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**THE COMMODIFIED SELF IN
LINA MERUANE'S *FRUTA PODRIDA***

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“It’s better to be rich and healthy than to be poor and sick,” my Jewish grandmother used to say. Chileans of the post-Pinochet years by and large agree. They have reaped the benefits of an effervescent economy whose neoliberal policies (put in place under the dictatorship) have pushed Chile hard to integrate with global markets. Steep growth in Chile’s GDP, the extension of credit to a wide swath of the middle and lower middle class, and a boom in TV advertising have unleashed a binge of consumption in the last twenty years. With prosperity has come improved health care, some of the best in Latin America. But not everyone is sanguine about Chile. Lina Meruane, in her 2007 novel *Fruta podrida*, casts a dystopian eye on her country’s conscription into the global economy. She gives us a world in which huge international institutions – a conglomerate that exports Chilean fruit and the worldwide network of medical research -- pervert even the most basic human relationships like the nurturing of children and caring for the sick. For Meruane, these global entities fatally undermine the establishment of human identity itself.

Fruta podrida is an allegory, which makes it tricky to draw from it direct inferences about human identity. Idelber Avelar, in his 1999 book *The Untimely Present*, notes how often the wounded human body represents the polis in Latin American post-dictatorship fiction, and Meruane adopts this common trope. Her protagonist, Zoila, is diabetic. Willfully, Zoila does everything she can to aggravate her disease instead of submitting to treatment. In choosing diabetes as the illness of her heroine, Meruane attends to the peculiar features of the disease, whose onset makes the body’s own defenses “recibir órdenes contradictorias, resoluciones suicidas. El propio cuerpo se rebela contra sí, el cuerpo hace de sí mismo su propio enemigo. ...es como si ese sistema hubiera sufrido un lapsus,

un trastorno, un golpe de Estado ...“(24-25). Of course, it is Chile’s 1973 “golpe de Estado” that unleashed on that nation’s body politic a struggle that, more than twenty-five years after democracy has resumed, continues to be played out. Zoila and her elder half-sister María represent contending value systems in that struggle. María has found her niche in the global economic system that has propelled Chile to prosperity since the 1980s. She has studied science to secure a good job as pest controller and middle manager for a fruit exporter headquartered in the U.S. She is a responsible adult, and so has promised Zoila’s North American absentee father that she will care for the girl. Zoila, in contrast, is a rebellious preteen who perversely refuses to take care of herself. Avid for sweets that, because of her illness, starve her system – cannot help but think of Chile’s insatiable appetite for consumer goods – she overdoses on insulin so that she can steal jam from her sister’s pantry, and falsifies the medical charts she is asked to keep. Never mind that her rebelliousness amounts to suicide. By asserting control over her own body, and ultimately her own death, she mounts the only resistance to the system that she can pose.

These two are opposites, yet the novel leads up to the surprise ending that Zoila and María and also a North American nurse who is the third main character in the book, form part of a single identity, that of a contemporary global woman trapped within, indeed consubstantial with, global institutions. We begin the novel poised to decide whether Zoila or María is more admirable. Although the first scene, the only part of the book cast as objective third person narration, predisposes us to sympathize with the pregnant María as she finds Zoila unconscious on the dining room floor, we soon learn that María is not to be admired. The middle two sections of the novel, some hundred pages in all, give us Zoila’s voice, partly as narration and partly as poetic entries in her journal. By the time we reach the final section, a fifty-page monologue of the nurse who finds Zoila freezing on a New York park bench, we have endorsed Zoila’s terrorist plan to sabotage a medical system that saves bodies but at the expense of humanity. And, as I will show, we realize that Zoila, María and the nurse symbolically comprise a single identity.

First, though, let me explain how Meruane conscripts us to Zoila’s nihilism. She does so by treating as interchangeable three conceptual and imagistic domains – the human body, fruit and language itself. The common element shared by all three of these spheres is the notion of “production.” María is a producer of children; she is five months pregnant as the novel begins and thereafter contrives to give birth every nine months. But she has reduced procreation to its biological essentials. Although, ironically, she bears the name of the iconic Christian mother, María feels no affection for the sister who is in her charge, for her own children or for the men who impregnate her. Even she is aware of her lack of maternal feeling. As she stares in panic at the unconscious Zoila in the opening scene, she thinks, “Debía comportarse como una madre, como una verdadera madre”. However, she is instead “la mujer que no era su madre” (16).

