

Ten Questions for Jarita Davis

1. A lot has changed in this country since the moment Tagus Press published *Return Flights*. Where do you see yourself now in relation to where you were then?

Honestly, I've been quite off balance since *Return Flights* has been published. I turned in my final edits for the book right before undergoing brain surgery, and I don't think I ever gave myself the proper chance to fully recover from that. I began 2016 with lots of readings and book signings, and ended it with community outreach, political engagement, and activism. My life has completely changed.

Since then, I haven't done much Writing with a capital "W" because I am not feeling centered enough. I journal almost daily, but that is a different kind of writing. It's a way for me to actively process thoughts and make sense of my day. The "real Writing" is more of a receiving; it's a deeper realization that leaves its mark on the page. My life has been too hectic, and I've allowed myself to be spread too thin to hear the words that make for Writing.

Right now I am trying my best to re-center. I think a lot of us in the United States have felt our lives disrupted by political chaos. The news headlines feel like a sadistic carnival ride, spinning us disoriented and nauseated. It's hard to feel grounded or stable. I'm currently seeking out serenity and patience, not that I think I can make sense of our nation necessarily, but I want to be able to stay anchored through the storm. So far the best ways I know to do this are through meditation and journaling.

2. I can imagine that the current political climate of intolerance and exclusion, especially the increasing normalization of public expressions of racism and anti-migrant sentiment, must be troubling for someone like yourself who has put a lot of thought into questions of race and migration in your writing. How do you see the present configuration of power as it targets the most vulnerable in our society?

What can I say? It's terrifying.

I was walking into the grocery store in January, and a girl about 12 years old asked if I would walk with her because she was afraid she might get

snatched. When I was a kid, I was always afraid of being kidnapped, and because I could sympathize I agreed to walk with her. It wasn't until we were in the store and she said something like, "Maybe people will think that you're my mom" that I realized she'd picked me because we were both brown skinned, and it turned out that yes, neither of her parents were documented. So, I don't think it was kidnappers that she was afraid of snatching her, but ICE. This is on Cape Cod, not the Mexican border. Our entire nation has been infected with this horrible culture of anti-immigration anger and terror. The sheriffs of Barnstable County and Bristol County have both entered into agreements with ICE called 287g in which their officers are deputized and have agreed to serve as immigration officers in communities which have large Cape Verdean populations. I do everything I can to protect the safety of these vulnerable members of my community, like fighting for the Safe Communities Act in Massachusetts, but that bill didn't pass. My own State Senator, Vinny deMacedo, voted against it even though he is a Cape Verdean immigrant himself, born on Brava, the very same island as my grandfather.

This is not an abstract idea or some distant threat. This is playing out right beneath my nose. And I'm not just talking about insensitive name calling or bullying; I'm talking about people living in fear for their livelihoods and their lives. People afraid of their families being separated, even afraid to learn what rights they may have because they don't want to call attention to themselves by asking questions. I cannot imagine ignoring or overlooking this problem—it would be unconscionable. I wish I had more answers to help all the people at risk, because whatever I do never seems to be enough.

3. I understand you've started your own political organization out on Cape Cod where you live. Can you tell me a little more about that?

After the presidential election in 2016, some of my friends joked about defecting to Canada or fantasized about becoming expats in Europe. But I said, "I feel like we have a responsibility to stay. A lot of people are going to need help. And these are people who won't have the luxury or financial means to pick up and move overseas." What I didn't realize at the time, was that there would be so many people who need help figuring out how to help. So many people in our town wanted "to do something" but didn't know where to start or how to get involved. I got together with six other women and we started a group called "Engage Falmouth." Our mission is to motivate, mobilize, and empower the community to become a

force for progressive change. In a time where a rapid fire series of crises can feel paralyzing, people are happy to make some active effort to be a part of some kind of solution. So, our group shares opportunities for people to connect with groups addressing a myriad of issues and causes under attack: women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, environmental concerns, social justice, religious freedoms, civil rights, economic justice, and many more. None of us are experts in these areas, but we offer people the tools and skills necessary to work on the concerns that interest them most. We've already outgrown our name-- our membership is strong all over the Upper Cape (Falmouth, Bourne, Mashpee, and Sandwich), and we also have members who live off Cape and on the Vineyard.

