band approach from miles away. I staked my territory. Precious underground metal was spewing far and wide from a chain of nine volcanic islands. Were these the riches navigators had plied the seas seeking for centuries?

"You are the lucky one," my father told me mysteriously once when I was 17. Years later I understand that comment as my fate, a sacred gift, and a ticket to irresistible adventure. With a word he turned the "us" into "you." Fate would connect me to others and, in my erring, bring me home. My father was a blind-man to many things and a seer of a few others. I put on his pair of black, hard-soled shoes I collected after he died and began to march with the fanfare, watch, and write. It was Cultural Anthropology 101.

3. *reading the viola da terra*

The *viola da terra* is a particularly Azorean musical instrument, found on all the islands with various minor variations. According to the Atlas of Plucked Instruments, it is related to the continent's viola *braguesa*, *amarantina*, and *toeira*, which explain its introduction to the islands where immigrants arriving from the continent carried it. Its 12 light strings create soft and delicate chord backgrounds, distinguishable from the deeper resonating tones of classical or Spanish guitars. Used to accompany traditional singing, its shape and decoration were modified by the Azoreans. I like to think that its sound was also influenced by the use of local materials and the hands that worked them. Viola makers inscribe a story on the instrument's surface.

As if it's impossible to suppress literature, you can read the *viola da terra*. The most obvious distinguishing feature is the sound hole or mouth of the instrument, which is in the form of a pair of hearts on either side of the strings instead of the usual circle on a guitar. Tradition has it that these two hearts represent the Azorean that remains on the island and the one who has left. The instrument's form not only contains a couple, its sound emerges from their hearts and this heart is a hole. From the tip of the two hearts a curve of dark wood inlay descends to a point near the base of the strings just above the bridge. Rafael Costa Carvalho, a viola expert from Ribeira Quente, indicates on his web site that this is an umbilical cord linking the two hearts. The diamond shaped inlay joining the ends of the umbilical cord is a *lágrima da saudade*. The ace of diamonds was also a lucky charm for immigrants. The saddle that secures the strings to the base of the instrument has an *açor* head (goshawk) carved into each end. The base of the viola is decorated with an inlay of a sprouting wheat plant, a symbol of nature and subsistence. Sprout. Spread. Diaspora. On a far more practical level, and a modern addition, the head of the instrument, where the tuning keys are fixed, is decorated with a strip of vertically positioned mirror. This allows the hard traveling viola player to arrive for a performance shaven and combed. It is the only instrument that I know of that incorporates grooming considerations into its design.

I look into the mirror attached to the head of my *viola da terra* and see an unshaven someone who looks like me asking a question. A man named Manuel who plays in a folklore group in Montreal brought the viola for me from São Miguel to Canada. I would have preferred to play my grandfather's viola, but because of some complicated business involving a promise between my grandmother and a cousin, it is locked up in storage in Las Vegas, Nevada, with a crack in the body. Despite my request and attempted negotiation, it appears that's where it will remain, silent and broken, so I strum the new one and listen to the sound that exits the holes shaped like hearts. It's possible to start again. One way or another, there would be a song.

Sometimes I imagine that memory is like a sound. It can become so faint it is barely audible. It can cease, start again, change, or surge suddenly and surprisingly from a source different and distant from the one you expected. It can be deafening, monopolizing, and exquisite; elevating, mysterious, and powerful in a way that words cannot be.

4. Three Poems (2007)

I am standing in a cemetery in Santa Maria, California, where my ancestors are buried 8000 kilometers from the peak of Pico. Their mouths are shut. They speak only wind-blown silence and a whispering that I hear by bending closer to the ground. The dead everywhere speak a similar hushed language. I am here to plant poems in the graves. I have located the stone of the woman called Conceição and her husband Manuel. These are the only ones of "us" underground that I have never met above ground. To my surprise, a small oval photo is attached to the gray stone marker and it appears unchanged by the 67 years it has been there. Because we have never met, I say, "Hello, I am Richard, Isadore's youngest son." My father had told me kind things about this woman, his grandmother. Since our town is called Santa Maria and the stone reads Pico-Santa Maria, one could be led to believe that Ana Conceição died a couple of islands over from where she was born instead of in the strange New World thousands of kilometers away. Now the elders will hear what I might teach them. I turn a page and read to them from Frank X. Gaspar's *Field Guide to the Heavens*:

Tonight I am speaking in tongues again.
…What are they saying in the aisles and naves of the light years? What
is the sacred word on the street? What celestial music am I
so afraid to miss?
…Eat every fruit, sleep soundly: surely, verily, nothing will be lost. (2)

No one answers, but I believe they have heard me. These people had no idea what the words Azorean or Diaspora literature could mean. I tell them I will come back to visit again some other time and walk across the green lawns amongst plastic flowers that don't waver in the afternoon breeze. People have stuck miniature American flags into graves that are marked Souza, Medeiros, Pereira, Garcia, Silva, Pinheiro, and Castro. I find the stones of my grandfather and grandmother. I adored them both as a grandson will. She was given to promises and appearances because she made someone vow to always keep plastic flowers on the family graves. They resist the wind. I turn a page in Gaspar's book:

What did you learn standing while the east wind guttered
over the fields of tilting stone, above the beloved dead, who
must love the stones in the field as they love the field?
As the stone loves, in turn, in its way, hardened and misunderstood:
It is not past loving. It is only past loving in one way of speaking.

So the stone teaches, and the stones teach, and you sat at their feet
And stumbled over your lessons…
…Who will recite like stone, like the stones? Who will bear
with compacted heart the inscriptions of the names of so much
that was beautiful? Will you? In their toppled kingdom, will you? (3)

But before I can teach, I have to learn. Practicing with the dead seems like a prudent choice.

I walk into the most recent section of the cemetery. For some reason I can't find the graves that I should know best, the ones that are closest to me in time and where I stood twice not that long ago to say goodbye. I walk back and forth across the uneven lawns, up and down the alleys. It's a quiet, unhelpful crowd here, and to the right and left I see familiar names. I have been away a long time. Embarrassingly, I have to go into the cemetery keeper's office and ask where my parents are. I feel like a lost five-year old at the fair. He finds them on a computer screen, marks a slash with a pencil in a box on a little paper map, and then points out the door. "Your folks are over there, straight ahead," he says. "You can't miss them." I can and do. It's as though I didn't want to come home to find them.

Here it's hardest to open my mouth, *abre a boca*, so I lie down on the grass and wait for a long time, listening for voices I will know, seeing images that are not so distant. "How are things going?" I ask. Then it is time to read on.

Let the dead speak in the one way I know
And let me be listening.
Let me be strong
Now that the weak are sleeping and saving themselves,
for like you, I'm moving beyond
love and hope. (4)

Conversations with Portuguese-North American Writers

5. *regressar semear*

I have to learn and that is why I am here.

I exaggerate.

Learning Portuguese is difficult, and I hope it's just because of age and impatience. It gets tangled in my mouth. I twist my ear to sort out the accents when I listen to the Azorean community in Montreal and wonder if the more I learn, the less I know, until I remember that all of them have also learned new languages. My son asks, "What am I Dad, Canadian, Quebecois, American, or Portuguese?"

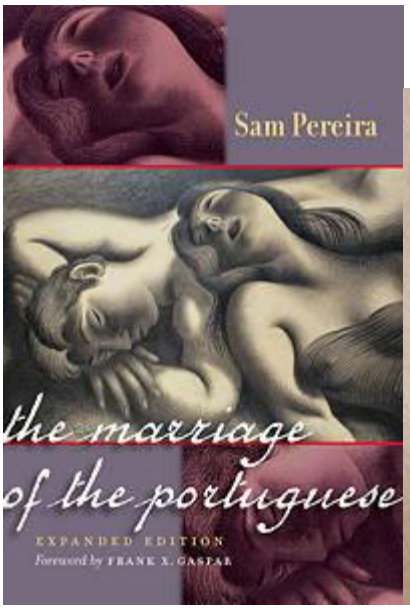
This is my suggestion: I think there should be a literary project to invite all Azoreans and Azorean descendants back to the islands at the same time for a family reunion. Paper, pencils, and recording devices would be furnished and everyone invited to speak. It would be a nine-island Babel *festa* with a wild mix of viola playing, eating, storytelling and get-togethers. Marching bands would criss-cross the islands with their anthems. We would all wear nametags. This might be the truest way to take measure of Azoreans, the Diaspora, and the complexity of the subject of its literature. But wouldn't the islands sink from the weight of so many people and its past? How many of "us" would there be? Would there be enough to eat and what if an earthquake erupted from all the noise and wreaked devastation in a single explosion? Could you verify who was legitimate and who a fake, the purest and the least pure? An Inquisition-like authority would have to be created. People from Alentejo and Madeira might try to sneak in, disguised as Azoreans. Oh hell, let them come. Brazilians too, even if the accents pose a problem. They're such fun at a party.

At the *festa*, the old stories will be retold, twisted, remembered, and told again. *Saudades, Chamarritas,* and *Pézinhos* will be sung. We will eat cod. The old words will dance with the new and unheard ones, with the timid and untested ones. They will mingle, argue, joke and steal each other's lines. Stories will slip down to the beach late at night and couple under the stars, singing odd new-old tunes in their love-making. And when you look out towards the dark sea where countless fish swim unbothered and hearing a song under the stars, ask, "Who is that?" You will answer, "It is us."

(1) Onésimo T. Almeida, Açores, Açorianos, Açorianidade- um espaço cultural 1989. P.121-122

Excerpts from Frank X. Gaspar's A Field Guide to the Heavens, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.

(2) A Field Guide to the Heavens p.3
(3) Education by Stone p.74
(4) Last Hymn to Night p.22



Sam Pereira: The Real Thing

The poet Sam Pereira was born in 1949 in a small town in central California called Los Banos, which, for most of his childhood remained rural and largely agricultural, with the population a combination of Portuguese and Italian immigrants. However, in recent times, as Pereira clarifies, "The urban sprawl has taken its effect, and much of this rural existence has gone by the wayside."

Early on, he explains, "There was closeness to family and the simpler things that life had to offer. The cultural aspects of life that were brought over from Portugal with my ancestors were not things I saw as being special until much later in life. The *festas*, the processions, the religious undertones, were always there, of course, but belonged more to the generation of my parents and grandparents than my own."

He says, "Many of my afternoons were spent with my grandmother, since both of my parents worked at that time—the 1950s—and I, along with my brothers and sisters would stay with her after school. She spoke almost no English, but we communicated largely through laughter and food—things I still associate with being Portuguese."

Sam Pereira received his Bachelor of Arts degree from California State University, Fresno (1971) and his Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Iowa (1975), where he was a student in the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His books of poetry include *The Marriage of the Portuguese, Brittle Water,* and *A Cafe in Boca*, which appeared in 2007. His work has been anthologized in a variety of collections including *Piecework: 19 Fresno Poets* (Silver Skates, 1987), *The Body Electric* (W. W. Norton, 2000), and *How Much Earth: The Fresno Poets* (Heyday/Roundhouse Press, 2001). Individual poems have appeared in *The Missouri Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review, American Poetry Review, Antioch Review, Cutbank, Manoa, The Missouri Review, Poetry (magazine)* and *Blackbird (online journal).*

He and his wife, the writer Susan Graham, make their home in the San Joaquin Valley and Pereira works as an English teacher in California's public school system.

As a child, the poet shares that his grandmother was a key figure in his development as a person and as a poet: "Each afternoon we would come over and share in a number of things: a nice Coca-Cola, back when it truly *was* 'the real thing,' some Portuguese cookies that we referred to as "bulls," because you could break a tooth eating them, and watching *American Bandstand* with Dick Clark. My grandmother couldn't understand a word of what was being said in the music or the conversation of that show, but she would stand in front of the television set, bent over in her dark widow's clothing, and simply laugh, her rosary in hand."

His early upbringing included religious training in the Catholic church, "as an altar boy—yes, altar boy to poet, go figure!—I was in many of the religious processions of the times. Often, I would carry statues through the streets, listening to the music of Portuguese bands, like the North Star Band from our own town, as well as towns from up and down the valley and the coast of California. This would all lead up to the steps of the local Portuguese hall, where mass quantities of *sopas y carne* would be consumed and washed down with beer or orange soda, depending on one's age."

His early school days were filled with challenges and inspiration. One teacher in particular had a major impact on Pereira's future life as a writer: "I had a first grade teacher, Sister Genevieve—I can tell it now, since she is long since dead—who once made me cry. She called on me to read, and I was stumbling. She abruptly called on another student, saying 'You go ahead! Sammy doesn't want to read today.' When my mother heard about this later that day, she came down and took this Mother Superior on! Damn, it felt good to have a mom kick a nun's ass, even at the age of six! Needless to say, with each new poem I write, with every new reading I give, I think about how that nun made me cry. In some ways, I'm grateful."

Pereira's first "real" job was an early indication of the person he would grow into as well as where his sensibilities were established: "I worked in a 'dime store,' where my aunt was the manager. She was a tough old bird, who had managed to make her way into management, long before women were accustomed to even being considered for such jobs. She hired me to do inventory type things and it was there that I first learned about working stupid jobs for money. I remember counting old WWII greeting card stock that was still there under the counter and yellowing with age. I remember counting the cap pistols and cheap Japanese toys. I remember how everyone used to talk about how all the Japanese stuff was crap. Remember, this was relatively soon after the war. Years later, some of those very same people would be flaunting their Honda Civics in the faces of people less well-off."

The literary calling came early. "I decided to be a writer—in particular, a poet, at the age of 17. It probably had to do with the passions of adolescence, but I knew it was serious and I never wavered from it from that day on." He said, "There were a couple of high school teachers who helped firm up this idea, as well. One was a rather elegant guy, who would spend his weekends driving up to San Francisco and was rumored to have a beautiful Asian girlfriend. He understood my love of literature and writing; while other students were looking for the easiest thing to read for book reports, he was stunned when I showed up with a copy of *Crime and Punishment* one day. Thanks to Fyodor Dostoyevsky, I began to be taken seriously in the only class that mattered much to me at the time."

