

Voicing the Community, or a Voice for the Community: Katherine Vaz, a Portuguese American Writer

ABSTRACT: This essay traces the debate about Portuguese American literature, the role that anthologies of Portuguese American literature play in defining this literary category, and then examines Katherine Vaz as a case study. In so doing, the essay considers how Portuguese American writers like Vaz contribute to the shaping of Portuguese American literature, the challenges Portuguese American literature faces, and how the community can help to shape the future of this literary category.

KEYWORDS: community, anthologies, Portuguese American literature debate, Katherine Vaz, literary categorisation.

RESUMO: O presente ensaio examina o debate sobre a literatura luso-americana, o papel das antologias na criação de uma definição da categoria de literatura luso-americana, e o caso específico da autora Katherine Vaz. Ao assim fazer, o ensaio considera o papel de escritores luso-americanos como Katherine Vaz na delineação da categoria de literatura luso-americana, os desafios que a literatura luso-americana encara, e como a comunidade pode ajudar no futuro de esta categoria literária.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: comunidade, antologias, debate sobre a literatura Luso Americana, Katherine Vaz, categorização literária.

This essay will begin by examining the debate about whether Portuguese American literature exists. It will set this debate within the development of community-based initiatives that have placed value on the Portuguese American community before examining the role that the anthologies of Portuguese American writing have in providing a definition of what constitutes Portuguese American literature. The essay will then examine the author Katherine Vaz as a case study of an author seeking a place within the American mainstream, the

Portuguese American mainstream, and also perhaps wanting to make a claim to the Portuguese literary field. The essay argues that Vaz's prominence arises from her self-conscious position as a transnational writer and as a transnational cultural broker. The essay concludes by considering the role that writers like Vaz have in shaping Portuguese American literature as a literary category, the challenges Portuguese American literature faces, and how the community can help to shape the future of this literary category.

The Portuguese American literature debate

In 1979, Nancy Baden wrote an article that asked whether Portuguese American literature existed. Baden's article emerged from a series of events that discussed the role of the Portuguese American writer and the existence of a Portuguese American literature. In her article, Baden argued that Portuguese writers who lived in the US like José Rodrigues Miguéis, Alfred Lewis, Onésimo Teotónio Almeida and Lawrence Oliver were examples of immigrant literature, rather than Portuguese American literature, in the sense that these writers either depicted the experience of emigration or maintained a strong connection with Portugal and, therefore, remained "entrenched in the Portuguese mainstream" (23). Baden's observations about Onésimo Teotónio Almeida's work suggest that the Portuguese American writer needs to both write for the ethnic group, "articulating their needs, aspirations and frustrations to the broader American public" (21), and to place the ethnic experience itself as a central theme within his or her work. At the time, Baden's conclusion was that Portuguese American literature did not yet exist, but that it was starting to take its first steps; "[w]hat exists is a young immigrant literature, the product of two successive waves of immigration" (27). Baden then went on to state that "[t]he term 'Portuguese-American literature' is useful to describe the works of writers who are neither Portuguese nor American in the usual sense and thus will undoubtedly be used for the sake of convenience" (28). Baden was alluding to the fact that Portuguese American literature was not yet a category, but that it had the potential to bring together Portuguese immigrant writers in the United States who describe their emigration experience to an American and Portuguese audience.

Baden's statement that Portuguese American literature was a convenient label raises questions regarding where to place writers who write from the emigration setting. In many ways, Onésimo Teotónio Almeida's 2005 article considers this question of placement, and constitutes the next step in tracing the development

of Portuguese American literature. Almeida's article draws upon his extensive publications in which he defends Azorean literature as a distinct category within Portuguese literature, arguing that Azorean literature is composed of writers in the Azores and the United States. By including Azorean writers in the United States in his definition of Azorean literature, Almeida highlights the artificial borders created when examining who belongs to a literary canon. He begins his examination of Portuguese American literature by briefly mentioning previous contributions to the debate over whether Portuguese American literature exists, citing Francis Rogers, Nancy T. Baden and Leo Pap, before making the following comment:

[A]re we in the presence of a specific literature? My answer is two-fold. From a literary perspective, I argue no, it does not, for a very simple reason – literature is written in a particular language. Beyond this, however, from a sociological viewpoint I say yes, Portuguese-American literature does indeed exist. (735)

The sociological basis Almeida mentions derives from his argument that an author writes in the language in which s/he feels more comfortable in order to depict the reality in which the writer finds himself or herself in. To this end, Almeida speaks of a fluid and inclusive Portuguese American bilingual community that the Portuguese American writer addresses, which comprises

three major, overlapping groups: Portuguese-speakers, English-speakers and bilinguals. An important bond connects them all: they identify themselves as belonging to an ethnic group distinct from the mainstream of American and Canadian societies. They have created community structures including radio and television stations, newspapers, magazines, associations of all types and yet function simultaneously at another level as members of the mainstream societies that received them, even while existing as a society unto itself. Writers emerging in their midst produce books that reflect the world they inhabit. (735)

For Almeida, then, Portuguese American literature is the product of a hybrid reality that depicts the community of the author (737). In Almeida's view, Portuguese American literature is not an ethnic literature, per se, but a literature that dialogues with the literary and cultural traditions of both Portugal and the United States and that, in sociological terms, speaks to the Portuguese

American community regardless of the language in which it is written. In this way, Almeida opens up categorisation in literature to a multiplicity of belonging; the writer can belong to many literary categories and, at the same time (in sociological terms), contribute to shaping Portuguese American literature as a category in itself.

