



THE RARIFIED AIR
OF THE MODERN

AIRPLANES AND
TECHNOLOGICAL MODERNITY
IN THE ANDES

WILLIE HIATT

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction: Airplanes and Historical Horizons on the Periphery	i
1. Modernity's Surprise Landing in the Andes, 1910–1911	15
2. Peruvian Air Farce, 1919–1930	39
3. Flying “Cholo”	61
4. High Technology in the Jungle	82
5. The Window Seat of Modernity	105
6. When Technology Bombs	129
Epilogue: Andeans and Airplanes after 1950	150
<i>Notes</i>	157
<i>Bibliography</i>	199
<i>Index</i>	215

Acknowledgments

IN JUNE 2002, while conducting research in the wonderfully chaotic archives of the Cuzco newspaper *El Sol*, I stumbled upon the story of a Quechua-speaking pilot who crashed and died in 1925 while attempting to land his Italian-made biplane in the Andes. As a former newspaper sports-writer, copyeditor, and graphic designer, I found the intensity of *El Sol*'s coverage of Alejandro Velasco Astete's death both touching and curious. Although I was writing a master's thesis on the role of newspapers in Cuzco's indigenista movement and had not yet decided to pursue a PhD, I tucked away several dozen digital images and went on my way. The "Flying Cholo" (see chapter 3) I uncovered that day later inspired a dissertation in history at the University of California, Davis, and a most unlikely book on aviation and technological modernity in the Andes. In the words of a former newspaper colleague, I had strayed far from my small-town Kentucky roots.

My biggest regret is that my parents, Barbara and Billy Hiatt, did not live to see the publication of this book. Although my mother never understood why I wanted to take a vow of poverty and go to graduate school in my mid-thirties, she gave me her unconditional love and support until losing a battle with cancer in 2005. My father, who operated one of the world's last true five-and-ten stores before his death in 2012, spent his whole life within eight miles of his birthplace. Even if he did not fully understand my life choices, he blessed a career path that took me through New Orleans, Louisiana; Davis, California; Lima, Iquitos, Cuzco, Arequipa, and Trujillo, Peru; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Santiago, Chile; Washington, DC; Memphis, Tennessee; and New York. My sister, Leigh Anne Hiatt, understood better than anyone that for me, the joy of graduate and doctoral work was in the journey and not the destination, the today and not the tomorrow. I loved every step of the process and am thankful that she and my niece, Sophie, shared it with me.

Chuck Walker's humor, enthusiasm, and familiarity with scholars, archives, bars, and used bookstores north and south of the Río Grande made

this project possible. From the moment I stepped foot on the UC Davis campus in 2003, there was nowhere else I wanted to be. As the instructor for a year-long research seminar in 2004–2005, Tom Holloway read more about Andean aviation than any human being should, but his excitement for this topic was essential. Andrés Reséndez’s kindness and encouragement reaffirmed not only this project but my intellectual journey more broadly. Marisol de la Cadena challenged my theoretical framework in almost every conversation, and her offhand comment about examining aviation as a “script for world history” inspired me from the beginning. I hope I have lived up to her expectations to not write “boring history.”

A Guggenheim Fellowship at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, provided me the freedom to research and write in a stimulating environment. Afternoon coffee with consummate Englishman R.E.G. “Ron” Davies, a foremost authority in airline history, was a true highlight of my life. His death at age ninety in 2011 caught me completely by surprise. A University of California Pacific Rim Dissertation Grant and Mini-Grant funded archival work in Peru, Argentina, and Chile. A Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholarship provided a year of graduate study at Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, where I refined my project and engaged Peruvian students and professors on their intellectual turf. Special appreciation goes to José Ragas for his inspiration, time, and Google-like depth of knowledge about archives and sources, and to Mark Carey, for his sharp comments and faith in the project from the beginning.

Thanks to many others as well. To Paulo Drinot, for encouragement, guidance, and affirmation along the way. To Dan Hagedorn, who reminded me that the airplanes themselves were an important actor in this story. To Susan Ferber, Maya Bringe, and Anitra Grisales for their comments and sharp editing. To Sara Gronim, Molly Tambor, Carlos Aguirre, the anonymous reader for Oxford University Press, Jennifer Van Vleck, Scott W. Palmer, and Erle Grubb for their helpful advice, comments, and critiques. To Dan and Nancy Reedy, who shared this experience at every stage; and to Susan Carvalho and Justin Wolfe, who made studying Latin American literature and history cool.

