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DICTATORSHIP, MACHISMO, AND THE CUBAN EXILE DRAMA IN A TRAGICOMIC MODE: CRISTINA GARCÍA'S *KING OF CUBA*

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ABSTRACT. ***Dictatorship, Machismo, and the Cuban Exile Drama in a Tragicomic Mode: Cristina García's*** **King of Cuba**. Three years before the death of Fidel Castro, Cuban American author Cristina García published a fictional account of the Cuban dictator's death in a darkly funny and sentimental story of intertwined destinies, ironies of fate, machismo, failure and suffering. With El Comandante and a fellow octogenarian émigré as protagonists, García launches into a fictional exploration of Cuban masculinity, machismo, the dictator's fate, vanity, and failure. Written in what I will argue is a tragicomic mode, balancing the tragic and the comic, the horrendous and the laughable, the pitiful and the ridiculous, the novel reflects different perspectives on sensitive topics for Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits, challenging preconceived ideas and inviting the reader to reflect on the relativity of truth.

Keywords: *Fidel Castro, dictatorship, machismo, Cuban American community, satire, tragicomic mode*

REZUMAT. ***Dictatură, machism și drama comunității cubaneze din Statele Unite în manieră tragi-comică:*** **King of Cuba** ***de Cristina García.*** Cu trei ani înaintea morții lui Fidel Castro, autoarea americană de origine cubaneză, Cristina García, publica o întruchipare imaginară a morții dictatorului cubanez într-o poveste sentimentală, scrisă cu umor negru, în care găsim destine încrucișate, ironii ale sorții, machism, ratare și suferință. Protagoniștii sunt doi octogenari: El Comandante și un cubanez care trăiește în exil. Cu ajutorul lor García abordează teme precum masculinitate cubaneză, machism, condiția dictatorului, vanitate și ratare. Scrisă într-o manieră tragi-comică, alternând în mod echilibrat tragicul și comicul, oribilul și rizibilul, jalnicul și ridicolul, romanul reflectă diferite perspective asupra unor teme sensibile pentru comunitățile cubaneze de o parte și de alta a Strâmtorii Florida, atacând ideile preconcepute și invitându-l pe cititor să reflecteze asupra relativității adevărului.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Fidel Castro, dictatură, machism, comunitate cubanezo-americană, satiră, manieră tragi-comică*

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Introduction

Cristina García has built her career as fiction writer by exploring narratively what it means to be Cuban in what Ana M. López calls "Greater Cuba" (39), a country of no conventional borders emerging from the experience of being Cuban on the island or away from it. "For me," Cristina García confesses, "Cuba is as much about imagining and projection and perception as truth and history." ("At Home" 81) This is especially true in *King of Cuba* (2013), a satirical text that complements her first two novels by writing about Greater Cuba from a male perspective, looking with critical distance into the heteropatriarchal mentality and traditional Cuban machismo that made Fidel Castro's dictatorship a strange romance between a strong, authoritarian, yet equally charismatic leader, and a nation which succumbed to the macho leader's charm and oratory.

García's novel is built around two main characters: one a dead ringer of Fidel Castro, the other a character modelled on the novelist's own father and other Cuban exiles of his generation. They are two octogenarians whose lives intersected in their youth and who end up dying together, in the most ironic and unheroic way possible. Portraying Fidel Castro in a kind of revenge fantasy novel was not without its difficulties, especially considering the controversial nature of the Cuban leader. Cristina García explained that she wanted to "build [her Castro character] from the ground up, to show how he became this charismatic, monomaniacal, mesmerizing figure ... to own him for the purpose of the novel" ("Cristina García Dethrones" n. page), although much of what happens in the novel – set in 2015 – is cleverly imagined by the author. She carefully researched her subject to understand the man as well as the public figure from inside out, to get to his essence: "What I wanted to do was reference Castro, but also give myself lots of room to create this caudillo, this strong man from the ground up. … I took great liberties. Yet somehow, I think, I was attempting to get at the essence of the real Castro. His lonely essence." ("Interview with Christina García" n. page)

Much of that essence, the novelist suggests, has to do with Castro's machismo, reflected not only in his *caudillo* public persona and the heteropatriarchal social order carefully disguised as a Marxist egalitarian society (cf. Dominguez-García 3-22; Reiss 115-135), but also in his private life. The figure of the dictator is mirrored in the novel – in an upside-down reflection – by that of the old Cuban émigré Goyo Herrera. As this study sets out to demonstrate, what the novel contends is that irrespective of their radically opposed political views and lifestyles, the two old men are more alike than they are willing to accept, and their connection is deeply rooted in their ridiculous, exaggerated and even self-aggrandizing masculinity, which the novelist sees as the unacknowledged reason for the big divide between the two sides of Greater Cuba.

