Transnational Modernisms: The United States, Mexico, and the Idea of America

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Abstract
This dissertation offers a bilingual analysis of the transnational co-formation of U.S. and Mexican cultural nationalisms in the 1920s and 1930s, and investigates the intra-hemispheric networks of modernist practice and exchange in the Americas. Drawing on a wide variety of materials (culturalist essays, poems, paintings, journals, etc.) from such diverse writers and artists such as Waldo Frank, Stuart Chase, John Dos Passos, Thomas Hart Benton, Alfonso Reyes, José Enrique Rodó, Diego Rivera, and Salvador Novo (among others), this project reconstructs the polydirectional process of cultural collaboration through which the gendered and racialized vocabulary of U.S. and Mexican nationality was produced, transacted, and sometimes contested. On the one hand, my focus on the circulation of goods, people and ideas investigates how the transnational movement of culture contributed to the reification of the language of cultural and/or national difference in the Americas. On the other hand, I argue that the traveling of culture generated forms of expression and identification that challenged the nationalist discourse of U.S. and Mexican sovereignty. Finally, this dissertation explores the unexamined relationship between Americanism and modernism, and considers the distinctive traits and shapes of modernist art in the Western Hemisphere.

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TRANSNATIONAL MODERNISMS: THE UNITED STATES, MEXICO, AND THE

IDEA OF AMERICA

Edward Lybeer

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My friends and family in Brussels.

And Laura.
ABSTRACT

TRANSNATIONAL MODERNISMS: THE UNITED STATES, MEXICO, AND THE IDEA OF AMERICA

Edward Lybeer

Rita Barnard

This dissertation offers a bilingual analysis of the transnational co-formation of U.S. and Mexican cultural nationalisms in the 1920s and 1930s, and investigates the intra-hemispheric networks of modernist practice and exchange in the Americas. Drawing on a wide variety of materials (culturalist essays, poems, paintings, journals, etc.) from such diverse writers and artists such as Waldo Frank, Stuart Chase, John Dos Passos, Thomas Hart Benton, Alfonso Reyes, José Enrique Rodó, Diego Rivera, and Salvador Novo (among others), this project reconstructs the polydirectional process of cultural collaboration through which the gendered and racialized vocabulary of U.S. and Mexican nationality was produced, transacted, and sometimes contested. On the one hand, my focus on the circulation of goods, people and ideas investigates how the transnational movement of culture contributed to the reification of the language of cultural and/or national difference in the Americas. On the other hand, I argue that the traveling of culture generated forms of expression and identification that challenged the nationalist discourse of U.S. and Mexican sovereignty. Finally, this dissertation explores the unexamined relationship between Americanism and modernism, and considers the distinctive traits and shapes of modernist art in the Western Hemisphere.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**  
1

**Chapter One:**  
17  
Waldo Frank or the Hemispheric Text of Americanism

**Chapter Two:**  
62  
Transacting the Americas: Stuart Chase, Diego Rivera, and the U.S. Reception of Mexican Muralism

**Chapter Three:**  
122  
America Undone: Salvador Novo and the U.S. Cadences of Mexican Poetry

**Bibliography**  
187
List of Illustrations

Cover of *The Survey* (May 1, 1924) 72
Diego Rivera, cover of *Mexican Folkways* (1928) 78
Paul Strand, *Woman – Patzcuaro* (ca. 1933) 79
Diego Rivera, drawing from Stuart Chase, *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* (1931) 81
Diego Rivera, drawing from Stuart Chase, *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* (1931) 82
Diego Rivera, drawing from Stuart Chase, *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* (1931) 82
Diego Rivera, drawing from Gregorio López y Fuentes, *El Indio* (1937) 83
Diego Rivera, drawing from *The Survey* (May 1, 1924) 84
Diego Rivera, cover of *Survey Graphic* (May 1931) 86
Diego Rivera, *The Man*, costume design for the ballet *H.P. (Horsepower)* (1927) 87
Photograph of David Alfaro Siqueiros at the Experimental Workshop (1936) 104
Diego Rivera, *Frozen Assets* (1931) 105
José Clemente Orozco, *Hanging Negroes* (1933) 106
Xavier Guerrero, *Death to the Landlords*, cover of *New Masses* (January 1929) 109
Tina Modotti, *Hammer, Sickle & Sombrero*, cover of *New Masses* (October 1928) 110
Introduction

Salvador Novo’s amused comment on the undisciplined behaviour of his beloved books provides a fitting point of entry into the contradictory dynamics that have fostered and prevented the development of the ever-emerging field of Hemispheric American literary studies. Over the last twenty years or so, Americanist scholars of all ages, colors and origins have made a concerted effort to put into words the transnational ecology of mute (because muted) coexistence that animates the autonomous life of Novo’s polyglot library. Following the wise advice of Carolyn Porter – whose 1994 essay, “What we Know That We Don’t Know: Remapping Literary Studies,” is often hailed as the symbolic beginning of the “transnational turn” in the field of letters – students of U.S. literatures and cultures have sought to denaturalize the nationalist assumptions and mythologies that have long informed the writing and conception of U.S. literary and

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1 “I noticed that my prolonged lack of attention to what they do and how they behave has allowed my books to be keeping bad company…For a long time and rather comfortably, British authors have been enduring the company of North American ones on the same shelves, and many Mexican books – for which I keep a special concentration camp – have fled into mute coexistence with the English ones. In compensation, a number of well-bound volumes of British and Yankee playwrights, novelists, and poets have migrated towards the shelves of Mexican literature, thus offering the same touristic contrast.”
cultural history. In particular, recent years have witnessed the proliferation of essays and articles that aim to expand our understanding of U.S. intellectual productions by placing them within the larger geographic framework of the American Hemisphere, or the Americas. This widening of the cartographic horizon of analysis has had the salutary effect of making us more attuned to the dynamic interface between the visible shape of the local and the spectral effects of the foreign. It has shed productive light on the transnational, intra-hemispheric stories of friction and encounter through which the nation is managed and contested and, in so doing, it has forced us to rethink the spatial and temporal frames of reference that organize the writing of nationalist historiography. Thus, for instance, in the context of the nineteenth century, the U.S.-Mexican War and the Spanish-American War are now considered equally important to the definition, construction, and self-perception of U.S. nationality as the patriotically celebrated Civil War. Likewise, studies of African-American culture and literature have paid increasing attention to the ways in which African-American texts engage with the hemispheric processes of racial formation in the Americas. Whether in the writings of Martin R.

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Delany, Frederick Douglass, Pauline Hopkins, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright or, more recently, Amiri Baraka, the domestic history of U.S. race relations and national struggle for racial equality appears closely intertwined with the larger, transnational history of racial subjugation (and emancipation) in the rest of the Atlantic world (and beyond).

Yet, despite this welcome expansion of “the object-domain” of U.S. literature and the innovate reading methods and strategies that have developed out of the recent academic venture into hemispheric territories, the rhetorical pluralization of the Americas has had little or no impact on the fixity of disciplinary boundaries (Edwards and Gaonkar 10). Indeed, according to Caroline S. Levander and Robert S. Levine, “[s]ince 1994, the divide between Latin American Studies and American studies has, in some respects, widened” (“Introduction” 399). Though spatially enlarged and methodologically refreshed, the unity and reproductive circularity of the object-domain has been left strangely intact: American literature is still U.S. literature, and vice-versa. At the most obvious level, this self-perpetuation of the changing same can be attributed to the persistent monolingualism and ensuing lack of engagement with foreign and/or non-English sources and materials that characterizes a vast majority of the work being done in the fields of English and American studies. In a more subtle way, however, it must also be related to the methodological tendency to equate the study of intra-hemispheric interactions with the study of U.S. imperialism. Commenting on Amy Kaplan’s landmark essay “Left Alone With America” – a piece that foreshadows the recent critical attention to the “hemispheric” – Brian E. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar observe that, “in the very process of dismantling [Perry] Miller’s exceptionalism, Kaplan’s reading
unwittingly reinstalls exceptionalism.” And they further explain: “[w]hat is fundamentally absent here is the possibility of conceiving of America as a cosmopolitan node, or a turnstile in the global flows, where America is the pivotal but not the singular moment of arrival and departure” (9). In the act of unmasking the imperial idiom and ideology that sustains America’s ontology of difference, they argue, Kaplan simultaneously reinscribes America’s claim to uniqueness and distinction. An analogous argument can be made regarding the flurry of works that register the pernicious effects of U.S. imperialism in the Americas. By focusing almost exclusively on the unilateral exercise of political, symbolic, economic, and military power as it spreads from Anglo America to Latin America, recent transnational scholarship has tended to ignore the multidirectional dynamics of intra-hemispheric commerce and encounter that have shaped the internal history of the continent, thus presuming and reaffirming the monologic centrality of the United States in the Atlantic world. Equally hindering to the practical instantiation of hemispheric methodologies has been the resistance and suspicion with which they have been received within Latin Americanist circles and departments. Annoyed by the compulsive tendency of Americanist scholars to proclaim the novelty of their vision, Latin American scholars have been quick to remind their colleagues of the long and venerable tradition of transnational thinking that has characterized Latin Americanist discourse for more than a century; and to dismiss the “hemispheric turn” as an imperial excursion into the protected domain of Latin American studies. ³ Thus, for example, in the essay “Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis,”

³ Indeed, even if one ignores the foundational texts and figures of the Latin American intellectual and literary tradition (José Enrique Rodó, José Martí, José Carlos Mariátegui, etc.), it is still true that some of the earliest academic efforts to think American letters from a hemispheric
Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick and J.T. Way regretfully observe that “[a] participant in a recent conference on ‘transnational history’ said she almost did not come, because for her as a Latin American, ‘transnational’ could not mean anything except (primarily U.S.-based) rapacious corporate dominance and its associated knowledge systems” (625). In a curious sense, then, the recognition of hemispheric interconnection has contributed to reinforcing the logic of continental partition. More than ever, the Americas can only be thought through the lens of what José Limón calls the “binary theory of US hegemony versus pan-Latin American textual resistance and opposition” (163).

The gravitational pull of the dualistic paradigm can by exemplified by the persistent critical tendency to downplay the level of textual interaction and cross-referencing between the U.S. and Latin American literary traditions. Talking about the supposedly failed meeting between Federico García Lorca and Hart Crane in a Brooklyn apartment, for instance, Carl Good observes that, “neither of the two poets ever seems to have made significant contact with writers or artists of any kind associated with the other language, and both, in fact, seem to have actively and consistently avoided such encounters” (229). More generally, Good describes the “non-encounter” between Lorca and Crane as an index of the “ongoing non-encounter between [the] national, or regional, literary and critical traditions in the hemisphere” (233). Of course, the fact of encounter cannot always be denied. There is ample textual evidence that, across the great divide of language and geography, a significant number of U.S. and Latin American authors read,

perspective have come from scholars who work primarily in the field of Latin American literature and culture. Some of these include Bell Gale Chevigny and Gari Laguardia, eds., Reinventing the Americas: Comparative Studies of Literature of the United States and Spanish America (1986); Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, ed., Do the Americas Have a Common Literature? (1990); and Earl E. Fitz, Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context (1991).
translated, and explicitly engaged in animated dialogue with their continental
counterparts. Even in those cases, however, the relation between Anglo-American and
Hispanic-American works and writers still tends to be presented as one of opposition and
antagonism. As Alfred J. López demonstrates in his insightful essay, “Translating
Interdisciplinarity: Reading Martí Reading Whitman,” this perplexing process of critical
repression and/or distortion can be illustrated by the sophisticated manner in which
“‘hemispheric’ Americanists” have read José Martí’s essays on U.S. literary figures, and
specifically his much discussed piece “El poeta Walt Whitman” (López 8). For the many
contemporary scholars invested in presenting Martí as “a hemispheric revolutionary
hero,” López explains, the Cuban writer’s genuine admiration for and identification with
the “imperialist” author of Leaves of Grass has posed “an insoluble problem”: “How
could Martí so admire a writer who celebrated – even came to represent – so much of
what Martí hated and feared in the U.S. as a rising empire with designs on his beloved
Cuba? And how to explain away "El poeta Walt Whitman," in which Martí not only
praises Whitman but seems to identify with him, even channel him at times?” (8). As
López explains, the widespread response to this critical conundrum has been to argue that
Martí’s apparent tribute is in fact a veiled critique of Whitman’s imperialist leanings. In-
between his words of praise, Martí would invite the discerning reader to search for “his
true misgivings about Whitman” (López 9). On the one hand, this rhetorical contortion,
and indeed, as López shows, manipulation of Martí’s text has helped preserve the
political consistency of the Cuban writer by foreclosing the need to examine the possible
(and possibly unpleasant) ideological parallels and affinities between his writings and
those of Whitman. On the other hand, this tactical resorting to the device of concealment
responds to the latent desire to not interrogate the secure distinction between the two Americas: on one side is the imperial North, represented by Whitman; on the other is the resilient South, embodied by the heroic figure of Martí. Admittedly, some critics have described more affirmative dynamics of intra-hemispheric literary engagement. In her important book, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (2002), Kirsten Silva Gruesz recovers an occluded, bilingual history of writings and translations between the United States and Latin America. In *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Culture* (2004), Anna Brickhouse reconstructs the hemispheric genealogies of the so-called American Renaissance. Likewise, Susan Gillman’s essay, “Otra Vez Caliban/Encore Caliban: Adaptation, Translation, Americas Studies,” discusses Martí’s translation and introduction of Helen Hunt Jackson’s novel *Ramona* (1844) and posits the existence of a transnational, revolutionary literary tradition in the Americas. In these cases too, however, I would argue that, despite its greater motility, the geo-determined structure of the American dyad remains in place: Latin American writers are still only anti-imperialist resisters, U.S. writers are still only idealist oppressors; North and South are still trapped in the dualistic language of antagonism, still caught in “a relation of non-relation” (Good 232).

Needless to say, my investigation does not seek to minimize the grim realities of hemispheric inequality or the violent forays of U.S. imperialism in the Americas. Neither would it like to suggest a naïve history of continental harmony, collaboration, and solidarity. What it tries to do instead is to narrate the bilingual, continental co-formation of the cultural cartography of American difference and similarity. In other words, this

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4 Notice that, symptomatically, all these works focus on the nineteenth century.
project describes the transnational production of the language and vocabulary of hemispheric uncoevalness; it follows the multilateral trajectories that have led to the dualistic partition of the American chronotope into two antithetical halves. As Edwards and Gaonkar respond to those who insist on “maintain[ing] the distinction between the hegemon and the subaltern in a bilateral mode,” “[i]t is not that there are no hegemons, not that there are no imperial impulses and formations, but they are working in a field made up of differential sets of players” (39). In an effort to derail the semantics of the bilateral and attend to the differential cast of actors and voices who jointly configured the Western hemisphere as “two competing spatiotemporal frameworks” (i.e. the two Americas), this dissertation analyzes the dense network of human, artistic and intellectual cross-pollination between Mexico and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s (Lomnitz, “Chronotopes of a Dystopic Nation” 209).

These particular times and places offer a unique vantage point from which to observe the dialectical construction (and division) of the Americas. Whether in Mexico or the United States, this period was marked by a patriotic, anthropological investment in the idiom of cultural nationalism. On both sides of the border, artists and intellectuals led a collective effort to determine the unique – but shared – traits and features that distinguished the transhistorical spirit of mexicanidad and/or the hurried cadences of the “American Way of Life” – a phrase that, as Warren Susman observes, “came into common use” during the 1920s and 1930s (154). At the same time, these years also

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5 Studies of cultural nationalism in Mexico or the United States are too numerous to mention here, but some of the works I relied on for this investigation include: Charles C. Alexander, Nationalism in American Thought, 1930-1945 (1969); Warren I. Susman, Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century (1973); Susan Hegeman, Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture (1999); Ricardo Pérez Montfort, Avatares
witnessed an unprecedented amount of transnational commerce and circulation between the two countries. More than ever before in the shared, but tense history between these rival nations, U.S. bodies, objects, and goods were passing through Mexico, and vice versa. On the one hand, this conjunction of centrifugal and centripetal impulses points to the interdependence of U.S. and Mexican nationalisms. In other words, the particular case of Mexico and the United States offers a paradigmatic illustration of the mutual embeddedness of nationalist imaginaries in the Americas. On the other hand, I believe that, in addition to being a story of two countries, this also is a story of two continents. As a result of both the geographical fact of its immediate proximity with the United States and the historical fact of the Mexican Revolution, Mexico in the 1920s was not just one of many places in Latin America but a metonymic index of Latin American difference in general. As Alfonso Reyes remarked in the essay, “Ciencia social y deber social”:

“México, por los antecedentes de sus transformaciones sociales últimas y aun [sic] por su temperamento nacional y su sensibilidad política…es, como si dijeramos, un testigo privilegiado: lo que se da para toda nuestra América en estado más o menos observable, aquí adquiere relieve de sobresalto” (115). Thus, to speak of the transnational production of the idea of Mexico and the idea of the United States is also to speak of the

6 “Because of her latest social transformations, as well as her national temper and political sensibility, Mexico is, so to speak, a privileged witness: what can be more or less observed in the entirety of our America takes here a startling shape.”
transnational production of the idea of North and South, that is, of the transnational production of the idea of America.

US/Mexican cultural relations have, of course, been the subject of extensive scholarly interest and commentary. But as Mauricio Tenorio Trillo remarks in a review essay of some of these works that deal with the early decades of the twentieth century, “by and large, these studies have emphasized the Mexican side, viewing the U.S. context with a certain indifference” (“Mexican Cosmopolitan Summer” 226). Despite the potential confusion of the formulation, this does not mean that these studies have paid too much attention to the Mexican products and contributions of U.S./Mexican cultural encounters. On the contrary, it does mean that, by adopting the imperialist paradigm and focusing primarily on the primitivist (mis)representations of the Mexican Other that circulated in the U.S. public sphere (and by adopting the Mexican perception of these representations), these accounts have failed to conceive of the cultural dynamics between Mexico and the United States as “a two-way street”: “consequently,” Tenorio concludes, “scholars still lack a comprehensive perspective that addresses not only politics, art, and social ideas but also the international dimension of the phenomenon, including its equally important U.S. and Mexican components” (234, 226).

This dissertation seeks to bring together these two components. To this end, I not only read North American figurations of Mexico (and, by implication, of the United States) as products of the U.S. imperial imaginary, but also relate them to the discourse of

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postrevolutionary Mexican cultural nationalism, and the instrumental role played by U.S.
actors in consolidating the symbols of that discourse. Conversely, I also consider the
ways in which Mexican artists used their visibility on the U.S. marketplace to promote
images of *mexicanidad* that coincided with the folkloric vision of their North American
counterparts. To put it differently, this project reconstructs the collaborative,
transnational process of “mutuo exotismo” (“mutual exoticism”) through which the
racialized, aesthetic vocabulary of U.S./Mexican difference was transacted (Tenorio
Trillo, *Historia y celebración* 182). The benefits of this dialogic approach are fourfold.
First, it circumvents the nationalist ideologemes that continue to inform the writing of
cultural history in both Mexico and the United States. As Tenorio Trillo observes, “los
Riveras, Orozcos, Siqueiros y Kahlos…no son ni fueron mexicanos o estadounidenses,
sino ambas cosas y muchas más” (“the Riveras, Orozcos, Siqueiros and Kahlos…are not
and never were Mexican or North American, but both things and many more”) (*Historia*
164). Of course, the same can be said about the writings of the Franks, the Brenners, the
Chases and the other U.S. Mexicanists who appear in the following pages.

Second, stressing the parallels and continuities between U.S. and Mexican
representations illuminates the multilateral nature of intra-hemispheric interactions. In
particular, this dissertation tries to emphasize the neglected impact of Latin American
intellectual productions on U.S. conceptualizations of the continent. Thus, for instance,
Chapter One situates Waldo Frank’s imaginings of America in relation to the writings of
José Enrique Rodó, José Carlos Mariátegui, and Alfonso Reyes. Likewise, Chapter Two
juxtaposes Stuart Chase’s Mexican fantasies with some paintings and drawings by Diego
Rivera and José Clemente Orozco.
Thirdly, this practice of juxtaposition is attentive to what Laura Doyle calls “the riptide currents of transnationalism” (10). It stresses the simultaneous unfolding and unexpected resonances between “streams of transnationalism” that are usually studied in isolation and/or placed in opposition (Doyle, “Riptide” 10).

Fourthly, I would argue that, by expanding the cartography of enunciation of the “American cast of vision,” this project contributes to what Edwards and Gaonkar call the “provincializing [of] the vernacular” (25). As the agents of the exceptionalist hypothesis begin to wear new clothes, inhabit new spaces, and speak new languages, the imagined naturalness, unity, and sovereignty of the hypothesis begins to wither and fray. As America becomes other than the United States, she also begins to lose her face.

This brings me to another important dimension of this work. On the one hand, my investigation is attuned to the ways in which the circulation of cultural goods contributes to the ossification of cultural and/or national difference. It registers the ways in which a given set of forms, images and attributes becomes attached to a given place or locale. On the other hand, I also follow the less beaten tracks through which, in the process of their circulation, “literature and objects of art, by the ease of their movement across any number of imagined categorical boundaries, post the limits of the ‘integrity’ and ‘wholeness’ of anything we might want to call a culture. They become vehicles for the articulation and disarticulation of different systems of meaning across discontinuous geographies and temporalities” (Evans 15). In particular, my attention to the disfiguring potential of travelling culture enables me to discuss the gendered terms in which the ideas of Mexico, the United States and, more generally, the Americas were conceived and contested. To be more precise, my analysis of Salvador Novo’s reception of North
American culture in Chapter Three investigates how the Mexican poet’s queer treatment and appropriation of U.S. modernist poetry and popular culture interferes with the masculinist voices of postrevolutionary Mexican nationalist discourse and U.S. imperial projections. Via the foreign sounds of English, Novo confounds the sexualized logos that structures the ideology of both Mexican sameness and intra-hemispheric non-synchrony.

In addition to offering an account of the transnational co-formation (and deformation) of such geopolitical categories as “Mexico” and “the United States,” or “North America” and “Latin America,” this dissertation hopes to contribute to the process of spatial refiguration of modernism that has been at the heart of the “new modernist studies.” In a much needed effort to interrogate the Eurocentric tendencies of modernist cartographies, recent commentators on U.S. literature have studied the distinctive forms and traits of modernist practice in the United States. Rather than offering one more panegyric (or condemnation) of the exiled few that make up the usual bulk of the modernist canon – Henry James, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald or Gertrude Stein, etc. – Susan Hegeman’s Patterns for America (1999) turns to the less publicized writings of Willa Cather, James Agee, Van Wyck Brooks, Hart Crane, Lewis Mumford, or Thomas Hart Benton, and locates the existence of vernacular, indigenous articulations of a modernist sensibility. Likewise, Anthony L. Geist and José B. Monléon’s important collection of essays, Modernism and Its Margins: Reinscribing

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8 See, for example, among many others: Anthony L. Geist and José B. Monléon, eds., Modernism and Its Margins: Reinscribing Cultural Modernity from Spain and Latin America (1999); Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (2003); Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, eds., Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces (2005); Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, eds., Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity (2005); Rebecca L. Walkowitz, Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation (2007); Matthew Hart, Nations of Nothing but Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing (2010).
*Cultural Modernity from Spain and Latin America* (1999), urges the reader to take a look at the modernist cultural production of the Hispanic world, a vast body of works and figures that are all too often excluded from the decidedly Anglophile concept and history of modernism. Combining these two interventions, Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg’s more recent volume, *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere* (2006), documents a rich tradition of modernist aesthetic experimentation in the Americas. In so doing, this collection of essays not only challenges “the dominant modernist paradigm that sees art of the Americas as solely indebted and subservient to European art” (xiv). Breaking the bounds of intra-hemispheric borders, it also brings to life “numerous threads of contact between artists throughout the Americas” (xiii). From Canada to Argentina, via Cuba and Nicaragua, *The Social and the Real* charts the unsuspected routes of artistic exchange and interaction between the nations of the continent.

This dissertation also performs a hemispheric rewiring of the modernist creed. Thus, on the U.S. side of the equation, my reading of Waldo Frank, John Dos Passos, Thomas Hart Benton or Archibald MacLeish – Chapters One and Two – points to the importance of reading U.S. modernist productions in relation to the creative output of Latin American *modernismo* and Mexican *muralismo*. Conversely, Novo’s aesthetic *yankeesmo* – Chapter Three – illustrates the unsuspected impact of English-language poetry in the Spanish-speaking world. Once again, this transnational methodology eschews the chauvinist limitations of nationalist historiography. More importantly, exploring the relation between modernism and Americanism leads me to question what Ralph Bauer calls the “Euro-centric epistemological assumptions about literary value” as
they relate to our traditional definitions of the modern (qt. in Giles 648). In particular, studying American variants of modernist activity interrogates the persistent conception of modernism (or modernisms) as “new formalism[s],” however varied and different these formalisms may be (Doyle and Winkiel 1). More than to formal concerns or iterative quests for novelty, I suggest, modernism in the Americas responded to the utopian impulse of resuturing the distended knot between aesthetics and politics, individual creation and collective expression. More concretely, I argue that, in the writings of Martí and Reyes, the paintings of Rivera and Orozco, or the poetries of Whitman and Sandburg, Frank, Dos Passos and Novo (respectively) recognized heterogeneous examples of an art form that was aesthetically modern, politically prescient, and distinctly American.

This broad claim brings me to a final and important point. Does my focus on the hemisphere reinscribe the fallacy of geographic determinism? Does my critique of the fiction of nationalism resort to the fiction of transnationalism? Do I substitute the thesis of U.S. exceptionalism with the thesis of continental particularism? In brief, am I guilty of what Paul Giles calls “hemispheric partiality?” (“Commentary” 648). In response to these valid questions, I would first note the simple fact that the recognition of singularity (real or imagined) does not imply a qualitative judgment. As Winfried Fluck remarks in relation to the United States, and one might repeat in relation to the Americas, “the term exceptionalism was coined to describe the ideology of a promised land and a chosen people. There is no logical reason, however, why, in rejecting this self-serving ideology, one also has to give up the idea that the development of American culture has taken place under conditions of its own” (60). Second, and as should be clear by now, the critical value of the hemispheric method is not to offer new, grander frameworks of
interpretation; fresh, subtler methods of mystification, but to operate “as a kind of agent provocateur, a way of interrupting the smooth circuits of institutional power” (Giles, “Commentary” 654). This dissertation does not map out a systematic theory of nationalism in the Americas, or even a working definition of modernism in the Western hemisphere. Through the practice of disbelief, it only seeks to soften the frozen surface of the given.
Chapter One

Waldo Frank or the Hemispheric Text of Americanism

El confiar en América ¿no era por aquellos tiempos una manera de izquierdismo? Tomando la expresión – claro está – en su sentido más general y filosófico. Ninguno de los elementos del izquierdismo está faltando: por una parte, cierta sublevación, cierto disgusto contra lo que nos rodea, unido al propósito de mejorararlo; por otra parte – y esto es esencial – cierta fe en las cosas abstractas; en lo que, prácticamente hablando, todavía no existe.9

Alfonso Reyes

Reyes’s description of “el confiar en América” as philosophical “izquierdismo” may now sound hopelessly naive. Whether used to refer to a mechanized mode of industrial production, a lifestyle of frantic consumerism, the military imposition of the democratic creed, or the religious tyranny of capital, Americanism is typically perceived as a symptom of socio-political conservatism, an ideological justification of U.S. expansion, and an exceptionalist belief in the imperial doctrine of manifest destiny. This widespread view animates the recent (and largely justified) upsurge of anti-Americanist sentiment; but it has also limited our understanding of earlier articulations of Americanist thought. While shared by artists and intellectuals with a variety of aesthetic and political

9 “Believing in America: was it not, in those days, a form of leftism (in the most general and philosophical sense of the term, of course)? None of the elements of leftism are missing: on the one hand, a certain revolt, a certain quarrel with the world around combined with the willingness to improve it; on the other hand – and this is essential – a certain faith in abstract matters; in that which, practically speaking, does not exist yet.”
affiliations, the cultural Americanism of the 1920s and 1930s “has traditionally been positioned on the political Right and often seen as simply fascist,” says Susan Platt (xii-xiii). This retroactive assessment of the Americanist discourse that prevailed during the modernist period may apply to the virulent nationalism of art critic Thomas Craven, or some of Thomas Hart Benton’s positions, but it also runs the risk of reproducing the very provincialism that it decries. To put it simply, it minimizes the global reverberations of early-twentieth century Americanism, which Miriam Bratu Hansen describes as “a powerful matrix for modernity’s liberatory impulses” (69). This perception of the United States as a site of progressive advancement appears most clearly in the modernist/avant-garde enthusiasm for the artistic potentialities of the techno-industrial age (of which North American society was, of course, the foremost example), but also extends beyond the realm of the aesthetic. Writing about Weimar Germany, for instance, Mary Nolan explains that, “Americanism and Fordism called into question traditional assumptions about culture and gender and the gendered nature of culture” (109). Far from being (only) experienced as a process of forceful imposition, Americanism was (often) welcomed as a promise of emancipation.

Reducing Americanism to a chauvinist manifestation of U.S. patriotic fervor not only ignores the historical reality of its international appeal; it also overlooks the hemispheric origins and dimension of Americanist thinking. More precisely, it silences the existence of what Mary Louise Pratt calls “a positively defined americano, a hemispheric New World identity marked above all by a commitment to democracy and

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10 For a perfect example of aesthetic Americanism, consider, for instance, Francis Picabia’s following statement: “Since machinery is the soul of the modern world, and since the genius of machinery attains its highest expression in America, why is it not reasonable to believe that in America the art of the future will flower most brilliantly?” (qtd. in Ziarek 94).
liberty and a rejection of what a poet in the 1830s called ‘la caduca Europa,’ ‘worn-out Europe’” (35). As suggested by Pratt’s words, this “important and less obvious point of reference” has long been a staple of Latin America’s aesthetic and political discourse, but it also found expression within the most enlightened circles of the U.S. intelligentsia (35). From the 1910s onwards, leftist political commentators such as Bertram Wolfe, Carleton Beals, Frank Tannenbaum, or Muna Lee, began to articulate a hemispheric model of American identity, and to encourage increased collaboration between the English and Spanish-speaking sections of the continent. This New Worldist sensibility also affected the realms of artistic and scholarly activity. At the University of California, Berkeley, historian Herbert Eugene Bolton taught a highly attended course on “The History of the Americas” and promoted the elaboration of a transnational history of the “greater America.” In the field of music, the Mexican accents of Aaron Copland’s popular piece, El Salón Mexico (1936), “encouraged the Americas to unite in the never-ending effort to find a musical identity apart from Europe” (Crist 44). Finally, compelling literary instances of U.S. hemispheric Americanism are William Carlos Williams’ In the American Grain (1925), Edna Worthley Underwood’s Improvisations: South America, the Carib Sea (1929), Archibald MacLeish’s Conquistador (1932), or Edgar Lee Masters’ The New World (1937). In the spirit of the times – according to Charles Alexander, “the central theme” of U.S. literature from the 1920s and 1930s was indeed “the rediscovery of America” – these writers revisit the American past, but they do so from a continental perspective (24). In Conquistador, MacLeish narrates the fall and

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11 Of course, as my analysis will show, this hemispheric Americanism is not to be confused with state-sponsored versions of Pan-Americanism. The former was indeed developed as a reaction against the latter; as an explicit critique of U.S. imperial intervention in Latin America.
conquest of Tenochtitlán, while Williams’ collection of vignettes revisits a number of key moments in the history of the Americas, whether in Canada, the United States, Mexico or the Caribbean.

This chapter addresses the Americanist writings of Waldo Frank. Silence and neglect have become the usual response to Frank’s artistic and intellectual legacy. In an age of obligatory suspicion for the grand pronouncements of aesthetic or political avant-gardism, the author’s apostolic posture, mystical spiritualism, and thinly veiled elitism are increasingly less likely to appeal to contemporary readers. Obsolete as they now seem, the overblown qualities of Frank’s writings and personality once made him a major player of the U.S. intellectual field. In Alan Trachtenberg’s words, “at one time his name stood for the radical cultural and aesthetic aspirations of a whole generation of writers” (Frank, Memoirs viii). According to Frank, the heart of his oeuvre is to be found in his works of fiction, and particularly his novels, which include, among others, The Unwelcome Man (1917), City Block (1922), Rahab (1922), Holiday (1923), and Summer Never Ends (1941). Despite the author’s predictable preference for his creative corpus, Frank’s reputation was built around the popular success of his works of cultural criticism, a division of his writings that the author called “History.” With the publication of Our America (1919) and its sequel, The Rediscovery of America (1929), Frank fashioned himself into a passionate ambassador of the nation’s creative troupes (the “Young America”), a self-appointed role that earned him the official recognition of his peers, whether in the United States or abroad (Our America ix). In 1934, for instance, Frank was appointed chairman of the First American Writers’ Congress and president of the American League of Writers. Three years later, he served as the U.S. delegate and
speaker at the Congress of Revolutionary Writers and Artists of Mexico. In February 1952, Frank was made a member of the National Academy of Arts and Letters. As Lewis Mumford insightfully (if problematically) writes, however, the author’s most “unique contribution” to U.S. culture resulted from his “repeated intercourse with the fundamentally primitive peasant cultures of Latin America” (Frank, Memoirs xxvii).

Starting in the mid-1920s, Frank became an assiduous student and interlocutor of the Hispanic world. Besides publishing numerous volumes on the topic – América Hispana (1931), South American Journey (1943) Birth of a World: Bolivar According to his Peoples (1951), and The Prophetic Island: A Portrait of Cuba (1961) – the author developed lasting friendships with illustrious Latin American artists and intellectuals (including Alfonso Reyes, José Carlos Mariátegui, Leopoldo Lugones, or Victoria Ocampo, to name a few); he published essays in local journals and newspapers, such as Amauta and Sur; and he made several lecture tours across the continent. In Reyes’s hyperbolic formulation, Frank became “uno de los personajes trágicos más eminentes en el diálogo de las Américas” (“one of the most eminent tragic characters in the dialogue of the Americas”) (“Significado y actualidad de ‘Virgin Spain,’”” Obras 139). Indeed, Frank’s success in Latin America was such that, still today, his Americanist efforts are more likely to be remembered in distant Buenos Aires than his native New York.12

12 The majority of the (few) books and essays that address in more than a passing manner Frank’s writings on Latin America are indeed written by scholars from the Hispanic world, or students of Latin American culture and history. Some of these include: Michael Ogorzaly, Waldo Frank: Prophet of Hispanic Regeneration (1994); Ricardo Fernández Borchardt, Waldo Frank: Un puente entre las dos Américas (1997); Irene Rostagno, Searching for Recognition: The Promotion of Latin American Literature in the United States (1997); Horacio Tarcus, Mariátegui en la Argentina o las políticas culturales de Samuel Glusberg (2001); Sebastián Faber, “Learning from the Latins: Waldo Frank’s Progressive Pan-Americanism” (2003); and Miguel Rodríguez Ayçaguer, Visitas Misionales: Waldo Frank en Buenos Aires (2007).
The following pages chart the political and aesthetic implications of Frank’s hemispheric Americanism. First, I relate the author’s investment in the warmest latitudes of the continent to the anthropological imagination of artistic modernism. In primitivist fashion, Frank configures Hispanic America as an inverted mirror image of U.S. industrial modernity, as an organic alternative to the individual and collective fragmentation of techno-industrial society. Secondly, I place Frank’s turn to Latin America in the context of his ambiguous relation with “orthodox” Marxism, and of the author’s lifelong quest for an indigenous avant-garde. Finally, and throughout the analysis, I demonstrate Frank’s in-depth knowledge of the main coordinates of Latin American culturalist discourse. While partly a product of Frank’s imperial fantasies and projections, the author’s hemispheric imaginings are best understood as an attempt to think America from the perspective of his Southern neighbors. Before I turn to these issues, however, a transatlantic detour is in order.

An American in Europe

Like most American artists and intellectuals of his generation, Frank’s aesthetic education is best described as “an enchanted revery of Europe” (Maríategui, “Itinerary of Waldo Frank” 66). Between his father’s library – where the young Frank first discovered the great philosophers of Greece and Germany, as well as the romantic poets of England – and his mother’s music – Beethoven, Wagner, Schubert or Wolf – the ways of beauty all pointed towards the East. Thus, writes Frank, the pictures of Washington and Lincoln that adorned the walls of the family house “spoke to [him] less eloquently than the
novelists and poets…living on the shelves;” while “Cooper’s redskins and sea rovers were more remote to [him] than the cockneys of Dickens, the Parisians of Balzac” (“I Discover the New World,” In the American Jungle 3, 5). Distant and imaginary as they were, the tales of Europe that lulled Frank’s boyhood held more appeal than his physical existence in “rectangular New York” or his grandfather’s heroic participation in the American Civil War: “these depths were voiceless, and I did not know them” (5).

