

ND 4.4 “A short, sharp punch to the face:” José Revueltas’ *The Hole (El Apando)* with Alia Trabucco Zerán and Sophie Hughes (CH)

Transcript

Chris Holmes

Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast that brings novelists and critics together to explore the making of novels and what to make of them. This is season four of the show, and we're dedicating our episodes to novelists and translators in conversation. I'm Chris Holmes, one of the many hosts you're going to be hearing this season of Novel Dialogue. Today, a Chilean novelist, Alia Trabucco Zerán, will be in conversation with her translator, Sophie Hughes.

One of the most exciting voices in Latin American writing today, Alia Trabucco Zerán was born in Chile in 1983. She was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship for her MFA in Creative Writing at New York University, and she holds a PhD in Spanish and Latin American studies from University College London. *La Resta, The Remainder*, her debut novel, won the prize for best unpublished literary work awarded by the Chilean Council for the Arts in 2014, and on publication was chosen by El País as one of its top 10 debuts of 2015. In 2019, *The Remainder* was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize. Most recently, she is author of *Las Homicidas, Women Who Kill*, also out with And Other Stories.

Alia's translator for both books is Sophie Hughes. Sophie has translated some of the most exciting and enduring writers in the Spanish language. Both her translation of Alia's *The Remainder* and Fernanda Melchor's *Hurricane Season* were finalists for the International Booker Prize. She has been a finalist for the Dublin Literary Award and longlisted for the National Book Award in Translation and Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction.

Hi, Alia and Sophie.

Alia Trabucco Zerán

Hey, Chris, so good to be here. Sophie, great to have this conversation with you today.

Sophie Hughes

Yes, I'm very excited. Thank you so much, Chris, for the invite and I'm super excited that I could do it with Alia.

CH

Thank you so much, both of you. We've come today to talk about a novella that Sophie co-translated with Amanda Hopkinson, a little demon of a book called *El Apando* or *The Hole*, by the late Mexican writer José Revueltas. When Sophie and I originally spoke about an interview, she already had in mind a conversation with Alia that could focus on a novel that had been important in its moment, somewhat muted by time, and then rediscovered and reinvigorated in translation. I begin by asking Sophie to introduce Revueltas and *The Hole*, and then maybe the two of you could tell me how you arrived at this

weird, violent, terrifying, claustrophobic, ingenious novella as your conversation piece for this interview. And Sophie, I believe you're going to read a little bit as well.

SH

Yes, I think it's worth reading a bit just to give the listeners an idea of what we're talking about when we talk about a sort of unhinged writing prose style. I will begin by talking a little bit about José Revueltas us and this is actually the second work of his to be translated into English. The first was *El Luto Humano* which was translated, it was called *The Stone Knife* and it was translated in the first, at the end of the first half of the last century. So quite quickly after it was awarded the National Prize for Literature in Mexico.

So this was a successful book and it was his first full length novel. After that, it was a complete sort of radio silence for him in English until Amanda and I came up with this slightly harebrained idea and plan to try to get *El Apando* into English, finally, what is considered by many people to be a masterpiece of Latin American Spanish language literature.

And actually, funnily enough, this is a book that Alia mentioned to me, when I first suggested the idea to you, Chris, I was absolutely imagining talking about someone else's translation of another book. That interests me a lot, looking at other people's translations and the decisions that they make. But then Alia was like, oh come on, if we're going to talk about reinvigorating a sort of lost work and a short work as well, and one that has had a big impact on us both then *El Apando* is surely the one.

I'll give you a little idea of who Revueltas was. He was born in 1914 in Durango, in the state of Durango in Mexico, but he was, he moved as a kid, as a young kid to Mexico City. Revueltas was initially and I think throughout the rest of his life considered himself to be first and foremost a sort of political activist. He was just 13 when he kind of came into contact with some laborers in Mexico City and in other places in Mexico where he was traveling around. And he was introduced to Marxism and Marxism was an ideology in its kind of shifting guises that really impacted on his life and obviously on his writing as well. I mean, he himself said later in his life that he tried not to introduce politics into his literature. And he said, and I quote him, he said, "I'm necessarily a person located in society, in politics. I don't conceive of myself as a writer without my political background."