He cites another English teacher as helping his decision as far as teaching and writing: "He was fresh out of Berkeley in the late 60s, and would play albums by the Grateful Dead and Country Joe & the Fish during class writing assignments. He also played the ukulele and the administration hated his ass. He was gone the next year, but he, too, took me and my writing seriously. Believe me, at that time, no one should have taken me seriously, but I am forever

grateful to these two teachers, who opened doors I would have probably never had the opportunity to go through otherwise."

About his book, *The Marriage of the Portuguese* reprinted in an expanded edition by Tagus Press this spring, the poems, as one critic says, "speak from a place of beauty between two worlds, the old and the new" illustrating the breath of content and reach that Pereira has in his work." The Director of the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and author of *O Segredo de Eça* (Edições Cosmos, 1996), Frank Sousa, declares, "With *The Marriage of the Portuguese: Expanded Edition* Sam Pereira contributes a beautiful collection of poems to American literature and makes the Portuguese American experience a little more visible, more an integral part of the American experience." Sousa explains the significance of this is vast in that "Pereira accomplishes this feat through wonderfully evocative poems, such as the eponymous 'The Marriage of the Portuguese,' 'Fado,' and 'Sugars of Terceira.' These beautiful and incisive words on a page bring to life, saved from silence and forgetfulness, characters and experiences that are now part of American literary and cultural history."

From gritty thoughts to lofty imaginings, the poetry of Pereira brings us to our cultural home as well as the home in our heart that beats in all of us, as in these lines from one of the opening poems in the collection, "A Disease,"

> And suddenly our story faltered. It could
> Just be another night in the suburbs. A man
> Grabbing up his cigarettes and wife and calling
> It a day. It's Wednesday. The 14th. Somewhere,

Q/A with Millicent Bacardi Borges

MBB: Who is your favorite author?
SP: Over the years there has been a consistency with this topic. As a student of Philip Levine's, he obviously remains a positive force, not only in my own poetic tendencies, but also merely for the power he has brought to poetry.

Another couple of people I reference often in my own musings are the poets David St. John and Larry Levis. Both of these amazing contemporaries of mine have managed to evoke the very nature of what I consider to be great poetry. Unfortunately, Larry died back in 1996, much too young for any poet, especially a great one, to leave the planet.

As for other well-known writers of this great art form, I include poet Norman Dubie, who is one of those poetic islands one likes to envision as always on the horizon. Earlier favorites include Mark Strand, Richard Hugo, John Ashbery, James Wright, and, of course, John Berryman, whose poems have grabbed me by the throat a number of times and not wanted to let go.

MBB: What books have influenced your life?
SP: For one, Philip Levine's *Not This Pig*, from way back in the 1960s. It was full of the power and truth that kept me loving poetry all these years, and remains one of Phil's best, in my opinion.

Like so many others my age, Berryman's *Dream Songs* opened so many doors! As I mentioned somewhere earlier, one must be careful with Berryman, however, as a writer. You will find yourself thinking and writing like the old boy—not as well, of course—but just the

same, sometimes you need to put those books aside for a while; maybe pick up something a bit tamer—perhaps, a nice Billy Collins collection.

My friend St. John's *The Face* drove home the importance of toughness in poetry; toughness, laced with pain. It's what has kept what's left of the male ego alive all these years, and yet allowed some of us to be warmly understood and perhaps even loved by those who choose a poetry of sharing, of reality, shall we say?

MBB: Do you like any Portuguese or Portuguese American writers in particular?
SP: You mean aside from the great Fernando Pessoa? Of course. The marvelous contemporary Portuguese American poet and, may I add, my friend, Frank X. Gaspar. It's interesting, because we became aware of each other's writing rather late in our careers. Frank has been a great source of support and energy for me. In fact, he wrote the forward for my soon-to-be released "expanded edition" of the first book I ever published, *The Marriage of the Portuguese*. Truth be told, the forward is some of the best writing in the book and I'm honored that Frank wanted to do it.
MBB: Can you share a little of your current work with us? A line or an excerpt?
SP: Sure. This is a section from a series of haiku, believe it or not, all dealing with the power elite on the planet; in this particular case, those with nuclear capabilities:

> Let's describe the end:
>
> A small uranium rod
>
> Right through the soul's eye.

This interview was previously published on the Portuguese American Journal website.

Millicent Borges Accardi, a Portuguese-American poet, is the author of three books: *Injuring Eternity* (World Nouveau), *Woman on a Shaky Bridge* (Finishing Line Press chapbook), and *Only More So* (forthcoming Salmon Press, Ireland).

Vamberto Freitas: Nas Duas Margens

By Oona Patrick

INTRODUCTION

Vamberto Freitas is a Portuguese literary critic who has specialized in Luso-American literature for much of his career, and has been watching and waiting for the emergence of American writers of Portuguese descent, such as Katherine Vaz and Frank Gaspar. Freitas, a native of Terceira island in the Azores, lived for twenty-seven years in the United States, where he earned his degrees. He now lives with his wife Adelaide, a well-known poet and novelist, on São Miguel island in the Azores, in a beachfront community just outside the main city of Ponta Delgada. He teaches at the University of the Azores, which was founded two years after the Portuguese revolution of 1974. His blog, Nas Duas Margens, explores his interests in Azorean literature including works by Portuguese North Americans.

Freitas is the author of *A America Entre a Realidade e a Ficcao*, *O Imaginário dos Escritores Açorianos,* and several other works of criticism. His latest book, *Border Crossings*, is a collection of literary and cultural essays reflecting on Azorean literature in the Azores, North America and Brazil. He has published opinion and criticism in many reviews, journals, and magazines in Portugal, including the Lisbon newspaper *Diário de Notícias*. He has translated Provincetown native Frank Gaspar's poetry into Portuguese, and while editing an Azorean newspaper's literary supplement, he published a special edition devoted to Gaspar in October 2005. He and his wife also contributed an article about women writers in the Azores to the book *Engendering Identities*, edited by Susan Castillo (Fernando Pessoa University Press, Porto, 1996).

Conversations with Portuguese-North American Writers

The nine volcanic islands of the Azores lie over 900 miles off of Portugal in the mid-Atlantic Ocean, and were first inhabited by Portuguese and Flemish settlers in the fifteenth century. It's well-known that many of Provincetown's Portuguese came from São Miguel, the largest island. But Provincetown may have more in common with the more isolated Flores island, which is known for producing many writers and intellectuals despite its small population. In Santa Cruz on Flores, the native poet Roberto de Mesquita's house has a plaque on it; in a nearby square a bust of him looks out across the town. Such tile plaques, statues, parks, and avenues honor poets, writers, and teachers throughout the Azores.

The current total population of the Azores is approximately 240,000. Mass emigration shaped Flores, and the Azores as a whole, like erosion. On Flores it left abandoned villages and a current island population of about 4,000, only slightly larger than Provincetown in the winter, and much diminished from its peak of 10,000 in the nineteenth century, when the islands supplied the whaling industry and other passing ships. The story of emigration is a central theme in Azorean culture today—there, the emigrants, loved or resented, have not been forgotten.

INTERVIEW

Oona Patrick—*Does the feeling of being considered "marginal" weigh on writers in the Azores, or did it once? It seems more and more Azorean writers are being recognized and reviewed on the mainland and elsewhere. Was there a point at which things began to change for Azorean writers?*
Vamberto Freitas—Yes and no, as an answer to all your questions. We're still a bit resentful of our absence in the national press as far as our literary life is concerned. Azorean writers can only escape this fate by moving to the continent, and it better be Lisbon or Coimbra, and the writer better be able to "cultivate" those in the publishing world, everyone from journalists to editors to publishers of all stripes and interests. And when the book is "about" Azorean life, things become harder still, it is almost as if we were from a foreign country with a culture of little interest. Most continentals outside these two cities have the same complaints, Lisbon centralizing the whole life of the country. But things are changing for all of us. The foundation of new universities all over the country has brought pride to their communities, and local governments underwrite some local authors. I suppose the same happens in America, this feeling of "isolation." Move to New York or perish in the backlands?

Faulkner once said that the major sources of his fiction, his references for local history and life in general, were the local writers in Oxford, Mississippi, those nobody else, we assume, ever read. Precisely because we live in what were once "isolated" islands, we now have in the Azores a very strong intellectual tradition; we've had to reinvent everything here, and our newspapers and other periodicals are very generous with the space they dedicate to literature.

And yes, our isolation probably led to our love of literature, the need to "communicate" with others and among ourselves. Poetry is very much loved and cultivated here. A friend once joked with me: I'll probably be the only famous Azorean, he said, for *never* having written a book! When I picked up Frank Gaspar at the airport on his first visit to the Azores a few years ago, we stopped at the university coffee shop early in the morning and began discussing poetry. He looked at me and said, *I can't believe this; I've been here for fifteen minutes and I'm already talking about what I love most*! We're very proud of this cultural ambience—book launchings (or book parties, as you say in America) occur every week, sometimes one event competing with another.

OP—*What is açorianidade?*

VF—The term was coined for us by one of our great writers, Vitorino Nemésio (b. 1901 on Terceira, d. 1978), in a 1932 essay. He lived on the continent most of his life, and died there, but the Azores were a permanent "obsession" with him. Most of his fictional works reflect this, particularly the masterpiece of Portuguese modern literature, the novel *Mau Tempo no Canal*, translated in the US (as *Stormy Isles: An Azorean Tale*, 1998) by Professor Francisco Cota Fagundes of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Basically, *açorianidade* is the cultural stance, the feeling of belonging, and, I would also say, the inescapable history for those who were born and raised in the Azores, or adopt the Azorean vision of the world, a whole way of life, a consciousness of being Portuguese in a particular geographical island-space.

I still remember when the Azorean political left would shiver at the mention of the word (the fear of "separateness," always…), believing in a supposed "universality" of being Portuguese, but only as canonically defined and legitimized by those with institutional power. But the Socialists, in power here since 1996, have wholeheartedly adopted the concept and now use and abuse it constantly wherever they find Azoreans in the world who will listen to them, or in their very justified political dealings with the central government in Lisbon. Their exercise of power in an autonomous region such as ours apparently taught them what others knew all along: Portugal is a continental *and* insular country, unified by centuries of a common language, culture and history, but also irremediably diversified, richer at all levels for that very reason.

For those interested in finding out more about *açorianidade*, I suggest a reading of *A Profile of the Azorean* (Gávea-Brown, 1980) by Onésimo T. Almeida.

OP—*What can you tell us about Neo magazine, with its interesting mix of Azoreans and writers from all over the world—why so inclusive?*
VF—*Neo* was founded in 2001 here in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures by my colleague John Starkey, a Luso-American who has chosen to live and work in the Azores. It was such an original little magazine that even some of the inattentive press in Lisbon noticed and reported on it in glowing terms. He decided from the beginning that Luso-American writers would be included—fiction, poetry or any kind of creative or academic writing. But then he opened it to any writer or poet whose work deserved being published and recognized, whether a student or a full professor, a famous writer or an unknown author.

Neo, really, is to me a kind of metaphor for the inclusive Azorean cultural attitude. Located between two great continents, Europe and America, deeply attached to the "idea" of getting on in new worlds, and always searching for "an unknown island ahead," language discrimination, particularly where English is involved, makes no sense for us. *Neo* is published yearly and has survived up until now, issue number 7 having just come out and paying homage to the late American poet Patricia Goedicke.

OP—*People in Provincetown may not be aware that Frank Gaspar's poetry, and his Provincetown novel* Leaving Pico*, have been translated into Portuguese and published here (with the poetry translated by you). How would you describe the reception of Frank Gaspar's work in the Azores?*
VF—To begin I might say that Luso-American writers only recently have become present among the most informed readers in the Azores. Katherine Vaz's novel *Saudade*, particularly after its translation into Portuguese and publication by a prestigious house in the continent (ASA), with its "power" to move and influence literary reception in the national press, received major, major, attention in the leading weeklies and daily newspapers in Lisbon. Prior to that she was already being read and studied in some of our best universities.

Frank Gaspar was read and known in limited literary circles in the Azores who recognized in him a major and of course original voice in Luso-American writing. They soon became aware of his prestige among certain literary circles in the US, the magazines where he published, the prizes his books continuously received up to that time, the names of poets and other writers who reviewed and/or recommended him to the American reading public in general (Mary Oliver, Mark Doty, Jay Parini, Adrienne Rich, Robert Bly, Yusef Komunyakaa, Ray Gonzales, Hilda Raz, among others). I made it a point of calling attention to all this when I began writing commentaries and essays in our regional and national press about him and others, or in academic conferences in Portugal and in the US. So when Frank first appeared in translation, his fiction and poetry provoked an immediate "shock of recognition," leading to a literary dialogue that included other poets and writers from here "answering" him in their own writings, considering him one of "us."

The poet and essayist Urbano Bettencourt, a native of Frank's ancestral island of Pico, lost no time in taking off from his discoveries in Frank's work to sort of "complete" his own vision of the Azorean experience in the homeland and in the American diaspora. Rather than being widely known, Frank has become, for us, a writer's writer, a status no one would reject, I suppose. Today, most official institutions in the Azores recognize his status among us, and invitations for him to come here for readings have followed since then.

