

Interview with Joao Reis

Interview by Bianca Weima

Joao Reis is a celebrated writer and translator from Porto, Portugal. Reis is the author of *The Translator's Bride* (2015), *The Devastation of Silence* (2018), and *Be-draggling Grandma with Russian Snow* (2021). In October 2022, *the Lyre* team had the honour of sitting down and discussing themes of translation and human connection with Reis, at the launch of *the Lyre* Issue 13: Found in Translation.

When asked about translating from his mother tongue, Reis says “I write in Portuguese. I’ve also written in English and translated at least two of my books into English, but I mainly write in Portuguese, it’s my mother tongue...body language has its own way of thinking or structuring the way we see life and the world. So it’s understandable that every language and every artist writes or produces art according to his own language because it influences the way we see the world.”

From a young age Reis has loved reading and writing, but never planned or anticipated writing to become part of his career. He tells *the Lyre* “I didn’t intend to be a writer when I was a kid, or even when I was a

teen or later in my life. So while I actually began working with books, as a publisher, and as a translator, way before I began to write by myself or seriously ... I guess it depends on the person but from my perspective, you write when you really have something to say, it doesn’t mean that you have to be social or political, active, socially or politically active writer. But you must have something to say.”

Reis tells *the Lyre* about the challenges he faced when attempting to get his first book translated from Portuguese to English, and how despite English being his second language, he did it himself as he understood the content best.

“That’s what happened when I translated my second book, which is not the same book, when I went to translate. My first book is actually a true translation in the sense that it’s the same book, as in Portuguese, with some adaptations, according to the language, of course. But my second book, which I began translating from the Portuguese, because I have six books published in Portuguese now, when I went to translate, I began changing everything,

So I changed the plot, the style, and the characters. So it's another book completely different. So it's, it was supposed to be a translation, but it's only in English."

The difficulty of translation is something Reis remains passionate about. Having discussed it at length in his panel at Simon Fraser University entitled *Truth and Fiction: A Conversation with Joao Reis*, dissecting the details when translating can prove difficult, altering or changing aspects of a book entirely to suit its translation. An important but often overlooked detail in writing and publishing, Reis does the work himself to properly articulate his writing across languages.

"It's very difficult to translate yourself, not in the sense that the author meant to say in the original, so it's an advantage. But at the same time it's difficult to refine yourself and not to change the book, as you were written, because years passed by and you are not the same person who wrote that book years ago. So your sense of style and the things that interest you change, so it's difficult to maintain the same books and try to respect what you were in the past."

On the translation of his first book, Reis explains "For example, my first novel, when I published the English translation I, there was a revision in Portuguese because it was out of stock. And I did some minor changes, but it's the same book. It's some kind of revised edition."

When asked his thoughts on the different



Night Visitor by Belle Villar

versions and ways to go about translation, Reis tells *the Lyre* "Portuguese is a Romance language, similar to French, and Italian and Spanish, very close to the Spanish. Scandinavian languages are Germanic languages. So they have the same family as English, and German. Actually, grammatically, they're quite close to English, they're more difficult for multiple reasons that I'm not going to delve into now. But they're simpler than German, for example."

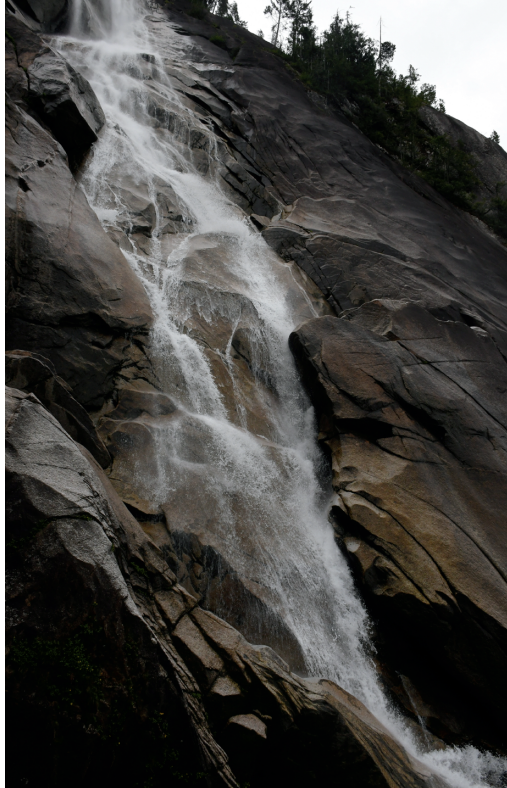
On the topic of writing and physical space, Reis believes that it's biologically within us to connect with the geography around us. "I was inspired by the place and I wrote the book, actually the second book, but

there was places I couldn't write in, like China, for example, but it wasn't really a residency, it was more like a festival. Or in Latvia, I wasn't so well. I couldn't write, the place wasn't giving me the inspiration. I wasn't feeling physically well, in that place. I can't explain why. I'm not a mystical person at all. I'm a materialistic person. I don't believe in anything but science, but it [Latvia] wasn't feeling okay. So that's why I couldn't write or everything I wrote I sent into the rubbish bin. So the place matters, yes, completely."

