

# TELLING OUR STORY, BECAUSE NO ONE ELSE WILL

## Cape Verdean Transnational Identity Formation as Knowledge Production<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Seemingly from birth, Cape Verdeans are charged by their elders to go forth and “tell their story.” Yet the Cape Verdean story remains relatively unknown despite its relevance to world history and ongoing processes of globalization. Nevertheless, Cape Verdeans refuse to be rendered “statistically insignificant” in the American imagination. This article explores recent scholarship and personal standpoints produced by people exploring Cape Verdean transnational identity as a means of making their truths known, thus redirecting the recurrent scholarly gaze from its focus on knowledge production among anglophone diaspora communities to the equally-relevant lusophone experience.

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**RESUMO:** Aparentemente desde o seu nascimento, os caboverdianos são encorajados pelos seus anciãos para “contar as suas histórias.” Mesmo assim sendo, a história cabo-verdiana continua a ser relativamente desconhecida apesar da sua relevância na história do mundo e do processo em curso de globalização. No entanto, cabo-verdianos se recusam a ser visto como “estatisticamente insignificantes” nas mentes dos Norte-americanos. Este artigo explora conhecimentos científicos e pontos de vistas de pessoas envolvidas a pesquisar a identidade transnacional de Cabo-verdianos como forma de tornar as suas histórias conhecida, assim redirecionando o recorrente olhar acadêmico a partir do seu foco na produção de conhecimentos entre comunidades da diáspora anglófona equiparada igualmente a relevante experiência lusófona.

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## A Call to Action

In summer 1995, the Smithsonian Institution held its annual Folklife Festival on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. That year, one of the cultural groups “on display” was Cape Verde, which was showcased in programming titled “The Cape Verdean Connection.” That summer, I participated in the program as a Cape Verdean-American, graduate student Fellow. While there, I met Ray Almeida—a rather gregarious Cape Verdean community activist and policy analyst, well known in both the D.C. area and in New England, who was also involved in planning the Cape Verdean exhibit. When I informed him enthusiastically of my plan to conduct my anthropological dissertation research on the Cape Verdean community of Boston, Ray asked me a rather simple yet perplexing question that shaped the trajectory of my research from that point forward: “Cape Verdeans . . . so what?” I took Ray’s brash tone of cynicism (which I grew to appreciate) as a challenge. Eventually I came to interpret it in many ways: as a form of self-deprecating disrespect of our people; as a slight to my chosen research field; but also as a barometer of the broad sentiments about and perceptions of Cape Verdeans held by the general public, given the limited scholarship at the time.

I have since come to understand Ray’s question as a call to properly contextualize the Cape Verdean experience—a call to reveal the relevance of this small immigrant and diasporic community. My work has been but a modest contribution to this quest, and the call is perhaps one without an end, for answering it requires a commitment not only to discovery but also to advocacy.<sup>2</sup> Uncovering the Cape Verdean experience in the islands and in diaspora, within the context of both historical and contemporary processes of transnationalism and globalization, provides us with alternative perspectives that may lead to innovative solutions to social problems.<sup>3</sup> But the call must first be answered. This essay thus also serves as a call for increased research on a population that is surprisingly still relatively unknown and, as a result, has been underserved in some communities and faces underrepresentation in others. Cape Verdeans are the people of my youth, my recent past, and my present. With intimate knowledge of this complex and rich community from my childhood, I find it stunning how silenced our “story” remains both in history and in the contemporary era.

The relative absence of Cape Verdean scholarship in several relevant disciplines, including anthropology and African studies, is not only striking at the theoretical level; it is also important to note in redressing the impact this underrepresentation has on diasporic Cape Verdean communities in the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere. The lack of scholarly attention paid to Cape Verdean lives past and present stunts the knowledge production necessary

to contribute to the cultural competence of individuals who must interact with and serve these communities rendered invisible in a sea of socio-cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity that surrounds them. A more telling comparison germane to this article is the way in which underrepresented communities feel compelled to make their experiences known anyway, despite and against an impulse to remain silenced. In their attempts to understand, create, and disseminate their transnational identities in globalized contexts, Cape Verdeans in diaspora are effectively engaging in knowledge production, both for themselves and for others.

