

# The Life



BY MICHELLE  
GREYSON }

## Rita Espescht: Resisting brutality in Brazil, cultural colonization in Canada

Since arriving in Canada in 2001 with her husband and then 10-year-old daughter, PEN Writer in Exile **Rita Espescht** has rebuilt her life and her career in a context of loss. She left behind most of her family, including two older step-children, left her culture and lost the opportunity to speak her native Portuguese language.

In this interview, Rita speaks candidly about the literature of resistance, having to leave one's homeland to live freely, the separation, and the impact on leaving behind a successful writing career and finding a way to write again.

**Q. Are you considered a true writer in exile?**

**A. Espescht:** It depends on what you're calling "true" here. I'm not legally exiled. I wasn't expelled from my country; I wasn't forced out by a government. I felt that

I had to leave because of the situation of extreme violence we were living under – criminal violence, not political violence. I'm not a "true" refugee either. But I'd say that the conditions that have driven my family out of Brazil were not too far from those of a country at war. There is a non-official civil war of criminal violence in Brazil, a war that claims 55,000 victims every year – one life every 12 minutes. Sometimes the local media calls it the "invisible war". Scholars describe it as "an implosion of violence", as opposed to an explosion, because it doesn't really affect the outside, the world out there.

Murder rates are something we can communicate, something people from other countries might somehow understand. But numbers alone can't explain what it means to live in a place like this. It gets into every single aspect of



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RITA AND HER DAUGHTER STILL IN BRAZIL

your life. It changes the way you relate to people, to your environment, to your work. The stories are horrific and they're never far away, they happened to your neighbour, to your family, to you. I had a stepdaughter, seven months pregnant, thrown to the ground and repeatedly kicked by a bunch of elementary-school kids – all in their uniforms – for nothing. Just to have fun. I had a relative gang-raped by six men while her husband was forced to watch. I had a knife on my neck held by a twelve or thirteen-year-old, and a gun to my head held by a kid a little older than that.

This is Brazil today – politically, a democracy, a very good one at that, actually. But the frayed economy, a history of hundreds of years of acute social inequality, a long-standing cycle of corruption and impunity, and many other factors have thrown us into this current situation of out-of-control violence.

We had our share of the traditional kind of political oppression. I grew up under a military dictatorship, a long dictatorship that lingered for about twenty years. I was born in 1961; the dictatorship started in 1964 and ended in 1985. We resisted political violence, we beat the military – but I just couldn't deal with the incredible, horror-movie criminal violence we started to live with during the last decade or so. So we came to Canada.

I left behind many things. The aspect of my former life I miss the most, though, is my professional identity. None of my skills – as a children's writer, editor, journalist, playwright or screenwriter in the Portuguese language – can be used here properly. I had no English when we immigrated eight years ago, and although I've been able to develop basic communication skills since then, it's not enough for me to work professionally with words, to make a living out of it. For me to write you these answers, for example, I stumble time after time on prepositions, idioms, ideas that I don't know how to use and have to forage the internet for answers, for the actual way you're supposed to say it. It's painfully slow.

There are thousands of kilometres between myself and my writing career, and I don't feel I have the option of going back. Is that "true" exile? I don't know. You tell me.

People come from all sorts of backgrounds. There are a good number of immigrant writers in Edmonton, but you won't find many among them that are technically exiled – or "true" writers in exile, as you put it. Some had been professional writers, journalists, or professors in their home countries. Others were just beginning, as so many of us are around here as well. Why are they here, though? Why do people immigrate? Take any large ethnic or national group that has made the long journey from one country to another and you'll always find a history of hunger, a history of persecution or of violence behind it. Yes, there's the woman or the man who came to marry a local, there is the adventurous youth who wanted "more of life". But all in all, as a collective phenomenon, the immigration story is a story of runaway people, people running away from a bad situation in the hopes of finding a better place, a safer place, a normal place. It's easy to see why this is so. Put yourself very briefly into our shoes and you'll feel it. You'll feel the enormity of it – of leaving your whole community behind, your family, your friends, your roots, your expertise in everyday life, your hard-earned place in the professional scene, your history, your everything. You leave yourself behind. And what if besides all this, you also happen to be a writer? Worse still, what if you're a writer who speaks another language? Then you're giving up your most precious skill – your intimacy with words, your friendship with language. Why would you do it, unless you had a really good reason? More and more, as populations push ahead and change the borders of the world, as the gates and walls that guard the land of abundance are climbed upon by growing numbers of people, we'll have to start thinking of different kinds of "true" exile. We'll have to realize that the exile has many faces – and that none of them is less heroic than the other, none of them is less deserving than the other, none of them is telling us easy, rose-coloured stories.

