

## Book Review/Reseña

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**Stephanie Saunders. *Fashion, Gender and Agency in Latin American and Spanish Literature*. Suffolk, UK: Tamesis, 2021.**

Stephanie Saunders' *Fashion, Gender and Agency in Latin American and Spanish Literature* (2021) is an important and welcome contribution to a field that is finally gaining traction. Not since Regina Root's *Couture and Consensus: Fashion and Politics in Postcolonial Argentina* (2010) has a book-length volume been published that places literature at the forefront of fashion scholarship in the region.

Saunders examines an engaging selection of contemporary literary works in which the seamstress—a formerly popular literary type forgotten in the dustbin of early twentieth-century memory—reemerges as a protagonist whose valuable skills enable positive change for self and community. The author contends that, while the nineteenth and early twentieth century represented the seamstress as a “dangerous” feminine identity associated with middle-class economic downfall and a potential slip into prostitution, more contemporary cultural productions recast the figure as a dynamic force for change pushing gender, artistic, geographic, socioeconomic, and political boundaries.

Following spatial theory as utilized by Susan Carvalho in *Contemporary American Novels by Women: Mapping the Narrative* (2007), Saunders sets out to explore rootedness and displacement, noting that in her chosen texts sewing and needlework allow protagonists to explore forbidden spaces and thus break through socially prescribed gender norms. Since her corpus consists mainly of novels in historical settings, the author recalls Carolyn Woolfenzon's *Muerte de Utopía: Historia, antihistoria e insularidad en la novela latinoamericana* (2016) to underscore how the texts tend to romanticize textile arts through temporal distancing but also encourage contemplation of pressing contemporary problems.

In Chapter 1, Saunders further grounds her study in fashion theory and the global dynamics of fashion consumption and production today. Relying on Lars Svendsen's *Fashion: A Philosophy* (2006) as well as Gilles Lipovetsky's *The Empire of Fashion* (1994) and *Hypermodern Times* (2005), the author reminds us that fashion is more than garments worn for protection; it is a system of cultural messages that arose in the nineteenth century with the industrialization of garment production and came to be seen as the linchpin of Western modernity. Since the 1960s, when ready-to-wear garments became available, fashion has come to signal a state of "hypermodernity" as intense demand fuels a global system of fast fashion in which, instead of seasonal fashion collections, new inventory circulates throughout the year. As Saunders details, while this system has "democratized" fashion by making it available to more people globally, it also contributes to environmental devastation, human rights violations, global inequality, and cultural displacement. Here and in the book's conclusion, the author explores more sustainable ways to participate in the fashion system, making evident her ethical concerns while also acknowledging the reader as a potential consumer and change agent.

In the chapters focused on literature, Saunders adeptly straddles high and popular culture. Chapter 2 examines Spanish author María Dueñas' novel *El tiempo entre costuras* [*The Time in Between*] (2009), which inspired a television series and has been translated into twenty-five languages. In this novel, set between the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, the protagonist finds economic freedom and the opportunity to intervene in politics as a spy, thanks to her dressmaking skills. Chapter 3 turns to César Aira's *La costurera y el viento* [*The Seamstress and the Wind*] (1994), a nontraditional exploration of Argentina's Patagonia in which a seamstress's skills enable her to depart from the gendered confines of her small town to experience a vast and surreal terrain. Chapter 4 is devoted to Pedro Lemebel's only novel, *Tengo miedo torero* [*My Tender Matador*] (2001), set around the time of an attempted assassination of Augusto Pinochet in 1986. Its cross-dressing protagonist, "La Loca del Frente," transgresses multiple boundaries as her success in needlework leads her out of the brothel and into formerly forbidden socioeconomic and political spaces.

In Chapter 5, the discussion turns to Brazilian author Frances de Pontes Peebles' *A Costureira e o Cangaceiro* [*The Seamstress*] (2009), a novel which was adapted for a film and a miniseries and has been translated into nine languages. Set in the Brazilian Northeast in the early twentieth century, it follows two sisters whose sewing skills lead them along widely divergent paths, one achieving social standing and economic independence, the other gaining a leadership role in a band of rural outlaws. Lastly, Chapter 6 discusses five recently published titles aimed at children in Latin America and Spain, which the author views as fulfilling a pedagogical purpose through sartorial characters who inspire reflection on ethnic and sexual equality,

vocational purpose, and international peace. In the literary analysis sections, some readers might find misspellings in Spanish-language quotes to be distracting; others will appreciate the author's faithful English translations from Spanish and Portuguese, which allow a wider audience to follow the discussion.

Saunders' book is remarkably coherent despite its broad range. The discussion shines when the novels involve characters drawn in a psychological light, as with the works by Dueñas, de Pontes Peebles, and Lemebel, where it is clearest that the protagonists' engagement in textile arts facilitates their empowerment and social mobility against gender expectations. Aira's novel is elegantly discussed, but it appears somewhat resistant to this reading, possibly because there is a more abstract notion of character at play, and also, perhaps, because of the role of sexual violence in the narrative and the distancing effects of the narrator's ironic descriptions of the seamstress. The novel makes sense in this corpus nonetheless, because Saunders presents it in the context of travel writing about the Patagonia—a geographic and imaginative space that the seamstress does traverse rather unconventionally.

Another strength of this book is the detailed contextualization of the literary works, whether in relevant sociopolitical frameworks or in terms of artistic tradition. The author makes clear how the figure of the seamstress works to make historical circumstances resonate in current contexts. An exception might be the chapter on *A Costureira e o Cangaceiro*, which curiously does not delve into how this particular novel intervenes in the tradition of literary representations of the Brazilian Northeast. Additionally, while the chapter on children's literature is rich and well framed in terms of the challenges of defining the genre and its traditional didactic character, the panoramic text selection might gel less easily for the nonexpert; the inclusion of well-known literary works which adopt a childlike perspective but are not usually considered children's literature, such as Rosario Ferré's "El cuento envenenado," might confound as it signals the porosity of the genre.

The fact that these two chapters might be most rewarding to readers with prior command of the narrative traditions in which they are embedded does not detract from the value of the book's original, interdisciplinary connections, which should appeal to a broad audience. For the reader exploring literature and material culture, for instance, the passages in which Saunders discusses fictitious textile creations and their narrative significance—such as the bridal dress in Aira, the counterfeit Delphos in Dueñas, or the embroidered tablecloth in Lemebel, to name a few—are choice moments for grasping the fascinating connections between textile work, writing, and acting upon the world.

In her introduction, Saunders quotes fashion scholar Valerie Steele's remark that the study of dress cannot be separated from women's history. The inclusion of children's

literature in this book indirectly touches on an understudied facet of that history: women's traditional work rearing and educating children. Saunders acknowledges the lasting legacies of textile arts such as the centuries-old *molos* of the Kuna / Guna and Chilean *arpilleras* and discusses a handful of available nineteenth- and early-twentieth century literary texts from Latin America and Spain depicting the difficult socioeconomic realities of women needleworkers. She rightly points to the dearth of scholarship, when compared to the Anglo-American context, on women's domestic work and its artistic representation in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Spain and Latin America.

Saunders' work effectively sheds light on twenty-first century interpretations while suggesting avenues for further inquiry. Additionally, intertwined with Saunders' fine literary analysis is a consideration of the exploitative nature of contemporary fashion cycles and garment production—processes that continue to rely on human labor and expertise despite their industrialized character. In this manner, the author humanizes and values anew the work of textile professionals, past and present. This is an altogether well written and incisive title that should grace many library collections and syllabi in years to come.

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