### **Cape Verdean Production of Knowledge and Truths**

In the trailer of a recent documentary film produced by Mike Costa entitled “Proud to Be Cape Verdean: A Look at Cape Verdeans in the Golden State,” Claire Andrade-Watkins, a historian and prolific Cape Verdean American filmmaker, said the following: “We are setting the standard for how our story is to be recorded. We’ll find the Cape Verdean story. And we will be the ones who will be the architects of telling that story.”<sup>4</sup>

This article focuses on a variety of contemporary attempts made by Cape Verdeans to be heard, to make their truths known, and to answer the “So what?” question for themselves, taking it upon themselves to “tell their stories.” Identity formation, that negotiation process undertaken through and necessitated by transnational movement, inevitably involves storytelling. Both the stories we tell ourselves, and the stories we tell others about ourselves, make meaning out of our experiences and thus inform our self-concept.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Cape Verde community, in effect, stories form the foundation of what we might term a diasporic yet organically-emergent oral historiography—a reflective understanding of history that has helped Cape Verdeans adjust to new sociocultural locales.

The tradition and practice of storytelling runs deep in a myriad of cultures across the globe and often forms the basis of the social norms, values, and attitudes of a community. Such stories are usually first told during childhood, as life lessons to be learned, and then passed down from generation to generation. Oral history research has revealed that early Cape Verdeans transmigrants often relayed such stories while traversing the Atlantic in packet boats at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> An example found in Cape Verdean society is the corpus of stories about *Nho Lobo* (“Mr. Wolf”), the trickster character that always gets into trouble as he struggles at the crossroads of right and wrong, similar to a host of animal folk trickster characters found in other diasporic African cultures.<sup>7</sup> Some contemporary diasporic Cape Verdeans have taken it upon themselves to educate others

about this tradition, as a means of keeping the tradition alive through public history performance. For example, Len Cabral is an award-winning, professional Cape Verdean-American storyteller born in Providence, RI. The “great grandson of a Cape Verdean whaler whose grandparents immigrated to America from the islands off the coast of West Africa,” Cabral has been telling stories of *Nho Lobo* and other folktales in the New England area for the past 40 years.<sup>8</sup>

While oral history is a valued tradition, the postcolonial social milieu in which most people on the planet live places greater value on the written word. This fact is not lost on the Cape Verdean diasporic community. Our histories, as with others’, are not codified in mainstream history or anthropology textbooks. In the quest to wrestle down a sense of invalidation due to this absence, Cape Verdeans have proactively captured their sense of self in a variety of ways.

Some individuals have turned to visual representation. Premier among these is Ron Barboza, who has utilized photography to document Cape Verdean culture as a means of making sense of Cape Verdean identity for himself as well as to educate others. He began with his first visit to the islands in 1975, followed by several trips thereafter, and has amassed well over 500,000 images, many of which have now become iconic.<sup>9</sup> In his biography in a recent installation in 2012, Ron is quoted saying the following:

My work not only brought me closer to my heritage, but it also connects me spiritually to my cultural roots. I have attempted to bring to the Cape Verdean-American Community and others the unadulterated images of Cape Verde. My vision is to raise the level of consciousness, of the very existence of Cape Verde.<sup>10</sup>

At a more recent exhibition, Ron also articulated the power of visual representation as a means of self-making, stating “When you bring a camera, you begin to create yourself.”<sup>11</sup> While many Cape Verdeans in the New England community know Ron by his longstanding reputation, his work has also found its way into academe, through a master’s thesis in anthropology by Rebecca Mobley. In this study, Ron explicitly states the intent of his artistry, which is to encourage future researchers to “pick up the mantle” and conduct further study of Cape Verdean heritage.<sup>12</sup>

Others have taken to the Internet to “get their stories out.” In recent years, YouTube has become a particularly interesting venue by which Cape Verdeans are now attempting to assert and share their understandings of their identities as created in diaspora. For example, a young Cape Verdean woman who calls herself “sweetp” articulates the basic tenets of negotiating identity as a second-generation Cape Verdean American in a YouTube

video entitled “BURRITO TALK: What is a Cape Verdean?”<sup>13</sup> In this video, “sweetp” provides a narrative through which she details the litany of criteria to which a typical diasporic Cape Verdean subscribes, including colonial history, transnational movement and diasporic adjustment, and racial identity politics as enacted vis-à-vis other communities of color in the U.S.