Weekly lunches with Jonathan Hagood and Josh Reid, political conversations with Susan Hogue during a fortuitous research overlap in Lima, and Skype exchanges with Lisa Justice helped sustain me through classwork, fieldwork, and writing.

Many Peruvians beyond the university and archives were essential. Coly, Peter, and the Bustamante family in the Lima suburb of San Miguel provided love, friendship, and a Fonzi-type apartment for an adopted gringo son. Iván

López and Marilú Dueñas took me in for three straight summers in Cuzco. The energetic and enthusiastic Angelica Velasco Astete de Rossi, Velasco Astete's daughter, provided rare materials on the aviator's life. Teo Chambi was always willing to share photos from his grandfather, the great Cuzco photographer Martín Chambi. Gen. José Zlatar Stambuk and Col. Rolando Cárdenas Brou made available the wonderful resources of the Instituto de Estudios Históricos Aeroespaciales del Perú.

All of you can see a reflection of yourselves in this book.

The Rarified Air of the Modern



FIGURE I.1 Topographic map of Peru. *Credit:* Chris Ware.

Introduction

AIRPLANES AND HISTORICAL HORIZONS ON THE PERIPHERY

NEWS REACHED LIMA in June 1910 that a Peruvian, of all people, was starring in European aviation competitions. Jorge Chávez Dartnell, born to Peruvian parents in Paris, was a bona fide celebrity in one of the most electrifying technological advances in history. Yet until then, almost no one in the Andes even knew he existed. The pilot soon set the world altitude record and then became the first man to fly across the Alps, a daring if not suicidal feat undertaken in a fragile kite-like airplane just seven years after the Wright brothers' first flight. Although Chávez crashed his Blériot in Italy and died from his injuries four days later, a new sense of empowerment tempered his countrymen's grief. A Lima observer proclaimed, "This 'dominion of the air' forms a bright and unlimited horizon for the national energies, and what fertile hopes, what patriotic dreams, what desires it has brought together!"¹ Chávez's European pedigree and aristocratic name enthralled Peru's oligarchic politicians, businessmen, military officials, journalists, and intellectuals who gazed longingly toward the modern Old World. An editorial cartoon enlisted the airplane to distinguish Peruvians living abroad from those in Peru. The former were successful, industrious, modern—typified by a pilot flying high above an urban landscape. The latter were bumbling, degenerate, inferior—represented by a man in a frock coat tripping and falling on a map of South America.²

Serendipity struck again when two more previously unknown Peruvian fliers, the European-trained Juan Bielovucic Cavalier and Carlos Tenaud, soon sailed from France with airplanes, European cachet, and plans to launch flight schools in the Andes. Lima's *El Comercio* chronicled Bielovucic's Atlantic voyage and stopovers in Panama and various ports along South America's west

coast.³ On January 20, 1911, an estimated 40,000 people crowded inside and around the Santa Beatriz horse track, an elegant facility with Moorish architecture and a signature onion-globe pavilion, to watch Bielovucic ease his Voisin biplane into the air and become the first native son to fly over a South American capital.⁴ Excited Limeños saluted the pilot from balconies and terraces. Trolley passengers sloshed to one side to glimpse the plane above.⁵ Lima magazines soon published photographs of natty dandies and women twirling parasols as they mingled outside airplane hangars during flying exhibitions at the hippodrome, dubbed more vogueishly as the “aerodrome.” Aerial modernity had crossed the Atlantic seemingly with such ease that Peruvians imagined themselves as South America’s flight leader. Nearly as gratifying were reports that neighboring Chile envied Peru’s newfound technological prowess.⁶

Aviation’s transplantation into the Andes between Chávez’s flight and the beginning of the jet age in the 1950s fostered a new sense of Peruvian possibility. In the wake of Chávez’s feat, a lawmaker announced, “Not everything has to be misery and desolation for Peru, honorable gentlemen.” The pilot had made it “possible to redeem the fatherland, elevating us above our miseries.”⁷ Although elites staked a proprietary claim to aviation, they never monopolized flight’s symbolic meaning or material capital. Technology’s emancipatory promise unfurled across Andean skies, conjuring geographical integration, economic development, military might, and local, regional, and national empowerment. Just as important, airplanes alternately reinforced Eurocentric narratives and mobilized uniquely Peruvian historical visions. To be sure, quixotic hopes for a futuristic aviation complex and nationwide air travel in 1911 soon crumbled beneath impossible expectations, but not before a self-perceived backward Andean country had glimpsed itself anew through the prism of Western technological modernity.

