
Introduction

Let us begin with an image that repeats throughout this book: the Latin American modernist intellectual grasps hold of the camera and asks: “What now? How do I capture an accurate image of this modernity? Who is the subject and who is the object of this photographic encounter?” The modernist looks through the lens or at a photograph and doubts the modern subject and the place captured within, the history it frames, the veracity of the technology of representation itself. In the decades of modernist experimentation of the 1920s and 1930s, photography played a crucial role in eliciting questions about the forms of ethical responsibility and the promises of innovative aesthetics. Once the camera changed hands, from foreigner to native (we will continue to circle around both of these terms), modernists retook photography’s naturalized function as a privileged medium of modern representation and used it to alter the very image of modernity.¹ The act of taking this tool into one’s hands became both a triumphant gesture of acquisition and created a deep trauma of representation. In Brazil and Mexico, two widely influential and iconic sites of modernism in the region, photographs and the idea of

the photographic led artists and writers to produce works that fuse meditations on ethics with experimental aesthetics in what I call the ethos of modernism.

Since its invention in the nineteenth century, photography has been bound up with modern fantasies and fears as much as it has defined artistic, scientific, and even political projects. In the 1920s, greater access to cameras and the widespread reproduction of all kinds of photographs created a broad association between the medium and key characteristics of modernity. Photography captured the increasing circulation of products, ideas, and people, contributed to an epistemology that associated seeing with knowing, and represented subjects marked by race and gender who were gaining visibility as participants in modern societies. These decades saw an explosion of photographs globally: improved rotogravure technology filled newspapers and weeklies with photographs; with smaller and lighter cameras in hand, tourists and social scientists voyaged to the frontier between the modern and its others by train, plane, and automobile; and artists moved between the continents and within nations, experimenting with new technologies and theories of representation.

The modernist avant-garde across Latin America emerged on the scene during the late teens and early 1920s: the Week of Modern Art in São Paulo (1922) featured readings, concerts, and exhibitions, Estridentistas (Stridentists) posted manifestos in the streets and published experimental visual poetry in Xalapa (1921), and odes to the urban such as *Twenty Poems to Be Read on the Tram* (1922) by Argentine Oliverio Girondo peppered the literary landscape.² During the 1930s the number of manifestos diminished but experiments with prose fiction and visuality still flourished, laying the groundwork for the international importance of the Latin American novel throughout the rest of the century. Brazilian anthropophagy, which proclaimed a nation of cultural cannibals who consumed African, indigenous, and European cultures, recurs in novels, theory, films, and fine arts throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. The Estridentistas and the Contemporáneos, the two leading modernist avant-garde movements in Mexico, were publicly at odds over the character of modern art and of modernity itself. Nevertheless, they shared a focus on linguistic innovation, temporal discontinuity, and interdisciplinary collaborations across the arts. These authors, who are now canonical figures in

the national literary traditions of Mexico and Brazil, looked at modern life through the camera in a variety of ways: Mário de Andrade, known as the pope of Brazilian modernism, took and collected hundreds of photographs, and Salvador Novo, who remained a dominant presence in Mexican letters from the 1920s until the 1970s, meditated on the medium's aesthetic potential as "the prodigal daughter of the fine arts." Major writers from both countries' modernist movements published in photographically illustrated magazines, an early form of mass media that included their reflections on the relationship between image and word contained within. Commonplace rhetoric about the contemporary experience of visual overload—through advertisements, the Internet, and video—echo proclamations about radical and disorienting changes in technologies of seeing and representation from this earlier period.

This book examines the varied functions of photography in the major modernist movements in Mexico and Brazil in the twenties and thirties, working toward a theory of modernism contained in the contact—material and conceptual—between image and word. The place commonly referred to as Latin America offers a story about modernism in which the variety of photographic discourses in circulation are as important as those few later designated as art. It poses the challenge of seeing such images as important practices of modernism even as they require a redefinition of modernist photographic aesthetics. The images that follow may be surprising to readers accustomed to looking at European and U.S. works from the same period: strangely rural for the urban New Vision, diminutive compared to Constructivism's monumentalism, more populated than the stark New Objectivity, melodramatically kitsch as much as avant-garde, and documentary without satisfying the progressivist desires of that reformist mode.³ Even writing those comparisons, however, works against the broad project of this book, which seeks to substantially decenter modernism from those centers of economic modernization. Looking at these photographs and reading the texts that engage them entails a formalism that does not impose aesthetic expectations from other modernist sites, and an ethics that understands the histories of modernity and photography embedded in that of colonialism.

Photography provides a special opportunity to theorize modernism in Latin America, for it bore both the promise of modernity as

technological advancement and the stain of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century projects of imperial expansion. In the groundbreaking first colloquium on Latin American photography held in Mexico in 1978, Héctor Schmucler explained that the truism that “the camera doesn’t look from nowhere” signifies more than just a general concept of the photographer’s limited “point of view.” The lack of neutrality of photographs results as much from the stance of the photographer as the camera’s design, which reproduces the perspectival illusion canonized in Renaissance painting. The Argentine scholar adds a twentieth-century challenge to this history of pictures, for “the Kodak, along with Coca-Cola and the starred flag, constitutes one of the most broadcast symbols of the North American presence in the world.”⁴ Just two decades before the modernist movements took shape, J. C. Hemment wrote in *Canon and Camera: Sea and Land Battles of the Spanish-American War in Cuba, Camp Life, and the Return of the Soldiers* (1898): “The camera is like the gun of the war ship: while the gun can do the deadly execution, while shot and shell are brought to a state of perfection by our skilled artisans, the man must be behind the gun. So it is with the camera.”⁵ As the dramatically illustrated, two-volume set *Our Islands and Their People* (1899) makes clear—especially in figure 1, an altered image with the U.S. flag drawn in to imagine a warm welcome in Cuba—photography arrived burdened with the baggage of military intervention and commercial expansion, as well as touristic curiosity and ethnographic desire.⁶ It also carried with it a way of seeing, which embeds ethical issues in even the most formal analyses. Literary expression shared these tensions: as much as photographers sought to make the camera see differently, writers attempted to make the colonizer’s languages of Spanish and Portuguese achieve national expression, even as millions of people around them spoke indigenous languages.

Despite the often violent history of photographic capture, there was no resisting the temptation of the camera in the vibrant cultural atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s. Mário de Andrade fondly referred to his camera as his *codaquinha*, a nickname that fused the name of the pervasive U.S. brand with the diminutive typical of Brazilian Portuguese. The literary and artistic modernist movements in Mexico and Brazil were deeply engaged with photography and exhibited a fascination with the medium as a means to represent modern life as well as a rich mine of words and concepts. Through the examination of



1 José de Olivares, *Our Islands and Their People*, N. D. Publishing Co., 1899

extensive archival materials, I show how photography pervaded the experimental and popular literature of the period, and how captions, graphic design, and other texts altered the meaning of photographs. The ethical self-questioning provoked by the photographic encounter was part and parcel of aesthetic experiments with light, line, and frame, surprisingly the very themes germane to the formalism of mainstream modernist studies.⁷ By making explicit the challenges of making art do more than just represent the world realistically, photography augured exciting new possibilities for formal experimentation and an ethics that challenged antiquated social mores rather than dictated morality. The resulting modernism participated in what Mário de Andrade termed “critical nationalism,” a politics that critiqued the colonial history of the Americas and its twentieth-century formation, yet did not obediently serve the interests of the increasingly centralized and homogenizing modern states in Mexico and Brazil.

