Preface

This book began in the intuition shared by its authors that what had been happening in modern Nicaraguan poetry was crucial to the development and eventual victory of the Sandinista Revolution. In our own “postmodern” North American culture, we are long past thinking of something like poetry as mattering much at all in the real world, so how could this be? Our answer is strongly influenced by recent developments in the theory of ideology that highlight the relational and discursively constituted nature of social identity itself. Though we do not share all aspects of their argument, we depend in particular on the insight advanced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985)—itself built on the work of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser—that what we think of as “society” as such is not some essence that is prior to representation but rather the product of struggles over meaning and representation. Such a perspective allows us to consider the ways in which literature, rather than being simply a reflection or epiphenomenon of the social as in the traditional base-superstructure model, is constitutive—in historically and socially specific ways—in some measure of it.

We propose to look at Central American literature as an ideological practice of national liberation struggle, emerging from a complex set of cultural relations and institutions given by tradition and encoding new forms of personal, national, and popular identity. Though we hope our conclusions will have some relevance to Central America as a whole, our focus is on the three countries where major revolutionary movements have emerged since the 1960s: Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. A decade after the high tide of 1979–1981, of course, it is clear that the moment of optimism about the possibilities for rapid revolutionary victory and social transformation in these countries has passed [we write these words on the heels of the defeat of the Sandinistas in the Nicaraguan elections of February 1990]. Whether this represents a new, postrevolutionary stage in the region’s history or simply a recession before the appearance of a new cycle of radicalization is uncertain. It is
likely, however, that any renewal of revolutionary activity will take somewhat different forms and involve actors other than the ones we will be concerned with here, and this may well modify our argument in important ways.

We will show that since the end of the nineteenth century a sometimes liberal-radical, sometimes ultrareactionary set of nationalist discourses develops in Central America, which finds its key, if not its only, means of expression in poetry. The reasons why such a tradition has not been recognized as important in the development of revolutionary activity in the region involve on the one hand academically sanctioned notions of art and literature that insist on their separation from politics, and on the other, the persistent prestige in the social sciences of a kind of economic reductionism—dependency theory would be an example—which sees the essential determinants of Latin American countries as their structural location in the world economy and cultural phenomena therefore as at best secondary. While we have no wish to deemphasize the economic or “objective” bases of revolutionary change—we argue in fact that it is the specific structure of socioeconomic dependency in Central America that positions literature as a crucial ideological practice—we share with Laclau and Mouffe a sense that, particularly in situations of large-scale political mobilization like revolutionary movements, the unity of a class or people is fundamentally a symbolic unity constructed in discursive practices.

How is this unity produced? Related to this question are the role of literature itself in the generation of an authentic and viable national culture in the face of the residues of colonialism and new forms of cultural imperialism, and the nature and role of sectors of the Central American intelligentsia involved in the formation of political and cultural vanguards in the region. The place that literature occupies in Central American societies is somewhat different from its place in the United States or even some other Latin American countries. To begin with, it is far from being a generalized cultural form. Less than a majority of the population of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala is functionally literate; moreover, the distinction between the even smaller minority of persons who actually write and/or read literature and those who do not corresponds to deep class and, especially in the case of Guatemala, ethnic divisions. Literature as a social practice remains in Central America very much bound up with colonial and neocolonial structures of domination and privilege. While we argue that Central American writers have produced in their work a revolutionary or proto-revolutionary articulation of what Gramsci called the “national-popular,” they are only heuristically genuinely national or popular voices, given that illiteracy, partial literacy, even the lack of institutionalization of litera-
ture itself at both a national and a regional level, are problems the revolutionary movements can begin to deal with effectively in a sense only after taking power.

