# Silvina Ocampo's Queer Eye: "Forgotten Journey," translated by Suzanne Jill Levine and Katie Lateef-Jan; and "The Promise," translated by Levine and Jessica Powell

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By Dorothy Potter Snyder

***Do I contradict myself?***
***Very well then I contradict myself,***
***(I am large, I contain multitudes.)***

***—Walt Whitman, Song of Myself***

***Es tan corto el amor y tan largo el olvido.***

***— Chavela Vargas***

Queerness resists definition and finds expression in the manifold array of ways of being and seeing in the world. "The word 'queer' has always contained the shimmer of multitudes," writes Jenna Wortham. Argentine writer Silvina Ocampo's first collection of stories, *Forgotten Journey* (*Viaje olvidado*, 1937) and her posthumously-published novel, *The Promise* (*La promesa,* 2011), now issued simultaneously in English by City Lights Books, emphasize the

individual's struggle against the imposition of false identity and the essential role of story in the conflictive, patchwork illusion of Self.

Suzanne Jill Levine, winner of the 2012 PEN Center USA translation prize and expert in modern Southern Cone literature, brought these two slim volumes to the attention of City Lights. She enlisted student Jessica Powell, who also collaborated with Levine on the Ocampo-Bioy Casares novel *Where There's Love, There's Hate* (Melville House, 2013) and current doctoral student Katie Lateef-Jan as co-translators. Their simultaneous publication offers readers the opportunity to see how Ocampo developed her themes over time, a comparison that is advisable for serious students of narrative art.

The youngest of six sisters of one of Argentina's wealthiest families, Silvina Ocampo (1903-1993) lived a privileged life. She and her sisters, like Jorge Louis Borges, received their formal education in English and French. "Silvina, as a child, wrote in English because Spanish grammar was 'impossible' for her," Mariana Enriquez tells us in her book, *La hermana menor* (Enríquez loc. 70, my translation). Early in her career, she was criticized for producing "sentences with cricks in their necks" (Enríquez loc. 656, my translation). Ocampo's elder sister Victoria, editor of the influential literary magazine *Sur,* published and praised her sister's poetry, but she critiqued her stories as "awkward"[1]. In Borges, friend of Ocampo and her husband Alfredo Bioy Casares, they also inspired resistance and incomprehension: "Some parts are too long, some too short," he complained. "It's on purpose," Ocampo replied (Enríquez loc. 268, my translation). Neither did Borges grasp her "strange love" for a "a certain innocent and oblique cruelty" (Enríquez loc. 2275, my translation). Ocampo's niñxs and self-absorbed adults do terrible things to each other in pitched battles for definition of Self, both their own and others'. Her obliquely-focused narrative lens requires readers to experience the off-kilter sensation of a slant perspective, lending a cinematic quality to her gothic themes. But to many of her contemporaries, Ocampo's fantastic stories were

just queer.

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The twenty-seven uncanny fairy-tales of *Forgotten Journey* (*Viaje Olvidado,* 1937) are almost all third-person narratives. They are populated by preternaturally aware niñxs who often fall victim to the incomprehension, dishonesty, and violence of the adults around them. "[Ocampo's] first book of stories," writes Mariana Enriquez "is her childhood deformed and recreated by memory" (Enríquez 77, my translation). She also drew inspiration from crime stories reported in Buenos Aires's newspapers that she re-purposed to reveal emotional truths.

Ocampo felt herself "the etcetera" (Enríquez loc. 10, my translation) and the ugly duckling of her family, though many saw her as lovely and seductive; she had love affairs with both men and women. Shaky self-image and the fear of abandonment fostered an anxiety that informed the themes she wrote about. Aurelia, the problem child of the six otherwise identical sisters in *The Linio Milagro Family*, refuses to knit like her siblings and insists on getting up at night to play piano then falling victim to her parents' "timid hope of an opportune fire" (*Journey,* 117) to collect insurance money. Aurelia "was the sister who provoked secrets, screams contained behind closed doors, awful arguments at meal times and prolonged siestas in the winter…" (*Journey,* 116). Queerness, we learn, can get you killed by your own family.