I introduce the concept of ethos as a way to theorize a set of modernist practices, both photographs themselves and photographic concepts and language in literature, that simultaneously engage ethics and aesthetics. The word itself is not new to the scholarship on modernism; in fact, it appears with great frequency among theorists of modernity and modernism from Latin America. Adrián Gorelik, for instance, refers to modernity as “the most general cultural ethos of the era, as the modes of life and social organization.”⁸ Perhaps the word’s popularity stems from its indefinite quality, so that it avoids the traps of regional or national essentialism, technological determinism, and the appearance of a causal relationship between economic modernization and aesthetic modernism. By developing a more defined architecture of ethos as the intersection of ethics and aesthetics, however, I am able to articulate the interventions and innovations of this generation of intellectuals and writers: their formulation of modernist aesthetics as a practice of formal intervention into the forms of everyday life, rather than formalism only as artistic purity, and their constitution of ethics as a social bond that nonetheless resists conservative moralism. Drawing out this ethos elucidates the continued relevance of these movements to artists in the region, who again are facing the challenges of new visual technologies and globalization.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists two definitions of ethos. The first cites Aristotle and refers to “the characteristic spirit, prevalent tone or sentiment of a people or community;” the second places the term “in reference to ancient aesthetic criticism and rhetoric . . . Some modern writers have taken ethos to mean ‘ideal excellence.’”⁹ The first definition helps to imagine ethics as the social location of the work and the artist, rather than simply as morality. Ethos frames ethics as a way of dwelling together, building community, being responsible to the others with whom one shares space. A central concern of Latin American modernism was to determine the places of this ethical responsibility by carefully considering the frontiers of the local. We will see that the space pictured by ethos is the actual space of lands (and nations) represented by photographs and texts, as well as the space constituted by representation itself, the framed space of the photograph and the left-to-right space of text. This ethics binds these spaces and the people who occupy them, such that concepts of locale and subjectivity become

mutually constitutive. While philosophers such as Hegel have meditated on the relationship between place and population, de Andrade offers a biting ethical critique of mistaking this mutual relationship for one in which the land founds a national race. He, Jaime Torres Bodet, and Xavier Villaurrutia picture a displaced intellectual, split in two, strangely running into himself as he tries to orient himself in relation to the modern nation and his fellow citizens.¹⁰ The ethos of modernism is embodied as much as it is located: it pictures the ethics of inhabiting a place. These two concepts—locale and subjectivity—have been at the center of discourses of modernity, in claims of cosmopolitanism and regionalism as well as civilization and primitivism, and are radically reimagined in the photographic works examined here.

The second definition of ethos designates its less expected, aesthetic sense. While the dictionary warns that this was likely not its classical meaning, common usage deploys the term to gesture toward an aesthetics that is not a formal mandate but rather a “way of life,” either of an individual or a society. The ethos of these works, to use Michel de Certeau’s language, combines a tactics of survival as a practice of everyday life with an aesthetic mode.¹¹ Mari Carmen Ramírez uses this word precisely when she wishes to describe these artistic movements’ mixture of art, experience, and life: this is Latin America’s “vanguardist ethos.”¹² Formal strategies including abstraction, lyricism, and montage create a modernist sublime that does not require moral or aesthetic purity but rather breaks down the hermetic distance of the literary text or art work from the social. The aesthetic quality of many of the photographic works, both literary and visual, is open, unfinished, tense, and contradictory, with reflections and repetitions that formulate the doubts of modernist intellectuals. The “excellent character” of works and people constitutes an aesthetic ethos but does not dictate their content; this quality materializes from contact with rather than distance from the social world.

Modernism in Latin America cannot be named by a style or charted as a historical progression toward abstraction. It is not characterized by a particular attitude toward cosmopolitanism or nationalism, nor does it faithfully reject or celebrate modern technologies. Alfredo Bosi argues that the single unifying characteristic that spans the diverse and even contradictory “mosaic of paradoxes” of these movements is their “colonial sense.”¹³ Theorizing ethos formalizes this “sense” and presents Latin American modernism as a philosophy of art situated in a real space

between representation and action. Bolívar Echevarría, who offers the most elaborated theory of a modern (not modernist) ethos, explains its work as “a mediating concept,” a “strategy of construction of the ‘world of life.’”¹⁴ His theory of ethos focuses on baroque art and literature, the “style” that accompanied the imposition of European colonialism in the Americas.¹⁵ This baroque ethos shows modernity unfolding in multiple modalities across history, everyday life, and aesthetics, and provides a mode of defense against its imposition; it is an ethical response without a determinate content, and it offers the radical promise of employing the deep structures of culture to reveal the “the possibility and the urgency of an alternate modernity.”¹⁶ The ethos of modernism developed here also bridges ethics and aesthetics, “those deep structures” of language and expression with social responsibility and critique, now however located in the artistic experiments of vanguardism rather than baroque art. It takes on the challenges of twentieth-century modernity, framed both by the history of European colonialism and the growing presence of the United States as the hegemonic power in the Western hemisphere.

The ethos of modernism performs a mediatory function between ethics and aesthetics, popular and elite, form and content. For Echevarría, this ethos is germane to the Americas’ defining *mestizaje*, a way of thinking mixture that is grounded in race, and which occupies a dominant place in theories of modernity.¹⁷ Yet theorists of coloniality have argued that the very idea of race was created by colonialism itself. Aníbal Quijano writes that race is “a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism. The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established.”¹⁸ I propose, therefore, that ethos opens up a process of mediation, rather than hybridization or *mestizaje*, and thus makes possible critiques of race (and racism), as well as of damaging myths of virility and femininity.¹⁹ One strategy of mediating art and life frequently deployed by modernists was self-conscious posing for the camera: de Andrade posed as a ridiculous version of “the primitive” by holding props such as a spear and a palm frond, and Arqueles Vela created a protagonist who rehearses the different poses of femininity she could use to defend herself against an unnamed threat. The pose is one

of many survival tactics that shape the ethics as much as the aesthetics of modernism.

Popular culture played a crucial role in establishing the mediatory function of the ethos of modernism. In addition to the shared colonial sense of modernism, Bosi finds an “ethical impulse” in the linguistic innovations of modernists who engage seemingly “high art” values of truth and beauty. Playing with the linguistic diversity surrounding them—formal Spanish and slang, as well as indigenous languages—they discover what he terms a “popular ethos” and respond to the oppressive social conditions of modernity in the Americas.²⁰ Rather than a singular “popular” ethos, I examine two broad and varied spheres that constituted popular culture during these decades: a folkloric or ethnographic popular, and mass media, “pop” culture. From Mexican Estridentistas eating “hotcakes”—a word still used in Mexican Spanish today—and talking in slang about movie stars, to de Andrade’s ethnographic collections that include himself as an object of study, the modernist avant-gardes simultaneously represented and participated in popular cultures. Photography was a crucial tool in their activities, due to its common use in both ethnography and mass media. The active participation of modernists in these popular cultures fashions a modernist aesthetics and an ethics, rather than the sort of distanced mining of popular cultures for the renovation of lagging civilization seen, for example, in European primitivism. The ethos of (popular) modernism reveals a sense of ethical responsibility to sectors of society that were increasingly defining modernity in these countries, and an aesthetic that reflects its formulation through disciplines and discourses not proper to high art.

Modernist Genres

I present ethos through Mexican and Brazilian innovations in the same genres that have been crucial to modernism internationally: landscape, portraiture, the (photo-)essay, and prose fiction. Here genre operates as more than just a formal designation. One looks at a portrait, for example, and recognizes both the person and the genre. But where does the recognition of the face end and the recognition of the genre begin? Is it not possible that the force of genre is so strong that it permits the recognition of the person? Jesús Martín Barbero offers a flexible

answer to these questions: “Genres mediate between the logic of the system of production and the logics of use . . . In the sense that we are working with genre, it is not something that happens *to the text*, but rather something that passes *through* the text.”²¹ He stresses that genres are not “purely literary,” for they bring up questions of communicability. That is, the uses to which texts and images are put create genres as much as literary and artistic traditions do. Elaborating both the aesthetic function of genre and its operation as this form of this communication, I show how these modernist genres fuse ethics and aesthetics to frame modernity in Latin America. The portraits examined in chapter 2 simultaneously represent the subjects they contain and redefine modernist portraiture; as a result, they alter the very concept of modern subjectivity.

