

Poetics of Immigration: A Review of *Through a Grainy Landscape* by Millicent Borges Accardi

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Through a Grainy Landscape by Millicent Borges Accardi is a collection of 61 poems that intricately navigates themes of cultural identity, diaspora, heritage, and the emotional landscapes of life. The volume opens with a foreword by Frank X. Gaspar and an introduction by Katherine Vaz, who both highlight the significance of Accardi's contributions within the context of the Portuguese-American diaspora literature and American poetry. The book is dedicated to two of Accardi's "literary heroes," George Monteiro (1932–2019) and Christopher Larkosh (1964–2020), acknowledging their significant influence on her literary journey.

In this collection, Accardi draws from the works of Portuguese and Portuguese-American poets, using their lines as springboards for her own poetic explorations. She skillfully enriches her poetry with allusions to celebrated literary figures like Pessoa and Saramago, among others, blending them with personal diasporic experiences and broader cultural and historical contexts. This intertextuality adds a universal resonance to the poems. The verses are richly layered, often employing vivid imagery and introspective reflections with evocative language that captures complex emotions and experiences in succinct yet powerful lines. Through these visual descriptions, she crafts a sensory journey for the reader, often drawing upon natural elements and shifting landscapes to evoke emotions and memories. The book's structure is carefully designed, guiding the reader through various emotional and thematic landscapes. The poems vary in length and style, creating a dynamic reading experience that mirrors the unpredictability of life itself. Smooth transitions between poems contribute to a cohesive collection, despite the diversity of topics and tones.

The blend of lyrical and narrative styles, coupled with vivid imagery, creates a profound and resonant exploration of the human experience as it relates to the Portuguese diaspora. This lyrical approach allows Accardi to delve into the inner landscapes of her subjects, unraveling intricate emotions and states of being. Additionally, other poems in the collection adopt a narrative tone, weaving stories of immigration, family dynamics, and cultural identity. This technique allows the poet to craft rich, detailed accounts of personal and collective experiences, vividly portraying life shaped by cultural heritage and migration. Accardi's reflective nature is evident in her contemplation of these themes, and her introspective style enables the reader to connect with her musings on life and identity. These elements denote heritage and enduring ties to one's homeland, creating a powerful connection to the past, and deepening the layers of meaning within the intricate tapestry of personal and collective histories woven throughout the collection. Predominantly embracing free verse, the poems navigate their topics and themes with flexibility, unconstrained by traditional poetic forms. The poet's frequent use of enjambment infuses the poems with a dynamic sense of movement and continuity, enhancing

the narrative's fluidity. Similarly, in *Through a Rainy Landscape*, patterns of repetition serve as a powerful technique that mirrors the ever-evolving nature of identity and memory creating a rhythmic effect with distinctive resonance, harmonizing with the lyrical and introspective style in this work.

In this reading of *Through a Rainy Landscape*, references to select poems provide a glimpse into Accardi's creativity, showcasing the themes that bind this work together within a rich tapestry of interconnected experiences and emotions. "A Man Sleeps, the Skies Move"—inspired by a line from Luis Quintais—and "With Eyes that Bear the Widowhood of Days" serve as introductions to the collection, laying the foundation for a deeper exploration of its subjects and styles. "A Man Sleeps, the Skies Move," delves into the fear, insecurity, and burden of responsibility placed on children in immigrant families. It poignantly addresses the anxiety experienced by a child aware of her/his family's precarious immigration status, with parents urging the child to "be an adult" in preparation for possible separation. It highlights the harsh realities faced by many immigrant families living in constant fear of deportation or separation:

It happens that way,
the sleep comes or not.
We stay awake and the worry
over a knock at the door,
at 5. When you are 5, your
parents sit you down and smoke.
They say. Ah. It is difficult
thing. They say, you are our child,
born in America, and we are trying.
We filled out the paperwork.
We hired an attorney. There
was a problem with an entry
date. Our visa was late but,
we did everything we could.
There was a problem, you understand?
[...]
There may come a day when we might
be away. Memorize your Aunties number.
Take care. Watch the rain clouds. Do the dishes.
Do not fall asleep without worry.
("A Man Sleeps, the Skies Move").

