

Interview with Irene Marques

Francisco Cota Fagundes

Irene Marques is a bilingual writer (writing in English and Portuguese) and Lecturer at Toronto Metropolitan University in the Department of English, where she teaches literature and creative writing. She holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, Master's degrees in French Literature and Comparative Literature, and a BA (Hon.) in French Language and Literature, all from the University of Toronto, as well as a Bachelor of Social Work from Ryerson University. Her creative writing publications include the poetry collections *Wearing Glasses of Water* (Mawenzi House, 2007), *The Perfect Unravelling of the Spirit* (Mawenzi House, 2012) and *The Circular Incantation: An Exercise in Loss and Findings* (Guernica Editions, 2013), and the novels *My House is a Mansion* (Leaping Lion Books, 2015), *Uma Casa no Mundo* (Imprensa Nacional, 2021), and *Daria* (Inanna Publications, 2021). *Uma Casa no Mundo* won the Imprensa Nacional/Ferreira de Castro Prize (Portugal). Her academic publications include, among others, the manuscript *Transnational Discourses on Class, Gender, and Cultural Identity* (Purdue University Press, 2011) and numerous articles in international journals or scholarly collectives, including *African Identities: Journal of Economics, Culture and Society*, *Research in African Literatures*, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, *Journal of the African Literature Association (JALA)*, *African Studies*, *A Companion to Mia Couto*, *The Worlds of Mia Couto*, *InterDISCIPLINARY: Journal of Portuguese Diaspora Studies*, *Portuguese Studies Review*, and *Letras e Letras*. Her website is: <http://www.irenemarques.net/>.

Irene, I would like to congratulate you on winning the Imprensa Nacional/Ferreira de Castro Prize for your novel *Uma Casa no Mundo*, published by Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda in 2021.

Thank you, Francisco. I wish though that the entities responsible for the prize (Imprensa Nacional and Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros), which is specifically for diaspora writers of Portuguese descent, the first of the kind and very much needed, actually promoted the book or made it easily available to those wanting to buy it outside of Portugal (by having it in e-book, for instance). They have done very little on that front. In fact, they have failed to respond to questions I have asked them about this matter and made promises that were not fulfilled, often giving me evasive, paternalistic, and bureaucratic responses, that smell of old Portuguese paternalism and non-accountability. It reminds me of why I left that country! I have just read the new protocol for this prize for the coming year, and it now clearly states that they actively promote the winning book and work with the authors in that regard. Since they have done very little on that front in relation to my book, I will believe it when I see it.

You are a professor of literature, and the author of novels, poetry, and short stories in both English and Portuguese. Would you kindly share with us your trajectory as a scholar and a writer since you immigrated to Canada?

When I entered grade school at the age of 7 and learned how to read and write, I immediately became aware that writing was that sublime task that I needed to devote myself to, the activity that gave me the most pleasure. Of course, before learning how to read and write, I had been listening to oral stories at home and from elders in my village, and therefore writing was also an extension of and was fueled by that. I started writing poetry and stories from a very young age, many of which were published in my high school newspaper, and in fact, when I was 16, I received an honorary literary mention in another Ferreira de Castro literary contest. Curiously, I share the same birthday as Ferreira de Castro: May 24.