Technology’s contribution to modern identity and history-making beyond the North Atlantic is central to this book. Diverse socioeconomic groups mobilized aviation to sustain, challenge, or reconfigure power asymmetries and historical silences deeply rooted in Peru’s colonial legacies and republican failures.⁸ New social and material arrangements participated in a critical moment in Peruvian modernity when a stultifying status quo could no longer invoke the natural order to justify oligarchic rule, indigenous marginalization, US and European neocolonialism, worker and student exploitation, hair-trigger military coups, and capitalist inequalities.⁹ Despite the expectation that airplanes arrived with a built-in capability and meaning, flying machines were never a transparent modernizing tool or neutral metaphor through which to view either the West or an Andean region with a

tenuous relationship to the North Atlantic.¹⁰ To the contrary, Peruvians and others attached particular interests to a “universal” technology assumed to transcend context and historical contingency. Modernizing elites, in particular, affixed their own agendas and then promoted the aerial project as essential to the nation as a whole.¹¹ In this way, technology served as an idiom and mechanism that ordered social relations and constituted power, all the while effacing the culturally specific matters that propelled Peru’s aerial project.¹²



FIGURE 1.2 Crowds at the Lima horse track watched a plane christened *Inca*, which Peruvian employees of W. R. Grace & Company donated to the army in 1921. Unlike Peru’s initial aviation chapter that began in 1911, the post-World War I era shed its aristocratic hues and found more popular support. This photo appeared in the Lima magazine *Mundial* on March 11, 1921. *Credit:* Biblioteca y Archivo Histórico (Lima, Peru).

However, aviation mediated identity beyond aristocratic and urban orbits. From the moment Chávez news reached Peru, technology's universal promise subverted elite attempts to control the historical content and material power of flight. Aviation fired the imagination of the *multitud*, the masses who populated visions for Peruvian renewal.¹³ The crowds constructed airfields to connect far-flung regions to Lima; raised money to purchase aircraft for the military; named airplanes after sponsoring civic groups, towns, and regions; and excitedly breached police cordons at flying exhibitions to get an up-close look at planes and pilots. During the 1933 Peru-Colombia war, a peasant woman professed the "desire to present myself on the sacred altar of the Nation" by turning over a plot of land for an airfield in the southern highlands.¹⁴ Their views of the interior newly refracted through technology, authorities praised provincial towns and indigenous communities for "willingly" parting with land designated for airstrips, apparently surprised to find rational behavior and patriotism in places where neither was expected.¹⁵ Popular engagement with aviation challenged perceptions of the masses as indifferent to national projects. Never were they awed, passive spectators who performed according to an elite script.

Science and technology provide novel analytical tools for disentangling configurations of culture, power, and materiality at the center of national and world histories. Technological artifacts help create identity, marshal historical knowledge, and maintain social, cultural, and racial boundaries.¹⁶ Beyond symbol and metaphor, technology has helped constitute Andean society in ways familiar to the industrialized and developing worlds alike. Peruvians have deployed technology to bridge geographical divides, knit together public spheres, merge into the world economy, construct modern institutions, and pursue national dreams and ambitions. Promising at once emancipation and domination, technology has stood in for modernity as the material embodiment of rationality, scientific method, and man's subjugation of nature. In important ways, technology and modernity are two sides of the same coin.¹⁷

In recent decades, science and technology scholars have illuminated the complex processes that shape scientific facts and artifacts.¹⁸ The result is a more nuanced understanding of the evolution of specific technologies (bicycles, weapons systems, mass transit), the sites of knowledge-making (laboratories, shop floors, colonial and postcolonial arenas), the actors who have received outsized acclaim for innovation (scientists, engineers, inventors), and those previously dismissed as passive bystanders (users, consumers, diverse social groups).¹⁹ Scholarship demonstrates that Western rational

thought never exists pristinely beyond state, capitalist, and societal influences. Similarly, technology never is born of an immaculate conception, fueled merely by its own internal logic or a “god within.”²⁰ Rather, technoscience is a multivectorial process of negotiation and accommodation in which so-called universal processes can only be mobilized in contact with and understood within local context.²¹

