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AVANT-GARDE DIASPORIC COMMUNITIES AND THE CASE FOR A HISTORY OF SURREALISM IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

This thesis interrogates the paradoxical invisibility and creative agency of Central America within the history of Surrealism and global modernisms scholarship. Taking as its threshold the *Surrealist Map of the World* (1929), where the isthmus vanishes beneath the continental masses of Mexico and South America, the research foregrounds how Central America has been persistently marginalised—cartographically, discursively, and institutionally—by both Eurocentric Surrealist imaginaries and dominant Latin American accounts. Thus, the study advances a history of Surrealism in Central America not as a derivative appendix, but as a liminal, generative site of negotiation between erasure, provincialism and cosmopolitanism.

Chapter 1 explores the region's split identities and the origin of the persistent question of whether a distinct Central American art exists or if its artists are forever consigned to extraterritorial circuits. Through figures such as Asturias or Mérida, the chapter traces the oscillation between local specificity and diasporic engagement (Hall), revealing how exile, dependency, and marginality have shaped the Central American avant-garde's forms of community and postcolonial innovation (Quijano, Wallerstein, Mbembe, Césaire). Chapter 2 examines the transnational character of the Central American avant-garde generation, focusing on how figures like Cardoza y Aragón and Asturias navigated the French and Mexican Surrealist circuits, appropriating and transforming their tenets to inscribe local imaginaries and cosmologies (Friedman, Giunta, Glissant). The analysis foregrounds the region's unique position as a corridor and cul-de-sac—simultaneously permeable and isolated, where the marvellous is both a product of historical contingency and aesthetic intention. Chapter 3 turns to the internal dynamics of what I defined as *isthmic compression*, addressing the region artists' own formulation of what Surrealism can be, their anxieties about identity and dependence, and the challenges of regional representation.

Throughout, the thesis resists reductive taxonomies, emphasising instead the fragmentary, polycentric, ephemeral, and contested nature of Surrealism in the isthmus. It highlights the gendered exclusions of the early avant-garde diaspora and calls for further research on adjacent figures to the movement, such as Salarrué,

González Feo, Benjamín Cañas, Ricardo Aguilar, and Carlos Cañas. Ultimately, the study advocates for a critically self-aware, internally generated art and cultural history—one that embraces contradiction, complexity, and the plurality of regional voices.

Keywords.
Central American art, Latin American art, avant-garde, global modernisms, Surrealism

I must make one point clear: my explanation here is the ballistic study of a gunshot.

Georges Bataille
(1946/1994, p. 59)

Los surrealistas buscaban lo maravilloso. Yo lo vivía.
[*The Surrealists sought the marvellous. I lived it*]

Luis Cardoza y Aragón
(1986, p. 210)

CONTENTS

A mi madre, *que me contaba cuentos*

A mi padre, que, en el sur, pudo experimentar lo real maravilloso

A mis padrinos, por su apoyo y ejemplo

A Alejandra, por el amor, la comprensión y el apoyo en la adversidad durante casi dos años de "autoexilio", viviendo lejos y (muy) cerca

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INTRODUCTION

Corset of the Americas

Dubious strait Isthmus

America's pastoral gorge

Banana republics

Valley of the hammocks

The renowned map *Le Monde au Temps des Surrealistes* of 1929 [figure 1], serves as a conspicuous threshold for this thesis, laying bare the paradoxical invisibility of Central America within the Surrealist imagination. In this cartographic vision, the isthmus vanishes beneath the colossal presence of Mexico and the contiguous expanse of South America—a glaring omission that extends far beyond the Surrealists' ethnocentric gaze. Even when contemporary scholars (*i.e.* Gilbert [2009]) revisit this seminal map to address its omissions, the neglect of the Central American question remains patent. The absence is not merely cartographic but a symptom: one that portrays the region's marginalisation by both the Surrealists and broader, more contemporary currents of Latin American discourse and scholarship. It is this persistent hiddenness that this research seeks to interrogate and (start to) redress.

This foundational absence is not simply a matter of external oversight, but reverberates with the region's own historical condition of *placelessness*—a state that Costa Rican curator Virginia Pérez-Ratton (1951-2010) would identify as both a challenge and a generative possibility for Central American art. The isthmus, described since the sixteenth century as a "dubious strait", has persistently occupied an ambiguous position: simultaneously a cultural corridor and a cul-de-sac, a site of geopolitical desire and cultural misunderstanding (Pérez-Ratton, 2019, p. 233). Such ambiguity rendered Central America susceptible to mythic projections and erasures, its cultural production too often subsumed under the monumental narratives of Mexico or the Andes, or else dismissed as peripheral and derivative.

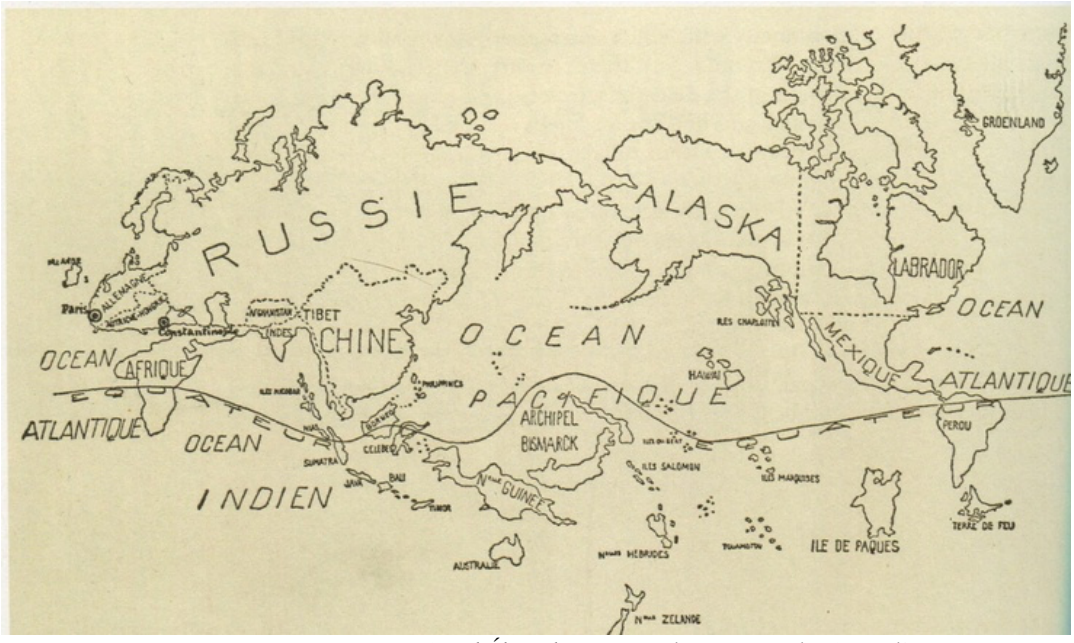

Figure 1. Anonymous artist (Paul Éluard?), *Le Monde au Temps des Surrealistes* (The Surrealist Map of the World), *Variétés* [hors série] (Brussels), June 1929

Inventing a place that already existed (Herkenhoff, 2019, p. 199), after centuries of oblivion and repetition compulsion, and where, counterintuitively, ex nihilo *aliquid*, also echoes internal anxieties about the very existence of a distinct Central American art, as voiced by Costa Rican journalist Leon Pacheco (1898-1980) during the *First Central American Art Exhibition* in 1935: is there such a thing as Central American art, or only Central Americans participating in broader, extraterritorial circuits? This question resonates throughout the region's avant-garde generation, as figures like Carlos Mérida (1891-1984) oscillated between local specificity and cosmopolitan engagement. The thesis thus positions the history of Surrealism in Central American not as a derivative appendix to more established centres, but as a liminal site of negotiation—between visibility and deletion, centre and periphery ("there are no Americas without Central America" [López and Malavasi, 2019, p. 24]), tradition and innovation.

Paradoxically enough, although quite consistent with surrealist doctrine, Central America has been present since the very beginning of the movement: both through the involvement in Parisian Surrealist circles by key figures of the development of the avant-garde in Central America, and through its material presence, as a result of the archaeological excavations/*huaquerismo* (grave-robbing) carried out by Europeans in the isthmus during the nineteenth century, consequently contributing to the determination of the Surrealists' ethnological fixation. As it has come to attention

by recent scholarship (Diawara and Geis, 2020, p. 71), placed on the ground of Breton's *mur*, along two sculptures of Cuban sculptor Agustín Cárdenas, a painted clay figure from Costa Rica was found, a female statuette of the Kingdom of Nicoya [*Nekok Yaotl*] (800-1525 CE), stolen and removed from the most austral region of Mesoamerica.

While it may seem isolated, given that it was not an artefact of Mayan origin—a more studied culture among European surrealists, this finding inserts unexpectedly the Central American question into one of André Breton's well-known practices: a transhistorical and transcultural collage of objects from disparate geographies, ostensibly united by their capacity to evoke the marvellous. Such juxtapositions, as will be discussed in the second chapter, risk reducing non-European artefacts to mere tokens within a universalising vision of the sacred, flattening their local meanings in the process. That is to say: the deranged "discovery" of the Americas that Breton described in his *Manifeste du Surréalisme* (1924) suggested a lasting form of "madness" that was far from his reach. *Au contraire*, Central American avant-garde figures, some with better critical fortune than others, aimed to mobilise Surrealist strategies to re-inscribe their own histories and cosmologies, attempting to transform the marvellous from an imported category into a mode of local resistance and reinvention.

The methodological difficulties in delineating a history of Surrealism in Latin America—let alone in Central America—are indicative of a broader epistemological challenge. As Ferdinán notes (2002, p. 74), the trite use of "surrealist" as a label for Latin American cultural production obscures the heterogeneity and fragmentary nature of the phenomenon. Rather than a cohesive movement, Surrealism in the region often manifested as a dispersed set of traces, appropriations, and rejections—an "ingredient" rather than a formalised poetics (Ferdinán, 2002, p. 76). This thesis, therefore, eschews reductive taxonomies in favour of examining how Central American figures assimilated, transformed, or contested Surrealist tenets, often in the absence of a stable local canon or tradition against which to define themselves.

This absence, as Alejo Carpentier argued, was both a constraint and a generative condition. Lacking the oppositional clarity afforded by European artistic traditions, Latin American *vanguardistas* were compelled to invent their own genealogies, to "plough virgin soil" (1986, p. 188). The resulting cultural products were

marked by a certain excess—a need to justify innovation by constructing adversaries where rather few existed (such as the dialectic between Rubén Darío (1867-1916), father of *modernismo,* and Nicaragua's *anti-academia*) or by elevating the stakes of artistic renewal. As it was very well elucidated by Valentín Ferdinán, Latin American avant-gardists had, at the same time, *to raise their windmills and attack them* (2002, p. 88).

Yet, as Nicaragua's José Coronel Urtecho (1906-1994) provocatively asserted, Central America is singular in having produced, across its history, works of universal literary value—the *Popol Vuh*, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (1568) by Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala's *regidor* Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Landívar's *Rusticatio Mexicana* (1767), and Darío's poetry (in Cuadra, 2004a, p. 7).[1] This assertion, however, is tinged with irony: the region's cultural significance is continually affirmed and denied, its existence both proclaimed and effaced. In this sense, coupling Fanon with the obscure and posthumous baptism that Salarrué gives to this study, one could go beyond than merely verifying this state of loneliness: Absolute solitude? "A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence" (Fanon, 1987, p. 139).

Nicaraguan avant-garde poet and intellectual Pablo Antonio Cuadra (1912-2002) anticipated that the critical apparatuses—schools, "isms," and movements—so central to European and North American modern art history were ill-suited to the lived realities of the Americas. The poetic and artistic landscape is not responsive to a "grid of meridians and parallels" (Cuadra, 2004b, p. 157), but is instantiated within a shifting terrain of "zones" and "countries" that often fail to coincide with political boundaries. Surrealism, in this context, is less a movement than a tendency, a recurrent mode of engagement with the marvellous, the fantastic, and the unresolved residues of history.

The history of Surrealism in Central America is, above all, a history of *ephemeral communities* (Castañeda, 2015)—constellations of artists, writers, and intellectuals whose alliances were rarely anchored in the region itself, but rather transplanted, provisional, and transnational in character. As Kane observes (2012, p. 58), Nicaragua stands as the sole Central American nation to have produced a self-proclaimed avant-

[1] Cuadra stated that Coronel Urtecho's list should include one last member, a Nobel Prize: Miguel Ángel Asturias.

garde group, the *anti-academia*, and even this formation emerged belatedly.[2] For the rest, the avant-garde impulse in Central America was often catalysed by figures like Max Jiménez (1900-1947) or Luis Cardoza y Aragón (1904-1992), whose itinerant trajectories opened the region to broader modernist currents, yet whose influences were always refracted through exile, diaspora, and the porous boundaries of identity (chapter 1).

This sense of displacement is not merely circumstantial but constitutive. As Ford and Snider have stated, Central American art is, at once, Latin American and distinct from the more canonised traditions of Mexico or South America (2018, p. VIII); each nation, moreover, asserts its singularity within the region's already fragile coherence. Therefore, Central America's artistic production was marked by histories of dependency, violence, and exile, where artists were shaped as much by disinheritance and despair as by conscious political engagement (Traba, 1973, pp. 116-117). Most of the seminal figures that will be studied in this thesis, following Argentine art critic Marta Traba's diagnosis were, tellingly, exiles, their creative energies forged in the crucible of dislocation. This structural circumstance shaped the very forms of community and exchange that defined the entanglement of Surrealism and the Central American avant-garde.

The reception and adaptation of Surrealism in the isthmus must therefore be unravelled from the more programmatic, organised (and even institutionally anchored) movements of Mexico, Chile or Argentina. As Traba suggested, the theoretical and "planned" Surrealism of Europe found little purchase in much of Latin America, and even less so in Central America, where Surrealism functioned as a set of dispersed traces, elective affinities, and intermittent appropriations (1994, p. 9). Notoriously situated and problematised in Carpentier's prologue to his novel *El Reino de este mundo* (1949), in which he coined the concept of *lo real maravilloso* to break away, partially, from dependence on (new) European traditions such as Surrealism (intensifying, simultaneously, the situated distinctiveness between nodes of a modern *scutum fidei* also in dispute with magical realism), this thesis threads cautiously against the

[2] Their manifesto, entitled *Primer Manifiesto. Ligera exposición y proclama de la anti-academia nicaragüense*, was published in the periodical *El Diario Nicaragüense de Granada* in 1931.

conflation of any of these traditions, or, as British art historian Dawn Adès forewarned, subsuming it under the rubric of cultural nationalism (2011, p. 393).[3]

The very notion of *Latin America* itself is fraught with ambiguity, its origins entangled in histories of imperial ambition, racial politics, and resistance to external domination (Adès, 2011, p. 395)—a struggle emblematically displayed in Central America, where the expansionist, slavery-driven campaign of American filibuster William Walker was decisively halted by the Costa Rican army during the National Campaign of 1856-57. Central America's position within this construct is doubly precarious: ethnologically and linguistically part of Mesoamerica, historically linked to Mexico, yet persistently peripheral in the narratives and scholarship of both North and South. The isthmus, Neruda's *garganta pastoral de América*, is both permeable and isolated, a space where orality often precedes literature, and where the boundaries between national, regional, and continental identities remain fluid and contested (Arellano, 2012, pp. 343-344).

Given these conditions, the Surrealist imperative to unveil, in the fashion of Breton's preferred archetypal figure—his *découvreur héroïque*—Columbus, "a new world before it had even occurred to him that he could leave the old one" (2002, p. 51) acquires a particular timbre. Central American artists, lacking the stable traditions and institutional frameworks of their European counterparts, were compelled to devise their own lineages, to navigate a landscape where the marvellous was as much a product of historical contingency as of aesthetic intention. Their communities were, by necessity, *ephemeral*—formed in exile, sustained by correspondence, periodicals, exhibitions, and fleeting encounters, and always shadowed by the spectre of marginality.

In sum, this research examines how Central American 20th-century artists and writers—including Guatemala's Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899-1974), Cardoza, and Mérida; El Salvador's Antonio "Toño" Salazar (1897-1986), and Salarrué; and Panama's Beatrix "Trixie" Briceño (1911-1985)—engaged with Surrealism, both carrying over the

[3] It should be noted that Adès included, in her lecture on the legacies of surrealism in Latin America (given at the 2009 British Academy Lecture Series), a quotation by Salvadoran writer and artist Salarrué regarding the anti-nationalist aspect of the movement: "I have no fatherland" (p. 396). His work, although studied in publications in Spanish by Davisson (2018) and Huezo Mixco (2019), had been ignored by the English-speaking academia until this mention.

founding movement in Paris or as a local adaptation of its aesthetical underpinnings. Their interactions within the surrealist circuit—fluctuating between European capitals and the alternative artistic centres in Latin America—enabled them to channel the Surrealist framework into their national and regional contexts, therefore contributing to the emergence and development of a distinctive avant-garde tradition in Central America.

Their works reappropriated Surrealism's European tenets posing questions about the region's erasure in the global avant-garde scholarship (Literature review), the interplay between identity and diaspora among these figures (Chapter 1), the *ephemeral communities* they integrated directly linked to the French Surrealist movement (Chapter 2), and, finally, the isthmus as a site of idiosyncratic compressed surrealities (Chapter 3). By tracing these artists' dialogues with—and deviations from—Surrealist orthodoxy, this thesis argues that Central America's avant-garde was not a passive recipient (nor a mere appendix of Surrealist Latin American centres such as Mexico) but an innovative critical laboratory for Surrealism's ever-expansive inertia.

This research addresses a substantial gap in art historical and literary scholarship by scrutinising the emergence and development of the Central American avant-garde within Latin American modern art frameworks and more all-encompassing global modernist accounts. While Latin American avant-garde scholarship has traditionally highlighted the cultural production of major artistic centres it has largely overlooked Central America. Consequently, Central American art has been misrepresented as a marginal, inert byproduct of a region too often defined by political volatility, economic precarity, and violence. This portrayal obscures not only the cultural production of the region but also the vibrant, transnational networks through which Central American artists engaged with other avant-garde traditions such as Surrealism and contributed to them.

In contrast to the cohesive, linear art historical accounts typical of modern art in Europe, North America, and the more canonised Latin American traditions, Central American art histories are often treated as isolated incidents or as the work of exceptional individuals, rather than as part of wider, dynamic, interconnected networks. This *fragmented* portrayal fails to recognise the region's thriving cultural

exchanges, shared political and social history, and the contested sense of community fostered by Central American artists, both within the region and across the Latin American diaspora. Many of these artists actively engaged with international art hubs such as Paris, New York or Mexico City, shaping connections that spanned national boundaries and supplemented their work with varied influences. These interactions challenge the notion of Central America as a peripheral, stagnant region, offering instead a vision of Central American modernism as part of the global avant-garde.

Focusing on their engagement in exhibitions, intellectual correspondence, literary criticism and, especially, in their body of work (both as artists and writers), the research explores how these artists navigated the interplay between their national/regional identities and Surrealism as an international movement. Thus, the research analyses **how Central American artists and writers, during the period 1924-1971, engaged with and adapted both European and Latin American Surrealism, contributing to the development of an avant-garde tradition in Central America.**

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite extensive scholarship on Latin American modernism, the Central American avant-garde remains relegated in favour of other traditions. Early works by Castedo (1970), Unruh (1994), Bethell (1998), and Forster (1998) overemphasised Mexican influence, primarily through Carlos Mérida, while neglecting Central American agency. Traba's (1994) contextualisation failed to recognise major contributions, and Kupfer (in Sullivan, 1996) identified gaps but provided only a cursory overview. More recently, Central American figures have been excluded entirely from major compilations—King (2004) and Anreus et al. (2022).

Jorge Schwartz, although not mentioning a single Central American artist in his book *Las vanguardias latinoamericanas: Textos programáticos y críticos* (2002), gravitates towards Guatemala's Asturias and a chapter on Nicaragua's *Movimiento de Vanguardia*. The same monophonic emphasis in the literature of Asturias can be found in Fernando J. Rosenberg's *The Avant-Garde and Geopolitics in Latin America* (2006), in Thomas E. Skidmore et al. *Modern Latin America* (2010)—nevertheless featuring a whole chapter on Central American politics concerning the US influence—, and in Guillermina De Ferrari and Mariano Siskind's edited volume, *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Latin American Literary and Cultural Forms* (2023).

As a brief index of unfortunate but noteworthy omissions, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Latin American Culture* (2004), edited by Valerie Fraser, failed to acknowledge Central American artists altogether. More recently, in *A Companion to Modern and Contemporary Latin American and Latina/o Art* (2022), several exhibitions curated by Gómez Sicre were referenced—*i.e. 32 Artistas de las Américas*, which included Central American artists—yet still didn't identify these artists by name. Likewise, the collection of essays *Surrealism in Latin America. Vivísimo Muerto*, edited by Dawn Adès, Rita Eder, and Graciela Speranza, did not include a single Central American figure, whether close to the movement or tangential, despite being such a significant and specialised anthology. These lapses reflect a pattern of scholarly neglect

that perpetuates the marginalisation of Central American contributions to the Latin American avant-garde and beyond.

