

## ARTICLE

# Shifting Realities: Migration and Surreality in the Work of Remedios Varo

Camilla Sutherland\*

---

This paper will examine Spanish painter Remedios Varo's attempts to capture the complexities of immigrant reality during her exile in Mexico between 1941 and 1963. It will analyse themes of displacement and migration within her oeuvre, focusing on the following three concepts: *migration as escape*, *perpetual motion*, and *permeable spaces*. Through this analysis, it aims to interrogate the manner in which the unfixing of traditional notions of reality, seen within Varo's work, was both influenced by and articulates the experience of exile.

---

Forced into exile by the atrocities of both the Spanish Civil War and Second World War, the painter Remedios Varo arrived in Mexico on 15 December 1941 and remained in the country until her death on 8 October 1963. This article will examine her Mexican exile as a process of shifting realities and interrogate the manner in which Varo's works attempt to capture the complexities of immigrant reality. I will begin by briefly contextualising Varo within the period of mass migration from Spain to Mexico that occurred during the 1940s, before moving on to analyse themes of displacement and migration within her oeuvre. I will characterise Varo's distinct treatment of these themes with the terms *migration as escape*, *perpetual motion*, and *permeable spaces*, which will broadly govern the sections of this paper. Through the term *shifting realities*, I intend to encompass both the literal process of migration (the movement from a European to a Latin American reality), the notion of a shifting – or fragile – reality experienced in exile, and,

furthermore, the unsettling of traditional artistic depictions of reality. Unlike her Mexican contemporaries, such as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, whose works foreground a conspicuously *Mexican* environment, Varo favours the ambiguity of surreal landscapes or dream-spaces. The locations of Varo's paintings represent neither a Mexican nor a Spanish reality, but rather a liminal space that exists between the real and the fantastic. Despite André Breton's assertion that Mexico itself is the 'Surrealist place *par excellence*' (Breton and Helidoro Valle 1938: 6), I do not propose that Varo's works stand as a product or response to some form of natural Mexican surreality; rather, this paper will argue that Varo utilises Surrealist tropes in order to evoke the defamiliarisation of the everyday that occurs in exile or emigration. Thus, what I aim to interrogate is the manner in which Varo's unfixing of traditional notions of reality was both influenced by and articulates the experience of exile.

In a 1963 interview Varo recounts that, 'I came to Mexico searching for the peace that I had not found, neither in Spain – that of the revolution – nor in Europe – that of

---

\* Spanish and Latin American Studies, UCL  
[camilla.sutherland.09@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:camilla.sutherland.09@ucl.ac.uk)

the terrible war – for me it was impossible to paint amidst such anguish’ (Kaplan 1988: 85). Having initially escaped the horrors of the Spanish Civil War in Paris, where she lived with her lover the Surrealist poet Benjamin Péret from 1937 to early 1941, Varo arrived in Mexico in December 1941 having been granted leave to remain as ‘a political exile for one year, renewable’ (Kaplan 1988: 86). Although her Parisian exile had initially been self-imposed, by 1939 Franco had closed the Spanish borders to all those with Republican ties, preventing Varo from returning to her homeland. The artist was part of an unprecedented wave of Spanish migrants who sought political asylum in Mexico in the wake of the civil war. In early 1939, once Republican defeat appeared inevitable, thousands of refugees initially flooded into France, with the numbers reaching an estimated 500,000 by April of that year (Smith 1955: 207). Of those who managed to secure passage to regions outside of Europe, the vast majority relocated to Mexico. In 1938, Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas had announced that Mexico would accept up to 60,000 Spanish refugees, increasing his offer in April 1939 to accept all refugees who could secure cost of transport and accommodation from the Republican authorities<sup>1</sup>.

