

*Afterthoughts:
an Interview with Vamberto Freitas*

Millicent Borges Accardi

Since the 1970's, Vamberto Freitas has published the most significant reviews and literary criticism available on Portuguese-American literature. A recognized expert on the literary landscape of the Portuguese Diaspora in the US and Canada, Freitas is a writer, essayist and literary critic from the Azores.

His critical works include studies and essays on American literature, Portuguese American literature and criticism, and profiles of Azorean and Azorean American writers.

An eminent translator of Portuguese-American writers like Frank Gaspar into Portuguese, Freitas is a life-long champion of the written word. His publishing credits have included coordinating the Azorean culture Supplement (SAC) and directing the Atlantic Supplement of Arts and letters (SAAL). He is a member of the Advisory Board for the peer-reviewed *Gávea-Brown: the Bilingual Journal of Portuguese American Letters and Studies* at Brown University, Rhode Island.

Born in Fontinhas, Terceira Island, Portugal, Freitas immigrated to California with his family as a child, and graduated from California State University Fullerton in 1974 with a degree in Latin American Studies. He returned to Portugal as an adult and now resides in Ponte Delgado

in The Azores. A professor at the University of the Azores, Freitas is a regular contributor to the literary supplement of the Lisbon newspaper *Diário de Notícias*, *Salamander*, and *Jornal de Cultura*.

We conducted this interview in English, over a period of many months via email from 2013-2014.¹

Millicent Borges Accardi: *Your critical book borderCrossings, (2013) what impact do you anticipate or hope it will have on Portuguese American literature in the US? North America? Globally?*

Vamberto Freitas: Probably not much, I'm sorry to say. Never mind "globally." On the other hand, we now have cultural and literary niches everywhere, due to global and instant communications. Any text published in an Azorean island can be transmitted to a fair number of interested readers everywhere, as most writers have experienced by now. Portuguese America literature is just now reaching a maturity – quantity and, I dare say, high quality – in search of a reading public, most probably still limited to a few interested academics and other writers within the lusophone world. But I know for a fact that some of these Portuguese American writers are already well known as far as Brazil, the novelist Katherine Vaz and the poet/novelist Frank X. Gaspar at the forefront.

The interest in modern Azorean literature will naturally lead to an interest in Portuguese American writing. After all, Portuguese American literary works will inevitably become part of two national canons: American and Portuguese. The question of identity in the twenty-first century, in a globalized and increasingly standardized world, is more important to a greater number of people in all modern societies, and especially in multiethnic and multicultural societies, which is practically the whole Western world. As for my book, or books, including *Imaginários Luso-Americanos e Açorianos: do outro lado do espelho* (Azorean Portuguese Americans and imagination: the other side of the mirror), I'm still waiting to see what results or impact they've had among a reduced Portuguese American public.

¹ Note: [] indicate comments by the interviewer and () indicate notations by Vamberto Freitas

BorderCrossings leituras transatlânticas received quite a few notices, and was generously reviewed by *Expresso*, the leading Lisbon weekly. I've also read with much pleasure (and sense of a "mission" on its way to being completed sometime in the future) the long interview that Michael Colson did with the poet Carlo Matos, especially when Carlo says that my last two books of critical essays place me "on the front lines of our movement.... He brings some cohesion to what is, at the moment, nothing more than a wild bunch of hungry and exciting young writers. He has written two books which are must-reads for anyone interested in what is going on right now in Portuguese American literature." (Portuguese American Journal, 2013). Let me just add this: Carlo's words are so gratifying for me that they alone justify my having written those two books.

MBA: *You are working on the second volume of borderCrossings. What writers will be included?*

VF: As far as Portuguese American writers are concerned, these among others: Sam Pereira, Frank X. Gaspar, Carlo Matos, Julian Silva, Darrell Kastin, Alfred Lewis, and Anthony Barcellos. I'm also about to read for the first time the poet Nancy Vieira Couto, and will very probably include her in *BorderCrossings II*.

MBA: *What do you think are the next steps in promoting Portuguese American Literature in the US?*

VF: I believe these steps are presently being taken. Great work is being done at the university level: anthologies such as *Luso-American Literature: Writings of Portuguese-Speaking Authors in North America* (selected and edited by Robert Henry Moser and Antonio Luciano de Andrade Tosta) and the recently released *The Gávea-Brown Book of Portuguese American Poetry* (Gavea-Brown University Press 2012), beginning with Emma Lazarus' words in a plaque of the Statue of Liberty, and bringing this steady poetical current from the nineteenth century up to your own generation. And then there is the magazine *Gávea-Brown: A Bilingual Journal of Portuguese American Letters and Studies* (Brown University Press, 2013) of the Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies that since the early 80's has been faithfully publishing the best of Portuguese American writing, thus introducing this literature to many other universities, libraries, and aca-

demic and literary colleagues everywhere.

