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# The Common Community Made Uncommon in Brian Sousa's *Almost Gone*

Roxane Hughes

This essay complicates the notion of commonality on which definitions of community are based, and focuses on the dissonant, disparate, and discontinuous elements at the heart of communities in settings of migration. Taking as a starting point the definition of *uncommon community* given by the American Portuguese Studies Association in the context of its 2016 conference, this essay explores the literary representation of the disconnected Portuguese American community as exemplified in Brian Sousa's *Almost Gone* (2013). This novel-in-stories approaches Portuguese migration from the multiple and conflicting viewpoints of three generations of Portuguese American immigrants. Through the narration of fragmented yet intertwined stories, Sousa portrays the personal and familial struggles faced by Portuguese immigrants in their search of self, and comments more generally on the complexity of the immigrant experience as the protagonists' individual and collective sense of alienation paradoxically separates and unites them across generations. By depicting a conflicted community in perpetual transit between time and place, as well as submerged in literal and metaphorical waters, Sousa subverts notions of unified, exclusionary, and common grounds that permeate definitions of communities and instead proposes a more nuanced representation of what makes a community in the context of migration.

A community is generally defined by its commonality, be it a shared place, language, ethnicity, religion, set of values or experience (*Merriam-Webster*). Little attention has, however, been granted to the internal space of the disparate and uncommon in theoretical approaches to communities. By reflecting on the notion of *uncommon community* for its biennial con-

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ference (October 2016, Stanford University), the American Portuguese Studies Association (APSA) emphasized the necessity to discuss “the increasing emergence of communities based on intense differences” in “settings of multilingualism, immigration and transnationalism” (n. pag.). The Association urges us to consider “the disparate elements within a common collective,” and focus on “the dissonance in consonance” (n. pag.). APSA thus revises notions of unified, exclusionary, and fixed grounds and looks instead at the fragmentation, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and fluidity of communal places and identities to offer “alternative forms of togetherness” across differences and ruptures (Liska 8).

How is the uncommon community, as defined by APSA,<sup>1</sup> constructed and represented in literary terms? What are the techniques used by writers to revise definitions of communities based on commonalities and address contemporary problems of being together across differences? I propose to discuss this theoretical concept through the example of Brian Sousa’s “novel-in-stories” *Almost Gone*.<sup>2</sup> The genre of novel-in-stories mirrors the uncommon community it depicts as the fragmented whole simultaneously sets apart and unites the independent stories told, while amplifying the *uncommon* grounds, temporality, and viewpoints that divide *and* join protagonists. Indeed, *Almost Gone* presents the Portuguese diasporic community of Narragansett, Rhode Island, from the multifarious viewpoints of protagonists whose relation varies in time and space but connects Portugal and the American continent, then and now. Sousa complicates commonality as he focuses on this diasporic community’s inherent oppositions, continuous relocation, and fragmentation. The temporal, spatial, and generational shift from one story to the next accentuates the theme of migration that permeates the novel-in-stories, as the protagonists individually relocate – or wish to relocate

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<sup>1</sup> This essay does not refer to the religious connotation of the term “uncommon community” that has been used more extensively in Christian studies to represent the diversity of the Christian community united across differences. Joey Letourneau, for instance in *The Power of Uncommon Unity*, draws attention to the uncommon community of apostles discussed in the Bible (Acts 4) that “came together in an uncommon unity that Jesus Himself had prayed for, and that the Spirit was willing to lead them and empower them from. They *came together diversely, but with one voice*. They were shaken from their old ways, and supernaturally bound together within something – or someone – new” (13-14; my emphasis). In the context of this essay, I complicate the notions of unity and oneness to draw attention instead to the plurality of dissonant voices at the heart of uncommon communities.

<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Brian Sousa who commented on an early version of this paper and gave me invaluable insight into his work.

– to new grounds to escape the loss of loved ones and/or their irredeemable past errors (infidelity, forbidden love, murder). Yet relocation, or self-exile, does not bring them relief but rather magnifies their traumatic memories. These multifarious shifts thus capture the protagonists' conflicting positions within the community: While their inability to escape their haunting past isolates them from one another, it is their experience of individual alienation that paradoxically unites them across differences. Indeed, what binds them together throughout *Almost Gone* is not their cultural identification as Portuguese in a diasporic context, but their shared relocation and sense of fragmented identity, estrangement, and un-belonging.

The uncommon community of Sousa's *Almost Gone* is further embodied by the water imagery that dominates the novel and complements the discontinuous temporality and geography in subverting notions of fixed and unified grounds. Bodies of water in diasporic contexts are ambivalent spaces that refuse fixity and categorization and thus aptly portray the fluidity of the diasporic subject, caught between movement – physical and imagined – and a contrasting sense of paralysis. Literally and metaphorically set in the middle of the ocean, Sousa's Portuguese American protagonists, submerged – if not drowned – by countercurrents, *meander* between here and there, now and then, in their perpetual endeavors to reconstruct their self-identity and come to terms with their old secrets and lies. The multifaceted ocean thus epitomizes the variegated mental states and inner conflicts of the characters grappling with their sense of guilt and contrasting longing for redemption and relief. By using water images to complement the temporal and geographical conflicts permeating *Almost Gone*, Sousa thus offers a nuanced depiction of what makes a community in the context of migration, as he paints an image of a drifting community whose disconnection and dissonance better illustrate the lasting effect of trauma on the forging of individual and collective identities across borders.

