

Interview with Scott Edward Anderson

Francisco Cota Fagundes

Scott Edward Anderson is the author of *Wine-Dark Sea: New & Selected Poems & Translations* (Shanti Arts, 2022); *Azorean Suite/Suite Açoriana* (Letras Lavadas, 2020); *Falling Up: A Memoir of Second Chances* (Homebound Publications, 2019), which received the 1st Literary Prize from Letras Lavadas in conjunction with PEN Azores in 2020; *Dwelling: an ecopoem* (Shanti Arts, 2018), winner of the Nautilus Prize; *Fallow Field: Poems* (Aldrich Press, 2013); and *Walks in Nature's Empire* (The Countryman Press, 1995). His poetry also received the Nebraska Review Award. He lives in the Berkshire Mountains of Western Massachusetts.

I am aware, Scott, that you gave us an interview recently. The present interview, however, occurs in a specific context: that of the celebration of Portuguese Diaspora Literature (PDL) to which *Gávea-Brown 47* is dedicated. Thanks for agreeing to another interview, which forms an integrated series of interviews with North American writers and professors.

You are the author of the four collections of poems and two books of non-fiction, including a memoir. You also have been awarded prizes for your poetry and your prose. Are you an American poet, a Portuguese American poet, or both? Please explain.

I am both—and more. Today, I think of myself as a Luso-American, Portuguese-American, or Azorean-American poet, primarily, as an important part of my identity has been restored to me, which feels particularly compelling after an exceptionally long time without that part of my identity. If I'm honest, however, I should include the Irish, Scottish, and English parts of my background and family ancestry. Of my great-grandparents, two were from the Azores, two were from England, three were from Ireland, and one was from Scotland. So, I guess that makes me an Irish-British-Islander-Luso-American poet or, perhaps more succinctly, a North Atlantic Islander poet.

Before the publication of your memoir and of *Azorean Suite*, it seems you had not yet literarily discovered your Azorean ancestry. Please share with our readers, who may not know your memoir and the collection *Azorean Suite/Suite Açoriana*, what it has meant to you to literarily assume that component of your identity?

It's true that I didn't grow up with a sense of my Azorean ancestry or what it meant. I was vaguely aware of it, but didn't really know much about it, despite growing up in a part of Rhode Island (East Providence) that had a large Azorean American community. In fact, I was made to feel ashamed of my Portuguese heritage—from my Portuguese grandfather's denial of his heritage and my father's negative attitude toward the Portuguese. I was darker than my brothers—who looked much more Irish or Scottish—whereas I favored the Azorean side of my mother's family. My father used to pick on me for it, call me a "Portagee" or, worse, "Porkncheese," which made me want to hide that part

of me. He always had derogatory things to say about the Portuguese and would point to newspaper items about Portuguese guys behaving badly. He had a difficult relationship with his father-in-law, and he took it out on me. This fueled a sense of being an outsider in me. When I was eight years old, I idolized the Puerto Rican baseball player Roberto Clemente to such an extent that I wanted to be considered Puerto Rican. I think this was an unconscious way for me to project my Portugueseness, my “otherness” onto a hero. When I started to learn about the Portuguese aspect of my heritage, in my twenties, I was fascinated. Rather than being ashamed, there was so much about which to be proud.

More recently, after going to the Azores for the first time in 2018, I had an overwhelming sense of connection to the place and the people. I met family there I didn’t know I had, encountered writers with whom I shared a sensibility and connected on multiple levels. I have said before that coming to the Azores felt like I had come home. It was like a missing piece of me—a piece that I longed for in a very Azorean way, it turns out—was finally found and assumed its rightful place as part of my identity. Since that time, I have completely embraced it—perhaps like a zealot—or it has completely embraced me. And it has meant the world to me. It’s changed my life in a radical, beautiful way.

This issue of *Gávea-Brown* is dedicated to the celebration of Portuguese Diaspora Literature (PDL) in the U.S. and Canada. What are your ideas regarding the survival of this literature now that Portuguese migration to North America has practically ceased?

