

PREFACE

Threshold Magic

When the *New York Times* reported on the Society of Independent Artists' costume ball of March 11, 1921, the outfit that received the lengthiest copy was the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García's poem overalls. While harlequin, futurist, primitivist, folkloric, and cross-dressing garbs each received some words in the short article, Torres-García's sartorial poetry attracted relatively extensive description: "[he] had New York City outlined on his costume, the Woolworth Building on one leg down town, the Metropolitan Tower on the other, he sat on the Bowery, the Times Building was on his chest just above Forty-second Street, and the Bronx ran uptown on the back of his neck" ("Greenwich Village"). The overalls hung on Torres-García's frame with the same baggy absurd colonial excess with which the city extended itself over the forests, fields, streams, wetlands, salt marshes, and beaches of the island. Whereas Walt Whitman had once found in the native Lenape name *Mannahatta* "a word, liquid, sane, unruly, musical, self-sufficient . . . nested in nests of water-bays, superb" (585), Torres-García's poem outfit (fig. 1) recaptured the modernist deceptions of Whitman's bombast: the outfit mimes the borough of Manhattan spread sloppily over the island, the unruly colonial urbanism that had crowded out the Lenape people, and the strategic spatial code of modernity that alienates the signifying of a native *Mannahatta*. The Venezuelan poet, art historian, and curator Luis Pérez-Oramas writes that Torres-García's overalls marked "the disappointment, even the failure, of his time in America . . . disguised as a 'human ad, a decoy'" (*Arcadian Modern* 24). As such, Torres-García's outfit is an emblem of historical alienations. It is thus another installment in the saga of world loss that anthropologist and cultural historian James Clifford calls "the 'serious poem' of cultural history," quoting Giambattista Vico, to describe how signs, figures, tropes, and even foppish outfits form the substance of

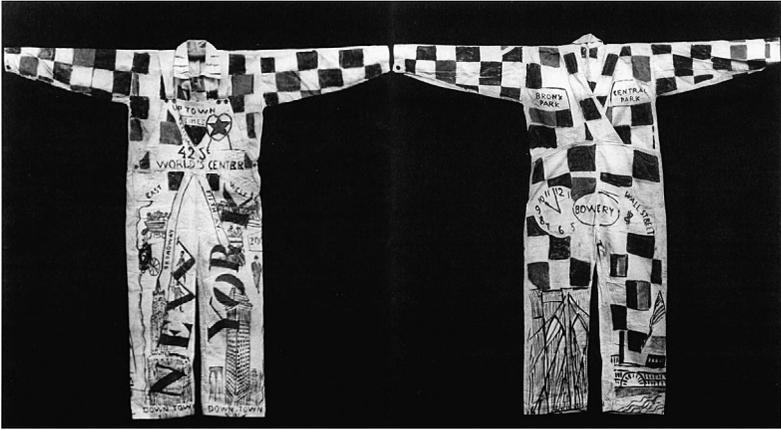


FIGURE 1 Joaquín Torres-García, “Overalls Poem” (1921). Hand painted and worn to the Artist’s Ball (Society of Independent Artists) at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, New York, 1921. Photograph: Courtesy of the Estate of Joaquín Torres-García.

our everyday realities in the wake of colonial violence (*Writing Culture* 10). The “serious poem” of colonial history is the outfit that anyone who walks those sprawling urban streets wears—a symbol of dislocation, dis-possession, and defeat.

Yet when Torres-García’s overalls marked an anthropological impasse, when they made dress a wearable sign of what Claude Lévi-Strauss, long ago, called “a circle from which there is no escape—the first thing [that] we see as we travel round the world [which] is our own filth, thrown into the face of mankind” (43, 38), they also drew attention to the rollicking dislocation of signs from their ordinary circuits of legibility. This meeting of cultures in an unequal context creates the consciousness of conflict and contradiction that the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz calls “transculturation,” in which the tensioned and often hostile interaction of different cultures encourages each cultural system to try to capture the terms of the other, but only to find that the intercultural convergence creates new meanings for signs. From the tensioned interaction of cultures emerges a dynamic sense of cultural contingency and social transformation. In this light, the most profound contradiction of Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques*—quoted above—is that its form outpaces the melancholia of its contents. While the book sags with a lament for the catastrophe of European global mobility—“I hate traveling and explorers,” it famously begins—it enacts its mourning by means of a “transient efflorescence” (7). Even the “streets of New York,” Lévi-Strauss writes,