Cárdenas’s motivations are, for the most part, considered to have been humanitarian<sup>2</sup> and followed from Mexico’s support of the Republican cause throughout the Spanish Civil War. As early as 1936, plans had been set into motion to secure refuge for Spanish intellectuals in Mexico under a scheme devised by Daniel Cosío Villegas, in conjunction with Cárdenas’s government, that funded the emigration of select intellectuals to be housed at La Casa de España in Mexico City; five arrived in 1938, growing to twelve in early 1939, and increasing even further with the Republican defeat. By the end of 1939, La Casa de España had fifty members working in thirty different academic and artistic fields. It is worth noting that in this period Spaniards “received substantially

higher academic salaries than Mexican university professors,” [...] In fact they were the first academics in Mexico to have full-time employment’ (Faber 2002: 18). Exacerbated by such inequalities, Cárdenas’s asylum policy faced opposition from all sides of the political spectrum: from revolutionary nationalists who prided themselves on their anti-Spanish, anti-imperialist stance, from workers who feared for their jobs, and from conservative groups who feared political unrest sparked by an influx of Spanish dissidents. Much of the Mexican artistic community – dominated by nationalist ideals – also viewed Spanish intellectuals with suspicion and disdain, with the painter Frida Kahlo going as far as to christen Varo and her colleagues ‘those European bitches’ (van Raay, Moorhead and Arcq 2010: 14). This cultural climate caused artists such as Varo to live and to work predominantly in isolated, expatriate communities within Mexico City. Varo enjoyed close working relationships with the acclaimed British Surrealist painter Leonora Carrington and the Hungarian photographer Kati Horna<sup>3</sup> during her years in Mexico. The artists lived and worked in the Colonia Roma district of Mexico City and fostered a collaborative and creative way of life. It is within this environment that Varo embarked upon what would become a fertile and prolific period of artistic production. Whilst Varo had experienced displacement during her time living in Paris<sup>4</sup>, the process of shifting realities that accompanied her exile in Mexico made a great impact upon the artist and is treated time and again within her work.

Varo’s 1955 painting *Rupture* sees the artist explore distinctly autobiographical themes: firstly, her exile from Spain and, secondly, the break from traditional women’s roles that accompanied her decision to pursue an artistic career. In it we see a cloaked figure – one of what critic Janet Kaplan terms Varo’s ‘self-portrait characters’ (1988: 48) – descending a staircase, walking away from a dark and imposing building. The central

figure is watched by six identical faces which peer through open windows overlooking the scene. Kaplan highlights that the similarity between these six faces and that of the central figure suggests a self-scrutinising gaze as much as it depicts the disapproving eyes of social convention (1988: 149). The staircase appears as a space of transition, utilised to illustrate a moment of interior development on the part of the central figure. Varo's pre-occupation with architectural thresholds and the act of entrance calls to mind Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage, which are rooted in the notion that 'to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world' (1977: 30). However, Varo's scene is far from a debutante's entrance into society; the cloaked figure escapes surreptitiously at dusk, refusing to take her place amongst the six identical figures in the windows above. She rejects society in favour of solitude and self-containment. What Varo offers us throughout her work is a form of personal rite of passage that, rather than induct a protagonist into wider society, often represents the transition into a space of marginality. Van Gennep's notion of passage into a 'new world' (1977: 30) can, in these cases, be seen as both metaphorical and literal, with Varo's personal rites of passage initiated through the crossing of both architectural and national boundaries. The notion furthermore encompasses the crossing of artistic thresholds through the movement from Realist to Surrealist modes of depiction: to view the paintings of Varo is to 'unite oneself with a new world' (van Gennep 1977: 30).

Varo's image of the staircase in *Rupture* offers merely a view of what the protagonist is escaping *from*, rather than where she is fleeing *to*. The diverging perspectival lines generate a sensation of increasing openness and expansion, with the point of greatest constriction concentrated on the architectural structure at its centre. The world that the protagonist is fleeing from is thus characterised by confinement and decay: the loose sheets of paper that follow in the protagon-

