

Teresa de la Parra

Teresa de la Parra:
A Literary Life

By

RoseAnna Mueller

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

Teresa de la Parra:
A Literary Life ,
by RoseAnna Mueller

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PREFACE

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

I read Bertie Acker's excellent translation of Teresa de la Parra's *Ifigenia: diario de una señorita que escribió porque se fastidiaba*, (*Iphigenia: The diary of a young lady who wrote because she was bored*) (1924) while designing a syllabus for a graduate course on Latin American Women Writers I was to teach at the Universidad de los Andes, Mérida, Venezuela during a Fulbright Teaching/Research Grant in 2002-2003. When I arrived in Mérida, I realized that the course I planned to teach would be a new experience for the students. The course was "Representative Hispanic American Women," the name the director of the Instituto de Investigaciones Gonzalo Picón Febres gave it. I wanted to include a Venezuelan woman writer. I happened on *Iphigenia*, read it and found it amusing and entertaining. I fell in love with the author's style, and it was a good story. I included the book in the syllabus. As soon as I got to Mérida, I bought de la Parra's complete works, read the novel in Spanish and enjoyed it all over again. I read de la Parra's second novel, *Mama Blanca's Memoirs*, a collection of sketches, and loved that, too. De la Parra became the subject of my research for the grant. I wanted to learn more about this versatile author. To better prepare for the course I was teaching, I read de la Parra's *Tres conferencias*, the talks she delivered in Bogotá in 1930. Since most of the students in my class had read *Ifigenia*, I had to find a way to teach it from a new perspective, especially since several of the students had read the book in high school and some wanted to make *Ifigenia* the focus of their term papers. The *Tres conferencias* worked their way into our class discussions since they lent themselves to women's roles in Latin American society, and de la Parra mentions several women writers, pausing to make her audience appreciate the literary works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Madre Castillo and the anonymous poet known as Amarilis.

De la Parra's works have begun to attract more attention and appreciation, and several Venezuelan critics call her a national treasure. I was lucky to meet with some of these critics, and they have contributed to my understanding of this complex woman. Then I discovered that Iván

Feo had turned *Ifigenia* into a film in 1986, which was being shown on Venezuelan television while I was there.

When I began this study, I thought the closest writer in the English language to compare Teresa de la Parra with would be Virginia Woolf, but as I re-read de la Parra's first novel I found that the Venezuelan writer had more in common with Jane Austen, Edith Wharton and Katherine Mansfield. Like Austen, de la Parra wrote about polite society and its preoccupation with class, manners and making good matches for its daughters. Both authors use gentle humor to poke fun at contemporary manners, and both are not above showing their heroines as less than perfect, naïve at first, and unable to see their imperfections. Ultimately, they learn how to get on in their societies, and Austen's heroines learn about themselves and often make happy matches. Unfortunately, as the title of de la Parra's novel implies, her heroine will have to make sacrifices as she herself becomes one.

De la Parra's literary contributions can be approached in several ways: her contribution to her own national Venezuelan literature, to Latin American literature, and to women's literature. In this study I hope to provide an overview of a writer whose novels were widely read and have been translated into many languages. Because English translations of *Ifigenia* and *Las memorias de Mamá Blanca* exist, the aim of this work is to make some of the criticism written in Spanish available to an English-speaking audience and to translate some of de la Parra's writings unavailable in English. This includes some of her letters, especially the ones that contextualize her work by shedding light on her published works and her plans for her future work. Her short stories were experimental works-in-progress, and only one has been translated into English. The lectures she delivered in Colombia and Cuba are more than a survey of Latin American women's contributions to the formation of Latin America, and have not been translated in their entirety into English. These were very popular lectures that she delivered several times due to public demand. Her associations and relationships with various members of the intelligentsia of her generation made her one of the first female public intellectuals. De la Parra was way ahead of her time in several ways which I hope this book will demonstrate.

CHAPTER ONE

A HEROINE IN THE NOVEL OF HER OWN LIFE

“You and I—all of us who, moving through the world, have some talents and some sorrows—are heroes and heroines in the novels of our own lives, which is nicer and a thousand times better than written novels” (*Iphigenia* 10).

There are two biographies about Teresa de la Parra: *Between Flight and Longing: The Journey of Teresa de la Parra* by Louis Antoine Lemaître, and María Fernanda Palacios’s *Teresa de la Parra*. Perhaps the best introduction to the author is in the letter she wrote to García Prada¹ when he asked for her permission to publish her second novel, *Mama Blanca’s Memoirs* (1929), for educational purposes. Despite the fact that she mistakenly stated in the letter that she was born in Venezuela, it gives a succinct summary of her life. Carlos García Prada, an assistant professor of Spanish at the University of Washington, was taken with both of de la Parra’s novels and wanted to use *Ifigenia, diario de una señorita que escribió porque se fastidiaba* (1924), as a model of good literature for his Spanish students. De la Parra wrote this letter:

To Señor García Prada
Paris, May 5, 1931
Washington

I was born in Venezuela to a large family of six children. I spent most of my early childhood on a sugar plantation in Caracas. Many of the memories from my early childhood are contained in *Mama Blanca’s Memoirs*. My father died when I was eight years old and my mother moved our family to a province in Spain to live near our maternal grandmother to be educated. Both my grandmother and mother belonged, in their outlook and in their customs, to the established colonial society of Caracas. Therefore, in my late childhood and adolescence I had a strict Catholic upbringing. Corpus Christi processions, Holy Week, Marian feast days, and other holy feast days of the Catholic Church, along with walks in the country, were my only celebrations and social outlets. I returned to Venezuela when I was eighteen years old. I spent a lot of time in the

countryside reading as much as possible. It was in Caracas that I first came into contact with the world and society. I observed the continual conflict of the new mentality of young women who traveled and read, but who lived bound to old assumptions and to the customs of an earlier age. They were ruled by the old values but did not believe in them and longed, in their hearts, for an independent life and ideas, until they married, gave them up, and reverted to the old ideas, thanks to motherhood. This eternal female conflict with its end in renunciation gave me the idea for *Iphigenia*. Because the novel was critical of men and was opposed to established ideas, it was not well received in my country. Conservative Catholics in Venezuela and Colombia deemed the novel to be dangerous to young girls, since they enjoyed seeing themselves portrayed by the heroine with her aspirations and her limitations and sided with her. The novel was attacked and defended by both sides, which contributed to its readership. In 1923 I moved to Paris, and I have lived here since. In 1928 I wrote my second book, *Mama Blanca's Memoirs*, which, unlike *Iphigenia*, was very well received by the traditionalists but disappointed the female readers of *Iphigenia*, who missed María Eugenia Alonso, the heroine sacrificed to custom. I am currently studying colonial Latin American history, which I would like to write about some day (*Obra* 599-510).²