In the waiting room of the emergency room, María wonders not whether Zoila will survive, but how she herself will pay for the funeral parlor or for Zoila's hospital care. Her expedient is a chilling one: she contracts with the Medical Director to be a baby farm and sell her children for scientific experimentation in the U.S. and as a source of transplantable organs. Her collaboration will assist the Chilean hospital to insert itself in the global health care industry in which human body parts become the ultimate commodity. In exchange, the Medical Director promises to treat Zoila with the latest medical advances, up to and including a pancreas transplant or a stem cell replacement of pancreatic cells. Motherhood has been reduced to the "célula madre".

Just as love and motherhood have atrophied into mere procreation, nature in Meruane's work has been reduced to agribusiness, another mode of production. In this sphere, as well, María occupies the role of mid-level technologist. As pest control expert, she exterminates unwanted and unruly nature – insects and molds that would impair the profitable cultivation of perfect fruit. Like María's babies, the apples, pears and grapes whose ripening she oversees serve the export market. Nature here is thoroughly demystified. It affords no pleasure, enjoys no exuberance. It exists to produce commodities.

To link these two avatars of production, Meruane loses no time in associating the human body with plants. In the first scene Zoila's breath smells of the cider she has drunk, and María thinks, "la menor [Zoila] estaba fermentando" (18). When the ambulance comes to take Zoila to the hospital, the half-sisters "[f]ueron arrancadas de cuajo Quedaron con las raíces al aire" (18) and, arriving at the hospital, "plantaron a la Menor en coma, en una sala toda verde, entre sábanas del mismo color" (19). The jars filled with human organs that line the office walls of the Medical Director (two of them, we later learn, contain his parents' hearts) remind María of "frutos en conserva. Fruta perfecta como las que ella estaba produciendo" (22). When the Doctor shows María a diagram of the human body, she sees "las venas creciendo como una enredadera hacia el cerebro" (25), and the pancreas looks to her like a "berenjena oscura y rugosa" (26). Not surprisingly, the dispassionate María thinks of the body as a factory, a "sofisticada planta procesadora provista de esfínteres de entrada y esfínteres de salida, de intestinos distribuidores, de fajas transportadoras y de arterias. En cada punto... había químicos, ácidos y un elaborado sistema que destruía los gérmenes, había almacenes y oficinas donde se elaboran las estrategias de producción. Una máquina perfecta ..." (25).

To emphasize that the mechanized production so valued in Chile today is two steps removed from any Romantic harmony of nature and human relations, Meruane mines her novel with allusions to the poems of Pablo Neruda. "La United Fruit Co." and Neruda's famous elemental odes to the artichoke, to socks and to the watermelon presume a benign connection of man and nature. Zoila, in a poem in her journal that contrasts with but evokes the "Oda a la alcachofa," compares her pregnant sister to a piece of fruit voraciously consumed: "María/

la fruta madura se parte/ y separa las piernas y los brazos María/ para que él devore tu corazón tierno” (44). This desacralized “corazón tierno” could not be more unlike the lovingly opened tender heart of Neruda’s artichoke. Meruane follows this allusion with a scene that personifies the Chile of Unidad Popular as a doddering old man. When María gives birth, she houses Zoila with an elderly neighbor whose decrepitude belies his earlier vigor. In his prime, Zoila knows, the man “trabajaba su propia huerta y dirigía su propio sindicato en la fábrica de calcetines” (51). This sock factory from a bygone economic phase has been bought out by the international fruit conglomerate (a latterday United Fruit Co.) and where unionized labor once worked, exploited temporary workers, all of them female, crate fruit to be shipped. Of course, the mass produced socks woven in the factory were already one step removed from the handknit pair Maru Mori presents to Neruda in his “Oda a los calcetines.” But Meruane insists on the Nerudian connection by portraying the old man dying, face down, collapsed into a watermelon that he has hollowed out and is trying to devour.

The third kind of production Meruane explores is the production of language itself, and the novel inexorably moves toward implicating language as still another tool of the corrupt global market. Those who use and control language dominate power, whether to defend the system or to subvert it. Both María and Zoila deploy words, but to different ends. María studies pesticide manuals to eradicate fruit flies, and, when her workers go on strike, reads history in her *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to learn how others have crushed organized labor. In contrast, the enigmatic poems Zoila writes in her journal, which she tellingly calls “Cuaderno de *de(S)composición*,” deconstruct the discursive rationality of language instead of relying upon it. Zoila’s “decomposing” of syntax parallels her deliberate spoiling of her own body, which deteriorates rapidly until, in the final scene, her foot actually dissolves into a puddle of goo. The novel ends as the nurse feels around for Zoila’s missing body part and exclaims to herself, “Ay, dónde termina ese cuerpo, dónde está el punto final de esta mujer” (185). The dual meaning of “punto final” – “extremity” but also the period at a sentence’s end – completes the metaphoric identification Meruane implies between body and language.