At the same time, it is clear that these movements, like similar ones in the colonial and postcolonial world, have generally involved a union of popular sectors (peasantry, wage workers, rural and urban poor) with a radicalized intelligentsia, drawn partly from formally educated members of these sectors but also from the petty bourgeoisie and bourgeois or oligarchic strata; and that literature, precisely because it is marked as an elite cultural practice closely related to forms of political and bureaucratic power, has been an important means of radicalization of such an intelligentsia. Moreover, the institution of literature itself changes in the course of revolutionary mobilization and in postrevolutionary processes of cultural disalienation and appropriation that involve a transformation in the nature of its dominant forms and concerns, particularly a breakdown or renegotiation of the distinction between elite and popular, European and indigenous cultures on which its status and prestige have rested.

We begin with a discussion of a number of theoretical issues concerning the relation of literature, ideology, and politics in general and their relevance to the structural characteristics of Latin and Central American development. We move on in chapter 2 to sketch the main lines of evolution of Central American literary culture up to the eve of the revolutionary period, with special attention to its role in the formation and radicalization of sectors of the regional intelligentsia. This leads to the core of the book, which is a presentation in chapters 3 to 6 of the evolution of a regional literary system—with distinct national trajectories in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala—beginning in the late nineteenth century with Rubén Darío and modernismo, passing through the so-called vanguardista literary movements of the 1920s and 1930s, and culminating in the writers of the 1960s and 1970s who link their work in literature more or less directly to the building of revolutionary organizations. We highlight the work of the three most significant poets of this third phase—Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua, Roque Dalton in El Salvador, and Otto René Castillo in Guatemala—and the coincident movement in women's poetry. We also describe the Nicaraguan poetry workshop project (poesía de taller) initiated by Cardenal and recent developments in literature in the context of the evolution of the Guatemalan and Salvadoran revolutionary movements, including an account of the major debates over cultural and literary policy. Finally, we analyze in some detail the testimonio (testimonial narrative), which has become the most influential narrative form associated with the Central American revolutions.
We alluded to the fashionable topic of postmodernism in our opening sentences. In our work on this book, we found ourselves thinking time and time again about this concept and its relation to contemporary Central American and Third World cultural production. Though it may be of concern mainly to readers in literary and cultural studies, we need to say a few words about it here. As Fredric Jameson (1984) has pointed out, postmodernism in its most general sense (the term is notoriously subject to imprecision in its uses) is a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the technological, economic, and social features of a new, "multinational" stage of capitalism. Clearly, there is a problem in applying a concept that is conceived in relation to the cultural anomie of advanced capitalist consumer societies to social formations such as those of Central America that in a sense have not gone through the phase of "modernity" yet. (A related problem is that modernismo and postmodernismo designate in Latin American Spanish specific early-twentieth-century literary movements that have no relation to what is understood as modernism and postmodernism in English.) Clearly, there is also a correspondence between cultural phenomena identified as postmodernist—North American television and fashion, for example—and the present sensibility and strategies of multinational capitalism, which give some credence to the idea that postmodernism may be a new form of cultural imperialism.

However, we think there is also an important sense in which the forms of cultural resistance represented by the Central American revolutions themselves rise up on a postmodern terrain, understood in a broad sense. The two central, and interrelated, problematics that are usually taken as defining postmodern culture as such are: (1) the collapse of the distinction between elite and popular (or mass) cultures, sometimes expressed as the loss of aesthetic autonomy, and (2) the collapse of the "great narratives" of "Western" progress and enlightenment with which the specifically aesthetic project of Modernist art was associated, a collapse that includes what is often designated as the "crisis of Marxism" (Lyotard 1984). The ideological and political significance of the literature we are concerned with elucidating depends on its ability (1) to function in the historically constituted space that separates elite and popular cultures in the region; and (2) to generate a new postcolonial, noneurocentric narrative of historical space and destiny. If it has been largely Marxist in inspiration, it has also been concerned with redefining an inherited European Marxist tradition to respond to the very different dynamics of Central American society and history. In these senses, we see this literature as coincident with postmodernism, rather than its other.
The general critique of postmodernism by the Latin American left (see, e.g., Yúdice 1985a) tends, we think, to set up a false dichotomy between complex, antirepresentational, value-leveling and predominantly “high-culture” forms of literature (of the sort represented by Borges or the work of the Latin American boom novelists) and simple, lineal, representational, value-affirming, forms of “folk” or popular culture. The first, in this view, is seen as in some sense or other imported or imposed from above, the second as a spontaneous and authentic creation of the people in conditions of underdevelopment and exploitation. Our perspective suggests that, rather than a clear dichotomy between a purely popular culture of resistance and a purely oligarchic and/or neocolonial high culture, Latin American literature in general has involved since its origins in the colonial period a series of shifts and transformations that play off elite and popular cultural forms. We want to posit Central American revolutionary literature as in effect involved in and constructed out of a dialectic of oppressor and oppressed, negotiating between the opposing terms of its dichotomies: literature/oral narrative and song, metropolitan/national, European/Creole, ladino or mestizo/indigenous, elite/popular, urban/rural, and intellectual/manual work.