Ana Teresa Parra Sanojo, who took the pen name Teresa de la Parra, was born on October 5, 1889 in Paris to a Venezuelan couple.³ She was the first daughter born to Rafael Parra Hernaíz and Isabel Sanojo Ezpelosin de Parra. She lived much of her life in Europe, but always considered herself to be Venezuelan, and such was her identification with Venezuela that in the letter to García Prada, she erroneously claimed that she was born in Venezuela, whereas her birth certificate states that she was born in Paris. Today she is considered one of the most distinguished Venezuelan authors, and her works are based on her time spent in Caracas (*Iphigenia*, 1924), and her childhood on a hacienda near Caracas (*Mama Blanca's Memoirs*, 1929). She described her upbringing and her experiences in Venezuela in a new style free of the criollismo or picturesque style in vogue at the time.

De la Parra was born in Paris because her father, Rafael Parra Hernaíz, was posted as the Venezuelan consul to Berlin, but the family lived in Paris at Avenue Wagram Number 7 bis. On February 1 she was baptized in the Church of the Madeleine, Paris, and her uncle Antonio (the inspiration for Tio Pancho in *Iphigenia*) was her godfather. Her older brothers were Luis Felipe and Miguel. Her younger sisters were Isabelita, Elia, and María del Pilar. In the family records her father wrote, "We returned on the 25th of August, 1890. We went to 'Tazón' on the 22nd of September the same year and settled in Caracas the first of September,

1891.” Ana Teresa was two at the time, and she spent her early childhood in Tazon, the family hacienda, which she used as the source for her second novel. Her sister María described the young Ana Teresa as a daydreamer with green cat’s eyes.



Casa Teresa de la Parra, Caracas. Photo by the author.

From 1890 to 1897 the family lived in Tazón, the inspiration for Piedra Azul in *Mama Blanca's Memoirs*. Her father's death on December 24, 1898 from a serious intestinal infection brought an end to her idyllic life on the hacienda and began what her biographer Lemaître calls her journey of longing and nostalgia. Her uncle, Rafael's brother Miguel, died two

days later. Following the death of her father, de la Parra, her mother moved the family to Godella, near Valencia, Spain, where Teresa was educated in a religious school administered by nuns, the Colegio de las Damas del Sagrado Corazón. There she received an education appropriate to a young woman of her station. She also read contemporary authors Guy de Maupassant and Valle Inclán, who would influence her writing. De la Parra owed much to her Catholic education. It instilled in her a love of language and literature, fed her rich imagination, and introduced her to contemplation and submission, which led to her search for an ideal inner life. In her school days she was immersed in the writings of Cervantes and the mystical writings of Santa Teresa of Avila. She learned to speak fluent and unaccented French. The life of retreats, prayer, and spiritual exercises she experienced during her Catholic school education never left her. She was an excellent student, and in 1904 she was awarded highest honors and a green ribbon. In 1908 she won the first prize for her poem commemorating the day of the beatification of the Venerable Mother Magdalena Sophia Barat, and the poem was published in the *Bulletin of the Sacred Heart*.

Following her return from Spain in 1910, de la Parra lived an uneventful life in Caracas, until 1922. Her Venezuelan biographer María Fernanda Palacios calls this a prolonged period of adolescence while *Iphigenia* was incubating. Her life, like those of most young women at the time, could be summarized as waiting for death or matrimony. There was tension between high society, the descendants of the original founders of the city, and the members of a new society whose wealth and status depended on the political connections of the Gómez regime and the booming oil industry. There was a preference for all things French. Paris lent a sophisticated tone to Caracas society. Mercedes Galindo, a young married woman in *Iphigenia*, serves as the model for rich caraqueños who traveled back and forth from France, acquired Parisian art and furnishings, and spoke French at their soirees. Venezuelans considered France to be their spiritual home, and there are references to French products—wines, perfumes, cosmetics and fashionable clothing—in *Iphigenia* that were coveted at the time.

Palacios can only speculate on how de la Parra spent her time between the ages of eighteen and thirty-three. Life for women in Caracas in the 1910s revolved around public holidays, attending Sunday mass, private celebrations and endless rounds of social calls. De la Parra attended dances, watched films at the Cine Rialto, attended charity functions, went to the opera at the Opera Municipal, attended mass at the Caracas Cathedral or at the nearby Church of Las Mercedes, and generally grew

bored. By the time she was twenty-six she was still keeping up her societal obligations, but was spending more time reading in her room. She read French novels *pour jeunes filles*, and she makes fun of these poorly written, sentimental novels in *Iphigenia*. Her literary influences were Gustave Flaubert, Marie-Henri Beyle (Stendhal), Guy de Maupassant, and contemporary authors Pierre Loti, Maurice Maeterlink, Alphonse Daudet, Anatole France, and the French women writers Gyp, Marcelle Tynaire, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette and Anne de Noailles. She was especially fond of the novel *Juan Cristobal* by Romain Rolland, and she was profoundly influenced by Rolland's works.

