In Memoriam: A Tribute to Diana Marcum*

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Translated by Katharine F. Baker

I

The news reached me only a few days later, but it came. Diana Marcum (1963-2023) had died on August 10 in the city of Fresno, with which she was long associated. She used to write for the *Fresno Bee*, the San Joaquin Valley's preeminent daily newspaper, but given the caliber of her journalism she inevitably had moved on to the *Los Angeles Times*, the most powerful voice in all of North America's west—the daily paper that makes its vast market (and even more so Washington, D.C.) tremble at its news and editorials when it writes in defense of the states and communities where millions of its region's daily readers reside.

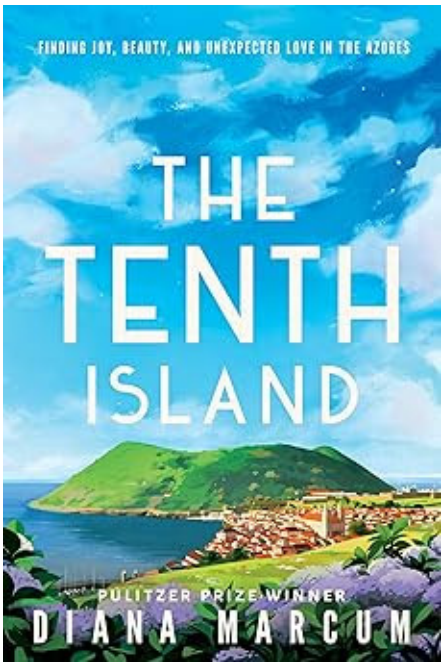
The *Times*'s obituary for its great journalist Diana Marcum tells much about her, but for now it suffices to note that she won a Pulitzer Prize for Journalism (a kind of Nobel Prize in that country) for a series of reports on the drought in California's dairying interior in the mid-1980s and '90s, centered on her investigations among Azor-descendants and our immigrants who have long settled and made their lives there. She spoke with them, socialized with them, embraced them for their kindness and then their friendship, ate with them, and persisted in her discoveries even far from their islands of origin. She would not rest until she came to live the Azorean daily lifestyle, particularly on Terceira (where she wanted to buy a home)—and then on São Jorge, an island of additional vacations and rest. All this would result in her exquisite book *The Tenth Island: Finding Joy, Beauty and Unexpected Love in the Azores*, published in the U.S. in 2018. It was this original English version that I read and reviewed, but Francisco Silva Pereira's Portuguese translation would soon appear at Cultura Editora (Lisbon) under the title *A Décima Ilha*.

Among the many things the *Los Angeles Times* published after her sudden death was this passage: "Marcum had traveled widely but said the remote islands and their people had taken a grip on her soul. She described how she loved the languid days, active volcanoes and abundant distance from the larger world. And Marcum embraced the Portuguese concept of *saudade*."

In 2018 I had already written about her Azores book, so was invited by Nuno Costa Santos to interview her in English at the Teatro Micaelense before a large audience as part of the first *Arquipélago de Escritores*. Before and after that, on esplanades and all around Ponta Delgada, our conversation continued—always in moments of happiness and, for me, learning. What follows is part of what I wrote about Diana Marcum and her revelatory book *The Tenth Island*.

* This essay has been lightly edited to combine two columns by Vamberto Freitas about Diana Marcum that were published in his 7 Aug 2018 and 22 Sep 2023 "Border Crossings" of *Açoriano Oriental*.

II



Every book can be read in many ways. Perhaps its informational content brings us nothing new. But a different viewpoint will also always exist in the originality of its pages. When they do not say what we expect or know, that perspective will never cease to be original, and so much the better for it. Ultimately all literature is a repetition of what we have known from the outset. All that remains to be seen is the different way that a people, community and nation are viewed. In almost all writing about the Azores by outsiders, I note a rather strange attitude.

First generation emigrants think they know all about their native islands, after which they distrust those of the second or later generations who write about us in English. Here, it seems to me, there is a certain misunderstanding, as reality will always be things conveyed to them in kitchen conversations, and in what comes to them by way of letters, photos and their pure imagination. This does not mean only the linguistic creativity of these writers and poets, but also the grandeur of their ancestral geography, or even a discovery almost entirely by chance.

I have never seen a comparable commentary from these same voices about the asininities and indeed outright racism in *The Innocents Abroad* by Mark Twain, who called Azoreans from a certain island [Faial] "vermin." They wrote about us with a certain hostility and ignorance, and quickly sought out the worst, for lack of a better understanding. John Steinbeck is on this list of defamers, not only in *The Grapes of Wrath* but also in another of his novels of no redeeming value. As Edmund Wilson would write about the work of the Scribe of Salinas, a Nobel Prize winner no less, he created "human beings so rudimentary that they are almost on the animal level."

All this comes from Diana Marcum's 2018 book *The Tenth Island*, which deals in clear-eyed brilliant prose with our San Joaquin Valley communities—owing once again to the drought that in recent years has afflicted the North American state, this vast expanse in the central interior of California—which consequently led to her two extended visits to the Azores, mainly to Terceira, and for a few days to São Jorge in the company of an American friend.

She wrote for the *Fresno Bee* (I realize I am repeating myself here) and after that for the great and influential *Los Angeles Times*. As I have already noted, she won a Pulitzer Prize for this reporting, and never rested until she saw the "distant and mysterious islands" of our archipelago firsthand. She may not have brought anything new to our existence in the middle of the ocean, but she brought something more precious and relevant: this external look, the way she saw us, lived, and perceived our land.

