



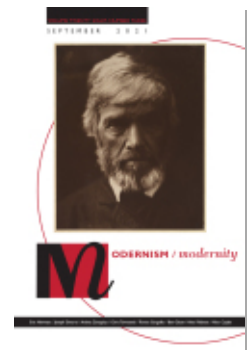
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*Surveying the Avant-Garde: Questions on Modernism, Art, and
the Americas in Transatlantic Magazines* by Lori Cole
(review)

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***Surveying the Avant-Garde: Questions on Modernism, Art, and the Americas in Transatlantic Magazines.* Lori Cole. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018. Pp. 256. \$94.95 (cloth); \$34.95 (paper).**

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During the twentieth century, avant-gardists of all stripes deployed the questionnaire to stake out their positions within an international network of sympathizers and rivals. Ubiquitous in twentieth-century little magazines, the questionnaire has been overlooked as a singular form. Lori Cole's meticulously researched study, *Surveying the Avant-Garde: Questions on Modernism, Art, and the Americas in Transatlantic Magazines*, capably addresses that neglect, establishing the questionnaire as a meaningful genre. Considering the questionnaire a "literary device," Cole first examines its history, currency, and relationships to its closest relatives—the manifesto and the magazine (27). Four case studies within the "triangulation of the United States, Latin America, and Europe" then reveal the slipperiness surrounding terminology (avant-garde, modernism, and contemporary) and the relationship between place and identity ("America") that concerned writers and artists on both sides of the Atlantic (4-5). Cole posits that the questionnaire embodies the tensions between the international and national that governed avant-garde cultural production. Revealing a "history . . . written by its participants," she shows that the questionnaire allows for retrospective recognition of the messiness of the development of modernism, from both geographical and ideological standpoints (185). The study confirms the questionnaire, like the manifesto, as foundational to modernism.

Questionnaires embody debates that took place among writers, artists, and intellectuals in cafés, during urban strolls, or in *tertulias* and salons. Lost to history, these conversations became formalized in the intentionally provocative questionnaires launched by journals, allowing participants to enact position-taking in print and to put uninterrupted soliloquies in dialogue with both like-minded and oppositional peers. Like the magazine, Cole argues, the questionnaire makes visible the fluidity of modernist thought, disrupting the idea of a "singular, dominant discourse" in favor of a "polyphonic field of responses" (185). Allowing for considerable debate despite its seemingly strict formula, the questionnaire underscores the laboratory-like characteristics of print culture, in which contributors debated artistic forms, social issues, and the intellectual's cultural position. As magazines crossed borders, oceans, and other divides, questionnaires allowed for the productive contention that facilitated the circulation of modernism.

According to Cole, "nearly every critic, artist, author, and movement in the twentieth century across Europe and the Americas" deployed the questionnaire (159). In chapter one, "Defining the Questionnaire," she situates the form in a long history and outlines its international scope and open-ended and reflective characteristics. The questionnaire's retrospective and plural qualities, she notes, differentiate it from the aspirational and targeted manifesto. The chapter also explores the questionnaire's close relationship with its vehicle, the magazine, another collaborative endeavor. She calls on periodical studies literature in "centralizing the role of the periodical in the development of modernism," especially in Latin American locations lacking institutional infrastructure (18). Cole cogently argues for the questionnaire as a connective tissue for Western modernists and as a "microcosm" of the periodical itself. Thus underlining the transnational currency of the questionnaire, Cole contributes usefully to the scholarship on global modernism.

In order to harness the "excess of surveys" that filled magazines during the 1920s–1930s, Cole structures the following chapters around case studies that examine questionnaires that circulated in Paris, the Hispanophone world, and the United States (and its expatriate community) and map the allegiances that occurred during this period (4). Magazines posed big-picture questions that echoed throughout a modernist community conscious of Paris's importance but determined to

602 challenge its dominance. Cole sets up the case studies with thorough histories of the magazines and personalities that drove them, helpful to readers unfamiliar with a given context. In the most useful parts of each chapter, she dives deeply into significant questionnaires posed by the publications, parsing complex perspectives on the issues of the day.

