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Torres, Ana Teresa. *Doña Inés vs. Oblivion*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1999. 243 pp. Trans. from Spanish by Gregory Rabassa. ISBN 0-8071-2476-1, \$27.50.

Torres's novel, which received the 1998 Pegasus Prize for Literature, offers a sweeping view of Venezuela's history, including both political and social upheavals as well as natural cataclysms, from the eighteenth century to the present. Doña Inés, whose voice and gaze guide the narrative, is a wealthy plantation owner who, after her death, follows the toils and exploits of her descendants. As in most magical realistic stories, the novel creates a world where the boundaries between the living and the dead fade, and the differences between objective and imagined reality disappear. Following a slave uprising that causes the loss of the property, Doña Inés pursues the legal titles to her land for close to 300 years, first in the world of the living and then from beyond. She engages the ghost of her husband, members of her progeny, and historical figures in her quest.

The family and the country's history come together in the 1980s when Doña Inés's last descendant becomes a partner in a development project with a black man. This man is also a descendant of one of the slaves who took her land away back in the eighteenth century. Thus the family and the country's history come full circle.

Rabassa, undoubtedly one of the most skillful translators of Spanish-American narrative, has once again produced a superb rendition, demonstrating his profound knowledge of Venezuelan Spanish.

—Patricia Rubio  
Skidmore College

# Enchanting tale of a 300-year old Venezuelan grudge

## DONA INES VS. OBLIVION

By Ana Teresa Torres

Translated by Gregory Rabassa  
Louisiana State University Press,  
\$27.50, 243 pages.

REVIEWED BY XIMENA ORTIZ

**D**ona Ines wants your attention. She has the tortured history of her family and her country to tell. From Venezuela's War of Liberation, to bloody revolutions, Dona Ines, the narrator of Ana Teresa Torres' novel "Dona Ines vs. Oblivion," vividly describes how events over nearly three centuries often devastate, but sometimes redeem her descendants and her country. Like most grandmothers, she demands you listen until she finishes her tale. Because of the author's fine touch, you will want to.

Unlike most grandmothers, Dona Ines doesn't spare the gore, the calamity, or the furtive sexuality that was commonplace from the 18th century to modern Venezuela. She takes you from a caravan of death, fleeing the brutal forces of the Spanish crown, to the crude whorehouses of a newly independent Venezuela. Although she isn't quite aware of it in the beginning of the novel, Dona Ines is a spirit storyteller, a voice from the dead, which gives her license to speak freely.

Don't expect a novel in the Latin American tradition of magical surrealism, a la Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Although, Dona Ines is a spirit narrator, the book, which was translated from Spanish by Gregory Rabassa, is otherwise grounded in realism. The mystical and temporal are left in their respective spheres, without the intersection these worlds would have in a magical surrealism novel.

see TORRES, page B7

# TORRES

From page B8

Mrs. Torres' novel is based on an actual Venezuelan court case that took over 300 years to resolve. The book's chronological progression helps anchor the stream of consciousness narration. Dona Ines' crusade started when a freed slave, Juan del Rosario, from her plantation lays claim to part of her vast land holdings in colonial Venezuela. Her 10 children have left home and her beloved husband Alejandro is dead, leaving her alone with her slaves — and her fight. Her self-appointed mission to win back that land so consumes her in life that she takes it with her in death. She wonders if her thirst for justice, if not vengeance, is a curse.

Dona Ines watches in agony as her family suffers the havoc of a bloody history. During the 19th century War of Liberation, nearly all of Dona Ines' grandchildren are killed. She helplessly witnesses and almost seems to experience the escape of her grandson's widow Isabel in a caravan as the soldiers of the Spanish crown raze her hometown of Caracas.

"I must feel her chills, the salt taste she has in her mouth, the salt spume of the sea, and look with her at the ships in the distance. I must too ask myself if anyone has seen Daria, a strong black woman, about twenty years old... who's carrying a girl of about two in her arms. I must ask if anyone has seen her run into the woods with the girl, because Isabel would like to know if she has anything left in the world. I must be with her when the men throw that boy from the cart because he stinks from being dead several days. I have to roar with rage, Alejandro, when those men

grab Francisquito and toss him into the mire while they hold back Isabel, who's screaming for him," says Dona Ines, from her otherworldly perch.

