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Merging Exile into Diaspora: Other Letters to Milena

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Abstract

The article opens by tracing two Cuban cultural vocabularies on which writer Reina María Rodríguez draws in her 2003 mixed-genre collection, Otras cartas a Milena. Arguing that both exile and diaspora are concepts central to the work, the article situates Rodríguez’s individual interest in this material in the larger context of the 1990s, when she composed most of the book, as well as the turn into the twenty-first century. Finally, it links these concepts to two female figures, the two Milenas of her book’s title, and in so doing it emphasizes her exploration of an aesthetic crisis one imbricated in her experience of economic crisis during Cuba’s initial post-Soviet phase of the “Special Period.” The literature resulting from her meditations speaks to larger experiences of migration through imagery of her daughter, and it explores transit as a metaphor for mortality.

In 2003 Letras Cubanas published the mixed-genre collection Otras cartas a Milena (Other Letters to Milena), by Reina María Rodríguez.1 Summarizing the book’s central structures is a complex exercise, one that engages two Cuban cultural vocabularies. The first involves exile, in the sense of an ongoing post-1959 process. The second arises from a more recent shift in island thinking about migrants and migration, one which has allowed the concept of diaspora to gain greater prominence while challenging some connotations of the word “exile.” Rodríguez draws from both concepts, exile and diaspora, to generate her book as a whole.

A reality that conditions Rodríguez’s perspective throughout Other Letters to Milena is her own decision to continue living in Cuba to date. She is famous as a literary presence and a cultural organizer in Havana, and it is worth keeping in mind that Otras cartas a Milena was published there. Whether one emphasizes exile or diaspora, this book explores perspectives firmly grounded in the experience of being the person left behind, not the one who leaves for a new life elsewhere. Even when Rodríguez describes her occasional travel abroad for professional reasons, she remains highly aware of her cultural locations with regard to a home and personal trajectory within Havana. However, I’ll suggest that her book succeeds in setting up potential intersections with writers living in the diaspora, be that in the United States or elsewhere.

Rodríguez began writing her book in the mid-1990s as Cubans scrambled to respond to a severe change in circumstances. Important Soviet-era alliances collapsed after 1989. The resulting “Special Period” of economic crisis hit the island hard, leading to departures of all sorts that were reminiscent of earlier peaks of migration. At the same time, migration gained a new post-Soviet status in the 1990s: the very intensity of migratory waves against the backdrop of global realignments triggered a shift in discourses about exile.

María Cristina García charted several major waves of Cuban migration in the late twentieth century in her well-known study, Havana USA. In García’s formulation, the first three waves of post-1959 movement from the island to the United States occurred in the immediate post-revolution years of 1959-1962, the “Freedom Flight” years of 1965-1973, and the Mariel Boatlift events of 1980. 1994, a date that Rodríguez places next to texts in Other Letters to Milena, represents a fourth peak. This year is associated with the balseros, or rafters, who set out in homemade rafts and small boats to cross the Florida Straits. García particularly emphasizes the massive number of rafters. Many individuals did not survive the voyage, a fact that heightens the tension in four prose poems by Rodríguez referring to rafts and emigration. These pieces (“Passage of clouds,” “The octopus,” “The figurehead” and “The photographer”) appear early in the book to set the stage.

Her acknowledgements of exile in Other Letters to Milena, some overt and others more coded, merge into the shift in Cuba’s public discourses during the Special Period. The concept of diaspora gained traction as part of a broad alteration to post-1959 political discourses. Ariana Hernández-Reguant has demonstrated that a “redefinition of the Cuban nation as an ethnic and cultural community,” rather than a specific political community, gradually took place over the course of the 1990s (72). A major outcome of this redefinition “was the disentanglement of nation from territory; effectively, the incorporation into the nation of the much vilified exile community now refashioned as a ‘diaspora,’” a word more acceptable to island authorities (72). Diaspora was flexible enough to account for new phenomena, including Cubans who had left the island to live elsewhere while still retaining an open relationship to their nation; it moved away from the stark political opposition previously connotated by language of exile.

Changes in the language of “Cubanness” were thus part of a large-scale remapping of ideologies that entered contemporary cultural expression:
Academic institutions on the island began supporting projects in various disciplines that emphasized a widening framework of nationhood in relation to culture. On an individual level, artists and writers on the island carried out active remappings in their work by the mid-90s. Tania Bruguera’s alternative art space El Espacio Aglutinador was showing art produced both abroad and in marginalized island circumstances; meanwhile, leaders of the literary review Diaspora(s), who also carried out their project in an unofficial manner, similarly sought to deterritorialize national literature (Hernández-Reguant 78). The Havana Biennials became sites of international exchange among Cuban artists living in different places (Birkenmaier and Whitfield 6). While these interventions did not lead to massive reform in political relations between Cuba and the United States, nor did they necessarily prompt faith in a new utopian ideal for the future, they did provide welcome space for alternative projects and points of view.

