

THE ETHNIC IMPULSE IN FRANK X. GASPAR'S POETRY AND FICTION

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Although a compelling and award-winning voice in contemporary American literature, the work of Frank Xavier Gaspar (1946-) has not received the attention it deserves. Apart from an article by Alice R. Clemente,¹ to my knowledge, there are no other scholarly publications touching upon his writings, all of which published in the course of the last seventeen years. While his work appeals to all audiences in the United States of America and even abroad – Portugal in particular – his poems dealing with issues related to his ancestral culture and ethnic background are the ones which have sparked the attention of Portuguese Americans. Prompted by Clemente's pioneer article on Gaspar's poetry and prose, in this essay my goal is to touch upon quintessentially Portuguese American issues left unaddressed in her piece. Furthermore, while I view Gaspar as a native-born American writer who resists ethnic tags, his Portuguese American background provided him with relevant materials and – to a certain extent – the impulse for writing. This is evident in his first volume of poems, *The Holyoke* (1988), where "ethnic signs"² loom more forcefully compared to his most recent work, *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* (2004). Although it is possible to detect traces of his ethnic background in all of his published works, in *The Holyoke* and *Leaving Pico*, however, these

certainly strike the reader in a more forceful manner than in his other three titles.

A Portuguese American writer and scholar, Gaspar is the grandson of immigrants who came to Provincetown, Massachusetts, from the island of Pico, in the Azores. He is the author of three award-winning collections of poetry. The first one is *The Holyoke*, winner of the 1988 Morse Poetry Prize. In this volume we witness a mature poetic voice reminiscing about how his childhood was shaped by his Portuguese family and community. It comprises a few poems touching upon Portuguese American issues, but *Mass for the Grace of a Happy Death* (1994), winner of the 1994 Anhinga Prize for Poetry contains even fewer. Practically all the poems in *A Field Guide to the Heavens* (1999), winner of the 1999 Brittingham Prize in Poetry, are about California, the poet's home. Unlike these volumes of poetry, in the novel *Leaving Pico*, published in 1999, Gaspar probes deeper into his ancestral culture. In this essay, my goal is to focus on Gaspar's ethnic impulse as incentive for artistic performance in all of his writings and ascertain why I view him as a compelling voice in contemporary American literature. While aiming for totality, for the reasons outlined above I shall dwell at length on *The Holyoke* and *Leaving Pico*.

The impression one gathers from his poems in *The Holyoke* is that he views himself as fully American, although with a few recollections of a childhood in Provincetown. Unlike Thomas Braga (1943-), another American scholar and writer of Portuguese descent, in *The Holyoke* Gaspar's references to his ancestral culture are very superficial. In *Leaving Pico*, however, such is not the case. As Clemente has noted, this "is a novel that fleshes out the characters and the Provincetown world of the earlier works in a way that poetry could not."³ It allows him to probe deeper into his ancestral culture through Josie and his grandfather, John Joseph, who, in the course of the story, tells him the tale of Carvalho, an adventurous explorer and competitor of Christopher Columbus. In addition, in *The Holyoke*, Gaspar will not trouble himself – or perhaps is not aware of – what it means to belong to a minor culture within a dominant one for he belongs to the mainstream. He will settle for observing his childhood community and leave it at that.

Mary Oliver's assessment of these poems in her preface is an

interesting one because she thinks that Gaspar does not resort to the subterfuges of most writers nowadays. She claims that the writers of today are obsessed with readers' opinions that it was worth their time to read these writers' work. This is not the case with *The Holyoke*:

Poems nowadays often address the reader with obvious insistence. "Let me tell you about my life," they say, "and I will make it fancy enough that you won't be bored." Frank Gaspar, I believe, has something else in mind. He is speaking to the reader – but also to himself, or perhaps to some hazy divinity, or to the blue sky. I felt in his voice no attempt to persuade me of anything.

In my view, what is missing in this quote is that Gaspar also wished to "speak" about his ancestral culture in some of these poems, even if lightly. Oliver also writes that the "poems tell the old story: a young man's passage from boyhood to maturity, in a small town by the sea. His people are Portuguese and Catholic."⁴ Upon closer inspection, *The Holyoke* may be seen as a Portuguese American version of Robert Frost's *A Boy's Will* since there are several parallels between both volumes of poetry. Both works deal with a boy's growth and how nature and the community assist the process of maturation.