Putting words together, realizing how symbols like letters can form words that can then form stories to become magical worlds, where I can be and experience anything, discover, uncover, dissect reality, search for meaning and even connect with the transcendental is a process that fascinates and drives me. Writing is a way for me to expand my Self, erase barriers between self and others (and otherness/the non-human), rational and irrational, material and spiritual, dream and reality, reality and fiction. I also see writing as a very political and social act: it allows me to see and dissect hierarchies of all sorts related to gender, class, race, colonialism, anthropomorphism, etc. When I was young, I believed that if one wrote beautifully, honestly, powerfully and could point to injustice and make the reader see clearly and feel deeply, literature could change the world and ourselves for the better. I felt this even before I became acquainted with the writing of Georg Lukács on the political powers of the realist novel. I also believe that communicating profoundly and honestly is the way toward true love, justice, and beauty (of the soul). My writing has a highly poetic and magic-realist trait that aims to see beyond simplistic reason and speak through non-rational intelligences and is deeply concerned with the “politics” of this world of ours. In that sense, literature (and literary language) is like a technology that aids us in furthering the world and ourselves, in discovering, illuminating matters that have previously remained in the dark. To use David Levy’s words in *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age*, “[T]o look at our written forms is to see something of our striving for meaning and order, as well as the mechanism by which we continually create meaning and order. It is to see the anxiety within and behind this order. And it is also, potentially, to peek at that which lies beyond all formulations—‘the unimaginable universe’—not just as an object of fear and denial, but of wonder and celebration” (2011: 202). And as the British art critic and writer Jeannette Winterson (2014: 137, 146) postulates, “Art is not documentary. It may incidentally serve that function in its own way but its true effort is to open to us dimensions of the spirit and of the self that normally lie smothered under the weight of living,” and “A different language is a different reality”—suggesting that one of the fundamental tasks of creative writing is to access the world beyond us and exit the “body politic” so that we can exit the socially constructed, stifling categories founded upon oppression and unbalanced power dynamics that transform us into small, and even envious beings, who define themselves through narrow ontological categories.

I came to Canada in 1990 when I was 20 years old as a nanny under a restricted work permit. I had many jobs throughout my university years; it was not a smooth, easy journey. At one point, I had four part-time jobs and was taking seven courses at two different universities, as I was registered in two different programs (Social Work and French Language and Literature). I had a lot of energy, drive, and curiosity and felt that there was so much to learn and discover. My first degree is in Social Work and I worked in the field for many years, while at the same time pursuing my Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. I have been teaching literature since at least 2005 at various Canadian universities including the University of Toronto, York University, OCAD University, and Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) in varied departments and programs, such as the Department of English, the Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics, the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and the African Studies Program.

My interest in social work is again tied to my interest in systems of injustice and human suffering. Literature is my preferred medium because when I write fiction or poetry, I am not bound to a style, a language, a method, and can explore issues in a much freer manner, which is, I believe, more conducive to enlightenment and consciousness expansion. I return to Winterson's statement noted above: "A different language is a different reality."

What does it mean, linguistically and literarily, to be a bilingual author? For someone who can hardly imagine, let alone embody, bilingualism and biculturalism, what does it really feel like to handle two languages and two cultural traditions at the same time, to inhabit two linguistic and cultural worlds?

That question is complex and can be addressed in different ways, and thus my response here will be incomplete. One would need to write an entire book on the matter. However, I would say that to be a bilingual writer means that one can write in two languages with equal ease (and hopefully equally well), and that the culture of each language (and country associated with it) informs and affects the way one writes in both languages. This also entails all the lived experiences one has had in those countries—the cultural, educational, familial, emotional marks that these have imprinted upon you—and which you display in your writing, whether consciously or unconsciously.

In my case, what is my cultural background? I came to Canada when I was 20 years old. I am now 53 and have lived most of my life here. Does that mean that when I write in Portuguese the Canadian "ways" and the English language are manifested there? In some ways, yes, of course, depending on the type of writing I am executing. In the novel *Uma Casa no Mundo*, this may not be very visible since the novel is more historical in nature and I made a conscious effort to recreate some aspects of my upbringing in Portugal and the life of my parents and their parents during the fascist regime. I deal with the wars for independence in Africa where my two older brothers had been forced to go as soldiers. But even there, I would say that my life and experiences in Canada, my prolonged "inhabitation" in the English language and my post-secondary education in this country, are what allowed me to write such novel, to have the need to write such a novel even, where I recreate a reality that is far away in terms of space and time—a reality that I am psychologically, emotionally, ontologically drawn to, in order to capture, recover, rescue what we may call a "Portugueseness" that I no longer have, no longer inhabit. In this sense, the novel (writing in Portuguese) is a way to recover, to reclaim that language and culture—an act against forgetfulness. In fact, when I wrote this novel, I had the intention to write it in English, but then the Portuguese language (world) was calling me in a very deep manner, and I had to write it in Portuguese. This need, this call, also reveals that I am (still) deeply attached to the Portuguese language and all that comes with it, and need to inhabit it to feed, feel, and experience my multifaceted and transcultural beingness. My intention with this novel was also to write about rural Portugal, something not done very often in Portuguese literature, and when it is done, it often resorts to stereotypes.

