

# The Ghosts of Comala: Haunted Meaning in *Pedro Páramo*

An introduction to Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo* by Danny J. Anderson

**"How do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly?"**

—Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*

**"I don't know. I see things and people where you may not see anything."**

—The character Juan Preciado in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*

During my college years, *Pedro Páramo* was the first Spanish-language novel that fully captured my attention. It haunted my thinking, a reaction comparable in intensity to my discovery of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* as an adolescent reader. Only partially grasping the nuances of words and styles in a language I was still learning, I became obsessed with understanding *Pedro Páramo*. It fascinated me to the extent that I decided to become a scholar of Latin American literature. Decades later, after analyzing it for graduate seminars, discussing it in conference papers, and teaching it to generations of students, the novel still holds that same hallucinatory power for me. The powerful effect of *Pedro Páramo* has its source in the use of enigmas that involve readers in the process of understanding the complex relationship between past and present in early twentieth-century Mexico.

The novel transports readers to a ghost town on the desert plains in Mexico, and there it weaves together tales of passion, loss, and revenge. The village of Comala is populated by the wandering souls of former inhabitants, individuals not yet pure enough to enter heaven. Like the character Juan Preciado, who travels to Comala and suddenly finds himself confused, as readers we are not sure about what we see, hear, or understand. For pages readers may not know exactly what to think about the events in Comala. Critic Carol Clark D'Lugo compares readers' relationship to the text with Juan Preciado's relationship to Comala: it is a journey in which both reader and character are constantly off balance.<sup>1</sup>

But the novel is enigmatic for other reasons. Since publication in 1955, the novel has come to define a style of writing in Mexico. Sparse language, echoes of orality, details heavy with meaning, and a fragmentary structure transformed the literary representation of rural life; instead of the social realism that had dominated in earlier decades, Rulfo created a quintessentially Mexican, modernist gothic.<sup>2</sup> Numerous reprintings have brought the novel to Mexican and Latin American readers as well as to generations of writers seeking to emulate its expressive power. *Pedro Páramo* has haunted the imaginations of readers and writers with a singular intensity. The author himself, Juan Rulfo, has contributed to the aura surrounding this text. A man of few words and many silences, Rulfo wrote secretively, polished extensively to achieve simplicity, destroyed countless manuscript pages, and published only a handful of texts. One collection of short stories, *El llano en llamas* (1953), translated as **The Burning Plain**, and the novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955) have made Rulfo a major influence in Mexican and Latin American letters. In later years a handful of other texts have appeared but not surpassed these two cornerstones of modern Mexican literature. *El gallo de oro y otros textos para cine* (1980) gathers a *nouvelle*, scattered writings, and a selection of photographs and film stills; *Inframundo: El México de Juan Rulfo* (1980) makes available a wide selection of Rulfo's work as a photographer. The haunting effect of *Pedro Páramo* derives from the fitful story of Mexican modernity, a story that the novel tells in a way that more "objective" historical and sociological analyses cannot. As an aesthetic expression characterized by imaginative understanding, the novel explores Mexican social history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The decadent remnants of a quasi-feudal social order, violent revolutions, and a dramatic exodus from the countryside to the city all gave rise to ghost towns across Mexico. The traditional world of rural Mexico, folk Catholicism, and oral tales gradually receded beyond the horizon for the rapidly urbanizing Mexico of the 1950s. *Pedro Páramo* made readers aware of the disquieting presence of a dying but not quite dead traditional Mexico looming just out of sight—a lingering reality no longer present, not yet past. Through its deft use of modern literary techniques, the novel communicates to readers the experience of uncertainty, the suspicion that something is there you do not quite believe. The novel evokes for readers the experience of being haunted.

Although it is among the most analyzed and commented works in Mexican literature, critics did not initially respond positively to the fragmentary structure, poetic style, and enigmatic plot. By the decade following its publication, the "boom" in the Latin American novel of the 1960s accustomed readers to such stylistic experimentation. In retrospect, critics and literary historians recognized *Pedro Páramo* as a cornerstone of the new creative freedom for Latin American writers. The abundant critical studies that followed have examined universal myths and archetypes, the

poetic qualities of rural orality, the embodiments of Mexican culture, the complexities of textual structure, and the allegories of national history.<sup>3</sup> For a reader approaching *Pedro Páramo* for the first time, perhaps the most important details to keep in mind are the way the novel interweaves the stories of three principal characters and the manner in which narrative voices give form to the textual fabric.

