

Introduction

As two key authors deeply engaged in the production, exchange, and circulation of literature produced in the context of post-1959 Latin America, Roberto Fernández Retamar and Mario Benedetti agree upon the centrality, originality, and truly unprecedented global reach of Latin American letters of this period, albeit from slightly different perspectives. Even by acknowledging the undeniable importance and contributions of authors such as José Martí, Rubén Darío, César Vallejo, Gabriela Mistral, Jorge Luis Borges, and Alejo Carpentier, among others, Fernández Retamar argued that “solo a partir de la década del sesenta puede hablarse realmente de una entrada de la literatura latinoamericana en el mundo, de su articulación orgánica con la literatura universal” [only starting in the 1960s one can really talk about Latin American literature’s entry into the world, and of its organic articulation with universal literature] (“La contribución de las literaturas” 25). This might seem like an overstatement, and one might even disagree with such a claim. One ought to keep in mind, however, the context of such a rotund assertion, since Fernández Retamar read this essay at the 8th International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) conference held in Budapest in 1976. Fernández Retamar does not make his claim lightly regarding the innovative and profound reach of the 1960s generation. In fact, he touches on the canonical names one might expect, ranging from colonial authors to the boom writers, and places them in context in Latin American letters. His point is that by the late 1950s and 1960s, there had been significant historical progression and maturity in Latin American letters that enabled a generation of writers to collaborate,

exchange ideas, and shape each other's works. This generation of the 1960s also happened to be one that has been widely translated and thus widely disseminated. Fernández Retamar's argument about Latin American literature's "organic articulation" with universal or world literature is one that certainly resonates today in academic circles.¹

Benedetti made a similar argument about the context of the 1960s in Latin American letters as one that enabled artists to develop their own voice and reach an unparalleled level of creativity. Even if there were instances in Latin American literature in which there was some measure of originality, such as in the case of *modernismo*, Benedetti makes the claim that Latin American literature before the 1960s was almost always lagging behind, imitating the fashions, techniques, and models coming primarily from Europe. It is in this context that Benedetti writes: "El escritor de América Latina ya no imita fielmente; tiene la necesaria libertad para crear, sea a partir de variaciones ajenas, sea a través de descubrimientos propios, un lenguaje afortunadamente original" [A Latin American writer no longer dutifully imitates; she/he has the necessary freedom to create a fortunately original language, whether based upon variations of foreign influences or upon his or her own discoveries] ("Subdesarrollo y letras de osadía" 32). Written in 1968, Benedetti's claim has specific resonances in the political and cultural landscape that enabled writers of this generation to produce "original" works, many of which have become landmarks of Latin American literatures.²

Beyond concurring upon the centrality of the 1960s generation of writers and artists in creating truly distinct works of literature emerging from various locations throughout Latin American on an unprecedented scale, perhaps a more subtle point of encounter between Fernández Retamar's and Benedetti's respective positions is their emphasis on literature as only one dimension of art. This emphasis on the divisibility or separation of the arts in the Latin American context of the 1960s is one that has always struck me as particular and assumed as the norm. Part of what *Sensing Decolonial Aesthetics in Latin American Arts* seeks to do is to bring the arts into a dialogue, rather than treating them as entirely divorced from each other. If one accepts Fernández Retamar's and Benedetti's singling out of Latin American literary and poetic production of the 1960s as that of a generation of authors that truly had a global, unprecedented reach and impact, one can also argue for the contribution of Latin American films

to third-world cinema or *nueva canción* songs to the widespread appeal of folk, socially committed, and countercultural music. And yet these art forms are treated and studied in isolation, as though each form reached its worldly potential in a silo or on an island. Instead, this book aims to recast attention to these art forms as an archipelagic network of artistic contributions that collectively marked a temporal division in Latin American arts by producing artworks that sought to engage larger sections of the population, rather than just elite circles. It is this investment in seeking transparent, democratic, colloquial means of aesthetic and affective expressions that allows me to focus on just some of the most salient figures of this generation of the 1960s and their representative artworks. Certainly, there were important films before this decade, for instance, in Mexican cinema's so-called Golden Age (1930s–early 1960s). But the development of film techniques truly distinct from those of Hollywood or European cinema, and their lack of political and social engagement, are what make this cinema so different from what emerged in the 1960s. This is just one example, dealing with film. One can think of other such examples in reference to poetry or music.

My focus in this book on the generation of the 1960s and its distinctive contribution to a redefinition of the arts echoes the positions stated earlier by Fernández Retamar and Benedetti, but also those of more recent studies such as Jean Franco's *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City* (2002), Diana Sorensen's *A Turbulent Decade Remembered* (2007), Samuel Steinberg's *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco* (2016), or Juan J. Rojo's *Revisiting the Mexican Student Movement of 1968* (2016). Where my contribution and study differ is that I will not focus on the novels from the Latin American boom or a single country, but rather on the productive intersections that might ensue if we emphasize the relations among poetry, music, and film as connected art forms. This, in short, is one of the points I make about the need to sense otherwise. Later in this introduction I will briefly engage with some key positions that have informed my framing of this project as one that focuses on the possible unity of arts by tracing threads, networks, relations among artworks, and emphasizing what Daniel Albright has called “comparative arts.”

But what is the sense we give to “art”? How do we sense artworks as seemingly diverse or distinct as poetry, music, or films? A partial answer emerges when we situate these questions in the context of a

thought-experiment or a hypothetical scenario that may not, in fact, be so hypothetical after all. How do our undergraduate students sense a song such as Violeta Parra's "Volver a los 17," or a poem such as Roque Dalton's "América Latina," or a film such as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968)? What is their aesthetic and affective response to such works either in isolation (on their own) or when they are studied alongside each other in a comparative framing? At best, even if the instructor situates these works within their historical contexts and in relation to relevant secondary sources, students more often than not will see these examples as art strictly belonging to Latin America's post-Cuban Revolution era and, by extension, as tinted by the artists' socialist or communist ideologies, which infuse their artistic and aesthetic propositions. This is why there is a need to sense otherwise, particularly when confronted with works from the past that have been read or critiqued in a reductive historical, political, and ideological context. The key to recovering alternative readings of such artworks is twofold: to read such works as producers of their own aesthetic propositions (related to Badiou's concept of inaesthetics), and to bring them into dialogue with contemporary aesthetic thought. In his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Badiou suggests ways to redefine the relationship between philosophical aesthetics and the arts. Rather than assuming that philosophy must make art its object of study, Badiou suggests that the arts are their own producers of truths and can thus be independent and on equal ground with philosophical discourse. In my understanding of my chosen corpus of artworks, I treat them as producers of their aesthetic propositions, which collectively are foundational to an archive of what is now called decolonial aesthetics. As such, decolonial aesthetics simply names a process of undoing the hierarchical relationship between philosophy and art, as well as Eurocentric conceptions of art in relation to those artworks produced elsewhere in the world. What follows is only an option, one alternative among various possible aesthetic models seeking to resituate the importance or validity of works from the past not simply as artistic artifacts retrieved from the archive, but as things that reveal important keys to understanding contemporary cultural and artistic productions.³