



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies



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# Hopscotch!

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## Latin American Literature in Translation

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Latin American Literature in Translation

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

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Latin American Literature in Translation

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

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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*Mama Blanca's Memoirs* 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.

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.

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.



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Perhaps things could have been different; perhaps they still could be.



# **PUBLICATION AND BETRAYAL**

The “Foreword” 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.

“It was not kinship that bound me to  
Mama Blanca, but mysterious  
spiritual affinities.” (5)

“Her sons lamented her living alone in such straitened circumstances [. . .] [Her] daughters-in-law [. . .] 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)

She ensures the continuity of a female perspective on history and what Doris Sommer calls a “tradition of women’s writing” that “dramatize[s] the incommensurability between experience and expression.” She points to what cannot be described or depicted, without abandoning the attempt to describe and depict.

“I hurried to the wardrobe to claim the mysterious manuscript on which, all her life at odd moments, she had secretly worked.” (12)

“It is dedicated to my children and grandchildren [. . .] they wouldn’t even bother to open it. It was written for them, but I am leaving it to you. You read it if you want to, but don’t show it to anybody. [. . .] This is the portrait of my memory. I leave it in your hands.” (12)

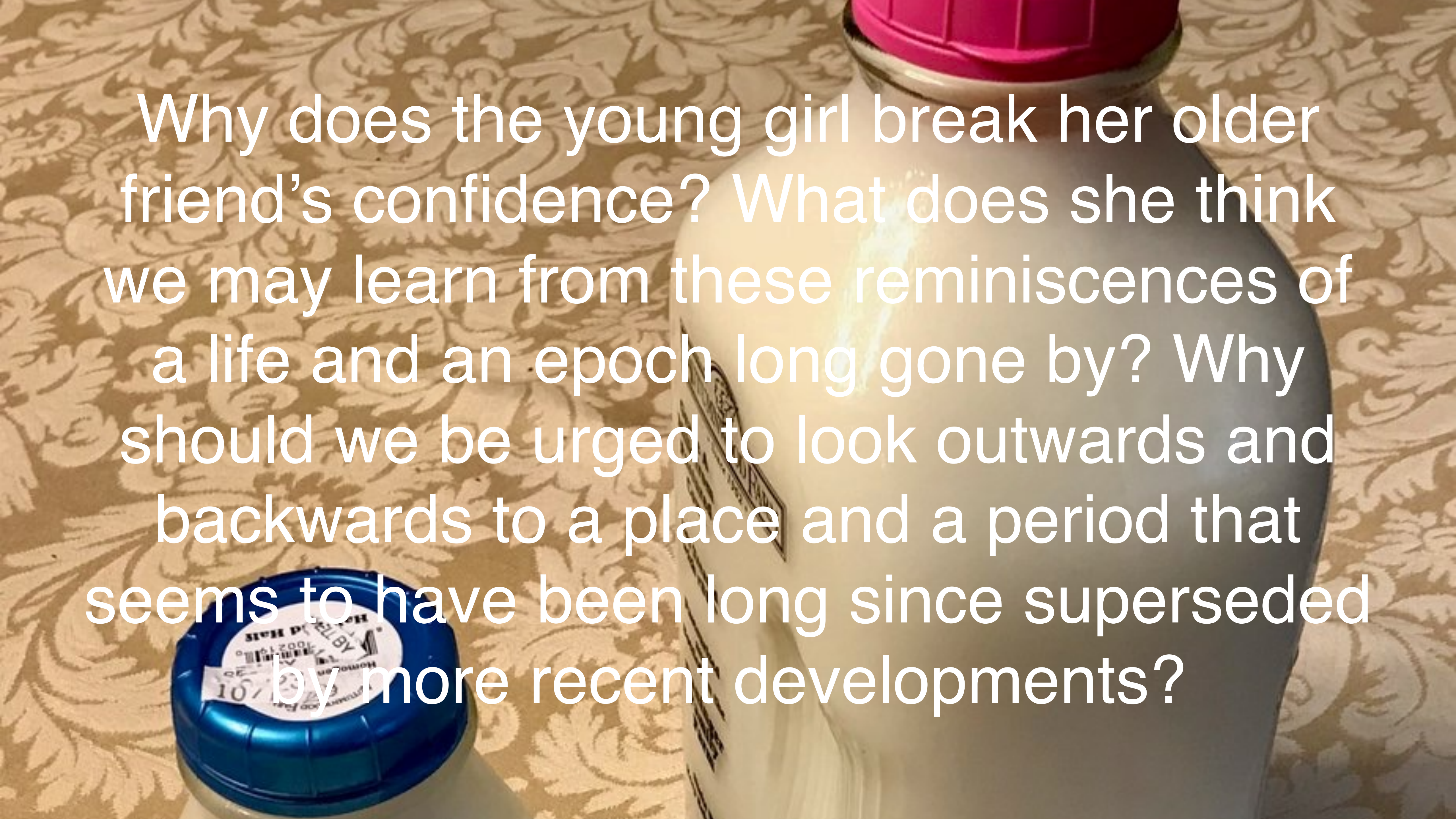


She has in fact shared it with us all, making what is private, public, and what is singular, potentially universal.

“I am sure that [Mama Blanca] will look on and approve with a glad heart the publication of these somewhat deformed memoirs.” (14)

“My memory depicted life, which is motley, delightful, and contradictory. You are showing it in a manner which I am sorry to say does not favor it at all. After sinning, [. . .] you have denied me several times.” (14)

Why does the young girl break her older friend's confidence? What does she think we may learn from these reminiscences of a life and an epoch long gone by? Why should we 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?



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“I have been unable to resist the trend of the times, and so I have undertaken the easy and destructive task of arranging the first hundred pages of these Memoirs.” (12-13)

In her own way the young editor betrays her friend as surely as everyone else does.

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She is, after all, a modern woman.



“Change is the law of existence.”