The debate over the existence of a Portuguese American literature was next taken up by Reinaldo Silva three years later, in a book entitled *Representations of the Portuguese in American Literature*. Here, Silva observes that Portuguese American literature has moved beyond its embryonic state. Silva sees Portuguese American literature as a literature of English expression that discusses ethnic interests, meaning that writers

explore what it means to be a Portuguese living at the margins of American society, [...] [finding] different ways to express their experiences; some employ the Portuguese language, while others use both Portuguese and English, and still others write exclusively in English. This reflects a gradual, steady movement towards a truly ethnic fiction in the English language in America. (2008: 156)

The impulse to write, in Silva's analysis, is to correct the image of the Portuguese migrant within the American mainstream, and writing is seen as a way of exploring the author's heritage. For Silva, authors like Thomas Braga, Frank X. Gaspar, Julian Silva, Katherine Vaz, José Rodrigues Miguéis, Jorge de Sena and Charles Reis Felix

exhibit a common sense of puzzlement, fascination, and frustration in response to the culture of their adopted country. Furthermore, these writers provide an in-depth account of Portuguese people, their ways and culture – not just a glimpse at surface customs [...] [to convey] what it means to be Portuguese-American. (157, see also 2009: 25)

Silva's definition of Portuguese American literature aligns itself with Baden's perception of ethnic literature, particularly when he comments that "[a]n ethnic literature emerges when second- and third-generation writers succeed in retrieving their ancestors' roots so as to learn more about where they come from" (205). In a later study, Silva agrees with Baden when he concludes that the "great [Portuguese] American novel [...] is yet to be written" (2009: 104). As can be seen, Silva places the definition of Portuguese American literature not just on ethnic grounds, but also on an American readership that receives (consumes?)

the written texts that are produced in English (2009: 169). For Silva, Portuguese American literature will exist when it is recognised as a literary category in its own right, beyond the ethnic literature label.

The next person to contribute to the Portuguese American literature debate, Christopher Larkosh, suggests that

Portuguese American literature examines the presence of pockets of Portuguese culture in the US through a perspective in which the Portuguese American author shows the resonances of Portuguese cultural references in his or her writing. Larkosh sees Portuguese American literature as multilocal, through the connections made between Portuguese cultural and literary references within the specific setting of the Portuguese American community. Larkosh takes up the idea of the “ethnic garden” presented by Silva in his 2005 article, and develops it to see how Portuguese American authors rework cultural references, particularly Portuguese literary references, to depict the Portuguese American reality in their works. The multilocality of Portuguese American literature, however, re-presents the Portuguese heritage of the Portuguese American in a renewed way. Larkosh describes this as an “ex-centric” process in which cultural resonances are found, but also renewed and reworked (2013, 43-45) so that Portuguese-American literature thus combines literary myth and ethnic memory in a potent New World vision for reconfiguring the present terms of ethnic identity and imagining one’s “place in the world,” both in the Americas and in the greater Portuguese-speaking diaspora, one that stretches across the world to this day. (49)

For Larkosh, then, Portuguese American literature is a field that shapes itself at the junction between cultures and literary traditions. As such, it builds upon Almeida’s comments about the porous nature of literary categorisations.

The most recent scholar to comment on the Portuguese American debate has been Vamberto Freitas, who observes that recognition of Portuguese American literature, as a field, will happen gradually, with an author having his or her work recognised by the mainstream, and by being joined by other authors “to be accepted and appreciated one by one, and through literary works that will stand first as great aesthetic performances. Content, theme and referential geographies will then impose themselves on other serious readers of literature” (293).

Freitas sees the existence of Portuguese American literature as a *fait accompli*, as being in the process of growth, but he calls attention to the need for Portuguese

American literature to receive sustained academic attention in order to achieve visibility, to call attention to the quality and quantity, so that, incrementally, the conditions are created for the literary field to be recognised (see Borges Accardi: 289-290). For Freitas, Portuguese American literature exists, but the field needs the gradual combination of being cemented academically and of being recognised for its quality by the mainstream (both in Portugal and in the United States).

It could be stated that the debate over whether Portuguese American literature exists is evolving towards a consensus. The consensus seems to be that Portuguese American literature depicts the concerns of the Portuguese American community, and that it speaks *about*, and *to*, that community. Here, it is pertinent to examine António Ladeira's comments on Portuguese American literature, particularly his statement that a literary field "starts as a community's dream, but it needs to be willed into existence" (20). Back in 1979, Baden observed that the Portuguese American community was not homogeneous, and that the (then) more recent wave of emigrants "had a generally higher level of education and display[ed] a real sense of being Portuguese. Their political ideas often clash[ed] with the more conservative views of established residents" (17). Ladeira makes it clear that the long list of authors who comprise Portuguese American literature is the result of many initiatives that have converged to form it: social, cultural, political, and academic initiatives. The beginning of this rapprochement between immigrant waves and between different Portuguese-speaking migrant communities might have been the result of bilingual education programs of the early 1980s, which, according to Almeida "advocat[ed] that migrants should be taught in their native language as they learned English, through text books that connected these students to their own worlds" (733). It is also, as Ladeira points out, the result of university programs, of publications that analyse the Portuguese American community and, I would add, the work of community associations like the Casa da Saudade, in New Bedford, MA, which provide a first point of contact to study and place value on the community, the visibility gained by initiatives like "Kale Soup for the Soul," a cooperative comprised of new Portuguese American writers who read their work at conferences and symposiums, and by the Disquiet literary program, and the work by Tagus Press, from UMass Dartmouth, in publishing and promoting Portuguese American writers. The development of the Portuguese American literature debate could be seen as accompanying the need to provide a voice of representation for the Portuguese American community. What, then, is the role of the anthologies of Portuguese American literature?