When Cape Verdeans take to the Internet to explain who they are, or to make some type of a statement regarding their identity, the public posting frequently creates an intragroup dialogue among those living in the diaspora.<sup>14</sup> So, while the intent of posts such as sweetp’s is to educate those who are unfamiliar with Cape Verdeans, typically it is people of Cape Verdean descent who post responses—usually of gratitude—for “getting the story out.”

Presenting one’s story or “truth” implies the ability to privilege certain memories, representations, and identities. Ultimately, when one’s “truths” are presented, they are done so as a means through which to connect the past and the present. For many Cape Verdeans, making sense of their identities invokes stories of and experiences on the islands. For the Cape Verdean living in diaspora—including those born in the diaspora—there is still the impulse to understand oneself in relationship to this historical site of memory—the islands.

Consider the case of a young man living in Germany, of mixed Cape Verdean and German ancestry, who attempts to understand his Cape Verdean identity by reaching out to others before making an inaugural trip to Cape Verde. In a short documentary, “Cabo Verde Inside,” posted on the travel website, [www.capeverde.com](http://www.capeverde.com), Alexander Schnoor simultaneously displays the “homework” he conducted in preparation for his trip—reaching out to other Cape Verdeans of mixed descent—while providing information to those who visit the site with insight into the impact and scope of the Cape Verdean diaspora of Europe.<sup>15</sup> Used as a travel advertisement of sorts, the documentary also provides information for anyone who is preparing to embark on a trip to the islands. However, for Schnoor, as the title implies, the documentation of his personal journey of discovery is one that implies his understanding of Cape Verdean identity as primordially linked to a cultural heritage site—the islands—through which he attempts to articulate his sense of Cape Verdeanness for himself. In the end, Schnoor comes to think of Cape Verde as a place to which he belongs, now actively imagined as a newly constructed second “home.”

### **Considering Cape Verdean Transnationality**

Cape Verdean transnationality transcends national identity—both by design, and by virtue of the fact that the majority of people identifying as

Cape Verdean in the world today currently live not on the islands but in diaspora. Cape Verdean diasporic sensibility also relies upon people interpolating deep heritage connections between each other, even as strangers. Cape Verdeans are at home in the world, even as non-Cape Verdeans attempt to reconcile their identities for them, often invoking the quintessential “What are you?” question, followed by guesses. They are also at home in the world by the ways they themselves enact their identities in multiple social contexts, and in multilingual ways.

To understand the African diaspora as a site of historical memory to which Cape Verdeans are connected is to acknowledge original conceptualizations of diaspora (i.e., dispersal from and connection to the homeland) while recognizing the continual re-creation of diasporic communities in the present. Germane to the Cape Verdean example, an understanding of the significance of a past process of Afro-Atlantic dispersion is essential to the contemporary examination of their diasporic community formations.

Given the present state of rapid global social mobility facilitated by economic trends, the concept of diaspora is understood in relation to local and global phenomena, whereby the “here” and “there” are no longer mutually exclusive but are in constant dialogue.<sup>16</sup> With continuous technological advancement, contemporary Cape Verdean diasporic populations enact ever more fluid transnational identities in response to their dislocations and relocations. This is witnessed in a myriad of contexts: improvements in transportation (e.g., more direct and frequent flights and ferries to and from the islands); political engagement across geographic boundaries, witnessed by frequent visitations to diasporic communities by Cape Verdean government officials; and sustained global consumption across locales constructed simultaneously as “home” and “diaspora.”

