

Poderes y Agencia: el resto es literatura

Proxy and Agency: the Rest is Literature

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Resumen: De entre la gran multitud de emigrantes catalano-parlantes que llegó a la Cuba colonial, un cierto número de mujeres llegó a La Habana en busca de sus esposos, aquellos con los que se habían casado “por poderes” (*poders*) justo antes de realizar el largo viaje. La obra de Carmen Riera *Cap al cel obert* narra la historia de las hermanas Fortesa, enviadas desde Mallorca. A Isabel la eligió su padre para casarla con un primo rico y se envió a María para acompañarla. Solamente María sobrevive el terrible viaje, que tiene lugar durante la última fase del control español sobre Cuba. Una vez en Cuba y recuperada de los avatares del viaje, María considera la vida monástica, pero en vez de ello, en su primera decisión real, acepta la oferta de matrimonio de Josep Fortalesa.

El sistema de poderes continuó aun tras la independencia de Cuba del control de España en 1898 y esta forma de matrimonio conforma el tema de *L'berència de Cuba* de Margarida Aritzeta, en cuya portada se describe como “absolutament verídica”. Eugènia se casa con Basilio, un vecino de su pequeño pueblo aragonés cuando él, por medio de una carta y billete a la isla, manda que la traigan una vez instalado él allí después del viaje de 1925. Las dos novelas forman, de manera conjunta y a grandes rasgos, unos cien años de historia cubana, desde finales del siglo diecinueve hasta finales del siglo veinte, poniendo de relieve la lucha de mujeres que a menudo parecen arrastradas como hojas secas en un huracán, como diría Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda.

Palabras claves: *Cap al cel obert*, Carme Riera, *L'berència de Cuba*, Margarida Aritzeta, inmigración, historia cubana, lucha de poderes, situación de la mujer.

Of the myriad Catalan-speaking immigrants to colonial Cuba, a number of women arrived in Havana in search of the husbands they married by proxy (*poders*) before undertaking the long journey. Carme Riera's *Cap al cel obert* tells the story of the two Fortesa sisters sent from Mallorca: Isabel, chosen by her father to be the bride of a well-to-do cousin, and Maria, dispatched to accompany her. Only Maria survives the terrible trip, leaving cousin Miquel off the hook, a widower without ever having seen his bride, but his father proposes to Maria instead, to the disgust of the old man's four adult offspring. Maria's lack of agency is stark: she would have preferred to stay home and perhaps enter a convent, but after her father's death leaves her brother in charge of the family, she obeys his wishes, which are, essentially, to be rid of her. Once in Cuba and recovered from her travels, Maria again considers monastic life, but instead, in her first real decision, she accepts Josep Fortalesa's offer of marriage.

The proxy system continued after Cuba's independence and such a marriage forms the subject of Margarida Aritzeta's *L'herència de Cuba*, which the book cover describes as "absolutament verídica". Eugènia marries Basilio, a neighbor from her small Aragonese village, when he sends for her with a letter and passage to the island. But times are hard, and Basilio is not as lucky as the old *indiano* Maximino, whose tales and wealth inspired the young man to go *fer Ameriques*. The two novels taken together form a century of Cuban history, foregrounding the struggles of women who sometimes seem blown about like leaves in a hurricane.

Making a fortune was not the only reason for crossing the Atlantic, and these complex, rich narrations are populated by motley crews of vagabonds, roamers, fugitives, and slaves, real and virtual. For example, Basilio's motivation to leave Spain includes a wish to avoid the draft, and Josep Fortesa, the original Majorcan immigrant from Riera's novel, had a brush with the law that caused him to depart in a hurry. No one could have less agency than the slaves, but that's another story and another history. Here, I will focus on the female protagonists whose lack of possibilities, sometimes combined with an almost infantile ingenuousness, leads repeatedly to disappointment and tragedy. The narrative voices are omniscient for the most part, but intriguingly bolstered by letters and songs to broaden the readers' view of history.