give a sense of transpositions or slippage points, incomplete makings, anticipations, and situations “which do not yet exist as objects”—rather, they are “signs of activity” whose situational nature in colonial power trips up on the imperfectability of that power (79–80). His prose animates itself in an implicit idea that the structure of the sign—that fundamental unit of language and culture—is not a thing in the world but a situation in which the slippage points of things are revealed. Signs are relational, and their relations are always being made, contested, and negotiated. Therefore, the “serious poem” of cultural history is not only a representation of loss. As Torres-García writes, “*Signo: Estructura*” and “*lo temporal no és més que símbol*”¹—which is to say that, if *time is a symbol*, symbols are expressions of the unstable temporal thresholds in which they find themselves, and those temporal thresholds are expressions of the symbols through which time finds its meanings. The signs of our “serious poem” of colonial historicity reflect those histories while giving form and content to them.

Walking through the entryway of the Waldorf Astoria, what else should the disillusioned Uruguayan wear but the immense artificial landscape of empire? Still, when that landscape takes on the easy disposability of overalls, it anticipates removal, change, and “transient efflorescence.” While it cannot move backward to an origin in the Lenape *Mannahatta*, it can make “origins” into what Walter Benjamin—poetic theorist of historical experience (that is, a thinker who highlighted the value of the imagination in understanding history)—calls “an eddy in the stream of becoming” (*Origin* 45). For Benjamin, history is something other than an archive, something other than a container of content. It is a swirl of present makings and creative possibilities. And it is in the form, not only the contents, that such “transient efflorescence” of signs in time makes itself perceptible. For instance, in Torres-García’s painting *Indoamérica* (fig. 2),² the geometric aesthetic of pre-Incan Andean pictography casts the alphabet into a native visual design, suggesting that this peripheral type of signifying (i.e., pictography) is not so peripheral. Here, it recalls the graphic writing of concrete poetry, in which the visual shape and patterning of words affects their semantic and phonetic values. But more subtly, the intercalation of writing and image also suggests that words have depth of field, that they are a part of the material world, transmitting and transforming it, even as the material world stages the conditions in which signs make meanings. The underlying message is that the “serious poem” of pictographic writing can transform how we view and experience the world, its materials and events, including those events that would appear to have superseded indigenous pictographs and native lands.

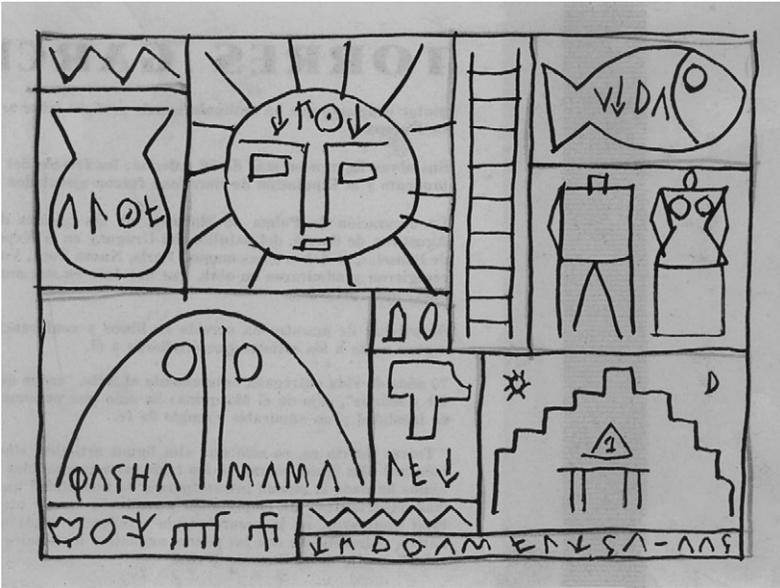


FIGURE 2 Joaquín Torres-García, *Indoamérica* (ca. 1937). Photograph: Courtesy of the Estate of Joaquín Torres-García.

The world in which pictographs appear is usually imagined as a collection of boundary points. A presumption about their limited legibility restricts their intellectual ambit to questions of racial or national positionality: as in, what race or nation is intrinsically closer or further away from these things? (Typically, as in *Tristes Tropiques*, this idea is traced in terms of how far the modern world has come from such things.) Such positions comprise a meaningful part of the historical index for pictography, which is to say, the fact of colonialism and its archival logic of supersession. Yet importantly, those positions also change when cast in the aesthetic forms—the distinct troping and figuration—that such a seemingly antiquated sign system as the pictograph provides. From the vantage of the signs of the Americas, Torres-García’s outfit is a sign of waiting pictographic transpositions and efflorescences.