Rodriguez participated in this process, using Other Letters to Milena as a site of experimentation with vocabularies of national identity. She evokes the lingering spaces and tensions of exile, for example in a series of alternately open and coded references to Miami as a twin and opposite to the city of Havana, yet she also uses the term “diaspora” extensively. I emphasize this context to reveal how she has made her writing complex. Uninitiated readers often assume that Rodriguez distances herself from her society and history when they first encounter difficult elements of her work: that is, her subtle coding of controversial topics and probing of domestic experience as (paradoxically) a site of public experience. Aside from isolated moments, as in an essay about exiled Cuban poet Heberto Padilla which requires her to refer somewhat more openly to the politics of cultural and political institutions, Rodriguez tends to resist overtly political language in Other Letters to Milena.

Recognizable slogans would approximate creative death in the logic of her book. It is more useful to begin from the notion that she subjects her environment to intense aesthetic exploration. Among her strategies, she continually links social crisis to the challenges of creativity, as well as the infinite embodiments of everyday life and the workings of memory.

As frontiers were being undone in Eastern Europe, and the European Union extended its domain considerably, in Cuba the limits of cubania were being rethought and the idea of a common culture of “Greater Cuba,” with hubs not only in Havana and Miami but also in other European, Latin American, and U.S. cities, was being articulated. (Birkenmaier and Whitfield 6)

How do you generate a new and powerful literary vision out of a time of profound confusion? This question rises to the surface of several pieces. Because “the post-Soviet present continues to be a time of dramatic change and intense uncertainty” in Havana in the new century, the issues Rodriguez confronted during the composition of her book remain pressing (Birkenmaier and Whitfield, introduction, 4). This social and artistic context serves as an important prelude for reflection on the two faces of Milena evoked over the course of her book. The female figures serve the writer in her quest for a new aesthetic. They are deliberately selected provocations for metaphorical and literal treatments of diaspora’s distances.

Rodriguez opens with a variety of genres: prose poems, poems with more conventional line breaks, and personal essays, tracing the oppositions between a “here” or “home” on the island and that which lies beyond its borders. She then places a series of rather different essays in the latter half of the book. These pieces, often focused on the writing of others, might appear to be random exercises in literary criticism that leave the two Milenas behind — until the reader traces the threads of displacement and loss that connect them. The essays call up Cuban poets José María Heredia and Padilla, as well as writers from other parts of the world (notably Russia and/or the Soviet Union), hinting at their relevance to the experiences Rodriguez includes in her more obviously autobiographical interfaces with diaspora. Some of these pieces are worthy of attention for their expansion of the chronotopes of exile/diaspora: that is, they exceed the frame of post-1959 emigration from Cuba, suggesting that the accumulated insights in Other Letters to Milena swell toward a broader horizon. Finally, the essay section drives home a connection between distance, everyday life, and the writer’s trajectory toward that most final of destinations, death. This last point of arrival is highlighted through essays about the losses of the writer’s father, brother, and a beloved pet (Diotima, one of many legendary cats always to be found around the house and terrace when Rodriguez hosts poetry readings).

As I’ve noted elsewhere, Rodriguez has lamented another specific loss: the effect of Special Period emigration on the Havana creative community. Writers who leave for other countries, even if they keep in touch with friends and colleagues, are no longer available as regular interlocutors to challenge their peers, which diminishes the overall energy of the Havana scene. Given this context, it’s not hard to see why Rodriguez would take an interest in the letters exchanged between two literary lovers whose writing was occasioned by their separation: Franz Kafka and the Czech journalist and translator Milena Jesenská (1896-1944). Some of their letters — only his letters — were published after their deaths under the title Letters to Milena, causing a splash in 1952.

Jesenská’s surname is not emphasized in Kafka’s letters, and her half of their correspondence is exiled to nowhere. She was the only writer amongst the women Kafka loved, so the loss of her letters contributes to the ghostly qualities of his surviving text. Rodriguez has composed other works in response to literary women — their work, their lives and images — and she clearly takes an interest in Jesenská on multiple levels at once. Kafka’s textual Milena, or the most visible Milena of Rodriguez’s 2003 collection, becomes a
touchstone for her meditations on literature, aging, death, relationships and distance. Scraps of Jesenska's real life and death are there too. Her eventual fate was tragic: she was interned at the Ravensbruck concentration camp, where she died. Thus Milena returns from the camp in Rodriguez's book "with the sulfurous odor of crematories still on her skin" ("The girl's story," V).