ist's wake are mirrored by the dried autumnal leaves that lie on the steps in the painting's foreground, suggesting both creative and social stagnation. This evocation of cultural sterility causes the image to represent the artist's desire (and that of the art-world more widely) to embark upon new modes of artistic expression, which, in the case of Varo, began in an adoption of Surrealism. In her 1986 work *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute*, Anna Balakian eloquently characterises early Surrealism as a 'legendary phoenix, [...] born of death and ashes' (1986: 123). The movement emerged in the wake of the First World War and was inaugurated in 1924 by Breton's 'Manifesto of Surrealism'<sup>5</sup>. 'We are still living under the reign of logic' (2011: 243) Breton declares, through which he indicates the failure of the preceding Dadaist movement to effectively dismantle the excessive rationalism that both Dadaists and Surrealists saw as the root of Europe's ills. Moving away from the nihilism of Nietzsche which had provided a philosophical foundation for the Dadaist movement, Breton and his colleagues sought inspiration in the writings of Sigmund Freud, from which the Surrealists drew their fascination with dreams and automatic writing and drawing: 'I believe in the future resolution of these two states – outwardly so contradictory – which are dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, a surreality' (Breton 2011: 247). Varo gained an intimate knowledge of the Surrealist movement during her time living in Paris as the companion of Benjamin Péret, a close friend and colleague of Breton, and the influence can be seen throughout her later work. 'Surrealism offered many women their first glimpse of a world in which creative activity and liberation from family-imposed social expectations might coexist,' Whitney Chadwick observes, 'one in which rebellion was viewed as a virtue, imagination as the passport to a more liberated life' (1985: 67). It is this initial step into a 'more liberated life' (Chadwick 1985: 67 that we see depicted in the painting *Rupture*.

The artistic liberation that Varo gained in Paris and Mexico, however, came at the cost of her political and national freedom, which causes an atmosphere of ambivalence to pervade her works. Whilst *Rupture* clearly prioritises the theme of escape, through foregrounding the moment of departure, it withholds the moment of arrival. The stairs open out to the very frame of the image, with no indication of what lies beyond. The protagonist remains halted in this moment of escape – the instance of *Rupture* – perpetually descending the staircase on an ever-expanding threshold. This image visually represents ‘the hiatus between departure and arrival’ that Amy Kaminsky identifies as the unique domain of the exile (1999: 52). The fact that Varo painted this image almost twenty years after she left Spain indicates the extent to which this moment of *Rupture* haunted the artist. The chrysalis-like cape that envelops the fleeing protagonist, however, speaks to the theme of transformation and potential emergence. This cloak, the partially visible figures at the windows, and the half open door, all foreground the theme of concealment, yet simultaneously contain the promise of revelation. In his 1958 work *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard highlights that ‘the word *chrysalis* alone is an unmistakable indication that here two dreams are joined together, dreams that bespeak both the repose and flight of being’ (1994: 65). In *Rupture*, this simultaneous dream of ‘repose and flight’ (Bachelard 1994: 65) is played out in the competing sense of ambivalence and foreboding on the one hand, and defiance and liberation on the other, that the image evokes. This tension is characteristic of Varo’s treatment of both the pain and liberation of exile.

These same themes recur in Varo’s undated drawing *Ancestors*. The work shares a similar composition to *Rupture*, showing a woman, with a wheel in lieu of legs, fleeing towards the viewer, moving from a space of constriction to one of greater openness. This

evocation of a passage from confinement to liberation is characteristic of Varo’s treatment of *migration as escape*. Here, the central figure emerges from a dark passageway of seemingly infinite arched doorways – a labyrinth of aborted thresholds that appears once again in *Insomnia* (1942-47)<sup>6</sup>. Interior space in this work is conceived of as a site of danger with ghostly arms reaching through crevasses, grasping at the central figure and trying to impede her flight. As in *Rupture*, and the later painting *Emerging Light* (1962), faces that closely resemble the protagonist’s peer from openings in the wall, fixing her with looks of suspicion and disdain, perhaps even envy. The work’s title – *Ancestors* – suggests the struggle that accompanied the artist’s desired break from traditional Spanish society, and also represents the avant-garde artist’s intention to escape from the artistic *Ancestors* of the Academy<sup>7</sup>. In the lead up and wake of the Spanish Civil War, the desire to break from the conservative norms of early twentieth century Spanish society (the nation’s *ancestors*) was evident at a national as well as a personal level, a fact that Varo – with her Republican sympathies – could be seen to dramatise within this work.

The wheeled-woman at the centre of *Ancestors* leads us to the second theme that I shall examine in relation to Varo’s treatment of migration and immigrant reality, that of *perpetual motion*. The protagonist’s mechanised body betrays a fantasy of increased mobility that is repeated throughout Varo’s work, such as the 1956 *To Women’s Happiness*<sup>8</sup>. It also, however, hints at the notion of being cursed by perpetual transit: the hands of the wheeled-woman are outstretched in order to balance, or are perhaps reaching for brakes that are absent. This duality – lure of mobility vs. desire for fixity – encapsulates both the treatment of transit in Varo’s work and the nature of her status as both exile and voluntary immigrant. The 1947 work, *The Tower*, completed six years after the artist’s arrival in Mexico, explores this very tension. The work shows a walled pool standing in