OP—*I'm curious about the life of Alice Moderno, an early twentieth-century Azorean woman writer you have compared to Gertrude Stein. Was she a lesbian? Did she embrace her outsider status, or did she simply have no choice?*

VF—In attitude, absolutely, but she even had something of Stein's look and dress, as they lived approximately in the same time period. Moreover, she was born in Paris in 1867 (where Stein lived many years and exercised her influence among such young writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway and many of those associated with the American "lost generation"). She died in 1946, always having lived way ahead of her time, in ideas, life style, and as a courageous "inventor" of a true "public life" in the Azores. She challenged centuries-old mores in an old, conservative culture. She was a fiction writer and poet, and an early protector of animals in the islands in a place and time where to violently kick a dog in public was perfectly acceptable. Yes, she assumed her lesbianism and, of course, took an unrepentant feminist stance, becoming a fearful polemicist in the local press, and is still greatly respected by the community in general.

Today, her house in Ponta Delgada is an officially and publicly recognized cultural site and displays a prominent plaque with her name. Her literary works are, in my opinion, rather limited, but her presence alone helped to liberate a whole generation. For more, you may read *Alice Moderno: A Mulher e a Obra* [*Alice Moderno: The Woman and Her Works*], by Maria da Conceição Vilhena, retired professor of the University of the Azores. Alice Moderno was a true human monument to our liberty and political-cultural dignity. Not bad for a so-called "isolated" community.

OP—*Who do you see as the most neglected Portuguese writer, or the one most overdue for translation into English and other languages?*

VF—Neglected, I don't know, but I would venture that two Portuguese writers definitely deserve to be translated into English, and both of them lived and worked in the US for many years: José Rodrigues Miguéis (1901–1980) and Jorge de Sena (1919–1978). Miguéis lived in Manhattan from the 1930s until his death, but wrote all of his works in Portuguese and for a Portuguese reading public back home. Some of his short stories, dealing with the diverse immigrant experience in American society, have been translated by George Monteiro. Monteiro

also edited and wrote the foreword to a book of translations by various people who had read and very much appreciated the works of our New York "exile." This was published by Gávea-Brown in 1983 as *Steerage And Ten Other Stories.* David Brookshaw also translated some of Miguéis' writings under the title *The Polyhedric Mirror*. Some of his novels are definitely relevant for readers anywhere interested in twentieth-century European "historical" or "existentialist" fiction, perhaps with Portugal as metaphor for political upheaval and totalitarianism in our time.

Jorge de Sena was a professor of Portuguese literature in the University of California, Santa Barbara, and also one of our foremost poets and novelists. Some have claimed that his *Sinais de Fogo* is one of the best novels in our modern literature, dealing with the Spanish Civil War and its impact on Portugal across the border. Sena had been an "exile" in Brazil from Salazar's Portugal before arriving in the US, never forgiving the Portuguese fascists for the fate of our nation up to the 1970s. This uncompromising stance characterizes all his works, fiction and poetry. I am convinced that once translated (and published by a major house) his literary stature among informed American readers would equal that of Fernando Pessoa. Let me just add here that Professor Francisco Cota Fagundes, the foremost specialist on Sena's works in the US, and the poet James Houlihan did translate two of Sena's books of poetry (*Jorge de Sena: Metamorphoses* and *Jorge de Sena: The Art of Music*), apparently never receiving the attention long overdue among the larger reading public of world literatures.

OP—*From what I can understand, few Azorean writers actually live in real isolation outside the larger towns or cities. Is isolation a real fear here, or do certain landscapes suggest something that's just not the case on all the islands?*
VF—You're right, very few of us live in real isolation. How can you live in isolation in the twenty-first century, in a world of globalized communication and transportation? I constantly listen here to my favorite radio station in California, Pacifica Radio in Berkeley and in Los Angeles. Our only writer here in S. Miguel living in a "rural" town (Maia) is Daniel de Sá, a well known and respected novelist. He is a retired schoolteacher, and I've noticed recently that besides publishing regularly, he spends a great amount of time on the Internet talking to his friends all over the world.

Our smallest island, Corvo, with a population of a little over 360 people, has now even attracted some Brazilian women who met their men through the Internet, then married and moved there, as have music teachers who have arrived from such countries as Russia and the Ukraine. We're five hours by plane from Boston, and two from Lisbon. There was recently a local colloquium on multiculturalism in one of our smaller cities in order to discuss those who have moved here from Africa, Brazil and Eastern Europe, and how we can all get along and "profit" culturally from the richness of this new "island" diversity. No, isolation is no longer "a real fear here."

OP—*On the other hand, maybe isolation can be good for certain writers. Flores, the westernmost island, almost an hour by air from the central group, has long been known for its writers and intellectuals. Why writers at the end of the world? Is it, as Norman Mailer once wrote, that artists have a "tropism" for the end of the land (Key West, Provincetown, etc.)? Or maybe it also has something to do with the traditional distance from authority of both Provincetown and Flores? Or have writers from Flores simply had the need to speak to the world, despite their seclusion, sort of like Emily Dickinson?*
VF—Norman Mailer might have been right, and maybe the distance from "authority" creates in us a certain audacity in freely communicating to the world—and to ourselves—what is going

on in our heart and soul. Some political elders tell me that even Salazar's secret police was much more "tolerant" in the Azores than in the continent, they probably felt, So what, let these "isolated" heretics say what they will!

Yes, "distant" Flores has given us some of our best writers and poets. Alfred Lewis (1902–1977), who left the island at a very young age, would become the first Portuguese immigrant in the US to publish a novel (*Home Is An Island*, 1951) with Random House, and actually be favorably reviewed in *The New York Times*. Roberto de Mesquita (1871–1923) (*Almas Cativas*/*Imprisoned Souls*) is now recognized as having introduced symbolist poetry to the whole country, even though it took decades for the national literary establishment to recognize this. Pedro da Silveira (1922–2003), poet and essayist, is now perhaps the most quoted Azorean literary figure among us, both for having put together the first proposal for a canon of Azorean poetry and for having been one of the first and foremost defenders of the existence of Azorean literature as an autonomous body from the national canon.

With Pedro (who lived and died in Lisbon), America was always present in his poetry, and he actually held American citizenship, somehow inherited in other and more tolerant times from his father, who had lived in California. Here's George Monteiro's translation of one of his poems, simply titled "Island," from the anthology *The Sea Within* (Gávea-Brown, 1983), which is now out of print, but is soon to be updated and published in Great Britain with translations by John Kinsella:

Only this:

Closed sky, hovering heron. Open sea.
A distant boat's hungering prow
Eyeing forever those bountiful Californias.

OP—*What are the stereotypes of the emigrants in the Azores? And vice-versa? What are some of our images of each other in our respective literatures?*

VF—The stereotypes here have been many, sometimes cruel, ignorant and, once again, provincial. Those who stayed through a troublesome history—underdevelopment, colonial war in Africa, dictatorship—greatly, if secretly, envied those who left. Upon the return of the emigrants, we only saw strange and wild clothes, unrecognizable "language" that creatively reflected the emigrant's new realities and cultural and materialistic references in American society, and great, if sometimes false, boasting of triumphs in the new land. Resentment being stupidly justified by putting on airs of superiority on the part of those who had never left. All the contradictions of an unhappy people. Our intellectuals, even in the Azores, suffered from the same ideological anti-Americanism, as some of their fictional and poetical works attest in their supposedly comical representation of emigrant characters.

Salazar was a strange and primitive political creature, a medievalist in twentieth-century Europe, always suspicious of political freedom and democracy. Ironically, the Azorean left never broke free of this fascist idea that Portugal was, despite all this, "superior," at least culturally. My father worked most of his life in the American Air Base at Lajes (on the island of Terceira), a humble man making his living, but visited occasionally, like many of his colleagues, particularly those like him who spoke a bit of English, by Salazar's secret police: no looking at American magazines, no "commerce" of any kind with American ideas. So instead, and to our everlasting gratitude, he brought home American ice cream on Sundays; it reached us half melted after his long walk from the military base. But it was enough, these small and delicious gestures, to motivate the family to emigrate to the US in the early sixties, and later to cure me

of nationalist fantasies of any kind. Of course some of my writer colleagues in the Azores still consider me rather strange because of all of this cultural and political "ambiguity."

The stereotypes in the US have been just as ignorant and cruel. Look at some of the canonical works of American literature, from Melville to John Steinbeck. Look at the way they represented Portuguese characters as nothing but bullies, idiots, and whores. Professor and poet George Monteiro of Brown University wrote about all this, and then I followed in his tracks here in the Azores. Racism and prejudice is everywhere in these works by intelligent and creative writers who nevertheless were incapable of escaping their northern European heritage of chauvinism vis-à-vis southern Europeans.

Tortilla Flat, for example, is a truly libelous novel against our people in California. Is it just fiction? Sure, but where do these "fictional" views come from? Where does Allen Ginsberg's—Ginsberg's!—vociferous poem of jealousy of Fernando Pessoa, one of the greatest European modernists, today recognized as such even in the US (particularly after the publication of some translations by Richard Zenith and George Monteiro), come from? Forget Hollywood movies, from Jerry Lewis to Julia Roberts. Didn't George W. Bush recently ask why the Portuguese language should be taught in the US? Where do these views come from? California, without the hard work and loyalty of the Azorean communities, probably would never have been the greatest agricultural producer and fishing industry in America, at least until the mid-twentieth century. Remember the Big Dan's incident in New Bedford (1984) and how we Portuguese in America all became suspected of being unrepentant rapists in the national media?

Luso-American narratives are also answering the "dominant" cultural discourse in the US, or "talking back to the empire," finally giving our people there the voice that they, along with any other ethnic or national group, have deserved since the beginning. This is also a very legitimate role of literature—excavating memories and defining the common soul of a people.

OP—*You lived in the US for many years. Do these attitudes in the US toward the Portuguese still make you angry? What did you think of the recent film* Passionada (2002)*? How far has it come from* Mystic Pizza's (1988) *representation of a Portuguese-American woman? (And why do you suppose the women always have to end up with Anglo men in the movies?)*

VF—They don't make me angry, just sad at such persistent ignorance about any people not belonging to the so-called dominant culture in the great human mosaic that is America. I never enjoyed being called a "Portagee" when I first arrived at the age of fourteen (1964) in the San Joaquin Valley. Our resentments concerning these and many other attitudes are many, including those of the older immigrants or Luso-Americans of that time, for we were "trivialized" in many ways by them; please do read Francisco Cota Fagundes' powerful and incomparable memoirs, *Hard Knocks: An Azorean-American Odyssey.* He speaks for many of us who underwent the radical change of leaving our native culture in Azorean small towns and confronting the process of readjusting our lives and vision of the world in an America before the advent of multiculturalism and greater sensitivity to the Other.

Never mind about *Passionada*, and much less about *Mystic Pizza*. So in the movies our women always fall for Anglo guys. Let their audiences live the fantasy. Women coming from an ancient and rich culture in Europe, themselves the offspring of a great and wonderful mixture of peoples in the Iberian Peninsula, not seeing a way out except by falling madly in love with those they sneeringly called "white bread"—rich looking on the outside and totally empty on the inside? Right. But then so what if they really—or in the movies—do fall in love with others?

OP—*What has been the impact of the success of Luso-American and Luso-Canadian writers both here and on the mainland of Portugal?*

VF—Fortunately for us, some continental intellectuals and academics for once have recognized these other "Azorean" writers from the American diaspora, and have been instrumental in giving them a Portuguese "national" status. Doctoral theses on their work—or allusive to their work—have already been defended in some of our best universities, and some of these writers have been repeatedly invited to major conferences and other literary events in Lisbon.

Luso-American writers, in fact, have achieved what we resident Azorean writers have never enjoyed, with a few exceptions: national recognition. This is historical among us, the discrimination or, more aptly put, "denial" of our cultural life in the Lisbon press. Never mind that some of the canonical works of Portuguese literature have come from the Azoreans since the nineteenth century! I realize that my calling writers such as Frank Gaspar "Azorean" might raise some tired and cynical eyebrows in Lisbon. But so what, new world literature is necessarily cross-cultural with multiple callings upon diverse ancestral histories (think of Salman Rushdie, Amy Tan, Bharati Mukherjee, Chang-Rae Lee, Vikram Seth, Sigrid Nunez, Pico Iyer, Michael Ondaatje, and Ana Castillo, to mention here just a few names from a substantial canon). Those who still don't recognize this simple and positive fact of globalization should cure their provincialism and inform themselves. Paraphrasing Hunter S. Thompson, we could try to teach them, but it would be wrong. Let them do their own homework.

As I wrote in a recent revisitation of *The Maltese Sangweech & Other Heroes*, by Bill Cardoso (1937–2006), the Luso-American journalist who coined the term "gonzo" for Thompson: Luso-American writings will soon be the only consequential "memory" of our place in American society and history. They are an inseparable part of our history and soul, they are the creative (re)inventors of the country that failed their ancestors, and they are most of all the liberated witnesses of our tragedies and triumphs in the New World. Portugal without its diaspora would be a much smaller country, and until recently, a rather "failed" society where a small elite governed and plundered a whole empire in Africa and in Brazil without ever having taken much care of its own courageous and suffering people. *Until recently*, I said…And, no, I'm not a communist or a neo-anything, just a reasonably informed citizen who truly loves his native country and region of birth.

OP—*In your opinion, what are some of the most important novels to come out of the Azores in the past 20 years or so?*

VF—Let's begin with João de Melo's (1949–) *O Meu Mundo Não É Deste Reino*, translated in the US (as *My World Is Not of This Kingdom*) by that great master, Gregory Rabassa. Follow that with his *Gente Feliz Com Lágrimas* (no English translation yet, but known in many other languages), and you have, in my opinion, the most eloquent fictional testimony of the tragic Azorean history as lived by our generation, including in the North American diaspora—Canadian version this time. It is a sustained poetical take without parallel in contemporary Portuguese literature, Lisbon jealousies aside.