The literature of the diaspora is finally coming into its own. This is probably true of many immigrant literatures in North America: there is a period of first-generation literature—you see this in Italian-American literature with writers like John Fante—which focuses on the stories of the immigrant experience and the intergenerational struggles, such as those my grandfather experienced as he tried to establish himself as an American. Now, those of us in the second, third, and even fourth generations have the chance to embrace those aspects of our heritage in ways that are informed by our connection to and exploration of that heritage.

There is still so much of this literature that deserves exposure, so many writers who are deserving of attention. The anthologies that have come out over the past decade or so have helped, and the increasing opportunities for publishing PDL allow us to codify it in a way. It takes time to establish a diasporic literature. It feels to me like we are just at the beginning stages of establishing a real Luso-North American literature in the way that Italian-American or Irish-American or Asian-American literatures have already been established. It’s our time.

Would you like to share any recommendations for a university-level course on PDL in North America? What would you envision its objectives to be? What about for a high school-level course?

In fact, I developed a syllabus for a graduate seminar called “Writing the Luso/a Diasporic Experience” when I applied for the FLAD Pedrosa Chair at UMass Dartmouth last year. While I didn’t get the gig, I did get great feedback from the folks with whom I shared the syllabus. Now, I just need to figure out a venue to do it! The aims of the course were to help participants expand their knowledge of the range of styles and forms employed by contemporary Luso/a memoirists, poets, playwrights, and fiction writers, share craft techniques from multiple genres of creative writing to help them explore the Luso/a diasporic experience, and to develop their persona as a writer exploring their own experiences as a part of the Luso/a diaspora and, more specifically, how their experience in the local diasporic community has shaped their sociocultural identity. While this was designed as a graduate seminar, it could easily be adapted to an undergraduate or even a high school-level course. I

also proposed developing a workshop focused on helping students and members of the community gather and tell their family stories before they are lost—that’s something that could be done with high school students, too.

***Dwelling: an ecopoem* focuses on an extremely important subject: our relationship to the Earth and our survival. Given its historical and philosophical richness, however, it is not an easy book for any reader, especially young readers. How would you, as teacher of your own poems, go about preparing the context for the reading of *Dwelling*?**

Interestingly, *Dwelling* was featured last fall in the syllabus for a course in environmental philosophy at Providence College by Professor Ryan Shea, and I was invited to be a guest lecturer during the semester. The students were undergraduates and they seemed very engaged with the book, it was a delightful experience. In terms of teaching the book, we broke it down to three essential parts: First, the context in which I wrote the book—as someone who worked in conservation for many years, informed by my work with The Nature Conservancy, as well as my study with the poet and environmentalist Gary Snyder, and my growing concern at the time that we weren’t doing enough to make a difference on environmental degradation; second, why poetry? Which, to me, as I’ve often repeated, is the most precise language we have for making sense of our world; and, finally, how poetry and philosophy interrelate or interact, especially in the context of environmental thinking.

Dwelling was also recently used in two courses at the University of Lisbon led by Margarida Vale de Gato—who has translated the book into Portuguese—a translation course and a course on U.S. geographical history. So, it turns out that while it may not be an easy book, it *is* versatile!

Please privilege a poem from each of your two collections *Wine-Dark Sea* and *Azorean Suite*. What are the elements in each that you would like to bring out for a viable reading of those two texts, but without barring the student from discovering his or her own meaning(s)? Is it necessary that a meaning or meanings be found and identified in a poem? Or is a poem, more than a bearer of meaning(s), an experience to be sought? Or is a poem something else altogether?

From *Wine-Dark Sea*:

III.

History, from the Greek, ἱστορία,
historia, meaning, “to learn from inquiry,”
 and “knowledge acquired by investigation.”
 Leading me to *história*—story in Portuguese—
 which language also renders
 the wine-dark sea, thus: o *mar cor de vinho*,
 where “cor” is color, although it resembles
 the English word “core,” the central or most
 important part of something, the Earth’s core,
 say, or the “core of an issue,” the central part
 of a fruit, as in Merriam-Webster’s definition:
 “*especially*: the papery or leathery carpels
 composing the ripened ovary in a pome fruit

(such as an apple)...”

