The Map as Political Agent: Destabilising the North-South Model and Redefining Identity in Twentieth-Century Latin American Art

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The art of cartography can be as contrived and subjective as any other artistic endeavour. Mistakenly construed as scientifically accurate, maps reflect geography's arbitrary contours and function as visual devices normalising singular worldviews. Serving as records of former countries and of political boundaries that are no longer in effect, outmoded maps are strong indicators of geography's political and dynamic nature. But even contemporary maps can communicate a particular perspective while oftentimes appearing to be objective representations of the current global landscape. The Mercator map, for example, is one of the most widely accepted representations of the world. Originating in the sixteenth century, the Mercator projection was devised to accurately represent navigational lines and is based on a rectilinear geometry that conflicts with the curvature of the earth. As a result, land masses are distorted by conforming to its linear grid and relative size among continents is also compromised. Consequently, regions in the Southern hemisphere appear much smaller while those in the North increase in size. In addition, Antarctica is frequently eliminated and the equator is located much lower than midway on the grid, enhancing the North's dominant position in these maps. This Northern bias has made the Mercator projection a point of contention for many scholars and educators who argue that its standardisation as a world map has provided many Westerners with an inaccurate image of world geography that perpetuates colonial mindsets.

Recognising a map's potential to affirm positions of power, trace certain global networks, and establish hierarchical relationships among nations and continents, several Latin American artists have introduced new mapping strategies into their works. Reevaluating existing colonial and postcolonial biases, the artists Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949),

Fig. 1. Joaquín Torres-Garcia. *South America's Inverted Map*, 1936. Ink on paper. Originally published in the first edition of the art journal *Circulo y cuadrado* (May 1936). Courtesy of Cecilia de Torres, Ltd., New York.

Alfredo Jaar (b. 1956) and Gerardo Suter (1957), have sought to undermine the hegemonic views underlying the standard map of the Americas. Critically assessing the peripheral situation of Latin America, these artists renegotiate the colonial landscape by emphasising the arbitrariness of a North-South geopolitical divide, deliberating on its hierarchical implications and assessing its impact on identity formation.

Challenging Eurocentric visions of the North as superior to Central and South America, Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García placed an overturned South American continent in the center of *South America's Inverted Map* (1936) and stretched it toward the map's outer boundaries thereby excluding the rest of the world [Fig. 1]. With this inversion, Torres-García reversed Latin America's subordinate position, declaring the pre-eminence of modern abstraction in the South. The significance of such a gesture is located in the efforts of Latin American artists in the 1930s to create internationally-recognised modern art movements rooted in local traditions.

Petitioning Uruguayan artists to seek inspiration from their own South American traditions rather than modelling themselves after European trends, Torres-García published his first manifesto in 1935 titled *The School of the South* and therein proclaimed his intention to shift the center/periphery and upper/lower model away from a Eurocentric North and toward the Latin American South. Torres-García wrote:

> I have said School of the South; because in reality, *our north is the South.* There should be no north for us, except in opposition to our South.
>
> ... From now on, the elongated tip of South America will point insistently to the South, our north. Our compass as well; it will incline irremediably and forever toward the South, toward our pole. When ships sail from here traveling north, they will be *traveling down,* not up as before. Because the north is now below ...
>
> This is a necessary rectification; so that now we know where we are.[1]

South America's Inverted Map celebrates this theoretical inversion. Curator and scholar of Latin American art, Mari Carmen Ramírez, has written extensively on Torres-García's strategy of inversion and describes it

as a means of destabilising the marginal restrictions of the first-world, "to emphasize figuratively the power and independence of the 'School of the South' and announc[e] the end of the colonial period of Latin American art and the beginning of a new artistic era."[2]

