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Escaping isn't what it used to be: Review of Ana Menendez's *Adios, Happy Homeland!*

Cover Page Acknowledgments

Thanks to Ana Menendez for speaking with me about her work.

Escaping Isn't What It Used to Be

Amy Letter, Drake University

Ana Menendez, *Adios, Happy Homeland!* (New York: Black Cat, 2011), 268 pp.

Adios, Happy Homeland! is sure to confound some readers. While the cover of the book announces that it is fiction by Ana Menendez, a glance at its form and content shows what seems to be an anthology of Cuban authors, curated by an Irishman-living-in-Havana named Herberto Quain. The name “Ana Menendez” appears again only as the author of the collection’s final entry, which seems to imply further that Menendez did not write the whole book. But the book is not what its form suggests. It is in fact a single cohesive work of fiction written by a single author—but a work of fiction that, significantly, makes many references to the works of others. It is presented in the form of an anthology, with each of the interlinked and intertwined stories being attributed to a different fictional author, and the “collection” prefaced by a fictional introduction by the fictional Quain, who, one suddenly recalls, is actually a character from Borges’ “Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain,” another story whose form makes it seem like something it is not: in that case, the short story pretends to be a literary analysis.

The push of formal masquerade is strong, and the reader of *Adios, Happy Homeland!* might need to occasionally remind herself that she is reading not an anthology but the work of a single playful but elusive author, Ana Menendez, and that furthermore we should not confuse the author with the “Ana Menendez” described in the book’s “Contributors’ Notes” as “the pseudonym of an imaginary writer and translator, invented, if not to lend coherence to this collection, at least to offer it the pretense of contemporary relevance.” It is part of this book’s marvelous metafictional bravado that its characters are its “authors,” and its “editor” is a borrowed (and liberally re-written) character, while its author’s name is described as a character’s pseudonym.

Before we meet any of the fictional Cuban authors, we meet the true “pseudonym[ous]...imaginary writer and translator,” Herberto Quain, who introduces the book, and from his own words we learn that a better cultural colonialist could scarcely be found: Quain adores all things Cuban, a love he traces to his Irish childhood and blood heritage. Between himself and the Cuban authors he sees innumerable connections, and he appropriates these

authors' works not just enthusiastically but affectionately—which emphasizes both how brutal the violation is, and also how well-intentioned.

Borges' Herbert Quain “deplored ‘the servile and obstinate conservation’ of books from the past,” and *Adios, Happy Homeland!* seems to be written in this spirit, for while it makes frequent reference to past works, it scrambles fact and fiction, personal and public; it re-employs others' characters and even historical persons freely, uses quotes in new contexts, and generally *plays* with the landscape of the literary lights, rather than record or defend them. There is something both marvelous and unsettling about seeing literature roughed about in the sandbox, although not as unsettling as seeing literature neatly arranged and boxed behind glass with a focal point as particular as Quain's—a contrast made more curious by the realization that Menendez and Quain are, in many ways, one.

Midway through the book, the authors write Quain a protesting (and anachronistic) cease-and-desist email (“From: The Poets, To: Herberto Quain, Date: May 23, 1923, Re: Your book”). In it they argue, “much of our lifework was and continues to be dedicated to the idea of escaping the bonds imposed by others. And now you come, an outsider, to impose on us a doomed structure. It is quite unacceptable.” But Quain answers their objections more than ten years before they wrote them (“From: Herberto Quain, To: The Poets, Date: August 9, 1912, Re: Re: Your book”) with fatherly scolding (“it is you who have not understood your own work. This is forgivable, given the constraints of your own narrow lives”), hurt testiness (“furthermore, it is you who are invented, not I”), and mathematical equations (hardly reproducible here).

The overall structure and the interplay between the authors and their aggressor-editor raises hopes that this book will become required reading in college Post-colonial Literature courses as a twenty-first century fictional meta-commentary on appropriation, for rarely has the subject been handled with such sharp humor, or as many layers of meaning. This email volley and the fact of the book in the reader's hands announce that authors do not and perhaps cannot have control over their own works, names, or reputations; that being unwillingly utilized to support a stranger's alien theory is an inevitable consequence of successful creation. The stories' thematic focus on flight and escape serve to underline the irony that artistic works expressing freedom become the tools used to re-cage the author in an intellectual construct. And the references to real-life authors, to fictional authors, to the themes of other literary works throughout the book show not only the connectedness of the literary consciousness, the endless and inescapable labyrinth of ideas, but they also display the extent to which the author herself,