In a recent article in *The New Yorker*, Harvard historian Jill Lepore takes on, once again, the issue of how to define and distinguish between literature and history. She goes back as far as Aristotle's argument that the difference between history and poetry is that one tells what has happened, the other the kind of thing that can happen; that is why poetry is more philosophical and to be taken more seriously. But most of her article is based on eighteenth-century English thinkers writing at the time of the formation of the discipline of history and the rising popularity of the novel. In a discussion of history as about important people while literature is about ordinary people, she emphasizes the gender division: women write novels of and for ordinary women, whereas men write history of and for important men. She mentions the

practice of incorporating false documents into novels which called themselves histories: *they also often took the form of counterfeit historical documents, usually letters or journals--a form that was itself a parody of the conventions of historical writing.* The example of one of Defoe's critics referring to the journal kept by Robinson Crusoe is germane: what did Defoe mean by this imposture, *unless you would have us think, that the Manner of your telling a Lie will make it a Truth* (81). Lepore is not a Hispanist, but for us, of course, both Cervantes and García Márquez spring to mind, not to mention the critical work of David Herzberger or the double meaning of the word "història" in Romance languages.

Both Catalan novels here, besides being based on Cuban history, have their roots in family stories or legends, another rather tricky word about reality / fiction divide. Carme Riera dedicates her novel to *la clara memòria de la meua àvia Caterina, i a les seves històries que no vaig tenir més remei que continuar.* In an e-mail to me she explains further that *el meu avantpassat Valerià Weyler fou encarregat pel govern espanyol per tal d'acabar amb la guerra i d'aquí el meu interès per Cuba,* and that it was her grandmother who told her the Cuban stories. And in an ending that sounds a bit like María de Zayas's taletellers claiming the veracity of their stories, she says that the granddaughter of the protagonist told the story to "la meua àvia" (351); this direct authorial intervention also smacks of Zayas, whose "novelas" Riera teaches at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Proof of Maria Fortesa's escape from Cuba is precisely that no one else could have known the story of her life that appears in the old blind man's ballad, in an "epileg prescindible," which offers readers an alternative reading of the novel.

Margarida Aritzeta traveled to Cuba in order to interview distant relatives who had emigrated there in the early twentieth century. Her character Basilio Peguero left Aragon in 1925 never to return, and a half-century later, *algú descobrirà l'ambigua veritat de Basilio...* (from book cover). But it is his proxy wife Eugènia who draws us in, beginning with her wedding in a cold, dark church in a "cerimònia fantasmal," not a "casament com cal", (26-27) as Basilio's elderly female relatives would have it. Not the wedding she had dreamed about since childhood, she nevertheless agrees to it and even thinks in terms of her future happiness. The honeymoon is indeed long and wonderful, but she is anxious to see her new home, only to discover that there really isn't one and they'll be living in a small cabin with another family in conditions that can only be described as squalid. Her first disappointment won't be her last, as her stark lack of agency becomes apparent: she is not only much poorer than she was in Spain, she is also completely dependent on Basilio.

The incorporation of letters and songs adds dimensions, points of view, and texture to both novels. In Riera's text, the exchanges and transformations of long love letters between the proxy couple, Miguel and Isabel, turn out to be between Maria and Angela. In passages that evoke Cyrano de Bergerac, Miles Standish, and the official Cuban poet of the García Márquez film *Cartas del parque*, Angela writes to Isabel on behalf of her nonliterary ne'er-do-well brother, but Isabel doesn't like to read or write either, so the missives are received and answered by the very literary Maria, both before