These experimental genres employ a sophisticated interdisciplinarity, spanning the literary and the photographic to imagine key characteristics of modernity in Latin America: locale, subjectivity, morality, and truth. In the following chapters, I analyze these genres to show how they formulate an aesthetics and an ethics that are of Latin America and also important to modernism internationally. The first genre, landscape, maps a paradoxical idea of locale in a practice of “erring.” Simultaneously signifying both “to make an error” and “to wander,” I present *erring* as a form of modernist abstraction that pictures place itself in new terms. These landscapes both locate Brazil and hide it from inquisitive and greedy eyes; they remap the presumed opposition between the local and the international long associated with modernist vanguardism. Once the place of modernism is plotted, I examine how the genre of portraiture envisages the modern subjects who inhabit these locales. Modernist portraiture faces the construction of race in modernity as an aesthetic as much as an ethical practice; these portraits exist not so much in the photographs themselves, but in the process of two subjects staring at one another that created them. The resulting modernist sublime alters the definitions of both individual and national character. As much as landscape begins the process of defining the meaning of locale in Latin American modernism, the space of representation requires further exploration. I return to the idea of space and movement through the genre of the photo-essay, which emphasizes the modern circulation of ideas within a work, as well as of bodies and goods in markets and streets. These essays—feminized through their contact with photographs and mass media—alter the trajectory of the (presumed

male) Creole intellectual by immersing him in popular culture. They place his word at the mercy of photographic images that take over the page, causing profound aesthetic and moral disruptions. This immoral aesthetic pervades modernist prose fiction, the final genre explored in this study. It leads to the creation of photographic documentary fictions, which are simultaneously indexical and illusory, embodied and abstract, hermetic and ethical. The ethos of modernist fiction frees ethics from the requirement of truth and replaces it with an ethics of photographic fiction.

These reformulated genres repeatedly constitute modernist objects that cannot be contained. Throughout the following chapters, photographic modernism turns the eye of the reader to the photographic frame and the written text themselves, but also to the margins between these spheres and some “outside.” I find that these movements used photography to frame this contradiction of a formally constituted and yet adulterated object, one that is simultaneously open and closed. Manuel Álvarez Bravo’s photographs, like the prose fiction by his contemporaries, simultaneously compose an internal drama within the photograph out of light and form, and gesture to the tensions of modernity outside the photograph. René Jara associates this character of objects with the experience of modernity in Latin America as a “closeness to everyday life,” which leads to an aesthetic philosophy in which “objects [are] there, beyond good and evil, in their naked materialness, depriving themselves of qualifiers such as beauty or ugliness, in their triumphal opacity.”²² Like Echevarría, Jara maintains that this quality results from the spectacular “ethics and a politics” that the modernist movements share with baroque art of the colonial period. Clement Greenberg’s classic theory of (mainstream) modernism imagines quite different objects, which dwell only in themselves: paintings that refer to the painterly surface, photography to the operation of light, and so on.²³ This formulation of medium specificity has been crucial to the proclaimed and assumed universality of what must be named as a European and North American modernist aesthetics. However, the medium of photography itself is not defined the same way everywhere: in Latin America, modernist photography can refer to itself in the interests of ethics and history. The ethos of these simultaneously self-referential and externally referential works also affects what Fernando Rosenberg calls the geopolitics of modernism, for they operate simultaneously as local and universal. The differences in the very definition of the medium of

photography mean that these adulterated and expansive modernist objects produce a vision of modernity that reaches from São Paulo to the Amazon, as well as to Paris and New York.

This theory of ethos intentionally, admittedly, contains the tensions and problems of thinking modernism and modernity in Latin America. Its reference to “a people” and echo of “*ethnos*” frame modernism’s troubled deployment of race as primitivism and indigenism. Its anachronistic, old-fashioned sound captures the paradoxical sense of futurity and classicism found in so many modernist photographs and texts, which Gorelik calls the construction of a future for its own tradition. Images of flappers and traditional masks filled the pages of modernist literature and photography, as feminized and racialized bodies were asked to bear the weight of this modern tradition in both Brazil and Mexico. Modern women were alternately vilified, praised, and desired for being both the carriers of tradition and traitors to it, and indigenous peoples were excluded from the benefits of the modern nation even as they became the symbol of its independent identity. As much as the ongoing influence of modernism is clearly visible today, the discomfort caused by ethos is fitting for the analysis of modernist artists and writers criticized both immediately after their heyday and by a new generation of scholars in Latin America. Mário de Andrade’s much-cited denunciation of himself and fellow modernists in “The Modernist Movement” (1942) has provided the terms for many of the movement’s recent critics: modernism was remote from the political urgency of the time and ultimately unproductive. Recent critiques have argued that modernist indigenism in fact precluded demands by indigenous peoples for their rights as citizens, and that the modern woman was vilified precisely when she sought suffrage and the broader rights promised by the revolutionary projects causing major social change. These tensions are crucial to the structure of ethos because they are the nodes that lead us to analyze what Roberto Schwarz might call the “ideas out of place” of modernism, modernity, and Latin America. They also indicate the relevance of these movements to a contemporary generation of photographers and writers, who face related challenges of globalization, an image-saturated modern world, and new technologies of imaging race and gender.

I bring ethos into focus through a comparative map of Mexican and Brazilian photographic modernism, not as parallel examples nor as models of influence within Latin America, but rather as a means of tracking how key ideas of modernism, modernity, and Latin America accrued meaning against the desire of their hegemonic articulation. Theories of Latin American modernism can be (polemically) divided into two extremes: one makes constant comparisons to its European counterparts, either as influence or as difference but always measured by these metropolitan versions; its mirror image rejects any such contact, imagining a utopic postcolonial sphere, miraculously free from the burden of a colonial past. Schwarz reveals the inadequacy of thinking both extremes of influence and originality in the Americas and proposes instead a theory of “ideas out of place.” He reasons that the flow of ideas from powerful center to periphery is unavoidable, but that this weaker partner uses these ideas against the dominant power’s intent. Thus the very examples of the “imitation” of European ideas in Brazilian arts and letters perform a crucial conversion, which produces the modernist avant-gardes that Bosi describes as simultaneously too original and too derivative. The titular concept of *errancy* thus begins by tracking the movement and disruptions of these key ideas out of place, rather than by judging their originality or condemning their submission to influence. Errancy, explained fully in chapter 1, is first a question of wandering, but also implies an error, which in the case of Latin American modernism is often an intentional one. This trajectory produces a recalibration of theories of modernism and postmodernism, and even of the nationalism long considered the defining political project of these modernist movements.

Photography provides an ideal opportunity to track these errant ideas and the form of modernism they made possible. The camera arrived throughout much of the Americas almost simultaneously with its proclaimed invention in France: the successful design of the daguerreotype was publicized in Rio de Janeiro on May 1, 1839, in the *Xornal do Comercio*, in Lima on September 25, 1839, in *El Comercio*, and in Mexico on February 26, 1840, in *El Cosmopolita*. Brazilian versions of this history contest the originality of the French daguerreotype, asserting that a photograph-like image was produced in a *camara obscura* in 1833 by Antoine Hercules Florence. Florence, a French émigré to Brazil, even

used the word “photography” five years before John Herschel but receives little acknowledgment outside the country.²⁴ This debate over the most basic facts about the history of photography reveals the heated contest for control over the medium as a major carrier of the ideas and the image of modernity. Given the French origins of this Brazilian inventor of photography, the story itself frustrates any desire for Brazilian “originality” even as it operates as a demand for equal recognition of histories located elsewhere. As an “idea out of place,” photography’s origins mean far less than the camera’s movement internationally, and the circulation of photographs in the press, art galleries, and social scientific studies.