Sousa's genre of novel-in-stories is akin to what Forrest L. Ingram called the "short story cycle" in the 1970s. This genre presents the collection of independent and interconnected stories that combine the brevity, intensity, lyricism, and fragmentation of the short story, with the narrative wholeness, continuity, and unity of the novel (Patea 9-10). In other words, it is a hybrid and "disruptive" genre (Lundén 20) that refuses fixity, as the debate regarding its definition and precise denomina-



tion, started fifty years ago, attests.<sup>3</sup> Its destabilizing nature lies in its juxtaposition of “variety and unity, separateness and interconnectedness, fragmentation and continuity, openness and closure,” and in the tension such juxtapositions create, as Rolf Lundén explains (12). Oppositions between singularity and plurality, as well as individuality and collectivity, can also be noted through the genre’s “double tendency of asserting the individuality of its components on the one hand, and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole,” as Ingram observes (19). This genre is therefore particularly suited to explore the relationship of the individual to the community, as its interconnected yet independent stories situate the individual within and against the community to which s/he belongs (Davis 8). Its hybridity and multiplicity of forms, as well as its destabilizing nature, thus offer myriads of possibilities for Sousa to explore the private and collective conflicts and tensions at the heart of the Portuguese diasporic community depicted in *Almost Gone*.

*Almost Gone* is divided into fifteen stories that can be read independently but remain connected when read together; a separation and connection that highlights, on the one hand, the protagonists’ attempt at self-assertion, and, on the other, the ineluctable presence of the community. When read individually, the short story depicts an intense and dramatic fragment, or a “slice or snapshot of reality,” in Viorica Patea’s words (11), that becomes representative of the protagonist’s larger world (Pasco 420). The fragmented and elliptical nature, as well as the intensity and dramatic potential of the short story, are emphasized in *Almost Gone*, as a majority of stories are internally fragmented (11 out of 15), with the storyline often interrupted by flashbacks and/or juxtapositions of episodes. Offering a collage of fragmented and discontinuous narratives, the stories of *Almost Gone* refuse linear progression, and epitomize the internal fragmentation and conflicts of the protagonists, whose self-fulfillment is often thwarted by their inescapable trauma and resulting sense of estrangement from and un-belonging to the community.

The fragmentation of *Almost Gone* into independent stories is contrasted with the simultaneous interconnectedness and inseparability of the stories that mirror the protagonists’ connection across differences.

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<sup>3</sup> This genre has been renamed over the years as “short story sequence” by Robert Luscher in 1989, “composite novel” by Maggie Dunn and Ann R. Morris in 1995, and as “short story composite” by Rolf Lundén in 1999, just to mention a few. It is now more neutrally called “linked stories.” For a detailed analysis of the debate surrounding this terminology, see Lundén 12-19.

The novel-in-stories follows a Portuguese American family spanning over four generations: Nuno and Helena, a married couple who left Portugal in 1941; their American-born son Paulo and his wife Claire; their grandson, Scott and his wife Hailey, and Emily, their deceased great-granddaughter. The stories of this extended Portuguese American family are complemented by the stories of Catarina, a thirty-year-old first-generation Portuguese immigrant; and Mateo, Helena's haunting lover who suffered a tragic death in Portugal at Nuno's hands before their migration to the United States. Catarina's and Nuno's stories give sense to the transnational struggles of the community, as they link Portugal and the United States, past and present. Moreover, as the eight protagonists' lives are interconnected, so are the stories they tell. Similar anecdotes and memories are told in a "kaleidoscope collage of different perspectives," as Sousa declares (qtd. in Ledoux n. pag.), the kaleidoscope figuratively epitomizing the variegated and constantly changing narrative standpoints juxtaposed in the novel-in-stories. By telling the same stories from a variety of perspectives, Sousa amplifies the Portuguese diasporic community's internal divergence and isolation, while simultaneously emphasizing the protagonists' inevitable interconnection with the rest of the community.

The tension between individuality and community, commonality and difference enacted by Sousa's novel-in-stories is furthered by the juxtaposition of first-person and third-person narrations, as well as external and internal points of view. Ten out of fifteen stories are told from an omniscient third-person narrative voice, which approaches the individual stories of the first and second generations of Portuguese immigrants represented in *Almost Gone*. This omniscient narrator resonates, so to speak, with the communal voice of the community, which, from an external position, looks into the individual lives of its members. Yet, this external point of view is also confused. These third-person narratives are dominated by internal monologues presented in free indirect discourse that destabilize the binaries of objective and subjective, external and internal, past and present. Indeed, although the ten stories are told in the past tense, the internal monologues give a sense of present-ness to these past stories, magnifying the older generations' nostalgia, as well as their continuing – if not timeless – feelings of alienation and entrapment. This tension between past and present dominating *Almost Gone* reveals how first and second generations are haunted by memories of a past long gone that affects them individually and collectively in the present.