and after the crossing. During Maria's illness and slow recuperation on the "ingenio", or plantation, Miquel prefers to stay in Havana, enjoying his debauchery as long as possible. Maria's utter lack of agency is foregrounded during this period, since she can neither walk nor speak; when she finally regains these powers, she discovers that Miquel's real desire is that she die so he won't have to marry her. The doubly duplicitous letters are echoed throughout the novel in the form of political intrigue in a subtext that reflects the decadence and tension on the island much like those in the Fortalesa family saga. Slave revolts, independence movements, and talk of either a British protectorate or an American annexation require a strong hand: enter the Capità General, whose patriotism is overcome only by his greed and corruption. Declaring "estat d'excepció", he is in total control, much as were his admired viceroys of old. A letter delivered to him during the gala festivities at the Fortalesa household forms the climax for both family and country: he leaves suddenly, and the speculation begins. Maria, standing next to him, refrains from reading the note out of politeness, for which her husband chastises her. Is it a note saying the American Simpson, archenemy to the Capità General, has arrived? A note to warn him that his life is in danger? Some other emergency? For Maria, it is the beginning of the end for it sets in motion the plot that leads to her sentence to die by "garrot". In an ironic twist, it is yet another letter that helps condemn her: on one of the few occasions when she makes a decision for herself, she writes a letter to the Capità General inquiring about his sudden departure from the party, and he will find a way to use it as evidence of the trumped-up accusations against her. But the real paper culprits in Maria's misfortune are a set of letters her husband had, discovered after his death, indicating the corruption of the Capità General and causing him to look for a victim: Maria, abandoned by everyone, is the perfect choice.

References to music throughout the novel reinforce certain subtexts: several operas are mentioned, and one that makes Maria faint while linking her to slavery and Jewishness is *Nabucco: L'emoció en escoltar el cor dels hebreus fou tan gran que els sentits l'abandonaren* (146). On one hand, the swoon announces her pregnancy; on the other, it reiterates the Jewish ties so long suppressed in her family. For parts of *Cap al cel obert* can be read almost as a sequel to Riera's 1994 historical novel, *Dins el darrer blau*, in which earlier generations of the Fortesa family were persecuted by the Inquisition. One ancestor in particular, Isabel Tarongí, bearing a strong resemblance to Maria, is the cause of the original Fortesa immigration to Cuba when a young Josep Fortesa flees the law after stealing a painting of his lovely forebearer. He also changes his name to Fortalesa, since it sounds a bit less Jewish.

Maria brings music and literature together: in her youth, she had helped the Mallorcan blind man, Raül, compose songs, and after her marriage she writes poetry, becomes a member of the Havana literary society, and edits a journal for them. A patriotic poem gains local praise for her, as she tries to express gratitude for her new land and perhaps find a sort of agency in her new identity: *Pàtria és més que naixença: / Per mi la dolça terra, / que acull i que abraçola / és Cuba. Oh Cuba, / pàtria meua, / tu em dons identitat!* (181). In yet another ironic twist, these words will be used against her later,

quoted inaccurately and accusingly by her husband's son Custodi. But it is the final "romanç trist", sung in a plaza in Palma's Jewish quarter by an ancient blind man and heard by Maria Fortesa i Fortesa de Fortalesa's son, that ties all these stories together and indeed compresses the entire novel into the classic form of the historical ballad, with eight-line syllables and assonant rhyme in the even lines. If we can believe the musical version of her story, even her escape from Cuba emphasizes her lack of agency, since she is rescued by the hot-air balloonist, lifting her "cap al cel obert" (346).

Aritzeta's use of songs, storytellers, and letters is quite different in tone, representing a less elegant sector of society and more recent times, but the theme of lack of agency remains constant. Again, Eugènia's story is backgrounded by historical events, and her personal suffering intensifies with her return to Spain at its worst moment: the civil war. In Cuba, so desperate she wishes she could be a maid to Donya Margarita, since she knows how to read, write and sew, she even mentions prostitution to her friend Catalina, who laughs, saying *I per què no?... Tens el millor d'un home sense haver-li de fer d'escarràs. I quan el tens a sobre sempre està content!* (84). Perhaps the most terrible manifestations of powerlessness are beatings and rape, and Eugènia is victim of both. When Basilio takes out his frustration on her, he has to be restrained by a neighbor to keep from killing her. She has no say in the return to Spain, for it is her husband who sends her, with their baby daughter and another on the way, to reestablish family ties and regain roots. She and her sister-in-law survive the war with their small children by sewing uniforms for republican soldiers, and this activity lays ground for her exploitation in the aftermath. Her brother-in-law Julio, having spent a lifetime being angry at Basilio for leaving, finds two perfect ways to take his revenge: here, with "poders" referring to power of attorney, he talks Eugènia into signing papers over to him with the promise that he'll arrange for the transference of Maximino's inheritance to her for Basilio. Julio absconds with her money for a return to Cuba as well as the property, rapes Eugènia, and disappears, having accomplished his goals. With no way to get the necessary documentation for good conduct, required for a job, she turns to smuggling to survive and thus finally finds a measure of empowerment since, for once, she has a little money of her own.