Cristina García's Fidel Castro: From beacon of the Revolution to Commander Frog

In his 1986 biography of Castro, Tad Szulc described the Cuban leader as "a fascinating phenomenon in our century's politics ... a man of panache, a romantic figure, an ever-defiant, dizzyingly imaginative, and unpredictable rebel, a marvellous actor, a spectacular teacher and preacher of the many credos he says he embraces." (Szulc 38). His was a charismatic authority (Weber 1947), manifested in a machista leadership that, in the words of Paul Sondrol, made Castro "fulfil a psychic functional requirement in Cuban society, still permeated by the [H]ispanic traditions of caudillaje … embod[ying] in his own attractive and legendary mannerisms - bravado, machismo, a superb intellect, hidalgo generosity - those inner qualities that Cubans themselves feel and would like to manifest, were they only able to do so." (609) Ironically, this type of leadership eventually proved disappointingly unromantic for many Cubans, who saw behind the public persona a megalomaniac, egotistical, cruel and sometimes irrational ruler, more of an absolute monarch in all but name (cf. Sánchez and Gyldén 2014), which is the blueprint for García's character.

In her text, the novelist captures the Luciferic fall of the leading hero of the Cuban Revolution. It is a portrait that reflects, in a tragicomic mode, the fact that, as Cristina García had realised during her visit to the island in 2011, "[t]he beacon that the Cuban Revolution once represented to the world had become nothing more than a grimy night light, with the Cuban people openly detesting Fidel himself – once a sacred cow – and his interminable gerontocracy" ("Fidel, the Promise" n. page).

It is precisely in this carefully balanced mixture of serious reflection of Fidel Castro's legacy of dictatorship and charismatic authority and the irreverent overtones of his portrayal as a foolishly vain, incapacitated, and impotent Latin American *caudillo*, stripped of real political power, that the reader sees Cristina García's craftsmanship at its best. Unsurprisingly, the novel belongs to El Comandante, who is given some of the most memorable lines that make the character credible as a fictionalised Fidel Castro, even in this satirical portrayal. The novel opens with the tyrant, alone in his room overlooking the sea and the Miami shore across the Florida Straits, meditating on death as something he is not yet ready to accept as a possibility:

> The tyrant was accustomed to being exceptional, and so he didn't expect that rules governing ordinary human mortality should apply to him. Nothing in his life had followed anyone else's rules, so why must he go the way of every mediocre nobody on the planet? Dying, he'd decided, was a fate for lesser men. (*King of Cuba* 3-4)

Had it not been for his poor health and the disgusting *gusanos* (US Cuban exiles) plotting against him, ceaselessly trying to assassinate him and spreading vicious "lies" about his health and life in Cuba, he could at least enjoy today's celebration of the 26th July attack on the Moncada barracks. To counterpoint El Comandante's self-aggrandizing ruminations, García minutely describes his morning routine: a nurse comes to wash his emaciated body, an assistant (the Huele-huele, or ass-sniffer) opens the window for him, and another member of his staff comes with his morning pills, a stack of newspapers and breakfast: dry toast and oatmeal.

Looking back on his life so far, El Comandante feels a surge of pride thinking of his legacy: "He'd left his mark on history with ink, and action, and blood." (*King of Cuba* 4) He has managed to alter people's perception of reality with his impassioned speeches, a very hands-on leadership, repressive measures to annihilate all subversive actions, and a gift for controlling people's minds and lives, and he takes pride in that. The tyrant's cynicism is in character. At the end of his life, Castro's fictional persona looks back at his role in the history of Cuba and he sees a great story – an idealist's utopia – that he penned and offered to Cubans as an achievable reality, even after he realised he could not deliver what he had been promising. He has poured into the ears of his people the same stories for so long that he is incapable of envisioning an alternative history for his nation: "In the end, Cuba could support just one utopia— his. Why? Because nobody on the island had bigger cojones than he did. Nadie. Except perhaps, at one time, his father." (8)

Much has been speculated on the influence exerted by Castro's father on him,[2] and the novelist likes the idea of a testosterone-driven competition between father and son, which ties in with her theme, Cuban machismo. She considers the emotional, psychological relationship between father and son edifying in explaining Fidel's excessive machismo, reflected not only in the same impulse to father several children (11 by most Castro biographers' count, but possibly more), but also in his machista leadership, constantly proving his political vigour, his mental and physical stamina in public shows of political and personal virility. When the novel's Fidel reminisces about his father, he can only think of his out of the ordinary genitalia, which the little boy saw as intimidating and inspiring at the same time. The novel suggests that Castro's narcissistic personality, projecting in public an image of "grandiose omnipotence" (Post 201), was in fact rooted in his early need for recognition, both as his father's son and as a virile force, in his public as well as his personal life.