So it's a bit of a contradiction because I think in this work especially, what is so masterful about it is that he sort of reaches that sweet spot with *El Apando*, where it is both a kind of public, it has a public narrative, you know, there is a political driving force and ideology behind the work or several, but his last work was set in a prison where he was captive and that is *El Apando*, which he wrote in 1968 and was published in 1969. And he was in prisoned in Lecumberri prison otherwise known as The Black Palaces.

Yeah, so there's a little bit about Reveultas and in terms of what kind of figure he is now, this is a book that I've never met anyone in Latin America who's a reader or writer who hasn't read it. Which I think that says, sort of it, sort of speaks for itself.

Let me tell you a little bit more about the novel. So he wrote this novel, as I say, when he was in prison in 1968. The book is set in Lecumberri, set in the prison where Reveultas was imprisoned when he wrote it, but he doesn't name it as that prison. There are three convicted drug addicts, they're the main characters. El Carajo, which we translated as the Prick, Albino and Polonio, and they're basically

conspiring to secure their next hit. They're sort of junkies, they're really in deep trouble and they end up being confined in the punishment cells, so they're not allowed their usual privileges. And they're in the punishment cell when we find them and which is called el apando, which is the name of the book in Spanish. And they've been apandados, which is a word that Reveultas comes up with. And they're forced to reformulate their plan, which was how to get drugs into the prison. So Albino and Polonio take advantage of El Carajo, the Prick, who's this really wretched, foul figure. He's disabled, they called him the cripple, and he's got one eye and he's known throughout the penitentiary for carving up his veins every time he gets banged up in the hole. So he's this really, really potent and viscerally disgusting figure really throughout the book. But Reveultas takes no mercy on him whatsoever.

Anyway, they convince El Carajo to get his mother to bring, to sneak the drugs in in visiting time. But the problem is that that plan has now been scuppered by the fact that they're in the hole. They're in this punishment cell. So it's like how do we get contact, how do we have contact, physical contact, in order for these drugs to come to us? That is essentially the plot and as I recount it now it's sort of amazing to me that anyone should have agreed to publish it in English.

But what happens is that the women get in, so the girlfriends of these lot, get in with the mother who has hidden the drugs on her person. I will say no more. Basically what happens is they realize they can't get the drugs to the men and so they make the girls make up this idea and they basically kind of incite a brawl and they stir up loads of trouble just to distract and to create this kind of distraction and moment where this pass over of drugs might be able to happen. But it fails and it ends up in this kind of gargantuan defeat and then the final nail in the coffin for anyone's honor or dignity or anything good is that El Carajo also betrays his mother's secret to the guards, completely unnecessarily. It's a final kind of stage of the novel that we get this just line thing where he just says that she's got the drugs.

That's the book and I'll read a bit. I've been speaking for so long, Alia I hope you're gonna take over after this.

ATZ

I will. I will. I'm having so much fun listening to you, I want to actually reread it for like the fifth time tonight, so.

SH

It doesn't take long. That's the other thing, you know it's one of those little like okay, it's almost like an experience to read this book, just a short, sharp punch in the face.

Right. This is not from the beginning of the book, but it's almost the beginning.

They were captive. More captive than Polonio, more captive than Albino, more captive than the Prick. For a few seconds it was empty, that rectangular cage, the apes disappearing momentarily as they paced back and forth in opposite directions to the far walls of the cage — thirty meters or so, sixty there and back — and that virgin, formless space transformed into inalienable sovereign territory under Polonio's stubborn right eye, which took in, millimeter by millimeter, each and every detail of that section of the wing. Apes, arch-apes, stupid, vile, and naïve, naïve as a ten-year-old whore. So stupid they didn't seem to notice that they alone were the captives, they and their mothers and their children and their forefathers. They were born to keep watch and they knew as much, to spy, to constantly look around,