But here, the core of the story,
the central part of my história,
at least, or what I’ve learned from inquiry,
is that the ocean-crossing of my great-grandparents,
heading from the Azores to America, is at the core
of my own history, my own story,
that their individual crossings bore fruit
in the form, not only of my later life,
but of a sort of trauma of separation
they both must have felt, leaving
their island, and which may have been passed
down to me, through RNA, rendering
the wine-dark sea, if not the color of wine,
perhaps the core of my own sensibility.

Ribonucleic acid (RNA) is a polymeric molecule
that serves as a messenger, coding and decoding,
regulating and expressing genes,
“sensing and communicating responses
to cellular signals.” In other words,
RNA is a storyteller—
The story it tells, then, is that
of “intergenerational *saudades*”
(as my friend Esmeralda Cabral calls it...),
which easily overtakes me, like ocean waves,
and which I’m convinced
was passed down to me from my ancestors.

“Yonder, by the ever-brimming goblet’s rim,
the warm waves blush like wine,” wrote Melville.

And off the bow of the ship was endless sea,
as if the ship was a floating island,
self-contained, its horizon continually
out of reach, as if anything were within reach.
Emerson’s “vast spaces of nature...
vast intervals of time, years, centuries,”
must have seemed vaster still to a girl of fourteen
or a boy who had just completed his nineteenth trip
around the sun, leaving their island home
for the first time, into an unknowable unknown.

This excerpt from the title poem of my book, *Wine-Dark Sea*, deploys several strategies that are central to much of my work: 1) an etymological investigation—like Celan, I am fascinated by the origins and meanings of words and how they relate to one another and to other words in English and other languages; 2) science and specificity—in this case a discussion of RNA, but elsewhere in my work it’s

biology, ecology, astronomy, etc.; and 3) storytelling—here, returning to the stories I’ve been grappling with over the last four or five years involving the rediscovery and deep-dive into my heritage.

From *Azorean Suite*:

II.

Standing before Ponta Delgada’s City Gates,
 I wonder how my great-grandparents felt
 when they passed through one last time
 to board separate emigrant ships—the *Peninsular*
 and the *Romanic*—one month apart, in 1906.
 It was early Spring, and they would never
 see their island home again.
 My main approaches to the island have been
 by air, over the ocean from New York,
 first, sighting Santa Maria and then São Miguel,
 or by small tourist boats—whale watching
 off the southern coast or touring the north.
 My great-grandmother, Anna Rodrigues Casquilho,
 was fourteen years old when she left,
 along with her parents and siblings.
 My great-grandfather, José Rodrigues Casquilho,
 was nineteen years old and left his entire
 family in Fajã de Cima for America.
The dock is the only hope of men with no goodbye! (Borges Martins)

Again, here, storytelling and trying to understand my family’s history from such a distance. *Azorean Suite* was written at a time when I was struggling with a work-in-progress, a prose memoir about uncovering my family history. I turned to poetry to try to loosen up a bit with the subject and approach it from a different angle. I learned this from poet Donald Hall, who was a mentor to me early on: that just because you’ve told a story in one form doesn’t mean you can’t repurpose it in another form later. Some stories never get old.

And

III.

I have been captured by the islands
 like a cloud caught by a mountain peak
 captivated and mesmerized—
 in that original sense of being pulled
 by a strong magnetic force—
 pull of my ancestry, luring me back.
 In my dream, I am flying
 I am flying in a caravel
 above an island in the sky
 there is no ocean, only sky

and my caravel transforms
 from ship of Discovery
 into a whaling barque—
 then, tethered to a sperm whale
 we circle our island home
 the island is a cloud
 or the cloud is an island—
 someone fires a cannon,
 but what is launched is poems
 not cannonballs—
 that's when I wake up.

One of the differences between my poem-sequences *Dwelling* and *Azorean Suite* is that I've made a conscious effort to allow more of myself into my recent work, more of my emotions, especially regarding how this new relationship with my ancestral islands has affected me. I never would have allowed myself to be so vulnerable in my work twenty years ago, when I wrote *Dwelling*. This is an important shift in my work, I think, a tectonic shift towards maturity.