[2] See, for instance, Bourne 1986; Coltman 2008.

It is this excessive narcissism and his intimidating authority that, he now understands, have estranged him from his people, from his country. He can see how it has all changed for the worse:

> How the hell did he know what was true anymore? People told him only what they thought he wanted to hear. Nobody had the nerve to say that this plan was unsound, or that most government employees didn't bother to show up for work on any given day. Cuba was riddled with corruption, hustlers, parasites; plagued by a culture of sinecure, amiguismo, back-scratching, ball-scratching. (*King of Cuba* 91)

The failure of the Revolution, as indirectly admitted by the dictator, and the harsh realities of his dictatorial rule are reflected in the novel in more than a dozen interludes and explanatory footnotes which give the reader access to the complaints of Cubans across the social spectrum. The most disturbing confessions are about food. Meat, flesh, everything is for sale on the black market. The truth is that, in Cuba, food [3] has become synonymous with power, the dictator's prerogative, as the reader discovers on two different occasions: the banquet offered to foreign heads of state and diplomats to celebrate the despot's 89th birthday, and the one the dictator organises for the imprisoned hunger strikers.

El Comandante's encounter with the hunger strikers from La Cabaña prison represents one of the most shocking scenes in the novel, revealing the despot's tactical and manipulative skills. It is a grotesque episode, which the author herself described as "*horribly* funny" ("Interview with Christina García" n. page), in which we witness the cynical tyrant throwing a banquet for the five hunger strikers - dissidents who were supposed to have died quietly, like thousands before them, not as martyrs of the counterrevolution. The shrewd old despot presents the famished prisoners with a multi-course meal of exquisite food, playing with their minds and testing their will power. García's dictator cunningly fakes concern and understanding, while destroying their confidence and patiently waiting for them to show the slightest sign of weakness. This is a true feast fit for the tyrant's gourmet palate, an insult for everyone else, especially the miserable hunger strikers. As the first course is brought in, the tension in the room rises. One of the inmates sips some water and the others follow suit. It

[3] Food is a recurrent motif in the novel: it is either rationalised and insufficient for most of the population (and a justifiable reason for illegal and/or immoral activities), or in excess in the Cuban American community. Bulimia among Cuban émigrés becomes a symbol of the trauma of displacement, as we see in the case of Luisa Herrera, Goyo's wife, and their island-born son, Goyito.

is a quiet moment, interrupted only by the sound of steps as the second course is served: lobster-stuffed avocados. Then, unexpectedly, one of the prisoners stands up, arms stretched as if on a crucifix, and with the words "I prefer my lobster grilled with butter sauce," he throws himself out of the window overlooking the sea, "wheeling into the air with astonishing grace, hovering for the length of a holy incantation, the summer day's haze outlining him as if he were a shimmering, stained-glass saint." (*King of Cuba* 135) The despot's reaction shows neither shock nor empathy: "'He chose his own penance,' El Comandante said tersely, recalling how Che used to dine at the firing squads. 'No sense in ruining a perfectly good luncheon.'" (136) As the feast continues, the old tyrant grows increasingly proud in his successful tactics: "He had them where he wanted them— agitated and impotent. Their resolve was waning, he could sense it. They were feeble, ravenous, worn out. ... Soon the dissidents' hatred would lapse into exhaustion, as hatred invariably did." (136; 137)

As if feeding on the prisoners' weakness and naivety, the despot's pride becomes too difficult to contain: "'We must make our peace with the necessity of dying.' He paused, glancing toward the window. 'But remember this: you won't create a new solar system in which I am not the sun. Even after I'm gone, the heat of my presence will be felt.'" (137)

An upside-down messianic figure, this is what Fidel Castro becomes in García's novel. Far from saving his country from dictatorship, the imperialist threat, and capitalist exploitation – as relative as these threats may have been – Castro's legacy is shown in the novel as a Communist dictatorship, in the guise of a true, socialist democracy, with a founding father nothing short of a royal despot, his head "itch[ing] for a crown." (187) The banquet scene is a perfect opportunity for the novelist to show the tyrant in action without a mask. He has nothing to lose by showing his true face to a handful of men who are going to die in prison, like so many of the system's opponents. Now that he is no longer the official head of state, he lives on little acts of power that remind him of his former dictatorial omnipotence. The banquet scene is disturbingly dark and comic at the same time, especially the tooth-removal episode. It is sad and comic at the same time that the book's Fidel would prove his mental agility and his *caudillaje* in front of men who are, in so many ways, weak opponents to a man like him.

