

Kale Soup and the Portuguese-American Soul: The Work of Millicent Borges Accardi

Millicent Borges Accardi, a Portuguese-American poet from California, has dedicated much of her art and her time as a fundraiser and event coordinator to advancing Portuguese culture in American literature. As a poet, Accardi's writing is soft around the edges, full of whispers and intrigue, mimicking the sounds of spoken Portuguese through primarily English words. While she writes on a wide array of themes and topics, her lyrical sensibility belies her cultural background and enhances her "non-Portuguese" poems. This deep connection to her cultural background spurred Accardi to establish the *Kale Soup for the Soul* reading series.

When talking about Accardi, it is impossible not to speak about *Kale Soup for the Soul*. The traveling reading series, which was founded in 2011 and began in earnest in 2012 with their first event in Chicago during the AWP conference, has grown over the years to become a key component of Portuguese-American literature. *Kale Soup* events have taken place at conferences, universities and Portuguese clubs around the country, each time presenting a rotating cast of poets and prose writers whose writing is connected through the themes of food and family, and through the shared cultural experience of Luso-America.

This reading series, the first of its kind for the Portuguese-American writing community, has found success in its ability to attract a diverse crowd, both in terms of readers and audience members. At a 2015 AWP panel on fundraising, Accardi spoke about the effect that *Kale Soup* has on potential funders, saying that "once someone gets a picture of what we do, they start trying to figure out how they can plug this into their environment. Like Tom Sawyer painting a fence, our enthusiasm about Portuguese culture has an addictive affect." This addictive affect extends to the writers and the audience as well.

Over thirty different writers have read as part of *Kale Soup*, myself included, and the type of audience is completely different each time. Some *Kale Soup* events take place on college campuses, funded in part by the universities, and those audiences are larger and include many high school and undergraduate students of creative writing. A *Kale Soup* event affiliated with a conference like AWP will see

MFA students and established authors sipping wine and sampling Portuguese refreshments—kale soup, if it can be found; other petiscos if not.

Some *Kale Soup* events take place at Portuguese clubs, which bring in the Portuguese audience. This is where *Kale Soup for the Soul* shines the brightest. *Kale Soup* was born out of a desire to “connect with Portuguese communities in the US by sharing stories and writing workshops,” a goal which became part of the official mission statement. At readings with primarily Portuguese and Portuguese-American audiences, the atmosphere is electric with a heavy sense of community. As *Kale Soup* writer Carlo Matos says, “I thought I was the only person exploring the Portuguese-American experience. What a relief it was to find others who were in the exact same boat I was.”

“Branding is everything,” Accardi went on to say in that 2015 panel. “We could have been called the Portuguese Writers Association or the Luso-American Academic Snobby Club, but no, we called it something else. We reached out to a sense of community, to a familiar touchstone, to a place where food acts as an entry point to so much more. Everyone who has a Portuguese heritage recognizes kale soup as comfort food, as something they remember from childhood, and once you taste it, you want more.”

Accardi’s poetry is like that kale soup—once you taste it, you want more. In her fourth book, *Only More So*, Accardi achieves a balance of flavors from childhood to California to feminism, from Portuguese-American life to World War II. For a collection of poems, having so many different topics and angles could cause the book as a whole to feel disjointed, but *Only More So* carries itself throughout, and while only a few poems in the book specifically make reference to Portuguese-American life, where they are placed is careful and deliberate. The result is a book of poems that is distinctly Portuguese, despite not having much luso content. The pieces that do focus on Portuguese and Portuguese-American culture grapple with them unabashedly.