An examination of Cape Verdean diasporic identity formation is irrevocably tied to stories, both individual and collective. Indeed, in some ways, the notion of “telling our story” is one rooted in the very nature of the term *diaspora*—a term that signals the ties of responsibility engendered between a nation and its emigrants abroad.<sup>17</sup> Cape Verdeans in diaspora often feel that they have in effect inherited a responsibility by their very presence to “tell their stories”—along with those of their ancestors, to whom they often feel indebted. Indeed, it is a tie similar to the ways in which diaspora is implicated in the discourses of development, whereby one’s country of origin is dependent upon engagement with its emigrants in new and creative ways. So, too, is the broader transnational Cape Verdean community dependent on itself to disseminate the story as an intangible form of remittance. The circulation of identity stories, through online venues in particular, becomes a transnational act of connection through which the

diaspora is constituted and reconstituted among itself and to others—often, on a daily basis.

The Cape Verdean case exemplifies post-colonial dwelling in displacement, the rearrangements of kinship constructed transnationally, *sodadi* or the longing for one's country that was left in body but that lives on in the imagination, and the search for identity and a sense of belonging that conjoins the past and present. Cape Verdeans produce and reproduce identities as a means of maintaining connection to heritage. The longstanding example of Cape Verdean transnationalism, fueled in the late 18th century by the whaling industry, and continuing into the present day, serves as an instructive lens through which to compare contemporary and emergent processes now occurring among many other diasporic communities.<sup>18</sup>

### **Cape Verdean Anthropology and Advocacy**

As members of a community rendered virtually invisible—by social dislocation into concentrated areas, by a hyper focus on larger immigrant and diaspora communities, and even by academe in its limited scholarly attention—Cape Verdean social scientists have taken it upon themselves to wed their community advocacy to their intellectual pursuits. Ethnographic research such as that of Cape Verdean healthcare policy scholar, Dawna Thomas, speaks to the relative invisibility of disabled Cape Verdeans in New England.<sup>19</sup> Hers has been a dedicated and tireless journey for nearly two decades to produce cultural knowledge needed to reduce barriers to efficient and effective health care interventions for this community. Yet Thomas has recently observed that cultural misunderstanding persists among health care providers despite the slow and steady growth of scholarship on Cape Verdeans.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, much recent scholarship produced on people of Cape Verdean ancestry has collectively contributed to our knowledge of many topics, including globalized labor arrangements, particularly in Lisbon and other European cities; entanglements of gender and familial relations; manifestations of cultural and linguistic variations in urban spaces; and overall patterns of transnational mobility and the attachments that are facilitated through movement. Each of these areas of research properly situates the Cape Verdean, and Cape Verdean diaspora, experience as one that stands poised to inform similar investigations of contemporary global processes in other communities.

Recent scholarship being produced—some by Cape Verdeans, some by those who are still engaged in their graduate studies, and many of whom have some connection to anthropology—include studies on Cape Verdean

migration to Portugal and the deployment of Kriolu rap music as a means of cultural adjustment; investigations of mutual-aid structures facilitated by Cape Verdean labor migrants in Portugal; studies of urban Cape Verdean youth, identity and citizenship in Mindelo; studies of migration to Cape Verde and the development of expatriate communities therein; studies of housing dilemmas faced by Cape Verdean migrants in Toronto; and studies on perceptions of Cape Verdean migration as seen through the relationship between Cape Verde and the diaspora.<sup>21</sup> The contributions in this special issue join this latest proliferation of Cape Verdean knowledge production.

The question to be raised here speaks not to the nature of the viability of so-called “native anthropology”—of the ability of Cape Verdeans to conduct research about ourselves and for ourselves as a means of “telling our story.” Rather, it pertains to the questioning of the responsibility and commitment that the discipline has to uncover products of knowledge that in turn contribute to our knowledge and awareness of the complexities of contemporary human societies and experiences.