The truth is that at this point in life, the despot no longer has any opportunities for real battles. He is no longer regarded as a big player on the international scene and neither is he, the novel suggests, the adored and respected Maximum Leader of his nation. He fears that not all the shots he is getting from his medical staff are indeed vitamin cocktails, he knows about the island bloggers and other dissidents criticising his regime and his political

legacy, and when he wants to make a speech on national television, he is warned by his own brother, the President, that Cubans might be upset to have their favourite telenovela cancelled and replaced by his live speech.

But at no point is his image as Maximum Leader so tarnished and his respectability so publicly destroyed than on the evening of his 89th birthday, when the victory at the Bay of Pigs was also supposed to be celebrated. The dictator finds out, too late to do anything about it, that the envisioned realistic and grand re-enactment of the Cuban victory against the exiles and the United States in the Bay of Pigs confrontation has been turned into a musical directed by none other than gay theatre director Orestes Mejías, a reformed dissident. The tyrant feels he cannot trust a victim of his repressive regime, but it is too late to stop the much publicised show. "Facilis descensus Averno" ("The descent to the underworld is easy"), he tells his brother as a warning (149).

These words prove to be a most appropriate description of his experience of the production: not only is the re-enactment written as a musical, but the whole historic event is presented allegorically as a mock-heroic battle between amphibians (the Cuban army) and pigs (Cuban exiles), with El Comandante himself featuring as Commander Frog, played by an actor who is "unintentionally hilarious, woodenly reciting his lines with a slight lisp." (178) The audience, mostly heads of state, foreign diplomats and journalists, are shocked and amused at the same time. The British ambassador whispers, right behind the despot: "*Animal Farm* meets La Revolución," while the audience "laugh[s] uproariously" (177). The whole farce drives the despot mad: "He felt like a condemned man. ... This was no homage but a grand mocking of him and his revolution. He'd have that faggot's head for this." (178) To make matters worse, everyone else seems to have a blast, so by the end of the show, when the amphibians burst into a reggaeton on hip-hop rhythms as the grand finale, the beautiful Tomás Terry theatre becomes a true pandemonium, the ambassadors shamelessly joining in the dance. The cruel irony behind this incident is that the true architect of the despot's humiliation may not be the director, whom El Comandante suspects, but his own brother, the new President, a budding dictator himself.

An atheist who sees himself on a par with Christ, yet unsure of what awaits him in the afterlife, the dictator is obsessed with his political legacy after a lifetime of dedication to his vision of revolutionary Cuba, and he is afraid. He fears the ungratefulness of his people, their preference for dead heroes such as martyred Ché Guevarra – "looking like a goddamn saint." (29) He knows his fame has been waning, and this is unbearably frustrating. Long gone are the days when women threw themselves at him as if he were a Hollywood star, when he was adored by the millions of peasants for whom he had built schools. And the more he thinks about his present impotence (political, physical), the

more he wants to show the world that he is still the great man who could subdue masses with his endless, mesmerizing speeches. Marginalised, humiliated and silenced, he feels Cuba – and with it, his identity as the incarnation of the Revolution, of his country – are gradually escaping him.

The dictator has very little to look forward to now, and this is an insufferable torment, surpassing by far the crippling pains and failing body functions that keep him dependant on others. The more aware he becomes of how relative his absolute rule has become, the more consumed he is by frustration, even rage, and the more he needs to know that his life – the mark he has left on the history of the island – will mean something after his death.

García's perspective is not necessarily impartial, although she is brilliant at adding to the portrait of her dictator just the right brush strokes and shadows to make her protagonist credible, intriguing, interesting, ridiculous and pitiable at the same time. He is the reflection of a flawed Revolution, frail and vulnerable, yet ridiculous in his delusion of grandeur. Like Lear, the dictator has caused his own downfall through excessive pride and a failure to understand that, as one island blogger comments, "real revolutions ... don't last over half a century" (*King of Cuba* 131). Neither do dictatorships.

