



The Winter Garden Photograph

Reina María Rodríguez

Prologue: Frozen Frames

This book opens with a command: “See.”

The poems following it assemble acts of observation. To compose her title poem, Reina María Rodríguez considered a phrase from an essay by Roland Barthes.¹ Barthes tries to understand his late mother’s life and identity by examining family photographs. In the process he expresses frustration and a lack of faith in photography’s ability to capture reality. Yet when he arrives at one image, the winter garden photograph—a picture of his mother as a child, standing by a conservatory—it brings him a special sense of intimacy with his mother, in spite of all his doubts.

Rodríguez’s own fascination with images led her to extended reflections on sight, desire, and loss. She followed Barthes’s lead in contemplating photography through the lens of language. Flipping through the pages of UNESCO’s magazine *Courier* at her rooftop home in Havana, she juxtaposed its international scenes with images of her home and the objects to be found there.

It took me many years to find the forgotten source of the epigraph Rodríguez placed before her poems, summoning readers to see.² She took it from a 1988 essay in *Courier* by French poet Yves Bonnefoy, whose search for compassion in the processes and products of photography leads him to admit that photography all too often pairs its care with cruelty. But like Barthes, he finds reason for hope.

1 *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Tr. Richard Howard. NY: Hill and Wang, 1981. 71.

2 A Colombian magazine eventually republished the Spanish-language version of the essay online. I found it in *Rinoceronte 14: Revista Digital de Arte y Literatura* (www.rinoceronte14.org, n.d.).

Martine Franck becomes his example of the rare artist who succeeds in creating a compassionate enlightenment. Silent, intuitive, Franck is an “alchemist,” the magician who transforms all evidence of relative realities into the impossible gold of a shared meaning: a glimpse of absolute truth, one surpassing human contestations. Franck becomes the antidote to the “kind of cruelty that is sometimes passed off as a desire to seek truth” with the camera lens—cruelty, Bonnefoy insists, because photographers too often undercut their penetrating vision with emotional blindness.³

Rodríguez takes her poems into these contradictions involved in bearing witness through the creation of imagery. Love, sensuality, and friendship give warmth to many scenes. Yet when she looks at the book in retrospect, Rodríguez emphasizes that she sees detachment rather than synthesis at the emotional center of these poems. She says, “Landscapes get erased; they deteriorate; they’re purely ‘intellectualized,’ so to speak. They’re cold.”⁴ For Rodríguez this detachment represents a fundamental flaw in her polished book.

Yet the imagery of cracks is relevant, humane in its very failure. It conjures many kinds of emotional and social breakage. Two examples: a fracture between social roles and the individuals who try but can’t completely fit into them; or, the inconsistent meanings of objects we collect in order to symbolize what we want to be. There’s something deceptive about the quiet atmosphere of *The Winter Garden Photograph*. It is not a complacent or quietist book, but a challenging one. The poetry presents us with a mind detaching itself from its surroundings, taking stock.

3 Bonnefoy, Yves. “The compassionate eye.” UNESCO Courier (April 1988): 8. General Reference Center GOLD (accessed February 10, 2019). http://link.galegroup.com.library.smcvt.edu/apps/doc/A6354160/GRGM?u=vo1_b92stm&sid=GRGM&xid=d55717c7. 8.

4 “Desire for Something that Doesn’t Exist: Interview Between Reina María Rodríguez and Kristin Dykstra.” *How2* I.7 (Spring 2002). Archived online at Arizona State University / The Piper Center: < https://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_7_200/current/translation/dykstrainterview.htm >.