Placing the South American continent in a 'downside-up' position, Torres-García provides map readers with a new perspective that is oriented from the Southern hemisphere. To orient the viewer, Torres-García clearly demarcates the equator, Tropic of Capricorn and Tropic of Cancer; but he inserts familiar cartographic clues in unusual ways, subverting them to promote a Southern reading and to demonstrate how these common cartographic signs are not universal markers but are instead politicising agents. The compass, for example, is oriented toward the Southern pole, directing travellers toward Montevideo, Uruguay, the home of the School of the South, which he accentuates by indicating its location with cross-hatching, an arrow, and its approximate coordinates. To the right of the compass is the Southern Cross constellation,[3] a celestial reference point for Southern sailors that becomes visible in the Northern hemisphere south of latitude-30, where Torres-García cuts off the map. Emphasising further the opposing perspectives of southern and northern sailors, Torres-García inserts a leftward pointing arrow to indicate the earth's eastward movement. Scientifically framing these contrasting worldviews within natural phenomenon, Torres-García metaphorically validates the South's separate reality as equally significant to the North's.

Legitimising Southern experience by ironically undermining the North's preeminent position, Torres-García implored Uruguayans to define themselves as a culture separate from Europe and vibrant in its own traditions. To this end, he sought to reposition his homeland on the cultural map of Western civilisation by means of "constructive universalism," a form of abstraction that espoused universal principles and was based on the constructivist traditions of native South American art. Its political ambitions, Ramírez says, was to define "Latin America as the point of origin for a new hemispheric visual arts tradition founded on the recovery and synthesis of two seemingly irreconcilable elements: the pre-Hispanic past and the legacy of universal art (Western and non-Western) as embodied in the emblematic language of Modernism – abstraction."[4]

Created around the time of *South America's Inverted Map*, *Cosmic Monument* (1938) immortalised the School of the South's ambitions and the constructive universalist style by fusing universal symbols of human experience with geometric abstraction. While rejecting the strict rationalism of modern European abstraction, Torres-García embraced its utopian ideal of promoting a new social order through essential forms. Seeking a universal art of metaphysical depth, he eventually found a more spiritual geometry in the art of ancient South Americans, who skillfully abstracted worldviews into geometric patterns and glyphs. Synthesising these two approaches to geometric abstraction, constructive universalism bridged the gap between old world and new, primitive and modern, historical and universal.

Similar to the European modernists who borrowed from "primitive" cultures, Latin American modern artists developed unique artistic programs that synthesised European modernism with complementary indigenous styles and local customs. Presenting the native constructivist tradition as universally significant and in line with European notions of modernity, Torres-García declared the School of the South's unique cultural identity while positioning it at the cutting edge of modernist trends. "The presence of the constructive principles on the American continent thousands of years before they were developed in Russia or Europe," Ramírez explains, " ... implied that the modern Latin American artist was not copying foreign models but continuing the long tradition of pre-Hispanic art, based on the rational principles of geometry, that had been obscured by centuries of colonial domination and the imposition of foreign styles."[5]

Instead of destroying the colonial model through a denial of difference, Torres-García modelled his revisionist strategies on imperialist mindsets and mapping techniques, manipulating them in favour of the South. By legitimising the new art of the periphery within the scope of European modern art, Torres-García prevented the School of the South and its native sources from becoming a marginalised Other. Instead, he validated its artistic production according to the cultural standards of the center. "What Torres-García defined as the abstract or universal order not only served to legitimise pre-Hispanic culture in the context of world civilisations, but established its artistic contribution at the same level as that of the classical civilisations of antiquity," Ramírez argues, adding that "the principle of universality of abstract form that tied the artistic contribution of the Inca to that of the Egyptians or archaic Greeks implied the right of Latin Americans not only to participate in the legacy of universal civilisations, but also to make use of the conventions of these cultures in their art."[6] Establishing constructive universalism's distinctive form of abstraction as rooted in the ancient American past and emerging centuries before its appearance in Europe, Torres-García denied Europe's claim to modernism, illustrating

Fig. 2. Alfredo Jaar. *A Logo for America*, 1987. computer animation, spectracolor lightboard. Displayed in Times Square, New York. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 3. Alfredo Jaar. *A Logo for America,* 1987. computer animation, spectracolor lightboard. Displayed in Times Square, New York. Courtesy of the artist.

