

## **Culture of the Interior (A Conversation)**

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### **Citation:**

STEWART, Judith and BRADBY, Lawrence (2021). Culture of the Interior (A Conversation). Engage International Journal of Visual Art & Gallery Education, 45 (Class). [Article]

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Title: Culture of the Interior

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Coimbra, 6 de Fevereiro de 1932 – Passo por esta Universidade como cão por vinha vindimada. Nem eu reparo nel, nem ela repara em mim. Miguel Torga (1)

(*Translation*: Coimbra, 6 February 1932 – I pass the University the way a dog passes a plucked grapevine. I pay it no heed and it treats me the same.)

Questions of social class have been a recurring theme in our writings about participatory practices within galleries. Bubbling under the surface has been the realisation that, along with the economic advantages of being middle-class, by privileging a particular middle-class definition of 'culture', galleries may be perpetuating social divisions. In our last exploration of this (2) we referred to the common assumption that certain communities suffered from a cultural 'lack' that can only be filled by those (like us artists) who have a surplus (3).

In this paper we take these considerations in a different direction, to areas and populations that could be argued to suffer from a double deficiency: communities which are both rural and working-class. Our methodology is autobiographical: we use our own experiences of culture in rural areas of the UK and Portugal to argue for a more fluid and generous approach to culture.

Lawrence:

I recently moved to a remote area of Portugal close to the Serra da Estrela. The region has amazing river beaches where people swim. It has hills and forests to explore on foot or by bike. It has picturesque towns and Roman remains. It also has low wages and poor transport. There is no rail network, and from the town where I live there are no direct buses running to Coimbra (the nearest city). Tourism and forestry are the two most significant local employers, and the region has experienced steady depopulation, with young people leaving the area to find work in the cities or elsewhere in Europe. The Portuguese financial crisis (2011 – 2014) increased this trend.

As a new arrival, I wanted to find what culture looks like here, to find out where it is taking place, and to try to join in with it.

I had advantages and disadvantages in this undertaking. I was helped by already having clear ideas about what I value in art, literature and music. And because I have worked as an artist and gallery educator in galleries in the UK for fifteen years, I had the confidence to contact organisations here and open conversations. I also had two significant disadvantages: my Portuguese was at beginner's level; and by the time I had got my bearings, almost every institution and event around had been closed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In my first months in rural Portugal, I had daily vivid encounters with culture: the tradition of naming streets after doctors, teachers and army generals, the vernacular architecture (new as well as old) with its joy in non-right angle corners, the daily and specific practices of hanging out the washing, of selling vegetables, of displaying bakery products – all this is striking to an incomer and, taken together, defines a certain space of thinking-doing-being. IMAGE 1

The writer Raymond Williams argued that this broad meaning of culture (first clearly defined by E.B. Tylor (4), the founder of cultural anthropology) is intimately linked to the restricted meaning of culture (labelled by Matthew Arnold's phrase (5) 'the best which has been thought and said in the

world'). Williams wrote that culture in the latter sense, 'the special processes of discovery and creative effort', emerges from the wider meaning of culture, which he described as 'the known meanings and directions, which its [society's] members are trained to' (6). The fundamental connection between the two forms of culture means that 'culture is always both traditional and creative' and leads Williams to insist on the significance of the conjunction of these two meanings of the word.

Galleries and cultural institutions often go the other way to Williams, stressing the *separateness* of culture from the everyday, showing us how artists, writers and makers of culture are different from the rest of us. The paradigm in which the artist is separate and exceptional also functions to conceal the social networks and the professional support which allows the artist to achieve their best work. Concealing the everyday forms of support is another way to reduce access to the arts for the working classes. As the *PANIC! It's An Arts Emergency* report demonstrated, people who rise to high levels in the arts most often explain their success by a belief in meritocracy and their own talent. Yet, the data shows that 'a key characteristic of the British culture and creative workforce is the absence of those from working class social origins. ... people working within culture, making culture, are not currently representative of the nation's demographics' (7).