In terms of your broader questions about poetry: I see poetry as a communication between a writer and a reader. The reader completes the poem if you will. Once the writer sends the poem out into the world, it no longer belongs to him or her. The reader is free to interpret it the way they want—to find in the poem what is speaking to them in the moment.

Take the word *saudade*. My friend Rui Faria, who runs the Azorean Emigrants Association, took issue with my interpretation of the word *saudade*, which to me meant “a longing for lost things.” For Rui, and I gather for other Azoreans—especially those whose families didn't leave—it means looking forward to seeing someone or someplace again. Not a loss, but a looking forward! So, for Rui, he can have a distinct perspective on my poem, a valid interpretation or argument with what I'm putting forth in the poem. I love that. It's what makes poetry so universal.

What have you discovered and are discovering about Portuguese culture that compelled you to embrace it?

There are several aspects that I discovered about Portuguese culture—and more specifically Azorean culture. First, the rich literary tradition. It's not all Camões, Pessoa, and Saramago. There is so much more. I was immediately struck by the publishing scene in the Azores, where it seems like there's a book or two published every week! Poetry, fiction, nonfiction, history, literary criticism, children's books—it's all there. And while the 19th and 20th centuries had their giants—Quental and Mesquita, Némésio and Correia and Pedro da Silveira—the 21st is proving to be a bountiful time for writers on the archipelago. Second, the language. I am diving deep into trying to learn the language as a key aspect of the culture. My reading comprehension is good, listening is okay, but I still struggle with speaking in Portuguese. I only wish I didn't come to it so late—it makes speaking the language difficult when you're old enough to be embarrassed by your mistakes!

Many people, including descendants of Portuguese migrants, have rejected their ancestral culture. Care to comment on that decision from your standpoint?

It's a decision they made for the reasons they had when they made it. From my standpoint, it's a missed opportunity. How much better would the world be if our differences and ancestral heritages were valued? We contain multitudes, to paraphrase Whitman. People have their reasons. My mother

(who is second generation) seems to have no interest whatsoever in learning about her ancestral place. She's turning eighty this year and I offered to take her back to the island of her grandparents. "They have cobblestoned streets there, don't they?" she asked. "Yes," I answered. "Naw, that's not for me," she replied. What am I supposed to do with that?

It's been said—and my experience of almost 60 years of migration confirms it for me—that the second generation of migrants (i.e., the first American-born generation) is for the most part a “lost” generation to the original culture. They generally did not learn the language and were not interested in the culture. In fact, many wanted to forget it. Today, however, we find many descendants of Portuguese—all the Luso-Americans who comprise the native-born writers of PDL, for example—making an effort, sometimes a real huge effort, to recuperate those lost origins. How do you explain this? Did descendants of Portuguese immigrants change, or did America and the world change?

Indeed, that's my understanding of my grandfather's experience. He wanted to be an American, so he went with an Anglo name, pursued American things (golf, insurance sales), married into a family that had been here since the British colonies, and only spoke Portuguese with his parents. Consequently, my mother and her siblings had little or no exposure to the traditions or cultural aspects of their heritage—and neither did I.

For the early immigrants, especially in the 20th century, there was a stigma associated with being a hyphenated American. There was even a publication by a prominent Portuguese-American cultural organization that proposed, "Want to be a good Portuguese? Become an American!" I know my grandfather felt he had to shed the immigrant past to succeed—and he proved to himself he was right. It wasn't until much later that multiculturalism began to be accepted and embraced, even celebrated. In that sense, America and the world changed. Today, it's less a melting pot and more of a stew, where all the unique flavors are retained when combined.

I know for myself, I needed to understand this aspect of my heritage to understand who I am. I always felt a little out-of-place in my family, which was dominated by my father's desire to be seen as a Scottish, not Irish-American—even though he was much more Irish than anything—which was both a class and religious prejudice. My father was a wannabe WASP and had all the bias against the "others" one would expect. Of course, I rebelled against that and, much later in life, embraced my differences.