In another recent anthology, *Essays on 20th Century Latin American Art* (2022), Francine Birbragher-Rozencwaig opportunely included a chapter on contemporary Central American art (post-1990s). However, Birbragher-Rozencwaig's sole emphasis on the fragmented, politically unstable circumstances reinforces the view that Central America lacks a cohesive artistic avant-garde tradition, overlooking the intertwined history of avant-garde communities. Furthermore, her portrayal of Costa Rica as a predominantly white society, where Afro-descendant communities were just "brought to attention" by Contemporary artists, reproduces the artifice of 19th-century Costa Rican *ethnic-metaphysical nationalism,* an outdated ideological framework criticised by several scholars such as Alexander Jiménez (2002/2015). Birbragher-Rozencwaig, following the critical frameworks of Traba (1973) and Ferdinán (2002), reiterates the absence of a formal Surrealist movement in the Americas and frames Latin American Surrealism as a series of aesthetic appropriations of the European avant-garde. Yet, this perspective overlooks the nuanced, locally embedded forms of Surrealist practice and, notably, omits the pioneering work of Stefan Baciu, whose *Antología de la poesía surrealista latinoamericana* (1974/1981) and *Surrealismo latinoamericano: preguntas y respuestas* (1979) remain a foundational but underacknowledged reference for the study of regional Surrealist poetics and networks, although Baciu solely named Asturias among the Central American avant-garde figures.

Building on Ford and Snider's *Central American Modernism* (2018) and Kane's *Central American Avant-Garde Narrative* (2014), this research advances these foundational publications. Ford and Snider provided an introductory survey of Central American modernism from an art collector's perspective, but lacked academic rigour omitting Belize, women artists, and Afro-Central American contributions. Kane focused on literary innovations from 1926 to 1936 but limited his scope to a few writers. Nonetheless, Kane's 2012 article on Cardoza is one of the most critical approaches to the Guatemalan writer's engagement with surrealism.

Otherwise, two rather groundbreaking recent works have informed the theoretical and methodological design of this research project. Greet's *Transatlantic*

Encounters (2018) is among the few to include Central American artists in documented exhibitions and artistic networks in Europe—particularly Max Jiménez. Correspondingly, *Contra el canon* (2020) by Andrea Giunta suggests a shift toward recognising a decentred, multipolar art network, particularly accommodating as an analytical framework for assessing Latin America's avant-garde and neo-avant-garde in the postwar period. Paradoxically, even in Giunta's alternative approach, Central Americans remain largely unacknowledged.[4]

A further complexity in the historiography of Surrealism in Central America emerges from the way regional artists have been subsumed under broader Latin American labels, often at the expense of their national or subregional specificity. While Mexican, Cuban, Brazilian, or Argentine artists are frequently situated within their respective national canons before being grouped under the Latin American umbrella, Central American figures are habitually considered "Latin American" by default, even "Mayan" in the case of Asturias or Mérida, their distinct trajectories and contributions rendered invisible within the larger, more institutionally robust national traditions. This pattern is evident in most of the aforementioned foundational texts and persists in recent scholarship, where the absence of comparative or cross-country studies on modern and Surrealist art and literature in Central America has been repeatedly noted.

The scarcity of comprehensive studies is complicated by the prevalence of survey texts—such as Rodríguez's *Arte Centroamericano: una aproximación* (1994)—which tend to offer broad historical overviews from the colonial period through the nineteenth century, rather than analytical or comparative accounts of modern or Surrealist art (Vindas, 2023, p. 149). Despite these limitations, recent interventions have begun to address the gap. Vindas' work (2021, 2023) is particularly significant for its comparative, region-wide analysis of Central American modernism and its emphasis on the need for cross-national studies (Vindas, 2023, p. 148). While no study to date has systematically examined the Surrealist phenomenon in Central America as an entangled, diasporic, and *ephemeral community* some authors have explored the Surrealist affiliations of individual figures. Existing studies have tended to detect minimal or isolated elements of Surrealist aesthetics or influence in the work of

[4] Except for Carlos Mérida.

prominent Central American figures, but none have systematically examined the phenomenon as it unfolded across the region or as a shared, entangled experience among the avant-garde generation (born between 1890 and 1935).

For instance, the Surrealist resonances in the work of Miguel Ángel Asturias, along Cardoza, Mérida and Jiménez, the most engaged Central American figure with the Parisian surrealist circle, have been variously explored by Barahoma (2007), Barrueto (2004), Henighan (1999), Karp-Toledo (1982), Lund and Wainwright (2008 and 2016), Merino (2001), Arango (2001), Prieto (1993), Bellini (1999) and Cardoza y Aragón (1991) himself. Asturias is, fundamentally, the only well-researched figure from the selected group of writers and artists. On the other hand, Luis Cardoza's Surrealist affiliations have been examined by Davisson (2016), Kane (2012), Lara (2022), and Rodríguez Cascante (2006), being his own autobiography/critical ensemble *El río. Novelas de caballería* (1986), the most revealing and understudied work to penetrate this period. In the visual arts, Gilbert (2009), Montgomery (2016), Sierra-Rivera (2017), Cruz and Ortega (2017) have addressed Surrealist traces in the work of Carlos Mérida, though always within the context of his broader modernist practice. For El Salvador, Salarrué's engagement with the fantastic and the oneiric—often adjacent to Surrealist concerns—has been discussed by Davisson (2018) and Huezo Mixco (2019). In Nicaragua, the work of Armando Morales has been a secondary subject of studies by Kassner (1995), Lœwer, Morales, Bonafoux, and Arellano (2010a, 2010b, 2010c), as well as Tibol and Lœwer (2011), all of whom note Surrealist elements without situating him within the movement. Costa Rica's Luisa González Feo has been scarcely addressed by Chavarría (2023), while in Panama, Julio Zachrisson's Surrealist inflections have been noted by Sánchez (2021) and the Art Museum of the Americas (2017). Yet, across all these studies, Surrealism is approached as a marginal supplementary component, never as a cohesive, regionally interconnected phenomenon.

The result is a literature that, while rich in micro-analyses of individual artists and writers, fails to account for the broader dynamics of Surrealism in Central America. The present research directly addresses this persistent gap by proposing a comparative, regionally grounded analysis of the history of Surrealism in Central America, conceptualising the avant-garde generation as a diasporic but articulated

community. By foregrounding the region's particular negotiations with Surrealist aesthetics and networks, this study seeks to uncover the diversity, agency, and innovation of Central American Surrealist practice and to reposition the isthmus as an active and generative site within the global history of Surrealism.

Theoretical framework

This research draws from classical theories of the avant-garde and Surrealism, while foregrounding decolonial methodologies founded in Latin American and Caribbean postcolonial thought. Central to the theoretical framework are Susan Stanford Friedman's *polycentric model* (2006) and Andrea Giunta's articulation of *horizontal art histories* (2017 with Flaherty, 2020, 2022). This assemblage structures the study systematically. Friedman's framework challenges the gravitational pull of canonical narratives that centralise cultural authority in Euro-American capitals—such as Paris, New York, or even major Latin American metropoles like Mexico City, São Paulo and Buenos Aires—by proposing a *relational* modernism that allows for multiple centres of artistic innovation. This perspective enables the emergence of a differentiated understanding of the Central American avant-garde as neither derivative nor late, but instead as operating through unique modes of cultural production, exchange, and rupture.

Giunta's concept of *simultaneous avant-gardes* serves to deepen Friedman's planetary paradigm by synthesising Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) notion of *contact zones* and Piotr Piotrowski's (2009) call for a *non-hierarchical* art history. Giunta's work is especially pertinent to the present study because it displaces the dichotomy of centre/periphery, proposing instead a networked, horizontal framework that acknowledges synchronic artistic innovations across diverse geopolitical contexts. Her emphasis on *simultaneity* and shared cultural horizons allows this research to frame the advent of Surrealism in Central America not as a tangential deviation from the Parisian model but as sites of autonomous experimentation, often shaped by local tensions, urban-rural dialectics, and political insurgencies.

María del Pilar Blanco (2021) and Édouard Glissant (1990) offer vital improvements to the theoretical foundation established by Friedman and Giunta. Blanco critiques Friedman's planetary model for assuming the universal applicability of concepts like rupture and stylistic innovation, which may not hold in contexts not shaped by modernity. She advocates for approaches that recognise historically and cosmologically distinct modes of artistic production. In parallel, borrowing from

Glissant's *Poétique de la Relation* (1990/1997), this research applies an archipelagic logic of interpretation, attending to multiple nodes of cultural articulation without collapsing difference into sameness.

The epistemological shift championed by Friedman and Giunta is amplified by thinkers like Partha Mitter (2008), who critiques the universalist pretensions of Western modernism. As Mitter notes, *cultural cross-fertilization* need not be reduced to influence or dependency. Rather, the aesthetic innovations of the so-called peripheries—including Surrealist practices in Central America—must be understood as constitutive agents in the rewriting of modernity itself.

This decentring principle also informs the study's theoretical intermediations in *Chapter 1. Split identities: Central America, a "dreamless" cultural landscape between Mexico and Colombia?,* which examines the region's avant-garde emergence through the lens of postcolonial critique. Grounded in Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950/1972), Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001), and the foundational concept of "Americanity" by Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein (1992), the chapter situates modern art in Central America within a broader logic of colonial violence and epistemic dispossession. Stuart Hall's essays—*Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990/2021), *The West and the Rest* (1992/2019), *Subjects in History* (1998/2021), and *Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts from Abroad* (1999/2019)—provide further critical tools for interrogating how race, diaspora, and colonial modernity shape artistic self-definition and reception. These perspectives stress not only the structural asymmetries in cultural production but also the creative strategies employed by Central American artists to reconfigure modernist discourse from within.

Chapters 2 (*Los de allá*) and 3 (*Los de acá*), focused on Surrealist poetics and visualities in Central America—the former connected to the diaspora in Surrealist hubs outside the region, and the latter to the emergence of an autochthonous compressed surrealism—, are informed by foundational and revisionist studies in Surrealism. Key among these is Peter Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974/1984/2010), which, concerning the Surrealist movement, critiques the institutional autonomy of art and asserts the avant-garde's imperative to reinsert artistic practice into the praxis of life. Bürger's analysis of Surrealism's *ethos*, its rejection of stylistic fixity, and its investment

in the everyday as a site of the marvellous provides critical leverage to analyse how Central American artists embraced and subverted the movement's key tenets. Hal Foster's *The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art* (1985) complements this view by interrogating the Surrealist reliance on primitivism and the ambivalence of its anti-rationalist stance.

Finally, philosophical traces of Surrealism as both a poetic and revolutionary project are brought to the fore in the writings of André Breton, particularly *Surrealism and Painting* (1928), *The Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism* (1941), and the *Introduction to the International Surrealist Exhibition* (1959). These are read alongside Walter Benjamin's *Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia* (1929), which sees in the movement a dialectical angle capable of extracting revolutionary energy from intoxication and dream.

METHODOLOGY

Research question.

How did Central American artists and writers (1924–1971) engage with and adapt Surrealism—both as a continuation of the European movement and through localised reinterpretations—to forge a distinctive avant-garde tradition?

This research employs mostly qualitative methods such as archival research, content analysis, and comparative visual, textual, and stylistic analysis. Concerning archival research, it should be noted that inquiry across digital repositories in Central America, and broader Latin American and UK collections was conducted. This research examines primary materials, including avant-garde figures' writings (published and unpublished), letters, exhibition catalogues, and photographs to reconstruct Central American modernist networks, exhibitions, and intellectual interests related to the development of Surrealism in the region. The listed primary sources were found in the following collections: Repositorio Centroamericano de Patrimonio Cultural (Universidad de Costa Rica), International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) at The Museum of Fine Arts - Documents of Latin American and Latino Art (Houston), Archivos Históricos de Guatemala (Universidad Francisco Marroquín, Ciudad de Guatemala), Archivo Museo MARTE (San Salvador), Foyle Special Collections Library (King's College London), Senate House Library (University of London), and the Essex Collection of Art from Latin America (ESCALA, University of Essex).[5]

Qualitative research, as Silverman (1993) maintains, is not limited to exploratory or descriptive aims but can also be employed to test theories specified in advance of data collection (in Bryman & Bell, 2016, p. 201). This methodological flexibility is particularly valuable for a project that seeks to interrogate both the emergence and transformation of Surrealist aesthetics within Central American avant-garde circles. Qualitative research tends to view social and artistic life in terms of processes, emphasising how events and patterns unfold over time and conveying a

[5] The three archives in the United Kingdom were visited in person in March 2025.

"strong sense of change and flux" (Bryman & Bell, 2016, p. 208). This perspective is crucial for tracing the dynamic evolution of Surrealist influences and networks across the region.

Through scrutiny of literary works, artworks, and cultural criticism, content analysis techniques clarify the patterns of the aesthetic and thematic interests of the Central American avant-garde concerning Surrealism, including their responses to regional identity, a vernacular style, and the specificity of Central American art. Content analysis, as Bryman and Bell (2016) observe, involves the examination of various documents and texts—"printed, visual, aural, or virtual"—and can be "qualitative, seeking to uncover deeper meanings in the materials" (p. 271). In this thesis, content analysis is primarily qualitative and iterative, searching for underlying themes and patterns rather than relying solely on predefined codes (Bryman & Bell, 2016, p. 287). This approach allows for the identification of emergent motifs and the nuanced negotiation of Surrealist ideas within the region's artistic production.

Conducting comparative analyses of visual art and literary works assesses avant-garde techniques, themes, and formal innovations from this group of artists in relation to the movement, both in Europe and in Latin America. The method will assist in discriminating Central American avant-garde stylistic novelties, its visual *topoi*, recurrent motifs, etc., within the framework of a very specific transnational avant-garde, Surrealism, scrutinising distinct cultural adaptations. The hermeneutic approach, influential in interpretivism, is also employed to interpret texts and artworks from the perspective of their authors, considering the social and historical context in which they were produced (Bryman & Bell, 2016, p. 289). This enables a deeper understanding of how Surrealist concepts were adapted, resisted, or reinterpreted by Central American artists and writers.

In addition to archival sources, the writings produced by Central American avant-garde figures are crucial for comprehending their roles as cultural critics, mediators, and agents of transnational exchange in the region. These texts, frequently disseminated through influential cultural journals such as *Repertorio Americano* (Costa Rica), *Criterio* (Nicaragua), *Espiral* (El Salvador), and *El Imparcial* (Guatemala), showcase the engagement with the political, social, and cultural upheavals of their

era—particularly those linked to Surrealism—reflecting their modes of commitment to intellectual inquiry and transformation. Discourse analysis is applied to these materials, emphasising how *versions* of society, events, and psychological worlds are produced in discourse (Bryman & Bell, 2016, p. 294). Rather than codifying procedures, this analysis adopts a *skeptical reading* stance, searching for underlying purposes and power dynamics within the texts (Bryman & Bell, 2016, p. 295). Critical discourse analysis further highlights the "effect of power hierarchies, structural inequalities," and historical struggles, bringing a "commitment to social change and empowerment" to the research (Bryman & Bell, 2016, p. 298).

These writings provide valuable insights into how Surrealism was introduced, contested, and reinterpreted within Central America. The iterative quality of this thesis, in which analysis shapes subsequent data collection and interpretation, is, therefore, in line with analytic induction (Bryman & Bell, 2016, p. 306). The documentation of the dynamic circulation of Surrealist ideas through various platforms reveals a recurring negotiation of identity, aesthetics, and ideology, whilst illustrating how local artistic concerns intersected with the Surrealist internationalist agenda. Moreover, these periodicals served as critical nodes in a broader intellectual network that linked Central America with other avant-garde circuits, such as Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Paris, and New York.

RESULTS

Chapter 1. Split identities: Central America, a *dreamless* cultural landscape between Mexico and Colombia?

Mi última noche de América, la pasé corriendo por una selva oscura,
toda cavada por el hueco de un corazón que en otros siglos anteriores llenó el mar.
Iba detrás de un mono blanco, blanco como una estrella,
como un serafín de la selva virgen, y no le puede alcanzar.
En el viento, mojado de un gozo de presa que escapa,
venía la sombra lenta del barco en que volví a París.

[*My last night in America, I spent running through a dark jungle,*
all hollowed out by the emptiness of a heart that, in centuries past, was filled by the sea.
I was chasing a white monkey—white as a star,
like a seraph of the virgin forest—and I could not catch it.
In the wind, damp with the thrill of a prey that escapes,
came the slow shadow of the ship on which I returned to Paris.]

Miguel Ángel Asturias
(1929/2000, p. 378)

The assiduous marginality of Central America within Latin American and global avant-garde scholarship cannot be reduced to a matter of historiographical neglect. It is, on the contrary, entrenched in the symbolic hierarchies that structure the region's cultural visibility. While Mexican, Argentine, Brazilian, or Cuban identities are readily accepted as sufficient markers of artistic legitimacy concerning this period of study, Central American nationalities—Nicaraguan, Guatemalan, Costa Rican, Salvadoran, Panamanian, and Honduran— rarely attain similar gravitas. The asymmetry extends, by way of individualising a paradigmatic example, even to one of the most internationally celebrated Central American artists, Nicaragua's Armando Morales, whose work circulates prominently in global markets and prestigious collections yet is habitually divested of its national and regional specificity. Despite the recurring presence of Nicaraguan tropical motifs and toponyms in his paintings, it is not unusual that Morales' work is critically stripped of its national or regional grounding. Instead, his haunting compositions—figures suspended in metallic stillness, shrouded in silence and solitude [figure 2]—are subsumed under the vague and commodifiable category of "Latin American" art, if not entirely "*universal*" (Millis in Lœwer et al., 2010a, p. 298). Such a repeated interpretive expurgation reveals an

outset condition: Central American identities, unlike those of larger Latin American counterparts, remain illegible unless abstracted, translated, or aesthetically sanitised to fit global circuits of recognition, including academia. Morales's international prestige, as will be determined also with other Central American avant-garde figures, far from securing visibility for his regional context or national artistic/literary tradition, becomes a paradoxical marker of its effacement.

Figure 2. Armando Morales, *Desnudo en frente de espejo cóncavo*, lithograph, 1980, n.d., Armando Morales Foundation Collection

This indiscernibility is compounded from within by the fragmentary memory formation process that haunts Central American cultural self-perception. Pastor (1988), referring to the concerns of José Cecilio del Valle (1777-1834)—a Guatemalan moderate intellectual and politician at the forefront of the Central American independence from Spain—inscribes the region in a valley of unrelenting forgottenness. The challenge of articulating a distinct Central American identity (or at least several robust national identities) is thus inseparable from the experience of historical amnesia, political struggle and the fragility of collective memory. Fundamentally, Central America, more

than the aggregation of the histories of the separate states, is a political, cultural and historical concept, without a "political or juridical entity". It represents the living memory and awareness of a nation that is divided; it is a remembrance of the past as a collective experience—one that is often unclear, and, in this instance, more than others, marked by mysteries, omissions, and ambiguous episodes (Pastor, 1988, pp. 13-14). Consistent with this apophatic portrayal, Baciu (1986) described the development of 20th-century Central American culture as "provincial" in nature, in which this condition— while often disparaged—acts both as a limitation and a poetic resource (pp. 173-175). As asserted by Costa Rican philosopher Pablo Hernández, "Central America, like any border, is defined not so much by the entities it separates as by the movements and relationships it enables and that continually cross and transform it" (2012, p. 83).

The multiplicity of identities assumed by Central American avant-garde artists and writers was more than a plain response to external ostracism. As a tendency of this generation, it reflects the internal convolutions of a region defined as much by its borders and passageways as by any supposed unity. Thus, the experience of diaspora and exile is central to understanding these subjectivities. Central American artists frequently formed or integrated diasporic, *ephemeral communities*—of a communal, closed, and not corporate nature, "which means that its members come together out of affinity rather than utilitarian motivations; that its organizations are selective; and that they have an informal and fluid structure, without an established authority apparatus" (Castañeda, 2015, p. 5)—, navigating between local, regional (Latin American) and international networks (Vindas, 2023, p. 151). These mobilities were not merely geographic but also metaphorical, imaginative or autobiographical.

Stuart Hall's conceptualisation of *cultural identity* as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (2021, p. 260) is particularly meaningful in this context. For Central American avant-garde figures, identity was always negotiated and in flux, shaped by the interplay of memory (a fragmented nation), history (the colonial wound), and migration (a consequence of coloniality) (Hall, 2019, p. 208). The result is a constellation of subjectivities that were repetitively split, even in contradiction with themselves, between home and abroad, nation and region, mestizo and indigenous,

tradition and modernity, the particular and the universal. The imaginative and autobiographical (re)turn to homeland—regardless of its mythic component as an appendix of the "umbilical cord" identified as "tradition" (Hall, 2019, p. 209)—becomes a means of negotiating these ruptures, allowing artists and writers to re-anchor themselves in a place that is as much constructed as remembered.

Colonial legacies further complicate the formation of these identities in Central America. Césaire's critique of colonialism as a process that decivilises the coloniser while brutalising the colonised, its boomerang effect, provides a framework for understanding the psychic and cultural wounds that persist in the region (1972, p. 13), and which were particularly decisive in the revolutionary cultural processes undertaken by the avant-garde. Wainwright and Lund (2016), for instance, provide in this sense a compelling account of how these dynamics manifest in the life of, arguably, the most renowned Central American writer of this generation, the Guatemalan, 1967 Nobel laureate in Literature, Miguel Ángel Asturias, who, as a "Latin American" in Paris, was confronted with his own alienation— a "regular" self-acknowledged *ladino*, before embarking on a life-changing trip to Paris in 1923—and ultimately "discovered" as Maya by a French ethnologist (Georges Raynaud), or, put in other terms, disclosed himself as Maya by European Mayanism (p. 105). This moment of interpellation, where Asturias was hailed as both subject and object of Eurocentric knowledge and its racialised regime of representation, encapsulates the "double consciousness" that characterised Central American intellectuals and artists in Europe. Identity here is not a stable essence but a shifting, hybrid construction, always mediated by external gazes and internal quandaries (Hall, 2021, p. 258). As will be further elucidated in the following chapter, this duality in Asturias' self-exploration produced a distinctive approach to the Surrealist techniques and methods, materialising as a form of "double writing," where the author presented the same literary event from two conflicting perspectives. One mythical and "irrational," while the other rational and aligned with official versions (Karp-Toledo, 1982, p. 111).

