

## **Discourse, Memories and Facts: The Perceptions of History and Her-story in Carme Riera's *Cap al cel obert* (1999)**

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Isabel de Fortesa, a young Majorcan woman of Jewish descent, is to marry her cousin, Miguel de Fortaleza, in Havana. She dies on her trip to Cuba but her sister Maria, who was accompanying her, survives. The Fortaleza family mistakes her for Isabel. Soon after, Maria tells them about her sister's fate. In a sudden turn of events, the head of the family, don José de Fortaleza, marries her. Despite Maria's good intentions, her new step children, as most people in Havana, see her as a social climber. The economical and political interests of the powerful, especially those of the Captain General, intertwine with her personal history. During a time of turmoil in Cuba, fate places her in the wrong place at the wrong time and her poems and letters are used to accuse her of conspiracy against the Crown of Spain. According to official History, she is executed, but Carme Riera leaves the door open to an unofficial version of history in which she may have survived. Her story, as well as that of her family, passes from generation to generation until today.

Carme Riera finishes her cycle of novels dedicated to the Majorcan *xuetes* (Jews that were converted to Christianity) and their descendants with *Cap al cel obert*. The action takes place in Cuba, sometime between 1850 and 1860, and those who were denigrated and prosecuted in the previous novel of 1995, *Dins el darrer blau*, are now slave masters. *Cap al cel obert* subverts the traditional role of the main female character because, far from being a passive, conservative woman, she is an active writer and presents the reader with Her-Story through her memories and her writings, in a clear opposition to official History.

This novel can be classified as historiographic metafiction, since the borderlines between history and fiction fade away. According to Linda Hutcheon's definition, this type of fiction turns to

the past to deliberately manipulate it without trying to give the impression of being objective or neutral:

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. (1998: 93)

This definition goes hand in hand with the refutation of “objectivity” in historiography claimed by the New Historicism. According to this, the great and exemplary History, with a capital “H”, is not possible since, following Walter Benjamin (1973) or Hayden White (vol II), it is but is the history of the winners, of those who interpret facts according to their own interests. Michel de Certeau goes even further and claims that History, due to its very nature, can only be subjective. The historian, argues de Certeau (1988), looks for that data which does not belong to him or to his time and starts shaping it with his words according to his personal and social background. Just by the mere act of choosing what to include in his accounts, the historian is exercising his subjectivity, putting his personal and social prejudices to play. Objectivity is, therefore, a chimera.

That being said, the only possible approach to the past, following Umberto Eco (1984), is to examine it with irony, and that is precisely what Carme Riera does, showing the ultimate goals of all the patriotic discourses portrayed in the novel. Her novel looks deeply into the lives of those descendants of the Majorcan *xuetes* to analyze how reality is shaped by discourse, and how deceptive language can be. As a result, people can become slaves of the words they uttered and can find themselves amidst a tangle of political and economical interests that will mark their destiny, as well as that of official History.

For Riera, historical reality can be glimpsed through letters, rumours, legends, brief notes, official documents and, most importantly, memories. These memories, passed from generation to generation, are usually opposed to official History. Riera’s goal is to dismantle official historiography by showing the forces and interests

that really drove it, everything that lies behind it; something that, according to Barthes (1967), has hardly ever anything to do with high ideals or teleological goals but with ambition and politics. The author presents the reader with different points of view about the events taking place in Havana during those years in which turmoil, cries for independence, slavery and political and economic factors shaped the life of the Spanish colony while showing how the words uttered by the main character shaped both her life and that of the colony.

In the first pages, the reader encounters several lascivious rumors spread in a dominical sermon by a priest about the sons of Senyor Josep Joaquim de Fortalesa, a rich slave master. Although the brothers lead somewhat libertine lives, the reader soon realizes the accusations are groundless, setting the pace for what is to come later in the novel. Havana's upper class is very keen on social forms and social masks, despising anyone who doesn't abide by their rules as well as anyone who is not one of them; and that is the reason for all these rumors, which will be taken as facts. This will set the tenor for the rest of the novel because History is often determined by and written with premises that are far removed from the facts.

Needless to say, historiographic accounts have been male centered for centuries and women, in general, have not spoken but have been spoken about. Since they did not have access to the mechanisms of hegemonic power, i.e. male power, their voice and their thoughts have not only been silenced, but denied existence and, therefore, excluded from History. Riera's proposal in *Cap al cel obert* follows Adrienne Rich (1979) by focusing on how women have been presented as acting for and used by men in History. In order to do that, she intends to show how women "live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name –and therefore live- afresh" (35). In this novel, it will be thanks to Maria's writings and memories that the reader will see how women in Mallorca and in Havana were trapped in a male world, barred from discourse, and how Maria's discourse will first trap her and, in the end, liberate her.

