

Cristina García at the 2013 Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival

Edited by Rafael Ocasio

The following text is a transcription of Cuban-American novelist Cristina García's reading as a guest writer at the 2013 Agnes Scott College's Writers' Festival. Founded in 1972, the Festival brings to the College writers who provide critiques of the works of creative writing. It is the culmination of a literary competition open to up-and-coming writers across the state of Georgia.

Ms. García contributed to a weeklong fiction and poetry workshop open to all students at Agnes Scott College. I had the pleasure to join Ms. García and some fifteen students in this wonderful experience. I hope that "Looking at Puerto Rican Culture From 'De afuera,'" a creative non-fiction piece that I started writing then, will become the preface to the manuscript of my book in process on the historical trip to Puerto Rico by anthropologist Franz Boas in 1915.

For her Agnes Scott College presentation, in a format different from most formal book readings, Ms. García asked the audience to suggest passages from her work that they would like to hear her read. In between readings, she took questions from the audience. In this paper, I have kept the same format, indicating the questions and suggestions from the audience, and Ms. García's answers, as well as her comments about the passages read.

This presentation took place at the Agnes Scott College, on April 4, 2013. It was filmed and edited by Rosa Contreras.

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Rafael Ocasio, Charles A. Dana Professor of Spanish
Agnes Scott College

Cristina García: Thank you very much for coming out on such a rainy Thursday afternoon. I am delighted to be here, at Agnes Scott College, where I had the privilege of getting to know quite a few students this week doing a workshop. We have had a rollicking good time with all of this wonderful local talent. I am pleased to be here today to read a little bit from my work.

I was originally just going to read from *The Lady Matador's Hotel*, which is my last book published, and a little preview from *King of Cuba*, which is coming out next week, but I thought I might also read a page or two from some other works, a little bit like a smarkle board. I also want to do something different, too. Rather than reading non-stop for some forty minutes and then take questions, I thought we can begin the conversation sooner by taking questions in between the readings. We can start the conversation that way and you don't need to keep your questions until the end of the reading. I will probably not read more than a page or two each time and we can do the fun stuff, which will be your questions.

At the workshop we have spoken a lot about openings, beginnings, how you extend invitations to readers. I thought I would begin at the very, very beginning, which is the opening of *Dreaming in Cuban*, which is my first novel. I would read the first pages. (Excerpt read: Celia del Pino while watching the north coast of Cuba.)

Question: At our writer's workshop we did an exercise about proper techniques to start a narration. Where do you start writing?

Cristina García: *Dreaming in Cuban* was very unusual because the beginning was the only part of this novel that did not change. I just had a very clear idea about this beginning, and this was so different from anything I have written later, and in that case, atypical. The novel began with that image of an old woman, all dressed-up in the middle of the night, with her binoculars in hand. She was very clear in my mind; it was a matter of finding out who she was, why she was doing the surveillance, and everybody else around her. Her image definitely sparked the beginning of the book. Other books, *A Handbook to Luck*, for example, I had a very strong image, and I felt very strongly about it, almost like what happened with *Dreaming in Cuban*, but it inspired the epilogue of the book, not the beginning. One has to stay flexible for a long, long time while trying to figure out sequencing and structures. Things can be a mess for a long, long time.

Question: Can you comment about how the characters in *Dreaming in Cuban* represent the variety of the Cuban political spectrum?

Cristina García: It is something that I know personally very well. I grew up with very, very conservative parents, people who were extremely anti-Castro. You could not say anything positive about the island or exhibit a mild curiosity about events going on there without the "ta, ta, ta, ta" sound of nails being spat at you. It was much later, when I've got to college, that I started to be more curious about Cuban politics and understood the schism present in my family. Much like in *Dreaming in Cuban* my family is divided. To this date I can't talk politics with my parents. Even to be a "garden variety Democrat" is for my parents a betrayal to everything they hold dear. This is very typical for their

generation as among the first wave of Cubans that came. They formed the hard-core of the Miami community, which pretty much dictates what happens policy-wise and with the embargo. That is a fact that, if you are Cuban-American, you always have to contend with, unfortunately, one way or another.

Question: Have you been back to Cuba yourself?