Here in Portugal we are also doing our part in the generalist press and other publications, with most major Portuguese universities now fairly aware of the existence of Portuguese American writers and their works. Frank X. Gaspar and Katherine Vaz have participated for many years now in colloquiums and other conferences in Portugal dealing with diaspora literatures and other narratives. In October of 2008, the University of Lisbon organized a major conference titled precisely “Narrating the Portuguese Diaspora: International Conference on Storytelling.”

The same institution, in conjugation with the New University of Lisbon/Universidade Nova de Lisboa, will again organize in July of this year (2013), through their respective Faculty of Letters and Faculty of the Humanities and Social Sciences, another great event under the title “Neither Here Nor There Yet Both: International Conference on the Luso-American Experience”. The yearly Disquiet Dzanc Books Literary Program in Lisbon always includes Portuguese American writers as active participants. These are huge contributions to both the dissemination and legitimization of Portuguese American Literature.

As for the US, only the writers themselves and their friends in the press together with a great range of other cultural and literary publications can push for a wider reading public. It takes time, but it will happen. As our young people increasingly enroll in higher studies, they will also become aware that they are not alone in their quest or reaffirmation of their dual identities, literature remaining the most serious and lasting repository of ancestral memory and creativity.

MBA: *What do you think are important motifs in Portuguese literature?*

VF: The notion of “literature and society” has always been a strong thematic pull in our literature, particularly from the so-called first Portuguese literary modernist movement with Fernando Pessoa and Co. The question of bringing and integrating a centuries-old society into the higher European mode has been an intellectual obsession, with the individual artists and thinkers at the center of the storm.

Until very recently, Portugal has been a very homogeneous society, ethnically, religiously and culturally. The question of *identity*, or of redefining it, has had a rather pointed place in our best literature. It’s been

also an epic and anti-epic literature, either the aggrandizement of our long and troubled history, or once again the anti-epic condition after the fall of the empire, an obsessive and masochist turning inward, “the voyage in”, as Edward Said would say.

Obviously, the question of Europe has influenced some of our contemporary writers, but this has only begun to color our best fiction and poetry in our days. The existential pain of being alive in this corner of southern Europe and the simultaneous impulse to move into the Atlantic, now as emigrants and not discovers and colonialists, is what marks a great part of our best writings, along with a period from the thirties until the seventies when *neo-realism*, or the *protest novel*, as was once called in America, reigned supreme, the leftist influence similar to what happened with American literature during the economic troubles in the thirties.

Azorean literature, an integral part of the national canon -- even if some continentals don't know it yet -- has had to redefine and reaffirm our regional or island identity, or identities, for there has always been cultural and even linguistic diversity among the nine islands. Obviously this also includes our first generation immigrant writers, especially in the United States. Portuguese Americans are now searching for or establishing a hybrid cultural identity, as they recognize their dual or even multiple cultural heritages as Americans and as descendants of Azorean immigrants, with many of you still having active families and/or distant but recognized relatives within the archipelago itself. The “loyalty”, if you will, towards this fast receding cultural past is an evident development among most Portuguese American writers. I firmly believe they are rescuing and redefining their own being, and choosing or constructing their own place within the great American human mosaic.

This is why, perhaps, American literature was, throughout twentieth century, and continues to be, one of the most vital and consequential literatures in the world. Its fantastic diversity is what feeds its greatness. No other country in the world, not a single one, can make this claim for its literary arts. The number of American writers who deserve the Nobel Prize every year would be embarrassing for the rest of us, and would cause a new type of rage among others.

MBA: *Why do you think P and PA literature has not taken off and become popu-*

lar in North America like, say for example, Cuban literature?

VF: It's an old story, Millicent. I'll give you an example from a few years back. The American translator Gregory Rabassa (who translated *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the great translation of Gabriel Garcia Marquez' novel *Cien anos de Soledad*, and of many other Latin American and Brazilian writers as well as some Portuguese novels and creative works in different genres), after having translated João de Melo's *O Meu Mundo Não É Deste Reino/My World Is Not Of This Kingdom*, submitted it to a major publishing house in New York, and the answer came back a few days later: great novel, but nobody knows anything about the Portuguese, and even less about the Azoreans! I think out of politeness they also may have wanted to say: and nobody cares about them. Rabassa had to wait until 2003, when an ex-student of his who was in charge (as editor, I think) of Aliform Publishing, in Minneapolis, took and published João de Melo's novel. In the last few years we've seen a small change of attitude due to Fernando Pessoa's *inevitability* and José Samarago's translated novels, especially after he received the Nobel Prize in 1998, and also with much help from such influential critics as Harold Bloom, as far as American readers were concerned.