On the other hand, when I write in English, does my Portuguese cultural background and the literature and language I first read and saw the world through, enter into that writing? Yes, of course. Being a bilingual writer allows me to be more innovative when writing in the two languages I command as one language informs and pushes the other beyond its capacities. My knowledge of Portuguese fuels my writing in English, creating (I believe) more innovative writing in English and my knowledge of English does something similar for my writing in Portuguese. Every language is incomplete, every language is always looking—or in the words of the outstanding Clarice Lispector in *Água Viva*, "fishing" for meaning—and so when you have more than one language at your disposal, you are more equipped to find meaning (more meaning), see a larger reality, access aspects of reality that may not be so readily available in one single language, and inhabit/experience a more expanded beingness. You

are, as it were, looking at the world through many lenses and thus the chances to find meaning are greater. Now, this relates to another aspect of why it may be important to command (learn) more than one language: when you exit your “single” language and enter another one, you are more equipped to see the world through the eyes of that person; this is of course, fundamental to forge collective, transpersonal affiliations, and multiculturalism. One should learn a language not solely for immediately practical reasons (ask for directions or a meal when in a country where that language is spoken, for instance), but to enter another dimension of understanding the world and the self, to access an expanded ontology and epistemology, to minimize the “incapacity” of each language—to be closer to “truth.” As Stéphane Mallarmé noted, “The imperfection of languages consists in their plurality, the supreme one is lacking: thinking is writing without accessories or even whispering, the immortal word still remains silent; the diversity of idioms on earth prevents everybody from uttering the words which otherwise, at one single stroke, would materialize as truth” (quoted in Benjamin, 2002: 259).

I would also argue that our world is in fact very bilingual or multilingual and very multicultural, especially in countries like the U.S. and Canada. What we need is to create literary institutions and traditions that allow, nourish, and value diverse modes of writing—authorize different languages and literary aesthetics to inform our writing. In Canada at least, even if there is currently a willingness to accept and encourage stories from diverse groups, the privileged aesthetic is still the Anglo-Saxon one. This aesthetic tends to value more literal (less poetic/allegorical/flowery) writing, with short sentences, privileging the motto “show, don’t tell” or a well-developed plot, while also favoring a certain type of (simplistic) rationality, which I, as a writer fueled by other literary, linguistic, and cultural traditions, consider limiting—ontologically and epistemologically unsatisfying. The people running literary institutions seem to be mostly familiar with this Anglo-Saxon aesthetic and so innovative ways of writing that feed on other languages and traditions are not very valued or understood. Anglophone countries (especially in the West) also read very little in translation and thus come to possess a narrowed definition of literature that feeds mostly on Anglophone texts—and thus we end up with an incestuous literature that revolves mostly around itself and does not sufficiently venture outside to expand its *vision*. I have an article titled “The Case for Literary Extroversion and Human Consciousness Expansion in Canadian Literature: Literary Writing, Identity and Belonging Beyond the Anglo-Saxon Ethic and Aesthetic”¹ coming out in the near future by the University of Manitoba Press, where I explore this subject at length, so I will leave my discussion on this here—but this is a topic that I am very passionate about.

Of all the genres you have cultivated – literary essay, poetry, novel, short story – which one feels most “natural” to you, i.e., in which do you feel more at ease or “at home?” Please elaborate.