Ana Menendez, has appropriated others' works, names, biographies, themes, even their very words, to construct her own world of meaning. We cannot despise Herberto Quain, and as we begin to see the connections between him and the book's actual author (not to mention ourselves), we lose the desire to. He is not a villain, even if he is sometimes arrogant in the extreme. What he does is what we all do when we engage with a work of literature: we impose ourselves upon the pages; we use the meaning we construct for our own purposes and ascribe it to the author without the author's consent. Readers are not monsters, but what we do can be, from the point of view of the author, monstrous. Every act of understanding obviates the author's (to the author alone knowable, losable) intent.

Herberto Quain's personal story both establishes connections between Cuban and Irish literature and reveals their superficiality. Yes, both countries are "green islands" (though an "editor's" footnote emphasizes that Cuba is actually an archipelago). Both have waved goodbye to a large emigration seeking economically greener pastures, a diaspora that remains culturally true to its homeland, whether scattered across Boston or Miami. Quain himself traces his ancestry to a man named Deoradhán, Irish for "exile" or "wanderer," and numbers "Quien" among the many iterations of his surname. ("Quain, quién?" the fictional authors ask in their letter, "What gives you the authority?") His family home in Connaught is described as a labyrinth: each generation added a bit more to create a spiraling house with a library at its core, and eventually installed (a delightfully repulsive metaphor to which I will return in a moment) toilets "for the guests" where the cooking stove used to be.

So, *quién es Quain?* He seems to be a spirit of the literary-critical tradition, one that perverts what it loves and destroys what it cherishes—one that inevitably turns the heat of nourishing familial creation into a repository for the waste of strangers—through these acts of appropriation. Yet the "digestion" hinted at here is what reading and understanding is all about. Authors want a wide audience of strangers to "devour" their writing, even as they recoil at what their readers sometimes interpret and conclude. One is reminded that, while what goes on in the toilet might be unsavory, it is necessary to life, and the inevitable result of even the most wholesome and honestly-received meal.

This fictional curator is essential to understanding the book as a whole, to seeing its place among the literary, cultural, and critical traditions that attempt to define Menendez and her work. The Quain character establishes this book as a response to a complicated literary aggressor, a paternalistic pretender who praises with disrespect, overwhelms with theories and abstractions

(not to mention mathematical formulae), and uses the literary art of others to gratify his own ego. The book asserts an author's point of view even as the real-life author removes herself from sight (gamely replacing herself with a fictional version) and conjures a motley chorus of "Cuban authors" whose complex time-traveling interdependent maze of story, poem, game, and glossary defies a simplistic "interpretation" and reveals Quain as a passionate fraud, promoting the authors' works even as he is deaf to their words.

But it is the works of the "Cuban authors" the fictional Quain collects that make up the majority of the book and the majority of its pleasures. We could read each of them as an influence upon and/or an aspect of the book's real author, Ana Menendez, but that hardly matters. The imaginary authors' stories are varied and compelling, laugh-out-loud funny in places, re-read-ten-times philosophical in others. The stories interlink by subject and theme, sometimes delicately, sometimes directly. And formally there is such variety and playfulness that the reader must sometimes just sit back and admire the invention, as though she had turned the corner in a museum and encountered some strange and marvelous machine.

For example, one section presents us a series of infinite loops, narrative versions of 20 GOTO 10 pretending to be branching stories, called "End-less Stories." The title of the book itself (*Adios, Happy Homeland!*) is taken from an awful machine translation of "Al Partir" by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda found in the section, "Adios Happy Homeland: Selected Translations According to Google," a section which immediately reminded this reader of how the kitchen of one generation of Quains, full of warmth and sustenance, became a subsequent generation's guest toilet.

These Google translations are naturally followed by a short story written mostly in Spanish, "Un Cuento Extraño"¹. In this story, two exiled North Americans sit in a Caribbean restaurant drinking American coffee, mystified that they should be speaking simple, awkward Spanish to each other when their native language is clearly English. It functions as a formal mirror of a tradition that includes Hemingway and even some of Menendez's earlier work (especially, "In Cuba I was a German Shepherd" the story for which her first book was named), which portrays exiled Cuban men speaking among themselves, but whose dialogue (and narration) is of course written in English—except for exclamations, which appear in Spanish. (True to the mirror, in "Un Cuento Extraño" exclamations appear in English.)