The instability of Central American identities, from within the avant-garde diaspora both in Europe or in larger Latin American countries, is manifest in its constant rearrangement—shifting from the broad signifier of "Latin American" to

Mexican (*v.g.* Cardoza, or Mérida), Cuban (*i.e.* Max Jiménez) or even retroactively inscribed within a precolonial lineage, such that "Maya" precedes Guatemalan. For Asturias, being Guatemalan/Latin American in 1920s Paris meant inhabiting a space of alienation, as both advocate and outsider to his own culture. This sense of estrangement, as has been discussed by various scholars (Henighan, 1999; Bellini, 1999; Wainwright and Lund, 2016), can be symbolically condensed in his rather sore *rebirth* "anecdote" at the Sorbonne, where Prof. Raynaud publicly identified him as "Maya" in front of his classmates and then, after inviting him to dinner, introduced Asturias to his wife with the following declaration: *Here is a Maya. And you said the Maya do not exist!* The performative power of this moment, whilst inhabiting the core of a hegemonic Eurocentric cartography in simultaneity with his first encounters with the Surrealists, transformed Asturias' self-understanding through an act of European recognition.[6]

The tension between (European) universalism and localism was a recurring theme in Central American avant-garde discourse. Cardoza's assertion, *I am universal because I am Guatemalan (It would be arrogance to invert the terms)* (1986, p. 751), encapsulates the paradoxical logic by which local specificity becomes the grounds for universality. Asturias, for example, was forced to grapple with the fact that his literary project could not be rooted in "guatemalteco" or any dialectal language, given the realities of illiteracy and social stratification in Guatemala. Cardoza's reading on Asturias' œuvre diagnosed the resentment accumulated by avant-garde authors and artists of the region due to the alienation they experienced concerning their own countries (poor audience and critical reception): "Sometimes I tell myself, he won the Nobel Prize, yet above all he wanted to be read in his own neighborhood." (1991, pp. 219-220).

Nonetheless, Cardoza y Aragón distanced himself from the political and literary stances of Asturias, since he understood his own identity as a political

[6] A rather similar disregarded/displaced experience had Luis Cardoza y Aragón when trying to enrol at the Sorbonne in 1921. After presenting himself as Guatemalan, officials didn't know under what nationality or native language he was supposed to be categorised. Cardoza remember they only had the categories of the United States, Mexico and *l'Amérique du Sud*. Since he spoke very good English after living in San Francisco, the clerk listed him as an English native speaker, despite Cardoza insisting that Guatemala was in Central America (1986, p. 200).

commitment. Beyond the ethnic and racial background that he shared with both halves of Guatemala, whether indigenous or mestizo/ladino, he rejected any connection to a fake, stereotypical, or mythic civilisation. He despised any literary or artistic endeavour that presented itself in the fashion of a "codex voice," portraying the Indigenous populations of Central America as "mysterious," "magical" non-existent peoples, "or other such nonsense—the cheap substitutes of the worst reactionary and paternalistic literature." (1986, p. 751); echoing Césaire's account of the colonial encounter as an ongoing process of negation, erasure, and re-inscription, in which the civilised status of a culture is continually rearticulated to justify domination: "Christianity = civilization, paganism = savagery, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences, whose victims were to be the Indians, the yellow peoples, and the Negroes" (1972, p. 11).

Cardoza's mestizo identity required him to purge the distance between his cause and the struggle of Guatemala's native cultures. Rather than becoming *el Gran Lengua,* as Asturias did during his "surrealist" phase, he assumed a critical awareness of the recursive, performative and paradoxical nature of power in postcolonial contexts, particularly manifested in the heartrending self-perception of the Indigenous peoples, some not only ostracised but embodying (reduced mostly to a spirit-less "body-thing", as asserted by Achille Mbembe [2001, p. 26]), humiliated, the qualities of backwardness, misery, and being underserving of respect (Cardoza, 1986, p. 751). Vis-à-vis Mbembe's category of the *native*, namely "the object and subject of commandement" (2001, p. 27), the Indigenous identities in Central America, from which the region's avant-garde writers and artists drew so much, abbreviated a transposed passive label, that did not belong to their ways of life, their precolonial and postcolonial cosmovision. Cardoza saw their and, therefore, *his* struggle, as indicative of the Guatemalan identity (1986, p. 751); analogous to the generative dialectical process described by Hall, in which producing is preferred over rediscovering, retelling the past is favoured over founding identities on archaeological findings (2021, p. 259).

This disagreement over the portrayal of indigenous identity was not only with Asturias, but also with Antonin Artaud, whom Cardoza met and befriended during his

first period in Paris (1921-1930), when frequenting Breton's Surrealist circle, and whom he hosted in Mexico in 1935. Cardoza criticised both for seeking the "primitive" or "magical" in indigenous cultures, rather than recognising their real, immediate, lived struggles. Despite the divergence, the irony is brutal: colonial systems of knowledge, the very same that categorised indigenous identity as pre-modern and irrational, bestowed it back upon them in the form of recognition. Asturias *became* Maya in Paris, just as Cardoza (re)*discovered* Guatemala through its absence,[7] tropicalising Benjamin's formulation about the German distant observer of the French Surrealist revolution, as the one who "gauges the energies of the movement" not from the source but from the valley (1999, p. 207).

The surrealist framework penetrated Central America in various fronts, namely, via a diaspora of writers and artists who engaged immediately with surrealist circles in Paris (Asturias, Cardoza, Jiménez), and Mexico City (Mérida, Cañas, Zachrisson) by the reception of a more balkanised group who assimilated surrealist methods, techniques and ideas through their involvement in international avant-garde circuits (Salarrué in the United States or Trixie Briceño in Brazil) or assimilated it from their own country (Ricardo Aguilar or Luisa González Feo); notwithstanding the persistent classification of Central America as a "closed area"—defined by Traba in terms of belatedness, provincialism, and a lack of avant-garde infrastructure (1985, p. 12)—which underpinned a hierarchy that privileges other Latin American modernities as legible and translatable—a criticism already suggested by Vindas (2023, p. 159). This discourse occludes rather than explains the distinctive ways Surrealism was metabolised in Central America—its recoding through local cosmologies, its theoretical reproductivity in periodicals, its articulation as method rather than style, and its survival as metaphor for political alienation, ethnic displacement, and fractured belonging.

Surrealism, in this context, became for most of these figures a transnational sensorium where displaced identities, hybrid aesthetics, and postcolonial critiques converged. It is no coincidence that these figures articulated their most potent

[7] Though somewhat contradictorily considering his critical reassessment, Cardoza even self-rebaptised himself as *Maya prince* his 1928 essay on Carlos Mérida, published in *Revista Amauta:* "Hearing the beat of my heart, I proclaimed myself Maya Prince, in the heart of Paris, not far from the Eiffel Tower. The Sun was my godfather. In the name of the gods, it assisted me. The Tower, a geyser of steel, marked my modern direction—utterly vertical, at the zenith" (1928, p. 31; translated by the thesis author).

surrealist inflexions not through institutional affiliations with Surrealism but through literary and artistic probes on its "innovations" forged in spaces of exile and cosmopolitanism. What connects most of them is a shared condition: the burden of speaking from a geography defined by loss—loss of unity, of visibility, of futurity. Surrealism's poetics of the marvellous (locally fringing, not without critical controversy, on the fantastic), its dream logic and ethnographic bent, were not just adopted in Central America—they were redeployed to confront a reality whose violence, disintegration, and porousness exceeded European imaginaries.

Diaspora thus functioned here as a condition of epistemological suspension. Following Castañeda (2015, p. 9), Central American artists operated through imaginative returns, constructing affective geographies of homeland in absentia. The diasporic imagination, in this sense, is not a romantic ideal but a pragmatic strategy for navigating the fissures and discontinuities of modernity. Castañeda's *ephemeral community* is, once again, particularly apt as an encapsulating notion for the avant-garde in Central America, where artistic collectivity is rarely stable or unified, but rather provisional, contingent, and often fleeting. For example, Armando Morales's melancholic visual poetics—desolate human figures in liminal spaces—are spectral cartographies, nostalgic projections that mock geopolitical fixity, although grounded explicitly in his birthplace, Granada, Nicaragua (Tibol in Lœwer et al., 2010c, p. 31). This is the true irony of the development of Surrealism in Central America: it reconfigures the very categories—identity, territory, origin—that have historically been used to exclude it. Its "Latin Americanness" is not encoded in iconographic markers but in a politics of absence and longing.

This backdrop of "non-existence", however, does not untangle Central America, and its interlocking with Surrealism, from the *longue durée* of colonial violence (Mbembe, 2001, p. 19), nor from the epistemic racism that dismissed Latin America's intellectual and aesthetic autonomy. The repeated classification of Central American art as "derivative" or "belated" follows what Mitter (2008) has defined as the *Picasso manqué* syndrome, wherein non-Western modernists are evaluated not on their own terms but by the degree of their proximity—or failure—to imitate Western models (2008, p. 537). To counter this inertia, as was briefly developed in the theoretical

framework, the assessment of the cannibalisation of surrealism in Central America deserved an appropriate analytical apparatus to address the various modernisms that flourished in the "periphery."

Fastening García Canclini's (1990/1995) notion of *hybridisation* as the basal horizon for surrealism in Central America, on which to deploy Friedman's (2006) polycentric modernisms framework, new conditions of possibility to foreground the productive ambiguities of vernacular hybrid cultures and the simultaneity of artistic modernities emerge, shifting attention from ossified questions of belatedness to those of relational invention. Friedman underscores this reorientation, stressing, not without poetic clarity, that "the modernisms of emergent modernities are that other hand that enables us to hear any clapping at all" (2006, p. 427). Within this perspective, what occurred in Central America was not a pale imitation of European avant-gardes, but a constellation of practices rooted in local histories—as has been briefly posited with the cases of Asturias and Cardoza—, articulated through networks of discontinuity, and animated by acts of resistance and re-signification.

This analytic alignment resonates with Mbembe's resolve on the coexistence of multiple temporalities within the postcolony. The historical experience of Central America, especially concerning such a rhizomatic cultural movement as Surrealism, cannot be reduced to a simple progression from "before" to "after" colonisation; rather, it is marked by the entanglement of indigenous, colonial, and emergent times, each inscribed with its own ruptures, oscillations, and unpredictable events (2001, p. 19). experience" was shaped by disturbance and the recurrent reinvention of place.

The recursive logic of influence that reinforces the centre-periphery binary, as critiqued by Argentine art historian Andrea Giunta, is at the core of the debate within Latin American modernist studies themselves. Where "we see Alfredo Hlito, they see Vantongerloo; where we see Joaquín Torres-García, they see Mondrian; where we see Tarsila do Amaral, they see Fernand Léger". Such comparisons, Giunta argues, unveil dialectically the logical inconsistency of European hierarchies, which have shamelessly dodged, until very recently, that the very heart of European modernism, such as cubism, was itself peripheral with respect to African sculpture (2020, p. 23). The critical challenge lies in resisting these hierarchies that render local invention invisible,

especially when art and cultural histories in Latin America reproduce the vocabularies and periodisations of the centre, framing national practices as mere "versions" of European movements (Giunta, 2023, p. 208).

The contradictory strategy at the heart of this research is to trace the manifestations of Surrealism in the region, all the while acknowledging its European origins, Latin American variations, and the risks of reinforcing the very hierarchies under critique. Nevertheless, by adopting Surrealism as an analytical and comparative framework, the intention is, unmistakably, not to impose an "updated and more sophisticated" derivative narrative but to provide a provisional blueprint—a set of coordinates that can help future scholars discern both the convergences and divergences that shape avant-garde artistic practices in Central America. This approach, while inevitably entangled with the vocabulary of the centre, aspires to make visible the specificities and creative negotiations that otherwise remain obscured, thus offering a differentiated lens for subsequent inquiry.

The local processes of indigenisation and nativisation, as Friedman (2006) elaborates, are forms of cultural cannibalism (bringing together the vertices of the *Abaporú*/García-Canclini/Friedman triangle), in which external practices are ingested, transformed, and claimed as one's own, often to the point that their origins are obscured. In this light, tradition itself becomes an invention of modernity, a site where rupture and continuity are continually reworked. The contradictions inherent in these processes—where modernity is fashioned through the "forgetting of origins" and the creative reappropriation of the foreign (p. 431)—remain at the core of the artistic and intellectual negotiations that define Surrealism's presence in Central America.

Postcolonial hybridity, in the Central American context, is a matter of historical compulsion. The writer/artist in the isthmus is not simply drawn to hybrid forms by aesthetic curiosity; rather, hybridity is enforced by a structural colonial and neocolonial regime of representation, by the imperative to render oneself legible to external gazes, and by the persistent demand to negotiate identity within a field of asymmetrical power. As Glissant (1997) argues, the right to opacity must be defended—not as a retreat into unintelligibility, but as a refusal to be exhaustively known or reduced to the terms of the other. Surrealism, as it was reworked in Central America, became less a

style than a tactic: a poetics of muddiness and refusal, a means of resisting both the flattening pressures of assimilation and the essentialist traps of authenticity.

Within this framework identity is never singular or static. Glissant's (1997) concept of *relation,* applied to the identity predicament of an intellectual like Asturias, offers an alternative to the binary logic of coloniser and colonised, in which negotiation/transformation is already embedded in the recurrent interpellation by external authorities. Surrealist enablers in Central America such as Cardoza, or Mérida, or Asturias himself, were all compelled to inhabit a "double consciousness" that is less about being split between two worlds than about dwelling in a "third space" (Bhabha, 1994/2004) where new forms of subjectivity and creativity can take root, albeit always under surveillance and constraint.

Glissant's approach to the rhizome in his *Poetics of Relation* (1997) offers, as well, a profound recalibration for understanding the assimilation of Surrealism in Central America. The rhizome, in Glissant's schema, "maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root" (1997, p. 11). Unlike the arboreal model of Western identity—anchored in singular origins, linear descent, and territorial fixity—the rhizome proliferates horizontally, privileging multiplicity, entanglement, and relationality. This rhizomatic logic reinforces the processes by which Surrealism, itself a product of metropolitan itinerancy and infrastructure, was altered in the Central American context, in the form of a networked, unpredictable, and generative encounter with otherness.

In Glissant's framework, identity ceases to be a matter of lineage inscribed in territory or myth (1997, p. 13). Instead, it is perpetually deferred, "afflicted or soothed" by the conditions of exile and errantry that mark postcolonial subjectivity. The Central American assimilation of Surrealism was not an act of passive reception, but a mode of errantry—a movement that refuses the "totalitarian drive of a single, unique root" (p. 14), that is to say: not dependent nor independent from the French, Mexican or American Surrealist circuit; a vessel of all and none. As the binary of centre and periphery is destabilised, Central American cultural production might return to being, at least for the sake of this research and a bit of consistency with its location and name, centre.

Glissant's "tragic variation of a search for identity" (1997, p. 17) is enacted in the region not only through resistance to colonial identification, but also through the creative reworking of imported avant-garde forms. Surrealism, in this sense, becomes a site for the assertion of opacity—a refusal to be rendered fully legible or subsumed by the universalising gaze of the metropolis (p. 19). Central America, thus, remains an underexplored opportunity for Glissant's framework, a site where subterranean "succulencies of Relation" may yet open new avenues for global cultural critique (1997, p. 21). The assimilation of Surrealism here is more than an act of dilution or loss, it is an instantiation of *limitless métissage* whose consequences are unforeseeable yet—particularly given the influence of Surrealist thought in Central American contemporary art—, whose elements are perpetually diffracted and recombined (Glissant, 1997, p. 34). In this way, the history of Surrealism in Central America exemplifies Glissant's vision of an open, relational, and ever-unfinished cultural landscape, where identity is constituted not by roots, but by routes.

To some extent, through the successive theoretical reassessment of Central America's avant-garde identity, a conceptualisation of Central America as a *fold of the Americas* was delineated, thus invoking Deleuze's (1993) ontology of the fold both as a metaphor and as a material and epistemic operator. In Deleuzian terms, the fold is the "smallest element of the labyrinth," an irreducible unit of matter and difference, always "folded within a fold, like a cavern in a cavern" (1993, p. 6). Central America, as the isthmic hinge where North and South America, the Atlantic and Pacific, and the "West and East" converge and are recursively inflected, constitutes a paradigmatic locus of this folding process. The historical crossing of the isthmus by Núñez de Balboa in 1513, which inaugurated the transoceanic articulation of the Americas, is a purely modern originary fold—an inaugural compression and torsion of space, time, and subjectivity that continues to reverberate through the region's cultural and epistemic configurations. Within this paradigm, Central America cannot be reduced to a point of passage or a liminal zone, since it has acted as a dynamic, generative pleat in the geo-historical fabric of the modern world-system (Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992, p. 549). The region is situated between two larger continental masses folded into one another, the

belly button of the dialectic modernity/*americanity*, producing zones of intense compression, friction, and transformation.

Deleuze's insistence that "unfolding is thus not the contrary of folding, but follows the fold up to the following fold" (1993, p. 6) is particularly appropriate for theorising the assimilation of Surrealism in Central America. Here, Surrealism does not arrive as an external form to be passively received or mimetically reproduced. Each encounter with the Surrealist imaginary is a new inflexion—a modulation that both compresses and expands the region's expressive capacities, generating novel aggregates and masses of meaning. The fold, as Monaldi notes, is the sign of a process of differentiation, a rise of multiplicity within the apparent unity of the subject-world: "difference is hence described as multiplicity; the emergence of difference as a rise of multiplicity within the One. Multiple does not mean many, Deleuze writes, but folded in many ways" (2012, pp. 6-7).

Ultimately, the isthmus operates as a site of epistemic turbulence within the world-system, as Quijano and Wallerstein (1992) argue. The very categories of identity, art, and modernity are themselves subject to recursive folding—continually reconfigured by the pressures of coloniality, migration, and global capital. The "stateness" of Central American states, and the ethnicities they produced and classified, are not stable referents but contingent constructs, always in the process of being folded into and out of the larger American, Atlantic, and global matrices (Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992, p. 550). The assimilation of Surrealism, in this context, is one more fold—one more intonation in the continuous, never-complete process of regional and hemispheric becoming.

Chapter 2. *Los de allá:* Community *within* communities

> *La hormiga y el astro son un diptongo y sus razones sencillas son inexplicables sin el ojo-diéresis del caballo que ve mejor que la Emperatriz de los Telescopios.*
>
> *[The ant and the star are a diphthong, and their simple reasons are inexplicable without the diaeresis-eye of the horse, which sees better than the Empress of the Telescopes].*
>
> Luis Cardoza y Aragón
> (1986, p. 11)

A history of Surrealism in Central America is best situated within the broader genealogy of avant-garde mobilities and diasporic intellectual exchange that characterised the early twentieth century. Before Surrealism's formalisation as a movement in Paris in 1924, a constellation of Central American modernist figures had already established themselves as active interlocutors within transatlantic avant-garde circuits. This cohort—among them Enrique Gómez Carrillo (1873-1927), Carlos Valenti (1888-1912), Carlos Mérida, Max Jiménez, and Toño Salazar—, though never coalescing into a formal regional group, integrated the broader Latin American diaspora in Paris and laid the groundwork for subsequent Surrealist entanglements, whilst also functioning as cultural mediators, negotiating the translation and adaptation of metropolitan innovations to the specificities of the isthmus.

Enrique Gómez Carrillo's trajectory is emblematic as a forerunner of this cosmopolitan avant-garde. As a Guatemalan *modernista*, Gómez Carrillo's editorial stewardship of publications such as *El Nuevo Mercurio* (1907), *Cosmópolis* (1919–1922), and his role as chronicler and writer for Spain's *El Liberal* (published 2767 chronicles from 1899-1920), and ABC (published 570 articles from 1921-1927), positioned him at the nexus of literary and artistic experimentation, facilitating the circulation of Cubist, Futurist, Expressionist, and Dadaist ideas. His engagement with the Parisian avant-garde was not limited to passive reportage; rather, he orchestrated a dynamic field of textual and visual translation, bringing the debates of Parisian salons, galleries and ateliers into dialogue with Latin American intellectual life (Noguerol, 2012, p. 363). The editorial labour of Gómez Carrillo cemented the prominence of periodical culture as a vehicle for the transnational dissemination of avant-garde innovations and debates.

On the other hand, Carlos Mérida's early sojourn in the French capital (1910-1914), for instance, placed him in direct contact with the School of Paris, particularly Expressionist, Constructivist and Cubist circles, and the ferment of Dadaist, pre-Surrealist experimentation—exhibiting in the 1914 *Salon des indépendants* (Greet, 2021). Mérida's subsequent involvement in the Mexican muralist movement and his participation in the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* (1940) in Mexico City, as will be further discussed later, typify the multidirectional flows of influence and the permeability of artistic boundaries. The fact that Mérida engaged with Surrealism in Mexico, despite having lived in Paris, is consistent with the polycentric modernisms' hypothesis, in which Central American artists did not limit their work to simply transferring pure, unaltered European ideas to the region. Instead, as Giunta suggests, they redefined and reinvented the avant-garde spirit. In some cases, such as Mérida's, they were transformed by the local cultures they encountered upon their return, shedding the regressive aspects of European culture they brought with them (2020, p. 15).

