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Three Questions for Orlando Ricardo Menes

September 24th, 2013

DANIEL OLIVAS: Some if not most readers will assume that the title of your collection is a reference to the erotic fixation on an object or non-genital body part. But for those who are familiar with your poetry or who read this book, the word “fetish” (taken from one of the poems of the same name that is subtitled, *Our Lady of Regla Church, Cuba*) has more of a religious connotation, as in a devotion to an object as being the embodiment of a potent spirit. How did you decide that *Fetish* would be the title (and, arguably, the overarching theme) of this collection?

ORLANDO RICARDO MENES: You are absolutely right in stating that I have no interest whatsoever in writing about kinky sexual practices. I am no John Waters in verse.

My interest in the word “fetish” is in how it can denote or mark the idea of attraction in the broadest sense of the term: attraction to other human beings, especially the Other, to nature, to the sacred, to the past, to music and art, etc. The word possesses a disquieting edginess — a disturbing allure — that I find productive to my poetics.

“Fetish” connotes complexity, contradiction, emotional intensity, even mania, and the magical. One meaning (albeit figurative) that the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides for this word is “something irrationally revered.”

The idea of fixation, therefore, is important to my collection. In fact, I am fascinated by how human beings, or nations for that matter, locate points of attraction (desire, longing, nostalgia) in very specific or exclusive objects or traits that undermine the totality of an individual person or culture.

For example, Zvi Mendel, an Ashkenazi Jew who emigrates to Cuba in the early 20th century (and, by the way, a character entirely of my own creation) rejects everything about this country with the exception of tobacco, which he consumes ritualistically, thus harking back to the Tainos’ own cult of this plant.

In the poem “Fetish,” I wish to add, although I am not a believer in the syncretic religion of Santería, I did, in a way, embrace the idol aesthetically, which is, I suppose, my own fetish, my own accommodation (as a Catholic) to this African deity.

DO: You begin the poem “*Spiderman in Havana*” with: “No claps, no cheers as Mary Jane kisses Spidey / upside down or when archfoe Green Goblin dies / impaled by his own glider.” But what does get the Havana audience to “rise and holler” is the movie’s Thanksgiving scene when Aunt May has set the groaning table with “side dishes and yeast rolls sludged in butter” alongside “a succulent bird.” The poem asks: “shouldn’t the embargoed / Cubans have

jeered or at least made some fuss / over the daily toil to appease a growling stomach?" Do you consider this and similar poems "political" (in the broadest form of the word) or simply an observation of two very different daily realities?

ORM: I am not a poet who is enamored with polemics of any type. I am no partisan of political causes, whether from the left or the right. Nonetheless, all facts point to Cuba's poverty being the result of more than 50 years of incompetence, corruption, and oppression at the hands of the Castro brothers and their crony generals. Anyone who is well informed about Cuba knows that the American embargo is just a red herring, one that clearly benefits the communist regime.

DO: *Fetish* was published this year by the University of Nebraska Press as the winner of a very prestigious contest, namely the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry. As an established poet with two prior books already in print, why did you decide to submit the manuscript to a poetry contest?

ORM: Because of the intensely competitive nature of the marketplace (the superabundance of manuscripts and the dearth of publishers), to publish one's poetry manuscript is exceedingly precarious, even for someone like me in mid-career. Milkweed Editions, the publisher of *Furia*, my previous collection, decided against publishing *Fetish*, so my manuscript became an orphan, a situation that I suspect is quite common, so I had no choice but to submit it to contests. It was a finalist and semifinalist several times, a process that took about two years, until it won the Prairie Schooner Prize. I am fortunate that *Fetish* finally found a home.

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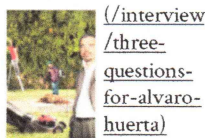
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