

Book Review

Gaspar, Frank X. *The Poems of Renata Ferreira*. Tagus, 2020.

The celebrated Portuguese-American poet and novelist Frank X. Gaspar is not known for his experimentalism. He is also not known for being provocative or fomenting controversy. His seven previous books could be neatly organized into two categories: poetry (5) and novels (2). *The Poems of Renata Ferreira* may change that. It is as subversive a book as it is unclassifiable.

At first glance, this book appears to engage in a familiar and very old game, which Cervantes also masterfully played when he wrote *Don Quixote*. In its foreword, Cervantes claimed not to be the author but merely the unsuspecting possessor of a manuscript originally written in Arabic by Cide Hamete Benengeli. This brings me to the case of *Les lettres portugaises*—which inspired *New Portuguese Letters*, often mentioned in *The Poems of Renata Ferreira*. Similar claims were made about this seventeenth-century volume: letters found in mysterious circumstances, disseminated by secretive editors and publishers, and plagued by competing and illegitimate sequels. It is now viewed as having been authored by the Comte de Guilleragues (1628-1684) and is considered one of the earliest examples of epistolary fiction. *Les lettres portugaises*—which presents the (possibly fictional) love letters of a Portuguese nun to the lover who slighted her—is also one of the reasons why “unbridled, tormented passion” has been (and still is) associated with the Portuguese and, by extension, the Portuguese-American.

I am convinced (although Gaspar will probably deny it) that this is the same literary device Gaspar uses when he claims that he just happened upon the manuscript poems of his friend Renata. Renata was a Portuguese-American painter who lived in Lisbon, New York, and Provincetown, among other places. As is the habit of the Provincetown *summer people* often depicted in Gaspar’s work, she used to regularly rent a room in the house of a local—in this case, Gaspar’s own family home. Assuming that Renata is real (let us suspend all

disbelief for now), the reader finds out that her poems were given to Gaspar by a friend several years after her death.

What makes this book particularly refreshing is the fact that Gaspar adds his own unexpected twists to an already boundary-defying genre: the story built around the discovery of a false treasure trove of literary documents whose real author is the one who claims to be the editor. The false editor begins by penning what would be expected in such an edition: a foreword. This foreword, which begins in a sober and genre-appropriate manner, quickly (and comically) transitions into a gripping novel—or, I should say, into the version of the novel (or novella) about Renata’s life that would exist had Gaspar chosen to fully develop it. As soon as the formalities are out of the way, this quasi-novel turns the reader into a witness to the story of how Renata’s life becomes gradually entangled with Frank Gaspar’s. This most unusual foreword becomes sort of a thriller in the end—including a rushed trip to the hospital, glimpses into the world of high finance and corruption, and a dead body that is not really dead—and is as enthralling as Renata’s poems themselves, if not more so.

The book has two subsequent major sections: Renata’s poetry and Gaspar’s notes on both the poems and his own foreword. Renata’s poems—which are, to a great extent, expressions of her passionate feelings for two of her lovers, Anaktoria and Ophelia—echo, in a symbolic manner, the sentimental stories that the reader is already familiar with. The final section, entitled “Cravos,” presents Renata’s impressions of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, which she witnessed. The poems express Renata’s denunciation of the toppled regime, her support for the famously persecuted Three Marias, and, naturally, her ideological complicity with the so-called conquests of revolution: progress toward gender equality, women’s rights, workers’ rights, freedom of speech, LGBT rights, etc.

But the book is far from over. In the last part, Frank Gaspar the “editor” places himself in the spotlight once more, although in a deceptively discreet manner. Though he modestly claims to be merely the author of the notes, his considerable inventiveness adds another layer of technical and artistic density as he alternates between the rigor of the editor and the creativity of the *provocateur*. Ellen Bass’s blurb on the back cover states that “even the notes are pure poetry”; I would eliminate the “even.” Some of the “notes” provide the climax for the tension that began in the first two sections. They add a metaliterary response to what has already been said while further problematizing the question of reality,

fiction, and time. For instance, in the same breath, Gaspar mentions Camões, Christopher Larkosh (the *real* editor of the publisher's Portuguese in the Americas Series), and Renata's Olivetti typewriter (whose existence is highly "debatable," to say the least).

Let us now speak frankly: These poems were *really* written by Frank Gaspar; and yet who are we to deny Renata's reality? Who are we to deny her right to exist in a world brought to life in such a masterful manner—the world of the Portuguese sensibility in Provincetown, New York, and Lisbon of the 60s and 70s. After this book, Renata is now as real as Frank Gaspar's magical Provincetown (now gone)—a place where the Portuguese were, for a brief moment, not as "invisible" as they later became.

António Ladeira
Texas Tech University