The role of anthologies in the Portuguese American literature debate

The role of anthologies in canon formation should not be underestimated within the Portuguese American literature debate outlined above. Anthologies of Portuguese American writing provide an initial step towards establishing the categorisation of Portuguese American literature.¹ The publication of anthologies like *Luso-American Literature: Writing by Portuguese-Speaking Authors in North America* (2011), edited by Robert Henry Moser and Antonio Luciano de Andrade Tosta, *The Gávea-Brown Book of Portuguese American Poetry* (2013), edited by Alice Clemente and George Monteiro, and the *Writers of the Portuguese Diaspora in the United States and Canada: An Anthology* (2015), edited by Luis Gonçalves and Carlo Matos, show just how many authors comprise, or could be said to belong to, Portuguese American literature. As the essay will now explore, the introductions to each anthology take it as read that Portuguese American literature exists.

Moser and Tosta published the first Portuguese American literature anthology. In their introduction, the definition of Portuguese American literature was opened up to authors who explored their experience of living in the United States and who were identified, or identified themselves, as having a connection to the Portuguese-speaking world. In the words of the editors, the anthology

functions as a literary ethnoscape of cultural encounters, of hyphenated experiences, within an “imagined world” located somewhere between North American society and the Lusophone diasporas, than as a written expression of a single, cohesive group struggling to address, for example, the repression of its communal history (2011: xxviii).

The anthology sees Portuguese American literature beyond the label of ethnic literature, in that the writers chosen examine both the cohabitation of different Portuguese-speaking communities within the same space in the United States and how the writers dialogue with the emigration setting. The definition of what constitutes a Portuguese American writer in this anthology is more complex. It is not an ethnic writer looking at his or her place in the United States. It is constituted in terms of the transcultural dialogue between cultures; how the culture and history of their Lusophone origins interact with the myriad Portuguese cultural spaces within the United States, and also with the wider multicultural setting within the United States.

Alice Clemente and George Monteiro’s anthology is perhaps simpler in its definition of what constitutes a Portuguese American writer, limiting it to “poets

of Portuguese ancestry who acknowledge their roots as a component to one degree or another of their artistic consciousness” (2013: 16). The emphasis here is on the writers’ exploration of the relationship between cultures.

Gonçalves and Matos’ anthology continues in the same vein as Clemente and Monteiro’s anthology. Indeed, the prologue, written by George Monteiro, states that the anthology aims to explore “the genuine literature produced in our shared space by Portuguese emigrants and their descendants” (2015: 13). What is interesting about Gonçalves and Matos’ anthology is that it was organised entirely by the writers themselves, calling on contributions from those who identified themselves as being Portuguese Americans and Portuguese Canadians.

The three anthologies examined above present Portuguese American literature as a transcultural exchange of ideas between the cultures that comprise the Portuguese-speaking world in the United States. Although the three anthologies take it as read that Portuguese American literature exists, the definition of the Portuguese American writer is different. Moser and Tosta’s definition is based on how the authors examined dialogue with an emigration setting where different Portuguese-speaking communities cohabit. This is quite close to the consensus reached by the critics examined in the previous section, which saw Portuguese American literature as depicting the concerns of the Portuguese American community. The anthologies also echo the consensus reached by critics examining the debate on Portuguese American literature: Portuguese American authors speak to a Portuguese American community and *about* that Portuguese American community. However, Moser and Tosta expand this perception to a more multilocal dialogue that extends beyond the Portugal/US dichotomy, particularly in their inclusion of writers from other places of the Portuguese-speaking world. In this way, the anthologies present the Portuguese American writer as someone whose Portuguese heritage (in the widest sense) influences the writing produced. This more inclusive approach opens up the possibility for a definition of Portuguese American literature as a porous category in dialogue with multiple cultures and literary traditions. It is here that the essay turns to the work of Katherine Vaz in order to examine how she seeks a position within different literary categories.

Katherine Vaz, the Portuguese American writer

To date, Katherine Vaz has published two novels and three collections of short stories. The novels are *Saudade* (1994), published by St Martin’s Press, and *Mariana* (1997), published by Flamingo. The collections of short stories are *Fado & Other*

Stories (1997), published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, *Our Lady of the Artichokes* (2008), published by the University of Nebraska Press, and *The Love Life of an Assistant Animator & Other Stories* (2017), published by Tailwinds Press. With the exception of *Mariana*, which is set in Portugal, her works depict Portuguese American communities, and the lives of their Portuguese American main characters. In this way, Vaz's work fits the definition of the function of Portuguese American literature as outlined above. Vaz's writing style could be described as fragmented, creating fleeting impressions of a character, or his or her emotions, and this is reflected in how the plot is constructed. The result is a story that is told haltingly, almost in stages, not so much like a prose poem, but as a self-conscious experiment in form and on the limits of prose.²

Vaz's first novel, *Saudade*, is a story of revenge that spirals out of control and sees Clara, a Portuguese immigrant child from the Azores to California, take ever more desperate measures against Father Eiras, a priest who acts as Clara's guardian after the death of her parents and who Clara believes has cheated her out of her family's inheritance in California. Clara is no ordinary child; she has been unable to hear since birth, and does not speak, communicating instead through a made-up language involving sugar, until her mother dies. It is worth quoting the passage explaining the moment of her mother's death in full, to get a sense of Vaz's writing style and to see how Vaz brings her Portuguese ethnicity into her writing:

In Portuguese death, the soul flies away as a moth, white as a snowflake. It first perches on the lips, then hovers and ascends. Conceição, trying to inhale the beating wings, fought so hard to swallow them that she spent her final hour kissing the empty air. Clara awoke to feel her mother's hand groping, desperately searching for her child's hand so that her work could be done with the two of them bound, but as Clara turned to reach for her, the moth paused, touched its wings together, and then abandoned its station. Clara was frantic – she had not held her mother's hand in time! She had seen the mouth in spasms but had not kissed it properly! Her mother had gone on ahead – not anywhere – without her! [...] She found her voice.