Cuba, on the other hand, is right next door. And its political history in our time made it popular among left leaning critics and publishers, the Cuban dissidents also being supported by the other side. Cuban writers also profited from the Latin literary boom in the 60's, started by such authors as Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It seems that for Americans there are only three European countries of any import, both politically and culturally: Great Britain, Germany and France. The rest is mere "periphery", in every sense of the word.

It isn't easy to cure such long standing and entrenched ignorance, nor to say anything about the chauvinism with which Anglo Americans have always looked at southern Europe. Never mind that we're the cradle of much that is good and virtuous in Western culture: democracy, philosophy and the arts in general (the Greeks), architecture and law (the Romans), and, yes, even the Mediterranean food is an ancient art of goodness and taste. Portugal not only "discovered" or reached most

lands that had remained unknown to most Europeans until the caravels left the Tagus River for triumph and tragedy, but began what is called today “globalization,” and on the way “pushed” our part of the world into modernity, both in science and knowledge gained from experience and pure invention. Do read the recent *Utopias Em Dói Menor: Conversas Transalânticas com Onésimo* (*Utopias in Transatlantic Conversations with Onésimo*), a summing up of some of these issues by the Brown University Professor Onésimo Teotónio Almeida.

I might be wrong here, but Portuguese American writers will have to deal with these same issues and resistance within contemporary American culture. You’ll have to be accepted and appreciated one by one, and through literary works that will stand first as great aesthetic performances. Content, theme and referential geographies will then impose themselves on other serious readers of literature. Not every writer in America has the privilege of saying: I also come from a literary tradition of a small nation that, among a few other great writers, produced Fernando Pessoa and José Saramago.

MBA: *There is The Interdisciplinary Journal of Portuguese Diaspora Studies which focuses on the Portuguese-American Diaspora. What other literary journals in the US do you read?*

VF: *The Paris Review*, including all the interviews that were collected in the series *Writers at Work*, now just called *The Paris Review Interviews*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *The Partisan Review*, until their last issue in, I believe, 2003, *Kenyon Review* and *The Southern Review*.

I check out *The New York Times Book Review* every week, just in case they get distracted and review a great novel or a poetry book, or even any book of interest, such a literary biography or autobiography, and then Onésimo T. Almeida brings me piles of it that he saves every Sunday, knowing that I’ll want to feel and smell the paper!

I used to read the British *Granta* (I have a few issues here in my bookshelf), especially when they did an issue on American or diaspora literature with writers from their ex-colonies.

MBA: *What books would you use if you were teaching a Survey of Portuguese American literature in the US?*

VF: We now have, fortunately, plenty from which to choose. I would definitely use *Luso-American Literature: Writings by Portuguese-Speaking Authors in North America* (Moser and Andrade Tosta), *Portuguese American Literature*, a collection of essays by Reinaldo Francisco Silva, and of course *The Gávea-Brown Book of Portuguese American Poetry* (Clemente e Monteiro). What a great contribution the work of these academics has made to our cultural and literary canons in the diaspora, and here in Portugal. Most examples of our best prose and poems are contained within these two anthologies. I would choose some poems and prose represented in these works, and then extended passages from such works as *Through a Portuguese Gate*, the autobiography of Charles Reis Felix, and passages from *Never Backward: The Autobiography of Lawrence Oliver* (San Diego, California), written in the 70's and giving us a whole vision of Azorean immigrants in the fishing industries. For the reading of whole novels I would probably assign *Saudade* by Katherine Vaz, *Leaving Pico* by Frank X. Gaspar, and *Land of Milk and Money* by Anthony Barcellos. I would also use prose, poems and even dramatic writings from a first generation of writers, particularly from those belonging to my own generation, those who introduced a kind of late literary modernism and postmodernism into immigrant writings in the Portuguese language, beginning in the 70's up to today.