We by no means see this literature as transcending these dichotomies—that would require as we have suggested a series of social and cultural transformations that have as their minimal prior condition the victory of these revolutions in the first place; but we do see this literature as constituting new possibilities of articulating them and, in particular, of defining new paradigms of the relationship between the intelligentsia and popular classes. In this sense, we argue that literature has been in Central America not only a means of politics but also a model for it.

In focusing on poetry, we are choosing to deal with literary expressions within the dominant Spanish-speaking Creole-mestizo cultural tradition of Central America. This tradition is nationally inflected in different ways, but has excluded until fairly recently—and then usually only in the context of the revolutionary movements themselves—other voices: those of the indigenous, non-Spanish-speaking peoples in the region, particularly in Guatemala; of minorities like the English-speaking black population of the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua; of women (the few important Central American women writers prior to the 1960s like Claudia Lars in El Salvador are exceptions that confirm the rule).

While our thesis is that this poetry has been a materially decisive force in the Central American revolutions, it is also important to stress that it is by no means their only significant or important ideological practice. There is, for example, the very rich heritage of Central American indigenous and mestizo oral culture: song—particularly the traditional corrido or narrative ballad, but also including new styles of urban
popular music and hybrid folk music (what in Latin America is usually designated as *nueva trova*)—street theater, storytelling, *refranes*, myth and superstition, forms of rumor and gossip. There is the complex ideological substratum provided by nineteenth-century Liberalism and Conservatism. There is the field of indigenous and European religious ideologies implicated in both Liberation Theology and Indian resistance movements in the region. There are the innumerable anonymous individual and collective strategies of daily survival and resistance. There is an important sense that remains to be adequately described and theorized—Ché Guevara outlined some of its elements in his account of the guerrilla foco—in which the revolutionary organizations themselves are as much cultural as military-political forms, concerned with the articulation of symbols of power, resistance, and domination. To tell the story of all of this would be a much more complex and ambitious task than the one we propose, however.

While we argue that the institution of literature as such and the "national question" become conjuncturally related in the process of Central American development (so that even a nominally apolitical writing can have measurable ideological consequences), and on this basis we include a considerable amount of literary history, our account should not be taken as a general introduction to modern Central American literature. Despite our attention to *testimonio*, we do not provide anything like an adequate account of developments in the novel, short story, and theater.

Costa Ricans and Hondurans will question in particular our decision to limit our focus to Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, pointing out that their countries have traditions of proto-revolutionary nationalist writing quite similar to the ones we describe, and that in any case literature functions in Central America on a regional as well as national basis. This is true—the significance of Ernesto Cardenal or Otto René Castillo's poetry is by no means limited to their respective countries, for example; by the same token the great Costa Rican proletarian novel *Mamita Yunai* or the contemporary protest poetry of Honduran Roberto Sosa have been factors in Central American literary culture generally (there is also the question of the relation of Panama to contemporary Central America). But in defense of our choice, we need to insist on the obvious: revolutionary processes involving broad popular participation have developed in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala in the last twenty-five years, but not in Honduras or Costa Rica. The reasons for this are complex (see, e.g., Dunkerley 1988 and Vilas 1989 for a current discussion); they certainly cannot be reduced simply to a question of different literary-cultural systems, nor do they exclude the possibility, particularly in the case of Honduras, of eventual revolutionary upsurges.
However, they do make Honduras and Costa Rica less than paradigmatic in terms of the problem of the relation of literature to revolutionary mobilization we want to explore here.