Songs and *cuenteros* function as two sides of a coin in this novel: while the lyrics to the Cuban music mostly relate the hard luck of the island's poorest, reflecting the dismal lives of Basilio and Eugènia, the exaggeration and joking of the *cuenteros* shows the lighter side. Both offer good examples of that special Cuban ironic sense of humor. As the novel stretches its timeline almost to its own publication, Braulio, *a qui tothom anomenava el poeta per la seva gràcia a treure versos i cantar* (202), sings this "dècima" about the "special period" of the 90s:

*Està dura la jugada, / no hay alimentación,
ya se acabó la ilusión, / ya no hay gusto para nada.
Hasta se ha paralización / la fábrica de hacer gente,
porque el que no se alimente, / de noche que se prepare:*

que no hay bastón que se pare / ni fogón que se caliente.*
[*Pararse: posar-se dret] (203).

The main *cuentero* in Aritzeta's novel is Santiaguíño, friend and neighbor to Basilio and Eugènia, who combines stories with old jokes, and of course, exaggerates. As Eugènia recounts to her daughters what Cuba was like, Santiaguíño's tales come up, again tackling the question of veracity and the role of the teller: *algú va trobar que exagerava i que allò no podia ser, i li va dir mentider (...) i va fer córrer que res del que explicava aquell home no tenia ni una mica mica de veritat* (142). Eugènia defends him to her little girls: *heu de saber que totes les històries són veritat, si es mira bé el que diuen, i això ja ho sabia el cuentero, encara que els altres no se'l volguessin creure* (142). Storytelling triumphs in the end, as the group that threw Santiaguíño out realizes how bored they are without him: *I ara només tenim les nostres veritats per a divertir-nos (...) I les veritats de cada dia no diverteixen ningú* (143). It seems we've come back to Defoe's critic: would you have us think that the manner of your telling a lie will make it a truth? Here, the *cuentero* functions as did the historical ballads, especially in isolated areas: they bring the news, in poetic form. On small farms, Batista's revolt against Socarrats, and Castro's against Batústa, arrive "com les històries del *cuentero*" (178), and the rebellion of workers and farmers against the government, in an effort to gain their own agency, are seen as *una mena de mite, tothom en parlava i ningú no ho sabia del cert* (178).

Basilio's letters to Eugènia begin with the same formula: *desitjo que en rebre aquesta carta estiguis bé de salut, tu i els teus, tal com jo ho estic gràcies a Déu* (37) and they indeed exaggerate, fatefully, how well he is doing. Those back home in Aragon, suffering hardships of their own and thinking the Cuban branch of the family is rich, write to ask for money or to criticize. Basilio's sister wants a tombstone for their little sister who died, not realizing that the expenses constitute a year's work. In a short, cold, and sad letter, Eugènia's mother chastises her because her brothers have no shoes, but Eugènia herself doesn't even have *aquella casa de pedra, un ruquet, oli, vi, pa negre* (114). But the most tragic letter of all is the one that, along with an emerald brooch and her name, represent daughter Margarita's "herència de Cuba" (195). At a moment when things seem to be getting better and Eugènia sits for a painter as a model for "la dolorosa," he proposes, and Eugènia finds out that she has no civil status. The divorce granted during the republic is no longer valid, the marriage papers in the church were burned during the war, and she doesn't even know whether Basilio is still living. Asking the Red Cross to help her find out, she receives a short, typed letter saying Basilio is married in Cuba with three children and *no tenia cap interès a tornar a Espanya i reconeixia que a Espanya no hi tenia ningú* (197). Neither single, divorced, nor a widow, she turns down the painter and goes back to sewing.