The many newspapers that proliferate in *Fruta podrida* exemplify language itself. Zoila collects news clippings about subversive acts like boycotts and strikes, and also articles about disease, and she takes these articles with her when she travels to New York. “El lenguaje del organismo,” she tells herself, “es el único que verdaderamente comprendes: ese idioma es tu única lengua y es tu mejor arma de ataque” (124). What Zoila has resolved to attack is the healthcare industry, which she sees as an international for-profit enterprise akin to the fruit company, which trades in organs and, claiming to value life, treats bodies as collections of recyclable parts. Of course, by refusing care for herself, she undermines in one way the system’s premise that human health is paramount. In addition, though, she flies to the U.S. to sabotage the world-renowned hospital

where María's babies are kept. In the last part of the book, which is set in a wintry New York, Meruane often uses newspapers as a figure for language. On the subway, Zoila observes a "bulto cubierto de diarios" (125) that turns out to be a beggar with a garbage bag filled with used aluminum cans. Later, damp newspapers cover the park bench where Zoila sits in the square adjacent to the hospital she repeatedly invades; sheets of newsprint blow around the snowy square; Zoila reads a newspaper, which a woman has brought to her; and the nurse who tries again and again to engage Zoila in conversation is carrying the morning paper on her way home from work. Made up of several "cuerpos" or sections, that newspaper affords a link between language and the human body, two of Meruane's imagistic spheres; the nurse muses, "Vuelvo a barrer el agua del banco para sentarme ... sobre el voluminoso ejemplar del diario. Separo el grueso cuerpo de los avisos económicos, el cuerpo de las notas internacionales y el suplemento científico. Todos unidos por cordones umbilicales, el cuerpo científico al financiero al internacional" (149).

Just as Zoila's foot is gangrenous, and the novel's eponymous fruit is subject to rot, language itself may be corrupt. The last chapter of *Fruta podrida* constantly refers to language in various of its forms, in order to critique its use as a tool of hegemony. It is the nurse – a character who in her devotion to established institutions resembles María – whom Meruane portrays as both mistress and victim of fallen language. The exceedingly long, unstoppable monologue of the nurse, a mix of thought and speech, constitutes the final fifty pages of the novel. Her mind cannot shut up. Not only does the nurse obsessively produce the narrative flow itself, but she brandishes a newspaper, has the job of maintaining the medical files of the hospital's patients, and has privileged access to the personnel records of its staff. So as to communicate effectively with the sick, she has mastered an array of foreign languages – Spanish, German and a smattering of French. Yet for all her linguistic savvy, the nurse is in the thrall of her own verbiage; she admits, "soy incapaz de cerrar la boca" (146). What is more, she is incapable of not talking about the horrors that take place in the hospital itself – euthanasia, the systematic discharging of the terminally ill, a wanton intruder's infiltration of the wards – and in society itself. Having just left work, she is eager to detach herself from her job, but each time she tries to deflect her attention toward some pleasurable subject – the breakfast she is about to enjoy or the elegant lives of fashionable shoppers – her mind at once adverts to something horrifying. "[S]ería necesario," she tells Zoila and adjures herself,

olvidarse de la sala de espera atestada de gente que gime y chilla y encima te vomita cuando le preguntas adónde se dirige ... porque hay que tener cuidado ... con la gente que se nos cuela por los pasillos sin ser vista. Pero esa es otra historia de hospitales, esta que quisiera olvidar ahora y para siempre es la de los pasillos llenos de catres, de quirófanos atiborrados e improvisadas camillas para enfermos terminales. Ya no hay lugar donde meter a tanta gente, gente que entra de pie y nunca más se levanta, toda esa gente, cuando yo lo que quisiera en

esta soleada y solitaria mañana es hablar a esos que nunca nos visitan: gente que nunca vi en la Sala de Urgencias; toda esa gente que entra y sale a todas horas de los almacenes, exhibiendo, en el pecho por ejemplo, o en los bolsillos traseros, infinitas marcas comerciales, esa gente que sale y entra y viceversa de toda clase de tiendas con una estremecedora cantidad de cachivaches, que sale de boticas cargada de cremas, que sale y entra y sale de restaurantes sin llevarse los sobrantes de la comida, que se queda atrapada en las puertas rotativas, dando vueltas como un carrusel en el parque; hablar hasta quedar afónica sobre esa gente que agarró sus cosas y se lanzó de los rascacielos en llamas . . . (145-46)

As we laugh at the black humor of this passage, which shows the nurse losing control of her pleasurable evocation of brand names and cosmetics and slipping toward a fantasy of 9/11, we see that language is one tool the nurse uses – unsuccessfully, in this case – to keep at bay atrocities that press upon her. What is more, as the scene unfolds and the nurse proves unable to walk away from Zoila, a potential interlocutor who remains stubbornly mute, we come to understand that the nurse’s onrush of language has ontological urgency; “mientras hablo me siento viva,” she lets drop (155). She badgers the moribund Zoila to reply, or at least to say her name and thus enter the nurse’s own linguistic realm, in part to communicate with someone, in part to bring Zoila into her own sphere of control, but in part to sustain her own being.