Nonetheless, even as science and technology scholars have demystified invention and innovation by demonstrating the mutual construction of context and artifacts, groundbreaking case studies have proved less attentive to specific historical panoramas.²² The tendency to address nonhistorians has fostered important interdisciplinary collaboration but also muted technology’s role in historical processes and historiographical debates. Not only is a clearer understanding of technology’s importance to whole swaths of historical time needed, but even more essential are ways to account for how technology influences the telling of our histories.²³ Never neutral or value-free, technology serves history-making by shaping how people everywhere have “read” the West and internalized or challenged the primacy of empirical reasoning and scientific method, two hallmarks of Eurocentric narratives.



FIGURE 1.3A Italian pilot Enrico Rolandi became the first person to fly across the Andes when he piloted his 220-horsepower Ansaldo S.V.A.5 from Lima to Cuzco in May 1921. Famed Cuzco photographer Martín Chambi captured his biplane above the Plaza de Armas. *Credit:* Martín Chambi Archive (Cuzco, Peru), www.martinchambi.com.

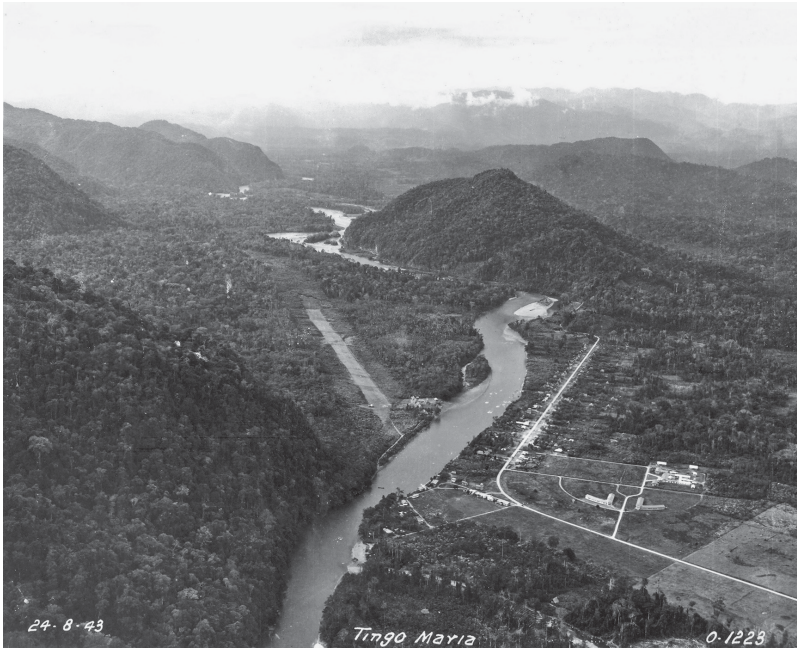


FIGURE 1.3B Sometimes beginning at river's edge, jungle airstrips were little more than rectangular clearings on which livestock and even peasant farmers might pose hazards. This 1943 photo of Tingo María captures the dramatic landscape in the high jungle (about 2,000 feet above sea level), known as the "eyebrow of the jungle." *Credit:* Biblioteca y Archivo Histórico, Instituto de Estudios Históricos Aeroespaciales del Perú (Lima, Peru).

Peru's response to aviation underscores the central role that technology has played in the modern experience.²⁴ For many Peruvians, flight's seemingly inexorable "West to the rest" path synchronized the Andean world to North Atlantic historical time. The first flying machines took off from Western Europe—albeit packed inside wooden crates on steamships—and showed up on South America's west coast with a swagger and authority that belied their fragility. Beneath initial technoeuphoria lay the conviction that Peruvians were participating in a universal phenomenon imminently transferrable to Andean deserts, mountains, and jungles. Confident modernizers assumed that Peru could master flight to rehabilitate its grim republican history, particularly the period after the War of the Pacific (1879–1883) ended with Chile's occupation of Lima.²⁵ Days after Chávez crossed the Alps, an observer reveled in the "satisfaction we feel at knowing that in this endeavor we are going to be first—us, the Peruvians, relegated to third, fifth, or tenth place in all other matters!"²⁶ An image emerged not of a country outside modernity

looking in, but of a technologically updated nation-state whose history was more closely aligned with the West's.