Judith:

I readily confess that I bought into this version of culture as part of establishing my identity as an artist. If not taught overtly as part of an art degree, the assumption is still there: *this is proper culture*. Today I have this 'proper culture' in abundance, not because of my social class but because of education. A rural upbringing in a working-class family meant that I was 16 before I experienced an art gallery, live music or theatre (beyond school plays) – although I had been to stock car racing, wrestling and agricultural shows. With parents working long hours and with infrequent bus services, culture was television, books, occasional visits to the cinema, and the countryside around me. IMAGE 2

The rural working class are doubly disadvantaged: besides social barriers and perceptions that culture is not something they can readily join in with, there is also the physical distance from cultural institutions and events. Proper culture is thought of as something out of the ordinary, precious, fragile; not for the likes of us. The Arts Council language of 'wanting to transform' (8) really means, to paraphrase Miles (9) filling someone else's lack. For those of us who have moved from one class to another, recognising this brings real problems: we value the art experiences we have gained through education and want to remove the barriers preventing others from encountering the full range of cultural possibilities. But how do we do this without paternalism and making assumptions about what other people need or misjudging what other people already have. As Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor note, 'those with the most experience of inequality often have the least value attributed to their perspective' (10).

Lawrence:

My first contact with culture in Portugal (in the Arnoldian sense of crafted things made primarily or entirely to carry symbolic and affective weight) was in a large, wooded park in the town of Arganil. IMAGE 3 One of the paths led me up a slope and into a clearing populated by thirty or so big slate slabs standing like giant gravestones. They ranged in height from 1.5 to 2.5m and each had a single poem carved into its surface. Many also had a dedication or a line portrait of the author. The tone and subjects varied widely: from the bitter accusations of Miguel Torga's poem 'Mother', to the tender, ruminations of João Bilha's 'Dedication', to the cheery rhyming dietary/medical advice of Serra e Silva's 'Stroke'. Torga's name I recognised; the others I noted down as suggestions for future reading.

Judith:

When you began describing your encounters with Miguel Torga's poetry in the forests around Arganil, it reminded me of a visit to Buitrago del Lozoya, a small town about an hour north of Madrid.

Buitrago is home to a small Picasso Museum which houses the Eugenio Arias Collection of drawings by Picasso. Arias, a native of Buitrago, was Picasso's friend and barber for 26 years. The drawings were all given to Arias by Picasso as acts of friendship and in lieu of payment for haircuts. What makes this story particularly interesting is Arias's background: he left school at the age of 11 to work and, when he later took over his uncle's barber shop, it doubled as a cultural centre for Buitrago: "[boasting] a little library where many locals learned to read, and gathered for discussions about theatre" (11).

When Arias returned to Spain after Franco's death, he donated his collection to the local council. The museum is very modest and sits very comfortably amongst the shops and the medieval architecture. Rather than emphasising the distinction between 'great' art and everyday culture, in Buitrago I experienced a celebration of friendship between equals.

Lawrence:

Your Buitrago story speaks of confidence and a social mosaic. My feeling, as an immigrant, was that I lacked not just language skills but also sufficient cultural understanding to interpret my surroundings. I had noticed the popular tradition of putting poetry, written on glazed tiles ('azulejos'), on the outside of one's home. IMAGE 4 This clearly connected with the poems on the slate slabs. But so much else was lost to me.

My next contact with culture was when I went, Google translate at the ready on my phone, to join the library (A Biblioteca Municipal Miguel Torga) (12). Here, a librarian told me that the local population was not overly keen on books: 'We have to give them lots of encouragement, they don't have the habit of reading' (13). Throughout the autumn, as my family and I made regular visits to borrow books and to learn the language, other librarians returned to this theme. We noticed that the promotions run by the library always began by asserting the importance of the book. The Christmas competition for instance, while inviting us to send in a photo of our books stacked or balanced or piled in the shape of a Christmas tree, also stated its aim very clearly: 'to encourage aesthetic sensitivity and creativity, combined with the importance of the book as an object of our daily lives (14).' IMAGE 5

Other residents also summed up the area as lacking culture. David Fernandes volunteers with Mais Além, a 'social-cultural, recreational and sport group' who organise elaborate carnival events in the small town of Coja. He told me 'We just want to bring something to Coja. We don't have a lot of culture around here (15).' Author Rita Martins emphasised the need for 'bringing culture to places that are usually forgotten' (16).

