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*Tales from the House of Smiles:  
Teresa de la Parra's Mama Blanca's Memoirs*

*Cuentos desde la casa sonriente:*

*Las memorias de Mama Blanca por Teresa de la Parra*

**Palabras claves:** Venezuela, Teresa de la Parra, *Las Memorias de Mamá Blanca*, sonrisa, risa, sátira, parodia, lenguaje cómico, letras femeninas

**Resumen:** En una casa colonial a los finales del siglo en Caracas, una niña se atreve acercarse a la casa de Mamá Blanca, quien la invita a entrar por la puerta que “parecía sonreír.” Una fuerte amistad se forma, y la niña se convierte la heredera del manuscrito de las memorias de la vieja jovial. La advertencia que nos introduce a Mamá Blanca en su vejez contiene las palabras “sonriente,” “la puerta parecía sonreír,” “la vieja cantaba y se reía,” “sorpresa y sonriente,” “gritaba con la misma sonrisa,” “habla sonriendo,” “hace sonreír su piano,” “los hijos se sonreirían,” “hay muchas sonrisas,” “alegría y gracia.” En el inicio de la novela la prosa es toda expresión jubilosa, sonriente y ligera con los ecos de carcajadas. La hacienda Piedra Azul es un mundo de encanto y gracia, un mundo mágico lleno de alegría habitado por personajes que nos dan risa.

In her second book, *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* (1929), the Venezuelan writer Teresa de la Parra offered a rare and witty insight into life on a sugarcane plantation near Caracas.<sup>1</sup> She described a seemingly idyllic and bucolic way of life that was rapidly disappearing during her own lifetime. During the turn of the century in Caracas a little girl walks in on an old woman who is living in genteel poverty. The narrator is attracted to the house by way of “That door, which was almost always ajar and seemed to smile on the street....” (5). The old woman, whose name is Blanca Nieves, was carrying out her afternoon ritual of eating ladyfingers dipped in chocolate and looks up to see the intruder. “Startled but smiling she called out affectionately from her table” (6). The uninvited visitor, whose name we never learn, shouts out her name, and Mama Blanca “called back in the same tone and with the same smile” (6). Although the house has a tumbledown air, “the joviality of its mistress” (6) wins the narrator’s confidence, and thus, welcomed warmly with smiles and laughter, the relationship between a young girl and a lonely but content and optimistic old woman begins, laying the foundation for the relationship that will lead to the publication of the often-humorous *Mama Blanca's Memoirs*. The narrator recalls her afternoons listening to the old lady as filled with smiles and joy: “In a word, I had fun with Mama Blanca” (8). So begins the Foreword to the novel, which ends with the narrator’s explanation of how she came to publish the stories bequeathed to her. “Mama Blanca loved healthy gaiety, and her passion was the happiness of others” (14).

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes are from the text *Mama Blanca's Memoirs, Teresa de la Parra*. Trans. Harriet de Onis. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 1993.

To read *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* is to enter into an exotic, lost world told through a series of vignettes about life as remembered by a five-year-old girl who lived on the hacienda Piedra Azul. The woman Blanca Nieves is now in her eighties, and she tells her life story to a young woman who will edit the memoirs, charming childhood reminiscences that reflect the author's love of Venezuela's past.

Laura Febres noted that there were few books of criticism about this Venezuelan writer.<sup>1</sup> This critic was concerned that Teresa de la Parra might be considered to be frivolous and not very profound, despite the fact that she was one Venezuela's most important writers because she was considered to be a humorous writer, and that put her in a superficial and shallow category. De la Parra herself was concerned that her irony would misfire. In a letter to Don Rafael Carias, she wrote, "True irony, in good conscience, as I said in my last article, is like charity and begins with itself; it should always have the smile of goodness and the perfume of indulgence. But not everyone smells the perfume, and neither do they see the smile."<sup>2</sup> At a time when Venezuelan literature lacked humor, de la Parra's wit and grace injected a much-needed light note. She broke new ground by treating serious matters in a humorous way, and she infused her writing with historical, mythological and religious references, sometimes to give them deeper meaning; at other times to satirize, mock or call attention to a contemporary problem. Satire acts on an intellectual level and requires readers to know what is being ridiculed. De la Parra formed a pact with the reader and invited the reader to join the young girl who accidentally stumbles into Mama Blanca's house. Along with her, we share the tenderly written and often humorous vignettes that will be edited and published.