The poem touches on themes of love and sacrifice as the parents strive to prepare their child for an uncertain future while trying to reassure them that they will be okay. Written in free verse, the poem allows the poet flexibility in form and structure, creating a natural flow of thoughts and emotions that mirror the family's uncertainty and unpredictability. The imagery in the poem, such as the jar that looks "like water, the glass dense and broken," symbolizes the fragile and precarious nature of the family's situation, and the instruction to "watch the rain clouds" generate a mood of impending danger or doubt, while the child is asked to memorize an aunt's number and take on responsibilities beyond her/his years. A recurring childhood dream of deportation conveys a palpable sense of anxiety and helplessness, intensifying the narrative's emotional resonance and suggesting themes of displacement and insecurity:

I grew up with the recurring dream

of being deported. I was
 five years old, and my father took
 of being deported...
 ("A Man Sleeps, the Skies move").

The dream becomes a haunting presence, lingering in the poet's subconscious and influencing one's perception of reality. Moreover, this imagery can be interpreted as a metonymy for the shared experiences of children of immigrants growing up in America. The title of the poem juxtaposes the static image of sleep with the dynamic movement of the skies, hinting at the contrast between the internal world of dreams and the external world of change and uncertainty. This juxtaposition underscores the theme of inner turmoil amidst a shifting external landscape, capturing the emotional volatility and insecurity faced by immigrant families, particularly those who are undocumented or have unstable immigration statuses.

"With Eyes that Bear the Widowhood of Days" captures the lives of Portuguese fisherwomen, exploring themes of loss, resilience, and hope. The depiction of the "ocean floor" as a barren landscape, appears to symbolize "lost meaning," paralleled by Portuguese fisherwomen united in their shared, time-worn struggle. The poem's vivid imagery and metaphors highlight the women's strong yet melancholic bond with the sea, encapsulating their lives bound together by shared experiences of waiting, loss, and love. Their "shawls," and the "black glue" they use for forgetting capture their complex emotional landscape, where sadness and joy coexist, revealing their deep longing and mourning:

The ceiling of the ocean floor is fat,
 with its tidal drop, a mere sandy slope, the
 barrenness, now, a symbol, a lost meaning,
 to catch, a rule that the Portuguese fisherwomen
 on the shore above can attest to, easily
 nodding in agreement that they are bound
 together, like time they have wagered and lost,
 a lifetime of fresh bets and new hands,
 grown old with uncertainty, a rule,
 a catch, a slip of the tongue and the
 courtship will be over, lost to sea journeys far
 away from solid-footed Terceira, where black glue
 is the medicine of forgetting and a pause
 is the known secret inside absence,
 and where love is a shy attachment to hope, the
 thaw that every woman, waiting here, tempts
 with her own fate. On shore, they long to don sadness,
 like a dark shawl around their forearms.
 It is a uniform, encompassing wool, knitted
 halfway between loss and joy.
 [...]
 ("With Eyes that Bear the Widowhood of Days").

Describing them as "grown old with uncertainty," the poem suggests the emotional toll and resilience of these women, who wear their sadness like a "dark shawl." The fleeting joy they experience is delicately captured by "a slight mention or a holding note of the wind," hinting at their enduring

hope amidst hardship and sacrifice. Despite their sorrow, the poem hints at their resilience and hope, portraying them as once “the friendliest girls” now marked by a quieter happiness as they await the return of their loved ones. The “known secret inside absence” subtly conveys their shared experience of anticipation and longing for their loved ones’ safe return. The poem concludes with a poignant nostalgia, their present happiness tinged with gentle reminders of the men they once loved:

The friendliest girls they used to be,
 these women, now waiting on the land,
 reveal happiness but with but a slight
 mention or a holding note of the wind,
 softly reminding them
 [...]
 (“With Eyes that Bear the Widowhood of Days”).

This exploration of human resilience and emotional duality travels throughout the collection, and it delves into the intricacies of human emotions, illustrating how joy and sorrow often intermingle and highlighting the transient nature of our perceptions. In “To You, Who Saw Fjords and Coral,” for example, the poetic voice reflects on the perceived durability of truth, likening steadfast and seemingly immutable entities—such as a parent’s love or a longstanding company—that seem secure:

The truth as you believe it
 seems durable and unmoving,
 like a parent’s love, a parable
 you believe in, can count on
 solid like a hundred year
 old wall or an established
 company that you trust
 will always be there...

