

Millicent Borges Accardi: An Interview

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I have been reading Millicent Borges Accardi's poetry and other writings for many years now. But what finally motivated me to do a full interview with the poet was the publication of her book *Through a Rainy Landscape* (2021), which I also reviewed for the daily newspaper *Açoriano Oriental* here in the Azores, and later republished in the Portuguese language *Tribuna Portuguesa/Portuguese Tribune*, out of California. I had been moved by her earlier poems in the books *Injuring Eternity* (2016), and later *Only More So* (2016). She has published much more in the time between, including a long series of interviews with Portuguese and Portuguese-American writers for the *Portuguese American Journal*. She has many poems dispersed throughout some of the most prestigious American magazines and journals that specialize in creative literature. I will be brief here because I structured the first question to let her talk extensively about her Portuguese-American background, and particularly on what became important in her past to lead her on this literary journey, including family and other influences. She has become a well-known poet among us in America and Portugal, having been involved in the Lisbon yearly literary event *Disquiet*, which brings together many writers from both countries. Her involvement with other writing groups in the U. S. is also present here, showing us her generosity and capacity to see things way beyond herself, a quality rare among writers in any language. She has now become one the principal literary players dedicated to recuperating and perpetuate our ancestral cultural heritage in America, a group of writers much larger than some others realize. She makes sure in this conversation none of us forgets the continuous publication of books that aim to reclaim a visible place in the literary canons in their country of birth—and, if possible, on this of the Atlantic that for centuries has been connecting all of us.

Millicent, before getting into your literary work let us begin by talking about the moments in your life when you found out about your Portuguese ancestral roots and began a return and decisive voyage. How does family life, or other experiences, lead you into poetry and other writings?

From as long as I can remember I have been fascinated by my Portuguese roots. There was a mystery, a secrecy about my father and his grandparents and his father. His history and the family that relates to that history was traumatic and not discussed.

My father Arthur was born to Azorean parents, Mary and Duque Baptista from the island of Terceira; born over ten years after his older sister Mary and his brother John. His mother died shortly after giving birth. As a “single” parent, Duque resented my dad, bringing a new girlfriend into the household nearly instantaneously.

An early New Bedford Census showed my dad (as a baby), his brother and sister and his father living in the same house, but, sometime after that, my father was adopted by his maternal grandmother who lived with her adult daughter. Neither one of them spoke English, so as soon as he started attending school (and learning English), he became their translator (for shopping, errands, and medicine). There must have been a formal or church adoption because my father's last name was changed to Borges, his dead mother's maiden name.

I knew times were tough. My dad was an altar boy, for the church and also for the extra income he was able to earn from tips at weddings and funerals. In those times there were multiple daily masses, so being an altar boy was like a second job.

His grandmother was harsh, and my dad only admitted a few things, but he would tell stories about how his grandmother chased him under the bed with a broom and locked him in the closet when he mouthed off. But he found solace with his Uncle Manny when he swept off his porch and ran errands for him. He also found safety at the Boys Club where he first learned to sketch and draw.

The family was filled with carpenters, fishermen and factory workers. At some point, my dad's grandmother passed away, so my dad was left on his own—he dropped out of school in 8th grade moved in with his newly married older sister Mary who did not relish a teenage boy to take care of. At that time my dad said Mary was OK and did her best but as soon as he could my dad lied about his age and joined the Navy. For a short time, he worked in the paint department at Sears and taught art classes at The Boys Club. He also attended Swaine School of Art. It was a precursor for MFA programs of today but more of a trade school.

When my dad got out of the service, he went back to Sears and in those days, they gave you credit for time served in the armed forces. On the SS Randolph, he painted (and repainted) the sides of the ship, worked in the Radio Room and produced the aircraft carrier's newspaper, drawing cartoons and writing stories.