how ideologically-based the North's assumed preponderance actually was. In doing so, he demonstrated how the South might supplant the North and proclaimed this victory stating: "That is why we now turn the map upside down, and now we know what our true position is, and it is not the way the rest of the world would like to have it."[7]

Unlike Torres-García who renegotiated difference to position Latin America within the existent cultural landscape, contemporary artist Alfredo Jaar decries the inequality inherent to established systems of power, seeking to bridge the distance between North and South, first and third world, center and periphery. Reaching beyond the artistic realm, Jaar's *oeuvre* addresses the interstices of social, economic, political and cultural power structures to reveal the subtle mechanisms sustaining the imbalance of global relations.

Jaar's controversial piece *A Logo for America* (1987) proposes the revision of these asymmetrical positions [Figs. 2 and 3]. Displayed in Times Square, this 45-second computer animation sequence confronted United States citizens with their hegemonic use of the label "American." It begins by disrupting the semiotic relationship of the United States map and flag with the term "America." The first frame depicts a silhouette of the continental United States imprinted with the slogan "This is not America."

The next one outlines the U.S. flag and states "This is not America's flag." Jaar's accusatory tone softens, however, as he isolates the term "America" in the following frame and then offers new signification for "America" through the creation of a new sign, a "logo," that accommodates all nations within the Americas under the disputed term. America's reduction from the heterogeneous to the one-dimensional, Jaar exclaimed: "America unfortunately has been transformed into a word-image of the One that defines itself by exclusion of the Other. So this project demands the simplest kind of recognition, that is, of being put on the map."[8]

After negating the United States' exclusive right to the label "American," Jaar illustrates how the new logo develops out of the term "America." Recognising advertising's role in the advancement of political ideologies, Jaar devised his own image of America in the form of an advertisement. His product was a unified America, representative of all its peoples, and its logo was the word itself with the silhouette of a united North, Central, and South America replacing the letter "R" at its center. Uniting image and text within what appears to be a natural order, Jaar suggests that the concept of a united America is inherent to the word itself.

The final sequence depicts the American continent spinning clockwise on an axis located in Central America. Throughout the rotation,

North and South America alternate geographical positions, thus eternally inverting the map and destabilising the ensconced geopolitical order. The term "America" no longer serves as a reminder of the severe rift between the North and South. In striking contrast to Torres-García's displacement of power through inversion, Jaar replaces the divisive North-South model with an all-encompassing, harmonious vision of the hemisphere. He comments on this strategy stating: "In my work, I try to close gaps between worlds that seem far apart but are deeply connected. I try to build bridges, create connections, reveal."[9]

Fully aware of how deeply engrained language is in the collective psyche, Jaar attempted to decolonise the map, and consequently the world, by exposing the linguistic systems covertly reinforcing colonial imperatives. Addressing the vital role of language in structuring power relations, linguist Noam Chomsky states that "language is the way we interact and communicate, so, naturally, the means of communication and the conceptual background that's behind it ... are used to try to shape attitudes and opinions and induce conformity and subordination."[10] Embodying imperious worldviews, these linguistic codes function as abstract borders denying access to those in the periphery. With *A Logo for America*, Jaar demonstrated the colonial mindset of the United States and confronted its imperialist agenda of continued hemispherical domination, holding each citizen responsible for reaffirming power differences through the semiotic designation "America" for the United States.

Unlike Torres-García who addressed fellow Uruguayan artists and others in the periphery, Jaar targeted the audience of Times Square – a space where capitalist principles are transmitted to people from all over the world via the latest modes of information technologies. Utilising the spectracolor screen to circulate his subversive vision of "America," he co-opted the media's channels of communication, thereby infiltrating the center. His intervention into the system provided him with direct access to U. S. consumers and a means of communicating with them in their language. By treating his universalist vision as a consumer product and inserting it within one of the central nodes of late capitalism's global network, Jaar divulges some of the economic interests sustaining imperial ideologies today.