Mouth a jagged black world.

She released a sound enormous and sharp-edged.

Her cry burst out so unnaturally past tissue that been determined to stay inviolate that her ears were startled into turning a violent red, and she slapped

her face, trying to put out the flames that had risen to its surface. Her cries came out in long streams and drove birds from the trees. [...] It was the bellowing protest Clara had refused to give at birth like everyone else. (47)

The notion of a Portuguese death presented here is a shorthand strategy to present Portuguese culture in a particular way. Reframing death within a Portuguese experience, with its call to the emotions evoked at the pain felt in the moment of death, enables Vaz to self-consciously tap into the taste for the ethnic in her American readership at the time *Saudade* was published.

It is no coincidence that, just before the publication of *Saudade*, Vaz hinted at how she was to be interpreted by the reader when she provided her working definition of Magical Realism:

magical realism is very much the attempt to find what is the fantastic or sublime in everyday things and it's also about finding out what's ordinary within wonderful or sublime things. [...] In my case, what I'm doing is using the senses primarily to uncover what those are and to create new worlds and new perceptions according to what the senses dictate. (*LA Times*: 21/01/1992)

Vaz had a clear strategy in highlighting how to be read; she was tapping into the tail end of a taste for Magical Realism during the 1980s, through Chicano literature, and the interest and appetite for the ethnic experience in the US.³ When *Saudade* was published in 1994, Vaz offered an ethnic experience with a difference; the Portuguese ethnic experience, couched within the wider umbrella of the Hispanic ethnic experience in the US. This is a view echoed by Reinaldo Silva, who commented that *Saudade* “aims at capturing the ways and mentality of Portuguese characters transplanted to American soil” (2005: 196). The appeal of Vaz, as a writer, is that this is an ethnic experience that is different, yet familiar to the US reader; it brings forth a feel of the Old World and its weight of heritage, of rites and cultural beliefs. In his analysis of Vaz and Frank X. Gaspar, Larkosh commented that both authors “invoke the land – and the seascapes of their ancestral Azores as a point of departure for other discoveries further west, [whereby] this common trajectory becomes a conduit for the transatlantic passage” (2013, 49). The Old World becomes a place of origins, where certain myths and imaginings can be inscribed (as in the made-up notion of a Portuguese death), enriching the portrayal of the ethnic experience in the New World setting so that, in the words of Thomas Keneally's blurb on

the cover to *Saudade*, in the “beautifully textured narration, you encounter a previously un-encountered, gorgeously enriched America, and characters with real blood in their veins.”

For the Portuguese reader, there is a similar effect of the familiar yet different. According to Vamberto Freitas, this is a narrative “de desafios a todos os níveis, recorrendo desde a primeira página a um realismo mágico que o catolicismo português e as suas crenças facilitam tanto para a libertação como para o amesquinamento das personagens” (2010: 63). Teresa Cid develops this in her analysis of *Saudade*, seeing Vaz’s novel as an expansion of the conquest narratives, and as an intervention that raises the power of women’s agency, which is forgotten in these narratives (257). Cid goes on to analyse the main character, Clara, as a metaphor for Portugal’s perverse following of a goal in history, highlighting that Vaz writes “improbable stories about improbable events, feeding upon a history of improbabilities: the Portuguese achievements in navigation, or the incredible existence of the Azores islands themselves” (258). Larkosh sees the novel as a world of fantasy that stretches between the Azores and the US, connecting Portuguese traditions with American lived experience (2013, 49). Vaz, therefore, reframes Portuguese culture from within the Portuguese American experience (see Cid; Coutinho Mendes), turning herself into a cultural broker who presents a Portuguese American ethnic experience that is approachable, but that still maintains the right balance of the exotic and the familiar both to a US reader immersed in the discourses of the US melting pot and of the portrayal of the ethnic experience in the US, and to the Portuguese reader immersed in the discourse of Portugal as a nation with global communities. In other words, through *Saudade*, Vaz provides a perspective that renews both national discourses while being distinctive enough to be recognisably different to each discourse. In this way, Vaz echoes Portuguese American literature’s multilocal approach outlined by Larkosh as well as the dialogue between cultures that the three anthologies of Portuguese American literature point to in the Portuguese American writer.