The setting in most of *The Holyoke* is clearly that of Provincetown. "Who is Hans Hofmann and Why Does the World Esteem Him?" and "The Woman at the Pond" show us a group of artists engaged in their work. Although some of these painters are seen as eccentric by the impoverished local Portuguese Americans, their "rent money," as we learn in the former poem, is highly appreciated since it "would buy a family's winter heat" (31). "August," for example, alludes to the nearby town of Truro. Oliver adds more particulars on this issue and even makes an interesting comment on how these mainstream artists view the people they stay with temporarily while vacationing in Provincetown, where the majority ethnic group is composed of Portuguese, more specifically Azoreans. According to Oliver, most of these mainstream artists believed it was unthinkable that in a community composed mostly of fishermen a poet such as Frank Gaspar would have ever emerged:

Because I have lived in Provincetown, Massachusetts,

for many years, it was impossible not to recognize the place-names of this manuscript. Provincetown has been, and still is, a town where artists and writers, Hans Hofmann among them, come to live and to work. Over the years there has been a lot of talk about what the “creative” people have added to the town – opinions voiced mainly by the creative people themselves. Perhaps a sense of elitism is inevitable in such a situation, perhaps not. None of us was born here. *And no one, if you get my meaning, ever considered the possibility of a Frank Gaspar.* That I was engaged by his work has nothing to do with Provincetown but with the poems themselves, naturally. But this part of the story, I decided, was also worth the telling (italics mine; xiii).

Undoubtedly, this quote stresses the recognition of the falseness of their “sense of elitism,” making Oliver’s comment about how “no one, if you get my meaning, ever considered the possibility of a Frank Gaspar” self-evident. Artists who flocked to Provincetown during the Summer had never considered the possibility of the birth of a writer in a town made up of Portuguese fishermen and clam diggers.

Although Frank Gaspar may be considered a Portuguese American writer, in *The Holyoke* we do not encounter a poetic voice torn between both cultures. What we witness is a mature Gaspar reminiscing about how his childhood was shaped by his Portuguese family. But even in some of these poems, we do not really get a close-up picture of the family either. In my view, the way in which he writes about such an ethnic past leads me to believe that it was not as strongly ethnic as that of Braga who, like Gaspar, was also born on American soil. Gaspar’s poems obviously possess a Portuguese flavor but they also evince how much this writer is not comfortable with Portuguese issues. This may be due to his lack of ease with the ancestral culture and language, something we do not encounter in other Portuguese American writers. Or even in Katherine Vaz [author of *Saudade* (1994); *Fado & Other Stories* (1997); and *Mariana* (1997)], whose familiarity with the language and culture is stronger than Gaspar’s.

A keen observer, he is nevertheless an outsider who does not probe deeper into some of the Portuguese American issues he raises in his writing.

Frank Gaspar may be compared to the Italian American writers Gilbert Sorrentino and Don DeLillo regarding their position within the American mainstream and how they manifest their ethnic signs. Gardaphé has noted that the writings of these Italian American voices have very few signs of *Italianità* because of their comfortable integration within the mainstream and their weak ties to the ancestral culture.⁵ The same applies to Gaspar in *The Holyoke*. A brief analysis of some of his poems will certainly support this argument. Furthermore, in a volume composed of forty-five poems, only about eight of them touch tangentially on Portuguese themes – and yet, these outnumber those in his other volumes of poetry.

The religious zeal of most Portuguese is a case in point since Gaspar does not relinquish his opportunity to focus on how Catholicism occupies much of the time of Portuguese women. “Tia Joanna” (“Aunt Joanna”) is a good example of a devout woman who spends much of her time in church either praying the rosary, going to confession, or trying to connect with God through mystical experiences. Perhaps the poem’s uniqueness lies in the manner in which it captures how Provincetown Portuguese women reconcile their spiritual lives with their role as housekeepers and wives of fishermen:

.....The soft kerchiefs
of the women, the dark cloth
of their long coats, the kale cooking
on the oilstoves in the redolent kitchens,
the checkered shirts of the husbands,
the fish they bring to the doorways....

