

Mama Blanca's Memoirs: Teresa de la Parra and the Plurality of History

Teresa de la Parra published *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* (*Las memorias de Mamá Blanca*) in 1929, while she was living in Paris—the book came out almost simultaneously in Spanish and French—but the novel takes us back to a very different time and place: a rural sugarcane plantation in mid nineteenth-century Venezuela. It reconstructs what is depicted as an almost Edenic paradise to which we have access only thanks to a chain of memory, the contingencies of writing, and a fundamental betrayal. The book certainly flirts with nostalgia in its depiction, from the perspective of a decidedly privileged child, of Piedra Azul as a site of liberty, free from all cares or responsibilities. But from the outset, it also warns that we should not necessarily trust the portrait it provides, reminding us that language is often duplicitous and unreliable, and that the account we have is shaped by modern priorities. Most interestingly, perhaps, it encourages us therefore to imagine alternative histories, neither the official narratives of progress and development nor the rueful nostalgia of a lost golden age. Perhaps things could have been different; perhaps they still could be.

1. Publication and Betrayal

The novel opens with a “Foreword” that explains and justifies the connection between present and past, between the book that we have in our hands and the experiences that it sets out to relate. An un-named editor details her relationship with Mama Blanca, and how the manuscript of memoirs ended up in her possession. “It was not kinship that bound me to Mama Blanca,” the editor recounts, “but mysterious spiritual affinities” (5). As a young girl, the editor had made friends with the author when she was an old woman—she “might have been my great-grandmother” (7)—who lived, in genteel poverty, in a big old tumbledown house in the neighbourhood. Abandoned by her own children—sons who “lamented her living alone in such straitened circumstances” and daughters-in-law who “were secretly ashamed of a mother-in-law who lived in a brick-floored house with a sloppily dressed old servant and who was, alas, neither intelligent nor educated” (9)—Mama Blanca effectively adopts the young girl who now delights in spending time with her, making up for the daughter she never had. By doing so, she thus ensures the continuity of a female perspective on history and ultimately what the novel’s editor Doris Sommer calls a “tradition of women’s writing” that “dramatize[s] the

incommensurability between experience and expression" ("It's Wrong to Be Right" xix). She points to what cannot be described or depicted, without abandoning the attempt to describe and depict.

Mama Blanca chats with her young friend, shows her around the garden, teaches her the piano, and passes on snippets of homely if somewhat unworldly wisdom. What is more, after her death, she passes on a manuscript "on which, all her life at odd moments, she had secretly worked." Though it is "dedicated to [her own] children and grandchildren," Mama Blanca realizes that only her new friend will appreciate what she calls "the portrait of her memory." "You read it if you want to," she instructs her, "but don't show it to anybody" (12). Yet the writer of the Foreword does not heed this injunction: the manuscript that she hurries to claim from the old lady's estate is the basis of the text that follows. She has in fact shared it with us all, making what is private, public, and what is singular, potentially universal.

Why then does the young girl, now grown up and "following the profession of letters" (13), break her older friend's confidence by publishing (after first editing) these recollections that were intended to die with her? She says that she is "sure that [Mama Blanca] will look on and approve with a glad heart the publication of these somewhat deformed memoirs," but even as she says this, she feels an admonition from beyond the grave, lamenting that the book "show[s] [Mama Blanca's life] in a manner which I am sorry to say does not favor it at all" (14). Publication is a "sin," albeit one that the older, now departed, woman is imagined as easily forgiving. But why does the younger woman sin in the first place? What does the editor think we may learn from these reminiscences of a life and an epoch long gone by? Why indeed might Teresa de la Parra herself think that there is something from this distant past that is worth recovering and preserving in written form? Pause the video, get out your notebook and write down some possible answers—you could also put them in the comments—as to why, from Paris, the capital of European modernism, we should be urged to look outwards and backwards to a place and a period that seems to have been long since superseded by more recent developments. While you do that, I'll have a glass of milk, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Milk

Among the many delights that Mama Blanca recalls from her childhood, she tells us that “the order of the glass of milk fresh from the cow was, without doubt, the pleasantest of them all.” The source of this happiness is not simply the milk’s taste, “covered in foam in which we buried our noses as we raised the glass,” but also the process by which the milk is produced and delivered: “the atmosphere of the cow barn at six in the morning” (90). The “republic of the cows,” presided over by “Daniel the cowherd,” provides a lesson in “wisdom” and “good government” (91). More than this, the young Blanca Nieves and her sisters can see immediately where both the milk and the political arrangements that enable its production come from. In a novel concerned often about the relationship between ideas and habits that come from without, to be imposed on the country, the plantation, and its inhabitants, and ways of being and acting that arise from within, milk, whose origin and emergence can be visualized and understood, seems to be an instance of the latter: an organic source of nutrition and harmonious social order.