After the family returned from Spain, de la Parra's sisters married, but she did not, which became a source of worry for her conservative mother. De la Parra was a beautiful woman, but according to Palacios she was too educated, and too outspoken on some issues, despite her beauty. Juan Liscano recalls, "Fragments of biographical anecdotes related to me by my mother set her in motion, dressed as she was ten years ago, wearing a wide-brim hat, her green eyes flashing in its shadow" ("Testimony" in *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* 121). He continues his recollection, "The image of Teresa is that of a modern woman from the twenties. She is smoking with a cigarette holder, she is wearing pajamas; she is elegant" (125). Mariano Picón Salas described de la Parra as "so beautiful a woman, who could be seen at all parties with her splendid eyes and her bearing of a young Spanish marquise who dressed in Paris and could tell us about episodes and anecdotes that dated back a century, because she had heard them from grandmothers and old servants."⁴

After graduating, she traveled to Paris in 1915 before returning to Venezuela. There she wrote some short stories under the pen name Fru-Fru. Supposedly this was the sound of silk swishing against silk, but the name also suggests frivolousness. Later on, her first short stories were published in *El Universal* and in other Parisian magazines. Articles published at this time include: "An Indian Gospel: Buddha and the Leper" and "Lotus Flower: a Japanese Legend." Her imaginative and fantastical stories "The Hermit in the Clock," "The Genie of the Letter Scale," and the "Story of Miss Dust-Mote, Sun Dancer," were published together for the first time in *Obra* (1982), edited by Velia Bosch. It was these magazine articles and short stories that paved the way for writing *Iphigenia*. Like María Eugenia's long letter and diary in *Iphigenia*, Lemaître suggested that de la Parra's writing was prompted by her boredom, and he believes her pen name, Fru-Fru, reflected an under-appreciation of her own work.

Her friendship with Emilia Ibarra, Guzman Blanco's sister-in-law, began in 1913.⁵ Emilia Ibarra (the inspiration for Mercedes Galindo in *Iphigenia*), twenty years her senior, became her patron and de la Parra lived with her for eight years. Ibarra's household was not as strict as de la Parra's family's, and Ibarra frequently hosted salons and tertulias, literary gatherings that helped to spark de la Parra's literary career. Ibarra was widowed in 1916. She died childless and left her entire inheritance to de la Parra after her death in 1924. This guaranteed that de la Parra could live as she liked and wherever she chose. The relationship between the two was one of friendship, devotion, protection and tenderness, and de la Parra referred to Ibarra as "her second mother." She would continue to grieve Ibarra's death for the rest of her life. Inheriting Ibarra's fortune, however, would allow her to live an independent life.

In 1920 she published *Diario de una caraqueña por el lejano oriente*, or *The Diary of a Woman from Caracas through the Far East* based on the letters her sister María, the real traveler, was mailing to her, in *Actualidades*, the literary magazine edited by Rómulo Gallegos. Her sister María married Marc Bunimovich, who worked for City Bank in New York. In 1919 the couple travelled to Japan, China and Manchuria. As Teresa received her sister's letters, aware that oriental themes were popular with the French Symbolists, she rewrote María's letters in the form of a travelogue. De la Parra also wrote for the weekly *La lectura semanal*, whose editor was José Rafael Pocaterra.

She made her first public speaking appearance in 1921 when the Prince of Bourbon visited Venezuela. That year was the centenary celebration of the 1821 Battle of Carabobo,⁶ and *El Nuevo Diario* asked her to write an address for King Alfonso XII of Spain's visit to Venezuela. She was declared a "very distinguished writer" (Lemaître 62), and she wrote the introductory greeting "La Madre España" or "Mother Spain" for this occasion. The Infanta Doña Paz de Bourbon had written a greeting to Venezuelan women, to which de la Parra was invited to respond. (De la Parra was happy to report later that the Infanta found *Iphigenia* so funny she laughed loudly enough to summon her maid.) After delivering this speech, de la Parra was praised for her charming prose and her profound thinking.

In 1922 she won the Outstanding Prize in the National Short Story contest sponsored by *El Luchador*, Ciudad Bolívar, for her short story, "Mama X," later integrated into *Iphigenia*. Her experience on her return to Caracas provided the raw material for the novel which she started writing in 1922 in Macuto, a popular beach community about thirty kilometers from Caracas. She describes how she wrote the novel in a letter to Vicente

Lecuna, April, 1932. She read parts of the novel aloud to Ibarra and to her friends, Rafael Carias and Carmen Helena de la Casas. Later in life, she recalled 1922 as her ideal year. Parts of the novel were published on July 4, 1922 in *La lectura semanal* #12, edited by José Rafael Pocatererra as *Diario de una señorita que se fastidia*, or *The Diary of a Young Lady Who is Bored*,⁷ and for the first time she signed her work as Teresa de la Parra.

De la Parra traveled to Paris in 1923 to enter her novel in a contest in which 70 entries had been submitted. While there, she struck up friendships with Latin-American diplomats and writers like Simón Barceló, Zérega Fombona, Ventura García Calderón and Gonzalo Zaldumbide, among others. Her life now revolved around various diplomatic circles and social events. At the time, many of the diplomats were intellectuals and embassies were worlds frequented by translators, newspaper writers, and editors of literary journals such as *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*. It was within this milieu that she met writers such as Miguel de Unamuno, Alfonso Reyes, Gómez de la Serna, and her future translator Francis de Miomandre. She later translated his short stories but despaired that they lost a lot in translation.

Unfortunately, Emilia Ibarra, de la Parra's friend, mentor and patron, died in Paris in 1924, just a few months before the publication of *Iphigenia* in its entirety. The devastated author dedicated the novel to her: "To you, dear absent one, in whose shadow this book flowered little by little. To that clear light from your eyes that always lit the writing with hope, and also to the white, cold peace of your two crossed hands that will never turn its pages, I dedicate this book."

As an independent woman living in Paris, she dedicated herself to seeing the typical tourist sites. She took classes in elocution and diction and attended art lectures at the Louvre and literary lectures and readings at the Société des Annales, where she heard the writers she had read in her youth. She took long walks in the Luxembourg Gardens and the Tuileries, and her afternoons ended with her taking tea with other Venezuelans (Palacios 65).