The case of Toño Salazar, the Salvadoran caricaturist and illustrator, is paradigmatic among these early entanglements. Salazar moved to Paris in 1923, after a short period in Mexico City (1921-1923), engaging effortlessly with the cultural and editorial effervescence of the capital. His illustrations were published by *Vogue* and *Le Rire*, whilst being part of several exhibitions, including the 6éme and 7ème *Salon de l'Araignée* (1925-1926), alongside Chagall and Foujita (Huezo, 2005, p. 14). During this time, he befriended Robert Desnos, who introduced Salazar to the Surrealist group meetings at Café Cyrano, where he met Breton and developed a particularly close relationship with Henri Cartier-Bresson [figure 3].[8]

[8] Cartier-Bresson photographed Salazar several times in 1925 (Paris) and later in 1934 (Mexico), after they both embarked in an "expedition" to gather ethnographic material, funded by the Mexican government and informally backed by the Trocadèro Museum (Galassi, 1987, p 20), from France to Mexico, with a short layover in Havana, Cuba. The project was an absolute failure (Huezo, 2005, p. 60/p. 88).

Figure 3. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Antonio Salazar-México*, gelatin silver print, 1934, 24.2 x 36.1 cm, Toño Salazar Collection (El Salvador)

Salazar, right before moving to New York (1930-1935) and later to Buenos Aires and Montevideo (1935-1950), published *Caricatures* (1930), an illustrated collection of his acquaintances in the Parisian *bohème*: Joyce [figure 4[], Stravinski, Gide, Salmon and Kiki. Prologued by van Dongen, this was the only publication indirectly related to the French movement by Salazar; even though, in his final stage as illustrator, back in El Salvador, he produced a series of illustrations portraying an array of Latin American and European avant-garde figures—Breton [figure 5], Asturias, Picasso, Borges, Pound, among many others—by sole means of recollection of his Parisian days, published in *La Prensa Gráfica* between 1971 and 1978.

Figure 4. Toño Salazar, *James Joyce* in *Caricatures* (1930), ink on cardboard, 1930, 33 x 25 cm, Toño Salazar Collection (El Salvador)

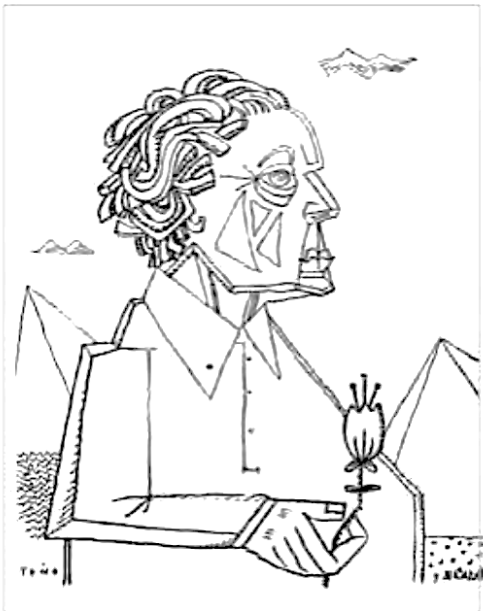

Figure 5. Toño Salazar, *André Breton* in *La Prensa Gráfica* (March 9, 1976), ink on cardboard, 1976, n.d., Toño Salazar Collection (El Salvador)

Considering these key precedents, it's crucial to establish a critical baseline before assessing the few figures who engaged directly with the French Surrealist movement. To do so, it's necessary to acknowledge the burgeoning intellectual activity that took place in the region (or was carried out by Central Americans) during the earliest reception stages of the avant-garde. For instance, in 1909, only months after its publication in Milan (*Gazzetta dell'Emilia)* and Paris (*Poesia*), the complete Spanish translation of Marinetti's Manifesto of Futurism appeared in the *Revista de la Universidad de Honduras*, predating the first Spanish edition published in Madrid not before 1910 (Osorio, 1982, p. 19). Almost simultaneously, Rubén Darío published a very critical analysis of Futurism in Buenos Aires (April 5, 1909, in *La Nación*), demonstrating both his familiarity with and nuanced response to European avant-garde experimentation. Marinetti himself acknowledged Darío's intervention by republishing the article in his own journal (Osorio, 1982, p. 21). These questioning obstruse responses also determined the early approach of Central Americans to Surrealism, who confronted the movement with the spirit of the Hispanic American *vanguardia*: conflating informed dialogue and selective adaptation (Osorio, 1982, p. 40).

Both dissemination cases, as has been argued, highlight Central America's role as a conduit for avant-garde debates within the continent and the Spanish-speaking world.

Surrealism, as a method, offered Central American artists and writers a set of tools and imaginaries through which to trade the persistent fractures of colonial history, the violence of modernity, and the ambiguities of their own positionality within the world-system. The movement's experimental approach—its ludic, scientific, and ethnographic registers—transformed creative endeavour into a site of everyday struggle, not only against exchange-value and utilitarian progress (Lusty, 2021, pp. 2-3), but also against the epistemic violence that rendered the region peripheral, "provincial," and invisible. Surrealism's attention to the quotidian, the marvellous, and the oneiric resonated with the lived experience of Central American artists, whose worlds were marked by both the banality of rustic life and the violence of political turmoil.

Baciu's evocation of Central American lyrical resistance to the modern postal system (1986, p. 174) underscores the poetic density of its provincial condition, where the surreal emerges not as an import but as an immanent possibility of everyday life. The Surrealist project in Central America was never reducible to a simple imitation of European models. Rather, as Martins (2004, pp. 18-19) observes, Surrealism was not a new language to be accepted or rejected, but a recurrent questioning of any language that claimed to be irreducible. The Surrealist valorisation of the "primitive," the "mythic," and the "marvellous" was always double-edged, entangled in the contradictions of ethnocentric primitivism and the risk of fetishising alterity (Mitter, 2008, p. 542).

In this context, arguably the most universal Central American avant-garde figure, the Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias, got acquainted with Surrealism from a very early stage of his first period in Paris (1923-1933). Along with Cardoza y Aragón, he was also the most engaged writer with seminal figures of the Surrealist movement. His work, particularly his early short stories published in periodicals of Guatemala, Cuba, Spain and France, such as *El ratoncito moribundo* (1926), *Escalera abajo* (1928), *Escalera arriba* (1928), *La barba provisional* (1929), *La verdadera edad de Matusalén* (1929), and his renowned collection *Leyendas de Guatemala* (1930), incorporated methods,

techniques and themes which structured the basis of Surrealist discourse and practice of the time, amalgamating the marvellous in between two worlds: modern Paris—the Surrealists' *little universe*, the "most dreamed-of of their objects" as Benjamin asserted (1999, p. 211), and a transhistorical dissection of Guatemala—compressing Maya, Colonial, and Republican periods in his quest of defining its cultural identity.[9]

Asturias's engagement with Surrealism in Paris is inseparable from his simultaneous discovery of Maya cosmogony and the quest for a distinct American identity (Prieto, 2009, p. 37; Henighan, 1999, p. 2). The process by which Asturias reconstructs himself as the "voice of the Maya" is marked by a series of displacements and re-inscriptions, mediated by the scrutiny of French ethnology (Barahoma, 2007, p. 23), the debates on Latin American periodicals (*Revista de avance*, *Amauta*, *Repertorio Americano*, *El Imparcial*), and the intellectual currents of the Parisian avant-garde. In this context, the presence of the three periods in Asturias's work is not merely coincidental but emerges as an idoneous strategy for both literary innovation and cultural rekindling.

His initiation into the Surrealist orbit was catalysed by a series of pivotal encounters in the late 1920s. His journey to Havana in 1928, ostensibly to participate in the *Prensa Latina* congress, proved decisive. On board the transatlantic voyage, Asturias met Robert Desnos, who travelled to Cuba, paradoxically, in substitution of another Central American: Costa Rica's León Pacheco (1898-1980).[10] The immediate impact of Desnos's recently published *La liberté ou l'amour* (1927)—with its trance-like structure and instantiated within the logic of the marvellous—opened Asturias to a sensibility that resonated with the indigenous mental universe he had been exploring for years (Barnabé, 2000, pp. 486–487; Chiriboga, 2014, p. 131; Prieto, 2009, pp. 33-34). This encounter was not isolated: Asturias's subsequent return to Paris, with a more prominent impact within the ephemeral community of Latin American writers in the

[9] Several authors (Karp-Toledo, 1982; Cardoza, 1991; Henighan, 1999; Bernabé, 2000; Prieto, 2009) have discussed the surrealist components of later works by Asturias, such as *El señor presidente* (1946), *Hombres de maíz* (1949), and *El Alhajadito* (1961). Nevertheless, this thesis has focused on the more contemporary literary production during and right after Asturias' encounter with Surrealism.

[10] Pacheco became for Asturias a paradigm of "the emancipated Central American intellectual" (1996, p. 61), after their meeting, endorsed and coordinated by Gómez Carrillo, upon Asturias' arrival in Paris. He acknowledged, with admiration, Pacheco's commitment to Central American culture.

city (including Carpentier, Cardoza y Aragón, Vallejo, Reyes, and Uslar Pietri), placed him in regular contact with Surrealist circles, exposing him to the intellectual ferment of Breton, Éluard, and Aragon, and the photo-cinematic innovations of Man Ray, Buñuel, and Dalí, as he acknowledged—in several of his chronicles for *El Imparcial*—being a frequent visitor of epoch-making hubs of the movement such as *Studio des Ursulines* (Barnabé, 2000, p. 492).[11] According to Henighan, Asturias' first conscious experiments with Surrealist techniques—such as automatic writing—only began after his encounter with Desnos in 1928, rather than during his initial years in Paris when Surrealism was already making headlines through public scandals (i.e. *Un Cadavre* [1924], opposition to the Rif war, etc.) and manifestos (1999, pp. 103–104). It was in this later period that Asturias, alongside Carpentier and Uslar Pietri, engaged in collaborative exercises of automatic writing, many of which were published in the short-lived, one-issue magazine *Imán* (published in April 1931).

A couple of years prior, Asturias published *La barba provisional* (1929) in *El Imparcial*, a short fiction written on his trip back to Paris from Havana, which bears the unmistakable imprint of Surrealist imagery and method. Narratives unfold in a first-person, quasi-autobiographical mode (*v.g.* the protagonist is a Central American flâneur in Paris, poor, stranded and nocturnal), structured by capricious associations, unexpected encounters—being one of the characters Desnos himself, and whose work is apocryphally cited (Henighan, 1999, pp. 107-108)—and a pervasive oneiric atmosphere (the narrator seamlessly traverses metropolitan locations: from an opening scene in a brothel named *The eleven thousand virgins* to a boulevard cinema).[12] The logic of dream, chance, comic absurdity, the first Spanish edition indicated on its back cover to be worth one quetzal, and the irrational governs the prose, dissolving conventional models of composition and embracing the principle of collage—a technique Asturias admired in Surrealist cinema and poetry. This short story functions as a primary case, a vehicle, for exploring the instability of identity (the protagonist's soliloquy indulges in

[11] Although he rarely referenced any singular Surrealist figure in his 440 articles published in *El Imparcial*, besides a few late mentions of Desnos (1929) and Man Ray (1931). Asturias' self-reflective period regarding his encounter with Surrealism dates from the 1950s and 60s (Henighan, 1999, p. 105).
[12] Henighan (1999, p. 109) detected Asturias' wink regarding his acquaintance with Surrealist literature ancestry, as he built his opening on Apollinaire's *Les onze mille verges* (1907).

the leitmotif *Who was I?*), the magnetic force of desire, and the poetic adventure of life itself (Barnabé, 2000, pp. 487–488).

As Surrealism became ubiquitous, Asturias started reciting at cafés segments of his *Leyendas de Guatemala,* before committing them to paper, taking advantage of the feedback and camaraderie of his peers to refine his approach (Kane, 2014, p. 69). This collaborative atmosphere fostered a shared sense of mission, particularly among the Latin American figures engaged with the movement, which acted later as the breeding ground of magical realism, an aesthetic rooted in the hybrid realities of the region's history and culture (Suskind, 2016, p. 105). As part of the discussion regarding the formation of a Central American ephemeral community within the broader community of Latin American figures—even among those who, after living in Paris, would later disperse to various avant-garde centres—it is worth noting that Toño Salazar illustrated the 1945 Argentine reedition of *Leyendas* [figures 6 and 7], which featured a preface by Alfonso Reyes (Huezo, 2005, p. 126). Salazar was also commissioned to illustrate Asturias's most celebrated novel, *El señor presidente*; however, his battle with Parkinson's disease prevented him from completing the project, as documented in their correspondence (Asturias, 1957).

Figure 6. Toño Salazar, *Miguel Ángel Asturias*, ink on paper, n.d., 44.5 x 35.6 cm, Toño Salazar Collection (El Salvador)

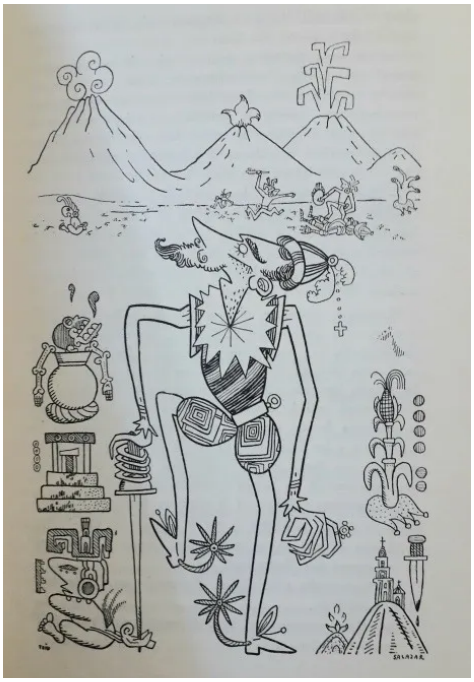

Figure 7. Toño Salazar, *Sketch for illustration of Leyendas de Guatemala.* ink on paper, 1945, 43 x 28 cm, Toño Salazar Collection (El Salvador)

Leyendas, written—as Asturias himself would confirm—between 1925 and 1929 and published in 1930 in Madrid, reflects the arduous process of rewriting and merging his own formative phases: between French Mayanism during his first four years in Paris under the influence of Raynaud, and the impact of Surrealism. Asturias's engagement with the movement from *Leyendas* onward, however, was never a matter of passive imitation. Rather, he subjected the movement's intellectualism to a process of translation and re-signification, aligning it with what he perceived as the "pre-logical," dream-infused reality of the Maya. "The indigenous," himself included, "have two realities; a palpable reality and a dreamed reality," Asturias asserted, foregrounding the quotidian condition of the marvellous in Central American experience as opposed to the "sanctimoniousness and artificiality" of metropolitan Surrealism (in Karp-Toledo, 1982, p. 103; Prieto, 2009, p. 36). This distinction is crucial: for Asturias, Surrealist techniques were not ends in themselves but means to access and express a deeper, collective vision—what he called the "vision of the tribe." Nevertheless, this τέλος, as already suggested in Chapter 1, was criticised by fellow Guatemalan Cardoza y Aragón, both as a futile political stance and a fraught identity.

The synthesis of Surrealist rhetoric and Mayan mythology in Asturias' *Leyendas de Guatemala* astonished European readers—Valéry included—with its oneiric resonances and radical departure from established literary conventions (De Aussenac, 2000, p. 400). The sensoriality of Asturias's prose—its "preoccupation with sound," as he confessed—reflects his allure with psychic automatism and the oral tradition of indigenous storytelling (Asturias in Canivell, 2012, p. 406). He cherished, suitably, the Surrealist onomatopoeic surplus, complementing his opulent imagery with a movement/sound concise formula (Bellini, 1999, p. 23). The legends are composed as sonorous verses, meant to be read aloud, thus fulfilling an ancestral function of transmitting myth and memory through the spoken word (*i.e.* "The tropical air sheds the indefinable happiness of lovers' kisses. Balms that swoon. Moist, wide, and warm mouths. Tepid waters where lizards sleep upon virgin females. The tropics are the sex of the earth! [Asturias, 1930/2011, p. 87]).

Asturias's technical innovations in *Leyendas*, extend beyond style to encompass narrative structure and rhetorical strategy. He appropriates the Surrealist device of *l'un*

dans l'autre, orchestrating a poetics of juxtaposition (Breton's double centre) and polarity. Cities are built upon the ruins of older cities; light is enfolded in darkness; a saint whose soul has transmigrated into a sinful body; indigenous and Spanish elements coexist both with and without synthesis, maintaining a productive tension (Prieto, 2009, pp. 46). This logic of duality and metamorphosis permeates his work, dramatising both the fragmentation of identity and the possibility of cultural rebirth/rescue (Rama, 2012, p. 16). The dialectic of creation and destruction, so central to both Surrealism and Maya cosmology, becomes a pivotal principle, as does the psychoanalytical motif of the return of the repressed—Indigenous culture "buried but not undone", *the unconscious Indian* (Wainwright and Lund, 2016, p. 105), awaiting a second coming (Prieto, 2009, pp. 54-56). In *Leyendas*, however, Asturias departs from the typical urban surrealist visual metaphors, and, as Prieto enumerated, casts "an imagery that is in no way derivative: 'mountains capable of chopping off a forest'; 'arms as green as woodland blood'; and trees that tally up 'the years of four hundred days according to the moons they have witnessed'" (Prieto, 2009, pp. 34). In a certain sense, the collection is one of the earliest examples in which the devices of French Surrealism experienced, via palimpsest, the nightmarish humidity of the Central American tropics—Valéry *dixit*.

For instance, in one of the legends, *Cuculcan: Serpiente envuelta en plumas* (Kukulkan: Feathered Serpent), Asturias (1930/2011, p. 145) adapted the integration of key Surrealist motifs—sun, bird, and mirrors—into a framework shaped by Mayan myth and analogical perception (Prieto, 2009, p. 83). Drawing on the imagery and symbolism found in the poetry of Tzara, Breton, and Eluard, Asturias used the bird and sun as emblems of freedom, transformation, and plenitude, while mirrors serve as sites of reflection and illusion. The character Guacamayo, a bird aspiring to become the sun, embodies both the Surrealist fascination with metamorphosis and the danger of deception, as his reflection is ultimately revealed as false. Through this synthesis, Asturias not only appropriates Surrealist techniques but reworks them to serve a didactic purpose: warning against the seductions of appearances and emphasising the artist's responsibility to unveil truth (Prieto, 2009, p. 84). This appropriation, in Asturias' words, unfolded as some sort of ethical theft: "I made others' ideas mine, for

my own. Were they hungry? I don't know. What's certain is that I [stole] as if they had been. I stole hard bread, not ornaments. Hard bread of ideas, not useless literary embellishments." (1928, p. 7).

What about Asturias's divergences with French Surrealism? While he adopted certain Surrealist techniques, his work fundamentally reoriented the movement's Eurocentric premises toward indigenous cosmology and socio-political critique. Asturias explicitly rejected the notion of Surrealism as a purely European import, arguing that its essence already resided in the "surréalisme lucide, végétal" of Maya-Quiché texts such as the *Popol Vuh* (Asturias in Karp-Toledo, 1982, p. 105). For him, the interplay between dream and reality was not an avant-garde innovation but an inherent feature of Mesoamerican thought, where myth and daily life coexisted seamlessly. This stance positioned his work as a reclamation rather than an imitation, transforming Surrealist methods—the *true* novelty— into tools for articulating a (proto)decolonial vision. A key distinction lies in Asturias's rejection of Surrealism's idealist tendencies. Where Breton and Éluard spiritualised desire into ethereal abstractions—exemplified by the seraphic "woman-child" Melusine—Asturias grounded his literature in corporeal licentiousness and political materiality. His novels, forecasting Mbembe's diagnosis on the policing of the bodies/sexualities of the colonised (2001, p. 88), revel in carnal excess, linking sexuality to themes of exploitation and sterility under capitalist modernity (Prieto, 2009, p. 35). For Asturias, the body—especially the marginalised, indigenous, or mestizo body—became a site of both oppression and resistance, reflecting the "telluric violence" of Central America's colonial history.

Asturias's myth-making functions as a form of historical supplementation. Merino notes that his *Leyendas* constructs a "ucronía"—a hypothetical history—to redress the gaps in Guatemala's colonial record, using myth to "adorn" and reinterpret Indigenous heritage. This process, akin to Barthes's notion of myth as *inflexion* rather than falsehood, allows Asturias to reimagine suppressed narratives without claiming totalising authority. However, this project is inherently fraught: by bypassing the present to bridge past and future, Asturias risks exoticisation, constructing a "cultural dream" that struggles to materialise (Merino, 2001, pp. 22-23). Yet this tension is

deliberate, reflecting the urgency of reclaiming Indigenous agency in a society that silences it.

Where Surrealists like Breton sought a "modern collective myth" through psychic descent into the unconscious, Asturias locates this unconscious in the Mayan underworld, Xibalbá. Symbolising the collective unconscious of Indigenous Guatemala, Xibalbá becomes a site of resistance against the "lost" surface world of colonial cities (Karp-Toledo, 1982, pp. 114-115). This inversion echoes Bataille's distinction between Surrealism's two paths: while Breton's followers prioritised artistic production, Asturias took the "arduous path" to the "essence of things," probing the night of cultural erasure to recover an ethnic "I" (Bataille, 1994, p. 50).

