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CHAPTER ONE

Modernism in Latin America

EDITED BY CAMILLA SUTHERLAND

One of the first problems when talking about modernism in Latin America is terminological: depending on the context, the Spanish and Portuguese term *modernismo* can refer to two very distinct moments of cultural production in the region. In Spanish America, *modernismo* refers to a *fin de siècle* literary movement spearheaded by Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío and characterized by its engagement with European Parnassianism and Symbolism. In the Brazilian context, however, *modernismo* designates the period of fervent artistic innovation that emerged out of the groundbreaking São Paulo Week of Modern Art of 1922. Within these same early decades of the twentieth century, we see a comparable moment of cultural innovation develop in Spanish America, but taking into account the extent to which these writers and artists were directly working against the perceived excesses and Europhilia of Spanish-American *modernismo*, the term “vanguard” is preferred among practitioners of the time and in subsequent scholarly accounts. The works of Spanish-American vanguardism and Brazilian *modernismo* most closely align with modernism as understood within the English-speaking world. I will therefore use the terms *modernism* and *modernist* (alongside *vanguard* and *avant-garde*) in their English usage to refer to the period of cultural production of both Spanish America and Brazil in the early part of the twentieth century.

These modernist movements flourished in Latin America’s major cities—Mexico City, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Lima, and Havana—predominantly between 1920 and 1945. This historical moment saw issues of national identity take center stage within both the political and artistic spheres of Latin America, with widespread efforts being made to identify and consolidate unique national, and also continental, forms of cultural expression. There are three key historical developments that provoked this particular moment of revived interest in national and continental cultural identity: (1) the Spanish-American War (1898), which marked the loss of the final Spanish colonies in the region and the intensification of direct US intervention in Latin America; (2) the independence centenaries, between 1910 and 1920, for the majority of Spanish American nations (1922, the year of the São Paulo Week of Modern Art, marked the centenary of independence in Brazil); (3) the Mexican Revolution (1910–17) and the shockwaves it sent through the entire continent. These three developments contextualize the extent to which artistic renewal within the region responded to liberation from colonial influence and other forms of oligarchic rule.

The renewal of artistic identity during this time of political fervor therefore entailed a distancing from, or rejection of, European cultural models—even if only in word and not in deed. At the same time, during this period technologies of modernity (rapid

advancements in mass mechanical reproduction, communication, and transport) enabled the wider dissemination of ideas of the European avant-garde within Latin America. These technologies also allowed for unprecedented mobility of both people and ideas within the American continent itself, contributing to a certain commonality in major artistic trends and developments stretching from north to south, particularly notions of indigenism and Pan-Americanism. A pertinent example from this period of artistic experimentation and continental interchange is the 1926 *Índice de la nueva poesía americana*. Co-edited by the Peruvian Alberto Hidalgo, the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, and the Chilean Vicente Huidobro, this collection was among the first anthologies to offer an overview of vanguard production across the Spanish-American region, and is typical of efforts to unite artistic output in a common transnational project.

A dominant preoccupation of modernist activities across Latin America is how to account for and incorporate European and US cultural trends while asserting a singular, autochthonous form of expression. Isolating this singular voice takes on distinct forms throughout the nations of this diverse region. As with Anglo-Irish modernism, 1922 was a crucial year for Latin American modernism, one which marked the publication of four seminal volumes of poetry across the region: César Vallejo's *Trilce* (Peru), Gabriela Mistral's *Desolation* (Chile), Oliverio Girondo's *Twenty Poems to Be Read on the Streetcar* (Argentina), and Manuel Maples Arce's *Inner Scaffolds* (Mexico), with Borges's *Fervor of Buenos Aires* (Argentina) and Pablo Neruda's *Crepusculario* (Chile) both appearing early the following year. Central to this year of fervent vanguard activity was the São Paulo Week of Modern Art, the first exhibition of its kind in the continent. Akin in status to the Armory Show held in New York nine years earlier, the São Paulo Week of Modern Art consisted of exhibitions of works by experimental plastic artists, alongside avant-garde poetry readings, musical performances, and lectures on modern art. The event was predominantly received with horror, confusion, and ridicule by the public and press, but its impact irrevocably shaped the development of Latin American artistic expression and cemented Brazil's position at the center of modernist expression in the region.

In the wake of the revolution, Mexican writers and artists embarked on a Janus-faced project to create a strikingly modern and forward-looking Mexico that was at the same time rooted in its indigenous, pre-Columbian history; the country was, in the words of Carlos Fuentes, "captured between its native impulses, the Zapata syndrome, and its modernizing impulses, the Ford syndrome."¹ This dynamic tension is encapsulated in the works of painters such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Rivera's *The Liberated Earth with the Natural Forces Controlled by Man* (1926) and Kahlo's *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (1932), with their overt use of both indigenous and mechanical symbolism (synthesized in the work of Rivera and placed in opposition in the case of Kahlo), are indicative examples of the dualism at the heart of much Mexican modernism. The oscillation between autochthonous and cosmopolitan concerns is likewise present in the two key literary groups of the age: the *Estridentistas* (with whom Rivera was briefly associated) and the *Contemporáneos*. Within the Peruvian context we see a comparable preoccupation with incorporating the country's prominent indigenous heritage into a burgeoning avant-garde movement. As with post-Revolutionary Mexico, Peruvian modernism was characterized by its socialist inflections. Spearheaded by José Carlos Mariátegui (considered Latin America's first Marxist theorist), the aims of Peru's

¹Fuentes, Carlos, "Introduction," in *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-portrait*, by Frida Kahlo (New York: Abrams, 2005): 19.

vanguard can be traced through the program of its key publication, *Amauta*, founded by Mariátegui in 1926. Though defined by its explicit socialist concerns, this modernist magazine attempted to strike a balance between local political struggles, internationalism and innovations in the arts. The defining aims of *Amauta* can be characterized as the following: the revalorization of Peru's indigenous heritage; the establishment of a dialogue between previous generations and emerging writers; and the promotion of three key vanguard practitioners: Carlos Oquendo de Amat (*Five Meters of Poems*, 1927), Martín Adán ("anti-sonnets" and novel *The Cardboard House*, 1928), and the Surrealist poet and painter César Moro. Surrealism took a dominant position within the *Amauta* group and represented for Mariátegui a method for humanity to escape subordination. *Amauta* is also notable for the active presence of Peruvian women writers in its vanguard activities, most notably poet Magda Portal (represented in this anthology) and cultural critic María Wiesse.