Following his precocious graduation from high school, Frank was sent for a brief stay in Paris, where he met students from all corners of Europe and merrily indulged in “the thunder of exciting talk: revolution, art, morality, death” (6). Determined to pursue his diligent explorations of the bohemian underworld, the seventeen-year-old even decided to attend college in Heidelberg, Germany, but Frank’s master plan was spoiled by the vigorous intervention of his “less philosophical” elder sibling: “‘You are not going to Heidelberg,’ said my brother. ‘You are going to be an American, by gum! ...You’re queer enough as it is…I’m going to send you to a place that will smooth out your angles and your crotchets. Yale for you.’ ...And to Yale I went” (7). Needless to say, the smoothening process did not work as expected. Estranged from his mindless classmates, whose sole interests revolved around football and beer, Frank served his time in college as a “rather cantankerous rebel”: he played Back, read Nietzsche, and seized every opportunity to mock “America’s woeful ‘lack of culture’” in a local newspaper, where he held a position as a drama critic (8). He also drafted a manuscript tentatively titled “The Spirit of Modern French Letters,” which was accepted for publication by Yale University Press (though never published because never completed). Soon after graduating from college, Frank returned to his native New York, where he worked as a reporter for The
New York Evening Post, and later The New York Times. As the author explains, however, writing about “murders, robberies, politics, and visiting celebrities” did not prove more stimulating than “the academic cloisters” (8). Eventful as it was, the vociferous world of metropolitan journalism could not silence the higher call of art (and Europe).

In February 1913, Waldo Frank packed his bags and headed for Paris. For the first time in his life, the aspiring artist “found [himself] in a world where writing – the sheer creative act – was considered a sacrament and a service” (9). Fully immersed “in the rhythm for creation,” Frank spent his days studying and writing: in the process, the author also found the time to know “a woman, a true daughter of this world who took [him] in and made [him] part of it” (9). And yet, Frank’s romance of artistic expatriation would not last long. After less than a year, the glamour and excitement of bohemian life transformed into a nagging feeling of purposelessness: “I was happy here, but I was not needed. I was being nourished by what other men, through centuries and ages, had created. I was a parasite” (10). Frank’s sense of vicarious irrelevance grew particularly vivid when surrounded by his fellow writers from the United States, whom he claims to have carefully avoided. In similar fashion to the younger Frank, the Americans in Paris “sneered…[and] jeered, they swore they were done with the barbaric land that had given them birth” (10). But Frank himself no longer enjoyed deriding the infantilism and mediocrity of the U.S. way of life: “if what they said was true,” writes a repenting Frank, “all the more urgent was the return of men like themselves who claimed to be conveyers of truth, creators of beauty – men who could endow America with what they accused America of lacking” (10). At the age of twenty-four and after spending the better of his life denying his shameful origins, the author felt the moral obligation to contribute to the
cultural and spiritual regeneration of his homeland. After taking him away from his friends and family, Frank’s fascination with cultured Europe finally brought him home.

Frank’s ambitious plan to endow America with truth and beauty initially clashed with the hard facts of national reality. In comparison with Paris or London, the cultural life of the United States appeared like a deserted landscape, a literal *nature morte*: “there were no magazines hospitable to virgin efforts, there were no Little Theatres, no liberal weeklies. The land seemed a hostile waste, consumed by the fires of possession” (12). Far from affecting Frank’s good spirits, this bleak state of affairs served to reinforce the author’s faith in the validity of his cause and the righteousness of his return: “so [he] set to work upon the pleasant task of making [himself] wanted in a world that seemed to be getting along extremely well without [him]” (12). Frank first established his intellectual reputation as an associate editor and regular contributor to the *Seven Arts*, a literary magazine published between 1916 and 1917, and “for which such critics as Gorham Munson and Van Wyck Brooks were to give [him] years later the larger credit,” says Frank (Memoirs 142). As the editors write in the last volume of the journal (October 1917), the *Seven Arts* was founded to give expression to “that latent America, that potential America which we believed lay hidden under our commercial-industrial national organization” (qtd. in Blake 123). It can thus be read (and is usually read) as a discursive platform for the emergent national self-consciousness that characterized the period.  

As Blake explains, however, “it would be a mistake to view the *Seven Arts* simply as a forum for cultural nationalism…The magazine’s promise of an American cultural renaissance was not an aesthetic counterpart to the ideal of a homogeneous political nationalism that infused the pages of the *New Republic* in its early years and inspired a generation of Progressive intellectuals and activists…the editors of the *Seven Arts* were deeply committed to a cosmopolitan vision that
an “America of youth and aspiration”) distinguished itself by its insistence on the social and political function of aesthetic activity, and particularly literature. Through the writings of established and emerging voices such as Theodore Dreiser, Randolph Bourne, Sherwood Anderson, Paul Rosenfield, Eugene O’Neill or John Dos Passos, Frank and his associates strove to convey the transformative powers of “the deep loam of the imaginative and the creative,” a noble campaign that was brought to a premature end by the combination of editorial conflicts and U.S. entrance in the First World War (Frank, Memoirs 83). Following the publication of (virulently) pacifist writings by Randolph Bourne and John Reed (among others), the magazine lost its source of funding and was forced to fold.

With time on his hands, Frank decided to hit the road and expand his knowledge of America beyond the Northeastern nucleus. After a stop in Chicago, where he “felt a childlike spirit” beneath “a braggart mood,” Frank made a passage through Richmond, “that slumberous aristocrat of cities” (“I Discover” 13). He then delved deeper into the Southern states, where he “came to know the Negroes in the Cypress swamps of Alabama and Mississippi”; finally, Frank went searching for the Indian communities of the Pueblo Southwest, and discovered the “spiritual splendor” of “their classic ceremonial dances” and “deeply unselfish religion of nature,” unadulterated remnants of “an American past” and potential seeds of “an American example” (14). On the one hand, Frank’s travels gave him a clearer view of what he later called “the American Jungle”: inequality, isolation, and division seemed the law of the land. On the other hand, this apparent fragmentation revealed the lingering presence of a shared longing. Frank recognized that admitted far greater variations in American cultural life than Herbert Croly and other American Progressives” (123).
“America, in other words, is a multiverse craving to become One,” a mute symphony waiting to be composed: “I saw our land as a fumbling giant child, idealistically hungry as was no other land in all the Western world, but helpless to express its hunger” (“The Artist in Our Jungle,” AJ 152; “I Discover” 12). For the rest of his career, and in various capacities, Frank dedicated himself to give it expression.

Frank’s most enduring analysis of U.S. life and society is the explicitly titled Our America (1919), a book that, according to the author, “was later to be called ‘the Manifesto’ of the 1920s” (Memoirs 142). In the continuity of his writings for the Seven Arts, Frank’s volume offers a scathing critique of the rampant materialism and spiritual bankruptcy of North American life at the turn of the twentieth century. As Susan Hegeman remarks, however, “Frank’s book sounded the more optimistic notes of his predecessors Bourne and Brooks about youth and its cultural mission, and put it together with a more hopeful description of America’s possibilities” (105). Beneath its residual Spenglerian undertones, Our America is the work of a prophetic, future-oriented imagination. In similar fashion to his friend and colleague Van Wyck Brooks (see his well-known essay, “Notes Towards a Usable Past”), Frank’s attempt to lay the ground of a cultural renaissance led him to revisit the archives of the nation: in the figures of Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, or Abraham Lincoln (the only American politician worth remembering, according to Frank), the author recognized possible models to emulate: luminous signposts for the future. But the makings of the new cultural order could also be located in the immediate obscurity of the American present. In the thickness of the growing jungle still survived scattered pockets of resistance, heroic actors that could help America “distill new spiritual values out of our modern chaos” and
become “the savior of the Old World” (*AJ* 15). At the vanguard of the front were, of course, the artists and intellectuals who bravely carried the torch of the American ideal. Frank applauds the writers of the “Chicago Renaissance” (Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, etc.), and the remarkable achievements of his New York collaborators (Alfred Stieglitz, in particular). Equally central to Frank’s willful vision of America are the nation’s ethnic enclaves, including the Jewish communities of the Northeast and, as suggested above, the Mexican and Indian populations from the American Southwest. In contrast to the spiritually dead society that surrounds them, these “buried cultures” are still in touch with “the Great Spirit,” hence their regenerative potential (*Our America* 113).

The impact and influence of *Our America* cannot be overstated, but the author’s grandiose vision of his country as herald of a new civilization also met with a healthy dose of local skepticism. According to Frank, some of his compatriots “even [came] together under the leadership of one of the Americans who spend their time in Paris and…published a fat book to prove that America was hopeless, an altogether unlivable place” (“I Discover” 14). Others offered a more sympathetic response. Foreign writers in particular, “told [Frank] with warm hospitality that this new America of which [he] wrote was what they needed” (14). As suggested by these divergent reactions, *Our America* was more than an exercise in cultural nationalism, or “spiritual pioneering”; it also was Frank’s first (of many) attempt(s) to foster transnational dialogue and intercultural exchange between the scattered artistic minorities of the globe – the book was in fact commissioned by Frank’s friends from the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, Gaston Gallimard and Jacques Copeau (*Our America* 9). More specifically, Frank’s insistence on the unique
qualities of his native country (its “hidden treasure”) was meant to act as a counterweight against the proliferation of “platitudes about America,” as an attempt to “create channels” between “Young America” and “Young France” (Our America 3, x). Frank’s project met with the desired result, and more: the book was not only “published by the NRF with great éclat in Paris”; it also made productive waves in the Spanish-speaking world (Memoirs 98). For instance, in a review of Our America – comically titled, “No todos son petroleros” (“Not all of Them are Oilmen”) – Mexican poet José Juan Tablada praises Frank’s generous appraisal of “las virtudes del pueblo mexicano” (“the virtues of the Mexican people”). He also invites his fellow countrymen to see beyond the “alma oscura y brutal del petrolero” (“dark and brutal soul of the oilman”); and to acknowledge the admirable “reacción espiritual” (“spiritual reaction”) of “la juventud Americana” (“the American youth”), as best embodied by the passionate voice of Waldo Frank, “hondo pensador, alto espiritualista y escritor de estilo prestigioso” (“a deep thinker, a high spiritualist and a writer of prestigious style”) (qtd. in Fernández Borchardt 73).

Following the end of the Great War, Frank opted to pursue his labor of intercultural education by returning to Paris, where the influence of such “mauvais bergers as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound” was steadily growing (Memoirs 109). A rising figure of the intellectual field, Frank could now “enjoy the surfaces” to the fullest: “doors were opened” (109, 114). The young writer was introduced to the key players of the French literary scene, including “the traditionalists” – Anatole France, Paul Claudel, or Valéry Larbaud, as well as “the enemies and negators of tradition” – the surrealists André Breton, Louis Aragon or Philippe Soupault, as well as Tristan Tzara and his Dadaist cohort, who “were rampant and virulent in the postwar years” (115). The wide-eyed
visitor also socialized with André Gide, Darius Milhaud, James Joyce, and the actors Louis Jouvet and Charles Dullin. But the crucial importance of Frank’s second European stay did not lie in its abundance of mundane activities, or even in Paris. The author’s sojourn in France was indeed followed and preceded by two escapades to the country of Cervantes. Sometime before his departure for the City of Lights, Frank decided to wander off the established itinerary: “one day it occurred to me: ‘Europe for me means England, France, Germany, Italy… why not Spain?’” (109). Frank was certainly not the first U.S. writer to show interest for the Iberian Peninsula. Well-known names like Washington Irving, Walt Whitman, Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein had previously written about and/or traveled to the Spanish kingdom. But Frank’s “why not go to Spain?” must be related to the peculiar logic of his journey. In contrast to his fellow modernists, who “liked Europe because it was not America,” Frank’s transatlantic venture was part of his ongoing project to discover (and share) the latent fabric of his native land (109). In his previous writings (Our America, in particular), Frank had suggested that, as he put it, “the Hispanic in the American Southwest had moved [him];” by going to Spain, the author of Rahab and City Block sought “to understand why [he] was moved,” to explore the deeper meaning of that fleeting sentiment (Memoirs 109,110).

During his time in Spain, Frank met such illustrious figures as the philosopher José Ortega Y Gasset, the poets Juan Ramón Jiménez and Pedro Salinas, and the novelists Manuel Azorín, Pío Baroja, and Pérez de Ayala; he traveled from Valencia to Seville, via Salamanca and Cordoba, and wrote a series of articles for U.S. publications – later collected under the title, Virgin Spain: Scenes from the Spiritual Drama of a Great People (1936). More importantly, these crucial weeks reaffirmed the significance of
Frank’s previous intuition: the Hispanic world was destined to play a major part in “the drama of Atlantic Birth” (*America Hispana* 352). Upon arriving in Badajoz, and seeing the “Spaniard[s] in their native home,” the solemnity of the moment dawned on him: “something was in these men, something I had not felt before, and *something I must find out*, because in an unregistered way I knew it was important,” writes Frank (*Memoirs* 111). The importance of Spain stemmed from two inter-related reasons. First, the author argues that the Iberian Peninsula offers a heroic example of national sovereignty and autonomy, and therefore a model for the cultural renewal of America. As Columbus tells Cervantes in the imaginary dialogue that closes *Virgin Spain*: “When Rome lived, Spain did not live in Rome: she bore her Stoics and her Saints for Holy Rome. When Holy Rome was holy, Spain was not holy. She bore, with her Jews and Arabs, the death of Christ. When Holy Rome was dead and Modern Europe flourished, Spain was not modern and Spain not Europe” (299). Because of this constant historical *décalage*, Frank explains, Spain has preserved her distinctive identity; and developed on the margins of Euro-American modernity. In other words, the example of Spain demonstrates that, in M.J. Bernardete’s words, “a nation…[can] throw her lot on the realization of a religious self, when other clamoring selves…promis[e] economic well-being and conservation to the goods possessed” (9). Thus, Frank imagines Spain as a historical antecedent of the spiritual America to come (“she bore America,” says Columbus), as a material proof that the author’s New Word prophecy is indeed “a possible fruition” (*Virgin* 299; *Memoirs* 128).

Second, Frank’s discovery of Spain leads him to expand his concept of America beyond the linguistic and territorial borders of the United States. Writing in his memoirs,
Frank explains that, during his time in Paris, he had felt “oddly cordial” towards the “writers of America Hispana” (Memoirs 122). Beneath the particulars of “race and religion,” the author sensed an unspoken affinity, “a secret that made them feel closer to [him] than Europeans” (122). Conversely, Frank observes that, “they felt it and recognized it and responded” (123). At first, the author attributes this mutual feeling of mute solidarity to the historic and geographical contiguity of the United States and Latin America, to their shared sense of colonial incompleteness, their shared pastness. After traveling across the Iberian Peninsula, however, Frank understands that his silent bonding with the writers of America Hispana is more than the fruit of a repressed memory; the mutual recognition between North and South also is a necessary pre-condition of American futurity. In other words, Frank now suggests that the very possibility of fulfilling the promise of the New World depends on the input of the Hispanic spirit as transplanted into Latin America. And indeed, while ostensibly about the land of bullfighting, Frank’s Virgin Spain is best understood as the author’s first effort to write about his Southern neighbors, and to conceive America through a hemispheric lens. This is implicit in the dedication that opens the book; and was later made explicit by the author himself. 14 As he once explained to a Latin American correspondent: “Si yo me he aproximado a España, es porque quiero entrar en la América Hispana por el camino real de la historia” (“if I have come closer to Spain, it is because I want to enter America Hispana through the real road of history”) (qtd. in Reyes, “Significado y actualidad de ‘Virgin Spain,’” Obras 141).

14 Virgin Spain is indeed dedicated “To / those brother Americans / whose tongues are Spanish and Portuguese / whose homes are between the Río Grande / and Tierra del Fuego / but whose America / like mine / stretches from the Arctic to the Horn.”
Frank’s opening words to Latin America came at the suggestion of the Mexican intellectual Alfonso Reyes, whom he met in Madrid and became his “first friend of America Hispana” (Memoirs 122). Familiar and sympathetic with Frank’s conviction that, after the carnage of the Great War, the American continent had become the “último reducto humano” (“the last human stronghold”), the author of Visión de Anáhuac (1917) invited his North American counterpart to compose a message to his fellow writers from Mexico and Latin America (Reyes, “Ciencia Social y Deber Social,” Obras 111). Frank confesses that, “when [he] wrote it, [he] knew nothing of Mexican culture, nothing of America Hispana;” ignorance notwithstanding, the essay (explicitly titled, “Mensaje a los escritores mexicanos,” “A Message to Mexican Writers”) was published and “began a dialogue that never ceased,” says Frank (Memoirs 122). Combined with the previous success of Our America and Virgin Spain, this brief missive consolidated his reputation among the cultured elite of the Spanish-speaking world. It was not until a few years later, however, that the author made his definitive mark on the mind of his Latin American comrades. Between June and December 1929, Frank traveled through the countries of Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Perú, Cuba, Brasil, Uruguay, Ecuador, Colombia, Panamá, Honduras and Nicaragua; and delivered the impressive number of forty-two lectures, “todas en español, con la excepción de una charla en inglés” (“all in Spanish, except for one talk in English”) (Primer Mensaje 9). Later collected and published under

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15 For a brief, but heartfelt account of the relation between Reyes and Frank, see Reyes, “My Friendship With Waldo Frank.”
16 The piece was first published in Repertorio Americano VIII (August 4, 1924), and later reprinted in Atenea II (October 1924), as well as P.E.N México (no. 17).
the title, *Primer Mensaje a la América Hispana* (1930), Frank’s essays condense his epic view of U.S. history as a gradual separation between “el ideal Americano” (“the American ideal”) and “el hecho Americano” (“the American fact”); but Frank’s lectures do not dwell on the “rasgos reaccionarios de la vida norteamericana” (“reactionary features of North American life”) – after all, these were all-too-familiar to his hosts (*Primer* 53, 216). More importantly, Frank’s speeches pursued the labor of cultural dissemination previously initiated in *Our America*. By introducing his Latin America audiences to the “menos conocidas” (“less popular”) contributions of the “profetas del arte moderno en los Estados Unidos” (“prophets of modern art in the United States”) – including Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O’Keefe, Eugene O’Neill, Sherwood Anderson Charlie Chaplin, and Isadora Duncan, to name a few – Frank’s lectures stressed the importance of creating what Alfonso Reyes later called an “inteligencia Americana,” that is, an hemispheric intelligence based on “el mutuo conocimiento” (“mutual knowledge”), “la circulación del espíritu” (“the circulation of the spirit”), and the cultivation of “vasos comunicantes” (“communicating vessels”) between the continental parts (Frank, *Primer* 211; Reyes, “En el día Americano,” *Obras* 63, 67). In some of his essays, Frank even began to address the conditions of possibility of such a hopeful scenario. For instance, in the essay “El Nuevo Mundo” (“The New World”), Frank describes himself as the North American thinker “más intensamente convencido de que América no tiene por límites el Canadá y el Río Bravo” (“most intensely convinced that the limits of America are not Canada or the Río Bravo”); and apologetically admits that, in order for a genuine (i.e., hemispheric) Americanism to exist, the United States must stop acting like an imperial power and consider themselves as one among the many nations of the continent: “mi
parte tiene una porción en la riqueza potencial de América; pero esa porción, con todo y ser tan grande, no es sino una parte; y no sera una realidad, a menos de conocerse a sí misma como sólo una parte” (“my part owns a portion of America’s potential richness; big as it may be, however, that portion is nothing but a part; and it will not become a reality unless it recognizes itself as such”) (28). In the explicitly titled piece “El problema de las relaciones entre las Américas” (“The Problem of the Relations Between the Americas”), the author further explains that the process of recognition must be a reciprocal one. It is not enough for the United States to abandon its self-appointed position of continental arbiter. Equally vital is what Mary Louise Pratt calls Latin America’s acceptance of her “accountability for hemispheric conditions” (36). As Frank fearlessly tells his Argentine auditors: “hágase que Hispanoamérica mire al Calibán que tiene dentro: al Calibán que coopera tan alegremente con el Calibán de Norteamérica, con el Calibán de Gran Bretaña” (“let Hispanoamerica look at her inner Calibán, at the Calibán that so merrily collaborates with North America and Great Britain’s Calibán”) (280). Bold and explicit as it was, this opening salvo only served as “una especie de introducción a un mensaje” (“a kind of introduction to a message”), as a provocative foretaste to Frank’s future writings on the continent (Primer 11).

Frank’s most explicit account of Latin America’s role in the future of the New World appears in the volume America Hispana: A Portrait and a Prospect. Published in 1931 and dedicated to the memory of José Carlos Mariátegui, America Hispana is subdivided into two parts. As suggested by the title, Book One introduces Frank’s North American readership to the main people, places and events of Latin American history. In impressionistic fashion, the author moves from Pre-Colombian times to the Mexican
Revolution, via the age of Independences and the Spanish-American War. Frank also depicts the geographical make-up of the Hispanic world (from the flatness of the pampa to the dizzying heights of the Andes) and the architectural magnificence of its main capital cities (Lima, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Río de Janeiro, Santiago de Chile). Finally, he familiarizes his readers with some of the key names and actors of the Latin American past and present, including political leaders (Bolívar, Irigoyen, Madero, etc.) and intellectual figures (José Vasconcelos, José Sarmiento, José Martí, etc.). More important to my argument is Book Two, “Prospect,” in which the author fleshed out his vision of the hemisphere as an unfulfilled dialectic, as a proto-body of antithetical forms longing for completion through mutual aid and collaboration.

According to Frank, the current shape and traits of the “American half-words” result from their different “concepts of the person,” and can be traced back to the originary difference between the Spanish and English settlers (317). Fully released from the Catholic synthesis of medieval Europe, those who peopled the northern parts of the hemisphere arrived as “atoms careering for themselves,” separatistic selves driven by the aggressive force of their bodies and the divisive labor of personal will (316). The Protestant’s relation to the New World thus began with the elimination of the numerous elements that did not fit within his exclusive worldview: “he denied the Whole beyond his sect…destroyed what did not conform and created a world almost purely in his own image” (311, 317). In short, the solipsistic creation called the United States emerged from the convergence of three coeval tendencies: Protestantism, Capitalism, and Democratism, which are based on “the same concept of the separate ego glorifying itself,” and eventually produced the machine culture of the twentieth century (324). According to
Frank, the U.S. citizen’s religious devotion to his absolute, separate will not only removed him from “his soil” (nature, earth, or “the objective world,” as Frank puts it), making him a slave to technology; it also removed him from “his soul” (329). Strictly preoccupied with the material side of life, the beasts of the American jungle gradually lost their personality, that is, their “intuition of the true person as the focus of mankind and of cosmos...[of] the Context which includes all life” (324, 328). To put it more concretely, the men of the North became “instinctive foes[s] of those qualities of mind which interfered with the business of pioneering: meditation, imagination, art.” They collectively faded into a mindless herd of “anesthetic men,” losing touch with the powers of the beautiful (325).

Against all odds, there also are “positive traits in the Democratism of the North”: “the bases of life as it has been built in the United States [may be] inadequate for the creating of whole human beings,” says Frank, but the land of plenty offers unique attractions to mankind (331, 330). The author applauds his nation’s willingness to ignore the quaint hierarchies of Europe’s socio-cultural orders. He also praises “the raising of the standard of common living” and his country’s unique contribution to “universalizing the will, if not the fact, of health” (332). More importantly, Frank stresses the United States’ vibrant “morale,” a quality that he defines as “a common temper or spirit rising from a people’s accepted and functioning ideals,” “an embodiment of ideals” (332, 360). To the difference of all other countries (excepting Russia), where the people’s “defunct moralities” fail to speak to their actual lives, the practical activity of the U.S. population coincides with its system of values (332). For better and for worse, Frank’s fellow countrymen lead their lives according to the nation’s constitutional ideals; life and words
are synchronized, hence the United States’ material wealth, and its magnetic appeal to the world at large.

Frank’s America Hispana is diametrically opposed to its English counterpart. Of course, the Spaniard’s coming to America also was a symptom of the decadence of Medieval Europe. Like his Protestant alter ego, the conquistador was driven by a strong personal will and a selfish lust for gold; he stormed through the luxuriant forests of the continent and destroyed all obstacles that lay in his path: “the Indian rulers were massacred or broken, cities were sacked, roads went to ruin, canals, bridges, inns, terraced fields, were broken” (55). But the violence of the Spanish conquest was simultaneously suffused with a “profound good spirit,” says Frank: though physically cut off from his homeland and in the process of wild discoveries, the mind of the conquering Spaniard was bound to the religious values and traditions of the mother country: he preserved his “sense of the Roman cosmic Order, which he felt destined to fulfill in a new world” (49). Because of this residual “Christian love” and proselytizing passion, the conquistador’s relation to the new land was never one of simple destruction. Unlike the French or English, he embraced the American soil and people, as best embodied by the telluric figure of the Indian woman: “the Spaniard took the Indian woman, and their child was the mestizo” (63). According to Frank, this child of encounter announces the future coming of “new Americans” (69). At this stage, however, the mestizo merely exists as “a twilight creature,” a confused “creature of transition” (64, 65). The present confusion of the mestizo results from the inner conflict between his “two world-wills,” between his Indian selflessness and his Spanish egotism; but it also stems from the tragic obsolescence of his ideals. Whether attached to his indigenous or Iberian past, the mestizo
inhabits a mental space that no longer speaks to his American experience: he is a “homeless spirit” (67). Finally, the homelessness of the mestizo must be related to the political failure of Latin American nations, which Frank describes as “ironic republics.” As foreign products of French and North American principles, and the “bourgeois premise of private property,” the countries of America Hispana have been unable to translate the archaic spirit of the people into a fresh political configuration (61). They have prevented “any premature crystallization of the mestizo” and become irrelevant to their world. Unlike the United States, Latin America thus suffers from a lack of morale, a dramatic “discontinuity between the people’s ideas and life” (334, 335). According to Frank, however, this abyss between word and deed accounts for America Hispana’s prophetic place in the future of the continent. It is precisely because he does not exist as a political being and feels “impotent as citizen” that the Hispano-American has preserved his “personal intactness” and natural connection with the earth and soil, hence the “rich group life of these countries” and their intuitive talent for artistic and intellectual activities (335, 351, 336).

It should be clear by now that Frank’s half-worlds operate as the two sides of a single American dialectic: “In one place, there is order that lacks life, in the other, there is life that lacks order. But a dead order is not organic, and a disembodied life is not alive” (340). In spite of their current isolation, the American poles are destined to converge and, in doing so, to realize the latent potential of the New World. On the Southern side of the equation, the input of U.S. discipline and morale will set “the themes of magnificent music” that lay dormant into motion (339). Once activated by the “rhythm” of the vigorous Northern body, the archaic soul of America Hispana will finally transfigure into
modern institutional forms. In contrast, Latin America’s instinctive spirit of the Whole will act as “a new germinal value” for the United States, providing the needed cultural substance for “a fresh creative beginning” and a new sense of community (340, 341). To put it differently, the masculine rigor of the North will help organize the South into a modern political body, while the feminine values of America Hispana will improve the social and cultural life of the United States. Through mutual aid and collaboration, the two Americas will thus exit the era of transition and enter the age of maturity. At last, “there will be born the Atlantic World – first world of conscious man” (347).

Frank’s America Hispana is, of course, a perfect example of the primitivist imaginary that animated modernist (and avant-garde) art and writing. Like Paul Gauguin’s Tahiti, Victor Ségalen’s Polynesia, or André Breton’s Africa, Frank’s Latin America (or Spain, for that matter) operates as an active reservoir of pre-modern

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17 That America Hispana is gendered as the “feminine” element of the continent is of course implicit in Frank’s identification of the South with spirituality, art, culture, the awareness of the Whole, etc. It also comes forth in Frank’s description of Spain and, by extension, Latin America, as “a woman with whom I had fallen in love” (Memoirs 125). Or, even more explicitly, in the versified dedication that opens up one of Frank’s subsequent volumes on Latin America, namely South American Journey: “I inscribe this book / to Gabriela Mistral of Chile / Victoria Ocampo and Maria Oliver / of Argentina / Clarisa Porset of Cuba, / And to the memory of Antonieta Rivas Mercado. / Friends through many years, sisters in struggle, who incarnate for me the genius of America Hispana.”

18 It should be added that Frank does not advocate the creation of a single and homogeneous Atlantic body that transcends national and linguistic borders. On the contrary, he conceives of the collaboration between North and South as a necessary step for the establishment of more autonomous Latin American republics and a less vulnerable America Hispana. According to Frank, “they [Latin American countries] must project the organic world which is their national ideal – a world that can come true only insofar as they achieve its reality in themselves…their political ataxia, their cultural confusion, kept them unaware of themselves and unaware of each other” (369, 281). With the help of northern discipline, technique and method, the nations of America Hispana will not only grow into their own selves and preserve “the rich varieties of [their] national life” (362). In doing so, they will also revive their waning tradition of cultural unity and offer more resistance against the common threat of U.S. imperialism. They will form an “immediate community of interest between the states: a community of self-defense and of economics” that can effectively resist the divisive action of Industrial Capitalism (363).
integrity, as the privileged sanctuary of an organic way of life that has been spared the social evils of industrial modernity (poverty, class division, individual alienation, etc.). In similar fashion to Frank’s account of the Pueblo Indians in *Our America*, his portrait of the Spanish-speaking world can be described (and dismissed) as a familiar case of romantic racialism, an unfortunate projection of the author’s imperial fantasies. Adopting that critical stance, Casey Blake argues that, “Frank’s treatment of Native American culture tells more about his need to claim some ‘buried culture’ for his own than it does about the multiplicity of tribal cultures he lumped together as a single Indian civilization” (174). Blake’s statement can of course be extended to Frank’s appropriative treatment of Latin America, which becomes particularly apparent when considering the author’s gendering of the South as the female actor of the continent. In his numerous writings on the United States, Frank had indeed shared his concerns about the endangered state of North American womanhood (and masculinity). In *The Rediscovery of America*, for instance, the author devotes an entire chapter to the “feminine bread-winner of the United States” and asks: “why, then, [is] woman not still woman?”; why has she become “an agent of masculine behaviour,” a mere “replic[a] of men? (184, 183, 186). And the author concludes: “There is probably no country in the world where woman has had less chance to be woman, less cogency as woman, where she has been so entirely on the defensive; and where the re-establishment of woman in her organic role is sorely needed, as in ours, for the fulfillment of the folk” (187). In such a context of feminine scarcity and masculine mediocrity, Frank’s construction of the South as a space of sensuality appears as a suspicious strategy in the author’s “quest for a newly revived feminine culture,” as a
convenient resolution to the gender troubles that plagued the social life of the United States (Blake 33).

Frank’s denial of Latin American coevalness is not only implicit in the developmentalist narrative that subtends Frank’s’ vision of the continent as divided into an archaic (feminine) South and a modern (masculine) North. It also comes forth in the uneven power structure that informs the author’s projected collaboration between Latin America and the United States. As we have seen, the American “Whole” will emerge out of the meeting between its two platonic halves, but as Frank immediately remarks, “America Hispana, even more than the United States, is a half-world…more urgently perhaps than any other man in the West, he [the Hispano-American] must create a world” (339, 68). From that perspective, Latin America’s participation in the making of the New World does not appear as a question to be discussed or negotiated, but as a matter of survival, as the moral obligation of the South: “America Hispana must collaborate in the creation of the Atlantic world in order to live,” says Frank (354, my emphasis). Thus, in spite of his repeated attacks against U.S. imperial policies and interventions in Latin America, Frank’s utopian plan of inter-American solidarity falls short of questioning the self-appointed leadership of the North and the imperial language of manifest destiny.19 A fitting example of this residual imperial imaginary appears in the following passage, taken from the aforementioned dialogue between Cervantes and Columbus in Virgin Spain: “your spirit, Spain. They above all will need it, in the north: they whose speech is

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19 In the closing pages of America Hispana, for instance, Frank writes: “Therefore Business in the United States is the natural foe of any force which tends to strengthen or unite America Hispana; and is the friend of those petty nationalisms which keep the republics separate – and the thieves in office. For the thieves are the true political allies of the Dollar in America Hispana. Beneath its hideous official friendship, ‘Divide and conquer’ and ‘Organize when conquered’ are the real slogans of the ‘Pan-American’ movement” (359).
English and who have led in the building of the Towers which are the Grave of Europe. *For it is written that these shall also lead in the birth of the true New World* – the true America which I discovered. Let them see you, Spain; let them take from you, O mother” (300, my emphasis). Like Columbus’s Spain, America Hispana’s sole reason-for-being is to lose herself in the firm embrace of the United States.

Frank’s understanding of hemispheric collaboration is dubious, but to reduce his account of Latin America to a benevolent variant of U.S. imperialism and/or Western primitivism downplays the unprecedented quality of Frank’s effort to stretch the meaning of America beyond the limits of the Río Grande, as well as his unique contributions to the study and recognition of the Spanish-speaking world in the United States. More importantly, such a critical gesture runs the risk of ignoring that the writing of *America Hispana* resulted from the author’s familiarity and engagement with Latin American intellectual and artistic production (as suggested by the extensive bibliography that closes the volume). Frank’s analysis of the Hispanic world may irk the political sensibility of contemporary commentators, but it also reads as the author’s compendium of the most influential variants of *americanismo* in circulation at the time. The obvious antecedent of Frank’s continental cartography is, of course, José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel* (1900), the foundational fiction of Latin Americanist intellectual discourse in the twentieth century. In similar fashion to Frank, Rodó’s portrait of America is structured around the racialized tension between Anglo-Saxon materialism and Latin spirituality. On the Southern side of the hemisphere dwells the spirit of Ariel, “la parte noble y alada del espíritu” (“the noble and winged part of the spirit”), which the author conceives as “una herencia de raza, una gran tradición que mantener, un vínculo sagrado que nos une a inmortales páginas de la
historia” (“a racial heritage, a great tradition to preserve, a sacred link that unites us to immortal pages of human history”) (198). More than any other living group, writes Rodó, “los americanos latinos” can still experience “el sentimiento de lo bello, la visión clara de la hermosura de los cosas” (“the feeling of the beautiful, the clear vision of the loveliness of things”); they still value “la consideración estética y desinteresada de la vida” (“the aesthetic and disinterested consideration of life”) (198, 163, 176). In contrast, “los Estados Unidos pueden ser considerados la encarnación del verbo utlitario” (“the United States can be considered the incarnation of the word ‘utilitarian’”) (196). Blinded by their materialist conception of human existence and their positivist belief in the “absolutismo del número” (“absolutism of the number”), the citizens of the United States have forgotten to cultivate “los intereses del alma” (“the interests of the soul”) and “la vida interior” (“inner life”) (157). In short, North American life amounts to a “negación del arte mismo” (“negation of art itself”) (208). Rodó’s staging of a heroic conflict between a utilitarian North and a soulful South forms the backbone of Frank’s continental drama, but the author of Our America also uses another central strategy of Latin America’s discursive self-definition. Echoing Martí and/or Vasconcelos (as well as many other writers), Frank’s musings on the prophetic quality of the mestizo suggest that, in stark contrast to the racial suprematism of the United States, what distinguishes Latin America is her unique capacity for racial synthesis, or mestizaje.

In order to account for Frank’s positive valorization of the mixed racial make-up of Latin America, it is first necessary to explain the author’s ambiguous relation with official leftist politics. Like numerous artists and writers and of his generation, Frank spent much of his intellectual energy trying to unite political radicalism and aesthetic
practice. In November of 1919, for instance, he travelled to Ellsworth, Kansas, where he worked as a newspaper writer and organizer for the Non-Partisan League. In the early 1930s, he became an active sympathizer of the Communist Party: he travelled to the USSR – a visit that was recorded in the volume, *Dawn in Russia* (1932); he headed the Independent Miner’s Relief Committee in Harlan, Kentucky; he wrote militant articles for *The New Masses*; and he eventually became the first Chairman of the League of American Writers. Despite these visible signs of political engagement and the author’s genuine admiration for Soviet Russia, Frank’s career as an activist is best described as “a series of repeatedly frustrated efforts to act as a spiritual leader in the world of politics” (Blake 170). After his brief experience with the league in the Midwest, for instance, Frank explained in a letter to his friend and fellow writer, Sherwood Anderson: “I cannot feel clean, after I have written a political paragraph.” And he further elaborates: “As I went up the scale of authority, there gradually faded out all that was sweet and gentle in the farmer’s world…For here, projected, was the Socialist State that is coming next. And, Beloved Man, it will be quite as far from thee & me, quite as ignorant & quite as hostile to our gods, as Tammany Hall…Let us be brave and admit that political representation will always, must always be a game for the tricky, the brutal…the shallow” (qtd. in Blake 177). Along the same lines, the author repeatedly denounced “the dogmatic blight” of “the revolutionists of the United States” and the “shallow Communists throughout the world” (*America Hispana* 175). Frank’s comments can be read as symptomatic of the aesthete’s contempt for the toiling masses, of the creator’s fear to lose his singularity in the anonymous mediocrity of the populace. They also illustrate the author’s surprising “lack of interest in politics as an arena of conflict and contention” (Blake 277). But they
mainly point to the author’s spiritual conception of politics as grounded in the inner life of the self. According to Frank, substituting industrial capitalism with a new social and economic creed (i.e., a revolution based on the premises of orthodox Marxism) would merely lead to a “humanitarianized capitalism,” or worse, a “false socialism”: “a socialism in which the true person – real human consciousness – has[ ] no place; in which man function[s] only as part of the pack in the activity of production and consumption” (America Hispana 348). What is needed instead (or at the same time) is a radical transvaluation of values based on true consciousness of self and the transformative powers of culture and aesthetics. As the author puts it: “both individual and mass re-creation must proceed together; and neither can be complete without the other” (342). In other words, the welfare of the Many ultimately rests on the transformation of the One.