Daria, Isabel's slave, does get that little girl to safety. The family lineage, and therefore Dona Ines' tale, continues. As the story unfolds, the reader comes to understand Dona Ines better and the narrator herself matures. Despite her rather advanced age (being already dead), Dona Ines reasons at times like a tempestuous and small-minded child in the beginning of the book. To her former now-dead houseboy, Juan del Rosario she rants:

"In this solitude I seem to see you playing along the porches with my children... Yes, my house boy and my freedman, you must remember the day you were born and I picked you up, a scrap of flesh filthy with blood and excrement, and wrapped in a sheet and washed you... and this is how you pay me back, you uppity nigger, saying that the lands are yours... You've got nothing — do you hear me? — nothing that I haven't given you. Nothing that hasn't come from my generosity and my power, you ragged nigger."

Dona Ines' racist and imperial temper tantrum aptly summarizes her perception of her role and rights in society. It also reflects the consequences of the elite's overriding power in the Spanish-colonial New World. Mrs. Torres' novel illustrates the harsh racial subjugation of the era by depicting the deeply personal relationship between Dona Ines and Juan del Rosario.

The conflicted tenderness that Dona Ines feels towards Juan del Rosario is palpable even in her rant against him. He was born from an adulterous relationship between

Dona Ines' husband Alejandro and one of their slaves. Even so, Dona Ines betrays her affection and admiration for him repeatedly in the novel. She perceives her legal wrangle with him over land as a fight between two potent equals. The author communicates a powerful nonpolitical message by exploring the dynamics between Dona Ines and Juan del Rosario: The cost of feuding with someone you love is ruinous.

As Dona Ines watches the progression of time in Venezuela, she evolves. Her evolution reaches a critical moment when she is struck with remorse for her decision, many years ago, to burn down the settlement Juan del Rosario had founded on her land. "Can this be my punishment, Juan del Rosario, for having ordered them to burn your village during the time of Portales? Could God have condemned me to search till infinity for the titles of possession without unearthing them," questions Dona Ines, as she becomes roundly aware of her past wrongdoing. As she observes society's progress, Dona Ines sheds some of her prejudices.

Fortunately, the Pegasus Prize for Literature, which is sponsored by Mobil Corporation and grants the translation of foreign-language books into English, has made Ana Teresa Torres' fine prose accessible to English readers. Her work is unmistakably imbued with a Latin American flavor but her novel is still markedly distinct from the style of the literary giants of the region whose work has been widely celebrated in the United States. "Dona Ines vs. Oblivion" will edify and captivate an English-speaking audience.

Ximena Ortiz is an editorial writer for *The Washington Times*.

Washington Times  
Sunday, October 31, 1999



emotional bonds between mothers and daughters. After her husband's death, Clarise attempts suicide by slashing her wrists with her knitting shears, and her girls are temporarily placed in foster care with strangers, Ramona and Mae. Emotionally battered by her separation from her girls, Clarise clings to the hope of a reunion when the mental haze of her grief lifts. The reader knows that Clarise's love is unconditional because of the attention and love she lavishes on her children. In contrast, Ramona and her mother, Mae, struggle with a relationship that leaves them at odds with each other. These central female characters, while quite distinct from each other, depict many forms of mother-daughter conflict.

In her fragile mental state, Clarise dismantles the image of the unbreakable black matriarch, while Mae is a selfish, uncaring portrayal of black motherhood. Clarise has nurtured her daughters, while Mae has shunned Ramona. We feel Ramona's pain in the following paragraph:

*She wondered how it must feel to be loved. She felt a stirring in her chest, as if she had known that kind of motherly love once, a long time ago; every now and then she would get such a stirring, try to figure out what it meant, but then a block of granite would come up in her chest and make her feel like she was suffocating.*

In her vivid prose, McKinney-Whetstone captures the world of her childhood with realistic portraits of women both hardened and weakened by a cycle of domesticity. Through a strong narrative voice, McKinney-Whetstone evokes a lyrical setting with fast-paced prose. The dialogue, believable in its representation of black vernacular speech, intermingles with powerful characterizations of these women. The reader is able to see multiple dimensions as the mothers weave in and out of stereotypes of older black women as overtly sexual, decorative, and/or stone-hearted housewives, and their daughters defy

the categorization of young black women as naïve, over-emotional, unintelligent.