a barren landscape: within the pool stands a dilapidated stone tower beside which a woman stands perched on a windmill-like structure. On either side of the pool are two more women, one which runs away from the tower and another who cycles towards it. The work foregrounds both the desire to escape – encapsulated in the fleeing figure on the left-hand-side of the painting – and the longing to return, signalled by the mechanised woman on the right. It is perhaps the still, though precariously balanced, central figure – torn between the competing urges to both escape and return – that most clearly represents Varo's *émigrée* identity. With reference to this work, Kathryn Everly highlights the manner in which Varo 'develops a particularly active female figure that defies the stagnation of the crumbling phallocentric ideology of European surrealism,' symbolised by the tower at the work's centre (2003: 46). If we accept Everly's characterisation of the tower as symbol of the distinctly male-dominated nature of the Surrealist movement, the simultaneous desire for both escape and return depicted in this painting could be seen to encapsulate Varo's complex relationship with Surrealism. The artist's move to Mexico led to both a physical and a creative distancing from the movement, and saw the creation of her most accomplished works. However, the exploration of the intersection between dream and reality that Surrealism promoted, alongside techniques of collage-like juxtaposition, incongruity, and visual trickery, remain dominant features of Varo's unique style. It could be argued that, freed from the 'Surrealists' [conception] of woman as man's mediator with nature and the unconscious, *femme-enfant*, muse, source and object of man's desire' (Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg 1991: 1), Varo was able to pursue a personal form of surreality that best encompassed her *émigrée* reality.

Towards the end of her life, Varo describes herself as 'more from Mexico than from any other place. I know little of Spain; I was very young when I lived there. Then I lived the

years of apprenticeship, of assimilation in Paris, then the war... It is in Mexico that I felt welcomed and secure... I do not like to travel at all. It is an experience that I do not like to repeat' (Kaplan 1988: 114). Yet, in her work, the artist continuously revisits and repeats the experience of her transitory youth, treating both its painful upheaval and emancipatory potential. This tension is evidenced in the previously discussed work, *Rupture*. Whilst Kaplan interprets the snails in the right-hand foreground of the image as an 'evocation of the weight of the past that Varo felt as her burden' (1988: 24), I see the snail as a symbol of a blurring between distinctions of fixity and mobility that offers a vision of self-contained mobile dwelling and the freedom that accompanies such a concept. This theme is repeated throughout Varo's work, exemplified by the 1955 *Caravan*, the 1958 *Vagabond*, and the 1959 *Exploration of the Sources* of the Orinoco River. *Caravan* is the first of Varo's works to conspicuously align the act of artistic production with the notion of transitory dwelling. In this painting, the vehicle, though mobile, acts as a refuge for a female musician's creative work. I would go as far as to propose that the intricate construction of the *Caravan* suggests that the musician's work both fuels and is fuelled by the transit of this mobile home.

*Vagabond* and *Exploration of the Sources* insert an element of agency into the act of travel that is perhaps absent from the mechanised, wheeled-woman that we saw discussed in *Ancestors* and which abound in her other works; these two paintings stand as images of inventive and intrepid exploration. Both works evoke the theme of self-containment that we saw treated in *Rupture*, depicting lone travellers enveloped in chrysalis-like garments. *Vagabond* epitomises the concept of autonomous mobility, depicting a man in an imaginative wheeled coat that contains domestic paraphernalia in its inner-lining; a bookshelf, framed portrait, potted plant and cooking utensils delicately adorn the *Vagabond's* clothing, accompanying him