Isabel de Fortesa, a young woman from Mallorca, is to marry one of the Fortalesa's sons, Miquel, in Havana. She represents a traditional woman and devotes herself to learn the rules of the upper class she will soon belong to in Cuba. Her idea of marriage is to stay at home, have children and give orders to her servants, following what Michel Foucault defines as explicitly male chauvinist ethics:

It was an ethics for men; an ethics thought, written and taught by men, and addressed to men – to free men, obviously. A male ethics, consequently, in which women figured only as objects or, at most, as partners that one had best train, educate, and watch over when one had them under one's power, but stay away from when they were under the power of someone else (father, husband, tutor). (1986: 22)

All Isabel cares for is to become a wife, govern the house and enter the circle of high class women. However, due to her "origens no nets", being of *xueta* descent, she does not dare talk to other "respectable" women in Mallorca:

A Isabel li hauria agradat poder acostar-se a alguna d'aquelles senyores – Donna Dolors Montis, Donna Onofrina Bellpuig o Donna Maria Magdalena Gual de Togores– per demanar-los alguns consells que l'ajudessin a desenvolupar-se en la seva vida futura. Però, tot i que coneixia alguna –havia cosit la roba de néixer dels dos primers infants de Donna Onofrina, i la seva germana Maria havia ensenyat a llegir a la filla de Donna Dolors–, no s'hi va atrevir. Temia que no es riguessin de les seves ínfulas de mossona i haver de sortir d'aquelles cases amb el cap baix i ofesa per alguna humiliació relativa als seus orígens no nets. (44-5)

Her only way of learning about high society is to be instructed by a French dressmaker, Madame Antoinette, who does not care about Isabel's origins. This marks the first distinction between "respectable" members of the community and all the "others", following Bhabha's concept, those who are not like me, or even Said's (1989) version, which includes women and any person belonging to a dominated class, national minority and all kinds of marginalized or incorporated group. High class women are reluctant about the French woman's past

and, due to her custom of washing herself so often – a highly unusual occurrence among them –, thought of her as having an extremely sinful past. Therefore, without even trying to understand why she acts differently her need to “clean up her guilt”, according to those women, is one more example of their disdain for any person who is not like them. Immobility is a cornerstone of this society.

Maria, Isabel’s sister and the protagonist of the novel, represents, on the other hand, a liberal character. In contrast with traditional expectations for women, she enjoys reading and writing. As a woman of letters, people in Mallorca consider her strange, and she is doubly ostracized because of her “origens no nets” (45). There is, however, a blind troubadour who sings romances and sees her for who she really is; and it will be through him that Maria’s story and writings will be heard for generations to come. Apart from being remembered through her writings, Maria is deeply concerned about her family’s history, dating back to the times of the “Actes de Fe de 1691” (34) and the burning of her ancestor, Isabel Tarongí, at the Inquisitorial stake.

Her father had passed these memories on to her and she wants to leave them to her descendants. These family memories deal with the injustices her paternal grandfather and his friends suffered because of their Jewish ancestors and of how one of them fled Mallorca to settle in Cuba, where he changed his last name from Fortesa to Fortalesa.

Those two letters added to his last name changed his history, enhancing his strength and the opportunity to become a rich man. The importance of discourse as a force determining human reality, one of the key themes in the novel, is reflected in the liberation of this man, giving him a fresh start through his new name. As in her previous novel, those histories, with lower case, are the ones preferred by Riera instead of the official one, with a capital H, (History), as well as to any written document. What she offers the reader is a partial view of History seen through the eyes of a woman. According to Gerda Lerner’s perspective, Riera intends to avoid the traditional male centered historiography in *Cap al Cel Obert* and to rectify this, and to light up areas of historical darkness we must, for a time, focus on a *woman-centered* inquiry, considering the possibility of the existence

of a female culture *within* the general culture shared by men and women. History must include an account of the female experience over time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women's past. This is the primary task of women's history. The central question it raises is: What would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define. (1979: 39)

As a matter of fact, the reader will not only see the island's history through Maria's eyes but her personal history will become so entangled with the official history of Havana that one cannot go without the other.