The author was fond of using allusion, satire, sarcasm, irony, and caricature to get her point across. As readers we enjoy recognizing, understanding and appreciating allusions since it involves us in the creative process and lets us in on the joke. We are invited to play along, which cultivates intimacy and community and strengthens the connections between reader and writer. De la Parra was a master of exposing hypocrisy and pretence and understood that fiction was a powerful tool to convey sometimes ugly truths. But the tone of the vignettes is always gentle. As a member of the Creole cultural elite, she had enjoyed a carefree and happy childhood on her family's hacienda, El Tazón, from the time she was two until she was nine. In *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* the family sugar cane hacienda is renamed Piedra Azul, and the stories recreate a turn-of-the century rural way of life. Growing up as one of four daughters in a conservative and patriarchal Venezuelan family, de la Parra recalled the experiences of the landowning class and the people who served them. After being educated in Spain, she returned to a Venezuela that was moving away from agrarian life. Her second book preserved the memories of a way of life that was disappearing, alerting Venezuelan society to the changes taking place that would impact of lives of both agricultural workers and the land-owning gentry. *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* recalls the insular world of a

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<sup>1</sup> *Cinco perspectivas críticas sobre la obra de Teresa de la Parra*. Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1984. p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> *Obra* p. 609. All English translations from *Obra (Narrativa, ensayos, cartas)* are mine.

sugar plantation situated not too far from Caracas peopled with idiosyncratic characters, each with his own humorous quirks. The characters become touchstones for readers familiar with the work, who fondly recall them.

The humor begins immediately when we learn that the daughters of the hacienda are ineptly named by their young romantic mother. In several instances, the names are the opposite of their natures because the mother refuses to accept reality. The patriarch Juan Manuel always wanted a son named after him, but instead fathered six girls who were poetically but absurdly named: Aurora, Violeta, Blanca Nieves, Estrella, Rosalinda and Aura Flor. We become complicit readers as Mama Blanca addresses us “I trust that none of you laughed as you read the list of our names---” (22). She invites us to laugh along with her as we discover why the girls’ names do not match their personalities or their destinies. In her old age, “the snow of my heavy hair came to justify my name” (54) as Blanca Nieves’ hair turns white. Aurora ironically dies in childhood. Violeta is no shrinking Violet; she is a tomboy. And we later learn that Estrella is also the name of a cow. There is humor to the concordance of the names of the cows, but a discordance in the girls’ names.

The little girls who live in Piedra Azul ask their mother to change the endings to the stories she tells them. De la Parra shows how young girls get initiated into literature and draws parallels to how the narrator later uses Mama Blanca’s material for telling funny stories. The use of religious vocabulary in this novel is ironic and it is used to objectify situations. For example, religious language and religious history are used as a simile: for Blanca Nieves, getting her hair curled is compared to an *auto da fe*. Other humorous similes borrow from the vocabulary of the kitchen. The outcome of Blanca Nieves’ curls is compared to an artichoke. She satirizes the characters through the use of history and myth as the daughters are compared to princesses of Castilla and Aragon. When visitors are expected in Piedra Azul, the girls are bathed and dressed and come out “looking like a flock of sugar bowls or compote dishes upside down” (24), as they file by the guests. Mama Blanca recalls how their mother was the perfect hostess who offers her guests more cane liquor, “beside herself with happiness, insisted that they have some more, and her attentions, her smiles, were such that I confess it made me want to cry” (25).