Asturias's myth-making diverges further through its rejection of Surrealist universalism. Foster contrasts myth as a tool of appropriation with *bricolage*—a playful, non-essentialist practice that embraces fragmentation (1985, pp. 63–64). Asturias leans toward the latter, weaving Indigenous symbols into a hybrid narrative language that resists static allegory. His myths are not primitivist abstractions but "sacred writings" that exorcise colonial trauma through poetic intensity (Cardoza, 1991, pp. 60–61). In doing so, he avoids the Surrealist trap of myth-as-power, instead offering a decolonial counterpractice that reasserts Indigenous epistemologies as dynamic, unresolved, and (partially) inseparable from the present.

As a final remark on Asturias' association with Surrealism, it is crucial to address the profound tension between identification and distance, appropriation and mediation he experienced, which has generated persistent criticism and debate. At the heart of this strain lies his self-fashioning as *el Gran Lengua*, the voice of the Maya, despite his origins as a ladino from Ciudad de Guatemala—a social position (part of the "middle- and upper-class urban educated elites with more or less awareness of their reiteration of elite privileges" [Rosenberg, 2023, p. 10]), as Cardoza noted, barred him from any "meaningful knowledge of Indian reality" (Cardoza, 1991, p. 56; Henighan, 1999, p. 50). This split identity, the most complex of all the figures studied in this thesis, dramatised in his fiction through the motif of metamorphosis and the "schizoid personality," echoes Rimbaud's *Je est un autre*, well in line with the Surrealist fascination with transformation (Prieto, 2009, p. 53).

Asturias's journey from positivist eugenicist to surrealist/indigenist and later magical realist is emblematic of the contradictions of postcolonial identity. In his early thesis, *Sociología guatemalteca: El problema social del indio* (1923), Asturias advocated for the "creation/improvement" of the Guatemalan race through mestizaje and European immigration, reflecting the racial hierarchies and anxieties of the ladino bourgeoisie (Henighan, 1999, p. 15; Wainwright and Lund, 2016, p. 106). In this formulation, the indigenous were a problem to be solved, instigators of the lack of harmony with the geography (another aporia of the postcolonial condition, as suggested by Wainwright and Lund, 2008, pp. 143-144), a degenerate presence to be assimilated or eradicated (Cardoza, 1991, pp. 116-117). Yet, in less than a decade, Asturias reinvented himself in Paris, emerging as a revitalizer of Maya mythology, a transformation, in the most Surrealist fashion, that makes many critics uneasy. This reinvention was not the product of lived contact with Maya communities, but rather of immersion in the European discourse of Mayanism—a scientific and aesthetic appreciation of the Maya that emerged from nineteenth-century exploration and plunder (Wainwright and Lund, 2016, p. 107).

The paradox of Asturias' Mayanism is thus inseparable from the dynamics of colonisation, dependence, and decolonisation that shaped Latin American modernity (Karp-Toledo, 1982, p. 99). His embrace of Surrealism and the development of magical realism reflect both a reaction against Western rationality and a reproduction of its fascination with the "primitive." As Barrueto (2004, p. 347) asserts, Surrealism's engagement with the Other was always mediated by the assumptions of modernity, appropriating the exotic as a source of aesthetic renewal. Asturias' own project, for all its radicalism, is marked by this ambivalence: he seeks to recover the mythic unconscious of the nation yet does so through the tools and language of the coloniser.

Language itself becomes a site of contradiction and creative tension. As Karp-Toledo (1982, p. 101) observes, the "colonised" writer must confront the dilemma of expressing protest and difference in the language of the coloniser—which includes the symbolic nature of narrating the destruction of the Maya world in Spanish. Asturias's use of Spanish—rather than K'iche' or another indigenous language such as náhuat, most common in Salamá, where he grew up—is both a necessity and a limitation,

producing what Sartre called *le décalage constant* in Third World literature. The destruction of logical and accepted structures of Spanish, the poetic short-circuiting of its syntax and imagery inherited from the avant-garde, drawing from the critical study of Karp-Toledo, becomes a form of resistance, but one that never fully escapes its colonial origins.[13] The very act of myth-making in *Leyendas* is thus a supplement, not a replacement, for the repressed or ever-lost indigenous voice.

Cardoza y Aragón, the other Guatemalan who engaged with French Surrealism, diagnosed Asturias' fiction as haunted by the absence of a living indigenous presence (1991, p. 56). The Maya of *Leyendas* and, later, in *Hombres de maíz* are spectral, mythic, consigned to the past or the unconscious of the nation. As Wainwright and Lund argue, the structure of *Leyendas* inscribes Guatemala as a "circle of ruins," a Maya nation without Maya territory, where the Indian is evoked only to be banished to the realm of forgotten stories—and which never happens to the Colonial Spanish heritage of Guatemala. The narrative spiral that moves from Palenque to Copán to Quiriguá and Tikal traces a geography of loss (although oddly depicted without explicit violence), aestheticising the indigenous as absence, as "uninhabited, abandoned, legends, extinguished, deserted, ghosts, empty" (2016, pp. 108–109). The living Maya are nowhere to be found; their social realities, struggles, and agency are subordinated to the needs of national myth and ladino self-fashioning.

Asturias' project was also "polluted" by his status as both subject and object of ethnographic and Surrealist fascination. His engagement with formal ethnographic studies in Paris allowed him to redefine cultural relativism and Guatemalan identity but also positioned him within the same structures of observation and comparison that defined the European gaze. The ethnographic surrealism, described by James Clifford (1981), reproduced in Asturias' work the exoticism it sought to critique. Asturias' own "Indianization," as Wainwright and Lund (2016, p. 110) contend, is homologous with the failed attempt to capture the Maya as proto-Guatemalan; the Indigenous, like the

[13] Although Asturias defended the mestizo condition of American Spanish: "Our Spanish is made up of all languages. I am not exaggerating. In addition to the Indigenous American languages that are part of its composition, there is the mixture of European and Eastern languages brought to America by waves of immigrants" (Asturias in Bellini, 1999, p. 230).

unconscious, resists stable incorporation, destabilising the very narratives meant to contain it.

Asturias's split identity—his oscillation between Maya and ladino, between Guatemalan and Latin American, between subject and mediator—remained unresolved. His work is a testament to the possibilities and limits of transculturation, to the power of myth and the persistence of absence. As Bataille suggests, the transparency of any myth, such as the ones presented by Asturias, is accentuated through its demise, that is to say: the absence of myth is itself a myth, and the absence of community a reality that cannot be contested. (1994, p. 48/81) The Guatemalan gave voice to this absence, at least making the wound visible. Asturias himself, in *La barba provisional* (1929), imagined being a "dead man," a "soldier unknown among the heroes who lost their memory, alive but dead to a former life and buried in the cemetery of the most beautiful city in the world" (Asturias, 1929/2000, p. 376). The prophecy was perversely fulfilled at his grave in Paris' Père-Lachaise: a Maya stela rises from a plain tomb, inscribed with his awards in Maya numerals and naming him "Gran lengua de Guatemala, unigénito de Tecún-umán" (Great tongue of Guatemala, only begotten of Tecun-Umán). This monument, discussed extensively by Wainwright and Lund (2016, pp. 112-113), both grand and uncanny, crystallises the paradoxes of Asturias's legacy. While the stela claims him as the sole descendant of Tekun Umam, it erased the living K'iche' Maya whose existence it symbolically supplants.

Luis Cardoza y Aragón, Asturias' only generational compatriot inscribed in the Parisian Surrealist circuit, engaged with the movement's experimentation during his most formative years, sharpening his worldview and criticism approach. Arriving in Paris in 1921, Cardoza found himself at the heart of the "intuitive epoch" of Surrealism, a movement whose "condemnation of the world" and radical challenge to bourgeois norms ignited his imagination and sense of rebellion (Kane, 2012, p. 58; Cardoza, 1986, p. 252; Gombrich, 2002, p. 264). Yet, as he would later reflect in his convoluted autobiography *El río. Novelas de caballeria* (1986), it was only from the distance of Europe that he could begin to intuit his own roots, recognising the presence of the indigenous world he had lived among but never *truly* seen (Cardoza, 1986, p. 203).

Paris became both a crucible and a mirror, a place where Cardoza's sense of self was forged in dialogue with the avant-garde and the ruins of his cultural origins, considered conceptually, as Fonseca argues, as suppressed knowledge (2020, p. 66). Staying in a modest student hotel half a block from the Odeon Theatre, he initially engaged with the Parisian avant-garde as a frequent client of two legendary bookstores: Adrienne Monnier's and Shakespeare and Co., run by Sylvia Beach (Lara, 2022, p. 209). He enrolled at the *Sorbonne*, where he also frequented Prof. Raynaud, for whom he translated his version of the *Rabinal Achí*. He began mingling with the Surrealists, but always maintained a critical distance. He started discussing Latin American avant-garde poetry (Huidobro's) with Tristan Tzara (1986, p. 217); later befriending both Artaud and Breton before the former's excommunication from the movement in 1927. Nevertheless, he maintained a relative connection with both, even after his first move to Mexico (1932–1944), following their visits in 1936 and 1938, respectively (Cardoza, 1986, p. 226). His admiration for Breton was tempered by disappointment at the movement's dilution, failure, and commodification (1991, p. 195).[14] For the Guatemalan, Surrealism's original fervour was too often reduced to a formula, its revolutionary promise domesticated into fashionable pastiche (1986, p. 750).

His early works—*Luna Park* (1923), *Maelstrom; Filmes telescopiados* (1926), *Torre de Babel* (1930), *El sonámbulo* (1937), *La nube y el reloj* (1940), and *Pequeña sinfonía del Nuevo Mundo* (written between 1929 and 1932, but only published until 1948)—bear the marks of Surrealist influence,[15] especially in their embrace of dream logic, absurd juxtapositions, corrosive irony, and the subversive play of images (*v.g.*, the firearm-like quality of a *loaded* Kodak). *Maelstrom*, for instance, unfolds as a collage of music (predominantly jazz), technology (photography) cinematic, poetic, and absurd episodes, where Keemby, the protagonist, is murdered in the first paragraph by the shadow of a film character and later wanders through Pompierlandia, a realm of pure artifice and no history (Kane, 2012, pp. 60–61). The novel's automatic writing,

[14] During his most mature period, he even dedicated a book (*André Breton: Atisbado sin la mesa parlante*, 1982) to Breton's religious and erotic thought within the framework of his Surrealist project.
[15] Its pervasiveness is encompassed in Cardoza's radiography of his first Parisian years: "One contracted either syphilis or Surrealism" (1986, p. 268).

panegyric to the wisdom in/of dreaming, fortuitous associations in character design—*i.e.* Picasso as society's role model, Breton and Max Jacob as rescuers, God as a child with a broken toy (the World), or Christ in despair due to the incapacity of contemporary men to even crucify him—and playful violence against reason demonstrate Cardoza y Aragón's assimilation of Breton's decalogue.

His guarded affinity for Surrealism—even during its "endlessly beautiful moment", when "its dream was rain beneath the sea" (Cardoza, 1986, p. 406)—was always moderated by a distrust of its propensity to degrade into a mere aestheticisation of revolt. This wasted potential, particularly in a region such as Central America, disenchanted the Guatemalan author given the inherent affinities the region had for such a movement, even in its least favourable circumstances. He remembered, for instance, that at the end of each year, Estrada Cabrera's regime in Guatemala (1899-1920) celebrated the Fiestas de Minerva (Minerva Festivals), constructing grand temples with Doric or Corinthian columns in every major city to honour the Goddess of Wisdom. Cardoza noted the bitter irony: at that time, the country suffered from an illiteracy rate close to 90%. "Not even the wildest Surrealism could have imagined such an exaggerated mockery," he wrote (1986, p. 173). The surreal spectacle of wisdom temples in a nation of the uneducated exposes the disconnect between official discourse and lived reality, a contradiction so extreme it surpasses the absurdities of the average European avant-garde imagination.

His understanding of Surrealism, however, was never naïve. He was acutely aware of the limitations and dangers of a superficial, acritical adoption of European avant-garde models in Latin America. In his essays and criticism, he repeatedly warned against the "concessions to the exotism that Paris demanded of us," the transformation of indigenous motifs into "picturesque" commodities for foreign consumption (Cardoza, 1986, p. 750). Labelling Latin American figures close to the movement as some sort of Surrealist shamans was, for Cardoza, a symptom of the colonial gaze, a mask that obscured the realities of oppression, poverty, and exploitation still endured by living indigenous peoples.

Cardoza's critical stance is also evident in his reflections on the impossibility of fully recovering or inhabiting the indigenous past. The myths and ruins of Guatemala,

he argues, are always mediated by the violence of conquest, the distortions of colonial history (1986, p. 665), and the ongoing annihilation of the Indigenous justified by racist dichotomies (indio/ladino). The very act of "approaching" the indigenous is fraught with the risk of racism, nostalgia, and falsification. His awareness of his own mestizo position—"for all my mestizaje, I am closer to Plato or Virgil than to the mythologies of the Indians of Guatemala" (1986, p. 756), or "we have drawn near to Coatlicue as we would to a Crucifixion" (1991, p. 123)—underscored the abyss that separates the Surrealist intellectual from the lived experience of indigenous communities (or, inverting Cardoza formulation, the Surrealists were more interested in the Maya of the Codex than in the imperilled flesh-and-bone Maya [1991, p. 28]). This scepticism was only matched by a restless interrogation of identity and tradition. His writings are saturated with irony, self-doubt, and a refusal to settle for easy reconciliations (*v.g.* "I remember that I am mestizo, that I am real because I am founded upon two myths: Apollo and Coatlicue. I do not idealise the contemporary indio nor the indio of pre-Columbian societies" (1991, p. 106). Although drawn to the "poetry of origins," to the vertigo of ancient memory and mythical time, to a form of Benjamin's *Rausch*, Cardoza recognised that those are ultimately inaccessible, shrouded in loss and longing (1991, p. 64).

Cardoza y Aragón deserves to be acknowledged as a pivotal art critic and cultural mediator in the reception and adaptation of Surrealism in Latin America. His acute sensibility for the distinctiveness of Latin American art is evident in his praise for Carlos Mérida [figure 8] (1928, p. 33). His critical eye was always attuned to the dangers of mere imitation; he warned that American painting, when transplanted to Europe, risked losing its sensuality and character. For him, the challenge was to "intellectualise" Latin American art without subsuming it under Western tutelage, recognising its tributary relationship to Europe but insisting on construction and originality as its central problems (1928, p. 35).

This role of his intensified in Mexico and is vividly illustrated by his acute commentary on the artists and exhibitions that defined the movement's reception in the region. He was both a supporter and a sharp evaluator of the Surrealist phenomenon, as seen in his nuanced reflections on Frida Kahlo—admiring her

singular, self-absorbed vision, yet unafraid to admit that some of her works repulsed him and alerted to the dangers of mythologising her persona (1986, p. 469). His attention to the 1940 International Surrealist Exhibition at the Galería de Arte Mexicano, organised by Wolfgang Paalen and César Moro with Breton's collaboration, demonstrated his critical vigilance: he noted the problematic hierarchy that placed Rivera and Kahlo among the "internationals" alongside Kandinsky, Dalí, Carrington, Klee, Duchamp, Varo, and Buñuel, while Central American and Mexican artists like Mérida, Montenegro, Lazo, and others were relegated to secondary or tertiary status (1986, pp. 557-558). Cardoza's response—published as a caustic review in Octavio Paz's literary magazine *Taller*—attacked not only the exhibition's structure but also the superficial adoption and commercialisation of Surrealism in Mexico, a critique that sparked heated debate among the country's poets and intellectuals (Cardoza, 1986, p. 558; Meyer-Minnemann, 2016, p. 80; Nicholson, 2023, p. 267).

Figure 8.
Carlos Mérida,
Retrato de Luis Cardoza y Aragón,
oil on canvas,
1927,
73 x 50 cm,
Luis Cardoza y Aragón Collection

On the other hand, Antonin Artaud's 1936 journey to Mexico—hosted by Cardoza himself, driven by a desperate search for a "magical" indigenous world untainted by modernity, epitomises the European Surrealists romanticised and often delusional engagement with Pre-Columbian cultures (1991, p. 122). Artaud, as Cardoza y Aragón observed, sought an idealised "red race" descended from Atlantis, envisioning Tenochtitlán as a pristine antidote to Europe's decay (1991, pp. 73-74). Cardoza, although disturbed by his friend's deterioration, dismantled this fantasy, noting that Artaud's quest was less about understanding indigenous realities than escaping his own tormented psyche and the civilisation he paradoxically embodied (1991, p. 122). Artaud's mental anguish—his "reason in flames"—led him to project onto Mexico a cosmic purity that never existed, ignoring the complex syncretism of contemporary indigenous life, shaped by five centuries of colonialism, the Church, and systemic discrimination. For Cardoza, Artaud's vision was tragically esoteric, a "visionary fury" that sought to abolish literature itself in favour of an impossible, prelapsarian communion with the marvellous.

Breton's fascination with Mexico as the "surrealist country par excellence" relied on similar misconceptions. Figures like Artaud and Péret reduced indigenous cultures to static symbols of primal energy or void labels such as "the Maya as Greeks of America" (Péret in Adès et al., 2012, p. 81), ignoring both their historical complexity and present-day realities. Péret's admiration for Maya "harmonious" architecture and circular rituals, for instance, glamorised bloodshed as cosmic order (formulating a curious distinction with Aztec sacrifices), while also reproducing the notion that pre-Columbian civilisations in Mesoamerica only flourished in today's Mexico—including the Maya—as if there had been no major Maya settlements in Guatemala (Tikal), Belize (Caracol), Honduras (Copán), El Salvador (Joya de Cerén), or if the Mesoamerican cultural area and trade circuit did not extend to Western Costa Rica. Something similar happened with Artaud, who questioned the distinction he found also in Mexico about a proliferation of cultures, instead of forms of civilisation. He considered there was only one culture in Ancient Mexico; an assertion that overlooked the archaeological and anthropological evidence of such a convoluted compartmentalised territory (Artaud in Adès et al. 2015, p. 107).

Cardoza countered such primitivist fetishism by stressing that Pre-Columbian societies were neither paradisiacal nor perpetually ecstatic; their art emerged from a fraught relationship with divine power, "absorbed by the love and terror of gods" (1991, pp. 122-123), rather than merely aesthetic contemplation. European Surrealists, in their compulsive "consumption of primitive art" (Mitter, 2008, p. 542), replicated colonial patterns, erasing indigenous self-representation to serve their own existential calamities, particularly after World War I. Cardoza's critique extends to the Surrealists' failure to grasp the lived consequences of colonialism. Artaud's despair at not finding an "idyllic Indian culture" in Mexico revealed his naïveté: contemporary indigenous peoples, far from being relics, navigated a world altered by forced mestizaje, poverty, and cultural hybridity. In this sense, Bataille's reflection on Artaud's "spectacular shipwreck" (1994, p. 45) underscores the broader collapse of Surrealism's utopian ambitions when confronted with irreconcilable realities. Cardoza, rejecting both Artaud's primitivist nostalgia and indigenismo's paternalism, argued that the true "problem" lies not with "the nature" of indigenous communities but with the oppressive structures that marginalise them. Where Artaud sought to "discharge psychological malaise" through shamanic catharsis, Cardoza demanded a reckoning with the present: a call to "change in relation to the indios" (1991, p. 121), acknowledging their agency and the urgent need for justice.

Cardoza's critical outlook extended to his assessment of the Mexican avant-garde at large: he recognised the achievements and limitations of muralism and was among the first to support Surrealism's reception, greeting Breton upon his arrival in 1938 (Traba, 1994, p. 62).[16] He was keenly aware of the transcultural dynamics at play, observing how figures like Mérida—himself Guatemalan—were implicated in the region's most seminal exhibitions, and how Surrealism's internationalisation in Mexico required both selectivity and invention, not passive imitation.

As a critic of Surrealism, Cardoza was appreciative, situated and doubtful. Surrealism's true greatness laid in its moment of incandescent rebellion, before it was

[16] Cardoza reflected on his correspondence with André Breton about Mexico after receiving a signed copy of *Point du jour* (1934), acknowledging he likely wasn't the reason Breton visited, although he made some recommendations. Breton sought out Trotsky amid tensions with the French Communist Party due to their lack of criticism of Stalin (1991, pp. 198-199).

digested and sweetened by the very world it sought to overturn (1991, p. 199). He saw in Breton's later disillusionment a tragic grandeur, even in his most optimistic remarks when he visited Mexico, the recognition that the dream of total subversion had been domesticated. This critical stance, as has been suggested previously, extended to his assessment of peers: while he valued Asturias's poetic reworking of popular traditions, he noted the absence of Surrealism's most radical components in Asturias's work, seeing instead a labour of poetic re-signification rather than true subversive transformation. Asturias' literature setback, merging Cardoza's criticism with Césaire's, was "not to make a utopian and sterile attempt to repeat the past," to revive—in an exoticist fashion—a dead society, but its inability "to go beyond." (Césaire, 1972, p. 31).

Furthermore, Cardoza's negotiation of his "Latin-Americanness"—oscillating between Guatemalan roots and Mexican belonging—reflects a lifelong commitment to transcending narrow nationalisms and embracing a plural, dynamic identity. Born in Antigua, Guatemala, *where the dead die dead from death* (Cardoza, 1986, p. 13), his early awareness of racial and ethnic discrimination and the limitations of patriotism led him to reject civic vanities and nationalist pride, inclining instead toward a cosmopolitan, borderless humanism (1986, p. 43), structured similarly to Glissant's poetics of relation "in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other." (1997, p. 11).

