■ **Chapter 1**

Locating the Avant-Garde

THIS BOOK is about the avant-gardes of Latin America and their critique of modernity.[1] Rather than engaging in the construction of an alternative modernity or attempting to renegotiate the modern in relation to the traditional, these vanguardists, I contend, sought to produce a critique of the modern as a global project.

From the perspective of a narrative of progress, Latin America seems to be cast either as a relic from the primitive past or as an unrealized but promising future. The linear temporality of the Judeo-Christian tradition—"ascending, descending, progressive or regressive," as Gianni Vattimo (1992, 87) characterizes it—and its modern varieties—evolution, decadence, revolution, and novelty—were as deeply embedded in the Latin American discourses of emancipation as they were in every project of modernity. But the difference that the avant-gardes opened to inquiry, a difference that cannot be reduced to the contours of "cultural difference" in the traditional anthropological sense, is that at both ends of the foundational narrative—the promise of the future and redemption through and of the past—Latin

© 2006 University of Pittsburgh Press

American discourse reencountered itself as subject to a larger order. It is as if the various futurisms and primitivisms that European movements displayed in an attempt to articulate a reaction against a bourgeois, conservative order (to express it in blatantly vanguardistic terms) were untenable from the Latin American position. For the Latin American avant-gardes, these alternatives kept referring back to the subaltern situation of Latin Americans themselves vis-à-vis the idea of the West, a concept that neither clearly included nor excluded Latin America.[2]

From this position, Latin American avant-gardes could undertake a critique of modernity and its narratives, including those of "international"[3] modernism and its avant-gardes, but along a different axis, not through rushing the temporalities of progress forward or through a return to primitive origins. Instead, they developed narratives of space that articulated the Latin American situation in a shifting world order. Some European avant-gardes movements (cubism, dadaism, surrealism, etc.) attempted to undermine the legacy of the Enlightenment and its foundation in the white man as the model of rationality and historical agency under the direction of universal, abstract progress. Because of their investment in modernity and their peripheral position in its foundational narratives, however, Latin Americans were forced to level their criticism through and with a particular attentiveness to spatial issues that addressed this problematic inclusion but that were repressed by the same idea of progress that they embraced.

This is not to say that Latin American avant-gardes were at any point more "advanced" than their European counterparts. While they tried to unravel European cultural supremacy, European avant-gardes usually remained attached to an assumption of their own universality. Artistic flights overseas were one way in which this was expressed, as the search for non-Western ways of life and perception became an exploration into the repressed soul of the universal human. For Latin American avant-gardists, (many times, no doubt, inspired by the Europeans), that position was untenable because the process of "discovery" was carried out under the suspicion of reproducing colonial dynamics. Therefore, tracking down influences and assessing the degree to which Latin American movements followed or did not follow European movements, as has been done repeatedly, misses the point and reproduces a colonial logic of unilinear development that, as we will see, Latin American avant-gardes tried to destabilize.

© 2006 University of Pittsburgh Press

Vicky Unruh rightly argues in her seminal book *Latin American Vanguards* (1994) that these movements overcame an idea of national and/or continental identity as rooted in an original nature and landscape.[4] What Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) called the nonorganic character of the work of art, that is, the possibility of assembling different components with no final resolution of the internal tensions, is akin to this moment in which identity was conceived as a collage (Unruh, chapter 3). The connection Unruh makes between the collagelike constitution of the work of art and issues of national and continental identity is compelling, since ideas of hybridism, transculturation, and cultural anthropophagy or cannibalization—conceptual tools that the avant-gardes favored—traversed the twentieth-century Latin American discussion. But to what degree did the vanguards represent only another step in the constitution of national or regional identities? No doubt, the different movements and writers are inevitably embedded in national traditions. But some texts of the vanguards, I propose, suggest that the question of identity is intertwined with a redefinition of the location of discourses about it in the context of a global negotiation. In these texts, the problem of loci of enunciation—that is, the conditions of possibility for Latin American artists and writers to intervene in the larger debate about modernity—takes precedence and redefines the problem of identity.