A lover of language, de la Parra reveled in words. Indeed, in one chapter of the work, she claimed the dictionary to be the best book in the world, a book refreshing to the spirit for its amiable incoherence and its lack of logic. She was especially fond of the spoken word and recreated and expanded anecdotes, such as Cousin Juancho’s appropriation of the wedding incident in *El Cid* to tell the story of Carmen María’s and Juan Manuel’s own minor catastrophe of the overturned carriage during their wedding. Her sources for the vignettes and their language were Teresa Soublette, her great-aunt, Mama Panchita, her great-grandmother, and Emilia Ibarra, her patron and the daughter of one of Bolívar’s aide-de-camps. *Mama Blanca’s Memoirs* was the reconstruction of lost worlds through women’s oral narratives told through Venezuelan language with its rich colloquialisms. De la Parra wanted to exploit the richness of this language, and she managed to do this by injecting gentle humor. She was a staunch defender of colloquial Venezuelan speech. By basing the vignettes in the past, de la Parra

could gently criticize current institutions like marriage, government, consumerism, and the patriarchy.

Venezuelan critics in particular are fond of de la Parra's second book for its fresh language. The gallery of portraits is drawn through prose which is light and ironic, but never dogmatic or militant. Unlike Gallegos and other contemporary writers, de la Parra never portrayed Venezuelan landscape as a character.

The premise of the work is a flashback. The hacienda suffered from a surfeit of daughters, and Mama Blanca herself had always wanted a daughter. Now she has one in the form of the little girl who visits her and listens to her stories.

De la Parra's gently mocking tone is especially evident in the telling of the story of her chronically unemployed relative. The chapter "Here Comes Cousin Juancho" takes place when Blanca Nieves is five years old. This chapter is devoted to the charming cousin who "works in the field of discussion" (50). Like the author, Cousin Juancho is a lover of language. The loquacious ne'er do well is a master of mishaps. He is calamity-prone creator of chaos who provides hours of humor-filled anecdotes for the family. Juancho is a walking encyclopedia who suffers many misadventures, but thanks to him, the narrator comes to appreciate *Don Quixote* in her later life, and when she visits Spain, the landscape becomes alive thanks to her cousin's love of literature. As she recalls Juancho, the sixty-seven year old Mama Blanca points out that she has finally grown into her name, which made no sense when she was a child. As a girl, she was dark-skinned and dark-haired, but now her hair is white. The last story Juancho tells is the reconstructed tale of 15-year old Carmen María's and 31 year-old Juan Manuel's wedding in 1846. As a grownup, Mama Blanca realizes Juancho recreated and embellished the marriage of El Cid's daughter. Sometimes objects take on a new life on the hacienda. The Anglophile Cousin Juancho brings an English garden umbrella to Piedra Azul so the family can have tea outdoors. This is a foolish notion, since the last thing the family wants to do is sip hot tea in the tropical sun in the afternoon. But eventually the umbrella gets put to good use as a surrey for the ox cart, a humorous juxtaposition of a genteel object finding a home in a rustic setting. In this vignette about the comical yet sad Cousin Juancho and his pratfalls, he manages to become a slapstick character despite his erudition.

Among the memorable characters in the work, Vicente Cochocho stands out. In Coccocho de la Parra created a unique character: a barely-clothed, part black, part Indian factotum the size of a seven-year old who is named after a louse. "Believe me when I say that the most unpresentable persons are generally the most interesting" (62), Mama Blanca reminds us. Evelyn's race hatred is discussed in relation to Vincente, who is at peace with himself. The narrator believes Evelyn's one-quarter blackness is at war with her three-quarters whiteness. This section ends with Vicente being lovingly compared to a plant that yields fruits and flowers.

Vicente has many talents and skills, but his prized talent is later revealed in Part II: he speaks seventeenth-century or Golden Age Spanish. He is a repository of the language of the chronicles, which are evident in his words, in his forms of address, and in his tone. Mama Blanca appreciates this gift, since she is a champion of the oral tradition. "The written word, I repeat, is a corpse" (68). Vicente

pronounces his courtly language to the beats of the maracas he is famous for playing at the local fiestas. He is a fount of wisdom, a healer and a naturalist. He lives on in the narrator's memory. "Our association with Vicente gave us a better training in philosophy and the natural sciences than any textbook could have done" (67).