making sure no one escaped their clutches in that city with its iron grid of streets, barred corridors, corners multiplying on all sides, and that stupid face they wore was nothing but the manifestation of a certain, hazy longing for other unattainable aptitudes, a certain stutter of the soul in their simian features, underlaid with grief for an irremediable loss of which they remained ignorant, eyes all over them, a mesh of eyes covering their bodies, a river of pupils rushing over their limbs, napes, necks, arms, chests, balls, all to put food on the table at home, or so they told themselves, where their ape families danced and screeched — the little boys and girls and the wife, hairy on the inside — during their twenty-four long hours with the master ape at home, after his twenty-four hour shift in the penitentiary, stretched out on the bed, foul and clammy, the grease-smearred banknotes from petty bribes laying on the bedside table, but never leaving the prison, vile and captive in an endless circulation, ape-notes, which the wife repeatedly smoothed and pressed in the palm of her hand, slowly, terribly, not knowing what she was doing. Life was one long not knowing anything at all: not knowing that there they were in their cage, husband and wife, husband and husband, wife and children, father and father, sons and fathers, terrified, universal apes.”

CH

Thank you. That was so beautifully read, and you get a sense of how harrowing this book is and how wonderful your translation.

Alia, would you talk a little bit about your own relationship to the book?

ATZ

Yes, I just want to start by saying, Chris, that just Sophie is just amazing 'cause the translation of this book, I think it's particularly difficult. I think we'll talk about this a bit more later on, but listen, I have the book in my hands in Spanish, so I was reading while you were reading, Sophie, and the translation is just remarkable.

And I just wanted to say that this book was introduced to me by the late Argentinian writer Sergio Chejfec. He recommended it at a class. I immediately, as a very good student, went and had requested it at the library because he was very enthusiastic about it, and I just couldn't believe this. It's a punch in the face as one of you said before. But it was not only the fact that such a short novel could do so much with language, because you are, you find yourself constantly lost and then finding out where you are, which in a way recreates over and over again the feeling of being imprisoned and you wonder how can I be lost in such a small space? Because they are imprisoned in a very small space and Revueltas manages to do that with language and it amazed me. And also at this claustrophobic, mad, brilliant use of language amazed me and it also told me that with, that you could, if you are as brilliant as Revueltas, of course, you can do quite a lot with very few pages if you let go of certain conventions regarding structure and the use of words.

And there's just one more thing which is something that I would love to discuss with you, Sophie and Chris, which is, it's the fact that this is a very uncomfortable book, you both agree, in the sense that you, it's a very sad book too. It's a very violent book, but it goes back to me to the question of what does a novel do to you as a reader? You know, you're finding, you're reading this book about characters that Sophie described very well, that are imprisoned and they're both violent characters and victims at the same time. And you do, you finish the book, you close the book, and you find yourself completely

saddened and bitter. And you are, and you've been also like a victim of a violent book yourself. And that literature can cause this state of uncomfortableness, you know, that you find yourself feeling like, is this the world that we are inhabiting, kind of book, you know. That's something that for me is very relevant, especially at times where sometimes literature can be quite domesticized, is that a word? Well, I'll say it anyways.

CH

Yeah, I think so.

ATZ

And leaving readers calm, you know, leaving readers feeling all right after reading a violent book or after watching a violent film or a film or a book about inequality. And then you finish it and you feel fine. And I think that's wrong. And this book, that's the exact opposite too. So, so that's another reason why I loved it. And that was my first reading with which was in 2010 and I remember it vividly because I had the book from the NYU library and I just wanted to write all over it, you know, because it wasn't my own copy and I couldn't because it was a library book. And so I had to turn it back and I couldn't find a copy funnily, so I printed it. It's a short novel. I printed it and then I wrote all over my printed version. And I became also fascinated by the fact, well that conditions under the which the author was living, I mean he was imprisoned. And this was something that fascinated me to the point that I wanted to write something about all books that had ever been written in prison, which is something that I was also obsessed with for some time.

So there was a second reading for me when I was, I actually wanted to write about that aspect of this book, the conditions under which it was written and that was in 2014. And then there was, the current and that time I didn't have a copy either, so it was another printed version. So I only bought the book now, which is really, it's on my third reading and I reread it twice for this conversation, and I just find myself in awe over and over again at the fact that he was able to leave us wondering who is imprisoned here, who exactly are looking after who, and who are punishing who, and over those changes in perspective throughout the book that they just, and I would say one more thing is that I remember reading it for the first time and just being fascinated by the use of language and the fact that you were lost in the use of words with monkeys. Who are these monkeys? And you're not sure what you're reading you know. And this last time I was just so sad, but maybe that was because I read it or reread it the day after the Chilean referendum where we radically lost or at least I did.