Like photography, each time the words *modernism* and *avant-garde* appear, they seem errant in some fashion, for these basic aesthetic terms do not translate between English, Spanish, and Portuguese. In Spanish America, the word used to designate these experimental artistic and literary movements is *vanguardia* (avant-garde), while the parallel and contemporaneous movement in Brazil is called *modernismo* (modernism). Spanish *modernismo* refers to late-nineteenth-century poetry movements—the very generation against which the *vanguardia* proclaimed its rebellion—which are known for an “art for art’s sake” aesthetic philosophy. Yet when Carlos Blanco Aguinaga takes on the task of naming the “sense” of modernity on the periphery, he observes that with the increasing presence of the terminology and theoretical apparatus of *postmodernismo* (postmodernism) in both Spanish and Portuguese, it is more and more common to find *modernismo* changing its meaning.²⁵ This new use of *modernismo* expands to include the *vanguardias*. When Mexican art historian Rita Eder describes “el *modernismo* latinoamericano,” “Latin American *modernism*, from the twenties and thirties, [which] had among the fine arts the strong support of poets,”²⁶ her use of the word to stress the visual arts’ connection with literary movements effectively broadens modernism’s reach, allowing greater diversity and eclecticism within the concept. While “modernismo” used in this fashion appears more frequently in the visual arts than in literature, Eder’s application of it to the literary is part of an important disciplinary and theoretical shift. I repeat the errancy of this revised meaning of “modernism” throughout the book, for it both demands entry of these movements into the “universal” and “international” theories of modernism that have generally excluded them, and underwrites recent returns to the period by artists, curators, and scholars.²⁷

The renaming of modernism via postmodernism is one of the key uses to which scholars in Latin America have put postmodern theory; it is a means to critique Eurocentric versions of modernity and to theorize alternative modernities. Mempo Giardinelli and José Joaquín Bruner, for instance, agree that postmodernism is the form that modernity takes in Latin America. These studies create temporal as much as spatial ideas out of place, converting postmodernism from the achievement, overcoming, or end of modernity into an opportunity to define global modernity in their own terms. Errant modernism therefore pictures a broad and varied set of practices that continue to circulate among artists at the beginning of the twenty-first century. No longer contained by objects, these practices actively engage popular culture, decenter the authorial subject, undermine scientific truth, and interrupt the forward motion of progress—social, individual, and even narrative. Read thus, they do not obey classic divisions between modernism and postmodernism. Román de la Campa, for instance, attributes Ángel Rama's return to a theory of transculturation proposed by Fernando Ortiz in 1940 to the intertextuality typical of the modernist avant-garde, rather than to postmodern pastiche.²⁸ Silviano Santiago has charted the path for this sort of "rigorous yet personal rereading[s] of Modernism from the perspective of renewal rather than canonicity."²⁹ Theorizing the ethos of modernism contributes to this process and suggests how and why contemporary artists using photography enact this return with the same goal in mind. The errant modernism pictured here has a contemporary urgency rather than a nostalgic longing.

Despite this reframing of modern and postmodern, it would be impossible not to address discourses of modernization and modernity when looking at modernist art and literature. The ethos of modernism contains the contradictions and violence of the global project of modernity, and functions as both a critique and a blueprint of the form it takes in the Americas. The works that follow certainly reference the historical period characterized by increased urbanization, faster transportation in trains, planes, and automobiles, and new technologies contributing to the development of mass media such as radio, cinema, and photographically illustrated newspapers and magazines. Interdisciplinary combinations of music, text, and image employing these technologies appeared in "mainstream modernism" as much as the places that experienced what Beatriz Sarlo calls "peripheral modernity." The importance for modernist aesthetics of collage, photomontage, and

printing experiments with literature, which referenced the technologies of representation listed above, is as apparent in Latin America as in Europe and North America.³⁰ However, to state that the meaning of these formal combinations depends on the particular histories of media and disciplines in each place is not quite sufficient. While we can say, for example, that the invention of radio had a tremendous impact on the perceived function and place of music and poetry, that impact was formed in the presence of already existing music halls, conservatories, and musical traditions. These differences are not simply a question of describing the historical context; rather, they call for an examination of the structure of artistic discourses in the region.

At stake here is the danger of collapsing modernism into modernity, of assuming a causal relationship in which modernity is a logical, historical context in which modernism emerges. This logic works no better for “alternative” or “peripheral” modernity than for its dominant examples. Even though I argue that the ethos of modernism contains a theory of the local, this locale should not be confused with Latin American modernity as a context. Contexts can be produced unendingly, such that each drawing of one context only poses the question of the context of that context.³¹ The basis for this logic of modernity as context paradoxically has been a view of it as a deterritorializing phenomenon, which produces a universalist modernism. Griselda Pollock, for instance, argues that the long modernism beginning in the late nineteenth century “effaces local particularism in pursuit of ways to deal with its topic and resource, modernity. Modernity can be understood in part as the very process by which local differences were erased and a general culture began to colonize and homogenize the world brought into varieties of contact through colonization, trade, commerce, political power, and tourism.”³² While critical of direct links between modernism and ideologies of modernization as progress, this analysis still presumes that both projects successfully erased local differences. Photographic modernism from Brazil and Mexico shows instead that these very endeavors—colonization, trade, and tourism—in fact constituted difference rather than homogeneity. This does not mean that modernism founds an identity based in difference, but rather that it represents modernity as a violence that erases the very differences of access, wealth, and rights that it creates.

One challenge for any theory of Latin American modernism is to locate its production in the face of this imagined deterritorialization,

while at the same time recognizing the local impact of global projects of modernism and modernization. While it may be tempting to assign peripheral modernism the role of rejecting modernity, not only would this oversimplify the dilemmas faced by these intellectuals, it also would not achieve the kind of defiance of current and former colonial powers they so desired. In fact, many European modernist movements defined themselves through such a rejection of modernity, in order to combat the general despair produced by a metropolitan modernity they perceived as emptied of cultural promise. If Latin American modernists at least to some degree wished to present themselves as doing something *other than* obediently following the hegemonic aesthetic movements, the mere rejection of the modern would fruitlessly repeat their gesture. At a more practical level, it is much easier to disavow modernization if one already enjoys the broader social and economic benefits it brings to some. Tace Hendrick stresses that, for very understandable reasons, the periphery strove to modernize during this period. Anticolonialism in its nationalist form did not simply reject “the modern,” nor did it exclude utopian visions of modernization as urban growth, technological invention, and the rapid circulation of ideas and people. Carlos Alonso describes this paradoxical longing and rejection as the strange temporality of modernity, which he finds in both aesthetic production and the socioeconomic situation in Spanish America. He calls this the “somewhere else” of modernity in the region; the very definition of modernity in the region is its out-of-placeness. So while Latin American modernism emerged within the discursive site of modernity, it was neither its opponent nor its henchman.³³

Brazilian and Mexican modernists self-consciously created their own photographic practices with the same tools credited with the expansion of European modernity, altering them such that the images produced were curiously wrong. This is the second meaning of errancy that I set forth: a way of getting photography wrong, of making the camera take a bad picture. De Andrade called his practice “apprentice tourism,” a form of travel and exploration that was both touristic and critical of its own acquisitive gaze. These uses of photography do not locate modernism in the “context” of modernity, but rather represent an intervention into its discursive formation in Latin America. The paths of modernity’s expansion characteristic of these decades were not only cleared by foreigners or in foreign lands, but also were topics and practices *within* Latin American modernism. Travel writing and photographs by

major figures including de Andrade and Novo engaged in debates about the relationship between nationalism and touristic propaganda, combining anticolonial rejections of European influence with demands to be taken seriously by the “international” art world. Sérgio Luiz Prado Bellei and Nestor García Canclini name travel to Europe as the formative experience of Latin American artists and writers, and the upheaval of these decades as a focus on Europe rather than the nation. According to García Canclini, Mexican artists became nationalist vanguardists by “discovering” their native land in Paris. Even as they also looked elsewhere for the imagined modern, I find that these movements seriously examined and engaged modernity’s inscription on the bodies and lands that they sought to designate as “here.” Travel abroad was important to modernist aesthetics, but so was travel within these countries, especially “apprentice tourism” and a related practice of domestic tourism in Mexico. These Brazilian and Mexican journeys share strange and defining effects on modernist aesthetics: a contradictory exoticism of the familiar, distinct threats to embodied explorers, and women travelers who threaten to alter the practice of travel entirely. If Rosalind Krauss’s foundational theory of (Euro-American) modernism relies upon John Ruskin’s description of travel as “contemplative abstraction from the world,” the travels examined here lead instead to aesthetic as well as ethical decisions about a world of colonial and national expansion.