My World Is Not Of This Kingdom proved that a conservative and superstitious Catholic culture, as Latin-American writers had discovered a few years before, was inevitably opened to magical realism (as Katherine Vaz would later show us in *Saudade*). The pleading of our people for life *and* death in the face of governmental abandonment, corruption, oppression and isolation in the middle of the Atlantic becomes a sort of chant or biblical poem out of the Old Testament (João was once an *ousted* seminarian in Lisbon). Faulknerian, almost, in its despair, violence taking the place of love among a gentle people, as modernization begins seeping in, and our society once again saving itself despite its stupid and forever commanding *elite.*

We have a letter here in our home from Rabassa telling my wife, who was once his student in New York, that it was the greatest novel he had read since his translation of Garcia

Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Debatable, maybe, but the point has been made. Rabassa wrote again in his recent memoirs (*If This be Treason*) that once he read it, he had to translate it even without knowing where he would publish his "labor of love". You've told me that *My World Is Not Of This Kingdom* is one of your favorite books. You've chosen well.

Raiz Comovida (3 volumes) by Cristóvão de Aguiar (1940–) is another great artistic journey into the soul of a people in a small town on the island of São Miguel. It is a sustained and sometimes painful excavation of memory where the narrator comes to terms with his fate among the laboring classes in times of darkness and want. Sometimes a sweet revisitation of all those who formed the narrator's tormented world, sometimes a bitter and violent "libel" against those who would oppress and trivialize the human soul, America always there as a dream of escape, its universal impulse coming from another Faulknerian theme: the capacity of people to "endure and prevail" under similar circumstances everywhere.

Aguiar belongs to same generation as João de Melo and Onésimo Almeida (who happens to also be from Aguiar's hometown, Pico da Pedra, which serves as the geographical reference to *Raiz Comovida*), sharing the fate of other well known Azorean writers among us who left the islands to study in Lisbon or Coimbra, and who have received national attention, winning major literary prizes and deservedly being widely reviewed in the best of the Portuguese press. *Raiz Comovida* is also a linguistic feat, where semantic "regionalisms" give color and deeper meanings to the unique experience of being an Azorean in the most isolated territory of the nation. Comedy and tragedy coexist to create a whole world to which one would want to belong to but then run away with some of its characters to an imagined salvation of wide spaces and liberty.

No other writer among us (at least in our generation) has made language itself become almost a "character" in the novel, making the reader want to read out loud many of its sections for the sheer pleasure of its music, never losing its multiplicity of meanings constantly signaling the Azoreans' historical fate. I believe that only a Gregory Rabassa could tackle its translation into the English language, and American readers of serious literature would experience another "shock of recognition," particularly in the reading of the first volume of *Raiz Comovida*. Aguiar has written much after this, fiction and a long running diary, once again distinguishing himself with the novel *Um Grito em Chamas.*

Then we have José Martins Garcia's (1941–2002) novels, a true canon of the existential pain of an Azorean writer and intellectual let loose in the world, and forever castigating his own destiny as a perpetual and incurable Azorean/Portuguese exile everywhere, always a "stranger" even in his indefinable and unwanted "homeland." We have the power of raw language here, the "islands" as metaphor for the concentration of all human vices and virtues, honor and perfidy. Usually, humanity at its worst.

He once told me in an interview published in a Lisbon daily that his happiest five years in life had been spent in Providence, Rhode Island, when he taught Portuguese literature at Brown University, and wrote what became his doctoral thesis on Fernando Pessoa. If you read one of his novels, *Imitação da Morte* [*An Imitation of Death*], you would never guess this biographical detail. A Lisbon journalist, who had been his classmate in the university there many years before, told me over a few drinks that Garcia's problem had always been clear to him: He had *rasgos*/moments of a literary genius, who never received his due recognition in his own country. I totally believe that today.

When Martins Garcia died in 2002, he had been a full professor of Portuguese literature and literary theory at the University of the Azores. I was and still am a mere lecturer there in the same department, but Garcia's generosity, engaging intellectual dialogue, and refusal to pull rank always fascinated me in the context of a straitjacketed Portuguese academic hierarchy. Is

this the same man who created the most nauseating and, to me, sickening protagonists of his genial fiction? Is Martins Garcia the writer who sees the world totally as an unsurpassable abyss? Among us, I believe he was our only *total* literary artist, uncompromising and absolutely true to his own vision of the human condition, as he perceived it. Do read *A Fome*, *Contrabando Original,* and *Lugar de Massacre*, perhaps our "strangest" war novel fictionalizing the campaign of the reluctant Portuguese army in Guinea-Bissau. America, by the way, is always present.

And, finally, Adelaide Freitas and her *Sorriso Por Dentro da Noite*. Published in 2004, *Sorriso* would soon be reviewed very favorably here, in the continent and in other publications of our communities in the US. At that time the author was an Associate Professor of American Literature and Culture in the University of the Azores, and was better known for her poetry and essays in her field and on contemporary Azorean writing. Her novel gives voice to a narrator who "retells" the senses, feelings and sorrows of a small child who is left behind with her grandmother in the islands when her parents emigrate to the US. America is here "imagined" by this child as she develops her own cognitive powers, through pictures, clothes, and the accompanying American "smells" and "colors" that arrive at her home in S. Bento, the fictionalized name of her native village here in the island of S. Miguel.

Besides giving "voice" to a woman-child in her search for love and identity in her depressed and oppressed surroundings of the Azores in the 1950s, *Sorriso* is the first major creative narrative that looks at emigration from the point of view of those who stayed behind, the consequences of the need and obsession with America as a savior country for our people since the ninetieth century, economics tearing the family and the social fabric apart. When Katherine Vaz read the manuscript of *Sorriso* she wrote back saying that (aside from all these perspectives) she had never read such violent prose dealing with a child's "woman-nature." I understood Vaz all too well. And here's the disclaimer: Adelaide Freitas is my wife!

The Azores have a very active and productive literary life, publishing an incredible number of books every year. Of course the contemporary Azorean canon is now substantial and is increasingly the object of studies at the post-graduate level in many other countries, particularly in Brazil, but also in the US and in Europe. Every reader of our literature will find wide and diverse choices in fiction and poetry. The war novel (from Portugal's African colonial wars of the 1960s and 1970s) has been a very distinguished literary act, even at the national level. A professor in Lisbon has attempted to explain this phenomenon, and I think he got it right: Azorean writers who participated in the violent African campaigns always felt "doubly" estranged: from their own country at large and from not believing in the fight to maintain an empire that they and their people had never known or identified with.

OP—*What's the significance of the debate over, if I can get this right,* Há ou não uma literatura açoriana? *[Is there or is there not an Azorean literature?] What's the latest view?*

VF—As some of my colleagues would also tell you: that has become a very tiresome question. Of course there's an Azorean literature. Were my father and all my ancestors ghosts or real people? The controversy began when in the 1970s some Azorean academics and intellectuals began proposing what to some of us was rather obvious: That in 500 years of island life, almost always abandoned by Lisbon, the Azoreans had created a "distinct" culture of their own within the nation. They had remained very Portuguese but necessarily had created their own view of the world, their own discourse and narratives. Something like, to use just an example, the case of Southern literature within the American traditional canon. Now, since at the same time, after the liberating Portuguese revolution in 1974, there was a separatist movement in the Azores, almost every one forgot to read the essays of these writers and intellectuals and just assumed

that it was all connected to the attempt to create an Azorean "nation," to justify its eventual and total independence.

Strangely enough, most of those who defended the existence of an Azorean literary canon were associated with the Portuguese left, or so inclined ideologically, strongly against the separatists among us. Onésimo T. Almeida of Brown University was the foremost defender of an Azorean Literature, and created the first course on our literature at his institution. Urbano Bettencourt and the late J.H. Santos Barros founded a magazine called *A Memória da Água-Viva* in Lisbon, taking the same position on the whole question. At that time the Lisbon daily *Diário de Notícias* asked me to do a whole series of essays explaining "Azorean Literature" to their readers in the continent, from which I took my book *O Imaginário dos Escritores Açorianos*, and forever acquired new friends and many enemies (particularly those who were left out). On the other hand, many well known Azorean writers still reject the label of "Azorean," for they are convinced it "belittles" them by not being included in the larger national literary canon. Think of those in America who don't like being called "ethnic" writers (as William Styron, I believe, once rejected the label of "Southern" writer), and you'll better understand our little "semantic" problem here. Very strange.

But let me add another bit of information concerning the solid existence of Azorean literature, now being studied and disseminated through translation in various countries. Gávea-Brown came out a few years ago with *The Possible Journey,* poems by the late Emanuel Félix from the island of Terceira (selected and translated by John M. Kinsella, of the National University of Ireland). He is considered *even* by some major continental critics (Eugénio Lisboa, for example) and academics to be one of our great poets who hasn't received the more than deserved national recognition. In 2003 Diniz Borges in California put together and translated another selection from contemporary Azorean poetry, under the title of *On a Leaf of Blue*, published by the University of California, Berkeley.

Just out of the University of Bristol (UK) and edited (once again) by John Kinsella and Carmen Ramos Villar, the magazine *Lusophone Studies* (*Mid-Atlantic Margins, Transatlantic Identities: Azorean Literature in Context*) dedicated a special issue to our literary production here. David Brookshaw also translated and published in the UK (2006) some of Onésimo Almeida's short stories, *Tales from the Tenth Island* (a reference to our Azorean communities in the US). The University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, has been in the past few years publishing not only the better known Luso-American writers, but also recently dedicated a whole issue of their journal *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* to the works of Vitorino Nemésio.

Various masters and doctoral theses on Azorean and Luso-American literatures have been defended in some Brazilian universities; others are now being worked on in Continental Portugal and Italy. In Great Britain, Carmen Ramos Villar did her doctoral thesis taking on an "overview" of contemporary literary production here in the islands. And a new anthology of Azorean and Southern Brazilian poetry (from the state of Santa Catarina) was published with the title *Caminhos do Mar* [*Sea Routes*] (2005), organized by Lauro Junkes and Osmar Pisani (Brazil) and Urbano Bettencourt (Azores), strongly *incited* and promoted everywhere by Lélia Pereira da Silva Nunes, writer and intellectual in Santa Catarina who dedicates much of her time to the cultural relations of our region with that part of Brazil.

For reasons I don't yet understand very clearly, some Central Europeans have become interested in our literature. It could be, who knows, shared feelings of "marginality" within the now vast European Union? A Slovakian intellectual and diplomat, Peter Zsoldos, not only has been writing about, and translating, Portuguese "national" poetry, but also became fascinated with the Azorean view of things, and managed to publish in his country another anthology of our poetry, *Zakresl'ovanie do mapy: Azory a ich básnici (*Bratislava, 2000). Although I did the

preface for this anthology, I still have no idea what this title means, but I like it immensely! The major literary journal in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, *Svetovej Literatúry*, dedicated special sections in two issues (1998 and 2000) to Azorean contemporary poets, as did another of their literary journals, which also circulates in Hungary, *Kalligram*, in June, 2000. And I have information that another anthology of Azorean poetry is currently being worked on and soon to be published in—imagine!—Latvia.

Not only do *we* know that Azorean literature exists, and exists well, but so do many others. The only people who *seem* not to know about our literary existence are our compatriots on the continent, two hours from us.

OP—*What's behind the recent publication or republication of some early Luso-American writers (such as Alfred Lewis's second novel* Sixty Acres and a Barn*—and works by José Rodrigues Miguéis)?*

VF—I believe I've given you part of the answer explaining the current creative surge and spreading interest in Luso-American writing, even in our national universities here. And then academia everywhere is always following trends that it previously ignored. Governmental and other institutional grants all of a sudden become available, and so does academia's new found love. That which had been ignored now occupies center stage, and perhaps academic tedium with the same old literary and "national" canons leads some to a "rediscovery" of familiar grounds. This is all for the better, of course.

Some in Lisbon are now talking about organizing a major conference bringing together most of the Luso-American writers and those who study them. The power structure here is always very attentive to possible new and influential allies in America, and to those who can give them "prestige" in their support for the arts in a culture such as ours. One could say much worse things about them; not bad at all for a young but successful democracy in Southern Europe.

By the way, the first great book written by a Portuguese intellectual from Lisbon on our Azorean communities in California was by António Ferro, a prominent member of the Modernist movement in Portugal during the 1920s, and sometime official propagandist for Salazar's dictatorship. His book, published in 1930 (*Novo Mundo Mundo Novo* [*New World, World Anew*]), had a simple message: a wish that our people in Portugal, he wrote, could be as creative, as free, and as audacious as our emigrants in California—greatly impressed as he was with seeing Azorean women wearing overalls atop tractors cultivating the land.

OP—*What was the Portuguese diaspora literary scene like when you first became interested in it? What made you decide to specialize in it?*

VF—Up until the 1990s, very limited, even though George Monteiro (author of *The Coffee Exchange*, a wonderful dialogue with his own Luso-American past and with the most significant Portuguese modernist writing) and Onésimo Almeida had already founded *Gávea-Brown: A Bilingual Journal of Portuguese-American Letters and Studies* precisely to spread the news and give us all a serious intellectual platform for studies of all kinds, and for creative writing.

A few years later, Katherine Vaz and Frank Gaspar appeared on the scene, and many other writers and poets who believed they were alone in various parts of the country began realizing they were actually part of a growing literary community. To mention a few of those names: Julian Silva, Charles Felix Reis, David Oliveira, Sue Fagalde Lick, Lara Gularte, Art Coelho, Michael Garcia Spring, and Joseph Faria. After having dedicated myself to Azorean literature for many years, I realized that through this Luso-American generation I could combine my two significant worlds, the Azores and America, in an ongoing act to better understand my own life

experience and to someday leave a record for future generations of those who are defining and rescuing our life in America.

OP—*What are you working on now?*
VF—I have almost ready for publication a book of essays on Luso-American writers tentatively titled *Imaginários Luso-Americanos: O Outro Lado do Espelho.* I'm also working on the collected essays on the same subject by the now-deceased professor Nancy T. Baden, of California State University, Fullerton. She was one of the first students of our literature in America in the early 1970s and, as my teacher and mentor, led me in this direction from the beginning. It is a theoretical framework that helped us in the broader contextualization of our own Portuguese-American writings by bringing in other ethnic groups and their literary historicity in the US.