The lesson here is that it is unrealistic for those of us in the social scientific community to rely upon people of Cape Verdean ancestry to manage (against barriers that remain insurmountable for many) to gain access to institutions of higher education and produce knowledge about ourselves. This pattern of native scholarship will not sufficiently advance knowledge in areas that are needed now—knowledge that can and must have an impact on “applied” projects for service providers who need the information to properly care for their clients. Clearly, other scholars are needed to answer the call, and to do so in a way that is not simply reduced to an impulse to research a particularly obscure topic for the sole purpose of cutting one’s anthropological teeth. A commitment to bringing Cape Verdean scholarship to the fore in anthropology, as part of a larger project of “lusophonizing” a discipline that is largely dominated by anglophone analyses of the wider African diaspora, must be done critically, and in engagement with members of the communities that would benefit from that type of knowledge production.

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## Notes

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2. Cf. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 36 (1995), 409–20; Louise Lamphere, "The Convergence of Applied, Practicing, and Public Anthropology in the 21st Century," *Human Organization* 63, 4 (2004), 431–43.

3. Throughout this paper, the terms "transnationalism," "transnational," and "transnationality" will be used to describe the resultant and emergent processes that enable individuals to feel a sense of belonging across multiple nation states and territories, as individuals continue to traverse the globe for a host of reasons, including escaping ecological and societal crises, reuniting with family, pursuing economic opportunities, and the like.

4. Mike Costa, *Proud to be Cape Verdean: A Look at Cape Verdeans in the Golden State* (Side Door Entertainment, 2012).

5. Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

6. Ron Barboza, "Talk at *Virtual Cape Verde Exhibit*," May 31, 2014, Rochambeau Public Library, Providence, RI.

7. Some English translations of wolf stories appear in: Elsie Clews, *Folk-Lore from the Cape Verde Islands*, Part I (Cambridge, American Folk-Lore Society, 1923); for discussion of comparative African diasporic trickster stories, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1988).

8. <http://www.lencabral.com/>.

9. Barboza, *op cit*.

10. <http://bristolcc.edu/gallery/Archives/AristidesPereira.html>

11. Barboza, *op cit*.

12. Rebecca Mobley, *Picturing Identity: On Being Cape Verdean-American through the Lens of Ronald Barboza* (M.A. thesis, Indiana University, 2004), 9.

13. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwEuDLNuFx8>.

14. Gina Sánchez Gibau, "Cyber CVs: Online Conversations on Cape Verdean Diaspora Identities," in: Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal (Eds.) *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics and Community* (Reno, NV, University of Nevada Press, 2010), 110–21.

15. <http://www.capeverde.com/life/documentary.html>.

16. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton Blanc, "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration," *Anthropological Quarterly* 68, 1 (1995), 48–63.

17. Iolanda Évora, "Migration or Diaspora? Perceptions of the Cape Verdean Dispersion in the World," Working Paper 115, Centre de Estudos sobre Africa e do

Desenvolvimento, Instituto Superior de Economia e Gestão (Lisbon), 2013. [http://pascal.iseg.utl.pt/~cesa/files/Doc\\_trabalho/WP115-2.pdf](http://pascal.iseg.utl.pt/~cesa/files/Doc_trabalho/WP115-2.pdf) (accessed 9 June 2014).

18. Donald Warrin, "Filling out a Crew in the Islands," in: *So Ends this Day: The Portuguese in American Whaling, 1765–1927* (Dartmouth, Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, 2010), 53–63.

19. Dawna M. Thomas, "A Cape Verdean Perspective on Disability: An Invisible Minority in New England," *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 2 (2014), 185–210.

20. *Ibid.*, 190.

21. Derek Pardue, "Cape Verdean Creole and the Politics of Scene-Making in Lisbon, Portugal," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 22 (2012), E42–E60; Samuel Weeks, "Marxian Crisis, Maussian Gift: The Mutual-help Practices of Lisbon's Cape Verdean Labor Immigrants in an Age of Austerity," *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* 24 (2012), 27–43; Pedro F. Marcelino, *The New Migration Paradigm of Transitional African Spaces: Inclusion, Exclusion, Liminality, and Economic Competition in Transit Countries, A Case Study on the Cape Verde Islands* (Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011); Carlos Teixeira, "Barriers and Outcomes in the Housing Searches of New Immigrants and Refugees: A Case Study of 'Black' Africans in Toronto's Rental Market," *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 23 (2008), 253–76; Évora, "Migration or Diaspora?" *op cit.*

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