In Cuba—another center of modernist developments—the emphasis fell on capturing a vernacular form of expression particular to the Hispanic Caribbean. Central to these efforts was the Grupo Minorista de La Habana, a group formed in Havana in 1923 that defined itself as "a movement of purification and renovation as much socio-political as literary and artistic."² Inflected with Afro-Cuban cadences and bringing to the fore the legacy of African music, dance, and cosmogonies in the Caribbean, poet Nicolás Guillén's *Sóngoro Cosongo* (1931) and novelist Alejo Carpentier's *¡Ecue-Yamba-O!* (1933) are indicative examples of Cuban modernism.

Argentine modernist developments are typically categorized according to the two main artistic factions that existed in the capital in the early decades of the twentieth century: the Florida and Boedo groups. Named after two districts of Buenos Aires, these groups represent the central (and opposing) artistic and ideological currents that coexisted in the capital during this period. Florida brought together primarily middle- and upper-class writers and artists who sought to promote avant-garde experimentation and the rejection of traditional culture. Boedo championed working-class causes and the social realist fiction that best represented them. Leónidas Barletta succinctly encapsulates the groups' opposing though related aims when he writes that Florida sought a "revolution for art" while Boedo pursued "art for a revolution."³

Borges was central to the Florida group, founding and contributing to a number of its key publications, such as *Prisma*, *Proa*, and *Martín Fierro*. During the early decades of the twentieth century, *Ultraísmo* dominated much of the poetic production of the Florida group and defined itself as a quest for the new, aiming to shed the ornamentation of previous generations of writers and achieve what they saw as concentrated metaphor. *Ultraísmo* shares many characteristics with *Creacionismo* developed by Chilean Vicente Huidobro; this poetics privileged the singular role of the writer as creator—casting him as literally "a little god" whose works would reject mimetic forms in favor of autonomous creation.⁴ While Huidobro valorized the act of "pure creation," fellow Chilean poet Neruda advocated an opposing poetics of impurity that rejected the

²Félix Lizaso, *Las vanguardias literarias en Hispanoamérica: Manifiestos, proclamas y otros escritos*, ed. Hugo J. Verani (Mexico, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990): 21.

³Leónidas Barletta, *Boedo y Florida: Una visión diferente* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Metrópolis, 1967): 52. Translation my own.

⁴Vicente Huidobro, "Arte poética," in *Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. Stephen Tapscott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996): 117–8.

autonomy of the art object and reconnected it with the dirt and sweat of humanity and thus anchored it in material reality. This tension between autonomous avant-garde creation and social engagement colors many of the modernist developments throughout the continent.

Rather than simply rejecting European and US cultural modes, Latin American modernists demanded to be voices (not echoes) in a larger dialogue. Even so, the issues of influence and imitation have governed subsequent scholarly accounts of Latin America's positioning in relation to European and US modernism. Of the figures represented in this section, Victoria Ocampo, Gabriela Mistral, César Vallejo, and Joaquín Torres-García spent substantial periods in Europe observing and contributing to vanguard artistic activities. Other key figures such as Rivera, Huidobro, Neruda, Borges, Emilio Pettoruti, and Carpentier likewise made important interventions in European and US modernist scenes. In the late teens and early 1920s, Huidobro and Borges, for example, edited and published frequently in French and Spanish literary journals such as Pierre Reverdy's *Nord-Sud* and Isaac del Vando-Villar's *Grecia*, with both writers credited with having consolidated the *Ultraísta* movement in Spain before transporting it to the Southern Cone. In the US context, Rivera was the second artist (after Matisse) to have a solo show at New York's MoMA gallery in 1931, breaking all previous attendance records in his opening week. Meanwhile, the 1920s and 1930s also saw an unprecedented number of US and European artists and writers operating within Latin America. The American photographer Edward Weston, for example, based himself in Mexico almost continuously between 1923 and 1927, collaborating often with Italian photographer Tina Modotti. At the invitation of Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, American painters Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish completed a mural in the Museo Michoacano in the State University of Morelia, Mexico, in 1934, while the French Surrealists André Breton and Antonin Artaud made important trips to the country in 1936 and 1938, respectively. In the Southern Cone we see the Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti undertake an acclaimed lecture tour of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay in 1926, while key Spanish writers such as Guillermo de Torre, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, and Federico García Lorca participated actively in the Buenos Aires vanguard scene by publishing in local modernist magazines such as *Martín Fierro* and *Sur*.

In addition to documenting the creation of regionally specific Latin American modernist voices, the texts in this section highlight the simultaneity of vanguard developments in the region and the predominance of multilateral transatlantic and Pan-American cultural exchange and collaboration. This section also showcases the work of figures who have not always received sufficient attention within the English-speaking world, and in doing so offers insights into the vibrant debates that shaped this era, highlighting key themes of indigeneity, gender, and the new. CS

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