This book itself errs as it strives to produce a Latin Americanism out of place through a comparative study of Mexico and Brazil. The debate over Latin America is contemporary but also very much of the period, when the idea of Americanness appeared in fiction, poetry, and visual culture.³⁴ During these decades, both countries sought to elevate their regional political influence, simultaneously employing nationalist and Americanist rhetoric against the increasing presence of the United States in the region. As Mexico struggled to show that the country had survived and moved past the Revolution and could be included more fully in the international sphere, Brazil sought a foothold in Spanish America.³⁵ Though not extensive, cultural and artistic exchange between the two reflected their shared projects of political, economic, and cultural integration into the region, most visibly in the form of José Vasconcelos’s journey to Brazil in 1922 to celebrate the centenary of its independence, Alfonso Reyes’s long residence there as ambassador in the 1930s, and Cândido Portinari’s murals influenced by the

Mexican school. Yet even as Mexico and Brazil played and continue to play major roles in Latin American economies, politics, and culture, each is set at a distance from Latin America. Brazil stands apart, an enormous, Portuguese-speaking land mass; Mexico is the lone Latin American country in North America. For these differences and many more, Mexicans and Brazilians often do not consider their countries to be part of Latin America. While their dominance in the region may invite an assumption of their representative quality, I propose to imagine Mexico and Brazil as the receding point of the idea of Latin America, dominating any definition of the region yet productively, errantly never quite fitting into it.

Traditional structures of Latin Americanism reduce the differences among the countries in the region, glossing over the conceptual disruptions caused by Portuguese-speaking Brazil, North American Mexico, and the multilingual Caribbean in order to impose a smooth surface of unity. Yet comparative studies can also reveal the modern sense of colonial histories in the region, particularly as a means of critique of the foundational national myths that paradoxically built upon them. Errant Latin Americanism is located on the margins, in the postcolonial space, even as the borders of that space by definition are constantly penetrated by colonial power. The history of the idea of Latin America itself contains this movement and makes the identities of natives and foreigners difficult to determine. While the term has been rejected of late as the invention of nineteenth-century French intellectuals, its oft-proclaimed foreignness is not entirely clear-cut. Citing Colombian José María Torres Caicedo's *Unión Latinoamericana*, Arturo Ardao argues, "This baptism [as Latin America], although it took place in Europe, was to be the work of Hispanic Americans, not of Europeans . . . the idea of the Latinity of our America appears for the first time in the pen of native inhabitants of it."³⁶ Even these displaced origins, however, are only ever the myths and desires of history. Ardao's "native inhabitants" were Creole elites, not Native Americans, whose naming defined an "independent" Latinity only insofar as it served their controlling interests. However, he continues that the power of naming "Latin America" came to function as a counterpoint to Anglo-Saxon North America; it was an anticolonial gesture that relied upon new articulations of regional identity.³⁷ The colonial condition that connects the divergent artistic and cultural experiments of the twenties and thirties is thus

doubled in the employ of *Latin America*, a term born in the period of the region's independence from Spain and fully defined in opposition to the new power of the hemisphere, the United States.³⁸

The Latin America that appears in this study is anticolonial and yet not nationalist, for the comparison of Mexico and Brazil reveals a critical nationalism that is substantially muted when we remain within their national borders and national myths. Salvador Novo's "Return Ticket" may best represent this Latin Americanism, despite the Mexican author's famous rejection of regionalism. As I argue in chapter 5, Novo's fictionalized memoir combines a denunciation of U.S. expansionism with a critique of Mexican nationalism, bizarrely mixing American English phrases with colorful details about popular culture in Mexico. Errant Latin Americanism contests European and U.S. influence, but it nonetheless admits the irrevocable impact of their colonial and interventionist projects. The qualified nativity of the modernists themselves will be central to the debates over the place of modernity, and the ethics and aesthetics of modernism.

Ethics and Photography: Knowledge, Science, and Modernity

Paul Strand wrote in the international journal *Broome* that the photographer "has taken to himself to love a dead thing unwittingly contributed by the scientist, and through its conscious use, is revealing a new and living act of vision." These "seekers of knowledge, be it intuitive and aesthetic or conceptual and scientific" are "disinterestedly experimenting."³⁹ During these decades, photographs circulated as art and science, amateur and professional. Artists and authors debated whether photography mechanically inscribed reality or was itself a creative act, an issue reflected in the fact that the standards of defining authorship and protecting the copyright of photographs were not yet fixed. In Latin America, the intimate contact between the artistic and the scientific led photographic modernism to challenge a defining characteristic of modernity as a "rationalist culture in which . . . a scientific world-view . . . claims privileged access to truth."⁴⁰ Despite Strand's assertion, Latin American photographers made it clear that they had a vested interest in the epistemology and aesthetics that their medium formulated. Mário de Andrade's photographs were part of his lifelong experiments with documentary practices, and Manuel Álvarez Bravo's

oeuvre plays with reflections, reversals, and cropping, to disorient the eye of the viewer and make her doubt the image she sees. At the same time that the major institutions of knowledge production in the region were being reinvented, modernist intellectuals used photography to rethink the very concepts of knowledge, truth, and representation.

The implicit relationship between seeing and knowing—the scientific process that asserts the facticity of observed experiments—is at the core of modern conceptions of truth. While the scientific truth of the visible ought to be universally accessible, Idelber Avelar points to the unequal global division of intellectual labor produced by this form of knowledge: certain sites are valued for their production of knowledge and others simply are not. Avelar proposes that ethics itself be defined as the concern for this inequity, as “the very relationship between ethos and episteme,” and that it can in turn assign value (and truth) to other forms of knowledge.⁴¹ Avelar formulates this definition of ethics through an analysis of Jorge Luis Borges’s short story, “The Ethnographer” (1969), which tells of a student of ethnography from the United States who discovers the carefully guarded secret of an indigenous group. When he returns from the field to the university, however, the student violates the very premise of the discipline: “He walked up to the professor’s office and told him that he knew the secret and had resolved not to publish it.”⁴² Avelar concludes that the story’s ambiguous ending rejects the limitation of the other to the status of object of study and denies that the knowledge produced by this exploitative process could ever belong to the foreign social scientist. Indeed, Borges shows that recognition of the relationship between knowledge and ethics is the only means of achieving understanding across difference; real knowledge was achieved by the student, who learned the secret and learned to keep it. This understanding does not imply complete or scientific knowledge; in fact, achieving that form of knowledge would be less than ethical. Borges leads us to wonder if the necessity of secrecy is the secret itself.

What remains to be defined in this exploration of ethics, however, is the place of the Latin American intellectual, as well as the foreigner, in the global map of knowledge and power. To put the question in terms of Borges’s story, we must ask: what happens to the Brazilian or Mexican ethnographer? Which role belongs to the Latin American modernist: that of the ethnographer or of the “native”? I find that Borges’s generation of modernists goes even further in the challenge of ethos and

episteme. Photography's simultaneous distancing and approximation and the doubled location of the displaced intellectual bring modernist aesthetics and its profound relation to ethics into focus.

In Brazil and Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s, the paradox of photographic veracity offered opportunities for ethical and aesthetic interventions into this contested terrain. Photographs functioned as evidence even as they were employed to violate viewers' belief in what they saw. Roland Barthes explains that the structural paradox of photography as both analogue and code is also its ethical paradox: "When one wants to be 'neutral,' 'objective,' one strives to copy reality meticulously, as though the analogical were a factor of resistance against the investment of values."⁴³ This "as though" is at the crux of thinking ethics and photography, not because it was erased by Latin American modernists, but to the contrary because they underlined the tension as an ethical bind. The very indexicality of photography, its analogical ability to trace each object in its purview onto the sensitized paper, appears counterintuitively as its ability to invent and deceive. In what de Andrade called "epidermic portraits," as well as photographic short fictions by Mexican modernists, the very characteristic of photography most associated with its ability to tell the truth in fact makes it deceive. Modernists invented in order to reveal the (imperial) history of representation contained in any photographic capture; they deployed this technology to create alternate visions of the very modernity that photography always already references.

