

Lori Cole, *Surveying the Avant-Garde: Questions on Modernism, Art, and the Americas in Transatlantic Magazines* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 240 pp.

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Once, during a graduate school flirtation with Italian Futurism, I stumbled on a facsimile of *Poesia*, a journal that F. T. Marinetti edited a few years before he published his momentous “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” (1909). Amid *Poesia*’s sheaves of Parnassian ostentation, Marinetti conducted two “international surveys.” One gathered attitudes on “the beauty of the Italian woman.” The other queried poets on a revolution underway in versification: “What are your thoughts for or against the so-called ‘*verso libero*’ in Italy derived from the French ‘*vers libre*’ that Gustave Kahn has created in France?” An odd brew of serious poetic self-examination, pseudo-empirical research attitudes, ill-conceived social posturing, and a desire to authorize a national imaginary, these surveys struck me as oblique preparations for Marinetti’s later assaults on bourgeois social and aesthetic norms. Accordingly, one might wonder if the historical avant-garde’s founding gestures were something other than explosive scenes of rhetorical warfare. Were they also inquisitive arenas of research, sounding social depths and taking the cultural temperature?

Literary critic and art historian Lori Cole takes up this revisionist premise in her first book, *Surveying the Avant-Garde: Questions on Modernism, Art, and the Americas in Transatlantic Magazines*. Cole has carefully combed through the pages of early twentieth-century little magazines circulating among Argentina, Cuba, France, Spain, and the US, describing a loosely woven fabric of avant-garde editors, artists, and writers. In their editorial programs, Cole catalogues a preponderance of questionnaires and surveys—*enquêtes*, *encuestas*, and *indagaciones*—in which aesthetic and national self-examination vie with our usual understanding of the avant-gardes as a parade of oppositional group projects. As they went about radicalizing their cultural production, how did these groups ask and answer big-ticket questions such as “what should American art be?” “What is the avant-garde?” “Is there an “Argentine sensibility?” And what is the nature of “contemporary disquiet?” Re-organizing literary history around such questions, Cole suggests a redefinition of the avant-garde as a self-reflective “forum in which to consider the stakes of one’s own enterprise,” stakes that include national and international canon formation, and the very meanings of contemporaneity and artistic value (24).

Cole offers a venerable aesthetic genealogy for this view of the avant-garde questionnaire, encompassing renaissance *paragoni* (“comparisons of the arts”), Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?” (along with Foucault’s claim that Kant offers a “permanent critique of

our historical era”), and the parlor games of Marcel Proust (24). She further distinguishes early twentieth-century questionnaires from social science surveys that became widespread at the same time. Cole shows how these questionnaires refer to their own predecessors; she compiles a helpful appendix listing more than one hundred such exercises; and she tracks their legacies in contemporary art journals such as *October*. Even so, her book is not a chronological march through the evolution of a discursive form. One Spanish respondent to a survey in Spain’s *La Gaceta Literaria* somewhat devastatingly characterizes it as a form of repetition whose questions recur with dulling frequency, always “identical in their epistemological fervor, and phrased analogously” (125). In its vanguard iterations, the questionnaire often slides into parochialization, reprovincialization, and repetition.

Thus, the main attraction of Cole’s book, in my view, does not come in a narrative history of the survey form, as one might find in Martin Puchner’s analogous account of the manifesto, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (2005). Rather, as she acknowledges, it occurs in the gradual unfolding of a 1920s flashpoint, in which magazines and their strategies of self-examination capture a great deal of transatlantic traffic, when France and Spain were newly flooded with vanguards from the hemispheric Americas, and the Americas newly inflected by avant-garde concerns that had germinated over the previous two decades in Europe. In truth, Cole devotes most of the book to the self-questioning impulses of several little magazine cohorts clustered tightly around this interwar historical conjuncture, including *Revista de Avance* (Cuba, 1927-1930) *transition* (US/France/Holland, 1927-1938), *Imán* (Argentina/France, 1931), *Martín Fierro* (Argentina, 1924-1927), *La Gaceta Literaria* (Spain, 1927-1932), and *Cahiers de l’Étoile* (France, 1928-1930).

Cole’s thorough assessments of these interrelated cohorts are sometimes groundbreaking in detail, and one of *Surveying the Avant-Garde*’s strengths is to be found in a deft compass for cosmopolitan literary history, which has no geographic home but which navigates “a web of European and Latin American alliances” in Paris, Havana, Madrid, and Buenos Aires (126). Cole studies whole networks, quoting liberally from patchworks of survey correspondents. Nonetheless, some inquisitive editors emerge as protagonists of her story, such as the polyglot Franco-German-American poet-editor Eugène Jolas, the Argentine patron Elvira de Alvear, the young Jorge Luis Borges, and the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. In several places, smart intrachapter comparisons also develop in the tradition of hemispheric studies (Cole does not cite Richard Morse, Roland Greene, or Rachel Price, but her method would have been fortified by attention to their respective calls for hemispheric and transatlantic comparison premised on “triangulations,” “obversals,” and the figure of “*discordia concors*”). Cole’s comparisons bring together Jolas’s well-known *transition* and de Alvear’s all but forgotten *Imán* around the problem

of transatlantic literary influence and expatriation, and in a fresh account of a long-studied interlude, she tracks the “meridian debates” unfolding in Madrid and Buenos Aires on the legacies of Ultraism in the formation of competitive Spanish and Argentine national canons.

Paging through these histories, readers who await Cole’s interpretation of a given questionnaire as the fulcrum or telos of a chapter may become impatient. I wish that Cole had grappled a bit more openly with the ways that her diachronic history of a minigenre and her synchronic history of interwar transatlantic print culture pull in different directions, occasionally thwarting the aims of one another. When it comes to a journal such as *transition*, discussions of Jolas’s core concerns about “the revolution of the word” and an Atlantic “super-language” are not effectively tied to the survey data he collects about the identities of Europe and the Americas. Here, survey topics do not come across as the journal’s beating heart, so much as ancillary marketing efforts and attempts to provoke debate. By contrast, when crucial disputes over *criollismo* and *argentinidad* in the journals *Proa* and *Martín Fierro* take the form of sublimated surveys, the force of Cole’s argument comes into striking view. In *Martín Fierro*, Oliverio Girondo’s manifesto proclaims a new Argentine sensibility, but a survey follows up by questioning the “bravado” in favor of a “conversation” about the same topic (146). Here the point is that the self-questioning impulse itself, not the bluster of the manifesto, is the vanguard provocation that engenders debate.

In all, as a history of the transatlantic avant-garde magazine in the late 1920s, Cole’s study is immensely valuable and expertly drawn. But this element unevenly corroborates the book’s avowed emphasis on the questionnaire form. As a study of the questionnaire itself, *Surveying the Avant-Garde* left me with several questions of my own. Cole argues that the avant-garde questionnaire managed to “parody empiricism” as a form of aesthetic achievement, but in some cases it seems as plausible to view it as the weak echo of social science survey data such as Evan Kindley outlines in his book *Questionnaire*. Put differently: Did the avant-garde questionnaire manufacture debate and coast on crowd-sourced content? Or did it successfully rival the manifesto as a key genre of avant-garde self-fashioning? In these modernist forerunners of focus groups, on which side of the one-way mirror should we ultimately locate the avant-garde questionnaire? Was the avant-garde questionnaire a concession or accommodation to a burgeoning BuzzFeed technocracy of which it was inadequately critical?