

Nancy LaGreca. *Erotic Mysticism: Subversion and Transcendence in Latin American Modernista Prose*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016. 179 pp. ISBN 978-1-4696-3077-9.

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Nancy LaGreca's new critical volume, *Erotic Mysticism: Subversion and Transcendence in Latin American Modernista Prose* (2016), provides a new interpretive lens for the mystical imagery and themes present in many modernist and, particularly, decadentist texts of Latin America. LaGreca's ability to tie such works into larger literary, existential, and scientific trends of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helps craft a stimulating analysis that reveals the *Modernistas* as important players in rewriting ideas surrounding sexuality, faith, death, and artistic production by using the imagery of erotic mysticism. In tracing the separation between modernist mystic and erotic tropes and those traditionally found in Catholic works throughout the introduction to her book, LaGreca aims to present "non-theistic mysticism" (16) as borne of Modernism's "fetishization of sensual beauty in all its permutations" (15). Here, LaGreca proposes that the separation of erotic mysticism from both religious and scientific developments proffered political commentary in three ways: 1) a critique of positivism through the exploration of sensuality and the metaphysical sublime, 2) a break with Catholic discourse to instead explore other existentialist and mystic philosophies, and 3) a rebuke of the requirement of a belief in God to seek immortality and a connection with natural forces (20). Such an approach to the erotic and, in Max Nordeau's view, "degenerate" elements of *Modernismo* dialogues with the continually evolving interpretation of the movement's social and political critiques, as LaGreca details (34). *Erotic Mysticism's* analysis thus promises a fresh assessment of some of the thornier aspects of mysticism and the decadent aesthetic.

Following the introduction, LaGreca's study takes readers on a journey through the often subtle mystical images present in some modernist Latin American prose works in five chapters analyzing different approaches to erotic mysticism utilized by both canonical and non-canonical authors. The chapters feel well-organized and are subdivided to facilitate comparison between the different authors and texts discussed.

The volume is a relatively quick read that finishes with a brief conclusion linking the five primary authors LaGreca considers to one another.

In the first chapter, “The Context of Non-Theistic Erotic Mysticism,” Nancy LaGreca further defines tensions between scientific and religious modalities of thought and the impact they had on modernist writers. Citing positivist texts that were critical of erotic desire, the author describes how prescriptive moralistic restrictions caused a variety of sexually deviant themes to emerge in Latin American prose in reaction to the stifling environment. She also believes that these oppressive forces occasioned more homoerotic writing, as authors covertly considered questions of sexuality and gender. While Positivism grew, LaGreca argues that Catholicism was losing its grip on Latin American politics and society, as seen in the religious versus secular education debate occurring in many countries. She explains how Catholic philosophies worked in conflicting ways, and, while also discouraging sexuality, did popularize mysticism again during the discussion of Catholicism’s relevance. The deviant popularity of sexually suggestive art and literature, coupled with renewed attention to mystic texts, thus provided fodder for a new erotic mysticism, according to LaGreca.

Chapter 2, “Theories of Non-Theistic Mysticism in Essayistic Prose,” delves into textual analysis by focusing on the essays of two lesser-known modernist writers, Carlos Díaz Dufoo and Manuel Díaz Rodríguez. Here, LaGreca argues that these authors examined modernity and distanced themselves from organized religion through erotic and sentient ways of being and a decadent aesthetic. The authors’ immersion in the natural world and the connection with spirituality through the erotic and the possibility of death figure centrally in Díaz Dufoo’s contributions to *Revista Azul* and in Díaz Rodríguez’s *Camino de Perfección*, according to LaGreca’s examples. In her third chapter, “Decadence Under Cover,” LaGreca turns to fiction and assesses *Resurrección* by José María Rivas Groot. Despite the novel’s conservative guise, LaGreca demonstrates that Rivas Groot’s use of decadent and artistic tropes, particularly music, relates to the novel’s homosocial and homoerotic tension. In LaGreca’s view, pagan and early Christian ideas also pervade the narrative and thus contribute to another version of erotic mysticism in conjunction with the homosocial and decadent aspects of the purportedly conservative text.

The final two chapters (four and five) focus on Zolia Aurora Caceres’ *La rosa muerta* and Enrique Gómez Carrillo’s *El evangelio del amor* respectively. In LaGreca’s approximation to Caceres, she highlights subversive aspects of *La rosa muerta* that promoted women’s erotic pleasure, the association of pain with sexuality and spirituality, and the idea of sacrifice for love in the novel, all of which she connects again to the text’s central theme. The idea of death and renewal, treated at the end of the fourth chapter, provides a new approach for finding feminist elements in this contradictory novel that some critics have described as playing into outmoded women’s roles. In the chapter on Gómez Carrillo, LaGreca deconstructs the interpretations of *El evangelio* as religious to show how the novel repeatedly undermines the Catholic

symbolism it employs in favor of a spiritual approach based in erotic oneness with the world and in the renegotiation of gender binaries. These two chapters therefore provide other possible examples of erotic mysticism using texts that LaGreca reads somewhat differently from other critics.

LaGreca ends the tome with a reflection on the pervasive nature of erotic mysticism in popular narratives of Modernism in “Subversion, Transcendence, and the Ongoing Quest for Blissful Unity.” This brief conclusion also calls for renewed study of the texts she discusses and others of the period. Since these writings were at the forefront of changing discourse surrounding religion, modernity, sexuality, and gender in Latin America, LaGreca argues that they merit much more attention in contemporary critical dialogue.

In sum, *Erotic Mysticism* often intrigues the reader by offering new, creative ways of interpreting some of the contradictory or surprising passages of Latin American modernist fiction. LaGreca achieves the text’s stated goals of tracing sexual, sensual, spiritual, and religious influences of the period, although one wishes for more on modernist poetry, which is outside of the study’s scope. *Erotic Mysticism* blazes new trails by reconsidering two essays and several novels of the era, which had contradictory messages but can be deciphered as progressive in their questioning of gender and religious norms. Ideally, LaGreca’s study will invite new readings of modernist fiction and poetry in the graduate classroom and among scholars in the field.