I remember that when I was a kid, my dad had all kind of friends in the Portuguese community, mostly in San Pedro and Artesia, CA—we went to the festas and the bloodless bull fights, the Portuguese bakery, and Massachusetts Picnics in the Park. There was a Portuguese restaurant in San Pedro called The Navigator. My dad's barber Rudy was also Portuguese—he had a wide network of Portuguese he bartered with for favors (painting signs in exchange for pizza or putting up Xmas displays at a bakery for a refrigerator).

All I remember is being curious about the language. —At this point I have to add that my heritage is similar to the writer Katherine Vaz in that on my mother's side there were the Irish and, on my father's side, the Portuguese. Like Vaz, the Portuguese side seemed to take hold strongly, as did a love for creative arts.

I started noticing you and your literary output when you became, a few years back, very active with the group named Kale Soup for the Soul/Sopa de Couve para a Nossa Alma. How did this come about, all the public readings in various parts of the United States? What made you and your fellow writers choose this very Portuguese remembrance of the tastes and smells in your mothers' or grandmothers' kitchens in the American Diaspora?

I first came to know the Portuguese-American literary scene thru Frank Gaspar. I was in college and at a writers' conference and someone said, Hey, you're Portuguese. Frank is too. You guys should talk! And so, we did. He became a mentor, a friend, encouraging my writing and introducing me to George Monteiro who first contemporary published me in *Gávea-Brown* in the 90s.

After I graduated from CSULB, I taught in the English Department at LBCC where Frank worked and for a while, we were colleagues. It was during this time that Frank had great success with the novel *Leaving Pico* and was often called out of town to give readings. I was honored to occasionally substitute for his creative writing classes, getting out from under the heavy load of remedial English courses I was teaching, to work with Frank's students (who adored him), in the world of poetry!

The reading series, Kale Soup for the Soul came about not long after the first *Disquiet* writers workshop in Lisbon, where the Luso Experience workshop was led by Frank Gaspar—and a number of us became friends and, decided later, to organize an off-site literary event for the AWP conference in 2012 at the Chicago Cultural Center, a gorgeous venue with 20 foot ceilings and large stained glass

windows. We had a guitarist playing fado and food and wine, with an audience of over 150 people in person and more than that tuned in from all over the world, including Portugal and The Azores online. We also partnered with Tagus Books and the Portuguese Consulate in Boston (with João Caixinha's support) to host a Book Fair table by Portuguese-American writers.

The first KSFS reading line-up featured poetry, fiction, and memoir with writers Amy Sayre Baptista, Linette Escobar, Oona Patrick, Carlos João Queirós, Tony John Roma, Carlo Matos, Paula Neves, and Lara Gularte.

People loved the idea of a group of writers of Portuguese descent reading together so we planned more events and workshops. Chicago was followed by readings at Rhode Island College, Brown University, Rutgers, University of Illinois, readings at APSA conferences in Iowa City and Albuquerque, readings at UMass Dartmouth, in Calif at Heritage Park in San Jose and the San Francisco Portuguese Consulate. Readings in Newark and Seattle with a sore group of writers Carlo Matos, Amy Sayer Baptista, and Paula Neves. Luís Gonçalves (Professor of Portuguese at Princeton) has been a great partner in organizing many of these events, including early panels at AWP, APSA and the Pages of Ferry Street. This past year, for our tenth anniversary, KSFS partnered twice with Diniz Borges's wonderful Portuguese Beyond Borders Institute (PBBi) at Fresno State.

Your poetic output continues at a steady pace, and we'll soon get to your recent book, *Through a Rainy Landscape*, where you say that many Portuguese and Portuguese-American writers are part of your references, and some the poems are also taken from lines and titles of other poets, including the Azorean Renata Botelho. Can you let us know who and how these echoes reached you from Portugal and from many other writers that share your "landscapes" in America?

