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INTERVIEW

An Interview with Catarina Letria on History-Writing, English as a Lingua Franca, and Literary Fiction

by Elnura Huseynova



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I first met award-winning fiction author Catarina Letria in Budapest during the first semester of the History in the Public Sphere program (HIPS), which is an Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree involving host universities from the EU and Japan. Coming from Lisbon, she majored in history. We talked a lot about literature and history-writing, and how subjectivity usually attributed to the former can also be embraced in the latter. Catarina's thesis project is an embodiment of that conviction. At the intersection between media and historical studies, it examines the representations of Mozambique's independence (1975) on Portuguese television. The thesis was Catarina's attempt to revisit the relationship of her generation to the colonial past of Portugal as well as her personal relationship to her grandfather Joaquim Letria, the first Portuguese journalist ever to interview the president of the Mozambican Liberation Front (FRELIMO), Samora Machel. Catarina is also an award-winning fiction writer. In 2022, her story "Toca-e-Foge" ("Touch and Run") was awarded the best fiction prize at the National Exhibition of Young Creators.

Elnura Huseynova: **During your undergraduate studies, you spent one semester as an exchange student in Paris. How did that inform your approach to history?**

Catarina Letria: In France, I took a course on colonial history that transformed my view of history-making. I was fascinated by my professor's research project which traced and compared the Transatlantic slave societies of the 17th century based on the specific case of an enslaved Angolan woman. I could sense an authorial voice in her project. And I realized that history could be very creative. It was different from my previous training which focused solely on historical facts rather than their interpretations. That course, on the other hand, taught me how to ask questions about the past and reconstruct a historical narrative.

Elnura: I sense an authorial voice in your master's thesis as well. What is the story behind it?

Catarina: Because of the course I mentioned, I became very interested in colonial societies. Later, my interest shifted to the topic of decolonization because it's quite fresh in the case of Portugal. The fact that the Portuguese empire was the last colonial empire of Europe intrigued me. There was also the role of chance in how I came up with my project idea. One day, when I was exploring the digital archive of Portuguese National Television (RTP), I decided to search for the name of my grandfather who is a journalist. A TV report about the independence of Mozambique showed up. I was astonished as I hadn't known about that.

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I realized it was a historical moment because the leader of the Mozambican liberation movement, and the country's soon-to-be president, Samora Machel was for the first time being interviewed by the Portuguese media — the moment when the colonizer ceased to be one. I was puzzled as to how this sudden change in the relationship between the two countries could be understood. As a cinephile, I was also fascinated by the visuality of my sources since the materials I used in my previous studies were mostly textual.



Catarina Letria © Sann Gusmão

Elnura: **What kind of challenges did you face while writing your thesis in English?**

Catarina: I used to be a bit insecure about my English but my attitude slowly changed as a result of intensive exposure to the language. I would say writing my thesis in English was not as difficult as I expected. The most challenging part for me was writing for an audience coming from different national and geographical backgrounds. I had to factor that into my writing by slightly distancing myself from the subject and explaining the things I took for granted as a Portuguese. Notwithstanding the challenges, I felt happy to write in English because my thesis could be read by people from different parts of the world. This experience changed my relationship to English a lot because I could see the positive effects of it being a lingua franca.

Elnura: **How would you compare it to your experience in French academia?**

Catarina: In France, all Erasmus students were expected to speak French. No English was accepted. I feel like they still think that the world speaks French as it used to be in the past. I was quite surprised when French professors would apologize for using quotations in English. As a Portuguese, this was unusual for me as we were expected to read in English at the university. Speaking of differences, during the HIPS program, we used English as a tool to communicate with each other. It was not connected to a specific nation, whereas speaking French was bound up with French culture.

Elnura: You mentioned the positive effects of having English as a common language. What do you think are the downsides of it?

Catarina: I think that having a common language for communication is efficient but we should be aware of its repercussions. I'm mostly concerned about how this process can result in marginalizing other languages. It can lead to the attitude that, if you speak English, you don't need to know any other languages because that's enough for you to live by in the 21st

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century. In Portugal, people generally speak better English compared to other European countries. But at the same time, I feel the youth fails to appreciate the richness of their first language enough and see Portuguese as less cool or trendy than English.

Elnura: I know that you write fiction in Portuguese. By the way, congratulations on your recent award! What was the concept of your story?

Catarina: After coming back from Japan, I was afraid that if I didn't put my impressions on paper, I would forget them. So I felt the urge to write them down. Later, I found an online call for submissions for a national contest and decided to send in my work. The text was shorter than required, so I searched my laptop for other texts I had written before. I read them and realized that despite being written in different persons (first and third person's perspective), they were quite connected to each other. I juxtaposed those texts in a non-linear manner but I believe they still cohere into a single narrative because of recurring themes such as estrangement and memory.

Elnura: Now that you mentioned your return from Japan where you defended your thesis, could you also elaborate on how the mobility aspect of the HIPS program played into your story?

Catarina: The program allowed me to spend time in different countries. The texts I included were about Budapest and Japan, places connected to HIPS. I tend to write more when I'm traveling because I want to memorialize all the experiences I have. When you're abroad, everything feels a bit unfamiliar. This strangeness makes me more attentive to little details of daily life. I enjoy roaming the streets and looking at how people live their lives.



Catarina Letria performing © Gerador

Elnura: Do you think that your background in history affects your way of writing fiction?

Catarina: Yes, I think so. When I was looking into my previous writings, I realized that all of them in one way or another dealt with the passing of time and memory. I think this obsession was the reason I chose history as my major. It's also evident in my fiction-writing. In history-writing, it's important to ground our statements in external "reality." Of course, there's no single version of reality but we still try to make sense of the traces of the past — they are the points of reference for us. I think my academic training taught me to be so rigorous and cautious about what I'm saying that I struggle with inventing things. Since I'm

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very attached to reality, it's difficult for me to conjure up stories. I always need some external prompts like actual conversations or observations to start from.

Elnura: Who is your favorite writer, the one that influenced your approach to literature?

Catarina: The author whose work touches me and which I feel lucky to read in the original is Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector. I feel like she was influenced by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce in terms of the stream of consciousness technique. She's more interested in what goes on in the minds of her characters. Although I feel attached to reality, I prefer to narrate the imprints of that reality on the human psyche. For me, the perceptions of the characters are more appealing than what they are doing. I love Lispector exactly for that. Her writing is very intimate. It's less about actions than feelings.

Elnura: Do you consider writing fiction in English?

Catarina: For me, English is more of an academic language, which allows me to communicate my research on an international level. When it comes to fiction-writing, I'm quite obsessed with the subtleties of artistic expression, which I can better convey in Portuguese.

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