Frank’s effort to strike a balance between organized political action and individual artistic freedom helps illuminates his enthusiasm for Latin America’s long history of mestizaje. On the one hand, Frank argues that the Indian’s intuitive sense of the clan (his “ayllu-consciousness”) provides the autochthonous ground for the creation of a continental community of love and solidarity (174). Following the theories of Mariátegui, Frank celebrates the workings of Inca society as an Americanist form of proto-communism. He notes the “affinities between ayllu and a possible soviet,” and the parallel “between the public works of the Inca and the stateless communism of Lenin” (174). On the other hand, the author explains that, in similar fashion to the Russian experiment, Andean society suffers from a “deliberate exclusion of self-consciousness” (175). Whether in Cuzco or Moscow, the creative individual is denied the necessary channels (art, meditation, and all forms of intellectual activity) to transcend the rigid
mandates of the group and attain “true consciousness of self” (175). And as Frank insists, “the individual must evolve from within himself, in order to become the actively willing and creating integer of the soviet-ayllu. The group, deprived of this active microcosm of the ego, dies of inanition,” hence the vital importance of Latin America’s Spanish factor, which the author describes as “the exalted development of the aspiring individual psyche” (175, 174). According to Frank, the Spaniard not only brought to the New World his Catholic longing for cosmic connection; he also introduced “a new dimension: the complex world of willing and of knowing whose focus is the ego” (175). Much like the figure of the immigrant Jew in *Our America* (see Hegeman), the Spaniard possesses the innate tendency and necessary willpower to follow the course of his personal drives and lead a life of pure genius and/or heroic action (though always in symbiosis with the Whole). 20 In short, the people of the Iberian Peninsula enjoy the endangered quality of “personality.” Because of this unique combination of Indian wholeness and Latin self-consciousness, Frank suggests, the cultures of America Hispana provide the ideal raw material for the implementation of a new, distinctly American political configuration: “an integral socialism which [will] transfigure the present industrial body on the basis of the true concept of the person” (348).

According to Frank, the most accomplished articulation of this “integral socialism” can be found in the politico-philosophical writings of “the new American,”

20 The parallelism between Frank’s Jew and Spaniard is made clear by the author’s numerous references to the “semitic” content of *latinidad*. In “The Gaucho” section of *America Hispana*, for instance, Frank writes: “one element in Spain is the fluid Semite and this element is strengthened by the kindred pampa strain” (96). In another passage, the author explains that, in addition to its Christian substrate, the “ego of the Spaniard had sufficient trace of the Semitic to keep its intuition of God as cosmos or as wholeness” (63).
namely José Carlos Mariátegui (170). A declared communist and follower of Marx, the Peruvian writer and political leader acknowledged the importance of the Russian example and the necessity of “direct social action” (176). But Mariátegui’s deep-seated “American roots” (i.e., his Indian intuition of the Whole and Latin sense of selfhood) also taught him that, in Leopoldo Lugones’s words, “truth and even politics are…modalities of beauty” (23). Unlike the shallow revolutionaries of the United States, exemplary victims of the “classic Communist anaesthesia,” the author of Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad Peruana (1928) understood that the making of “fresh social forms” is not just a matter of “social engineering”; that the success of political change ultimately rests on “the creative kernel of the soul,” on the virtuous labor of the ego through which (and through which only) the new social forms acquire substance and depth. Thus, Mariátegui’s Americanist brand of communism “welcomed poets, painters, ethnologists, historians, archeologists [and] musicians,” whose guidance and leadership would ensure the spiritual completion of the revolutionary process (173).21

The mestizo background the America Hispana not only informs her holistic view of politics as a process of both structural and psychological transformation; conversely, it also accounts for Latin American artists’ familiarity with the “estímulos de la acción” (“stimulations of action”), a knowledge that separates them from the hopeless aesthetes of the “países agotados por viejas civilizaciones” (“countries exhausted by old

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21 Interestingly, Mariátegui makes a similar argument regarding Frank’s understanding of revolution. In his essay “Waldo Frank and Marx,” the Peruvian writer explains: “his work proves concretely and eloquently the possibility of harmonising historical materialism with a revolutionary idealism. Waldo Frank has the positivistic method. But in his hands, the method does not become instrumentalism…In Waldo Frank, as in all great interpreters of history, intuition and method collaborate. This association produces a superior aptitude for penetrating into the profound reality of facts. Unamuno would probably modify his opinion of Marxism if he studied the spirit – not the letter – of Marxism in writers like the author of Our America” (142).
civilizations”)(Reyes, “En el día Americano,” Obras 69). As Reyes explains in his well-known essay, “Notas sobre la inteligencia americana,” Latin America’s artistic tradition is “necesariamente menos especializada que la europea…el escritor tiene aquí mayor vinculación social…es casi siempre un escritor ‘más’ otra cosa u otras cosas’…la inteligencia Americana está más avezada al aire de la calle; entre nosotros no hay, no puede haber torres de marfil.”

In contrast to their European (and North American) counterparts, Latin American intellectuals still ignore the agony (and luxury) of specialization and professionalism, a condition that, if once experienced as a “desventaja” ("disadvantage"), now gives them a unique prestige and recognition. In the tumultuous political context of the 1920s and 1930s, says Reyes, the Hispano-American writer’s familiarity with the “aire de la calle” ("air of the street") places him at the vanguard of international aesthetics: “la inteligencia Americana está llamada a desempeñar la más noble función complementaria: …la de ir aplicando prontamente los resultados, verificando el valor de la teoría en la carne viva de la acción. Por este camino, si la economía de Europa ya necesita de nosotros, también acabará por necesitarnos la misma inteligencia de Europa” (Obras 86).

Waldo Frank’s attraction to Latin America also results from the conviction that her artistic and intellectual legacy provides an exemplary model for future creation. In reference to José Martí, for instance, Frank remarks that the Cuban writer conveys a “wholeness that only the Hispanic countries seem still able to

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22 “American intelligence is, by necessity, less specialized than the European one…here, the writer enjoys greater social vinculation…he is almost always a writer ‘plus’ one or more things…American intelligence is more familiar with the air of the street; among us, there do not and cannot exist ivory powers.”

23 “American intelligence is destined to fulfill the most noble complementary function…to promptly put the results into practice, to verify the value of theory in the living flesh of action. At this pace, and like the European economy, the European intelligence will soon end up needing us too.”
produce.” Not satisfied with being “a poet,” the author of Versos sencillos (1891) is also “a publicist,” “a soldier,” and “a man of action,” a powerful combination that makes him “modernly prophetic…a citizen of the unborn New World” (America Hispana 267).

Along the same lines, Frank describes Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, author of Facundo (1845) and former president of Argentina, as “an intellectual whose thoughts are the rough-hewn forms of his experience in life: a new kind of schoolmaster…a new kind of statesman” (106). Even more explanatory is Frank’s assessment of José Hernandez’s Martín Fierro (1872), which the author describes as “the greatest folk poem of the modern western world” and a foremost example of the “synthesizing word”: a literary incarnation of the gaucho’s “immediate continuity between himself and his world…And this is value!” (107,108, 106). Whether in the writings of Márti, Sarmiento, Hernández, or Mariátegui, Frank thus locates successful examples of what John Dewey would later call Art as Experience (1934), and is commonly referred to as the avant-garde.24 More emphatically, I would argue that Latin American aesthetic culture provided him with a New World alternative to European versions of artistic and political avant-gardism. In his 1924 essay, “Seriousness and Dada,” Frank warned against the propensity of his fellow U.S. writers to model their work on European inventions such as Dadaism or Futurism. According to the writer, the Dadaist rebellion against artistic seriousness and morality

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24 As Krysztof Ziarek demonstrates in The Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event, the avant-garde is best understood as an attempt to ground the production of art in the structure of mundane experience and everyday life: “avant-garde art explicitly distances itself from the concept of aesthetic experience as a separate ‘higher’ or ‘more essential’ moment of experience…it demands instead, a rethinking of the very structure of experience apart from the notion of the subjective and the private…. If there is a ‘content’ to avant-garde art, a space ‘proper’ to its experimentation, it is precisely the complex interlacing of experience and language. Such a reconfiguration of this mutual bind in the aftermath of modernity, in the increasingly techno-scientific culture, forms the texture of avant-garde art (10).
was a spontaneous consequence of European history, “a salutary burst of laughter in a world that felt itself too old” (*American Jungle* 128). In the context of the United States, however, the Dadaist cult of nonsense and youthful energy amounts to a dangerous form of narcissistic self-indulgence: “For America is Dada. The richest mess of these bean-spillers of Italy, Germany and France is a flat accord beside the American chaos” (129). What is needed in the United States is therefore not an art of laughter and frivolity, but its exact opposite: “mature action,” “integrating thought,” and “a bit of seriousness for ourselves” (130). Or, as Frank puts is elsewhere, the moral and political responsibility of the contemporary American creator is to produce “a modern classic art”: an art which starts “from a common experience and reach[es] towards a common purpose;” a locally-rooted art which contributes to the human and social betterment of the polis and that, as we have seen, Frank recognized in the synthesizing, *mestizo* contributions of Latin American *modernismo* (“The Artist in Our Jungle,” *American Jungle* 149).

Frank’s concept of *mestizaje* (and America) is grounded in a racialized understanding of continental difference. Despite the biological basis of Frank’s Atlantic drama and its reliance on the vocabulary of scientific racism, however, my analysis suggests that Frank’s *mestizaje* is best understood as the empty signifier of a political and aesthetic ideal.25 That the notion of *mestizaje* primarily refers to the utopian promise of more egalitarian society and the possibility of an integrative art (rather than to the actual processes of racial and national formation across the continent) is made clear by the futuristic temporality of *America Hispana*. On the one hand, Frank gives a detailed

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25 This idea is borrowed from Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado’s essay, “El mestizaje en el corazón de la utopía: *La raza cósmica* entre Aztlán y América Latina,” in which the author develops a parallel argument regarding José Vasconcelos’s famous essay, *La raza cósmica*.

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account of Latin America’s complex history of human encounter; he narrates the marriage between the Indian woman and the white Spaniard in Peru, and he also notes the existence of other hybrids, such the “zambo – mixture of Indian and Negro – and the cholo –mixture of Negro and mestizo” in Colombia and Venezuela, or the “mulatto” and “octroon” in Brazil and Cuba (69). On the other hand, Frank’s text insists that, in its present shape, the mestizo is still a transitional form. Despite the actual fact of mestizaje, the unique potentialities of racial mixing are still to be actualized. Of course, the incompletion of the mestizo may be read in the context of Frank’s residual imperialism, and of the South’s supposed dependency on the North. But it also points to the imaginary, fictional quality of Frank’s America. Despite the author’s detailed account of her distinctive people and history, America does not refer to any pre-existing reality, any identifiable location. Neither a place nor a racial condition, America is an ethico-political demand of the aesthetic imagination, a far-fetched belief that, as Frank famously put it, “in a dying world, creation is revolution” (Our America 232)

Waldo Frank in America Latina

Frank’s Americanism met with occasional resistance and criticism from Latin American readers and audiences. In an editorial of the Argentine journal Renovación, for instance, the anonymous author points to the abstract mysticism of Frank’s “posición filosófica” (“philosophical position”), which he/she sums up in the following terms: “Reformemos al hombre y él se encargará de reformar su mundo” (“Let us reform man and he will take care of reforming the world”). And the writer continues: “en la extrema
insistencia con que [Frank] afirma este postulado vemos nosotros su único defecto. En su afán por predicarlo con amor y leal vehemencia se olvida de encarar los otros aspectos del problema, aquéllos que son precisamente para América Latina los más importantes. Incurre así en el arrebato común de todos los espiritualistas, es decir, confiar demasiado en las fuerzas del espíritu, que desgraciadamente se mueven en un mundo material que les ahoga y enflaquece” (qtd. in Fernández Borchardt 86).26 For the editors of Díogenes, the opposition between an arielist South and a utilitarian North is based on “inert images, seen with intemporal eyes from the bowels of yesterday…[Frank] formulates his present anathemas in the name of the past to which it is impossible for us to return.” Not just a symptom of the author’s outmoded romanticism, the author’s dream of a spiritual America led by the artistic and intellectual caste is premised on a tyranny of the mind, “a kingdom of intellectualist power…much more sad and implacable than the willful power of the United States” (185). Even more critical was the Mexican writer Alfonso Casal, for whom Frank’s project to combine the respective qualities of the American half-worlds is a veiled form of gringo imperialism. Thus, in his article “Norteamérica, paradigma continental” (published in Contemporáneos, April 1931), he describes the author of America Hispana as “el paladín esforzado de un obscuro ideal de Norteamérica” (“the zealous champion of an obscure North American ideal”), as a sentimental agent of U.S. economic interests (84). These various objections are, as already suggested, easy to justify. While imagined as a project of anti-imperialist resistance and anti-capitalist

26 “Frank’s extreme insistence on affirming that postulate is his only fault. As a result of his eagerness to preach it with love and faithful vehemence, he fails to address the other aspects of the problem, which are precisely the most important for Latin America. He thus commits the common mistake of all spiritualists, that is: trusting too much in the strength of the spirit, which unfortunately moves in a material world that drowns it and stifles it.”
revolution, Frank’s utopian vision of North/South collaboration ultimately fails to address the economic and political terms of this unlikely scenario. But the limitations of Frank’s projected insurrection not only stem from its naïve idealism and obvious lack of pragmatism. Equally suspicious is Frank’s belief that the making of the New World rests on the shoulders of the intellectual and artistic avant-gardes of the continent. In spite of Frank’s attack against European aestheticism and avant-garde escapism, and his willingness to integrate artistic labor into social praxis, Frank’s political vision is based on the denial of popular agency, and an authoritarian model of the artist as a magnetic “spirit of the Mass” (Frank, “A Note on the Novel,” *Salvos* 230). As Blake puts it, “in the end, Frank’s romantic-democratic stance for intellectuals threatened to strip the public of any real role except as an echo to the prophet’s call” (175). Finally, and as already noted, Frank’s America Hispana operates as a primitivist figment of the author’s ethnographic imagination. By confining Latin America to the role of cultural and spiritual provider, Frank’s continental cartography reproduces the uncoeval logic that has long justified the progress of U.S. imperialism, whether in Latin America or elsewhere. Pure and exemplary as it is, the fragile existence of the South ultimately depends on the goodwill of the North.

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27 In fact, according to Blake, Frank’s attraction to the social organization of the “buried cultures” (whether in the U.S. Southwest or in Latin America) must be related to his absolutist conception of intellectual leadership: “Frank’s treatment of Native American culture…speaks volumes of the dangers in Frank’s attempt to create a romantic-democratic role for intellectuals as prophets of a new American culture. For what seems to have appealed to Frank in his portrait of Indian culture was its lack of a politics, of any realm in which deliberative reason and contentious debate might shape collective life. Presiding over Frank’s ‘buried culture’ was the figure of the cacique – whose use of magic enabled the tribe to live in harmony with the cosmos. The cacique was Frank’s intuitive prophet at his least democratic” (175).
Despite the political and ideological trappings of Frank’s Americanism, the voices of criticism remained few and far remote. More often than not, the author’s enthusiasm for the cultures of America Hispana was received with genuine fervor. Consider, for instance, José María Salaverría’s following remarks on Frank’s visit to Argentina: “although the public of Buenos Aires is accustomed to manifest lavishly its goodwill and its applause to all the notable representatives of the mind who reach its shore, toward Waldo Frank its applause has gone the limit, to such a point that it goes beyond all that has been know up to now” (92). Indeed, his popularity was such that the author of *America Hispana* even became the subject of emotional poetic tributes. In his “Romance a Waldo Frank,” Férnandez Moreno depicts the U.S. visitor as a “norteamericano / de claro mirar” (“North American / of clear vision”), a “húesped admirable” (“an admirable host”), before candidly concluding: “te vas en la busca / de un reino ideal / donde ya florece /otra humanidad. / Lo hallaremos todos, / dulce Waldo Frank: / tú eres espolique / en la obscuridad” (44). Equally lavish is Ezequiel Martínez Estrada’s piece “A Waldo Frank,” in which the Argentine writer describes his U.S. counterpart as “nuestro camarada que llega” (“our comrade who arrives”), “un cantor de América” (“a singer of America”), and “mi capitán” (“my captain”) (238). Finally, a compelling illustration of Frank’s lasting impact on Latin American intellectual circles is Victoria Ocampo’s “Carta a Waldo Frank,” published in the first number of the famous literary magazine *Sur* (Summer 1931). As Ocampo explains, the foundation of *Sur* was a direct consequence of Frank’s hemispheric longings, a concrete effort to pursue his labor of continental creation through additional dialogue and collaboration between its parts: “Usted, Waldo, me ha

28 "You go in search / of an ideal Kingdom / where already blooms / another humanity / All of us will find it / sweet Waldo Frank: / you are a guide / in the darkness."
impuesto esta tarea...esta revista es su revista y la de todos los que me rodean y rodearán en lo venidero. De los que han venido de América, de los que piensan en América y de los que son de América.” (“You, Waldo, have forced the task upon me...this is your journal and the journal of those who are and will be around me in the future; of those who have come to America, of those who think about America, and of those who are from America”) (13-16).

Excessive as they sound today, these marks of affection help elucidate the reasons of Frank’s popularity across Latin America. First, they point to the converging Americanist agendas of North and South American intellectuals. Even more than in the United States, the question of America’s identity (and of its vital place in the future unfolding of human history) was a central motif of Latin American creative production in the early decades of the twentieth century. This is of course implicit in Victoria Ocampo’s description of Sur as a discursive platform of continental encounter, and is most clearly expressed in the writings of such diverse figures as José Vasconcelos, Pablo Neruda, Vicente Huidobro, Alejo Carpentier or Alfonso Reyes, whose essay “Ciencia Social and Deber Social” offers a fitting illustration: “América aparece como el teatro para todos los intentos de la felicidad humana, para todas las aventuras del bien. Y hoy, ante los desastres del Antiguo Mundo, América cobra el valor de una esperanza” (“America will be the stage of all attempts at human happiness, of all adventures of the good. Today, in the face of the disasters of the Old Word, America takes the meaning of a promise”) (Obras 60). Second, Frank’s notion of a syncretic America that would combine the virtues of its North and Southern constituencies was perceived as a salutary alternative to the official language of “political chancelleries,” as a rare recognition of
Latin America’s full participation to the course of universal history (Mañach 72). For the first time, write the editor(s) of Revista de Avance, a U.S. writer treats Latin American subjects “as neighbors in the same world, as men called – sentenced – to a common destiny” (46). Along the same lines, José María Salaverría explains: “the great intellectuals of Europe were wont to speak to the Argentinians if not as mature persons to the younger ones, at least as outsiders. But recently the North American writer has put a stop to that practice. He has spoken to the Argentinians as from within; that is to say, he has placed himself in the attitude of the American who speaks on equal terms with other Americans” (91). In contrast to European philosophers and/or North American diplomats, Frank did not approach his continental hosts “as pupils to be taught…as colonials,” but as active agents of their own destiny, fellow participants in the drama of Atlantic birth (91). More precisely, I would argue that Frank was the first representative of the U.S. intelligentsia to treat Latin America’s artistic contributions as a distinctive tradition (rather than as derivative of Euro-American models or exotic curiosities); as a substantial body of works that demands critical attention and serious consideration.29 As suggested by my analysis of the inter-textual connections between America Hispana and Latin American culturalist discourse, Frank’s volume not simply points to his admiration for the aesthetic life of the South; more importantly, it should be read as a unique (and faulty) attempt from a U.S. writer to conceive the continent from the perspective of Latin America.

29 Besides sharing his interest for Latin American art, and particularly literature, in his own writings, Frank also promoted Hispanic letters in an editorial capacity. He worked as an editorial advisor for the Latin American section at Doubleday, Doran and Company (as well as Farrar and Rhinehart), and helped publish such important novels as Mariano Azuela’s The Underdogs (1915), Ricardo Guiraldes’s Don Segundo Sombra (1926) and José Hernández’s Martin Fierro (1872).
Of course, it may be tempting to read Frank’s implicit and explicit references to Reyes, Vasconcelos, Martí, Rodó or Mariátegui as so many cases of intellectual co-optation and/or wishful thinking; as the author’s suspicious attempt to convey an illusion of harmony and dialogue where conflict and ignorance are the norm. To put it differently, it could be argued that, in contrast to Frank’s project of continental collaboration, Latin Americanist discourse was developed as a strategy of anti-imperialist resistance, as a separatist effort to produce a transnational block of Southern solidarity against the threat of Northern expansion. To be sure, *La Raza Cósmica*, *Ariel*, or “Nuestra América” (to name some well-known examples of *americanismo*) are discursive attempts to manufacture a sense of commonality across the Spanish-speaking world, but these resonant calls for political unity never entailed the unilateral rejection of all things North American. More ambiguous than most critics are willing to acknowledge, the language of *americanismo* simultaneously evoked a “grudging admiration [for the United States]” (Pratt 37). Predatory and unforgiving as it was, the giant of the North still remained, in Pablo Neruda’s words, a “necessary brother” (qtd. in Pratt 39).

More precisely, I would argue that, anticipating Frank’s *America Hispana*, the most popular instances of Latin Americanist thinking also pointed to the eventual necessity and potential advantages of a rapprochement between the United States and Latin America (one that, paradoxically, depended on an uncoeval conception of continental difference). In order to illustrate that point, let me briefly turn to Martí and Rodó’s famous manifestoes. Of course, it has now become customary to read Martí’s “Nuestra América” as a paradigmatic example of Latin American resistance to U.S. empire, but as Paul Giles writes in his insightful essay, “The parallel Worlds of José
Márti,” this widespread assessment not simply ignores that “Martí’s definition of his key terms, ‘our’ and ‘America’, keeps fluctuating”; it also runs the risk of “flatten[ing] his view of the United States, towards which his writings maintain a more complicated sense of ambivalence” (186, 185).³⁰ Far from rejecting any contact or interaction with North America, Martí’s piece stresses the importance of improving the communicating vessels between “los dos factores continentales” (“the two continental factors”). On the one hand, the Cuban writer explains that the nations of Latin America must overcome their isolationist tendencies and introduce themselves to the Northern foreigner, because “el desdén del vecino formidable, que no la conoce, es el peligro mayor de nuestra América” (“the contempt of the formidable neighbor, who does not know her, is the biggest danger for Our America”) (167). On the other hand, Márti notes that “se ha de tener fe en lo mejor…de él” (“we must have faith in the best in him [the formidable neighbor]”) (167).

Notice that, in similar fashion to Frank, Martí’s call for greater continental engagement rests on a gendered division between North (“el vecino”) and South (“nuestra América”). The prospect of deeper continental connection appears with even more clarity in Rodó’s Ariel. Soon after remarking that, “América necesita mantener en el presente la dualidad original de su constitución” (“at the moment, America needs to preserve the original duality that constituted it”), the author articulates a future scenario that no longer requires the cultivation of “la dualidad original” (199). Basing himself on the observation that “la historia muestra en definitiva una inducción reciproca entre los progresos de la actividad ultilitaria y la ideal” (“history shows a definite relation of reciprocity between the

³⁰ For instance, in her essay, “The 3:10 to Yuma,” Ana María Dopico explains that “José Martí, who himself lived most of his adult life in New York, tried to wrest the word America from its U.S. owners and restore it as a hemispheric denotation, a transnational binding identity capable of serving as a proud alternative to U.S. culture” (47).
progress of utilitarian activity, and that of ideal activity”), he explains that “la obra del positivismo norteamericano servirá a la causa de Ariel” (“the work of North American positivism will ultimately serve the cause of Ariel”), and continues:

lo que aquel pueblo de cíclopes ha conquistado directamente para el bienestar material con su sentido de lo útil y su admirable aptitud a la invención mecánica, lo convertirán otros pueblos, o él mismo en lo futuro, en eficaces elementos de selección. Así, la más preciosa y fundamental de las adquisiciones del espiritú – el alfabeto, que da alas de inmortalidad a la palabra –, nace en el seno de las factorías cananeas y es el hallazgo de una civilización mercantil que, al utilizarlo con fines exclusivamente mercenarios, ignoraba que el genio de razas superiores lo transfiguraría convirtiéndole en el medio de propagar su más pura y luminosa esencia.

La relación entre los bienes positivos y los bienes intelectuales y morales, es, pues, según la adecuada comparación de Fouillée, un nuevo aspecto de la cuestión de la equivalencia de las fuerzas que, así como permite transformar el movimiento calórico, permite también obtener, de las ventajas materiales, elementos de superioridad espiritual (216-217).

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31 “the material advantages that the people of Cyclops have achieved though their sense of the useful and admirable capacity for mechanical invention, will by converted by other peoples, or by themselves, into efficient elements of selection. Thus, the most precious and fundamental invention of the spirit – the alphabet, which gives wings of immortality to the word – was born in Phoenician shops and created by a mercantile civilization, one that used it for strictly mercenary ends, and ignored that the genius of superior races would transfigure and transform it into a means of spreading their purest and most luminous essence. Following Fouillée’s appropriate comparison, the relation between, on the one hand, material goods and, on the other, intellectual and moral ones, is thus another example of the question of equivalence between forces, an equivalence that transforms caloric movement, but also transforms material benefits into elements of a higher spirituality.”
Writing in 1900, Rodó described this meeting between the spiritual and the material factions of America as a hopeful conjecture: “la vida norteamericana no nos ofrece aún un nuevo ejemplo de esa relación indudable” (“North American life does not yet offer a new example of this unquestionable relation”) (217). Writing in 1930, Frank opted to believe that the time had come.
Chapter 2

Transacting the Americas: Stuart Chase, Diego Rivera, and the U.S. Reception of Mexican Muralism

Waldo Frank’s *America Hispana* (1931) aimed to introduce his U.S. readers to the unknown lands and people of Latin America, which he portrays as a heterogeneous but continuous entity united by a shared history and a common language. However, as Frank remarked during one of his many conferences across the continent, his idea of the Hispanic world was primarily mediated by his idea of Mexico: “desde el punto de vista norteamericano,” Frank explained, “es vuestró México la esencia y culminación de esa otra América,” (“from the North American standpoint, Mexico is the essence and culmination of that other America”) (*Primer* 28). More than in the broad pampas of Argentina, the Amazonian jungles of Brazil, or the grand Andean mountains of Peru, the spirit of the South lay for Frank and his compatriots in the neighborly expanses of Mexico. Indeed, as the author of *Our America* observed in a review of Carleton Beals’s *Mexican Maze* (1931), travelling to Mexico in the late 1920s had effectively become a U.S. “custom…almost a tradition” (“Pilgrimage” 183). While in previous years the bohemian intelligentsia “went exclusively to Europe,” says Frank, “at this stage Mexico puts in its eloquent appeal” (184).

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32 Frank’s text acknowledges that “the nations of America Hispana are sharply individualized,” but his narrative gives primacy to the commonalities that unite the nations of Latin America, over and beyond local differences (361). As he writes, “a tradition of union (always excepting Brazil) does exist between them [the nations of America Hispana]…it is older and longer than the century of their separation…and is stronger now than ever” (361-362).
In order to investigate the reasons and significance of that collective appeal, this chapter turns to Stuart Chase’s well-known volume, *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas*, published in 1931 with accompanying illustrations by Diego Rivera. Resting on the empirical findings and data of two academic works of cultural anthropology, Robert and Helen Lynd’s *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (1929) and Robert Redfield’s *Tepoztlán, a Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life* (1930), as well his own observations (the author spent five months in the highlands of Mexico), Chase’s comparative analysis of U.S. and Mexican life first offers a paradigmatic example of the mixture of modernist, nationalist, and Marxist currents that fostered the U.S. discovery of Mexico (and, more generally, of Latin America). In similar fashion to Frank’s America Hispana, Chase’s Mexico operates as both the ancestral site of a uniquely American past and the potential platform of a utopian American future. Second, and as suggested by Rivera’s visual enhancements of Chase’s narrative, *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* points to the transnational networks of U.S/Mexican collaboration that led to the production of the Americanist language of intra-hemispheric difference. While partly attributable to Chase’s primitivist and/or imperial longings, his Indianized conception of authentic *mexicanidad* must also be related to the official discourse of postrevolutionary Mexican cultural nationalism. In other words, Chase’s book channels the nationalist aspirations of both Mexican artists and U.S. modernists. Third, my discussion of Rivera’s drawings will bring me to consider the aesthetic dimension of the Mexican fashion. In particular, my account of the U.S. reception of Mexican muralism will connect the U.S. fascination with Mexico to the avant-garde promise of merging aesthetics and politics, and the New Worldist quest for an Americanist form of modernist practice.
Chase’s *Mexico*, or the Future Anterior of America

As the title indicates, Chase’s *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* emphasizes the “dramatic contrast” between both sides of the Rió Grande. South of the water lies the mountainous village of Tepoztlán: “economically independent” and unfamiliar with the plague of unemployment, this “typical” Mexican community embodies the timeless “gospel of…play” and the leisurely cadence of quotidian fiestas. By opposition, the urban community of Middletown (the pen name for Muncie, Indiana) preaches “the gospel of work” and only exists as a “cog in the wheel” (15). To the difference of Mexico’s autonomous rustic utopia, the industrialized city of the North is entirely tributary to the impersonal workings of “a vast interdependent industrial structure” (15). According to the author, Tepoztlán and Middletown’s contrary systems of economic production and subsistence account for the very different mental make-up of their respective inhabitants. Because of their stress-free lifestyle and the sense of security that surrounds their existence, Mexican villagers are gifted with a “superior common sense” and have been spared the psychological ills of modernity. “In Tepoztlán a Freudian complex is unthinkable,” Chase writes, whereas the pressure and tension of life in the industrial North has produced “a due quota of neurotic and mentally unbalanced individuals” (17). Despite their relative geographical proximity, Tepoztlán and Middletown stand “a whole world apart”: the former is comfortably tied to “the leisurely pattern of the handicraft age,” while the latter is “firmly locked into the culture of the machine” (14).

Chase’s conception of Tepoztlán as a “reservoir” of “the ancient way of life” originates in a racialized conflation between Indianness and authentic *mexicanidad*. In
similar fashion to D.H. Lawrence in *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), Witter Bynner in *Indian Earth* (1929), or Katherine Anne Porter in her Mexican short stories, Chase contends: “it is the Indian and not the white that makes Mexico, that *is* Mexico…Mexico is an Indian country” (81,108). Throughout the narrative, the author systematically downplays the influence of the Spanish factor on Mexican life, and insists that “the Indians would have none of the Castillian pattern, or very little of it” (81). Despite the violence and magnitude of the conquest, we are told, in Mexico “the Indian has withstood the Old World” and remained untouched by the corrupting presence of European settlers and missionaries (6). Even more surprisingly, Chase affirms that, “Indianization is steadily increasing. There must be far less whites blood today, both relatively and absolutely, than in 1790” (231).33 The author’s ethnicized version of the “real Mexico” not only results from the magnification of its most “authentic” or folkloric attributes and the ensuing suppression of the people and places that do not fit within his primitivist picture of the country – these include the “impure” border states and the all-too-cosmopolitan Mexico City, which he describes as “part Seville, part Atlanta, part indigenous Indian, embroidered with billboards, electric lights, tabloids, Tom Thumb golf courses and taxicabs” (14). Chase’s idea of the “real Mexico” is also based on an atemporal notion of Indianness as frozen in an eternal past. According to Chase, Mexican villages such as Tepoztlán operate as “great gaps in the map”; they have evaded the shackles of Western “civilization’ for four hundred years” and provide transhistorical access to the pre-conquest mores and traditions of Aztec and/or Mayan societies (86). In that sense, Chase’s volume reads as both a comparative analysis of contemporary Mexican/U.S.

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33 According to Chase, Mexico’s population in the late 1930s was 96% Indian and Mestizo (“most of them [mestizos] liv[e] like Indians,” says the author), 3% white, and 1% foreign (5).
societies and an archeological exploration of Mexico’s pre-Columbian past, to which the author devotes the opening chapters of the volume.

Chase’s treatment of Mexico as a timeless sanctuary of unadulterated indigenousness is, of course, symptomatic of the modernist fascination with cultural authenticity and so-called primitive societies. But it must also be related to the author’s nativist anxieties and his concomitant effort to manufacture what Van Wyck Brooks famously called “a usable past.”34 In the course of his exposition, Chase repeatedly opposes the “pure Americaness” of Tepoztlán to the ethnic confusion of Middletown, which he sees as “an omelette of English, French, Poles, Italians, Czechs, Russians, Negroes, Germans, Irish, and heaven and the Bureau of the Census know how many other nationalities” (15). In an autobiographical digression, for instance, the author confesses his personal feeling of rootlessness: “ordinarily I am proud of the nine generations of New England behind me,” says Chase, “but I feel like the rawest immigrant compared to the little brown boy up there in the belfry…a comparative newcomer on the continent” (18, 318). Moving from the sphere of the private to the sphere of the national, Chase also questions the United States’ dubious claim to the title “America”: “And why, in the face of this timeless pyramid, should we arrogate to ourselves the name ‘America’ at all?” (7). As suggested by these various expressions of nativist insufficiency and cultural bastardy, Chase’s Indianized Mexico not simply operates as a primeval alternative to industrial modernity. The author’s insistence on the pre-Columbian pedigree of Mexico’s ways of life must simultaneously be read as part of his attempt to ground the present and future of his homeland in the geological soil of

American time and history. In similar fashion to Frank’s Pueblo Indians, but to a larger and more epic scale – “[i]n my nation, the old world has wiped out the Indian and made a totally new culture,” says the author – Chase’s Mexico provides the United States with a symbolic dose of historical capital and an invaluable stock of authentic Americanness (6). Chase’s incorporation of Mexico’s indigenous past (and present) into the narrative of U.S. national history becomes particularly evident when considering his far-fetched analogies between the United States and pre-Columbian civilizations. When discussing the political system of the Aztecs, for instance, he explains: “to an Anglo-Saxon it is perfectly clear that the Aztec civilization was an experiment in democracy…Three hundred years before Thomas Jefferson!” (56). Along the same lines, Chase identifies the ninth and last Aztec emperor, Montezuma, with the “President of the United States”; he compares the experience of sitting in a Mexican bus to standing in the “six o’clock express in Times Square”; he argues that, from the high-perched temple of Tepoztecal, the “little town” of Tepoztlán “lies below us, as the stones of Broadway lie under the Woolworth Tower”; and he muses that the Mexicans’ heroic resistance to the conquest of Tenochtitlán “puts [him] in mind of the Alamo” (75, 190, 2, 74). Following the logic of Chase’s argument, then, pre-Columbian Mexico prefigures the creation of the United States, and should therefore be a source of “patriotic pride” for “all Americans” (28).

This chauvinistic appropriation of Mexican history appears with even more clarity in his appraisal of the civilizational advancement of the so-called “early Americans” (19). Whether at the levels of engineering, architecture, social institutions, medicine,

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astronomy, science, or craftsmanship, Chase remarks, pre-Columbian Mexico challenged or was “far in advance” to “the best which the Eastern Hemisphere had to offer” (45, 57). Socially and politically speaking, for example, indigenous societies were much more enlightened than their European counterparts: “monogamy was the rule…the position of women was far superior to that of Spain…and slavery was practiced, but in a mild form” (50). In particular, the author praises the scientific and technological achievements of the Mayas, whom he describes as “the high priests” of the “American mind” (45). In addition to marveling at their architectural talents and engineering skills, Chase explains that the Mayas discovered “the cipher” centuries before the Hindus and the Moors (who “brought [it] to Europe about 1000 A.D.”), a mathematical discovery that makes them the original precursors of “modern science, and its offspring the machine age,” of which North American modernity is, of course, the most advanced manifestation (46). Thus, through a detour via pre-Columbian Mexico, Chase’s volume not only questions the Eurocentric basis of civilizational discourse. More importantly, the author’s stretching

36 In fact, according to Chase, “the Mayas were the most civilized people on the planet” between 450 and 600 A.D (27).
37 As Susan Hegeman observes in Patterns for America, a similar logic informed U.S. intellectuals’ fascination with Native American cultures: “while dehistoricizing the Indian…a central premise of the salvage endeavor of this period was that objects of Native American manufacture were both antitheses and progenitors of modern machinery and technology. Thus, Otis T. Mason, the first curator of ethnology for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, found a theoretical use for the objects his institution collected in his view that ‘the people of the World have left their history most fully recorded in the works of their hands.’ Charting the progress of humanity from savagery to civilization through the concept of ‘invention,’ or the successful technological manipulation of the environment, Mason could assert that the salvage objects of Native American ways of life were windows into human history – specifically, into a triumphal American history of ever-increasing technological prowess” (33-34).
38 Indeed, according to Chase, American culture was not only in many ways superior to its European counterpart. It also was (and is) a purely autochthonous product: “American culture in its more advanced phases was a purely American phenomenon. It took nothing from Egypt, nothing from China, nothing from Angkor. Granting the invasions, they came before the Old World civilizations had developed, or from races out of contact with them. Peru, Mexico and the
of the spatial and temporal contours of the U.S. national past allows him to naturalize the socio-political progressivism and technological leadership of the United States by placing it within a continental narrative of manifest destiny and historical inevitability. To put it simply, Chase’s volume constructs an Americanist history of modernity, one that begins in Mexico and culminates in the United States.