After his Parisian period, his relationship with Mexico, however, became both intimate and emblematic. He never became a Mexican citizen, but Mexico became a second motherland, a place where he could "sew his dreams" and entrust them to "the hands of Mexico, which protects my homeland with its body" (1992, p. 28). He recognised the deep ethnic and historical ties between Guatemala and Mexico, noting that "the same race: the Maya" spanned both countries (1928, p. 31). In this sense, the vibrancy of the tropics, the "solar" energy of the Americas—"A people influenced only by the sun. The sun is the great classic of the tropics. God's Shakespeare. Everything is gold, everything shines and dreams, resonant colour, everything lives passionately" (1928, p. 31)—and the shared legacy of indigenous civilisations outweighed the artificial divisions of the nation-state. However, for this thesis, it remains noteworthy

that Cardoza chose a virtual transference toward a Mexican identity, even refusing the notion of Guatemalan art, since it stands beneath Mexico's auspicious shadow (1928, p. 31).

His early defence of Mexico as a global avant-garde hub of utmost prominence, even before moving, is saturated with Surrealist imagery and intellectual ferocity. He invokes the irreverence and iconoclasm of Surrealism by calling for a break with the past: "*The Maya were the Greeks of Europe* (…). Let our ancestors rot in peace! Let's not cowardly console ourselves by remembering (…). Father Sun, melt their bones, dissolve them. Teach us to abolish tears once and for all" (1928, p. 31). This radical rejection of nostalgia is paired with a playful, almost delirious myth-making, as he proclaimed himself "Prince Maya in the heart of Paris," baptised by the Sun and flanked by a modern, steel geyser—the Eiffel Tower. Such self-mythologising, blending indigenous and modern symbols, echoes Surrealism's penchant for dreamlike identity shifts and the fusion of disparate realities. Cardoza's Mexico is not a static repository of tradition but a site of "primitive forces," a place where Botticelli's Primavera can dance with the Renaissance on her hips, where the boundaries between Europe and America, East and West, myth and modernity, are *subversively* blurred (Foster, 1985, p. 61). His language is deliberately provocative, even shocking— "Mexico is a Percheron, a virgin. What a pity she masturbates!" (1928, p. 31) —using Surrealist shock tactics to jolt the reader out of complacency.

This vision, at once irreverent and utopian, positions Mexico as a perpetual site of rebirth, where the avant-garde is not imported but erupts from the collision of local myth and global modernity. Despite the geographical emphasis, his engagement with Surrealism further solidified his opposition to nationalism in art and thought. Cardoza insisted thus that "a national point of view is entirely foreign to the essence of art. All nationalism in art is nothing but superstition" (1986, p. 490). Instead, he advocated for a transcultural, universal vision, one that could "digest" influences and return them transformed, rooted in local or regional experiences but avoiding solipsist traps, positing a Central American alternative to the "constraints of Western epistemology" (Mitter, 2008, p. 532) of the failed universalist project of modernism.

Cardoza's identity was defined by uninterrupted mobility, an "in-and-out" existence that resists the confines of nation, movement, or fixed belonging. To be Guatemalan, he writes, is to be the "bad conscience" of one's own people, to carry the weight of a history marred by discrimination and the violence inflicted upon the indigenous majority (*i.e.* in "my country of indios, killing an indio is not considered killing a man." [1986, p. 433]). His life unfolded in displacement—confronting colonialism anew in global forums (for instance, French President Auriol expressed disapproval when appointing him as Guatemala's ambassador to France (1948–1950) because he had criticised European powers for sustaining colonialism [1986, p. 661]), and insisting that culture is only meaningful as an instrument of transformation, not as paternalistic spectacle (1986, p. 482). His writings served as a bridge, not between fixed shores, but between oppositions—between the avant-garde and those who followed, between regional specificity and universal aspiration. He was at once rooted and uprooted, cherishing Guatemala while refusing to be confined by it, embracing Mexico, Surrealism, and a planetary stance.

To conclude this chapter, procuring to counterbalance the sole Parisian imprint of this transnational exchange, although already introduced as a precedent, Carlos Mérida's entanglement with Surrealism outside of Europe is worth discussing as a clear case of the polycentric approach this research has followed. Mérida's artistic identity was defined by a conciliation between his Guatemalan/Maya-K'iche' origins and his (resisting) immersion in the Mexican Muralism movement, a duality that shaped both his self-conception and his institutional role within the Mexican art world. Arriving in Mexico in 1919, Mérida was immediately recognised as a figure of "rigorous personality" from Central America, with a cosmopolitan background that included exhibitions in Paris and New York and a body of work inspired by indigenous motifs (Torres, 2013, p. 3). Rather than following the familiar trend of Latin American artists returning home from Europe to "discover" their roots, Mérida's trajectory was marked by a continual movement among cities and contexts. His identity was not the product of a singular homecoming but, as Montgomery has suggested, of a looping, transnational path that required him to inhabit multiple

positions at once: "a primitivist and primitive, cosmopolitan and outsider, mestizo and elite, artist and object of exotic fascination" (2016, p. 488).

This complex foreignness is central to Mérida's interplay between identities, and his questioning of artistic and cultural binaries. He consistently asserted his Maya heritage while spending his career in Mexico, a neighbouring country of Guatemala, contributing to the muralist movement and playing a foundational role in building institutions that could support the revolutionary state's cultural ambitions (Sierra-Rivera, 2017, p. 42).

Mérida's understanding of tradition, almost as a forecast of the Friedman/Giunta framework this thesis has applied, was rooted in a vision of Mexican and American heritage as a living, horizontal coexistence of epochs, rather than a linear succession. He described Mexico as a country where "epochs do not present themselves in vertical succession but in horizontal coexistence, like the blades of an open fan" (in Torres, 2013, p. 6). In this environment, the Pre-Columbian ancient tradition, the colonial syncretism, and the avant-garde interacted harmoniously, enabling the assembly of new national, regional art that would belong to humanity without resorting, as already asserted by Cardoza, to the imitation of imported models or subservient imitation of the past.

Mexico City functioned as a crucial platform for Mérida's mediation of these identities and as a burgeoning hub that could accommodate his institutional ambitions, particularly if compared to Guatemala's infrastructure. The capital, during the 1920s and 1930s, attracted not only Mexican artists but also international figures (*i.e.* Hannes Mayer, Francisco Zúñiga, Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, Tina Modotti, etc.) seeking a space for artistic experimentation and exchange. Mérida joined a vibrant community of artists and intellectuals, including locals such as Diego Rivera (who arrived a year after him), or Roberto Montenegro, and Central American figures like Guatemala's Rafael Yela Günther and Arqueles Vela or Honduras' Rafael Heliodoro Valle (Montgomery, 2016, p. 490).[17] This cosmopolitan milieu enabled Mérida to engage

[17] Valle, although Honduran, lived in Mexico for more than half a century (1907-1959). He was the writer and journalist to whom Breton, during his visit to Mexico in 1938, gave the interview of his (in)famous statement: "Aside from everything I have already said, *Mexico tends to be the surrealist place par excellence*. I find the surrealist Mexico in its landscape, in its flora, in the dynamism brought about by the mixture of its races, as well as in its highest aspirations." (in Valle, 1938).

with the muralist movement and to contribute to the redefinition of Mexican modernism. While Rivera and Orozco promoted a nationalist art rooted in social realism,[18] Mérida advocated for an art that was "completely American," synthesising the lessons of the European avant-garde (particularly Cubism and Constructivism) with the forms and content of pre-Columbian and popular art (Gilbert, 2009, p. 34).

Figure 9.
Carlos Mérida,
Voodoo scene, or Women sleeping,
oil on canvas,
1929,
61 x 51 cm,
Unknown collection

Mérida's approach to indigenous sources, however, was distinguished by a commitment to merging abstraction with the Indigenous psychic state. He warned against the "trap of the folkloric", insisting that even indigenous art should serve as a point of departure, not as a model for literal imitation (Gilbert, 2009, p. 36). His second period in Paris during the late 1920s deepened his engagement with abstraction and Surrealism, leading to a transformation in his painting upon his return to Mexico. Although initially explored through a figurative approach, thematically inclined to

[18] Or, as defined by Mérida himself, a synthesis of French structural painting—cubism, and the Mexican tradition of altarpieces and popular modern printmaking (1924).

Carpentier's *real maravilloso* Ti Noel archetype [figure 9], Mérida's sense of pervasive abstraction, which he traced to Mayan sources, was enriched by his encounters with European Surrealism, particularly the biomorphic abstraction of Joan Miró [figure 10] and Jean Arp (Gilbert, 2009, pp. 38–39). In this specific context, Mérida enters as another node of the Central American ephemeral community, by sharing a focus on reinterpreting pre-Columbian sources through modernist forms. His work with the Popol Vuh parallels Asturias' literary experiments and Cardoza's critical emphasis on the marvellous as a transformative reality. Mérida's 1943 lithograph portfolio on the Popol Vuh, combining text and image, reflects a shared regional effort to move beyond folkloric or costumbrista commonplaces toward a dynamic, internally driven modernism that engages critically with a non-European referent [figure 11].

Figure 10.
Carlos Mérida,
La isla alegre,
oil on canvas,
1936,
80.5 x 64 cm,
Pérez Simón Collection

Institutionally, Mérida's mediation extended beyond painting. He was an active writer and critic, contributing extensively to cultural and literary magazines. In his writings, he praised the achievements of the Mexican muralism generation (of which

he was part, although, once again for a Central American figure, swinging in and out), but also cautioned against superficial nationalism and the dangers of pastiche. The latter, by insisting on their path after their mission was completed, was, in his own words, "an invitation to commit suicide" (Mérida en Baciu, 1986, p. 100). This position allowed him to play both official national avant-garde and outsider roles, positioning himself as an exception, *peripheral-by-will,* to the picturesque or politicised engagements with *artes populares* that characterised much of Mexican art at the time, a heavily criticised phenomenon by Traba (1973/1994).

Figure 11.
Carlos Mérida,
Plate 10.
The resurrection of the twins,
lithograph on paper,
1943,
41.3 x 31.2 cm,
From *Prints from the Popol-Vuh*

The reception of Mérida's work in Mexico was marked by both admiration and ambivalence. While critics, as Montgomery has compiled, such as Montenegro and Rivera acknowledged his contributions to the development of the *new* art of the Americas (Diego Rivera included, who called Mérida "our comrade who is no less representative of Mexico for having been born in Guatemala" [1924]), others accused him of self-colonialising primitivism (similarly to Cardoza criticising Asturias) or of merely trading academicism for French fashion (Montgomery, 2016, p. 493). Following Juarez (2023) analysis, whether portraying the Maya Hero twins of the Popol-Vuh—Hunahpu and Xbalanque— "as transparent entities that fight against biomorphic creatures in an oneiric landscape" [figure 11], or geometrically compressing and transposing a ritual dance in *Los Hechiceros* [figure 12]—more akin to his renowned personal style in which rhythm served as the functional principle (Traba, 1994, p. 66), "Mérida agreed on the invitation to recover the agency of Native artistic practices as an opportunity to subvert the structures of Western culture" (p. 335), beyond sticking to Euroamerican formalisms.

Figure 12. Carlos Mérida, *Los Hechiceros (Sorcerers)*, oil and polytec on masonite, 1958, 70.2 x 109,9 cm, Private Collection.

Mérida's willingness to occupy multiple subject positions—avant-garde, outsider, indigenous, mestizo—enabled him to embody a model of cultural identity that was fundamentally oppositional, interstitial, and anti-colonial, rooted in the local-

global dynamic rather than nationalist essentialism (Montgomery, 2016, p. 488). Consequently, Mexico City's cosmopolitan networks facilitated encounters between artists from diverse backgrounds and provided a space for the development of critical modernism. Mérida's work, read as concurrently Mexican, Guatemalan, Maya, and Latin American, exemplifies the contingent split identities that emerged from this environment, separate from European circuits.

Throughout his career, Mérida remained attentive to the dangers of romanticising or domesticating indigenous culture, quite like Cardoza. He sought to create an œuvre that would allow for experimentation through technical novelties of the avant-garde, but inverting the logic of dependence, namely, "turning inward" the conceptual and thematic source (Montgomery, 2016, p. 496). For instance, he found there was no need for Latin American artists to try to force themselves into the 20th-century abstraction "discovery/(re)invention" European genealogy (af Klint-Kandinsky-Picabia-Kupka-Mondrian-Malevich…), another foundational myth (Hall, 2019, p. 209), when abstract strategies developed by Pre-Columbian indigenous cultures were omnipresent as a visual language on its own, in not only archaeological collections, but also as a pervasive tradition in popular printmaking, crafts and indigenous arts, transformed and reworked, but never lost, during the colonial period. Mérida aimed to digest those practices while making them modern (Montgomery, 2016, p. 506).

Mérida's navigation of avant-garde networks during the 1930s and 1940s exemplifies a horizontal and simultaneous engagement with Surrealism that both intersected with and diverged from the dominant currents of Mexican modernism, a cross-fertilisation case which expands geographically the dyads Breton-Césaire,[19] black cultural resistance—French "negrophilia" discussed as paradigmatic by Mitter (2008, p. 532). His connection to Surrealism, while less conspicuous than that of figures like Frida Kahlo or Leonora Carrington, contributed to the Surrealists' evolving understanding of Mexico and provided Mérida with a conceptual and formal toolkit for developing a modernism distinct from the social realism of Rivera and Orozco (Gilbert, 2009, p. 30). Mérida's theoretical writings and public lectures in Guatemala

[19] Refer to Breton in Adès et al., 2012, p. 139.

and Mexico articulated a vision of Surrealism that transcended Breton's Parisian circle. He framed Surrealism as a *condition* rather than a movement (against Octavio Paz's sanction (in Baciu, 1979, pp. 10-11]), one that could be rooted in "derivations of an ancestral American type" (Gilbert, 2009, pp. 36–37) and that allowed Central America to function as a bridge of bridges, a merging buffer, a no-place that entangles all places, the south and the north, the east with the west.

In the 1930s, Mérida increasingly identified his work as Surrealist, advocating that "every painter is and should be surrealist" (1930) and emphasising the marvellous as a universal criterion of beauty, quoting Breton himself (Gilbert, 2009, p. 36). This stance positioned Mérida right in between the nationalist rhetoric that permeated post-revolutionary Mexican art and the anti-nationalist ethos of Surrealism, a tension that also surfaced in Breton's own presentations of Mexican art, whose visit also "triggered massive protests among artists and writers aligned with the Stalinist Mexican Communist Party" (Gilbert, 2009, p. 42). For Mérida, one of Breton's defenders, as Gilbert (2009) has argued, Surrealism offered an alternative to folkloric and didactic indigenism, enabling a more lyrical and abstract engagement with pre-Columbian sources.

He also reformulated the precedents of Surrealism established by European tenets in a similar anticolonial/antiderivative fashion as he did with abstraction, a *counter-countercanon* to use Bürger's expression (2010, p. 704), an expansion: before Uccello-Bosch-Arcimboldo-Goya-Sade-Lautréamont-de Chirico…, there was "Tarascan sculpture of West Mexico and the decoration at the Maya site of Chichén Itzá" (Gilbert, 2009, pp. 36-37). His works, including the Popol Vuh lithographs, fused Surrealist biomorphism with Mesoamerican motifs, creating a singular rumination on his heritage that differed significantly from the literalism of Mexican muralists and their successors [figure 13]. As Gilbert has proposed as well, Mérida became during the early 30s Mexico's "champion of surrealism" (Rivas, 1931), even labelled as a surrealist with "universal value due to his local Guatemalan/Mexican specificity" by Cardoza y Aragón (1934), in his catalogue preface to Mérida's exhibition in the Palacio de Bellas Artes.

Mérida's institutional interventions were equally significant. Upon returning from Paris in 1929, he co-founded the Galería de Arte Moderno in Mexico City, which lasted only two years, nonetheless providing a crucial exhibition space for modern and Surrealist-influenced artists such as Rufino Tamayo and María Izquierdo. His curatorial and critical activities promoted a model of painting linked to Surrealism while simultaneously negotiating anxieties about national identity and the suspicion directed at internationalist tendencies within Mexican art, almost a political threat at the time, as analysed by Gilbert (2009, p. 41).

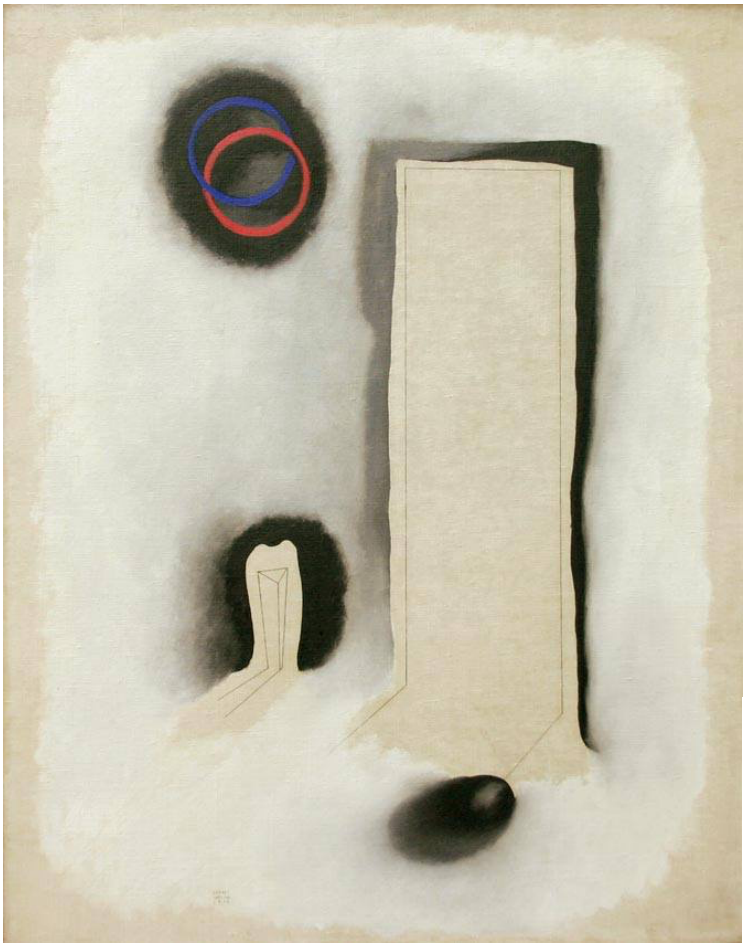

Figure 13.
Carlos Mérida,
oil on canvas,
Puerta estrecha (Narrow door),
1936,
80 x 63 cm,
Blaisten Collection

The International Exhibition of Surrealism in Mexico City in 1940, organised by Wolfgang Paalen and César Moro with Breton's support from Paris, became a key episode for Mérida's participation in the Surrealist network. The exhibition, staged at the Galería de Arte Mexicano, brought together international and Mexican artists, increasing the strained coexistence between local and global artistic discourses (Cruz & Ortega, 2017, p. 4). Mérida was included in the Mexican section alongside figures such

as Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Manuel Rodríguez, while Rivera and Kahlo also appeared in the international section with European Surrealists like de Chirico and Duchamp. This dual structure underscored the ongoing negotiation of artistic value, quality, and identity within the Surrealist-inflected Mexican scene.

Mérida's engagement with Surrealism extended beyond exhibition participation. He collaborated with Paalen, contributing to the dissident Surrealist journal *DYN*, which "attempted to form connections to the past by collecting, registering, and celebrating folk art and Indigenous traditions" (Juarez, 2023, p. 335). *DYN*'s comparative and collage-like approach to the native arts of the Americas resonated with Mérida's synthesis of pre-Columbian aesthetics, popular imagery and Surrealist abstraction. This amalgamation is also found in concurrent print series by Mérida, such as *Carnival in Mexico* (1940) and *Trajes Regionales Mexicanos* (1945),[20] which reflect a Surrealist-driven ethnographic engagement with popular and indigenous practices that transcends straightforward documentation.[21] These

Figure 13. Carlos Mérida, *Desposadas de Tuxpan (Brides of Tuxpan)*, silkscreen, 1945, 44.5 × 32.3 cm, from *Trajes Regionales Mexicanos*, Foyle Special Collections Library (King's College London)

Figure 14. Carlos Mérida, *Dos hombres de Santa Ana Chiautempan vestidos de mujeres* (*Two Men from Santa Ana Chiautempan Dressed as Women*), colour lithograph, 1940, 44.5 × 32 cm, from *Carnival in Mexico*, Foyle Special Collections Library (King's College London)

[20] Both portfolios were studied closely in the archival visit to Foyle Special Collections Library (King's College London).

[21] Mérida engaged in participant observation, as outlined by Birkenmaier as a useful method for Latin American surrealists (2006, p. 16), traveling to remote regions in order to document popular practices (dance and rituals) in Guatemala and Mexico, where he worked since 1934 for the Escuela de Danza de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (School of Dance of the Secretariat of Public Education) (Traba, 1994, p. 66).

portfolios, while attentive to the visual richness of regional attire [figure 14], the rhythm of a particular dance or the deep-seated enmeshment between dress, gender and race [figure 15], convey a deeper poignancy that resists mere illustration.