.....
She likes that, thinks of the host she will receive
in the morning, *His* light shining in her eyes.

But tonight still there is mackerel to pickle
with vinegar and garlic in the stone crock,
her husband’s silver hair to trim, the bread

to set rising in the big china bowl
on the stool tucked close to the chimney (7-8).

In this poem, Gaspar does not dwell on the sense of fate and mourning that traditionally has characterized the Portuguese temperament and how in this poem this is conveyed through, for example, this woman's dark clothes. Another important aspect is how this particular couple still holds on to their native language in this ethnic enclave. This can be seen in the following line: "Go wash, she says in the old tongue" (8). Although the "old tongue" is often alluded to, as readers, we do not really hear its sounds. The other poem stressing this people's Catholic fervor is "Ernestina the Shoemaker's Wife," which dwells on the mystical experience of a woman who claims to have met St. Francis in the woods when she was a young girl. But it also focuses on the poetic voice's mother who believes in supernatural occurrences and witchcraft, especially when she claims that Ernestina is a witch, that is, "a bruxa/[who] can give you the evil eye herself" (12).

"Potatoes" is an unusual poem because it highlights the fondness the Portuguese evince in growing a vegetable or fruit garden in their backyards. This is an aspect that characterizes immigrant life in the United States – especially immigrants from agrarian societies – and shows that even in an industrial setting as is, for example, the Ironbound section of Newark, New Jersey, the Portuguese still plant vegetable and flower gardens today. In their need to hold on to an ancestral way of life, they find in these gardens a spiritual connection with the old country.⁶ Or, perhaps, like the mother figure in Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," this may be their only means to express their spirituality since most of these immigrants – like most Blacks after Reconstruction – were predominantly illiterate. Despite the obvious differences between both ethnic groups, the garden metaphor is what brings meaning into their lives of toil. Walker tells about how her mother found beauty, creativity, and spirituality in her elaborate gardens; the Portuguese, too, feel the same way when in their vegetable and flower gardens. What is fascinating about the gardens in *The Holyoke* is that they have a little bit of everything. Apart from potatoes and even corn, one also has a patch of kale (to make the famous Portuguese kale soup) as well as a "patch of anise"

(10). The episode of Gaspar's mother digging for potatoes comes in the tradition of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) in which the narrator digs a few potatoes to make a chowder. Fortunately, the old New England way of life that Jewett so eloquently wrote about at the turn of the nineteenth-century has not entirely disappeared since it is in a way kept alive by the Portuguese. With the rapid industrialization of New England throughout most of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, Jewett's novel records the disappearance of an agrarian way of life which still attracted a number of mainstream Americans. Certain emergent contemporary American literatures, however, stress the ways in which this agrarianism in specific ethnic communities was kept alive – especially by those waves of immigrants arriving in the United States from predominantly agrarian countries. The Portuguese are not the only ethnic minority interested in growing a garden, for as Boelhower has noted,

It is truly surprising how frequently the garden appears in Italian-American narratives – from the spice garden of Marietta Simone (with its *basilico*, *finocchio*, Italian parsley, and leaf-chicory in JoPagano's novel *Golden Wedding* (1943) to Rosario's garden of basil, sage, chives, garlic, and peppers in Joe Vergara's autobiography *Love and Pasta*(1968)...⁷

“The Old Town” and “Descent” aim at capturing the carefree attitude and simplicity in childhood experiences. While in the first poem the author and his “old friend Santos” (32) have gotten together for a bottle of beer, reminiscing about how they spent their time capturing birds, the second one describes the time when the boys used to dive for eels and other fish. Judging from the surnames in both poems, Santos and Carvalho, this suggests that the Azorean community in Provincetown was a very closely-knit one and that the boys socialized only with those belonging to their own ethnic background.

“Ice Harvest” is a poem that highlights the New England practice of cutting ice from ponds for business purposes. Like so many other poems in this volume, “Ice Harvest” fulfills one of Ralph Waldo Emerson's tenets for American literature – the celebration of the commonplace. But the poem also reminds readers of the

scarcity of references to Portuguese culture and language in this volume. When mentioning his “mother’s / favorite uncle William” (49) among the ice-cutters, Gaspar shows that the process of Americanization among his family members is well under way. Within just one or two more generations, surnames like Santos or Carvalho will be all that is left pointing to their Portuguese ethnic background.