MBA: *Can you describe a typical day?*

VF: Early in the morning to the university, late in the afternoon home again. In between classes, I try to get done anything related to the infernal (as Jorge de Sena used to say) bureaucratic exigencies now made from every teacher in the Western world, leading, of course, to nothing most of the time. Any free minute I have, I read and/or do some writing. This is really a daily routine. I write every day, even if it is just a single line or a paragraph that will then let me {"rethink" about it} later, any text until it is completed. For the past two years I have only worked on my weekly columns for the *Açoriano Oriental* (Ponte Delgada) and the *Portuguese Times* (New Bedford), some of these pieces being also published occasionally in the literary page *Maré Cheia* edited by Diniz Borges in the *Portuguese Tribune/Tribuna Portuguesa* (Modesto, CA newspaper), or even for one or another publication in Lisbon. These are short essays I then compile into *borderCrossings: leituras transatlânticas*, shaping them into what becomes – or

I hope they become – my own narrative as a literary and cultural history here and in the diaspora, including Brazilian literary works pertaining to our historical presence there. Volume two is almost ready.

During the last ten years, my personal life has been dedicated to taking care of my wife Adelaide, limiting almost totally my movements, even within the islands. I seldom participate in literary or cultural events, but then I spent a whole lifetime travelling from one conference to another. I have sort of sublimated my present condition -- plenty of time to read at home, reflect upon what I read, and then do as much writing as I wish or need to do.

MBA: *You spent most of your youth in Orange County, California: what compelled you to return to Portugal, to live?*

VF: Love. I fell in love with the woman who would become my wife when I met her at a literary conference, here in São Miguel, in 1990. But, then I was professionally ready to return to Portugal, either the continent or the Azores. I had been teaching for fourteen years at a high school in southern California, but also writing regularly for *Diário de Notícias*, the Lisbon leading daily until the mid-nineties, and also for Azorean and Portuguese-language weeklies in our immigrant communities. I found myself returning frequently, visiting Lisbon and my native Terceira Island.

Everything fell into place when I met Adelaide and we decide to marry. She was my perfect companion for many years, until she got stricken with the disease that is now slowly destroying her. She was an Associate Professor of American Literature at the University of the Azores, and also an essayist, poet and novelist. Adelaide finished her novel *Sorriso Por Dentro Da Noite* (now being translated into English in the US) shortly after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Our whole life together had language and literature as the basis for our work, pleasure and passion.

MBA: *What do you miss about California?*

VF: Space! I miss getting on my car and driving at high speed in the early morning hours through the serpentine (out of LA) and then the flat, mythical California 99 up to Tulare, in the San Joaquin Valley, where

most of my family lives. I miss the best bookstores in Orange County or in the LA area, including Westwood where I used to hang out on some Saturday nights, going to film premiers or to a bookstore with huge tables of hard cover remainders. I miss walking through the beautiful campus of my *alma mater*, California State University, at Fullerton, and sit in the quad in the California spring and summer reading a magazine or simply watching people go by, books under their arms, laughter in their hearts.

Portuguese society is in an extreme depressed state, and we hardly see a way out of this economic and financial mess. The only thought or ray of hope that keeps us going with our lives and professional responsibilities is remembering that Portugal is almost nine hundred years old, and we always survive a maddening State governed by incompetent, corrupt and shamelessly greedy politicians. And I miss the huge cholesterol-filled American breakfast I used to eat by stopping midway on 99, after descending the LA mountains, and right before Bakersfield.

MBA: *How often do you return to the US? Do you have family here?*

VF: I used to go back every year when Adelaide [his wife] could still travel, either to visit the family in the San Joaquin Valley and in the LA area, or to participate in literary events on both coasts. Now it's been more than five years since my last visit. The more I know and experience "Europe" the more America becomes dear to me. I compare the period we're living through, politically speaking, with the 30's: America elected a real-social democrat, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and "Europe" elected Hitler, and permitted and then "accepted" the traitorous Vichy regime in France, opposed only by a handful of courageous French in the Resistance; today the US elected Barak Hussein Obama, another great American social-democrat, and "Europe" elected that charming lady by the name of Angela Merkel (greatly admired by right-wing Republicans), and my country is "occupied" by a foreign financial and political power called, without any shame or remorse, "The Troika".

Please don't ask me why I write "Europe" in quotation marks. I'm not the only one who does. I now dream of having my country back, and a passport that simply states: República Portuguesa/Portuguese Republic. Obviously, it's not going to happen. Germany wants and demands a new empire, which makes me miss America, especially California, even

more; too late at my age and present family circumstances.

MBA: *What are your pet peeves as far as things you do not like in writing. Techniques or gimmicks writers use that irritate you? Or maybe genres you personally dislike?*

VF: No idiotic proverbs in my writing, ever. I dislike and avoid writers who are always asking what I'm working on, just as measure of their own "greatness", or trying their insecure ideas on you, pretending humbleness but actually getting free information out of you. I refuse to listen to a writer telling me about "constructing" a situation or character in their *work in progress*. I no longer get past any second page of deliberately obscure prose. No, I have never and will never read *Finnegan's Wake*, and will die just as knowledgeable and happy about literature in general.

