EPISODE 3: MARÍA DEL PILAR BLANCO

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:02
Ever wondered what it would be like studying Spanish at the University of Oxford? Sit in on my conversations with Spanish tutors to find out what's so fascinating about the literature they teach, why they love teaching it, and why they think you might love it too.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:15
Hi María, can you hear me?

María del Pilar Blanco 0:17
Hi Christy, how are you?

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:18
I'm good thank you. How are you doing?

[CONVERSATION FADES OUT]

María del Pilar Blanco 0:21
Well, my name is María del Pilar Blanco, and I am an Associate Professor in Spanish American Literature at the University of Oxford. I'm also the Fellow and Tutor in Spanish at Trinity college and I am an Associate Lecturer at Worcester college in Oxford.

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:40
Great, so what is the name of the text we'll be speaking about and who wrote it?

María del Pilar Blanco 0:46
The text that we are going to discuss today is *Cartucho* and it was written by an author called Nellie Campobello, a Mexican author.

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:55
And so tell me a bit about the form of the text. Is it prose or poetry, for example?

María del Pilar Blanco 1:00
Campobello's *Cartucho* is a set of...scenes of the revolution. It is a prose text that works on a fragmentary level. Most of the fragments that you see in Campobello's *Cartucho* are anywhere from two pages to maybe four pages long. So it's almost like one scene after another, after another, and these are actually connected, but they're also very much distinct from each other.

Christy Callaway-Gale 1:36
What's the text about, in broad terms?

María del Pilar Blanco 1:40
The subtitle of Campobello's *Cartucho* is *Relatos de la lucha en el norte de México*. And by 'relato' it's just, you know, it's again, I would translate it as 'scenes from the battles of the north of Mexico' and the battles that she, that Campobello's, referring to here are the conflicts that occurred in the north of Mexico in the period that began, sort of, 1916/17 and moves into 1920 in Chihuahua, which is a region in the north of Mexico with a border...with the United States. So the text is a set of recollections by Nellie Campobello, who was a young girl

growing up in this very turbulent time, in a very turbulent city. And she retells the things that she saw when she was a young girl, and she's trying to give you a sense of what it felt like and what it looked like to a young girl...at that time. And this is one of the most amazing things about this text, is the fact that for whoever is a student of Mexican Revolution literature, or anyone who's starting to read Mexican Revolution literature, they will be very used to a narrative voice that is usually a man. Somebody who is usually quite omniscient as well, as a narrator. And here what you have is a very interesting voice of a girl and we also have to think about that other layer—Nellie Campobello wrote this in 1931, so there she is, as a grown-up woman, living in Mexico City at this point, thinking back to what the world looked like, and felt like, when she was a girl. So she's inhabiting, in many ways, the perspective that she had as a little girl...in this very, very tumultuous time.

Christy Callaway-Gale 3:57
And that's really interesting...so you picked up in particular about the fact that Campobello is a woman author. So was it common for women in Mexico to publish literature at the time that *Cartucho* was published...was reading and writing already seen as a...female space?

María del Pilar Blanco 4:16
Not a lot of women were publishing, no. I think that the...literary establishment was not very friendly to women, especially in terms of the publication of full texts. There definitely were women readers. We have to think that in the period in which the Mexican Revolution is happening, the...readership in Mexico is actually a very reduced readership anyway. I always like to tell my students one interesting statistic about the period that I teach—and I teach normally the last few decades of the 19th century—and there you have a literacy rate of about 10-15%. So the people who were reading in Mexico in the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th—I think that literacy rates started going up definitely in the 20th century, and they got…they go up dramatically after the Revolution, but you have to think that it's not a big readership. It's nowhere near the amounts of readers that the United Kingdom had at this point in time. But those people who did read, many of them were women because you have to think also that the biggest venue for readerships…for literature to come out, in this period, were magazines. And a lot of these magazines were read by women, a lot of literary magazines were read by women, and a lot of literature appeared in newspapers and newspaper supplements. But I would say that, in terms of publishing a novel, if it was difficult for men it was absolutely difficult for women to publish at this time. And it was definitely...you could say that Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho* stands apart in this whole corpus that we call the *novela de la revolución mexicana*, the novel of the Mexican Revolution, or literature/auto-fiction about the revolution. It's mostly a male canon. And so she...definitely is somebody who brings in a much needed perspective, from the point of view of a woman...of a young woman.

Christy Callaway-Gale 6:36
And so in terms of literary style, then, is there anything that sets *Cartucho* apart from this male literary canon?