*Pedro Páramo* tells the stories of three main characters: Juan Preciado, Pedro Páramo, and Susana San Juan. From the point of view of Juan Preciado, the novel is the story of a son's search for identity and retribution. Juan's mother, Dolores Preciado, was Pedro Páramo's wife. Although he does not bear his father's name, Juan is Pedro's only legitimate son. Juan has returned to Comala to claim "[j]ust what's ours," as he had earlier promised his dying mother. Juan Preciado guides readers into the ghost story as he encounters the lost souls of Comala, sees apparitions, hears voices, and eventually suspects that he too is dead. We see through Juan's eyes and hear with his ears the voices of those buried in the cemetery, a reading experience that evokes the poetic obituaries of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). Along with Juan Preciado, readers piece together these fragments of lives to construct an image of Comala and its demise.

Interspersed among the fragments recounting Juan's story are flashbacks to the biography of Pedro Páramo. Pedro is the son of landowners who have seen better days. He also loves a young girl, Susana San Juan, with a desire that consumes his life into adulthood. However, Susana moves away. His loneliness grows as his father dies and eventually the rest of his family passes away. Ambitious young Pedro is left to take charge of the family estate and its debts. Through chicanery, wiles, and violence, Pedro builds an empire. He begins by marrying the heir of his largest creditor, Dolores Preciado. Once marriage allows Pedro to usurp Dolores' land and wealth, he sends her off to live with her sister, in a place where her interests will not disturb his designs. What follows is the story of a ranch, the Media Luna, and its dramatic success, expanding without restraint and weathering with ease the assault of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. But Pedro, the greedy land baron, also suffers. He begins to pay for his sins when the only bastard son he recognized and to whom he gave his name, Miguel Páramo, has a fatal accident. Next news arrives that Susana San Juan and her father are back in the region. Although Pedro arranges for the death of Susana's father and for his reunion with her, he is unable to win back Susana. She dies emotionally beyond his grasp in the throes of madness. In the end, as Comala is withering, another son, Abundio Martínez, an unrecognized heir, comes to ask Pedro for money to bury his own dead wife. When refused, in a drunken rage, Abundio Martínez kills his father.<sup>4</sup>

The textual structure weaves together these two story lines through a series of fragments. Readers may easily follow the alternation between the two story lines through the alternating narrative voices. In various fragments, Juan Preciado narrates in the first person his journey to Comala, his futile search for his father, and his own death. Partway through the novel, readers make a jarring discovery: we are overhearing a dialogue. Juan's conversational partner changes roles and enters the scene to fill in gaps, ask questions, and offer opinions about Juan's tale. Alongside this dialogue of the dead, a more traditional third-person omniscient narrator traces the biography of Pedro Páramo from childhood to death in the other fragments. Although the story line in these biographical fragments follows a generally chronological order, the duration of time is strangely distorted; brief textual passages that may read like conversational exchanges sometimes condense large historical periods. Moreover, the third-person narrative voice oscillates between two discursive registers. On the one hand, poetic passages of interior monologue capture Pedro's love for Susana and his sensuality; on the other, more exterior descriptions and dialogues represent a domineering rancher determined to amass wealth and possessions.

Within this alternation between the first- and third-person narrative voices, readers must listen for another voice and reconstruct a third story, that of Susana San Juan. We overhear bits of her tale through the ears of Juan Preciado, listening with him to the complaints that Susana—in her restless death—gives forth in the cemetery of Comala. Readers piece together other parts of Susana's story from her role in Pedro Páramo's biography and from what she says during her delirium before dying. The text hints of an incestuous relationship between Susana San Juan and her father. Susana has lost her roots and had her share of extreme experiences. Most importantly, she too has loved and lost. Poetic sections evoke her passion for another man, Florencio, and Pedro never becomes the object of Susana's affection.