In the poem “Leaving Pico” we are introduced to a group of nostalgic Azoreans in a living room, talking about their native island of Pico and the beautiful things they had left behind, especially the

green and clay roads, they said,
and the rolling walls
brushed white with lime,
and how many trunks
in the hold of a ship,
what dishes, what cloth, how many
rosaries and candles to the Virgin,
and the prayers for the old dead
they left to sleep under the wet hills
(the green hills, and at night
light from the oil lamps
and sometimes a guitar keening
and windmills that huddled white
over the small fields of the dead)
and all the time they were
preparing themselves behind
their violet lips and heavy eyes
to sleep in this different earth
consoled only by how the moon
and tide must set themselves
pulling off to other darkness
with as little notion of returning (9).

In this poem, it is only the older generation who yearn for their place of birth or even remember it with fondness. The poetic voice, however, manifests absolutely no interest in visiting Pico or any curiosity about it. This voice’s attitude towards the ancestral land and culture is one of detachment while the members from the older generation get together every now and then to reminisce

about it.

“The Old Country” focuses on a superstitious belief some of these immigrants had brought with them from the Azores. After so many years, the poet still remembers how his “mother would never sweep at night, / would never let us sweep. The broom / rustling, she said, would bring the dead up” (55). The reason why the poet’s mother had never questioned such a belief was because she was afraid her ancestors’ ghosts would come to haunt her and say this to her: “*We never came/ from the old country to live like this*” (55). Is it the new lifestyle these immigrants adopt in America or the manner in which they slowly drop – one generation after another – their distinctive “ethnic signs” that these ghosts are rebelling against? What is obvious is that the poetic voice completely resists them:

And this old country is any place
we have to leave. The voices
calling us back are dust.
I have traveled to the far edge
of a country now, fearing the dead.
They still want to speak with my mouth (55-56).

Gaspar might be acknowledging that he will try to fulfill their request even if that proves a difficult task since he is more of an American than a Portuguese. His ties with Portugal are weak. To add to this, as an adult he has moved to California (for professional reasons) and is physically distant from the ethnic roots he had left behind in Provincetown. *The Holyoke* contains no poems with explicit references to Portuguese history and culture. Moreover, Gaspar’s command of written Portuguese does not seem as proficient as, for example, Braga’s. A glance at the poem “Ernestina the Shoemaker’s Wife” confirms this since the word he uses, “hervas,” should have been spelled “ervas.” A conflation with ‘herbs’ reveals how much closer he is to English language and culture than to that of his ancestors. While this example attests to his unfamiliarity with the ancestral culture and language, it also stresses the rapid process of assimilation of the Portuguese into the American mainstream.

As these ethnic communities receive fewer new emigrants from Portugal, the collective memory from the old country will gradually disappear, leaving us with only Portuguese surnames. Such is the

current situation in Hawaii. Perhaps this might soon be the trend in continental U.S.A. as well, especially as Portugal has developed so much after having joined the European Union in 1986. In this sense, the Portuguese are no different from the waves of Eastern Europeans, Germans, Poles, and Italians who arrived in America at the end of the nineteenth-century or during the earlier decades of the twentieth-century. At this point, these ethnic groups have been fully assimilated into the mainstream. The Portuguese are no exception because they are marrying people from other ethnic backgrounds. Contrary to those scholars who have insisted on the melting-pot theory as anachronistic in American culture – arguing that it should be replaced by the mosaic theory – the melting-pot, after all, is still alive in America even if it takes a few generations to, so to speak, bring it to a “full boil.”

If *The Holyoke* comprises only eight poems touching upon Portuguese American issues, *Mass for the Grace of a Happy Death*, which is divided into three parts, contains even fewer. I am particularly interested in part one, because it is the one dealing with Gaspar’s Portuguese American background. The setting in part I of this book, “Chronicle,” is Provincetown during the poet’s youth. The poems in parts two and three, “Lamentation” and “Psalm,” range from the poet’s days in the navy during Vietnam to his days as an undergraduate and graduate student in California, life in the Golden State, the drought, illegal Mexican immigrants being assisted by family members, the youth culture of the 60s, the border scene, the 70s road culture, women and sex.