I have so far focused on Chase’s discursive strategies to construct Mexico as an enclave of primordial Indianness. Yet, despite the author’s investment in the language of “imperialist nostalgia,” his work is also traversed by a healthy dose of critical self-consciousness. At various stages of the narrative, Chase interrupts his lyrical flights to question the reliability of his ethnographic gaze. After describing Tepoztlán as the antithesis of Middletown, for instance, he observes: “I fear I am tipping the scales. In this dreamy haze, amid snow-capped volcanoes, it is all too easy to become sentimental” (17). Further in the exposition, he mocks his many “compatriots who have gone virtually native,” reveling in Mexico’s “bottomless pit of mysteries, atavisms, sorceries and primitive profundities;” and he remarks: “[b]etween this Scylla and Charybdis the traveller must steer, on guard against crude Nordic reflexes, and against sheer sentimental mysticism” (124). Thus, despite his own tendency to romanticize Mexico’s “machineless men,” Chase recognizes that Tepoztlán is “no rustic utopia”: for better and for worse, “the machine age [has made] its breach in the Aztec wall” (224, 11). Far from lamenting this growing encroachment of industrial life into the Mexican landscape, the author rest hammered out their own destiny from their environment. Diffusion took place within the Americas, but hardly from the old world, unless we go back to stone hatchets and wooden dugouts” (24).

explains that Tepoztlán would in fact benefit from the input of more science and
technologies. “Only the gloomiest of backward-gazing philosophers would paste a sign
‘no trespassing’ across its [the village’s] gates,” says Chase: “certain attributes of
Western culture could not fail to improve and enrich the processes of living” (224). In
particular, he stresses the need of introducing modern standards of hygiene and sanitation
(better clinics and hospitals, well-trained nurses and doctors, etc.), scientific means and
methods of agricultural production (fertilizers, irrigation, tractors, steel ploughs, etc), and
an extension of electric power (for lighting, refrigeration, a telegraph line, a long-distance
telephone).

Chase’s ambiguous treatment of Tepoztlán as being both within and without the
sphere of modernity must be related to the chiasmic temporality that structured the U.S.
fascination with Mexico. In addition to furnishing a usable American past and a quota of
civilizational respectability, Mexico was also imagined as a political platform towards a
brighter future. As the site of the first social revolution in the twentieth century, the
country of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata had long captured the imagination of North
American activists (whether Communists, Anarcho-Syndicalists, Socialists, or
independent Leftists). In the autumn of 1913, for instance, socialist journalist John Reed
was sent across the Río Grande by Metropolitan Magazine to report on the Mexican
Revolution. He famously joined the Villista army, and later collected his colorful
adventures in the critically acclaimed volume Insurgent Mexico (1914). A few years later,
the left-leaning writer and historian Carleton Beals evaded the draft by escaping to
Mexico, where he founded the English Preparatory Institute, worked as a political analyst
for The Nation, and served as a mediating figure between U.S. and Mexican officials.
Among Beals’ numerous volumes on Mexican politics and history, one could mention *Mexico: An Interpretation* (1923), *The Church Problem in Mexico* (1926), or *Mexican Maze* (1931). In addition to informing their compatriots about the developments, setbacks, and intricacies of the revolutionary process, numerous U.S. radicals became actively involved in Mexican political life. As Dan La Botz explains in his essay, “American ‘Slackers’ in the Mexican Revolution: International Proletarian Politics in the Midst of a National Revolution,” North American leftists collaborated and built alliances with agrarian and socialist leaders from Mexico, and tried to channel the scattered energies of the nation to consolidate the advancement of the international worker’s struggle. 40 Indeed, in the hopeful eyes of U.S. communists and aspirant revolutionaries, Mexico appeared as a strategic point from which to initiate a proletarian insurrection in the Americas: “the seething cauldron of the Mexican Revolution which had been going on for ten years, made it seem to them and to some Mexican radicals as if there might yet be another eruption, the final revolutionary proletarian communist wave” (La Botz 583). More than any other nation in the continent, 1920s Mexico was a time and place of utopian promise and revolutionary longing.

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40 For instance, Linn A.E. Gale and Charles Francis Phillips were amongst the most active members of the Mexican Socialist Party. Indeed, with the help of one of its founders, Adolfo Santibáñez, and the Soviet emissary Mikhail Borodin, they provoked a split of the Mexican Socialist party, and helped create the Communist Party of Mexico. Another important figure in the collaboration between the U.S. and Mexican labor movements was American Socialist Roberto Haberman, who was hired by the governor of Yucatán Felipe Carillo Puerto to run his cooperative organizations, and served as a liaison between Luis N. Morones, head of the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM), and Samuel Gompers’s American Federation of Labor (see La Botz). On the collaboration between the U.S. and Mexican Left, see Gregg Andrews, *Shoulder to Shoulder? The American Federation of Labor, the United States and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1924* (1991); and Harvey A. Levenstein, *Labor Organizations in the United States and Mexico: A History of their Relations* (1971).
Though never a declared Marxist, Chase also portrays Mexico as a laboratory for the creation of a new economic and socio-political order. This is implicit in his insistence on the similarities between Russia and Mexico, but becomes even clearer in his comparison between Middletown and Tepoztlán’s respective systems of social organization and economic production. According to the Chase, Tepoztlán’s self-sustaining economy not only grants its villagers a degree of mental comfort and security that is inconceivable in Middletown, where the community is subject to the fluctuations of the economic world-system: “if these markets fail – as they do today – repercussion is quick and deadly” (216). More interestingly, the author suggests that, in many instances, in addition to making numerous (and sometimes fishy) comparisons between the two countries and their inhabitants – “farmhouses sprung along the turnpike are rare in Mexico, as in Russia” (144); “Mexican, like Russians, have no time-sense, but go on doing what they are doing so long at it amuses them” (292) – Chase stresses the parallels between the Russian and Mexican Revolutions: “both began in handicraft cultures, flecked with industrialism. In both manor houses were burned, and their lands reclaimed by the villagers. In both progressive labour codes were inaugurated, and trade unionism made all but mandatory. In both foreign concessionaries were held to new and stringent interpretations of property rights, while the state took title to all church lands and buildings…Thus we can set down parallel after parallel” (308-309).
“handicraft economics” is in fact more profitable than industrial mass production: “I am convinced, in the teeth of all the doctors of economics, that [the latter] cannot always compete in price” (247). Thus, after demonstrating his counter-intuitive hypothesis through the analysis of a village potter’s impressive costs/benefits ratio, Chase gleefully exclaims: “Try to beat that, Mr. Ford! ...The Indian system, for many products, in respect to both quality and cost, has mass production completely whipped” (248). This is not to say that he urges his compatriots to desert North America’s factories and “go native”: “You, my fellow citizens, do not desire to return to a handicraft economy, and one would not want you to” (326). More exactly, Chase’s speculations point to his vision of Mexico as a utopian alternative to the unbridled mechanization and senseless over-production of North American industrial society, where “both machines and behaviour flowing therefrom are transcendent” (215). In the immediate aftermath of the Great Depression, the nation of Zapata and Felipe Carrillo Puerto appeared to U.S. observers as an experimental site for the creation of what Lewis Mumford called a “neotechnic” society: a society that combined the joys and benefits of both urban and rural societies, “hand work and machine work,” “economic specialization” and “a handicraft culture” (Chase 327, 139). 42 “The future of industrialism in the sense of mass production is not rosy,”

42 Tragically assassinated in 1924, the socialist governor of Yucatán was a particularly revered figure among the U.S. sympathizers of the Mexican Revolution. Indeed, Chase’s Mexico ends with Carrillo Puerto’s following sentences, which sum up the author’s own vision of Mexico as a beacon of international hope: “With their own communal lands, with good roads, with schools in every hamlet, with a self-sustaining diversity of farm products, with a social organization in each village that will serve spiritual and social needs, with the cultivation of more than one export crop, with co-operative consumers’ and producers’ organizations, with a cultivation of the handicrafts, the native music and dances, with a deliberate introduction of every scientific improvement, we will, in a single generation, have anew Yucatán. We will have a Yucatán that will preserve all that is rich, beautiful and useful in the traditions of the Mayas, and at the same time one that will have absorbed all that can be used of the new and modern in science. We will
says Chase, “as a result Mexico has unparalleled opportunity to evolve a master plan whereby the machine is admitted on good behaviour, and not bolted raw as North Carolina now bolts it” (315). In that sense, the phrase “two Americas” in the title of the volume not simply refers to the “dramatic contrast” between Middletown and Tepoztlán. It also refers to Mexico’s unique chance to strike an appropriate balance between both sides of the Río Grande and lead the way towards a more humane and prosperous tomorrow. As Waldo Frank himself had previously remarked, somewhere between Tijuana and Tapachula will the American half-worlds meet and give shape to the latent promise of the New World; on the multi-layered soil of Mexican territory will the North and Southern parts of the continent coincide and effectively merge into a higher Whole:

“aquí esta el lugar de contacto de las dos mitades de América. En este lugar es donde estará la más inmediata expresión de este acto nuestro que, únicamente él, podrá hacer una realidad de América, de esa América que, como luego veremos, es de tan profunda manera el simbolo del futuro del mundo” (“here is the place of contact between the two halves of America. Here is the place where the most immediate expression of our action will flourish – of that unique action that could make a reality of America, that America

cherish our soil, harbour our group life, grow and develop into a free and strong people, an example to Mexico and even to the World” (qtd. in Chase 327).

43 Chase was in fact a member of the Technical Alliance, and a major advocate of technocratic progressivism. While partly inspired by the goals and ideals of Soviet Russia, technocracy is best understood as a reformist project based on the controlled use of modern technology as a means towards increased freedom and happiness: “Technocracy hopes to create a classless society peacefully, just by intelligent application of technology and the establishment of a social system which will correspond to this technology” (qtd. in Mello 335).
that, as we will see later, is so deeply the symbol of the world’s future) (Primer Mensaje 29).  

**Mexicanidad on the Marketplace**

Needless to say, Chase’s construction of Mexico as a rural oasis of Indian peasants, golden cornfields and communal markets drew the ire of contemporary Mexican intellectuals (or some of them, at least). In an essay from 1935, for instance, Jorge Cuesta deplores that “la industria del turismo Americano en México descansa principalmente sobre la idea, que se hace extensamente popular en los Estados Unidos, de que México es a country of romance: un país exótico, poético, hecho de fantasía” (“the American tourist industry in Mexico rests principally on the widely accepted notion that Mexico is a country of romance: an exotic, poetic country, made of fantasy”); and further remarks: “esas extravagantes imágenes y nociones…son denigrantes y calumniadoras…deben ser rectificadas cuanto antes por medio de una propaganda adecuada (“these extravagant images and notions are denigrating and slandering, and must be rectified as soon as possible via adequate propaganda” ) (“El turismo en México”)

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44 Interestingly, the conception of Mexico as a space of liminality not only appears as a recurrent motif of U.S. writings from the 1920s and 1930s – in Idols Behind Altars (1929), to give one more example, Brenner describes Mexico as a product of “dramatic juxtapositions of climates and landscapes”; a “land which takes such liberties with time and space” – but also informs much contemporary scholarship on the topic (14, 43). In her recent Continental Divides (2009), for instance, Rachel Adams remarks that, “in the Mexican context, the distance between tradition and modernity, ‘primitive’ and contemporary, felt greater but also more proximate (111). In a similar vein, the anthropologist and distinguished scholar of Mexican culture Claudio Lomnitz explains his decision to write a doctoral thesis on Mexico by reflecting on the feeling of spatial and temporal telescoping he experienced upon his first visit to the country, which looked to him as “a preserve of attitudes and practices that had disappeared in Europe decades, and sometimes earlier” (Death and the Idea of Mexico 12).
More humorously, the poet Salvador Novo poked fun at the exoticist fantasies of “Mister Davis” (who could very well be Mister Chase), a brilliant specimen of the “grandes pensadores rubios que vinieron en aeroplano” (“the tall blond thinkers who flew in”), searching for “el paraíso que no pudieron ser los Estados Unidos (“the paradise that the United States failed to be”) (Antología Personal 203). Adopting a similar perspective, recent commentators have tended to emphasize the lingering racialism that permeated U.S. representations of Mexico. According to James Oles, for example, “visiting American artists…steered a course between their own conceptions and an overidealization of Mexico and its culture. More or less resistant to the dominant ideas and prejudices of their time, many visiting artists created images that reinforced stereotypes, revealed undercurrents of racism, oversimplified and romanticized a foreign culture” (South of the Border 213). Chase’s equation of Mexico with rural indigenousness can of course be regarded as a paradigmatic case of Western “conception” or “overidealization” of the Southern Other, but as Mauricio Tenorio Trillo rightly observes, Oles’s “finding of so many ‘fake images’ confirms the presumption of the existence of a real image of Mexico that was never adequately captured by U.S. aficionados” (“Mexican Cosmopolitan Summer” 235). It also ignores the fact that, as the volume’s extensive bibliography and Rivera’s accompanying illustrations suggest, Chase’s ethnicized presentation of Mexican life and culture “was not a foreign-imposed

reading but a synthesis of the interpretations put forward by Manuel Gamio, Xavier Guerrero, Adolfo Best Maugard, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Moises Sáenz, Jorge Enciso, Roberto Montenegro, and others, who themselves drew on transnational intellectual shifts tied to cultural relativism, nationalism, authenticity, and the collective unconscious” (López 101). While partly a symptom of modernist primitivism and/or U.S. imperial fantasies, Chase’s volume must simultaneously be read as a product of the symbiotic process of U.S./Mexican cultural collaboration that characterized the 1920s and 1930s. At a time of widespread anti-indigenous prejudice among the most conservative and/or Hispanophile sectors of Mexican elites, foreign (and particularly U.S.) visitors’ infatuation with Indian Mexico played a determining role in the consolidation and validation of the ethnicized version of *mexicanidad* that was promoted by the postrevolutionary Mexican state.

A famous example of U.S. actors’ crucial involvement in the making of Mexican national identity is the bilingual magazine *Mexican Folkways*, published between 1925 and 1937. Founded by the North American Frances Toor with the help of official subsidy from the Mexican government, *Mexican Folkways* juxtaposed contributions (essays, poems, drawings, photographs, etc.) from both local and foreign figures – including Manuel Gamio, Salvador Novo, Adolfo Best Maugard, Diego Rivera, Robert Redfield, Edward Weston, or Elsie Clew Parsons, to name a few – and rapidly became the authoritative forum for the discussion, study, classification, and dissemination of Mexico’s Indian vernacular traditions. Indeed, according to Rick López, *Mexican

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46 Though López’s words originally refer to Katherine Anne Porter’s presentation of Mexico in the catalogue of an exhibition of Mexican culture held in Los Angeles in 1922, they adequately apply to Chase’s book.
Folkways was “the first comprehensive cross-disciplinary journal to promote rural aesthetics as part of the nation’s proud heritage rather than as embarrassing evidence of backwardness” (142).47

Figure 2. Diego Rivera,
Covert Art of Mexican Folkways, 1928

Another important document of U.S./Mexican cross-pollination is Anita Brenner’s Idols Behind Altars, written with the help of Jean Charlot and illustrated by Edward Weston and Tina Modotti. This work has recently been described as “the first consistent apologia for postrevolutionary Mexican Painting (González Mello 29).48 Finally, one could mention the remarkable labor of Paul Strand, who was initially hired by the Secretary of Public Education to photograph and document Indian communities in the war-prone state of Michoacán; and was later put in charge of producing a series of “películas educativas”

47 For a detailed analysis of the history, structure, organization, and contents of Mexican Folkways, see Margarito Sandoval Pérez, Arte y Folklore en Mexican Folkways (1998).
48 On Brenner’s importance as a mediating figure between the U.S. and Mexican art worlds, see the bilingual collection of essays, Anita Brenner: Visión de una época / Vision of an Age (2006).
(“educational films”), of which only one was eventually realized, namely Fred Zinneman’s *Redes* (1936) – released as *The Wave* in the United States.\(^{49}\)

![Image of Woman - Patzcuaro, circa 1933](image)

Figure 3. Paul Strand, *Woman - Patzcuaro*, circa 1933

In a variety of formats and various capacities, Chase, Toor, Brenner, Strand and many other U.S. artists and intellectuals directly contributed to the cultural recovery of the deeper (and darker) Mexico, and to the forging of a Mexican nationality grounded in the seeds of Indianness.

The transnational routes of Mexican cultural nationalism can also be charted by looking at Mexican artists’ visibility on the U.S. marketplace, though which they effectively (and sometimes lucratively) promoted and advertised their indigenous concept of *mexicanidad*. In one of his weekly columns for *El Universal*, the *modernista* poet José Juan Tablada had already suggested the strategic importance of the North American demand for the future development of Mexican art and artists:

\(^{49}\) On Strand’s Mexican works and sojourns, see James Krippner, *Paul Strand in Mexico* (2010), which contains all of Strand’s photographic work in Mexico, archival documents about the production of *Redes*, as well as essays on Strand’s time in Mexico.
On the one hand are we [Mexicans], a people rich in manifestations of beauty, in pure aesthetic products, but without a market to consume them, without the culture or wealth in our own midst to absorb those products… On the other hand is this nation [the United States], overflowing with riches to satisfy its smallest whims and capable of absorbing and purchasing our artistic products in every possible form, from the greatest architectural project to the most trivial object of art…. Never has the law of supply and demand offered us a more propitious occasion to affirm our spiritual capacity.  

Chief among the many artists who followed Tablada’s shrew words of advice, and capitalized on the international appeal and marketability of colorful Mexico was Diego Rivera, “undisputed ‘rey gordo’ of the Mexican summer” (Tenorio, “Mexican” 225). More than any of his compatriots, the astute muralist utilized his success and popularity in the United States as a platform for the advancement of both his personal career and his indigenous concept of Mexican nationality. Rivera’s transnational promotion of his nationalist agenda can be exemplified by the beautiful drawings that accompany Chase’s volume and faithfully parallel the author’s argument and overall depiction of Mexico. In

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50 From a literary standpoint, Tablada is most famous for introducing avant-garde techniques (and particularly the haiku) into the formal lexicon of Latin American poetry. But Tablada – who lived in New York from 1920 to 1936 – is also remembered as one of the most passionate ambassadors of Mexican culture in the United States. He organized numerous conferences and exhibitions devoted to Mexican arts and history; and introduced English-language audiences to the work of Mexican artists (including Rivera, Orozco and Covarrubias, to name a few). In addition to promoting Mexican national culture in the United States, he also published a weekly column – “Nueva York de día y de noche” – for the journal El Universal, through which he informed his compatriots about the latest events of New York’s artistic and intellectual life. Finally, the poet also founded the Librería de los Latinos bookstore on East 28th Street, which served as a popular meeting point for the Hispanic community in New York.
Figure 4, for example, Rivera echoes Chase’s initial presentation of Tepoztlán as a premodern antithesis of industrial Middletown. The image dramatizes the conflict between the urban and rural worlds, respectively represented by a luxurious car of sophisticated socialites and sombrero-clad peasants walking on the side of the road.

By conveying the simultaneous proximity and indifference between the characters in the vehicle and the faceless villagers, the image conveys the radical opposition between the two Americas, the unbridgeable chasm between the ancient slowness of Mexico’s indigenous traditions and the breakneck speed of North America’s technological modernity. Following the same logic, though in more hopeful mode, Figure 5 evokes the co-operative spirit of Mexican villagers working in peaceful harmony for the collective welfare of the community. In implicit contrast with the mechanization and alienation of waged labor under industrial conditions, work is here presented as a playful, organic
activity, as a natural element in the well-rounded cycle of everyday life – notice Rivera’s insistent use of circular shapes.

Finally, Figure 6 echoes Chase’s utopian vision of Mexico as the designated crossroads of the Atlantic World; as an experimental site for the creation of a technocratic, and possibly Communist future.

Figure 5. Diego Rivera, drawing from Stuart Chase, *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* (1931)

Figure 6. Diego Rivera, drawing from Stuart Chase, *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* (1931)
Admittedly, Rivera’s use of colours may initially evoke the contrast between the fertile vitality of Mexican culture and the sterile lifelessness of the machine age. However, unlike in the first drawing, the relation between the characters depicted (and the values, worldviews, and symbols they stand for) does not appear as one of shared ignorance and mutual rejection. On the contrary, the woman’s approving stare towards the diligent worker in the background points to their mutual interdependency, that is, to the new civilization that could emerge out of the fusion between the technical genius of the masculine North and the cultural wholeness of the feminine South. Far from questioning Chase’s textual narrative, then, Rivera’s visual accompaniments further reinforce the author’s racialized (and gendered) conception of Mexican identity and culture, and the uncoeval North/South partition of the Americas that sustains it.

Another good example of Rivera’s advocacy of his pro-indigenous political positions via North American publications are his illustrations for the English version of Gregorio López y Fuentes’s acclaimed novel, *El Indio* (1935), translated by Anita Brenner and published by the Bobbs-Merrill Company in 1937.

Figure 7. Diego Rivera, drawing from the English edition of Gregorio Lopez y Fuentes, *El Indio* (1937)
Maybe more surprising than Rivera’s pictorial participation in the construction of an ethnicized and folkloric version of Mexican identity are his numerous works that, a la Chase or Frank, articulate an Americanist discourse of hemispheric solidarity and cooperation. As early as in 1924, Rivera’s drawings for the Mexican issue of The Survey (May 1) hinted at the benefits of greater hemispheric cooperation by imagining the triumphant return of Mexican farmers from “the land of the great tools,” where their North American neighbors patiently introduce them to (and even provide them with) the wonders of modern agricultural machinery.

Figure 8. Diego Rivera, drawing from The Survey (May 1, 1924)

But Rivera’s New Worldist enthusiasms are even more pronounced in his work from the early 1930s, a time when, according to Terry Smith, “Rivera arrived at his version of a tendency shared among some Mexican artists and intellectuals – Pan-Americanism” (212). For instance, in the essay “Scaffoldings” – published in the magazine Hesperian in
the Spring of 1931 and described by Bertram Wolfe as “a valedictory to America” – Rivera urges his U.S. comrades to give up their dreams of Europe and embrace their autochthonous American patrimony, which he locates in the lower latitudes of the continent, and particularly Mexico:

Listen Americans! ... Most of your houses are covered with bad copies of European ornament from every known period, mixed up together in a most incongruous fashion…. With these costly spoils from the Old World you have made of America a rags-bottles-sacks market instead of a New World….

Americans, America has for centuries nourished an indigenous and productive art, with roots deep stuck in their own soil. If you wish to love ancient art, you can have American antiques that are authentic….

The antique, the classic art of America, is to be found between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, that strip of continent which was to the New World what Greece was to the Old. Your antiques are not to be found in Rome. They are to be found in Mexico….

Take out your vacuum cleaners and clear away those ornamental excrescences of fraudulent styles….Clear your brains of false tradition, of unjustifiable fears, in order to be entirely yourselves. And sure of the immense possibilities latent in America: PROCLAIM THE AESTHETIC INDEPENDENCE OF THE AMERICAN CONTINENT. (qtd. in Wolfe 296)
Even more celebratory is the explanatory booklet to Portrait of America (1934) co-authored by Rivera and Bertram Wolfe, in which the reader finds the following declaration of hemispheric autonomy and solidarity: “I have always maintained that art in America, if some day it can be said to come into being, will be the product of a fusion between the marvelous indigenous art which derives from the immemorial depths of time in the center and south of the continent (Mexico, Central America, Bolivia, and Peru), and that of the industrial worker of the north” (19). In similar fashion to the writings of Frank or Chase, Rivera’s aesthetic New Worldism rests on a developmentalist narrative of historical progress in which the South plays the part of a timeless past, and the North operates as the active agent of the continental present (and future). Of course, Rivera’s uncritical Americanism also appears in some of his U.S.-based visual production from the period. The painter’s cover for the May 1931 issue of Survey Graphic, for instance, depicts a U.S. worker and a Mexican peasant shaking hands over the sun-bathed border between the two countries, thus suggesting a peaceful future of intra-hemispheric harmony and collaboration.

Figure 9. Diego Rivera, Covert Art from Survey Graphic (May 1931)
Finally, Rivera’s reliance on a logic of American unity that presupposes the cultivation of uncoeval continental difference can be exemplified by the following sketch for the costume designs of the ballet *H.P. (Caballo de Vapor)*, in which Rivera’s stylized characters appear as perfect embodiments of Chase’s indo-proletarian fantasy, that is, of the synthesizing American that will emerge out of the fusion between the archaic traditions of the Hispanic world and the technological talents of Anglo-Saxon modernity.  

Forcing the reading a little bit, one could even argue that Rivera’s use of colors implicitly places the United States in a position of continental leadership.  

Rivera’s contribution to the “espectáculo de la mexicanada y ‘mexican folkways’ en el extranjero” (“spectacle of mexicanism and ‘mexican folkways’ abroad”) and the

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51 Conducted by Leopold Stokowski and choreographed by Catherine Littlefield, the Diego Rivera/Carlos Chávez ballet *H.P.* premiered at the Philadelphia Grand Opera Ballet on March 31, 1932. As Jeffrey Grant Belnap writes in his essay, “Diego Rivera’s Greater America: Pan-American Patronage, Indigenism, and H.P.,” “the ballet’s four incidents stage the relationship between North America’s culture of technological production and the bucolic ‘southern tropics’ that supply the raw materials necessary for the Northern industrial machine” (67).

52 Another, and more famous example of Rivera’s reliance on the North/South developmentalist dichotomy is, of course, the *Detroit Industry* murals. As Terry Smith explains, “[Pan-Americanism] was instrumental in the conceptual program of the Detroit murals” (213).
catechism of Pan-American unity did not sit well among all of his compatriots (Rivas Mercado, Correspondencia 252). In his essay “Rectificaciones sobre las artes plásticas en México” (“Rectifications About the Plastic Arts in Mexico”), for instance, David Alfaro Siqueiros describes Rivera as a mercenary merchant of “la pintura ‘Mexican curious’,” which he sees as “el más grande peligro que tiene ante sí el moderno movimiento pictórico mexicano” (“the biggest danger for the modern Mexican pictorial movement”) (Palabras de Siqueiros 54). 53 Even more resentful of Rivera’s commercial tactics was José Clemente Orozco, who repeatedly denounced his colleague’s strategic manipulation of the U.S. marketplace, and his cynical participation in the business of “la Mexican fashion o mode de Mexique,” which he also calls as “la tormenta ‘mexicanista’” (“the ‘mexicanist’ storm”) (60, 61). In a letter to his friend and collaborator Jean Charlot, for instance, Orozco remarked:

Diego Riveritch Romanoff: toda una amenaza para nosotros todavía…hablar de ‘indios,’ ‘revolución,’ ‘renacimiento mexicano,’ ‘artes populares,’…es hablar de Rivera y dime: de qué otra cosa habla Anita [Brenner]?…todas esas palabras son sinónimas de Diegoff y lo que necesitamos es combatir por cuantos medios sea necesario la papa esa ‘mexicanista’ de la cual la Sra. Paine y Anita son ahora las Profetas. 54

(57, 60)

53 Siqueiros further describes “el arte Mexican curious” as “una continuacion del fetichismo que se hace del arte popular” (“a continuation of the fetishization of popular art”), an imperial product of “la demanda del turismo” (“the touristic demand”) and an “exportacion folklorica” (“a folkloric exportation”) (54).

54 “Diego Riveritch Romanoff: still a major threat for us…to speak of ‘indians,’ ‘revolution,’ ‘mexican renaissance,’ ‘popular arts’…is to speak of Rivera and tell me: what else does Anita [Brenner] speak of?...all these words are synonymous with Diegoff; by any means necessary, we
In similar fashion to Siqueiros, Orozco not only deplores the primitivist stereotypes and nostalgic archeologism that inform Rivera and his U.S. patrons’ joint efforts to contain the meaning of “lo mexicano” within the folkloric mold of “indios” and/or “revolución.” He also points to the detrimental consequences of Rivera’s international hegemony over the form and content of “authentic” Mexican art; to how the U.S. success of “lo exótico-pintoresco-renacentista-mexicano-Riveriano” wound up limiting the aesthetic register and vocabulary of Mexican art and artists (60). Thus, according to Orozco: “en lo que se refiere a la pintura hay que empezar de nuevo y quitarse de encima toda huella de ‘mexicano’ si se desea llegar a tener personalidad propia, pues de lo contrario seremos para siempre ‘discípulos de Rivera’” (“in order to find our own pictorial personality, we need to start anew and shed all traces of ‘lo mexicano.’ Otherwise, we will always be ‘Rivera’s disciples’”) (47).

Yet, despite his contempt for Rivera’s practices and his declared willingness to distance himself from “la peste del Mexican movement” (“the plague of the Mexican movement”), Orozco himself was not immune to the temptations of the transnational marketplace (85). To the great dismay of his friend Rivas Mercado, he did not hesitate to

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55 In his one and only manifesto, titled “New World, New Races, and New Art” and published in Creative Arts (January 1929), Orozco further mocked the (then) widespread idea of creating a new American art based on the continent’s indigenous traditions in the following terms: “to go solicitously to Europe…is no greater error than is the looting of the indigenous remains of the New World with the object of copying its ruins or its present folklore. However picturesque and interesting these may be…they cannot furnish a point of departure for the new creation…the architecture of Manhattan…has nothing to do with…the Maya palaces of Chichen Itzá or with the ‘Pueblos’ of Arizona.” This piece is reproduced in its entirety in Alejandro Anreus, Orozco in Gringoland: The Years in New York (2001).
cash in on the exchange value of the colorful Mexico that he so despised. Indeed, according to Anna Indych-López, Orozco was the first muralist to “accommodate his production for export to the north” (9). For instance, in regards to *Los Horrores de la revolución*, a collection of revolutionary vignettes specifically produced for the U.S. market, López remarks: “Orozco elaborated and reconfigured this series, altering his work to accommodate both the expectations placed on a Mexican artist and the vicissitudes of the commercial marketplace in the United States” (9). More precisely, it appears that, after registering the negative reactions to the critical and violent imagery of some of the drawings, Orozco decided to polish the rough edges and present a more hopeful picture of Mexican life and history. In other words, the painter re-conceptualized his *Horrores* in order to align them “with the nationalism that was expected of them” on both sides of the border (Mello 36). In a subsequent exhibition, this self-imposed process of aesthetic sanitation went even further. Following the advice of a wealthy admirer who had “made [him] promise that in the future [he] would only paint happy things,” Orozco delivered a number of works that, with a touch of irony, he describes in the following terms: “they are pretty and full of color. There are no more dead bodies or black. Everything very bright and happy” (qtd. in Mello 36). In addition to meeting the expectations of picturesqueness of his U.S. clientele, Orozco also sometimes resorted to the celebratory language of Americanism (or “aesthetic Monroeism,” as Mello aptly puts it) (35). For example, in the famous mural *The Epic of American Civilization* (1932-56)

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56 In a letter to the painter Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, for instance, Mercado regretfully exclaims: “Y no, siguiendo la táctica del cerdo de Diego, ¡qué grave es parecerse a sus enemigos!, prefiere exaltar a Maroto y a gringos malos, temeroso de que le quiten su manzana. Ne sabe cuanto me irrita esto” (“And no, following the tactic of that pig Diego – how grave it is to imitate one’s enemies! – he’d rather praise Maroto and mean gingos, scared as he is to lose his bite of the apple. He doesn’t know how much that irritates me”) (251-252).
1934) – painted in Dartmouth College’s Baker Library – the artist deploys “a founding myth in the United States”, namely “the idea of an ‘American civilization,’ with all the ambiguities implicit in the concept of ‘America’” (Mello 45). More precisely, Orozco’s composition relies on the same pairs of oppositions (North/South, Modern/Ancient, Anglo-Saxon/Latin or Indian) that organize Chase and/or Frank’s racialized cartography of the Americas. Despite his numerous attacks against Rivera’s opportunism (and the U.S. guardians of the real Mexico), Orozco too played his part on the globalized stage of the Mexican summer.57

In light of the obvious similarities between Rivera and/or Orozco’s paintings and Chase’s writings, then, it would be a mistake to read Mexico: A Study of Two Americas (merely) as a U.S. fantasy or as an instance of cultural appropriation and co-optation. Instead, Chase’s volume is best understood as a paradigmatic illustration of the transnational production of postrevolutionary Mexican cultural nationalism and Americanist hemispheric ideology. While typically conceived as a form of local resistance against the threat of global integration or “as a discourse that inherently defended national culture against the despoiling gringo invader,” Mexican nativism was “forged in the fires of transnational political and cultural discourse by both Mexican nationals and foreigners,” and served the different but converging interests of both U.S. and Mexican actors (López 97). The forging of Indian Mexico satisfied the nationalist

57 Other good examples of Orozco’s active participation in the transnational construction and promotion of the deep Mexico are his drawings for the English translation of Mariano Azuela’s famous novel, Los de Abajo (1915) – published by Brentano’s Press as The Underdogs: A Novel of the Mexican Revolution (1929); as well as Susan Smith’s The Glories of Venus: A Novel of Modern Mexico (1931).
and New Worldist ambitions of both U.S. and Mexican artists and intellectuals. In other words, the browning of Mexico went hand in hand with the making of the Americas.\footnote{The phrase, “the browning of the nation,” is borrowed from Mary Kay Vaughan, \textit{Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940} (1997).}

\textbf{“The Home of Genius”}

\textit{Mexico: A Study of Two Americas} sheds light on the mixture of leftist and nationalist aspirations that informed the U.S. vogue of things Mexican. As the land of both Zapata and Moctezuma, Mexico captivated the political imagination of U.S. radicals and revolutionaries who sought to establish a socialist utopia in the Americas; and offered a vibrant example of an organic American culture (in the anthropological sense of the term). Unlike the ethnically impure and culturally confused Middletown, Tepoztlán (and Mexico in general) appeared to North American observers as a preserved space of cultural integrity and authenticity: a luminous index of the American past, and a foundational stone of the American future. But the appeal of Mexican life and mores cannot solely be related to the modernist fascination with cohesive, and preferably remote cultural communities (whether the Indians from the Pueblo Southwest, Mexico, and Peru, or the African-American communities from the American South). As suggested by the social composition of the English-speaking colony in Mexico – which, from the mid 1920s onwards, comprised a majority of artists, intellectuals, and other members of the creative class – the U.S. fascination with the land of the Aztecs was also due to its
thriving artistic life and traditions. In addition to being perceived as a bastion of revolution and cultural cohesion, 1920s Mexico was synonymous with art and creation, a privileged location in the geography of beauty.