The third-person narratives are accompanied by five stories told by a first-person narrative voice: Scott's introductory, internal, and concluding stories, Hailey's email, and Mateo's brief story written in letter form. While Hailey's and Mateo's first-person narratives are related to the epistolary genre in which the stories are written, Scott's first-person voice frames and dominates the novel-in-stories. His stories – along with Hailey's email – are the most recent, as they stretch from 2009 to 2010.<sup>4</sup> Juxtaposed to his forbearers' third-person narratives, Scott's first-person voice dramatizes his conflicting journey to self-assertion, and more generally, the third generation of Portuguese immigrants' search for self-definition and fulfillment outside of the community's collectivity.

With its structural juxtaposition of different narrative forms and perspectives, Sousa's novel-in-stories is particularly befitted to represent issues related to migration, notably the alienating effect of displacement on the formation of individual and communal identities across borders and generations (Nagel 225).<sup>5</sup> Its subversive and destabilizing form, which isolates and unites, dramatizes the individual fight against a common collective. Seen in this light, the tensions at the core of this genre can also represent, when left unresolved, the collection's possible "failure to form and define a community," in Rocío Davis's words (9), and to bring together the "things pulling apart" (9). This failure of unification is at the core of Sousa's *Almost Gone* as the independent, yet interconnected, stories and viewpoints magnify protagonists' individual trauma, often to the detriment of the communal whole.

However, despite the generational gap inferred by the contrasting first and third person narratives, as well as past and present narrations, the stories remain focused on the characters' individual grief, as they are all haunted by a darker past that impinges on their self-development in the present. In this respect, the juxtaposition of these narrative techniques has a double and more ambivalent function. While it widens the

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<sup>4</sup> Conversely, Mateo's letter written in 1941 is set in the furthest past, which stresses its lasting effect in the present of the characters involved (Helena and Nuno).

<sup>5</sup> As Nagel highlights, the short story cycle attracted migrant writers throughout the twentieth century to explore issues related to "immigration, acculturation, language acquisition, assimilation, identity formation, and the complexities of formulating a sense of self that incorporates the old world and the new, the central traditions of the country of origin integrated into, or in conflict with, the values of the country of choice" (15). Dealing with immigration, displacement, alienation, and identity conflicts, *Almost Gone* finds space in a larger field of diasporic writings in the United States, which expands the notion of uncommon community beyond the Portuguese American community on which this novel-in-stories is centered.

discrepancy between the individual and the community, it also breaches the intergenerational gap separating the protagonists, thus drawing attention to the formation of an uncommon community whose members are united by their communal sense of individual trauma and longing for the past.

It is precisely in this feeling of longing and grief, or in other words, in this shared sense of *saudade*, that the diasporic community's Portuguese identity is the strongest. *Saudade* – a Portuguese term that refuses translation – can be described as a mixed feeling of “longing, grief, sadness, pain and enduring love,” an “aching absence” inherent to the “Portuguese soul,” as Robert Henry Moser and Antonio Luciano de Andrade Tosta state (4-5). This mixture of sorrow and nostalgic longing permeates Portuguese American literature dealing with the immigrant experience as it captures the difficult condition of the immigrant deeply affected by lasting feelings of love for the people, culture, and land left behind. The haunting, yet absent, presence of the loved ones in *Almost Gone*, while contributing to building a Portuguese cultural identity across borders, equally holds the protagonists back or in a state akin to paralysis as they seem unable to let go of the past and move forward. This ineluctable traumatic past gives a darker twist to the notion of *saudade*: Longing dissipates under grief, anguish, and heartache for all protagonists alike as they are unable to redeem themselves from their past actions.

The protagonists' separation and connection across generations, as well as their mutual entrapment in a distressing past, are equally emphasized by the uncommon temporality governing *Almost Gone*. The stories move back and forth between 1941 and 2010. While the first six stories take place in the 2000s (1: 2010; 2: 2008; 3: 2000; 4: 2000; 5: 2000 and 6: 2010), the following nine stories alternate between 2010 and a variety of dates between 1941 and 1976 (7: 1945; 8: 2008; 9: 1965; 10: 2010; 11: 1976; 12: 1941, 13: 2000; 14: 1941 and 15: 2009). Although *Almost Gone* does not offer a decreasing chronology, it nevertheless moves further back in time in its second half, as it explores more deeply each character's dark secrets and past experience at the roots of their individual alienation.

The novel-in-stories' discontinuous temporality is complicated by the reverse chronology governing each character's storyline. While Scott's story starts on the beach of Fortaleza in 2010, his last story concludes with his daughter's death that occurred in Rhode Island in 2009. A similar chronological decrease takes place in Catarina's narratives. While her first two stories are set in 2008 – the first story taking place a few

months after the second one – her last story goes back to 2000 when she migrated to the United States. More time elapses in the case of Paulo’s storyline that moves from 2000 to 1976 and retrospectively explores traumatic moments of his childhood. This return to the past culminates with Nuno’s stories that move from 2000 to 1975 to 1941, the year he killed Mateo and migrated to the United States, which forges the temporal gap separating him from the younger generations. Similarly, the reverse chronology overseeing each character’s storyline locates the various protagonists’ lives in different and distant temporalities. However, while this reverse chronology sets them apart, it also highlights their shared sense of alienation across difference and rupture. Indeed, the future seems “perpetually unreachable” for all protagonists alike, as Ethel Rohan states (n. pag.).