on his journey and providing a semblance of conventional domestic reality whether he is stationary or in transit. *Exploration of the Sources* foregrounds a strikingly similar contraption, showing a determined young woman wearing the boat she travels in: her winged bowler hat is seamlessly attached to a fabric sea-craft that is buttoned around her like a waistcoat. The boat travels through a flooded forest, approaching a hollowed tree that contains, what we imagine to be, the sources of the Orinoco River emanating from a small wine glass, sitting on a three-legged table. In contrast to the *Vagabond* (and the central figure in *Rupture*) this traveller has completed her journey, with the notion of the 'exploration of the source' suggesting the culmination of an existential, spiritual or artistic quest. Whilst both of the central figures in these two works appear to control the direction of their elaborate vessels, the seemingly symbiotic relationship between body and vehicle speaks to the notion of involuntary and perpetual motion raised in relation to *Ancestors*, encapsulating the ambiguous treatment of the theme of travel throughout the artist's work. Speaking of *Vagabond*, Varo characterises its central figure as 'an *unliberated* vagabond [...] he needs the portrait, the rose (nostalgia for a little garden in a house) and his cat; he is not truly free' (Kaplan 1988: 151). The painting and Varo's assessment of it encapsulate the simultaneous 'need for retreat and expansion', the desire for both 'the repose and flight of being' that Bachelard foregrounds in his analysis of the chrysalis (1994: 65). These competing elements are woven throughout Varo's work and take on a distinct significance when considered in conjunction with the experience of exile. Whilst Bachelard would propose that the *Vagabond's* 'nostalgia for a little garden in a house' (Kaplan 1988: 151) is rooted in the longing to return to the (womb-like) intimacy of the childhood home, common in all human beings, in the case of the exile this nostalgia for a lost home is made complex by the seeming immutability and injus-

tice of the forbidden return. If we return to the image of the snail discussed previously, we can glimpse a method through which Varo attempts to reconcile the apparently opposing urges expressed in works such as *The Tower*, *Vagabond* and *Explorations of the Sources*. The snail unsettles the conventional association between dwelling and stasis, suggesting the possibility of the intimacy and security of home accompanying one through ever-changing environments; it is thus a rich symbol for encapsulating the process and experience of exile. Ultimately, the snail – and the associated fantastical vehicles present within Varo's work – proposes that home is inherent to a being's body, or, more pertinently, that the dwelling place of most singular importance is, in fact, the self.

Both Kaplan and Chadwick cite the use of journey and travel within Varo's work as autobiographical references to the painter's flight from Europe to Mexico, whilst Everly emphasises that they are indicative of the search for 'creative autonomy' (2003: 45). I would suggest that Varo's treatment of *perpetual motion* represents the quest for both a physical *and* an artistic home. In his 2000 essay 'Reflections on Exile', Edward Said makes explicit this alignment of exile and homelessness, characterising exile as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home' (2000: 137). It is this rift that we often see dramatised in Varo's work. However, these paintings also contain the ever-present notion of self-imposed or desired exile (explored in the first section of this paper) that challenges the concept of an inextricable connection between self and native-home. When Varo states that she is 'more from Mexico than from any other place' (Kaplan 1988: 114), she highlights the arbitrary nature of nationhood, challenging the validity of essentialist conceptions of national identity<sup>9</sup>. What her works propose is not a simple desire to retreat to a native homeland nor an attempt at complete acculturation, but rather the formation of a space

between – or perhaps outside – nations and singular conceptions of the home.

This notion is evidenced, furthermore, in Varo's preoccupation with, and unique treatment of, domestic architecture. In works such as the 1955 *The Task*, the 1960 *To Be Reborn*, and the 1962 *Emerging Light*, Varo proposes dynamic architectural spaces that, rather than constrict movement (as we saw in *Rupture*, *Ancestors* and *Insomnia*), permit a fluidity between inside and outside, actively testing the binary of fixity and flux. These are permeable interior spaces, that allow protagonists to move seamlessly through structures, creating their own unconventional thresholds. In one of her least androgynous depictions of the female form, the central figure of *To Be Reborn* appears to burst through the wall of a room, seemingly compelled by an image of the moon reflected in a chalice. A hole in the ceiling reveals the night sky above, suggesting the protagonist was seduced by an illusion, entering the room based on the beauty of a mere reflection, seemingly unaware of the object itself above her head. The symbol of the moon – like that of the chrysalis in *Rupture* – suggests cyclical transition and transformation, whilst also evoking the theme of partial revelation of a potential whole. The title, furthermore, compounds the notion of transformation in a manner that alludes to the process of migration: to move from one physical space to another, Varo suggests, is to be reborn. The painting's use of reflection presents the viewer with distinct layers of representation – an instance of mimesis within a mimetic medium – that causes the work to reveal and accentuate its own illusory nature. The image calls to mind the *trompe l'oeil* mode favoured by European Surrealists and exemplified in such works as Rene Magritte's 'The Human Condition' series of 1933 and 1935. In addition to making conspicuous the artwork's status as representation, this technique forces the viewer to confront the possible illusory nature of their own reality.