OP—*You visited Provincetown after having read* Leaving Pico*. What did you think of the town? Was it what you expected? Could you see the Azorean influence?*
VF—I loved it! It reminded me in many ways of the Azores—its relaxed life style, the absence of the stressful rat race that characterizes the American suburban cities where I had always lived in Southern California. And then Provincetown represented to me America at its best, a place where artists and some writers retreated to create one of the most vital literatures in the world. Not too far away, in Wellfleet, one of my literary heroes lived and worked for many years: Edmund Wilson. I hope women in Provincetown, who may be reading this, forgive me for my intellectual choice here!

I saw the Azores everywhere, but perhaps I was still under the deep impression and "suggestions" of Frank's novel. I could almost "hear" our people in the streets echoing Frank's reinvented community of the 1950s, the women gossiping in chopped up language and the men boasting under the wonderful influence of a few cheap beers or whiskey.

OP—*You've said that mass tourism is inevitable in the Azores—the mass tourism of cruise ships and casinos. (A new cruise ship and ferry terminal has just been built on reclaimed land along the waterfront of the beautiful old cobblestoned city of Ponta Delgada, right in front of the harbor walk and the sidewalk cafes.) Do you think there is a future for "cultural tourism" there? What are your fears about the impact of mass tourism on the culture, or the soul, of the Azores?*
VF—This is provoking a very lively debate in the Azores at this time. Yes, cultural and ecological tourism is a possibility, with *National Geographic* having recently described the Azores as the second most desirable group of islands in the world for those looking for "restful" and uncrowded tourism. I now think we'll never have mass tourism here: the weather is too unpredictable and one casino will not (Las Vegas style) a playground make. The culture and the soul of the Azores can only be consoled by the calm and intelligent presence of others among us.

OP—*Many believe that a mindset came to Provincetown with the Portuguese that wasn't present in majority Anglo-American towns nearby, and this ingredient led to the town becoming both an artists' colony and later a gay resort. I was interested to read that there's a large open gay community and well-known gay beach on your home island of Terceira. Is there anything you can identify in the attitudes or worldview of the Azoreans, who are such a mix of cultures and races themselves, that might have made Provincetown such a supportive place for people who might not have fit in elsewhere?*
VF—Maybe. Paradoxically, we've always been a conservative Catholic culture, but a most tolerant one. As a matter of fact, some of our most significant religious festivals are still a real

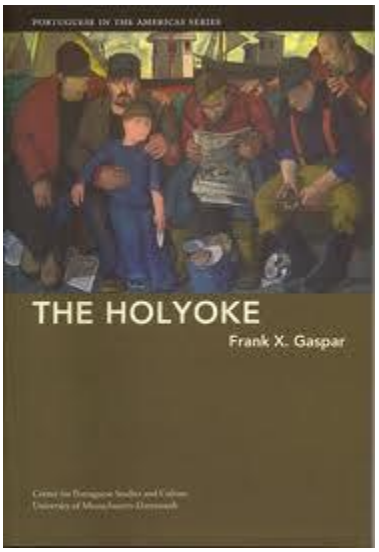
indication of this. The Azorean Holy Ghost Festivals, for example, come from a tradition of the people's challenge to the Church's "canonical" notion of things, it is a religious *and* profane ritual that not only remains strong in all the islands, but it is deeply celebrated in all our communities in the US and in Southern Brazil, bringing together all the generations.

We're a very easygoing and tolerant people, with an "inclusive" culture. Don't forget our early contacts with other peoples in the world during the globalization process that Portugal initiated with the Discoveries. In fact, one of our kings during the heyday of that adventure "ordered" the first Portuguese leaving to colonize Brazil to go there "and mix our blood" with those they encountered. We have never shared the Anglo puritanical attitudes toward sex or any other fundamental human pleasures. Perhaps this is where Provincetown's tolerance has also come from. Frank's novel *Leaving Pico* depicts its young protagonist first encountering his love for books by borrowing them from a gay couple who vacationed in Provincetown during the summers.

—November 25, 2007
Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, Azores

This interview was previously published in *Gávea-Brown*.

Oona Patrick earned an MFA in nonfiction from the Bennington Writing Seminars and a BA from Brown University. Her work has appeared in *Post Road, Gulf Coast, Salamander*, *Seixo Review*, and *Gávea-Brown*, and she is a frequent contributor to *Provincetown Arts*. Two of her publications have been listed as notable essays in *Best American Essays 2003* and *Best American Travel Writing 2005*. She is the Luso-American Liaison for the Dzanc Books/CNC DISQUIET International Literary Program in Lisbon. She grew up in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and now lives in Brooklyn, New York.



Frank Gaspar's The Holyoke: Childhood as Catalyst for Portuguese-American Writing

Essay by Reinaldo Francisco Silva (Universidade de Aveiro)

Unlike John Dos Passos and John Phillip Sousa, Frank Gaspar belongs to a generation of Portuguese-American writers who has not felt compelled to alienate himself to the point of disregarding his ethnic background. Instead, he has seen in his heritage a richness worth celebrating and writing about. Some of his poems in *The Holyoke* pulsate with Portuguese-American themes and are fine examples of a truly ethnic literature. While assessing what constitutes Portuguese-American literature as opposed to other emergent ethnic literatures, this essay also attempts to argue that despite its limited canon, Portuguese American literature has matured to the point of aptly being classified as such thanks to the writings of Frank Gaspar, Thomas Braga, and Katherine Vaz. Unlike earlier immigrant voices, Frank Gaspar writes in English so as to focus on his Azorean childhood recollections in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Fully assimilated into the mainstream, Gaspar does not claim for himself the status of a hyphenated American. With a strong Azorean presence on the tip of Cape Cod, *The Holyoke*, however, contains very dim recollections of a childhood lightly swept by an ethnic way of life. Unlike Braga, in *The Holyoke* we do not encounter a poet deeply engaged in focusing on the complexities of being born and growing up as a hyphenated native of the United States. Nor is Gaspar eager to celebrate Portuguese-American heroes, express the Portuguese reaction to mainstream values and beliefs, or how Portuguese values and traditions are kept alive within a dominant culture.

As George Monteiro has shown in "'The Poor, Shiftless, Lazy Azoreans': American Literary Attitudes toward the Portuguese," John Dos Passos and John Philip Sousa reacted negatively to their Portuguese ethnic background because of the demands imposed by the dominant culture. (Monteiro 186-96). Two figures who may be seen as emblems of cultural dispossession, Dos

Passos and Sousa may be regarded as sacrificial ethnic lambs who had to relinquish any attempt at cherishing their ethnic background so as to break into the cultural mainstream. In other words, they stand as symbols of ethnically disposed people due to the excessive demands mainstream American culture placed on its non-Anglo citizens, especially those with artistic yearnings.

Fortunately, more recent writers have not felt compelled to alienate themselves to the point of disregarding their ethnic background. As a matter of fact, they have seen in their heritage a richness worth celebrating and writing about. Such is the case of Frank Gaspar. He has found in his Portuguese (Azorean) ancestry experiences worth pondering. His poems pulsate with Portuguese-American themes and are fine examples of a truly ethnic literature. Mary Dearborn has pointed out that the ethnic and cultural "outsider can best represent what it means to exist within American culture" and that the "literature by and about those who seem to be on the edges of American culture can perhaps best represent what happens within that culture" (Dearborn 4-5). We must look into the margins since what we will encounter there is, in essence, American culture. In William Boelhower's words, "ethnic writing is American writing" (Boelhower 3).

Portuguese-American literature as it is understood today, does not have much of a tradition yet. Gaspar's poems in *The Holyoke* (1988), however, qualify as representatives of American ethnic literature. But is there such a thing as Portuguese-American literature with similar claims and status as, let us say, African American literature, Chicano literature, Jewish American literature, Native American literature, or even Asian American literature? Can the writers in America with a Portuguese background claim a similar status as, for example, that held by Toni Morrison, Rudolfo Anaya, Philip Roth, Louise Erdrich, or even Maxine Hong Kingston, to name a few? It is my belief that with Gaspar (and more recently, Thomas Braga and Katherine Vaz), Portuguese-American literature has matured to the point of aptly being classified as such. This is, in part, due to these writers' choice of English as their means of expression. In the past, writers such as José Rodrigues Miguéis, Dinis da Luz, and even Jorge de Sena wrote mostly in Portuguese about what it meant to belong to a minority culture within a dominant, mainstream one.

Frank Gaspar, Thomas Braga, and Katherine Vaz belong to a generation of Portuguese-American writers who can best express their condition as hyphenated Americans in the English language. Their appeal to a wider audience is obviously greater than those of the former immigrant voices. Not too long ago, however, scholars wondered when and if such a literature would ever come into existence. This can be seen in, for example, an interview conducted by Nancy T. Baden in June of 1979 and now recorded in the transcript with the title "A Literatura Luso-Americana: Que Futuro? – Uma Mesa Redonda" ("The Future of Portuguese-American Literature: A Round Table Discussion"), where one of her interviewees, Onésimo Teotónio Almeida, when asked about the possibility of the emergence of a Portuguese-American ethnic literature, observed that:

> There may come into existence a literature written in the English language, but in that case it shall certainly accommodate itself within the canons of American literature. Ethnic, at least. The so-called ethnic literatures also have their own problems, especially in terms of classification, but it is obvious that what may concern such a potential literature written in the English language and focusing on the Portuguese immigrant experience, that it shall either have to achieve such a good literary quality to claim its right in belonging to the American literary canon

> or that it shall have to settle for the status of a body of minor works with merely some sociological, historical, and ethnographic value (Translation mine; Duarte 26).

In another essay, "The Contribution by Americans of Portuguese Descent to the U. S. Literary Scene," Francis M. Rogers defines ethnic literature as

> a literature of maturity. Almost by definition, ethnic literature normally has to be written by immigrants resident here for many years and by descendants born here. The ethnic literature of Americans of Portuguese descent and birth forms part of American literature, not of Portuguese literature. It treats American problems, not Portuguese problems (Rogers 425).

In "Portuguese-American Literature," Leo Pap noticed a few glimmers of hope for this emerging ethnic literature, one which would eventually achieve a state of maturity after having, like other ethnic literatures, completed the cycle of development. At the very end of this study, Pap concludes that:

> Much of the material cited, the greater part written in Portuguese rather than in English, does reflect the typical immigrant experience, often nostalgically harking back to Portugal, but just as often revealing a growing concern with and for America (Pap 195).

What distinguishes Frank Gaspar from the earlier immigrant voices is his writing exclusively in the English language instead of Portuguese. An American-born and American-educated writer, Gaspar believes he can best express his childhood recollections in the Azorean community of Provincetown, Massachusetts in the English language. Thus, if the requirements of a truly ethnic literature in America are to be conveyed through the English language, in the poetry of Frank Gaspar they are completely substantiated. Unlike Thomas Braga in *Portingales* (1981), for example, Gaspar's use of Portuguese is very minimal. He only sporadically uses a word or two in some of the poems that compose *The Holyoke*, winner of the 1988 Morse Poetry Prize. With Gaspar we are evidently a big step away from Braga.

Another aspect that differentiates Gaspar from Braga is that he seldom criticizes the American mainstream or even feels the need to "speak" to it. Perhaps this is due to his perception of where he positions himself in American society. He does not view himself as an outsider, that is, as someone living on its margins. Gaspar does not even seem to identify himself with the status of a hyphenated American. The impression one gathers from his poems in *The Holyoke* is that he views himself as a part of the mainstream, although with some dim recollections of a childhood lightly swept by an ethnic way of life. Unlike Braga, Gaspar does not capture the essence of his ancestral culture. He will not trouble himself – or perhaps is not aware of – what it means to belong to a minor culture within a dominant one. He will settle for observing his childhood community and leave it at that.

Mary Oliver's assessment of these poems in her preface is an interesting one because she thinks that Gaspar does not resort to the subterfuges of most writers nowadays. She claims that the writers of today are obsessed with readers' opinions that it was worth their time to read these writers' work. This is not the case with *The Holyoke*:

> Poems nowadays often address the reader with obvious insistence. "Let me tell you about my life," they

> say, "and I will make it fancy enough that you
> won't be bored." Frank Gaspar, I believe, has
> something else in mind. He is speaking to the
> reader – but also to himself, or perhaps to some
> hazy divinity, or to the blue sky. I felt in his
> voice no attempt to persuade me of anything (xi).

Perhaps she could have added that Gaspar may have also wished to "speak" about his ancestral culture in some of these poems, although very lightly. Oliver also writes that the "poems tell the old story: a young man's passage from boyhood to maturity, in a small town by the sea. His people are Portuguese and Catholic" (xi). Upon closer inspection, one cannot help wondering if *The Holyoke* is the Portuguese-American version of Robert Frost's *A Boy's Will* and how much of Frost there may actually be in these poems. The truth is that both works deal with a boy's growth and how nature and the community assist in his process of maturation.

The setting in most of *The Holyoke* is clearly that of Provincetown, Massachusetts. "Who is Hans Hofmann and Why Does the World Esteem Him?" and "The Woman at the Pond" show us a few artists deeply engaged in their work. "August," for example, alludes to the nearby town of Truro. Oliver adds more particulars on this issue and even makes an interesting comment on how these mainstream artists view the people they stay with temporarily while vacationing in Provincetown. As we all know, the dominant ethnic group in Provincetown is composed of Portuguese, more specifically Azoreans. For these mainstream artists, it was unthinkable that in a community composed mostly of fishermen a poet such as Frank Gaspar would have ever emerged. Oliver further writes that:

> Because I have lived in Provincetown, Massachusetts, for many years,
> it was impossible not to recognize the place-names of this manuscript.
> Provincetown has been, and still is, a town where artists and writers,
> Hans Hofmann among them, come to live and to work. Over the years
> there has been a lot of talk about what the "creative" people have added
> to the town – opinions voiced mainly by the creative people themselves.
> Perhaps a sense of elitism is inevitable in such a situation, perhaps not.
> None of us was born here. And no one, if you get my meaning, ever
> considered the possibility of a Frank Gaspar. That I was engaged by his
> work has nothing to do with Provincetown but with the poems themselves,
> naturally. But this part of the story, I decided, was also worth the telling.