In conclusion, I will once again evoke María de Zayas's baroque literature, also protagonized by women with little agency, but whose voices come to us through the storytellers in the frame and through the songs sung within the tales. Lisis and her friend and both of their mothers go to the convent to avoid being in the power of men,

but Lisis tells us that it is to be seen as a choice that empowers rather than an escape from the world. Aritzeta's Eugènia cannot leave much of an inheritance to her daughter, and whether Riera's Maria gets garroted or swept away in a hot-air balloon, their voices and their truths remain with us.

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Translations of quotations from Catalan.

- *Cap al cel obert*: toward the open sky.
- *L'herència de Cuba*: the Cuban inheritance.
- *absolutament verídica*: absolutely true.
- *fer Ameriques*: to go off to the new world to make a fortune.
- *la clara memòria de la meva àvia Caterina, i a les seves històries que no vaig tenir més remei que continuar*: the bright memory of my grandmother Caterina, whose stories I couldn't help but continue.
- *el meu avantpassat Valerià Weyler fou encarregat pel govern espanyol per tal d'acabar amb la guerra i d'aquí el meu interès per Cuba*: my ancestor V. W. was charged by the Spanish government to end the war and my interest in Cuba comes from that.
- *epíleg prescindible*: optional epilogue.
- *algú descobrirà l'ambigua veritat de Basilio*: someone was to discover Basilio's ambiguous truth.
- *cerimònia fantasmal*: ghostly ceremony.
- *casament com cal*: proper wedding.
- *estat d'excepció*: state of siege, or exceptional, or martial law.
- *L'emoció en escoltar el cor dels hebreus fou tan gran que els sentits l'abandonaren*: she was so moved listening to the Hebrew's chorus that she lost consciousness.
- *Dins el darrer blau*: into the farthest blue.
- *Pàtria és més que naixença: / Per mi la dolça terra, / que acull i que abraçola / és Cuba. Oh Cuba, / pàtria meva, / tu em dons identitat!*: Fatherland is more than birthplace: My sweet land, welcoming and embracing, is Cuba. Oh Cuba, my homeland, it's you who give me my identity.
- *romanç trist*: sad ballad.

- *I per què no?...Tens el millor d'un home sense haver-li de fer d'escarràs. I quan el tens a sobre sempre està content: Why not?...You have the best of a man without having to wait on him. And when he's on top of you, he's always happy.*
- *a qui tothom anomenava el poeta per la seva gràcia a treure versos i cantar: whom everyone called the poet for his facility to come up with verses and sing.*
- *algú va trobar que exagerava i que allò no podia ser, i li va dir mentider...i va fer córrer que res del que explicava aquell home no tenia ni una mica mica de veritat: someone thought he was exaggerating and that wasn't right, and called him a liar...and spread it around that nothing that man said was true at all.*
- *heu de saber que totes les històries són veritat, si es mira bé el que diuen, i això ja ho sabia el cuentero, encara que els altres no se'l volguessin creure: you have to understand that all stories have their truth, if you really listen to what they say, and the cuentero knew that, even if the others didn't believe him.*
- *I ara només tenim les nostres veritats per a divertir-nos...I les veritats de cada dia no diverteixen ningú: Now we only have our own truths to entertain us...and everyday truths don't entertain anyone.*
- *una mena de mite, tothom en parlava i ningú no ho sabia del cert: a sort of myth, everybody was talking about it but no one knew for sure.*
- *desitjo que en rebre aquesta carta estiguis bé de salut, tu i els teus, tal com jo ho estic gràcies a Déu: I hope this letter finds you and yours in good health, as I am thanks be to God.*
- *aquella casa de pedra, un ruquet, oli, vi, pa negre: that stone house, a little donkey, oil, dark bread.*
- *no tenia cap interès a tornar a Espanya i reconeixia que a Espanya no hi tenia ningú: he had no interest in returning to Spain and he claimed that he had no one in Spain.*