

Ana Teresa,
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Torres, Ana Teresa. *Doña Inés contra el olvido [Doña Inés Versus Oblivion]*. Caracas: Monte Avila, 1992.

From the very first line of her long personal memoir, Doña Inés Villegas y Solórzano draws the reader into her story—a tumultuous tale of passion, rivalry, violence, racial and social prejudice, sacrifice, heroism, intense hatred, death and reconciliation. The crux of the novel is three-hundred-year-old land dispute, the intricacies of which carry the narrative from colonial Venezuela to the present. The matriarch of an aristocratic white colonial family, Doña Inés claims property in the Valley of Curiepe that the Crown ceded to her family in 1663, but which her husband, Alejandro Martínez de Villegas, bequeathed to his illegitimate son, Juan del Rosario Villegas, by one of the family's black slaves. During the following three centuries, Juan del Rosario and Doña Inés and their descendants battle over Barlovento, the land that blacks turned into their own community.

Doña Inés spends the last years of her life searching for documents that will prove her rights to Barlovento and explaining to Alejandro and Juan del Rosario, both deceased, the developments of the case. Even after she dies in 1780, she continues her exposition, commenting not only on the litigation, but also on historical developments, the activities of the family, political innovations, scientific and technological inventions, and changes in social mores, race relations, and fashions. Doña Inés's observations are detailed and rich in personal insights, for she is struggling against oblivion. Her need to remark on the minutia of everyday existence, including the antics of slaves, servants, and family members, as well as of historical figures, stems from her fear that all will be forgotten.

The property claim is, of course, merely a pretext. Through Doña Inés' commentary, which is properly skewed by her prejudices and historical perspective, the author paints a vivid picture of Venezuelan society through the centuries. She has drawn on the new historicism to present a revisionist view of the Independence movement and the turmoil that followed. Instead of focusing on the glories of Bolívar, she zeroes in on the personal tragedy that revolution brought to countless Venezuelans. In the midst of pestilence, war, earthquakes, and floods, many families struggled to survive, only to be decimated. Those that did pull through were impoverished by natural catastrophes, government expropriations and endless litigations.

In the plethora of characters that Ana Teresa Torres brings to life, a few are unforgettable. One is Daría, a slave who escapes Caracas with Doña Isabel, the only surviving descendant of Doña Inés and Don Alejandro, during the War of Independence. In the exodus to the coast, many noble families are forced to part with their belongings and huddle with their slaves in rickety carts headed for safer ground. But before long it becomes clear that the refugees are doomed. When disease, bad

Ana Teresa Torres. *Doña Inés contra el olvido*

weather, and marauders begin to take their toll, Daría abandons her mistress, who is clearly destined to perish, and flees with Doña Isabel's infant daughter to Barlovento, where she raises the child as her own. Years later, she brings young Isabel to a convent, where the girl will be educated as a white woman, go on to marry, and eventually grant her rescuer freedom. Daría, an uneducated slave who until that moment had never before been called upon to make a decision, becomes the salvation of the Villegas family and one of the heroines of Doña Inés' story.

León Bendelac, another engrossing character, is as different as possible from both the white upper class and the blacks of Barlovento. A Sephardic Jew who settles in Venezuela in the 1920s, Bendelac possesses a work ethic and a business sense that eventually bring success. Predictably, the father of a soldier he befriended introduces him to a Sephardic jeweler, who takes him into the business when Bendelac marries his daughter. Bendelac's future seems assured until he meets up with Belén, a descendent of the Villegas family, who is, ironically, married to Domingo Sánchez, a mulatto descendent of the blacks of Barlovento.

An emblem of the changing times, Sánchez has risen through the military ranks and now occupies an important position in the government. His wife, a jewelry lover, meets Bendelac at his store and a mutual fascination leads to an affair. Sánchez, catching wind of what is going on, takes his wife to Europe for an extended vacation, which devastates León, who abandons work and family and then disappears. Belén, a survivor from a family of survivors, soon recovers from her disappointment. It is she who, years later, beseeches her nephew Francisco to return to the business of reclaiming the Villegas lands in the Valley of Curiepe. Francisco's negotiations with the leader of Barlovento, a political militant who, in spite of his revolutionary rhetoric, shares Francisco's enthusiasm for the development of tourism in the area, finally bring Doña Inés' struggle to a fruitful conclusion.

Ana Teresa Torres has woven a rich and varied tapestry of characters, events and intrigue. Her panoramic view allows the reader to appreciate the slow but steady maturation of Venezuelan society, the integration of blacks, the contributions of new immigrants, the evolution of the power elite, the development of a middle class. At the same time, her focus on one particular family permits us to experience these phenomena from a human and a personal level. *Doña Inés contra el olvido* is a spell-binding novel that not only rescues Doña Inés from oblivion, but assures Ana Teresa Torres' place in Venezuelan letters as well.

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