The *uncommon grounds* that protagonists inhabit between Portugal and the United States echo the discontinuous temporalities of their lives. The characters’ reverse chronology that fixes them in the past – however fluctuating it may be – is contrasted with their continuous physical and mental relocation between geographies linking the United States (Narragansett, Rhode Island), Brazil (Fortaleza), Portugal (Lagos, and Sintra) and Spain (Granada). In so doing, *Almost Gone* draws attention to the Portuguese diasporic community’s transnational bonds and inability to settle in one unique place, thus destabilizing the notions of common land or territory that often dominate definitions of community. Moreover, although resonating strongly with the theme of migration permeating the novel-in-stories, the protagonists’ constant movement also points to their pervading sense of un-belonging that spurs them to move physically and imaginatively in time and space in the hope of finding a better – yet ultimately unreachable – future outside of communal bonds. The concentricity of the stories, however, brings the characters back to Narragansett where they live or once lived, and to Portugal through numerous flashbacks – two sites of longing and trauma for the respective generations. The protagonists’ physical relocation is thus opposed by their reverse migration – not physical but imagined – that continuously brings them back to their point of departure or origins.

For first-generation immigrants, Portugal is associated with traumatic memories of loss and death that appear enmeshed with other cherished recollections of a past long gone. This intertwining of haunting trauma and *saudade* prevents them from moving forward with their lives. References to Portugal are mostly made through Nuno’s and Helena’s previous lives in Lagos, a maritime city carefully selected by Sousa. Located in the region of Algarve and facing the Atlantic Ocean, Lagos consid-



erably developed during the fifteenth century with Portuguese maritime discoveries and conquests. Because of its strategic location, Lagos became an important harbor and trading post in this era of maritime expansion and developing trade routes (see Coutinho). The protagonists' migration to the United States – although taking place between the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – is subtly inserted in this larger legacy of maritime discovery. Yet, Sousa gives a negative twist to this heroic history of Portuguese migration. The protagonists' dream of *terra prometida* – here associated with the United States – is demystified. Haunted by their past and discovering an often-disabling America, Portuguese immigrants are unable to find self-realization in the United States, thus deconstructing the American Dream of the first generation. Helena's love affair with Mateo in Lagos, whom Nuno involuntarily killed, haunts Nuno beyond Helena's death. Helena's memories of Mateo similarly hold her back and negatively impact her relationship with her husband. Her attempt to assimilate into American culture and prove worthy of Nuno's attention – as narrated in her story "The Dog" – is juxtaposed to her memories of Lagos, interwoven with her reminiscence of the pleasure found in Mateo's arms – a sexual *jouissance* contrasted to her sexual paralysis with Nuno.

Catarina also returns to the traumatic time of migration and relocation that permeates her stories, from her mother's sudden migration to the United States when she was a child, to her own immigration to Rhode Island upon her father's death, as well as to her escape from the United States in search of an *elsewhere*. Her desired elsewhere resembles a middle ground between Portugal and the United States: "There was nothing in Portugal for her anymore, and now, nothing left in the United States. But inbetween? Inbetween perhaps there was everything" ("Teach Me" 21).<sup>6</sup> The juxtaposition of nothing and everything depicts this inbetweenness as a place of possibility and self-fulfillment. Her search for an elsewhere throughout the novel-in-stories, exemplified by her constant movement, in body and thoughts, dramatizes her sense of un-belonging now and then, here and there. Yet, in contrast to Nuno and Helena who clearly never made it back home, Catarina *almost* returns – yet not quite – as she considers settling in Portugal's nearest neighbor, Spain. By presenting Portugal as a site of nostalgia, but especially as a place of trauma and suffering that the first generation seeks to

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<sup>6</sup> For the sake of specificity and clarity, the parenthetical citations list the titles of Sousa's individual stories throughout this essay. In contrast, the bibliography does not provide an individual entry for each story, but only refers to the whole novel-in-stories.

escape, Sousa once again deploys *and* complicates the Portuguese notion of *saudade* and sheds light on immigrants' difficulty to forget and move forward.

As the first generation of immigrants escaped Portugal in the hope of finding a better future in the United States, American-born Portuguese immigrants turn to Brazil to escape the pressures of the family and community. Brazil interestingly emerges as an alternative to the United States and Portugal – a middle ground in second-generation Paulo's story "Almost Gone": "Brazil had been his favorite; he found it easy to get around, meet interesting people, sleep with women. He'd never made it to Portugal, he wanted to go, and he got the sense that his father had wished he had" (59). Paulo describes Brazil as a place where he could taste a little bit of Portuguese culture and language without returning to his ancestors' land. Read in this context, it is not arbitrary that Scott, Paulo's son, also chooses to flee to Brazil upon his daughter's death. His father's photograph of Brazil, which he finds when going through his daughter's belongings, depicts it as a promised land with "green water, thatched roofs on the beach, stretches of golden sand dotted with brown bodies" ("Jerusalem" 123). The ocean he imagines in Brazil *a priori* contrasts with the submerging and engulfing water that took his daughter's life – and his with hers, at least metaphorically so.