The three poems from part one which I will focus on are “Reliquary,” “Acts,” and “Mass for the Grace of a Happy Death.” “Reliquary” focuses on the Portuguese contribution to the New England whaling industry through the figure of the great uncle, who had left a few whaling artifacts behind as family heirlooms:

Bone of the manatee
and the carved yellow tooth
of the sperm whale, the number
of barrels of oil tried from its fat
penciled next to the old name
in the tooth’s hollow – whale killed
in 1912 by my great uncle,

this from memory...

In the following sequence, the poetic voice laments their disappearance. His mother had been forced to sell these objects to antique dealers because of the hard times during the long New England winters which kept fishermen ashore:

..... for the relics
 have been bargained away from our door
 by the traveling antique dealers,
 my mother remembering the hard times
 of some previous winter and letting
 everything go for a thin rick of dollars:
 brass compass boxed in mahogany, harpoon's
 lily, case-knife, the blue serge uniform,
 even the coffin flag, for little goes down
 to the lockers of death with the body as once
 it did, the daggers of the old sailors
 laid by their sides in the burial boats,
 the boats laid under the rich bogs
 to fester in the holy nitrogen
 where nothing followed and no one
 came after, and above, on the crown
 of the earth, the mourner's foot
 stepping quietly to a song....

Such a past does not exist any longer because the activity has been discontinued and the objects which testified to its former existence have vanished from the family's abode:

.....*Mother,*
what winter was it that stripped us
of all the implements of that life?
 I remember snow moaning up the ditch
 from the harbor and fog on our breath
 in the bedrooms. Now I must
 remember everything. *Where is our bone?*
*Where has that scored tooth gone?*²⁸ (18)

As the poet must find some consolation in recollection so as to retrieve such a valorous – yet perilous – past, in “Mass for the Grace of a Happy Death,” he also remembers those times when the Provincetown youngsters got together to discuss their

family's poverty, the losses at sea, and the dead-end life of their progenitors, most of whom had been humbled by a dangerous life at sea. The heroism of the trade did not appeal to them since they had witnessed too many shipwrecks and knew too many families who had been torn apart:

A bunch of us always standing in doorways down by the center of town opposite the drugstore or over by the Bowlaway with its five lanes of candlepin – in a city you might think a gang, but not here in our little blue village, tourists gone for the season and us bumming cigarettes from one another, rain coming down in the dark, somebody telling jokes, punching, the usual stuff because nobody wanted to sit at home like his father or uncle or older brother, stuck and humbled, no point to much of anything, every now and then a broken window or some stolen hootch, sometimes the solemn story repeated from mouth to mouth on the same gloomy steps, like a prophecy, like when one of the boats went down in December cold, all hands, and we knew every one of them, gave our versions, told our reasons – too much weight up on deck, out too far in bad seas, greedy, too young to be in the pilot house, bad luck:

As native-born Americans, they knew America had more to offer them than a life of toil at sea since they, unlike their parents, were not affected by the language barrier. They all agree not to follow in their father's footsteps:

.....Every one of us under
those drizzly eaves repeating
the mysteries until we were
satisfied, for a while, that
what finally rose from us was
the benediction unspoken – *not me,*
not me, not me – and waiting
awhile after that prayer finished
itself before we drifted off
along the sidewalks to our houses,
knowing that we'd stayed away
long enough, that the lights

would be out and everyone asleep. (24-5)

With the summer vacationers gone, and the realization that there was nothing more promising in this fishing town, the Portuguese American youth of Provincetown solemnly swear to renounce a life of peril, poverty, and uncertainty on the sea. As a university-trained man, Frank Gaspar renounced the dangerous life evoked in this poem and he can now write about these occurrences rather than, like his grandfather, live them.