A year before *Iphigenia's* publication in 1924, de la Parra wrote a long letter to Venezuelan dictator Juan Vicente Gómez asking for financial assistance to publish the novel.⁸ She received no reply. She would later be taken to task for writing this letter. She managed to get her novel published without the help of the dictator, and the first edition in Spanish of *Ifigenia* was published in 1924. The 6,000 copies printed sold out on the first day and the manuscript of the novel circulated among her friends. At thirty-four, de la Parra found herself at the brink of fame and independence, thanks to her heroine María Eugenia, who, as Palacios

points out, achieved neither. She was awarded 10,000 francs for the novel as a prize sponsored by Casa Editora Franco-Ibero-Americana de Paris.

After Ibarra's death de la Parra travelled to Geneva. It was a summer of mourning, and she tried to distract herself by taking car trips. This was also the year of her secret engagement to Gonzalo Zaldumbide. In October, she returned to Caracas to settle the estate Ibarra left her. Her inheritance included Ibarra's house on Las Mercedes and six other rental properties, and stocks in the Banco de Venezuela. She claimed after writing *Iphigenia*, inheriting this estate was the most important thing that had happened in her life (Palacios 67).



Statue of Teresa de la Parra by Carmen Cecilia Caballero de Blanch, Parque los Caobos, Caracas. Photo by Veronidae.

When she returned to Venezuela for a brief time to settle her inheritance in 1925, she wrote to Gonzalo Zaldumbide, with whom she had an intimate amorous relationship. Her correspondence with Zaldumbide describes their relationship as it progressed from an infatuation, to love, to a lasting friendship. Twenty years after her death, Zaldumbide confessed to Díaz Sanchez that de la Parra was the only woman he ever loved (Palacios 75). They first met in 1923 through Zaldumbide's friend, Alfonso Reyes. Zaldumbide was forty and single and de la Parra was thirty-five. Following the custom of the times, de la Parra was always escorted when she attended lectures, went to cafes or visited friends in their homes. When she travelled to Geneva that June (1925) to attend a meeting of the Society of Nations, she wrote him flirty, seductive letters: "I have to go to Paris to get dressed (don't be alarmed, I'm not undressed, merely badly dressed)." By August she had dropped the Ud.

(the formal form of address in Spanish) and began calling him Lillo. They began their romantic relationship in his apartment. She wrote in a letter that she feared “what the butler saw.” There followed a six-day-long romantic escapade, a car trip through Bordeaux, Garrone, Bayonne, and Guéthery, a little town outside San Juan de Luz, where María and her mother were living. Zaldumbide discreetly stayed at a hotel in Biarritz. In September, before she left for Venezuela, she ripped out a page from a book and scribbled, “As always, I am thinking of you: Guéthery, then Bayonne, all those dear little towns of love and car trips, how happy I am we are seeing each other, without it I would have embarked with sad thoughts.” Zaldumbide had given her his ring to seal the commitment, de la Parra later returned it through her sister María, and in Caracas Lola Ibarra gave it back to her (Palacios 78). In total, she wrote him at least five letters from Venezuela. Her letter to Zaldumbide on November 16, 1933 shows that they kept up their loving correspondence.

After settling Emilia Ibarra’s estate, she returned to Paris and she and Zaldumbide met again and continued to share their intimate, family and financial details. Palacios believes that Zaldumbide took the place of Ibarra in de la Parra’s heart; he replaced her and became the man in her life (79). Gossip about them circulated in Caracas, which de la Parra denied. On March 18, 1926 Zaldumbide married Isabel Rosales Pareja, the daughter of an Ecuadorian diplomat. He later claimed it was a marriage of laziness, and that de la Parra had run away from him. They met again a few months later, and he claimed he loved her more than ever. There were more secret meetings and many letters and the affair lasted four more years.

In 1926, de la Parra began writing her second novel, *Mama Blanca’s Memoirs*, in Vevey, Switzerland, at her sister Isabelita’s house. She also became president of a literary society in Paris. The next year she prepared the second edition of *Iphigenia* (Bendelac 1928) with additions and corrections. As a participant in the Latin Press Conference, she traveled to Cuba for the first time in 1927 and delivered a series of lectures on Simón Bolívar. These talks inspired her to write an alternative biography of The Liberator, and she threw herself into the study of colonial Latin American history and began her correspondence with Vicente Lecuna, a noted historian. De la Parra hoped that her biography of Bolívar would inspire a spiritual regeneration in Venezuela, and felt that writing this novel from a woman’s point of view would further the cause. She also identified with Bolívar, with whom she would share the same fate, since he died of tuberculosis at forty-seven, and she would die of the same disease at the same age. In a letter written on May 18, 1930 to Don Vicente Lecuna, de

la Parra wrote that she thought many women had inspired and animated Bolívar. "From his black nursemaid Matea to Manuelita Saenz, his last love, Bolívar could not live without the image of a woman to inspire him, to console him during his periods of melancholy, and to see through their eyes and look within to see his own genius" (*Obra* 514).

While in Cuba to deliver her lectures, de la Parra began her friendship with the Cuban folklorist Lydia Cabrera.⁹ The two women first met in 1924 when de la Parra was on board the *Macoris*, on her way to Venezuela and France by way of Havana. Lydia Cabrera, a Cuban anthropologist, was writing a manuscript on Afro-Cuban folklore. The research later led to Cabrera's preservation of the African influence in Cuba through her collection of *Cuentos Negros de Cuba*, which she would dedicate to de la Parra. After completing her secondary studies Cabrera left for Paris in 1922 to study painting, art and Oriental culture.

When de la Parra and Cabrera first met, the former was thirty-four and Lydia was ten years her junior. They became lifelong friends and collaborated on literary and other projects from 1927 onward. Cabrera was with de la Parra when she died of tuberculosis in 1936. Teresa considered Lydia her younger sister, and they shared many interests and traveled together. "Lydia, the wizened younger sister, smoothed out as much of the obstructive and the treacherous from Teresa's physical path as she could, and their shared interests were many" (Lemaître 198). In a letter to Rafael Carias, de la Parra describes her travels in Italy with Cabrera, whom she described as "intelligent, a good artist, whom I love and with whom I share the same tastes." When de la Parra wanted to return to Venezuela to get some background for her novel about Bolívar, she patiently waited until Cabrera recovered from an illness. Palacios describes the relationship between Cabrera and de la Parra like that of a mother or an older sister (89). Perhaps de la Parra assumed the role Ibarra played in her own life in her relationship with Cabrera.