The multi-talented Vicente is also the local coffin maker and practitioner of herbal medicine. As far as mores are concerned, de la Parra compares Piedra Azul to a brilliant European court complete with sexual intrigues. While free love was accepted at the hacienda, Carmen María is scandalized to learn that Vicente lives in his humble, rented hut with both Aquilina and Eleuteria. She insists that Vicente marry one of them, though all three seem to live in perfect harmony. Evelyn thinks Vicente's behavior is depraved. De la Parra, who never wrote fondly about the institution of marriage, here offers her opinion: "As it inevitable and unfortunately happens everywhere, at Piedra Azul, too, most of the men, once the knot has been tied, gave themselves over to infidelity with remarkable dedication and plurality (75). This is de la Parra at her best: a sharply perceptive social critic who mocks contemporary mores with gentle humor.

Vicente was also a brilliant military strategist who formed a militia when the revolution broke out, and protected the plantation from the opposing forces. This poignant, lovingly written section about Vicente ends with his going off to war. Juan Manuel's mocking him by addressing him as Captain Vicente Aguilar in a deprecatory tone only serves to ennoble him and make him more endearing to the little girls. Juan Manuel's unkind farewell elevates Vicente in the girls' eyes and lowers their esteem for their father. Vicente never returns from the battle, and Mama Blanca's beatifies him by rewording the Sermon on the Mount: "Heir of glory, you rule today among the blessed, and yours, all yours, is the Kingdom of Heaven" (82). The universe of Piedra Azul has its own norms, rules, codes of conduct and prohibitions, and the lovable Vicente managed to break all of them, to the father's chagrin and to the delight of the girls. Although the beloved Vicente Cochocho is named for a flea and is hardly dressed and unpresentable, his noble character imprints itself on the little girls. Vicente addresses his superiors as "lord" giving no distinction to gender. The little girls do not know his last name, but when the father sarcastically calls him Captain Aguilar "pronounced with smiles" the little girls know that Vicente is being mocked (81).

"No More Mill" describes the girls' daily treks to the plantation's sugar mill, a much anticipated treat. Evelyn, the mulatta nanny from Trinidad, who has been employed to teach the girls English, is gently mocked in this section since instead of teaching the girls English, she speaks to them with "a Spanish devoid of articles" (53). Evelyn makes us laugh for the humorous brand of Spanish she speaks: "You've gone and dirtied clean dress, you stubborn thing, sitting on ground (18), and " Careful with pretty dresses from Caracas. Not sit on ground " (112) Evelyn eventually returns to Trinidad.

In this vignette de la Parra slips in one of her gentle barbs against politicians. She was suspicious of politics, and although she was a defender of women's rights, she urged them not to contaminate themselves through political careers. One day,

Violeta utters a nasty word. As a result, the girls are punished by not being allowed to go to the mill. “To our rustic souls the mill was club, theater, city” (84). When the mill was turned off, the little girls could splash and play in the stream. Violeta’s words, “like those of certain congressmen and senators, disrupted the calm course of life. Peaceful multitudes then had to suffer the consequences” (87). Banishment from the mill became a special place in the narrator’s memory and it taught her a valuable lesson. Mama Blanca speaks ironically of Evelyn, whose “good influence filled our childhood with joys and saved it from the bleak, cruel boredom that afflicts the soul of those children who have everything....” (88).

The seventy-five year old Mama Blanca reminisces that “surfeit never dulled the edge of desire” (89). In her good-humored way, Mama Blanca explains that experiences such as banishment from the mill and the lack of material goods have made her still grateful in her old age for pleasant things like rides in the country and small presents. The girls see Evelyn as a strict task-master who denies them the pleasure of going to the mill, asking countless questions of the workers, and bathing in the millstream when the mill is shut down.

When Violeta utters a shockingly nasty word, the maids “shriek with laughter; Evelyn is “outraged by the laughter” (84). Violeta is punished, when she cries, the other sisters join in. But eventually, “The collective weeping turned to collective joy” (43) and the little girls are allowed once again to bathe in the millstream. Being allowed to visit the millstream is met with “shrieks of delight” (88). The pool formed by the millstream is a world of delight and sensual pleasure combining sound, sight and cool water.