Nonetheless, mobilizing an imported technology to make oneself modern on the "periphery" was fraught with tensions and contradictions.²⁷ If technology could remake Peru in the West's image, as some hoped and others feared, was mankind doomed to a flattened, homogenous world?²⁸ Would Peruvians become unique modern subjects or mere copies of their Western counterparts? And if airplanes were a vehicle by which to construct an affirmative national narrative, whose history would they tell? Whereas coastal aviation advocates imagined an urban and Hispanic orientation for Peru, highland elites appropriated airplanes to mobilize a unique regional identity based on a romanticized pre-Columbian past. In 1921, a reporter gushed that the "soul of the Incas . . . would have shaken with infinite joy" on seeing an airplane flying over the immense stone fortress above the highland city of Cuzco: "Oh, what a moving and sublime picture . . . seeing the airplane circling magnificently over the Inca ruins!"²⁹ The airplane permitted Cuzco residents to imagine their region infused with new energy and positioned at the vanguard of the ethnically and geographically divided Peruvian nation.

Explanations for technological awe and wonder in the North Atlantic do little to illuminate technology's emotional appeal and material power in regions where the past and present have remained inextricably bound up in Western economic, institutional, and technological forms.³⁰ Celebratory currents in aviation history, in particular, have reified technology and uncritically praised man's visceral reaction to it.³¹ Not everyone who watched airplanes fly necessarily saw the same thing. Peruvian aviation at once challenged and reinforced the Western notion that some nation-states always would be latecomers to modernity. Anxious about their marginal position relative to the "true" West, many Peruvians rejoiced that Chávez and Bielovucic had planted the country's flag in the time and space of early flight, only to soon bemoan their own inferior version of an idealized European and North American "original." Calibrating Latin American modernity to the West often created an unsettling sense of absence and lack.³²

Although Latin Americans perceived the forward motion of modernity differently across social, economic, and racial divides, liberal middle and elite groups had long found Eurocentric history essential for constructing their own modern narratives. The encounter with world processes after independence from Spain in the nineteenth century required articulating heroic and exceptional national histories while simultaneously integrating the region

into universal currents.³³ In the early twentieth century, aviation invigorated a public discourse that often described an external modernity arriving whole and pristine.³⁴ Peruvian intellectual and political exile César Falcón witnessed preparations for German Hugo Eckener's transatlantic Zeppelin voyage in 1924 while living in Spain. Lamenting that "many ideas in our era have not yet crossed the ocean," Falcón anticipated the day a Seville–Buenos Aires dirigible service would deliver civilization to the Americas. For Falcón, month-old European periodicals circulating in American republics represented a literal and metaphorical time gap. The airship that trundled across Falcón's imagination traced a one-way vector of world history as it crossed the Atlantic and narrowed the spatial and temporal distance between Europe and Latin laggards.³⁵



FIGURE I.4 The airline interests that became known as Pan-American Grace Airways—a partnership between Pan American Airways and W. R. Grace & Co., which operated Grace Line steamships—began operating in 1929. Better known as Panagra, the airline flew the west coast from the Panama Canal to Buenos Aires until Braniff Airways purchased it in 1967. Here crew and passengers exit a Douglas DC-3 in the 1930s at the Limatambo Airport in Lima. *Credit:* Special Collections, University of Miami Libraries (Coral Gables, Florida).

In important ways, modernity was a language through which Latin Americans came to experience science, technology, urbanization, industrialization, and other coveted “Western” trappings.³⁶ Read through a liberal lens, airplanes embodied not just technological progress but enlightened rationality, capitalist enterprise, and nation-state aggrandizement. However, how societies have narrated and mobilized technology—whether as a new source of production and efficiency or as a threat to custom and tradition—reveals culturally specific values and historical concerns.³⁷ Discourse shapes meaning, assembles disparate elements, and facilitates historical readings that inform how groups experience, use, and understand technology.³⁸ Even before the Great War demonstrated flight’s enormous possibilities, Peruvians already had socialized airplanes into an Andean context by trumpeting their military, economic, and cultural potential. Just a few years after the 1911 unearthing of the famed Inca site Machu Picchu, an advocate hoped airplanes would help locate new archaeological remains.³⁹ Making visible the narrative strategies that shape how societies have read and understood technology helps puncture the myth that artifacts possess a universal, unchanging meaning and capability.⁴⁰