The reticence of family and friends on the nature of the relationship between de la Parra and Cabrera, and the absence of a marriage or an acknowledged relationship with a man has left many questions concerning de la Parra's sexuality unanswered.¹⁰ In an interview with Laura Febres, a leading de la Parra critic in Caracas, in 2003, Febres dismissed the idea that Lydia and Teresa had a lesbian relationship.¹¹ She attributes the silence about any romantic attachments on the part of de la Parra to the fact that she was in love with Zaldumbide. Cabrera herself claimed that de la Parra preferred platonic relationships. She resisted both her family's pressure to marry as well as pressure to be more militantly feminist. At the time of her death, Febres claims that de la Parra's family burned letters

and other documents that would have clarified the matter of her sexuality. In 1988 Febres interviewed Cabrera when the Cuban anthropologist visited Venezuela.¹² Febres recounted how Cabrera pointed out to her that the dead can continue to influence us. Cabrera wanted to dispel the false image of de la Parra as a frivolous woman. On the contrary, the author read and thought and was concerned with philosophy and spiritual knowledge. Cabrera was with de la Parra when the author came down with tuberculosis, but Cabrera was not afraid of being infected with TB because she thought she had been exposed to the disease as a child and therefore had acquired immunity to it. Febres pointed out that being infected with tuberculosis was like having AIDS in those days. Febres quoted Cabrera as saying “You did not deserve her” meaning that Venezuelans did not appreciate Teresa de la Parra as a writer. But that, according to Febres, seems to be the fate of Venezuelans, Simón Rodríguez, Andrés Bello, and Simón Bolívar, were all exiled if not geographically, then in the minds of their countrymen, and suffered at the hands of their contemporaries. These outstanding Venezuelans had to suffer before they could be appreciated by their fellow countrymen. De la Parra was aware of this situation and attacked the conditions that allowed it to occur. She was upset by the narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy and the rampant machismo of her time.

In her letters to “Cabrita”, which is how de la Parra referred to Lydia Cabrera, she confided her suffering to her friend, telling her about the morphine and opium she had to take to alleviate her pain and how she was preparing herself for death. Lydia appreciated her friend because she recognized de la Parra’s greatness and accompanied her when she was alone, and she was with her when she died in Madrid in 1936.

In 1927, de la Parra went to Spain with her sister Isabelita and was introduced to the court of the Infanta Paz, one of her devoted readers. She also travelled to Veresnes and was invited to the Castle of Pelabon by Baron Fouquie to hunt. That same year she traveled to Italy with Lydia Cabrera and met Romain Rolland, a writer whom she greatly admired.¹³ Still sensitive to the negative criticism leveled at *Iphigenia*, she vowed to write a nostalgic novel, and in 1927 she wrote to a friend that she was working on the novel *Mama Blanca*, and she assured her friend that it would be “the most criollo of criollo literature” (*Epistolario Íntimo* 70). This novel, according to Palacios, is not the naïve, sentimental, inoffensive book some critics make it out to be. It is an anachronistic parody and shows the distrust of power in all its forms, a song to natural incoherence that abandons all logic (95).

In 1928, the third year of their relationship, Zaldumbide began to look for a way to dissolve his marriage. That year she was invited to attend the

VII International Interamerican Press Conference as the foreign correspondent for *El Universal* and spent time with the French delegation on board the ship. Perhaps she flirted with Maurice de Waleffe, who presided over the delegation, and he may have proposed to her. Years later, months before her death, she received a romantic postcard from him. After attending this conference, she travelled to Cuba, and there were rumors that President Machado was also in love with her, had proposed marriage, and would not allow her to leave Cuba (Palacios 83). She delivered her talk, "The Hidden Influence of Women on the Independence of the Continent and in the Life of Simón Bolívar." This is the talk that she eventually expanded into the *Three Colombian Lectures* in 1930. This lecture also inspired her to write a historical novel about Bolívar.

In Cuba, de la Parra stayed as a guest of the Cabrera family for a few days. She observed women's life in Cuba and wrote her reactions to it in her *Three Colombian Lectures*. Cabrera claimed she was "infected" by Zaldumbide at the time. According to Palacios, Cabrera and de la Parra never lived together. Each lived her separate and independent life. De la Parra wrote that she sometimes felt invaded by Lydia, and they had their disagreements, as she wrote in her *Bellevue- Madrid- Fuenfría Diary*, even months before she died. According to both Palacios and Cabrera, de la Parra was never a passionate woman. Her relationship with Zaldumbide frightened her. Her first love affair caught her off-guard. In a letter to him she compared falling in love to the brutality of the bullfights on Sundays. She was afraid of being swept away, afraid of losing control. Her relationship to others was based on social ties, and she was never part of an inner circle, as some critics suggest. She was not interested in politics or greater social or political problems (Palacios 101). Rather than being reactionary or conservative or indifferent to politics, she viewed politics as dirty business, to wit, her humorous line in the first of the *Three Colombian Lectures* in which she compared politics to coal mining and doesn't want women to get their hands dirty. Since she was aware of what went on in diplomatic circles, she witnessed first-hand the hatred, exaggeration, and the falsehoods that took place at political goings-on (Palacios 105).

She returned to Caracas on April 12, 1928, from Cuba. She also traveled to Spain and Switzerland, and to Munich, to attend the Wagner Festival. Back in Paris, she was busy editing her second novel. In Vevey, on the shores of Lake Laman, she accompanied her ailing mother, and she wrote to her friends in Caracas that she was living like a hermit and reading.