However, this perception is challenged by the poet’s reflection on the comforting solidity of these beliefs, metaphorically described as a “storm in the port” during times of uncertainty. The tension and readiness in the poet’s “calves,” followed by the leap into the unknown, symbolizing a courageous acceptance of uncertainty and the willingness to move forward despite the lack of solid ground, where the “nest at the end of the leap” representing a hope for safety and security amid turmoil:

[...]
 My calves were tensed and ready to
 lift up as I nodded yes,
 and leapt off the cold edge of uncertainty,
 ready to land into the nest—that was waiting
 for me, hanging on a rope, far above my life.
 (“To You, Who Saw Fjords and Coral”).

Overall, the complexities of truth and belief are highlighted, showing how these concepts can be both comforting and deceptive, underscoring human resilience and the capacity to navigate through uncertainty. This poem fits neatly into that narrative by highlighting how our understanding and trust in what we consider permanent can be disrupted. It suggests that memory itself might be selective and unstable, influencing our perception of stability and happiness. In this interplay of stability and flux,

the poem's focus on the shifting ground of what can be trusted juxtaposes well with the collection's exploration of stability's ephemeral nature. It challenges readers to consider how much of their sense of security and happiness is contingent on external circumstances versus internal resilience. On the whole, it enriches the thematic complexity of the collection by offering a look at the dynamics of belief, change, and adaptation, echoing and deepening the exploration of memory and stability within the larger body of work.

Poem fifty-five, "More Nocturnal than Sleep" takes the reader on yet another captivating journey through the depths of the human experience. The poem provides a striking exploration that transcends the boundaries of the physical and emotional realms. It begins with a vivid depiction of an overwhelming sensation akin to a sudden blackout, effectively conveying a profound sense of disorientation and detachment from reality. The repetition of "more than" throughout the poem emphasizes the uncanny nature of the experience, highlighting the overwhelming weight of the experience. The poet describes the abrupt onset of dullness, illustrated by the physical weakness with "legs buckled underneath," and sensory overload with "ears spun out with fussy noise." As the narrative unfolds, the intensity of the experience deepens:

[...]
 I went down like a dislodged
 boulder, in the middle of
 the wall. Five tons dislodging
 more than sleep, more than slumber
 more than temporary.
 ("More Nocturnal than Sleep").

The poetic voice emphasizes that this is not merely sleep or lethargy, but something much more profound and immediate. It is described as a force, a powerful impact that knocks the speaker down like a "dislodged boulder," a metaphor suggesting a loss of control and stability. This experience transcends easy categorization or explanation, surpassing conventional descriptions or comparisons. The poet grapples with something beyond comprehension, something that defies rationalization. With the final lines, "more than temporary," suggesting that whatever the experience may be, it leaves a lasting impact. It is not just a fleeting moment but something that lingers, perhaps shaping the poet's perception or understanding of the world around. Overall, this poem offers a powerful exploration of a profound and mysterious experience, conveying the intensity and complexity of emotions and sensations.

Central to *Through a Rainy Landscape* is the theme of identity, which permeates the collection, by uncovering the complex and layered identities of those of Portuguese descent living in America. This exploration is multifaceted, beginning with the two introductory poems. "A Man Sleeps, the Skies Move" vividly captures the experience of growing up as a child of immigrants in America, as previously mentioned, delving into the anxieties and hopes intertwined with forming an identity in a new world. The second poem, "With eyes that Bear the Widowhood Days" explores the collective identity of Portuguese fisherwomen, emphasizing their strength and resilience. Further examples include the fourth poem, "The Most Vertical of Words," which illustrates how oppressive family histories shape and impact individual identity. In poem thirty-four, "The Graphics of Home," Accardi begins by tracing the origins of the Portuguese and Portuguese American communities and their diverse backgrounds. Identity is conveyed through the detailed and symbolic use of everyday objects within the narrative, highlighting the intricate ties between personal and communal identity in immigrant life, connecting the present to the past and featuring the migration patterns of these communities. The

mention of the Great Depression and various industries grounds the poem in a specific historical context, reflecting the economic struggles of these communities:

Were broken by the Great
Depression, the textile mills,
and the golf ball factories.
We came from The Azores
and the mainland and Canada,
settling in Hawaii and New Bedford
and San Pedro, the original
Navigators. No one was documented.
("The Graphics of Home").