María del Pilar Blanco 6:46
Nellie Campobello has been associated with...actually personally associated with somebody called Martín Luis Guzmán, who is a writer...a very, very well-known writer, who is the author of a very...a lot of books, but one of them is called *El águila y la serpiente* (The Eagle and the Serpent), which is one of the most important accounts of the Mexican Revolution and it works somewhere between fiction and autobiography, because he himself was somebody who...was an intellectual, who travelled through Mexico in the Revolution and reported back about the Revolution. You put that next to Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho*, you see something entirely different. As I said, Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho* is...a set of fragments. They're not heavy on historical detail. It's not...something...you're not getting a history book account of this, of the things that she was seeing. What you get is a set of very personal impressions and

I think that the word 'impression' here is very interesting, because you have to think about an impression...if you think of a hand just touching a photographic film and then leaving a bit of an imprint. So she has that...it's a very, very tenuous type of account. Incomplete. You know, she...purposely gives you these brief fragments that are incomplete stories, but as the story of what, of how something felt very intensely at a given moment.

Christy Callaway-Gale 8:26
And I think because what you said before about a much needed female perspective of the revolution, or multiple female voices, really, I'm sort of interested as to how female characters are presented in the text and whether the characters conform to conventional understandings of gender at the time in Mexico, or not?

María del Pilar Blanco 8:48
It's a very conservative society that you're looking at. This is a society that has emerged from a period of government that lasted a very long time, called the Porfiriato, which was the presidency of General Porfirio Díaz, that took...who took power in 1877 and who was ousted around 1910. And this...the Revolution was at first a reaction to the potential re-election of Porfirio Díaz. And so what you have is...kind of remnants of that society of the Porfiriato, which is a very Catholic, very moralistic society, women were very much kept in their place. But there's...a group of women who are very interesting and have been mythologized since...in the Mexican Revolution, called the *soldaderas* and they were women who accompanied the men as they were fighting and who, you know, they could tote a gun, but they were mostly there to...cook for the men and to tend to the men. So you could say that these wartime women are...they don't...perhaps they don't fit the bill of the traditional Mexican woman from the years of the Revolution, but that's not what Nellie Campobello or her mother are. Her mother...they're very much, you know, people who are...very much confined to their home. We don't see Nellie Campobello's mother being a professional woman, she's just trying to get by and...make do with what she has. And it's a very, yeah, it's...they are very much a tight...tightly knit domestic unit. But it's a very traditional thing, you're not going to recognise...you're not going to see the absolute modern woman emerging out of this...out of this narrative, no.

Christy Callaway-Gale 10:50
And I suppose I'm also interested in the role of politics in the literature of the Mexican Revolution. Was literature seen as an important political tool, or was it sort of dangerous for literature to be political?

María del Pilar Blanco 11:07
That's...a very good question. I...think that, at this point, literature is always political, because a lot of the people who are writing up to this point are writers who have perhaps some kind of affiliation with the government, or who have some affiliation with those in power. This is a phenomenon of Latin American literature, in general, is that...a lot of the authors that you're going to read from the 19th century into the 20th century, especially the beginning of the 20th century, are writers that also do other things, writers that are engaged in some other job, whether they're diplomats, whether they're lawyers, whether they're presidents of countries. But in the general genre of the novel of the Mexican Revolution, you have...a set of people who are affiliated somehow to the conflict. Nellie Campobello is not somebody who works in that manner with the government. Nellie Campobello, what she did, she was a dancer her whole life and she...was the director of a school of ballet. And, in that sense, she belongs to the kind of cultural machine of the state, right? But...she is able, I think, when she's writing *Cartucho*...it's very much...she's able to write something that is actually quite dangerous at the time. Because she...also states her admiration for somebody who perhaps was not admired by everybody and that's General Pancho Villa, who was possibly the most famous face of the Mexican Revolution. I am not aware of whether she got into trouble for this, but definitely

some of the opinions that she puts forward here are dangerous. If you're not...if you don't agree with her, yes.

Christy Callaway-Gale 13:08
And just briefly, thinking, I suppose, about someone that's...might be picking up the text for the first time, is there anything that you would encourage a first-time reader to look out for, or to really think about in detail, while they're reading?

María del Pilar Blanco 13:25
I would be very interested in...for...I mean, the best kind of reader is the first-time reader of anything, because there's...that's a very good level...that's a very good sense of naivety. I don't...like to think of naivety as ignorance; naivety...the naive reader is the reader who can just sit down and discover something for the first time and I think anybody would be very surprised with this book. I would like for...if I were to tell somebody, watch out for this, I would want people to think of this text's form. And by that I mean the level of its composition, the way that she has chosen to build a narrative that doesn't have chapters, doesn't have progression, that you could see much more as a mosaic rather than a linear account of the Revolution. And I'm also very...I would like to ask people to think very intently about the choice of language, the way that she puts the starkest simplicity on...what must have been terrifying events.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 14:37
A big part of studying Spanish at Oxford is looking at literary texts in a lot of detail. So I'm asking María to pick out one of the scenes from this text so we can analyse it a bit more closely.