The rejection of the truth of modernity, though not its power, occurred in representational practices that obscured as much as they revealed. As much as photography participated in modernity's fundamental association between knowing and seeing, in Latin America it offered a fascinating opportunity for Borgesian sorts of hidden and even deceitful presentations of knowledge. Since the advent of "postmodern" photography in the 1970s, the medium's unreliability has received a great deal of attention. From posed film stills to invented ethnographies, artists such as Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, and James Casebere have produced faked and staged photographs, inventing characters, settings, and events. In his "Monticello" series (2001), Casebere flooded architectural models of buildings that he then photographed from close up, so that they appear almost as if they were real buildings (see plate 1). Yet we will see that the mimetic accuracy of photography was teased, questioned, and joked about since its invention, especially during the



2 Manuel Álvarez Bravo, "Arena y pinitos" ("Sand and Little Pines"), circa 1920s.

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period of modernist production. In "Arena y pinitos" ("Sand and Little Pines"), Álvarez Bravo photographed a mock-up of the kind of pictorialist landscape of Mexico that made German photographer Hugo Brehme famous (figs. 2 and 3).⁴⁴ Casebere's flooded building and Álvarez Bravo's title include just enough distortion for their photographs to be simultaneously grandiose and a little ridiculous at the same time. They take the viewer in and soon let her know that she has been duped. The photographers considered the progenitors of art photography in Mexico and the writers whose work inspired the internationally renowned generation of the Boom created a photographic modernism that took on the crucial dynamic of truth and seeing.

During this same period, the institutions responsible for the production of knowledge in Latin America, from universities to literature to newspapers, were undergoing profound changes. These changes contributed to the critique of Western modernity's epistemological

promise and emphasized the relationship between ethics and knowledge. While still governed by dominant classes, the *ciudad letrada* (lettered city)—Angel Rama’s denomination of the urban, Creole intellectuals who wrote the literature and the laws of the Americas—was being transformed in both its real and metaphoric senses. The “real” city experienced massive demographic shifts from rural to urban, as well as changes in the gendered expectations of public and private spaces. Industrializing São Paulo grew from 64,935 inhabitants in 1890 to 579,033 in 1920, a population composed of new immigrants from Europe and Japan as well as migrants from the interior of Brazil.⁴⁵ The rate of change for Mexico City was equally radical: in 1900, Mexico City had a population of 344,721, which rose to 615,367 in 1921, and then skyrocketed to 1,029,068 in 1930 and to 1,802,679 in 1940.⁴⁶ Thousands of rural Mexicans and Brazilians were arriving in the cities, populations who were perceived to be racially distinct from the established

3 Hugo Brehme, “Peak of Orizaba,” *México pintoresco*, 1923. Courtesy Dennis Brehme



urban populations. More and more women began to work outside the house, gaining visible presence in public spheres not traditionally open to them. The *letrados* created new ideas about knowledge, about truth and seeing, as they sought to respond to these changes in the definition of the city itself.

The institutional structures underlying literature and the arts, the *ciudad letrada*, were also undergoing deep transformations. University reforms of the late 1910s meant that the traditional degrees in law and medicine held by the aristocratic elite no longer guaranteed the same role in society and politics, and the antioligarchic project of these reforms clamored for the rights of the underprivileged classes. García Canclini points to the contradictions faced even by the reformed universities: “Confronted with the illiteracy of half of the population and with pre-modern economic structures and political habits . . . literary practices are conditioned by questions about what it means to make literature in societies that *lack a sufficiently developed market for an autonomous cultural field to exist*.”⁴⁷ Latin American modernisms — though hardly successful in their utopic goals of a shared nation, and still characterized by the vast divide of class and race that split the elite from the masses — created “new aesthetic trends within the incipient cultural field and novel links that artists were creating with the administrators of official education, unions, and movements from below.”⁴⁸ Darryl Williams even calls the Week of Modern Art in São Paulo the beginning of the erosion of the ivory tower, which pulled “the medieval image of the scholar-in-the-turret” down into the flow of people. These changes led to a new kind of professional class of writer/intellectual, who began almost to scratch out a living by writing, addressing, and participating in varied forms of popular culture. Williams describes new cultural practices put to use by this new generation, including popular literature, cinema, sports, and even *automobilismo*, in which driving cars bridged tourism, art, literature, and the newly formed mass media.⁴⁹ I show that these cultural practices — all of which employed photography — played an important role in the articulation of modernist aesthetics in both Brazil and Mexico and made race and gender crucial formal and philosophical categories. The transformations of the *ciudad letrada* were translated into ethical and aesthetic demands, which profoundly altered the status of knowledge in Latin American modernity.

These changes in the lettered city have been associated more with Latin American modernism's political, nationalist charge than with ethics as such. Internationally and regionally, Mexican muralism and Brazilian anthropophagy long have been emblematic of nationalist modernism, including large murals in public space, educational projects, and essays of identity. Muralism in particular—paid for by state funds invested in promoting national culture following the violence and social chaos of the Mexican Revolution (ca. 1910–20)—repeatedly appears as the dominant example of what Latin American modernism looks like and certainly has had a major influence on political art throughout North, South, and Central America. Yet these decades of energetic cultural production reveal a range of experimental practices in literature, media, and the arts in addition to muralism (in Mexico and beyond), all of which engage ethics as well as politics. Thinking errant modernism draws our eye to these practices, which alter the classic division between political avant-garde and high modernism: the former defined by its social engagement, the latter by a definition of modern art exclusively referencing the artistic, either art institutions or the materiality of the artwork.⁵⁰ Critical responses in the burgeoning field of comparative and non-Western modernist studies are producing exciting new possibilities to replace this dyad, but there is still an emphasis, especially in studies of what we might call “strong” modernist movements such as the Mexican and Brazilian examples, on the political and the state.⁵¹ I find that sophisticated critiques of modernity and formulations of modernism in both countries have been overdetermined by attention to these nationalist projects. Two presumably opposing options, hermetic poeticism and political manifesto, were combined through a photographic practice grounded in ethics and aesthetics, and produced critical rather than cultural nationalism. Critical nationalism emerged in response to the push and pull of anticolonial and nationalist discourses, especially as they faced the idea of modernity as economic modernization and the rhetoric of modernization as progress.

Jorge Schwartz writes that attempts to differentiate “political vanguardia” from “artistic vanguardia” in Latin America ultimately fail.⁵² Not only did individual artists belong to both types of movements at different moments in their careers, but the very same works appeared in different contexts as alternately political and artistic avant-garde.

Nonetheless, most studies of the most influential modernist groups in Mexico, the Estridentistas and the Contemporáneos, separate them on the basis of the quarrels over art and nationalism that divided them during their short lives as constituted groups, a battle that maps easily onto the conceptual divide between political avant-garde and formalist modernism.⁵³ The Estridentistas (active ca. 1921–27) were considered more “political,” even if their vision of art and politics suffered from accusations of Italian futurist influences. The Contemporáneos (active ca. 1928–32), were characterized as producing pure poetry (although also suffering from European influence). These groups were more similar than the bibliography admits; many of the most influential figures are included in the membership lists of both groups, among them Diego Rivera and Salvador Novo.⁵⁴ Similarly in Brazil, despite Eduardo Jardim’s classic division of two phases of modernism—the “heroic” phase (1917–24), which focused primarily on aesthetics, and a phase of nationalist didacticism (1924–42)—both critical nationalism and experimental aesthetics appeared consistently across the two decades.⁵⁵ Indeed, Aracy Amaral characterizes Brazilian modernism as a middle ground between politicized nationalism and aestheticized cosmopolitanism. Mário de Andrade collaborated in a heteroclite variety of journals and modernist groups, including *Estética* in Rio de Janeiro and the Grupo Estrela in Belo Horizonte. This book reunites the two sides of these dyads, and elucidates the groups’ sophisticated combinations of art, ethics, and politics as the ethos of modernism.

Recent ethical theory, especially in the U.S. academy, admires the mixture of politics and art associated with the avant-garde and calls for a return to these decades. “Peripheral” literature and racialized and feminized subjects are central to this field of inquiry. However, while providing a sophisticated critique of modernity, this theory suffers from its neglect of aesthetics outside of modernism’s classic centers. Lawrence Buell proposes that ethical criticism revisit the modernist avant-garde’s celebratory combination of criticism, art, and politics, but in practice he solely recuperates European and North American avant-gardes.⁵⁶ It may be easy to agree that one must think about ethics when studying non-Western cultures from within the U.S. academy, but I argue that assuming a “naturally” ethical, simply moral art from the periphery threatens to vacate the aesthetic and critical content produced by these different places. Such a presumption risks once again delimiting the space of the non-Western artist or critic to a (post)modern version of

the “noble savage”: innocent of the guilt of colonial exploitation, but also excluded from an active role in analyzing global systems of modernization and modernism.⁵⁷ It paradoxically reproduces the peripheral status of Latin American modernisms *ad infinitum*, limiting these artists to the presumed ethical place of the ethnographic other; the West ultimately maintains ownership not only of the telos of modernization but of modernism’s critique of the modern as well. The ethos of modernism, in contrast, offers a form of ethical criticism based in Latin American modernist approaches to art and life, politics and ethics.