Although Gaspar may be considered a Portuguese-American writer, in *The Holyoke* we do not encounter a poetic voice torn between both cultures. What we witness is a mature Gaspar reminiscing about how his childhood was shaped by his Portuguese family—but not too profoundly. Such an ethnic past is certainly not as strong as that of Braga who, like Gaspar, was also born on American soil. Gaspar's poems obviously possess a Portuguese flavor or touch, but they also betray how much this writer resists plunging deeper into the aspects he decides to dwell on. Most likely, this may be due to his lack of ease with the ancestral culture and language, something we do not encounter in such voices as Alfred Lewis in *Home is an Island* (1951) or even more recently Katherine Vaz in *Saudade* (1994), *Fado & Other Stories* (1997) and *Mariana* (1998). A keen observer, he is yet a bit of an outsider who does not problematize the issues at stake. A brief incursion into some of his poems will certainly support this

argument. Furthermore, in a volume composed of forty-five poems, only about eight of them touch directly on Portuguese issues. Our next goal is to look at some of these poems.

The religious zeal of the Portuguese is, for example, an issue that has captured Gaspar's attention. Gaspar does not wish to give up his opportunity to focus on an aspect that occupies much of the time of Portuguese women, eventually providing his own view on it. "Tia Joanna" ("Aunt Joanna") is a good example of a devout woman who spends much of her time in church either praying the rosary, going to confession, or experiencing a mystical union with God. Perhaps the poem's uniqueness lies in the manner in which it captures how Provincetown Portuguese women reconcile their spiritual lives with their role as housekeepers and wives of fishermen:

> .....The soft kerchiefs
> of the women, the dark cloth
> of their long coats, the kale cooking
> on the oilstoves in the redolent kitchens,
> the checkered shirts of the husbands,
> the fish they bring to the doorways....
> .....
>
> She likes that, thinks of the host she will receive
> in the morning, His light shining in her eyes.
> But tonight still there is mackerel to pickle
> with vinegar and garlic in the stone crock,
> her husband's silver hair to trim, the bread
> to set rising in the big china bowl
> on the stool tucked close to the chimney (7-8).

Unfortunately, Gaspar does not dwell on the sense of fate and mourning that traditionally has characterized the Portuguese temperament and how in this poem this is conveyed through, for example, this woman's dark clothes. Another important aspect is how this particular couple still holds on to their native language in this "ethnic enclave" (Gordon 227). This can be seen when she says to her husband, before supper, "Go wash, she says in the old tongue" (8). Although the "old tongue" is often alluded to, as readers, we do not really hear its sounds. The other poem, "Ernestina the Shoemaker's Wife" dwells on the mystical experience of a woman who claims having met St. Francis in the woods when she was a young girl.

"Potatoes" is an unusual poem because it highlights the fondness the Portuguese evince in growing a vegetable garden in their backyards. This is an aspect that characterizes Portuguese immigrant life in the United States and shows that even in an industrial setting as is, for example, the Ironbound section of Newark, New Jersey, the Portuguese still plant lavish vegetable and flower gardens today. It seems that they cannot erase an ancestral rural way of life that easily and somehow find in these gardens some type of spiritual connection with the old country. Or, perhaps, like the mother figure in Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," this may be their only means to express their spirituality since most of these immigrants—like most Blacks after Reconstruction—were predominantly illiterate. Despite the obvious differences between both ethnic groups, the garden metaphor is what brings meaning into their lives. Writing about how Walker's mother found beauty, creativity, and

spirituality in her elaborate gardens, the Portuguese, too, feel the same way when in the midst of their vegetable and flower gardens.

What is fascinating about the gardens in *The Holyoke* is that they have a little bit of everything. Apart from potatoes and even corn, this one also has a patch of kale (to make the famous Portuguese kale soup) as well as a "patch of anise" (10). The episode of Gaspar's mother digging for potatoes comes in the tradition of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) when the narrator digs a few potatoes to make a chowder. Fortunately, the old New England way of life that Jewett so eloquently wrote about at the turn-of-the-century has not entirely disappeared since the Portuguese somehow keep it a little bit alive in their own communities. In this sense, Gaspar is shaping another motif typical of ethnic writing into his poetry: the importance of ethnic food and eating, which, for example, occupies a lot of contemporary Italian-American writing (Gardaphé 118). This is an issue that we may also encounter in Braga's poetry and Vaz's fiction.

"The Old Town" and "Descent" aim at capturing the carefree attitude and simplicity in childhood experiences. While in the first poem the author and his "old friend Santos" (32) have gotten together for a bottle of beer, reminiscing about how they spent their time capturing birds, the second one reports back to when the boys used to dive for eels and other fish. Judging from the surnames in both poems, more specifically Santos and Carvalho, one is inclined to believe that the Azorean community in Provincetown was a very closely-knit one and that the boys socialized only with those belonging to their own ethnic background.

This, I believe, calls into question Nancy Baden's contention that "the Portuguese have not been concentrated in the ghetto-like situation in which one lives exclusively the 'ethnic' experience as have blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos" (Baden 27). Portuguese-Americans do tend to stay together and even avoid the mainstream, especially the first and, perhaps, the second generations. With the Portuguese, the process of assimilation is much quicker compared to other ethnic minorities, Hispanics in particular.

"Ice Harvest" is a poem that highlights the New England practice of cutting ice from ponds for business purposes. Like so many other poems in this volume, "Ice Harvest" succeeds in fulfilling one of Emerson's tenets for American literature—the celebration of the commonplace. But the poem also reminds readers of the scarcity of references to Portuguese culture and language in this volume. When mentioning his "mother's/favorite uncle William" (49) among the ice-cutters, Gaspar shows that the process of Americanization among his family members is well under way. Within just one or two more generations, surnames like Santos or Carvalho will be all that is left pointing to their Portuguese ethnic background.

In the poem "Leaving Pico" we are introduced to a group of nostalgic Azoreans in a living room, talking about their native island of Pico and the beautiful things they had left behind, especially the

> green and clay roads, they said,
> and the rolling walls
> brushed white with lime,
> and how many trunks
> in the hold of a ship,
> what dishes, what cloth, how many
> rosaries and candles to the Virgin,
> and the prayers for the old dead
> they left to sleep under the wet hills
> (the green hills, and at night

light from the oil lamps
and sometimes a guitar keening
and windmills that huddled white
over the small fields of the dead)
and all the time they were
preparing themselves behind
their violet lips and heavy eyes
to sleep in this different earth
consoled only by how the moon
and tide must set themselves
pulling off to other darkness
with as little notion of returning (9).

It is only the older generation who yearn for their place of birth or even remember it with fondness. Gaspar, however, manifests absolutely no interest in visiting Pico or any curiosity about it. His attitude towards the ancestral land and culture is one bordering on detachment and uninterestedness. With such feelings, a strong personal identification with the Portuguese allusions he dwells on in some of these poems is nowhere to be seen. Moreover, the ambiance of poverty and mood of isolation typical of island life are also left untouched.

"The Old Country" focuses on a superstitious belief some of these immigrants had brought with them from the Azores. After so many years, the poet still remembers how his "mother would never sweep at night, /would never let us sweep. The broom/rustling, she said, would bring the dead up" (55). Supposedly, the reason why the poet's mother had never questioned such a belief was because she was afraid her ancestors' ghosts would come to haunt her and say this to her: "We never came/ from the old country to live like this" (55). Is it the new lifestyle these immigrants adopt in America or the manner in which they slowly drop—one generation after the other—what distinguishes them from other ethnic groups that these voices are rebelling against? What is obvious is that the poetic voice completely resists them:

And this old country is any place
we have to leave. The voices
calling us back are dust.
I have traveled to the far edge
of a country now, fearing the dead.
They still want to speak with my mouth (55-56).

Gaspar might be acknowledging that his ancestors from the Azores cannot really count on him to perpetuate a cultural continuity since he is more of an American than a Portuguese. His ties with Portugal are weak and superficial. To add to this, as an adult he has moved to California (supposedly, for professional reasons) and is physically distant from the ethnic roots he had left behind in Provincetown. As far as *The Holyoke* is concerned, it contains absolutely no poems with explicit references to Portuguese history and culture. Whether the poet is well versed or not in these matters is a point this volume does not clarify. Moreover, Gaspar's command of written Portuguese does not seem as proficient and error-free as was the case with Braga. A quick glance at the poem "Ernestina the Shoemaker's Wife" seems to confirm this since the word "hervas" should have been spelled "ervas." Clearly, what Gaspar wishes to convey here is "herbs." A blend such as this one reveals how much closer he actually is to the mainstream language and culture than to that of his ancestors.

True, one example cannot be held as a universal truth, but it certainly leaves this reader with the impression that Gaspar belongs to a generation of Portuguese-American writers whose command of the ancestral culture and language will become weaker and weaker. This is certainly due to the rapid process of assimilation of the Portuguese into the American mainstream. As Leo Pap has argued nearly two decades ago, assimilation of the Portuguese into the mainstream has been unsteady. It has depended on the patterns of emigration of the Portuguese into the United States and whether these immigrants came from the Azores Islands or continental Portugal:

> It has been said that immigrants from the Azores have been quicker to identify with America than those from mainland Portugal, and those from the western Azores quicker than those from São Miguel. Actually those from the western Azores started coming first, followed by those from São Miguel and then by Continentals. The Azoreans as a group have had less of a sense of Portuguese nationality than the Continentals to begin with. There have been contradictory opinions about the comparative rate of Americanization of the Portuguese in urban New England as against rural California. Those in Hawaii are said to have assimilated more rapidly than the ones in California; but Portuguese immigration into California continued long after influx into Hawaii had ended. It is too early to appraise the rate of Americanization of the tens of thousands who have come from the Azores and the rest of Portugal in recent years…. Generally speaking, it is the "second generation," the American-born (or American-raised) children of any immigrant group, that have the most decisive influence on the Americanization of the foreign-born adults. As these children go through American public schools, usually perceiving themselves as a "minority" and mingling with "other" children, they tend to become more subject to peer pressure than to parental control and present their elders with the choice of a widening generation gap or else parental willingness to adjust at least partially to majority patterns. This is also true for the Portuguese ethnics (Pap, *The Portuguese-Americans* 220-21).

As these ethnic communities become less and less rejuvenated with new waves of emigrants from Portugal, the collective memory from the old country will gradually disappear, leaving us somewhere down the line with only a handful of Portuguese surnames. Such is the current situation in Hawaii. Perhaps this might soon be the trend in continental U.S.A. as well, especially now that Portugal has developed so much after joining the European Union in the mid-nineteen eighties. In this sense, the Portuguese are no different from the waves of Eastern Europeans, Germans, Poles, and Italians who arrived in America at the end of the nineteenth-century or during the earlier decades of the twentieth-century. At this point, these ethnic groups have been fully assimilated into the mainstream. What may distinguish them from one another is, perhaps, their look or physical features and the inevitable surname. The Portuguese are no exception since they are also marrying people from ethnic backgrounds other than their own. The melting-pot, after all, is still alive in America even if it takes a few generations to bring it to a full boil.

What we may safely conclude is that the closer one is to the ancestral culture, the stronger the criticism or the need to "speak" to the American mainstream is. Such was the case with José Rodrigues Miguéis in such stories as "Steerage," "Cosme," and "Bowery '64"; Alfred Lewis in, for

example, the poem "Bicentennial: A Portuguese Salute"; and, to some extent, Thomas Braga in the poems "Chants Fugitifs" and "Judith Melo." The closer one is, the more passionate one's voice will be in denouncing the excesses in the American way of life. Such is also possible because these voices are well aware of the major differences between both cultures.

In the case of Gaspar, the opposite tends to prevail. The more one is distant from the ancestral culture and, in turn, completely immersed in the culture of the mainstream, the more uncritical such a voice will be. While Miguéis in, for example, the story "Bowery '64" felt compelled to denounce certain political and social excesses in American society, knowing that other alternatives existed elsewhere, Gaspar, for example, is fully accommodated to the mainstream. With their respective time periods taken into consideration, the attitude of the latter sounds something like this: Why criticize if one has no qualms about the space one occupies?

With Frank Gaspar, Thomas Braga, and Katherine Vaz we are already near the heart of Portuguese-American ethnic literature. That is why some of the scholarly arguments discussed at the beginning of this paper may be seen as somewhat outdated and in need of reassessment. There is no doubt that the poetic writings of Gaspar belong to American ethnic literature since they completely fulfill Onésimo Almeida's and Francis Rogers' criteria for what constitutes ethnic literature in America. With these writers, Portuguese-American literature is evidently beyond an embryonic stage. It is ethnic literature in its own right. My contention is that a truly ethnic literature emerges when second or third-generation American-born voices attempt to retrieve their ancestors' roots so as to learn more about where they came from. Such is the case with Gaspar. The great Portuguese-American ethnic novel, however, is yet to be written. With Frank X. Gaspar's *Leaving Pico* (1999) and Katherine Vaz's *Saudade* (1994) and *Fado & Other Stories* (1997), we are certainly a step closer.