**Q. What was your experience abroad as a censored writer?**

**A. Espescht:** In my only close-up encounter with the traditional, proper kind of political censorship, I wasn't there as a writer, but as a young actress. It was a small high school production of a children's play, which was going to be presented at several elementary schools. After weeks of rehearsal, the time came for the censors' private show. Even tiny productions such as ours had to go through it. We acted the entire play, full costumes, props, lights

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RITA AND DIRECTORS/PUPPET MAKERS CARLOS EDUARDO REZENDE AND WILMA RODRIGUES WITH YURI, THE CENTRAL CHARACTER OF HER CHILDREN'S PLAY, "TERRA AZUL!" (BLUE EARTH), PRESENTED AS PART OF THE CULTURAL PROGRAM AT THE UN EARTH SUMMIT IN RIO DE JANEIRO, 1992.

and all, for an audience comprised of two censor ladies and one censor gentleman. The theatre seemed enormous with all those empty chairs, and it was, a real challenge to keep going on stage while the censors' red pens frantically slashed words on the paper.

There is a difference, though, between living under censorship and being censored. During the final years of the dictatorship, for example, I've written lots of politically-charged little bulletins that were never censored – for the simple reason that they were never out in the open. This kind of stuff would circulate secretly, underground. It could be a leaflet left in a bathroom stall at the university. Or a mimeograph-printed publication circulated among members of clandestine political parties.

I used to belong to a cell of an illegal organization during the dictatorship. This isn't a bio feature that I advertise very widely around here, though. Because I can see it very easily coming across as something entirely different than it was. You say "cell", you say "illegal", "clandestine", and people with a Canadian background are very likely to think of "terrorism", "bombs" and the like. Why wouldn't they? It is not part of the Canadian experience, to think of the law as something that might be so fundamentally unjust that you have no choice but to break it. If you've never experienced it yourself, it's hard to grasp what it means to live under a totalitarian society where you'll either side with the dictator, or you'll forcibly be an outlaw. During the military years in Brazil, there was one and only "government-sanctioned" opposition party. All other parties were banned after the coup. What do you in a situation

like that? You go illegal, and you try to become invisible. You can't say what you need to say on a newspaper, on a magazine, on a microphone, not even out loud in a classroom. Then you use whatever media you can count on – a wall, for example. We would often go spray-painting political messages in the middle of the night, a task that sometimes ended up with us driving like crazy, running away from a police car. We had to run away. It wasn't a matter of being arrested and charged. People were tortured back then. They were killed. They simply disappeared, never to be seen again.

Traditional censorship is a very important instrument for the suppression of freedom of speech – but it's hardly the only one. The perceived threat to your personal safety, for example, is a very effective way of silencing voices. Nowadays, this is the biggest threat to freedom of expression operating in Brazil. According to the Inter American Press Association (IAPA), "Brazil is among the most dangerous countries to practice journalism." A very high-profile case happened in 2002, when reporter Tim Lopes, of the television network *Rede Globo*, was working on a series of stories about organized crime in Rio de Janeiro. Lopes was caught by the drug dealers; they cut off his arms and placed him on a device locally known as "the microwave": a pile of tires that are fit on the victim's body up to the neck, and then put on fire.