Poetry is what comes most naturally to me. It is almost as if it writes itself, it is already there, and I am just the medium through which it speaks/passes. I would also add that my prose writing (novel and short fiction) tends to be very poetic. Given that the “poetic” is something quite natural to me, it always sneaks in, even when I try to curb it. Moreover, when I write academic essays/articles, my poetic ethos can also be seen there quite clearly. However, sadly, given that traditionally, academic writing—even the one devoted to literature analysis—tends to not value the poetic and aims to be “rational” and “scientific,” I often feel the need to control my *poetic vein* when writing academically. Yet, the “scientific” should allow for the “poetic,” given that language is not an accurate portrayal of

¹ See also my paper and interview with *Maple Tree Literary Supplement*, where I explore some of these (and other related issues): “Notes on the Incestuous and Monocultural Nexus of the Literati” and “Canada’s Literary Mono-Culture and its ‘Politics’ of Separation.”

reality, but only a translation of it and therefore the importance of using poetic language in academic discourse, language that writes, unwrites and distrusts itself—a *code* always yearning to know more, become more. On that note (and I don't mean to come across as arrogant), I think that literary writers who are also scholars of literature, can write more engaging academic work because they can be more aware of the subtleties of language and be more playful when composing arguments. But surely, many academics still privilege a stifled, tedious discourse and may trash your “poetic” essay, accusing you of not being knowledgeable or rational or objective—or master the analytical literary jargon of the time. It is as if they can only understand *one language* and that *single* language can *kill* a lot of meaning. It is a great loss, I think, and it prevents us from really *seeing*, understanding, and expanding our consciousness and epistemological paradigms.

How does your background as a professor of literature—you hold a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, University of Toronto, have taught literature at several universities—and your creative writing in many genres intersect? Does being a professor give you a special insight into creative writing, or is it creative writing that gives you special insight into the literary texts you study? Please explain.

As noted above, literature has been something that has interested and fascinated me from a very early age, my great LOVE. Even though my first degree was in Social Work, I was not satisfied with that alone. I needed to know more, discover the multiple insights that writers from different parts of the world had, how they interpreted their world and wrote about it in moving ways, allowing us to see beauty, exploitation and suffering through the astounding powers of their words, their craft—and how their powerful depictions could potentially lead to change and vision. I always had this hunger for knowledge, knowledge gained from the intricacies, mysteries and surprises that literature can allow. For me, there is no other discipline (domain) that can be as powerful, as moving, as satisfying . . . After all, a novel is about everything, can be about everything. I was interested not just in literatures in Portuguese but in literatures in other languages and the complex worlds that came with them, so Comparative Literature appealed to me. There was so much to learn, to know, to discover that it did not seem possible to just concentrate on one subject, one discipline. Many visions and paradigms were needed. Comparative Literature is (was) also heavy on theory, which allowed me to become acquainted with feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism, and many other “isms,” therefore greatly expanding my understanding of literature and the multiple dynamics that shape our world. Getting a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature allowed me to greatly expand my knowledge of literary traditions, theories and languages, as we had to be fluent in 3 languages—in my case, English, Portuguese, and French—and better understand the role of literature as a social force that can make things happen, can move people through aesthetics, through emotion, through denouncement. This exposure to multiple literatures and theories enhanced my own creative writing, though that passion, that pleasure, that need to write, had always been there, and it was just heightened, developed through this process of studying literature from different sociopolitical, temporal, and cultural contexts. My teaching of literature and my creative writing also intersect in the sense that I teach many courses related to feminism/women's writing, colonialism, post-colonialism and my own writing also deals with those subjects.

Broadly defined, feminism is one of the ideological and thematic mainstays of your creative writing: would you care to share with our readers whether this tendency in your works stems more from your personal views or your professional inclinations? Are they the same? Please elaborate.