The first reason the editor gives for publishing Mama Blanca’s manuscript is that she is carried away by fashion: “I have been unable to resist the trend of the times,” she tells us, which is why “I have undertaken the easy and destructive task of arranging the first hundred pages of these *Memoirs*” (12-13). For all that the younger woman may have learned from the older one, and for all that she wistfully looks back at how things were done in an earlier, apparently more innocent age, she remains a child of her own time. However much she assures us of her intimate bond with Mama Blanca, as the adopted daughter who usurps the place of the biological children (remember that the text is written for and dedicated to them, but we are told that “they wouldn’t even bother to open it” [12]), in her own way the young editor betrays her friend as surely as everyone else does. She is, after all, a modern woman, even as modernity may also entail a curiosity about the past—hence the vogue for biographies and memoirs that drives the younger woman to publication. If at the same time, and by doing so, she also contributes to the destruction of that past, she cannot help it: the way of the world is change; it is “the law of existence” (114). As Mama Blanca discovers at the end of the book, when she returns to the plantation to find it almost unrecognizable, there is no going back. All we are left with is memories that, we are told, we should “fold away [. . .] within ourselves without

ever venturing to confront them with things and beings that life changes" (114). By ignoring this advice and by risking that confrontation, the young editor exposes the past as out of date, unfashionable, fallen from favour. To fix the past through publication—turning “memories” into “memoir,” though the Spanish word “*memorias*” blurs this distinction—is also to deal it the *coup de grâce*, to acknowledge its irretrievable distance. The “written word,” as Mama Blanca asserts, “is a corpse” (68). But it is all that we have.

At the same time, of course, it is also this betrayal that ensures the survival of Mama Blanca’s memories, or of something like them. The text may only be “the portrait of [her] memory” (12), a memory at one remove, but it is at least a trace of a way of life that has otherwise vanished, a residue preserved by the same act of publication that confirms that it will never be more than a trace. What is more, the memories that Mama Blanca preserves tend to focus on characters and types that are otherwise often lost to history: rural and domestic workers such as Daniel the cowherd, Evelyn the Trinidadian nurse, and perhaps most emblematically Vicente Cochocho, the half-Black, half-Indigenous hired hand who does lowly odd jobs around the plantation, from cleaning out the ditches to weeding the patio. Cochocho is the lowest of the low, “worse than badly dressed [. . .] not even a sharecropper” (62), looked down upon even by Evelyn (out of “a complex, personal race hatred” [64]), and the subject of much moral disapprobation for his scandalous (“depraved” [77]) domestic arrangements, living with two women under the roof of the same cabin. Yet for Mama Blanca, his “obscure, beloved memory, so deserving of glory, has an honored place in [her] recollections. There he has his street, his statues, his sepulchre” (62). In a book that has much to say about names, Cochocho’s is recalled and celebrated—as also are the names even of the cows under Daniel’s care—while those of the presidents and generals that are normally recognized with monuments and shrines are here omitted or entirely forgotten: “some well-known name I cannot now recall” (81). This is a history from the margins, from the point of view of a young girl who is compared to a “savage” (24) and a “vandal” (107) for her lack of formal education. *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* is a counter-point to the official histories written from Europe or even the Venezuelan capital, Caracas. It is a “backwoods” history that aims, with gentle irony, to question the usual privileging of “civilization” over “barbarism” (and also of the city over the country, the public over the private, the masculine over the feminine, and so on) that otherwise structures most literary depictions of nineteenth-century Latin America.



Camille Pissarro, *Landscape with Women under a Large Tree* (1854/55)

2. *Domination without Hegemony*

The world of *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* very definitely has its hierarchies. In Venezuela of the 1850s, when most of the story is set, slavery had only just been abolished (on April 28, 1854). Not that we are told that in the book itself. Yet the picture painted by Teresa de la Parra is of clear social distinctions and divisions along the lines of race, gender, and class. Hence the worst tasks on the Piedra Azul plantation are delegated to a figure such as Cochocho, to whom a mulatta such as Evelyn can feel superior as she identifies with the inhabitants of the big house, at whose centre is the white landowning family whose young children are shielded from the violence and exploitation upon which the entire social structure rests. Our narrator—not yet “Mama Blanca,” but “Blanca Nieves” or “Snow White”—can portray her upbringing as a fairy tale or Edenic paradise because she takes for granted that she has a small army of nursemaids, housemaids, cooks, and other staff to cater to her every whim. For her and her five sisters (she is the third-born of the six), “each and every thing, animate or inanimate, was secondary to us and existed only

to serve us" (19). From such a position of privilege we should not expect—and we do not get—a hard-headed critique of colonial legacies or extractive agro-export economics, but the fact that Blanca's life is made up predominantly of leisure and play allows her to play also with those very distinctions that she treats with such childlike indifference and innocence. As critic Cynthia Sloan observes, this is "nation building," but also a reflection on nations as political constitutions, "as child's play" ("Nation Building as Child's Play"). Nothing is taken too seriously, but a child's perspective questions and denaturalizes the ways power works.