The existential quality of the duel between the subversive Zoila, bent on hastening her own death, and the nurse, desperate to sustain life, however vulnerable and flawed that life may be, is one of many points of contact between this part of *Fruta podrida* and the theatre of the absurd. It is easy to imagine adapting this part of the novel for the stage, for Meruane has conceived of it as a symbolic dramatization. In its performative quality, this chapter is reminiscent of *Lumpérica*, which adopts at many points the notion that what is being enacted is part of a movie that is being filmed. Like Eltit, Meruane creates a stylized *mise-en-scène*, in both cases a public square where a suffering woman confronts the destitute. At one point in Meruane’s last chapter a group of blind beggars enters and exits, loudly chewing gum and banging beer cans filled with coins, a pantomime that points at once to man’s doomed physicality [blindness], his lack of insight [blindness], destitution [beggars], the failure of language [the sound of chewing], commercialization [beer cans, coins], beating hearts [rhythmic banging] and the ticking of a clock [the banging]. Other details of the narrative are abstract and symbolic. The snow melts and spring arrives to signal the passage of time. A garbage truck awaited by the impatient Zoila stands for death, as evidently as Godot stands for God. And exaggerated and inopportune technology – the wireless microphone the nurse hilariously pulls out to enable an unconscious Zoila to listen to her – recalls Harpo Marx extracting from his coat some absurd literalization of an idea.

Although we are perfectly aware that this part of Meruane’s text is not realistic, we start the last chapter having seen Zoila sneak into the hospital and

cut the intravenous lines of children being kept alive on life support. We know she is the terrorist. When the nurse broaches the subject of the series of attacks that have taken place in the hospital over a period of ten years, we assume that Zoila has somehow been able to remain in New York to continue her subversive acts, or that time has become elastic in this part of the book. The denouement we expect is that Zoila will eventually reveal herself to the nurse as the nefarious saboteur. Instead, what we discover as the nurse rambles on and on is that she herself is the terrorist, or, put another way, that she and Zoila are part and parcel of a single identity. Points of contact gradually emerge between Zoila and the nurse. Both fiddle with their hair. Zoila is going blind from diabetes, while the nurse complains “*Estoy completamente miope!*” (140). Both, we later learn, have green eyes, and Zoila remarks, when she finally does begin haltingly to speak, “*me parece que sus ojos serían como los míos si usted se sentara aquí, si se pusiera en mi lugar*” (180). We learn that a woman often comes to give Zoila a newspaper, that she sits on Zoila’s bench on the newspaper she herself brings, and that this woman is the secret attacker. Repeatedly, the nurse starts to sit on the bench herself, once laying her paper on the seat so she will not get wet. She shows Zoila a clipping that attests to her own special knowledge of the investigation. (That is, she, like Zoila, collects clippings.) When finally the nurse gives Zoila her newspaper, we realize that the scene we are witnessing has taken place many times before, and that it is she who has perpetrated the sedition she so decries. At this point we recall that, earlier in the book, it was Maria, collaborator-with-the-system extraordinaire, who in a moment of vindictive rage has laced the fruit bound for export with cyanide and unleashed an international boycott. And she has bequeathed her money and passport to Zoila, details that signal as well the shared identity of the two siblings.

As Zoila succumbs to her illness she at last recovers her voice and seems more and more intent on imparting to the nurse the identity of the criminal. Simultaneously, in a sort of chiasmus the nurse becomes sick herself, silenced by coughing from an asthma attack. “*La mendiga se ha robado la voz que yo he perdido mientras toso,*” as the nurse puts it (179). For one climactic moment, both women speak at the same time, drowning each other out but dramatizing the idea that they embody the same soul.

This soul wills itself to die at the end of the book. Zoila’s suicide, on the one hand the fate of a self-indulgent Chile addicted to consumer goods, on the other (and more importantly) is the momentary triumph of the rebel in the global system. In giving us three characters who turn out to be one, Meruane insinuates that the uniqueness we call identity, a uniqueness partly inborn and partly cultivated in a matrix of family, culture and language, cannot subsist in a commodified and profit-driven world. The fruit company and the hospital abide. Zoila does not.

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