The often unquestioned acceptance that technology was quintessentially Western obscured the processes by which materiality contributed to modern subjectivity and national imaginings in unique contexts.⁴¹ Technology’s history-making power derived in part from the conceit that science and technology were neatly separated from culture and society. The silencing of the politics, social relationships, public interests, and worldviews that shape sociotechnical artifacts lies at the heart of modernity.⁴² The distillation of the human and nonhuman, of man and machine, is not given in nature but produced in historical and cultural ways.⁴³ Therefore, examining the constantly evolving spokesmen, interests, and matters affixed to airplanes at specific junctures is essential to understanding how this technology crossed the Atlantic and inspired Andean hopes and dreams.

When perceived as existing beyond society and history, technology bestows authority and legitimacy on those who pursue advancement and social improvement. Scientists, engineers, and even aristocratic pilots soar above mere mortals in a post-Enlightenment world in which reason and rationality reign supreme.⁴⁴ More broadly, new sociomaterial configurations constituted pilots, travelers, and aviation advocates as modern subjects and relevant historical actors who assigned Peru’s indigenous and provincial inhabitants to inferiority and irrationality.⁴⁵ Accounts of Indian–airplane encounters stressed premodern religious symbolism and superstition. In 1921, a reporter

claimed that highland Indians viewed an airplane as Jesus Christ flying face-down on a cross emitting smoke. With a wink and a nod, the pilot assured his superstitious greeters that it was only an airplane, “a product of science and the progress of other nations.”⁴⁶ Coastal perspectives celebrated the technological conquest of Peru’s awe-inspiring geography even as they further sealed off the sierra and jungle as the outposts of modernity. With the advent of the commercial age, exuberant travel accounts heralded the openness and democratic leveling of the technological age but also reinforced entrenched racial and geographical perceptions.

The frayed technological thread that runs throughout Peru’s often gloomy republican historiography predisposed an optimistic reception for airplanes. Eurocentric narratives by oligarchic lawyer-intellectuals in the early twentieth century, eminent historian Jorge Basadre’s candid assessment of missed opportunities, and pessimistic Marxist scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s at least implicitly indicted technology’s absence or failure.⁴⁷ The unpopular Grace Contract (1889) settled Peru’s foreign debt crisis by handing over railroad concessions to British capitalists.⁴⁸ Foreign loans for foreign manufacturing and agricultural technology invited foreign interlopers. The failure to develop a capitalist class and market—an enduring but questionable refrain—exposed Peru to the fluctuations of a one-dimensional export economy.⁴⁹ Technological inadequacy lurked in the memory of Peru’s military past as well. In the humiliating defeat by Chile, exhausted warships and inferior weaponry betrayed naval commander Miguel Grau and infantry officer Francisco Bolognesi, who ascended to Peru’s military pantheon on superhuman courage in the face of technological frailty.⁵⁰ By most accounts, technology’s failure had contributed to Peru’s unfavorable position in world processes.

When the first airplanes arrived in Peru, public discourse registered residual melancholy decades after the Pacific war. Grim essays probed Peruvian identity for the root cause of its “defects, vices, deficiencies, its ridiculous pretensions in matters of culture and progress.”⁵¹ In 1915, lawyer and diplomat Víctor Andrés Belaunde attempted to diagnose the Peruvian pathology, but he hardly knew where to start: “True, Peru is sick. But what is its illness? Is it physical, biological, psychological? Is it in the land, the race, or collective ideals and aspirations?”⁵² Democratic consolidation, sustained economic development, and racial integration had proved elusive. Exasperated that the indigenous had inherited Indian indolence but not Inca industriousness, coastal and provincial intellectuals initiated new debates about what role the brown-skinned masses should play in the national project.⁵³ Conservative

author and diplomat Francisco García Calderón argued that the Panama Canal's 1914 completion would integrate Peru's agricultural markets and entice racially robust European immigration through direct connections to English, French, German, and Italian ports.⁵⁴ Racial improvement and cultural transfer promised to ease intrinsic backwardness.