The third poem which offers us another perspective of ethnic life in Provincetown and even invites us into a Portuguese American kitchen is, for example, "Acts." A popular foodstuff available in most Portuguese communities in the United States or even found in major supermarkets across the nation is sweet bread, which Americans often eat toasted with butter for breakfast or a late afternoon snack. In "Acts," baking sweet bread is a community ritual which he, as a child, has had the opportunity to witness. This poem stresses this community's strong ties given that baking sweet bread was a means to bring its women and men together:

As if there were no bitterness
 in their lives, as if no dark ever
 slid outward from the sills of
 those kiltered windows, the house
 would suddenly fill with women
 and the rooms would float in heady
 yeasts while my mother, powdered
 to the wrists in flour, would pound
 the dough in the great bowl, yellow,
 sugared, egg-heavy, warm in the gossip
 and coal-smoke of a winter morning.
 And the gravid bowl set by the chimney
 filled each corner with lingering
 spirits, the sweet bread swelling,
 buttock, breast, belly, plump tub
 of the world where the women even then
 were softly disappearing into their
 envies and wishes, and where the men
 also slipped toward shadows as they waited
 for the hot slabs tendered from the oven,

greased with butter, to dredge
in milked coffee after a freezing day
at the wharves:.....

Moreover, it is laden with religious imagery, namely that associated with Christ's Last Supper. The old woman's blessing of the sweet bread before it is baked, its distribution after it is taken out of the oven, and the communal ritual of the men eating it together reminds us of holy Eucharist:

.....and the oldest
among them all, maple-skinned, gaunt
under her rough apron, brushing
the heel of her hand in the Sign
of the Cross over still-rising loaves,
a devotion she would never again
make over loaves like these,
never again in exactly this way,
the earth, in the rife bounty
it heaps upon the favored, letting
go of all of this forever: If such
sweet bread were ever blessed or holy,
let them take it now, quickly – and eat. (19)

A poem centering on a popular Portuguese delicacy, *pão doce* or *bolo da Páscoa*, also has the effect of highlighting the old woman's Catholic fervor – and the Portuguese people in general – living in this Portuguese American community.

Practically all of the poems in *A Field Guide to the Heavens*,⁹ Gaspar's third volume of poetry, are about California, the poet's home. This volume conjures up the memory of lost ones as it also focuses on the poet's immediate family, his wife and son. There are no kale and potato gardens, but, instead, a rose garden in the backyard. The nights are spent either star-gazing through a telescope or reading books – John Milton, *The Teaching of Buddha*, the ancient Greeks, Dante, Allen Ginsberg, George Herbert, João Cabral de Melo Neto, and Fernando Pessoa. Only two poems in this collection hark back to the poet's Provincetown days, namely "February" and "The Standard Times." While "February" continues the author's treatment of the theme of poverty and the uneventful lives of fishermen on the very tip of Cape Cod, in the figure of

the poet's stepfather, in "The Standard Times" we find the poet reminiscing about his boyhood as he delivered the *Cape Cod Standard Times*, before dawn, which paid his "lunches/at school, most of the time" (73). Apart from these two poems, the one that I find the most representative is, "I Am Refused Entry to the Harvard Poetry Library," which I quote in full:

Rightly so: for who am I but a tired question
 squatting, in those days, somewhere up on
 Beacon Hill, snow equally tired, crusted and dirty,
 crouching in striated piles along the ancient curbs—
 such a homely winter. And so there should
 be books at my elbow! And there were rumors
 of that splendid room: imagine sitting in
 the warm, thick air, among the sons and daughters
 of the sons and daughters, among the thin spines,
 among the soft chairs, I would not eat all
 day but linger there and let the gray light slant
 through the gothic windows, or the square windows,
 or from brass lamps, or from fluorescent lights,
 the exact details so impossible to imagine
 that they roll and flicker and agitate
 the manic breath and heart: walk to the T and lay
 my coins down, count the stops, hunch in
 the chill morning to coffee and sugar at the vendor's
 cart near the square, then advance, certain I can
 talk my way into the sanctified places, sure
 I can find in my pocket some scrap of card,
 some guarantee I might pass. And if the world
 has its own ideas, and if they are not in accord
 with my own wishes, and if the mild young woman
 shakes her head firmly and explains how I in
 general never have, and never will, live a qualified
 day in my life, I must not be afraid of the cold gray
 sky and the sprawling yard – I must walk among
 the gay colors of the coats and scarves, the backpacks
 of the deserving: there are other buildings open
 for roaming, and though I might be regarded
 with the sideways look reserved for my kind,

someone will soon lay down a book or some other thing that will fit a hand, and swiftly it will be mine. (62)