There are some instances in the novel when the author lifts her character's mask and looks deep into his soul to find the innocent, loving yet insecure boy hidden under layers upon layers of pretence. The dictator's vulnerability is revealed in the few instances in the novel when the he allows his wife, Delia, to treat him like a child, or when he reminisces about his childhood years, when he felt safe and protected by an adoring mother, proud of her ambitious son. This subversive vision of the "omnipotent leader" gives the reader the possibility to decide whether to feel compassion or amusement, or rather to experience a little of each, remembering both the Lear-like tragic figure of the scenes where the dictator speaks and behaves like a great leader contemplating the possibility of a lonely, pitiful death of no historical significance, and his farcical portrayal as Commander Frog – a former dissident's expression of hatred and disrespect in a comic mode, symbolising an entire nation's long-repressed frustration and pain.

Goyo Herrera: A sentimental portrait of the Cuban American exile

The character of the tyrant would be incomplete without an exile nemesis as a symbol of the greatest threat from which the Revolution has to be defended. Cuban exiles – *gusanos* (worms), as he calls them – whom the dictator considers more annoying enemies than the US government. They are everywhere, the tyrant suspects, infiltrated among his staff, spreading lies about his health

and his private life, the worst kind of counterrevolutionaries. He is not too far from the truth as the hourly reports on his health condition on *hijodeputa.com* suggest. Goyo Herrera, now a Miami-based Cuban exile in his mid-eighties, checks this web site a few times a day, hoping that he will still be alive when the news of the tyrant's death is published there. Like the tyrant, he is an old Cuban macho wishing to die a hero's death. The former dreams of dying as a combatant, in public, defying his assailant; the latter hopes to become a Cuban hero on a par with José Martí by killing the despot, even if that means losing his own life:

> His fixation with ending the tyrant's life had begun to consume Goyo day and night. The thought that he could die a hero tantalized him, probably more than it should. His heroism would've been greater had he undertaken the mission as a young man, but even grizzled and arthritic as he was, he might yet achieve mythic status. HERE LIES A CUBAN HERO. Goyo imagined these words chiseled on his headstone, the wreaths and tributes, the eulogies and Martí-inspired poetry read in his honor. (11)

Goyo Herrera is, as Cristina García told one interviewer, the result of distilled experiences in the Cuban exiles' communities ("Interview with Christina García" n. page), a composite character with traits from several old Cuban exiles, including the writer's own father (Cf. "'Multi-hyphenated identities'"). In many respects, he is more like the despot than he is willing to admit. They are both bastards with Galician fathers who married their mothers after years of living together as a family. Raised in the countryside, they both adore fishing. They share a Jesuit education, even though in different countries, and their lives intersected at the university (where at times people mistook them for one another), and they both took interest in the same young woman, Adelina Ponti. Adelina – the love of his life – had succumbed to the despot-to-be's charm, giving birth to his son. Tormented by regret for her weakness, she later took her own life, leaving Goyo remorseful for not having done more to save her.

In Goyo's mind, the despot is guilty not only of having destroyed his chances of a happy, fulfilled life with Adelina, but also of having stolen Cuba from him to turn it into a Communist make-believe democracy, sending hundreds of thousands of Cubans like himself into exile, depriving all of the only place they could call home:

> There was no one in the world he loathed more, no one for whom he stoked a more bottomless fury, no one else he unwaveringly blamed for invading, oppressing, and misshaping his life than that fearmongering, fatigues-wearing, egotistical brute who continued to call the shots from his deathbed overlooking the sea. ... For him true heaven was the precious

> memory of his youth, of the earthly paradise he'd lost. Cuba had been his birthright, his home, and it'd been taken away from him— brutally, eternally. What was death next to such banishment? (*King of Cuba* 11)

Goyo also holds the dictator responsible for everything that is wrong about his personal life: the loss of his great love, exile, a problematic marriage, a wife and son struggling with depression and bulimia, his son's drug addiction, and his daughter's wasted life. All his misfortunes, he believes, were set in motion by the actions and abuses of the dictator and now, before his death, he wants to take his revenge like a real man, in a heroic, patriotic gesture.