Juan Preciado, Pedro Páramo, and Susana San Juan are all haunted by ghosts; in turn, they become ghosts who haunt the realities of others. Although as readers we have the sense of lives once lived by these characters, they emerge for us as phantasms, as partially known presences who are not immediately intelligible and who linger with inexplicable tenacity. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery F. Gordon explores the figure of the ghost

and the experience of haunting to develop a valuable framework for linking the aesthetic, the social, and the reader's experiences. Gordon explains that "[t]he ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us." Most importantly, seeing ghosts gives us the experience of being haunted, and "haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition."<sup>5</sup> Reading *Pedro Páramo* creates a transformative recognition of Mexico's move toward modernity in the early twentieth century; more than the objective lessons learned from social and cultural history, as a novel, *Pedro Páramo* produces a structure of feeling for readers that immerses us through the experience of haunting.

As ghosts, Pedro, Susana, and Juan point outward to the social context of Mexico in the difficult movement toward modernization, toward social arrangements that never completely die as a newer social order is established. Pedro's accumulation of land as a rancher harks back to the trends of capital accumulation during the benign dictatorship of President Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911). Díaz strove to modernize the nation through the development of infrastructure and investment; it allowed for anomalies such as the creation of the Media Luna ranch and strong local power brokers such as Pedro Páramo who shared the interests of the elite and helped maintain a thinly veiled feudal social order. Within this context, Susana San Juan and other individuals murmur their complaints in ghostly whispers. Indeed, at one point, Rulfo planned to call the novel *Los murmullos*—the murmurs. Speaking in the streets of Comala, overheard in dreams, and groaning in the cemetery, these spectral murmurs bespeak a reality hidden beneath the façade of Porfirian progress.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 gave expression to repressed peasants—the *campesinos* of rural Mexico—and put an end to the Porfiriato. Susana San Juan, in turn, reveals the repressed role of women in a patriarchal order. In this world women are chattel and ranch-owners can forcibly populate the countryside with bastard children by asserting feudal rights to the bodies of peasant women living on their lands. Peasant revolutionaries and Susana San Juan as well are all manipulated by Pedro Páramo. He can force events to keep them all in the places where he would have them, but he cannot control their desires and their pleasures. The peasants celebrate festivals, and after the revolution they eventually rebel again by participating in the Cristero Revolt of 1926-1929. Susana suffers guilt and remembers pleasure in evocative passages that underscore her erotic ties to Florencio, a man unknown to others in the novel, perhaps a dead soldier from the revolution, the man Pedro would have had to be in order to have Susana's love. This re-edition of Margaret Sayers Peden's translation of *Pedro Páramo* is illustrated with the photographs of Josephine Sacabo, images that make visible the ghostly effects of the novel and especially the way they relate to Susana San Juan. The photographs are selected from a sequence entitled "The Unreachable World of Susana San Juan: Homage to Juan Rulfo" (*El mundo inalcanzable de Susana San Juan: Homenaje a Juan Rulfo*). In an interview, Sacabo, a native of Laredo, Texas, has explained that in *Pedro Páramo* she recognized the patriarchal rancher culture that extended north into Texas, a culture that drove Susana San Juan to madness. Sacabo describes Susana as a woman

*whose entire discourse is one of memory and delusions, delivered from her tomb. It is the story of a woman forced to take refuge in madness as a means of protecting her inner world from the ravages of the forces around her: a cruel and tyrannical patriarchy, a church that offers no redemption, the senseless violence of revolution, death itself. These photographs are my attempt to depict this world as seen through the eyes of its tragic heroine.*<sup>6</sup>

Elena Poniatowska writes that the images by Rulfo and Sacabo "are an apprehension of ghosts, a confrontation with darkness, with shadows that resist and spurn the distant light..."<sup>7</sup> Throughout the photographic sequence, Sacabo portrays how light struggles with shadow and how superimposed layers of images visually evoke the experience of seeing specters. The viewer, like Susana, sees what may or may not be there. Or, as Juan Preciado explains when he realizes that he is being haunted, "I don't know. I see things and people where you may not see anything." As readers and viewers, like Sacabo's Susana and Rulfo's Juan, we are drawn to understand this uncanny perception through haunting.