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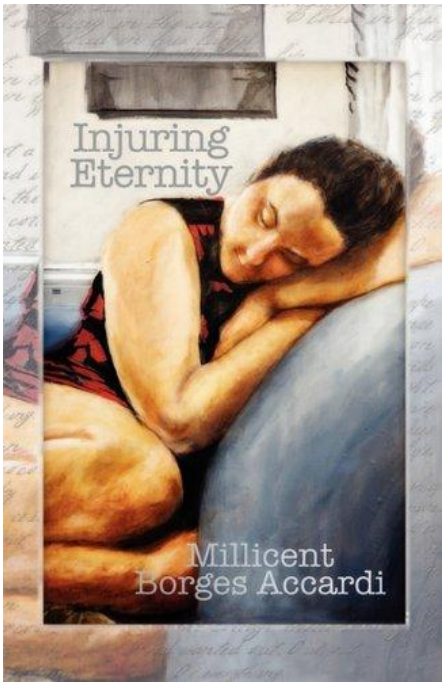
Conversations with Portuguese-North American Writers



Millicent Borges Accardi: The Last Borges

Interview with Fernanda Viveiros

Millicent Borges Accardi, a Portuguese-American poet, is the author of three books: *Injuring Eternity* (World Nouveau), *Woman on a Shaky Bridge* (Finishing Line Press chapbook), and *Only More So* (forthcoming Salmon Press, Ireland). Her poetry has appeared in over 100 publications, including *Nimrod, Tampa Review, New Letters* and the *Wallace Stevens Journal* as well as in the *Boomer Girls* (Iowa Press) and *Chopin with Cherries* (Moonrise Press) anthologies. In this interview Millicent speaks of reuniting with her identity as a Portuguese-American.

Fernanda Viveiros—I understand that your father is of Azorean background whereas your mother is of Irish ancestry. Both the Azoreans and the Irish have a long history of writing nostalgic, melancholic and sorrowful poetry. It could be said that you were genetically inclined to be a poet. When did you first know you wanted to write?
Millicent Borges Accardi—I wanted to write ever since I could outline "Millicent" on a fogged up window. When I was a little kid, I seemed to be sick all the time. I had walking pneumonia twice and a variety of fierce allergies; the first attack coming after I brought roses from the garden to my first grade teacher at Luther Burbank Elementary. So, much sick time meant recuperating in bed with library books, which evolved into me making my own volumes. I would decorate a cover and then thread colorful yarn through the holes in the lined notebook paper to create my own chapbooks. Early on I wrote sequels to Mary Poppins, then the Frank Baum Oz series.

Conversations with Portuguese-North American Writers

FV—As a child growing up in southern California, did you attend Portuguese festivities or have any connection to your Portuguese background?
MBB—We went to the blood-less bull fights in Artesia and yearly picnics in Recreation Park in Long Beach and The Navigator restaurant in San Pedro, but I was isolated from much of the Portuguese culture since my parents moved from the East Coast to California before I was born. They had this idea of giving me an "Americanized" upbringing" in the suburbs with white bread, green lawns, canned fruit. Despite the fact that Portuguese was my father's first language my parents felt the only way to succeed in the US was to speak English which meant I was sheltered from many traditions. Oh, we had kale soup once a week and my dad made blood pudding and linguiça. When we were in Hawaii, we had *malasadas*. And on birthdays we'd have *pasteis de nata*, almond pastries and cream cakes from the Artesia Bakery. My dad's circle of friends included a few Portuguese speakers but for the most part Portuguese was banished.

FV—Did you ever feel as if you were navigating two cultures?
MBB—Actually I think my parents were frustrated with the hypocrisies of the Catholic Church and many of their family back in New Bedford so they wanted to make a clean break. I felt inside one culture but missing the one I was really meant to be IN. Like a changeling. I dearly wanted to straddle two cultures but my parents foresaw a better life in California than they had had—my mom struggled working in a golf ball factory. I had aunts who worked in the cranberry bogs and as checkers in grocery stores. The men were frustrated builders or carpenters whose ancestors had been fishermen. It was a hard life to fight through. Instead of embracing apple pie and Disneyland, I rebelled. I asked all the time, where is our family from? I longed for parochial school and the *festas* my cousins attended back in MA.

FV—To what degree do you identify as a Portuguese-American writer?
MBB—After my mother died, I felt a new sense of finding my own way, and one of the directions I took was my Portuguese-ness. And when I got married, my husband took my last name as his middle name. I think this time was important to me as a writer and it was then I decided to embrace the culture and my work started exploring topics that I had pushed away. I think it is important to write from who we are and where we came from; it's a way to keep culture alive. Of course it is also a way to move forward. Unlike some other PA writers, I think, since I am in the discovery phase, I am more willing to write about sardines and fishermen. I am interested in learning about fado and whaling. Whereas other writers who perhaps were raised within a Portuguese community feel a need to push forward, writing about what may be perceived as more modern or sophisticated topics. I find new within the old. Like hunting for treasure, I am honored and fascinated by the past.

FV—In what way, if any, does your father's ancestry link you to your ethnicity?
MBB—Here's one of my poems which describes it best (I think). This poem and a few others I wrote will be included in the new Portuguese-American Poetry anthology by Gavea-Brown which is due out later this year.

The Last Borges

Like God and his Eve,
you never passed on
your secrets; I struggled
to learn. Coitadinho, coitadinho.

O Último Borges

Tal como Deus e a sua Eva,
nunca partilhaste
os teus segredos; Lutei
para aprender. *Coitadinho, coitadinho*.

Conversations with Portuguese-North American Writers

Never sure which accent to
migrate towards; which window pane
to breathe on for the best cursive fog.
I shunned the loud
Portuguese fights.

The visiting relatives, named for
saints,
Over and over, in the driveway
at night, drunken Uncle John or Paul,
or Robert crashed his truck
into the side of our house:
filha da puta!

While you went to night school
two nights a week--for twenty years,
and ate linguiça sandwiches,
I watched and listened.

I would catch you: sitting at
Rudy the barber's chair
I would sneak up behind to hear
foreign words.

At school, I pronounced our name
as you taught me,
as an Englishman would:
flat and plain, riming it with
a word for “pretty.”

After a while it seemed
that someone else
had heard a grandmother's
lullabies at night:
a verse that sounded like
a baby's cries for milk,
wanting the nipple:
Mamã eu quero, Mamã eu quero

As you grow older, papa,
I long for a language that joins us,
beyond our last name,

Sem nunca ter a certeza para que
sotaque migrar; que vidraça
embaciar para melhor escrever.
Evitei as barulhentas
discussões portuguesas.

Os familiares que visitavam, com nomes de santos,
vezes sem conta, à noite, na entrada da garagem,
um dos meus tios embriagado, o John, ou o Paul,
ou o Robert, bateu contra a nossa casa
com a sua carrinha.

Enquanto ias para a escola à noite
duas vezes por semana – durante vinte anos,
e comias sandes de linguiça,
Eu observava e escutava.

Eu apanhava-te: sentado
na cadeira do barbeiro Rudy
Aproximava-me sorrateiramente por detrás
para ouvir palavras estrangeiras.

Na escola, pronunciava o nosso nome
como me ensinaste,
como um inglês o faria:
simples e directo, rimando-o com
uma palavra para «*pretty*».

Após algum tempo parecia
que outra pessoa
tinha ouvido uma canção de embalar
de uma avó durante a noite:
um verso que soava como
um bebé que chora por leite,
a querer mamar:
Mamã eu quero, Mamã eu quero

À medida que envelheces papá,
anseio por uma língua que nos una,
para além do nosso apelido,
do espaço entre os nossos dentes da frente,
e cabelo preto ondulado.

FV—Who translated your poem and were you involved in the process?
MBB—Rui Vitorino Azevedo did the translation. I think he had his students help too. We went back and forth on a few phrases, etc., so we did work together.

FV—For some, that is the crutch of being an ethnic writer - often one is seen as a cultural ambassador from that community instead of being a writer first. Have you ever sensed that your ethnic identity could become a straightjacket at some point?
MBB—Perhaps at some point. Perhaps not. I have always been proud to be a woman and that pride has not changed. For now and since I can remember I am enjoying the exploration of my Portuguese heritage in my writing. Which is not to say that I ONLY write about Portugal or the Azores. For now, it is a focus. It is important for me to reclaim what was lost. There is much to be done. Ask me the same question after I've written my poetry collection about Portuguese fairy tales and see how I feel? For now, my heritage is where I want to be and what I want to explore. Gosh I just started studying the language! Although I understand more than I speak.

FV—In the past year since your time at the Disquiet International Writing Program in Lisbon you've become much more involved in the Portuguese-American literary community. Several of your articles and essays have appeared on the online Portuguese American Journal and you organized a reading, Kale Soup for the Soul, at this year's AWP. Since returning from Lisbon, have you felt any self-imposed pressure to refer to yourself as a PA writer or to contribute to the community?

MBB—It is important. In the past year I have connected with a wide variety of Portuguese-American, Luso and Portuguese writers and for so long, many of us have been lost and perceived in the US as "other" or as sort of like Italian or a different kind of Latino. I have interviewed many wonderful writers of Portuguese descent: Jacinto Lucas Pires, Sam Pereira, Carlo Matos, Rogerio Miguel Puga, Jeff Parker, Linette Escobar (to name a few).The Portuguese are a small ethnic group, but one with a strong literary voice. Some might say the voice has been marginalized. Or unclassified and, therefore, lost. Portugal has an identity crisis. It is Europe's oldest country, and yet, for a time, the Portuguese navigated and explored the world. We are not an annex of Brazil or the children of Spain. There is much work to be done with education. Like popcorn, smaller ethnicities have launched: Cuban, Pilipino, Vietnamese, etc. I'd like to think I am an advocate for all things literary and Portuguese but in reality I'm probably more of an avid cheerleader—It was my dream to have a reading by Portuguese-American writers AT the Associated Writing Programs conference, even as an offsite event, it was an important "first." A triumph.

FV—At Long Beach City College you got to know the poet and novelist Frank Gaspar, the author of *Leaving Pico*. Was he your first introduction to Portuguese-American literature or had you read previous works by other authors?
MBB—I met Frank Gaspar at a writers conference in Florida or Kansas City years ago when someone said, "You're Portuguese-American? YOU should meet Frank!", then we had coffee and through the years we kept in touch. In the late 1990's we both taught at LBCC in the English Department. Outside of family, he was one of the first Portuguese-Americans I had ever met! *Leaving Pico* blew me away. Frank's work has been far-reaching.

FV—Are you reading more works by Portuguese or Portuguese American authors as you explore your own ethnicity? Any favourite works or writers?
MBB—This past year, I have been reading more work both by Portuguese and Portuguese-American writers perhaps in an effort to catch up on what I perceive as my lack of education in this arena. I read *The Moon Come to Earth* by Philip Graham (a journalist's account of living in

Lisbon for a year), the new anthology from Rutger's Press: *Luso-American Literature: Writings by Portuguese-Speaking Authors in North America*. I've been reading Portuguese poetry translated into English at the Poems from the Portuguese web site. Also *The Three Marias: New Portuguese letters*, Sam Pereira, Carlo Matos, Nancy Vieira Couto, Katherine Vaz, Pessoa and Darrell Kastin. I just got *Barnacle Love* by Anthony de Sa from the library and have a copy of *Through a Portugee Gate* I ordered from Tagus Press.

FV—Vamberto Freitas, a respected literary critic based in Terceira, has promoted your writing on his blog, *Nas duas Margens*. What did it feel like to know that your work was being discussed on an Azorean blog?
MBB—It made me cry. I was also interviewed via Skype on RTP the Azorean news broadcast and it felt really, really like home to know that there were people in the Azores making a connection with me and me with them, through literature. I felt in a way like someone who had gone off on a whaling ship and returned with gifts and exciting news from abroad. After all this time, to embrace the Azorean community is an absolute honor.

FV—You mentioned your interest in Portuguese fairytales which you explore in the poem, "The Maiden with the Rose on her Forehead." It's closely based upon a well known violent and very sad fairytale. Can you speak on this interest?
MBB—In my work I often explore violence and sex, in particular, in traditional folklore, which tends to have much violence against and committed towards women, and, often it is sexualized.

FV—One of the poems in *Injuring Eternity* reflects a very Portuguese sensibility. I'm referring to "The Story of the Ten Blackbirds." Was this poem inspired by one of your Portuguese relatives?
MBB—My great aunt, Flossie worked in a mill in Canada when she was a child. I wish I had taken notes! I remember her saying that the children hid in a broom closet when the inspector came around. Times were different then, and families were large and so many widowed or single mothers needed financial help. Against common sense, children often worked under dangerous conditions.

FV—We hear about the "tortured artist" so often, so I'm curious to know what is the most enjoyable part of the writing process for you?
MBB—Like music, it is the trance or the being in the moment. When an idea comes, I write and work and time disappears. It is like flying, I imagine.

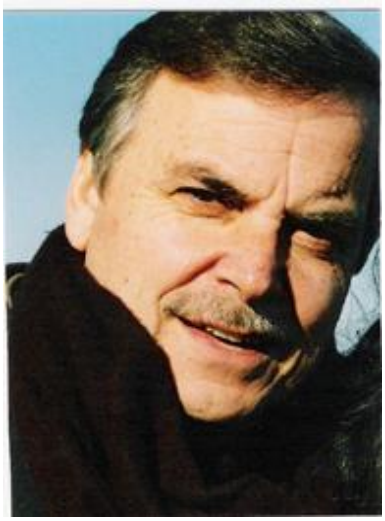
FV—What are you working on now that your latest collection of poetry has been released?
MBB—A second full-length poetry book *Only More So* is due out next year from Salmon Press in Ireland. Right now I am working on a manuscript of poems inspired by traditional Portuguese and Azorean fairy tales, collected from California immigrants from the 1970s through 2000. In addition, I have a manuscript entitled *Practical Love Poems* about love in the ordinary, instead of highly romanticized. Here is what the critic Elizabeth Willse said about my work, "I like love poems written by practical people," I just said, to a friend. Meaning… I like the same kinds of love poems as I like love stories. I love the things that capture love in ordinary moments. Tenderness, friendship, companionship. No matter where my own head and heart are, I like to read, and hear stories about love that lets real life in."