As with most literary pieces by Riera, the seduction of words, how they can lead people (as well as the reader) to do or feel something, is illustrated by means of the epistolary style. Riera herself defines letters as a postponed dialogue. The epistolary genre gives the illusion of closeness to the person who writes but, like any written text, letters are an incomplete means of communication, since the textual producer is not present. As such, the wish to compensate for that absence boosts the reader's imagination. Early in the novel one can observe the power and seduction of imagination in the letters written between two characters: Maria and Àngela. Maria de Fortesa pens the love letters her sister, Isabel, sends to her fiancé in Havana and Àngela de Fortalesa writes the response in name of her brother, Miquel. As both Maria and Àngela are supplanting other people, the reader perceives how this double play of enchantment and deception mirrors far greater issues, the problem of authorship and the impossibility of absolute knowledge through the written word. Àngela, in fact, writes the kind of letters she would like to receive from the lover she does not have:

Durant aquells mesos Àngela de Fortalesa no visqué per altra cosa que no fos el festeig del seu germà i les seves futures noces, que, en més de una ocasió, en alguna llarga matinada, inclinada sobre el paper, confongué amb les pròpies.

Ja no sóc jo. Des que t'escric sóc un altre. Sóc tu. Pots creure-ho. És cert. El meu jo es dilueix en la teva persona. S'hi confon... (30)

She discovers that words are free for anybody to use and that, following the style of *Les lettres de madame de Sévigné*, *L'histoire d'Abélard et Héloïse* and *Les liaisons dangereuses* (27), she is able to seduce her reader with them. When Maria learns that it was Àngela who wrote the letters, she believes there is actually a romantic connection between the two of them, even though their respective love letters were faked. The seduction of words goes beyond any truth or falsehood they may intend to bear.

Maria's ensuing letters would enslave her even more. After her disastrous trip to Cuba, in which her sister Isabel perishes, she herself becomes so sick that the Fortalesa family mistakes her for Isabel. When she recovers her strength, but not her voice, she thinks Àngela would better understand her and writes her a letter disclosing her true identity and her sister's demise. At first, she believes that "Confessar-li tot això immediatament li seria més fàcil perquè no tindria més remei que contar-li-ho tot per escrit" (92). However, she soon found out how hard it is to "posar en ordre tot quant necessitava dir-li" (93). Aware of the possible consequences, Maria is certain that her words can only reflect in the "mirall de les paraules trossos del seu passat" (95). When Àngela enters Maria's room she discovers not only the letter addressed to her but also the various pieces of discarded drafts Maria had written. Àngela reads them all in order to "Tractar de descobrir-ho en el mosaic que anava recomponent amb trossos minsos (...) com si s'aventurés en la recerca d'un tresor robat" (96-7); but all she can recover are fragments. Now Àngela knows all those letters were not true but, despite all those drafts and the letter she just read, she knows her new knowledge is uncertain, incomplete once again.

Maria not only writes letters, but also poems. She is one of those few women who wrote verse in the nineteenth century, portraying the tension between liberal, romantic ideas that gave women a more dignified status and the conservative norms that lingered on at that time. The fact that women were writing and being published in newspapers shows the rising importance of the issue. There were more and more female readers. And that meant business which, according to Eco, is enough reason to promote social change.

These changes, however, faced the opposition of traditional powers in society; and Maria will find herself paying a high price for her liberal ideas. In Cuba, she publishes a poem dedicated to don Josep Joaquim de Fortalesa who, in a sudden turn of events, decides to marry her. She writes of him in figurative terms as her “Pàtria [és] més que la naixença: per mi la dolça terra, (...) tu em dons la identitat” (181). The poem is praised by some of Havana’s intellectuals, but others condemn it as an example of a woman trying to imitate a man’s writing, which is unacceptable. Several of her critics go further and read the poem as an exaltation of Cuba, one more example of the impossibility of transparent communication through the written word. This provokes a heated discussion in Havana’s literary circle about the concept of nation, an extremely hot issue at that moment as well as today in several parts of Europe, particularly the Peninsula and especially Catalonia.

Those were troubled times for the island and Riera, following the same technique as in *Dins el darrer blau*, uses these intellectuals with exquisite irony to show what lies behind the so-called ideological principles such as the concept of nation; especially the importance of economic interests and the pursuit of power behind them. Rich businessmen and intellectuals ponder Cuba’s joining the United States, either as a means of scaring Madrid and obtaining more economic freedom or, as a final goal -“Només amb l’annexió salvarien els seus capitals” (194) -, to eventually obtain the island’s independence. Not all slave owners share the same view about joining the United States; but they all feel the need to “whiten” the island; a clear example of white supremacy to avoid that: “la raça superior triomfadora per sempre més sobre totes les altres, fóra la negra, fosca com les tenebres, o la groga, impura com el pecat” (200).