In the vignette “Rain Cloud and Little Rain Cloud” Mama Blanca recalls “The Republic of Cows” and de la Parra inserts a gentle dig at sweet-talking politicians who hold their constituencies under their sway. This tale involves a cow and her ill-fated calf. The “Republic of Cows” is ruled by Daniel, the cowherd from the plains, where writing songs and making music goes hand-in-hand with cattle ranching on the vast ranches of Aragua. Daniel is crafty and rapacious, but is not without a touch of gallantry and humor. Mama Blanca describes the cowshed as a Marxist utopia. Personifying the cows, she reminisces, “Nobody complained and nobody was resentful; there was no class warfare. To each according to her needs, from each according to her ability. All was peace, all was light” (91). The cows have names similar to the little girls’ and one cow is named Estrella, like one of the sisters, and there is humor in naming the cows like the girls since both are “daughters of the hacienda.” Once again, the father is outwitted by one of his workers, and his authority is undermined. Daniel sings to the cows, who are spellbound by the lyric pleasures of poetry and music (96). When Daniel is fired because Papa suspects he is swindling him, he is quickly rehired because the new dairy man refuses to sing to the cows, and the spoiled cows refuse to cooperate and give up their milk. When Little Rain Cloud dies, Daniel tricks the mother by placing Little Rain Cloud’s salted hide over another calf, which she quickly adopts. In true *llanero* fashion, he composes verses on the spot, a plaintive song filled with philosophy and consolation, which serves to confuse the little girls who miss the central metaphor: “All milk is turned to cheese/ And all sorrow is allayed” (100).

Like cows, people can be swayed and seduced by a conniving leader. When the corrupt leader is forced to leave office, the new leader may fail because his people are used to being manipulated.

The last installment of the book appeared in July, 1928 in the *Revue de L’Amerique Latine*. In 1927 she wrote to her friend Rafael Carías, to whom she entrusted her manuscripts, that she was wholly devoted to this book, “though not as difficult, will definitely be better than *Iphigenia*.”<sup>1</sup> In November of 1928, she wrote to Enrique Bernardo Núñez that she had finished the book. “I have written it with great affection and find it entirely to my liking, which is why I am so fond of it.”<sup>2</sup>

*Mama Blanca* has traditionally been lauded for its fresh use of language and de la Parra succeeded in preserving the daily speech of the members of the hacienda: the lyrical and cadenced speech of Carmen María; the archaic 16th century Spanish speech of Vicente Cochocho; the comical, ungrammatical, article-free Spanish Evelyn from Trinidad speaks, and Daniel’s songs that demonstrate the skill Venezuelan cowboys use in composing spontaneous verse. The language in which these characters express themselves contributes to the humor in the book.

Diversity made life on the plantation entertaining. While the owners of the plantation are Creoles, descendants of the Spanish settlers and conquistadors of Venezuela, all kinds of people lived and worked on the plantation, and it is clear that while the narrator tries to paint a picture of a feudal paradise, the servants have agendas of their own and do not hesitate to carry them out despite the putative authority of Juan Manuel, the patriarch. De la Parra believed the future success of America was its ability to become a melting pot, and the inhabitants of Piedra Azul represented such a variety and mixture of races.

Digging under the surface of the entertaining narrative, Juan Liscano’s “Testimony” describes *Mama Blanca’s Memoirs* as a delicious chronicle of “nineteenth century Venezuela with its agrarian economy, caudillo uprisings, large coffee, cocoa, and sugarcane haciendas, aristocratic, Francophile minorities, malnourished, illiterate peasants, and exhausted treasury and nonexistent industry” (119). Beneath the nostalgic and poignant vignettes filled with charming characters who play tribute to mellifluous Venezuelan speech, there are signs of subversion and disobedience in this bittersweet recalling of a happy childhood. The death of the calf Little Rain Cloud segues into the death of the seven-year-old Aurora and the “last week of delirious happiness in Piedra Azul” (104). The final chapter is the narrator’s introduction to money. The family moves to Caracas and Blanca Nieves recalls the trauma of leaving a perfect world in which she did not know what money was. She has never seen a coin, but she needs money to buy sweets from the corner vendor, and her mother needs cash to buy the food that used to “appear” daily. But all these memories of a paradise lost are fondly recalled by a smiling Mama Blanca who is never bitter about her loss.

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<sup>1</sup> *Obra* p. 610

<sup>2</sup> *Obra* p.544

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