In this poem, Accardi encapsulates the complexities of identity and immigrant experiences by using the life cycle of a shirt as a metaphor to illustrate the immigrant ethos of resourcefulness and adaptation. The shirt, a hand-me-down, arriving in a repurposed box, undergoes multiple transformations as it becomes worn and repurposed repeatedly, embodying a spirit of adaptability and endurance:

[...]
When outgrown and too worn
for even that, the placket of buttons was removed,
in one straight hard cut along the body
of the shirt front, through and through.
The buttons were pulled off by hand,
for storage in an old cookie tin,
the cloth cut into small usable pieces
for mending, for doll clothes, for
whatever was left over. The rest, torn
into jagged rags for cleaning and, if the fabric was soft,
used for Saturday's dusting of the good furniture
in the den. Whatever was left, was sold
by the pound, wrapped and rolled into
giant cloth balls, sold to the rag man
who made his rounds in the neighborhood
all oily and urgent and smiling as if
his soul were a miracle of naturalized
birth.
("The Graphics of Home").

The act of mending and repurposing household items are significant traits of the immigrant identity depicted in the poem. These actions symbolize the ability to adapt, the perseverance needed to thrive in new environments, and the creativity required to maintain cultural practices away from one's homeland. The use of sensory details, such as the smell of 'stale cigarettes,' further emphasizes the connection between the material object and the memories it holds. These items are not just functional; they are repositories of personal and collective memory, linking the characters in the poem to their heritage. This connection underscores the identity of the community as deeply connected to their roots and traditions, and it ties into the broader theme of *saudade*. In fact, the poems, in this

collection, are imbued with a sense of *saudade*, a Portuguese word capturing a deep emotional state of nostalgic longing. This ongoing process of building and maintaining a home environment reflects the complex layers of immigrant identity, which balances the preservation of cultural origins with the adaptation to new societal contexts. In poem thirty-six, “Over Broken Bottles and Rivers,” the poetic voice reflects on identity and loss, capturing the fragmented nature of the lyric voice to illustrate the struggle and resilience inherent in self-discovery while emphasizing the poet’s introspection and emotional depth, particularly through the following lines:

[...]
 I am exactly what people think
 of me, a dark mixture
 of all I have lost. There is no one
 to attract or bring home to me anymore.
 [...]
 (“Over Broken Bottles and Rivers”).

Poem forty-four, “Your Native Landscape,” explores the intertwined themes of grief and identity, contemplating the connections between individuals and their ancestral lands. Lastly, poem fifty-nine, “Still Not Ilha Enough,” highlights the poem’s exploration of the tension between duty and identity, complexities of belonging to a place. The symbolism of gold rings slipping off fingers to signify the loss and the fleeting nature of responsibilities once held dear. The flights to the Azores and the archipelago’s towering mountains evoke the connection to heritage and the grandeur of ancestral roots, enriching a deeper reflection on personal and cultural identity amidst changing priorities.

The collection concludes with “I’ve Driven all Night through a Grainy Landscape” which travels through themes of uncertainty, separation, and longing, capturing the emotional struggle of waiting and the desire for normalcy amidst ongoing pain and heartache, as well as the search for understanding and belonging amidst life’s uncertainties and the artificial constructs of society. Truths are portrayed as repeated “lines in a political game,” highlighting the constructed nature of reality and the challenge of discerning genuine authenticity. The imagery of “walls, boundaries, and torn families” symbolizing the division and isolation that pervade modern existence. Through its evocative imagery and sensory detail, the poem captures the essence of our struggles and desires, inviting the reader to contemplate the complexities of human experience, emotional landscapes and explore the search for authenticity in an ever-changing world. It juxtaposes the agony of waiting for relief with the inevitability of change, highlighting the tension between hope and despair. The “mid-line boundary” between reassurance and finality underscores the precariousness of life’s journey. The poet’s resolve to remain true to their patience, despite the pain, conveys a deep-seated endurance and a quest for authenticity. The poem also delves into the emotional toll of these struggles, where routine interactions and basic civility become acts of defiance against the underlying disarray. The poet navigates through memories and experiences, grappling with the painful inevitability of change and the longing for a return to familiarity. This is poignantly captured through the imagery of “clock ticking” and the metaphor of life being “sawed in half like a magic trick,” evoking a sense of loss and disorientation in the face of temporal progression. The heartache of watching loved one’s drift away and the conflicting desire for connection reveal the complexities of human relationships. The longing and waiting create a “middle ground,” a difficult place where hope and resignation coexist:

But, last year, it didn’t take weeks
 for the clock to click one minute to
 three like when you were a kid, agonizing

to go home. And then there are the waiters,
 not food service but those who are patient,
 for diagnosis, for tests, for death.
 The mid-line boundary between
 someone saying everything is gonna be
 OK and everything is over. It is the passage
 Of that long journey, that I have
 to work myself up to face, to make it
 Through borders and boundaries, week after
 week for the past year, a life lived,
 sawed in half like a magic trick. I am
 perched on the edge of, ready to
 nod or run. Waiting makes you swear
 someone was loved and kind once, and
 that to make it all OK again, there is
 wishing, a hope for it to be as it was,
 when it was perceived to be all right
 but perhaps it never was. And, so,
 to normalize interactions, the daily hellos
 we take for granted, the guarantees we
 make with each other must be labeled
 seared into agreements that we promise
 to be civil or polite to each other, the nods
 at the bus stop, basic remnants of life
 in front of a modicum of human happiness.
 [...]
 ("I've Driven all Night through a Rainy Landscape").

The poem employs a disjointed structure and stream-of-consciousness style, mirroring the fragmented nature of the character's thoughts and experiences. Ultimately, it portrays a life fragmented by external pressures and internal conflicts yet held together by the enduring human spirit that seeks meaning and connection in a fractured world. The emotional state of "longing" serves as an intermediate space between the desire for closeness and the reality of "distant connections." It expresses profound heartache, capturing the tension between wanting to hold on and the inevitability of moving on. This state makes waiting and hoping for change become central, and the anticipation of a future where waiting ceases brings a sense of guilt, as if living in the present is overshadowed by this constant yearning. Ultimately, the lines suggest that these feelings and experiences blend over time, much like polluted "rivers" merging and searching for a new outlet, symbolizing the search for resolution or a new beginning amidst the emotional turmoil:

[...]
 Longing is the middle ground, when you have
 distant connections. It's such a hard place to be in.
 The waiting and the hoping for a time
 When you won't wait any longer then, feeling lived,
 a life guilty for that thought. Then, it all runs together
 in time, like dirty rivers, seeking a new mouth
 ("I've Driven all Night through a Rainy Landscape").

The poem encapsulates Accardi's exploration of the themes, images, and motifs that permeate and unify the volume. Its representation of the collection's essence makes it a fitting and an admirable choice for the book's title. Building on these themes, the collection, *Through a Grainy Landscape*, provides a poignant examination of how personal and shared histories intersect, capturing the essence of human emotions and the continuous quest for meaning and belonging. Collectively, these poems convey powerful innermost states of identity, shedding light on the multifaceted experiences of those navigating their heritage and individuality in a new cultural context.

In *Through a Grainy Landscape*, Accardi crafts a poetic symphony that entwines cultural identity, resilience, and the immigrant experience into a rich tapestry of heritage and self-discovery. Each poem is a delicate thread, intricately woven with vivid imagery, potent symbolism, and the liberating structure of verse, drawing the reader into a realm of introspection and emotional resonance. The skillful use of language and form creates a profound depth of meaning, allowing each poem to stand alone while contributing to a cohesive exploration of themes. Through her poetic lens, Accardi addresses not only the Portuguese American experience but also the broader, universal quests for meaning and belonging. Overall, *Through a Grainy Landscape* is a significant contribution to both Portuguese-American literature and contemporary American poetry, standing as a testament to Accardi's talent as a poet.