As for her male characters, they are killed off or missing, fickle or reduced to flimsy door-mats. This theme of inadequate black male figures echoes novels by other black women such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Terry Macmillan's *Waiting to Exhale*. Although McKinney-Whetstone attempts to challenge gender stereotypes of men in minor characters like Clarise's emotionally vulnerable uncles, I'm not sure she's successful.

The central characters in *Tempest Rising* are well-rounded black women doing whatever they must to survive minority status in a white male dominant world. The shackles of domesticity and racism are just as scarring as the loss of love between mothers and daughters who act as both victimizer and victimized.

McKinney-Whetstone's cultural and political lens succeeds in revealing the black woman as a multidimensional figure, with all of her strengths and weaknesses. Her focus on the love between family members illuminates the cycles of disillusionment and self-awareness, family conflict and mending that are crucial to forming an honest and mature identity.

*Jo-Ann Reid*

DOÑA INÉS VS. OBLIVION. Ana Teresa Torres, Louisiana State University Press, PO Box 25053, Baton Rouge, LA 70894-5053, 1999, 243 pages, \$27.50 cloth. Translated by Gregory Rabassa.

Ana Teresa Torres blends historical fiction and magical realism in a vivid account of an authentic legal battle in the history of Venezuela. Her protagonist is the once vibrant but now deceased Doña Inés Villegas y Solórzano, who speaks to the reader from



beyond the grave. History becomes personal through Doña Inés' reactions:

*If it isn't one thing it's another: if on the one hand they happen to send us a decent governor, on the other they saddle us with the Guipuzcoana Company, which bleeds us dry; when there are no heavy rains to ruin the harvest, there's an earthquake, and houses come tumbling down; if the pirates stop laying waste to us, the English bombard us; the year when there's no typhoid, smallpox and yellow fever plague us; and when everything seems peaceful, some blacks revolt and burn a plantation.*

Beginning in 1715, *Doña Inés vs. Oblivion* details the fight for clear title to the family's cacao plantation in a struggle that lasts for centuries. The fact that the other party to this lawsuit is Juan del Rosario Villegas, the illegitimate son of her dead husband, Don Alejandro, and a black slave, sets the stage for conflicts of race, class, and gender. Torres draws the reader into a complicated web of familial relationships that reflects the events of the day and eventually focuses on Inés' great-granddaughter Isabel who is reared in the shade of cacao, the lifeblood of the region. The courageous actions of Isabel's black nanny Daría during the bloody War of Independence shows the positive side of black/white relationships: the woman carries the child to safety as they flee the victorious Spanish troops. Before Isabel eventually claims her inheritance, she is raised by former slaves still loyal to her family.

Doña Inés' first-person narrative jumps back and forth in time from 1663 to the present as she describes her life of privilege and depicts the struggle between races, classes, and sexes, focusing on the tremendous gulf separating members of Venezuelan society. Her personal experiences uncover the quotidian rituals and routines of women's lives, the births of their numerous children, and the tragic deaths of these children from disease,

drowning, and political discord. Torres sharply criticizes social mores, especially the treatment of marginalized women and blacks, and the sexual double standard. For women of the upper class, death is the punishment for infidelity, while for men the freedom to enjoy sexual relationships with slaves or to frequent brothels is simply a fact of life. Nevertheless, Doña Inés reflects the prejudices of her background as she labels Juan an *uppity little black boy* and considers it a major offense for him to think you were white, revealing the pervasive racism that dominates her world.

Torres spares no one her close scrutiny, from the wealthiest nobles and aristocrats to the ordinary mulattos and mestizos who comprise most of Venezuela. In an ironic and sarcastic tone, she characterizes Joaquín Crespo, the peasant who becomes a general, as *master of the great plantation called Venezuela*. A panoply of colorful characters inhabits the novel, from Doña Inés herself, obsessed with her legal quest, and her husband whom we know only through her imagined dialogues with him, to numerous blacks, Indians, and a few Jews. Marching through the pages of the book is a seemingly endless succession of Spanish kings who rule Venezuela as well as the Great Liberator, Simón Bolívar, hero of the War of Independence, a struggle for freedom from Spain and basic human rights for blacks.