The depiction of indigenous dress, as Cardoza y Aragón noted, carries a dual significance: it functions as a marker of identity and social control, a "wise yet subjugating" system that persists as both agency and constraint (1991, p. 19). Mérida's treatment of these motifs acknowledges their aesthetic wonder while also suggesting the ambivalence of folkloric self-recognition—a process that is as much an unconscious lament as it is a celebration of cultural heritage. His work thus situates indigenous textiles and rituals within a Surrealist framework that is attuned to the complexities of memory, loss, and the politics of representation; even in direct dialogue, for instance, with famous Breton-approved Mexican Surrealist artworks such as Frida Kahlo's 1943 *Diego on my mind* (*Self-portrait as Tehuana*),

The 1940 exhibition and Mérida's broader practice contributed to a cosmopolitan reimagining of Mexican and Central American art, challenging the dominance of muralism and opening space for new dialogues with international movements (Cruz & Ortega, 2017, p. 4). His approach to Surrealism was marked by insisting, like Mabille (in Adès et al. 2015, p. 247), on finding the marvellous in everyday life, such as his utopian vision of integrating art and architecture, stimulated by the communal work of the Mayas (Mérida in Baciu, 1986, p. 102). Throughout these years, Mérida's position remained virtually distinct from both the Mexican School and the European Surrealist mainstream. His Maya descent and Guatemalan origins informed a pan-Americanism that differed from the Aztec-centred indigenism of his Mexican colleagues (Gilbert, 2009, p. 43), particularly due to his engagement with the visual languages and thematic topoi of pre-Columbian cultures of Southern Mexico or Central America, and popular art.

The various traditions comprising the latter, such as religious art, for instance, were fused as layers of meaning in some of Mérida's more committed-to-Surrealism paintings, in which catholic-like imagery, such as polychrome wooden sculptures (of which Guatemala had one of the most sophisticated American Baroque and Neoclassicist schools during the 17th and 18th century), are rearranged spatially to

follow his rhythmic principle, even depicting damaged or dismembered figures, as can be found in any church or religious art collection in Latin America [figure 15]. In a comical gesture, title included, that disavowed Ristić's solemn attack on humour due to its indifference, narcissism and lack of commitment to the revolution which, in his opinion, every Surrealist creation must incorporate (in Adès et al. 2015, p. 200), Mérida weaponised his artworks to ridicule the loyalty to the Regula Sancti Benedicti' tenth step of its humility ladder, embedded in both Latin American religious conservatism and the most politicised faction of writers who collaborated in *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924-1929).

Figure 15. Carlos Mérida, *El amor anda suelto* (*Love is on the loose*), oil on canvas, 1940, 51.6 x 72.4 cm, Pérez Simón Collection.

In sum, Chapter 2 focused on Central American avant-garde figures who engaged directly with the Surrealist movement in Paris and Mexico, with particular attention to the split identities and transnational exchanges that shaped their trajectories. Miguel Ángel Asturias's experience is emblematic of this dynamic. His formative years in Paris exposed him to Surrealist aesthetics and ethnological

scholarship, but also heightened his sense of alienation as a Guatemalan *ladino* seeking to articulate a national culture from the margins of Europe. This tension is evident in his literary output, where he sought to transform Surrealist techniques into tools for reimagining indigenous myth and identity, as seen in *Leyendas de Guatemala*. However, Asturias's position remained fraught, criticised for appropriating an indigenous identity that was not his own. His work thus embodies a persistent doubleness, oscillating between identification with Maya heritage and the realities of his meztizo background, and between the desire for cultural integration and the inevitability of estrangement.

Luis Cardoza y Aragón, similarly, shaped by Parisian exile, navigated the Surrealist milieu with a critical awareness of its limitations and possibilities. Cardoza's writings foregrounded the marvellous as an everyday, lived reality, challenging both the Eurocentric gaze and nationalist essentialisms. His correspondence and criticism reveal a stance that was both engaged and sceptical, positioning him as a mediator between local traditions and international avant-garde currents. Likewise, Carlos Mérida's trajectory, spanning Guatemala, Paris, Mexico City, and New York, further illustrates the chapter's central theme of horizontal and simultaneous networks. Mérida's engagement with Surrealism and abstraction in Mexico, informed by his Maya heritage, allowed him to forge a visual language that resisted folkloric reduction and nationalist orthodoxy. In the capital, he played a key institutional role, participating in the International Exhibition of Surrealism (1940) and fostering spaces for modernist experimentation.

Within the broader Latin American diaspora in Paris and the Surrealist circuit in Mexico, Asturias, Cardoza y Aragón, Mérida, and their peers formed an ephemeral but interconnected community. Their collaborations and mutual references reveal a shared intellectual and artistic agenda, often converging on foundational topics such as the Popol Vuh, which both Asturias and Mérida reinterpreted through Surrealist techniques. Mérida's portraits of Cardoza and Cardoza's prefaces to Mérida's exhibition catalogues exemplify their reciprocal engagement, while Cardoza's critical reviews of Asturias's Surrealist experimentations underscore the dialogic yet contested nature of their relationship. Toño Salazar, another key member of this network,

illustrated Asturias's books—including *Leyendas de Guatemala*. These artistic and literary exchanges, spanning Paris, Mexico City, and beyond, fostered a sense of shared purpose while highlighting the conflicts inherent in their attempts to articulate a modern Central American artistic identity within transnational avant-garde contexts.

Chapter 3. *Las de aquí*: Isthmic compression

Ixpapalota es nuestra madre, Señora del Mundo,
"La Mariposa de Cristal" esto es: La Noche Estrellada.
Así vio el indio sus dioses con ojos de esteta refinado,
ojos de soñador, de poeta, de artista, de sacerdote (…).
Ixpapalota… ¡Oh Mariposa de Obsidiana, vela por nosotros!
El monte sueña con la distancia, envuelto en una manta gris-azul de niebla invisible;
sueña allí a lo lejos, cujti, remoto y su sueño es ahora de zafiro y no de rubí (…).
El sueño de Izalco no es ya de fuego, es un pesado sueño de lava,
de techcal, entre gris y azul, ya lo dijimos antes, sueños de zafiro y lapizlázuli.

[Ixpapalota is our mother, Lady of the World,
"The Crystal Butterfly"—that is: The Starry Night.
This is how the indios saw their gods, with the eyes of a refined aesthete,
eyes of a dreamer, a poet, an artist, a priest (…).
Ixpapalota… Oh Obsidian Butterfly, watch over us!
The mountain dreams of the distance, wrapped in a gray-blue blanket of invisible fog;
it dreams far away, cujti, *remote, and now its dream is of sapphire and not of ruby (…).*
Izalco's dream is no longer of fire, but a heavy dream of lava,
of techcal, *between gray and blue—as we said before, dreams of sapphire and lapis lazuli.*

Salarrué
(1970, p. 251)

Central America exists as a geological paradox—a bridge of mountains forged by tectonic violence, a slender isthmus divorcing and uniting, as a communicating vessel, continental masses, cultures, and histories (Pastor, 1988, p. 21). This volatile landscape, shaped and remodelled relentlessly by eruptions and hurricanes, mirrors the region's fragmented political and cultural fabric: a mosaic of ancient ethnic divisions, colonial rivalries, and postcolonial nation-states whose borders, as Pastor has argued, rarely aligned with the lived realities of their peoples (1988, p. 245). The logistical obstacles inherent to this geography—disconnected volcanic highlands, coastal corridors, and jungles resistant to infrastructure—compounded the atomisation of artistic production. Unlike the European avant-garde, which thrived on rail networks enabling rapid dialogue between urban centres, Central America's artists who stayed worked in relative isolation, their exchanges fractured by distance, political instability, and the absence of cohesive institutional support (Ferdinán, 2002, p. 90). The region's avant-garde, as has been discussed in the previous chapters, emerged not as a collective movement but as a constellation of singular figures navigating these

discontinuities, their engagements with Surrealism marked by improvisation, indirect "assimilation," and a processual heterodox conciliation of their marginal condition.

This chapter examines, in a more concise way, artists who developed Surrealist-inflected bodies of work despite—or because of—their distance from Surrealism's metropolitan hubs or groups. Unlike their counterparts in Mexico City, New York or Paris, even in Buenos Aires or Havana, who participated in transnational Surrealist networks, these figures often operated outside formal circles, their encounters with Surrealist ideas mediated by periodicals, secondary sources, personal exile, or the pressures of a region infrastructurally peripheral. Their work reflects what Anke Birkenmaier identifies as Surrealism's resonance in Latin America: a shared preoccupation with historical trauma and the unresolved past, articulated through fragmented, oblique strategies (Birkenmaier, 2006, pp. 48-49).

Salarrué, writing in El Salvador and New York, wove automatism and dream logic into theosophical parables rooted in Indigenous cosmologies, without directly acknowledging Surrealism. Trixie Briceño, traversing continents from London to Panama, from Brazil to postwar Tokyo, hybridised early geometrised compositions with pop-surrealist figuration, her mannequin motifs critiquing gendered violence without any documented encounter with Breton's circle. These artists' relationships to Surrealism were often ambivalent, even oppositional. Their works absorbed Surrealist techniques—the marvellous, the uncanny, the dissolution of boundaries between dream and reality—while rejecting affiliation, the movement's Eurocentric frameworks or overt political affiliations.

The indirectness of their engagement reflects Central America's permeability to external influences, yet isolated from the global and Latin American centres of cultural power. Initiatives to forge regional cohesion, such as the 1935 *First Central American Art Exhibition* or Luis Cardoza y Aragón's *Revista de Guatemala* (1945-1954), remained transient, their impact diluted by the region's institutional limitations and dependence on external validation (Vindas, 2023, pp. 173). In this context, Surrealism became less a coherent aesthetic program or a fixed movement than a set of tools (founded on the methods and techniques devised in Paris) for navigating dislocation. These artists'

works, scattered across private and national collections, lost exhibitions, and diasporic archives, resist easy categorisation.

The first of these distant figures is Salarrué, born Luis Salvador Efraín Salazar Arrué in 1899 in Sonsonate, El Salvador, who occupies a singular, unclassifiable in the Central American avant-garde. His œuvre reflects the region's layered histories, descending on his mother's side from a small group of Basque immigrants who integrated rapidly into Salvadoran society, a rare occurrence in a country with minimal European influx (Huezo, 2019, p. 138). This background placed Salarrué at the intersection of local and foreign influences, a position he would later amplify through his persistent renunciation of fixed national identity and his cosmopolitan intellectual pursuits.

His formative years unfolded in a Salvadoran context marked by scarce artistic infrastructure, widespread illiteracy, and a lack of state-driven cultural integration, especially among the country's large Indigenous population (Huezo, 2019, p. 139). Despite these constraints, the capital and major cities of El Salvador in the 1920s experienced a vibrant circulation of ideas through newspapers and literary journals, a broader phenomenon across Central America. Salarrué himself, at 23 years old, even before self-renaming as such, was part of the foundation, as artistic director, of *Espiral* (1922-1923), an influential literary magazine that lasted only a year after 34 editions. This intellectual effervescence, as analysed by Huezo (2019) was shaped by simultaneous interests in esoteric thought, particularly theosophy, and the growing influence of Bolshevik ideas among intellectuals and workers. The avant-garde in El Salvador thus emerged not from institutional support but from improvisational networks of writers, artists, and thinkers responding to both global trends and local crises.

Salarrué's engagement with modern art crystallised during his periods abroad, particularly when he relocated to New York (1916-1919/1946-1958). While living in the city, he attended exhibitions curated by René d'Harnoncourt at the Museum of Modern Art, where he observed the deliberate pairing of contemporary works—Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), or Lipschitz's *Woman playing guitar* (1929)—with Greek and Colombian antiquities. Salarrué interpreted these juxtapositions as evidence that the lineage of

modern art could be traced to both proximate and distant pasts, and that the same existential questions were articulated in primitive and hyper-intellectual forms alike (Salarrué, 1949, p. 56). His article, beyond his analysis, included photographs of the artworks, which enabled the artists and the broader literate Central American audience—given the magazine's wide distribution and strong impact (Pakkasvirta, 2005)—to visually familiarise themselves with the new trends in European and North American avant-garde art. His annotations in the Costa Rican magazine *Repertorio Americano* revealed an ethnological sensitivity and a Freudian awareness of the erotic, even as he refrained from explicit identification with Surrealism or any movement.

Salarrué's approach to identity is articulated most forcefully in his rejection of national categories. He famously declared, as was acknowledged by Adès, *I have no fatherland, I don't know what homeland is*, distinguishing between the abstract, administrative notion of nation and the tangible, affective reality of *terruño*—land and people as lived experience (Ortega Díaz, 1934, p. 338). For Salarrué, El Salvador as a bureaucratic entity, a legal fiction, held little meaning; instead, he identified with *Cuscatlán*, a department in modern El Salvador but a powerful pre-Columbian *Nahua* state confederation during the postclassical period between 1200-1528, and with the creative labour of its inhabitants. This perspective aligns with both Surrealism's antinationalism and its fascination with the "primitive" as a site of critique against Western modernity, yet Salarrué's focus on Cuscatlán subverts exoticising tendencies. His rejection of a *fatherland* reframes indigeneity as a creative, land-based praxis (Ortega Díaz, 1934, p. 338), echoing Mitter's assertion about colonised artists who repurposed primitivism to interrogate Eurocentric hierarchies, turning the ethnographic gaze back upon the coloniser (2008, p. 543). Salarrué's critique extended to the economic elites, whom he saw as disconnected from the land's ethos and the experience of rural labour, their worldview reduced to the circulation of money and market values in a more-than-not pre-industrial region (Ortega Díaz, 1934, p. 338).

The violence of Salvadoran 20th-century history, particularly the 1932 massacre of Indigenous and farmer communities, profoundly marked Salarrué's work and worldview. His literary accounts evoke the brutality of state repression, and the devastation visited upon Indigenous lives and landscapes (Huezo, 2019, p. 145). In

these narratives, the marvellous and the tragic are inseparable, and the dreamlike quality of his writing becomes a means of bearing witness to trauma. In this sense, the epigraph of this chapter, for instance—particularly discerning what entails *Izalco's dream* —takes on an unbearably stinging emotion when juxtaposed with the ethnocide of *La Matanza*, the beginning of the end for the Nahua people, the end of the end for 25,000 lives. The context of artistic and intellectual production in El Salvador was further convoluted by the lack of a coherent national project among the country's political and intellectual elites, whose efforts to "civilise" and "nationalise" the popular sectors were sporadic and ineffectual (Huezo, 2019, p. 139). Salarrué's later return to the United States in 1946, this time as a cultural attaché in Washington, exemplifies the improvisational nature of artistic careers in Central America. Diplomatic postings, although he never became a diplomat per se, often served as creative residencies in the absence of sustained cultural policy at home, reflecting the region's reliance on external opportunities for artistic development (Huezo, 2019, p. 155).

His artistic and literary practice embodies a synthesis of theosophical inquiry, regional myth, and Surrealist technique. His approach to automatism, exemplified in works such as *La Monja Blanca* (*The Mad White Nun,* 1940) [figure 16], diverged from European Surrealist models by integrating theosophical concepts of astral consciousness into the muddle of tropical flora and fauna. Salarrué described his "astral method" as a process where the painter momentarily suspends conscious control, allowing the hand to initiate creation before the personality intervenes (in Huezo, 2019, p. 159). This technique, rooted in Hinduist philosophy and theosophical ideals of higher consciousness, parallels Surrealist automatism but reframes it as a spiritual praxis aimed at transcending material reality to access the "inner nature of objects and people" (Boland, 2001, p. 134).

The painting was praised in the 1947 Knoedler Galleries *Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings from Latin America* in New York. Salarrué was included in the exhibition along with the region's modern masters Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Rufino Tamayo and Wilfredo Lam, and even had *The White Nun* selected as the cover of the New York Times review of the exhibition (Huezo, 2019, p. 159). The result, as seen in this painting, is an enigmatic portrait of marvellous potency.

One easy interpretation can be extracted by the name and the flower motif. The white nun, or *Lycaste skinneri* (also known as *Lycaste virginalis),* is an orchid native to the highland forests of southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Its delicate, pristine white blossoms—hermaphroditic and capable of producing millions of seeds—embody both rarity and resilience, as successful germination depends on a symbiotic relationship with specific fungi, rendering the species scarce in the wild. Declared Guatemala's national flower in 1934, the white nun holds deep symbolic resonance in regional identity, blending themes of purity, transformation, and fragility.

Salarrué's use of a double reading of a white nun as a subject in this painting draws on this botanical element's layered meanings, invoking both the marvellous and the elusive, virginity and fertility, madness and sexuality, chastity and lust, and situating the orchid-nun dyad within the dreamlike dimensions of Surrealist-inflected art. Not only that, Salarrué made a transdisciplinary translation of the work by including a reference of the Mad White Nun in his short story *Pintor de apariciones* (1960), concerning the origin of the model, while proposing, in a Borges-influenced fashion as Huezo has analysed (2019), a "game of mirrors between the original painting and a painting by his daughter Maya. Set in New York City, the story also alludes to the Knoedler Gallery" (p. 159).

In his literary works, such as *Remotando el Uluán* (1932) and *La sed de Sling Bader* (1934), both texts analysed extensively by Davisson (2018), Salarrué employed dream narratives to destabilise linear time and spatial logic. These short stories, structured as travelogues through imagined geographies, dissolve boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness, often catalysed by violent accidents or hallucinogenic substances (Davisson, 2018, p. 21). *Remotando el Uluán* unfolds as a caleidoscopic journey within a dream, only to reveal its events as mental projections, while *La sed de Sling Bader* (*The Thirst of Sling Bader*) inverts this dynamic, situating a static narrative within the perpetual motion of a ship captained by a hashish consumer. This fluidity reflects Surrealism's preoccupation with the marvellous, yet Salarrué's framework is distinctly theosophical, positing infinite planes of reality where the mind seeks synthesis of spiritual, philosophical, and social ideals (Davisson, 2018, p. 23).

Figure 16.
Salarrué,
La monja blanca
(The Mad White Nun),
oil on canvas,
ca. 1940,
54.5 x 47.5 cm,
National Painting
Collection of El Salvador

The interplay of myth and modernism in Salarrué's work critiques the imposition of European rationalism on Indigenous cosmologies. His short stories, such as *El ángel del espejo* (*The angel of the mirror*), stage conflicts between scientific discourse and Indigenous worldviews, particularly in the aftermath of *La Matanza*, where state violence ruptured communal ties to land and tradition (Huezo, 2019, p. 145). Creatures like *La Siguanaba* [figure 17]—a shapeshifting, multiple-origin entity from Salvadoran folklore—symbolise this tension, appearing in both painting and texts that juxtapose the marvellous with the traumatic realities of colonial and postcolonial violence, the excessive colourful humid natural richness of Central America and its threatening facet—whether a jaguar or a ghastly woman circumventing waterbodies, the *Siguanaba's* direct translation. The painting, fundamentally, let the folktale unfold by juxtaposing elements pushed to the extreme of *horror vacui*, a distinctive feature of Latin American baroque, therefore a concept engrained in Salarrué's visual language. Volcanos, rivers, iguanas, masks, trees, roots, and the entity itself, who seems to have shed her skin not long ago. Unlike Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso*, which resolves such

clashes through aesthetic harmony, Salarrué's tales leave contradictions unresolved, reflecting Central America's fractured historical consciousness (Davisson, 2018, p. 20).

Figure 17. Salarrué, *La Siguanaba*, oil on canvas, ca. 1940,
104 x 124 cm, Private Collection.

Other artworks that resemble a relative familiarity to Surrealisms are Salarrué's fantastic, sometimes described as proto-psychedelic paintings/drawings, such as *Villano rojo* (*Red villain*, n.d.), Monstruo marino (*Sea monster*, 1950), *Túnel en el ojo de la vaca* (*Tunnel in the Cow's Eye*, 1958) [figure 18], and *Túnel en el ojo del búho* (*Tunnel in the Owl's Eye,* n.d.) [figure 19]—exemplify his Surrealist-inflected exploration of vision, particularly the last two, as both a physiological and metaphysical process. In these works, the eye becomes a vortex, a spiralling threshold that collapses distinctions between interior and exterior, perception and dream. The concentric forms evoke not only the anatomical structure of the eye but also the cosmic and the oneiric, the

physicality of nature and the abstraction of biology, suggesting, as he proposed in his literature, a journey inward that is simultaneously a passage to other realities.

The choice of animal eyes—cow and owl—further situates these paintings within a mythic and regional context. The eye, in both pieces, appears as a prevalent, active, generative force—an astral aperture to experience. The cow's eye, rendered in dark, swirling tones, conjures the earthy, nocturnal mysteries of rural Central America, while the owl's eye, vibrant and luminous, alludes to wisdom (*Athene noctua)*, and the transformative epistemic power of the marvellous. Both artworks destabilise the viewer's position, inviting a dissolution of self into the spiral, as constituted in Salarrué's conception of art as a "marvellous communion" that transcends boundaries between subject and object.

Figure 18. Salarrué, *Túnel en el ojo de la vaca (Tunnel in the Cow's Eye*), oil on paper, 1958, 45 x 78.5 cm, National Collection of Visual Arts of El Salvador.