¹ I don't read Spanish, so (in what I felt was the spirit of the book) I used Google Translate to read it, but an English translation is available on Menendez's website: <<http://anamenendezonline.com/uncuento.htm>>.

The fictional authors to whom the stories are attributed are in some ways translations themselves. Ernest Hemingway wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* inspired by the Cuban town Cojimar. “Ernesto del Camino” (fictionally) authors the story “Cojimar” in *Adios, Happy Homeland!*, but this tale is inspired more by the story of Elian Gonzalez than by *Moby Dick*. In the “Contributors’ Notes” we learn that Ernesto del Camino, “went on to study for a PhD in comparative literature: his thesis involved going through the novels of Ernest Hemingway and correcting the awkward English that was supposed to imitate Spanish, but that to his mind just reeked of lazy translation.”

Not all the names are as immediately identifiable as “Ernesto del Camino” or “Alex Carpenter,” but all are as interesting: “The Boy Who Was Rescued by Fish” was “written by” Teresa de la Landre, a character from Menendez’s own *Loving Che*. “Un Cuento Extraño” is ascribed to Nitza Pol-Villa, a surname reversal of Nitza Villapol, the “Cuban Julia Child.” The “Glossary of Caribbean Winds” is by “Vietor Fúka,” Slovak for “the wind blows” (and an in-joke for Menendez’s Slovak in-laws). “You Are the Heirs of All My Terrors,” has its title taken from Reinaldo Arenas’ suicide note and is listed as being authored by Arenas’ character, “Celestino D’Alba.”

The “Contributors’ Notes” also lists a “promising poet in his twenties, [who] turned to translation in his thirties, declaring that all the good poems had already been written,” named “Joseph Martin.” This Joseph Martin is credited as the translator for “The Poet in His Labyrinth,” a story “written by” Silas Haslam, the mysterious author at the heart of Borges’ “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” in which Haslam is cited as the author of *A General History of Labyrinths*. Joseph Martin’s translation of Silas Haslam’s “Poet in His Labyrinth” shows us a mystified José Martí exploring the terminal halls of the airport that bears his name, and quoting himself extensively.

Labyrinthine and experimental, this book is also playful, and consistently delights in defying expectations of form. “Zodiac of Loss” and “Glossary of Caribbean Winds” create reference works for the strange world within this book, while “The Boy Who Fell from Heaven” re-writes a real-world Wikipedia entry, placing the story’s fictional author (Laika Almeida—named for Menendez’s cousin) among those who have, in the real world, stowed away on planes. (The date of Almeida’s adventure? April 1st, of course.)

Several of the stories are entirely excerptable from the book (although one should be careful whom one lists as the author), and stand alone: “In Defense of Flying” (by “Carla

Gades”), “The Parachute Maker” (by “Ovid Rodriguez”), “Redstone” (by “C. Casey”), and “Journey Back to the Seed (*¿Qué Quieres, Vieja?*)” (by “Alex Carpenter”) are particularly strong—and fascinating—stories. But to divorce them from their labyrinth is to present them simply as unusually-shaped paths, and to deprive the reader of the joy of recognition when inevitably a character or image from one story appears in another, of the pleasure of discovering that she has turned back without realizing it, that she has been looking at the same walls, from the other side, all along.

Menendez’s books up to this point have focused primarily on the universal experience of exile, but *Adios, Happy Homeland!* is far more interested in the universal experience of escape, and especially of flight—as Daedalus and Icarus showed us long ago, there is just one sure, and perilous, way to escape a labyrinth. This book’s greatest accomplishment is how well and how vividly it portrays the particular combination of madness, hope, ambition, and loneliness that drives us to harness the wind and fly away from the void we know into the void we do not.

These fictional authors are born of but not caged by the history and culture that tries to define them. They translate themselves; they write their own characters in constant motion, moving from one culture to the next, from one life to the next. They fly: through the countryside in a train, through life in reverse, through the skies on a great horse, away to sea on a golden kite. They will be misunderstood and misinterpreted. They will be cataloged and collected. They will become lost, leaving only names, which strangers will use to label legends. They will leave a lasting mark in the world, even if it is hard to see, even if it is, as in the central image of “Redstone” (by “C. Casey”), an emptiness, like a hole in a high, dark train station’s ceiling, and as difficult to reach.