The region is often promoted because of its historical treasures (like the picturesque mountain village of Piódão), and its natural beauties (like the waterfall at Fraga de Pena, or the Serra de Estrela with the highest peak in mainland Portugal (17)). Such beauty spots are places that local residents rarely visit. How can other forms of rural culture avoid also being characterised as 'seen it once, seen it all'?

Judith:

This 'bringing culture to places' mirrors the Arts Council language mentioned earlier. But I wonder if there is another dimension to this also be seen in the UK: the use of culture to bring tourists and their money to regions. The evidence of this as a motivating factor is embedded in the literature surrounding European Capital of Culture and UK City of Culture competitions (18) where income from tourists is a key measure of 'success' and which, by definition, exclude rural locations. Like Coja, towns such as Fakenham are usually marketed because of their proximity to *somewhere else* (19). It is a sad likelihood that the crisis brought upon cultural organisations by Covid-19 will make little impact on cultural accessibility in rural areas, but it has underlined the dependence of rural populations across Europe on the tourist economy. IMAGE 6

Lawrence:

After several visits to the municipal library, I realised a festival had been running in the town, and in fact across the region: the *Festival Literário Internacional do Interior* ('International Literary Festival of the Interior'). All of the festival's live events had already taken place. The urgent bureaucracy I had triggered by moving to a new country, together with my poor language skills, meant I had completely missed the adverts. One part of the festival was still on show: an exhibition on writer Fernando Namora in the foyer of the library. Namora, like Miguel Torga, was a doctor. He wrote his poems and novels alongside a full-time working life. And like Torga, Namora practiced in remote rural areas for some years before moving to the big city (Lisbon in Namora's case, Coimbra in Torga's case).

My ignorance about the literary festival took me back to my twenties when I suffered from a chronic illness. Two effects of the illness were that I became hypersensitive to noise and that I began writing poetry. Living in Norwich, I could easily get hold of published poetry (from the mobile library, or from a friendly bookshop which would deliver) but how could I share the things I was writing? I didn't go to pubs or parties or readings (too noisy and tiring) so I didn't meet other people who wrote or edited or published. For a long time, I had no idea how to go from writing to being in a book. The most frequent advice seemed to be 'get picked' or 'win competitions' or 'be lucky'. This feeling of having no way in flushed through me again in Portugal. Being on the outside and not even recognising the walls that you have to scale.

Judith:

To access the means of production and distribution, an artist or writer needs to have both knowledge of the system and self-confidence: confidence in one's own work and in the expectation of being taken seriously. How does someone from a working-class background who has never attended any cultural venue acquire that? There have been many references recently to the gate-keepers of culture, and the need for a more diverse cultural workforce. But, referring back to my university experience, acquiring the established values was not only necessary to disguise my own ignorance, but became so embodied that, for a while, I joined those gate-keepers.

The divide between the culturally-rich centre and the sparse periphery affects artists and participants alike. Among arts professionals in the East of England, there is a recurring discourse of hesitancy and of the difficulties of engaging with networks of validation. As this validation is largely determined by attendance at particular universities (in London), artists who have trained in the regions are frequently overlooked, even in their own localities. An example of this is the Escalator programme led by Wysing Arts (Cambridgeshire) in partnership with the Royal College of Art. In its first 2 or 3 years, this artist professional development scheme held four short retreats a year. Originally, each retreat was designed to support ten artists from the Eastern region. By its second year, this had been halved, with remaining spaces filled by artists from across the UK. The rationale for this being 'not enough good artists in the region' (curator in private conversation).

Rather than this being an isolated view, a curator from a different region told me more recently that she would only work with regional artists if they had studied in London.

We have to ask where these views originate and why are they perpetuated. For all the rhetoric of Great Art for All, a glance at the Arts Council's map of its current National Portfolio Organisations (20) shows Norfolk and Suffolk as barren counties. This, it seems to me, embeds these hierarchical value systems, ignoring and marginalising the interesting work that is carried out beyond the metropolis by artists who are invested in their locality. While many of these artists, such as Original Projects in Great Yarmouth, receive ACE project funding, the system overlooks the degree to which such ventures are dependent on the individual commitment and unpaid labour of artists. This results in a high level of burn-out and a perpetual cycle of re-invention rather than building a sustainable cultural infrastructure. Artists have living costs too.