The idea that the Mexican people “have a unique, innate aesthetic sensibility” is a recurrent motif of U.S. writings on Mexico published during the period (Delpar 125). In Idols Behind Altars, for instance, Anita Brenner emphatically affirms that the country is “dominantly artist”: “her first and definitive gesture is artistic,” says the author, “only as artists can Mexicans be intelligible” (33, 314, 31). In an attempt to illustrate her point, Brenner further remarks that Mexico “is a nation which establishes a school for sculpture before thinking of a Juvenile Court, and which paints the walls of its buildings, much sooner than it organizes a federal bank. Sanitation, jobs, and reliably workable laws are attended to literally as a by-product of art” (314). Similarly, and despite the political currents that first took him to the Spanish-speaking world, Carleton Beals conceded that, “Mexico’s most vital message…is aesthetic” (Glass-Houses 206). For his part, Waldo Frank believed that, “perhaps as no other land in the world, Mexico is the home of genius. From the earliest Maya to the modern craftsman, Mexico has poured forth unceasing beauty” (America Hispana 220). In particular, the author of Our America marveled at the all-encompassing musicality of Mexican life: “Music is so deep in Mexico that even the built and carved stones of the churches flow from their plastic

59 Susan Hegeman insightfully remarks that the emergence of the humanist, anthropological concept of culture has been traditionally understood as a reaction against “the aesthetic ideal of ‘high culture’…which is seen as evaluative, discriminating, and therefore antirelativist.” As the author further notes, however, “the bipartite history of culture (as on the one hand ‘anthropological’ and on the other hand ‘aesthetic’) is inadequate to explain the nuances of cultural discourse,” which “often ‘subsumes’ both of these ideas” (6-7). As I show in this chapter, U.S. writings on Mexico also oscillate between these two uses of the word “culture.”
bonds into the waves of song” (231). As suggested by these and many other testimonies of Mexican artistry, travelling to Mexico in the early decades of the twentieth century took the meaning of an aesthetic pilgrimage. In a similar fashion to the European Grand tour of yore, crossing the Río Grande became a necessary detour in the education of the aspiring artist, an obligatory rite of passage in the process of professional maturation and preparation. In addition to bringing numerous artists and intellectuals to wander off into Spanish-speaking territory, the widespread perception of Mexico as “the home of genius” conversely contributed to the invasion of Mexican arts in the United States. In 1922, the first major display of Mexico’s artistic gifts was organized in Los Angeles, to popular and critical acclaim. Sponsored by the Ministry Industry, Commerce, and Labor, the exhibition combined folk art items with contemporary paintings, including works by Adolfo Best Maugard, Xavier Guerrero and anonymous Mexican schoolchildren; the exhibition catalogue, titled Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts, was written by Katherine Anne Porter. Other significant shows were the First Pan American Exhibition held at the Los Angeles Museum of Fine Arts in 1925-26; or the “Mexican Arts” exhibit, which was organized by the American Federation of Arts and opened in 1930 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A more curious, but equally revealing example of Mexico’s artistic prestige and reputation was the “Mayan revival style” in architecture, which started after WWI and flourished with notable success in Southern California. Inspired by the structure and design of Maya pyramids, U.S. architects (including Frank Lloyd Wright, most famously) started adding indigenous motives and ornaments to their urban constructions (Delpar 131).
The aesthetic and ornamental qualities of Mexican art, its unique geometric designs and its exotic combinations of color, were of course an important part of its appeal; but its prominence in the 1920s and 1930s was mostly due to the search of artists and intellectuals from the period for an art of social relevance and political responsibility. As Richard Pells explains, U.S. artists of the nineteenth century (and writers, in particular) had typically situated themselves on the margins of the nation’s political life: “they had felt themselves out of touch with American life – isolated from the centers of power, repelled by the dominant ethic of greed and acquisitiveness” (4). In a world driven by the ruthless logic of the mighty dollar, the social detachment and collective estrangement of the artist came to be perceived as a prerequisite conditions of aesthetic liberty and integrity; the inner life of the mind was configured as a practice of private resistance to the public world of economics and politics– a posture that is best illustrated by such illustrious figures as Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, or Henry David Thoreau. At the dawn of the twentieth century, however, U.S. artists and intellectuals could no longer subscribe to what Aaron Copland called “the old shibboleths of rugged individualism and pure expression,” which they now denounced as complicit with the acquisitive spirit of industrial capitalism (qtd. in Crist 24). This rejection of the autonomous vision of art as a vehicle of individual creation or, as John Dewey put it, of “the departmental conception of fine art,” can be exemplified by the populist poetry of early modernists such as Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay, as well as Frank’s writings from the 1920s, for instance; but it found its loudest expression during the militant 1930s (8). In the wake of the Great Depression, Malcolm Cowley famously explained, “a new conception of art replac[ed] the idea that it was something purposeless, useless, wholly
individual and forever opposed to a stupid world…the artist and his art once more become a part of the world, produced by and perhaps affecting it” (qtd. in Crist 17). Rather than reveling in their position of socio-political isolation and irrelevance, artists from all backgrounds and political affiliations worked to restore the severed bond between art and life, to make their creations more widely accessible, and to produce objects that could speak to a larger audience, serving as “enhancements of the processes of everyday life” (Dewey 6). As Aaron Copland wrote in an article on the state of modern music - but one that aptly conveys the public aspirations of many artists during the so-called Red Decade: “If the art of composition is to go forward … composers must abandon their isolated position and address themselves to the broad mass of workers and professional people, for whom music is not a luxury but a thing of immense personal and social concern” (qtd. in Crist 24). At a time of collective unrest and economic precariousness, the cult of autonomy ceded place to the cult of political engagement.

In the process of going forward and producing artworks with collective resonance and transformative force, Mexican aesthetics acquired an exemplary value. In the eyes of U.S. artists and commentators, Mexico’s creative tradition had never been fully assimilated to the European mythology of art for art’s sake and the philosophical fallacy of artistic autonomy. Far from operating as a masturbatory vehicle of personal fulfillment, art making in Mexico had remained attuned to the collective murmur and unspoken desires of the silent majority. Not content with the mere making of beautiful things, says Brenner, Mexican artists are “also person[s] with a definite social attitude, a consciousness that must determine [their] choices in daily life and [their] work” (231). In other words, “their work [is] always part of somebody else’s. It [is] famous or beloved
because the god, idea, or national emotion [is] vividly present in it” (52). As a result of this remarkable synchrony between the labor of individual artists and the larger energies that surround them, Brenner concludes, “nowhere as in Mexico has art been so organically a part of life, at one with the national ends and the personal longings, fully the possession of each human unit, always the prime channel for the nation and the unit” (32). Unlike any other artistic school, tradition, or movement, Mexican art exemplified the avant-garde project to recover the continuity between aesthetics and politics, artistic creation and everyday life.

Brenner’s admiration for Mexican artists’ ability to reconcile the beautiful and the ordinary, the mundane and the aesthetic, points to the importance of “indigenous handicrafts…in American explorations of modernity in art,” and to the intimate connection between primitivism and aesthetico-political avant-gardism (Hutchinson 4). In similar fashion to Navajo weaving or Pomo basketry, Mexican pottery (and vernacular handicraft traditions in general) was praised for its organic and integrative quality, for its rare combination of formal elegance and practical usefulness, artistic value and social purposiveness. As Elizabeth Hutchinson observes in relation to the Indian craze, the Mexican fashion “was used by artists and critics interested in promoting the decorative arts as a means of bridging the gap between art and life” (6). Needless to say, the appeal of Mexican (or Native American) vernacular art was due to the racialist belief that, as Frances Toor puts, “every Indian is either a creative or a potential artist” (qtd. in Delpar 134). Once again, however, the primitivist hypothesis falls short. Brenner and her

contemporaries’ understanding of Mexican aesthetic production was not solely mediated by the work of indigenous artisans, or by handicraft objects and artifacts. Neither can it be fully grasped by focusing only on the visible signs and material evidence of Mexican genius and creativity: the actual paintings, jars, poems, vases, garments, drawings, jewelries, or tapestries that circulated around the museums of the United States and/or were purchased by wealthy collectors.

Equally crucial to the U.S. appraisal of Mexican aesthetics was the high symbolic value and key political function of cultural workers in the structure of modern Mexican society: their direct involvement in the workings of the polis, and their influential presence in the public and institutional sphere of the nation. Well into the twenty-first century, the exact political nature and significance of the Mexican Revolution is still subject to debate and controversy.\(^{61}\) An aspect of Mexico’s revolutionary period that has been well documented and remains undisputed, however, is the cultural and artistic effervescence that characterized these years; and the instrumental role artists and intellectuals played in the process of national formation, unification and postrevolutionary reconstruction.\(^{62}\) As Mary K. Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis explain:

\(^{61}\) As Claudio Lomnitz explains the essay, “Final Reflections: What Was Mexico’s Cultural Revolution?,” political commentaries of the Mexican Revolution have typically followed Alan Knight’s distinction “between so-called traditional (or neotraditional) and revisionist” interpretive frameworks (337). According to the traditional contingent, the revolution was the triumphant culmination of a historical process of national self-determination with firm roots in popular and agrarian milieus. In response to this narrative of the revolution as “a movement for social justice,” the revisionist hypothesis presents it as “the contrived and disastrous result of conniving bandits and revolutionary elites” (337-338) No longer a social and legitimate uprising, the Mexican revolution is here conceived as a petty political affair, a shaky product of temporary alliances between the elites of the nation that bears no connection to the idea of justice, or the popular will.

“artistic production provided the polish for the muddied boots of the ‘backwoods’
military generals who ruled postrevolutionary Mexico. They sorely needed this cultural
capital to negotiate with the outside world” (14). Because of Mexican leaders’ urgent
need for the diplomatic and redemptive powers of culture and aesthetics, artists and
intellectuals (or some of them, at least) enjoyed a preferential status: they were granted
financial and logistical support from the Mexican state, were placed in positions of
institutional control and leadership, and frequently occupied prominent (if always
volatile) functions in the ideological apparatus of the nation, a situation that forced the
admiration and even jealousy of their U.S. counterparts. In a letter to his friend and
fellow musician Carlos Chávez, for instance, Aaron Copland remarked: “when I was in
Mexico I was a little envious of the opportunity you had to serve your country in a
musical way. Here in the U.S.A. we composers have no possibility of directing the
musical affairs of the nation – on the contrary, since my return, I have the impression that
more and more we are writing in a vacuum. There seems to me less than ever a real
rapport between the public and the composers and of course that is a very unhealthy state
of affairs” (qtd. in Crist 47). According to Copland, Chávez’s work as head of the
department of fine arts accounted for the popular appeal of his compositions, and
facilitated his efforts to expand his audience and listeners beyond the well-to-do music
aficionado. U.S. artists’ enthusiasm for the place of art and artists among their Southern
neighbors is even more apparent in George Biddle’s influential missive to Franklin

aguila, 1920-1925: educación, cultura e iberoamericanismo en el México postrevolucionario
(1989), which focuses on Vasconcelos’ gargantuan contributions to the making of Mexico
through educational, artistic, and cultural means.
Delano Roosevelt. Following a stay in Mexico, where he discovered fresco painting and participated in the elaboration of public murals, the renowned painter urged his friend and president to emulate the Mexican model of state-sponsored art, a request that “initiated a chain of events that led the federal government to promote rather than solely procure art,” and eventually materialized in the creation of numerous public programs, including the Federal Art Project in 1935 (O’Connor 10). Thus, the artistic and cultural manifestations of the Mexican Revolution were of equal if not superior importance to its socio-political achievements. In addition to fueling the hopes and energies of those who wished to erect a Socialist future in the Americas, Revolutionary Mexico was heralded as a living example of art and culture’s superior capacity to induce change, generate collective values and ideals, and draw the contours of a better world.

**Mexican Muralism as Americanist Modernism**

The most emblematic illustration of Mexican aesthetics was (and still remains), of course, the muralist renaissance, famously embodied by the controversial works and

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63 “Rivera … told me personally … he went directly to President Obregon and asked that the younger modern artists be given an opportunity, at workmen’s wages, to carry out in murals the ideas of Mexican nationalism.

There are many of our younger mural modern artists today who are conscious of the economic and social revolution through which America is going and who would be eager on the same conditions to express in permanent art forms the ideals for which the present administration is fighting” (qtd. in Delpar 160).

64 While symptomatic of the avant-garde sensibility of the 1920s and 1930s, the perception of Mexico as an artistic and intellectual utopia can of course be found in U.S. writers and writings from later periods. In his *Mayan Letters* (1953), for instance, Charles Olson rhetorically asks his fellow poet Robert Creeley: “are not the Maya the most important characters in the whole panorama…simply because the TOP CLASS in their society, the bosses, were a class whose daily business was KNOWLEDGE & its OFF-SHOOT, culture? / that thus a man of K’s temper & interest could become Big Boss, & then, God?” (32).
careers of the so-called tres grandes: Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. As early as in 1916, the Mexican Marius de Zayas – a close collaborator of Alfred Stieglitz and one of the earliest advocates of avant-garde and modernist aesthetics in the United States – introduced Rivera’s name to the English-speaking public by exhibiting some of his cubist paintings at the Modern Gallery.\textsuperscript{65} It was not until returning from Europe in the early 1920s and fashioning himself into a major animator of postrevolutionary Mexico’s cultural scene, however, that Rivera made his mark among his northern neighbors. Following the controversial success of his mural paintings at the Secretary of Education and the National Preparatory School, Rivera’s epic brushstrokes became the topic of laudatory essays and articles in the U.S. press. In a letter to the \textit{Christian Science Monitor} (June 1922), for instance, Katherine Anne Porter – who was living in Mexico at the time – called Rivera “one of the great artists of the world” and captured her emotional response to his work in the following terms: “[w]hen I first went to see his Indian fresco, still half finished…I was struck with the certainty that I was in the presence of an immortal thing” (qtd. in Kraver 153, 154). Rivera’s fame grew exponentially throughout the decade. But the artist’s definitive entrance into the North American art world followed the completion of his work at the Palace of Córtez in Cuernavaca in 1929 – which was commissioned by the U.S. ambassador in Mexico Dwight D. Morrow and exhibited in New York in the form of large scale photographs – soon after which the Mexican painter was officially invited to bring his talents to the United States, where he would paint a number of well-known compositions, including

Allegory of California at the Pacific Stock Exchange in San Francisco (1930-1931), the Detroit Industry series at the Detroit Institute of Arts (1932-33), Portrait of America a the New Workers School and, of course, the unfinished Man at the Crossroads at the Rockefeller Center. By the early 30s, Rivera was arguably the most acclaimed visual artist in the United States – “Rivera had by this time become the hero of the entire western world,” said art critic Henry Mc Bride –, a status that earned him the honor of becoming the second living painter (after Henri Matisse) to have a solo exhibition a the Museum of Modern art in 1931 (qtd. in Delpar 150-151).

Though less vocal and histrionic a figure than Rivera, Orozco’s influence on his U.S. counterparts was equally remarkable. After an earlier and unsuccessful stay in the United States between 1917 and 1919, the so-called “Mexican Goya” returned to New York in late 1927. Orozco’s letters from his life in exile convey the poverty and solitude of the artist as he struggled to make a name for himself in the concrete metropolis. With the help of some of his North American admirers (including Anita Brenner, who had previously written an article on his work for The Art magazine, and Alma Reed, who became Orozco’s self-appointed agent and promoter), however, the Mexican painter gradually found his niche into the selective space of the Manhattan art world. Following a successful show of his oeuvre in Philadelphia, Orozco made his New York solo debut on October 1928 at the Fifty-Seventh Street Galleries of Marie Sterner. Particularly well received was the series of sketches, Mexico in Revolution, which was thus praised by a critic in International Studio: “It is doubtful whether his drawings and lithographs…are surpassed in power and beauty by any living artist” (Delpar 147). A few months later, and at the suggestion of his fellow artist Thomas Hart Benton, Orozco had a
comprehensive exhibition of his work at the Arts Students League. Starting in 1928, Orozco also became an important member and participant of the Delphic Circle, an esoteric society founded by Angelos and Eva Palmer Sikelianos to promote the spiritual regeneration and social pacification of the world. Of course, Orozco’s sojourn in the United States was also marked by the completion of famous frescoes, including *Prometheus* in Pomona College’s Frary Hall (1930-1931), *A Call for Revolution and Universal Brotherhood* at the New School for Social Research (1930-1931), and *Epic of Civilization on the American Continent* (1932-1934) for the Baker Library at Dartmouth College, which Edward Alden Jewell described as “the finest mural accomplishment to date, from any hand, in the United States” (Delpar 149).

David Alfaro Siqueiros made a brief passage though the Industrial North in 1919 (while on his way to Europe), but only reappeared in 1932 to produce three murals in Los Angeles: *Worker’s Meeting* at the Chouinard School of Art, *Tropical America* in the Plaza Art Center, and *Portrait of Mexico Today*, painted in the private home of filmmaker Dudley Murphy. In 1934, Siqueiros also exhibited paintings and reproductions of his murals at the Delphic Studios. But the artist’s most notable contribution (and a compelling illustration of his direct impact on U.S. artists) was the creation of the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop: A Laboratory of Modern Techniques in Art in 1936. Located at 5 East 14th Street in New York, Siqueiros’s short-lived, but influential workshop promoted methods of creation that combined the most “modern” practices of aesthetic experimentation (e.g., pouring solvents across paintings in order to create controlled accidents, combining paints and materials that do not blend, using mechanical

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instruments such as the drill-gun or spray-gun to produce new textures, etc.) with the spirit of revolutionary action, and was attended by the young Jackson Pollock, whose spectacular painting techniques partly evolved from Siqueiros’s teachings and his concept of *pintura dialéctico-subversiva* in particular. 

As the example of Siqueiros’s creative laboratory indicates, Mexican muralists did not limit themselves to showing and selling their art in the United States. By giving public lectures and conferences, contributing essays and drawings to local publications, and collaborating with U.S. artists and intellectuals, they actively participated and intervened in the aesthetic and political life of the nation. Indeed, some of their most famous written statements on art and/or politics were first published in English-language venues. Orozco’s manifesto “New World, New Races, New Art” initially appeared in the magazine *Creative Arts* (January 1929). Rivera’s programmatic statements on

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revolutionary aesthetics were regularly published in U.S. magazines, often in dialogue with contributions from local artists and critics. In the autumn 1932 number of *The Modern Monthly*, for instance, Rivera’s piece, “The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art,” is preceded by H. P. Calverton’s influential article, “Can We Have a Proletarian Literature?,” to which the Mexican responds with a resounding affirmation. Siqueiros’s landmark essay, “Los Vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva,” was originally delivered as a conference paper at the John Reed Club in Los Angeles in 1932 and was directly inspired by his exposure to Hollywood cinematic technologies, while his well-known controversy with the Trotskyist Rivera was initiated in the pages of *New Masses*, where Siqueiros published the article, “Rivera’s Counter-Revolutionary Road” (May 29, 1934). In addition to expressing their aesthetico-political views and positions in the U.S. public sphere, Mexican artists did not flinch from using their art to comment (often critically) on North American life and history.

![Figure 12. Diego Rivera, Frozen Assets (1931)](image)
Rivera’s moveable fresco panel, *Frozen Assets* (1931), for example, uncovers the repressive apparatus that sustains the capitalist structure of North American industrial society. While Orozco’s arresting lithograph, *Hanging Negroes* (1933), offers an unequivocal snapshot of the history of U.S. race relations.\(^{68}\)

![Figure 13. José Clemente Orozco, *Hanging Negroes* (1933)](image)

Far from acting as exotic outsiders or passing celebrities, Mexican muralists were integral members of the U.S. art world, and among its most influential and respected figures. Thus, in his essay “Art and Nationalism,” Thomas Hart Benton did not hesitate to hail Mexico’s muralist renaissance as the highest contemporary manifestation of North American aesthetics, and to refer himself to “the vitality of our Mexican school…the healthiest thing in our world today” (53, my emphasis). Similarly, Charmion Von

\(^{68}\) Orozco’s piece was in included in two exhibitions from 1935: *An Art Commentary on Lynching*, sponsored by the NAACP; and *The Struggle for Negro Rights* (Cullen 145). On the connections between Mexican and African-American artists, see Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, *In the Spirit of Resistance / En el espíritu de la resistencia* (1996); and Deborah Cullen, “Correlations between Mexicanidad and the New Negro Movements” (2009).
Wiegand described the contributions of the muralists as magnificent examples of “our actual native expression” (qtd. in Anreus, Linden and Weinberg xiv).

Admittedly, the popularity of Mexican painters caused occasional discomfort among their most chauvinistic U.S. counterparts, who resented the success and opportunities foreign artists enjoyed on their native soil. In an interview for *California Arts and Architecture*, for instance, Ione Robinson (who had previously assisted Rivera in the making of his murals at the National Palace of Mexico and also was his mistress for a while) shared her reservations about the invasion of Mexican arts and artists in the United States: “in order to develop a national art,” she argues, “painters need the support of our political and educational leaders to see it that they have opportunities for commissions, and thus avoid the importing of foreign artists” (qtd. in Delpar 154). Nativist resistance to the Mexican colonization of North American walls also took the form of calculated skepticism regarding the U.S.-based creations of Mexican painters, which were deemed inferior to their autochthonous works and alien to the spirit and environment of the United States. According to the fervently nationalist art critic Thomas Craven, who was in fact among the earliest U.S. supporters of Rivera and Orozco: “the best work of these two painters is to be seen in their homeland. Both are now substituting symbols for the vigorous representations so characteristic of their Mexican frescoes” (360). In the wake of their migration to the colder climates of the continent, Craven suggests, the graphic compositions of the two artists had lost the communicative force and expressive vitality that characterized their earliest murals. Even more subject to criticism were some of their paintings that dared to address the endangered state of North American society, such as Rivera’s aforementioned *Frozen Assets*, in reference to which Henry McBride exclaimed
in annoyance: “Oh, we don’t lack material, but you can see it is not good stuff for strangers. It takes someone who has known us before to employ it adequately” (qtd. in Indych-López 146). Yet, despite these and other objections against the overzealous involvement and visibility of Mexican painters in the United States, it is fair to say that, starting in the mid-1920s, and for a large part of the 1930s, Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros were among the most revered artists North of the Río Bravo. More than Italian Futurists, Russian Constructivists, or French Surrealists, Mexican muralists set the standard of aesthetic avant-gardism in the Americas.

The U.S. enthusiasm for the Mexican mural renaissance must first be understood as a consequence of the Marxist configuration of the aesthetic field from the 1920s and 1930s. As Andrew Hemingway puts it, “the influence of Mexican muralism on some American artists of the interwar period was fundamentally related to the attraction many of these same artists felt towards Communism…the appeal of this new artistic model [was] most profound among leftist and aspirant revolutionaries” (14). Of course, Soviet Russia constituted the ultimate political referent of U.S. radicals. Culturally and artistically speaking, however, the Mexican model was perceived as a more viable option than the Russian one. “On the cultural front,” James Wechsel remarks, “Mexican Revolutionary Artists led the international movement” (155). The vanguard position of Mexican art is apparent in the ample (and strategic) space it occupied in the pages of

Indeed, as Andrew Hemingway explains, American Communist writers and artists no only “did not feel any compulsion to model their work on Soviet examples” and follow the aesthetic mandates of Social Realism (17). They also rejected Russian art (and painting, in particular) as too academic and conservative. In a 1935 article for New Masses, for instance, the political cartoonist Russell Limbach compared Soviet paintings to “the illustrative style familiar to readers of the Saturday Evening Post and other slick paper publication,” and further described them as “no better or worse than the usual bourgeois art found in the galleries of this country and Europe” (qtd. in Hemingway 17).
leftist magazines such as *The Arts*, *Creative Art*, and particularly *New Masses*, “the flagship publication of the Communist cultural movement in the United States” (Hemingway 21). In the May 1927 issue, for instance, Xavier Guerrero published “A Mexican painter,” a programmatic essay defining the criteria of revolutionary art. Two years later, a cover photograph of one of his woodcut pieces (implicitly) provided the illustration to Lenin’s aesthetic theories.

![Figure 14. Xavier Guerrero, Death to the Landlords cover art for *New Masses* (January 1929)](image)

In addition to these two revealing examples of Guerrero and his compatriots’ authority over the form and content of *l’art engagé*, other items of Marxist Mexicana that appeared in the pages of *New Masses* include cover illustrations by Tina Modotti and Rufino Tamayo, essays by Anita Brenner and, of course, paintings and drawings by Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros.
Finally, one could also mention Michael Gold’s surprising translation and adaptation of a Mexican *corrido* (“Death to the landlord, a ballad of the agrarian revolution in Mexico,” published in January 1929); as well as Porter Myron Chaffee’s self-explanatory poem, “Diego Rivera (Mexican Revolutionary artist)” (August 1929), in which the U.S. writer celebrates his Southern neighbor as a larger-than-life embodiment of the avant-garde ideal to reconcile aesthetic activity and political militancy:

Diego Rivera paints the living principle of a mighty word. It is a word that will bring usefulness to white hands that now wring themselves in vain. It is a word that has made weavers in factories dream over fabrics. It is a word that hangs flesh on the shadows of men. That word is

REVOLUTION!

Diego Rivera paints Revolution. He has caught the awful rhythm of the world-epic. His song is the life-principle that springs from the blood and sings:

*Life lie a little closer to Life and you will beget Life!*

***

There is no “art” about the man. No still-song nor sterile wine, But Bread - great hunks of bread.
Unlike the futile makers of dainty rhymes and artsy melodies, Rivera grounds his creative labor in the hungry vitality of the toiling masses, the muscular motion of the brewing insurrection.

Despite U.S. and Mexican artists’ joint efforts to define fresco painting as the artistic idiom of the hammer and the sickle, the appeal of muralism cannot be solely explained through the prism of political categories and party affiliations. First, the influence of the Mexican movement extended well beyond Communist and Leftist circles. Both Thomas Hart Benton and Thomas Craven, for example, were vocal enemies of their Marxist contemporaries. In his article, “Art and Social Struggle: Reply to Rivera,” Benton rejected the Mexican painter’s “effort to fit the role of the artist to the faith [in Marxism]” and deplored his growing popularity among the “infantile leftists” and “left-wing dialecticians of the Marxist stamp” (44, 41). Along the same lines, Craven lamented the reductionism and abstract universalism of the “wedding of art to doctrine,” from which “Rivera’s work receives most of its advertising”: “they [the Communists] have only bound art to a specific program, using it as a tool for the propagation of economic theories which, though geographically distributed, are far from universal in their application. This, I submit, is the basic error of the new system” (353). Yet, despite their disapproval of Rivera’s political sympathies and, more generally, their resistance to the influence of Marxism in the artistic field, both Craven and Benton were among the earliest U.S. advocates of Mexican aesthetics. According to Craven, Mexican fresco painting represented “the first significant mural painting of modern times;” and Rivera and Orozco were among the four painters (George Grosz and Benton being the other
two) “accountable for the changing direction of art – a new movement which, winning
the allegiance of the young, is leading art into the communication of experiences and
ideas with social content” (346). Secondly, it is useful to remember that, while Rivera
enjoyed the most public attention and media coverage, “it was Orozco, the most
politically equivocal and pessimistic of the muralists, who offered the least problematic
[artistic] exemplar” for U.S. communists. In other words, the North American popularity
of Mexican muralists was not only due to their outspoken and frequently controversial
political positions; it also resulted from the fact that, from an aesthetic standpoint, fresco
painting was perceived as a distinctly modern vehicle of artistic expression. Thus, during
his speech at the 1936 American Artist’s Congress, for instance, the painter Gilbert
Wilson described his discovery of Orozco’s frescoes at the National Preparatory School
in Mexico as his personal introduction to the meaning of “modernity” in art: “from that
moment on I knew it was what I wanted art to be,” said Wilson, “here was the first
modern art I had ever seen” (qtd. in Anreus, Linden and Weinberg xiii). But what was it
that made fresco painting the paradigmatic example of a modern art form? Why were
Mexico’s colored walls at the vanguard of international aesthetics?

The answer to these questions can be found in John Dos Passos’s first essay on
Mexico published for New Masses, “Paint the Revolution!,” in which the writer contrasts
mural paintings to the hanging artworks from the New York galleries.70 Dos Passos’s

70 As a student at Harvard, the young Dos Passos wrote an enthusiastic review of John Reed’s
Insurgent Mexico (1914). Following a stay in Mexico in 1926, the author also published three
essays for New Masses, including “Paint the Revolution!” “Relief Map of Mexico,” and
“Zapata’s Ghost Walks” – the last two were also included in the “Land of the Great Volcanoes”
chapter of In All Countries (1934), and the first was recently reprinted in John Dos Passos, Travel
Books and Other Writings, 1916-1941 (2003). The perceived picturesqueness of the Mexican
landscape also inspired the writer to venture into the visual arts and paint two watercolors: Man...
favoring of the former over the latter is initially based on the distinction between private and public art forms. “All we have in New York…are a few private sensations and experiments framed and exhibited here and there…little pictures, little landscapes after Cezanne, Renoir, Courbet, Picasso, Corot, Titian, little fruity still lifes…little modern designs of a stovepipe and a bisected violin…[and] occasionally a work of real talent” (596). But even in those rare instances, the author wonders: “[W]hat’s the good of it? Who sees it? A lot of male and female old women chattering round an exhibition; and then, if the snobmarket has been properly manipulated, some damn fool buys it and puts it away in the attic, and it makes a brief reappearance when he dies at a sale at the Anderson Galleries” (596). Be it at the levels of production or consumption, gallery paintings are destined to remain individual affairs, beautiful things for beautiful people. Of course, the opposite is true of Mexican muralism. Mural compositions are not only physically imposing works, paradigmatic examples of an epic, monumental aesthetic – according to Dos Passos, “the three stories of frescoed walls” at the Secretariat of Education are “probably a good half mile” (597). They also operate as public services to the nation: “The revolution…had to be explained to the people,” says Dos Passos, and “the people couldn’t read…so the only thing to do was to paint it up on the wall” (596). In contrast to the New York art of private sensation and isolated contemplation, mural painting is addressed to the silent majority, and plays an instrumental role in the edification of a collective national narrative, and the symbolic unification of the Mexican masses. As Orozco put it in “New World, New Races, New Art,” and Dos Passos’s essay seeks to emphasize, mural art is “the most disinterested form, for it cannot be made for

*With a Hat* and *Trio With Straws*. On Dos Passos’s stays across the Río Grande, see Rubén Gallo, “John Dos Passos in Mexico” (2007).
private gain; it cannot be hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few. It is for ALL” (qtd. in Anreus, Linden and Weinberg 32). As suggested by Orozco’s unusual association of the ideas of disinterestedness and popular appeal, Dos Passos’s muralism can be seen as an alternative to both the political conservatism of museum art works and the aesthetic mediocrity of mass culture. In the paintings of Rivera or Orozco, the author of the U.S.A. trilogy recognized a creative form that was not only popular, but also artistically challenging.

Besides being apparent in their sheer physical magnitude and their didactic and educational function, the public and collective dimension of frescoes is inscribed in the process of their making, as well as the artistic practice of their makers. Unlike traditional easel paintings, which Dos Passos describes as “intellectual, aristocratic and onanistic,” the production of murals does not depend on the individual genius of a single creator, but on the unitary will and physical co-operation of a large group of people working collectively towards the completion of a shared goal (598). In other words, mural painters embody the democratic ideal of the artist as worker, a recurrent motif of aesthetic discourse from the 1930s, and one that was promoted by Mexican artists themselves, and particularly Rivera.71 Passos further explains that, from its very beginnings, the “huge explosion of creative work” known as the Mexican mural renaissance was conceived as a collaborative and egalitarian enterprise (597). In an effort to multiply their energies and form a single aesthetic front against the agents of reaction, Mexican artists created “the Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos, the painter’s and sculptor’s union;” they issued a

71 As Rivera once explained: “For me, the artist is a worker, and unless he expresses his work as a worker, he is not an artist. I must remain with the people...By worker I mean anyone who contributes physically or mentally. I do not discriminate. Perhaps, though, I do mean especially the ones who create with their hands (qtd. in Craven, Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist 80).
manifesto (explicitly titled, “Manifiesto del sindicato de obreros técnicos, pintores, y escultores”); they created a magazine called *El Machete*, “which started as the Union’s mouthpiece;” they built “a cooperative studio” and decided that “everyone was to get the same wage for painting” (598). Through both the product of their labor and their manner of laboring, Dos Passos suggests, Mexican muralists have contributed to “the socialization of art” and “the absolute disappearance of individualism,” thus demonstrating that “in our day a popular graphic art is possible” (599).

Implicit in Dos Passos’s distinction between a private and a public art form is the opposition between an abstract and a realist aesthetic. Talking about Orozco, for instance, Dos Passos explains: “his panels express each one an idea with a fierce concentration and economy of planes and forms.” He also describes Roberto Montenegro’s work in a public school as “a sober and lilting decoration.” But Dos Passos’s admiration for the sobriety and communicative transparency of mural painting should not be read as a defense of figuration *per se*, or, conversely, as a repudiation of artistic experimentation in general. As previously mentioned, Russian painting may have been realist and figurative, but U.S. artists also rejected it as too bourgeois and conservative. Conversely, despite his critique of modernist aesthetics, Dos Passos himself did not hesitate to use many experimental techniques (e.g., collage, stream of consciousness, free verse, etc.) in his own writings. Thus, the perceived realism of muralism cannot only be related to its formal simplicity or accessibility. More importantly, Dos Passos praises the indigenousness of fresco painting, that is, its organic connection to the Mexican environment. While European and North American artists are busy painting “little fruity still lifes” or, in the most adventurous cases, “a stovepipe and a bisected violin,” Rivera and Orozco find their creative energy
and material in the breathing actuality of Mexican life and history: “the plodding dust-colored soldiers of the revolution, red flags and black flags of the Zapatistas, crowds in marketplaces, women hanging out washing, politicians making speeches, and Indians dancing” (596). At the formal and technical levels too, muralist art draws on Mexico’s rich history of vernacular handicraft traditions and aesthetic practices. As Dos Passos explains, Guerrero’s training involved numerous visits to the pre-Colombian site of Teotihuacán, where “he studied the methods of the ancient Indian painters…made chemical analyses of the pigments and varnishes used and after much experimentation, began to paint” (598). In a similar fashion, after returning from Paris full of “Picasso and Derain and the plaint of artists pampered and scantily fed by the after-the-war bourgeoisie,” Rivera travelled to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where he discovered “an enormously rich and uncorrupted popular art in textiles and pottery and toys and in the decoration of ginmills” (596-597). In contrast to the paintings of N.Y. galleries, then, which the author dismisses as alien or foreign to the spirit of America – outmoded “leavings of European fads” – the painted walls of Mexico are rooted in the lessons of the soil and the “earth colors” of the local landscape (599). In that sense, I would argue that Dos Passos’s muralism functions as a New Worldist alternative to both the artistic traditionalism of Russian painting, and the cultural remoteness of European avant-gardism. On the walls of Mexico City, Jalapa or Guadalajara, the author of Manhattan Transfer (1925) discerned the possibility of an art form that was both attuned to the global currents of international aesthetics and uniquely American, both distinctly national and decidedly modern.
Last but not least, Dos Passos’s piece is structured around the gendered opposition between a masculine (or virile) and a feminine (or non-virile) aesthetic. In his 1916 essay, “Against American Literature,” the aspiring writer had already attributed the foreignness/rootlessness/abstractness of U.S. letters to their feminine character. As the author had then explained:

It is significant that, quite unconsciously, I chose the works of two women [Edith Wharton and Mary S. Watts] to typify American novels. The tone of the higher sort of writing in this country is undoubtedly that of a well brought up and intelligent woman, tolerant, versed in the things of this world, quietly humorous, but bound tightly in the fetters of “niceness,” of the middle-class outlook. And when the shackles are thrown off the result is vulgarity, and, what is worse, affectation. (590)

Dos Passos’s mockery of U.S. painting in “Paint the Revolution” is based on a similar equation between artistic failure and effeminacy. The author describes “the little pictures” exhibited in the art galleries of New York as “stuff a man’s afraid to be seen looking at;” and he depicts their wealthy consumers as “a lot of male and female old women…whose idea of painting [is] a chic girl drawn a la vie Parisienne with sensually dark smudges under the eyes” (599). Unlike in his youthful diatribe against the feminization of North American letters, however, where the author urged his contemporaries to emulate the “primitive savagery” and “earth-feeling” of Russian fiction, Dos Passos’s solution to the emasculation of U.S. culture is now located in the neighborly South (590). By the late 1920s, Dos Passos’s model of artistic masculinity was no longer Ivan Turgenev, but the Mexican Diego Rivera, who “has drawn the bending of bodies at work, the hunch of the
shoulders under picks and shovels of men going down into a mine, the strain and heave of a black body bent under a block of marble, men working at looms, in dye-vats, spooning out molten metal” (596). Of course, the purported virility of Rivera’s oeuvre (and muralism in general) was not just related to its stylized depictions of masculine labor and activity, or its heroic evocations of male camaraderie. Because of the physical strength and endurance that it requires, fresco painting was also perceived as an artistic activity reserved to the muscular talents of strong and masculine men. And as Siqueiros once put it: “del hombre viril obra viril, y del eunuco, obra monstruosa” (“from virile men comes virile art; from eunuchs comes monstrous art”) (“Al margen del manifiesto de sindicato de pintores,” Palabras 29).72

Dos Passos’s construction of muralism as an alternative to the obscurantist elitism of continental modernism was a common rhetorical strategy of U.S. advocates of Mexican aesthetics. According to Thomas Craven, for instance, fresco painting aimed to question the “the mysteries of art” and “the cabalistic slang of modern [i.e., French] esthetics.” More than any of his contemporaries, says Craven, “the portly Mexican” Rivera “has carried painting from the Ivory Tower into the market-place” (347). The relation between pro-muralism and anti-modernism is also apparent in the writings of

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72 Siqueiros’s addendum to the Manifesto of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors repeatedly insists on the heroic masculinity of Mexico’s cultural revolution. Remembering the creation of the artists’ syndicate, for instance, he notes that, “en él se agruparon todos los pintores y escultores viriles de México” (“it was joined by all the virile painters and sculptors of Mexico”). Even more explicitly, Siqueiros deplores that “en México, en donde el pueblo es tan viril como el mejor del mundo…los intelectuales son, como todos de su especie latinoamericanos, lo más servil que exista en toda la redondez de la Tierra” (“in Mexico, where the people are as virile as the best in the world…intellectuals are, like the rest of their kind in Latin America, the most servile there is in the whole wide world”). In particular, the painter’s words are directed against “los literatos” (“the literary men”), whose production he describes as “meliflua y descastada” (“mellifluous and rootless”), and whom he urges to “dejar de pensar en Oscar Wilde” (“stop thinking of Oscar Wilde”) (Palabras 27, 28, 29).
Anita Brenner, for whom the theory and practice of fresco painting “implies a repudiation of the intellectual and social snobbery that determines much of the appearance and character of ‘modernist work.’ In fact it requires a complete revision of the function of the artists that it brings about a new school and new style (sic): as also new forms, and even new instruments and new techniques and materials” (qtd. in Gluscker 38). Along the same lines, Archibald MacLeish’s poem “Oil Painting of the Artist as Artist,” from the volume *Frescoes for Mr. Rockefeller’s City* (1933), implicitly contrasts the indigenous authenticity of Mexican painters to the cosmopolitan pretensions of U.S. modernist exiles, of which the “plump Mr. Pl’f” (MacLeish’s onomatopoeic pseudonym for Ezra Pound) is a compelling representative: “the plump Mr. Pl’f is washing his hands of America: / He is pictured at Pau on the place and his eyes glaring: / He thinks of himself as an exile from all this: / As an émigré from his own time into history /…/ There is much too much of your flowing Mississippi: / He prefers a tidier stream with a terrace for trippers and / Cypresses mentioned in Horace or Henry James” (15-17). In contrast, MacLeish’s verbal frescoes – which, as the title indicates, were modeled on Rivera’s unfinished work at the new RCA centre – are rooted in the sounds and sights of American geography and history. They chant “the grasses of Iowa Illinois Indiana,” “the west wind and the sunlight,” “the mowings under the thick turf,” the “many nations of Sioux,” “the makers making America,” her “brown breasts and the mouth of no other country” (6, 5, 12, 8, 19, 7).