Yet, as with his elders, Scott's relocation fails to relieve his trauma. Scott's framing stories, told in the present, are juxtaposed to detailed accounts of fragments of his life in Brazil to dramatic flashbacks of his daughter's death that he relives in his dreams, and his alcohol-induced loss of consciousness that relentlessly carry him back to Rhode Island. Moreover, Scott's attempt to escape his community ironically brings him closer to his family as he confronts a similar alienating experience of relocation. *Almost Gone* opens with Scott's emphatic sense of physical, cultural, and linguistic alienation in Brazil. Read in contrast to Helena's discomfort with the English language that Nuno forces her to speak to *fit in*, Scott's discomfort with Portuguese underlines the pressures of assimilation on the Portuguese community in diaspora and the loss of ancestral language and culture across generations. Scott's whiteness and blond hair also demarcate him from the Brazilian population and grants him the title of "gringo" (1). To this interpellation is added the chaotic Rio de Janeiro, which he feels "assault[s]" him with its "maniac honking and squealing tires" (2) that make him "jumpy" and "skittish" (2). Scott finds refuge in the Northeastern city of Fortaleza – a symbolic fortress or stronghold, which, far from providing him with comfort, figuratively connotes his entrapment. Scott's life thus mirrors the lives of his for-



bearers, whose haunting past erases any sense of future healing. Scott ultimately and ironically connects with his ancestors through his shared sense of alienation from the community.

The ocean that permeates *Almost Gone* also complicates the notion of firm or fixed ground at the heart of definitions of community and identity, and contributes to depicting the Portuguese American community of Narragansett as being adrift between different temporalities and geographies. The Atlantic Ocean that geographically links *and* separates Portugal and Rhode Island acts as a symbolic frame to the stories told. The novel-in-stories is paratextually enclosed by water: The same black-and-white photograph of water introduces and concludes the novel-in-stories (internal title page and last page of the book).

Literally set in the middle of the ocean, the stories are not only contextualized within a larger maritime history of migration, but also engulfed, if not submerged, in this body of water. Oceans are sites of multiple contradictions and tensions formed by tumultuous crosscurrents (Fajardo 39). They are spaces of migratory flows and diaspora connecting here and there, now and then. Indeed, oceans refuse temporal fixity. They are sites of history, and memory;<sup>7</sup> sites where identities *meander* between conflicting spaces and temporalities (Baucom 17). The fluidity of the ocean seems to appeal to Sousa as it not only simultaneously divides and joins the various grounds occupied by the Portuguese diaspora, but also contributes to the blurring of past and present temporalities that keep the protagonists caught in a state of trauma. Indeed, by literally setting the stories in the middle of the ocean, Sousa questions a notion of firm place or ground for the Portuguese community that does not seem to be at home in any of the locations they come to inhabit. He thus points to the *meandering* of the protagonists' identities, which fluctuate between past and present, individuality and collectivity, as well as between various localities.

The drowning stories that open and conclude *Almost Gone* complement the paratextual submersion enacted by the oceanic photographs framing the novel-in-stories by subverting notions of fixed grounds, and by locating the Portuguese diasporic community in the middle of the ocean. This also accentuates the fragmentation of the protagonists, who appear to metaphorically drown in their traumatic past. The opening story "Fortaleza" juxtaposes Scott's memory of his daughter's drowning

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Paul Gilroy's, Gabeba Baderoon's and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's writings on the Middle Passage; as well as James Clifford's, Kale Bantigue Fajardo's and Clare Anderson's works on colonialism, imperialism and transit.

– which he reconstructs episodically in his three stories “Fortaleza,” “Jerusalem” and “Where to?” – to his own drowning experience in Brazilian waters. While Scott felt a “strange dizziness” and was “breathing harder than usual” when he started swimming, his heart now “pound[s],” his skin “itches and crawls,” his “head spins” (“Fortaleza” 5), as he grapples with the rough and strong undercurrent encountered – an undercurrent that metaphorically symbolizes his sinking under the weight of memory. Indeed, it is the thought of his deceased daughter Emily and his family left behind that accentuates his palpitations and prevents him from swimming. His feeling of dizziness is accelerated when a little boy, whose young age reminds him of Emily and makes her absence even more difficult to bear, swims next to him:

But *my legs* scramble, and *my feet* flail and touch nothing but emptiness. *My hands* open and close, *my arms* spin frantic circles, and suddenly I feel cool water rushing into *my lungs* as I choke and cough, slapping *my hands* against the water as the boy did. I can’t breathe this air, but for some reason pulling *my head* up is too difficult. I want to press it further and further down into the cold, to sink down and rest. (“Fortaleza” 6; my emphasis)

The fragmentation of Scott’s body renders the drowning scene more vivid as it draws attention to the slow decline of his fighting spirit. His battle is replaced with a desire to “sink down and rest” at the bottom of the ocean, to metaphorically end both the trauma caused by the loss of his daughter, and his own sense of guilt for her death.

