



DOI: 10.2478/genst-2024-0012

BOOK REVIEW:

CAMILLA SUTHERLAND.

***THE SPACE OF LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN MODERNISTS*. CARDIFF: UNIVERSITY OF WALES PRESS, SERIES: IBERIAN AND LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES, 2024, 205 PAGES. ISBN 9781837721085 (HARDCOVER)**

ADRIAN TAYLOR KANE

Boise State University

adriankane@boisestate.edu

In *The space of Latin American women modernists*, Camilla Sutherland analyzes the literary and artistic production of eight women from Latin America: Argentinian printmaker Norah Borges and Argentinian writers Victoria Ocampo and Norah Lange; Mexican painter Frida Kahlo; Bolivian sculptor Marina Núñez del Prado; Chilean writers Gabriela Mistral and María Luisa Bombal; and Spanish-Mexican painter Remedios Varo. Specifically, Sutherland argues that “modernist women’s artistic careers involved overcoming spatial boundaries and that their thematic treatments of space contributed to a reframing of gendered spaces and identity” (p. xviii). She thus examines how cultural shifts provoked by modernity – such as the rapid development of urban centers and the invention of new modes of transportation – impacted the coding of gendered spaces, and how Latin American women writers and artists responded to these new spatial configurations by constructing their identities as artists through distinctly spatial strategies. The book contains an introduction, four chapters, and an afterword. The twenty-nine visual images that accompany her analysis are helpful for orienting the reader to the spatial strategies under examination. The four

chapters are organized around the spatial themes of domestic architecture, the public sphere, the natural world, and travel.

Chapter one, “Upon the Threshold: Reconsidering the Modernist Home,” examines the home as a symbolic space and an “essential component of spatial vocabulary used in the reassessment of private life, gender identity and creative praxis” (p.1). For example, Sutherland deftly demonstrates how Norah Lange’s 1937 autobiographical work *Cuadernos de infancia* (*Childhood notebooks*) contests the boundaries between private and public space. She reads a scene in which the teenage protagonist, clad in a men’s hat and poncho, climbs on to the roof of the kitchen to shout for the neighbors to hear as a “comment on the woman artist’s need to actively challenge traditional gender roles” (p. 2). Moreover, she argues, the space of the kitchen roof is a liminal space, simultaneously a part of the home and apart from it, in which the artist interacts with the public sphere. Further examples of the importance of domestic architecture in this chapter include the symbolism of windows and doors, which serve as both thresholds to the public sphere as well as impediments to it. Sutherland reads Lange’s 1950 novel *Personas en la sala* (*People in the room*), which is framed according to what happens in front of the protagonist’s window, as a metaphor for the forced proximity of the modern urban environment. As with the in-between space of the kitchen rooftop in *Cuadernos de infancia*, the act of gazing out the window and occasionally being watched alludes to “a form of liminal existence” that is explored in several of the works analyzed. A further example that Sutherland notes is Norah Borges’s 1930 print *Paisaje de Buenos Aires* (*Landscape of Buenos Aires*), in which women are similarly positioned “on the brink between interior and exterior, between domestic and public space” (p. 13). Contrasting their positioning with the central image of the male statue of San Martín, she contends that Borges’s work is reflective of gender hierarchies and the limits placed on women in Argentina at the time. In addition to the liminal spaces inhabited by women in Latin American modernism, this chapter explores “architectures of escape” that allude to the theme of emergence and women’s desire for emancipation from restrictive gender roles. Here she offers Remedios Varo’s painting *Ruptura* (1950) and her undated drawing *Ancestros* as examples (p. 17). In the former, a woman appears to be escaping down a staircase from the confinement of a colonial era building. In the latter, “an androgynous figure with a bicycle wheel in place of legs” flees toward the viewer in a movement from “a space of constriction to one of greater openness” (p. 22). In sum, in the works studied in

this chapter, “domestic architecture becomes a key trope to explore the shifts in social relations occurring during the modern age” (p. 14). In doing so, these works depict a transitional moment in women’s history in Latin American when traditional gender roles were being contested and women increasingly asserted their right to participate in the public sphere, including through artistic expression.