When asked about the intersections of study environment, academia, and writing, Reis discusses the complex dynamics of his experience and how they lead him to write with such a distinct style.

"I started veterinary medicine first. And then philosophy. And then, well, while I was studying philosophy, I learned later Scandinavian languages. So I came from a science background and went to arts and letters, perspective. So you can see much of that in my books, for example, one of them has a lot of fiction with a lot of humorous but dark humor, let's say, it has a lot of philosophy. So you'll see philosophy, and you can see my philosophical perspectives in many of my books. And my perspectives on the environment, animals, and biology. It's always a part of the author."

Thank you Joao, for inspiring and creating such wonderful work and taking time to



Harmonious Dissonance by Daniel Cheung

discuss translation and writing with *the Lyre* team at SFU!

Interview with Mercedes Eng

Interview by Bianca Weima

Mercedes Eng is a writer, poet, and teacher based in Vancouver, British Columbia. Mercedes' most recent release, *my yt mama* (2020) explores her Chinese-Canadian heritage and investigates the ongoing colonial violence occurring in Canada. Prior to the release of *my yt mama*, Mercedes published *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* in 2017, a book of poetry that won the BC Book Prize in 2017.

When asked about her considerable contribution to community organization, Mercedes tells us that “sometimes it’s hard to separate community organizing from creative writing. I think community organizing informs what I write about, it also informs how I write what I write about.” Mercedes explains to *the Lyre* that being in solidarity with vulnerable people is integral to her experience as a community member “Part of my community organizing and volunteerism is being a guardian at the Memorial March. At the memorial March that happens every February 14, Since 1990, which honor[s] and remember[s] so many of the murdered and missing women, Indigenous women and Two Spirit people that have gone missing.” Mercedes does not see community organizing and writing as “separate things” but instead states that “there is always a back and forth, an intersection.”

Mercedes' work has previously focused on Indigenous incarceration and the colonial state, on this topic Mercedes explains “Because of the things that I am writing about, it seems absolutely necessary to me to be involved with communities that I’m writing about, to have grounded relationships with those communities, as well...I also try to do work on the ground with folks, volunteering at a farm that is managed and operated by former insiders and the volunteer work of people that are currently incarcerated.” Mercedes' community work and writing reflect the care she has when working with and supporting people who have been incarcerated.

On contextualizing her 2017 poetry book, Mercedes says “My book, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*, seek to humanize people that society has reduced. I think my dad is very much an example of a model minority mutiny. So I think that book works to disman-



Natural Textuality by Daniel Cheung

tle certain stereotypes around prisoners, or criminals, as they are seen by a large majority of the public.”

Part of creating these connections and outlets for people who were previously incarcerated means needing to be conscious of how they’ve been victimized and treated within larger systems. Mercedes informs us that “the settler state, of course, is one that is ableist, racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic. So in teaching creative writing, whether I’m teaching in an informal space, like a free workshop at the Carnegie Community Center, or whether I’m teaching in formal spaces like the university, I strive to create a space, even if only a temporary space, that allows for a radical kind of inclusivity for folks who experience those forms of prejudice.” When teaching,

Mercedes is conscious of possible barriers that are a product of mistreatment from the settler state.

Within these systems of harm and oppression, Eng believes there is an important trend happening in writing - the celebration of joy, and connection. Mercedes highlights the work of celebrated Indigenous writers, Joshua Whitehead, Brandi Bird, Jessica John, Billy-Ray Belcourt, on their work Mercedes says “I see that there is certainly an acknowledgement of the conditions of the colonial state, but also a moving towards joy, in family, in romantic relationships. Connection in terms of family, friends, romantic relationships, thinking a lot of joy, and survivance.” Eng is excited to see how the writing community has evolved, “seeing the literary landscape

change and expand to include folks other than white folks - and different, new and creative forms that work against settler forms. [I am] just thinking a lot [about] joy, survivance and medicine, and how to do that in my own writing.”

Mercedes tells us about her current project, a book on the increased budget of the Vancouver Police Department, the reinstatement of police liaisons in public schools, the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes, and all while considering these relevant changes Eng takes a Socratic approach to her work “So how do I write? What do I write about that? While also thinking on joy, thinking on survivance, thinking about what the medicine can be there?”

When we tell Eng our theme for this year’s Lyre issue, she considers lived experience.

“Much of my lived experience informs how I interact with folks having experienced various kinds of prejudice. I’m mindful of that when I communicate and interact with folks. As I age and as I develop my writing skills I think a lot more about listening. Listening instead of talking, and really being able to hear folks. When I started writing, the literary landscape was different than it is now - so it seemed very necessary to be taking up space. In certain contexts, I’m thinking mainly about academic spaces, and how much room white folks, particularly white men, would take up. But as I see more BIPOC folks writing, organizing and flourishing, I think about what my role is, in terms of interacting with folks in it. I have more of a focus on listening.”