Her account begins almost surreally. She was sitting at her desk in the *Fresno Bee* newsroom when one of the paper's photographers came by and handed her a picture of a farmer who I surmise was from the Tulare area, plowing his land during the drought years using a plow with rolling discs pulled by two oxen. The photographer asked her, "Do you think there's a story here?" She looked, and quickly decided there was.

She set out in search of that cultivator of the land, and succeeded in striking up a conversation with him. From that moment on they became friends, or at least built mutual trust. In her work as a reporter and writer she began embedding herself in our Luso-American agricultural community, getting invited to private parties at one or another person's home, or to our people's community *festas* in the area. Then Diana Marcum makes an unusual confession: she does not even know her own

ancestry, as both of her [adoptive] parents died young. Her admiration for our communities takes on such vast proportions that she decides to find out the origins of these strong people, and comes to the Azores for the first time.

Her passion never left her, so some seven years later in 2014 she decided to return, this time for an extended stay. She bought a used car and traveled all over the island, making friends, talking with everyone she met, her eyes always alert to what we here do not, or do not want to, see. Many in our first generation should keep this in mind—we arrived here with set ideas, and our references from childhood or adolescence never let us go beyond our memories. The typical infrequent visitor sees things we never do. We do not notice what others encounter for the first time—neighbors, friends, even places that had never been seen or thought about before. That is exactly what the stranger in a strange land is capable of looking at and registering, giving us another interpretation or placing us universally among everyone else.

Some may say that emigrants never leave here. This is false. They leave here, but only later find themselves again when they return. The mystery of so-called belonging is very mystified, or mythologized. Only those from outside complete us, whether in our way of being, or in the deepest recesses of our origins. There is a complex, let me repeat, that we all suffer from, that without others we can never know who we are. *The Tenth Island* is a mix of memoirs and fiction—the author confesses that she never consults her notes, and reinvents dialogues—all in smooth, direct prose, as if it were a journalistic human interest story. I have heard some criticisms of such writing, but to me that is precisely where its eloquence and reading pleasure reside.

In a few months or in a year, and years later, Diana Marcum was not just a tourist and writer. Rather, she became part of us. Living in and around Serreta, she did not miss even book launches, as was the case in 2014 with Joel Neto's *Da Vida no Campo*—as well as holding long conversations with the great artist Luís Bettencourt, also from Terceira, about the nature of love, art and other human issues.

She made friends with another local who advised her about the island and told her what she should see and absorb. She made friends with neighbors, traveled around the island, tried to create a sense of belonging with those who had arrived and made these islands a second home. This is rare, very rare, in our times. I refer not to the foreigners among us years ago. I speak of a great writer who did not leave unnoted her happy days on islands hitherto unknown to her. In the 19th century these islands were mere objects of opportunism, the wine and orange trades, and diplomatic responsibilities. Those foreigners built palaces and established vast gardens, later laid and maintained submarine cables, and sent their German, British and American children to exclusive schools. Yes, indeed.

But books like this, of pure affection and discovery of the nooks and crannies in our century, simply take us by surprise and for no other reasons than our kindness, the aroma and shape of our nature—and the unconditional friendship of which we are also capable.

"Just being here, at ease, alone in the dark," Diana Marcum writes in a passage about her stay on the island of Terceira and recalling her California, "made me realize I had been mindlessly maneuvering just-the-way-things-are, accepting that violence was always a possibility, never realizing there are other places where it doesn't feel that way. Of course, my dad had a saying for this: 'They might have a different way of doing things across the river.' Or in this case, the middle of the ocean."

I must mention here that Diana Marcum has a good Azorean friend who has lived in California for many years, and who throughout her Atlantic planning and travels guided and advised her about both the choice of houses on the island and the idiosyncrasies of its people. Elmano Costa is a Professor of Education at California State University, Stanislaus in Turlock, one of our best-known immigrant communities in that state.

From word to word, from sentence to sentence, the author adapted to the environment, from Angra do Heroísmo to Praia da Vitória and all the villages in between. Once again, few readers will

find in these pages an unknown geography, much less cultural innovations, be they the now-traditional summer festivals or the bullfights, which she classifies as something tragi-comical. A closer reading will bring out the best this book offers us, which is both travel literature and a hymn to another land only now discovered.

References

Marcum, D. (2018). *The Tenth Island: Finding Joy, Beauty, and Unexpected Love in the Azores*. Little A.

Marcum, D. (2019). *A Décima Ilha* (F. S. Pereira, Trans.). Cultura Editora.

Translator's postscript

In *The Tenth Island*, Diana Marcum rhapsodized over the *pão caseiro* baked each Friday in the wood-fired oven at Ti' Chôa restaurant in Serreta: "The thick brown crust was chewy, the pale soft interior a beehive of bread and pockets of warm air. There was the faintest whisper of sweetness... [from] an until-now-secret ingredient: sweet potato yeast" (p. 184). Online research for this heritage method proved fruitless, however, so in our paper "The Search for Maria de Fátima's Sweet Potato Bread in *I No Longer Like Chocolates*" (*Gávea-Brown* 48, Fall 2023), my husband John and I related his development of recipes approximating both Ti' Chôa's Friday bread and the *massa sovada* that Álamo Oliveira recalled in his novel from childhood in nearby Raminho—each leavened with a traditional sweet potato wild yeast starter. Diana and I had exchanged several emails after I read *The Tenth Island*, so I looked forward to renewing contact with her to share the sweet potato bread paper (including her influence on it) once it was published. However, she died just days after John and I submitted our manuscript, so we were left to add a dedication in the paper to her memory, in gratitude and sorrow.