

PREFACE

I have chosen the closing verse from César Vallejo's poem entitled "Thunderclap" from *Los heraldos negros* (1918) for the title of this collection of essays because, with the figure of the "sinister pains spreading swiftly there / in the narrow pass of my nerves," Vallejo captures the moment when subjects such as Garcilaso de la Vega, Inca, Guamán Poma de Ayala, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and even José Carlos Mariátegui realized that their destiny was to write, to write in order to engage in battle, but with a little advantage: positioned at the *desfiladero*, or narrow pass. In Vallejo's poem Alma, at the prospect of battle, "se asustó," while the Grand General Thought ("el Gran General Pensamiento") girded himself with a deicidal lance. My reading of the poem extends the scene from the moment when the battle is contemplated in fear to the moment when a strategy has been devised for coping.

I find this combination of fear and apprehension followed by the decision to write in order to fight to be the core of the prose of the world that post-conquest writers deploy in order to surface from the avalanche of conquest which has literally set their world upside down. The experience of "El mundo al revés," as Guamán Poma describes it, is not confined in the colonial world to one generation or to one place. The coloniality of power that ensues as a world order, the shifting but always colonial position of the subject, is experienced in different guises over and over again by writers as distant in time and space as the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and José Carlos Mariátegui as they both search for a *punto de mira*. Outnumbered and overwhelmed by the Eurocentric claims made on knowledge

and capacities by the colonial discourse that ensued after 1492, both Alma and the Great General need to move from the plain that gives the advantage to an army onto an elevated point in the terrain from which to see the whole of the field, ascertain the strength of the enemy and plan their mode of engagement while they are, like Kierkegaard, trembling in fear and suffering of “susto,” as an Andean healer would tell you. After many years (thirty for Guamán Poma, twenty for the Inca) of inhabiting the “hospital of nerves,” the “vexed encampment” that Vallejo figures for this classic Greek battle, the colonial writer crawls up to the top of the escarpment and from there he situates himself above the narrow pass. From there he/she can now see and has modified the terms of the battle. Indeed, he/she has set up the place through which the troops of the enemy can pass. The enemy cannot now come as an overwhelming tumult and overpower him/her in one single attack. It can now pass only a few at time at the risk of being attacked by surprise by the colonial. The enemy has thus been rendered vulnerable to the eye and the understanding of the colonial writer and can now be engaged under the advantage of a good weapon. It is this moment of setting up oneself at the *desfiladero*, at the narrow pass, that I try to capture in these essays.