Chapter two, “Mother Earth Remapped,” analyzes the use of natural landscapes as sites for “the construction of gendered, national and artistic identities” (p. xxxv). Sutherland is particularly interested in the notion of recuperating nature as “a productive realm for feminist creative praxis” (p. 41), arguing that these Latin American women’s work was part of a modernist testing of the boundaries between nature and culture. She analyzes Gabriela Mistral’s *Poema de Chile* (posthumously published in 1967), suggesting that the natural landscape is central to the poetic voice’s identity as a Chilean and Latin American. Similarly, she asserts that Frida Kahlo’s 1936 painting *Mis abuelos, mis padres y yo (Árbol genealógico)* [*My grandparents, my parents, and I (Family tree)*], “carefully interweaves, family, nation and landscape” by incorporating natural imagery such as the *nopal* cactus and Mexican desertscapes (p. 50). Sutherland also observes a tendency to reappropriate discourses of fertility among these Latin American women artists. She proposes, for example, that Kahlo’s 1943 painting *Raíces (Roots)* “utilizes images of biological fecundity to underscore her autochthonous identity and agency, advocating women’s creativity beyond mere motherhood” (p. 57). Sutherland also interprets several of Marina Núñez del Prado’s sculptures, such as her 1957 *Virgen de Copacabana (Virgin of Copacabana)*, which appears to fuse a woman’s body with a mountain, as advocating for a central role for women artists in national and continental modernist projects. She further argues that Latin American women writers and artists sought to reframe the natural world as a site for sexual liberation and self-discovery, thereby undermining the discourse of female passivity. She offers Kahlo’s 1944 painting *La flor de la vida (The flower of life)* as a key example. Overall, Sutherland finds in the works studied in this chapter a rejection of traditional conceptions of women as passive objects in favor of a repositioning of women as both subject and object within the natural world, endowed with the agency for self-discovery and sexual liberation.

In the third chapter, “Cosmopolitan Promises: Travel, Exile, and Alterity,” the author asserts that “Latin American women’s narratives of travel reveal the complexity of directional

flows that characterized this era and question who had the right to claim an unanchored identity” (p. 82). She highlights the importance of international travel to all eight of the women studied in this book. In her analysis of Norah Lange’s 1933 novel *45 días y 30 marineros* (*45 days and 30 sailors*) the protagonist, Ingrid, travels from Buenos Aires to Oslo aboard a cargo ship. However, “Ingrid remains painfully inscribed by her gender. Lange’s protagonist escapes the limits of the local through a literal act of physical displacement but is never permitted to transcend the limits of the sexualised body. The female subject remains, thus, forever rooted in the provincialism of the corporeal” (p. 89). Sutherland finds in Remedio Varo’s oeuvre the theme of perpetual motion as a metaphor for the constant search for a physical and artistic home. She compares the notion of wandering in Varo’s work with Gabriela Mistral’s 1938 poem “País de la ausencia” (“Land of Absence”), concluding that, in contrast to the privileged artistic identity associated with modernist cosmopolitanism, “The *vagabunda* figure embodies the conflicted and uneasy position afforded to women during a period in which they were able to assert their presence in an increasingly expanding field and yet continued to feel perpetually out of place” (p. 98). The final section of this chapter is dedicated to the perception of Latin American women modernists as exotic others. Works such as Mistral’s 1938 poem “La extranjera” (“The female foreigner”) capture the angst of being misunderstood as either “barbarically animal or esoterically cosmic” (p. 99) yet Sutherland also points out that other artists, including Kahlo, Núñez del Prado, and Ocampo, at times took advantage of their perceived exoticism as a means of maintaining the interest of other intellectuals in avant-garde circles. In the chapter’s conclusion, Sutherland asserts, “The representation of journeying examined in these women’s works express a clear desire to harness the increased mobility brought by the modern age. Through this they dispute the established scope of women’s roles and experiences” (p. 117).