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“We should fold away our memories within ourselves without ever venturing to confront them with things and beings that life changes.” (114)

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“The written word [. . .] is a corpse.” (68)

The text may only be 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.

The memories that Mama Blanca preserves tend to focus on characters and types that are otherwise often lost to history.

For Mama Blanca, Cochoco's "obscure, beloved memory, so deserving of glory, has an honored place in [her] recollections. There he has his street, his statues, his sepulchre" (62).

This is a history from the margins. *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* is a counter-point to the official histories written from Europe or even 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.



# **DOMINATION WITHOUT HEGEMONY**

The world of *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* very definitely has its hierarchies.

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The picture painted by Teresa de la Parra is of clear social distinctions and divisions along the lines of race, gender, and class.

The white landowning family's young children are shielded from the violence and exploitation upon which the entire social structure rests. Blanca Nieves 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.

“Each and every thing, animate or inanimate, was secondary to us and existed only to serve us.” (19)

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. Nothing is taken too seriously, but a child's perspective questions and denaturalizes the ways power works.

“Papa, 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).



The limits of his "supreme authority"  
soon become evident.

“I’ll spend these two or three nights here,  
in the neighborhood. I’ll be coming back,  
you know.” (97)

“There was no class warfare. To each according to her needs, from each according to her ability. All was peace, all was light.” (91)

“Most of the men, once the knot had been tied, gave themselves over to infidelity with remarkable dedication and plurality.” (75)

“Give me a little time. [. . .] Please be patient with me. 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).

“Not even if you were to give me all Piedra Azul, Don Juan Manuel,” Cochocho tells him. “Under that magnificent answer Don Juan Manuel was crushed like an insect under a rock” (81).

There is nothing like what we could call “hegemony,” 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.

“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).




The entire force of Mama Blanca's memoirs has been to question the priority placed on so-called civilization.

“*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)

De la Parra invites us to read her book  
creatively, playfully, against the grain.

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.



# MUSIC


Fósforo,  
“Cochabamba”



# PRODUCTION

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# HISPANIC STUDIES





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*¡Don't leave it to mañana!*