Lawrence:

The *Festival Literário Internacional do Interior* (FLII) also negotiated that distinction between the culturally-rich centre and the sparse periphery. The idea for the festival emerged from the region itself, from an arts organisation called *Arte-Via*. After the catastrophic forest fires of 2017 *Arte-Via* set out to use "art and culture as revival of a region and of a people" (21). The organisation is based in the town of Lousã in the rural central region, but it receives support from government (the Ministry of Culture and the Regional Government) and from national cultural charities (Lisbon-based José Saramago Foundation and Gulbenkian Foundation).

The first edition of the FLII, in 2018, held readings and events in all thirteen municipalities of the central region affected by the fires. The festival's goal was 'to take books and writers to the most unusual and unpredictable places, ... factories, fields, beaches, churches, places where people work, live together, that is, the books go to the public ...' (22).

Looking through the festival programme for 2020 (23), of the 25 writers and performers who participated, only 4 state any connection to the region affected by the fires. The biographies of two others offer a link to rural Portugal. The remaining 19 give no specific link to rural Portugal or the central region but they do mention jobs in universities, newspapers and TV stations in Lisbon, Coimbra or Porto. The writers who the festival takes 'to unpredictable places' are mainly practicing their craft and sustaining their literary lives in the metropolitan centres.

## IMAGE 7

Judith:

There are two questions here: the first is whether it is essential to an artist's/writer's credibility to have connections to places rich in cultural offerings. The second is, how do people living in remote rural areas become writers? There is an infrastructure that chooses who will become a writer and then maintains them as such. How is this infrastructure revealed, explained and made accessible to rural residents? Returning to Buitrago, we could ask how someone from Arias's background acquired such a hunger for culture when his formal education ended aged eleven? His obituary credits his teacher, underlining the key role played by schools, and from your experience, local libraries.

Lawrence:

With your second question in mind, I asked the library staff about the audiences at the events I had missed. As well as the Namora exhibition, the library service had hosted a debate between writer Rita Martins and journalist Wagner Merije, chaired by the festival curator Ana Filomena Amaral.

The theme was 'protest and the silence of those who remain without a voice'. There was an audience of 23, most of them Year 12 students from the high school. (Due to Covid-19 measures, the capacity of the library auditorium was capped at 30, so 23 was over 3/4s full.) The library staff told me that the questions at the end of the debate 'revealed the interest of young people in the issues addressed'. The students' questions focused on 'the role that young people play as promoters of a better future. They also stressed that often adults do not give them a voice (24)'. The closing ceremony featured author António Carlos Cortez and journalists Luís Ricardo Duarte and José Mário Silva discussing the role of poetry in society.

I found it hard to trace the impact of the FLII out beyond the library itself. My appeal on Facebook for more information sparked only one result, from Rita Martins, the author who herself had been part of the debate. Other local residents who I contacted only found out about the festival after the event or were entirely oblivious to it.

Judith:

I can't help but wonder whether it matters that only a few locals attended the FLII? Do arts organisations in Portugal find themselves operating under the same imperatives to 'transform lives' that they do in the UK? And does this mean that there is a different attitude towards social class?

Lawrence:

Well for Rita Martins, the experience of the FLII was valid and rewarding. Martins' lives in the region. Her most recent book, *Stories of the Fire: stories of heroes with faces* (25), has in-depth interviews with seventeen survivors of the 2017 fire. IMAGE 8 Martins acknowledged that FLII audiences were small and that overall very few younger people attended. But she also spoke with conviction about the possibility of authentic communication during such events: 'We open the doors of our beings when we are true in our feeling, talking, and sharing what goes on within us (26)'. And she described the lasting connections which she had made: 'I'm still in contact with people I met during the FLII, including a student who was inspired by my words and sought me out to share his writing (27)'.

Judith:

As I young woman I consciously lost my Norfolk accent because it became clear that, to my middle-class university friends, a rural accent equalled stupidity. And I have lost count of the endless references to webbed toes and in-breeding that follow any mention of Norfolk. The move to cities is much more recent in Portugal than in the UK and it still has a much more rural population. I wonder if this produces different attitudes towards the rural poor?