I don't like reading drama, but I adore seeing a great play. Opera, for me, is the silliest and most ingenuous genre in the arts, all that supposed love, betrayal, abandonment, blood, sweat, tears and murder -- in Italian or German, mostly. *Poupa-me!*

MBA: *What are you reading? What's on your bedside table?*

VF: On my bedside table, just a Chinese alarm clock that often fails to go off. My desk here keeps on getting piled up, as with most impulsive readers and writers. At the moment I have to read books that will fit into the thematic line of my *borderCrossings: Páginas sobre Açorianidade*, by António M. B. Machado Pires; *Late Rapturous* (poems), by Frank X. Gaspar; *The Gávea-Brown Book of Portuguese American Poetry*, selected by Alice R. Clemente and George Monteiro; *The Face in the Water* (poems), by Nancy Vieira Couto; *Al-Andalus Rediscovered: Iberia's New Muslims*, by Marvin Howe; *American Dreamers: How The Left Changed a Nation*, by Michael Kazin; *Mazagran: Recordações e outras fantasias*, by J. Rentes de Carvalho; *Os Malaquias*, by Andréa Del Fuego (a Brazilian writer who received the José Saramago Literary Prize in 2011); *Exílio*, by Marcela Tagliaferri (also Brazilian, and little known in Portugal) *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*, by Salman Rushdie; the fourth volume of *The Paris Review Interviews*, a reprint of writers at work from the 50's to 2008.

MBA: *Across the board, there is a lack of exports from Portugal to the US. Portu-*

gal has GREAT wines, foods, music and yet most are unknown in the United States. Other small countries seem to have their cultural exports more widely adopted and enjoyed. Why do you think Portugal has been ignored? Hidden?

VF: I believe I have given some tentative answers to some of your previous questions. We have never been part of the American imaginary, or imagination. Their loss, obviously. But you have to remember that we figure in the imagination of some American intellectuals and academics at a higher level. When most American writers think of us, from Mark Twain to John Steinbeck, for example, we'd rather be forgotten: all their prejudices and Anglo-American chauvinism come forth. Again, ignorance is, unfortunately, a universal vice or a widespread condition.

{for example, in *Innocents Abroad*, Twain writes in a passage about visiting The Azores: "The community is eminently Portuguese--that is to say, it is slow, poor, shiftless, sleepy, and lazy."}

Even when Barak Obama, in a speech about a year ago, wanted to score some points with the American public, he cried out that "We're not Portugal." Well, no, we existed centuries before the United States became a super power, before America, as an organized country, was even "imagined", and we "connected the world" (as CNN International likes to brag for themselves) way before the pilgrims arrived at the Plymouth rocks, and we also demonstrated to the rest of Europe that they would not fall off the water if they sailed in a straight course, and "we" wrote one of the greatest epic poems in European literature (*The Lusiads* by Luís Vaz de Camões) at least two centuries before those thirteen British colonies organized themselves into a federal state, brought spices from the Far East that the English are still trying to figure how to use in their bland "cuisine."

Yes, we're just a small country of a little over ten million people, and presently going through some rough waters. But we're used to them, we're survivors. We've been around for a long time, and will continue to be around for a long time, European Union -- or no European Union.

MBA: *Can you give us a short quote from something you have written?*

VF: From a critical piece (1980) published in *The Portuguese Tribune* on a book of great poetical prose, *Plural Transitivo*, by Urbino de San-Payo,

an immigrant from northern Portugal, who lived with his wife for many years in Beverly Hills while in the service of some movie barons: “*A América tornou-se-lhe, como talvez para a maioria de nós, numa espécie de ‘bela indesejada’, um fruto proibitivo e logo saboroso demais para largar. Parte dele (de nós) morreu cá; parte dele (de nós) nasceu cá. É de toda essa ambiguidade que nascem as presentes crónicas. Está agora a pagar, com paciência e estilo próprio, a sua pena*”.

Translation: “America became for him, maybe for most of us, a kind of ‘Undesired Beauty,’ a forbidden fruit, thus too tasty to let go. Part of him (of us) died here; part of him (of us) was born there. It is out of this ambiguity that these chronicles are born. He is now paying, in patience and in his own style, his sentence” (translated by Elisabeth Figueiredo Kastin).