I had been to Portugal a few times and longed to build a bridge between contemporary Portuguese-American writers and Portuguese writers and along the way I realized how woefully ignorant I was. So, I served on panels at various conferences in Lisbon, including "Images of Terror, Narratives of (In)security: Literary, Artistic, and Cultural Responses" and "Neither Here nor There." In the meantime, I continued to research finally discovering an amazing website of 21st Century Portuguese Poetry translated side by side, in English and Portuguese.

These poems were the germination of my book *Through a Rainy Landscape*, taking inspiration from writers such as Margarida Vale de Gato, Armando Silva Carvalho, João Miguel Fernandes Jorge, Renata Correia Botelho, Ana Marques Gastão, Alberto Pimenta, Yvette K. Centeno, and Isabel Aguiar, and the title comes from this quote by Tiago Araújo: "I've driven all night through a grainy landscape, on a motorway with dim and orangey lights."

At the time, I had already interviewed many Portuguese-American writers and artists for the *Portuguese American Journal* and other publications, so I wanted to get closer to the landscape of what poetry is being written now. My literary journeys also took me to interview and read the wonderful work of Rosa Alice Branco, whose new bilingual book, *Cattle of the Lord* was an enormous inspiration.

Contemporary Portuguese-American writers whose work inspires me? The list is too long, and I am afraid I will miss names, but definitely the work of Katherine Vaz, Frank Gaspar, George Monteiro, Sam Pereira, Amy Sayre Baptista, Paula Neves, Carlo Matos, Darrell Kastin, Brian Sousa . . . the Kale Soup for the Soul reading series has included maybe 30 or more talented Luso writers.

Landscape for me also means internal landscape, emotional landscape. It is the scenery that you view on your life's journey. Writing is a way to connect with yourself and others, like José Saramago says, "Inside us there is something that has no name, that something is what we are."

Isn't THAT the connection we all seek?

***Through a Grainy Landscape* immediately brought to me the beautiful fields of California, particularly the San Joaquin Valley where I lived for a while, and where most of my family, including my daughter Vanessa, still lives. What drives your closeness to our Portuguese-American communities?**

The mystery. The longing for community that I had as a kid, when I would ask questions about my Portuguese family. We went to Artesia for the bullfights and the Portuguese bakery and also to San Pedro, which in the 1970s and 80s had a restaurant called The Navigator, as well as a library with Portuguese language books.

As an adult, I am driven by the search for what I do not have, as family has passed away and the world moves on, I yearn to make connections. Like my work serving in the Board of the Portuguese Heritage Press, readings in San Jose at Heritage Park, and readings at the San Francisco Portuguese Consulate, and a panel at University of California Stanislas, chaired by Frank Sousa, featuring the work of Darrell Kastin, Anthony Barcellos, Sam Pereira, and myself.

One of my poems that you have expressed an interest in, describes this longing:

The Last Borges

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

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

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

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

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

At school, I pronounced our name
as you taught me,

as an Englishman would:
flat and plain, riming it with
a word for “pretty.”

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

As you grow older, papa,
I long for a language that joins us,
beyond our last name,
the space between our front teeth,
and wavy black hair.
Beyond linguíça,
kale soup and sweet bread.

But, the only Portuguese words
you ever gave me do not stand for love.
Que queres, que queres.
What do you want, what do you want.

Your closeness to us is now unbreakable, so it seems to me. The great poet and fiction writer Frank X. Gaspar and the no less great novelist and short story writer Katherine Vaz preface this recent poetic narrative of *Through a Rainy Landscape*. What made most Portuguese-American writers turn to their ancestral memories when America has an endless roll of thematic choices? Did other writers from different national backgrounds have any influence on the writing that takes hold from early 90s until today?

The good writers write about what they know. As close as I can stick to my own authentic experience and my searches for meaning and change is the best that I can do.

Many of your poems also travel to other cultures, geographies, and even historical periods, as I read closely your previous *Only More So*, published in 2016. How does one maintain the intellectual and literary equilibrium in the American culture existentially diverse and a great literary output in all forms and genres?