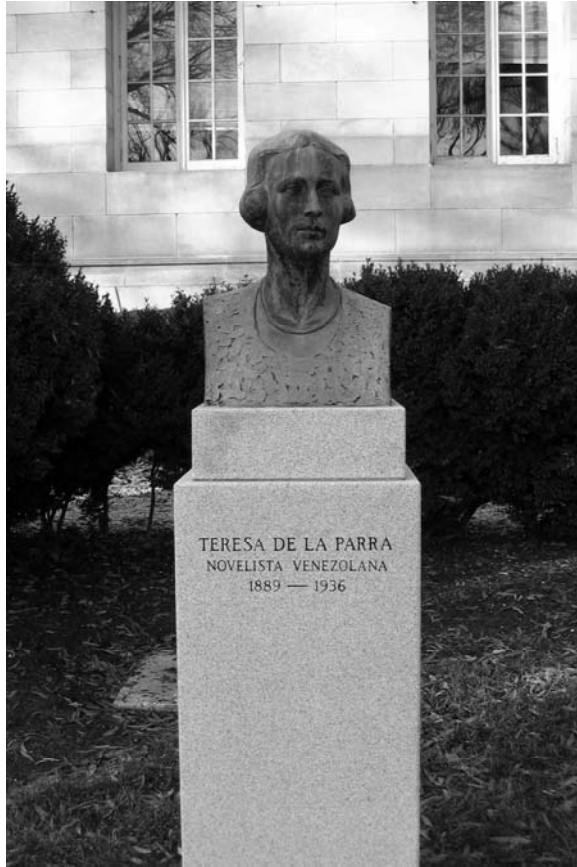
On April 1, 1928 the *Diario de la Marina* in Cuba published an interview of de la Parra by Armando Maribona.¹⁴ She was taken to task for it by Venezuelans who were bitterly opposed to the Gómez dictatorship. When she passed through Caracas, the city was swarming with popular and student demonstrations. As a result, Gómez's police shot the demonstrators down with machine guns, closed the universities, and sentenced the young people of the 'Generation of 28' to hard labor on the roads and the rest to prison or exile. The writer wrote to Gómez on April 12, 1928, and enclosed a clipping of the Havana interview. According to Palacios, however, this interview was given in innocence, it was untimely, and de la Parra really had no idea of the political climate in Venezuela, or the importance of the student protests in February, which she downplayed in the interview. She was unaware of the seriousness of the situation and the increased state of repression (101). When she agreed to the interview, she was expecting to have a caricature of herself made, like the famous Messaguer caricature that today graces the covers of books and articles about her. She was caught off-guard. Later that year de la Parra returned to Venezuela, but her stay was cut short when she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. She returned to a sanatorium in Madrid. Doctors suggested a hot, dry climate would help her.

Mémoires de Maman Blanche, with a prologue by Miomandre was published in *Le Cabinet Cosmopolite* in 1929. Editorial Le Livre Libre published *Las Memorias de Mamá Blanca*. De la Parra and Cabrera travelled through Italy. In 1930 she returned to Havana. The years 1930 and 1931 were spent in Neuilly. She wrote letters to Carias and to Lecuna as a historian-apprentice for her novel on Bolívar and to Zea-Uribe as a friend and disciple. This began a period of striving for inner perfection. She read about and followed the disciplines and healing techniques popular in the 1920s. During this period she also corresponded with Gabriela Mistral, the Chilean poet, and Lydia Cabrera.

In 1930 she delivered three lectures on the *The Influence of Women in the Formation of the American Soul: Conquest, Colony, Independence*, in Bogota, Colombia, to great acclaim and standing-room-only crowd. These lectures were not published until 1961.¹⁵

She referred to 1931 as her "año en blanco." This is the year she began experiencing symptoms of her illness. She became more withdrawn, more unsociable, seeing her life as blank and empty. She read Ortega y Gasset, Proust, Rainier María Rilke and the German Romantics, Nietzsche, and Freud. After reading Freud's theories, she tried to analyze her dreams. She wrote about having a dream in which Ibarra's ghost visited her. She read Tolstoy's autobiography and the *Life of Gandhi*, which fed into her spirit

of renunciation and sacrifice. She spent August in Bauliue in the Hotel Metropole with Lydia, and read about nature and philosophy. She wrote the first pages of her *Bellevue, Fuenfría, Madrid Diary*, published for the first time in *Obra* and translated for the first time in this book.



Bust of Teresa de la Parra by M. de la Fujite, 1998, south lawn of the Organization of American States Building, Washington. Photo by Judith Guy.

On her return to Europe in 1931 she began writing a sentimental biography of Simón Bolívar. After preparing to give the *Three Colombian Lectures*, what Palacios calls a “dangerous fantasy” to write a novelized

biography of Bolívar materialized, an illness almost as bad as the illness that would take her life (110).

Doctors discovered a lesion on her lung in 1932. This year marks the beginning of the search for a cure for T.B. and striving for internal perfection. She became reflective and wrote painful letters to her family and friends scattered throughout the world. In February she consulted with Dr. Jacquerod, who sent her to Leysin, a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps. After she entered the sanatorium searching for a cure for her tuberculosis, she began to read about occult disciplines. Her correspondence with Dr. Luis Zea Uribe attests to their mutual interest in alternative spiritual practices. Her early short stories had also shown an interest in the supernatural, the occult and Eastern religion. Her letters reveal a deep spiritual need for faith, and she studied the lives of mystics and saints. "Outside her novels, Parra had difficulty building a permanent bridge between her opposing self-images of ultramodern woman and Christian mystic" (Lemâitre 14). In her metaphysical exchanges with Zea Uribe, the Colombian who wrote *Mirando al Misterio* and who shared her belief in visions, transports and telepathic communication, she wrote how she tried to visualize Emilia Ibarra in her meditations.

De la Parra began practicing Coué, repeating the words the French psychotherapist suggested, while she tried to visualize her friend and patron. She notes in her diary that she practiced Coué, a self-help method and philosophy designed to bring inner peace and happiness. She explained the method to Zea Uribe in a letter in 1933. In her diary she described the practice as a form of meditation that included the mechanical repetition of words, banishing all negative thoughts and concentrating on positive ones. She practiced Coué along with visualization for five minutes every morning and then prayed for Ibarra's soul. The "cure" began to agree with her, and she started putting on weight. She was allowed to go to Lausanne and spend the fall in Vevey, in 1932 with her mother, who still did not know about her illness.