In “The Last Borges,” the speaker wrestles with her desire to have had training in Portuguese from her father, who instead chose to raise her as solely English speaking. The frustration of a stolen language and the sorrow of perhaps never getting it back drips on every line. In the fifth stanza, when she says, “I would catch you: sitting at/ Rudy the barber’s chair/ I would sneak up behind to hear/ foreign words,” the speaker is reaching for the language, and by extension the culture, while simultaneously sneaking, as if to speak Portuguese were a transgression. Just a couple stanzas down, she adds that “After a while it seemed/

that someone else/ had heard a grandmother's/ lullabies at night." This disconnection from her own experience is iconic of the immigrant child, and particularly to Accardi's generation and the generation before of Portuguese-Americans whose parents were so concerned with adapting to the English-speaking US that their children never had the opportunity to learn their parents' native tongue.

This pain and frustration reaches its sharp apex in the final stanza, when the speaker confesses that "the only Portuguese words/ you ever gave me do not stand for love./ Que queres, que queres/ What do you want, what do you want." In Portuguese, this phrase can come off as curt and affronted, whereas in English the same phrase is imploring and nearly desperate when paired with the Portuguese. What do you want? There is a simple answer, based on the body of the poem, that the speaker wants to be able to communicate in Portuguese. But there is a more complex answer, wrapped up in the reaching for a world that could have been hers, reaching for a father who could have been more present if only a language had changed between them. This experience is emblematic of Portuguese-American life.

Another poem that grapples, though in a very different way, with Portuguese-American life is "Breaking with the Old," a poem about New Bedford, MA. At the heart of the largest Portuguese-American community, New Bedford is inescapable. Accardi herself was born in New Bedford and lived there as a child until her family relocated to California, and her relationship with the city is just as complex as the poem. Written partially by glossing the Urban Dictionary entry on New Bedford, "Breaking with the Old" is a poem of dissatisfaction, befitting the once dying city in Southeast Massachusetts. In the act of leaving, the speaker recalls "the city on the south coast where you can eat linguisa/ and Jag. A place where you know to stay away from/ The Front after dark" without fondness. The festas that are iconic of Portuguese culture are treated with a dismissive flippancy: "you know that Sassaquin Pizzao/ isn't really New Beige, but then you get dressed up/ to go to the Madeira feast, or the Holy Ghost./ And even you can prove the Dartmouth refs get paid off." The second half of the poem builds into a list of aka's, each one more violent than the last. It begins as "New Bedford/ Mass, I say, aka 20 aka the secret city" before moving into "aka the new war zone/ Aka the new Baghdad aka the druggy capital of the world." This violent imagery transitions to an ending which, like "The Last Borges," emphasizes the things unsaid. In "The Last Borges," what is unsaid is intimate, the love between father and daughter. Here, however, that silence is city wide: "And here's the bit most people don't know/ this but it's called

the secret city because there is no snitching/ in New Bedford. No one ever tells. New Beige, a place where half/ of the hell of this city don't even speak.”

Her most Portuguese-centric poem in the book, “How to Shake off the Policidade Segurança Publica Circa 1970” is another poem that deals in secrets and things unsaid. In this poem, the speaker follows a man as he walks home through Lisbon, putting forth his best effort to appear non-threatening to the regime. The speaker advises him to “Carry an ordinary/ briefcase. Dress in shades of brown,/ as if you could fold/ up and turn back/ into dirt if you needed to.” The figure ducks into crowded establishments and hides in upstairs rooms where he doesn't belong, hoping to evade an ill-fate at the hands of the regime. In a way, all Portuguese writing post-Salazar must be in communication with the effects of the Estado Novo, and Portuguese-American writing is no different.

This poem is different from Accardi's other offerings directly related to the Portuguese-American experience, but in the book it is placed after a run of four poems written about World War II and the Holocaust. This placement is essential for all five poems in helping them each carry the weight they deserve, and is well-thought for an audience that may not be familiar with modern Portuguese history. By tying the PSP to WWII and the Nazis, Accardi challenges our historical narrative and forces us to reexamine Portugal, which as a nation remained neutral throughout WWII. By reexamining Portugal, we as Portuguese-Americans grow in our culture and in our connection to our roots. That desire present in “The Last Borges” is fulfilled, though in a way much more somber than anticipated. However, to be somber is also something that comes naturally to the Portuguese.

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