It is complex. I write about what fascinates me, what draws me in. I have eclectic tastes. I write, for me, what needs to be communicated, whether that be a poem about World War II or a bumble bee in my backyard.

In the amazing book by John Fowles, *The Collector*, there is a series of quotes about the artist life, about not having time for silly and trivial things and about using your life. The last twenty years that has meant that I write poetry, creative non-fiction essays, and interviews. Just about the only thing I

stay away from is fiction. I have written many short stories but they all end up as internal monologues and when it comes time to insert conflict or moving the characters? I run out of steam.

What effect, if any, has a Catholic background influenced your living and writing. From the poem “The Story of the Stories” in *Only More So: Holy Saturday / Lasts until dusk / The altar un-covered / stripped / Of its riches. / Worshippers solemn . . .*

At a recent reading for the journal *Presence*, I was astonished to find out how many of us there are, lapsed Catholics, and those who are on the outside looking in. Despite my lack of formal Catholic training, I find myself invoking religious imagery in my work. Often unconsciously.

The truth is that I am what is jokingly referred to as a Cultural Catholic, in that for my whole life I was and continue to be surrounded by Catholics, and I even married into a Catholic Sicilian family with a beautiful mother-in-law who attended early morning masses well into her 90s. It was the thrill of her life when we took her to Our Lady of Angels in Los Angeles for a Mother’s Day Mass and brunch and she met Cardinal Mahoney who gave her a rose.

Here’s the poem, based on Psalm 6 that appeared in *Presence*:

In the Way that Sinners Take

In the way that sinners take, we
 Struggle against the swear and the curse,
 The open-handed slap across the face
 that the inevitable wall of being alone
 among your fears gives you, safety
 briefly, certainly not sanity or even a right
 to bear sweet comfort. In the way that sinners
 take us on a journey, dragged into their doubt
 and the unwillingness of them to let
 us in, to swear us to the truth they
 deny, we carry on, packed against
 what is chaff and what is wheat,
 sorting through a season of what we need
 to believe and what we desire for the moment.
 What can we do with the time we have
 fooled here, and who can benefit most
 in the creation we have been easily
 un-singing all to ourselves under our breath
 when we start to consider what it all
 means to have a divine pattern
 or a source document in which to
 consult when the tough lasts through
 many times of choosing which weakness
 we want so badly to adopt and trounce
 upon, to rejoice, not in fear, but with a new
 willingness to look beyond the horizon
 and into just figuring out the next
 of our many steps as we cut down

the brambles and sort through
 our own discontent and doubt while embracing
 coolly the ambition we had when jealousy
 first started to speak our infinite tongue.

You've participated in the Lisbon great literary event *Disquiet*. Was this your first visit to mainland Portugal. What have you taken from this yearly event until the pandemic struck all of us in the world?

I attended the inaugural year (yes, my first time in Portugal!), and the writing workshop was inspiring and life-changing, a gathering of fellow Luso writers from all over North America. However, it is disappointing that *Disquiet* has not included Azorean writers such as yourself, as teachers, panelists, and presenters. And a missed opportunity not to have actively engaged more participants from Frank Gaspar's 2011 "Writing the Luso Experience" in the eleven years since.

I suppose no one sits down and says, I'm going to write a book of poems. How do they happen, poem by poem, and fit into what I've called here a "narrative? Do you become, let's say for lack of a better word, "obsessed" in making each one fit into a continuing thematic whole?

A book evolves. One poem may come to me, and my writing process is more like listening and recording than writing. I have to match what I "see" in my mind and get it down on paper. Most of my efforts in writing are making what I imagine or think of match what I can translate to the written page. Like recording a dream upon awakening, that I have to write it down swiftly before I forget—like I would imagine automatic writing would be? Sometimes a thought percolates in my head for a day or a week, and I run the risk of writing it down TOO fast—but—I also run the risk of forgetting it entirely.