Atop the social pyramid is the girl's father, Don Juan Manuel, described as "a kind of equestrian deity with leggings, spurs, chestnut beard, and broad-rimmed Panama hat" who "without suspecting or deserving it, took on in our eyes the thankless role of God. He never scolded us; and yet, out of religious instinct, we paid his supreme authority the tribute of a mysterious fear tinged with mysticism" (17, 19). But as the novel proceeds, the limits of his "supreme authority" soon become evident. For instance when, suspicious that his cowherd, Daniel, is "robbing" him by falsifying the accounts of the dairy's operation, Blanca's father fires him, Daniel does not go far. "I'll spend these two or three nights here," he is reported as telling a millhand, "in the neighborhood. I'll be coming back, you know" (97). Sure enough, his replacement quickly proves unable to handle the herd, and the plantation owner therefore has to rescind his order, allow the man back, and live with whatever petty pilfering his employee may be getting away with, unpunished. In fact, the insubordination that Daniel presents is perhaps more subversive than even Blanca's father might suspect, in that among the cows something like a primitive Communism is in effect: "there was no class warfare. To each according to her needs, from each according to her ability. All was peace, all was light" (91). Against its owner's wishes and better judgment, the plantation harbours something like the seeds of another social order, which he can do nothing about.

Similarly, neither Blanca's father nor her mother can do much about Vicente Cochocho's idiosyncrasies, despite the fact that in theory (and for the most part also in practice) he is the lowest of the low, practically the figure of subalternity. Blanca's mother, concerned for the moral life of the plantation workers and "filled with apostolic zeal," exhorts them to legitimize their sexual relations through marriage. At the best of times, the results of her endeavours are mixed: "most of the men, once the knot had been tied, gave

themselves over to infidelity with remarkable dedication and plurality" (75). With Cochocho, however, she scarcely even has the satisfaction of the façade of rectitude. Pressed to regularize his unorthodox living arrangements, he responds to the mother's "missionary zeal" by asking for "a little time. [. . .] It's just a question of a little while longer"; but we are told that this "'little while longer' went on indefinitely through all the coffee gatherings" (78). As for Blanca's father's attempts to prevent Vicente from periodically leaving the plantation to engage in the various "revolutions" and military uprisings that punctuate nineteenth-century Venezuelan history, these are likewise stonewalled by the hired hand, who refuses to be either persuaded or bought off: "Not even if you were to give me all Piedra Azul, Don Juan Manuel," Cochocho tells him. "Under that magnificent answer," the narrator observes, "Don Juan Manuel was crushed like an insect under a rock" (81). In short, while there may no doubt be exploitation and inequality in the world of the plantation, there is nothing like what we could call "hegemony," if by that is meant the securing of authority through either coercion or consent. The hired hands persist in many of their habits and customs, and maintain a measure of autonomy and distance from the power that purports to lord it over them.

Ultimately, however, all this comes to an end. Don Juan Manuel is forced to sell up and move to Caracas, and for his daughters "all at once we had lost an empire. Humiliated, prisoners, in that moment we ceased to rule the world" (105). In the city, Blanca and her sisters are enjoined "to learn to act civilized. [. . .] Nations acquire civilization by fighting and suffering; so did we" (108, 109). But the entire force of *Mama Blanca's* memoirs has been to question the priority placed on so-called civilization. Moreover, just as when Blanca's mother reads her a book such as Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's 1788 novel of childhood utopia on French Mauritius, *Paul et Virginie* (*Paul and Virginia*) the young girl often asks her to change the book's ending—"Paul and Virginia at times had a happy ending [. . .]. But if it so happened that my soul felt a vague, voluptuous desire to immerse itself in grief, then I let things take their course" (34)—similarly de la Parra invites us to read her book creatively, playfully, against the grain. What if the history of nineteenth-century Latin America had turned out differently? Where would we be now? Re-reading and interrogating memory, we can imagine other possible narratives, other possible conclusions to a story that refuses to be entirely pinned down, even if it is the modern way to assume that past is prologue and the present is progress.

works cited

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Image:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paysage_avec_femmes_sous_un_grand_arbre.jpg

Song: "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" (Cyndi Lauper)