Tim Lopes' story had many reasons to become "famous" – he worked for the biggest TV network in the country, he was murdered in touristy-beautiful-trendy Rio de Janeiro, and the execution method was more horrific than the usual bullet to the head. But killings of journalists by members of organized crime in Brazil are not rare. Sometimes it's a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, such as with 23 year-old reporter Melyssa Martins Correia, murdered in 2003 in Presidente Prudente, state of Sao Paulo, by members of PCC (acronym in Portuguese for First Command of the Capital, one of the two biggest crime organizations in Brazil). Melyssa was a cultural reporter – she covered music shows, art exhibitions, etc. She went to a supermarket to write a story about a promotional event, but the day after she went there, police closed the supermarket. It turns out it belonged to one of the organized crime bosses, and they thought the timing of the police action was too much of a coincidence – so Melyssa was executed for "spying on them".

Dozens of other journalists were also murdered – especially in smaller towns – while investigating politicians or businessmen on corruption or other charges. I lost a friend



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to one of these murders. He was writing a series of stories for a small newspaper, about environmental crimes being committed by a powerful agribusiness company in a rural area, and had been receiving threats over the phone. One night he was walking home with a friend, when a man came out of nowhere, stabbed him repeatedly, and left without a word, without trying to steal anything. Before he died (which happened less than an hour later), he told his friend he had never seen the man before. As in most cases like this, his death was attributed by police to common crime, and no one was ever charged for it.

I've been threatened once by a mayor who was the subject of a story on corruption I wrote for a magazine. He phoned the newsroom, furious, promised to sue both myself and the magazine, the whole nine yards. Recently, this same mayor (still a mayor, many years later) was finally arrested on other, unrelated corruption charges. As they entered his house with a warrant, police discovered literally tens of illegal weapons stacked all over the place. Most of the time, when you write stories on corruption, that's the kind of people you're dealing with – scary people.

**Q. What is your experience here in Canada – are you still somewhat a censored writer?**

**A. Espeschit:** Since I've arrived, the worst enemy of my "freedom of expression" has been the English language.

**Q. How would you define for yourself and your own writing just what you picture as freedom of expression?**

**A. Espeschit:** Freedom of expression is extremely important for writers. But I think it's even more important for readers. Of course there are always the readers (usually the highly educated ones) who are able to somehow read between the lines, who are able to have a more-or-less realistic view of what's really going on around them, even though they're bombarded on a daily basis with the vision of the make-believe country depicted in the controlled press. For the vast majority of the population, though, a distorted representation of reality by the media means an equally distorted perception of reality. The nation's ability to critical thinking is badly damaged. That's the scary thing about it. Information control: it actually works. You can use it to get an entire nation hell-bent on war. Or to get an entire nation hysterically paranoid with communism. Or almost anything else.

**Q. One of the quotes by you I read was:**

*"I have lived through political censorship, long military censorship, running from police dogs with big mouths and*

*big teeth," she said. "It is a different experience from when the only way you know about guerrilla warfare in your own country is because someone left a pamphlet inside the washroom stall." However, Espeschit said she's almost more comfortable with that type of censorship than the kind of behind-the-scene corporate censorship that happens in North America. "It's like 'Censorship Inc.' At least when it's out in the open, you can keep an eye on it. You're aware that it's happening," she said. "I think it's more dangerous when it's hidden and forgotten."*

**Could you please elaborate more on what you said and how it relates to literature of resistance – here in Canada and abroad?**

**A. Espeschit:** What happens around here – and I don't mean what happens to immigrant writers, I mean to everyone, to North American writers and readers in general – is infinitely more subtle, of course, than what happens in totalitarian regimens or in countries under extreme conditions of violence. The thing is, being subtle doesn't necessarily make it less dangerous. Freedom – of expression or otherwise – is never something we can take for granted. As writers or as readers, we have the obligation of being attentive, of informing ourselves, of constantly trying to understand the old and new ways through which our society is deprived of listening to the voices of dissent.

The growing concentration of mass media ownership within a few powerful economic groups is one such way. Yes, you may say the truth – except no one will publish it, if it happens to be one of those "inconvenient truths". A few months ago, in November 2008, a nationwide survey of American adults ("The Harris Poll") found that an astonishing 37% of them still believed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. That's 85 million people – 85 million adult Americans, all of them believing together in the same lie. What does it say about the American media? Did all these people just make up the WMD story in their minds? Or were they led to believe in it as they spent day after day watching the news on TV, listening to the radio, reading the papers?