Lawrence:

I don't know the answer to that yet. I do know that the government body that supports culture in this region is the Direção Regional de Cultura do Centro (DRCC). On 1<sup>st</sup> February, Suzana Menezes (director of the DRCC) announced the third round of the support programme for cultural action in the Centro region. Menezes specified support for 'cultural initiatives, of a local or regional character, carried out by agents and organisations of a non-professional character' that are not covered by the national cultural support programs (28). The funds are directed at projects that 'strengthen the non-professional cultural fabric' and allow the recognition of non-professional cultural agents'. The amounts, however, are small. €70,000 (29) for a region which is nearly a third of the land area of Portugal and contains more than a fifth of the population (30).

Judith:

The urban/rural divide adds a complicated layer to class structures and prejudices in England. Poor country people are often viewed as stupid or backward or both. This is manifest in the absence of any media figures with rural accents. It was always a shock to hear Colin Pillinger (31) interviewed, not because of his knowledge of lunar and meteorite geology but because a Bristolian accent is so rare on national radio and TV, though not as rare as Norfolk or Cornish or Lincolnshire.

#### Conclusion:

Class is an explanatory framework, a way to organise and combine a multitude of prejudices, beliefs, solidarities, traditions and economic pressures. It is a social construct which is real and also an amalgamation; our lives play out subject to the pressures and privileges of class, but this is never the whole of our experience. While we're subject to class, no individual can be explained solely by their class or can exemplify a particular class; at times each of us side-steps or wrong-foots class.

In this essay, we have presented a series of incidents, anecdotes and autobiographical moments drawn from our lives. We discuss culture in East Anglia, culture in the Estrela region, and the FLII. None of this is comprehensive. We choose details to answer an earlier point rather than a broad view because they make an argument more complete or exhaustive. This is research as dialogue and research as chance encounter.

We use this fluid and dialogic approach to writing to argue for a fluid and generous approach to culture, an approach that is rooted in place and where contemporary practices can become normalised and common as everyday culture. This requires a recognition of everyday rural culture that exists beyond morris-dancing, fox-hunting and organised game shoots; or beyond fado, great goat's cheese and fandangos. That for participants, urban and rural, engagement with Arnoldian culture will not arise because a famous artist or writer has arrived to demonstrate what the region lacks, but through the active 'making of new observations, comparisons and meanings' that extend and depart from 'the known meanings and directions' (32). Perhaps it would also be a more productive experience if artists and writers acknowledged the benefits they accrue from working with non-professionals, whose own knowledge, skills and understanding are so often overlooked.

= 4,029 words

#### Notes

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<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/eugenio-arias-friend-and-barber-to-picasso-819668.html> Last accessed 23 March 2021.

12 <https://bibliotecas.cm-arganil.pt/>

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14 <https://www.cm-arganil.pt/agenda-de-eventos/concurso-de-natal-arvore-de-livros/>  
Last accessed 7 March 2021.

15 David Fernandes, telephone interview with Lawrence Bradby, 25 January 2021

16 Rita Martins, personal interview via Facebook Messenger, 15 February 2021

17 <https://www.visitportugal.com/en/destinos/centro-de-portugal> Last accessed 15 March 2021

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21 <https://www.litfestwordsoffire.com/en/about2020>  
Last accessed 9 March 2021.

22 <https://www.litfestwordsoffire.com/en/about2020>  
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23 Festival Programme (pdf) 3ª Edição do Festival Literário Internacional do Interior - FLII palavras de fogo em homenagem às vítimas dos incêndios florestais  
<https://litfestwordsoffire.com/files/Programa%20FLII%202020.pdf>  
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24 Assistente Técnica, Biblioteca Municipal de Arganil, email dialogue with Lawrence Bradby, 25 January 2021

25 Martins, R. (2019) *Stories of the Fire: stories of heroes with faces*, Viseu: Edições Esgotadas (title in Portuguese: *Histórias do Fogo – relatos de heróis com rosto*)

26 Rita Martins, personal interview via Facebook Messenger, 15 February 2021

27 Rita Martins, personal interview via Facebook Messenger, 15 February 2021

28 Menezes, S, Live Facebook launch of Programa de Apoio a Ação Cultural Na Região Centro 2021.  
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<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/may/08/colin-pillinger>  
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