Even some alternative modernist studies, which have done important work in geographically diversifying the field, diminish the aesthetic concerns of these movements in favor of a propagandistic or didactic political function. They do so by equating the difference of Latin American modernism with the countries’ statist nationalism, and by dividing the art object or literary text into a European form and Latin American content. Brazilian modernism thus asserts its difference by inserting a “typically Brazilian” object into an imported composition.⁵⁸ Mexican modernist photography is perhaps the best known among Latin American countries, and yet even its most recognized artist, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, is too often read in relation to the aesthetic goals set by U.S. modernist Edward Weston during his brief residence in Mexico between 1923 and 1926. Erika Billeter writes: “Although [Álvarez Bravo’s work] *formally* inclined toward the *international* tendencies, his vision evolved from the roots of his country.”⁵⁹ Aesthetics in this mode of thinking remains always European, while the periphery produces only the objects to be represented. These objects can be exploited in the same fashion as the natural resources in the Americas, for they seemingly take no work to produce and contain no philosophy of art of their own.⁶⁰

Mainstream modernist studies established the groundwork for the seeming aesthetic vacuity of places outside of Europe and the United States by presuming that artistic influence always follows economic and political power. Even sophisticated readers of modernist photography such as Molly Nesbit fall into this trap, producing texts that I view to be symptomatic of this geopolitics of aesthetics. Nesbit, for instance, paradoxically makes Edward Weston’s formalist photographs decidedly nationalist when she addresses his years in Mexico: “[Weston] prized . . . realism, meaning by this a denatured, aestheticized realism. It was never the social realism of his Mexican colleagues. Weston’s avant-

garde position was an American one, based on the significant forms of the straight document and formulated long distance in Mexico, on a tangent from Steiglitz.”⁶¹ All of Mexican modernism is encapsulated in a reductive vision of muralism, and in this reduced fashion can present no possible impact on the famous U.S. photographer, despite the fact that he produced some of his best-known work in Mexico.

We shall see that Mário de Andrade and Álvarez Bravo created photographs that comment on this geopolitics of aesthetic value. The Mexican artist’s “Urinating Boy” parodies the version of formalism Weston represents for Nesbit, and de Andrade’s “Victrolas” literally turns the image of the modern circulation of goods and images on its side (see figures 12, 60, and 61). These works use humor and critique as part of the formal complexity of modernist objects characterized by internal and external references. The ethos of Latin American modernism engages aesthetic concerns that have long been considered central to modernism internationally: abstraction, medium specificity and the purity of the art object, opticality versus narrativity, and the long-debated relationship between “high” and “low” culture.⁶² However, the recognition of certain familiar concerns of mainstream modernism does not ultimately negate the urgent need to theorize these other sites. The ethos of modernism reveals the simultaneous location in and distancing of Latin America from hegemonic discourses of modernism and modernity; it points to the necessity of critique and the impossibility of remaining free from these dominant political, literary, economic, and artistic modes.

Brazilian anthropophagy famously provides a graphic answer to this structure of cultural influence: the digestion of foreign and local content alike in the production of modernist aesthetics. The São Paulo Anthropophagists, led by writers Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade (no relation) and painter Tarsila do Amaral, took center stage with the Week of Modern Art and maintained their dominance in the decades that followed. Oswald’s “Anthropophagist Manifesto” (1928) did more than just parody Shakespeare when he proclaimed: “Tupi or not tupi, that is the question.” By inhabiting the famous playwright’s English with the name of one of the major indigenous groups in Brazil, Oswald does not destroy either. Rather, he eats them up in a sentence that transforms the most ontological of verbs, “to be,” into a joke that asks the pressing question of whether indigenous people will survive modernity in the Americas. The Paulistas maintained their dominance

throughout the century, but as we shall see, Mário de Andrade's active engagement with writers and artists in distant parts of Brazil contributed greatly to his theory and practice of modernism. His broad investigations into the vast terrain and the heterogeneity of cultures of Brazil, especially through his practice of photography, contributed to what Amaral considers the main contribution of Paulista modernism: the presentation of the idea of national culture as a *problem*.

The ethos of modernism maintains a distinction between ethics and politics but does not exclude the defining debates over politics within and about these movements. Throughout the book, the ethics formulated by these groups is shown to be linked to the production of a critical nationalism, rather than the cultural nationalism that was the tool of the centralizing and modernizing states. Paul Gilroy's influential map of the Black Atlantic (to which Brazil and Mexico would certainly belong) contains critical and artistic practices that resemble ethos as I define it: "Not simply a succession of literary tropes and genres but a philosophical discourse which refuses the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics."⁶³ While Gilroy's parallel sentence structure sets up a relationship of equivalence between "ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics," I focus on the first pair of reconciled oppositions. The simultaneous engagement of the aesthetic and ethical in photographs and literary texts, as well as critical writings from the period, produces a modernist ethos that is more important to rethinking modernism and more relevant to the contemporary moment than the second pair of "culture and politics." These two pairs of concepts usually are subsumed in discussions of the nationalist tenor of many Latin American modernist movements, which often use Brazil and Mexico as prime examples and include influential groups in Cuba and Peru. Gilroy's "culture and politics" was an important dyad in the period, but more than the *problem* of national culture, it describes the nationalism promoted by the cultural missions of postrevolutionary Mexico and the work of Brazilian modernists for governmental cultural and educational programs, especially in the years following the Estado Novo revolution (1930).

The decades of greatest modernist experimentation, however, preceded the consolidation of power as revolutionary governments became authoritarian regimes. Darryl Williams calls the productive chaos before the consolidation of culture and politics the "culture wars" of Brazil, a term Anne Rubenstein uses to describe the same years in Mexico.⁶⁴

While modernism was made to work for the interests of the centralized governments by the end of the 1930s, the articulation of nationalism by artists and writers in the preceding two decades was not so monolithic. Despite the centralization that characterized both governments' plans for modernization, these movements were not born in their respective country's capital cities.⁶⁵ The famous Week of Modern Art (1922) in São Paulo stood explicitly in contrast to the International Exhibition in the capital of Rio de Janeiro the same year, which celebrated the Centenary of Independence and promoted the official state discourse of order and progress.⁶⁶ The canonization of the São Paulo-based modernist group certainly has to do with the city's increasing economic power as the industrial capital of Brazil, but its displacement from the administrative center of the federal government is nevertheless significant. In highly centralized Mexico, the Estridentistas first mobilized in the small city of Xalapa, Veracruz, which has an important intellectual history but was by no means a political center of the postrevolutionary government. The members of the Mexico City-based Contemporáneos were originally from different places across the vast country: Xavier Villaurrutia was born in Mérida, in the south, Salvador Novo lived his early years in northern Torreón, Gilberto Owen was from Toluca, Jorge Cuesta from Córdoba, and José Gorostiza from Aguascalientes.⁶⁷ The horizon of modern Mexico and Brazil drawn by the writers and photographers addressed here was not limited to their centers of administrative control, and their vision of critical nationalism reflects it. In his classic essay on anthropophagy, Haroldo de Campos argues that a reborn baroque character of Americanness exploded in the Brazilian movement of the 1920s, which plots "nationalism as a dialogical movement of difference."⁶⁸ This critical nationalism with no origin repeats in distinct constellations, or movements, from the historical avant-garde to Concrete Poetry, and functions as the very condition of possibility for a modernist avant-garde in the aftermath of colonial violence.