You have been published bilingually on the other side of the Atlantic. How do you envision non-migrant Azorean writers and Azorean-American-Canadian writers collaborating on joint efforts beneficial to both? Any ideas?

I think we've already started to do this—some of us are participating in conferences and festivals in the Azores and on the Continent, and several of us Azorean North Americans have started a group, the Cagarro Colloquium, to share and promote our work and encourage others to share theirs. My book *Azorean Suite/Suite Açoriana* was a co-translation between Eduardo Bettencourt Pinto, José Francisco Costa, and myself. Michael Spring recently had a collection of his poems translated into Portuguese by Maria João Marques and published by Companhia das Ilhas. Margarida Vale de Gato has translated my book *Dwelling: an ecopoem* into Portuguese, which will be published as *Habitar* by Poética Edições in Lisbon this fall. Diniz Borges is working on a bilingual anthology of poems by Azorean poets and poets from the Azorean diaspora. Oona Patrick and the late Christopher Larkosh published an anthology with Tagus Press. Then there's the anthology edited by Luis Gonçalves and Carlo Matos, and another of Portuguese-Canadian writing edited by Fernanda Viveiros. My first trip

to the Azores was part of DISQUIET International's Azorean residency program, which I hope they revive in the coming years. There really is a lot going on.

Do you have any ideas you would like to share on how to promote more effectively than has been done up to now PDL on both sides of the continent and on both sides of the frontier of the US and Canada?

We've talked—the Cagarro Colloquium, that is—about holding a conference or festival sometime, celebrating the cross-fertilization of Azorean and Azorean diasporic writers. I've talked with a poet buddy of mine, Keith Kopka, about developing an exchange or residency program between the Azores and the MFA program he's developing at Holy Family University in Philadelphia. And, finally, I have this idea of building a Poets House Azores (Casa dos Poetas Açores), modeled on Poets House in New York, which is a wonderful library of poetry with programs to engage the public. The library would house poetry from all the islands and the diaspora, bring together poets from both sides of the Atlantic, and develop programs for the public. It's a dream that's a way off yet, but I'm putting it out there in hopes to manifest it over the next five-to-ten years.

In *Wine-Dark Sea*, you've translated poems by Pessoa, Vitorino Nemésio, Luís Filipe Sarmiento, Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, and Ângela de Almeida, and you're working on a translation of Vitorino Nemésio's *Corsário das Ilhas* for Tagus Press. Is translation something you plan to do more of in the future?

Yes, I'd like to translate some of the poems by Pedro da Silveira that George Monteiro didn't get to, especially those from his important first book, *A Ilha e o Mundo*. I'm also trying to build my body of Nemésio translations into a kind of selected poems collection, so Azorean descendants who don't read Portuguese can read the work of this important Azorean writer. And I've told my friend Pedro Almeida Maia that I'm keen to translate his novel, *Ilha America*, which Letras Lavadas published in 2020, into English—I think that novel would be a great introduction to contemporary Azorean writing for the North American audience.

You've expressed your desire to divide your time between the Azores and the U.S. How is that going?

Well, I'll be spending a month there this fall, after my wife and I were back this past spring. We recently moved to the Berkshires in Western Massachusetts, which allowed us to downsize and live a more affordable lifestyle—and be just a few hours from Logan Airport in Boston with its direct flights to Ponta Delgada. It's our intention to spend as much time in the Azores as we can. Samantha has a business partner in the Azores, so she's building a reason of her own to be there. When we were there in the spring, I met with professors at the University of the Azores, who seem interested in having me teach and lecture again there in the future, which I would love to do. The students there were amazing and there seemed to be a positive response to my lecture last April. So, I'm hoping I have more of an excuse to be there! And then there's the Poets House idea, which will be my way of giving back to the islands.

Where we're living now is on the other side of a mountain from Millay Arts, where I wrote *Dwelling* twenty years ago. I feel like I've come back to my locus of creativity. Being able to divide my time between here and the Azores feels like a magical, inspirational gift.