A different Milena in the 2003 collection reveals a parent's face of concern about the world taking shape for her children. With the onset of crisis after 1989, staying put in Havana was even more a choice that a parent made not only as an individual, but with an awareness of impact on family. Rodriguez' daughter, Elis Milena, haunts this book. The youngest of the author's four children, she was still quite small as the Special Period took hold. Rodriguez explicitly writes about the experience of raising her daughter amid crisis in "The girl's story," the longest series within the book, containing segments openly addressed to Elis Milena. The epistolary style makes the daughter's presence palpable.

Elis Milena is therefore also named by the book's title, despite the fact that she is sheltered under the cover of the more prominent referent, Kafka's Letters to Milena. Through Elis the book raises questions for the next generation. Will the daughter grow up to be another ghost, floating across the distances of diaspora? Or will she still walk through her mother's city, shadowing the same routes they once followed together? Statements like "we play at escaping ruin for a second," found in one of the texts depicting mother and daughter in "The girl's story," reveal an immediate source for the sadness and disorientation, a sort of homelessness permeating this book. As her daughter plays by her side in a neighborhood park, the writer struggles to draw her characteristically ethereal, suggestive poetic beauty out of a harsh new scene of economic disaster, but she cannot seem to figure out how one would make art without inadvertently taking advantage of the community's pain. Texts in "The girl's story" share insights as to how economic disaster becomes psychological and aesthetic. They also foreshadow the future decisions that will have to be made by Elis about where she will build her own adulthood.

As I write this commentary, the prophecy between the lines of her mother's book has come to pass: Elis did recently leave Cuba as a young adult, and she began her diasporic journey in that wildly prototypical space of Cuban post-1959 exile, southern Florida. This fact makes a tangible reality out of the potential connections between Other Letters to Milena and the literature composed across recent generations by Cuban exiles and their descendents in the United States. It also emphasizes a whole layer of the book's most literal subject matter: the profound impact of separation on family life. Another one of the author's children, a son whose birth is mentioned in the essay about her brother's suicide, now lives in Barcelona. Rodriguez will surely have readers who relate to parts of this book not through dialogues about Cuba's historical status or ruminations on post-Soviet life, but through their own difficult experiences of transition.

In the end diaspora is what it is. In Other Letters to Milena it's also much more, and much less: diaspora flattens into the horizon between life and death. Rodriguez mourns the losses of family members and writers; she seeks a way to adequately feel and name atmospheres of social and artistic crisis; she links earthly experiences of separation to one's own impending death. I am reminded of remarks by Anna Veltfort, after whom writer Lourdes Casal (also Cuban) named her now-canonical 1976 poem about exile in New York. "Lourdes understood the universality of exile," Veltfort told interviewers, describing the meaning of that exile as "a universal sorrow" (Negrón-Muntaner and Martínez-San Miguel 67).

ENDNOTES
1  My commentary emerges in part from the process of translating this book into English. While the complete book is not yet available in English, interested readers can consult selections. A particularly good companion to this commentary is a set of excerpts from "The Girl's Story" that appeared in the digital magazine Asymptote (April 2011, Nonfiction section), which can be accessed at <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Nonfiction&id=6&curr_index=7&curPage=N onfiction>. The excerpts appear in both English and Spanish. I was also able to record Rodriguez reading a section dedicated to her daughter, Elis Milena.

2  For useful context on the spatialization of Havana vis-à-vis other locations in post-1959 discourse, see Velia Cecilia Bobes' "Visits to a Non-Place: Havana and Its Representation(s)" (in Birkenmaier and Whitfield, 15-30).

3  Here two exemplary connections to Cuban-American literature spring into view. It is now common in research and teaching materials to make an explicit link between post-1959 exile literature and earlier examples of literary production by exiles traveling through the United States, like José Martí and Heredia. Another way of pushing at the limitations of the post-1959 chronotope, and one that perhaps moves more effectively away from dependence on modern nationhood as a backbone, is modeled in the novel Days of Awe by Achy Obejas. Here the strategy is to double diaspora by layering post-1959 experience over the long history of Jewish diaspora in the Americas. In each case, the literary reconfiguration of the time and space of exile allows for themes to emerge that might otherwise be obscured by the polemics of ongoing political opposition between the US and Cuba.

WORKS CITED

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