Chapter two, “Picturing Latin America,” homes in on the Havana journal *Revista de Avance* (1927–30). Cole emphasizes the regional perspective in seventeen responses (published over a twelve-month period) to the September 1928 questionnaire “What should American Art be?” Here, Latin American writers and artists negotiated novel formal practices learned abroad with specific national (or regional) conditions, seeking to belong to a hemispheric vanguard coalition, yet distinguished by local identity. Their responses point to the need, in Latin America, for cultural independence from a stale Europe, and a resistance to the increasing economic and political reach of the United States. While diverging in specifics, the answers reveal common aims and point to the inextricable links between vanguard production and societal reform that define modernism in the region. The questionnaire thus emerges as a crucial decolonizing tool in which respondents voiced the urgent need for understanding “America” as a regional designation that signified common cause in Latin American countries.

The third chapter, “Translating the Americas” takes a transatlantic focus. Cole’s examples include two interdisciplinary Paris-based magazines with a surrealist presence: *transition*, published from 1927–38 by the trilingual writer Eugene Jolas; and the single issue of *Imán*, published in April 1931 by the Argentine patron Elvira de Alvear with the participation of Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. Both magazines aimed to place creative production from outside Europe within the Parisian cultural field and, through translation, to broaden the audience for hispanophone and US literature. As mobilized by these publications, the questionnaire allowed for debate on the relational aspects of the term “America,” as both a cultural presence within Paris and an imagined distant place. The poll’s results pointed to the same hemispheric tensions that had emerged in *Revista de Avance*, with the United States, sharper in focus, as a mechanistic menace or embodiment of a dynamic new age. Latin America remained vague, exoticized, and mired in colonialist fantasy. These questionnaires, Cole shows, “tested [the periodicals’] transatlantic positions” and “provoked questions about [expatriates’ and exiles’] relationships to their homelands” (73).

Given this focus on regional and national identity, here and elsewhere, this reader found distracting and problematic the author’s surprising use of the term “America” when speaking of the United States exclusively, and the terms “North America” for the anglophone Americas and “South America” for Latin America—both of which elide Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. As well, these terminological choices represent a lost opportunity to explore the thorny history of naming the Americas.

Cole explores transatlantic exchange in a different way in chapter four, “Forming National Canons,” which examines debates around the term “avant-garde” resulting from the Spanish vanguard’s shift from Madrid to Buenos Aires with the relocation of Jorge Luis Borges, Norah Borges, and Guillermo de Torre. Cole points not only to how practitioners of the avant-garde embraced the openness of the term, but also how they made competing national claims to cultural relevance. The collective aims voiced in questionnaires enabled Argentines to lend their *criollo* version of *ultraísta* formal innovation local inflection and meaning. In moving away from the movement in name and purpose (eventually becoming more identified with their journal *Martín Fierro*), their questionnaires took up intergenerational debates, as they jockeyed for position with local artistic and political rivals.

In the final chapter, “Extending into the Contemporary,” Cole cements claims for the effectiveness of the questionnaire as avant-garde tool. Centering on a 1930 questionnaire launched by the Parisian magazine *Cahiers de l’Étoile* that explored “*inquiétude contemporaine*” (“contemporary unrest”), this chapter expands prior discussions of periodization through the terms “avant-garde” and “modernism.” Cole differentiates this questionnaire from others in scope and ambition,

given its broader geographical reach (it included some respondents from Asia and Eastern Europe). Its “new temporal lens,” moreover, revealed widespread anxieties around topics such as imperialism, capitalism, social revolution, and modernization that allowed the magazine to posit a shared sense of epoch and purpose amidst a varied international network (157). This type of “macro-level thinking about world problems” and the concept of the “contemporary” resonated not only during the turbulent interwar years, but also in later twentieth- and early twenty-first-century questionnaires among conceptual artists and art magazines (162). The continued use of the genre, Cole posits, demonstrates the value of the questionnaire “to participate in and shape one’s historical moment,” while the manifesto has faded (178).

Cole’s cogently argued, if sometimes repetitive, evaluation of the collective practice of the questionnaire establishes the medium as foundational for modernism. By making visible this vital forum of debate, Cole’s study will benefit anyone probing the capacious landscape of modernism during the 1920s and 1930s, and beyond. The book opens paths for study of the questionnaire’s performative possibilities, which were ably plied by the Estridentista poet Manuel Maples Arce, for example. It also leads to in-depth examinations of local uses of the genre; in the case of *Revista de Avance*, contributors also explored the idea of “America” in racial terms. Cole leaves no doubt that the questionnaire proved an important genre for those who had a stake in the spread of modernism.