

Examining Place and Process in *Penthouse in Bogotá* by Virginia Paxton

Ricardo D. Salvatore writes about North American travelers to South America in the post-independence period stating that their gaze was drawn to romanticize the natural world and their documentation was presented as objective observation of new and different customs.¹ Virginia Paxton's travel account of Bogotá, Colombia in the early 1930s appears to deviate from this norm suggested by Salvatore. Perhaps time had changed perspective, or perhaps gender and purpose provided new avenues, but attention to detail and physical layout are notably lacking. Examining Paxton's background and travel purpose suggests links to the choices she makes with the material included in her account. But, more significant than the selected subject material itself is the methodology and process she employs to make connections with these selections: connections between self and environment and connections between the reader and a distant time and space. Paxton's primary method of communicating the urban and social landscape is through anecdotes of daily interactions, not through a romantic world view. These situational descriptions shine light on the physical environment, but through emotions and language tools give precedence to social aspects and conflicts, where Paxton acknowledges her subjectivity.

Virginia Paxton's presence and purpose in Bogotá center on her husband's assignment as an international correspondent for the Associated Press. This is not only Paxton's first visit to Colombia, but her first international travel experience. At the beginning she does not even know where Colombia is located, let alone that its capital city is named Bogotá (3). This information alerts the reader that the author is not an experienced traveler and has no predetermined agenda in writing this text. While her husband picks up the news, and sends out word of political and social events, Virginia writes about her everyday life as an educated, North American woman in

¹ Ricardo Salvatore, "North American Travel Narratives and the Ordering/Othering of South America (c. 1810-1860)" *Journal of Historical Sociology*, March 1996, 85-110.

Bogotá. For her, significant, word worthy events include keeping house, shopping on the streets, caring for her sick son, and changes in her family's diet. Her text is a chronicle, not only of experiencing a new place, but of creating her own place in a new context as she sets up house and lives her daily life.

In addition to her background, the development of Paxton's ideas surrounding Bogotá is important to note as part of the conscious[?] that the author brings to her first encounters. Paxton incorporates her emotions into her descriptions to articulate developing fears. She writes, "We were frightened. Facing the unknown and listening to unpleasant rumors about the city which was to be our home, we were disturbed." (5). She includes the comments of the other travelers, allowing the reader to grasp an element of the fear that she carried in her mind as she set foot in Bogotá. Warnings about the cold, the darkness, slums, contaminated water, and the altitude create the image of an isolated city of "The Middle Ages" (5). These descriptions of a city she knows little or nothing about serve as an important part of the text against which Paxton later examines the city itself and her own experience in it.

Continuing deeper into the account, one can quickly see that Paxton chooses to emphasize the social and cultural landscape of Bogotá over the physical appearance and layout, yet various examples do arise in her text to help the reader understand the urban landscape. Paxton neglects details and cardinal directions, opting instead to present the physical aspects of Bogotá only as she interacts with them. One might be hard pressed to map any section of the city after reading her account, but still come away with a good feeling of how it felt to walk down the streets and have a distinct image of the inner walls of Paxton's home or the city shops.

One of Paxton's first ventures into the streets of Bogotá and interactions with its landscape provides a glimpse at the city's physical self. She begins her segment on shopping

dubbing the experience an adventure with a “capital A” (once again giving priority to the emotional and social). The streets are busy, the sidewalks narrow, specific types of people are located on corners, and shop windows are a complete random conglomeration (89). She chooses to briefly mention the slums up the side streets, but maintains her focus on the main streets where she stops to make purchases. In describing these physical places, she begins by emphasizing what they are not. They are not supermarkets or specialty shops or department stores. In short they are not the landscape of the average North American city. She initiates her descriptions through contrast with her past physical landscape. This serves to separate here from there, while as the same time reminds the reader of the perspectives and norms she carries with her. The account states, “It is as if someone took all the merchandise in the city, stirred it up with a huge stick, tossed it into the air, and let it fall where it listed. Your first search resembles a treasure hunt with no clues.” (90). This statement leaves the reader in similar position that Paxton finds herself in, unable to place or name anything. The account chooses to convey few details of layout or structure, but instead imparts the feeling of Bogotá on a virgin visitor.

Transitioning from physical space to social and cultural elements, Paxton uses everyday interactions as teaching tools for both her own adjustment, being forced to evolve within a new environment that conflicts with the old, and to aid in the reader’s attempt to cross over the strangeness barrier to examine a new world and reflect on his or her own. As a middle class housewife, Paxton finds herself being elevated socially in her new Colombian context. It appears that she encounters ² two different types of culture shock and adjustment that she ⁰ choose to record: keep verb
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constant one, the sensory and isolating aspects of her experience (often connected to the physical), and two, the transition into a somewhat contradictory position of elite prestige.