Finally, the ghosts point toward post-revolutionary modernization in Mexico. Historians have debated extensively and heatedly whether the Mexican civil war of 1910-1920 was a genuine "peasant revolution" as embodied in figures such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata or whether it was more a "bourgeois revolution." Although the

popular element in the revolution was strong, the emergent middle class and intellectuals held a great stake in political and economic development. Under their tutelage, the revolution created a new class of upstart politicians-cum-military leaders who would control the government, form an official political party, and co-opt all interests with a state project that ironically fulfilled many dreams of the Porfiriato. As capital accumulated in Mexico City after the revolution and centralized industry created a hub of investment and growth, all over Mexico real ghost towns, like Comala, began to emerge. After the Cristero Revolt of 1926-1929 and the economic crises of the 1930s, thousands of rural folk were lured to cities. In 1951, when José E. Iturriaga published his now classic study, *La estructura social y cultural de México*, he began with a chapter on this dramatic movement from countryside to city, describing urbanization and "deruralization" (desruralización) as key transforming forces. Iturriaga underscored that in 1910, at the start of the revolution, 79.99 percent of Mexico's population lived in rural areas (i.e., in towns with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants). By 1940 the relative percentage had decreased to 64.91 percent living in towns with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants, and he expected the 1950 census to reveal the same trend. In real numbers, cities grew dramatically between 1910 and 1950. In 1910, only two cities in Mexico had more than 100,000 inhabitants; by 1950, ten cities had over 100,000 inhabitants, three more than 300,000, and one more than 2,000,000.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast with these impersonal numbers, Juan Rulfo recounts an experience that gives insight into the personal significance of the deruralization that was haunting Mexico. Reina Roffé, in *Juan Rulfo: Autobiografía armada*, cites Rulfo's story about the origin of *Pedro Páramo* in a trip to a town from his own rural past:

*But Pedro Páramo comes from before. The novel was, one might say, planned. Oh, say about ten years earlier. I hadn't written a single page, but I was turning it over and over in my head. And there was one thing that gave me the key for getting it out, I mean for unthreading the yarn still held in the wool. It happened when I went back to the town where I used to live, after thirty years, and I found it uninhabited. It's a town I knew with about seven or eight thousand inhabitants. It had one hundred fifty when I returned. Those immense houses —it's one of those big towns with shops measured by the number of street-front doors, there were shops with eight doors, with ten doors—and when I arrived the houses were padlocked. The people had left, just left. But someone had the idea of planting casuarinas along the streets of the town. I was there at night once, and it's a town where the wind blows a lot, it's at the foot of the Sierra Madre. And at night, the casuarinas bellow and howl. And the wind. That's when I understood the loneliness of Comala, of that place.<sup>9</sup>*

Iturriaga's statistics and Rulfo's story both demonstrate the profound changes in twentieth-century Mexico. A recently rural population became the dwellers and voters of the city; Mexico embarked on major economic development in the wake of World War II investment opportunities. The Comalas of Mexico multiplied. Numerous families had their own ties to ghost towns as well as ghosts, the relics of a life left behind and ways of living that had disappeared. Juan Preciado, like countless Mexicans of the 1950s, in searching for his father, in learning the stories of the demise of Comala and the frustrations of Susana San Juan, was striving to come to terms with his own ghosts, with the apparitions that explain the uneven and unequal social order in the present.<sup>10</sup>

In this perspective, as Avery Gordon suggests, ghosts have an affective function in the present. The haunting power of *Pedro Páramo* resides in the way that it creates for us through the act of reading a specific experiential understanding. It does not objectively describe the struggles toward modernity and identity in Mexico. Rather, the novel uses its unique configurations of tales and techniques to plunge us into the struggle itself, to wrestle with the contradictions of being haunted by a past that will not completely die, to live in a present shaped by forces beyond our control. Like Juan Preciado, to be haunted is to see through the eyes of the dead; when he arrives in Comala, what he sees does not match up with what he had imagined. He expected to find green hills, fertile valleys, and soft winds. Referring to his mother's memories and words, he explains: "I was seeing through her eyes, as she had seen them. She had given me her eyes to see." For Juan Preciado, the experience of seeing and hearing what possibly is not there leads to disorientation, to sickness, to death. For readers, however, the disorientation leads to insight. By coming to terms with the ghosts of Comala, *Pedro Páramo* pushes readers toward a transformative knowledge of Mexican society and its historical struggles. More than a condemnation of the land baron Pedro Páramo alone (although the novel does condemn his cruelty), the novel portrays Pedro as well as all the inhabitants of Comala in their frustrated desires, in their unsuccessful search to make lives of happiness and satisfaction on earth.

