

May 7, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2428 words.

Tags: Writing, Inspiration, Process, Beginnings, Identity.



# On what it means to be an Azorean artist

**An interview with writer Nuno Costa Santos**

**Your work covers a number of genres, and you've written for both the stage and the screen. How did you start? How did your creative process evolve over the years?**

It all started with me writing short stories in the house where I lived in São Miguel, Azores. I lived in the parish of Livramento. Those short stories were inspired by the juvenile books I was reading at the time. I remember writing a crime story at the age of 13 or 14. Later on, my father would find that story and ask me, "Did you write this?" Experiencing some level of pride, I told him I had written it. I was definitely influenced by the kind of books I was reading at the time. At some point, I started writing poems and chronicles. Then, as I grew up, after paying a few visits to my father's library (where I came across the book that has made the deepest impression on me, ever, *The Outsider* by Albert Camus), I started to feel the need to order books from the mainland. Especially, poetry books. I remember a book by Hölderlin and another one by William Blake. I asked my parents to bring them to me from Lisbon. Those were quite specific titles; it would be almost impossible to find them in the Azores.

Plus, I believe it is important to state that music has always had a fundamental role in my development. My friends and I, we all loved music very much. We lived in the Azores, so we had to order records—lots of records—from the mainland. We used to get them from Contraverso, an independent record store in Bairro Alto, Lisbon (no longer in business). We enjoyed a wide variety of music. From 4AD's catalogue to John Zorn, all the way to Meredith Monk and Zoviet France. We also paid close attention to the Madchester movement, with the Stone Roses and other bands such as Inspiral Carpets, Happy Mondays, and New Fads. We were also listening to Ride, Slowdive and My Bloody Valentine. We enjoyed De La Soul, Public Enemy, and Ice-T. And jazz.

It was mostly music and literature, but also cinema, some painting, and a little bit of sculpture. These were the pivotal arts in my development, during my adolescence in the Azores.

**Do you have a ritual or a particular approach to the way you work?**

I write a lot at a specific café moderately close to the place where I live. I like rituals, and I enjoy being faithful to this one: I go to that café, take my laptop out and, after a quick read through the daily news, I start writing. I like to plan my day in advance, to plan what I'll do with the hours according to my writing needs.

When I have to write a novel, or other form of long text, I choose to work in the mornings. Only that kind of discipline allows me to make real progress. I also like to write in libraries. Sometimes, however, I need to have some noise around me. I like to sense life happening around me when I write. I always carry a notebook, so whenever an idea crosses my mind I write it down. Sometimes, I can even understand my own handwriting.

**How is your creative process different when you work in fiction as opposed to poetry or, say, something for TV?**

Fiction, long fiction (novels), is an exercise in discipline. Pure and simple discipline. One starts by writing down ideas in notebooks here and there, and then he or she has to make some sense of it all and create a coherent narrative. I am an advocate of having a predetermined number of hours dedicated to writing that kind of long-form fiction. Otherwise it is too easy to get lost or unfocused.

Poetry also needs discipline—especially when it comes to editing the poems. Writing poetry can be considered more spontaneous—it can happen in a lot of very mundane situations. The most important thing is to always carry something onto which one can write down ideas as soon as they surface. Then, one must work on those ideas.

TV is professional work. There is a deadline dictating the screenwriter's life. There are goals, specific deadlines, an entire team expecting our work to be delivered on time. It's a collective effort that does not answer to romantic attitudes towards creativity.

**How important is it for young writers to attempt to work within different genres? What is there to be learned?**

I have the conviction that by experimenting with different genres, one gets to evolve as a writer or, at least, to understand what does and does not work for him or her. There are genres that intertwine and communicate with one another. And then, there is the idea of the whole experience, one that is still very strong when one has just started writing. That stream of ideas that many artists and creative people experience when they're young deserves to be materialized into something—drafts of masterpieces to come. Even if they end up as creations we don't really value that much later on.

I believe writers should listen a lot. Listen to the people talking at the cafes, in the streets, in the subway, at the local markets, at home. To put their ears to good use will help them later on in the writing. Especially when it comes to writing dialogue. A writer is someone who works with transformation. To do that, he or she must master the transformation of raw materials. The words other people use is one of those raw materials, and one of the most important ones.

**You are perceived as an Azorean writer. How much is your work influenced by the Azores, their landscape and culture? And how important is it for an artist to, wherever he or she comes from, create a body of work that talks about his or her culture?**

I like to be designated as an "Azorean writer." Honestly, the idea that there is a common correlation between my work and the place where I grew up fills me with a certain sense of pride. I don't fear what is local, regional. I don't fear the connection between my writing and a concrete piece of land. Even though most of the times I am just described as a writer, or screenwriter, or journalist, or critic, to be labeled as an Azorean author is something I welcome with all empathy and sweetness, for it is a matter of identity.

Nowadays there is this apology of cosmopolitanism, but I don't think feeling a deep connection to the ground is incompatible with that idea of being able to comfortably breathe anywhere in the world. The Azorean country is always inside of me, even when I'm abroad. Even in Lisbon, where I live, for instance. It doesn't mean I'm always thinking about it, but it is there, always ready to announce itself whenever the circumstances demand it to or whenever I want to.