Paxton does not explicitly state her new social status but chooses to document individual

examples of her discomfort or surprise in her new social position. Or, perhaps it would be better said that it is not simply a new social position that presents difficult adjustments, but an ambiguity of social place. She writes of the confusion of functioning within, or even finding, that position on this new social ladder. She demonstrates this uncertainty and conflict of past and new social norms when she describes a conversation she has ^{with whom?} regarding house help:

- I don't know. I haven't been out in it [Bogotá] yet. Mike comes first.
- Of course. Must get you a maid.
- I'm going to take care of him and do our housework myself. I always have.
- My dear... you can't, not here. Custom of the country. It demeans you husband's position... if they look down on his wife because she works as a servant. (52)

This dialogue demonstrates the translocation of her past experience and social norms onto a new setting. These are questioned and eventually modified to fit a well positioned Colombian woman.

In another example, Paxton notes the narrow space of the city sidewalks as she proceeds to describe her first confrontation with two Colombian *señoras*. Paxton squeezes up against the wall to allow them by single file, but the women refuse to move, indicating her role to step into the streets to allow them passage and emphasizing Paxton's status as a foreigner and intruder in their space (90-91). Paxton brings elements of her own personality and a generalization of North-American women into her reading of the situation. Yet, it is important to recognize that these elements are not simply detected by the reader, she clearly acknowledges the presence of these influences on her actions and perceptions. She is conscious of her "Scotch stubbornness" and very openly expresses her American pride in not being pushed around. Through this account, Paxton also allows the reader to see the process of her own cultural adjustment. She does not simply present the details of the encounter, but explains her attitudes and what she learned from it. In retrospect, she writes, "It was not polite of me. It was not courteous. I never did it again.... I was the intruder, and thereafter I stepped into the street" (91). Paxton is able to admit her

defiance and modify her behavior. This segment demonstrates her recognition of place and a willingness to abandon the constructs of her own past place to function within a new one.

The use of specific language serves as another important tool in Paxton's methodology. Paxton utilizes past, and assumed common, experiences as metaphor for her audience. The physical aspect of Paxton's travel is expressed in her text through this technique to help the reader understand incongruence between here, the United States, and there, Bogotá. For example, she compares her body's physical response to the extreme altitude to the feeling of looking in at oneself in an amusement park concave mirror (48). This illustration depends on shared common experience with the reader to promote understanding of difference. In expressing a moment of disorientation and distortion she seems to seek out a similar moment that will allow her to make sense of this new situation and at the same time allow others to participate in it.

The same methodology is again used later in the book when she writes: "Were you ever a wallflower, back in those gangling self-conscious days of your adolescence? If so, then you know how it feels to be the only *extranjera* surround by Latin American women" (184). She speaks directly to the reader and appeals to the common experience of adolescence to familiarize her audience with the awkwardness of the social setting and her own emotions. These situational metaphors reduce the strangeness factor for both the author and reader, past and current, by leveling common ground. The author maintains connections with her home country and past experience while at the same time provokes a nod of understanding from the reader who has had such thoughts and easily recounts similar emotions. She moves the reader across time and space, allowing him or her to experience Bogotá instead of simply seeing it through second-hand eyes.

The anecdotes and methodology of *Penthouse in Bogotá* give us a picture, the feeling, of the city's urban space and social strata, but even more clearly they give us an image of human

movement provoking the dynamic interaction of time and place. Paxton presents an interesting dichotomy. She must abandon former place in order to understand and interact with new physical and social landscapes while, at the same time, become more aware of that former place, using its nuances and metaphors to categorize and function within a previously undefined context. As I read her account, I was continually drawn back to the ideas of Sam Wineburg surrounding the paradox of historical thinking.² The author, in experiencing, and the audience, in reading, must wrestle with her own awareness of time and space to understand the realities of another. So, does geographic thinking about travel and urban spaces, of which history is an integral part, warrant a similar cognitive process? For both Paxton and her readers, it does.

An excellent discussion that not only reveals the various landscapes encountered by the author, but also engages the methodological readings in meaningful way. Very well written. Fine job of illuminating the cultural and social contexts experienced by the author during her sojourn.

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² Sam Wineburg, *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts : charting the future of teaching the past*. Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 2001. 3-27.

Wineburg comments that we naturally superimpose our own present on our views and understanding of the past. He suggests that we must become aware of this natural act in order to pursue the unnatural manner of thinking that sets this aside and confronts one's own ignorance in order to better understand the past. Here I am suggesting that time can be substituted and/or added to this equation of unnatural thinking.