As part of a geopolitical shift that, with the advent of World War I, shook loose the assumptions of nineteenth-century liberal culture, the avant-gardists in Latin America explored the limits of a national, culturalist response to crisis of the universality of civilization. The concern of the national creole elite in the constitution of its hegemony—namely, how to organize the nation (or Latin America, for that matter) so as to inscribe its culture more firmly in the annals of universal history—was for the first time left in suspense, owing to the war that put an end to the nineteenth century's faith in the rationality of European history and the worldwide projection.

Since literary criticism in Latin America was by and large engaged in the travails of the national cultural elite, I intend to open up the vanguard texts to this different set of concerns, shedding light by the same token on the makeup of that critical tradition. I am interested in the moments of interruption when vanguard experiments called attention to contemporary places of identification and symbolic production that were neither national

© 2006 University of Pittsburgh Press

cultures nor reducible to them. Such interruptions occurred as literary discourses exhibited an openness to planetary concerns that resulted in an exploration of vanguardistic ambition. As a result, the vanguards were led to recognize the indebtedness of literary discourses to the reproduction of colonial perspectives and to occupy positions of utterance that they imagined to dislodge this coloniality.

"From 1922 (the date is tentative, it is a situation of consciousness that has been defining itself little by little) all that has ended," writes Jorge Luis Borges (1926, 15), the vanguardist, in reference to the sea change that set in motion a Latin American artistic and intellectual field that would no longer voice "our longing for Europe."[5] Without attempting to reduce cultural production to a set of contextual conditions, I want to point out certain major historical trends that framed this alternative imaginary. The 1920s and 1930s were decades when the political order was reconfigured as the consequence of an ongoing change in the global geopolitical balance following World War I. It was a time of increasing democratization in the Latin American social space, but it was also an era of new pacts between conservative forces in different national arenas. The upheavals and revolutions that provoked regime changes in more than one national context at the end of the 1920s differed in character, yet they shared a common soil, as historian Tulio Halperin Donghi (1996, 371) makes clear:

> The world crises that erupted in 1929 had an immediate and devastating impact in Latin America, the loudest sign of which was the collapse, between 1930 and 1933, of the majority of the political situations that had consolidated during the good times that came before. What was not immediately evident was that the crash differed from previous complications along the way not only in terms of its unprecedented intensity; this crisis ushered in a new era in which the painful solutions that had allowed the continent to incorporate itself into an increasingly global economy proved ineffectual. [6]

We are not referring to a discrete event but to a broad historical pattern that subtly undermined faith in the viability of national autonomy as a way to frame, understand, and localize the production of culture. The question of what might constitute Latin America's possibilities, its conditions of cultur-

© 2006 University of Pittsburgh Press

al production in this "increasingly global economy," was at stake in many avant-garde texts of the early 1920s.

A parallel demographic change touched on the imaginary of positive modernity and its inception in foundational national narratives. The rural-urban balance of power on which modernity as spatial conquest was carried out (that is, the city as a model of governmentality whose effects were to be projected onto the rest of the territory) was unsettled with the formation of what the historian José Luis Romero (1986, chapter 7) called the "massified city." Major demographic changes were already occurring in many Latin American cities and had produced an overall change in the cultural landscape at the end of the nineteenth century. But the vanguard movements were the first artistic enterprises of the cultural elite that didn't react to this shift with strategies of domination, separation, or rejection. Instead, in an effort to cross the "great divide" between mass culture and elite culture, they integrated with and accommodated themselves to the logic of mass production and consumption.[7] The well-studied phenomena of unabashed promotion of artistic movements, the circulation of ideas through magazines, the interest in new media, and the political engagement with increasingly visible nonelite subjects can all be traced back to the vanguards' attempts to break through the narrowly conceived boundaries of literary culture.