Goyo Herrera is in a slightly better shape than the dictator. At 86, he has already had a triple bypass, he has arthritis, borderline diabetes, diverticulitis (like the despot), weak lungs (which make him dependent on an inhaler), a kidney stone that sometimes bothers him and a shorter leg, following a car accident. He also lives on a strict diet because of his gastrointestinal problems, and his emaciated body often fails him when carrying out even the simplest tasks, making him dependent on his daughter at times. Unlike the dictator, however, he has not become completely impotent, something that makes him feel still strong in spite of his many health problems. A philanderer all his life, though he had married Luisa for love, Goyo started dating a Cuban woman only three months after his wife's death. García chooses to name her Vilma Espín after Raúl Castro's wife – a deeply ironic name considering how different these two women are. Goyo's "Vilmita" is the opposite of feminist Vilma: she exploits Cuban men's desire to constantly prove their sexual stamina as a confirmation of their manliness, using her voluptuousness and sex appeal to obtain small favours, including hard cash. Goyo knows what she is doing, but like the foreign tourists in Cuba, he is willing to pay for sexual favours, pretending he is just helping Vilma make ends meet. His philandering is, in essence, a proof of potency and charm, but unlike the dictator, for whom women were more like spoils for a warrior, Goyo's indiscretions have always been irrepressible impulses, which also helped him preserve his *cubanidad* in a foreign culture, even though he felt the pangs of remorse for how his affairs affected his wife, struggling as she was to adapt to a foreign culture.

Both Goyo and the dictator are terrible husbands and fathers because they are too self-absorbed to understand family life and their role in it. El Comandante's commitment to his Revolution is so complete that he sees himself as a paterfamilias for the entire nation, while he ignores his own children. For Goyo Herrera, being a good paterfamilias means providing for his family, having a successful business, especially in a materialist culture like that of the United States. Unfortunately, with a new business to develop and an increasing fortune

to manage, Goyo left his mentally unstable wife, Luisa, handle all family matters and the upbringing of son Goyito and daughter Alina, a task at which she failed miserably, emotionally maiming her children.

Now, in his old age, Goyo understands how his actions and his absence have affected his entire family, and the only thing he can do to escape the overpowering sense of failure as a husband, as a father and as a Cuban man is to channel all his energy into a plan to assassinate the man he holds personally responsible for his and his family's misfortune, his nemesis. With his wife no longer able to shame him into inaction, he is more committed than ever to kill the dictator. Before he can set out and achieve his mission, however, this old Cuban macho needs to accept that weakness, pain and failure are part of him, and that can only happen if he learns the lesson of unconditional love for his mentally disabled son, for himself: "[To] love what was lovable wasn't truly love, Goyo thought; only suffering made love worthy." (188) The same is true of his love of Cuba,[4] which the old exile recalls as once beautiful, a perfectly lovable and happy place, its destiny irrevocably changed by the Revolution. It is, of course, an exile's sentimental perspective on his homeland, coloured by nostalgia and a deep feeling of yearning for an increasingly elusive homeland, evoked at times with its tropical colours, sounds, music and fragrances, and other times as "a floating scar in the Caribbean Sea" (42), a country maimed by the abuses of its dictator.

Cuba is evoked with great tenderness by Goyo. Above all, it is the nostalgia for a lost paradise that torments him the most, the longing for the place of his birth, of his youth, that has been denied to him for decades, now more a half-remembered, half-imagined place in his mind, in his heart: "Maybe this was what happened when a man approached death; senility and longing conspired to overtake reality. Perhaps Cuba had become nothing but an imaginary place, unrelated to any truth." (129-30)

The same nostalgia can be seen in the entire Miami community where Goyo and his wife chose to move as they got older. It is particularly evident in Cuban exiles' refusal to acculturate, living in a small community, a simulacrum

[4] As in *Dreaming in Cuban* (Celia) and *The Agüero Sisters* (Blanca), Cristina García cleverly writes Cuba into her text in the guise of a character. Here the symbol for Cuba is Goyito, described in ambivalent terms as a once beautiful boy who was bruised and abused, and who is now, at the age of 60, a deeply disturbed man, with the mental and emotional development of a little boy, desperate for affection and reassurance, stuck in his world of psychotherapy, binge eating and the study of birds' singing. Although his physical appearance is grotesque, making him repulsive to all except his loving, guilt-ridden father, there is a lingering inner beauty about him – his wonderful sensibility from his childhood days – that makes Goyito intriguingly fascinating. He is like Cuba after decades of dictatorship, a victim scarred and mangled, yet still showing some of its former attractiveness, a victim that the exiles continue to love for being part of them, of their past and their identity.

of Cuba, with "nearly every octogenarian … semibionic— replacements, hair plugs, heart transplants, and a panoply of other age-defying enhancements … believing— if only for the two minutes and fifteen seconds of Pérez Prado's 'Mambo No. 5'— that the Revolution had never happened." (34) There is also something terribly sad about these people's escape into a fantasy Cuba, a nostalgia-tinted version of their homeland before 1959, and their hopeless dreams of a successful assassination of El Comandante. It is the only reason some of them, Goyo included, wake up in the morning to face yet another day of old-age afflictions and the humiliations they entail.