Finally, Salarrué's conceptualisation of the "invisible sculpture," developed in literary terms in a homonymous short story published as part of his collection *Eso y*

más (1940), deserves some discussion. With the biting irony that defined the Dada and Surrealist movements, Salarrué somewhat prefigures, from Central America, the radical dematerialisation of the art object later explored by Klein, Byars, Warhol, and Cattelan, as well as other developments in postwar conceptual and Neo-Avant-Garde art. In the story, the protagonist Sacha Nitrisky encounters a series of sculptures by Paulo Bresky that are never fully resolved in material form; instead, each work invites the viewer to complete it imaginatively. The block with female hands, the nude distorted by invisible water, the children fleeing an unseen terror, and the swan in epileptic collapse—all exist in a state of ontological incompleteness, demanding the spectator's psychic participation to realise their full meaning. The invisible element—whether a dove, water, or a monstrous pursuer—functions as a conduit for desire, memory, and projection, aligning with Breton's assertion that the object of art is a reserve for the workings of the unconscious, not a model for representation (Krauss, 1986, p. 43). From a certain distance, the same participation is demanded in Salarrué's

eye paintings, in which no other definitive element than the title, clearly identifies what is being depicted.[22]

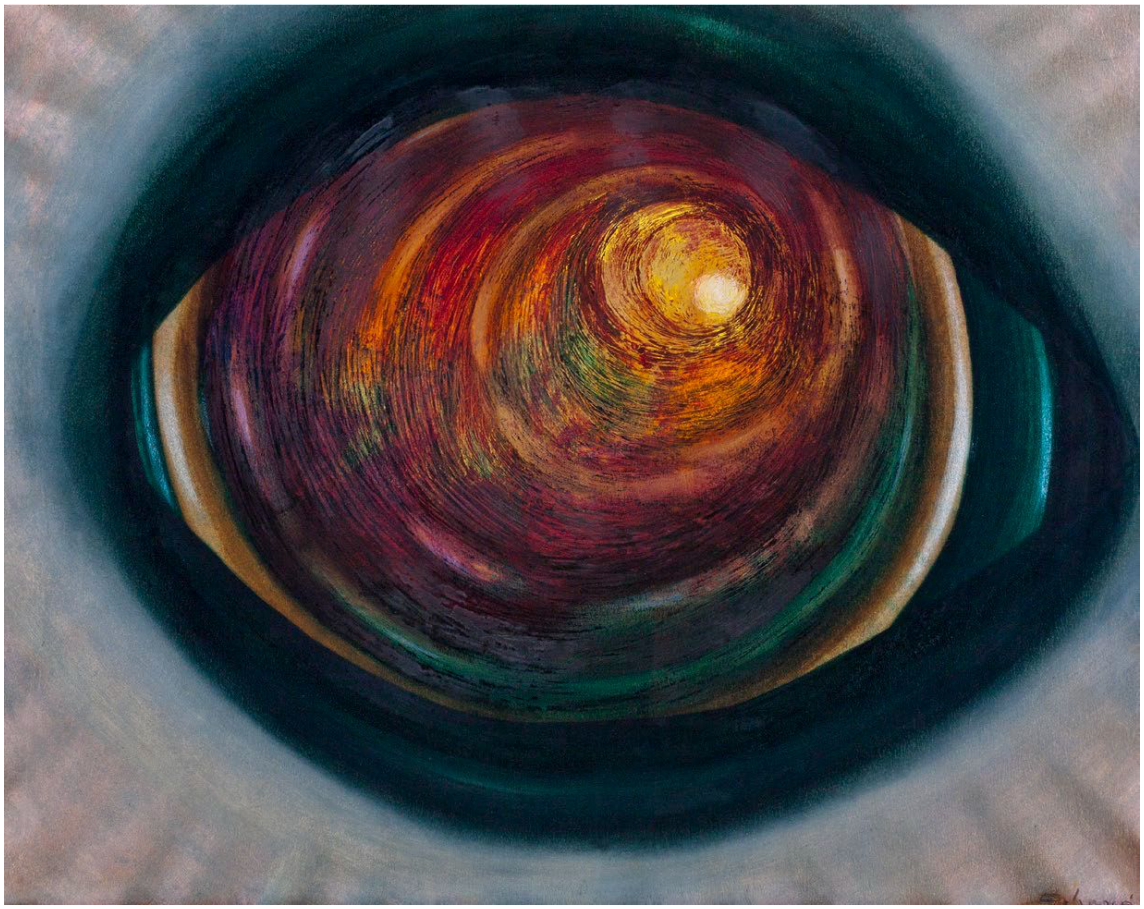

Figure 19. Salarrué, *Túnel en el ojo de un búho (Tunnel in the Owl's Eye*), charcoal on paper, no date, 46 x 58.5 cm, National Collection of Visual Arts of El Salvador.

Beatrix (Trixie) Briceño's transnational formation, the other Central American figure studied in this chapter of adaptive local Surrealism, offers a compelling case through which to approach her idiosyncratic painterly vocabulary—a hybrid of figurative surrealism, geometric abstraction, and a pointed, at times ironic, social critique. Born in London in 1911, Briceño's early life unfolded across an itinerant geography that included the United States, China, and Japan. These displacements were not incidental but formative, embedding within her work a diasporic sensibility which often prioritised plurality and conceptual ambiguity. Her eventual settlement in Panama in 1943—following her marriage to journalist and diplomat Julio Briceño—

[22] Although it will not be addressed in this thesis, given the extension constraints, it is nonetheless suggestive to at least point out the parallel in intent between this story by Salarrué and Trixie Briceño's painting *Escultura en Proceso de Autocreación* (*Sculpture in the Process of Self-Creation*, n.d.). A rather unusual correspondence among Central American avant-garde figures.

inaugurated a new phase of intercultural negotiation. In this liminal position—between insider and outsider, native and émigré, Panamanian and British—Briceño developed a singular aesthetic language that resisted classification within the hegemonic national paradigms.

Her artistic training reflects this cosmopolitanism: initial studies under Juan Manuel Cedeño in Panama and Betty Bentz in the Canal Zone were later complemented by an influential period in Rio de Janeiro (1958-60), where she studied with Frank Schaeffer, a disciple of Fernand Léger (Kupfer, 2013, p. 28). This Brazilian sojourn introduced Briceño to the tenets of geometric abstraction, visible in her predilection for hard edges, flat acrylics, and vivid colour fields. Yet, her work consistently resisted abstraction, maintaining a figurative core that draws equally from naïf traditions, magical realism, and the emerging currents of what Traba would later identify as "pop surrealism", though not referring to Briceño (1994, p. 163).

Genesis (1969) [figure 20], a paradigmatic example of this synthesis, presents a visual economy in which architectural forms morph into anthropomorphic towers, bricks curve like flesh, and figures emerge both from within and beside their constructed environments. The allusion to creation—the biblical, biological, and mythic—is not allegorical but conceptualised through a vocabulary of rounded geometries and uncanny juxtapositions. The fragmented female nude in the lower left stands within a sort of inner courtyard surrounded by buildings. Behind the adjacent façade, Briceño depicted a face with penetrating eyes behind its windows, suggesting surveillance, enclosure, and a gaze that entraps rather than reveals. These architectural forms, evocative of both womb and kiln, produce a mutable semiotics of femininity as constructed, reproductive, and domestic. Briceño's interest here is in staging a symbolic confrontation between the organic and the artificial, between the gendered body and its architectural circumscription.

Figure 20. Trixie Briceño, *Genesis*, oil on canvas, ca. 1969,
99 x 73.66 cm, OAS Art Museum of the Americas Collection

Likewise, Briceño stages in *Genesis* a revisionist cosmogony in which the foundational myths of origin—divine creation, gendered hierarchy, reproductive destiny—are reconfigured through a (pop)Surrealist idiom signified by architectural allegory and corporeal symbolism: namely, the naked female figure, plausibly cast as Eve, whose thigh bears a conspicuously absent brick. This small lacuna, easily overlooked, performs a radical semiotic inversion: rather than Eve being formed from Adam's rib, as dictated by the Pentateuchal account, it is Eve who is visibly

"incomplete," suggesting that a part of her has been extracted to engender the rest of humanity. In Briceño's flattened world (as in real life), the female body is not derivative but originary; it is the material substrate from which humanity is quite literally fabricated. The surrounding brick structures—organic in curvature, superficially solid, vaguely uterine—serve as the only spaces where intimacy is represented: a couple embracing in one kiln, another man half-emerging from another, as if fired or gestated within. These brick ovens, a synergetic architectural organism, become reproductive machines, sheltering and manufacturing male figures who seem to be sculpted, not born. In this schema, love-making and creation are possible only within these gendered containers—spaces of thermal intensity and enclosure that underscore both the labour and confinement of reproduction. Briceño's *Genesis* thus performs a double critique: it subverts theological patriarchies and reasserts, with quiet but defiant irony, the unacknowledged work of women as the true architects of the species' perpetuation.

The thematic articulation of gender, in a Surrealist-inflicted fashion, is even more explicit in *Las Muñecas* (*The Dollies*, 1968) [figure 21]. Here, Briceño's engagement with the social construction of femininity enters a realm of the sinister. A line of pink female mannequins—ornamented with make-up, wigs and jewellery—passes along a conveyor belt. A male figure, dressed in what could be a medical coat, inspects or manipulates the mannequins, whose legs, incongruously individualised by stockings and shoes, imbue them with a residual trace of life. The background—a claustrophobic interior with tiled floors and a surgical spotlight—invokes the operating theatre as much as it does the fashion atelier. Kupfer (2013, p. 12) reads this composition as a critique of the homogenisation of female beauty, but its implications extend further: the scene materialises the uncanny in the Freudian sense: the return of the repressed within the familiar. The female form is dehumanised yet "hyper-feminised," rendered seductive and inert, mobile and immobilised. The disembodied eyes in the wall—a recurrent motif in Briceño's work—express again surveillance and objectification, reminding Benjamin's description of the mannequin as the cypher of modern alienation: "the play of human features exchanged for the face of an alarm clock" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 218).

Briceño's use of the mannequin motif in *The Dollies* resonates with René Crével's theorisation of the "Noble Mannequin," published in *Minotaure* in 1934. For Crével, the mannequin was not merely a shop-window dummy but a potent metaphor for the modern female body under capitalism—assembled, dressed, dismembered, and reconfigured in the image of masculine desire. This entity is not entirely passive; she is "twice a woman," both flesh and apparel, a "hermaphrodite" that repels singular identification (Crével in Adès et al., 2015, p. 43). Briceño's mannequins echo this ambivalence. Their smooth surfaces and erotic appendages signal (male?) desire; nevertheless, their serial production implies them to be casualties of aesthetic and ideological violence. The factory line, thus, becomes a necropolis, the shop window a mortuary. A similar gendered Surrealist strategy can be traced in other works of Briceño, such as *Fútbol* (*Football*, n.d.), which explores the uptight dynamic between sport and patriarchal masculinity in Central America; *Reina de belleza* (Beauty Queen, n.d.), returning to the motif of the mannequin; *La Frutería de Adán* (*Adam's Fruit Shop*, 1977), which recurs to the biblical creation myth; or, finally, *El sueño* (*The dream*, n.d.), merging biomorphic abstraction elements with brushstroke automatisms in the style of Masson, all entangled in the surrealist theme par excellence.

Figure 21. Trixie Briceño, *Las muñecas* (*The Dollies*), oil on canvas, 1968, 92 x 114 cm, OAS Art Museum of the Americas Collection

Her engagement with gender and embodiment places her work in dialogue with feminist reconfigurations of the female form in postwar art. As Giunta (2020, p. 31) notes, women artists in Latin America—regardless of explicit affiliation with feminist movements—produced works that destabilised the masculinist regimes of representation that had dominated the modernist canon. Briceño's dolls, houses, and hybridised forms of female corporeality speak to a broader reconceptualisation of the body—not as mere object of desire but as a site of discipline, resistance, and melancholic allegory. Like Giunta, Birbragher-Rozencwaig (2022, p. 26) has emphasised how Surrealism offered women artists in Latin America a cognitive and affective space in which to articulate political, cultural, and gendered concerns otherwise suppressed in male-dominated spheres. Her painting does not merely invert the gaze; it reframes the scene of looking itself, populating her canvases with eyes detached from faces, and body-forms detached from agency.

If Surrealism sought to liberate the unconscious through irrational juxtapositions, as Lautréamont's infamous dictum posited—*the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table*—then Briceño's tableaux offer a particularly potent Central American variation. In her works, the collision is not between objects but between categories: the woman and the machine, the domestic and the industrial, the naïve and the surreal. As Carpentier (1987, pp. 18–19) observed, the surrealist image was less about fantasy than about the production of a third beauty—an impossible synthesis born of incompatible parts. Briceño achieved precisely this, drawing from everyday iconographies—the home, the doll, the mannequin, the factory—and reconfiguring them as dream-images charged with ideological critique and satire.

Her work, therefore, must be situated within a complex cartography of intermediate forms, trained abroad, established within Central America, detached from any Surrealist group, whether European or Latin American. Briceño's insertion into this prolegomenon to a history of Surrealism in the region requires a careful navigation of both her geographic dislocation and her stylistic hybridity. Her use of humour, allegory, and visual excess positions Briceño as a vital, if underrecognized, interlocutor in the broader conversation on gender, modernity, and surrealist explorations in the region.

All things considered, the indirect, improvisational adaptation of Surrealism in Central America, as traced through figures like Salarrué and Trixie Briceño, reveals a region where artistic innovation flourished also through singular, heterodox responses to atomisation and marginality. These two artists, often working in isolation and negotiating complex diasporic or hybrid identities, transformed Surrealist techniques—automatism, dream logic, the marvellous—into tools for tackling personal, historical, and cultural dislocation. Salarrué's synthesis of theosophy, Indigenous myth, and automatist practice, alongside his antinational stance and literary engagement with trauma and myth, personifies a Surrealism adapted to the splintered, painful realities of Central America. Briceño's transnational formation and hybrid painterly vocabulary, combining geometric abstraction, naïf figuration, and pop-surrealist critique, foregrounds the gendered and social dimensions of the marvellous, especially through

her use of the mannequin and the uncanny. In both cases, Surrealism emerges not as a fixed program or imported aesthetic, but as a procreative, critical language—one that evades categorisation and disrupts Eurocentric narratives.

CONCLUSIONS

The calligram that inaugurates this thesis was not intended to be a visual preface. Mirroring the cartographic layout of Central America, it is comprised of terms, adjectives, and definitions produced by the external gaze, which has so often defined, distorted, and effaced Central America in art historical and literary scholarship. Constructed from signifiers of otherness, maps, and names imposed from the outside, the calligram signals a persistent condition: Central America has been seen, written, and curated by others, its contours shaped by the epistemologies and desires of foreign eyes. More than a neutral act of observation, it is a process that has produced a region at once hyper-visible as a site of exoticism and violence, and invisible as an agent in the making of modernities/modernisms. The thesis acknowledges that this gesture remains a futile stepping stone if it is not followed by a history written from within, by voices that claim their own right to narrate, interpret, and *invent* the region's artistic past and future. In that direction, this is an initial approach to articulate the conception of the Central American avant-garde as a polycentric, transnational, dynamic, distinctive, and communally engaged generation. It is, as well, the first attempt to write a common history of Surrealism in Central America.

The region's atomisation, its logistical and political obstacles, and its improvisational responses to external pressures have shaped a distinctive, if discontinuous, artistic trajectory. Central America's avant-garde emerged as a constellation of uncohesive exiles and disconnected national processes. The 1971 *First Central American Painting Biennial* held in San José, with Marta Traba, Fernando de Szyszlo and José Luis Cuevas as the panel of judges, stands as a crucial liminal event. Conceived as a moment of regional affirmation, it paradoxically marked the exhaustion of the avant-garde's utopian promise. The biennial exposed the fragility of regional institutions, the centrifugal pull of international centres, and the limits of artistic identity in the region.

Decades later, the 2009 aborted Central American art exhibition, which would have been one of the first of its kind in the United Kingdom (Harwood, 2009) provided

a different lesson. Intended to showcase Central American art internationally, the exhibition's stoppage revealed the persistent challenges of representation, translation, and the risk of being curated into invisibility. The project's ambition was to offer a corrective to the region's marginalisation, but its outcome underscored the enduring power of external frameworks to define Central American artistic agency. These events—one marking the end of the avant-garde, the other the pitfalls of international mediation—frame the history of Central American art as a series of ruptures and missed connections. The vases, it appears, have had much trouble communicating. The region's avant-garde figures have often worked in the interstices, forging ephemeral communities and experimental forms that still resist easy assimilation into dominant modernist narratives.

Surrealism's arrival in Central America is representative of both creative stimulus and problematic imposition. The movement's foundational quest for the marvellous resonated with the region's own histories of myth, folkloric culture, and the marvellous real, yet its arrival was always mediated by displacement, translation, and selective appropriation. Central American artists such as Salarrué, Cardoza, and Mérida did not simply import Surrealist techniques; they reworked them through local cosmologies, ethnology, theosophy, and their lived experiences of exile and marginality. Salarrué's integration of automatism, dream narrative, and the astral method within the context of regional myth and theosophy, for example, reveals a Surrealism that is less about adherence to a European canon than about improvisational adaptation and invention. His negotiation of identity beyond fixed national or artistic schools, even during his New York period, all warrant deeper investigation.

Yet the legacy of Surrealism in the region is also marked by exclusion. The international avant-garde circuits of the early to mid-twentieth century were overwhelmingly masculine, reflecting both the patriarchal structures of Central American societies, in which most of these figures could not afford the "luxury" of independent study or exhibition tour, without being chaperoned by a man, whether their husband or a family member. Women artists and writers—such as Luisa González Feo, Trixie Briceño, and others—remained largely absent from the canonical

histories, their contributions marginalised or removed. Fortunately, recent efforts from within Academia and the cultural institutions of the region are counterbalancing this historical wrong.

The thesis has also highlighted how Surrealism's fascination with the "primitive" and the marvellous often served as a form of external manipulation, flattening the complexity of indigenous and local traditions into consumable exoticism for Euro-American audiences. The Surrealists' own ambivalence toward the colonial other—oscillating between identification and fetishisation—mirrored the broader dynamics of cultural dependency and resistance that have defined Central America's avant-garde venture.

The region's relationship with Surrealism is, consequently, deeply ambivalent. Surrealism offered Central American artists a language for expressing the marvellous, the uncanny, and the unresolved residues of history, but it also risked reproducing the very hierarchies it sought to overturn. The Surrealist gaze, as Ferdinán (2002, pp. 92-93) notes, often projected onto the region a model of disorder and marvellous excess that was defined by the criteria of the observing society, not by the lived realities of Central Americans themselves. Breton's famous declaration of Mexico as the "surrealist country par excellence" transformed a dualistic model—reality versus surreality—into a unidimensional one, in which all of Latin America was cast as the domain of surreality, while Europe retained the privilege of being the site of reality and order. This cognitive mapping, far from liberating the region, reinscribed it within a colonial logic that positions it as the perpetual other, the site of the marvellous but never the subject of its own modernity.

The thesis also confronted the persistent problem of audience and artistic autonomy in Central America. As Marta Traba observed, the artist in the region is often a "creator without a public," caught between the demands of international recognition and the realities of local marginalisation. The writer/artist's position as a member of a cultural minority, disconnected from broader publics, is both a symptom and a cause of the region's artistic precarity. The challenge is not only to recover the histories of those who have been excluded or forgotten but to invent new forms of community, dialogue, and critical memory that can sustain a plural and dynamic artistic field;

namely, paraphrasing Blanco (2021, p. 67), alternatives to modernity and modernism. The only way for art to maintain relative autonomy is to generate its meaning from within the precarious cultural circumstances it inhabits, and for criticism to validate this structure by understanding the totality of the process and insisting on the necessity of meaning.

The thesis calls for further research on key but understudied figures whose work illuminates the diversity and adaptation of Surrealism in Central America. The artistic trajectories of Luisa Gonzáles Feo, Ricardo Aguilar, Benjamín Cañas, Carlos Cañas, and Julio Zachisson reveal the multiplicity of responses to Surrealism and modernity. On the other hand, Rodolfo Abularach and Armando Morales are crucial artists who remain underexamined in this study of Surrealism in Central America. Both lived in New York, met Surrealist figures, and absorbed multiple avant-garde influences, yet they never joined Surrealist groups or accepted the label for their work. Their positions were neither fully local nor directly tied to Surrealism's main currents, but rather intermediate and independent. Their importance to the region's modernism deserves focused research to better understand their contributions and the ways they navigated transnational artistic networks.

All these figures, spanning painting, literature, and hybrid forms, offer crucial insights into the plurality of Surrealist legacies in Central America and the ways in which local artists have re-signified imported models. The marginalisation of women and the gendered exclusions of the avant-garde diaspora call for a sustained effort to recover and reinterpret the contributions of figures like González Feo and Briceño, whose transnational formation and hybrid styles challenge the boundaries of regional and global modernisms.

The region's artistic history is written in the interstices—between nations, between continents, between the visible and the obliterated—where the avant-garde emerged as an ongoing experiment in the invention of place, identity, and community. Most of these figures often occupied a precarious position as cultural minorities, caught between the demands of international recognition and harsh local disregarding. The construction of a new art history requires acknowledging these contradictions and embracing complexity. Martí's vision of the "natural man" overcoming false erudition

remains a guiding principle, emphasising, applied to the isthmus, the transformative potential of culture studied from within

Contemporary artists such as Margot Fanjul, Priscilla Monge, and Regina José Galindo have demonstrated the enduring relevance of Surrealist strategies—juxtaposition, collage, and the uncanny—in addressing historical trauma or bodily constraints, whilst asserting artistic sovereignty. Their work points to the possibility of new narratives that engage critically with the legacies of colonialism and modernity. Ultimately, the process of self-assertiveness, as Zavala and Martí have argued, must be developed as a third way between European colonialism and North American imperialism, grounded in the region's own contradictions and creative energies. Only by reclaiming its own histories, recovering its lost and marginalised figures, and inventing new forms of collaboration and critical memory can Central America awaken from imposed dreams and assert its place in the global history of modernism. Or not, choose to put those expectations and everything in crisis. Throw it into the fire. Push it toward the centre of the solar system. Cardoza (1928, p. 30) said it best: only in the Central American tropics *the sun splits open its belly in an unheard-of harakiri of colors.*

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