The ideal of Central American unity is an important feature not only of the ideology but also of the long-term strategy of the revolutionary movements in the area, but in general we have not been able to articulate the relationship among international, regional, and nationally specific levels in Central American cultural dynamics—a problem faced in a different way by the revolutionary movements themselves. One sign of this was an indecision on our part as to whether we should speak of a Central American revolution or Central American revolutions.

Ideologies generally operate at some level as historicisms; that is, they give a sense of shape and meaning to historical experience. In developing our argument, we run the risk of historicism ourselves, of constructing a teleological narrative that reduces the complexity of the social and cultural phenomena we deal with to a perspective peculiar to our own time, or more accurately to our own structure of hopes and convictions. We take this risk, because we believe that the reality of historical becoming—and by extension the validity of our approach—is at least in part a matter of position taking and struggle. We have not been able to separate problems of focus and method from the concrete practice of the revolutionary movements themselves. This is a book about ideology, then, but also one situated in ideology.

In different degrees, we have both been involved in the cultural practice of the Central American revolutions. However, the main limitation of our study (which is perhaps also the precondition for the kind of theoretical abstraction it involves) is that we write at a considerable distance from the direct cultural producers and from the rich and complex national and regional traditions that they articulate. We expect that they may find much of it overly schematic when not simply misinformed or wrong-headed.

We hope, nevertheless, that what we have done here will be of interest not only to them, but also to Latin American and Central America specialists in the academy and to a broader audience of persons involved in literature and poetry, cultural studies, and political or humanitarian work, particularly in Central American solidarity and human rights organizations and in movements for social justice and change throughout the Americas.

Because of space limitations we have not been able to give much representation or description of the actual poetry or narrative. A number of anthologies and individual works of Central American literature currently available in English are included in the bibliography. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in the book are our own.
We owe a common debt to many people in making this book. Among them are Margaret Randall, Barbara Harlow, Steven White, Sergio Ramírez, Claribel Alegría, Sandy Taylor and Curbstone Press, Ernesto Cardenal, Manlio Argüeta, Ileana Rodríguez, George Yúdice, Ivan Uriarte, Hugo Achugar, Todd Jailer, Hernán Vidal and the Ideologies and Literature group at the University of Minnesota, Fred Jameson, the Marxist Literary Group, and Richard Graham at the University of Texas Institute of Latin American Studies for his interest in this project and editorial help with it. The authors were both graduate students in the Department of Literature of the University of California, San Diego, in the late 1960s, an experience to which we owe this collaboration and which has marked its concerns and approach deeply. John Beverley would like to thank in particular the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Stanford University for allowing him to try out some ideas for this book in a seminar on Central American Revolutionary Literature in the spring of 1986; the Center for Latin American Studies of the University of Pittsburgh for a grant to finish writing it; and the people of the municipality of San Isidro, Pittsburgh's Sister City in Nicaragua, for being “the soul of a heartless world.” Marc Zimmerman would like to thank Otto Pizaka and the Latin American Studies Program of the University of Illinois at Chicago for encouraging him to develop a course based on the material in this book; UIC's Circulation Desk and Interlibrary Loan Staff (Kathy Kilian, Michael Williams, and, above all, Janice McFadden) for many services; the Fulbright Program of the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars, and UIC's Office of Social Science Research for financial support; Mario Widel for help with computer problems; Raúl Rojas and Andrea Barrientos for research assistance; and—in the last hours—Yolanda Miranda, Leta Daly, Margo de Ley, Carmen Matute, Amada Cabrera Urizar, Esther Soler, and Max Araújo.
Literature and Politics
in the Central American Revolutions