Here and in most passages describing Miami-based old Cuban exiles, Cristina García uses humour as a shield against excessive sentimentalism. Funny and extravagant as they are in their materialism, right-wing politics, anti-Castro sentiments, and refusal to accept any other version of historical truth than their own, these people are nevertheless sad, pathetic old men and women for whom Cuba time stopped in 1959, with the revolutionaries' seizure of power. It was the moment that marked the end of life as they knew it. They are addicted to this simulacrum of a Cuban lifestyle, such as meeting for coffee and a chat in Calle Ocho cafés, or going to old Cuban music concerts, and the novelist shows some restraint in parodying them out of respect for their age and their predicament.

It is in the exiles' and the dictator's inflexibility and denial of reality that García finds the material for the most amusing scenes in her novel, including the tragicomic, anticlimactic ending. Both the dictator and Goyo Herrera are in New York, where the latter feels he has the upper hand. Following the humiliation on the evening of his birthday celebration, the despot looks forward to an opportunity to shine again and receive a standing ovation in front of the General Assembly at the United Nations. He has just dodged another bullet, an assassination plan that his security forces overturned on time for his safe arrival in New York, and he feels confident that his death, should it come soon, will be a hero's death, as predicted by the strange angel of death, Vásquez, who visited him on the night he turned 89. Goyo, on the other hand, received a less clear message from a fortune teller, also named Vásquez. But he is determined to carry out his plan, or what that diviner called his "incurable fate." (161) He is not deterred by shaking knees (fear, tiredness, both?) or his missed opportunity to take communion that morning. In fact, his determination grows as he sees the defiant despot enjoying an excessively warm welcome, the delegates seemingly "clap[ing] and screech[ing] like monkeys" (233). That bastard is fully enjoying every second of it – an unbearable farce, Goyo thinks. The writer builds the suspense by focussing on Goyo's thoughts, on his mental calculations for the best time to attack, his rage exacerbated by what feels like an endless standing ovation for El Comandante. As he takes aim and shoots, his heart gives out, but he sees the despot collapsing on stage, and nothing else matters:

> It was over. He'd done it. He, Goyo Herrera, had shot the son of a bitch dead. Let his heart stop, let the heavens fall down on his head, but he'd accomplished his mission. He'd come face-to-face with his destiny and pulled the trigger. … Death, insistent, touched his brow. An ellipse of darkness engulfed him. Beyond it were vague shapes, a fading chaos. A hero. Sí, he would die a hero… (234)

Goyo's bullet misses the tyrant, but his heart attack prevents him from seeing that El Comandante's collapse was the effect of his own heart giving out at that precise moment. The dictator is fuming. He has been robbed of a hero's death:

> The pain in his chest was unbearable. A knife thrust to his heart. Damn it, he should've taken the fucking bullet. He'd wanted to die in battle, on horseback, like the great Martí. Or like Caesar, looking his killers in the eye, the blood between them the last word. … It infuriated him to succumb to something as mundane as a heart attack, or whatever the fuck was happening to him. He refused to surrender, to accept this as the story of his death. (234-35)

As he draws his last breath, the dictator understands something that had previously appeared to him in a dream: he is dying the pitiful death of an old despot. García holds him up to ridicule one last time by imagining him return to his old obsession with his father's menacing virility, seemingly the most important motivation for the macho despot he was to become. Behind even the fiercest dictator, the last lines of the novel suggest, there is a little boy, insecure and fragile, dependent on a woman's reassurance, a state to which he will return in his final moments for comfort and peace, annulling all pretences of grandeur or of omnipotence:

> A dirigible floated on the horizon, its flesh-toned snout tilted toward the sun. An inexplicable joy overcame him. The tyrant imagined flying high over the Sierra Maestra, over Pico Turquino, which he'd scaled as a young man. Then he felt himself rapidly sinking, a leaky dinghy, deep into the Caribbean Sea without the prerogatives due him at death. Cojones, not like this! Around him, loved ones began to gather: Mamá, her apron filled with silky rose petals; Miriam, beckoning to him in her wedding gown; his naked father, prodigious balls quivering, shouting: "Get up! Get up!" "You're very brave, mijo," his mother whispered. "You are my bold boy." "Sí, Mami, lo soy," the tyrant sang back, and then he, too, was gone. (235)