As history unfolds in the novel, we witness natural disasters and man-made calamities—earthquakes, epidemics, battles with pirates, and civil wars and revolutions. Federalists wage war against conservative oligarchs attempting to maintain their wealth and position. Vivid descriptions of local customs reveal the dichotomy between past and future, colonialism versus independence, a fading aristocracy and *people of color*. Doña Inés remembers with nostalgia *sleeping an unhurried siesta later when the heat grew stronger and preparing myself for the gracious reception*



of visitors, giving orders and overseeing the preparation of sweetmeats and teas served on the porcelain plates and gilded glasses that I had had imported from France, waiting for the ladies to arrive and then for the slave girls to take their cloaks in the entranceway, sitting in the parlor with my daughters, conversing.... At the end of the novel, Doña Inés questions her husband, *You ask who died? The world, Alejandro, the world we used to have.*

The novel is a metaphor for contemporary Venezuela. Doña Inés, in her fall from the wealthy landowning aristocracy to financial bankruptcy, represents the demise of the great world power that was Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Just as she is forced to confront the reality of freedom for slaves and the recognition of their rights as human beings, Spain too must recognize the independence of its colony Venezuela and its right to exist as an independent nation. Although the nation and its slaves have achieved freedom, the social turmoil of Venezuela's colonial period remains a reality of twentieth-century life where poverty prevails among most Venezuelans and the color of one's skin determines the life one leads. In unforgettable images of a world in chaos, *Doña Inés vs. Oblivion* reminds us that discrimination based on race and class has been an ever-present part of Venezuela's history.

Winner of the prestigious 1998 Mobil Pegasus Prize for Literature, Torres' prose flows smoothly and compellingly through the great Gregory Rabassa's seamless translation. Redolent with the sounds, sights, and smells of daily life—when Ferdinand VI becomes king, Alejandro provides *a banquet on the main square, with a rich display of hams, cheeses, and cassavas so the crowd can eat its fill.... Even a statue that poured wine out of its breasts, to the consternation of churchmen who saw in it the work of the devil to get the people drunk*—this splendid stream-of-consciousness novel is on

a par with the best of Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende.

Roberta Gordenstein

Editors' note: Ana Teresa Torres is only the second woman to win the Mobil Pegasus Prize since its inception in 1977. Keri Hulme of New Zealand won for *The Bone People* in 1985.

REPRESENTING WOMEN. Linda Nochlin, Thames and Hudson, 500 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10110, 1999, 272 pages, \$24.95 paper.

Linda Nochlin puts "woman" in her place in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western painting by theorizing the impossibility of such an endeavor. The author, a leading art critic and historian, describes her approach:

*Woman...cannot be seen as a fixed, pre-existing entity or frozen "image," transformed by this or that historical circumstance, but as a complex, mercurial and problematic signifier, mixed in its messages, resisting fixed interpretation or positioning despite the numerous attempts made in visual representation literally to put "woman" in her place. Like the woman warrior, the term "woman" fights back, and resists attempts to subdue its meaning or reduce it to some simple essence, universal, natural, and above all, unproblematic.*

Nochlin is Lila Acheson Wallace Professor of Modern Art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. *Representing Women* was published in Thames and Hudson's "Interplay" series, which aims to cut across traditional disciplines. Nochlin successfully integrates art, history, and theory in this elegant and thought-provoking book. The book is essentially a collection of groundbreaking essays on the representation of women as warriors, workers, mothers, sensual beings, or absent beings in the works of



dispenses love, guidance and magic. The second novella, also in the first person but more conventional in format, concerns the family's mysterious Gypsy maid, Bene, who may be a demon herself or the victim of diabolic machinations. Burdened with overly cinematic and occasionally contrived moments, this book is still popular in Spain, and will be of interest to U.S. readers mainly as a first work by an influential European author. (Nov.)

### ☆ THE ART OF THE STORY

Edited by Daniel Halpern. Viking, \$40 (667p) ISBN 0-670-88761-7

A decade after Halpern's *Art of the Tale* anthology comes a hefty companion volume, this one collecting 78 international, contemporary authors, those born between 1938 and 1970. The new book elegantly shrugs off the dictates of political and cultural theorists to answer the demands of literary aesthetics. Yet the stories represented here, written by authors from 35 countries, are rife with honest social commentary: Haruki Murakami's suburban fantasy "The Elephant Vanishes" is told by a bourgeois Japanese man living outside Tokyo; the characters in Bobbie Ann Mason's "Wish" are poor tobacco farmers with crocheted pillows, sour stomachs and dirt yards; "Escort" by Abdulrazak Gurnah tells of a Tanzanian who returns briefly from England, where he is a teacher and a scholar of poetry, and becomes unwillingly involved with his taxi driver, a meticulously evil lapsed Muslim named Salim. The philosophy guiding Halpern's choices, as he points out in a refreshingly brief introduction, is that contemporary authors, unlike the early moderns collected in his previous anthology, are essentially reactionary: they respond conservatively, critically and satirically to the effluvia of current popular media. Though claiming to be an international selection, the majority of these stories were written in English, and many are by the usual suspects for such a collection: Lorrie Moore, Joyce Carol Oates, Julian Barnes, Martin Amis, T.C. Boyle, Raymond Carver. The international scene is represented by well-known writers-in-translation like Banana Yoshimoto, Patrick Chamoiseau and Peter Esterhazy, along with some distinguished voices not yet discovered by mainstream American readers. Halpern selected these stories with great intelligence and zero trendiness, and the anthology is a true pleasure at every turn. (Nov.)