SH

Alia, I've got so many things to go on from that from what you were saying, all in agreement with you. I think one of the things that you said was, you know, you mentioned just now, what a short novel it is. And you mentioned before at the very beginning about a sense of being lost. I mean you, given that we're readers and so obviously we get plunged into a physical world, a physical setting that's kind of quite an obvious one in this book, it's a prison. And it's a sort of panopticon-style prison, which is why you get the description here of a river of eyes flowing over the guards because from certain positions in their cells or on their wings they are able to look at the apes who are the prison guards. But of course, the prison guards themselves, and this is a high security, like really well developed prison, so they're also caged. They're in their own cage. Hence, and Revueltas takes this fact, this you know, physical fact of the

condition of being prison guards. And he absolutely runs with this idea of them being apes until it's so normal to read this this sense of, this word, you know it, they become one and the same thing, you know, you no longer know whether or not when he says apes you're imagining a prison guard in this blue flannel suit, or an ape, or something in between. And that for me is a little bit of the magic of this book.

It's such a clear, you know, Borges famously said like it's useless to try and make up new metaphors because, you know, they're just strained and they don't really work. But here you have this image that just couldn't be more appropriate and that leads me to thinking a little bit about what, why it has such power, because it does make you lost. And in some ways it is actually unhinged. Sometimes as a translator, you feel yourself sort of not being able to quite work out a physical space. That happens a lot. The physical spaces usually become clear to you as you translate. If it's not 100% clear in the original, you sort of make up your own in which to be absolutely clear, so that the reader gets the sense of being set in a space on the stage. And here it's such a confusing space, these bars upon bars, the city that is an iron grid on all sides.

And I had to go to the National Archives in order to even understand what Lecumberri prison was, even though this book is, and it's important to stress, not set in Lecumberri prison. It was written there, and I think we can, I think it's pretty clear that you know what he's describing is Lecumberri. And it, I honestly had to go there in order to be able to translate the book. Amanda had been there. Amanda actually spent a lot of time there. She was doing a lot of translating and interpreting for political prisoners, but I also had this sense of being completely lost in some of its symbolism in the physical space of the novel, in the space in which it was set. The sort of political moment which isn't explicit in the book, but is, I think it's why it's a masterpiece, because in this book, he's absolutely seeking truth. He's trying to understand something about human nature and the idea of what freedom and being a free man or woman is and the value of life if you are not free, or the worthlessness, which I think would be how he would see it.

ATZ

Yeah, totally. I also wanted to add to that, that there's this paradox, I think, to the space, which is very relevant in this novel. That you're in a very small place in a prison and even in a punishment cell. And yet even though you're between four walls, you're lost.

SH

Right.

ATZ

So in the book you find yourself lost and I think that paradox is actually, it's something that perhaps he managed to write because he probably lived through it, the disorientation of being imprisoned there, the disorientation of actually not knowing exactly when it's morning and when it's evening and how many days you've been inside a jail, you know and between those four walls. And I, it's something that was also quite striking for me because as a law student I went to several prisons to try to move prisoners from one place to another because their lives were in danger. So when I read this book I, it was really also something that I don't know, I thought I would go back in my imagination to those prisons, to the prisons that I had actually seen. And yet I was constantly, my point of view was constantly shifted, you

know, through the use of language and through this way of just making the distinctions invisible between the policeman, the guards I mean, and the people who are there for like as a punishment. And they're all in this same position.

SH

No, pragmatically, he sets it up for us to be lost and confused because he puts the prison guards in cages.

ATZ

Exactly.

