To Love and Be Loved
An Interview with Ana Alakija
by Terry Weber Mangos
and Barbara Buls Boudreau
FOREWORD

The first section (Page 3) of this piece was written in 2018 by Ana Alakija about seven years after she arrived in America from Brazil. The essay was part of a project between the Sawyer Free Library and the Wellspring House titled “Portraits of Cape Ann Immigrants.” The project recognized that the majority of us are descendants of immigrants, and that immigration continues today with newer arrivals from places such as Morocco, Syria, Guatemala, Egypt, Honduras, Brazil, China, Afghanistan, South Korea, Iraq, Uganda, Mexico, and Senegal (just to name a few).

As written in the portrait project, “Like those of us who preceded them, today’s arriving immigrants have traveled great distances to make life better for themselves and their families. They come to escape civil war, gang violence, and government repression. They are looking for safety, quality education, and economic opportunities for their families. They miss so much about their native countries yet, in spite of all the challenges, they are grateful to call Cape Ann home.”

The second section (Pages 4 to 10) of this piece is an interview giving a more detailed look at Ana Alakija’s story, and an update on her life now. Ana’s journey is one of giving back, learning, and educating others about our complicated past. Thank you Ana for your work in the community and for sharing your story with us.

EDITING WHEN ENGLISH IS NOT A FIRST LANGUAGE

Please note that when someone’s first language is not English, we relax our editing process—preferring to leave the author’s voice intact over stringent editing. Therefore, we left Ana’s section the same as when she submitted it in 2018 to the portrait project and did not heavily edit her more recent interview.
ANA ALAKIJA’S THOUGHTS AND PLANS FROM 2018

“I have a volunteer spirit. People here support me a lot, so why not do the same?”

ANA
Former Student
Brazil

I came here from Brazil in 2011. My husband is American. He was in the Peace Corps in Brazil.

In Brazil, I was a journalist. I graduate from university in communications and journalism. We have English in middle school and high school. I studied in private schools too, to get better. But it’s very very different, the pronunciation, when you have everyday life.

When I came, I did not have too much problem with reading. The hard part was speaking and listening. Another thing is the culture -- how are the everyday rules. That’s the reason I came to Wellspring -- for everyday English, and for the culture. I had classes and individual tutoring. I had a math class too; I need to take a test for graduate studies. I had a class about reading, comprehension, listening and writing. I studied from 2012 to 2017. Each year I have a different approach, a different tutor.

Wellspring understood my needs. The tutors are so dedicated, each one. I had a mentor too.

Now I am studying for a Master’s degree in history at Salem State. My research field is African Diaspora Identities, but especially Afro-Brazilian families whose process is rooted in Nigeria and Brazil. I am going to do a conference about my work at Williamsburg College. In 2012, I have a show at the Cape Ann Museum about my project: Interconnections: Brazil/Africa, Portugal/New England.

I have a volunteer spirit. People here support me a lot, so why not do the same? I volunteer for Wellspring, for the library, the Gloucester Democratic City Committee, the Department of Health, the church.

Yesterday I passed the test for U.S. citizen. The last 24 hours I am just laughing. Maybe when I have my passport in my hand, I think, oh, I am American. Right now I don’t know what I am.

When I came to live here, I have no idea about America everyday life. Now I have a vision of what America is; I feel very fortunate. Massachusetts is wonderful. I am in the heart of the United States.

Used with permission from Wellspring House and the Sawyer Free Library’s project titled “Portraits of Cape Ann Immigrants”
To Love and Be Loved
An Interview with Ana Alakija - 2022
BY TERRY WEBER MANGOS AND BARBARA BULS BOUDREAU

Ana, tell me about where you were born.
I was born in Brazil. My hometown is Salvador, the capital of Bahia state. Salvador was the oldest port for the slave trade of Africans,¹ and Bahia also dealt in domestic slavery. Bahia was a dominant sugar plantation state. Salvador and Bahia are both cradles of the Afro-Brazilian culture.