Whereas the previous chapters are illuminating for their analysis of the artistic strategies regarding the treatment of space in these women’s work, the fourth and final chapter, ““On the margins of the fray’: Situating Modernist Women in Print Media,” is revealing for its presentation of the blatant misogyny that Latin American women modernists had to contend with. This chapter thus focuses on the space of the cultural sphere in which these women lived and worked as the object of analysis. As evidence of the struggle for access to the cultural sphere, Sutherland begins by offering compelling data on the male-to-female participation rate in prominent journals,

anthologies, and museum exhibitions during the first half of the twentieth century. She then turns her attention to the critical reception of the eight Latin American women's work by contemporaneous male reviewers, who often relied on a series of spatial tropes that "relegated women practitioners to the private spheres of the domestic and the corporeal, and to the margins of artistic collectives and conceptualization of the modern more broadly" (p. 131). One of the common tropes she analyzes is the gendered opposition between exterior spaces, generally regarded as male territory, and interior spaces, construed as the female domain. To bolster her argument, Sutherland juxtaposes reviews of male modernist artists by the same critics, thus revealing a clear contrast in the use of spatial terminology to construct gendered spaces in these reviews. In the reviews offered as evidence, even when their work was praised, it was simultaneously attenuated through language that attempted to diminish its impact. She shows, for example, how male modernists were frequently praised for their skill, intellect, or genius, while women's creative successes were attributed to organic intuition. Another common trope in these reviews was the female body as receptacle, an image that aligns "women artists' creative skill with their potential for reproduction," thus excluding them from the intellectual realm (p. 141). Sutherland further examines the repeated conflation of the artistic beauty of their work with the physical beauty of the artists themselves. The implication is that "The female artist herself is deemed a suitable object for aesthetic scrutiny," thus diluting the impact of their artistic creation (p. 147). Moreover, characterizing the Latin American avant-garde as a fraternity, replete with macho, occasionally violent discourse, Sutherland makes a persuasive case that the cultural sphere of modernism in Latin America was constructed as a gendered space to which women practitioners had limited access. The chapter's final section, "Anachronistic and Anomalous Positionings," reveals how male reviewers frequently presented Latin American women modernists as exceptional and isolated instances while others compared them to artists in bygone eras to maintain them at a distance from the fraternity of the avant-garde. The author concludes, "The profound ambivalence evidenced in the reception of women's work by male reviewers reveals the extent to which the ground of the cultural field was shifting uncomfortably beneath their feet" (p. 134).

One of the study's stated aims is "to open up lines of communication across disciplinary boundaries that have until recently been hampered by linguistic and terminological obstacles" (p. xvii). The book succeeds in this endeavor by making significant contributions to the fields of

gender studies, Latin American studies, literary criticism, art history, and modernist studies. Importantly, *The space of Latin American women modernists* takes a step toward rectifying the uneven presence of Latin American women in scholarly accounts of modernism due to both gendered struggle and geopolitical marginalization. In doing so, Sutherland challenges the accepted modernist canon, making a persuasive argument that the Latin American women artists under examination made valuable aesthetic contributions to the trans-Atlantic dialogue on modernism. This study would likely be of interest to scholars of Modernism, Feminism, Art History, and Latin American Literary Criticism. It could fit well in advanced undergraduate courses or graduate seminars in any of these fields. It is thoroughly researched and productively dialogues with previous scholarship on modernism and the Latin American avant-garde. Sutherland's analysis of these multi-modal works is profoundly insightful and presents a compelling narrative about the ways in which these Latin American women modernists used space as means of remapping female subjectivity during an era of vertiginous change in Latin American societies.

Adrian Taylor KANE is professor of Spanish at Boise State University. He is the author of *Central American Avant-Garde Narrative: Literary Innovation and Cultural Change* (Amherst: Cambria, 2014) and editor of *The Natural World in Latin American Literatures: Ecocritical Essays on Twentieth-Century Writings* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010). His research fields include Central American literature, the Latin American avant-garde, and Latin American environmental literature.