As Rodríguez wrote the collection, she was also reflecting in daily journal notes on the seismic shifts transforming many different levels of her life. Her archived notebooks, journals, and letters show how those meditations became poems. Physically, Rodríguez was suffering from a painful illness that made sexual activity difficult and probably dangerous. Her relationship with her long-term partner was in crisis, and their everyday life included tense negotiation. Also in crisis was her self-image as someone who had given birth to four children and was reimagining herself as a woman past childbearing age. She remained interested in sexuality and in sensuality but found herself forced to re-define what these experiences might be. For the purposes of writing, for example, exploring sensuality meant transforming writers of interest into imagery of painted and sculpted male beauty in her poems, marking these frozen men as inaccessible. Meanwhile her literary reputation continued to grow throughout the '90s, which aggravated dissonance with her partner. These personal concerns bleed through the fractured intimacies of her poems.⁵

A constant characteristic of Rodríguez's writing is her ability to connect apparently private reflections to the broader life of her community. Social pressures inform the tensions in *The Winter Garden Photograph* in muted yet significant ways. During the mid- to late 1990s, the city of Havana and the nation of Cuba had moved well into crisis. The ongoing economic embargo by the United States merged with ongoing fallout from global realignments around the former Soviet Union, which had long offered a variety of important partnerships and resources to Cuba. While the island's leadership sought to hold onto its identity, accomplishments, and forms of organization in post-1959 society, broader

5 The Princeton University Library holds the Reina María Rodríguez Papers, which include pieces of notebooks from the time of composition of *La foto del invernadero*. My remarks on the author's personal life and its flow into her writing refer to movements on the pages of those notebooks, as well as to our past conversations. This introduction incorporates selected segments from a longer article I published in a scholarly journal, regarding the contexts and composition of the book: "A Just Image': Poetic Montage and Cuba's Special Period in *The Winter Garden Photograph*." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 41.2 (2008): 55-74.

global shifts re-contextualized the island's ability to operate in the world at large. Its internal economy declined precipitously. The island had entered its "Special Period" of crisis and forced transformation. Its changes permeated the fabric of everyday life, affecting Cubans' sense of place in world history.

The Winter Garden Photograph registers seismic movements through the expression of crisis in personal interfaces with the speakers' surroundings. "All human beings act within certain culturally shaped background expectations and understandings, often not conscious, about what 'reality' is," writes Katherine Verdery, showing that the late twentieth century is characterized in post-Soviet societies by a crisis in the "general understanding of their place in the universe."⁶ Among elements of that general understanding fall broad concerns about community origins and identity, accompanied by questions of different scope: "What makes conduct moral or immoral; what are the essential attributes of a 'person'; what is time, and how does it flow (or not)".

Verdery's last example about the flow of time is particularly relevant to *The Winter Garden Photograph*. The same question animates these poems, with their speakers mulling over the construction of time. Some poems focus on gestures of the moment (an elderly woman bending over in a plaza), others on postures of frozen eternity (a speaker imagines herself embracing statues under the sea; a diver hangs suspended above the water). One poem explores one of the world's most famous photographs, an image of Ernesto "Che" Guevara shot in 1960, wondering about its legacy for the present. Meditations on the nature of time and reality act as triggers, opening out into profound disturbances and reconstructions of meaning in everyday life.

Rodríguez portrays human relationships with objects in these portraits of moments she extracts from life. Objects anchor daily human activities, giving form to domestic landscapes. They give concrete definition

6 *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1999. 34.

to abstract aspects of place. Rodríguez read avidly while composing her book and drew on related ruminations by other writers—among them Virginia Woolf, to whom Rodríguez has often turned. Of objects and their alignments with one’s consciousness Woolf writes, “Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it.”⁷ Rodríguez pursues this haunting of the mind by objects, one of her methods for making everyday life simultaneously recognizable yet oddly unfamiliar.

The Winter Garden Photograph was immediately recognized as a powerful book in Latin America. It won the prestigious Casa de las Américas international prize for poetry in 1998—the second time Rodríguez had taken that prize, cementing her reputation as a writer of the highest order.