Cristina García: Yes, many times, most recently in spring of 2011. I felt that I needed to go back in order to finish *King of Cuba*. This is a good segway, I will read an excerpt from it next. This novel pretty much explores these polarities in the Cuban community through El Comandante, who is a fictionalized version of Fidel Castro, and Goyo Herrera, an octogenarian exile, who is pretty much vehemently against the Revolution. I just felt that it was feeling too static to go back and forth between these sort of titanic characters and that it was not giving the reader a sense of the complexities of what was going on in the Cuban scenes (plural). I went to Cuba and spent a few weeks there and got to meet all kinds of interesting people that made their way in the book in terms of footnotes or as commentators. There is nothing longer than a page. There were about fifty commentators who ridicule, contest, comment the extremes of the so-called official history of the Revolution, that belonging to the exiles as well as that of the Revolution. That's why I needed to go to Cuba. I did not realize that I had picked up these voices. It was not until I was at the airport leaving Cuba that I started writing these voices, and this went on for about a month. I ended up with over a hundred voices and I reduced the number.

Since you brought it up, I can read some of these voices. I will read from *King of Cuba*. There is this one voice and this is something I barely touched from reality into fiction. I met an artist who had created a studio between two old mansions in El Vedado, which is a kind of old, rich bourgeoisie neighborhood in Havana. She created this almost like a tree house and she painted there. This is called "Galapagos." The artist is Zaida del Pino. The name I made up, but the situation is true.

Cristina García: This is another voice, a museum guard named Fidelia González. A lot of the commentators are from women, mostly from the island in various disguises. This section is called "Frank País's Shoes."

Cristina García: Maybe I should read a bit from El Comandante in *King of Cuba*. This is a flash back that happens fairly early on in the book. He is in his late eighties and he is thinking back, grumbling about this and that, walking around his mansion, while complaining about the Russians, and this that and other. This is a flashback about his father and the first time he saw his father get out of the bath. I promised this to my students because there was a penis poem at the workshop. Yeah, Becky! I should have you read that poem but I am not going to force you to do it! (Laughter). Then I said, yeah, I too have a section on the Comandante's penis, so here it is. For those of you who don't know, you will hear the word pinga a lot, which is the Cuban slang for penis.

Cristina García: That was the fun part of inhabiting someone like El Comandante, any one who wants to run away from the room, go ahead, screaming optional. One of the cool things about imagining him was that I completely immersed myself into Fidel Castro land. I read absolutely everything written about him and by him. I saw a lot of old footage of his speeches to the point that I can do a good imitation of him (which I am not going to do here!) But then I shut off. I wanted to do an archetypal Caribbean strongman, and called it El Comandante. I decided to take a lot of liberties with history while still being faithful, I hope, to the essence of the man. But I still had to imagine things, like him as a child, and I gave him a different number of siblings than in real life. He ends up with crazy mano a mano with Fernando, who is his brother, like Castro's own brother, Raúl. What was really fun too was to show his omnipotence over this island. For example, if he wanted to see the dolphins at the aquarium in the middle of the night, he disrupted everyone's sleep. This is a kind of darkly comic book, but all of that was a tremendous amount of fun, more than I imagined. While I was writing this book I too became a little dictatorial. My own daughter who was finishing high school at the time would tell me, "You know, mom, you are expecting things a little faster," and I had to pull back, but it was super fun to write him.

Question: Your work is clearly very character driven. Do you feel that you come up with these characters first and then build a story around them?

Cristina García: It has happened within the whole spectrum of possibilities. In the case of *King of Cuba*, I knew that I felt ready and up to the task, in a weird way, to wrestle with the presence of Fidel Castro over anything Cuban during the second part of the twentieth century and beyond. In my book *Monkey Hunting*, which is my third novel about the Chinese in Cuba in the nineteenth century, it was a matter of exploring a historical question: how was it that the Chinese ended up in Cuba? I knew a little about them because when I was a kid my parents used to take the family on Sunday, as the most affordable option, to the Chinese restaurants in Upper East Side. The waiter of the restaurant was Chinese but spoke Spanish with a Cuban accent. The menu was almost like the poetic bilingual translation that you get: on the one side, the Chinese, and on the other side, the Cuban dishes. You could mix and match, and it was fantastic! I kept asking how did this happen and no one seemed to know. My own daughter is part Japanese, so I became interested in these multiple-hyphenated identities before we even had the language, the kind of contemporary multi-cultural vocabulary to fully describe it, which happened years before we had this industry of multiculturalism. *Monkey Hunting* was, in a sense, more idea-driven, and then I had to find a character who would embody that era in some way.

Each book in one way or the other tells you how to write it. You just got to get out of its way a little bit.

Question: Do you read aloud often as you write?