This poem is about refusal, about not being allowed into the Harvard Poetry Library. Only the best students in the nation and the privileged are eligible there. I am not sure if the poem is about not qualifying for study there or, instead, if the poetic voice is denied entrance since he is on a day trip to the Harvard campus. While he may visit other buildings on the site, the “splendid room” is not for him. To me, it is an updating of Virginia Woolf’s plea in *A Room of One’s Own*, but from the ethnic – not feminist – perspective. What is the reader to make of, we are told, the “mild young woman/[who] shakes her head firmly and explains how I in/general never have, and never will, live a qualified/day in my life” or even when he “might be regarded/with the sideways look reserved for my kind”? Is this a reference to how visitors are treated by mild but patrician librarians? Or, instead, the poet’s fear of not being admitted into the hall of fame of poets, canonization, if possible? To me the phrase about letting “the gray light slant/ through the gothic windows” echoes Emily Dickinson’s poem, “There’s a certain Slant of light” in which an overall mood of depression prevails as Dickinson questions Emerson and Thoreau about the therapeutic qualities of Nature as postulated by the writers of the American Renaissance or even the English Romantics, namely William Wordsworth in *The Prelude*. In the light of this verse, Gaspar may have also in mind Dickinson’s fear of not being well received by her audience, her fear of publication, and rejection, which she has distilled into, for example, “Publication – is the Auction.” In addition, Gaspar is suggesting that this poem also be read as the saga of a Portuguese American from a poor fishing town with artistic yearnings, but who cannot qualify for Harvard given his limited financial resources. “I Am Refused Entry to the Harvard Poetry Library” is a Portuguese American rendition of the fears and uncertainties of a given writer, Frank Gaspar, about his audience, literary merit, and fame.

Leaving Pico (1999) is a novel about Azorean immigrant life in Provincetown during the 1950s and 60s and how this community reacts to – or resists – American ways. This novel captures quite well the antagonism between the Portuguese from the Azores, represented by Josie’s family, and the *Lisbons*, that is, those from

the Continent, represented by Carmine, who is courting Josie's mother, Rosa. This conflict, which Leo Pap has written about in *The Portuguese-Americans*,¹⁰ is further highlighted through the characters of Madeleine Sylvia, a *Lisbon*, and Great Aunt Theophila, the narrator's great aunt and a "Pico" woman:

My great aunt had also been active in church, amoving force in the Holy Rosary Sodality, and she had been a great fighter for the *Pico* side of things in the Portuguese-American Social Organization, a powerful if *Lisbon*-dominated civic club that conducted all important functions in our town and held whist parties on Friday nights. It was in the PASO Hall that battles raged long and hard between *Picos* and *Lisbons*, fought with wrath and passion, almost exclusively by the women. When the snooty *Lisbons* tried to relegate the *Pico* ladies to mere cleanup duties after a feast, it was my great aunt who would pound the table and spit furious old-country oaths at the like of Madeleine Sylvia. She was strong and demanded respect. The *Picos* could cook salt fish with tomato sauce as well as anyone, and the damned *Lisbons* could wash the pots! For a while Great Aunt Theophila seemed bound to take control of the entire organization....¹¹ (4-5)

In this novel about Josie's coming of age, there are numerous references to the Azorean presence on the very tip of Cape Cod: the kale and potato gardens, the social clubs and club bands, the fish served during the two clambakes that take place in the course of the novel, the names on the fishing boats, most of which highlight this community's strong Catholic beliefs (the *Coração de Jesus*, the *Amor de Deus*, etc.), the fado music that is played at parties and social gatherings, and the rituals associated with their Catholic calendar throughout the year, namely, the sodalities, the festivals with their street processions, the Blessing of the Fleet, etc.