Though sympathetic to innovative scientific thought, Peru's oligarchic intellectuals wielded positivism as a moderately progressive tool but protected a status quo that sustained their power and authority.⁵⁵ Although Peru never institutionalized positivist science to the same degree as Mexico or Brazil, scientific philosophy inflected literature, journalism, education, and public policy at the turn of the century.⁵⁶ Denigrating Spain's obscurantist colonial legacy, strident Peruvian social critic Manuel González Prada advocated liberation not by a "mummified science," but rather a "positivist science that in just one century of industrial applications has produced more good for humanity than entire millennia of theology and metaphysics."⁵⁷ Little wonder that the technologically inept Spaniards had left their colonies ill-prepared for modernity. According to González Prada, when "you send a telegram from any Spanish city, you send a note by train to alert them that the message is on its way, and when the train departs, you send a mule to announce that the train has left."⁵⁸ In this view, more than three centuries of Spanish colonialism had stunted technoscientific capacity.⁵⁹

The Rarified Air of the Modern explores how technology shaped decisions at a fundamental moment in Peruvian history. An abiding faith in technological modernization emerged during oligarchic rule in 1910 and built momentum through President Augusto B. Leguía's imitative eleven-year reign through the 1920s, the militaristic nationalism and protectionism of the 1930s, and the conflicted engagement with the United States around World War II. Although the aviation project appeared to reinforce Lima's centralized rule, the penetration of airplanes into the sierra and jungle alternately equipped provincial residents to challenge coastal hegemony and deepened the perception that retrograde regions required a modern, technological makeover.

The first two chapters of the book explore the simultaneous renewal and anxiety that characterized the modern condition in Peru. Airplanes presented Peruvians with a new opportunity to finally get technology right. A reporter boasted that Chávez's performances for the European gaze had altered perceptions of a country and continent whose "mentality and energy . . . have been scorned in the truly civilized world."⁶⁰ The pilot arrived as the embodiment of rationality. Sidestepping positivism's anticlerical strains, a priest eulogized

the aviator as “a model of science” whose exploits were “the result and exercise of a powerful and active intelligence.”⁶¹ Chávez had revealed an unbeknownst technological capacity, a powerful antidote to pessimism. Airplanes arrived free of the political and cultural baggage that tainted military weaponry and the British-owned railroad. An engineer asserted that “with airplanes we can achieve what we never will either with naval squadrons or railroads: bridge distances, overcome the obstacles of the terrain, and make Peru what a country with riches should be.”⁶² Whereas Peru’s railroads symbolized deficiency and failure, airplanes represented rationality and ingenuity.

After the initial aviation collapse in 1911, in which an oligarchic hue colored the endeavor, organizers began cultivating popular support. Although most aviation progress occurred after the Great War, the 1910s were far from a lost decade. Powerful spokesmen—politicians, military officials, businessmen—promoted aviation as a civic and patriotic pursuit, then pointed to new popular engagement as evidence for technology’s organic nature. Nonetheless, the French Aviation Mission’s alleged failure and an embarrassing congressional investigation in the early 1920s exposed deficiency in almost every aspect of Peruvian aviation. The crisis of a “faux” modernity surged to the fore when dispirited advocates unfavorably compared Peru’s aerial project with those elsewhere in Latin America and beyond.

Chapters 3 and 4 move the focus to the sierra and jungle. A Quechua-speaking pilot’s triumphant flight across the Andes and subsequent fatal crash in 1925 demonstrated how highland elites paradoxically appropriated airplanes to reconnect with an interrupted Inca past. The pilot and his feat equipped Cuzqueños to dislodge Lima’s coastal and Western orientation by trumpeting an authentic Peruvian essence with roots in distant but tangible Andean history. A eulogizer recognized that the pilot’s death conveyed not a sense of human powerlessness against technology, but rather carried “the fecund germs of an immediate or distant rehabilitation.”⁶³ Sierran modernizers imagined aviation as an emancipatory agent, a history-making technology, and a corrective to Lima’s centripetal social, economic, and cultural pull.

No comparable endeavor attempted to reassert a primordial jungle past. Coastal and jungle elites mobilized airplanes to integrate, domesticate, and civilize a new frontier and refreshingly blank slate on which Peru could overcome republican ineptitude. The vast green carpet of the jungle as seen from the air, exotic flora and fauna, and inhabitants perceived as stuck on Darwinian pause served as the perfect screen on which elites projected their modernity. However, myriad accidents created compelling cultural encounters among survivors, Amazon “savages,” and geography in a reversal of the