Scott’s drowning continues as the scene proceeds, when Emily appears as a literal and metaphorical weight on his shoulders pushing him down:

I close my eyes and choke and see you, Emily, climbing onto my shoulders so I can run around the house with you again and again. Hailey’s laughing from the kitchen, yelling “Be careful, be careful!” I feel my heart chugging slowly, but Emily, your feet are pressing me down and I’m sinking into the blackness again – should I let myself go? (“Fortaleza” 7)

His previous assertive desire “to sink down and rest” (6) is replaced by an apostrophe to his daughter – “should I let myself go?” (7) – putting his fate in his daughter’s hands as he is neither able to absolve himself from the guilt of her death, nor to move on. His daughter thus becomes the cause of his drowning, as she metaphorically pulls him toward her.

Unable to distinguish the boy from his imagined daughter, Scott mistakes the boy's struggle to drag him back to shore with his daughter's pushing. Scott's state of internal bewilderment is mirrored at the narrative level as reality and illusion blur, leading to a confused description of his fight for air:

My eyes sting in the salt and the sun, I feel his hands pressing down – but why down? Why pressing down? – on my chest *and* then my shoulders, *and* my eyes flash open as I flail my arms *and* kick, *and* with my last bit of strength I grip his skull as I go under, gasping, choking, and then pull him under me, my fingers clutching at his open mouth, Emily's hand pushing too, her face flashing above me, my knees digging into his back, one of his arms pressing my throat, then air filling my lungs. (“Fortaleza” 7; my emphasis)

The repetition of the conjunction “and” at the beginning of this long sentence not only re-connects his body (chest, shoulder, eyes, arms) to make it whole again, but also emphasizes his regaining control over the action as he makes himself the subject: *He* feels, flails, kicks, grips, and goes under. The repetition of this conjunction is, however, replaced half way through this long sentence by an asyndeton that juxtaposes gerund clauses separated *and* linked together by commas. The asyndeton, in addition to representing his gasping for air, emphasizes the confusion of the scene, as Scott fights against the boy and his imagined daughter, who are conflated in their pushing. The narrator, the boy and Emily are reduced to fragmented body parts, as their limbs intermingle, pushing up and down, thus contrasting with the narrator's temporary feeling of wholeness expressed at the beginning of the sentence. This juxtaposition of wholeness and fragmentation echoes Scott's conflicting state as he grapples with his daughter's death and his own sense of guilt. The chiasmic structure of the juxtaposition of Scott's fighting and Emily's appearance – “*my fingers* clutching at his open mouth, *Emily's hand* pushing too, *her face* flashing above me, *my knees* digging into his back” (my emphasis) – interweaves father and daughter, while accentuating Emily's immateriality, as she is represented as framed, if not contained, by her father. In contrast, the boy, whose presence concludes this chiasmic fragment, appears as disentangling from father and daughter, ultimately saving Scott from drowning and figuratively sinking into madness. This opening drowning scene gives a dark and sad tone to the novel-in-stories and comes to epitomize figuratively the struggle of protagonists internally fragmented between the here and there, the now and then.

Scott's literal drowning in "Fortaleza" is followed by his symbolic drowning in alcohol in his hope of evading reality and forgetting Emily – a metaphorical drowning experienced by many characters throughout the novel-in-stories.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Scott's endeavor to forget her is futile; alcohol gives Emily flesh. Whereas the first drink makes her "whole" (9), the second helps Scott relax and distance himself from his own life and self as he contemplates the "Before and After" of his life (9) – an after that, interestingly, starts when Emily is diagnosed with leukemia. The third drink, although giving him a fleeting sense of relief from his family's judgment, accentuates his confusion, blurring his vision of the past, and mixing "Portuguese and English" voices in his head (9) – voices that metonymically represent his family fading into the background. The fourth drink plunges him deeper into daydreams as he hopes to rewind his life to the moment preceding Emily's death. This rewinding is actually a new beginning – a beginning without Hailey, his parents, and grandparents; a beginning for him and his daughter exclusively (10). Far from evading Scott's mind, Emily reappears with more strength and passion, eluding the soothing escape Scott sought in alcohol.

The literal and figurative drowning of Scott narrated in "Fortaleza" is contrasted with Scott's lighter description of his daughter's drowning at Jerusalem beach reported in the last story "Where to?". In this brief story, Scott recounts how he took his daughter out of the hospital, at her request, and brought her to her favorite beach. Despite the sadness of the episode narrated, the story concludes on a happier note, as Scott remembers Emily feeling better, entering into the water and happily dancing one last time (177). The ocean is not depicted as menacing or engulfing in Scott's recollection; the tide is low and the waves "whispering" (177). Scott's fear of seeing his daughter disappear in the water is counterpoised with her "slipping under the waves with ease" (178) before being taken away by another "curling sheet of water" (178). The light, although literally "dying," continues to "shimmer" (178) at the surface, as the waves lastingly carry Emily's voice in an echo.