I grew up in a rural, conservative, and patriarchal Portugal, and saw, very early on, that men had many privileges that women did not have. My maternal grandmother was a single mother who had two girls in the 1920s and was stigmatized as a result, as all (or most) women in this situation, were then. My own mother had 10 children and worked very hard at home, on the land, and on her own businesses (selling and making cheese, selling and producing coal, selling sardines, eggs, chicken, and any other things she could sell to make money). I saw that her life was so much harder than that of men, and I did not want to be, to live like she did. However, I must say that my mother was a very strong, resourceful, and independent woman, who had more power than my father on many fronts, and was thus a positive role model for me. She could be both a feminist and a patriarchal figure, which I guess is natural when you are a woman and internalize patriarchal systems: you become “confused,” split, fragmented, a subject in search of subjecthood, fighting consciously and unconsciously with the patriarchal status quo. My own brother, who was only 22 months older than me, was allowed to do things (or not do things!) that I could not do (or had to do!) which infuriated me and made me search for the reasons for this different treatment. Such privilege seemed viscerally, intuitively wrong, a deed from a mean-spirited God, who was far from being perfect, from being fair, like all Gods ought to be—why should another human being get away with certain things, have available to him all kinds of freedoms, that I, also a (full) human being, could not, did not? Naturally, it made no sense to my inquisitive mind and idealistic self. I also had negative personal experiences in Canada and Portugal that *made* me a feminist or sedimented my need to be one. In that sense, I would say that the world around me made me (forced me to be?) interested in feminism and women’s issues, and that in turn, made me study (or be attracted to) feminist literature and theory, and explore the subject in my creative writing. My creative writing seeks to clarify, expose, denounce all kinds of power imbalances (related to class, gender, race, anthropomorphism, etc., as already noted); it is also a quest about the self and the world, the place of the self in the world, how the self responds and reacts to the world, other selves (human and non-human), and so naturally, feminism comes into play.

This issue of *Gávea-Brown* is dedicated to the celebration of Portuguese Diaspora Literature (PDL) in North America (both Canada and the U.S.). Please share with us some of your views on this ethnic literature.

It is important to celebrate diasporic writers, of course. I don’t like the term “ethnic” since we are all “ethnic.” By only using the term when referring to certain groups within a society, we give the impression that some groups (often the more established ones tied to European colonialism) can live, see, think, and exist outside of their ethnicity and cultural lens, which is of course not possible. An Anglo-American, like an Anglo-Canadian, sees the world through his/her/their lens, just as a Portuguese-American or a Portuguese-Canadian does. The term tends to create categories (hierarchies) that are not conducive to true multiculturalism and equality in citizenry. It is also a term that is in disuse in Canada, perhaps because Canada is different from the U.S. in terms of its politics of multiculturalism. However, this is a very complex issue, and I can’t address all its intricacies here. My previously mentioned article discusses this matter at length in relation to Canada.

Portuguese migration to Canada and the U.S. has abated in the last decades. What future do you envision for PDL in North America? Why are you optimistic or pessimistic? What can writers and teachers and professors do?

Eventually and hopefully, as PDL enters and informs the cultural fabric of Canada and the U.S. more and more, the need for that label will become less pressing. That will be the true measure of a diverse, multicultural and transethnic society. Being an idealist, I believe it will eventually happen. Currently,

though, there is still a lot to do to bring our literature to the forefront of these societies, and the PD community needs to be involved in that process.

There are courses in universities that focus on diasporic literatures, some focusing on specific groups, i.e., Asian Americans, Caribbean Canadians, etc. There aren't any in Canada that focus on PDL, and they don't seem to exist (or be that common), as far as I can tell, in the U.S. either. I think it would be important to offer such courses. Partnerships between Canadian and American Universities in this regard could be formed—perhaps even have writers come as guest lecturers to classes and teach some courses or sections of courses. Offering creative writing courses that encourage the exploration of one's own cultural background could also be beneficial. Having writers' associations (the North American Lusophone Writers' Association, for instance) could also serve to advance PDL and bring us all together. Having organizations that can support and work with PD writers in North America (or other parts of the world, including institutions in Portuguese-speaking countries) would be another way to enhance our situation. For instance, the U.S. has the Luso-American Development Foundation that offers all kinds of supports to writers, but in Canada, there is nothing of the sort.

