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Monica Bravo, *Greater American Camera: Making Modernism in Mexico*

New Haven and London, Yale University Press

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- 1 There is no shortage of scholarship on emblematic “American” photographers Edward Weston, Paul Strand and Tina Modotti, and their relationships with Mexican culture in the 1920s and 1930s — most notably their influence on Manuel Alvarez Bravo. In numerous monographs and exhibitions dedicated to their careers, Mexican travels always emerge as a defining moment. Yet, from Rebeca Zurier’s *Photographs of Mexico: Modotti/Strand/Weston* (1978) to James Krippner’s *Paul Strand in Mexico* (2010), through various biographies attempting to follow Modotti’s adventurous life, previous studies have tended to suggest a fairly unilateral, North-South circulation of photographic innovation and skills, besides crediting Weston and Modotti with “having introduced new techniques and approaches to photography in Mexico” (Locke A., 2013: 112), thus paving the way for Mexican photographers to adapt modernism to a national culture marked by *indigenismo*.
- 2 Monica Bravo’s *Greater American Camera* builds on the existing literature, but the illustration placed at the beginning of her essay — a postcard sent from California by Paul Strand to his mentor Alfred Stieglitz in May 1916 — signals a very different conversation. This postcard reaffirms as much as it destabilizes the central importance of national culture, history and art in the constitution of “American” photography. The front is printed with the photograph of an old Mission, part of California’s Hispanic heritage, while the postmark commemorating the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition echoes the United States’ imperialist ambitions. “Everything is extremely

American,” Strand wrote on the back, adding, “You know what this means.” Strand’s America looked to the South as much as stretched U.S. culture from East to West. In this context, Bravo’s main contention is that “what America meant” was subject to considerable reevaluation in the following decades. As the two World Wars called for a redefinition of transatlantic relations, modernism in North America — including, but not limited to, photographic modernism — took it as one of its missions to forge a “Greater America.” The book’s ambition is to trace the contours of this new, transnational understanding of what “America” was. Mexico-based artists of different origins did not simply influence one another, Bravo suggests, but they also shared similar concerns about history and modernity, integrating limited strands of European influence into a larger American culture that was continental in scope rather than strictly national.

- 3 In this context, Mexico City needs to be reevaluated as a vibrant, global capital (10) whose role was no less crucial than that of Paris or New York, notably because it became the center of new inter-American visions and a “hemispheric form of belonging” (viii). Photography’s fluidity and mobility made it a symbol of the time, as well as a potent medium for transnational cultural exchanges and the exploration of a new cultural geography (16). Throughout this beautifully designed and illustrated book, the interplay between images and numerous references reaching across chapters helps bring to the fore these cultural links and inter-American dialogues.
- 4 At first glance, however, one might find that the structure of the book does not completely do justice to Bravo’s ambitious and innovative proposition. If Mexico City was a place which concentrated a vigorous cultural scene and if, indeed, the visual and poetic language that heralded “Greater America” relied on questions of place, indigenous culture and the dialectics of avant-garde and tradition (5), then dividing the book in four chapters ostensibly devoted to individual photographers — Weston, Modotti, Strand, and more surprisingly, Helen Levitt — somehow runs the risk of diluting questions of circulations and exchange within discrete case studies.
- 5 As Bravo’s interest lies explicitly in intercultural exchanges, hybrid identity, and multidirectional influences and conversations, thematic or even chronological chapters might have been envisioned. For clarity’s sake, doubtless, a different approach was favored: the short introduction on “photography in Mexico” (10-18) makes it clear that the book is also intended for a larger audience. This being said, each chapter succeeds in providing fresh and provocative interpretations about each photographer’s new imagined “America” by focusing primarily on their interaction and collaboration with Mexican artists and intellectuals. All four case studies provide synthetic and highly readable accounts of the circumstances that led to the photographers’ visit to Mexico, followed by detailed analyses of specific instances of engagement with the local public, history, and culture as well as Mexico’s artistic scene. This multi-faceted panorama backs up Bravo’s claim that the Mexican modernist scene defined a “new form of American belonging” (217).
- 6 Chapter one reminds the reader of Edward Weston’s adoption by Mexico City’s cultural elite, and shows how his commissioned work for Anita Brenner’s *Idols Behind Altars* (1929) led him to a deeper appreciation of the symbiosis between the land and Mexico’s traditions, the vitality of folk culture, and the notion of *mestizaje*, all informed by racial categories that were pervasive on both sides of the border. Celebrated by Rivera as “the American artist” in the transnational meaning of the word (62, 69), inspired by his

friends in the muralist movement, he “fused his technologically progressive approach with elemental Indigenous or folk forms that had survived Mexico’s ancient past.” (69)