This change of cultural practices entailed a broader concern with what I will call positionality. At a time when the hierarchies embedded in a notion of a progress that promised to spread from center to periphery and from city to countryside were being questioned, some cultural actors found themselves needing to gauge new configurations of production, circulation, and consumption within an expanded horizon, a world-system of attribution of cultural value and meaning. Countering modernity as a merely expansionist force, to the unilinearity of universal history, Latin American artistic movements would continue to posit places of resistance to anchor their identities in the midst of historical flows. Consequently, the elemental refuge of the baroque rain forest that magically eschews Western categories or the boundary-less hinterlands that haunt the gaze of the observer, though refractory of positivist discourse, would continue to be revamped (by early travelers of the nineteenth century, regional writers of the early twentieth century, and practitioners of magic realism) as a cornerstone of cultural formation. But the avant-gardes opened the possibility of a differ-

© 2006 University of Pittsburgh Press

ent strategy. Amid so much praise and condemnation of speed and transportation as icons of the universalized, homogeneously modern abolition of spatial constraints, the vanguards elaborated, for the first time, their own loci of enunciation imbricated in the circulation of goods, discourses, and peoples. Two seminal manifestos of the early 1920s—one Argentinean, the other Brazilian—are exemplary in that regard:

> A single struggle—the struggle for the way. Let's divide it up: poetry for import. And Brazilwood poetry for export. (Schwartz 1991, 138)

> *Martin Fierro* accepts the consequences and responsibilities of situating oneself. . . . Instructed on his antecedents, his anatomy, the meridian on which he walks, he consults the barometer, the calendar, before stepping into the street in order to live it with the nerves and mentality of nowadays. . . .[8] To accentuate and to expand to the rest of the intellectual activities, the independent movement in language initiated by [poet] Rubén Darío doesn't mean . . . that we will renounce, much less pretend not to recognize, that every morning we use Swiss tooth paste, French towels, and English soap (Schwartz 1991, 113–14).[9]

Two native, national products, one commercial ("Brazilwood," the first Brazilian export to the metropolis and the source of the region's name) and one cultural (Martín Fierro, the mythic character in the epic poem about an autochthonous gaucho as a founder of Argentinean nationality) are not only the anchor for a renewed nationalism, as has been argued widely, but also become vantage points from which to understand an expanded geopolitics. The map projected to elaborate this position needs to be altogether different from the one inherited from the period of nation-state formation. The modern and the new, so the "Manifesto Martín Fierro" seems to claim, necessarily come from an elsewhere that also has the power to define modernity and its others, whereas the "Brazilwood manifesto" foregrounds the fact that what stands as artistically new also depends on a sort of validation that is not at all foreign to a global circulation of commodities.

If, as Perry Anderson (1984, 105) affirms, "the market as an organizing

© 2006 University of Pittsburgh Press

principle of culture and society" was "uniformly detested by every species of [Euro-American] modernism," what are we to make of these seemingly conformist attitudes of the Latin Americans? It is a critical consensus that the reabsorption by advertisement and the market of the avant-garde aesthetic of the fragmentary, the shocking, and, of course, the appeal of the new and permanent change is one of the factors, if not the main one, that emptied some aesthetic techniques of any revolutionary potential. "The modern today is not in the hands of the poets. It is in the hands of the cops," affirmed Louis Aragon as early as in 1925 (Meschonnic 1992, 413). The avant-gardes from everywhere are conventionally referred to as propounding an aesthetic of rupture and resistance, an oppositional stance that these sections of the manifestos don't seem to honor. Were the Latin Americans envisioning that development—the "mass-mediafication" of avant-garde aesthetics—*avant la lettre*, and thus accommodating it—working it out, as it were—from within? Immediately after the Spanish-American war of 1898, an earlier form of modernism, Hispanic American *modernismo*, constructed itself and the Latin America that it was meant to represent as a spiritual enclave that rejected the materialistic, massified world. *Modernismo* in turn fashioned this rejection into a theory of a spiritually oriented Hispanic identity—a moment emblematically captured by the antithesis proposed by Uruguayan critic José Enrique Rodó, of the idealistic Ariel and the utilitarian, materialistic Caliban.[10] The avant-gardes, no doubt, distanced themselves from that position. They were especially attuned to the reverberations between the new art and the logic of the commodity because both shared, from the standpoint of the peripheries of capitalism, the affective aura of modernity as identified with an elsewhere. They triggered, to use Benedict Anderson's phrase, the "specter of comparison" that lies at the peripheries in their relation to modernity.[11]