Moreover, for those who also write in Portuguese and want to publish in Portugal (or other Portuguese-speaking countries), it would be important to have programs in these countries that aid in the process—this would be beneficial for those in those countries as well, for they would get to access our literature and be exposed to our experiences. This seems to be the goal of the Imprensa Nacional/Ferreira de Castro Prize, which started about three years ago, and Imprensa Nacional's new editorial line directed at diasporic writers. These are excellent initiatives, but as I noted above, my experience with them as the receiver of the first Imprensa Nacional/Ferreira de Castro Prize, is far from being spectacular. The new editorial line for diasporic writers by Imprensa Nacional also seems to lack transparency or a clear vision. It is not clear how the writers published are chosen or selected and the website says very little about that. Who chooses the writers? What are the criteria? How do we send a manuscript? What can we expect after sending one? All kinds of questions that are not properly addressed, again demonstrating lack of transparency, accountability, or serious interest. I sent them a manuscript a while ago and did not get a reply for almost one year, and when I inquired about it, I was given evasive responses by the Director, as if I did not have a *right* to ask.

What would you recommend to a colleague in the teaching profession who has never taught a course on PDL but is contemplating doing so?

As noted above, it would be important to have courses offered in universities that deal specifically with PDL. There are enough writers in Canada and the U.S. for that to materialize. But it is important that a thorough survey of these writers is done, so that we know exactly who is out there. Often, only a few names are known for no other reason that they may have won a prize or may be friends with a person in a position of power.

Writing in the field of PDL is difficult, but publishing is often much more difficult, as we all know. Would you care to share with us your views on the publishing world vis-à-vis the development of PDL? Have the Portuguese communities in Canada and the U.S. done all they could do to make it possible for beginning and established writers to get greater access than they do now to a quality press?

Publishing is extremely difficult even when you have published widely and have won some prizes, regardless of whether we are dealing with PDL or literature in general. Publishers now want you to write the books, procure blurbs and reviews, and promote the book widely—I see lots of writers at all levels and from multiple backgrounds doing this. I am uncomfortable with this. We have a vicious

cycle where you have friends reviewing friends or asking friends (or associates) to review and buy their books. This takes away from the integrity of the book and publishing industry. Now, as I note in my answer above to question number two, I think if you are a writer that does not write within that Anglo-Saxon vein (in terms of content and method, or what I often term “ethic and aesthetic”), the North American market may not understand or value you sufficiently, so there is a lot to do in Canada and the U.S. in terms of creating a literature that is diverse in the true sense of the word. It is necessary to have people at the forefront of the publishing industry (agents, editors, jury members in literary prizes, etc.) or who occupy positions of power in larger and more established publishing houses come from a variety of cultural backgrounds—people who have a more universal/diversified (less Anglo-American, I mean) understanding of literature. There is certainly a push for that in Canada, and the Canadian Writers’ Union has just published a report of this very issue, which demonstrates that literary institutions are listening to writers and willing to change the landscape of literature. Again, these are issues that I discuss in my forthcoming article by University of Manitoba Press.

There are partnerships that can be established between Canadian and American Universities or organizations that can be formed to make PDL more visible in North America. Canadian and American literary communities and universities that have Lusophone programs could also have a more direct involvement with the publishing world and advocate on behalf of their communities.

Can creative writing be taught? Does teaching creative writing help you enhance your own creative writing?

I mostly teach literature courses, but I have been regularly teaching one creative writing course since 2017. I must say that I had some reticence about teaching creative writing, as I fundamentally believe that we can’t really teach creative writing. The fact that there are so many creative writing programs in universities now, can in some ways, lead to a sameness in writing, a prescribed way of writing that is counterproductive to diversity and leads to a literary monoculture. I would say that it is mostly my teaching, studying, and reading of literature that helps me become a better writer. Yet, I also acknowledge that since I started teaching creative writing, I have learned to look at certain technical aspects of the literary text (such as plot, sentence structure, word choice, structure, etc.) more closely and to pay more attention to the editing process—and that may help perfect my own writing. At the same time, when I teach too many courses in creative writing, it starts to feel mechanical; I fear it may take away my creative spark and I crave going back to teaching literature courses or just reading literature. This leads me to another salient point: the most important thing for a writer is to read extensively, read as much as one can, and from a varied source of writers.

Thank you very much, Francisco and *Gávea-Brown*, for giving me the opportunity to speak about my writing and discuss important aspects related to the literary world in general, and Portuguese Diasporic Literatures.

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