Taking Her Back

Portuguese Presence &
the 38th Voyage of the Charles W. Morgan

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Dissertation: Aura, Ambivalence, and Allure: The Portuguese in Modern American Literary Spaces

Areas of Specialization: Modern American Literature / Creative Writing / Poetry

2nd-Generation Portuguese-American

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Poet/Writer

38th Voyager
Sacred Heart teacher sets sail on whaleship

Posted on July 18, 2014  |  By Paul Schott

Greenwich teachers are embarking on some exciting adventures this summer. In the case of Cristina Baptista, an English teacher at Convent of the Sacred Heart, she is participating in the 38th Voyage aboard Mystic Seaport’s 1841 whaleship the Charles W. Morgan.

Poetry at sea

After over 170 years of use, the Charles W. Morgan whale ship set sail for its “50th Voyage,” carrying 85 passengers including one of Convent of the Sacred Heart’s own, eager to relive history in the modern day.

Dr. Cristina Baptista, Sacred Heart Upper School English Teacher, was one of the designated poets on the three-month voyage. Her passion for American Literature and history heightened her appreciation for the historic value of the trip.

Cristina Baptista stands at the stern of the Charles W. Morgan while at the New Bedford State Pier, while waiting to set sail, on the morning of July 6.

Here is her account of the maritime expedition.

Cristina Baptista:

“This summer, I have been playing the role of Time Traveler. Last week, I joined Captain Kip Files and his Crew of the 19th-century whale ship, Charles W. Morgan, as a 38th Voyager, during a portion of the ship’s 50th Voyage.”
Presentation Overview

Portugal & The Sea

Portuguese Identity via an American (Literary) Lens

Portuguese Presence on Whaleships

My Voyager Project

My Voyager Experience

Post-Voyage Goals—Piecing Together Heritage

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Portugal & The Sea
A.J.R. Russell-Wood’s *The Portuguese Empire, 1415-1808: A World on the Move* (1998) suggests that the Portuguese “were initiators, protagonists, and cultural brokers” (Russell-Wood xiv).

It is they who “inexorably pushed forward the frontiers of European knowledge and established a permanent European presence in Africa, Asia, and the Americas” (8-9).

Even Christopher Columbus owes much of his personal and professional life to Portuguese influence. He probably spoke Portuguese before Castilian, married a Portuguese woman, and as a teenager, had attended Prince Henry’s school of navigation in Sagres, Portugal. Despite Columbus’ well-known connection to Spain, it was Portugal that played a most instructional and pivotal role in Columbus’ formative years.
Praia da Nazaré, Portugal and the Atlantic Ocean
Lisboa (Lisbon) Waterfront
Yet, precisely because Portugal was the forerunner of systems of trade, migration, and political conquest, its empire was poised to become first the “most archaic,” its presence “subsid[ing] into backwardness and lethargy” (Jeremy L. Adelman, “Foreword” in Maxwell, Conflicts xi).
“The Portuguese die of love.”

(Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra)
Portuguese Identity via an American (Literary) Lens

A shift from a desired to decaying people:

--Henry David Longfellow and the “warbling” Portuguese Poets

--The William Dungey v. Joseph Spencer Court Case

--M. Estellie Smith and the “invisible minority”

--Novelist Frank Norris and Portuguese Whalemens as “relics”
Portuguese Identity via an American (Literary) Lens

“The community is eminently Portuguese—that is to say, it is slow, poor, shiftless, sleepy, and lazy.”

~ Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) ~
Portuguese Identity via an American (Literary) Lens

“It won’t be long before they own the whole valley, and the last American will be gone.”

~ Jack London, The Valley of the Moon (1913) ~
Portuguese Identity via an American (Literary) Lens

“Big Joe [Portagee] rarely told a lie. His mind didn’t work quickly enough.”

~ John Steinbeck, Tortilla Flat (1935)~
Felipe: Two years of hard labor before the mast has made a man of more than one of our people!

Capt. Bamby: Of more than one of any people!

Ana: Make him understand, Bam! Tell him the wonderful adventures you told me when I was young like him—tell him about his father, but, more than everything else, make him understand that I love him. That’s why I did it.

Capt. Bamby: I’ll make him understand and I’ll bring him back safe!

Ana: Bring him back—a man!