Conclusion

Although *King of Cuba* may be read as a fictional representation of the two sides of the major political and historical divide created by the Cuban Revolution, what makes it stand out among García's other novels on the same topic is the fact that it also looks into how private and public masculinities work, especially in a cultural context in which machismo and heteropatriarchy are relatively uncontested, in which men grow up believing they are kings. In a radio interview with Peter Robinson, the author explains: "The 'king of Cuba'... refers to all Cuban men because they were raised in the arms of a Cuban mommy. Every single one of them [considers himself] the center of the universe. So 'king of Cuba' refers to both El Comandante, as well as his exile nemesis." (*KALW* 31:21-31:44)

Goyo Herrera and the dictator are hilarious and pathetic symbols of Cuban machismo: egotistic, controlling yet paradoxically somewhat powerless in their own homes, narcissistic, and with an almost pathological obsession with virility (especially the Castro character), and a long line of lovers to fuel their macho ego. The two octogenarians are distorted mirrorings of one another, a strategy that the novelist employs to emphasise the similarities (rather than the radical differences) between Cubans on the island and in the diaspora. They are, the novelist explains, vehicles for the exploration of Cuban masculinity in Greater Cuba, so clearly manifest in Cuban and exile politics:

> I was ... trying to illuminate the false dichotomy between two men like El Comandante and Goyo. [They represent] the two Cuban points of view. The two sides of the [Straits of] Florida. Underneath this black and white, this "If you're not with us your against us" mentality, underneath the roots, [the two sides] are really entangled. They're really one in the same. They share that same intransigence, the same inability to compromise, the same [view of the] right and wrongness of things. ("Interview with Christina García" n. page)

From here derives, in the novelist's opinion, the potentially excessive exercise of masculine authority, or the "public intransigence of male Cuban politicos" in the public sphere: it is the effect of counterbalancing "a kind of political impotence at home." ("'Multi-hyphenated identities'" 209)

The author portrays both protagonists with a satirist's eye, focusing on their foolish, ludicrous, exaggerated, and pitiful behaviour. In spite of their political differences, the two octogenarians are deeply preoccupied by their deaths, which they hope will be honourable. The despot needs an appropriate ending to a life of power and history-making; Goyo Herrera hopes to endow his

otherwise unexceptional existence with meaning through an exceptional death. Their laughable yet painful old age predicaments, including a series of absurd mishaps and plenty of opportunities for both to show how testosterone-driven, narcissistic and obstinate they are, make them look more like old fools trapped in lives that elude their control. The anticlimactic ending of the novel only confirms what the reader has felt all along: that they are tragicomic characters whose desire to achieve greatness (Goyo) and determination to make of death a final act of heroic proportions (the dictator) are destroyed by unlucky coincidence and overstimulated old hearts.

The novel elicits, as a modern tragicomic text is expected to, both "tragic empathy and comic detachment" (Randall 13), leaving the reader amused but also moved after reading about the (mis)adventures of the two old protagonists, their ridiculous denial of reality, and their bathetic, mundane deaths. "Fictio cedit veritati ... Fiction yields to truth." (*King of Cuba* 43), the despot remembers his Jesuit teachers saying. The novel's fictional Castro, whose character stands out as the more interesting of the two protagonists, may not be a faithful representation of the Cuban leader, "a wax statue for her story to pose beside" (Greer, n. page), yet Cristina García has managed to reach a deeper truth of the Cuban dictator, whose final public appearances showed him as a diminished, sad-looking yet ridiculous shadow of the man he used to be. A visibly ill, almost voiceless man who could barely walk or stand, sporting Adidas tracksuits instead of his fatigues, he seemed the image of a deteriorating ideology, social system and country. In her novel, the writer shows the ambivalent attitude and the kind of critical distance a journalist raised and educated outside the Miami Cuban community can afford. With a great sense of humour and a vivid imagination, she pens an alternative end for the architect of the Cuban Revolution, envisioning his final months as a time of introspection, failed acts of power, and growing awareness of the corrupted Communist paradise that Cuba has become. Undoubtedly, this novel is Cristina García's gift for her parents and the Cuban exiles of their generation.

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