Walk Back, Look Ahead, a Chronicle

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 media, 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, I believe, 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. 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 one 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. Of course, both.

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 exchanging the rural tasks of 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. As a 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. Instead, we sang it like a song and thought ourselves wise and special at our Ideal Motel. I flaunted the saying

liberally along with some fairly 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 two 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 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 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 relatives of that language, touch the faded images, know how the 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. 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. So, 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 be traced back eventually 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 difference from doll to doll. One can view much of the worlds' current conflicts as the result of ideological and territorial confrontations 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 an 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 marching in an Azorean fanfare 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 saying, "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 fanfare approaching 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 an irresistible adventure. He made the “us” now “you.” Fated luck would connect me to others and, in my erring, bring me home. He 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 folk 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 wrote 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 they are all 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 to her and explain who I am. 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 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)

They don't answer, 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, a woman given to promises because

apparently she has also made someone vow to always keep flowers on the family graves. 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 crowd here, and to the right and left I see names of people I knew. 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 5-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." 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)

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 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 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 9-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 genocide? Could you verify who was legitimate and who was a fake, the purest and the least pure? An Inquisition-like authority would have to be created. People from the continent 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 so much 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."

End

Richard Simas, Montreal. October 2009

(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