

Provincetown Arts:
Interview with Vamberto Freitas:
Contemporary Azorean and Luso-American Writing

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By Oona Patrick

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 our own 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 in 1976 after the Portuguese revolution of 1974.

Freitas is the author of several works of criticism, and has published opinion and criticism in many reviews, journals, and magazines in Portugal, including the Lisbon paper *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.

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 plaques, statues, parks, and avenues honor poets, writers, and teachers throughout the Azores.

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.

Oona Patrick - *Many 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?*

Vamberto Freitas – 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 published by a major and prestigious house in the continent (ASA), with its “power” to move and influence literary reception in the national press. It 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 recommend 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 appears 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 - *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 in Portuguese literature have come from the Azoreans since the nineteenth century! I realize that my calling writers such as Frank Gaspar an “Azorean” might raise some tired and cynical eye brows 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 Bill Cardoso and one of his books (*The Maltese Sangweech & Other Heroes*), the recently deceased Luso-American journalist who coined the term “gonzo” for Thompson: Luso-American writers 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 - *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, great boasting, if sometimes false, 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 (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, reaching us half melted after a 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 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 - Ginsberg! - vociferous poem of jealousy against 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 mid-twentieth century. Remember Big Dan's in New Bedford (1984) and how we Portuguese in America became all suspects 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 - *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 *O Meu Mundo Não É Deste Reino*, translated in the US (*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, becoming 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 (three volumes) by Cristóvão de Aguiar is another great artistic journey into the soul of a people in a small town of S. Miguel, 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, that 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 coexisting 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 signalling 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 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 his novels, (*Imitação da Morte/An Imitation of Death*) you would never guess this biographical detail. A Lisbon journalist, who had been his student colleague in the university there many years before, told me during 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 straight-jacketed 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 Guiné-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 that "retells" the senses, feelings and sorrows of a small child that is left behind with her grandmother in the islands when her parents emigrate to the US. America is here "imagined" by the 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 50's, *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 when dealing with the 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 being 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 diversified choices in fiction and poetry. The war novel (African colonial wars of the 60/70's) 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 hit 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 Literatura?) 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. Was my father and all my ancestors ghosts or real people? The controversy began when in the seventies some Azorean academics and intellectuals began proposing what to some of us was rather obvious: That 500 years of island life, almost always abandoned by Lisbon, the Azoreans had created a "distinct" culture of their own within the nation, remaining very Portuguese but necessarily having 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 at creating an Azorean "nation", justifying 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 deceased 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 in not being exclusively 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* (selection and translation done by John M. Kinsella, of the National University of Ireland), poems by the recently deceased Emanuel Félix from the island of Terceira, considered *even* by some major continental critics (Eugénio Lisboa, for example) and academics one of our great poets who hasn’t received the more than deserved national recognition. Diniz Borges in California put together not long ago 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 have been defended in some Brazilian universities, mostly encouraged and directed by Professor and writer Luiz Antonio de Assis Brasil at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul, others now being worked on in Continental Portugal and Italy, both on Azorean and Luso-American literatures. 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 or “marginality” within the now vast EU? A Slovakian intellectual and diplomat, Peter Zsoldos, not only had 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, that 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 in the continent, two hours from us.

OP - *What is “açorianidade”?*

VF - The term was coined for us by one of our great writers, Vitorino Nemésio (born in the island of Terceira) in an essay written in 1932. He lived in and died in the continent most of his life 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 (*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 - *Does the feeling of being considered “marginal” weigh on writers here, 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?*

VF – 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 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 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 chose the Azores to live and work. It was such an original little magazine that even some of the inattentive press in Lisbon noticed and reported 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 Azorean inclusive cultural attitude. Located between two great continents, Europe and America, deeply attached to the “idea” of getting on in new worlds, 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 Patricia Goedicke, recently deceased.