The familiar yet distinct Portuguese American experience depicted by Vaz is found in the way the characters undergo a journey of adaptation, of negotiating two cultures. For instance, in *Saudade*, Clara emigrates to California immediately after her mother’s death. Under the wing of her Portuguese American neighbours, Clara adapts to her new life in the US and undergoes two parallel journeys: the magical and the real. The magical journey sees her becoming aware of,

and entering, a different plane of perception, where she converses with her dead uncle and almost kills herself just by using her willpower. The real sees her intentionally seduce Father Eiras and, as a consequence, become pregnant. Her child is born with an open wound in his chest and dies shortly thereafter. The end of the novel sees Clara walking away from a loving relationship with a widowed man. In a sense, what we are shown in *Saudade* is the folly of youth taken to an extreme. It is also a story that is dressed up as the experience of an immigrant in the US; the child Clara bears, and her subsequent grief following his death, could be read symbolically as the pain inherent in adapting to the emigration setting. As Reinaldo Silva comments,

Vaz's narrative captures hybrid, hyphenated realities in blending Portuguese and American realities. In other words, *Saudade* wonderfully conveys what happens when the values, culture, and literature of an Old World country come into contact with those of the New World (2008: 198).

Or, in the words of Vamberto Freitas, the novel is “um constante chamamento tanto à mítica de uma comunidade de origem fechada e depois precariamente aberta no seu novo mundo californiano como a uma história ora universalizada ora reduzida às isoladas comunidades de ilhas atlânticas” (2010: 62-63). *Saudade* calls upon a universal experience of the pain inherent to emigration and to “melting” into the American pot, yet it is different enough to pass as ethnic through the inclusion of references to Portuguese culture. It is also, for Portuguese readers, an evocation of a reality that calls upon the imagining of the lived experience, of the trials and tribulations of the Portuguese abroad. Although Vaz's novel conforms to the definitions of Portuguese American literature explored above, it does so in a particular way, as will be explored below.

Vaz, the cultural translator

As was briefly mentioned, in her writing, Vaz exoticises the Portuguese and their culture, creating a surreal and distinctive world that is somehow plausible. In so doing, Vaz positions herself as a cultural broker between the exotic and the familiar for Portuguese and American readers. The made-up notion of a Portuguese death examined earlier could be seen in this way, but there are other examples interspersed in her text. For instance, in *Saudade*, Vaz starts her chapters with a section in italics so as to explain a legend or story from the Azores. In Chapter 7, for example, a *fado* is explained in the following terms:

Fados, the songs of fate, wail in the cafés of the Azores and all of Lusitania, including the homes of the Portuguese in California. The lyrics approximate the timbres of grief: disjointed, in the cadence of actual moans and pleadings, and the music weaves them into a net that can catch whatever listener's soul cast towards it.

Two lines from a *fado*
 Navegar é preciso
 Viver não é preciso
 This has two meanings:
 To navigate is necessary
 To live is not necessary
 Or:
 To navigate is precise
 To live is not precise
 A widow in the town of Lodi, California, wrote a *fado* (233)

In explaining *Fado*, Vaz becomes a translator not just of the meaning behind Portuguese words, but also of Portuguese culture for the US reader. For the Portuguese reader, it is an unusual look at Portuguese culture that, according to Teresa Cid, produces a distancing effect that enables a renewed interpretation of Portuguese culture (261), and, in the process, gives “added clarity to the way this present-day woman writer is dealing with the voices of a predominantly male canon, both American and Portuguese” (257). However, what Vaz fails to point out in her explanation is that the *fado* she quotes is in fact two lines taken from a poem by Fernando Pessoa.⁴

It is useful to examine Vaz's role as a cultural translator in light of João Leal's discussion of the evolution of the concept of *saudade* within Portugal. Leal traces *saudade*, as a concept, from its emergence in the late nineteenth century as a way to provide a unique typology or “trope for speaking about being Portuguese” (269), to its adoption by Portuguese ethnologists, and later the Portuguese State, to describe the Portuguese character as undefinable, yet anchored in “key moments of Portuguese history, [on] what made Portugal great” (274). Leal examines the evolution of the concept of *saudade* to its current use within the Portuguese national discourse, as a trope, as a way of thinking about the nation and its people. Crucially, Leal also examines how the concept of *saudade* was embraced within the Portuguese American communities, describing it as an

invented tradition whereby the “process of ethnicisation turned *saudade* from a rather bizarre ‘invention’ of a Portuguese poet who strongly disliked cosmopolitanism into a widespread device for travellers, emigrants and cosmopolitans alike [...] to deal with the issues of home and dislocation” (2000: 281). Leal also comments that the concept of *saudade* has developed a “particular version of portugueseness” (282). For Leal, *fado*, as a musical style, plays a strong role in the definition of Portugueseness, having transformed itself from the music of the lower classes in Lisbon to being embraced by the elites and becoming recognised as one of the national songs. *Fado*, however, has a troubled history. During the Estado Novo regime, *fado* was used to promote a populist ultranationalism. Manuela Cook notes the social function of *fado* as an instrument of social control against social unrest directed towards the Estado Novo and as a way of promoting pride in all things Portuguese (22). In the words of Manuel Halpern, “o Estado Novo serviu-se do fado para hastear a sua bandeira. Muitas vezes criou-se uma coincidência entre o que se cantava no fado e o espírito salazarista” (119). Both Halpern and Cook highlight the fact that *fado* singing was promoted both at home and abroad during the Estado Novo, particularly through the famous *fado* singer Amália Rodrigues. After the April Revolution in 1974, a Revolution which put Portugal on its path to democracy and ended the Estado Novo regime, the popularity of *fado* declined in Portugal due to its association with the Estado Novo past, in a conscious strategy to move away from certain cultural aspects that had been embraced by the Estado Novo (Halpern: 70). However, as Leal points out, *fado*’s popularity did not wane within the Portuguese American communities; it was actually promoted by certain official organisms in what he terms the market of *saudade*, becoming a vehicle for the promotion of *saudade* both at home, in Portugal, and abroad. Within the Portuguese American context, Leal observes that both the concept of *saudade* and *fado* songs were part of

a celebration of personal memories of emigrants: it was sung by folk singers at formal gatherings and celebrations of Azorean migrants taking place in the USA; it was used to baptise the new market that Azorean emigrants provided to Portuguese and American products, the so-called market of *saudade*; it was enthusiastically evoked by cultural and political leaders of Azorean-American communities at the Congresses of Azorean emigrants organised and sponsored since 1976 by the Azorean Regional Government. Finally, it was also celebrated by Luso-American writers, novelists and poets closely linked to

the Azorean-American community. [...] Although writing in English for an American audience, this new wave of Azorean-American writers keeps on celebrating *saudade* as a privileged trope for the evocation of Portuguese texts, as the case of Katherine Vaz suggests (280).