The child Silvina preferred to observe and listen unseen and to observe life in the servants' quarters on the upper floors of the Ocampo mansion. Her experiences there (some of them sinister and likely including a molestation)

contrasted radically with the bourgeois sophistication of her family, and emerged in characters who are not as they seem. The depressed young doctor of *Diorama* finds purpose in treating a wealthy man's liver ailment—and, later, his imagined wife. The nameless niñx of *The Statue Salesman* plays pranks on the title character, until those games take a fatal turn. Like Edgar Allen Poe, Ocampo reveals the interior stories that beset her characters and propel them toward their ineluctable destinies.

Ocampo published *Forgotten Journey* at age thirty after giving up a promising art career; her painter's preference for form over embellishment is evident. She studied with foundational surrealist artist Giorgio De Chirico, with whom she shared an interest in the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, but whose work she also criticized: "You can't see the forms beneath all the confusion of color," she told him (Enríquez loc. 216, my translation). The titles of *Forgotten Journey* read like exhibition labels — *The Poorly-Made Portrait; Landscape of Trapezes; Siesta in the Cedar Tree* — but visuals are never decorative and always serve the central emotion; queer feelings are embodied in the precise deployment of ordinary objects. "I understood this was a moment in life when you had to cry," says Miss Claude Vildrac in *The Lost Passport* as she bids adieu to her weeping family. "I rubbed my eyes and kept my handkerchief in my hand as a symbol of tears until everyone had said goodbye." Fourteen-year-old Claude frets not about losing her family but about misplacing her*self*: "If I lose this passport, then no one will know who I am, including me" (*Journey,* 31). Identity is friable because memory is fragile, contained in objects that can be lost or ruined.

Adults deprive Ocampo's niñxs of their self-knowledge by controlling their appearance, which must meet bourgeois expectations: "She was trying to remember the day she was born and frowned so much that every few minutes the grownups would interrupt to make her smooth her brow," we read about the nameless niñx of the title story, "Which is why she could never reach back

to the memory of her birth" (*Journey,* 111). Niñxs destabilize adults with their resistance and the adults go mad from their charges' refusal to submit to control. In *The Skylight,* we witness the action through a queer lens, looking up through a glass darkly. "Above the hall in that house with a skylight was another mysterious home, and through the glass you could see a family of feet surrounded by haloes, like saints…" (*Journey,* 3). The story's weird soundtrack —a player piano "stuck on the same note", a child jumping rope, laughter, clocks striking the hour—is shattered when the child Celestina is beaten: "Slowly a head split in two was sketched upon the glass…" (*Journey,* 5). Niñxs rebel against adult needs and adults deprive niñxs of the quietude they need to remember who they are.

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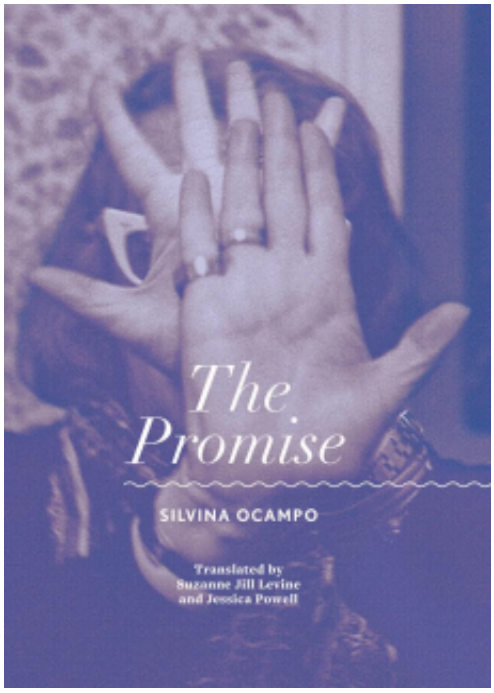


The nameless narrator of Ocampo's only novel *The Promise* finds that quietude when she falls overboard during a transatlantic voyage to Africa. The coolly-aimed third-person lens of *Forgotten Journey* here gives way to a claustrophobic first-person: "I came to in the water dazed by the blow. I couldn't even remember my name" (*Promise,* 5). Thus stripped of identity, the narrator wards off despair as she awaits rescue by willing herself to take "a kind of mental journey" (*Promise,* 6) through her memories of people. "I don't have a life of my own," she warns, "I have only feelings. My experiences were never important—not during the course of my life, nor even on the threshold of death. Instead, the lives of others have become mine" (*Promise,* 4). This is the Ocampo niñx as adult, stripped of Self and staying afloat by constructing a virtual raft of stories, her own and those of the multitudes within her. This sea of memory is both female and male, cold and

warm, terrifying and beautiful.