And yet, while Dos Passos, Craven, Brenner, or MacLeish may have welcomed muralist Mexico as an alternative to the hegemony of modernist Paris, it would be a mistake to see the U.S. enthusiasm for Mexican painting as a form of anti-modernist
reaction (or modernist exhaustion). Instead, acknowledging the impact and influence of Mexican artists on their Northern counterparts invites us to question the spatial politics of modernist historiography, and to recognize the existence of an Americanist modernism that did not emerge in the metropolitan centers of Europe, but in the Southern latitudes of the Hispanic world. In the eyes of such diverse figures as Dos Passos, Thomas Hart Benton, or Katherine Anne Porter, the makers of the modern were not Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, but Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco.73 Re-spatializing the study of modernism along a North-South axis (rather than an East-West axis), however, not simply requires the addition and introduction of new names and actors into the modernist canon. More importantly, placing Mexican muralism within the selective sphere of modernism brings us to revise our traditional understanding and definitions of the term. First, “this new geography involves a radical rewriting of what critics have called modernism’s internationalism…[and] its resistance to national culture” (Stanford Friedman 427). Far from being opposed to the idea of nationalism, the modernism of Rivera was, as we have seen, a localist aesthetic grounded in the customs and traditions of Mexican life and history; and an indigenous affirmation of American autochthony. Secondly, situating fresco painting within the modernist orbit allows us to dissociate modernism from the aesthetic ideology of auto-referentiality and the rupturist language of innovation that still inform most discussions of interwar artistic production. Modernism in the Americas cannot be reduced to a solipsistic exploration of the medium or to a

73 Incidentally it may be useful to remember that, as David Craven explains, “the term ‘modernism’ (or modernismo) was, in fact, invented in the 1880s on the periphery of the world economic order by Rubén Darío of Nicaragua, Latin America’s first internationally acclaimed modern author and poet” (42).
recognizable collection of stylistic traits and features. More than to formal concerns or epistemological considerations, the quest for an Americanist modernism responded to the populist desire to expand the communicative possibilities and political incidence of creative activity.
The postrevolutionary period is often remembered as the moment when Mexican culture and national identity finally came into its own. After decades of Porfirian subservience to the economic interests of foreign powers and the cultural hegemony of Europe (France, in particular), the story goes, Mexico reached the age of mature independence and autonomy in the 1920s and 1930s, thus carving her distinctive, sovereign place among “a global family of nation-states” (López 30). As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, a key strategy in this process of national emancipation was the revalorization of the indigenous elements and traditions of the nation, that is, the ethnicization of Mexican nationality. In Rick López’s words: “what set postrevolutionaries apart from their predecessors was that they celebrated the living indigenous heritage as a vital component, even the foundation, of Mexico’s authentic national identity” (7). Through the creation of museums dedicated to the country’s vernacular arts and crafts, the staging of patriotic pageants inspired by indigenous dances and folklore, the organization of ethnic beauty contests, or the ethnographic recording and collecting of indigenous customs and traditions, Mexican officials, artists and intellectuals formulated a unifying, modern version of *mexicanidad* grounded in the living legacy and patrimony of the autochthonous Mexico. Equally important to Mexico’s postrevolutionary sense of national identity was her self-differentiation from the United States. As a result of the long, violent history of conflict and invasion between the two
countries, the forging of an independent Mexico required not only her Indianization, but also, and simultaneously, her de-Americanization. In Arielist fashion, Mexican culture was conceived as a site of collective resistance against the imperial threat and influence of the mighty neighbour from the North, as a spiritual alternative to the individualist, materialist ethos of the U.S. way of life: “because of its geographic position,” Anita Brenner writes, “Mexico was the first of the Latin American countries to flare into a nationalism directly resentful of the United States” (328). Despite the relative accuracy of this patriotic narrative of increasing autonomization, it is equally important to attend to the international dimension of Mexico’s process of national construction. On the one hand, I have already shown that the indigenization of Mexico was a deeply transnational phenomenon. On the other hand, the crafting of a distinctive Mexican national culture went hand in hand with its internationalization: more than ever before, 1920s Mexico was a receptacle of cosmopolitan currents and desires, a cross-cultural center of global energies and influences, including many North American ones. Indeed, according to Carlos Monsivais, “entre 1920 y 1930 o 1932, aproximadamente, la Ciudad de México conoce su ‘edad de jazz’” (“between 1920 and 1930 or 1932, approximately, Mexico City experiences her ‘jazz age’”), which he goes on to describe in the following terms:

Ya son pecados de lesa modernidad los actos de obediencia a las represiones y las limitaciones informativas; ya se dan las aproximaciones iniciáticas a Freud y Marx; ya se vislumbra el poderío de Picasso y Dadá y se vincula a las artes con el comportamiento; ya toman forma cultural el escepticismo y el cinismo que prodigó el desquiciamiento de los años de guerra. El cine y el radio les permiten a los jóvenes mexicanos una
simultaneidad de experiencias con sus correspondientes en todas partes.

Hay modas en el vestir, modas en la actitud y súbitas modas devocionales:
Chaplin y Harold Lloyd, Gloria Swanson y Pola Negri, Griffith y King Vidor, las vamps y el Charleston, el shimmy y el pelo corto de las mujeres. Si la cultura francesa aún impera, el porvenir es de Norteamérica y, a toda velocidad, algunos quieren resolver las décadas de postergamiento. (48)

Thus, as local (and foreign) ideologues sought to manufacture a postrevolutionary *mexicanidad* uncontaminated by the products of U.S. culture, the Mexican youth was busy discovering the shining smiles of Hollywood stars and the syncopated sounds of New Orleans bars.

This convergence of centrifugal and centripetal forces can be illustrated by the discrepancy between the inaugural and final numbers of the literary magazine *La Falange: Revista de Cultura Latina*, first published in December 1922 under the direction of the poets Jaime Torres Bodet and Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano. In the idiom of Ariel, the “Propósitos” section of the opening volume (December 1, 1922) states that *La Falange* was created to:

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74.“Now, acts of obedience to the repressions and limitations of information are sins of lese-modernity; approximative initiations to Marx and Freud are becoming customary; the reign of Picasso and Dada is appearing on the horizon and art is getting connected to forms of behaviour; the skepticism and cynicism that was wasted in the insanity of years of war is beginning to take cultural shape. Cinema and the radio offer the Mexican youth a simultaneity of experiences with their correspondents everywhere. There are clothing fashions, fashions in attitude and sudden devotional fashions: Chaplin and Harold Lloyd, Gloria Swanson and Pola Negri, Griffith and King Vidor, vamps and charleston, shimmy and women with short hair. While French culture still reigns supreme, the future belongs to North America, and some are eager to make up for the decades of postponement, at full speed.”

124
expresar, sin limitaciones, el alma latina de América,
reunir a todos los literatos de México que hacen literatura sana
y sincera en un núcleo que sea exponente de los valores humanos de nuestra tierra,
servir de índice de la cultura artística nacional a los demás pueblos del Nuevo Mundo.

Against the pervasive influence of “la civilización del Norte” (“the civilization of the North”), condemned as “ilógica y enemiga” (“illogical and inimical”), La Falange proposes to express the ethereal spirit of the “masas latinas” (“latin masses”), the transhistorical latin fiber “que vuela libre de compromisos terrenos, en la esfera del ideal y de la luz” (“that flies free of earthly compromises, in the sphere of light and ideals”) (1-2). And yet, despite the editors’ presentation of La Falange as a discursive platform of latinidad, it is curious to note that the last, undated issue of the journal included an “Antología Norte-Americana Moderna” (“Modern North-American Anthology”), with poems by Alfred Kreymborg, Edgar Lee Masters, Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, Carl Sandburg and Sara Teasdale, and an essay by Rafael Lozano titled “Los Nuevos Poetas de los Estados Unidos” (“The New Poets of the United States”), in which the author introduces his Mexican readership to the main traits of and important names in contemporary U.S. poetry (381, 375). The apparent contradiction between La Falange’s originary mission and the materials published in its last number can be attributed to the editorial confusion of the magazine in its final stages. In July 1923, Torres Bodet and

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75 “To express, without limitations, the latin soul of America / to bring together all the literary men of Mexico that produce healthy / and sincere literature and to form a nucleus that displays the / human values of our land, / to function as the index of a national artistic culture for the other / peoples of the New World.”
Ortiz de Montellano were joined (and, in practice, replaced) by a group of new contributors, and La Falange changed from being a literary channel of Hispanic solidarity and resistance against the threat of “la influencia sajona” (“saxon influence”), into an intellectual forum for the discussion of “la actualidad de las ideas” (“the actuality of ideas”), including the decidedly Anglophone “actualidad del cine [y] del radio” (“actuality of cinema and the radio”) (1, 193). But the editorial inconsistency of La Falange cannot simply be related to the eccentric tastes of individual figures and contributors. More generally, it responded to a slow, but steady re-mapping of the international geography of letters. By the early 1920s, the United States was no longer (or at least, not only) synonymous with practical efficiency, consumerist frenzy, and artistic vacuity. In the eyes of a growing number of Mexican and Latin American writers and critics, the country of Ford and Coca-Cola was also becoming, as Enrique Díez Canedo put it, “el país donde florece la poesía” (“the country where poetry flowers”) (qtd. in Pacheco 106).

A good index of this perceptual shift is the journal Prisma, founded in 1922 by Rafael Lozano while he was living in Paris, and which Guillermo Sheridan has described as “la primera publicación periódica en lengua castellana que se dedicó a promover de manera sistemática la importancia de la nueva poesía norteamericana (“the first periodical publication in Castillian language that was devoted to the systematic promotion of the new North American poetry”) (Contemporáneos ayer 121). One could also mention Xavier Villaurutia’s occasional commentaries on the poetic production of the United States, including an insightful review of Eugène Jolas’s Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Américaine (1928), as well as an informed “Guía de poetas
norteamericanos” (“Guide of North American poets”) – both were published in the literary journal *Contemporáneos*. But the most suggestive and surprising example of Latin America’s growing attentiveness to the literary life of the English-speaking North may be Pedro Henríquez Ureña’s essay, “Veinte Años de Literatura en los Estados Unidos” (“Twenty Years of Literature in the United States”), first published in 1927 in the Argentinian magazine *Nosotros*. The Dominican intellectual is of course known as a key actor of Iberoamerican *arielismo* and a foundational figure of Latin Americanist thinking – in particular, Ureña is remembered as the author of *Seis ensayos en búsqueda de nuestra expresión* (1928) (*Six Essays in Search of our Expression*). As a possible result of the years he spent studying and teaching at Columbia University and the University of Minnesota (respectively), however, Ureña also was among the first Latin American writers and intellectuals of his generation to value the continental significance of U.S. literary expression. Thus, rejecting the Arielist assumption that the creative grain of America grows in the Hispanic South, Ureña opens up his survey of modern U.S. prose and poetry by explaining: “la literatura se ha transformado en las dos Américas: la inglesa y la española. La transformación es mayor en los Estados Unidos que en la América Española” (“literature has transformed in the two Americas: the English and the Spanish ones. The transformation is more significant in the United States than in Spanish America”) (309). Against popular reason and biological common sense, Ureña locates the present and future of American letters in the Northern latitudes of the hemisphere.

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76 It is curious to note the French detour that precedes these writers’s public confession of their interest in U.S. literature. Their reference to France seems to function as a filter of credibility, as a gesture of legitimation that guarantees the (dubious) artistic quality of North American verse.
Conversely, the extent of Mexican (and Latin American) writers’ admiration for the literary output of the United States can be gauged by the defensive reaction of those who deplored the sudden “yankeeification” of Hispanic literature, and specifically poetry. For instance, in his preface to Jaime Torres Bodet’s poetic collection, *El Corazón Delirante* (1922), Arturo Torres Rioseco contrasted the “gran tristeza” (“great sadness”), “melancolía indefinable” (“undefinable melancholy”) and “humildad lírica” (“lyrical humility”) of Bodet’s verse with the vulgar cheerfulness, rhetorical arrogance and “lirismo espectacular” (“spectacular lyricism”) of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. (15-16). Four years later, Bodet himself emphasized the distance between his own work and that of his U.S. counterparts (as well as that of his Mexican compatriots who followed their example). More precisely, he opposed the style, tone, and language of his forthcoming collection, *Biombo* (1925), to the fashionable aesthetics of “[el] imaginismo, extraña modulación norteamericana que otros logran evocar con acierto, pero que considero por completo ajena a la vibración de mi raza y de mi espíritu” (“imagism, a curious North American modulation that some are able to evoke with success, but that I consider completely alien to the vibration of my race and spirit”) (qtd. in Sheridan, *Contemporáneos* 184). Bodet’s efforts to preserve the pure diction of the race notwithstanding, the foreign modulations of U.S. poetry had a major impact on the words and sounds of modern Mexican letters. As the author of *Biombo* reluctantly remarked in his essay, “Perspectiva de la Literatura Mexicana Actual, 1915-1928” (“Perspective on Contemporary Mexican Literature, 1915-1928”) – published in *Contemporáneos*, September 1928 – “el conocimiento de la literatura norteamericana ha
Among the best minds of Bodet’s illustrious generation, Salvador Novo (1904-1974) is undoubtedly the poet who made most remarkable use of his knowledge of U.S. literature. Poet, playwright, travel writer, essayist, publicist, journalist, and teacher, Novo mastered the various practices of the word with equal brilliance and impertinence. He wrote some landmark titles in the history of Mexican verse – *XX Poemas* (1925), *Espejo* (1933) and *Nuevo Amor* (1933) – and innovative travel narratives - *Return Ticket* (1928), *Jalisco-Michoacán* (1933), *Continente Vacío* (1935); he energized literary journalism by flooding the local press with irreverent reviews of famous and obscure international authors; he shocked his well-bred contemporaries by staging scandalous plays of Eugene O’Neill, Jean Cocteau and Oscar Wilde; he fashioned himself into the official voice and chronicler of Mexico City’s mundane society (see the many volumes of *La Vida en México*); and he even sold cigarettes with the lucrative jingles of his advertising pen. In addition to his multifaceted creative life, Novo also made the headlines as a master of public scandal: initially as an extravagant dandy and the first openly homosexual writer in Mexico; eventually as a heartless defender of the powers that be, or, as Christopher Domínguez-Michael puts it, “el letrado defensor del despotismo mexicano” (“the lettered defender of Mexican despotism”) – an often cited example of the ruthless cynicism and conservatism of Novo during his later years is his alleged rejoicing at hearing the news of the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968 (374).

In the canonical versions of literary history, Salvador Novo is usually remembered as a member of the literary group *Contemporáneos*, credited for bringing
Mexican literature up to date with the experimental currents of international (and primarily European) modernist and avant-garde aesthetics.\textsuperscript{77} Through their writings and translations, as well as their creation of and participation in numerous literary magazines (including \textit{Ulises}, \textit{Contemporáneos}, \textit{Examen}, and many others), Novo and his associates are said to have introduced their compatriots to the cosmopolitan language of André Gide, Marcel Proust, Federico García Lorca, or James Joyce, and to have effectively inaugurated the age of critique in Mexican letters. Despite Novo’s encyclopedic knowledge of European poetry and fiction, this chapter will focus on the predominantly U.S. accent of Novo’s literary language, which is what sets him apart from the other members of \textit{Contemporáneos}.

Like all respectable Mexicans of his generation, Salvador Novo grew up with an unflattering picture of the United States: “como todos mis contemporáneos,” says Novo, “había procurado ignorar a los Estados Unidos. En la escuela se nos invita…a despreciar a los sajones. De la primaria en adelante el odio se vuelve tolerancia, pero sigue siendo desconocimiento…Aceptamos sin discutir la idea de que los Estados Unidos tienen rascacielos, opresión capitalista y máquinas, nada más…” (“like all my contemporaries, I had carefully ignored the United States. At school, we are invited to despise the saxons. From primary school onwards, hatred becomes tolerance…but it is still ignorance. We accept without discussion the idea that the United States has nothing but skyscrapers, capitalist oppression, and machines…”) (‘Un esquema de las revistas americanas,” \textit{Viajes} 77)

\textsuperscript{77} The writers associated with \textit{Contemporáneos} usually include Jaime Torres Bodet, Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, Enrique González Rojo, José Gorostiza, Xavier Villaurutia, Salvador Novo, Jorge Cuesta, and Gilberto Owen. For an in-depth account of the “grupo sin grupo” (“group without group”), as the members of \textit{Contemporáneos} liked to call themselves, see Guillermo Sheridan, \textit{Contemporáneos ayer} (1985).
Despite his deep-seated disdain for the shallowness and superficiality of the U.S. way of life, unexpected circumstances soon forced Novo to reexamine his inherited positions. Following his clandestine attendance of Pedro Henriquez Ureña’s courses at Mexico City’s Escuela de Verano, or Summer School, the poet was invited to join the “pequeño grupo de discípulos asiduos” (“small group of assiduous disciples”) that surrounded “ese vinculador de talentos” (“that connecter of talents”) (Novo, La Vida en México en el periodo presidencial de Manuel Ávila Camacho 553). Novo’s recollection of his apprenticeship with Ureña emphasizes the “disciplina austera que nos imponía” (“austere discipline that he imposed on us”), but the authoritarian tutelage of the Dominican intellectual provided the ambitious Novo with a unique opportunity to “cimentar [su] nombre literario” (“cement [his] literary reputation”) (554). Under the wise, if demanding guidance of Ureña, the seventeen-year-old Novo composed essays and articles for such illustrious journals as México Moderno and El Mundo; he supervised the publication of an anthology of short stories, and saw some of his verse published in literary journals from around the continent. More importantly for our purposes, Ureña and his Anglophile disciples, who included Daniel Cosío Villegas, Eduardo Villaseñor and the Nicaraguan writer Salomón de la Selva – whose first collection of poems, Tropical Town (1918), was composed in English and published in New York by the John Lane Company – must be credited for introducing the incredulous Novo to the unsuspected pleasures of U.S. letters. It was during his brief, but productive stint as a member of Ureña’s intellectual circle that Novo first discovered the forbidden verse of,

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78 According to Silvio Sirias, Salomón de la Selva’s Tropical Town is in fact “the first English-language collection of poetry by a Hispanic writer in the United States – a fact unknown to most scholars and students of Hispanic-American literature” (Tropical Town and Other Poems 1).
among others, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Harriet Monroe, Edgar Lee Masters, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, a discovery that left a decisive imprint on his literary practice and his understanding of poetry.

Recent commentators on Novo’s work have not failed to mention the author’s heterodox investment in the products of U.S. poetry and culture. According to Guillermo Sheridan, for instance, Novo’s first published book, *Ensayos*, constitutes “la primera evidencia de nuestra llegada a los twenties” (“the first proof of our arrival to the twenties”) (*Contemporáneos* 213). In his insightful chronicle of Novo’s life and works, *Salvador Novo: Lo marginal en el centro* (2000), Carlos Monsiváis relates the formal innovations of Novo’s *XX Poemas* to “la influencia (la contaminación) de la poesía norteamericana” (“the influence (the contamination) of North American poetry”) (75). Focusing on Novo’s work as director of the Department of Theatrical Productions of the National Institute of Fine Arts in the 1940s and 1950s, Salvador Oropesa has shown how Novo’s use of dramatic “principles learned from Broadway theater” helped him to “improve Mexican theather” (“Salvador Novo: The American Friend, the American Critic” 58). During Novo’s lifetime too, a number of insightful readers commented on his pronounced attraction to the United States. Thus, in the eyes of a frequent contributor to Carlos Noriega’s magazine, *El Universal Ilustrado*, Novo was “un escritor yanqui…que escribe en español” (“a yankee author…who writes in Spanish”) (May 8, 1924) (qtd. in Magaña-Esquivel 58). Despite these suggestive interventions, it is fair to say that, as Novo himself remarked in his essay “Mis poetas norteamericanos favoritos” (“My Favourite North American Poets”), Novo’s aesthetic *yankeesmo* has not yet been studied “muy capazmente” (“very ably”) (Magaña 215). More precisely, I would argue that, by
failing to explore the particular reasons and motivations of Novo’s poetic proclivities, critics have tended to reduce his relation to English-language verse to a mere question of influence, thus presuming a unidirectional flow of knowledge from the center (the United States) to the periphery, which is to say to Mexico. To be sure, some of Novo’s poems bear the recognizable stamp of specific U.S. writers and works. The spectral vignettes of *Poemas proletarios*, for example, can be read in relation to Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* (1916), some parts of which Novo actually translated. But as Novo once noted about the orientalist poetry of José Juan Tablada, the potential overlaps and similarities between the works of different writers need not be read in terms of direct influence or artistic precedence; instead, they may just point to a shared predisposition, a common condition, or a simultaneity of emotion: “[e]s de notar cómo nuestro Tablada coincide un poco en sus arranques ideográficos y sintéticos con los americanos. Véanse las fechas de *Li-Po* y de *Un día*. Lo que significa, únicamente, que Tablada, caso de ser éstas enfermedades, sabe enfermarse a tiempo” (*VEI* 81). Significantly, Novo’s advice to not draw premature conclusions about literary influence and filiation appears in a footnote of a section of *Ensayos* – “Traducciones Del Chino” (“Translations from the Chinese”) – that includes an essay on the U.S. writer Christopher Morley, as well as some translations of his work. As such, Novo’s words must also be read as an indirect comment on his own aesthetic practice. Rather than trying to identify the possible parallels between Novo’s work and that of specific U.S. writers, then, this chapter will investigate the *critical function* of the Mexican poet’s artistic *yankeesmo*. Specifically, I

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79 “It is to be observed how the ideographic and synthetic fits of our Tablada coincide a little bit with the Americans. Notice the publication dates of *Li-po* and *Un día*. This only means that, if these are illnesses, Tablada knows how to get ill at the right time.”
will relate Novo’s intertextual conversation with North American poetry and culture (as well as his actual use of English) to the author’s queer dissonance from the aesthetics and politics of Iberoamerican arelismo and Mexican cultural nationalism. By turning to the foreign words and forms of the North, I would argue, Novo registered his dissenting perspective on the cultural configuration of the South.

*Continente Vacío, Iberoamerican Books, and Yankee Poems*

Salvador Novo’s *Continente Vacío: Viaje a Sudamérica* offers a productive port of entry into the author’s enigmatic yankeesmo. First published in 1935, Novo’s travel narrative recreates the three-month journey across the continent that the author made in the official function of “Relator de los trabajos de Mexico” (“Reporter of Mexico’s activities”) for the “VII Conferencia International Americana,” held in Montevideo in 1933. From the opening pages, however, the author warns his audience that *Continente Vacío* does not provide one more “prueba (test) de la cortesía y de la solidaridad panamericana” (“test of Panamerican courtesy and solidarity”), or any insider insights about the political and diplomatic relations between the Hispanic nations of America (*VEI* 702). Dissociating his retelling of the journey from the actual occasion that led him to embark on it, Novo remarks: “si algo se logró, ni yo tuve la culpa ni es éste el sitio en que el lector haya de buscar mayores datos sobre la Séptima Conferencia International Americana; la participación de México es objeto de una memoria especial que me tocó imprimir, pero no escribir. A ella remito a quien desee más amplia y completa
información del proceso del panamericanismo” (705). More surprisingly, he refuses to endow his work with any didactic, educational, or documentary significance. While Novo willingly admits that “[e]scribir el libro de un viaje puede representar la contribución de un importante documento que las generaciones futuras consulten” (“writing a travel narrative may represent the contribution of an important document for future generations”), he immediately explains that Continente Vacío “no se trata de un libro documental” (“is not a documentary book”) (702, 706). “En [su] caso personal” (“In his personal case”), says the author, the recording of his hemispheric wanderings “no tiene sino el limitado valor de una conversación con[sigo] mismo ni obedece sino al impulso de referir cuanto hice, como en ‘vía de consulta,’ a una persona mayor a quien hubiera de rendirle cuentas” (“only has the limited value of a conversation with myself; it only obeys to the impulse of relating what I did to an older person to whom I would be held accountable”) (702).

The author’s unwillingness to attribute any symbolic or epistemological value to his book is apparent in the neutral and instantaneous nature of his prose, and the disconcerting randomness of the events described. Throughout the narrative, Novo carefully refrains from any interpretive or analytical gesture. He pays equal (that is, equally superficial) attention to such apparently minor details as a game of bridge on the train from Mexico to New York, the insipid food served onboard the “Northern Prince,” and a casual conversation with an Uruguayan barber as he does to potentially major

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80 “If anything was accomplished, I was not responsible for it, and this is not the place where the reader will find more facts and data about the Seventh International American Conference; Mexico’s participation was the object of a special report that I was asked to print, but did not write. Whosoever desires more ample and exhaustive information on the process of panamericanism should consult it.”

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events, such as his first sightings of Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, or his encounters with the illustrious poets Juana de Ibarborou and Federico García Lorca. In quasi-mechanical fashion, the author limits himself to rewinding the film of his trip across the continent and to chronologically transcribe the facts of his journey as he remembers them – “no rele[o] ni corrig[o]” (“I do not re-read or edit”), says Novo – stopping short of providing the reader with any retrospective assessment, conclusive thoughts or final reflections on what is being reported (706). But how do we account for Novo’s virtuoso performance of irrelevance? How do we explain the author’s insistence on emptying his travels of any meaning and significance? As Mary K. Long notes in the essay “Salvador Novo’s Continente Vacío,” Novo’s meticulous efforts to “writ[e] about ‘nothing’ result from the author’s “rejection of the principles and goals of the Iberoamerican movement” (93-94, 92). More precisely, Novo’s tactical inability to perceive the spiritual and natural fullness of the continent must be related to his critique of the aesthetic ideology and political pretentions of “los libros iberoamericanos” (“Iberoamerican books”) and to his simultaneous attraction for “los poemas yankis” (“yankee poems”) (703, 729). In an unexpected turn of events, Novo’s crossing of the Americas exposed him to the limitations and obsolescence of the Arielist partition of the continent.

From the introductory paragraphs of the narrative, Novo invites the reader to consider the relation between Continente Vacío and the intellectual legacy of Iberamerican modernismo by invoking the figure of José Enrique Rodó. “Releo a un Rodó olvidado y viejo entre el tumulto de los libros que preferimos ostentar más a mano” (“I re-read Rodó, old and forgotten in the tumult of the books that we prefer to carry in
Novo writes in the opening sentence, before quoting various passages from *Motivos de Proteo* (1909) in which the Uruguayan writer reflects on the transformative effects of travelling: “la práctica de la idea de nuestra renovación tiene un precepto máximo: el viajar. Reformarse es vivir. Viajar es reformarse” (“the practice of the idea of our renewal has one major precept: to reform oneself is to live. To travel is to reform oneself”); or also, “en lo que siente quien de luengas tierras vuelve a la propia, suele mezclarse a la impresión de desconocimiento de las cosas con que fue íntimo, y que ve de otra manera que antes, cierto deseconomicimiento de su misma personalidad del pasado” (“whomever comes home after being in distant lands returns with a feeling of estrangement from both the things he used to know intimately – and now sees differently than before – and from his own personality from the past”) (701).

In addition to framing his travelogue with the wisdom of Rodó’s “melancólica voz” (“melancholy voice”), which, says Novo, convinced him to sit down in front of his “maquina silenciosa” (“silent typing machine”) and “revivir [su viaje] hora por hora” (“relive every hour of his journey”), the author recalls the Americanist efforts of some illustrious Mexican writers and intellectuals who, like him, had the rare chance to experience “un contacto personal y directo con Sudamérica” (“a personal and direct contact with South America”) (701, 705). Novo mentions the famous journey of José Vasconcelos, “que a su retorno trajo consigo un copioso acervo de bibliografías…de antolologías poéticas de cada país visitado…de historias literarias y criticas…de cuentos gauchescos, [y] de novelas” (“who brought back with him a copious collection of bibliographies…anthologies of poetry from every country visited…literary and critical histories…books of gaucho tales, and novels”), and maintained a lively “contacto
epistololar” (“epistolary dialogue”) with his fellow writers from Spanish-speaking America (703). He alludes to the “transmigracion[es]” (“transmigrations”) of the *modernista* poets Amado Nervo and Enrique González Martínez, who served as “nuestro[s] representante[s] en aquellos países hermanos” (“our representatives in those brotherly countries”). (Nervo was the ambassador of Mexico in Uruguay and Argentina, and González Martínez occupied the function of plenipotentiary minister of Mexico in Chile and Argentina). Novo also mentions the boombastic inauguration of the “Biblioteca Iberoamericana, primer paso dado por Mexico, en el caballo de Simón, con las alas de Ariel, para la definitiva fusión con las países iberoamericanos” (“Iberoamerican library, Mexico’s first step – on the horse of Simon and the wings of Ariel – towards the definitive fusion with the nations of Ibero America”) (703). According to Novo, however, these individual and collective initiatives to create a “bolivariano vínculo intelectual” (“Bolivarian intellectual bond”) between Mexico and “todas estas repúblicas que se dan la encallecida mano de los Andes” (“all those republics that shake the callused hand of the Andes”) amounted to little more than punctual expressions of goodwill (703). While Vasconcelos’ collection of “libros iberoamericanos lleva[ba] a pensar que no hab[ía] razón ni dificultad alguna para realizar [la definitiva fusión] con los países iberoamericanos” (“iberoamerican books led to believe that there was no reason or obstacle that could prevent the definite fusion with Iberoamerican countries”), the projected fusion never became a reality (703). Because of the absence of any efficient “salvoconducto” (“safeconduct”) for the “intecambio local de la producción latinoamericana” (“the local interchange of latinamerican production”), Novo explains, “era difícil encontrar en las librerías de Mexico más libros sudamericanos que *Don
*Segundo Sombra, La vorágine, Doña Barbara, y el Cántaro fresco*” (“it was difficult to find in Mexico any other Latin American books than *Don Segundo Sombra, La vorágine, Doña Barbara, and the Cántaro fresco*”) (704). In other words, the obsolete “acervo” (“collection”) of the Iberoamerican library “no fue renovado ni enriquecido” (“was not renewed or expanded”): “[p]or desgracia, aquella biblioteca se empolvó sin mayor fruto…para infortunio de Rodó, el polvo de las bibliotecas pesaba demasiado en las alas de Ariel” (“unfortunately, that library gathered dust fruitlessly…for Rodó’s misfortune, the dust of the libraries was too heavy for the wings of Ariel”) (703-704). Despite Vasconcelos and Rodó’s eloquent prophecies of continental fusion and collaboration, Novo suggests, the Bolivarian project of a single and united Latin America (and Latin American literature) has remained a far-fetched fiction of the literary imagination. Dusty Iberoamerican books and libraries notwithstanding, Mexico and her writers are irrevocably “desvinculad[os] del resto del continente ‘que áun ama a Jesucristo y reza en español’” (“disconnected from the rest of the continent that ‘still worships Jesus Christ and prays in Spanish’”) (704).

Novo and his travels provide compelling examples of that intra-continental “desvinculación” (“disconnection”). Prior to embarking on his journey, he voiced his skepticism regarding the potential prospect of experiencing any “goce literario en [su] breve paso por Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires y Montevideo” (“literary pleasure during his brief passage through Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires and Montevideo”) (702). Novo not only confesses that “no sabía sino vulgares generalidades sobre estas partes del planeta…ni admire de estos países sino a unos cuantos autores y unas que otras obras” (“he only knew vulgar platitudes about those parts of the planet…and only admired a
handful of writers and works from those countries”) (702). As he further explains, he also is naturally prejudiced against the well-intentioned writers who seek to publicize their works by sending them to the remotest corners of the continent: “mi experiencia sobre la clase de autores mexicanos que envían fuera sus libros con cálidas dedicatorias me había hecho siempre desconfiar, a priori, de una reciprocidad que me englobaba en el grupo de los permanentemente jóvenes escritores mexicanos que reciben volúmenes sudamericanos con cálidas dedicatorias” (“my experience with the kind of Mexican writers who send their books abroad with warm dedications has made me distrustful – a priori – of a reciprocity that would include me in the group of eternally young Mexican writers who receive South American volumes with warm dedications”) (702). The extent of Novo’s ignorance and the accuracy of his suspicion become particularly apparent during his passage through Uruguay, where the author is embarrassed to realize that Sabat Ercasty, Silva Valdés and the handful of local authors he is familiar with are no longer “á la page;” and repeatedly observes that his insistent inquiries on the whereabouts of Ildefonso Pereda Valdés “les causa extrañeza a los amigos escritores que hice en Montevideo” (“causes perplexity among the writers I have met in Montevideo”). Pereda Valdés may be the Uruguayan author “quien más asiduamente [le] había enviado sus libros” (“who has sent him his books most assiduously”), but as Novo eventually understands, he also is a complete stranger in his own land (755). Conversely, after being introduced to “varios escritores uruguayos” (“various uruguayan writers”) during a conference at the local YMCA, Novo remarks that, while his letrado “interlocutores” (“interlocutors”) hardly know his name, and much less read his work, “les eran, en cambio, familiares las obras de escritores jóvenes mexicanos que yo a mi
vez desconocía porque no se venden en México” (“they were, however, familiar with the
works of young Mexican writers that I personally did not know as they do not sell in
Mexico”) (762). In order to further emphasize the level of intra-continental
incommunication, Novo also observes that, to his favorable surprise – “confieso que sentí
un gran alivio” (“I confess I felt a great relief”), says the poet – the internationally known
Mexican muralists have had little or no following in South America (762). Despite its
success and popularity in Mexico, the United States, or even Russia, “la obra de Diego
Rivera no es conocida en Montevideo” (“Diego Rivera’s oeuvre is unknown in
Montevideo”); whereas Siqueiros’s “discursos incendiarios” (“incendiary speeches”) on
art and revolution “no tuvieron éxito” (“had no success”) among the artistic and
intellectual circles of Uruguay and/or Argentina (762). In fact, in Buenos Aires,
Siqueiros’s unpopularity was such that, “cuando repitió sus impertinencias, le fueron
interrumpidas y se le clausuró o se le negó el salon en que daba sus conferencias” (“after
he repeated his impertinences, he was interrupted and was denied access to the room
where he used to give his lectures”) (762). Thus, rather than teaching him any “alta
lección de americanismo” (“high lesson of americanism”), Novo’s Latin American
expedition brings him face to face with the quotidian reality of continental non-synchrony
(765). Whether when conversing with his fellow writers from Argentina and Uruguay or
attending conferences “sobre temas quizá un poco siglo XIX” (“on slightly antiquated
topics”), the author witnesses the absent communication and mutual ignorance that
characterizes the relation between the artistic elites of Hispanic America (765).