SH

And that's also the scene of the, the final scene is a really bloody brawl between these three, you know, cold-turkey prisoners who are absolutely wild, I mean, they're described as gladiators. And the women are ripping pieces of hair out of people's heads from outside and whenever they can get one of their hands through the bars, they're kind of ripping hair off, you know, the prison guards, to try to get there, to try and help their boyfriends. And it was honestly hard at every stage to understand what cage, what cell, is the guard now in the cell? And, but then he compounds that sense of being lost and of disorientation by adding in these extraordinary transcendent, transcendental digressions which are the scenes of the prisoners essentially remembering either, there's a kind of nostalgia for the flesh in every way, either drug taking, or like sexual activity with their girlfriends who they're pining for.

ATZ

It's, I think, ethically such a powerful book in the way that it makes you feel as a reader. You know, it makes you feel also very uncomfortable about the cruelty of the prison, you know, and this is something that keeps on going. And you, we assume as a society, we pretend it doesn't happen but this space does exist, and I think the fact that the book makes you feel uncomfortable throughout and lost throughout the reading process and experience, it's just, it also touches the ethical question of the role of literature, when literature touches these delicate subjects you know.

SH

So that was going to be my next question for you, Alia, as a writer and one who I also see to be, you know, as a person, I see you totally located in society and politics. I, you, that is you. As a writer, it's there, but they're not what I would call political novels? I'm not sure, really, I'm not sure I'm entirely sure what I would call a political novel in the first place. But you know, one of the things that comes back time and time again around the criticism of this work by Revueltas is that this sort of, taking it as a compliment, I mean, complimenting him on finally having toned down some of his politics, or sort of, you know, stopped wearing on his sleeve in order to sort of transcend it, in order for this to become a book whose symbolism grows, and the sort of specificity wanes a little bit.

So he focuses always on excluded people, on the kind of wretched of the Earth, on drug addicts, on prostitutes. Almost all of his stories, you know, involve this and there are some really tragic line, I read one before you know "as naive as a 10 year old whore"

Of course, this does not Revueltas speaking. He's not calling a little girl who's prostituting herself a whore. What he's trying to look at, I think, what he's trying to do is kind of, in a way, show us the full truth and get as close to the Mexican reality as he can in order, and he doesn't paint a pretty picture. Like this poor mother of the Prick is also just described in the most cruel ways, you know, she's described as the ugliest creature on the planet, you know. It's horrible. But he's trying to get at the truth. He's trying to understand everyone in all their colors.

ATZ

I guess it's such an irrelevant question of what a political novel is, because I guess there's this idea that a political novel will have to be somehow pedagogical. So you'll have to, it will have to very clearly tell you who is the good guy and who is the bad one, and so you close the book and you have this ethical learning and you can take that out of the book and in this particular case I think Revueltas, being such a political writer, of course, and such a political being, he's doing something a lot more complex. It is political, but it's not pedagogical in any way, you know, it's this thinking through writing and it's, Sophie, as you're saying, Sophie, it's like more existentialist in its approach, but it is asking these political questions. So what is freedom? What is the meaning of being free? And what happens with all sorts of human beings when their freedom is taken away from them? And what is cruelty? And all these are political questions. It's just that literature, when good literature, when it approaches these questions it's not to say yes and no. It's not to say good and bad or up and down or left or right it's just to ask it all over again.

So it's a novel that's asking this question a million times: what is freedom? You read this book and you can ask it in every single page. So what is freedom? And you'll find maybe a poem in the reply in one page, and in the next one you will find this violent act. And then you'll have a tiny little act of tenderness. And then you close the book without one answer and I think the political novels that are able to do that to approach subjects with such complexity and doing that with language, I just find it so, I don't know, so extraordinary, which also leads me to a question, Sophie, about your process and Amanda's process translating this book, but also how your relationship to this book changed through the translation process, if you remember any conversations you had with Amanda on certain paragraphs, or words that you found particularly hard or particularly, I don't know challenging to translate. So I just want you to talk a little bit about your process because I just as a reader I read this book and I, it's just that I let go. I let go and I find myself completely submerged. And as a translator I imagine you can't completely let go because you need to be constantly thinking about the next word and the rhythm. And I want you to, yes, if you could talk to us about that a bit.

