



Other Articles

Partida/Regresso, Departure/Return

by Robert Frazier

In a song on her most recent record, Cesaria Evora, the barefoot diva of Cabo Verde, sings mournfully: "Plunging through the blue waves/Seeing my land/I cried out my sodade." It is the song of a sailor passing by the archipelago, and thus by where his true love lives, but it harkens deeper to his love of his native soil. In the last centuries, Cape Verdeans have traveled far from their birthplace, it seems, but always felt the call of its shores. In a modest exhibit of poetry and matching illustrations hanging at the Whitney Gallery of the Research Library on Fair Street, this call is answered by Jarita Davis, a recent writer-in-residence for the Nantucket Historical Association.

Jarita—a Ph.D. fellow at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette—singled out Nantucket for its Cape Verde heritage, a heritage that can be traced to the heyday of the whaling fleets.

"I came to Nantucket precisely because of its history and population of Cape Verdeans," says Jarita. "Many Cape Verdeans immigrated to the United States, Portugal, Holland, and Brazil in order to earn money to support their families. After whaling slowed, other families came from the mainland of Massachusetts in the first few decades of the 1900s to work the cranberry bogs on Nantucket."

During her recent stay, Jarita used her time to study that history in the NHA library, and to talk to some of our Cape Verdean families.

"Their goal was not often to stay in America and make a life here, but to return to their homes in Cape Verde."

As Jarita puts it in her poem "Harvesting a Return," written in the voice of a cranberry harvester:

Boxes stand stacked, bulging with berries.
If the picking is good this year, and next,
I'll bring back an armload of stories
and berries from the fields
of this other fiery Cape to the brown faces
in the beige mountains of Fogo.

"Presently," Davis notes, "there aren't many Cape Verdeans who immigrate directly to Nantucket from the islands. Most come from the mainland, and the population seems to be

Cape-Verdean American, with several people who are second or third generation American."

She found also that Cape Verdean-Americans still send goods home...clothes, money orders, food items, etc. "Many," says Jarita, "save up to renovate their childhood homes so that they can retire where they were born."

It is clear from both Jarita's studies and her poetry, that Cape Verdean-Americans are trapped between two worlds, two homelands, and they are prone, as she words it in a subtitle to another poem, to romanticize the old country.

Another of Davis' poems, "Return Flights," speaks directly of her pilgrimage to the African islands, where she gathered dissertation material for her studies in early and African-American literature.

"My family in America had not had contact with anyone in Cape Verde for many, many years, and by the time I visited, there hadn't even been knowledge that any of our relatives still lived there."

On her flight back to the U.S., she found inspiration for the poem.

The seventeen year old on the plane
from Sal to New York knows
Cape Verde is not a place you leave.
It's the shuttling across the Atlantic
with his carryon filled with letters
written and saved long ago...

But Jarita discovered more than just dissertation experience on her journey to Cabo Verde, made last summer with the help of a Woodrow Wilson Mellon Minority University travel grant.

"I found distant cousins in Brava without expecting to reunite with any family. I wrote about this in "Meeting Mano and Mae Vinda," an autobiographical poem."

Soul of Cape Verde

Davis' lines are direct and suffused with personal verve. Their imagery is often muted and earthy, like the passage above on the cranberry laborer, and though they lack flashy verbiage, they possess a compelling honesty and an emotional depth not unlike the traditional morna that Cesaria Evora introduced to a world of listeners.

"Cape Verde is a very musical place,' says Jarita, "and if that music has trained my ear, it is only subconsciously. I would like very much to write poems that are more melodically informed, but nothing I have so far has mirrored the forms that closely."

Though not musical with native rhythm or syncopation, her poetry shares one direct relation to Evora's singing: a clear voice.

"While I enjoy many music forms, the morna "invades" my poetry the most. For me, the meaning and sentiment of that

music has had the greatest impact. The loneliness and nostalgia inherent in the morna is a fitting metaphor for a culture like Cape Verde's, because its history is shaped by continual movement: separating, reuniting, separating again."

The people in Davis' work achieve sharp definition and palpable characterization in just a few lines, but Jarita seems ever present, never eclipsed by the story within.

Brava held him in its worn nets. Too poor to keep him,
his memories became mine. Today I have learned
to say, Bom dia, and tonight I will not point, but speak...

Jarita works within a group of Afro-American poets called "Cave Canem," where she claims there is good poetry being written right now.

"I love what some contemporary poets like Tim Seibles and Terrance Hayes are doing by writing with voices that have very immediate, intense presence. They are both very brave writers because they put their raw, vulnerable selves onto the page."

The Future

Jarita Davis is presently polishing a new poetry collection, "As Minhas Mornas," which acts as her Ph.D. dissertation, and she continues her collaborations with Washington D.C. artist Alexandra Huttinger, a college classmate she has kept in touch with.

"Alexandra and I have been friends for over ten years now. She has an incredible energy about print making, and I am very excited about this new collection. I mailed her some of the poems I'd written, and she designed prints from the images that she pictured when she read my work.

"She told me that they made her think of her mother's home in Puerto Rico; she envisioned a lot of the landscape from her experiences there."

When Jarita completes a poem, she sends it to Alexandra. The linocut artist chooses a piece that speaks to her, and then completes a print, scans it, and emails it back.

"Some of the images, especially "Harvesting a Return 1 & 2" and "This is Someone Else's Life" were so close to what I saw in my mind while writing the poems, that I was astounded."

Huttinger's black and white prints, more like woodcuts in their fresh, lively appearance, are as integral to the Whitney Gallery show as the poetry. Especially one of Evora.

Entering the Whitney is like entering a publisher's paste-up room for a hand-set, hand-illustrated collection of poetry. You can stroll through the book.

Check with the Nantucket Historical Association at 228-1894 for times and duration of the exhibit...they claim it will hang for a few more weeks, but the final date is unclear. This close-knit interchange between a true poet and an inspired printmaker should not be overlooked. It illuminates our local melding of ethnic identities with focused perception.



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