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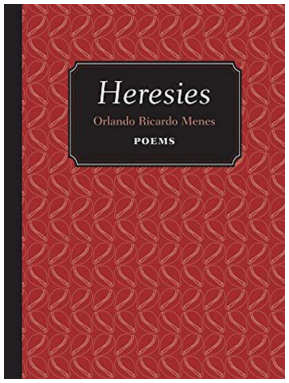
Author interview: The invention of the saints

Daniel A. Olivas, Special to the Times *12:10 p.m. MST December 21, 2015*

Menes finds room for both ridicule and respect in new poetry collection



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Orlando Ricardo Menes teaches creative writing at the University of Notre Dame, where he is professor of English. He is the author of five poetry titles including "Fetish," winner of the 2012 Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry.

Orlando Menes *(Photo: Matt Cashore/University of Notre Dame)*

His most recent book is "Heresies" (University of New Mexico Press, 2015). "Heresies" is a rich, satisfying collection imbued with wit, compassion, and a respectful skepticism for multicultural religious devotion and all its complexities.

Q: In many of your poems in this new collection, you blend Afro-Cuban and

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Roman Catholic ideologies, dogma and traditions. You also offer a bit of historical revision with regard to certain saints. Are these the "heresies" that you refer to in the title?

A: True, but only in part. Yes, for many years I have been adamant about portraying Cuba as a Caribbean nation in which African-ness is a crucial element. To say that my family's white Spanish and Catholic heritage is the Cuban norm would be ridiculously offensive. I must embrace all the Cubas, the totality of Cuba.

Some readers might think that inventing saints is quite cheeky on my part, and I can live with that, but they should also recognize that many of our saints are the product of legend and folklore, without any historical evidence, which is especially true of the martyrs. All they have to do is read Voragine's "The Golden Legend," a medieval compendium of hagiographies, to realize the power of fantasy to instill devotion.

These saints' lives are very often a product of either individual or communal imaginations, and it is tradition (culture) that establishes (or presupposes) their authority. In the vast Catholic panoply, even those saints who are undoubtedly historical, such as St. Rose of Lima and St. Martin of Porres, are remembered by the faithful through the use of narratives that could be easily called magical realist.

Perhaps even more shocking are those heretical voices in my collection that espouse an irrational spirituality or that brazenly censure Catholic dogma. We are both puzzled and threatened by immoderate devotion and by zealous beliefs that are in opposition to capitalist modernity and those rational ideas of the Enlightenment that have so much shaped our liberal democracies. Yes, it is undoubtedly true that extremism in faith and religion can easily explode into violence directed at the unfaithful, which is clearly abhorrent, but how can a seemingly good, well-balanced person follow so fervently such a faith and its accompanying dogma? I believe that they find in extremism the most pure and inviolable expression of faith, one that requires of them the strictest self-abnegation. To serve the severest God is, for them, the ultimate blessing.

Q: One of my favorite poems in the collection is "St. Cajetan, Patron of Gamblers," which begins: "Why dawdle with Hail Marys when it's Lady Luck you really seek?" Could you talk a little bit about your approach in creating this piece?

A: I am fascinated by the transactional nature of prayer among the Cubans with whom I grew up, specifically the practice of making a *promesa* to a saint or the Virgin (not so often to Christ himself) — in other words, a promise (more like an exchange) that goes something like this: You give me X, and I will give Y, or you cure my cancer, and I will go on a pilgrimage to Santiago. I presume that this kind of prayer goes back to pagan times, and no wonder the Church looks askance at it. And Protestants would be even more critical of this kind of materiality. One should seek out strength and guidance from God, nothing more, a purist would say.

As you can tell, this poem is satirical, my St. Cajetan a bit of a rogue, but my intent is more Horatian than Juvenalian. One must recognize that our human needs are both material and spiritual, so that our interactions with the sacred would naturally combine the two in very concrete terms.

Daniel A. Olivas is the author of seven books including "Things We Do Not Talk About: Exploring Latino/a Literature through Essays and Interviews" (San Diego State University Press). Follow him on Twitter @olivasdan.

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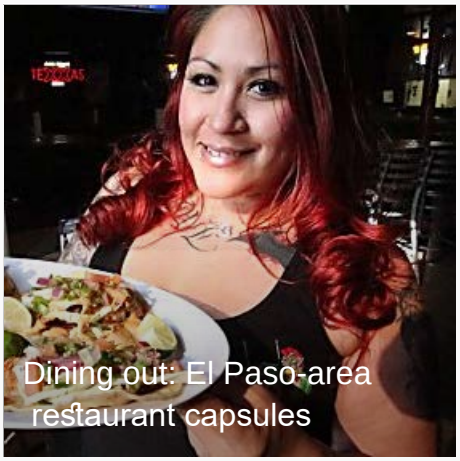

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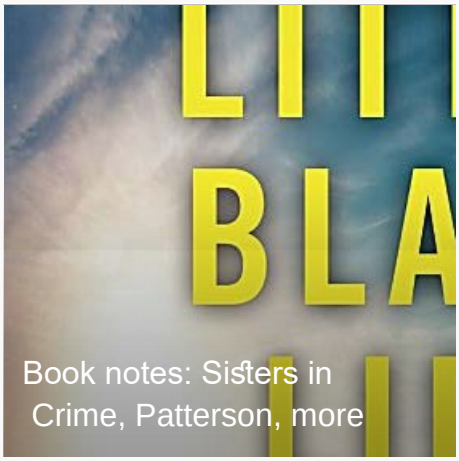

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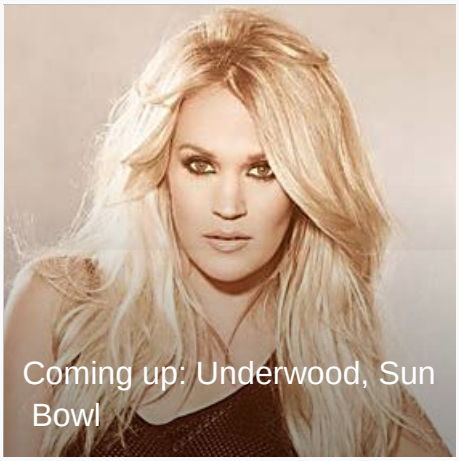

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