A book tends to build itself. A poem comes and it MAY be just an individual poem that stands alone, or it might be part of a larger theme. It is too soon to tell until I have a collection of maybe ten or twenty poems, and then can start to see a theme or a connection between the poems, a thru-line.

There are also "one-offs," individual poems that I write for a particular purpose or to communicate something, a cause or a protest, and they exist by themselves, published on their own, and they never fit into a larger work. I like the freedom of being able to experiment that way, that if I decide on a book about psalms, for example, what I am working on presently, if I decide to write about Ukraine or a conversation I over-heard, I can, and I don't feel pressure to make each and every poem FIT together.

Sometimes the theme is organic, and I do not realize it until I have written a year's worth of poems, and I print them all out and step back and a calm rushes over me, that there was a theme all along that I just did not realize. I like learning from my poems. I have never been one of those who has a solid idea first.

Instead, I prefer to allow the poem to tell me its secret. In school when I would write term papers, I can remember teachers admonishing everyone to start with an outline and then a thesis statement, but I worked backwards, writing the paper, letting it unfold and then—after it was written—I would recreate an outline and fill in all of the organizational steps that were required.

A reader travels with you through a significant "landscape" and sees the world simultaneously through you and his own eyes and circumstances. Do you think about reaching others with a

poem, or do you simply practice your aesthetics and thematic pulse without immediate concerns for how you're read by others?

When I write, I have to focus on the work and what I am writing, otherwise I would be scared off and never write anything, but still—I write to communicate and to connect and build community, so I have to be aware of the images and messages I am sending out into the universe. Rather than starting with a theme and then writing 100 poems on that theme, I tend to find my focus more organically, the poems tell me where to travel next, whether the landscape be interior or external. My poetry for me is similar to when a novelist or a playwright claims that the characters guided the narrative. Often, when I begin a poem, I have no idea where that poem will take me, what journey I will be on.

As the writer Milan Kundera says about his work, “The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented.”

When I write a poem, like Pessoa I often take on the persona of someone else. One poem of mine that makes everyone think I have a brother is “Buying Sleep,” adapted from a story that my husband told me:

Buying Sleep

My brother leans over
 in the cabin bedroom
 that we shared once
 a year and says to me
 --now mind you
 this is the brother I have
 hated all my life--
 he leans over the bunk bed.
 Yes, he got the top.
 He leans
 into the springs
 like he's an old car
 all 12 years
 of him, and he
 says to a boy half his age,
 a boy tossing and fearing
 outhouse snakes,
 and the awful windy
 silence, the calm of the desert
 and the unfed
 spring of the fear of Father
 for still being awake
 when the rest
 of the sane world is not.
 Now this brother leans over
 and asks in the sweetest voice possible:
 “Wanna buy some sleep?” In the darkness
 I nod and, then, realizing years later
 say, “Yes,” aloud and so he begins.

He gathers up a cocoon of sleep
 in his hands and tucks in my feet,
 my ankles, my legs, my torso
 and then zips it up tightly under my chin
 almost as if he loved me.

You've received support from various American national institutions that support the arts in general. Too numerous to mention them all here. Does this give you added confidence, or is each book of poems a new struggle?

Each book is new! As Walter Huston, the actor made famous in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* once said in an interview, "In Hollywood, you are only as good as your last picture!" Each poem and each book is in a way like starting over from scratch because you never know where the writing will take you, and you do not want to keep repeating yourself (as I fear I am here, in this interview). The act of writing has to be brand new each time you put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard.

You have also reviewed and interviewed many authors for the *Portuguese American Journal*. Self-serving question: what drives you to let others talk about their public work or writings?

I suppose I came to interview other writers honestly. I felt ignorant and wanted to push myself to read more books by Portuguese authors and to get to know my community. I felt I had a lot of catching up to do and these interviews started out as a way to learn about the arts scene and a way to educate myself. After a while though the interviews took on a life of their own, people come to me now or I get leads all the time.