How long have you lived in Gloucester?
I visited Gloucester for the first time in 2000. I married here in 2002. My American husband was a Portuguese interpreter. We lived abroad for a long time. I worked as a journalist in Brazil, and he worked in Kosovo. For ten years we could only meet a few times per year. Sometimes in Kosovo, sometimes in Brazil, and sometimes here, in Gloucester. I lived in Kosovo for a while. In 2005, my husband retired and came to live in Gloucester. I moved here permanently in 2011.

Why did you make Gloucester your home?
Initially the connection with my husband. He bought ‘9 Pine’ in 1995 before we got married. We had met each other a long time ago in Brazil when he initiated his research on capoeira² and samba in Bahia. But we started to date many years later, after we ended our previous relationships. Sadly, he is not here anymore; he passed away in 2019. But I cannot see myself living in another city in America, Gloucester is my second home.

What languages do you speak?
Portuguese and English. I understand Spanish and can speak Portunhol, a friendly linguistic mixture between Portuguese and Spanish. I can also say something in Yoruba, French and Italian.

¹ UNESCO reports: As the first capital of Brazil, from 1549 to 1763, Salvador de Bahia witnessed the blending of European, African and Amerindian cultures. It was also, from 1558, the first slave market in the New World, with slaves arriving to work on the sugar plantations. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/309/; License CC-BY-SA IGO 3.0.
² Capoeira is art form with elements of martial arts, dance, and spirituality. Samba is a lively Afro-Brazilian dance-music form.
What do you like about Gloucester?
Despite the terrible storm in 1991 that inspired The Perfect Storm, Gloucester is a town protected from most bad weather. I have also said that I live at the house of the third little pig, because I live in a brick house. I like the house and this feeling of protection from nature’s moods. I like the size of the city too. Because Gloucester is not large, it does not have the inconveniences of a big city. I also love old cities like Boston. Although Boston is just an hour away, I am happy living here. I like the train whistle and seeing people greet each other on the streets. People here know each other. My doctors call me to check how I am. My doctors are the doctors of my neighbors and my friends. We can exchange experiences. Gloucester also hosts an incredibly diverse ancestry, with people from the six continents. I worked for the 2020 Census as a census-taker. It was a great experience to see this firsthand. Anyway, I like the cosmopolitan spirit of Gloucester.

What do you do for work?
I am a writer, historian, and a community interpreter-translator for the Portuguese language. My daily routine involves three activities: First, as a journalist, I write for a Brazilian blog. Second, as an interpreter/translator, I interpret for organizations during meetings, in-person and online, and translate documents. And third, as a historian, I research, organize, manage, write, and publish essays on historical, ancestry, and cultural heritage projects. I am currently working on the pre-inventory of my husband’s archives, Ralph Waddey, who died in 2019. He was a musician and an ethnomusicologist. His research paper about “Samba de Viola and Viola de Samba in the Reconcavo of Bahia” was the first study on this subject in Brazil.

My life is very busy, but I still find time for activism, attend doctoral history classes online, and manage my house.

What are you most proud of, about your work?
Maybe I am more grateful than proud of myself. I am always very enthusiastic about everything I do. The best part is when the work has a great impact. I like when the work is well done. I am intellectually restless and will rest only when I have published my book on Afro-descendant families in Brazil.
What is/was one of your greatest challenges in your life? How did you overcome it or manage it?
The greatest challenge in my life is not only a personal challenge, but millions and millions of people like me everywhere have had gender and race issues. Unfortunately, gender, race, and social class issues have not been solved. As a woman of mixed cultural and racial heritage, I know prejudice firsthand. I consider myself privileged, and it has helped a lot to overcome some of these issues. I was born and grew up in an environment where intellectual African and Afro-Brazilians socialized with each other. People who knew the history of my family called me “Princess.” I have lived and worked in international, multicultural, and multiracial environments. I have also done volunteer work for increased diversity issues. As a writer and historian, I have focused on these issues. My experience and dedication to racial, ethnic, and social justice was recognized by members of parliament of Bahia state in 2001 during the International Year of Mobilization against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Intolerance established by the United Nations.