As Clemente has noted, "Gaspar structures his narrative around two clambakes."¹² During the first, we meet a gay couple, Roger and Lew, who have rented an upper room for the Summer season at Josie's house and the two women, Cynthia and Amalia,

John Joseph (the narrator's grandfather) is flirting with. What is appealing about the character of John Joseph is – unlike most first-generation Portuguese immigrants – his willingness to interact with individuals from beyond his ethnic enclave and eagerness to know more about American ways. At a point when the clambake is well under way and all the Portuguese guests had already arrived, we learn that:

behind them came two women. They were not townspeople, but summer people, wearing long flowery dresses and big, wide-brimmed straw hats. A ripple of distress passed through the *Pico* ladies sitting by the door. I watched my great aunt calculate their arrival. Yes, they were friends of John Joseph, some of those people from away that he invariably ran off with every summer, those women who sat along the wharves and painted bright senseless pictures of the fishing boats – painted pictures of John Joseph, even, in that poor hat of his and with his unshaven face. These were the people from the Other World, and without John Joseph we would never have had any contact with them.... The two worlds of townspeople and summer people existed side by side, like parallel universes, but no one traveled between them except for my grandfather (28).

The clambake enables its community members to get together and, in the process, reminisce about the old country and revive some of its traditions:

John Joseph and I brought out the lobsters and clams and fish and bread and corn. Their smells spread a lushness in the air, and the women softened and talked and laughed as we all ate. Everyone celebrated my grandfather's cooking, and cartons of ale were now stacked along the duckpen fence. Sometime after the clatter and slosh of eating had subsided, Jaime Costa, Juney's younger brother, pulled his guitar out of its battered case, and in his ragged voice began singing *fados*, those sad, old-country songs of fate (29).

The second clambake is held in chapter eighteen, the very last

chapter in *Leaving Pico*. Everybody has gotten together to mourn John Joseph, who had perished at sea. Between both episodes, this novel depicts the times when the boy went sailing with his grandfather and the stories he told the boy about the mythical ancestor from Portugal. *Leaving Pico* is, in my view, the best Portuguese American novel to date because we get a very detailed and engrossing portrayal of life in a Portuguese ethnic enclave in the United States.

In his fourth collection of poems, *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*,¹³ published in 2004, references to ethnicity are scarce. In “I Am Not a Keeper of Sheep,” the poetic voice acknowledges being fascinated by the poetry of Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) whereas “One Arm and Another Arm,” builds on a poem by Eugénio de Andrade (1923-2005). Were it not for both references to these Portuguese poets, the items composing this volume hardly provide any signs pointing to the author’s ethnic background. Instead, in this collection, the poet wrestles with a few metaphysical questions. These range from the state of the soul in today’s world to a quest for meaning. While these issues are prompted by late-night readings, these poems reflect a poetic voice searching for answers in Buddha, the Bible, Bodhidharma, Plato, Dante, St. John of the Cross, Keats, and other voices, hoping, in the process, they will provide solace to the troubled poetic soul.

From the first volume of poems to the subsequent titles, we witness a gradual erasure or, instead, a process where the allusions to the author’s ethnic background become dimmer and dimmer. And yet, his childhood recollections of a predominantly Portuguese American community functioned, so to speak, as a catalyst which catapulted him into the world of writing – and a pool from which he would later draw from to write his first novel. At this point, Gaspar has already become a major voice in contemporary American fiction and poetry – and a cornerstone in Portuguese American writing as well.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Alice R. Clemente, “Of Love and Remembrance – the Poetry and Prose of Frank X. Gaspar,” *Cávea-Brown: A Bilingual Journal of Portuguese-American Letters and Studies*, vol. XXI (2000): 25-43.

² William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), p. 36.

³ Clemente, p. 39.

⁴ References to Frank Gaspar's volume are taken from *The Holyoke* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1988), see page xi.

⁵ Fred L. Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), pp. 154-55.

⁶ On this issue, see my article "The Ethnic Garden in Portuguese-American Writing." *The Journal of American Culture* 28.2 (June 2005): 191-200.

⁷ Boelhower, p. 114.

⁸ References to Frank Gaspar's volume are taken from *Mass for the Grace of a Happy Death* (Tallahassee, FL: Anhinga P, 1995).

⁹ References to Frank Gaspar's volume are taken from *A Field Guide to the Heavens* (Madison, WI: The U of Wisconsin P, 1999).

¹⁰ See Leo Pap, *The Portuguese-Americans* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), pp. 158-9.

¹¹ References to Frank Gaspar's novel are taken from *Leaving Pico* (Hanover and London: UP of New England, 1999).

¹² Clemente, p. 41.

¹³ Frank X. Gaspar, *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* (Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 2004).