The current world, marked by transnational commerce, global markets and the dominance of new technologies, does not fit the center-periphery model of previous colonial relations. At the same time, however, contemporary society is nowhere near a postcolonial stage of redemption, an observation Ramírez has noted, stating:

In this intersection of eras, indelibly marked by the tyranny of the marketplace and by the positivist Darwinism of globalization, we live a reality of accelerated expansion characterized by the dissolution of geographic borders and the consequent homogenization – economic as well as cultural – of the planet.[11]

Today's imperial model is therefore entrenched in the dynamics of globalisation, as it serves late capitalist agendas, and in the utopian rhetoric of pluralism that alleges to promote equality among different groups while endorsing a homogeneous global identity.

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Fig. 4. Gerardo Suter. *TranSitus*, 1998 (launched 1999). Internet site, homepage. as the page loads, the US-Mexico borderline disappears. Courtesy of the artist.

This neocolonial context forms the foundation of Mexican artist Gerardo Suter's examination of the North-South / US-Mexico divide, its role within global politics, and the implications of its erasure for Latin American identity. Situated on the US-Mexican border, Suter's Internet piece *TranSitus* (1998, launched in 1999) was a two-part project that played out in both real and virtual space. In real space, a truck allegedly travelled the length of the transnational border transporting, what the website states is "someone remembering and rebuilding his memory while he travel[led]." The Internet, which is the work's main component, served as the receptacle for this memory. Constructed in virtual space, the traveller's memory transformed his journey along the border into a memory of the border's erasure. Figuratively illustrated as the erasure of a line in the sand, the border's disappearance is the central image of the *TranSitus* homepage [Fig. 4].

Fig. 5. Gerardo Suter. *TranSitus*, 1998 (launched 1999). Internet. Pop-up screen depicting global interference on the traveler's memory. Courtesy of the artist.

In *TranSitus,* as well as in present-day society, the US-Mexico border is an emphatic symbol of the profound political and socio-economic disparities between first and third worlds and, more recently, of the inequities intrinsic to globalisation's imperialist enterprise. The destitute conditions of some Mexican border cities, which serve as production centers for large transnational corporations, vividly illustrate how global markets favour those who already occupy positions of privilege while exploiting underprivileged local workers. Border traffic also puts this inequity into high relief since passage is facilitated for those who are privileged to reside in North America and restricted to those living South of the border. Marking the space of division in the North-South model, this borderland offers an extreme example of the intersection between globalism and local economies, the advancement of transnational corporations and the subsequent alienation of its labourers, as well as the freedoms of global commerce and the simultaneous restrictions on human migration. Focusing on the identity politics ensuing from this arbitrary divide, Suter presents his viewer with the "Southern" perspective by inserting his traveller within this global

system as both transported product and illegal immigrant. Permeating the border within the truck's container, the traveller becomes the pawn of this neocolonial, transnational system.

Demonstrating the precariousness of the traveller's memory, Suter made his private memory accessible to members of a global audience, those with access to positions of power in this global arena, who unsuspectingly manipulated it. As Internet users accessed the website, each hit altered the traveller's memory construction by injecting a flash of light that interfered with the visual process of erasing the border [Fig. 5]. This image captured from the website displays solid white rectangles where light would flash in the animated sequence, indicating where global intereference affected the traveler's memory construction, which was depicted as weekly segments according to his position on the border at the time.

Providing a sense of history, memory plays a significant role in identity construction, constantly shaping one's sense of self. In today's world, human experience is shaped by a network of intersecting events and can no longer be understood as a linear, historical progression. In *TranSitus*, Suter addresses the changing conceptions of history, exploring how human beings define their own identities within this unfolding global realm. To achieve the haphazard effect of memory construction, it was of crucial significance for Suter that Internet users directly influence the traveller's memory and, consequently, his historical knowledge. These external forces intervened in the traveller's process of becoming, deterritorialising the subject further and separating him from his homeland and historical roots, an act cultural theorist Michel Foucault summarised, stating "if one controls people's memory, one controls … their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles."[12] By having Internet users "control," even if unwittingly, the traveller's memory, Suter drew attention to the effects of global interference on personal and collective histories, suggesting that globalisation's promise of egalitarianism through a homogeneous identity could actually lead to the reinforcement of established relations of power. The dissolution of collective identities thus becomes an imperialist strategy.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's notion of Empire summarises the neocolonial structure underpinning globalisation, which continues to marginalise those on the periphery while also eradicating collective histories to establish control. Analysing the decline of nation-states on account of the globalisation of economic and cultural exchanges, Hardt and Negri present the concept of "Empire" as the model for a new global order, a new form of sovereignty.

Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow.[13]

The Internet and the anonymous users that shaped the traveller's nomadic identity allude to the decentered power and agency of Empire and to the potential illegitimacy of local influences in the face of global homogeneity. Unlike Jaar, who repositioned Latin America within a unified Western hemisphere, Suter presents the situation of a Latin American person within the contemporary world at large. Dramatising the erasure of this North-South division by way of the Internet, a decentered structure, Suter established the discourse of globalism as the context for this traveller's journey and identity formation. By erasing the border, Suter's migrant traveller entered a deterritorialised space – an unknowable and infinite space, which cannot be mapped. Within this electronic and ephemeral space, the traveller negotiated and confronted his new identity, which was no longer defined in terms of postcolonial hybridity, the product of both native and European influences. Expanding the discourse of Latin American identity, Suter presented the contemporary Latin American as a migratory figure whose identity is defined at the intersection of collective history, the memory of his personal journey, and global interference.

Torres-García, Jaar, and Suter have employed diverse mapping strategies that range from inversion and difference to unification and border erasure in order to undermine the dominant ideologies reinforcing geopolitical prejudices. Manipulating the North-South divide, these artists symbolically reconfigured Latin America's geopolitical position vis-à-vis its northern counterpart, while posing questions about personal and collective identity in light of global relations. Despite the Latin American perspective shaping these new cartographic designs, however, the issues raised are of far broader significance, encouraging viewers throughout the world to ruminate about the fate of the subject within the existing global order.

1   J. Torres-García, 'The School of the South', 1935. Reprinted in J. Torres-García, Constructive Universalism and the School of the South, (Washington D.C.: Art Museum of the Americas, Organization of American States, 1996). 41. A minor revision was made to the English translation offered in this text. The capitalisation of the word 'north' has been removed to reflect more faithfully Torres-García's restricted use of capitalisation for 'South'.
2   M. C. Ramírez, El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy (Austin: Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery; University of Texas Press, 1992) 1, 3.
3   K. Groninger shared this observation in conversation with the author, Richmond, Virginia, 23 January 2005.
4   M. C. Ramírez, 'Re-positioning the South: the legacy of El Taller Torres-Garcia in contemporary Latin American art,' in M. C. Ramírez, El Taller Torres-García, 258.
5   Ibid.
6   Ibid., 257.
7   Torres-García, The School of the South, 41.
8   A. Jaar, 'Transcripts of Remarks', in R. Weiss and A. West, (eds.), Being América: Essays on Art, Literature and Identity from Latin America (Fredonia, N.Y.: White Pine Press, 1991) 124.
9   A. Jaar quoted in 'La Generazione delle immagini, Public Art, Alfredo Jaar', n.d. http://www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.pl?x=/Facts/Eng/fjarr.htm (12 February 2009).
10   N. Chomsky, 'Collateral Language', interview by D. Barsamian, Z Magazine, July-August, 2003, http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/200307--.htm (11 February 2009).
11   M. C. Ramírez, 'A Highly Topical Utopia: Some Outstanding Features of the Avant-Garde in Latin America', in M. C. Ramírez and H. Olea, Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2004) 1.
12   M. Foucault, 'Film and Popular Memory', in S. Lotringer, (ed.), Foucault Live! Interviews, 1966-84, translated by J. Johnston, (New York: Semiotext[e], 1989) 92.
13   M. Hardt and A. Negri, Empire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) xii-xiii.