The novel is structured as a series of portraits linked together via repeating characters: the beautiful and intense Irene; her child Gabriela; Irene's lover (the man with whom the narrator is also obsessed), the handsome, cold-hearted Leandro; and flirty Verónica. The narrator's memories of others are punctuated by episodic returns to her own predicament (like gasps for air) during which she asks questions that hint at an increasing distance from normal consciousness: "I would like to swim for hours and hours! But, aren't I in the sea?" (*Promise,* 33). Memory is friable and unreliable but the only stuff we have to patch together a Self. In this floating world, there is nothing to cling to except the narrator's promise to write the book we now hold in our hands should she be rescued. But, she frets, "What publisher would accept it? I think it would be impossible, it would take a miracle. Though I do believe in miracles" (*Promise,* 3).

It is indeed a miracle that *The Promise* was published at all, let alone now in English. While she worked on the novel for 25 years, Ocampo may have feared that it was too revealingly auto-biographical. "To make this dictionary of memories that are at times shameful, even humiliating, would mean revealing my intimacy world to anyone and everyone," says her narrator (*Promise,* 4). The posthumous edition published by Lumen in 2011 emerged thanks to the tender care of literary critic, poet, translator and Academic Curator at Villa Ocampo Ernesto Montequin, who also contributes the preface to this new English edition.

*The Promise* offers little of the formal structure that readers expect from modern novels. This narrator seems more exquisite corpse than protagonist and gender queerness flows naturally from her multitudinous self: Best friends Lily and Liliana trick the young man who thinks they are fighting over him by loving each other instead; Irene is surprised that daughter Gabriela isn't a boy,

though she dresses her as one; Leandro, infatuated with the similarly-named Leonor, kisses her cold, dead lips—a necrophiliac and, arguably, hermaphroditic moment. So while gender queerness is front and center, it is only one color in Ocampo's narrative paint box. All identity is fluid, shaped and reshaped by a flotsam of stories.

The search for atman is the crucial thread that weaves throughout the novel. The narrator's initial promise to Saint Rita —"I love you and promise to be a good girl." — is that of a child appealing to a mother for love (*Promise,* 3). Immersion in the ocean is a return to the amniotic fluid, a place of birth but also potential death. In the final pages, the narrator is at the zoo and she engages with the human-like monkeys: "I tried to talk to them. They did not understand me. I tried to play with them; they understood (*Promise,* 102). The problematic nature of language is mirrored in the first two words of the novel, "Soy analfabeta"—I'm illiterate—which is smoothed into "I'm such an ignoramus," the only disappointment in this otherwise fine translation (*Promise,* 3). To be without letters or word-symbols is to be without stories and thus granted a return to that original Self, that Eden that the niñx of *Forgotten Journey* strains to remember. Finally, the narrator sees a "*Pacará,* 'Black man's ear', as my mother called it." It is the mother's story to a child that begins the transformation from natural to word-being: "An Indian waits for his lover. The ears of the tree continue to wait for her. She will never return, but the man keeps waiting for her in the ears of the tree, since neither the Indian nor the beloved return" (*Promise,* 103). We are made of stories, and, when they are as well-told as Silvina Ocampo's, they will remain after we are gone.

Ocampo, Silvina. *Forgotten Journey*. Translated by Suzanne Jill Levine and Katie Lateef-Jan, City Lights Books, 2019, San Francisco.

Ocampo, Silvina. *The Promise*. Translated by Suzanne Jill Levine and Jessica Powell, City Lights Books, 2019, San Francisco.

*Works Cited:*

Enriquez, Mariana. *La hermana menor*. Editorial Anagrama, 2018, Barcelona.

[1] Judith Podlubne, who has written extensively on Ocampo, said in an interview with Mariana Enriquez that in her review of *Viaje olvidado*, Victoria "[p]oints out as defects those things which, you could say, are the values that Silvina Ocampo's narrative art pioneered and on the basis of which she deserves to be read" (Enriquez loc. 2187, my translation).