I see you hosted an exhibit at the Cape Ann Museum (CAM). Are you an artist as well?
Oh, no, I am not an artist. But I have friends with extraordinary talents who helped me to install an exhibit called Interconnections at the White-Ellery House in 2012. I copied and enlarged photographs of Afro-Brazilian families taken in Africa and Brazil around the turn of the century. These families had their roots traced to ancient West African kingdoms. Their realms were destroyed through inter-ethnic wars precipitated by the slave trade. Their people were made prisoners of wars and sold like human goods into the business of trafficking and enslaving Africans. So, sovereigns from African traditional royalty and supreme priests found themselves as slaves in Brazil, which was a Portuguese colony at the time. As a unique aspect of African Diaspora, these families were able to remake themselves, homecoming and established connections in both continents, Africa and the Americas.

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3 Diaspora is the dispersion of any people from their homeland.
Did you find any connections between Gloucester and Afro-Brazilian families or Africans in America?

In preparing to exhibit *Interconnections*, I researched those specific historical and cultural links. I shared five significant local pieces exploring the historical context of Africans in New England. Two of these pieces came from the Unitarian Universalist Church of Gloucester. These pieces examined the history of Gloster Dalton, a native of Africa, reportedly brought as a slave to Gloucester by the Ellery family. The Ellery family gives the name to the White-Ellery house. Years later, as a free man, Dalton signed the church’s charter in 1785.

The other three pieces belonged to the CAM archives—a copy of a ship’s log page, a newspaper page from Monrovia (capital of Liberia in West Africa), and a letter from Monrovia to the then Consul to the United States. They were exhibited as evidence of the life and death of Capt. William Presson from Gloucester who shipped Africans back to Liberia during the repatriation movement. He died in Monrovia in 1842.\(^4\) I exhibited these pieces in my installation as significant findings of African heritage legacy in Gloucester. They are important enough to place Gloucester as one of the historical centers of abolitionist movements in Massachusetts. There’s an intangible but important connection between the stories of Dalton and Africans who moved to Monrovia through Gloucester with the story of Afro-Brazilian families’ stories. It is the shared determination of these people to seek their roots, rebuild a homeland, and recover their dignity and ‘peoplehood’—people of African origins who were dispersed from their homelands. I believe that my own presence in Gloucester, as a descendant of one of these families, is a way of connection in the present with these stories of the African past in Gloucester.

**What other connections did you study?**

I also explored how these stories interwoven with the stories of Portuguese in Gloucester who came from the Azores to develop the fishing industry. You know, although large numbers of Portuguese have left Gloucester, descendants of these people still live here. The connection was about Portuguese who came to Brazil during the post-slavery migration from the Azores. There is a recent Brazilian population flourishing Gloucester. They crowd the local businesses and services sector. I believe most of these Brazilians descend from Portuguese (and Italians). I think that the descendants of the early Portuguese and Brazilians share the same feelings of

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\(^4\) Presson Family Papers, Cape Ann Museum Archives.
home here today. The Atlantic Ocean served as the vehicle for these links. The Portuguese were also the great navigators of the past. I also displayed old nautical charts designed by the Portuguese that show shipping routes between Africa and Brazil, and a copy of a photograph of the last ship on which Africans returned to Africa after slavery ended in Brazil. I still displayed artifacts and other objects made by the cultural mixing of these people.

Tell me about the impact of your exhibit.
My installation was a teaching and learning activity focusing on diversity in Gloucester with the support of important organizations, such as the CAM. According to Martha Oaks, the museum’s curator, more than a hundred people visited my one-day interactive installation. I exhibited a video provoking discussion about racism and created a design section motivating people to trace their roots and talk about their lineage.

I take into high account Ms. Oaks support and from her assistant Leon Doucette. I would like to thank everyone affiliated with the CAM for their generous support.