~ Martha Stanley, My Son (1924) ~
Joe Silva: “There is ghosts, by God! My cousin, Manuel, he seen one! Off on a whaler in the Injun Ocean, that was. A man got knifed and pushed overboard. After that, on moonlight nights, they’d see him a-settin’ on the yards and hear him moanin’ to himself. Yes, sir, my cousin Manuel, he ain’t no liar neither—‘ceptin’ when he’s drunk—and he seen him with his own eyes!”


--Superstition

--Drunkenness

--Religion/Spirituality
From Herman Melville’s “The ‘Gees” (ca. 1839-60): New England’s Portuguese sailors and whalemens are “an inferior tar.” Their “complexion is hybrid” and they are quite “green.”

Only after they prove themselves the most adept seamen are they “ennobled with the human name” of “Portuguese” rather than the truncated 'Gee.”

Melville’s description of these immigrants working on American ships ends on an indefinite note. While at first these Portuguese are likely to “raise some curiosity” among ethnologists hoping “to see a ’Gee,” forty years of ubiquity on New England ships changes their presence. They “are no longer green ’Gees. They are sophisticated ’Gees, and hence liable to be taken for naturalized citizens badly sunburnt.”
My Voyager Project

New Bedford, MA – Buzzards Bay, MA (July 8, 2014)

Inspired by my Portuguese heritage, I am re-evaluating the role of immigrant whaling communities and giving recognition to the contributions, failures, and successes of the immigrant whalemen who have made significant impacts on the American global culture. I am currently working on a collection of poetry (possibly with images) that will reflect and give acknowledgement to the original Charles W. Morgan voyagers, as well as connect their relevancy to the Portuguese and American experience today.
My Voyager Experience
New Bedford Dockside Exhibit, prior to continuing on the Voyage, July 7, 2014
Although she was docked, I could feel her “bones” ebb softly, even coolly before the heat would get trapped in the fo’c’sle later that evening, before the penetrating yet pleasantly soothing “whir” of modern day fans droned throughout our humble abode. I kept imagining the murmur of different languages spoken by various nationalities that would have been present in the Crew, crowded and clustered in the dark. The Portuguese words “como sardinhas em lata” (“like sardines in a can”) came to mind immediately. A shared language must have been a relief on this ship of so much nautical lingo that, as I’d learn the next day, I felt like I was in a foreign land. A foreign, floating land.

In many ways, too, I felt like I was channeling the dead.
Probably one of the most curious parts of the Voyage is how to contend with the reality that although we are making every attempt to recreate the past by restoring and sailing on this 1841 whaleship in the first place, we will never be able to fully-extricate ourselves from very real, twenty-first-century reminders ringing every layer of the *Morgan*. 
The Portuguese have sometimes been regarded (in a diminutive fashion) as mere “’Gees,” as Herman Melville calls them in his essay about the Portuguese seaman on New England whaling ships. Meanwhile, the Portuguese have been called a “invisible minority,” and it is my job to ensure that the cloak of invisibility that has oftentimes muffled the Luso voice is stripped away as easily as the Morgan herself was once stripped to her original wood and refitted with modern, safe, and new parts.
One of my favorite parts of the tour of the *Morgan* was going down into the hold. While our tour stopped short of ripping open the ply-board-looking covers that, no doubt, conceal the lead ballast at the very belly of the ship, I have been forever fascinated by the swoops, curves, and gentle “kneeling” of the wooden braces or “knees” of the ship.
That this ship that took about 30 men to build in eight months and was expected to have an average lifespan of 25 years or so is still here, looking quite elegant, is a true testament to the care and passion of her makers. She is as much a work of art as she is a working vessel, as much a precious museum artifact as she is a living history that needs this chance to keep on doing what she was made to do: patrol waters in search of a precious cargo. For us, and as the Seaport has said often, it is a “cargo of knowledge.”
In the somewhat glaring lights of the New Bedford State Pier, we engaged with one another, tried to connect to the *Morgan*, reflected upon the ship and whales in general, and made predictions about what the next day would bring.
The Morning of the New Bedford to the Massachusetts Maritime Academy Leg of the 38th Voyage (July 8, 2014).
Ropes are pesky things to keep in order but the Crew handled knots and coils like they were nothing. The members’ energy, exuberance, and fortitude was exhilarating. Even when a few of the Crew members would slide down the rigging and leap back to the deck, huffing and puffing, they wasted no time racing back up, clipping in and climbing over the futtocks, if a mate commanded them to do so. Knives were sometimes brandished from back cases to snip lines or trim rope. Once a couple of sails were set, and a few more came down, it seemed the Crew spent the next few hours making vertical pilgrimages up and down the rigging, barely touching the deck planks.
One of the major realizations I—a first-timer when it comes to sailing on tall ships—made was just how significantly a ship’s sails can inform your body movement. As soon as the tug lines slacked and the *Morgan* began going under her own sail power, I found myself walking with a more pronounced “cowboy swagger,” if you will: I had to exert my center of gravity a bit more, thrust out my hips slightly, and bend my knees more and more as more sails were set. This learning moment hit me as something I can pursue in my project as well—the way in which a ship controls a body, changes its contours, forces it to bend and break beyond its human will.
In general, a lot of the Voyage is about “hoarding” things—facts, figures, ideas, and memories—as if oil in barrels. We’ll make sense of it all later. We’ll find out how much it’s all worth when we’re back in our home ports.
List of Voyagers, crew, and guests on our Leg