SH

Yeah, I think that what happened at different stages when I read, we read this book now, I think that for both Amanda and I, what happened in different stages of translating it was that we either let go or held back and try to take control. And it always felt like you were sacrificing one thing for the other. Like I'm not sure we ever found that sweet spot as I read it, of letting both things happen at once. And thank goodness, Amanda was there doing it with me, because in one part you would obviously just in a very practical and kind of pragmatic sense, together we would, something I've never done with another co-translator before, teasing out which adjective went with which noun. I mean at that basic a level, and that's not because Amanda and I didn't have the language to understand, its earlier, I said at the beginning, you know, like just, you get lost. And that's because he has all these kind of like sub-

alternating clauses that are kind of fighting for attention and that he, the digressions within one sentence.

With Amanda we took chunks of the book. And it was kind of like, yeah, page 1-5 for you, 5-10. And off we went, and then we came back and we did so many drafts of this book, in a way that I think we almost lost control sometimes of it. We literally had this kind of chaotic process of pages flying back and forth through the ether. But on some pages I'm really proud, and I think that something about that process really helped us to almost get the feverishness of it. And I think that Amanda and I, every now and again, towards the end of the process, we actually said to each other, we'll never know if that additive was meant for this or for this because it just so happens that they have the same gendered, you know, ending. So we can't know. So let's go with this one. And unlike almost every book I've ever translated or co-translated, I think there will be things that we did differently. But I think that our process was sort of truthful to the fury of the writing of it.

ATZ

When I read it this time, and the word "nadien" comes out at the beginning and at the end of the book and I've underlined it in my copy at last. And then I was thinking about this word, the "no one," there's this sad, sad togetherness in being no one. In that plural there's, it's a no one because a no one is usually alone and he adds this plural and there's this togetherness and I think that's also something that's there throughout the book, because everyone is so, you're in solitary, you're in prison. You're in an isolated cell and everyone is like a man by his own and for his own and there's this violence to that. And yet that word creates this sense of bonding that's at the same time very, I don't know, it's just very deeply sad in the very deeply sad way that a book talking about people in prison can be, you know?

SH

Yeah, I agree with you Alia, it goes from the final pages where they have the, finally have the fight. Which is like, it's like sort of finally the novel explodes after he's laid all of these little seeds, or at least poured petrol everywhere and then just goes boom. And then the final two lines, five lines, maybe, it becomes tender. It sinks back down again, and I must say that those are the kinds of moments as a translator or co-translator in this case, where I think, yeah, Amanda and I, we really, we really got that. I do think that we heard all of it, you know, because he put, he puts everything into the book. There's everything in there. There's so much sadness, there's so much anger. There's his own captivity. But really, he's not focusing on that, he's focusing on the wretched, you know, like people who have been completely forgotten, you know, on the excluded of society.

ATZ

Which is almost unwritable in a way. And nowadays I think there's this tendency in literature, like a tendency towards literality, you know, where the author is the protagonist, and there's, like everything is autobiographical. And this isn't. And he was in prison, but, and yet, it's not about his particular experience in prison. It's, there's this universality to it, that there's also like a way of, even though he is in prison, he manages to cut that tendency towards literality and do something else. And I think that's also, it's a lesson for writers today, to be able to jump a bit farther from yourself, even though, even if the experience touches upon your experience.

CH

There is this sense that there's so much interest in drawing autobiographically from authors now, and the fact that Revueltas took pains to say that this was not his precise experience, and yet we want so much to understand what it was like for him in prison and to see that as the lens that will help us understand the novel. But he's working precisely against that. And I'm, and I wonder how you both think about the tension that's brought there. Because it's not that it doesn't reflect on his experience, of course it does, but as, Alia, as you say, there's a universality that's much more important, ultimately. So I wonder how you deal with the tension between the keen desire for the autobiographical now and the specific fictionality that Revueltas wants to play in.

SH

What you made me think about is the other translations, because I became really interested in that very question when I was translating with Amanda and I looked at the existing translations of *El Apando*, which had kind of spanned from pretty soon after in France, quite relatively soon after it was originally published, to just like a few, one in Polish, French, Italian just happened a few years ago. And so I was interested and I looked at all the blurbs because I was, I wanted to see whether or not which narrative was going to be drawn out. The translation theorist Mona Baker, I never don't think about what she says about translators having the ability, but also publishes having ability, to activate certain narratives at their whim, like every translation decision that we have activates a narrative, a personal narrative, a public narrative, a meta narrative. And I always think about this. I mean, not always as I'm translating, but always when I'm doing things like pitching a book, which has happened to be the case this time with Amanda, you know, we were really trying to sell this book.