[MUSIC ENDS]

María del Pilar Blanco 14:50
So I've chosen a very short fragment called 'Desde una ventana' (From a Window) and it's a page and a half long. And it's an account where you can clearly see the young Campobello in her house looking from a window outside into the street, and she witnesses a murder. She witnesses an Official killing somebody else. And for days, three nights, the body of the dead man was sitting...was there lying in front of her house. And she develops an affection towards it, she...becomes close to it, she was fascinated by it. And then they take the body away and she starts missing that body. And she ends on saying that, that night, she was dreaming or hoping that they would kill another one so that she could have another dead body in front of her house.

Christy Callaway-Gale 16:02
So is the tone of the passage one of horror and shock? Or is it more that this is really quite normal?

María del Pilar Blanco 16:11
It's the tone of absolute, everyday, quotidian happening. At nowhere in this passage, when you read it, do you see an exclamation mark, do you see the word 'oh my god, how horrific'. Do you see any kind of phrasing like that? No. She reduces it. She puts...she sets it back into an everyday experience. It's like, you know, I would check on it every once in a while. Just like, you know, you would check on some stew that was cooking in the kitchen. It's that...it's that normalised.

Christy Callaway-Gale 16:50

Despite the fact that this seems very normal, and it's going on just outside the house, is it still clear that the narrative voice is coming from that of a young girl?

María del Pilar Blanco 17:03
Yes, for me...it's coming...for me it's coming from the perspective of a young girl at certain points and then there's other things that I'm like, wow, you are really...if this was a young girl remembering, without the filter of the older author remembering...you know trying to kind of channel that...youthful voice, there are some...it would be a very savvy, very worldly young woman. There's a moment in which...that the man is...killed with numerous bullet holes, you know, numerous shots. And we are…we are treated to the phrase that these bullets 'incrustaron en su cuerpo hinchado del alcohol y cobardía'. So a very loose translation here is that the bullets 'entered—*incrustar* is like, you know, were buried in—his body, which was swollen with alcohol and cowardice'. And that idea of a 'cuerpo hinchado del alcohol y cobardía', that seems to come from a later...a more grown-up perspective. Because...wow, I mean, what a way to describe the body of a man who has just been shot, right? But maybe this is a girl who already knows about the way that alcohol...you know...alcoholic consumption was enormous, and almost necessary for the toleration of death...or, you know, the man who was about to be shot probably wanted to be drunk so that it would not hurt as much. So there's something very, very unsettling there about...about how much she had to learn too quickly.

Christy Callaway-Gale 19:08
So speaking a bit about striking imagery and language in this particular passage, is there any imagery that you want to pull out from the passage as being particularly important?

María del Pilar Blanco 19:19
Well, looking at the passage, it begins very simply: 'una ventana de dos metros de altura en una esquina'. It's not even a sentence. And so you have, not only the fragment in terms of chapters that are fragments, but also sentences that are fragments. And it's two girls, because it's Campobello and another girl looking at this group of men who are about...who are pointing a gun at this person who's about to be killed. To my students, I always tell them at the moment of death—so I've just given you the idea of 'el cuerpo hinchado del alcohol y cobardía'—and then you have another sentence that I find...it absolutely floors me. It goes: 'un salto terrible al recibir los balazos, luego calló manándole sangre por muchos agujeros'. So...you have two moments, two pictures to look at, to consider. One is that...how the body jumps, reacting to the shots, right? And she calls it a 'salto terrible'. So there you have the word 'terrible' which is, you know, it grapples with the trauma, right? It, you know that, that there is a kind of judgement on what we're seeing being horrible. But then something that really strikes me is that idea of the body falling, and then there's blood squirting, or like emanating, 'por muchos agujeros'. And now I tell people when we think of a wound—you know, because the person had received a lot of wounds—well, the word for wound in Spanish is *herida*. And, here, Campobello uses the word 'agujero', which is 'holes'. And when I think of 'agujero', I don't know, it's like I have...you think of 'agujeros' on a wall, you know, the holes in a wall, or something like that. So the fact that she chose 'agujeros' and she decided not to talk about *heridas*…in a way, kind of, de-humanises the body for me, making it a thing, is what I mean. So you have the movement from that 'terrible', the kind of awful signs of the last moment of death...of the death moment, and then you have an objectification of the body in the second part of the sentence and I find that amazing.