The year 1933 began badly and ended worse. She became more ill, the bolivar was devalued, and she began to worry about being able to afford living in the Grand Hotel in Leysin. She moved to the Richmond Clinic, which was less costly. That fall the money crisis worsened and she moved to Hotel Montblanc, which cost half as much. She was hoping for a quick recovery and received an optimistic diagnosis. In September, however, she underwent a pneumothorax, an invasive procedure designed to collapse the lung to allow it to heal. This therapy went on weekly for two years. Antibiotics would not be discovered until ten years later. During this time she started to write about her "mysticism without faith" and she

abandoned dogma and formed her own credos. She renounced Catholicism in a letter to Lydia, claiming it was counterproductive and materialistic. She continued to read about other religions. After she rejected Catholicism, she became an atheist, then started reading about Buddhism and eventually saw all religions as “possibilities.” She rejected the idea of both Hell and Nirvana. But months before her death, when she thought she had a “visitation” from Ibarra, she promised to have masses said for her soul and vowed to attend all of them.

On October 1933 she wrote to Cabrera that she was in a receptive period, ideas were incubating, and she hoped that someday the writing would flow so quickly that Lydia would have to stem the flow of words. In September she lost more money, 2,000 Swiss Francs, when the bank she kept her money in failed. During 1934 she wrote how she “took trips around her bed.” The therapy no longer worked, and she left the sanatorium at her own risk, against the advice of her doctors. She declared herself cured and headed back to Paris, despite suffering from attacks of bronchitis and asthma. Her letter to Zaldumbide, on November 16, 1933 demonstrates that the two kept up a loving correspondence, and she wrote him that she wanted to go to Caracas for the remainder of her cure. The pneumothorax therapy proved to be useless. In 1934 she left Leysin and travelled to Paris, Barcelona and Madrid. The most painful period of her life began in 1934, when she began to record more about her suffering in her diary.

By 1935 she was growing weary of her restless, rootless lifestyle. While living in hotels freed her from everyday chores and the hotel staff took care of her daily needs, she never had a home of her own. She had always lived as a guest, either in hotels, or in her mother’s or sisters’ households. Palacios claims she was a perpetual guest of not only places, but of time (68). Her life was provisional; she was always coming or going from Switzerland to Paris, to spas in Brittany, the Costa Azul, or staying at various hotels in Paris. While she attended several salons, she never held one of her own. She returned to Paris to consult with Dr. Valery-Radot that year, accompanied by her youngest sister María, hoping to learn more about the mysteries of tuberculosis, its causes, and the best climate for its cure. She sadly realized there was no ideal climate. The disease caused her to put herself into a kind of voluntary exile, living in various sanatoriums. In a strange way, her illness forced her to live the only kind of life in which she felt at home with herself. She lived life on her own terms from 1930-1935. She observed life in Leysin, learned more about her disease, and wrote she felt at times having the disease was like riding a train. In her

writing during this period she reflected on Macuto and the tropical sun. She wrote only in her diary.

In February of 1935, she travelled to Barcelona with Lydia to consult with Dr. Sayé, another specialist, but her condition worsened and she was sent to Fuenfría, a sanatorium near Madrid in the Sierra de Cerdilla. She was still corresponding with Zaldumbide and in a letter she described to him how miserable she was, how much she suffered, and how the disease was making her life unbearable. She lived her life in agony, taking pain pills, sedatives and sleeping pills. When she awoke, the "demon in her chest" took over once again the moment she opened her eyes. She longed for death to relieve her suffering. On June 15, 1935 Dr. Sayé travelled to Madrid to perform another pneumothorax, increasing the pressure. She girded her loins during the painful treatment and promised to be cold-blooded, though she fainted from the procedure. Despite her asthma, Dr. Tapia allowed her to travel through Spain and to Paris with her sister María and a Belgian friend, who was perhaps the last of her admirers, Baron de Tarwagne. During seven days they drove through Avila, Segovia, Valladolid, Burgos, San Sebastian, Bordeaux, Poitiers, Tours, Chartres, Rambouillet, Versailles and Suresnes, where María lived. Her health worsened and she sought medical advice from Dr. Valery-Radot, Louis Pasteur's grandson.¹⁶ She returned to spend the Christmas holidays at Fuenfría.

In a letter to Zaldumbide in 1935 she wrote of her nostalgia for Leysin. The longing for it was like an illness. She found it hard to adjust to the real world after living at the sanatorium. In her final days in Madrid, the blue skies and the bright Spanish sun cheered her up at first, but in the long run only made things worse and contributed to her sadness. Surrounded by friends who were concerned for her health, she grew sick of their advice, of cures, and the things that were prohibited to her. Palacios writes that contrary to what has been written, or what people believe about her, or would like to believe about her, de la Parra did not live an intense intellectual life in Madrid. Among her acquaintances were exiled Venezuelans, Cabrera's Cuban friends and Spaniards who were friends of friends. She referred to her contradictory moods as a symptom of "neurasthenia." She was hopeful about the house in Madrid she and Cabrera had rented and the kind of life she would lead there, but her hopes were soon dashed. She found it difficult to put up with the vulgar and trivial goings-on in the rented house, and she felt subjected to the tyranny of visits that encroached on her time. She complained that her time was being wasted, and longed for solitude. She recalled how her stay in Leysin shielded her from being bothered by people, and how in the sanatorium

she could live “outside time,” retreat from real life, feeling above it all, literally and figuratively, high up in the Swiss Alps. She missed the life of seclusion in Leysin in the Grand Hotel and fondly looked back on it as a time of enchantment and endless possibilities. In Madrid she unpacked her memories, family photos and letters, sorting and keeping some and destroying others. She learned of Gómez’s death on December 18, 1935 in the newspapers. This news awakened a sense of patria, and a longing for her homeland.