And in a way, I do sometimes think that publishers sort of meet you with, well, why hasn't it been translated already? I do feel that you have to do a bit of work to get them to think well, it surely it would have already come into English if it was that good a book, because this is 50 years later. And I understand that, I do, and in this case what happened was something interesting, which is that I kept talking about him being a sort of '68 writer, a forgotten '68 writer. And then I started to become a bit uncomfortable with this idea of him as a '68 writer because I felt I was misleading what the novel was about, because it's not a book about the '68 movement. And then I looked, and lo and behold, the French edition, the Italian edition, they all set in Lecumberri prison, which it is not set.

Of course, there is a stamp at the end of the manuscript which gets repeated in our printed edition, which is beautifully done by New Directions, and they also say at the end that he wrote it there and I do think that that is an important part of the text. But it was interesting to me that they were kind of pushing this public narrative right from the paratext, right from the blurbs, and his bio on the back and things. Because in this particular case, that sort of cultural specificity or that sort of geographical specificity, right, he was the Mexican leader, he wasn't, but you know, he was leading the Mexican student marches. There's, usually we try to explain to publishers why a book is so universal that you should translate it because you're going to, you know, it's going to touch the English readers, too, you know, Americans and anglophones all over the world will be able to understand something, you know what I mean, this sort of tendency that we have to think that we're all aliens if we speak different languages.

But in this case, it was pushing the universalism of this global movement, this is saying he was a global writer, and in a way I sort of came to think in the end that that was sort of commodifying something that he would have loathed. Like I think he would have hated it, to see on the back of the blurbs, his bio.

ATZ

I agree. He would have hated it.

SH

Yeah, yeah.

ATZ

Sometimes novels like, this is from a very critical point of view, too, of what sometimes international literature does, which is to somehow exoticize. I don't know if that's a word, either--

SH

It is.

ATZ

-- but saying like this particular book will make you travel to certain place or you learn about certain countries culture and so that's the other thing. So it's either you make it universal or you make it very specific and you move between these two, you know, this dichotomy that and you need to fit a book into either universality or specificity to make it sellable and readable. And I think in this particular case, this book, it is about all these characters being imprisoned. It is about a person in particular but it isn't. And I think also what makes it so profound is what Revueltas does with language and what you managed to do with Amanda with the translation, which is it's like this game where you do, you turn around and round and round and you're dizzy, you know, and you're dizzy and you're trying to figure out where you're standing and this is how I felt through the different readings of the same book. You never stop feeling dizzy, and I think that's just extraordinary.

CH

I think it goes back, what you were saying so beautifully before, Alia, about the not wanting to engage the pedagogical instinct in reading this and instead the affective experience of reading it. So that it almost dares you: try and learn something from this. Try and even, try and even understand the space in which you have been asked to inhabit, and instead feel claustrophobia and feel loss and feel the yearning for freedom and that being much more important than this notion of a pedagogy that literature asks you to take away.

SH

Yeah, I so agree with you there, Chris. It's like you try and understand the essence of man's freedom. I'm gonna give it a go. See if you can grasp anything from this like kind of slippery trail that I'm gonna leave. But, and yet, it's so, I guess Spanish word would be like contomentes, like so filling, it like, you finish it feeling so invigorated, I think.

CH

Well, that's, before I take us out, I want to make sure that we can talk a little bit about our season signature question, which is thinking about translation in a very specific way, and that is the idea of

untranslatability. Is there a word that either of you feel is untranslatable or is particularly difficult to translate for a certain reason?

ATZ

I'll take that question first just to say that, because Sophie and I have known each other for some time now and at least my first novel, it was full of what we called Chilenismos. So these are Chilean ways of saying things and Sophie managed to translate absolutely everything so I don't know if there's an untranslatable word for Sophie Hughes, in particular because she will.