4. As you know, I was born and grew up in the Cape and Islands region, an area of the Commonwealth with a number of traditional population groups: not only the Portuguese Americans, but also the Wampanoag Indians, Cape Verdeans, a group that you personally identify with, and more recently the Brazilians. What is it like for you to live, write and engage politically in this kind of diverse cultural environment?

As a native son of this region, you know that this community is very white, which can make nonwhite people feel isolated and sometimes invisible. On the other hand, these other cultures you've mentioned are also present and perhaps being in the minority is what keeps us from taking the value of that culture for granted. It's wonderful to see these groups celebrating their heritage and working to pass it along to the next generations. The Falmouth Cape Verdean Club has been active for almost 75 years now, and people came from all over to go to their dances and events. It was known as "The Big Club." Similarly, the Wampanoags have an impressive language reclamation project where they were able to recreate their lost language by using the religious texts that British colonists created to convert tribal members when they first arrived. The Bible, Book of Common Prayer, and other materials written in the Wampanoag language have survived, and from them enough vocabulary and grammatical structure was recovered to be able to reconstruct the tribe's original language. I've played soccer with Brazilians and Azoreans and Portuguese from the mainland. We're all here. It just takes some looking to find us.

5. In our online conversations, I've noticed that you've also been referencing a number of African-American women writers and thinkers: black feminist

thinker Audre Lorde is just one who comes to mind. Could you talk a bit about the impact of the women of color that were important to you in your intellectual and cultural development?

You have to understand that I cut my aspiring writer's teeth reading Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Sonia Sanchez. In my writing studio, I have framed black and white photos of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Rita Dove in the 70s. They are young and have full afros and are just starting out. These women have always been my heroes. They are strong and brilliant and defiant. I admire these women because they insist on having their voices heard by making their own way in a world that doesn't have a path cleared for them.

These writers make me feel less lonely. I've also learned so much from them. They are probably the reason I'm a writer.

6. *Return Flights* is a collection of poems that also tells a story: about a young person, whose mother's family is from the Cape Verdean community of New Bedford, and who undertakes a journey from this region to discover more fully the culture of her grandfather. Cape Verdean young people, regardless of whether they migrated here as children or were born in this region. In your readings, there are young Cape Verdeans who are inspired to return as do work to give back to their country of origin? While we probably never imagine that we will become a role model for younger people, so it happens, perhaps precisely because we do not seek it. What has been your reaction to this, and what do you have to share or impart to young Cape Verdean Americans as they begin to take this culture forward?

I had never really thought about how powerful and important representation is. I gave a poetry reading at an afternoon tea for some grade school girls at the Cape Verdean Club in Falmouth. I could see them taking it all in—that someone like them could write about their experiences and have it matter enough that it could be made into a book that others would buy and read. It also turned out that I happened to be seated at a table with three family members from my New Bedford ties. We had no idea that we were related until we sat together that day. The older woman was the one who made the connection. She said, "You're my cousin" and started to cry. Her granddaughter asked, "What does that make me?" and I said, "I guess we're second cousins." She was so excited she couldn't stay seated. She threw her hands up in the air and shouted, "I'm second cousins with a poet-writer!!!" That was the first moment I've ever felt like I had finally found home.

I'm sure a seed was planted for some of those girls who were already curious about what Cape Verde was or means to them, and I hope they let that curiosity grow and explore some more on their own.

7. You were also a participant in the Disquiet International Program in Lisbon and, equally important, its Luso writing workshop. Could you tell me a bit more about your experience in that setting, your relationship with the city of Lisbon as a place for thinking about literature and culture outside of the US context, and of the Portuguese culture as you experienced it from your own set of cultural perspectives?