The story – and the entire novel-in-stories – concludes on an open note, as the narration takes a new direction and moves to a more recent

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<sup>8</sup> Hailey talks about her drinking problem in her story "Smile": "I know I started drinking more. (OK, I know it became a problem and I'm saying right now, I'M SORRY, but Dr. Rich says that it's a drinking meckanism [sic] that a lot of people use. I don't drink like that anymore [. . .].)" (76). Nuno also heavily drinks throughout his stories – using alcohol to forget his wife's affair with Mateo and his involuntary killing of the latter, as well as to cope with his own affair in Narragansett with one of his friends' wives. See "Just One Night" (89).

time between 2009 and 2010, a time of departure, hope, and new beginning for Scott, as he leaves for Brazil, taking his daughter with him: “When I decided to leave, I knew that you’d come with me, Emily. Tonight, I can feel you in the empty seat next to me as the plane trembles and then takes off against the cold winter wind” (“Where to?” 178). Emily – gone, but not quite – continues to live in Scott’s mind and memory as she travels with him to distant shores. Together, they head toward an elsewhere where their bonds and complicity can survive unaltered. This elsewhere is equated with the ocean that “surges and beckons” them (179), when Scott remembers merrily spinning around with Emily on his shoulders. Called by the ocean, Scott ultimately and symbolically comes to inhabit this fluid oceanic space of memory that subverts fixed geographies and temporalities.

The open-endedness of the story, echoing the question formulated in its title “Where to?” while also hinting at the possibility of a new beginning for Scott and his daughter, brings the reader back to the beginning of the novel-in-stories, where similar images are deployed in the opening story “Fortaleza”: “You never leave my mind, Emily. I can hear you exhale with every step I take. You’re always up on my shoulders, where you loved to sit, your hands buried in my hair, your swinging weight pressing down on me” (2). The circularity of the novel-in-stories – if we consider the decreasing chronology of each protagonist’s story – dramatizes the stasis of the characters as time worsens their condition and entraps them in their illusions. Scott does not appear pressed down by his daughter’s weight in the last story, but inspired by his daughter’s ghostly presence, as he chooses dreams over reality, escape over responsibility. Conversely, a year later in Fortaleza his daughter’s ghostly presence has not receded but increased, and is slowly pushing him down. Moreover, the elsewhere he was hoping to find in Brazil remains illusory, as his trauma evades time and relocation, but appears magnified “in light of a new land” in Sousa’s words.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, by concluding with a drowning scene, the last story literally engulfs the novel-in-stories, thus precluding any sense of escape or figurative re-surfacing. The stories once again plunge the protagonists into the middle of the ocean – in this dark and profound fluctuating space between – a place of history and memory that ultimately refuses fixity. Yet the happier imagery and tone concluding the last story gives a sense of relief, even if temporary, from the traumatic repetitions of the cycle, thus ending the novel-in-stories on a lighter note and leaving the reader with a sense of hope.

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<sup>9</sup> Personal conversation dating to 4 January 2017.



This drowning frame finds resonance throughout *Almost Gone* in the figurative representations of the protagonists' trauma. Hailey and Scott's attempts to cope with their daughter's death in "Jerusalem" are punctuated by threatening water images, as they return together to the beach where their daughter drowned – in a symbolic, if not spiritual, journey toward acceptance and forgiveness. "Well, Dr. Rich *did* say that this trip might inspire some deep thought," Hailey says in the opening of the story (123). However, "Jerusalem" does not portray Scott's and Hailey's *deep thinking* but their individual retreats into the past, despite their common endeavor to cope with their daughter's death. Drowning images that isolate and join them in their experience of alienation depict their metaphorical sinking into trauma. Hailey seems engulfed, in Scott's eyes, by the waves surrounding the jetty on which she is walking: "the further she goes, the deeper the water is, the bigger the waves are that crash on either side," observes Scott (128). Her slow movement is soon counterpoised with her paralysis as she stops: "Hailey is on one knee, paralyzed. [. . .] The waves pound at the rocks all around her. If she stumbles and hits her head, slides into the water that's brown and heavy with seaweed and yellow foam, she could drown. She could drown" (129). Scott's distance from Hailey amplifies the threatening aspect of the ocean that seems to be waiting to take her away. The lingering thought of her drowning – like their daughter – scares him and spurs him to react, to "sprint" and "move quickly" (129) toward her to save her. This constitutes a first step toward resolution. Yet, his running *toward* her is followed by his running *away* from her as she violently accuses him of having killed their daughter: "You took her away, Scott! *My daughter!*" (130). Blind to their daughter's sickness and to her daughter's last wish that Scott fulfilled by bringing her to her favorite beach, Hailey does not find peace in the physical and spiritual journey she imposes on Scott, but enlarges the gap that separates them. Scott's resulting desire for escape culminates at the end of the story as he leaves Hailey on the jetty. The juxtaposition of his running toward and away from her speaks of the limbo he inhabits, caught between his traumatic past and hope for a better future.