OP - *I'm curious about an early twentieth-century Azorean woman writer you 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 has something of Stein's look and dress, as they lived approximately in the same time period. More, 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 a conservative and old culture. Fiction writer and poet, early protector of animals in the islands, 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 still greatly respected by the community in general. Today, her house in Ponta Delgada is an officially and publicly recognized cultural point to be noticed, displaying 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 US for many years: José Rodrigues Miguéis and Jorge de Sena. Miguéis lived in Manhattan from the 30's until his death in 1980, 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 (who also edited and wrote the forward to a book of translations by various people who had read and very much appreciated the works of our New York "exile", published by Gávea-Brown in 1983 as *Steerage And Ten Other Stories*), and David Brookshaw also translated some of Miguéis' writings under the title *The Poliedric Mirror*. Some of his novels are definitely relevant for readers anywhere interested in twentieth-century European "historical" or "existentialist" fiction, perhaps Portugal as metaphor for political upheaval and totalitarianism in our time. Jorge de Sena, who died in 1978, 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 United States, never forgiving the Portuguese fascists for the fate of our nation until the 70's, and 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 school teacher, and I've noticed recently that besides publishing regularly, he spends a great amount time in the net 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 the music teachers who have arrived from countries such 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. You told me that Flores, the westernmost island, almost an hour by air from the central group, has long been famous in Portugal for its writers and intellectuals (despite a current population of only about 4,500). Why writers at the end of the world? Is it, like Norman Mailer says, 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, 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 (*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, poet and essayist, is now perhaps the most quoted Azorean literary figure among us, 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 a few years ago) 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 his poems, simply titled “Island”, from the anthology *The Sea Within* (Gávea-Brown, 1983), which is now out print, but 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 you working on now? Can you tell us a little about your upcoming book of essays?*

VF – I have almost ready for publication a book of essays on Luso-American writers tentavely titled *Imaginários Luso-Americanos e Açorianos: o outro lado do Espelho*.* I’m also working on the collected essays on the same subject by 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 70’s 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've said that mass tourism is inevitable in the Azores—the mass tourism of cruise ships and casinos. (They're building a new cruise ship and ferry terminal on reclaimed land along the waterfront of Ponta Delgada right now, in front of the harbor walk and the sidewalk cafes.) Do you think there is a future for “cultural tourism” here? 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, *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 some kind of mind-set came to Provincetown with the Portuguese that wasn't present in majority Anglo-American areas nearby, and this ingredient led to the town becoming both an artists' colony and later a gay resort. I was also 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 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 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 easy going 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 that vacationed there, in Provincetown, during the summers.

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, it’s 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 way, 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 50’s, the women gossiping in chopped up language and the men boasting under the wonderful influence of a few cheap beers or whiskey.

OP - *You lived in the US for many years. Are there any attitudes in the US toward the Portuguese that still make you angry? What did you think of the recent film Passionada? How far has it come from Mystic Pizza’s 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 Nocks: 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 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 90’s, 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 X. Gaspar appear 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 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, Azores and America, in on going act to better understand my own life experience and to some

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

OP - *What's behind the recent publication or republication of some early Portuguese-American writers (Alfred Lewis's second novel—and the one in New York?)? How has the Portuguese diaspora literary scene changed? What would you like to see from such Luso-American/Canadian writers as Gaspar, Vaz, and Vasconcellos in the future?*

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 the 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 worst 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 20's, sometime official Propagandist for Salazar's dictatorship. His book, published in 1930 (*Novo Mundo Mundo Novo/New World World Anew*) had a simple message: wish 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 on top of tractors cultivating the land.

As for the last part of your question, I simply wish Luso-American writers continue to be good writers, no matter what subject or cultural matter they decide to work on.

OP - *As a critic who has specialized in their literature, what would you say to Azoreans and their descendants involved in the arts in diaspora communities? How are they doing? What's still missing?*

VF – Be proud of our history in America, trust your instincts, and, yes, be audacious and forever free. Honor, above all, your cultural and literary heritage in your ancestral land and in America. Not many people can count Camões, Fernando Pessoa and Jorge de Sena as masters of language and thought, not that many people can claim artists as different from one another as John dos Passos, Frank X. Gaspar, Katherine Vaz, Julian Silva and Erika de Vasconcellos (in Canada), and some others, as their models on North American soil. Don't ever be afraid to fail as writers - just write, and see what happens next.

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