Nevertheless, despite the appearance of being only driven by a racial factor, the reader soon perceives the irony of their exalted patriotic and racial comments since economic interests are paramount. They all agree, for example, that slaves cost more money than paid laborers (“Els esclaus surten massa cars” [199]) because they would not have to worry about the workers’ food, health or lodgings. The white aristocracy also doubts that their human property possesses a soul. African slaves are considered the “other”, i.e. that who is not like

me and is therefore marginalized; and this concept goes hand in hand with the interests that lie behind the official history since “a major nombre de negres, més necessària es fa la protecció de la metròpolis; a més negres, més soldats, més exèrcit, més subjecció” (193), which would evidently interfere with their businesses.

Far from following a traditional conservative view Maria, on the other hand, does not see slaves like rich people in Havana and tries to convince her husband, Don Josep Joaquim de Fortalesa, to free them. Senyor Fortalesa, however, retorts that his slaves are luckier than manual workers in England, who work 18 or 20 hours per day for a miserable salary, while his slaves receive lodging, food, medicine and religion, and work less. As with everything else in life, there is not only one driving factor behind ideological positions: the master's relation to his slaves is not only economical, but also a pleasurable one. Slaves, most often female ones, are exploited as exotic sexual objects. Senyor Fortalesa's sons, for instance, lost their virginity with their slaves, and continue having affairs with them. Fortalesa himself, before marrying, fathered bastard sons with his slaves. This exotic view is also shared by women, like the marchioness of Pozos Dulces, who is always accompanied by a twelve-year-old black boy who shares her bed. In order to keep the status quo, it is necessary for those in power to hold their supremacy against these “others” and, in doing so, it is always useful to consider slaves as wild beasts, whose souls are as black as their skin. Deemed without morals, they are regarded as being superstitious and great liars. Riera, however, dismantles this view with her habitual irony by exposing the logic behind one of the slaves' superstitions, which does not differ much from the thousands of legends Western, “civilized” men have had for centuries.

As mentioned above, the concept of the “other” includes anyone who is marginalized for being somewhat different, regardless of skin color; if someone is different and poses, or may pose, some kind of danger to the status quo, that is enough reason for exclusion. Parker, a British citizen whose life is a mystery for many who think he has pacts with the devil, is treated as an “other” by Havana's society. Ironically, he treats the rest of white people as “others”, the same as black slaves in Havana, breeding them not just to work as slaves but to improve the white race. He raises young white men and women to be

educated house slaves, and perfect lovers, “especializats a millorar la nostra raça (...) els productes que jo obtinc, amb llavors seleccionades, solen ser d’una rara perfecció” (154).

Even this concept, so fond of the ideas of miscegenation, white supremacy (and later Nazism), presents itself as something worth praising: he claims that his female slaves enjoy much better luck than “la immensa majoria de dones, esclaves domèstiques, venudes per les pròpies famílies al millor postor, obligades a dur fills al món com conilles, sovint objecte d’humiliacions i maltractaments” (154-5), whereas his slaves enjoy a greater education and a life full of pleasures. He may well have a point. However Riera, once again, shows that what makes a difference is not white supremacy but education; and tells us how education made it possible for five black slaves who belonged to the previous senyor de Fortalesa to play Mozart concertos. He “volia demostrar que els esclaus poden arribar a desenvolupar les mateixes capacitats que la gent lliure, que tot era qüestionar-los. Volia fer esclaus lliures” (176). Whites can also be treated as “others” the same way that black slaves can be educated as white people. The point Riera keeps on underlining is that those who hold power treat those who do not as different, as “others”, purely and simply so that they can retain control.

All those slave-masters who were only interested in making money thanks to their slaves –and who do not care about conspiring against the Crown if that helps their business– have no ethical problem in purchasing a title of nobility from the monarchy. Don Josep Joaquim de Fortalesa aspires to become a marquis for two reasons: to impress his clients and, therefore, obtain more financial benefits; and also to offer it to his wife, Maria, as a present that would compensate her and her descendants of all evils suffered because of their Jewish origins. He plans to announce his new title at a party he is throwing. All the important people in the island are there, but something unexpected happens. The Captain General receives a mysterious note and leaves in a rush. The mystery and the power of words come into play again in the novel and become a permanent fixture.

Various rumors explaining his departure spread throughout the city but a despised opera singer fabricates the most dangerous one

for the Fortalesa family: namely, an attempt to murder the Captain General at the party. Maria, being the hostess, writes to the Captain to find out what happened and to excuse herself for any part she may have unintentionally played. Unwittingly, she becomes a slave of her own discourse, and that letter will be used later as an admission of guilt on her part. An official statement takes the conspiracy rumor as fact, a practice not that odd in historiography, and uses it to imprison several intellectuals, close all publishers, all schools, and the university. A United States general, who had only come to invest some money, is also accused of conspiracy, and expelled from the island; the reader learns later that his business intentions happened to interfere with those of the Captain General. Luckily for him, some riots occur which justify to the public his activities although they have, in fact, nothing to do with secessionist insurrections but with a popular revolt against an injustice.