If we take Leal's words into account, Vaz depicts the way the Portuguese American community has continued to embrace *fado* and its function as the tangible embodiment of the concept of *saudade*, even if these two specific markers of Portuguese identity have been rejected, and then rediscovered and embraced once more within Portugal in recent years. This, as Leal observes, results in the Portuguese American community being an example of long distance nationalism; the construction of a more vigorous concept of home within the emigrant setting (281). What Vaz is reproducing in her novel *Saudade*, and within her other works, therefore, is how the Azorean Americans view themselves and how they relate themselves to Portugal and its cultural heritage. In so doing, Vaz could be seen to align herself with the view that Portuguese American literature dialogues between cultures and heritages explored earlier in this essay. But is there something more at play here?

Vaz as Self-Conscious Transnational Cultural Informant

Frequently calling upon Portuguese writers like Camões or Pessoa, or including Portuguese legends and stories, such as the creation of the Lagoa das Sete Cidades in *Saudade*, or describing how the ukulele arrived in Hawaii in *Fado & Other Stories*, enables Vaz to give her texts ethnic authenticity. It also operates on another level; in seemingly explaining an aspect of Portuguese culture and cultural heritage, culture becomes a commodity that is called upon in Vaz's quest to define and cement her role as a transnational cultural informant. This role becomes increasingly evident in her 1997 novel, *Mariana*, which depicts the life of Mariana de Alcoforado. Mariana de Alcoforado was a Portuguese nun whose love letters to a French lieutenant during Portugal's war of independence from Spain were published in the seventeenth century, and circulated widely, although their authenticity has been a source of academic debate. In the postscript at the end of the novel, Vaz outlines the debate regarding the authenticity of Mariana de Alcoforado's letters, and frames her own fictionalised portrayal of this Portuguese nun in the following terms:

Bad enough that her letters should be taken from her. Unforgivable that anyone should attempt to brush her spirit aside. My conviction is that her life and

authorship should be returned to her. Though the translation of the love letters is mine, the sentiments are Mariana's. I have fleshed out her story based upon my research in the original Portuguese sources. This novel relies on true events, including some that may seem uncanny. (324)

As can be seen, Vaz presents herself as a cultural informant who has not only done research, but who also sees herself as having a duty to redress a wrong, even an oversight. After all, as Vaz comments, “[w]hy, then, is [Mariana de Alcoforado] virtually unknown in Great Britain and the United States of America?” (323) If we are to believe Vaz's postscript, Mariana's story is also unknown in Portugal. There, Vaz suggests that her visit to the convent in Beja put her in contact with Leonel Borrela, the caretaker who allowed her to visit the convent, even though it was closed, so as to share his passion for Mariana de Alcoforado with someone. Vaz, thus, becomes the accidental discoverer of something that is not as valued as it should be, positioning herself as a cultural informant with a conscience; she introduces readers to the story of Mariana de Alcoforado so that her story is recovered and appreciated beyond the few scholars who are aware of it. For the Portuguese reader, Mariana's story is extended beyond the letters to encompass the whole of Mariana's life. The reader, thus, benefits from a chance encounter and becomes informed about a feature of Portuguese history and culture, which Vaz seemingly “rescues.”

Vaz's claim of “rescuing” is only for the benefit of a reader not familiar with the controversial publication of *Novas cartas portuguesas* in Portugal in 1972, which saw a revival of the interest in the letters of this Portuguese nun, particularly within the field of Portuguese Studies. As such, Vaz's stance could be seen as an example of Portuguese American long-distance nationalism that Leal pointed to earlier, and the slight disconnect of this long-distance nationalism with cultural debates within Portugal. In adopting this role of “rescuer”, Vaz is seemingly unaware of the international importance of *Novas cartas portuguesas* during the 1970s and beyond, or the academic attention the text has received over the past 40 years. I would argue, however, that Vaz consciously chooses to sidestep acknowledging this attention so as to prevent destabilising her image as cultural informant with a conscience. An interview with Vaz published by the Portuguese newspaper *Diário de Notícias* in June 1998, conducted by Maria Teresa Horta (Mariana was first published in 1997), would suggest that Vaz would have been briefed on the importance of *Novas cartas portuguesas* prior to her publicity tour in Portugal. Vaz's review of the English translation of *Novas cartas portuguesas*

in 2001 highlights the controversy of the original publication and her own fascination with Mariana de Alcoforado. This review article highlights the translated text as an example of feminine resistance to oppression, and by mentioning her own fictional recreation of Mariana de Alcoforado, Vaz appeals to readers to read her own interpretation of the life of Mariana de Alcoforado in similar terms: “I wrote a novel in which I interpreted Mariana’s life, and the television host in Portugal who wanted to interview me was none other than Maria Teresa Horta, delighted that another woman in another country had also found this splendid nun an inspiration” (81, my emphasis). Whether Vaz is aware of the international and academic importance that *Novas cartas portuguesas* has received or not, the fact is that Vaz consciously positions herself as an authoritative informant of Portuguese culture to the reader.