As we saw in *Vagabond* and *Explorations of the Sources*, Varo's work consistently depicts a seamless interplay between interior/exterior and real/illusory spaces. Crucially, interior space in these paintings is conceived of as porous, allowing for a fluid interaction between inside and outside, between the man-made and the natural. Georg Simmel's 1909 essay 'Bridges and Doors' highlights that 'It is absolutely essential for humanity that it set itself a boundary, but with freedom, that is, in such a way that it can also remove this boundary again, and it can place itself outside' (1997: 172). In the case of the exile a boundary has been erected that does not contain Simmel's desired freedom. As a reaction against this immovable boundary, Varo can be seen to visualise 'the possibility of a permanent interchange' between the 'bounded and boundaryless' (both Simmel 1997: 173) that Simmel concludes is the privileged characteristic of the door; Varo recognises this same symbolic potential of domestic thresholds, but extends the liberating powers of the door to the traditionally rigid and containing structures of walls, ceilings, and floors. '[T]he human being is [...] the bordering creature who has no border,' Simmel states. He adds:

The enclosure of his or her domestic being by the door means, to be sure, that they have separated out a piece from the uninterrupted unity of natural being. But just as the formless limitation takes on a shape, its limitation finds its significance and dignity only in that which the mobility of the door illustrates: in the possibility at any moment of stepping out of this limitation into freedom. (1997: 174)

As illustrated throughout this essay, Varo's works exemplify the simultaneous desire to compartmentalise 'the uninterrupted unity of natural being' and the need to step 'out of this limitation into freedom' (Simmel 1997: 174). By challenging the bounded nature of the home, Varo visualises the destabi-

lizing, uprooted nature of migration and exile, foregrounding the unique interaction between the *émigré* and their adopted environment.

As with *To Be Reborn*, the 1962 work *Emerging Light* showcases the act of emergence, but accentuates a moment of liminality. Whilst the previous image evokes the passage from one space to another, this painting suggests a high degree of symbiosis between the female figure and her surroundings. She appears to emerge organically from a wall, as if removing a second skin. There is an ambiguity in this painting that is not present in the previous, one that, were it not for its title, allows for the possibility that the protagonist is retreating *into* the wall: merging *with*, rather than separating *from*, her environment. Both paintings portray the desire—or necessity—to break through the constraints of domestic interior spaces that threaten to constrict or smother. Varo's female figures appear to assert their visibility in order to prevent an inescapable symbiosis between body and interior space from occurring, a concept that is fully realised in the 1960 work *Mimesis*<sup>10</sup>. Kaplan characterises both *To Be Reborn* and *Emerging Light* as visualisations of 'spiritual breakthrough' (1988), though as we have seen in the autobiographical themes treated in *Rupture* and *Ancestors*, this form of spiritual breakthrough most often accompanies or is prefaced by a literal or material *Rupture*. In addition to the spiritual, the emphasis on the passage from darkness into light, evoked by both the works' titles, — in common with *Explorations of the Sources* — suggests artistic and intellectual enlightenment. However, there is again a simultaneous process of concealment and revelation at work here; the torch held by the central figure of *Emerging Light* suggests the promise of clarity and revelation. What we are offered, however, is the liminal stage of this lucidity, as the figure conceals more than she reveals. The partially visible face (almost identical in features to the protagonist's)

beneath the floorboards suggests the presence of an underground self, alluding to the Freudian unconscious<sup>11</sup>, or perhaps the notion of a past (national) identity threatened with imminent disclosure<sup>12</sup>.