### DOÑAINÉS VS. OBLIVION

Ana Teresa Torres, trans. by Gregory Rabassa. Louisiana State Univ., \$27.50 (243p) ISBN 0-8071-2476-1

Winner of the Mobil Pegasus Prize for Literature, this bold novel by Venezuelan writer Torres probes the effects of vio-

lence, corrupt politics and class strife on one family over the course of 300 years, from the early 18th century to the present. Torres traces the historical roots of Caracas through the eyes of Doña Inés Villegas y Solorzano, the aristocratic widow of a wealthy plantation owner who desperately fights to keep the land her family has owned since 1663. Even after her death in 1780, Doña Inés continues narrating the story in her dogged attempt to keep her land out of the hands of the black and mulatto descendants of her husband and a slave woman. In effect, she becomes Caracas's chronicler as she observes the city metamorphose from sleepy plantation lands to a vibrant, hectic metropolis. Based on a real-life court case that was, incredibly, not resolved until the 1980s, the novel reveals Venezuela's cultural transformations as vividly as any history book might. Unfortunately, its slow pace and monotonous narration do not do justice to the dramatic events depicted. Even after her death, Doña Inés maintains dictatorial control by revealing other characters only through her eyes. Other characters' dialogue is sparse, appearing as Doña Inés relates and remembers it, so that her version of things strives to be the ultimate last word. But Torres also examines the bitter woman's diminishing hold on her domain, and it is this triumph of the living city and its inexorable journey into the future over the tenacious ghosts of the past that is the visionary thrust of the novel. In this encompassing, ambitious epic, Caracas emerges as a sensuously and politically charged survivor, the enduring hero. *Five-city author tour.* (Nov.)

### A MIDNIGHT CAROL, A Novel of How Charles Dickens Saved Christmas

Patricia K. Davis. St. Martin's, \$16.95 (208p) ISBN 0-312-24523-8

In 1843, Charles Dickens has a pregnant wife and a wastrel father, and his most recent book, the ill-received *Martin Chuzzlewit*, has left the London writer with dwindling funds and few ideas. Meanwhile, Dickens's friend and supporter Thomas Carlyle obtains for him a chance to speak before Parliament to address the terrible conditions of London's multitude of impoverished workers. A well-educated but penniless lad, Benjamin Newborn, hears his beloved author's impassioned speech, and will figure prominently in Dickens's financial and literary future. But for now the hero puzzles over how to save his family from creditors. Inspired by a desire to make Christmas the joyous occasion it had been in the Merrie England of old, Dickens dreams up a tale that makes his po-

litical and social points as well. He approaches his publishers, Squibb and Ledrock, with a risky and brash proposal—he'll own the book, and pay all the bills, but it must be published before December 17 so that it can sell for Christmas. The greedy publishers, tired of carrying Dickens, embark on a brilliantly underhanded plot to steal ownership of the book, which they know to be a masterpiece. Newborn, the prime minister and a host of bobbies all have a hand in saving Dickens from ruin. This first novel is assured, sprightly and well-conceived, aptly depicting the conditions under which different social classes lived in 19th-century England, and vividly portraying the personality of the mercurial and headstrong Dickens. Though we're told that it's based on a true story, readers won't know exactly what is fictionalized and what is historical in this tale; however, the plot, setting and characterizations all make it a stocking-stuffer par excellence. (Nov.)

### THE FORTUNES OF WANGRIN

Amadou Hampaté Bâ, trans. by Aina Pavolini Taylor. Indiana Univ., \$39.95 (376p) ISBN 0-253-33429-2; paper \$17.95 -21226-X

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