Ethos underlines the existence of a modernist aesthetics in Mexico and Brazil and seeks to free it from a theoretical enclosure that locks works of art into an instrumental understanding of what expressive culture does in the social or political sphere. It reveals that the impact of these movements cannot be judged by the successful delivery of a message or the iconic utility of a single or set of works of art, nor can it be limited to state-funded nationalist projects. By joining ethics and aesthetics in this word, this book overcomes the entwined theoretical

structures that oppose political avant-garde to hermetic modernism and an always foreign aesthetic to merely local objects. The ethos of modernism in Mexico and Brazil is neither obsessed only with form nor can it be reduced to a didactic, political message. These movements developed theories and practices that reflect a concern with the medium of representation—an aesthetic of radical presence focused on the object itself—while always already producing that object in dialogue with the social tensions of being in a particular place. As a result, modernism contributed a critical nationalism, which pictured Mexico and Brazil including groups who inhabited a marginal form of citizenship: Afro- and indigenous populations, women, and homosexuals. We will see how de Andrade and Novo’s sexuality framed their articulation of both the ethos of modernism and a critical nationalism, adding another level of intensity and complexity to photographic modernism’s practices of revealing and hiding, documenting and inventing. These modernist groups were certainly anxious about the political implications of this image of nation, and at times even turned to reject it themselves. Nevertheless, their intimate and active engagement with photography locked them into an errant modernism defined by a fusion of ethics and aesthetics.

The Ethos of Modernism

The two main parts of this book follow a parallel structure, the first half dedicated to Brazilian modernism, in particular Mário de Andrade’s photography, and the second to Mexican modernism’s interaction with photography in the pages of illustrated magazines. Chapters 1 and 4 deal with ethos as place and a broader social locale, while chapters 2 and 5 address subjectivity and a more individuated inhabitation of those places. They are joined by a theoretical interchapter whose topic and function is mediation: it makes the transition from Brazil to Mexico, from the photograph itself to the circulation of photographs, and from ethnographic or folkloric popular culture to mass culture. The images in the two parts look very different, both because the ethos of modernism did not impose a particular style, and because photographic modernism actively engaged very different forms of popular culture to compose an ethics and aesthetics.

Chapter 1 examines the ethos of modernism in the photographic

landscapes that appear in de Andrade's literary, theoretical, and folkloric work.⁶⁹ Ethos here demarcates a shared space, the aesthetics of a particular place. In addition to the definition of ethos as home, however, a less familiar sense exists that stems from the word's Greek root, meaning "to wander."⁷⁰ The dual meaning of ethos appears in Mário's fascination with the idea of *erring*, meaning both to move and to be full of errors, a repeated trope in his mixed-media manuscript *O turista aprendiz* (*The Apprentice Tourist*), as well as the canonical works of poetry and fiction that have dominated Brazilian literature through the twentieth century. Simultaneously travel diary, ethnographic text, folkloric collection, poetry, and fiction, *O turista aprendiz* includes photographic and literary landscapes that show Mário's struggles to find his place. Like modernist landscapes in general, this errant ethos engages abstraction, but his abstracted landscapes foreground the ethical dilemma of the Latin American modernist intellectual. In contrast to the purity so often ascribed to this dual entity of abstraction/landscape, Mário configures the place of Brazil as always partially deferred or inaccessible, and nevertheless a locale crucial to any theory of modernism.

Chapter 2 presents Mário's photographic and literary portraits as a form of Brazilian primitivism, which creates an image of national and individual character that overturns Freudian narratives of modern subjectivity. This primitivism develops in photographs that show Mário to be the object of representation even when he is the photographer, an experience that he proclaims to be the basis of a modernist sublime. Pushing the mimetic habit of photography to its limits, Mário presents a racialized, modern subject — and himself as such a subject — via strange poses and obscure language, which he insists can bridge the hermetic and the political. Read alongside these photographic portraits, his foundational novel *Macunaíma: O héroi sem nenhum caráter* (*Macunaíma: A Hero with No Character*, 1928) prepares us for a radical repositioning of portraiture, ethics, and aesthetics. This hero is ethical in a different sense: he both reflects the painful inheritance of colonialism and resists its influence. The ethos of modernism creates a blurry yet accurate portrait of a reconfigured subject, creates a sublime based on being the object of a gaze, and sets out ethical and political proposals for the character and rights of modern citizens.

Chapter 3 shifts from Brazil to Mexico through a return to the question of the great divide between elite and mass culture, and the idea of the popular.⁷¹ Photography carried elite culture into the popular and

back again, blurring the boundaries between artistic and ethnographic photography and illustrating experimental literature in mass-media publications. Mexican and Brazilian modernists did not simply mine the popular for exotic and scandalous images but rather actively located themselves within it, as producers and consumers of mass and popular culture. Expanding on Martín Barbero's theory of mediations, I propose that the modernist avant-garde's active participation in photographic mass culture recasts the relationship between race and modernism examined in the first two chapters, and I add to recent critiques of mestizaje, the long-dominant discourse grounding Latin American identity in racial mixture. The gender of modernity is crucial to this critique, as femininity operates as a tense and conflictive means of mediating between the modernist ciudad letrada and the modern city.⁷²

Chapter 4 presents extensive archival evidence of this strange mixture of popular and modernist avant-garde: photo-essays, poems, and stories by Estridentistas and Contemporáneos that filled the pages of the new mass media in Mexico. Unlike a traditional view of the visual as an obedient and docile feminine, photography offered a distinctive modernist aesthetic that I term the *bellas artes públicas* (public fine arts). Salvador Novo calls the medium "the prodigal daughter of the fine arts"; a rowdy and active femininity in circulation through the city, she is popular, mobile, energetic, mass-produced, curious, and mechanical. The ethos of modernism pictured by this photographic feminine produces an ethics that both appears in stark contrast to the traditional morality associated with women's prescribed domesticity and formulates aesthetic ideals far from the formal concepts of light and line associated with artists such as Weston and Strand. The public sphere of *El Universal Ilustrado* and other similar illustrated magazines, in dramatic contrast to the masculinist space of the murals, repeatedly printed photographs of modern women in photo-essays that redefine the classic genre of the Latin American essay of identity. These popular photo-essays restructure the path of the essay, causing the critical eye of the elite "man of letters" who traditionally served as its narrator to err. Rejecting the moralisms of both Catholic femininity and the secular Revolutionary *caudillos*, they present a radically different image of the socially engaged artist. In this modernist ethos, varied and uncontrollable performances of femininity are perversely constitutive of the artist as ethical critic.

The *bellas artes públicas* that filled the journals described above also

invaded the poetic and extremely aestheticized novels by Mexican modernists examined in chapter 5. As much as these short novels have been studied and anthologized, their successive reprints have erased their connection to the illustrated journals and the photographs that pervaded them. This chapter details the theoretical debates over photography's evidentiary force that appear in modernist fiction and relates them to the work of Manuel Álvarez Bravo, whose images play with invented documentation and invisible forces. Mexican modernist prose, incorporating photography as a trope, creates an ethos of modernism based in imagined evidence and documentary fictions. Jaime Torres Bodet, Arqueles Vela, and Salvador Novo created a visual and literary genre of fiction that has little to do with the determination of its truth or lies but rather uses images and concepts learned from photography to reconstitute the status of evidence so central to the discourse of modernity.

The book closes with an epilogue on the contemporary art practices that continue to engage the ethos of modernism. In 1996 Mexican performance artist Maris Bustamante proclaimed that contemporary non-object art in Mexico is the heir of a set of practices that first emerged in 1922 with Estridentismo. She explains: "It has seemed more interesting to me to try to find the roots of these forms of contemporary visual thought of the end of the century in Mexican culture itself."⁷³ Bustamante's national specificity and anachronistic return to the 1920s throw into question an entire set of assumptions that underwrite the idea of contemporary international art, as well as the relevance of a similarly globalized postmodern theory to her generation's body of work. This revision of the trajectory leading to contemporary art practices does not just refer to Estridentismo, it also reenacts the group's critical and artistic procedures of manifesto and critical nationalism. Similarly, in the renowned 1998 São Paulo Biennial, head curator Paulo Herkenhoff challenged the participating foreign curators to respond to Oswald de Andrade's famous "Anthropophagist Manifesto" in their galleries. Like Bustamante, Herkenhoff does not simply position modernism as a historical movement that contemporary art must surpass, he anachronistically locates it as a contemporary theoretical and artistic challenge. Neither of these leading figures in the Latin American and international art world treats the modernist avant-garde with nostalgia; instead, they find that strategies used in criticism and art production in the second and third decades of the twentieth century are critically relevant in the beginning of the twenty-first.