
Public Space/Private Discourse

Discourses about public and private spaces and the separation of masculine and feminine activities circulated throughout nineteenth-century Spanish America. In fictional and nonfictional texts alike, writers addressed questions about male and female roles, the nature of domesticity, codes of conduct in the private and public spheres, and the connection between morality, gender, and the family. Recently work by cultural geographers has called attention to the specificity of place and its relationship to gender.¹ As Doreen Massey writes,

From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood. The limitation of women's mobility, in terms of both identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination. Moreover the two things—the limitation on mobility in space, the attempted consignment/confinement to particular places on the one hand, and the limitation on identity on the other, have been crucially related [. . .].

One of the most evident aspects of this joint control of spatiality and identity has been in the West related to the culturally specific distinction between public and private. The attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity. (188)

The emphasis on the physicality of what has often been envisioned in rather more abstract terms as the public and private spheres illuminates the

textual depictions of the spaces in which activities coded as “public” or “private” occur. Such representations may be read as enactments, enforcements, or subversions of accepted spatial practices. Specifically, I propose that in nineteenth-century Spanish America, the notions of public and private, while mapped onto exterior and interior spaces, respectively—the street and public institutions such as Congress, city hall, churches, and courts vs. the home in general and living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms in particular—are, in fact, slippery and uncontainable within those supposedly set parameters. The abstract concepts of public and private may be plotted onto exterior and interior, but the permeability of the barriers between exterior and interior means that private and public become enmeshed in ways represented as both positive and negative, sometimes simultaneously. Men may be free to roam outside, but private activities seep into that exterior landscape; women may be confined to the home (if indeed they are), but they bring public activities into it. Even the notion that one sex is empowered to occupy one type of space while the other is limited to a different type of space unravels in numerous texts; women occupy outside spaces and traverse streets and landscapes and men mark out locations within homes where they transact business and tend to personal affairs. In novels, journalistic essays, and other representations of the (en)gendering of space, authors explore, test, and question the ways in which social norms are mapped onto physical and psychic spaces. As these representations enforce or subvert particular behavioral codes, they also draw attention to the constructed nature of the ways in which human beings possess and use the spaces around them.

The division between the private and the public spheres has traditionally been seen as a product of the Industrial Revolution, as discussed in chapter 1. Many historians have viewed the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain, Europe, and North America as “the cause of the rift between public and private, since men’s work took them outside the home and left middle-class women alone, stranded with housework and child-rearing duties, and eventually, later in the [nineteenth] century, with increasingly more leisure time” (Elbert 9). In Great Britain and Europe, one of the concrete results of the Industrial Revolution was a stricter delineation between work and home spaces. In preindustrial economies based predominantly on agriculture, families lived on the land where they labored. The small class of

artisans and craftspeople also worked from their homes, and entire families were involved in the productive work of the home space. The Industrial Revolution drew workers away from the countryside into cities, centralized work in factories, and ended much artisanal, home-based production. While many lower-class women participated in this movement, public discourse often viewed these women and their departure for the factories as a moral and social problem. By leaving the home and abandoning traditional feminine pursuits, these women threatened family stability. Numerous politicians, religious leaders, and other social arbiters attempted to counteract this perceived problem by exploiting the growing division between home and work and assigning gender-dependent meanings to those spaces: women were associated with the home and family work, while the workplace was figured as masculine. As Griselda Pollock succinctly summarizes, “The public sphere, defined as the world of productive labour, political decision, government, education, the law, and public service, increasingly became exclusive to men. The private sphere was the world [of] home, wives, children, and servants” (94–95).

As we saw in the first chapter, the connection between physical conditions and ideological phenomena is not always exact. Indeed, there is hardly ever the perfect correlation supposed in such assumptions, even in Great Britain and North America, which experienced the most thorough effects of industrialization, and similarly the development of social attitudes about men’s and women’s respective places should not be attributed solely to the Industrial Revolution. Assigning gendered norms to the private and public spheres had gone on for centuries if not millennia, but with the advent of industrialization, the connection between gender and space acquired another layer of meaning and social force.

In Spanish America, the processes of modernization occurred very differently than in Europe and North America. Industrialization and its accompanying phenomena of mass migration to cities, the redistribution of productive work from home-based workshops to large-scale factories, and the rise of a middle class with sufficient money and free time to pursue leisure activities did not take place at the same time or in the same way as in Europe and North America. Yet the rhetoric of separate spheres appears consistently in Spanish American fiction and essays of the nineteenth century, as it did in European and North American writings. These

writings by Spanish Americans reveal that similar, if not identical, ideas about the proper domains of men and women, the sanctity of the home, and the dangers posed by—and to—women who left their homes prevailed in discourse about the public and private spheres as they did in the European context. These constructions of the separation of spheres and the appropriate roles for men and women did not arrive in a vacuum but mapped onto already existing social norms governing gender roles in Spanish America. Colonial Spanish American society's emphasis on the honor code and female chastity privileged the enclosure of women in the private world, although "private" and "public" were understood differently before the nineteenth century. Ann Twinam, writing of colonial New Spain, notes that the private sphere in the Spanish colonies consisted of the family, both nuclear and extended, close friends, and family servants, while the public sphere was everyone else (257). Women were closely associated with the family and the space of the home, but their status as bearers of family honor meant that they also had public roles, since they were responsible for maintaining and imparting family status and legitimacy.