The year 1936 marks the end of her anguished search for a cure. Palacios writes that the author’s final days can be summed up with a list of drugs she took: sanocrisina, neurinase (Barbitol and Valerian), pantapón, sedebol, efedrina, creosote, carybendrina, adalina, spasalgine and geneatropine. With her mother, her sister María and her friend Lydia Cabrera at her side, de la Parra died in Madrid on April 23, 1936, during the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, a world war and the transformation of Venezuela into an oil producing nation. The morning of her death, Cabrera offered her a cup of coffee, to which she replied, “I will eat a little earth.” According to her doctors, the official cause of death was a lack of oxygen to the heart, since tuberculosis attacks and weakens internal organs. When Gabriela Mistral was informed of her death, she recalled how much she loved her, “I’ve never met a woman more pure, well-formed and proper.” De la Parra was buried in the Almudama Cemetery in Madrid. Her remains were brought to the Cementerio General del Sur, in the Parra Sanojo family crypt in Caracas in 1947. On the centennial of her birth, in 1989, her remains were brought to the National Pantheon in Caracas.

Innovation and Legacy

De la Parra’s published work consists of two novels, some short stories, her correspondence, fragments of a diary and the *Three Colombian Lectures: Women’s Influence in the Formation of the American Soul*, which she was invited to deliver in Bogotá and Cuba in 1930. She eschewed modernism, which, as she reported in her letters, left her cold, though her short stories hint at experimentation with this contemporary mode of writing. Both of her novels are detailed character studies with well-drawn characters, and de la Parra’s gift for describing defects and prejudices in Venezuelan society, all the while employing tongue-in-cheek humor and subtle irony, make her an outstanding social critic. She is considered a model of Latin American feminist literature. Audacious, convincing and sincere in its outlook, *Iphigenia* is a reference point for

understanding the feminine world of a young girl who struggles to fit in her society, questions its values, but succumbs to its demands. De la Parra's works penetrated into the deepest reaches of feminine identity and the search for women's universal worth. She wrote about women—how they view the world and their domestic lives, using letters, diaries, vignettes and lively dialog: “Instead of lamentation in Teresa's writing there is confession; instead of rage, irony” (Liscano in *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* 125).

Part of de la Parra's charm and vitality lies in how she accepted her vocation, and how she fell into the role of a writer. She was not very driven, and discovered late in life that inspiration was not enough, that she had to have discipline. She realized first hand when she lived in the sanatorium that inspiration without discipline led to lost opportunities. A case in point was the novel about Bolívar that never got written. She was aware of her limitations and never became a professional novelist. According to Palacios, “She heard the call of ancestral voices” (60). De la Parra was aware of her heritage and mined the information she received from her female relatives and acquaintances. She was proud of her ancestral line, and she could trace her family to one of the first conquistadors of Venezuela.

She considered Venezuela her homeland. She traced her roots there and it was the source of her material. Caracas and the hacienda where she grew up became mythical places, and her experiences there served as the basis of her fiction. Her family's hacienda, Tazón, was a timeless place where she could recall her childhood memories. At the time it was still a typical colonial hacienda, and one had to travel there by horse and cart (Palacios 25). This colonial time also formed part of her inner geography and provides a key to who she was, as she later explained in the *Three Colombian Lectures*. “All of her aristocratic virtue, her criollo humor, her respect for hierarchy, that unique unwillingness or inner distance that made her impermeable to fashionable influences, all of them have their origin in the colonial homeland of her childhood (Palacios 28).”

“If there is truly something worth telling in Teresa de la Parra's life, it lies in her personality, to whose independent flowering she first sacrificed social respectability and which, in the end and with vengeance, she sacrificed to the mystical ideal” (Lemaître 213). This critic focuses on the prevailing theme of de la Parra's novels, which concerns the stratification of Venezuelan society and the concerns of criollos, who were trying to increase their financial standing and preserve their racial purity. There was an increased awareness of the role of women in Venezuelan society, and de

la Parra's novels bridged both the criollo and European cultures she was intimately familiar with.

During Juan Vicente Gómez's dictatorship (1857-1935), a time of repression and social upheaval, Venezuela emerged into the 20th century. His rule coincided with the discovery of oil in Venezuela in the 1910s. His regime was aided by this discovery, and he was able to stabilize the country. By the late 1920s Venezuela was the world's largest exporter of oil and the country was able to pay off its foreign debt. It was on its way to economic recovery, but this was not true for the country's poor, who continued to live in poverty. The economic changes and progress brought about by the petroleum boom did not show up in the mentality or the modernization of the country. Women's lives were restricted and they continued to be treated as though they lived in the previous century. After having lived in Paris during a time when it was the intellectual capital of the world, the stark contrast of life in Caracas during the Gómez dictatorship surprised de la Parra, and her literary output as well as her personal correspondence reflects the two worlds. *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* captured the author's longing for her bucolic upbringing on the family hacienda. This novel is set a postcolonial period. In *Iphigenia* she wrote beyond the anecdotal and nostalgic mode to create a new work that both chronicled and criticized the society she was currently living in. De la Parra wrote a letter to Gómez in 1931, petitioning to reinstate her pension. According to Lemaître, she was forced to defend Gómez because she had relatives working in high places in his government (128). Later critics, however, condemned her for corresponding with the dictator, and for an interview she granted in Cuba, in which she commented favorably on Venezuela's progress during Gómez's rule.

De la Parra chronicled the many changes taking place in her homeland from a woman's point of view. Her work was groundbreaking insofar as her fiction created a space for women, and she refused to write in the dominant styles of the period. The author's limited body of work showcases her diversity and her depth. *Iphigenia* is a coming-of-age novel and a love story. *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* evoke a happy childhood and a dying way of life. Her lectures reveal her concern for the status of women in modern society as she summarized their influence and their roles in all Latin-American societies across the centuries. Her extant correspondence records her personal concerns, sheds light on her writing process, outlines her literary ambitions, attests to her friendships, and in the last years, chronicles her painful life as a tuberculosis patient in a sanatorium. Her *Bellevue-Madrid- Fuenfría Diary* is a chronicle of her illness and the last unhappy months before her death in Madrid. But up to the end, living in a