CH

For regular humans, though.

ATZ

Maybe for regular humans, but she will find a way, and she will not only find that way, she'll find like the exact syllables for those words. So that's why it's such a pleasure to, and an honor to be, that my work translated by her and I'm just not being nice. Yeah, she really is something else. I was, I just wanted to bring in a funny word in Chilean, in Chilean Spanish, which is "carrete" which is a word that also verb that is, it's a particular kind of party, an informal party that you go to, invited all of a sudden to go to someone's house. So you go to a carrete, carreteas, and it's also the word for, the thread where you put the thread. I don't know the word actually in English. Well, Sophie will have to help with that. I don't, I don't know if it's untranslatable. I just like it a lot.

SH

Is it the spool? I, this is yeah, I'm--

ATZ

It's the roll, it's the roll with where you keep the thread you know.

CH

Oh, the spool, the spool.

SH

It's a spool, the spool.

ATZ

Yeah, thank you. So that word some somehow translates into, in Spanish, in Chilean Spanish, into going to party and it has like a million different versions of it, which I really like. And it's like transgenerational, which is really nice too.

SH

Yeah, and who could resist the invitation to a party that you know is going to unspool.

ATZ

Exactly, you never know. You don't know where it will end, you know.

SH

That's great.

I have, yeah, I, there are loads of words, Chris. There are so many words that I come up again. And I always mean to write them down and I never do, because in every context they change. But I did remember a really nice story. It's a little anecdote. Maybe we should finish with an anecdote. I like it and it'll become clear why I like it because we often get asked about untranslatable-ness, the untranslatability of things as translators. I don't mind it because I think philosophically it's kind of interesting and maybe even linguistically is interesting, but also it is a little bit like being, like a musician being asked which bit of that famous piece, like which ornament is impossible to play, like where do you always fudge? It's essentially a question like where do you never manage to do your job, sort of thing. Where do you fail time and time again? So it's funny because we always get asked it as translators and I don't mind, because it's not about it.

But there's a really nice story that I heard when I was back as a master student about 21, and I read it because I was doing some work on Beckett and thinking about his self-translations and it was Emil Cioran, the philosopher who was spending time with him at the time in Paris. And he wrote this anecdote which was that the French text which was originally written by Beckett and was called *Sans*, in English he self-translated it as *Lessness*. And Emil Cioran and Beckett were looking again at the translation, which is a self-translation. And then Emil Cioran became obsessed with Beckett about the poverty of the original after it had been translated as into *Lessness*, so they were no, he was no longer satisfied with the original title—

CH

That's fascinating.

SH

--the *Sans* which means without, right and, Cioran said we finally agreed that we should give up the search, that there was no noun in French capable of expressing absence in itself, and that we had to resign ourselves to the metaphysical poverty of a preposition, and I would like to imagine that one day someone's going to sit down and find like the time to look at all the instances where a translation in part thanks to the translator, but also in part thanks to the language, the target language that can sometimes do and flex and bend in ways that the other language can't do, in certain instances, that means you get these little moments of magic that you could never back-translate into the original language.

I think we have one in *El Apando* which is "the stutter of the soul" and something, some magic happens, some alchemy happens because of the target language. And so I do think there are certain like undoable back-translations that can't go back to being as full and rich as they are after they've been translated, so that's my little like flag waving for translation.

ATZ

I love that.

CH

Those were so perfect. I thank you so much for those thoughtful offerings and with that marvelous ending, I'm going to close us out.

Our thanks is always to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship and to Public Books for their continued support. Hannah Jorgensen is our graduate intern, Connor Hibbard is the sound engineer, and I'd encourage you to subscribe, rate us and leave a review on Apple Podcast, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Some novelists from past seasons include Chang-Rae Lee, Teju Cole, Orhan Pamuk, Damon Galgut, Sigrid Nunez, and Caryl Phillips, and many more conversations like this one.

Thank you, Alia and Sophie, for joining me for this very special conversation.

SH

Thank you so much, Chris. Thanks, Alia.

ATZ

Thank you so much. Yeah, thanks, Sophie, that was a lot of fun. Thank you.