MBA: *What frustrates you with your writing?*

VF: Writing has always been a pleasure for me. What frustrates me? The new graphics in most Portuguese periodicals: it’s as if now the text illustrates the pictures, rather than the other way around. Space! Write just few words, they demand, even if to discuss with readers a great and complex novel, or any other book! Therefore, I feel privileged in writing for *Açoriano Oriental*, *The Portuguese Times* and *Tribuna Portuguesa* -- all the space I need within rational limits. I could publish more often in Lisbon, but book reviews or essays are relegated to whatever corner is left from “cultural” news, and favored “personalities” in the arts. I look at *The New York Review of Books* with much pleasure – here’s a real literary and cultural journal.

MBA: *Is there something you are trying to accomplish but haven’t yet?*

VF: Write a literary biography of my Azorean generation, both here and in the United States. Write a book on some currents in the criticism and essays of Edmund Wilson.

MBA: *Do you think there is such a thing as Portuguese American or Portuguese-Canadian literature (as a separate canon?). Like, for example, Italian-American literature? If so, what are the “markers” of Portuguese North American writing?*

VF: Yes, I do, but limited to the United States. Portuguese-Canadians

are still lagging behind in their writings in which Portuguese ancestral roots would be present. However, we have two great Portuguese-Canadian writers that I am aware of, and I have written on their novels: *My Darling Dead Ones* (translated into Portuguese as *Meus Queridos Mortos*) and *Between the Stillness and the Grove*, by Erika Vasconcelos, and *Barnacle Love* (translated as *Terra Nova*), by Anthony De Sa. There is an Angolan-born writer, Paulo da Costa, residing in British Columbia, who has a very good book of interrelated short stories, *The Scent of a Lie*. But a “canon” they do not make, yet.

I do believe, however, that there is now a substantial canon of Portuguese American literature. One cannot use numbers {of books} to define a “canon,” but from the 90’s up to today our literary production {of books written by Portuguese-Americans} in the US has been developing at a great pace (thanks also to your generation) and with undeniable quality. Of course, this is always a subjective judgment – as all judgments are -- on any critic’s part.

There is now a whole literary *corpus* which distinguishes itself for having a clear thematic unifying line: the Portuguese experience of being either a son or daughter, or even of a generation further removed from its roots, of immigrants from all parts of Portugal, the Continent or the islands, in America. In addition, all of these writers (some mentioned here, many others not), whether in prose, poetry or in any other form, make multiple artistic callings on their ancestral histories and memories. As for Portuguese American writing being a separate canon, yes and no.

After all, all American literature, from its very beginnings, is richly “divided” into a great human or ethnic mosaic: Anglo-Americans, Irish-Americans, Afro-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Jewish-Americans, Southern Literature, etc. Yet, they, or at least most of them, all fit into the national canon of American literature, as is shown, for example, in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, in which even an Indian-American and award-winning writer, Bharati Mukherjee (who is a friend of Katherine Vaz, let’s appreciate these connections for they are very important) is present. There is no other country in the world that can boast such artistic diversity and richness. Portuguese American literature has to promote itself to the point where future and “open”, well-informed, national anthologies will include some of our writers.

We've been much distanced from these cultural objectives, but I firmly believe we'll get there, despite some of the historical attitudes we'll have to overcome, mentioned before in our conversation.

MBA: *Who are your favorite Portuguese writers? Can you share a significant line or passage and explain its importance?*

VF: Eça de Queirós, Fernando Pessoa, Jorge de Sena, José Rodrigues Miguéis, Eugénio Lisboa, Onésimo T. Almeida, Urbano Bettencourt, João de Melo, Eduardo Lourenço, Almeida Faria, and many other literary modernists, including a good number of Azorean, Brazilian and, of course, Portuguese American writers. Camões is a founding father, and one loves him as such, as well as Fernão Mendes Pinto, the first great anti-imperialist European writer. Wish he'd be around for us in these darkened times.

Jorge de Sena, from his great poem "In Crete, With the Minotaur", in a translation by George Monteiro (*In Crete, With the Minotaur and Other Poems*):

*I shall collect nationalities like shirts that are shed –
One wears them and one throws them away – with all the respect
Due clothes one has worn and which have given good wear.
I am my own homeland. The homeland
I write about is the language into which by chance of generations
I was born.*

This is, for me, part of the greatest emigrant/immigrant poem ever written in the Portuguese language. It encapsulates all the themes, all the anxieties suffered, I believe, by all those who, willingly or unwillingly, become strangers in a strange land, when flags and national anthems say very little to their hearts. It is a ferociously anti-nationalist poem, yet patriotic in the best sense of the word: adherence to a language, solidarity with all who become the *others* anywhere, and yet survive with courage and dignity.