Novo’s critique of the literary americanismo of Rodó, Vasconcelos or Pedro
Henriquez Ureña – with whom, after “10 años largos” (“10 long years”), Novo coincides
during his passage through Buenos Aires – is further developed in his treatment of the Spanish language (774). Latin American intellectuals have historically treated the language of Cervantes as their deepest common heritage, as the unifying thread that traverses the various nations and factions of the continent, beyond political, territorial or economic differences. For his part, Novo purposefully exaggerates the idiomatic heterogeneity of the hemisphere and the linguistic difficulties he encounters to communicate with his fellow South Americans. Upon setting foot in Rio de Janeiro – the first city he visits in South America – the author immediately makes a point to observe that not all the peoples of the continent have been raised in the shared cadences of the Spanish diction. He recalls being welcomed in the “idioma dulce e incomprensible” (“sweet and incomprehensible language”) of “los changadores” (“the porters”) and, for the readerly ease of his audience, frequently translates some of the foreign (and italicized) words he resorts to when narrating his time in Brazil (746). Thus, for instance: “antes de retirarme, al quinto andar – piso – (donde en una cadeira – silla – ya me aguardaba el pijama de marras) ... los acompañé a visitar varios cabarets” – “before going to my room, on the fifth andar – floor – (where on a cadeira – stool – were sitting my pajamas) ... I accompanied them to the cabarets” (747). More curiously, Novo’s translational (and italicizing) practices persist (and even multiply) during the sections of his travelogue that focus on his time in Uruguay and Argentina. In the same way as Novo marks the foreignness of English and Portuguese words and phrases such as fox trots, boiled halibut, stewards, alfaiaterias, lampíridos or churasco con farofa, he signals the linguistic strangeness of copetines, maní, gomina, patotas, chauchas, and some of the other alien sounds (and things) he overhears in the Spanish-speaking streets of Buenos
Aires and Montevideo. On certain occasions, the author conveys his doubts and uncertainty regarding the exact meaning and correct usage of specific words. When attempting to describe one of his conversations with a Uruguayan waitress, for instance, Novo refers to “la mina – supongo que así debo llamarle – rubia que se hizo cargo de mí” (“the blond mina – I suppose that is how I must call her – who took care of me”) (759, my emphasis). But the most compelling and comical illustration of Novo’s undoing of the myth of Latin American linguistic unity is the following transcription of his discrepant conversation with a montevidean barber:

–Rasúreme, dije al barbero. (Shaven me, I told the barber)

Mirándome con desconfiada extrañeza, en tanto que me ajustaba una especie de camisa de fuerza: (Looking at me with distrustful estrangement, as he tried to fit me into a kind of straighjacket)

–¿Cómo ha dicho? – me preguntó. (How did you say? He asked)

Y como yo, desconcertado, recurriera a la mímica: (And as I resorted to a disconcerted mime)

–El señor quiere que lo afeite – replicó benevolamente. (The gentleman wants me to shave him, he replied benevolently)

Yo no sabía que acababa de pronunciar un mexicanismo. Era mi primera, rotunda discrepancia con, al menos, los barberos de Montevideo. Ya toda la larga que me tuvo en sus manos no ceso de tratarme con commiseración: (I did not now I had just pronounced a mexicanism. It was my first, emphatic discrepancy with, at least, the barbers of Montevideo. And for the rest of the time he held me in his hands, he did not stop treating me with commiseration)
–Feo, mal, pelo mal cortado – decía, como si se dirigiera a un niño o a un andorrano… (Ugly, bad, hair badly cut – he said, as if he were talking to a child or a person from Andorra…)

–Yo arreglar, dejar lindo. El señor viene de Brasil? (Me fix it, leave clean. Is the gentleman from Brazil?) (753-754)

With a mixture of suspicion and condescension, Novo’s barber initially corrects his confused client and finally expels him from the restricted circle of his native tongue, quarantining him in the foreign territories of Brasil and Portuguese. Far from operating as a platform of intra-hemispheric dialogue and communication, then, Novo’s Spanish appears as a site of tension and division; as a contested terrain for the expression of petty national rivalries rather than as a common basis for the cultivation of continental harmony and solidarity.

As Novo’s sudden realization that “acababa de pronunciar un mexicanismo” (“he had just pronounced a mexicanism”) suggests, his Latin American journey did not bring him closer to feeling the collective pulse of Vasconcelos’s transnational “raza cósmica” (“cosmic race”), but it did force the poet to embrace the intensity of his attachment to his native Mexico. The farther away from his receding homeland, the more clearly does Novo understand that, Rodó’s introductory words notwithstanding: “pertenecemos en verdad, a un solo y mínimo pedazo de la tierra…cuanto es viajar, ir a otros países, nos diluye y nos debilita, y ya luego no servimos para nada…Yo quiero a México hoy como no lo he querido nunca antes – de un modo total –, apasionado y físico que me hace desear con amargura el abrazo de su tierra misma, el azote de su viento en mi rostro, su
sol en mi carne y no otro” (718). More importantly, Novo’s journey through Brasil, Uruguay and Argentina leads him to experience personally the geographical peculiarity and cultural idiosyncracy of his beloved homeland, from where the “único camino” (“the only route”) to Buenos Aires entails “dieciocho días de barco inglés que se aborda en Nueva York” (eightshe days aboard an English boat that sails out from New York”) (702). To the difference of all other citizens from Spanish America, the Mexican traveler headed for the South must first wander through the Northern cities of the United States: “el abrazo de México a la América del Sur la envuelve por ambos costados” (“Mexico’s embrace of South America wraps her from both sides”) (717). Novo’s comments on the ambiguous nature of the Mexican condition are initially cloaked in the language of regret and historical inevitability. As he explains, Mexico’s excessive proximity with the United States has prevented her from developing more durable ties with Latin America, and is steadily contributing to the de-hispanicization of Mexican culture:

¿Qué podíamos hacer, sino succumbir a un Destino que, al dificultar nuestra comunicación, aplazaba nuestra fusión [con Latinoamérica] hasta el día en que todo el mundo pueda viajar en aeroplano? La carretera panamericana, el Sudpacifico, el Tren Estrella, el ferrocarril central y la línea Ward nos ponen los Estados Unidos al alcance de la mano al propio tiempo que nos ponen en las manos de los Estados Unidos, y nuestro inglés ha mejorado notablemente desde que podemos practicar su audición

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81 “In truth, we belong to only one, minimal piece of the earth...as for traveling and going to foreign countries, it dissolves us, weakens us, and renders us useless afterwards...I love Mexico today as I have never loved her before, in a total, passionate, and physical way that makes me bitterly long for her land’s embrace, the lash of her wind on my face and, on my flesh, her sun – and no other.”

145
Despite these opening reflections on the nefarious consequences of U.S. imperialism in Mexico, Novo’s account of his Latin American escapade gradually turns into a provocative affirmation of what the author calls “el tabú mexicano” (“the Mexican taboo”) (720). As Novo delves deeper into the continent, and personally witnesses “la irreconciliabilidad de Sudamérica con Norteamérica” (“irreconcilability between South and North America”), he simultaneously recognizes the uncomfortable fact that, as a Mexican poet and subject, he feels closer to the Anglophone culture of the latter than the Hispanic traditions of the former. For better and for worse, “un partido de football” (“a game of soccer”) sounds more familiar than “un partido de fútbol” (“a game of football”), as they say in Uruguay (791).

This eventual realization is best illustrated by the notable contrast between the author’s first and final impressions of the United States, and particularly New York. Novo explains prior to his departure that, in order not to betray “la virginidad de [sus] impresiones” (“the virginity of his impressions”), he opted to travel with as few books as possible: “[c]on escasas, tibias y empolvadas lecturas sudamericanas, por todo bagaje de prejuicios, me dispuse a la sorpresa del viaje” (“with scarce, lukewarm, and dusty South

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82 “What else could we do but to succumb to a Destiny that hindered our communication and deferred our fusion with Latin America until the day when everybody will be able to travel in an airplane? The Panamerican road, the South Pacific, the Star Line and the War and Central lines put the United States within arm’s reach from us at the same time that they put us within the hands of the United States, and our English has improved notably since we hear it daily with the help of the vitaphone. Without noticing it, we have grown accustomed to think about the Niagara Falls with more familiarity than the Tequendama or Iguazú rivers.”
American readings as my only load of prejudice, I made myself available for the surprises of the journey”) (705). And yet, for all of his efforts to leave it at home, Novo’s literary “bagaje de prejuicios” initially proves too heavy to be ignored. Not unlike the Filipino waiter who serves him on a Texas train, “vestido con la idea que en Hollywood tienen del traje español” (“dressed in the Hollywood idea of a Spanish costume”), Novo’s first perception of the United States is conditioned by the packaged idea of the country he has encountered in the pages of his “empolvadas lecturas sudamericanas,” such as Guillermo Prieto’s Viaje a los Estados Unidos (1878), which Novo recommends to his readers (708). Much like Ruben Darío, who once exclaimed, “los he visto esos Yankees, en sus abrumadoras ciudades de hierro y piedra y las horas que entre ellos he vivido las he pasado con una vaga angustia” (“I have seen those Yankees, in their exhausting cities of stone and iron, and the hours I have lived among them I have spent with a vague anxiety”), Novo describes his pre-departure days in New York as “horribles, angustiosos” (“horrible, distressing”) (qtd. in Devés Valdés 33; Novo, VEI 714). In the eyes of the Mexican poet, Manhattan appears as a panic-inducing “máquina deleznable” (“despicable machine”), as a hostile and monotonous succession of “almacenes, teatros [y] cines” (“stores, theatres, and cinemas”) peopled by “indiferentes, apresurados rostros que march[an] juntos sin conocerse, como un batallón de reclutas” (“indifferent, hurried faces that walk together without talking to each other, like a batallion of conscripts”) (714). Upon returning to New York after his time in South America, however, Novo remarks that “le debo una apología a Nueva York” (“I owe an apology to New York”) (802). Following his “pavorosa aventura” (“terrifying adventure”) across the “inmundicia que son los árboles [de Sudámerica]” (“the filth of Southamerican trees”), the poet gains a
new appreciation for “el bosque infinito de los rascacielos” (“the infinite forest of skyscrapers”) (802). No longer “tétrico o aplastante” (“gloomy or overwhelming”), the island of Manhattan is now described as “esta amada de Ezra Pound, esbelta, blanca” (“Ezra Pound’s beloved, slender, white”); as an exciting megalopolis where “el placer tiene grados, sentidos, posibilidades. Y un ascensor abordado en el subway puede llevarnos a la cima del éxtasis” (“pleasure has degrees, senses, possibilities. And an elevator taken in a subway station can take you to the summit of ecstasy”) (802). Thus, in marked contrast with José Vasconcelos, whom, as Novo reminds us, concludes “el libro de su viaje a la América del Sur” (“the narrative of his trip to South America”) by confessing that “la despedida de Buenos Aires cuesta lágrimas” (“leaving Buenos Aires costs some tears”), Novo’s book concludes with the poet’s discovery of the “multiple y plena seducción” (“multiple and full seduction”) of New York, which he leaves with a note of sadness and a nostalgic promise of return: “Y, en fin, al tren, un domingo un poco triste, con la promesa de volver en cuanto se pueda reunir el dinero preciso” (“Thus, on a slightly melancholy Sunday, I head to the train, with the promise to come back as soon as I can scrape the money together”) (797, 802).

Novo’s “viaje a Sudamérica” (“journey to South America”) leads him to reconsider his unexamined perception of the United States. As Mary Long remarks, however, the poet’s new appreciation for his English-speaking neighbours “does not necessarily translate into a North American cultural triumph” (104). On the one hand, it is important to observe that Novo “does not portray Mexico as simply a passive victim of North American imperialism” (104). Despite his allusions to the invasive force of “el Destino” and his reflections on the Americanization of Mexican cultural traditions, Novo
describes the relation between Mexico and the United States as more even and reciprocal than the imperial history between the two countries might suggest. As Novo puts it, “[l]a carretera panamericana, el Sudpacifico, el Tren Estrella, el ferrocaril central y la línea Ward nos ponen los Estados Unidos al alcance de la mano al propio tiempo que nos ponen en las manos de los Estados Unidos” (“the Panamerican road, the South Pacific, the Star Line and the War and Central lines put the United States within arm’s reach from us at the same time that they put us within the hands of the United States”) (704). On the other hand, the poet’s positive valorization of the United States should not be read as a naïve celebration of the American way of life, or as an obedient capitulation to the economic and cultural agents of U.S. capital. Instead, Novo’s account of his journey is best understood as an invitation to rethink the artistic cartography of the Americas. In a similar fashion to Ureña’s aforementioned essay, “Veinte años de literatura norteamericana,” Novo’s Continente Vació suggests that the present (and future) of American letters dwells in the northern territories of the hemisphere: “es la otra mitad del continente que hará el Americano,” (“it is the other half of the continent that will make the American man”), says Novo, “es la extranjera hacia quien apuntan todos los sentidos del poeta tal como en otro tiempo apuntaran las flechas de los indios” (“it is the foreign half towards which the senses of the poet aim, like the arrows of the Indians used to aim”) (790). More than economic, political, or even cultural, Novo’s attraction to the United States is essentially aesthetic and literary.

This can first be intuited from the poet’s rare, but significant references to U.S. poets and novelists. While Novo refuses to let his experience of Latin America be mediated by “los libros iberoamericanos,” he conversely refers to some of his favorite

Secondly, in the rare instances when he focuses his attention on contemporary Latin American writers, Novo approaches their work through the prism of U.S. letters. Ildefonso Pereda Valdés’ “poemas onomatopéyicos de negros” (“black, onomatopeic poems”), for instance, are reminiscent of Vachel Lindsay’s collection, *Congo and Other Poems* (1919) (755). The “delicioso sense of humour” of Sarah Bollo’s books, *Diálogos de las luces perdidas* (1927) and *Los nocturnos del fuego* (1933), “hace pensar…en Elynor Wiley [sic]” (“is reminiscent of Elynor Wiley”), and particularly her *Nets to Catch the Wind* (1921). Finally, the poet praises the visionary qualities of Fernán Silva Valdés’s strangely titled collection, *Poemas gringos* (1925). The most curious and explicit indication of Novo’s poetic yankeesmo, however, appears in the “Canto a Teresa” section of *Continente Vacío*, in which the poet interrupts “la narración de [su] viaje” (“the narration of his journey”) to compile an extensive, multilingual anthology of “poemas o fragmentos de poemas que alud[en] al mar” (“fragments or fragments of poems that allude to the sea”) (745, 723). In addition to illustrating his encyclopedic knowledge of European and American literatures, Novo’s “antología marina” (“marine anthology”) gives him a first opportunity to reflect on the difference between Hispanic and English letters (735). With agile erudition, the author mentions and quotes famous and obscure writers from all periods of the British, U.S., Spanish, Mexican, Latin American, as well as French poetic traditions; and demonstrates that, while British and, to a lesser extent,
U.S. poets have historically “ruled the waves, como dice James Thomson,” their Spanish-writing counterparts have opted to speak of rivers, that is, of what José Vasconcelos called “el gran río latino” (“the great latin river”): the Iguazú, the Paraná, the Atoyac, the Tequendama or the Choroní (723; qtd. in Long 108). As Novo further explains, “el mar en la América del Sur es un mar introvertido, que choca con una subconciencia selvática” (“the South American sea is an introverted sea, which clashes with a sylvan subconscious”) (738). But Novo’s “Canto a Teresa” not only allows him to “affirm[ar] [su] teoría del río-poesía” (“affirm his theory of river-poetry”) (735). More importantly, Novo seizes the opportunity to dissociate his work from the Hispanic tradition and fashion himself into a U.S. writer. In the midst of his “excursión por el mar norteamericano” (“excursion through the North American sea”), which takes him through the heterogeneous languages of, among others, William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Hilda Doolittle, Wallace Stevens, and Mariane Moore, Novo suddenly mentions his poem “Naufragio,” “con toda modestia y sin que venga al caso” (“in all modesty and without particular relevance”) (727, 730). But why does Novo distance himself from the “subconciencia selvática” of Latin American letters? What is it that attracts him to the oceanic qualities of U.S. verse?

As already explained, Continente Vacío offers a materialist critique of the abstract bookishness of Latin American modernismo. Throughout his journey, the poet puts to the test the americanista writings of Rodó and Vaconcelos and experiences the political, aesthetic, and linguistic chasms between the Hispanic peoples of America. More exactly, and as the title indicates, Novo’s narrative suggests that “los libros iberoamericanos”
have emptied out the continent of its human element. In the manner of European
naturalists such as Alexander Von Humboldt or Charles Darwin, “[que] anduvo por aquí,
recogiendo insectos y observaciones” (“who roamed around these lands, collecting
insects and observations”), the celebrated bards of *americanismo* have succumbed to “la
gratuita belleza del espléndido panorama” (“the gratuitous beauty of the splendid
panorama”): they have sung the luxurious rivers and natural riches of America, but had
little time for the actual citizens who inhabit them (748). In contrast, Novo explains that
“aspir[a] a ser, en toda la mayor modestia del término, un humanista por cuanto [le]
interesa el paisaje en función del hombre” (“in the most modest sense of the word, he
aspires to be a humanist, as far as his only interest in the landscape is in relation to
man”); and repeatedly points to the failures and limitations of literary expression and
textual mediation: “qué deleznablemente pequeña es la mejor novela frente a la trágica,
musical, y sublime posibilidad de las intranscribibles vidas humanas” (“how
insignificantly small is the best novel when compared to the tragic, musical, sublime
possibility of untranscribable human lives”) (748, 801).

Novo’s curiosity for the unwritten “vidas humanas” leads him to take various
detours from the official path of his civic duties and obligations. During his first day in
Rio, for instance, Novo escapes from his fellow “delegados” (“delegates”) to immerse
himself in the “tráfico diurno” (“diurnal traffic”) of the forbidden brothels and cabarets,
where “[le] fue revelada la profunda belleza de los ojos cariocos, y el ritmo de una
música que hará por siempre suyo mi recuerdo de Rio” (“the deep beauty of carioca eyes
was revealed to him, and the rhythm of a music that will always be his memory of Rio”)
(747). While in Montevideo, he decides to “explorar los barrios bajos, los cafetines en
que se bebe cerveza, los automáticos y los cabarets más populares” (“explore the poor
neighbourhoods, the small cafes where one drinks beer, the automáticos and the most
popular cabarets”); and in Buenos Aires, Novo explains to his reluctant friend Victorio
that “quier[e] ir a la Boca, a los cabarets y a los cafetines de marineros, de ‘reos,’ de seres
legítimos” (“he wants to go to the Boca, to the cabarets and small cafes of mariners,
‘criminals,’ and legitimate beings”) (759, 779). Significantly, the poet’s discovery of the
“vida menos civil” (“less civil life”) of Latin American capitals is initially made possible
by his friendship with “los chicos de la orquesta del Northern Prince” (“the boys from
the orchestra of the Northern Prince”) (759, 746-747). It is in the company and at the
suggestion of North American musicians, most of whom “no habían salido de Nueva
York” (“had never left New York”), that Novo get his first peak at the “seres legítimos”
(“legitimate beings”) of the continent (747). In analogous fashion, I would argue that
Novo’s attraction to the foreign sounds of U.S. poetry must be related to their prosaic,
democratic, and indeed, populist inflections. Unlike Latin American poets and poems,
Novo suggests, North American writers and letters have been attuned to what Christopher
Morley called “the stenography of daily life” (“The Palimpsest,” Bright Cages 101). As
Novo himself once remarked, “para el goce de la poesía [norteamericana] no [es]
 necesarío tener a mano un diccionario de palabras raras y referencias clasicas…La vida
es su glosario” (“the enjoyment of North American poetry does not require a dictionary
of rare words and classical references…Life is its glossary”) (“Mis poetas
norteamericanos favoritos” 218). Unlike Novo’s “tibias y empolvadas lecturas
sudamericanas” (“lukewarm and dusty South American readings”), whose archaic
language and obscure allusions render them inaccessible to all but a handful of “críticos y
eruditos” (“critics and erudites”), the “poemas yanquis” are made to be read and enjoyed by the largest majority, including “la gente que no [ha] leído nunca antes versos” (“the people who have never read a verse before”), says the Mexican poet (VEI 733, “Mis poetas” 218). To put it differently, Novo’s aesthetic yankeesmo is coextensive with his interest in “[las] vidas [que] no ha[n] sido cantadas” (“the lives that have not been sung”), such as the lives of the Uruguayan barber, the Brazilian changadores, or the Argentinian marineros (VEI 730). In the poetries of Dickinson, Whitman, Lindsay and Sandburg, to name a few, Novo overheard the avant-garde murmur of Gilles Deleuze’s “minor literature,” and found an alternative to the elitist affectation of modernista aesthetics.

This can be exemplified by the tension between the two sections of Novo’s bilingual poem, Seamen Rhymes (1934), composed during his crossing of the continent and first printed in Buenos Aires with illustrations by Federico García Lorca. Adopting the contemplative gaze and refined rhetoric of a Latin American letrado, the first part of the poem – written in Spanish – captures the sublime beauty of a day at sea: from the early hours of the morning, when the rhythmic waves resemble a “fuga de blancos pétalos” (“fugue of white petals”), the water looks like a “líquido jaspe” (“a liquid jasper”), and one can feel the soothing freshness of “las gotas del rocío” (“the dewdrops”) to the solemn beauty of the evening tide, when “el horizonte gris…se diluye sobre el azogue” (“the grey horizon dissolves over the mercury”) and the ocean transforms into a “callada sombra total como un presagio” (“a quiet shadow complete like a premonition”) (Antología Personal 163-164). Exempt from any stains of human transit and/or commercial traffic, the sea appears as an empty and universal abstraction, as a shifting but timeless picture of “nubes” (“clouds”), “olas” (“waves”) and “espumas” (“foam”),
“ceniza” (“ashes”), guirnaldas” (“garlands”) and “azahar” (“orange blossom”) (163). In what seems like a direct response to the impersonality of that aestheticized vision, the second part introduces the reader – “en inglés, naturalmente” (“in English, naturally”), Novo whispers – to the “vida simple y práctica” (“simple and practical life”) of “un marinero” (“a mariner”) and does so in the informal language of popular speech (VEI 723). The focus is no longer on the subtle beauty of “el mar blanco y callado de la mañana limpia” (“the white and quiet sea of the clean morning”) or “el mar de la tarde que inicia un canto rumoroso, claro y profundo” (“the afternoon sea that murmurs a clear and deep chant”) (AP 163-164). Indeed, the focus is no longer on the sea, but on the people of the sea, the workers of the water that were elegantly left out of the lyrical compass of the previous section: the “men who work for a living,” who “keep on doing the same things everyday / on this same ship / and getting fifty five every month” (166).

More exactly, Novo invites us to listen to the prosaic, “real life” story of “Neville Charles Rogers,” better known as “Buster” (165-166). As if conversing with an old friend, a distant relative, or of one his fellow workingmen, Buster starts his tale by showing the reader his dirty hands and his damaged finger, “all torn from [his] work;” he then complains with resignation about his salary (“And since I only get fifty five a month / It must be that I’m only worth fifty five”); he explains the historical origins of his nickname, as well as the precarious situation of his sibling (“I have a brother in New York / He’s married and he has a child / but he has no job now. Well, / he has a home / They must be happy); and he eventually sings one of the “very old seamen rhymes” that he likes to whistle, “sometimes, at night,” when “[he] feel[s] kind’o lonesome” (165-166). Echoing Novo’s critique of Latin American intellectuals’ distance from the
common men and women who people the natural landscape of the continent, Buster conveys the curtain of invisibility and incomprehension that separates him (and his fellow sailors) from the merry citizens “traveling on this boat for some reason / for business / or just because [they] want a vacation:” “we see you at night,” says Buster, “dancing on the deck / or having a swell drink / or maybe you stare at us / because you wonder about real life / and men who work for a living” (166). Like the anonymous voice of the first part of the poem, or the high-falluting apostles of Latin America, the well-to-do passengers stare but do not see: they can marvel at the magnitude of the ocean, but cannot communicate with the seamen rhymers who work on it. Thus, even more explicitly than Continente Vacío, I would argue that the bipartite structure of Seamen Rhymes captures Novo’s idea of the difference between “los libros iberoamericanos” and “los poemas yanquis:” while the former are destined for the selfish enjoyment of the privileged few, in the latter, “la milonga es para todos” (“the milonga is for all”) (VEI 790).

Queering the Nation in the (Queered) Language of Empire

Novo’s minor treatment of U.S. literature can be further explored by looking at some of his works that address the aesthetics and politics of postrevolutionary Mexican nationalism. As Guillermo Sheridan and other critics have explained, the Mexican literary field of the 1920s and 1930s was fractured by an intermittent, but vitriolic debate between “nacionalistas” and “cosmopolitas.”83 To the difference of painting, drama, or even music, Mexican letters (and particularly poetry) had historically remained on the

margins of the nation’s political life and turmoil: “la poesía había recorrido sin mayores apremios las procelosas aguas de la utilización política, disfrutando de la libertad que le otorgaba su naturaleza elitista. Se trataba de una tradición que, por lo mismo, no había padecido ninguno de los gravámenes ideológicos que imponía el pragmatismo político, ni se disputaba ninguna representatividad de nada”84 (Sheridan, México en 1932 70).

Starting in the early 1920s, however, poetry’s cosmopolitan detachment from “el impulso nacionalista” (“the nationalist impulse”) became a source of increasing concern and attention among the cultural ideologues of the recently formed postrevolutionary state (Sheridan 39). As early as in 1922, for instance, an editorial of the aforementioned journal, La Falange, deplored the social irrelevance and foreign flavor of Mexican letters, that is, their formal and thematic disconnection from the actuality of Mexican life and/or the nation’s vernacular traditions:

Como vamos a interesar a nadie en nuestros libros, si no reflejan en nada el sentir de la hora, ni el color del paisaje, ni el matiz del sentimiento nacional? Nuestra literatura se ha desvinculado de la raza, del medio, del minuto. Arde en ella un vino extraño: exageraciones ultraístas, modernismos falsos. Pero ¿dónde está el artista humilde capaz de resignarse a las realidades cercanas? ¿Quién – desde Guillermo Prieto – ha

84 “Poetry had crossed without major damage the stormy waters of political exploitation, enjoying the liberty she was granted by her elitist nature. Likewise, it was a tradition that had never suffered the ideological burdens of political pragmatism, nor fought for the representativity of nothing.”
cantado nuestras canciones populares y se ha llenado la boca con el agua luminosa del poema mexicano? (qtd. in Sheridan 71)\(^8^5\)

Ten years later, the leftist writer Ermilo Abreu Gómez (among many others) reopened the discussion by writing a series of articles denouncing the insufficient nationalism of the “muchachos y muchachas de la vanguardia” (“the boys and girls of the avant-garde”), by which the author refers to Salvador Novo, Xavier Villaurutia, Jorge Cuesta, Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, and the other writers associated with the group and magazine *Contemporáneos* (231).\(^8^6\) According to Abreu Gómez, modern Mexican literature is nothing but a pale and heartless copy of “las literaturas europeas” (“European literatures”): “[l]a vanguardia mexicana no corresponde a ninguna literatura nuestra” (“the Mexican avant-garde does not correspond to any of our literatures”), says Gómez, “[e]s tan sólo una muestra, muestra inferior, muestra endeble, de la vanguardia extranjera…una rama perdida…un lamentable transplanto” (“it is only a sample, an inferior and feeble sample of the foreign avant-garde…a lost branch…a deplorable transplant”) (176). Unlike “los otras manifestaciones del arte y del pensamiento mexicano” (“the other manifestations of Mexican art and thought”), and particularly mural painting – “la vanguardia legítima” (“the legitimate avant-garde”), according to Abreu Gómez – which has captured “el espíritu nuevo de México” (“the new spirit of Mexico”) and “influído tan poderosamente en la conciencia nacional” (“had such a

\(^8^5\) “How are we going to interest anybody in our books if they fail to reflect the feel of the hour, the color of the landscape, the shade of the national feeling? Our literature has severed itself from the race, the environment, the minute. It is burning with a strange wine: ultraist exaggerations, fake modernisms. But where is the humble artist that will resign himself to our closest realities? Who – since Guillermo Prieto – has sung our popular songs and fed off the luminous water of the Mexican poem?”

\(^8^6\) All citations from Abreu Gómez’s essays are taken from Guillermo Sheridan, *México en 1932*, which compiles all the essays and articles related to the nationalist polemic of 1932.
powerful influence on the national consciousness”), Mexican letters have been out of
synch with the urgency of Mexican history (177). Instead of following the triumphant
example of their fellow painters and dedicating their creative energies to the elaboration
of “una literatura genuina” and “auténtica” (“a genuine and authentic literature”), that is,
a literature “que sirv[a] para organizar la cultura de un pueblo” (“that serves to organize
the people”), the “literatos” (“men of lettes”) of Mexico have created a rootless and
artificial language of “novedad puramente preciosa” (“purely precious novelty”): “una
literatura sin genealogía humana ni estética” (“a literature without human or aesthetic
genealogy”) (176-177, 180, 234). In other words, Mexican poets have failed to fulfill
their civic, political, and moral responsibilities towards the “juventud mexicana”
(“Mexican youth”) and to embrace their role as public voices and emissaries of what José
Vasconcelos once called “la genuina nacionalidad” (“the genuine nationality”) (177, qtd.
in Sheridan, México 27). As Abreu Gómez puts it, “[e]s ésta una vanguardia descastada
que ha vuelto la espalda, impúdica, a nuestro solar y se ha hecho sorda al latido de la
angustia de nuestra raza” (“this is an outcasted avant-garde, which has turned its indecent
back against our lineage and remained deaf to the anxious heartbeat of our race”) (176).
Exerting his symbolic authority over the aesthetics and politics of Mexican revolutionary
art, Rivera too repeatedly denounced the unpatriotic fiber of Mexican poets and poetry.
Thus, for instance, in one of his murals at the Secretaría de Educación, Rivera painted
ruthless, grimacing portraits of Salvador Novo and Xavier Villaurutia; as well as an
image of Antonieta Rivas Mercado – a friend and collaborator of Contemporáneos –
being handled a broom to dispose of an issue of the magazine.
Unabashed by Rivera’s fame and popularity, Novo responded to the painter’s scathing caricatures of himself and his friend by writing “La Diegada,” a series of satiric poems on Rivera’s life and antics that initially circulated in clandestine, carbon-copy versions only and were later included in the volume, Sátira (1955). Novo’s most direct and explicit answer to his detractors, however, may be found in the volume Poemas Proletarios (1934). Novo’s improbable collection is organized into two sections.

Adopting the mocking and sarcastic tone that characterizes much of his prose and poetry, the first part of Poemas Proletarios ridicules the stock images and “palabras signaléticas” (“flagship words”) of official Mexican historiography and the patriotic obligation to abide to the aesthetic and political “postulados del Instituto Político de la Revolución Mexicana” (“postulates of the Political Institute of the Mexican Revolution”) (AP 202, 204). As the poet explains, “[n]uestros héroes / han sido vestidos como marionetas / y machacados en los hojas de los libros / para veneración de la niñez estudiosa” (“our heroes / have been dressed like marionettes / and crushed inside the pages of books / to be venerated by the studious youth”) (201). In particular, Novo’s caustic tongue targets the “poetas proletarios” (“proletarian poets”) and, of course, the celebrated “pintores” (“painters”) who claim to represent and speak in the name of the indigenous “campesinaje mexicano” (“Mexican peasantry”) (204, 202). On the one hand, the poem suggests that, in parallel fashion to the well-intentioned authors of “libros iberoamericanos,” the “intelectuales proletarios al servicio del Gobierno” (“intellectuals at the service of the Government”) are dramatically out of touch with the Mexican masses, and vice-versa (203). The militant litanies of “los poetas proletarios” may urge the “campesino” to “toma[r] la hoz y traza[r] su destino” (“seize the sicke and trace his
destiny”), but as Novo maliciously whispers, “(se lo dicen en la ciudad, o por radio / y él no puede escucharlos) (“they say it from the city, or through the radio / and he cannot hear them”)” (204). Likewise, the poet observes that, while “los pintores lo graban en los muros de las oficinas / abrazando al obrero” (“the painters engrave him on the walls of government buildings / embracing the woker”), the campesino “no ha visto esos muros, y en su choza / cuelga un viejo almanaque de los productos Báyer / o el retrato de Miss Arizona en traje de baño” (“has not seen those walls / and his hut / is decorated with an old Bayer calendar / or the picture of Miss Arizona in a swimsuit”) (204-205). To the dismay of their self-appointed representatives, the indigenous icons of the nation may not be as culturally pure and authentic as Rivera’s primeval pictures might suggest.

In addition to conveying the discrepancy between the words and walls of the urbanite revolutionaries who preach “la doctrina marxista” (“the Marxist doctrine”) and the lived reality of the Indian campesino who still worships the Virgen de Guadalupe – “porque en su atraso y su ignorancia / no sabe que ya no hay Dios, ni santos, ni cielo, ni infierno” (“because backwards and ignorant as he is / he doesn’t know that there are no longer God, saints, heavens, nor hell”) – the poem establishes a curious coincidence between the prescriptive “postulados de la Revolución” (“postulates of the Revolution”) and the exoticist expectations of “[el] hijo pródigo yanqui” (“the yankee prodigal son”) (205-206). Not unlike the well-intentioned “turista[s]” (“tourists”), “periodista[s]” (“journalists”) and “grandes pensadores rubios” (“tall blond thinkers”) who flock into Mexico in search of colorful adventures and timeless truths, “los intelectuales proletarios” (“the proletarian intellectuals”) have reduced the idea of Mexico and mexicanidad to “cartucheras” (“gun belts”), “indios” (“Indians”), “chozas,” (“huts”),
“sarapes” (“zarapes”), “petates” (“matting”), “jarros toscos” (“crude jugs”), and a handful more folkloric symbols and “palabras signaléticas” (“flagship words”) (202-206). Despite their apparent conflicts and differences, Mexican nationalists and U.S. imperialists are complicit “ladrones de lo pintoresco” (“thieves of the picturesque”) (Sheridan, México 164). Far from being a heroic manifestation of indigenous autonomy or an authentic expression of what Alfonso Reyes called “el alma nacional” (“the national soul”), then, Mexican revolutionary art appears as a transnational effect of the global market in exotic goods, as an ironic product of the unspoken complicity between the cultural apparatus of the Mexican state and the primitivist longings of foreign observers (qtd. in Sheridan, México 54).

Following Novo’s parody of the triumphant rhetoric of state nationalism and the stale formulas of la “poesía revolucionaria / alrededor de tres o cuatro anécdotas de Villa” (“revolutionary poetry / about three or four anecdotes of Villa”), the second part of Poemas Proletarios cedes stage to some of the anonymous many who cannot be mentioned in “los folletos de propaganda revolucionaria” (“the pamphlets of revolutionary propaganda”) or Rivera’s monumental narratives of collective action and national self-determination (203). Specifically, Novo introduces his readers to “Cruz, El Gañan,” “Gaspar, El Cadete,” “Roberto, El Subteniente,” and “Bernardo, El Soldado,” four common soldiers whose unheralded lives and deeds the poet describes in the plain, 

87 A particularly telling illustration of the silent affinities between U.S. commentators and Mexican literary nationalists is the following excerpt from a letter of Hart Crane to Waldo Frank. Echoing Abreu Gómez’s critique of Mexican poets and poetry, the author of “the Bridge” explains: “What makes me rather indifferent to all of them [Mexican writers] is the fact that not one of them is really interested in [sic?] iota in expressing anything indigenous; rather they are busy aping (as though it could be done in Spanish!) Paul Valéry, Eliot, – or more intensely, the Parnassians of 35 years ago. And they are all ‘bored – or at least pleased to point the reference’ (173).
unrecorded language of those who “habla[n], habla[n], en voz muy baja, para sí mismo[s]” (“who talk, and talk, in a very low voice, to themselves”) (208). Avoiding both the celebratory heroism of the epic and the romantic gravity of tragedy, Novo’s trivial portraits do not make any reference to the field of action or to military feats, but focus instead on the dreary cycle of everyday life in the barracks, on the timeless succession of “mañana[s] muertas” (“dead mornings”), “tardes llenas de moscas” (“afternoons full of flies”), “botones limpios” (“clean buttons”), “complicada[s] ceremonia[s]” (“complicated ceremonies”), “el encierro forzoso” (“forced confinement”) and, when the night finally comes, “cigarillos” (“cigarettes”), “marihuana” (“marijuana”), “mujeres” (“women”) and “tragos de alcool teñido” (“drinks of dyed alcohol”) (208-212).

Talking about sub-lieutenant Roberto, for instance, who began his successful career “con una gran energía acumulada” (“with lots of accumulated energy”), enjoys the rare luxury of “un asistente que le tra[e] la comida” (“an assistant that serves him the food”), and spends his days instructing “los soldados” (“the soldiers”), the poet explains: “entonces, con la sombra, desp[iertan] sus más primitivos instintos / y reunido con otros oficiales / beb[e] tequila hasta embriagarse / [y] [va] a buscar a una mujerzuela / para golpearla depiadadamente /… / y luego acaric[iarla] con ternura, dándole todo su cuerpo febril y joven” (211).88

Importantly for our purposes, Novo’s sketches of these four (but many) forgotten civil servants who bow, order, and are prone to lose their temper, offer additional illustrations of his distinction between Iberoamerican books (or murals) and yankee

88 “And then / with the shadow / his most primitive instincts wake up / and in the company of other officers / he drinks tequila till intoxication / and picks up a girl / to beat her mercilessly / … / and caress her with tenderness afterwards / offering her his frail and youthful body.”
poems, and of the poet’s critical use of the latter to comment on the former. As Carlos Monsiváis and other critics have remarked, Novo’s “poemas-vignetetas” (“vignette-poems”) are written “un tanto a la manera de Edgar Lee Masters en Spoon River Anthology” (“a bit in the manner of Edgar Lee Masters’s Spoon River Anthology”) (99). More significantly, the first section of *Poemas Proletarios* explicitly refers to the poetic legacy of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg, whose poems “Leaves of Grass and “Cool Tombs” Novo invokes as whispering counterpoints to the strident aesthetics of the revolutionary puppet show: “[c]rece el tiempo en silencio, / hojas de hierba, polvo de las tumbas [frías] / que agita apenas la palabra” (“time grows in silence, / leaves of grass, dust of the [cool] tombs / that the word hardly stirs”) (203). Thus, expanding on my reading of *Seamen Rhymes* and *Continente Vacío*, I would argue that Novo’s *Poemas Proletarios* turn to U.S. literature as a model for the expression of that which grows and silence and is yet to be worded. In the “prosa prosaíca” (“prosaic prose”) of Pound, Whitman, Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters, Novo found an aesthetic vehicle for writing the precarious existence of the unpatriotic elements of the Mexican nation, its unsung anti-heroes: the “muchos y pequeños *nuestros*” (“the many little ‘us’”) that needed to be ignored in order to preserve a respectable picture of “lo nuestro nacional” (“the national ‘us’”) (Sheridan, *México* 215, 68). To put it differently, one could say that, in similar fashion to Whitman’s account of the U.S. Civil War in *Specimen Days* (1882), Novo’s signifying on the U.S. poetic tradition served him to compose the unrecorded history of the Mexican nation.