All of this demonstrates that Vaz is a writer who is not afraid to trade with her ethnicity, or her role as a woman writer, in order to be known, published, recognised, asked to comment on aspects of Portuguese culture, and so on. She, therefore, is happy to become a marketable good, a brand, a representative voice, or spokeswoman for the Portuguese and the Portuguese American experience. This fuels her (justifiable) pride in being the first Portuguese American to have her work recorded in the Library of Congress, in being one of the two writers in the list of top Luso American figures, or in teaching creative writing through the Disquiet literary program.⁵ In seeking to represent the Portuguese American experience, and also to translate, or become an ambassador, for Portuguese culture, Vaz could be seen to fashion herself as a transnational writer. Such fashioning takes advantage of any opportunity given to raise her status as a writer.

Here, it is useful to trace Vaz’ career within the backdrop of Portuguese American initiatives. Her publications in English coincided with a period of Portuguese American community initiatives that Ladeira and Almeida referred to. These began with the study of Portuguese American communities in university programs⁶, and with the educational initiatives to service the local Portuguese American community.⁷ In other words, Vaz emerged at a time when she could be used as a source of pride within the Portuguese American community that was seeking a voice of representation.

When the Portuguese translation of *Saudade* was published in 1999, and the Portuguese translation of *Mariana* came out in 2002, Vaz’s reception in Portugal had already been framed within the literature produced by Azorean descendants in the US, but it has also moved steadily towards representing the Portuguese American

community to Portuguese readers by those who examine her within academia. This is not so strange when one connects all the dots; the Azorean emigrants are mostly concentrated in New England, where the university programs looking at the Portuguese American experience started, and where respected scholars of Azorean literature work.⁸ At the turn of the millennium, Vaz was embraced in Portugal by the *Suplemento Açoriano de Cultura*, which published two critical articles on her novels in December 1997 and October 1999, penned by Adelaide Batista, interpreting her work as a bridge between cultures (1999). In the interview between Vaz and Maria Teresa Horta for the Portuguese newspaper *Diário de Notícias* in June 1998 mentioned above, Vaz again reinforces the idea of being a cultural ambassador for Portugal in the US, moving herself beyond the Azorean label to cement a certain self-fashioning strategy as a transnational cultural broker. Vaz's participation in the Disquiet program also consolidates her role as transnational cultural ambassador.⁹ Current scholarly work on Vaz frames her writing as Portuguese American and as part of the Azorean emigrant community in the US. It would seem, therefore, that Vaz's work places her as an author with movable categorisations, and as a writer who serves different aims for representation.

The reality is perhaps more complex; Vaz emerged as an outsider from the Portuguese American literary and cultural field. As mentioned above, her rise to fame was within the interest for the ethnic experience in the United States. However, her Portuguese ethnicity, and her conscious use of that ethnicity, meant that she was quickly adopted to answer the needs of the Portuguese American community to gain visibility in the US literary and cultural mainstream. The fact that her works were published by mainstream publishers, rather than the Portuguese American publishers (as is the case for Charles Reis Felix, Julian Silva, Darrell Karstin, Brian Sousa, or, to an extent, Alfred Lewis and Sam Pereira, for example) helped the Portuguese American community to gain more visibility.¹⁰ Her work was quickly adopted by different audiences to answer the specific needs of those audiences who saw her as a writer who wrote about the ethnic experience, but from the Portuguese perspective (American mainstream), as a writer depicting a familiar, yet different reality (Portugal), and/or as a writer depicting the experience of emigration and adaptation and talking about the difficulties faced in both (the Portuguese American community). As a result, the reception of her work suited particular agendas. Thus, Vaz became visible, and enabled a visibility for Portuguese American culture that built upon the Portuguese American community-based initiatives examined above.

Concluding remarks

In what may be seen as an obvious statement to make, care needs to be taken when the aspirations of a community to nurture its cultural heritage combine with the aspirations of the individual author who arises from the community in question. In Vaz's case, this is an author who is carefully constructing, nurturing, and even promoting, specific versions of Portuguese, American, and Portuguese American communities, and what it means to be a part of these, to raise her profile as a writer. The danger inherent in this lies in thinking uncritically about the wider context in which the author emerges from, and in examining the work of authors such as Vaz as examples of long distance nationalism, as this implies that authors such as Vaz can be absorbed within a wider global discourse of the Portuguese as a nation made up of many overseas communities, or even as ethnic literature in the countries in which these authors write, and not as part of a literary category in its own right. Or does it?

Vaz's self-fashioning, reinvention, and malleability as a writer within different contexts raises possibilities about the malleability and movable categorisation that can be found in the figure of the Portuguese American writer, and the role these Portuguese American authors play in different settings. Vaz exemplifies the case of an author who not only seeks to speak from the Portuguese American community, but also uses that community as a starting point through which to make herself a marketable good to different audiences so as to have her work read, even published. Using Portuguese American ethnicity as a marketable good to produce visibility, however, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, we have the commodification of Portuguese American culture for the mainstream, both in Portugal and in the US, and the concomitant risk of reducing this culture to a cliché of difference, as an example of ethnic literature, even a curiosity held up for recreation and meaningless consumption. On the other hand, as Ladeira comments, "[j]udging by what happened in the most successful ethnic literatures, producing several widely visible authors, with powerful mainstream appeal, might just diminish – paradoxically – the need for having (and obsessively protecting) such an ethnically defined field in the first place" (14).¹¹ This observation perhaps explains Reinaldo Silva's comment that, although both Vaz and Gaspar have taken the first steps towards writing a truly ethnic Portuguese American fiction within the US context, both authors have written about the localised ethnic community from which they originate (2009: 104). However, is there such thing as ethnic literature?