Christy Callaway-Gale 21:59
So that's really interesting that, you know, clearly vocabulary has been chosen very carefully. Are there any other examples of vocabulary that you want to pick out from the passage as being significant or particularly powerful?

María del Pilar Blanco 22:12
Yes, absolutely. Well, I've just read you...that was the first paragraph of this three paragraph passage. The second paragraph is amazing and if I may read it out loud, and then I'm going to take you through it. It goes: 'Como estuvo tres noches tirado, ya me había acostumbrado a ver el garabato de su cuerpo, caído hacia su izquierda con las manos en la cara, durmiendo allí, junto de mí. Me parecía mío aquel muerto. Había momentos que, temerosa de que se lo hubieran llevado, me levantaba corriendo y me trepaba en la ventana, era mi obsesión en las noches, me gustaba verlo porque me parecía que tenía mucho miedo'. Okay, so in that second paragraph, you have the idea of the duration of the body not being picked up and not being taken away to a morgue, or to wherever its resting place was going to be. And what you see there is the word 'garabato', 'a ver el garabato de su cuerpo', 'me había acostumbrado a ver el garabato de su cuerpo'. If you think of 'garabato', 'garabato' is kind of like 'a scribble' or 'a mangling' of something. So the...you can immediately see the body but it's not described in the way that a body would be described. We tend to actually also associate 'garabato' with writing, with scripture. It was...you know, with inscribing. So the fact that a body is a 'garabato' is quite interesting, but it's almost like a mess of a thing. So, notice how she...has done, again, something which objectifies, which de-personalises...it creates a...immediate distance. But then, again, it's a kind of...what you have is a tug...a game of tug of war, because you have the objectification and then you go back to a kind of endearment with the body. You have that body sleep[ing]—and he says 'durmiendo allí junto de mí'—she thinks it's sleeping, it looks more like a sleeping body, rather than a dead body. Then, she has that very incredible line, very short line: 'me parecía mío aquel muerto', 'he seemed like he was mine'. She starts getting possessive of it, so you start noticing, rather disturbingly, that the dead body is almost like seeing a dead ragdoll outside. So she starts using the word...the vocabulary of possession and 'mío': 'it was my obsession', 'era mi obsesión en las noches'. And so, again, it's just...it's just that idea that perhaps, you know, this is...all that she could have to look forward to. There's that realisation, but also the idea that what was a political event, or one of the many chapters, many senseless chapters, of a political conflict, this is how...what it gets reduced to when you have two girls looking out a window and seeing an execution.

Christy Callaway-Gale 25:32
And just to round our analysis of the passage off, as such, can we talk a little bit about that final line, which you mentioned before and is...really quite disturbing.

María del Pilar Blanco 25:46
Yeah, I mean, this is...this is really one of the most...devastating passages of Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho*, in my opinion. When they take the body, you have the sentence that says, '[e]l muerto tímido había sido robado por alguien, la tierra se quedó dibujada y sola'. So, 'la tierra'...I love that phrase 'la tierra se quedó dibujada y sola', so you can see that perhaps the very faint outline of the body was still on the street, but then it felt alone, something had been taken away. To me it also, in a way, it speaks about...the things that you become attached to, even in the bleakest times. You wonder whether this child had a lot to play with, very many things to play with, very many things to entertain her. And then this was, in a way, a weird form of entertainment. But it was also this body becomes a form of solace for her because it had permanence about it. Because it was there, and it wasn't moving. And perhaps, in...if you have...if you think of what she was probably seeing, which was like a film reel of one event after another, and you know, one commotion after another, the stillness of this body is very consoling. And then they take it away from her. And she has this, kind of, evocation of the childish dream, that maybe there will be again something that she can look out the window, and it'll be just there. So, so many things that we can extrapolate from that, but it...it shows you...I think there's something quite interesting here about the contrast between stillness, and movement, and stillness, and...lots of change, and lots of uproar, and upheaval. And how, as at this point in this very dark moment, it's the dead body that is that thing of permanence for the perspective of a young child. And that's, that's something that you really, really take away from the story. It's a very horrifying thing, but it also...there's a beauty of it.

There's a beauty in the way that she says it's so calmly with so much aplomb. And...that you just don't know, you know, it really...I can only describe it as haunting.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 28:25
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[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 28:37
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Christy Callaway-Gale 28:45
This podcast was created by Professor Ben Bollig, produced by me Christy Callaway-Gale, and brought to you by the Sub-faculty of Spanish at the University of Oxford. Special thanks goes to the tutors that participated and the Taylor Institution Library.

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