While the book symbolizes a certain kind of closure to the twentieth century, it is far from marking the end of Rodríguez’s own writing. She continues to be known for her stark dedication to artistic integrity. Her daily involvement in writing has translated into a stream of well-regarded works of poetry and prose in the twenty-first century. Among other awards, she received Cuba’s National Prize for Literature in 2013, followed by the international acclaim of the 2014 Pablo Neruda Ibero-American Poetry Award, an extraordinary mark of respect in the Spanish-language literary world.

7 From “Solid Objects.” *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. NY: Harcourt & Brace, 1985. 104.

el frío

el frío fuerte pasó
y los días de marzo han vuelto
con su polvo del sur a levantar la hojarasca.
días para quedarse a vivir eternamente en el vaivén;
días en que nada más que una calma
de mediodía común estremece algún vidrio.
si me estuviera permitido
quedarme en esa falla del tiempo,
sólo para recibir su luna nueva y no pasar
—tampoco detenerme— sentarme allí en el
tiovivo a revivir su pausa
que golpea y endulza mi piel
como un arquero ciego.
y pensar que se puede volver a uno como un niño!
si el espíritu se decide por el regreso a sí mismo
un poco atolondrado después de haber salido
del exceso de alegría y de pena;
nunca seguros ante el sinsentido de este día
que no pretende la inteligencia ni la razón
que no permite que tu belleza
envejezca en los desgastes terrenales
y te hace mirar al cielo por la estrecha pausa
que su serenidad ha impuesto.
a ti, recién llegado de cualquier fortuna
contra el éxtasis de estar aquí, conmigo en este día,
te pido que vuelvas más tarde.
poco después, cuando empieza a oscurecer
su resplandor, la noche.

the cold

the bitter cold ended
and the days of March returned.
their southern dust rises with storming leaves.
days for staying to live eternity inside the oscillation;
days in which nothing more than inactivity
rattles some windowpane at ordinary noontime.
if I were permitted
to stay here, inside this fault line in time,
just to receive its new moon and not to move on
—not to stay—to sit down there on the
merry-go-round and revive its pause
that thumps against my skin and softens it
like a blind archer.
and to think that you can come back to yourself as a child!
if the spirit chooses to return to itself,
a little disoriented after exiting
the excess of happiness and pain;
we're never safe from the meaninglessness of this day
that doesn't claim intelligence or reason
that doesn't allow your beauty
to age with earthly wear and tear
and forces you to look up at the sky through the walled-in pause
imposed by its serenity.
as for you, recently arrived through whatever destiny runs
counter to the ecstasy of being here, with me, in this day,
I ask you to come back later.
a little later, when the day's splendor begins
to dim with night.

la diferencia

yo que he visto la diferencia,
en la sombra que aún proyectan los objetos en mis ojos
—esa pasión de reconstruir la pérdida;
el despilfarro de la sensación—
del único país que no es lejano
a donde vas. donde te quedas.
sé que en la tablilla de terracota
que data del reinado de algún rey,
con caligrafía japonesa en forma de surcos
están marcados tus días.
los días son el lugar donde vivimos
no hay otro espacio que la franja que traspasan
tus ojos al crepúsculo.
no podrás escoger otro lugar que
el sitio de los días,
su diferencia.
y en esa rajadura entre dos mundos
renacer a una especie (más estética)
donde podamos vivir otra conciencia de los días
sin los despilfarros de cada conquista.

the difference

I, who have seen the difference
in shadow cast by objects across my eyes
—the passion for reconstructing loss;
the extravagance of sensation—
in the only country that isn't far away
where you go. where you stay.
I know your days are recorded
on the terracotta tablet
—dating from the reign of some king or another—
in wrinkles of Japanese calligraphy.
the days are the place where we live
there's no space other than a strip over which your eyes
pass at sunset.
you won't be able to choose any place other than
the location of the days,
their difference.
and in that crack between two worlds
to be reborn into a (more aesthetic) species
where we could live a different awareness of the days
without the extravagances of each conquest.