I contend that the Latin American avant-gardes therefore understood "the new" spatially, not temporally—along a horizontal axis, not a vertical one. This is underscored, for example, by the Nicaraguan movement, which in one manifesto strove to differentiate between two senses of the new: on the one hand the genuine sense that opposed the conservative values of the literature and politics of the past and, on the other, the "evil and fake novelty" supported by interventionist and neocolonialist U.S. policy (Schwartz 1991, 215). Although the strict separation between these two senses of the

© 2006 University of Pittsburgh Press

new might strike us as too simplistic, it nevertheless calls attention to the effort to sort out the category of the new in geopolitical terms. Cognitive mappings were the only possibility for imagining the contours of modernity, its lines of circulation and re-creation, its impossible demands and the limits on its utopian projects, without rejecting modernity altogether, thus leaving its promises open.[12]

In chapter 2, "A Case for Geopolitics," I examine the problem of Latin American literary historiography and the place of the idea of modernity within it. I argue that the avant-garde is not only a privileged example around which Latin American modernity was debated but that it also provides some of the major trends that characterized this debate. This partially accounts for the continuing appeal of the avant-gardes in the cultural and artistic landscape of the continent, I contend. The avant-gardes took issue with the philosophical foundations of modernity and the place assigned to Latin Americans by the narrative of progress, a critique that becomes apparent from our (post)postcolonial and (post)postmodern situation.[13] Drawing on Walter Mignolo's understanding of modernity (2000a) as always already colonial, I reframe the reading of avant-garde texts as engaged in a discussion that transcended (although often by including) the constitution of national modern cultures. In my debate with the more convincing theoretical efforts to gauge the global geopolitics of the avant-gardes, namely those of George Yúdice, Nestor García Canclini, Fredric Jameson, and Perry Anderson, I point out the different impasses that their critical readings fail to overcome. Throughout this theoretical chapter, I also elaborate on concepts that are more or less canonical in modernist studies, such as simultaneity, cosmopolitanism, and artistic autonomy, to make them speak the language of the geopolitical problems that I contend they often echo.

Chapter 3 focuses on Roberto Arlt's novelistic diptych *Los siete locos/Los lanzallamas* (The seven madmen/The firethrowers) (1986 [1929–1931]).[14] Written in Buenos Aires at the end of the 1920s, the novels addressed a number of the topics that the avant-gardes understood as constituting the new landscape of cultural production, such as the immersion of the subject in the conditions of urban life, the possibility of revolutionary change, and the inception of film and mass media. The main argument of the novels could be said to be geopolitically charged: It concerns a revolutionary cell that plans a sudden change in the global balance of power, achieved from a

© 2006 University of Pittsburgh Press

peripheral position (the outskirts of a South American city) and position of social abjection (the characters are outcasts). This tour de force can be read as an attempt to bring closure to the conditions of cultural production and political change that were still prevalent in the 1920s and as an attempt to map out and propose new ones. The role in this novelistic diptych of the epistemological enterprise of mapping a new world order is far from metaphorical. It is a continually pending quest that is at the base of every one of its intellectual, aesthetic, and political concerns. From the map present in the novels, a mysterious emblem, I read this narrative as an investigation into the possibilities of a mapping that, from different and movable peripheral positions, is unable to claim any mimetic authority, but is nevertheless necessary in order to imagine alternative political possibilities.