Cristina García: Yes, I read aloud a lot! To the point that if I were not writing a novel I would be carted away by men wearing white suits. For me, it is very important to hear it. I would say that the reading aloud happens very concertedly towards the end of

the writing process. Every book I have read aloud front to back, at least three times in sections. Sometimes I would read it backwards, not literally backwards, but one chapter at a time backwards. This process helps the ear, helps the music, and I will make decisions sometimes about a sentence based on music alone. I am also trying, I think, that because so many episodes in my books take place in Spanish, I want to feel that the English is accommodating Spanish. I do that on a musical basis as well. I want English to stretch itself, kind of doing a cha cha cha a bit. My idea is that although you are reading this book in English, you are reminded, not only by the bit of Spanish that I use, but by the syncopation of the sentences themselves, that we are in a different terrain culturally and linguistically.

Question: What would you say about the structure of *King of Cuba* that allows you to have so many different voices?

Cristina García: It mostly alternates between the two perspectives of El Comandante himself and Goyo Herrera, who is my feisty octogenarian Cuban exile. These other voices sort of creep in between segments, they even interrupt the text in midstream, while contesting what someone is saying. For me this type of technique was very important because of the “strangle hold” that the extreme right and left has over the public dialogue about Cuba. I wanted the museum guard, the artist, while not necessarily directly contesting anyone, to have a voice.

There are many ways to be Cuban. I was once told that because I did not write in Spanish I was not Cuban. I resented that insinuation! There is a whole world out there, which is full of complexity and which is not dealt with, at least not in the public arena. I felt that that was sort of my mission as it were.

Question: So far you have read from characters who speak from many perspectives, age, gender, political spectrums. Is it difficult to write these many diverse characters? Do you have a specific type of technique to keep them as distinctive individuals as they are?

Cristina García: The voices that ended up in *King of Cuba* happened later toward the end of the writing of the book. I worked for a long time on getting these two men, El Comandante and Goyo Herrera, to get their voices right. Sometimes if it would get too crazy or cacophonous, I would concentrate on one character for a while. I also did the same in *Lady Matador’s Hotel*, which alternates between six different perspectives and six close third points of view. There was a point, of course, that I was so confused that I had to work on one character at the time, almost as if they were a mini-novella, while following through one at a time and then re-weave them judiciously. I do this intuitively and on a one-on-one basis and it stays very fluid for a while.

Perhaps I should read from *Lady Matador’s Hotel* for a while. In another Q&A I discovered that everyone is very mad at me because the ending is empty. To make amends with you guys I’d like to read a segment, obviously not from the ending. Any suggestions?

Suggestion: I would like to hear the section where Aura is at the hotel speaking to her dead brother.

Cristina García: Besides Lady Matador, Aura is one of the six characters. She is an ex-guerrilla fighter who grew up in the Guatemalan highlands, long after the civil war she is now working as a waitress in the coffee shop here. Her brother died in the war.

Question: What did your family think about *Dreaming in Cuban*?

Cristina García: I've gotten various responses from the family and I was a little nervous about *Dreaming in Cuban*, especially by the Lourdes character. The essence of it is very much my own mother's. This character owns a bakery in Brooklyn and has vowed to fight communists with rollers and cookies, or whatever. She is a very unreasonable character. At the very end I was throwing so many things at her, to make her very different, at least physically, from my mother. I gave her orthopedic shoes, a wandering eye, a unsightly bun, but it was still her. I just waited, while thinking that I should have an open plane reservation to go as far as possible. Two months after the book came out I got the dreaded call from my mother, and she said, "so, I read your novel" [in a heavy Cuban accent], she truly does her r's quite heavily. Ummm, I say. She says, "you know, that Lourdes character," and I go, "yeah?" She said, "she was the heroine of the novel!" And I am thinking, "damn, how did that happen, I just dodged that bullet?" She never said, "Oh, that was me," but she clearly completely identified with her.

In contrast, her sister, who was a little the basis for the crazy Felicia character, my aunt who is still in Cuba, when she got to the section where I describe her. It took her two years to get over this line: "her pale fleshy buttocks..." (p.9). "Bacatan," she threw the book across the room and she told me this very straightforward. She finally got further because the family told her, "No, no, it gets better." But she immediately identified with that. Who knows why?

Question: My favorite part of the *Lady Matador's Hotel* is the section where a guy spots Lady Matador while she is swimming. I think this is the best moment of the whole book.

Cristina García: Is that an invitation to read from another segment? I think I owe you guys a lot to make up for the ending you did not like.

I think I need to do an antidote to Martín because I don't want to end with him. I don't like the guy! I would like to read from one of my Amazonian women, one of the sisters in *The Agüeros Sisters*, who comments about Cuban men. This will be a better place to end. Reina is an electrician, and an Amazonian, her job is to scout around the island for electrical equipment and to seduce men. Of course, the last part is not part of her job description. She is out in El Cobre, which is a copper mine in Cuba and also the site of a basilica that houses La Caridad del Cobre, Cuba's patron saint.

Bibliography

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