

# ACTIONS & VOICES

## Creative Interculturality

The incorporation of authors coming from other languages, whether foreigners or from the immigrant world, is a normal process in cultures favorable to diversity or those that are powerful enough to be attractive. This is the paradigmatic case of British or North American culture (including English-language Canadian culture), but also French, where authors such as Jonathan Littell or Marie NDiaye have won important prizes. That this phenomenon is reproduced in Catalan literature is more surprising, but authors like Matthew Tree or Najat el Hachmi confirm that this intercultural flux is also possible in cultures of smaller dimensions. Essayists such as the Argentine Patrícia Gabancho or the Slovakian Simona Skrabek, the American critic Sam Abrams, or the Czech novelist Monika Zgustova are other names that regularly nourish Catalan letters.

One explanation for these incorporations is the quality and profundity of Catalan literature, with a body of work that goes back a thousand years. Another is the fact that the position of this culture within Spain, where it does not have formal or political recognition outside of its strict territory, brings the writers a certain degree of commitment to the Catalan cause. But it is also true that Catalan culture is open to innovation and new creative forms, which makes it ductile and attractive. One only need mention an attempt such as *Serial Chicken*, the first novel written on Twitter and with the support of Google Maps, which tells the story of a chicken killed on the streets of Barcelona. The work, by journalist and writer Jordi Cervera, coincided with the celebration of the international festival BCNegra, which focused on detective fiction.

PATRÍCIA GABANCHO



# INTERVIEW

## MATTHEW TREE: THE INTENSITY OF EXPERIENCE

PATRÍCIA GABANCHO

Born in London in 1958, Matthew Tree has lived in Catalonia since 1984, after leaving behind an unconventional life with a large component of social protest, which he himself revisited in the volume *Memòries! 1974-1989*, published in 2004. He writes in English and Catalan. He has published novels that explore the human condition both familiar and strange, ironic essays about the reality surrounding him, or more serious ones on the great problems of human beings, such as God seen from the atheist point of view. Like any writer, he has an interesting life, and there are always autobiographical elements that add intensity to what he does, experiences, and writes.

### It's quite unusual to find an Englishman writing in Catalan.

I learned Catalan without any intention of writing in this language. I learned it because I was living in Catalonia, in a small town, and the life around me was in Catalan. After six months I had interiorized the language. Years later, I discovered that I also thought in Catalan when it came time to write and that writing in Catalan I could free myself from a whole series of obstacles I had stumbled over when writing in English.

I wanted the flexibility of American English, in which you can “go from angels to dung” according to George Orwell’s phrase about Henry Miller’s style. In British English, to speak of the angels obliges you to use expressions that have a varnish of the upper-middle class and to speak of dung, to use what we might call workers’ phrases. A generalization, but more or less that’s the way it is. When I began my first text in Catalan, the feeling of freedom was instantaneous: with the foreign idiom, I could do whatever I wanted. Freedom!

### Do you write in Catalan or in English depending on what you want to write about?

Years ago there was no division of labor between the two languages, but now there is. I began to write, whatever it was, only in Catalan. A novel, stories, a road-book set in Catalonia: ten years of writing in Catalan only. Afterwards I had an idea for a novel with English themes: the words came to me in English. I discovered that English had also turned into a half-foreign language, with which I could do what I liked. I now had my voice! Thus, I first wrote the novel (*Privilegiat*, *Privileged*, 2001) in English, later in my own Catalan version (and it was even translated into Spanish). From then on, ideas for fiction came to me in English. In English, inevitably, I have a bit of a wider margin in terms of my mastery of the vocabulary.

### Do you write differently when you write non-fiction?

Not completely, since everything is creative writing, to put it one way. If you want to tell the intellectual history of racism in ten pages, for example, which I tried to do in my most recent book (*Negre de merda*, 2010), you have to take out superfluous sentences, choose adjectives, create expectation, exactly as if it were a fictional story. In non-fiction I’ve only worked in two genres: diatribe, which is a genre that lends itself to a certain literary manipulation; and personal essay, in which well-researched information and autobiographical elements can be mixed in a way that I personally find very satisfying.

### Do you keep in mind that you’re writing for a more narrow market in Catalan?

Mentally, when you get to work, you are writing for everyone, even if you know that this “everyone” must have access to the language. You never ask yourself how many speakers there are in the language you are using. It would be absurd.

### You have just published a book of essays entitled *Negre de merda*?

There’s a subtitle: *El racisme explicat als blancs* (Racism Explained to White People). It speaks, in general, of where racism comes from and what it is and what some of its consequences are, with concrete examples. There are two chapters that deal with how this issue is experienced in Catalonia (and concerning Catalonia, things are always *sui generis*).

### In writing so intensely of experiences that might be universal but that have an immediate, personal component (this is one of your characteristics as a writer), you are able to make the reader look into a mirror.

I hold on to a phrase of William Burroughs that appears in a conversation he had with the painter Jasper Johns: the purpose of writing is to make it happen. If the last page leaves the reader in exactly the same condition as when beginning the first, we have failed.

The topic of racism also permeates the novel he has been working on for five years, *Snug*, written in English. The first paragraph, situated in a small town on the Isle of Wight in 1974, clearly shows the quality of Matthew Tree’s language. Somehow, in few words, he is able to get the reader to guess that terrible things have happened and will happen, and that an oppressive atmosphere will hover over the experience. He says: “This was back in the nineteen-seventies, when they didn’t have global communications systems of any kind—we civilians didn’t at any rate—no mobiles, no sat-navs, no internet, no bloody, bloody glib e-mail abbreviations like ASAP, no bloody, bloody snappy e-mail sign-offs such as “Best”. All we had then were telephones, some of them in our homes and some of them outdoors, in red steel-and-glass cabins that frequently whiffed of piss.”