Everything I've read until this day, and everything I've lived, it all influences my writing. I feel the Azorean landscape and its weather also influence what I write. When I write about the Azores, I try to let myself be influenced by the humors of the weather and those of the landscape. I believe it makes a lot of sense.

I want to write many stories about the archipelago. Because there are many stories to be told from and about the Azores. As I feel a special inclination towards starting with real live stories—things I hear here and there, things I read in the papers—I feel the will to investigate them, so one day I can turn them into literature.

I think the Azores need to be written about more often—their traditions, their contrasts, the people who have been living there for many years and those who have just arrived, their lost legends and new tales. And I feel like, as a writer, I have the duty to tell those stories. One of writing's missions is to portray the origins, the places people come from. One of the reasons I feel connected to American writing has to do with that: the relationship with the land, with the place one comes from. Many of the American authors I admire write about their small hometowns and their people. To go there and find an opportunity to tell the story of men and the story of humanity is the real challenge.

**Is there a typically Azorean tradition in the arts or in music? How would you describe it? And how important is it to encourage and preserve those traditions?**

Yes, there is a tradition. The centuries of isolation originated a will to create, a cultural environment of our own, an identity. Be it in the traditional or popular arts or in the so called higher culture, there are some elements that always seem to be there. Speaking of what I know best, literature, there are a few recurring themes. One of them is the return; to return to the island or the islands. It's an obsession for me, and I do have that obsession as an author. There are many Azorean authors, from poetry to prose, that felt a need to convey the isolation, the weather, the landscape, the perseverance, the need to go and the will return one day. Each one of them in his or her own way.

Identities, naturally, shift—they're not permanent—they gather new influences, new contributions. Identities question themselves, which is a healthy thing. The Azores, today, are a territory that, while maintaining ancestral characteristics, is washed by new winds that have some influence on it. So, that being said, it is only natural that new elements arise, giving new meanings and flavors to the statement "That's so Azorean."

**Several young artists from the Azores I talked to told me there is this pressure about writing or singing in English so they can reach a wider audience. As someone who writes exclusively in Portuguese, what is your experience with that? How important is it to see your work in translation?**

Even though, my own language is more than enough for me, translated work is definitely very important. I understand those who sing and feel the need to be understood by wider audiences. Music festivals and a sense of communion that comes with them will feed that will to share that experience in a common idiom.

But I also understand and respect those who want to use their mother tongue as their weapon. I've been paying attention to the Azorean rap phenomenon lately, for instance, and I think it only gets stronger by being sung in Azorean Portuguese—or that of the islands of São Miguel and Terceira, which is where the projects I listened to come from.

This means there is room for all possibilities. I mean, it just feels so good to be here, in 2018, and being able to listen to the Malian Tuaregs Tinariwen. Just like the Italian Paolo Conte, who is celebrating his 80th birthday this year. And also, the Portuguese Legendary Tigerman, who chose to sing in English. Or Maria Bettencourt. And Rafael Carvalho, who chose the language of his instrument, the viola da terra.

**What do you do when you experience writer's block? Or whenever something just doesn't feel right?**

I talk to someone. Dialogue helps relax the mind and new ideas are planted as people talk to me. Sometimes one phone call is enough, other times meeting a friend at a café or a bar will do the trick. To take the focus out of ourselves for a while helps us find new creative ways. We shouldn't be prisoners to the traps our brain creates. To read or to go out for a walk can also be rather helpful.

When it feels like something isn't working, sometimes it is good to leave it for a while, to let it cool off. If a chapter of a book isn't quite as I'd like it to be, often the best thing to do is to leave it as it is and come back and work on it later on. It's like that TV remote control that sometimes is too stubborn and won't work. There's no use in smashing it into the wall. The best thing to do is to leave it on the couch and read a book. After a while, feeling calmer, we check to see it is working again.

**Any advice for young writers? Is there anything you'd like to have known when you were younger that you ended up learning the hard way? Do you have a specific piece of advice for young Azorean, or Portuguese writers in general?**

I don't give advice. I might share some tips, though. Advice can be too much of a paternalistic gesture. Here's a suggestion: For those willing to take writing seriously, it only makes sense that they'd want to improve it as much as possible. That can only be achieved with a lot of reading, a lot of writing, and a lot of rewriting. That can only be achieved by discussing with others and being able to confront our own ideas and doubts. To improve as a writer one should not be spending the entire day staring at social media; that can be harmful for those who need silence to think and to write. I believe it is very important to be able to disconnect.

**At the place where you find yourself now, how would you define success?**

For those who write, success is to write; to look for ways of being imaginative and rigorous in your writing; to have an ensemble of people, be it larger or smaller, who care about what you write. It is also about learning to deal with the ups and downs, having confidence in the urge to convey something on writing, and living through those days when it seems like there's no point to writing at all.

Nuno Costa Santos recommends:

"Sol de Março", by Medeiros/Lucas—a music record

"É na Terra Não é Na Lua"—a movie directed by Gonçalo Tocha

"30 Crónicas" — a book by Emanuel Jorge Botelho

Arco 8, a bar in Ponta Delgada, Azores.

Livraria Solmar—a bookstore in Ponta Delgada, Azores.

Name

Nuno Costa Santos

Vocation

Writer

Fact



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