FV—What is the best piece of writing advice you've heard?

MBB—Read. Read everything. Read botany text books. Read the back of cereal boxes. Read toy advertisements. Read instructions for refinery maintenance. Read what others recommend. Read widely and with abandon. Read the best. Read the worst so you can develop an opinion. Read what work has come before you, before you write. Read. That is all.
Also, I liked Henry Miller's rules:

1. Work on one thing at a time until finished.
2. Start no more new books, add no more new material to "Black Spring."
3. Don't be nervous. Work calmly, joyously, recklessly on whatever is in hand.
4. Work according to the program and not according to mood. Stop at the appointed time!
5. When you can't create you can work.
6. Cement a little every day, rather than add new fertilizers.
7. Keep human! See people; go places, drink if you feel like it.
8. Don't be a draught-horse! Work with pleasure only.
9. Discard the Program when you feel like it–but go back to it the next day. Concentrate. Narrow down. Exclude.
10. Forget the books you want to write. Think only of the book you are writing.
11. Write first and always. Painting, music, friends, cinema, all these come afterwards.

In my former home, I had Miller's Rules posted on the wall in my writing studio. And behind me, I had a Jack London poster (that I bought at Valley of the Moon) inscribed with these words: "I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The function of man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them. I shall use my time."



A Conversation with Onésimo Teotónio Almeida

Interview with Phillip Rothwell (Rutgers University)

INTRODUCTION

Born in San Miguel, the Azores, in 1946, Onésimo Teotónio Almeida studied Philosophy at Brown University, where he went on to become, and is today, Professor of Portuguese. Having published widely on Portuguese literature, culture and identity, he also has numerous volumes of creative writing to his name, the most recent of which is *Aventuras de um Nabogador e Outras Estórias-em-sanduíche*, (Lisbon: Bertrand, 2007), as well as a long-standing presence in the Portuguese media. The host of RTP's *Onésimo à Conversa com…* changes roles to answer a few questions about his academic and creative work, his passion for the Azores and the future of Portuguese Studies in the United States.

INTERVIEW

Phillip Rothwell: A large part of your intellectual project, dating back to the 1980s, before it became fashionable, has been about debunking essentialist tendencies wherever they occur, and particularly in Portuguese intellectual thought. Indeed, you gave a very powerful critique of the "ontologizers" in Portuguese philosophy in 1985, and yet, as we know, the tendency resurfaces repeatedly, and increasingly, in postcolonial guises. I wonder if you would like to comment not only on how essentialism keeps cropping up, but why it has such a strangle-hold on what we do?
Onésimo Teotónio Almeida: That was an expansion on a paper I read at the first conference of the *Associação Internacional de Lusitanistas* held in Poitiers, France, in 1984, which provoked quite a reaction for being iconoclastic. In it, I attempted a deconstruction of the essentialist views held by some Portuguese intellectuals, particularly regarding *saudade,* a quintessential obsession of those engaged in debates on Portuguese culture, namely the defenders of *filosofia*

portuguesa. Soon after I developed it into a long essay, expanding on the logical flaws detectable in arguments developed by the "ontologizers" of the concept (1). This essay was published almost a decade before Boaventura Sousa Santos's *Pela Mãe de Alice,* and long before essentialism became a buzzword in the academy. In the paper, I think I demonstrate how there cannot be a necessary connection between the past and future of a culture. Contingency, of course, is antithetical to absolutism, and also to essentialism. It does not follow, however, that the past does not weigh on the future of a culture, or that the history of a nation can easily be made to change its course. Hence it is preferable to speak of the predominant values of a given culture, values that may change over time, or persist over extensive periods. Any concept of value immutability is alien to this sort of language. Here, though, lies the Gordian knot of the debate. Academics not familiar with philosophy confuse essentialism with the predominance of cultural structures (this is perhaps what Fernand Braudel called "la longue durée," and anthropologists have called value structures, cultural patterns, predominance of types, and cultural paradigms). Any confusion with essentialism reveals a failure to understand what exactly essentialism is. Essentialism derives from the Latin "essence," and this in turn from "esse" (being), which implies immutability. Ignorance of this perhaps explains why so many people throw the charge of essentialism around so easily nowadays. Maybe they should read more before they speak or write, if they want to be taken seriously.

Given my longstanding critique of confusions over essentialism, and the umbrage it provoked among supporters of "Portuguese philosophy," it is ironic that now, more than twenty years later, in an article published in a recent issue of *ellipsis,* Maria Manuel Baptista indirectly links my views on lusofonia to Salazarist leanings, or at least with some of its "myths and stereotypes"(2). Also, a few years ago, while reviewing an article of mine in *After the Revolution: Twenty Years of Portuguese Literature, 1975-1994,* Marcus Freitas wrote that "Onésimo Almeida clearly follows Lourenço's standpoint and refuses to accept the discontinuity between pre- and post-revolutionary [Portuguese] identity."

I have written extensively on the issue of identity both in Portuguese and in English. One of my goals in essay writing is to avoid jargon and use the most vernacular language. I try to keep my vocabulary tightly controlled, trimming all unnecessary obfuscations, valuing above all clarity and neat argumentation (perhaps a deformation due to a very strict training in analytical philosophy). Having written many papers on diverse, apparently unrelated topics, I pursue coherence even though such a goal is difficult to achieve. This is why my papers constantly refer to other papers of mine. My arguments are not bulletproof, but the charge of essentialism is uninformed. Of course, disagreements are the bread and butter of academia, but nobody likes to be misquoted or misunderstood. These incidents of misreading reveal a pattern that needs clarification.

In my work, I have called attention to the fact that debates on identity often collapse two dimensions. For some people, identity means a continuum between past, present and future. However, the word actually has two important and analytically separable dimensions: first, the value constants emerging in a culture's past; second, the goals, desires, and aims of a culture facing its future. Collapsing the two causes serious theoretical and practical complications.

For instance, Oliveira Martins may perhaps be charged with some sort of essentialism, but Antero de Quental should not. Antero is a good example of a thinker who separates past cultural patterns and future directions with remarkable success. He identified (whether one agrees or not) the patterns taken by Portuguese culture after the Counter-Reformation and called for a radical change toward modernization. This is the antipodes of essentialism.

PR: Following from that, could you comment on the continuities and ruptures you identify as occurring in discussions about Portuguese culture?
OTA: These postmodern times have brought about an array of intellectual production that is strongly anti-essentialist. Inevitably those debates reached Portugal. It was important for Portugal to end its isolation. A culture forced to be monolithic for such a long time was in need of an earthquake. The April 25th revolution, however, did not really act as such, since the Left replaced one ontology with another, a variety of Marxist or Marxian dogmas, all sharing somehow an essence. It took a long while for that atmosphere to break up. But when it did, it went to another extreme. It is as if Portugal had gone from a pre-modern society to a post-modern, without going through modernity. Actually I think this is a serious matter. There are important values that we, in the West, have inherited from modernity that have not disappeared in this post-modern era. I have written about this in detail and I actually teach a course at Brown precisely on this topic. It looks like the baby is being thrown out with the bath water. Postmodernity basically underlines our incapability of holding in absolute terms any single value of modernity—knowledge and technology, liberty and justice, democracy, progress. Every one of them hinges on the others and middle grounds have to be found. We are back to where Aristotle was in his views on virtues—the secret is to strike the happy medium. Justice (or better, fairness) is nothing but the search for the equilibrium between individual liberties, that is, my rights and your obligations, which are proportionately symmetrical with my obligations and your rights.

We do not, however, have the time to talk about this here. I should simply add I fear that with all this postmodern talk in Portugal (even though the problem is not confined to my homeland), people forget that there are plenty of continuities in Portuguese culture. These are not ontological. They are cultural traits that have survived a long time. Every culture has them. It is ridiculous to elevate them to ontological categories, but it is also blindness to deny their existence. Curiously, someone like Boaventura Sousa Santos, who charged me once with essentialism in a debate after a lecture I gave at his invitation at the University of Coimbra, is now talking about the "epistemology of the South," something I do not understand because either it means different cultural values—and that would be "axiology," not "epistemology." Or, if you claim that there is in the South a different epistemology, this would imply a different way of knowing, which smacks of ontology. Besides, what is the South? Australia is south and so is South Africa.

PR: As well as Onésimo, the academic, you are perhaps equally well known as a writer, and particularly, as a writer who humorously captures the absurdity of everyday experience. I wonder if you could talk a little about the "need to write," and the importance of the process of writing in the development of your academic thought. In other words, I want to understand Onésimo not as an academic and separately as a writer, but as an entity (if you will excuse the ontology!) in which one aspect feeds into and nourishes the other.
OTA: You can say entity. I am not one of those who think that there is no self. As a human being I am an entity, even if I am one who has changed quite a bit over these sixty years, almost like Theseus's boat, but one who indeed remembers being still the same person. Yes, I do double as a scholar and as a writer. I could never separate the two and I am the same person expressing the same points of view in both forms. It is always the same voice speaking even though I make a huge distinction in styles.

There are two basic ones—the analytical and the "creative." In an analytical essay, I try to be as critical as I can: my philosophical training comes in full steam and I am after clear and

distinct ideas, as Cartesian as I can be, even when dealing with matters that fall on the side of emotions. The other form of expression is much freer and incorporates all my other writings (which one could call "creative"), in the sense that I am not bound by empirical, analytical or critical concerns. In it, I feel a certain freedom in moving between genres and osmotically blending them. I have written *prosemas* which are prose poems, *crónicas* that seem like short stories and I have also mixed the story genre when writing "estórias-em-sanduíche" (stories sandwiched between *crónicas*). I have also explained elsewhere that my *crónicas* are short-sleeved essays. Usually, in my stories *I show,* whereas in my essays *I tell*.

I have also said in various interviews that I basically write about the same interconnected themes of identity, worldviews, and values and, above all, about my life experiences. And here my living in two worlds, the Portuguese and the American, figures prominently. As a raconteur with no boundaries, basically telling stories in many ways and using the capabilities language allows us, I try to be creative in the way I tell them. However, even though I emigrated to the United States and I consider myself a hyphenated Portuguese (a Portuguese-American), I do not feel I have a divided self.

PR: Another facet that comes to mind when we think of Onésimo is the Azores. As well as the obvious affective link it holds for you, please comment on the importance of the islands in your intellectual development.

OTA: I imagine that I would be a desert lover had I been born in Morocco or Egypt. I do not know. I simply know that I am an island lover and that I need the sea as part of my surroundings. That said, I think it is very easy to love the Azores, as lots of people who were not born there do. The islands are indeed a bit of paradise. Having grown up surrounded by such natural beauty leaves its marks, among them, an almost pantheistic infatuation with nature. There is more to it, though. When I grew up, the Azores were really an old world. It was an orderly world, with proportion, rules, and where everything seemed to make sense. If Portugal was isolated from the rest of the world, in the Azores we were even isolated from Portugal itself, and most people lived isolated even from neighboring islands. Everything contributed to create an atmosphere which is today lost for the most part, for good or ill. But it is still within me. The first literature I read was Azorean. I was very young when a teacher of mine put Vitorino Nemésio, Nunes da Rosa and Roberto de Mesquita in my hands. In my adolescence, in the sixties, we were opening up to a wider world and news from outside arrived there, but filtered. Everything arrived in some sense in a cleansed, purified form. As I was growing up, things also started to change. But still not much information about the wider world was available. We heard more of the Vietnam War than of war in the African Portuguese colonies. In the late 60s, we lived in sort of a utopian age dreaming of the most naïf revolution of peace, love and justice for all. All that has contributed to my elevation of those islands to a certain mythical status that obviously only existed in my mind. I said I was analytical and rational when talking about reality, but I did not say I was not subjective.

PR: APSA celebrates ten years as an association, and clearly Portuguese and Brazilian studies has evolved immensely over the period. Where do you see it going next?

OTA: I remember very well what I thought were utopian dreams entertained by Joanna Courteau when she used to talk about creating an association for Portuguese Studies. I thought it would be a mistake to divide us even more, weakening the Portuguese presence at the AATSP conferences. But I realize now that it was a great move. APSA has come a long way and every bi-annual conference seems to attract more people. Our journal is now appearing more regularly and with better quality, but I think that the association should perhaps think in terms

of strategizing the expansion of teaching Portuguese in the United States by identifying places where it could expand. Portuguese is growing slowly but steadily, but it needs to grow more. In the past, Portugal has been in a better position to help a variety of projects. Now, the situation is not so good and help is limited to the Luso-American Foundation for Development and the Camões Institute. Since Brazil continues to look the other way, we are on our own. But I feel that there is a growing interest in the US in Brazil and in Portuguese-speaking Africa. I fear though that the continental part of our programs will dwindle if the loss of interest in the past continues. I must add that I feel this is a mistake. We cannot form good Luso-Brazilianists without a strong background in Portuguese literature, for instance. Our overemphasis on the present has made us let previous centuries fall into oblivion. Another danger I see is the overemphasis on theory. It becomes so important to learn a few clichés applicable to everything that the actual study of the language, literature, history, and culture almost appear to become secondary. I feel comfortable saying this because my doctorate was in Philosophy. I am not afraid of theory, but I must add that, with all due respect to those who do it well, a lot of what I see passing as theory is a mere repetition of clichés forcefully applied to fit ideological straightjackets.

Notes:
1. See "Filosofia Portuguesa; Alguns equívocos." *Cultura: História e Filosofia* IV (1985): 219-55.
2. See Maria Manuel Baptista, "A Lusofonia Não É um Jardim ou da Necessidade de 'Perder o Medo às Realidades e aos Mosquitos'." *Ellipsis* 4 (2006): 99-130.