This can be further illustrated by the volume *Espejo, poemas antiguos* (1933), a collection of autobiographical pieces that, like the works I have previously analyzed, was
also written by the “el Novo ‘prosaista,’ ‘exteriorista’ or conversacionalista,” (“the prosaic, exteriorist, or conversational Novo”), that is, by the yankee Novo, the one who distrusts the moving music of “versos perfectos” (“perfect verses”) and the easy rewards of “metáforas nuevas y brillantes” (“new and brilliant metaphors”) (Pacheco 106-107; Novo, AP 132). *Espejo* offers a colloquial genealogy of the childhood images, feelings and sensations that led the mature Novo to deride “los dudosos honores del proselitismo” (“the shady honors of proselytism”) and the formulaic rhetoric of the patriotic creed (137). Anticipating *Poemas Proletarios*, for instance, the poet conveys his precocious suspicion of the “carteles rojos” (“red signs”) and “bocas ásperas” (“harsh mouths”) that roamed the streets of his infancy, shouting “palabras extrañas / que se grabaron en mi cerebro como enigmas” (“strange words / that engraved in my brain like enigmas”) (131).

In particular, Novo’s mnemonic snapshots reconstruct his uncomfortable passage through the halls and classrooms of the educational state apparatus, where the candid child experienced the bodily tremors of “el primer odio” (“the first hatred”) (129). In the deceptively naive “Libro de lectura” (“School Reader”) Novo remembers being taught the hierarchical scales of biological, human and national distinction, and the patriotic lesson to sing the unique splendor of the Mexican homeland:

\[
\text{¿Qué se hicieron los gatos, los conejos,} \\
\text{el Rey de la Selva y la Zorra de las Uvas,} \\
\text{los Cinco Guisantes, el patito Feo?} \\
\text{Hace tiempo que no trato con esos animales;} \\
\text{desde que me enseñaron que el hombre} \\
\text{es un ser superior, semejante a Dios,} \\
\]

165
Lo único que odio en este libro
es que esboza que hay diversos países

Antes de venir a la escuela
no distinguía entre los hombres;
todos ellos me parecían iguales,
Ahora sé:

Europa, Asia, África, América, Oceania
y México. ¡Viva México!

“Espléndido es tu cielo, patria mía.”89 (128)

As the poet explains, however, his constitutive lack of revolutionary pedigree made it
difficult to accept the commonsensical teachings of his “libro de lectura.” Not only did
Novo’s “ropa fina” (“delicate clothing”) and expensive “libros” (“books”) meet with the
disapproval of “el profesor” (“the teacher”) (127). In the poem “Historia,” Novo further
tells us that, while the gist of revolutionary historiography is, “¡Mueran los gachupines!,
“mi padre es gachupín, / [y] el profesor me mira con odio / y nos cuenta la guerra de
independencia / y cómo los españoles eran malos y crueles / con los indios – él es indio –,

89 “And what became of the cats, the rabbits / the King of the Jungle and the Fox of Grapes / The
Five Peas, the Ugly Duckling? It has been long since I mingled with these animals / since they
taught me that man / is a superior being, similar to God / … / the only thing I hate in this book / is
that it suggests there are different countries / … / before I went to school / I did not distinguish
between men / they all looked alike / I know now: Europe, Asia, Africa, Americas, Oceania / and
Mexico. Viva Mexico! / ‘Beautiful is your sky, o motherland.’”
“Death to the gachupines!, / my father is a gachupín / [and] the teacher strares at me with hatred / and tells us about the war of independence / and how the Spaniards were evil and cruel / with the Indians – he is Indian –, / and all the boys shout “Death to the gachupines.”

\[90\] Yet, Novo’s inability to embrace the pedagogical precepts of authentic *mexicanidad* cannot only be attributed to his socio-economic background or his Spanish origins – after all, the ideological architects of the postrevolutionary nation were also “gachupines” cladded in “ropa fina.” It must also (and maybe primarily) be related to “ese pudor extraño” (“that queer shame”) that made him feel “tan inferior…al lo hora del recreo” (“so inferior…at the time of recess”) (127). In other words, *Espejo* invites us to consider the sexual politics of Mexican cultural nationalism and of Novo’s aesthetic *yankeesmo*.

As suggested by Abreu Gómez’s aforementioned description of Mexican poets as the “muchachos y muchachas de la vanguardia” (the writers he refers to were all men, in fact), his perception of their poetry as “impúdica,” and, more explicitly, by the self-explanatory title of some of his essays (“Literatura sin sexo,” for instance), Novo and his friends’ insufficient nationalism was not merely due to their excessive cosmopolitanism or the elitist formalism of some of their work. Equally worrying to the legislators of the “alma nacional” were their “effeminate” manners and distasteful lack of masculine vigor. Or better, Novo and Co.’s susceptibility to the alien charms of “las influencias exóticas” (“exotic influences”) was perceived as a cause and/or symptom of what Carlos Monsiváis calls their “heterodoxia sexual” (“sexual heterodoxy”) (62). The equation between virility, nationalism and revolutionary art was most explicitly debated during the public quarrel that followed Julio Jiménez Rueda’s publication of the article, “El Afeminamiento en la literatura mexicana” (“The Feminization of Mexican Literature”).
(El Universal, December 21, 1924). Complaining about the absence of an authentic Mexican literary aesthetic, that is, the absence of any contemporary “obra poética, narrativa o trágica que sea compendio y cifra de las agitaciones del pueblo” (“poetic, narrative or dramatic work that captures and encodes the agitations of the people”), Rueda lamented: “el tipo de hombre que piensa ha degenerado. Ya no somos gallardos, altivos, toscos…Nos trocamos en frágiles estatuillas de biscuit, de esbeltez quebradiza y ademánes equivocos. Es que ahora suele encontrarse el éxito, más que en puntos de la pluma, en las complicadas artes del tocador.” 91 Personalizing Rueda’s salvo against the desexualized “literatos,” Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz soon composed two articles – “Literatura con sexo y literatura sin sexo” (“Sexed literature and sexless literature”) and “Los jóvenes poetas sin sexo” (“The young sexless poets”) – in which he directly attacked the writers Salvador Novo, Jaime Torres Bodet, Francisco Monterde and Xavier Villaurutia (not of all whom were in fact homosexuals), thus unleashing a debate and controversy that lasted for weeks and elicited various responses from the side of the accused.92

The relation between masculinity and nationalism (and conversely, between extranjerismo and effeminacy or homosexuality, which were seen as identical) is also apparent in the sweaty writings of Manuel Maples Arce’s Marxist/nationalist avant-garde group, estridentismo, which can be described as a literary equivalent of the muralist

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91 “The type of man who thinks has degenerated. We are no longer brave, proud, rugged…We have turned into fragile biscuit statuettes of breakable slenderness and equivocal expression. Success is now more related to the complicated art of the dressing table than the dots of the pen.”

92 For a detailed discussion and analysis of the terms and actors of the controversy, see Víctor Díaz Arciniega, Querella por la cultura “revolucionaria” (1996).
project.\(^3\) In the closing sections of the second manifesto *estridentista* (dated January 1, 1923), for instance, the authors insist – in case there might be any doubt – that “ser estridentista es ser hombre. Sólo los eunucos no estarán con nosotros” (“to be an estridentista is to be a man. Only eunuchs will not join us”) (qtd. in Balderston 59). In his poem *Urbe* (which was, incidentally, translated by John Dos Passos), Maples Arce opposes the vigorous vitality that emanates from “los pulmones de Rusia” (“lungs of Russia”) and “el viento de la revolucion social” (“the wind of social revolution”) to the feeble rhyming of “los asalta-braguetas literarios [que] nada comprenderán / de esta nueva belleza / sudorosa del siglo” (“literary zipper-robbers who will not understand / this new sweaty / beauty of the century”) (qtd. in Hérnandez-Rodríguez”). Finally, I would like to quote the following passage from Maples Arce’s memoirs, *Soberana juventud* (1981), in which the poet reports one of the concrete initiatives that was taken to preserve the endangered sexual hygiene of the postrevolutionary nation. More exactly, the poet explains how and why – following the example of the nationalist painters from the group “30-30,” who had publicly voiced their disapproval of “el homosexualismo” and called for the firing of the government functionaries “de dudosa condición psicológica” (“of dubious psychological condition”) – he and a number of other intellectuals decided to convene and write a letter to the Comité de Salud Pública (Committee of Public Health) to demand the dismissal of the “hermafrodita[s]” (“hermaphrodites”) who occupy “puestos oficiales” (“official functions”) “and “crean una atmósfera de corrupción que llega al extremo de impedir el arraigo de las virtudes

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viriles en la juventud” (“create an atmosphere of corruption that is so extreme as to impede the development of the virile virtues of the youth”). In Maples Arce’s unapologetic words:

En una ocasión nos reunimos en el Salón Verde de la Cámara de Diputados para tratar el problema de los homosexuales en el teatro, el arte y la literatura…la gente se preguntaba por qué se les permitía moverse con tanto desplante, cuando en la época de Porfirio Díaz se les obligaba a barrer las calles…Fue la época de la insistente publicidad de Proust y Gide, en cuya obra se amparaba la comedia de los maricones y el cinismo de los pederastas…Para escapar a toda responsabilidad adoptaron una posición neutral que les permitió sobrevivir por todos los conflictos ideológicos que han conmovido a la nación mexicana…Pretendían una estética que los eximía de compromisos y los ponía al margen de toda obligación responsable.⁹⁴ (qtd. in Monsiváis 65-66)

Like in the writings of Jiménez Rueda or Abreu Gómez, Maples Arce’s attack against the literary “maricones” – in particular Villaurutia and Novo, whose poetry “no disimula los deseos bajo ningún eufemismo sexual” (“does not not dissimulate desires under any sexual euphemism”) – posits a correlation between their sexual orientation, their

⁹⁴ “On one occasion, we gathered in the Green Room of the Chamber of Deputies in order to deal with the problem of homosexuals in theater, art and literature…people were wondering why they were allowed to go around with so much impudence, when in the days of Porfirio Diaz they were forced to sweep the streets…This [meeting] took place during the period of insistent publicity for Proust and Gide, in whose works the comedy of “the faggots” and the cynicism of the pederasts sought protection…In order to evade all responsibility, they adopted a neutral stance that allowed them to survive all the ideological conflicts that had shaken the Mexican nation…They claimed an aesthetic that absolved them of any commitment and left them on the margins of any responsible obligation.”
cowardly evasion from the national question, and their uncommendable imitation of
foreign literatures (qtd. in Balderston 61).

Despite Maples Arce’s allusion to Mexican artists’ enthusiasm for the immoralist
writings of the French (i.e., effeminate) André Gide and Marcel Proust, these various
examples of gay bashing and hunting may also help us understand Novo’s anti-patriotic
interest in the poetries of Masters, Whitman, Sandburg or Elinor Wylie; and, more
generally, his attraction to the forbidden products of North American culture. As Mary
Nolan insightfully explains in Visions of Modernity: American Business and the
Modernization of Germany (1994), “[f]or many Weimar observers, Americanism and
Fordism symbolized much more than a stunningly efficient, modern system of
production…the primacy of economics and consumption…a spirit of pragmatism and
materialism, an acceptance of…uniformity, and a thoroughly rational, unromantic
attitude towards production, work, and the factory” (108). More worryingly to some,
Americanism was also synonymous with “a fundamental redefinition of masculinity and
femininity,” and a dangerous questioning of “the gendered nature of culture” (109). In the
eyes of a majority of German observers and commentators, the American woman’s
emancipated participation to the public and economic life of the nation constituted not
only a threat to the traditional distribution of the male and female spheres of duty and the
sanctified realm of domesticity. Of even greater concern was the so-called new woman’s
perceived control and monopoly over the business of culture, that is, her “feminization of
all emotions, tastes, art and thought” (124). In other words, American women were
deemed responsible for the increasing production, consumption and proliferation of the
frivolous, escapist, mass cultural forms that were slowly contributing to the demise of
European (and male-dominated) high culture, and the moral deprivation of the European youth.

Similar anxieties informed Mexican perceptions of the United States. Deploiring the power and centrality of women in U.S. culture and society, for instance, the poet José Juan Tablada remarks in one of his New York chronicles that, “los Estados Unidos caminan, acelerada y fatalmente, hacia el Matriarcado” (“the United States are headed, fast and fatally, towards Matriarchy”) (“Mujeres, mujeres, mujeres,” La Babilonia de Hierro 157). In the enigmatically titled poem, “…?,” the poet conveys his outraged bafflement at the sight of the sterile, machine-like creatures that walk the inhuman avenues of the Big Apple: “mujeres que pasáis por la Quinta Avenida, / tan cerca de mis ojos, tan lejos de mi vida… / … / Mujeres ‘fire proof,’ a la pasión inertes, / llenas de fortaleza, como las cajas fuertes, / es vuestro seno el antro de la ambición histérica, ¡vuestro secreto es una combinación numérica!” (“women who pass through Fifth Avenue, / so close to my eyes, so far from my life… / … / ‘Fire proof’ women, of inert passion, strong as safevaults, / your womb is a hole of hysterical ambition, / your secret a numerical combination!”) (Obras 327). The relation between the cultural influence of “yankilandia” and the emergence of unnatural women with short hair, boyish manners and manly occupations is also made explicitly in Luis G. Pinal’s article, “Men-Women,” written for EL Universal Ilustrado in 1926. Specifically, Pinal warns against the increasing presence and visibility of U.S. women in the “Public Thing.” As the outraged Pinal puts it, in the United States “there are already three WOMEN who now occupy public posts, which were created for MEN” (qtd. in Gabara 193). The new woman’s perceived usurpation of roles and activities traditionally reserved for virile men also
extended to the realm of arts and culture. In an essay published in *El Universal*, for instance, Tablada explains that the decadence of the flapper is not only due to her deliberate manners and “lamentable philosophy.” More dangerously, flappers spend their suspicious days “working the dictaphone and in front of the typewriter” (qtd. in Gabara 158). Likewise, an editorial of Liszt Arzubide’s *estridentista* journal, *Horizonte*, derides the frivolous (i.e. americanized) femininity that threatens to overtake the virile world of the written word. More precisely, the editors lament the dangerous proliferation of U.S.-flavored popular journals, weeklies, and *revistas ilustradas*: “the ambience that journals have created…is one of laziness of concepts and cowardice in manifestations, that has been poorly called eclectism, a chaos that satisfies the undulating taste of women” (qtd. in Gabara 191).

In similar fashion to their counterparts from Weimar Germany, Mexican commentators conceived the eclectic, feminized products of U.S. culture as dangerous threats to the natural order of things and the gendered distinction between high and mass culture.

Needless to say, painted-nails-Novo did not share the masculine panic of his compatriots. In the story “El joven” – published in *Nueva Grandeza Mexicana* (1946) – for instance, the author characterizes the rise of “el individualismo en las mujeres” (“individualism in women”) as “muy interesante” (“very interesting”) (*VEI* 240). In the apologetic preface (“Mis razones privades,” my private reasons) of “Divorcio: drama Ibseniano en cinco actos” (“Divorce: An Ibsenian Drama in Five Acts”) – a mini-play that dramatizes the destructive consequences of U.S. femininity on the sacred institution of marriage, and is dedicated to “miss Edith R. Chase, gran lectora de *Plays*, matemática, doctora en filosofía, admiradora de los cigarros mexicanos y amiga mía muy estimada
(“miss Edith R. Chase, great reader of Plays, mathematician, doctor in philosophy, admirer of Mexican cigars and a very dear friend of mine”) – Novo further confesses that “no sient[e] hacia los Estados Unidos ninguna mala voluntad” (“he bears no ill will towards the United States”) (VEI 58). In particular, he stresses his good relations with the vilified “americanas” (59). According to the purposefully vain and shallow Novo, who befriended many of these “americanas” while teaching at Mexico City’s Summer School, “ellas son las únicas personas que [le] han pedido autógrafos, que han tomado en las veranos kodaks [suyos], y que [le] han hallado interesting” (“they are the only ones who have asked him for autographs, taken kodaks of him in the summer, and found him interesting”) (59). As suggested by the name of the fictional Edith R. Chase that appears in Novo’s ibsenian drama, Mrs. Gutenberg – a divorced “doctora en filosofía” (“doctor in philosophy”) who claims to “viv[ir] [su] propia vida” (“live her own life”) and “ten[er] derecho a la felicidad” (“have a right to happiness”) – Novo was particularly enthusiastic about U.S. women’s access to and influence over the realm of printed matter (64). Noting the gender discrepancy between North and Latin American letters, he remarks in a review of Elinor Wylie’s collection, Nets to Catch the Wind (1921), that “para la literatura norteamericana no es, como para la nuestra de habla española, singular e inusitado fenómeno el advenimiento de una poetisa” (“the advent of a female poet is not as singular and rare a phenomenon in North American literature as it is in our Spanish-language tradition”): while women writers are “casos esporádicos insólitos” (“sporadic unusual cases”) in Latin America, they are legion in the United States (“Redes para captar el viento,” VEII 237).95 Crucially, Novo praises “las poetisas norteamericanas” (“North

95 Interestingly, Elinor Wylie was not only a poet, but also seems to have been a paradigmatic
American poetesses”) for what could be called their écriture non féminine (237). In contrast to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Juana de Ibarborou, Gabriela Mistral or Delmira Agustini, whose admirable works potentially lend themselves to being dismissed as puerile “derivaciones psicológicas” (“psychological derivations”), Hilda Doolittle, Amy Lowell, Hilda Conkling, and Edna St. Vincent Millay – to name a few of the U.S. female poets Novo mentions – have been able to “desexualizar el arte” (“desexualize art”) and to produce a language “limpi[o] de géneros gramaticales, ‘neutral’” (“devoid of grammatical gender, ‘neutral’”) (237). The watchdogs of literary virility would have a hard time attributing “el fuego apasionado y casi místico de Emily Dickinson” (“the passionate, quasi mystical fire of Emily Dickinson”) to “una mujer” (“a woman”), Novo argues; and H.D. or Amy Lowell’s imagist verse could very well have been written by “los hombres del grupo” (“the men of the group”): D.H. Lawrence, Richard Aldington, F.S. Flint, or John Gould Fletcher (237). In other words, Novo applauds the women poets of the United States for their cunning ability to confound the aesthetic expectations of gender.

A similar argument can be made regarding Novo’s first published book, Ensayos (1925), an epileptic collection of essays that comprises, among other curious pieces of writing, “Algunas sugestiones al boxeo” (“Some Suggestions on Boxing”), “Meditación sobre los anteojos” (“Meditation on Eyeglasses”), “Antología del pan” (“Anthology of Bread”), “Ensayo sobre la leche” (“Essay on Milk”), “Radioconferencia sobre el Radio” (“Radiconference on the Radio”), “Confesiones de pequeños filósofos” (“Confessions of example of the “new American woman.” Indeed, according to the editors of The Poetry Foundation, “she was trained for the life of a debutante and a society wife, but she rebelled against that destiny and became notorious, in her time, for her multiple marriages and affairs” (http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/elinor-wylie).
Small Philosophers”), “El buen pensador mexicano” (“The Good Mexican Thinker”), as well as translations of Vachel Lindsay and Christopher Morley’s poetry. On the one hand, Novo’s rapid and irreverent essays must be related to his avant-garde mockery of the cult of artistic seriousness; and to his concomitant enthusiasm for the aesthetic possibilities of new media technologies. Performing the randomness and disorder of a radio show, Novo’s melting pot of words and references from heterogeneous aesthetic registers and genres contributes to distorting the traditional hierarchies of taste, and the age-old distinction between high and popular culture.

They posit the heretic idea of an art that is not meant to last or “eternizarse – aspiración literaria” (“to be eternal – a literary aspiration”), but to be fast and effective, to impress and “retirarse para no volver más en la misma forma” (“and disappear not to reappear in the same form”): a hurried art of immediate pleasure and satisfaction that announces “la abolición de los museos y de las investigaciones arqueológicas” (“the abolition of museums and archeological investigations”) and “la muerte de las bibliotecas como fuentes del conocimiento” (“the death of libraries as sources of knowledge”) (“Radioconferencia,” VEI 39, 40). On the other hand, Ensayos must also be read in relation to the alleged effeminacy of “las revistas americanas” (“American magazines”), which, like Novo’s volume, “trata[n] ligeramente las cuestiones profundas y profundamente los asuntos que no valen la pena” (“treat serious things lightly and worthless things deeply”) (“Un esquema de las revistas americanas,” VEII 60). To put it differently, Novo’s trivialization (or de-solemnization) of

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96 As Novo tells his perplexed audience in “Radioconferencia sobre el radio:” “[a]cabáis de escuchar el sexteto All Nuts Jazz Band y ahora oís mi palabra; dentro de 10 minutos oíreis Il Bacio, de Arditi, o Gadalupe la Chinaca, de Nervo, o Manon, de Massenet” (“You have just heard the All Nuts Jazz Band and you now hear my voice; in ten minutes, you will hear Arditi’s Il Bacio, Nervo’s Guadalupe la Chinaca, or Massenet’s Manon”) (VEI 39).
Mexican literature is coextensive with his demasculinization of it. By performing the “feminine” aesthetics of North America’s “semanario[s] frivolo[s],” Novo’s *Ensayos* confuse the sex and gender of Mexican letters and, in doing so, they register the author’s queer dissonance from the virile aesthetics and politics of Mexican nationalist discourse (“Algunas verdades acerca de la literatura mexicana actual,” *VEII* 113).

Considering the queer dimension of Novo’s aesthetic *yankeesmo* allows me to take a renewed look at some of the texts I have previously discussed. Novo’s critique of Iberoamerican politics and *modernista* aesthetics in *Continente Vacío* is not merely due to their aristocratic elitism or their abstract idealism. It also results from the masculinist bent of “los libros iberoamericanos” (and Latin American writers) and Novo’s sexual idiosyncracy, one that the author subtly communicates throughout the narrative. In the opening pages, Novo conveys his unspeakable “difference” from the other members of the Mexican delegation by noting that, excepting him and “alguna otra excepción” ("some other exception"), “todos los que las tienen trajeron a sus esposas (‘everyone who has one brought their wife’) (716). Upon arriving in Brazil, the author surreptitiously shares his irresistible attraction to a Brazilian *changador*, or porter. After noting the boy’s surprised reaction to his generous tipping practices, Novo clarifies the situation and the nature of his intentions in the following terms: “No comprendía que en este reino de ensueño yo no podía llevar en las manos otra cosa que no fuera el deseo de oprimir a esta tierra lujuriosa, otra actitud que la de recibir su caricia” (“He did not understand that, in this kingdom of fantasy, I could not carry anything in my hands but the desire to press that luxurious land and receive her caress”) (746). While Novo’s words seemingly refer to the natural caress of the land, it seems clear that they also allude to the author’s
unnatural longing for the intimate touch of the “dulce” changador. This becomes particularly obvious in the following pages of the narrative. Following the account of his nightly escapade in the seedy, harbor-bars and cabarets of Rio de Janeiro, Novo explains that his illicit behaviour became the topic of concerned rumor and discussion among his fellow Mexican delegates. As a well-intentioned woman tells him, but Novo refrains from putting in print: “El purser [me] dijo que ayer en Rio… Esa actitud es muy mal vista en Montevideo, no será tolerada, sera cosa de policía…” (“the purser told me that yesterday in Rio… That attitude is gravely frowned upon in Montevideo, it will not be tolerated, it will be brought to the police”) (751). The most explicit clue of Novo’s unspeakable behaviour (and of the queer thread that structures *Continente Vacío*), however, may be found in his beautiful account of “aquella tarde de intimidad” (“that afternoon of intimacy”) that he spent in the company of Federico García Lorca in Buenos Aires: “nos sentamos, Federico y yo, solos, como dos amigos que no se han visto en muchos años, como dos personas que van a cotejar sus biografías, preparadas en distintos extremos de la tierra para gustar cada uno de cada otra. ¿En qué momento comenzamos a tutearnos? Yo llevaba fresco el recuerdo de su oda a Walt Whitman” (“we sat, Federico and I, alone, like two friends who have not seen each other in a long time, like two people who are going to compare their biographies, prepared in different extremes of the earth for their mutual enjoyment. At which moment did we start addressing each other as ‘tú’? The memory of his ode to Walt Whitman was fresh on my mind”) (783). In addition to situating him within an illustrious lineage of homosexual writers and writing, Novo’s reference to Lorca’s famous poem on the author of *Leaves of Grass* establishes a direct connection between his personal and his aesthetic queerness. To put it simply, the poet
relates his queer interest in “los poemas yanquis” to his even queerer interest in Brazilian *changadores*. From that perspective, then, it also seems clear that, as suggested by the not-so-subtle pun of the title, Novo’s decision to write part of *Seamen Rhymes* in English not only followed his desire to be considered a North American writer. More importantly, Novo adopted the prosaic language of U.S. poetry and the foreign perspective of a U.S. mariner in order to signal his estrangement from the masculine vigor of Latin America’s “subconsciencia selvática” (“sylvan subconscious”) and include himself within a queer tradition of maritime writings – one that includes such well-known names and works as Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd* (1924) or Jean Genet’s *Querelle de Brest* (1953).

Finally, the sexual politics of Novo’s literary *extranjerismo* can be exemplified by Novo’s posthumous memoirs, *La estatua de sal*, composed in 1948 and first published in their entirety in 2008 with a prologue by Carlos Monsiváis. Despite the decades of delay between the moment of conception and the year of publication, Novo’s psychoanalytical retelling of his sexual adventures from early childhood and young adulthood – Novo only covers the first two decades of his life – remains an explosive text. As Daniel Balderston put it a few years ago, *La estatua de sal* is “apparently still considered too racy for Mexican readers” (and non Mexican-readers too, for that matter) (73). In contrast to “typical” coming-out narratives from the period (or Novo’s other writings) – in which verbal suggestion and understatement operate as discursive invitations to search for what Sylvia Molloy and Robert McKee Irwin call “the invisible queer” – the purposefully graphic and explicit language of Novo’s *La estatua de sal* aims to leave his unwarned audience in a state of outraged disbelief (xi). Consider, for instance, Novo’s description of his obstructed encounter with the well-endowed Agustín Fink. After proudly observing
how “[se] atrevi[ó] a lo que era fama que sólo su amante Nacho Moctezuma toleraba: la verga de Agustín Fink, positivamente igual en diámetro a una lata de salmon” (“he dared to attempt to take on what only his lover Nacho Moctezuma was known to tolerate: the dick of Agustín Fink, positively equal in diameter to a can of salmon”), the author depicts the stimulating challenge in the following terms: “Consciente de su gigantismo, la introducía cautelosamente dormida u bien forrada del lubricante entonces conocido antes del benemérito advenimiento de KY: la vaselina. Pero una vez adentro, se abría como un paraguas, estrellaba la estrechez de su cautiverio” (“conscious of its gigantic size, he would introduce it cautiously limp and well coated with the lubricant of choice in those days before the meritorious advent of KY jelly: namely, vaseline. But once inside, it would open up like an umbrella, bursting the bounds of its captivity”) (115). In addition to initiating the reader into the colorful details of Novo’s sexual life, Estatua de Sal provides a native informant’s acute radiography of the places and people of Mexico City’s queer underworld from the 1920s: these include, among others, la cotorra con pujos (“the moaning parrot”), la pedo embotellado (“the bottled fart”), la India bonita (“the pretty Indian”), la virgen de estambul (“the virgin of Istanbul”), Sor Diablo (“Sister Devil,” who was in fact a priest) and el Vaticano (“the Vatican”), one of the popular hangouts of the days. Yet, what interests me here are not the campy accounts of Novo’s nocturnal adventures, his queer ethnography of the city, or even the published vesion of La estatua de sal, but rather the scratchy outline that preceded the actual writing of the book, and which Novo conceived entirely in English.
Novo’s unusual decision to sketch his memoirs of transgression in the idiom of Whitman may be due to the synthetic, concise nature of the English language, a feature that the poet frequently alludes to. In light of my previous readings, however, Novo’s linguistic decision must also be related to the author’s queer treatment of the English language and U.S. culture. Whether in Continente Vacío, Seamen Rhymes, Espejo, Ensayos, or the

97 In the essay “El buen té y la poesía de Vachel Lindsay” (“Good tea and the poetry of Vachel Lindsay”), for example, Novo expresses his admiration for “la visión directa y sintética…que caracteriza hoy a los poetas americanos” (“the direct and synthetic vision…that characterizes American poets today”) (VEI 358). In Continente Vacíó, Novo justifies his reproachable tendency to “preferir los nombres ingleses para mis obras” (“prefer English titles for his works”) by invoking “obvias razones de síntesis que el español no siempre ofrece” (“obvious reasons of synthesis that the Spanish language does not always offer”) (VEI 723).
outline of *La estatua de Sal*, Novo turned to the language of empire to express that which could not be spoken in the language of the nation.⁹⁸

Novo’s bilingual aesthetics operate as a welcome interruption of the monolingual music of Iberoamerican *modernismo* and Mexican cultural nationalism.⁹⁹ Via a cartographic detour through the foreign sounds and forms of U.S. culture and literature, Novo’s Anglophile prose and poetry interfere with the aesthetics and politics of revolutionary *mexicanidad* (or continental *latinidad*); and articulate a heretic, queer, transnational model of literary practice that undoes the totalizing claims of nationalist liturgy. As I have tried to show, however, it would be a mistake to read Novo’s anti-patriotic critique of the sexual, artistic, and political postulates of “la revolución triunfante” (“the triumphant revolution”) as a critique of nationalism *per se*, or, what is worse, as a naive acceptance of the homogenizing flows and forces of North American imperial reason. While Novo occasionally tried to pass as “un escritor yanki…que escribe en español” (“a yankee writer…who writes in Spanish”), it is equally true that, as suggested by his numerous writings on Mexican life and society, he never stopped being “[un escritor] muy mexicano” (“a very Mexican writer”). Thus, riffing on the title of

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⁹⁸ Importantly, Novo’s perception of U.S. culture (and more generally, the United States) as a site of greater gender/sexual freedom was not unique among Mexican/Latin American writers and intellectuals. It is no coincidence that, for instance, two of Xavier Villaurutia’s most explicit evocations of homosexual desire, “Nocturno de los Angeles” and “North Carolina Blues,” are set in the United States – for an analysis of these poems, see Robert McKee Irwin, *Mexican Masculinities* (2003). More generally, Mary Louise Pratt also observes that “they [Latin American women] found allies and models in U.S. women movements (as well as in European anarchism)…From midcentury on the United States’s emancipated women were a touchstone for what might be called anti-anti-Americanism among Latin American women activists and intellectuals. Today, gay writers make the same point in their dialogues with the Left” (“Back Yard with Views” 41). In the 1920s and 1930s, Novo also made the same point in his dialogue with North American poetry.

Rebecca Walkowitz’s recent volume, I would argue that, instead of being read as a cosmopolitan attempt to get “beyond the nation,” Novo’s bilingual modernism is best understood as an attempt to get within the nation and explore her minor elements. On the lower frequencies of the frivolous, prosaic, localist, and indeed, regionalist writings of Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Amy Lowell or Elinor Wylie – notice the markedly Midwestern flavor of Novo’s U.S. poetic proclivities – the Mexican poet found an adequate aesthetic register for expressing the marginal subjectivities of the nation: the “decentered, noncapitalized hispanisms” and similar mexicanisms (Molloy and McKee Irwin xv). To put it less militantly, one could say that Novo’s literary yankeesmo allowed him to conceive an intimate history of Mexico; not the epic history of the “Mexico trágico y solemne” (“tragic and solemn Mexico”) that appears in the “proclamas y poemas murales” (“mural poems and proclamations”) of Diego Rivera, but the private, affective history of a modest and quotidian Mexico, “mi México, las gentes que allá me quieren, los sitios que me son familiares y acogedores, lo que enternece mi corazón” (“my Mexico, the people who love me there, the places that feel familiar and cozy, what moves my heart”) (Novo, VEI 212, 718). In that sense, Novo’s poetic practice can be best described as an example of localist transnationalism, that is, as a passage through the supranational for the writing of the infranational.

Last but not least, it is important to add that, while primarily directed against the masculinist accents of Latin American letters and the prescriptive terms of revolutionary mexicanidad, Novo’s exercises of literary deterritorialization also question the national sovereignty of the English language and the imperial power structure between Mexico

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100 Rebecca L. Walkowitz, Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation (2006).
and the United States. To be sure, it could be argued that Novo’s admiration for the freshness and novelty of U.S. poetry reinscribes the developmentalist logic of traditional models of influence and the evolutionary ethos of Euro-American modernity. As in the writings of Frank and Chase, or the paintings of Rivera and Orozco, Novo’s poetic practice (and my analysis of it) would configure the North as the center of creation, the South as a periphery of imitation. In response to these valid questions and reservations, I would argue that, in addition to illustrating his avant-garde enthusiasm for the democratic and artistic possibilities of the machine age (i.e., the United States), Novo’s aesthetic yankeesmo must also be related to his “afán filibustero and colonizador – en el buen sentido de la palabra (“filibustering and colonizing urge – in the good sense of the word”) (Novo, “El buen té y la poesía de Vachel Lindsay,” *VEI* 76). As Novo’s minor use of North American literature undoes the myth of a united Latin America and a homogeneous Mexico, it also undoes the exceptionalist narrative of North American modernity. Specifically, I would argue that Novo’s queer appropriation of the forms and words of the English language questions the United States’s self-appointed monopoly on the making and meaning of the new.

In order to illustrate that point, I would like to conclude this chapter by taking a brief look at Novo’s anthology *La poesía norteamericana moderna*, published in the pages of *El Universal Ilustrado* in 1924. As Anthony Stanton has remarked, Novo’s poetic selection stands out for its “abigarrada confusión” (“mixed confusion”) (154). While nine of Novo’s representatives of North American literary modernity can be described as “más bien traditionalistas” (“rather traditionalist”) – Witter Bynner, Sherwood Anderson, Hilda Conkling, Adelaide Chapsey, Joyce Kilmer, Edna St. Vincent
Millay, Harriet Monroe, Christopher Morley and Sara Teasdale – only eight of them qualify as “auténticos modernos” (“true moderns”) (153). These include Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost, as well as the more “claramente vanguardistas” (“clearly avant-gardists”), namely Alfred Kreymborg, John Gould Fletcher, Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound. According to Stanton, Novo’s curious juxtaposition of “lo viejo y lo nuevo” (“the old and the new”) may have been due to “la falta de información precisa de que disponía el mexicano o el carácter de divulgación general que evidentemente tenía la antología” (“the lack of information available to the Mexican or the popular and general character of the anthology”) (154). Maybe more importantly, the critic also speculates that the apparent insconsistency of Novo’s anthology could be seen as “un indicio de los gustos de Novo, poeta moderno que no tiene compromisos con ninguna secta y que mantiene una preferencia por lo novedoso sin abandonar totalmente la tradición” (“an index of the tastes of Novo, a modern poet who does not make any pledge to any sect and has a preference for the new without fully giving up on tradition”) (154). Without discarding the accuracy of Stanton’s hypotheses – all of which may have come into play – I would also like to read the “abigarrada confusión” of Novo’s selection as a Mexican critique of the North American fetish of progress and novelty as manifested in the naive language of aesthetic innovation and the “fáciles modernismos en boga” (“easy modernisms in vogue”) that abound in the United States (Novo, “Redes para captar el viento,” VEII 235). This can be further illustrated by the “Nota Preliminar” (“Preliminary Note”) of Novo’s anthology, in which, as Stanton astutely observes, the Mexican poet purposefully mistranslates the second principle of the Imagist manifesto published in Amy Lowell’s preface of the 1915 volume, Some Imagist
Poets. First, Novo amputates the second clause of the first sentence: “To create new rhythms—as the expression of new moods—and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods” only gets translated as “crear nuevos ritmos como expresiones de nuevos modos” (“to create new rhythms as the expression of new moods”). Secondly, Novo inverts the meaning of the third sentence: Lowell’s “We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free-verse than in conventional forms” becomes “No creemos que la individualidad de un poeta pueda siempre expresarse major en versos libres que en las formas convencionales,” that is, “we do not believe that…” Finally, Novo entirely ignores the last sentence of the original text, in which the North American poet declares that, “in poetry, a new cadence means a new idea” (Jones 135). By eliding or mistranslating the sections of Lowell’s text that posit a natural coincidence between the creation of new forms and the expression of new contents (or conversely, the repetition of old forms and the reproduction of old ideas); that is, by dissociating the fact of modernity from the recognizable forms of modernity, Novo’s tactical mistranslation performs a symbolic unmapping of the Euro-American geography of the modern, and undoes the binary division of the Americas into a industrial North and a primitive South. No longer propriety of the North, the fact of modernity becomes a multiform collision, a siteless plasma in which the “old” forms of Mexico may carry as much “novelty” as the “new” forms of New York.


———. *Expresiones Populares y Estereotipos Culturales en México. Siglos XIX y XX.*