## Notes

1. Carol Clark D'Lugo, [The Fragmented Novel in Mexico: The Politics of Form](#) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 70-81.
2. An important line of thinking in the critical studies on *Pedro Páramo* explores the way that Rulfo's literary style "dissolves" the conventions of realist representation. Particularly useful on this point are two studies: Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "Relectura de Pedro Páramo," in *Narradores de esta América, II* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Alfa Argentina, 1974), 174-191, and Maribel Tamargo, "El poder subversivo de la escritura: Una lectura de *Pedro Páramo*," in *De la crónica a la nueva narrativa*, ed. Merlin H. Forster and Julio Ortega (Mexico City: Editorial Oasis, 1986), 277-284.
3. Jorge Ruffinelli's edition of Juan Rulfo's *Obra completa* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1977) and Claude Fell's edition of Juan Rulfo's *Toda la obra* (Paris: ALLCA XXe, 1992) in the impeccable Colección Archivos provide excellent overviews of and selections from this abundant criticism as well as detailed bibliographies. Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann's *Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin American Writers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) and Roffé's book cited in note 8 below are excellent sources of biographical information about the author. Leonardo Martínez Carrizales has anthologized the early reviews and reception of Juan Rulfo's writing in *Juan Rulfo, los caminos de la fama pública: Juan Rulfo ante la crítica literario-periodística de México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998). For an English-language introduction to Rulfo's work, the chapter on Rulfo in Joseph Sommers' *After the Storm: Landmarks of the Modern Mexican Novel* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968) and Luis Leal's *Juan Rulfo* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983) are excellent points of departure.
4. Jorge Ruffinelli's "Los hijos de Pedro Páramo," *Texto Crítico* 1.1 (1975): 89-106, explores these three sons—Juan Preciado, Miguel Páramo, and Abundio Martínez—as key points of reference in the social and psychological significance of Pedro Páramo.
5. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.
6. For the interview with Sacabo, consult Jon Newlin, "Invisible Realities of Dream and Meaning: The Photographs of Josephine Sacabo," *Photography Quarterly* 19.4 (2000): 10-13. I cite Sacabo's description from a card that accompanies the boxed proofs of the sequence for potential collectors and exhibitors. The sequence was first exhibited at A Gallery for Fine Photography in New Orleans in 1996 and 1997. *El mundo inalcanzable de Susana San Juan* has also traveled to the International Art Fair in Basel, Switzerland (June 11-18, 1997), the Gallery of Contemporary Photography at the Bergamot Station Arts Center in Santa Monica, California (August 1-September 5, 1998), and the Teatro de San Martín in Buenos Aires (August 3-September 5, 1999).
7. Elena Poniatowska, "Sacabo y Rulfo," unpublished essay from 2001, translated by Connie Todd.
8. José E. Iturriaga, *La estructura social y cultural de México*, 1951 (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública "Cien de México," 1987), 19-27.
9. Reina Roffé, *Juan Rulfo: Autobiografía armada* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1973), 600-61. The translation is mine.
10. Recent studies of *Pedro Páramo* have begun to emphasize in a new manner the ways in which Rulfo's novel is a critique of Mexican modernity. Charles Boyer's chapter on *Pedro Páramo* in "Revolution and Romance: Social Change and Desire in Mexican Narrative, 1955-1989" (dissertation, University of Kansas, 1999), explores the relationship between desire and modernization, and Patrick Dove, "'Exígele lo nuestro': Deconstruction, Restitution and the Demand of Speech in *Pedro Páramo*," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 10.1 (2001): 25-44, examines the relationship between nation-building and modernity.