The Disquiet program was a wonderful experience for me. I was inspired by the ways in which many of the writers in the Luso workshop found overlapping similarities, even though our families were from places as far away as Brazil, Goa, Portugal, Cape Verde, and the Azores. There is an underlying thread that ties us all, and it was exciting to see how a diaspora could have such deep roots.

I had only been to Portugal once before, and it is a beautiful country. I don't think of it as "mine," meaning, it doesn't feel like my birthright, but it is still possible to fall in love with a place that hasn't been passed down to you. My grandfather had never been to mainland Portugal and when he talked about returning to "The Old Country" he was not thinking of Lisbon. Still, literature is such an important part of Portuguese culture, and it is so valued in a way that it is not here in the United States, that as a writer, it won my heart.

8. Luso-American literatures and cultures, especially Portuguese-American works, have drawn both upon canonical Portuguese literary figures and well-known US American writers, though to be frank, mostly from white authors. How might this set of overlapping cultural identity also draw more from African and African-American texts to understand its longstanding relationship with questions of race and radicalization, whether in the context of Portuguese colonialism or US systems of racial categorization?

I would really like to see more Cape Verdeans celebrate revolutionaries like Amilcar Cabral and the PAIGC. We talk about music and food and beauty, but there's a lot we could learn about empowerment from our recent past. The work of African-Americans struggling for civil rights certainly has relevance to that of the political effort it took for Cape Verde to become its own nation.

9. We've had more than a few conversations over the last few years about Cape Verdean Americans and the often ambivalent relationship that many of them apparently have with the fact that Cape Verde is in Africa and yes, that Cape Verdeans themselves have different understandings of their own racial identity, with some identifying as African-American or Black and others not as much if at all? What is your take on this? What if anything is at stake in identifying as Black today?

It's interesting how race, ethnicity, and nationality intersect, and how people choose between them. A Black friend of mine, who is not Cape Verdean, once made a flip comment saying, "I think it's sad when people of color need so desperately to identify with their colonizer." Cape Verde has always been a cultural crossroads, a place where people from far and wide passed through during the navigational explorations, then slave trade, and whaling. When Cape Verdeans distance themselves from Blackness, from being from Africa, they are giving up a part of themselves. I also feel like trying to make a complete break from Portuguese influence is also destructive; it's peeling away another culture layer rather than trying to make peace with it or at least understand how it has come to shape Cape Verdean identity and the nation itself. Rather than defining ourselves by what we aren't, should we be looking at all that we are? I know many Cape Verdeans who would rather identify themselves as "other" or "none of the above" when asked about racial heritage. But wouldn't "all of the above" be much more accurate? And wouldn't it be a better way to think about our culture? To think about all the ways in which we are connected to others across the globe rather than all the ways in which we are separate? If we continue to isolate ourselves further and further, we will only choke off the flow of interaction of that keeps our culture vibrant and alive.

10. If you were to plan another "return flight" to Cape Verde again in the near future, how might your trip be different this next time, knowing what you do now and with more experience behind you? Would you want to travel alone as you did before, or with others? Are there other islands you'd want to see beyond those you visited last time? What sites of cultural, historical or political significance would you want to visit?

I would most like to visit the islands that I have not yet seen. I would especially like to go to Santo Antão, São Vicente, São Nicolau, and Boa Vista. I know that the landscape, people, and culture vary from island to island, and I would like to

see more of it for myself. I would spend less time seeking out personal, familial connections, and more time learning about how the people and their lives in a larger context.

JARITA DAVIS is a poet and fiction writer with a BA from Brown University and an MA and a PhD from the University of Louisiana, Lafayette. Her grandfather immigrated to the US from the Cabo Verdean island of Brava. Her work has appeared in the *Southwestern Review*, *Cave Canem Anthologies*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Plainsongs*, *Verdad Magazine*, and the *Cape Cod Poetry Review*. She lives and writes in West Falmouth, Massachusetts.