In his study about how language politics in the US have shaped literary cultures and the notional formation of an US discourse of belonging, Joshua Miller (2011) points out that the debate regarding ethnicities, and their place in US society, has repeatedly emerged in the US in response to what he terms as Anglophone primacy. For Miller, Anglophone primacy results in the homogenisation of the US literature category in specific and narrow terms that push works that are not written in English to the category of ethnic literature. Miller's study suggests that the category of ethnic literature is a construction that responds to wider drives for assimilation within a US society based on Anglophone primacy. To support this argument, Miller's study highlights how, despite continuous efforts in legislation, there is no single official language in the US. With this in mind, and extending Miller's argument, we could affirm that there is a multiplicity of literatures written by different groups that forms a whole, regardless of the language in which it is written, and the cultural heritage it draws upon. This sounds slightly familiar, particularly considering Moser and Tosta's more inclusive definition of the Portuguese American writer in terms of a relationship with the author's Portuguese linguistic and cultural heritage, regardless of where they come from in the Portuguese-speaking world. It also echoes the observations about how literary categories are porous, and how writers that could be said to belong to Portuguese American literature can also belong to other literary categories. In the same way that a writer should not be restricted to a single literary category, this same writer can also serve the needs of a particular literary category. For Portuguese American literature, belonging to that literary category means exploring the negotiation of different cultures and traditions, the examination of the interactions of the Portuguese community (and communities) within US society, and even the exploration of the writers' Portuguese heritage in the widest sense. As Vaz's case exemplifies, the Portuguese American writer can move between categorisations and serve different aims. In other words, Portuguese American literature can be defined as a porous literary category whose authors simultaneously belong to other literary categories, but who also address the specific parameters for inclusion within the Portuguese American literary label. Such an approach is not without its problems, but it is a productive start towards forming a recognised literary category that is more inclusive and representative of the reality of the Portuguese American community on the ground. Crucially, a more inclusive approach to the definition of Portuguese American literature can aid, and be aided, by community-led initiatives already

present within the US that promote pride in being Portuguese American in the widest sense of the word. It requires, however, that differences are set aside in order to work together for a common project.

Ultimately, as Vamberto Freitas points out, we are talking about an incremental, gradual process. Any visibility, community-led initiative, even academic attention, of the Portuguese American community is desirable in order to encourage future generations to have pride in their heritage, and to write about the community to which they belong. This creates the conditions for the appearance of more works that could be seen as belonging to the Portuguese American literary canon, even if they are seen as belonging to ethnic literature. Taking into account the list of authors found in the anthologies and the authors published by Tagus Press, to give two examples, Portuguese American literature is a healthy field well on its way to moving beyond being an example of ethnic writing, but it needs the support (in the widest definition of the word) of the Portuguese American community (in the widest sense) to get there.

NOTES

1. Elsewhere, I have written about the role of anthologies and canon formation, in the context of Azorean literature (see Ramos Villar 2007). Vamberto Freitas has also commented on how anthologies help to build a picture of how big a canon is (2012: 296).

2. Her most recent publication, *The Love Life of an Assistant Animator & Other Stories*, also includes montages of photographs, perhaps asking the reader to make connections between the image and the text.

3. A possible reason for this is that her first editor was Bob Wyatt, García Márquez's North American editor (LA Times, 21/02/1992). Around the time when Vaz began to publish her work, US readers had seen the publication of Glória Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), and Júlia Álvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), along with the publication of Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (1989), which was quickly turned into the blockbuster film (1992).

4. I wish to express my gratitude to Cláudia Pazos Alonso for highlighting this.

5. See her biographical details in her author's webpage (<http://katherinevaz.com/bio/longer-bio/>).

6. For instance, university programs offered at Brown (since 1980s), UMass Amherst (from 1990s), and UMass Dartmouth (since the mid 2000s, also home of Tagus Press).

7. To name two examples, please see the work undertaken by the Casa da Saudade in New Bedford (which is near Brown, UMass Amherst, and UMass Dartmouth), and the J. A. Freitas Library in California.

8. Just to name two, we have Onésimo Teotónio Almeida and Francisco Cota Fagundes, who are very active within both Azorean and Portuguese academic circles.

9. According to its website, the Disquiet International Literary Program is “run by a group of North American writers with ties to Portugal [...] to deepen mutual understanding among writers from North America and writers from Portugal.” For more information on the Disquiet Program, see <http://disquietinternational.org/who-we-are/>.

10. Anecdotaly, I am told that, in the 1980s, there had been efforts by the Portuguese embassy in the US to promote prominent public figures in the US who had Portuguese heritage. This is part of the reason why Danielle Steel, whose mother was Portuguese, could possibly be included in the list of Portuguese American writers, or why the actor Tom Hanks forms part of the list of important Portuguese American figures. Such lists could be seen as forming part of a wider move for Portuguese American visibility within the US by providing inspirational examples so as to aid the Portuguese American community's aim in promoting cultural initiatives.

11. In his introduction to a volume on Portuguese American literature, António Ladeira (2013) poses a series of provocative questions about the double bind of producing and promoting Portuguese American literature on ethnic grounds.

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