**Q. Do you see writers in exile now here in Canada still feeling shadowed and fearful when they write and publish here in Canada?**

**A. Espeschit:** We have immigrant writers here that have experienced very difficult situations in their countries of origin – people that were subjected to torture and/or prison, people that went through extremely stressful events in their lives. This isn't, of course, the kind of thing that you just leave behind without at least some degree



of scarring. I've met people with very fragile health, for example, and you can't help but wonder whether they'd be in such a bad shape if only their life history had been different. On the other hand, writers are a pretty resilient bunch. Maybe because we have this wonderful escape valve that's our writing – I don't know.

**Q. How does having to write, live, think in English pose a sort of self-exile in one's own head?**

**A. Espeschit:** Language is, of course, the biggest issue, and the hardest to deal with – because it takes time, a lot of time. There are many other issues though. Cultural differences are a big deal. So are differences in the way the market works – what is publishable in a country might be totally unacceptable in another, and vice-versa. It helps a lot if we can get together to exchange experiences on this front – because this way people don't have to learn everything the hard way. That's one of the reasons why we're trying to set up a group of multilingual/immigrant writers, which will possibly be meeting on a regular basis to work together on joint projects and discussions.



RYTA'S FIRST CANADA DAY, 2001

Another issue is finding out where exactly you belong within the local writing community. Immigrant writers often find themselves in a very peculiar situation. In some

aspects, it's as if we were suddenly sent back in time to the beginning of our careers. We're back to being "emerging writers" all over again. For example, a few months after I had arrived here, I tried to join a Canadian writers' organization. The organization required a certain number of publications for an author to be accepted. But the application form was very clear in that the published work had to be in English. Because my publication credits were all in Portuguese, I would be accepted as a "friend" of the organization, not as a full member. In other situations, your previous experience might count – but not always in a positive way. Not long after being deemed "unpublished" by that organization, I found out about a literary contest for emerging, unpublished Canadian writers. I phoned for more information, and was told that I couldn't enter the contest – because I was already published in Brazil. It's like when you hit puberty, and you want to go to that late-night party, and your parents say, "Absolutely not. You're still a child!" Then you leave your dirty clothes for Mommy to pick up and wash, and she goes: "You're not a child anymore! You can do your own laundry!"

**Q. How do you see Obama's comments "... those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history ..."?**

**A. Espeschit:** I am (well, me and a few other billion anxious people all over the world...) obviously VERY relieved with Obama's election. I'm trying not to expect too much – but I have to admit the man can be truly inspiring when he talks. I've read that authorities in China made sure no translations of Obama's speech in Chinese websites included the part about "...deceit and the silencing of dissent" – meaning, I guess, that they agree this is applicable to their current situation... But I don't think it would be too long a shot to read it also as criticism to the way in which the Bush administration conducted the business of releasing and controlling information to the public.

**Q. What can we as Alberta writers do?**

**A. Espeschit:** I think I kind of answered that already – when I talk about being alert and trying to keep informed. There's so much to do! Getting together with other writers, being involved with organizations such as the Writers Guild or PEN Canada, are ways of doing something. So is helping out in events such as Freedom to Read Week, protesting against governmental decisions that take away the little financial incentive that the arts still have, producing writing that collaborates to critical thinking, and so on.

I think that "literature of resistance" can't be seen as a synonym for propaganda, for aesthetically-deprived, didactic works. Whatever moral or political convictions you have, they're bound to transpire on what you write – or, sometimes, on what you don't write. What I mean is that it's not only about writing protest poems or novels about starving little children. For example, if there's an ongoing process of aggressive cultural colonization – such as during dictatorship times in Brazil, when all you could listen to in Brazilian radio stations were songs by American rock bands – an art of resistance could be as simple as trying to keep alive and re-invent your own cultural traditions, exploring the richness of your community's cultural background.

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*Michelle Greysen enjoys her writer's lifestyle from her unique Nanton antique store, Inktiques, where she shares a passion for all things collectible in the ink-world. Michelle is currently developing an inspirational book for emerging writers and travel guide books for antique shoppers, dabbling in poetry, and working on her first novel.*