After Don Josep Joaquim de Fortalesa's death in mysterious circumstances, Maria, who was seen as an "other" by most of Havana's high society, is called to see the Captain General. She possesses some letters written to her late husband uncovering the Captain's real interests: he and don Josep were positioning themselves to become the sole owners of the booming real estate business. The Captain himself is a close friend of some of the secessionist conspirators since they offered him a percentage of their businesses. Madrid uncovered his illicit friendships and the mysterious note he received during the party was a warning of his eventual removal from office.

The Captain General sees in Maria the perfect victim to clear his name: her letter to him, the deliberate misreading and misinterpretation of her poem, and the unlucky events which surrounded the party made her the ideal scapegoat. Her demise would provide no embarrassment to Madrid: she has no powerful allies to protect her and all those who were in her favor had been imprisoned. In this way, Maria can be classified as an "other" according to Edward Said's definition, of "women, dominated classes, national minorities and even marginalized or incorporated academic sub-specialties" (207) because she is different. She comes from a foreign land, she is of Jewish origin and she is a liberal thinker and a poet, which allows

her fit in almost all those categories. To top it off, she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Carme Riera not only uses the Captain General to show the interests that drive History, but also to make him share a historical view of Spain which is the same one Francoism later embraces: that of an empire whose enemies never forgive Her for having been the most powerful nation in the world. His History of Spain, and that written by Francoist historiographers, is a discourse of great heroes and heroic battles, very similar to the concept of a “usable past” coined by David Herzberger (1995). The Captain General knows reality is not like that; but he also knows this is a very convenient historical view. He assumes that the History he is writing, the one that will pass onto the official documents, and the one he is carrying out are two completely different things: the grand narrative of his documents, following Lyotard’s concept (1980), and the greediness behind them are dismantled before the reader’s eyes through Maria’s accounts.

At the moment of Maria’s execution, a foreigner, an-“other”, who is giving a balloon exhibition descends towards the site and, legend has it, he takes her with him; nobody in the island will ever know about her again, whether she is dead or alive. In the last part of the novel, ironically called *the expendable epilogue*, the reader learns that, according to the official version, Maria is executed, but her body is never returned to her family, despite their requests. One also learns that the Captain General is finally removed from office, despite his efforts to cover his wrongdoings with his own historiography. Maria’s son dedicates his life to clearing his mother’s memory. He goes to Mallorca to collect what she wrote there and publish it in a volume along with her other works. There he hears Raul, the blind balladeer, recounting Maria’s story in full detail. The ambiguity surrounding her death is retained, but certain details of the romance he sings are best explained if Maria was actually saved and she herself sent the romance to her old blind friend.

In this manner, through unofficial versions of History, Maria’s life and that of her ancestors is passed on to the following generations as her father wanted. As in Riera’s previous novel, the Majorcan writer prefers subjective, personal partial versions of history to a totalizing, official, supposedly objective version, which she dismantles

by showing what interests lie behind it. Maria's personal history becomes so entangled with the official history of Havana that each is incomplete without the other, which is one of Riera's main points.

After careful documentation, Carme Riera approaches history in this novel with an ironic glimpse, following Eco, to manipulate it without giving the false idea of neutrality or objectivity. In other words, her discourse comes to be what Linda Hutcheon defines as historiographic metafiction. Her goal is to promote a dialogic reading of the texts, both historical and fictional, in order to confront the female voice with the male centered counterpart, the idiom of power. Notwithstanding, Riera does not intend to foster separatisms, but to provide new and more comprehensive insights. She considers herself, above all, a woman who sympathizes with everyone who is disadvantaged, as seen in her previous novel and crystallized by her revelation: "Prefiero escribir para todos. Por eso mismo creo que sólo puede haber buena o mala literatura" (Guillaume 1998: 76).

Riera, like many other contemporary peninsular writers, wants to contest the lack of memory displayed by contemporary globalized society. If Spaniards do not remember where they come from, this leads them to forget that they also were immigrants before, that they profited from the colonies and that, at one time or another, they were also the "other". History is not often moved and written only by ideals but rather by political and economical interests which are, as a textual product, then reinterpreted for future generations. By remembering this, by recovering the histories that have been censored, forgotten, mutilated or deformed, people will be able to better understand themselves and also be mindful of the "others", the "colonized ones", as Said puts it, such as the immigrants of the past or of today's postmodern Spain.

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