Did you discuss your own ancestry during your exhibit?
Yes. In this way, I welcomed the professor of Africana, Portuguese, and Brazilian studies from Brown University, Anani Dzidzienio, who came especially to Gloucester as a keynote for a seminar as part of my installation. I was born to one of the Afro-Brazilian families I talked about previously and I did discuss it at Interconnections. Like most of the families in my research, my family has connections between the state of Bahia (Brazil), Nigeria, and England. My family was the first African heritage family to legally claim its original name. In Brazil, Afro-Brazilian families took the name of their masters after slavery ended. My family came from Yorubaland, West Africa. In the Yoruba language, “Alakija” means “founder of the Ikija realm.” My family also went back-and-forth between Africa and Brazil and never lost their roots. My great-grandfather was Brazilian. My grandfather was a British citizen born in Nigeria and migrated spontaneously to Brazil after slavery ended.

Why is this specific research so important to you, to the community?
I would like to explain why identifying lineage is important for Afro-descendant families. Cultural heritage was essential to retain the history and the identity of Africans in the diaspora. Africans had their social world destroyed when they were transported as human cargo to
America, Brazil and elsewhere. Religion, culture, family and community were/are very important connections with one’s country of origin. As in any western society, family names are vital in African cultures. We have better understanding of ourselves, our families, when we know where we came from, what we have lost, and what we hope to gain.

How were you involved in the recent celebration – the Brazilian Independence Day held at the CAM?

I participated in the Brazilian Independence Day celebration as part of the Gloucester400+ events aiming to salute the different peoples that made and made up the city. As you know, I volunteer for the Gloucester400+ Diversity Committee. The program got the attention of the press and people from other cities who attended the event, such as Boston, Framingham, and New York. I was also contacted by the Brazilian Consul in Boston who was interested in participating in the celebration. Consul Benedicto Fonseca attended the event. He was welcomed especially by Miranda Aisling (CAM) and Fatima Gomes (Action, Inc). His visit to Gloucester has paid off. Besides the support he received from the Brazilian community in Gloucester, he is planning to establish an agency of consulate services in town.
Let’s switch gears. Tell me about your other interests. Which Gloucester writers have you read or studied?

As one example, I was able to work on a project related to the writings of Charles Olson. When I was completing my internship here in Gloucester, at the Maud-Olson Library, I served as a community historian. Unfortunately, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, I could not accomplish an impactful program. But, with the support of the coordinator of the library, Henry Ferrini, I was able to organize a cataloged bibliography of Olson’s perspective on human diversity. Olson was the first writer in Gloucester to point out the diversity of the town through his poems. But he also looked out of the window of the town. All these readings are now cataloged and available at the CAM in Gloucester. I feel proud for having contributed to making books on human diversity more accessible to the Gloucester readers.

Do you have time for other hobbies and activities? Have time for fun?

I love to watch movies! Especially thought-provoking movies. I love to invite friends and show movies in my place, which I call affectionately my “9 Pine Homemade Theater.”

What else makes you happiest in your personal life?

I have a great family: two sweet kids, grandkids, sisters, nephews, nieces . . . all of them live in Brazil. I had loving and understanding parents. Additionally, I have friends everywhere: Brazil, Europe, Africa, and the U.S. I have very special friends in Gloucester. They are my family here. I also have an intense social and cultural life. I am a healthy person too. All of these are special gifts that I am proud of. I also feel proud for having contributed to making books on human diversity more accessible to the Gloucester readers. The feeling of fulfillment in anything—it can be minor or major. The ability to love and be loved.
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Yes I too would like to thank the people and organizations above. I would also like to thank those who helped with my exhibit at the White-Ellery House in 2012, such as David and Ann Rhinelander, Veronica Morgan, Mamadou Diop, Anne Jones, Roz Frontiera, Peter Lyons, Patricia Piper, and Robert Stone. I would also like to thank Melissa Buchanan (Wellspring), and Jessie Ballantine (HAWC)—organizations that also supported me at the event.

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Ana Alakija, 2022, at Gloucester’s waterfront.