These works display a tension between the desire to assimilate — to adapt to one's surroundings — and the desire to maintain the heightened sense of mobility granted through the act of migration. *To Be Reborn* and *Emerging Light*, in my mind, prioritise the latter, depicting female protagonists who break through the constraints of interior spaces that would otherwise bind them. These paintings, furthermore, treat the issue of migration and nationality via their allusions to birth<sup>13</sup>. *Nation* has as its root the Latin *nat-* from the verb *nasci*, to be born, a notion that is playfully explored within the titles and the labial nature of the wallpaper in both images. Varo's works, in this manner, suggest the possibility of a plurality of *native* homes beyond the confines of national borders. 'The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional', Said states, 'Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience' (Said 2000: 147). Varo's permeable spaces literalise the provisional nature of the home *and* the crossing of national and artistic boundaries that are enacted by the exile. Aside from the 'building so Spanish in its architectural detail' (Kaplan 1988: 23) that Kaplan observes in *Rupture*, Varo's work almost entirely eschews geographical specificity. Her artistic technique and style also defy simple geographic categorization. Whilst Varo is typically classified as a Surrealist — and the influence of European Surrealism upon her painting is undeniable — her position as a Spaniard exiled in Mexico must be accounted for, as it is this that I feel contributed to the formation of a mode of surreality that operates outside the doctrines of Breton's Surrealism. It is through the evocation of a location



somewhere between a Spanish and Mexican reality, a space between the real and the surreal, that Varo is able to articulate not only her experience of *émigrée* reality, but also to test the boundaries of Surrealism.

## Notes

- 1 Between 15,000 and 30,000 fled to Mexico under this scheme (Smith 1955: 207).
- 2 Post-Revolutionary Mexico had already established itself as a haven for political refugees, the most famous of whom was Leon Trotsky who sought asylum in the country in 1936.
- 3 Carrington arrived in Mexico in 1943 and lived in the country until her death in 2011, whilst Horna arrived in 1939 and lived and worked in Mexico until her death in 2000.
- 4 I assert that a distinction should be made between Varo's French and Mexican periods. Since her move to Paris was very much a voluntary one, motivated primarily by love and a desire for artistic freedom as opposed to personal and political safety, I do not feel that the two can be analysed within the same concept of exile.
- 5 The term *surrealist* was seemingly coined by Guillaume Apollinaire in the preface that accompanied the first performance of *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* in 1917.
- 6 This image is one of a number of small works in gouache produced as advertising campaigns for Bayer Pharmaceuticals between 1942 and 1947.
- 7 This notion could be extended to include the female artist's necessary break from the restrictive, and masculine environment of the avant-garde itself, which was achieved in her move to Mexico.
- 8 The image of the wheeled body is also foregrounded in the 1959 sculpture *Homo rodans* and Varo's accompanying text *De homo rodans* published in 1970 (Varo 1970).
- 9 Today, Varo's works are held in collections designated for Latin American artists such

as the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires.

- 10 In it, we see a woman with skin camouflaged in the pattern of her upholstered chair and hands transformed into the same carved flourishes of the chair's wooden arms.
- 11 Psychoanalysis was a dominant preoccupation of the Surrealist circles within which Varo operated, and is repeated throughout her work in paintings such as *Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst* (1961).
- 12 The image of a literally underground self is first utilised by Varo in *Double Agent* produced in 1936 during her time in Paris.
- 13 The title *Emerging Light* in my mind suggests the Spanish phrase 'dar a luz' (literally *give to light*) used for the act of giving birth.

## References

- Bachelard, G** 1994 *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.
- Balakian, A** 1986 *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Breton, A and Valle, R H** 1938 'Diálogo con André Breton', *Universidad de México* 29.
- Breton, A** 2011 *Manifesto of Surrealism*. In: Danchev, A (ed.) *100 Artists' Manifestos: From the Futurists to the Stuckists*. London: Penguin.
- Caws, M A, Kuenzli R and Raaberg G** 1991 *Women and Surrealism*. Cambridge, MASS: MIT Press.
- Chadwick, W** 1985 *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Everly, K** 2003 *Catalan Women Writers and Artists: Revisionist Views from a Feminist Space*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press.
- Faber, S** 2002 *Exile and Cultural Hegemony: Spanish Intellectuals in Mexico, 1939-1975*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Kaminsky, A K** 1999 *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Kaplan, J** 1988 *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*. London: Virago.
- Said, E W** 2000 *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MASS.: Harvard University Press.
- Simmel, G** 1997 Bridge and Door. In: Frisby, D and Featherstone, M (eds.) *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*. London: Sage.
- Smith, L E** 1955 *Mexico and the Spanish Republicans*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- van Gennep, A** 1977 *The Rites of Passage*. London, Routledge.
- van Raay, S, Moorhead J and Arcq T** 2010 *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*. Farnham: Lund Humpheries.
- Varo, R** 1970 *De homo rodans*. Mexico City: Calli-Nova.