The story concludes with yet another drowning simile infused with a touch of hope, however, as Hailey proceeds toward Scott: "Hailey begins to *try* to run toward me, *digging in* and *fighting* the currents of wind, but she barely moves. It is as if she is drowning. Or *learning to swim*" (130; my emphasis). Her previous paralysis is opposed to her movement and physical fight against the wind that figuratively symbolize her attempt to bridge the gap between them. Her movements are barely visi-

ble – the drowning imagery still dominating and hindering her metaphorical progress toward him. However, her drowning is counterpoised by her learning to swim, which brings hope of a new beginning. The fragment “or learning to swim,” which is grammatically isolated from the drowning statement, while offering a touch of hope, also stresses its incompleteness. The juxtaposition of the contrasting “drowning” and “swimming” – with their gerund form expressing an action in progress – ultimately reinforces the liminal position that both Scott and Hailey occupy, stuck between the traumatic memory of a past “gone wrong,” to use Rohan’s terms (n. pag.) and their desire – although *almost* impossible – to move on. This last juxtaposition also echoes Scott’s paradoxical running toward and away discussed above. Their symbolic return to Jerusalem, a place rife with symbolic and religious connotation in the context of diaspora studies, thus fails to give them a sense of wholeness. It ironically contributes to their *dispersion* and separation as any return to a life in unison is impeded by their personal guilt and inability to communicate. The ocean once again underlines their movement *and* paralysis, as well as connection *and* separation. Their inevitable separation is accentuated as the story unfolds, as they literally sink under the weight of their individual yet mutual trauma. Caught in this fluid space between, they are left to drift alone between their inescapable past and an unreachable future together.

The ocean similarly submerges Nuno in “Just One Night” as he grapples with the haunting memory of his wife’s affair with Mateo, and his equally traumatic desire – yet inability – to tell Helena he knew about her love for Mateo. Nuno’s memories of Lagos – awakened by “the salt in the air” he inhales (83) – culminates as he joins his wife in bed and feels submerged by a choking feeling: “Nuno wanted, suddenly, to hold onto her [Helena] as tightly as he could to stop the feeling that was washing over him, as if he was adrift in those waves again, being tossed by the current” (84). The oceanic simile concluding the sentence complements the water lexicon preceding it (“washing away”) to emphasize Nuno’s inability to forget the traumatic episode that submerges him time and again. Panic takes possession of his body – “his heart [is] drum[m]ing under the covers” (84), spurring him to pull the covers down, in an effort to resurface from the metaphorical water that surrounds him. The passage concludes with Nuno rolling onto his back, as Helena wakes up, and with a description of his upper lip that is said to be “wet” (84). In addition to nodding to the water imagery used to describe his panic attack, the focus on his wet upper lip also foregrounds



his trauma, as this unidentified moisture calls attention to his strong bodily response; his sweat, tears, or excess of saliva.<sup>10</sup>

For Helena, the smell of the ocean in Narragansett reminds her of home, thus bringing her temporary comfort from her alienating experience of displacement and forced assimilation in the United States. In her mad confrontation with the dog, which she desperately wants to capture to save Nuno's garden, Helena quiets down as she hears "the rise and fall of the ocean and the faint scream of the gulls outside" ("The Dog" 111); a familiar sound that temporarily transports her home. Yet despite the temporary escape and sense of home it might provide, the ocean looks once again menacing, as its breeze takes "somewhere else" the smell of the food she has smeared all over the garden to attract the dog, thus threatening to ruin her master plans that would bring her closer to Nuno (117). Magnifying her trauma, the ocean figuratively accompanies her sinking into madness and links her to the other characters, whose lasting memory of a traumatic past engulfs them time and again and leaves them adrift between different grounds and temporalities.

Accordingly, *Almost Gone* presents a divergent, heterogeneous, fragmented, geographically disconnected, and drifting community. Through the narration of fragmented yet intertwined stories that refuse common grounds, Sousa portrays the personal and familial struggles faced by Portuguese immigrants and their descendants in their search of self. Sousa approaches the conflicting present of a community that appears in endless diaspora – as a sense of home and self-fulfillment continues to evade them. The discontinuous temporality of the stories that often carries us backward instead of forward, as well as the circularity of the whole novel-in-stories, dramatizes the characters' continuing relocation, or self-exile, in search of an elsewhere and a better future. Yet, the characters' movement in time and space intensifies their stasis and inertia, as they are unable to come to terms with their old secrets and the loss of loved ones. It is this shared sense of un-belonging and estrangement, as well as their movement and paralysis – amplified and embodied by wa-

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<sup>10</sup> In contrast to his father, Paulo finds a sense of comfort in the ocean. Paulo associates the ocean with a temporary fantasy in "Almost Gone" that provides him with relief from the constraints of his marriage. At a moment when his wife tries to arouse him, Paulo's body shuts down, and his mind wanders to other shores as he fantasizes about his father's neighbor Catarina: "Paulo slowed his breathing and stayed perfectly still, waiting for her to stop, and on the beach next to him lay Catarina, her black skin glistening with saltwater" (59). The beach he imagines figures as a temporary elsewhere or refuge that also recalls the Brazil that Paulo once saw, with its green water, long beaches, and brown bodies lying in the sun immortalized in the photograph that Scott is to find years later ("Jerusalem" 123).

ter imagery – that connects them across difference. The notion of uncommon community, therefore, offers a better look at the conflicting and polyvalent relations of the individual to the community and revises the concepts of unity, common grounds, and fixed cultural identities that continue to permeate definitions of communities, while providing a more complex perspective on migration.

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