And once I finish an interview, like magic the next subject appears, demanding my attention. I feel very proud that through the years I have interviewed so many honorable writers and artists, such as yourself, including writers such as Katherine Vaz, Frank X. Gaspar, Sam Pereira, Nuno Júdice, Rosa Alice Branco, Carlo Matos, Anthony de Sa, Brian Sousa, Stephen Rebello, José Peixoto, Darrell Kastin, Alberto Pimenta, Irene Marques, Nancy Vieira Couto, George Monteiro. Alice Clemente, Anthony Barcellos, Lara Guarte, PaluA Neves, Amy Sayre Baptista, Diniz Borges, Hugo dos Santos, Elaine Avila, Sam Pereira, Deolinda Ado, Jacinto Lucas Pires, and Erika de Vasconcelos.

Interviewing, for me, is a way of understanding, building bridges. The interviews I do, yes, they help promote the writers and artists I talk with, and as a bonus, I also get an education and a glimpse into someone else's artistic process, a brief chance to experience something new, to discover what makes someone else tick.

***Injuring Eternity*, *Woman on Shaky Bridge*, and *Practical Love Poems* are the books that precede those we've been broaching here. Do you ever re-read them to see the "road" you have been traveling in your writings?**

I spend years on a book, editing, revising, organizing. I think possibly by the time a book is published I have probably "read" it 100 times, so have no interest in re-reading my past work. I put everything I had into the book, each book, at the time and have zero interest in reliving the process.

Of course, I DO relive the poems the individual poems in some way as I give readings, so ultimately, I DO end up living with and re-reading portions of the books I have written but not all of a piece. In other words, I do not re-read from start to finish the books. Also? I would be nervous to because revisiting--especially after many years would mean that I MAY find ways to make the poem

better or poems that I would have edited out in a larger manuscript, and I would not want to be a Walt Whitman who spent his life revising *Leaves of Grass*.

There needs to be a final version, a full stop, to a point where I can walk away and say, OK that is good enough. As to the second part of your question? I never think about each book as being a guidepost on a road or a journey. I imagine—instead—each book as a process, an end, in and of itself, each book existing in its own special universe, frozen in time and place.

Where do the Azores fit into your life and roots? Have you ever visited the islands?

There is urgency and longing to visit the Azores. When my father was alive, I used to try and talk him into it, and he never was interested. Kind of like the war, he did not want to talk about it. Short answer? I would LOVE to see the Azores.

So, fast forward to 2015. I applied for a Fulbright to the Azores and miracle of miracles I was selected for a fellowship!

And then? Life got in the way. My husband Charles had a cardiac arrest and heart failure. We discussed trying to travel and I delayed my Fulbright as long as I could, as long as they would let me. It was a huge honor of which I am very proud of, but, like I said sometimes life gets in the way. It was not possible for my husband to travel, and it was also not possible for me to leave him alone for that long of a duration—and then, there was a long process of waiting for a heart transplant, and he was always deemed “too well” for a transplant and not well enough to travel or have much mobility.

And then, Covid hit, and we were quarantined more than before. In the movies, the romantic notion is that someone applies for a transplant and then immediately gets one. Which in real life is not the trajectory that happens. Gloria de Sa lost her brother who was also awaiting a transplant. Sometimes patients can wait years and years for a suitable donor or for the timing to be right. Charles and I felt blessed at first when he was trying to qualify and when he got on the transplant list, and we imagined that we could tackle anything if we just hunkered down and made the best of things, but months turned into years and he was put on and taken off and there were more tests, and it seems as if the initial idea of getting a transplant and then moving on easily is not possible.

For the past 2–3 years we have been isolated, and the plus side is that we DO have a yard so I can grow vegetables and get outside. Also, during the Covid days I wrote a new book, *Quarantine Highway*, which is coming out in the fall of 2022 with *FlowerSong Press* Texas. Inside every bit of hard news is a bright spot. And my writing has again and again saved my life.