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## Fátima: a life-long lesson

The diffuse presence of Maria Velho da Costa permeated the background of my transnational childhood. For one, she was a university friend of my father and the godmother of my youngest sister. Perhaps more importantly, my mother had told me that she was a famous writer. For a young girl who would soon graduate from *Les Malheurs de Sophie* to devouring the likes of *Little Women*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Jane Eyre* by the age of eleven, the knowledge that there was a real person somewhere out there, who possessed the magic to conjure up words to weave stories (because that was what books primarily meant to me back then), was quite simply enthralling. And the intangible existence of such a thrilling, if mysterious, female role model was sufficient to set my imagination free. It allowed me to dream, however naively, that one day I might grow up to become a writer myself...

I have no recollection of meeting Fátima (as she was known to friends and family) as a toddler in Lisbon. What I vividly remember, however, is various encounters in 1980s London when I was fifteen. I had yet to read any of her books. To a shy, wide-eyed teenager, Fátima's extensive culture and formidable intellect were awe-inspiring. She was also exceptionally insightful and had the uncanny ability to see through the incongruities of polite society. And she was a consummate, highly entertaining, mimic of a range of accents and mannerisms. Not only did she take notice of my sisters and me as individuals, she validated our desire for freedom.

Retrospectively, it seems inconceivable to me that, even after several meetings, I didn't steal myself to plunge straight into her novels. Especially since at the time I was aware, from listening in on adult conversations around me, that she was writing what would become the novel *Lucialima* and the chronicles of *O mapa cor de rosa*. I owe my discovery of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* to King's College London where I completed my Masters' studies in 1987-88: at the time one of my contemporaries was working on this iconic feminist text. Fátima, who had just finished her stint as *leitora* at KCL the summer before I was due to start, had been kind enough to ring me to encourage me to pursue my academic dreams. Her call came out of the blue and I guess it was then that intellectual curiosity about her writings finally kicked in.

In fact, unbelievably, I must confess that the Three Marias were among the first Portuguese women I had read since the distant childhood tales of Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen. What a memorable initiation! That year, serendipitously, I was living in an all-female international residence belonging to the British Association of University Women. Their wonderful library allowed me to familiarise myself, for the first time in my life, with women's history and their transnational struggles for political, social, and sexual emanci-

pation. Reading *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* was a revelation. Its sheer collective audacity was mind-blowing. It would pave the way for Lúcia Jorge, whom I initially discovered through *Notícia da Cidade Silvestre*, rather than *A Costa dos Murmúrios*. And the rest, as the saying goes, is history. Or rather *herstory*.

Back then, in 1980s London, I didn't know the term 'public intellectual'. But that's what Fátima was – even in the context of the small group gatherings that I was intermittently allowed to eavesdrop on in the course of my late teens. I can partially attribute my interest in women's writing to these informal yet formative encounters – first in real life and then through literature, as I finally embarked on a belated attempt to remedy my ignorance of Portuguese women's writing, while a doctoral student. Something that has since become a life-project...

In 1994, shortly after joining the University of Newcastle, I co-organised my first academic conference, ambitiously titled 'Women and Culture in the Portuguese speaking-world'. Maria Velho da Costa generously came over from Portugal, thereby lending to the event the 'wow factor' of her presence. I still recall a full room of students and colleagues, some of whom had travelled far and wide, eagerly awaiting to meet this legendary writer. The anticipation was palpable, heightened by an inspirational introduction where Professor Helder Macedo brought to life the fraught political background against which *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* had come into being.

Another, more private, moment that I fondly recall was when she shared with me the draft script *Madame* (1999, revised 2000), a brilliant revisionist take on Machado de Assis' *Capitu* and Eça de Queirós' *Maria Eduarda da Maia*, before the play was performed to great acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. As usual, her insightfulness shines through, not least in her remarkable portrayal of *Capitu* and *Maria Eduarda's* imaginary domestic servants. Through *Francisca*, the Brazilian maid, she brings out Brazil's inheritance of slavery, and the intersection of race, class and gender, in order to give visibility to the voice and subject-perspective of a working-class black woman.

In 2003, Fátima accepted an invitation to come and speak at the University of Oxford about her newly published novel *Irene ou o contrato social* (2002). I'm ashamed to say that I have no recollection of the academic event at which she spoke because I was so incapacitated at the time. But her kindness has stayed with me ever since. I was barely able to walk a couple of hundred yards without excruciating pain, and she walked with me at a snail's pace along Oxford's Broad Street. Having her by my side I felt stronger, for she was able to impart to me her deep-seated conviction that there was no shame in human vulnerability: it was a fact of life, whether one denied it or accepted it. Above all, it was the family friend who was there for me then, providing emotional support, not the recent Camões Prize winner. I've often thought about that visit. To quote Maya Angelou here: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel".

After reading *O Livro do Meio* in 2006, co-written with Armando Silva Carvalho, I was

able to appreciate more fully her own formative years and her mind-blowing courage, given the scale of her intellectual and sexual rebellion. Fátima's willingness to explore vulnerability, and moreover, gendered vulnerability makes her one of the most compelling writers of the last fifty years. Yet such an engagement also necessitates a searing exploration of the multiple shades of violence that haunt both the outside world and inner psyches. The power of Fátima's uncompromising resistance against systemic injustices continues to hit me afresh every time that I teach and discuss with students the poignancy of her *Myra*, a novel that, to my mind, stands out as the crowning glory of a vast and varied output. When I think of her compelling writings spanning four decades, I always think of Virginia Woolf: "Who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?"

In 2015, the Peter Lang series I co-edit with Paulo de Medeiros, *Reconfiguring Identities in the Portuguese-speaking World*, published the milestone edited collection *New Portuguese Letters to the World: International Reception*. But there were still so many other facets to Fátima's long, ground-breaking, individual literary career to explore; and her period in Britain seemed such an obvious starting-point to me. In 2017 I had the privilege of co-organising, with Hilary Owen and Maria Luísa Coelho, a three-day conference on Transnational Women Artists, held at Wadham College to celebrate the life and works of Ana Hatherly, Paula Rego, and Maria Velho da Costa. It paved the way for a 2019 special issue of *Portuguese Studies*, where Fátima took centre-stage across three stunning articles that showcased, to quote the introduction, "the transnational experiences and transcultural genealogies that inform her thinking and artistic practice".

I've often felt that it would be nigh impossible to write an academic article on Fátima myself –as the inspirational figure who unlocked for me the riches of Portuguese women's writings, in a sense perhaps subconsciously she still remains beyond academic analysis. Yet despite her magic aura, engaging with her vast oeuvre over several decades has led me to become acutely aware that the seemingly ethereal writer that populated my childhood imagination from afar did exist in the real world, where she had to fight for space and voice every step of the way as Portugal emerged from dictatorship to democracy and into post-imperial times. I feel privileged that, through Fátima's shining example, I gained a behind-the-scenes understanding about the wider implications of what it means to be a writer: an intensely private person yet also a public intellectual, a woman determined to shed light on a world still rife with social, sexual, and financial inequalities, whatever the personal cost.

In short, her precious life-long lessons about intellectual and creative freedom have, in more ways than she will ever know, shaped who I am for the better. She will forever remain etched in my memory as the dazzling writer who embodied for me the transformative agency of words. Ultimately, Maria Velho da Costa may belong to a particular time, yet she transcends it thanks to the power of her vision. The shock and sadness of losing her this weekend is laced with the intimate knowledge that she is truly timeless.