This book unravels how such sign types become thresholds of meaning in modern and contemporary poetry, storytelling, art, and law. Focusing on four sign types—pictography, petroglyphs, hieroglyphs, and khipu—which this book calls “unnatural signs,” it examines these signs in their dislocation, transiting in and giving meaning to contemporary happenings, effectively challenging the “tristes” of Lévi-Strauss’s colonialist melancholia over an enfeebled subalternity. The double nature of

the claim is essential: the story of how these signs suffer the ramification of the modern world is well known. They are subject to expropriation, misuse, and mistranslation. That story can never go away, nor should it, because it is an ongoing story of unhinged racial hierarchies and hidden social manipulations. Less known, and the story that this book tells so as to empower the very sites that Lévi-Strauss presents as powerless, is how these signs also create systems of knowing and being well into the twenty-first century. Pictography is not a dead language, lying flat in archival tombs. I aim to show that those tombs have always been cenotaphs, empty signifiers for a signifying system that is very much alive, energetic, responsive, and indeed unnatural in its ability to continuously redefine the nature of its world. The key to doing that is to focus on the semiotic and aesthetic forms of these signs, and to observe how these forms have moved across languages and cultures to create contemporary experiences, insights, and relations.

When Torres-García walked into the Waldorf Astoria dressed as a disposable Empire City, hoping thus to shed some of that city's imperialist psychogeography, he practiced something akin to what Benjamin calls "threshold magic" or "profane illumination." With these terms, Benjamin refers to the practices of inverting seemingly natural mimetic orders upon themselves, using aesthetic *form* to work the *content* of history into more pliable political agency. As Benjamin also calls it, this is a technique of "anthropological materialism," a means of immersing oneself in the aesthetic contours of an object of analysis, in order to reveal its contradictions and turn these innervated or embodied contradictions into sources of critical poetic inspiration (*Arcades Project* 214; *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 1, 209, 217). Through the presencing of visual and poetic forms, the contents of history could be loosened from imperial norms and brought into a mutable (because vulnerable) now: from the ruins of history, the imaginative itineraries of historical experience.

To be sure, Benjamin recognizes the risk involved in such creative criticality. His "Theses on the Philosophy of History" read, "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was . . . ?' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (*Illuminations* 255). Benjamin sees the danger involved in creative engagements with historical objects—but he also foregrounds the necessity of such engagement. The danger has been imposed on us, who must live through the racial violence that would keep these signs silent. In that regard, their moment of danger *is* now—amid the persistent colonial interdict that has defined these signs as off limits and retrograde. But, if their moment of danger is *now*, then it is all the more urgent to seize the poetics of these signs, to hear the echoes of their historical music in

our midst. Benjamin's "eddy in the stream of becoming" is also a flow pulling away from colonial historiography, churning in the forms that continue to define the diverse worlds that surround and suffuse us. The critical point of Benjamin's "profane illumination" is that history is not unidirectional, captive to the forward force of the pseudo-Hegelianism of linear time leading inescapably to modernity and accelerated capitalism. His flows of time are heterogeneous, with currents, countercurrents, variant imperatives, and ever-shifting possibilities moving in all directions—including the threshold of the Waldorf Astoria when framed in the disposability of Torres-García's poem outfit.

The problem of such temporal heterogeneity rushes through Torres-García's works and is the breaking wave of conceptual questions at the heart of the book in the reader's hands: how are these signs subject to normative positions, spaces, and temporalities of history while they shape those positions, spaces, and timescapes as well? That is, how are signs technologies of the social body in both senses of the term *techne*: subjectivizing the body while making available its discrepant fashionings? How are the signs of the Americas aesthetic thresholds or "serious poems" of cultural history in the fullest sense? And by what failure of the conception of the sign as (Saussurean) index of content do we strain to see history formed and transformed in semiotic and aesthetic thresholds? To draw forcefully on the Benjaminian poesis of historical experience: how is history more than an archive, more than its collected contents? How is it also a totalizable act of present making, a sign that signs—like people—are active at the scene of their becoming, *then* and *now* in the *nous* of our *thens*? And how does that mimetic reserve nonetheless compel us because it constrains us, grounding us in material presences that must signify the fragmentary histories we might wish to flip transversely, into contemporary streams and unnatural becomings? How are the signs of the Americas a source of poetics in the realest sense, limited by material conditions that they also define, organize, and enliven? How are these signs indeed worlds, absorbing us into their realities (whether we perceive them or not)? How are they here and now?