Para las elites, estas distinciones conscientes entre lo privado y lo público estaban integradas en las negociaciones relativas al honor, un complejo y cambiante concepto que incluía la exclusividad de la elite, la *limpieza de sangre*, y la descendencia legítima de muchas generaciones de ancestros legítimos. Las mujeres de la elite poseían personalidades y posiciones públicas en la esfera civil precisamente porque tenían un honor que mantener y transmitir a la siguiente generación.

For the elites, these conscious distinctions between private and public were embedded in negotiations having to do with honor, a complex and changing concept that included the exclusivity of the elite, the "cleanness of blood," and the legitimate descent from many generations of legitimate ancestors. Elite women possessed public personas and positions in the civil sphere precisely because they had honor to maintain and transmit to the next generation. (262)

The fact that such precepts about women's subordination to family and home dominated in the colonial era meant that the rhetoric of the separation of spheres associated with the modernizing effects of the Industrial

Revolution mapped conveniently, if not exactly, onto preexisting gender norms despite arriving in a continent that would not fully experience the Industrial Revolution until the twentieth century.

This chapter focuses on four novels to elucidate some of the ideas in circulation in mid-nineteenth-century Latin America about gender roles and their connection to the private and public realms. I argue that the representations of the ways in which gender determines the occupation and use of various types of physical space in these works demonstrate that the collisions between the modern and the premodern, public and private, were conditioned by and in turn conditioned contemporary understandings and projected imaginings of gendered identities and gender roles. The novels in question are dispersed over a geographical range in more ways than one: Jorge Isaacs's *María* (Colombia, 1867) takes place in the rural environment of the Valle de la Cauca. In Clorinda Matto de Turner's *Aves sin nido* (Peru, 1887), the fictional village of Kíllac forms the setting for the novel's plot of clerical abuse, and Alberto Blest Gana's *Martín Rivas* (Chile, 1862) is an eminently, and preeminently, urban text.² While those novels fall within the current canon of Latin American nineteenth-century literature, Eligio Anconá's *La mestiza* (Mexico, 1861), set on the outskirts of Mérida, Yucatán, is a lesser-known text.³ Yet in all four novels the uses of space are continually negotiated and shifting; the understanding, creation, and representation of public and private spaces are contingent upon those who use them rather than objective, externally determined forces. In Massey's words, places "are not so much bounded areas as open and porous networks of social relations" (130). Places accumulate meaning according to the uses to which they are put, and their inhabitants both give and acquire meaning and identity through their relationship to those places.

The configuration and use of spaces in Isaacs's *María* on the surface seem to follow gendered norms, in which women occupy the interior and engage in domestic tasks while men carry out public duties outside the home. However, throughout the novel supposedly standard spatial configurations are subverted and undermined.⁴ The space of the house is repeatedly the *locus* of transactions that by rights belong to the public sphere, and private business and emotions are displayed outside the home. In addition to the slippages between the public and the private realms, nature and civilization, or the wild and the constructed realms, also suffer from a

problematic collapse of barriers. Definitions and limits that should separate those two areas and define their domains are too easily crossed and even ignored. In these ways the porosity of spheres in *María* is contingent upon the permeability of nature and the characters' interactions with nature. One of the novel's deep contradictions has to do with the way that Isaacs consciously employs the modernizing rhetoric of the separation of spheres and the construct of the domestic angel of the house at the same time as he sets the novel up as an idyllic evocation of the preindustrial state described by many theorists as the "before" of the public/private divide. Both strategies allow him to place the house itself as the epicenter of a vanished happiness, yet the disconnect between them reveals fissures in the construction of gendered social norms and disrupts what is intended to be an unproblematic description of a vanished, and perfect, past.

The novel famously begins with a scene of (male) departure from the home: "Era yo niño aún cuando me alejaron de la casa paterna" (I was still a boy when they removed me from my paternal home; 5). The opening scene figures the family home not only as a paradise from which Efraín is exiled but also as a bastion of patriarchal power (*la casa paterna*). Throughout the novel, however, Isaacs also constructs the space of the house as essentially female. In the first scene the house almost literally encloses María: "María estaba bajo las enredaderas que adornaban las ventanas del aposento de mi madre" (María was under the falling vines that adorned the windows of my mother's bedchamber; 5). The vines drape over and around María, attaching her figuratively to the house and specifically to the mother's space. This description, too, is an immediate prefiguration of the ways in which the novel blurs the nature/culture divide and the premodern and modernizing discourses which it manipulates. The vines (nature) come from the house (culture) and are a part of it; María is connected to the house, which at first is characterized as an element of patriarchal power (premodern), but then more specifically as a bastion of femininity and ideal motherhood, a concept related to the discourses of modernity.

María's connection to maternal space is repeated throughout the novel, with frequent references to her use of the mother's sewing room (8, 15, 58, 87). Sewing, as Bonnie Frederick points out, occupied hours each day in the lives of women in the nineteenth century; until late in the century it was one of the few socially acceptable means by which women could earn