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<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>RESIDENCE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Smith</td>
<td>Groton, CT</td>
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<td>Article F. Bailey</td>
<td>Mystic, CT</td>
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<td>Michael D. Bradley</td>
<td>New Bedford, MA</td>
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<td>John H. Murray</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
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<td>Rose Rivier</td>
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<td>Alex Calabretti</td>
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<td>Catherine Briney</td>
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<td>Jeffrey M. Leonard</td>
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<td>Sarah E. Giordano</td>
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<td>Edward B. Miller</td>
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<td>Christopher J. Briney</td>
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<td>Lisa Kelly</td>
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<td>Richard W. E. Bell</td>
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<td>John Smith</td>
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<td>Susan E. Bell</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael Liddick</td>
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List of persons composing the company of the Bark CHARLES W. MORGAN, whereof Kip Files is Master, bound for New England ports.
Finally, a large part of the Voyage experience is connecting with colleagues / other Voyagers – we feed each other’s fire. Each story shared is another bible leaf in the tryworks, if you will.
Post-Voyage Goals—Piecing Together Heritage
(Ancestral, Historical, & Now)

--Research

--Family Stories / Connections

--Saudade (personal / historical)

--Reclaiming an “unwritten life”
My paternal lineage—my grandmother is the child in the foreground. Great-grandmother is the seated woman at left, and great-great grandparents are the seated couple at right. Portugal, mid-1920s
Various family members who took to the seas.
Below: maternal grandparents, Hartford, CT, ca. 1960s or ‘70s.
At right: paternal grandparents, Portugal, 1980s.
Baptista/Francisco Family, 1987, Moitas-Venda, Alcanena, Portugal
Project Progress

-- Poetry as a traditional part of Portuguese identity

-- Title *Taking Her Back*

-- Arrangement

* Mizzenmast: Looking Back

* Mainmast: The Haunting Between

* Foremast: Present & Future
To the Morgan

Let me be your scrivener, thrusting ink on your sails.

No—
it is there, the way the sky slips between folds, writing its words in a history of secret languages, eternal stories that linger in air and,

by morning,
are gone.

Let me record them now, with temptation and tempting pen, with my awe and with my wonder.

Let me fold myself amidst canvas and conspiracy
to let silence do all the talking.
Final Hopes

--That people reconsider *The Morgan* as a place to relearn about our country’s past; their own ancestral past; and racial and ethnic, social, and religious equality.

--That people are inspired to re-think whaling—the industry is more significant to American experience than many recall. It’s more than *Moby-Dick*.

--That people may even recognize that whaleships are the social networks of the past—a place of diverse people going to diverse places, connecting through necessity and desire.
Final Hopes

--That the Voyage incites curiosity in artifacts, museums, history, and heritage.

--That the Voyage stimulates a greater understanding of and empathy for others due to common (sometimes unexpected) heritage and ancestral experiences.
Final Hopes

“We’re doing this for a future that doesn’t exist yet,” (Mystic Seaport’s Dana Hewson, in The Charles W. Morgan: America’s Last Wooden Whaling Ship (2014))

* * *

We’re also doing this for a past we don’t even know we’ve had.
As Voyagers, we have the amazing privilege of being privy to history, accessible to it and accessing it freely. We have the honor of being able to experience what most others cannot and never will. But as Voyagers, too, we have the responsibility of taking our experiences, recording them, and making sense of them in diverse ways that are accessible to thousands upon thousands of people not in our positions. And we have to make them works of art—as if the Morgan and the experience itself isn’t already its own unique art form.