- 7 Moving on to Modotti, inseparable as always from Weston, Bravo reminds us that her nationality was “not self-evident” (82) and that various episodes in a life marked by migration and exile made her aware of how politically fraught such a notion could be. In Mexico, her interaction with Stridentist writers, including her contribution to their magazines and broadsheets, seems to hint at an ambivalent stand towards the modernization of the country. Grounding her analysis on the material conditions of photographic circulation on the one hand, and close readings of specific photographs on the other, Bravo depicts Modotti as torn between her ambition to connect to progressive vanguards on the global political scene (while in Mexico she contributed to illustrated magazines in the U.S. and in Europe) and her reluctance to accept some of the transformations wrought by modernity (116). Yet, according to Bravo, the fact that she abandoned photography after her exile suggests that Mexico had offered her a unique context for a form of political photopoetry that was both unabashedly propagandistic and yet uniquely creative.
- 8 Chapter three is devoted to Strand’s work in Mexico, both as photographer and filmmaker. Bravo’s recontextualization of Van Wyck Brooks’s concept of the “usable past” allows her to account for Strand’s gradual understanding of Mexican culture as integral to his own “Native Land” —the name Strand gave to his 1932 movie. As in the previous chapters, Bravo recounts the photographer’s integration in Mexico’s cosmopolitan capital, focusing on the fact that his friend, the composer Carlos Chávez, invited him to work for the Secretaría de Educación Pública. This, of course, is well-known. Yet Bravo’s assessment of this relation brings to light a convergence between the two men about what modernity could mean on the American continent. Some of the most interesting pages in the book revolve around the report written by Strand after a mission to survey artistic education in the state of Michoacán in 1933: the photographer’s interest in indigenous art is entirely devoid of sentimentality and testifies to a sense of history that is still severely lacking, even today, in many photographic representations of native cultures: “It seems to me necessary to realize that even with people that are called ‘primitive,’ they can no more return to their past [i.e., to create art or maintain their culture] than can a modern Greek or a modern Chinaman return to his” (quoted p. 129). Strand’s evolution from photographing the material culture of folk Catholicism to filming *Redes*, a story about fishermen rebelling against their exploitation by unscrupulous bosses, is not without ambiguities. Though Bravo finds his portrayal of indigenous people “moribund” and “inactive” (137), she shows that his work was anchored in a direct engagement with contemporary conditions in Mexico and his recognition of “Indian” peoples as the enduring core of Mexican culture. She argues that although they were both “steeped in a classicism that was not autochthonous to their national cultures,” both Strand and Chávez “stroved to produce a native modernism from this substructure, upon their own soil” (121).
- 9 The book’s fourth chapter is the most intriguing initially, as Helen Levitt, usually considered a New York street photographer, seems to have only incidental connections with Mexico, where she spent approximately three months in 1941. Bravo recounts the circumstances of this trip, which appears to have been largely dictated by her friendship with James Agee’s wife Alma rather than by a sustained interest in the culture or a clearly defined photographic project (167). In spite of this, Levitt becomes a

surprisingly convincing illustration of Bravo's point, as her "Mexico" is less a country across the border than a place inhabited by a transnational surrealist sensibility radiating all the way to Paris and New York. "Greater America," here, reverberates in visual and imaginative echoes found in photographs by Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, and especially Manuel Alvarez Bravo. This idea is not only inferred through formal similarities and parallels: although they are beautifully brought into relief by Bravo (see examples pages 189-195), these readings would remain inconclusive, to this reader at least, if they were not grounded in a detailed description of the networks and experiences that contributed to Levitt's cultural understanding and interpretation of Mexico as "the surrealist place by excellence" (André Breton, cited p. 173). The photographer actually discovered Mexico (and surrealism) in New York when she visited Julien Levy gallery's famous *Documentary and Anti-Graphic Photographs* exhibition in April 1935, long before she ever imagined she would go there. By mapping out the cultural context in which Levitt evolved (her familiarity with Cartier-Bresson's work; her collaboration with Buñuel and various surrealist magazines; etc.), Bravo convincingly argues that Alvarez-Bravo and Levitt partook in an informal, transnational movement that strove to "make photographs that were not emulative or worse, derivative, of European creations" (p. 204). The surrealist project was redefined in the context of Greater America by considering street life as a stage, mixing life and art, and using the camera to playfully suggest the limits of what can be seen.

- 10 Beyond the particular focus of each chapter, as outlined above, the overall argument is strengthened by the recurrence of certain themes and concerns. The place of indigenous cultures and the impact of modernity are evidently central to the discussion, but Bravo never forgets to flesh out the social and material conditions of the circulation and reception of people and images. At the end of this stimulating journey across Greater America, the conclusion also reminds the reader that several Mexican artists worked in the U.S. at the time to define this transnational modernism from a symmetrical perspective. In the current political context, Bravo's unapologetic claims about the "inextricability" of U.S. and Mexican art histories (6) makes it clear that conversations about the "greatness" of America have implications far beyond the realm of visual culture (ix). What remains unclear, perhaps, is the extent to which this extraordinarily creative moment of American modernism was able to shape durably the U.S. and Mexican perception of the continent's "hemispheric of identity." Moreover, in spite of the vitality of arts and culture across the border today, it seems doubtful whether the specific historical conditions which gave rise to this moment can a blueprint for a contemporary cultural renaissance of the "Greater America" idea.

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