From here I turn, in chapter 4, to a completely different intellectual trend introduced by the avant-garde: the ethnological inquiry that is at the base of Mário de Andrade's attempt to address the constitution of a distinctive culture in his 1928 novel *Macunaíma, o herói sem nenhum caráter* (Macunaíma, the hero with no character).[15] Anthropological knowledge was a discursive tool that modernist intellectuals used in their critique of modernity, and many in Latin America had recourse to it as a token for the constitution of a differential cultural identity. Miguel Angel Asturias's surrealist recreation of Mayan texts in *Leyendas de Guatemala* (Guatemala legends, 1930) and the representation of the indigenous in the production of Mexican muralists are cases in point. The ethnological object, the native antihero Macunaíma, enacts the mediation between traditional and modern, popular and elite, in the construction of a national culture by traversing a multifarious Brazilian territory and negotiating between different temporalities, pushing to the extremes the ethnological quest for identity. But *Macunaíma* also bears witness to the impossible closure of the quest, which through this ethnological pursuit keeps referring back to the afterlife of the colonial enterprise, an afterlife that resists being placed under the banner of national culture—not even the carnavalesque, multitemporal, anthropophagic one in which the Brazilian avant-garde (the *movimento modernista*) was invested. Under the pretense of ethnography, the geography of the nation is the stage for questioning the colonial makeup of modern knowledge.

In chapter 5, I come back to the works of Roberto Arlt and Mário de

© 2006 University of Pittsburgh Press

Andrade in order to elaborate on vanguardist travel writing. The writers appear as figures of the artistic voyager that are part of the culture of modernism at large—on the one hand, the urban traveler as a master of ironic detachment, a painter of the modern life, on the other, an interpreter, admirer, expert, performer, and reinscriber of those cultures displaced and subordinated by different "civilizing missions" (colonial, national). In their writing practice, however, as they interact with places and people, they confront their own role as traveler-writers by unpacking the discursive traditions and systems of value that sustained them. Travel writing, as much celebrated by postmodernists for its deterritorialization as accused by postcolonial thinkers of reproducing and expanding power structures, becomes a practice that confronts and examines established regimes of representation while pointing to subjects and practices occluded under those regimes.

In chapter 6, I analyze the cultural phenomenon of artistic repentance that many participants of the vanguard movements seemed to experience in the 1930s and 1940s with respect to their own earlier artistic pursuits, which they suddenly regarded as foreign and too "cosmopolitan." The importance of this moment becomes apparent in the iterative aspect pointed out by several cultural critics: that is, throughout the twentieth century, many Latin American artists and intellectuals reencountered their Latin American ties in a kind of a posteriori reaction against their own European affiliations (Asturias, Carpentier, Cortázar, etc.). Primary in the intellectual stance of the avant-gardes in the 1920s was a criticism of any vernacular ontology in favor of more dynamic and cross-cultural notions, but some repentant artists intended a later recuperation—destined to remain inevitably ironic—of the organic notion of identity. I trace the poetic development of, among others, Oliverio Girondo, Vicente Huidobro, and Oswald de Andrade, three of the most "cosmopolitan" writers, if cosmopolitism is to be understood as the power of detachment of the well-traveled. But ultimately, my purpose is to take issue with this notion of cosmopolitanism in order to call attention, in analyzing texts by César Vallejo, to a different understanding of the concept. Another, alternative cosmopolitanism unsettles binary oppositions between authenticity and irony, nativism and elite cosmopolitanism, particularism and universalism.

Even though I claim that some of my arguments can be used to revamp the discussion of Latin American avant-gardes, my texts are not selected

© 2006 University of Pittsburgh Press

under the assumption of representation—neither at the national nor the continental level nor in terms of artistic movements. I take inspiration, here and elsewhere, from Walter Benjamin, who wrote that "to encompass both Breton and Le Corbusier—that would mean drawing the spirit of contemporary France like a bow, with which knowledge shoots the moment in the heart" (2003, 459). This book doesn't intend a cataloguing of different trends, and thus three of its five substantive chapters focus on the writings of Mário de Andrade and Roberto Arlt. The intellectual projects of these two writers differ radically, yet what might be akin to idiosyncratic primitivisms and futurisms—if we are to give their endeavors familiar labels—ultimately become critical explorations of the geopolitical assumptions presented in these trends. I am attracted to this corpus not so much because of their potential as case studies but because they do not embrace the international vanguard aesthetic of which they uncomfortably partake as a new universal, but actively open and problematize it from a particular locus of enunciation. This strategy highlights a whole period of cultural production, not in terms of its proclaimed rupture and aesthetic battles, but in its somewhat reluctant figuration of a culture to come.

© 2006 University of Pittsburgh Press