MBA: *If I asked you at age 12 what you wanted to be when you grew up, what would you have said?*

VF: Underwater archeologist, after having read a book by Jacques Cous-

teau, whose title I don't remember, about his underwater explorations of ancient civilizations in the Adriatic Sea. There was just a little problem with my early ambition: I'm terrified of the ocean, and never learned how to swim! I believe I've always been a continental posing as an islander.

MBA: *Who has been your biggest influence? Or mentor?*

VF: Three great professors at California State University, Fullerton: Nancy T. Baden (Portuguese and Brazilian literatures), Michael Holland (American and European literatures), and William Koon (American, particularly Southern, literature). They taught me the essential theoretical or hermeneutical approaches to any text, but also gave me the firm idea that great literature is always a portrait not only of an individual and his circumstances – as Ortega y Gasset wrote – but also of a whole society or community. All the rest is wasteful narcissistic gesture that may be fun but inconsequential at all levels.

Then there was my epiphanic discovery of Edmund Wilson in the early 70's. Again, literature, society and history are the fundamental references of all great prose and poetry. He showed me that clear and concise writing can only come from deep involvement with a text, from an almost intuitive understanding of subtexts and historical undercurrents in any narrative. He seldom wrote on books he didn't like, rather ignored or dismissed them in private letters, as he did with his friend/nemesis Vladimir Nabokov about *Lolita*, even though he helped to get it published in America.

He was also a master of, let's say, critical creative writing, using and elevating the good works of others while creating his own narratives on American literature and culture. On the other hand, Wilson was the first great, canonical critic of the twentieth century to dedicate himself to minority cultures and ethnic literatures: *Red, Black, Blond and Olive: Studies of Four Civilizations* (1956), *Apologies to the Iroquois* (1960), and even Canadian literature, almost totally ignored in the US when he published *O Canada: An American's Notes on Canadian Culture* (1963). We may even include here *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea* (1959). More than from anybody else, I drew from him the certainty that those small literatures not only have to be given their due, but that we must: these literatures are the aesthetic and permanent records of other cultures and their existence

and contributions to the building of societies, to the sharing of their humanity with all others. He did this while explaining to the American readers the early literary modernism, coming first from Europe (*Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literatures of 1870-1930* (1930) and cultivated in America, with New York as the center or heart for invention and literary daring.

MBA: *What draws you to literature?*

VF: All of the above.

MBA: *Is there a tune or music that has affected you?*

VF: “The World Over”, by Frank Sinatra, and recently “Saudade,” by Mariza, from her fantastic album *Terra*. “Adagios” by Albinoni and “The Four Seasons” by Vivaldi always affect my state of mind, help me remember that sadness and happiness are most natural feelings or sentiments shared by all humanity, as dark winter is followed by spring and summer.

MBA: *The critic and writer George Monteiro at Brown University states, “It is time for an anthology of Portuguese American poetry. If it cannot be called The Oxford Book of Portuguese American Verse; we propose to call it, with little or no levity, The Gávea-Brown Book of Portuguese American Verse.” What impact do you think this anthology will have?*

VF: I have it here in front of me, to read word by word, line by line, including every biographical note of the twenty four poets gathered in its pages. It is one of the greatest and timely contributions to Portuguese American literature, encompassing various generations, from Emma Lazarus in the ninetieth century to the present. You won’t say it, but I will: your poetry opens the anthology. Congratulations on being so prominently present in such a book.

I also want to take this opportunity to state the following: No one among us has even a fraction of the work in bringing Portuguese American literature to the forefront as Professor, essayist and poet George Monteiro. Fortunately, since *The Gávea-Brown Book of Portuguese American Poetry* was also organized and selected by Alice R. Clemente, his own poetry has been justly included in these pages. His poems in *The Coffee Exchange* (1982) and in *Double Weaver's Knot* (1988) are now part of the

canon we've been discussing along this conversation.

I can think of no more important and, once again, timely book for all of us – it is now a permanent book of academic reference, pure pleasure as text, setter of standards among future poets. I also appreciate the criteria in putting it together, and I'll quote from the introduction: "Early on, we determined that our selection of poetry by Portuguese Americans would be governed by aesthetic rather cultural criteria... While it will include poems on Portuguese American themes, the major criterion for inclusion is that the poems themselves – regardless of subject matter or theme – be work of the highest aesthetic quality."

And so it should be. No hiding here behind fabricated identity excuses. Yet, it is also, and rightly so, questions of *identity* that come forth in these marvelous and competent poems. All literature is memory and identity, confirmation or an exercise in the search for them. Not a single institution either in the US or in Portugal has done as much since the 70's to promote Portuguese American writers – and, no, I'm not forgetting anybody or any other institution. George Monteiro and Onésimo T. Almeida started it all, and now with active collaboration of Professor Alice R. Clemente, secretaries and others, continue to do their work with *Gávea-Brown: a Bilingual Journal of Portuguese American Letters and Studies*, founded in 1980. *Gávea-Brown* continues to be the flag publication for Portuguese American writing -- essays, book reviews, fiction, poetry and any document pertinent to our studies or curiosity in this field.

With the contributions of Tagus Press at UMass, Dartmouth, directed by General Editor Frank F. Sousa, in publishing or republishing books by Portuguese American authors of all generations, we are now probably in a much better cultural and literary position than many other ethnic or minority writers.

MBA: *Can you share an excerpt of what you are working on right now?*

VF: The pleasure is all mine. From a review of *Sinais de Fogo: Estudos de Literatura*, by Professor and essayist António Manuel Ferreira, from the University of Aveiro talks about the poetry of Joaquim Manuel Magalhães, in 'consequences of place or already known Royal' in a 'back to the poetry from seventies contravenes a 'lyricism' hollow and empty of collective sense, I believe that we will also be able to deduce

that the vision of the critic and essayist in these texts takes us to the age-old question of ‘ literature and society ‘, that is, each text is not only by express their interior design writer or poet, for the originality with which sees itself and the ability to transform their existential condition in art, as in particular the place to which it belongs, individual and community or society in a Dialogic inevitable, standing out the whole spirit of a particular human geography and of an era.”

MBA: *What do you think writers can do to enhance communication between North America and Portugal?*

VF: Continue to do the things you’re now doing: publishing, going to readings and conferences, coming to Portugal every chance you get, participate, when invited, in writing and discussion programs, such as the summer gathering of Disquiet, in Lisbon. We here in Portugal should organize more literary events for that very purpose throughout the academic year, and of course invite as many Portuguese American writers as financial support permits. Unfortunately, you know all too well of our current national situation, financial and economic meltdown with no end in sight, despite government propaganda to the contrary.

MBA: *Why do you think so few Portuguese writers’ work is translated into English?*

VF: Only a very few foreign writers sell well in the US. Without generous institutional financial support nothing can be done about it. Most of our writers, some of the best in contemporary European literature, would quickly end up in the remainder tables. But again, this is also true of many of the best and serious American writers. Our personal collection here in our house, with thousands of American hard cover books of fiction, poetry and essays of all types and subjects was practically all bought from those tables when Adelaide and I made frequent trips to America.

MBA: *Why do you think the immigrant experience can be bitter sweet?*

VF: The greatest spiritual and cultural hurt happens when you leave family, friends, language, and all native references built and cultivated over many generations to restart life in a foreign and distant land. Eventually, the immigrant readjusts and assimilates a new way of being and living, even reinventing his language, creating new families through marriages

and births of sons, daughters, and the following generations.

Nevertheless, an immigrant will forever be a divided soul, permanently longing for what has been lost: longing for his/her homeland, and in periodical visits, if they happen, longing for the new county and the acquired customs. But the Portuguese people have made movement from one continent to another a historical way of being in the world, accept for our traditional elite, always steady, rapacious and unjust. Exactly what we are living at this moment. Just in the last few years, over two hundred thousand of our people have emigrated in search of a better life. Not too long ago one of our sickening politicians {name withheld} actually declared in a public event in Brazil that our well-educated and no so-well educated young people should leave what he cynically called the “comfort zone”, that is, their families, friends, language and all native references I’ve mentioned, while he, no doubt, excusing himself from such ventures, and continuing to suck out of the public treasury.

MBA: *Which comes first? The character or the plot?*

VF: Character, of course. Plot is really out of fashion, unless you’re reading a political or a crime thriller. I myself am a great fan of Raymond Chandler (*The Long Goodbye* and *The Lady In The Lake*), and of Rubem Fonseca (*A Grande Arte* and *Agosto*), Brazilian novelist, and one of the best writers of the Portuguese language who rightly combines politics and delinquent crime in all his novels and short stories. In 2003, he received the most prestigious literary prize in the Portuguese-speaking world, Prémio Camões.

MBA: *Do you consider yourself a realist or a romantic?*

VF: Perhaps a romantic realist? This is what keeps me, and I think most Portuguese, going. We believe in ourselves despite a country that has been searching for its rightful place in the world since the loss of the empire. We bite our lips and dry our tears, but keep going. Anywhere in the world! A few days ago a television program discussed and showed young and older Portuguese people in other countries in Europe, and far away (Australia and Hong Kong, for example). They talked about missing family and friends, but then would smile and say they were alright, and being successful in their various professions or occupations. This

is our people, a great people, or no less greater than those of any other nationality or country.

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