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The New Modernist Studies ed. by Douglas Mao (review)

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The New Modernist Studies.

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Modernist studies over the past few decades have undergone a radical sea change that has altered some of the field's long-standing assumptions about the foundations and meanings of modernism as a theoretical and historical category. Recent critical interventions into what is now commonly referred to as "the new modernist studies" have charted paths that extend the traditional axis of modernism beyond early twentieth-century Euro-American arts and literature. By showing how modernist works operate in diverse geographical locations and cultural forms, and on different timelines, these scholarly activities have transgressed modernism's previous disciplinary boundaries in various "spatial, temporal and vertical directions," as Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz wrote in their seminal essay "The New Modernist Studies," published in *PMLA* in May 2008 (737). Such efforts have led to the reconfiguration of modernism as a polycentric rather than a singular phenomenon while rendering the term itself increasingly elusive and at times hard to grasp.

The publication of this new collection of essays, *The New Modernist Studies*, continues and advances such critical work by rigorously documenting and responding to the field's key areas of debate and self-inquiry, which were first developed in edited volumes such as *Bad Modernisms* (Duke UP, 2006), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (Oxford UP, 2012), and *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism* (Columbia UP, 2016), and recently anthologized in *The New Modernist Studies Reader* (Bloomsbury, 2021), to list but a few. With its fourteen essays divided into two parts, "Histories" and "Horizons," the current volume, edited by Mao, both historicizes the critical currents of (the new) modernist studies from its origins to the present (Part I) and identifies productive points of departure for fresh paths of inquiry oriented toward the future (Part II). The two essays in "Histories," by Michael North and Mark Wollaeger, provide a useful and comprehensive overview of the birth and growth of modernism's trajectory as a cultural, intellectual, and academic formation. The remaining twelve essays in "Horizons" collectively explore a wide array of topics from a largely contextualizing perspective with a simultaneous emphasis on textual specificities and formal features. The volume undertakes the task of rethinking text-context relations in ways that resist the immediate prioritization of context over textual meaning. Such prioritization of context can be said to have dominated the field of the new modernist studies from its inception.

Several chapters set out to explore modernism's spatial and global dimensions, highlighting patterns of transaction between diverse cultural and geographical contexts as well as individual texts and movements. María del Pilar Blanco's contribution begins with a theoretical reflection on the notion of the planetary, which critically builds on previous models developed particularly by Gayatri Spivak and Susan Stanford Friedman. Taking as its case study Spanish American *modernismo* and French *Décadence*, the essay underscores the continuities and ruptures between the two movements through translation, linguistic correspondence, and individual travel. *Modernismo's* encoun-

ters with the *Décadence* movement serve as a testing ground for comparative, planetary readings that nevertheless remain cautious of flattening out the temporal and linguistic boundaries through a homogenizing Anglo-American institutional lens. This revisionary approach to modernism as a global and transnational project emerges as a key concern in several other essays from a notably broad range of angles: Friedman's chapter, for instance, proposes transnationally situated comparative readings that bring together figures like Rabindranath Tagore and E. M. Forster based on their mutual engagement with religious identity and empire. Aarthi Vadde probes the formal and conceptual allegiances between the technological and scientific engineering of international auxiliary languages, on the one hand, and mid-twentieth-century global modernist literature, on the other. Steven S. Lee's contribution examines the global revolutionary projects of communism before and after the Cold War as a generative force for modernist aesthetics' engagement with social realism. Edwin Hill is equally invested in uncovering modernism's wider cultural and spatial flows in his exploration of noir film and its use of jazz as a transnational sonic site for modernist and postcolonial conceptualizations of Blackness and Black culture.

Both Hill's and Lee's pieces, like several others', build nodal points between distinct but intersecting scholarly currents in the new modernist studies: they both trace modernism's multifaceted spatial itineraries while moving across different media and genres—Hill on noir film and Lee on social realism—neither of which would traditionally have been viewed as “modernist” according to previous uses of the term. The inclusion of a larger set of objects and styles within the scope of modernism not only poses a challenge to the vertical division of cultural materials into modernist/non-modernist, high/low, and so forth; such inclusion also speaks to the permeability of such categorical divisions themselves.

Other contributions tackle the heated issue of modernism's temporal expansions (both forward and backward in time) beyond the twentieth century. Paul K. Saint-Amour's chapter pursues textual and visual explorations of “deep time” and ecology from Virginia Woolf's fiction to archeological photography during World War I. Modernist preoccupations with deep time serve as a compelling counterpoint to commonly received associations of modernism with “the now” and “the new.” An expanded model of modernist temporality is also apparent, although in a markedly different way, in Sara Crangle's and David James's works, which illuminate the persistence of recognizably modernist features in works produced “well after the early twentieth century” (9). The vantage point of alternative modernist temporalities works in concert with broader efforts that discern modernism as a transhistorical formation developed in response to competing versions of modernity across multiple timelines. In this regard, the volume also provides a sense of critical alertness toward a view of modernism that can be applied to countless periods and traditions at the expense of contextual specificity (for examples of such alertness, see 11–12, 68, 84).

At the foundation of the book's collective remapping of modernism also lies a shared understanding of the cross-disciplinary character of modern-

ist studies as a guiding incentive. This endeavor is clearly on display in Friedman's focus on comparative methodologies and religious studies and in Maren Linett's consideration of disability studies. In other chapters, it extends to include, rather impressively, a host of other areas, including affect theory, archival studies, recent feminist theory, ethnicity studies, ecocriticism, and queer theory. All in all, the extent of these cross-disciplinary alignments proves "the continuing productivity of modernist studies' porousness" as a field (4).

Perhaps the most significant development governing the study of modernism, and one that is clearly reflected across the pages of *The New Modernist Studies*, is the critical transformation of the modernist canon. Over the past years, the new modernist studies have expanded their curriculum beyond the established figures of modernism with the inclusion of previously marginalized or ignored cultural materials, figures, and movements. But the usual suspects conventionally associated with modernism—from T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound to James Joyce and Virginia Woolf—still play a vital, if not a dominant, role in this new critical constellation (Woolf alone enjoys over thirty index entries). Against the steady relevance of such familiar names, *The New Modernist Studies*—much like other modernist scholarship of the past few years—is characterized by the absence of other well-known US-American modernists, from Wallace Stevens to Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, and Hart Crane. Stevens, for instance, is mentioned but twice, and only in passing with reference to previous critical work on the poet.

To find Stevens's work only at the margins of the new modernist studies is perhaps not entirely puzzling: his relationship to modernism has been contested, with influential critical pieces declaring him to be either a late romantic or a near contemporary. Moreover, as a figure who, during his most productive years, rarely traveled and largely sought to keep to his private life, Stevens does not seem to resonate well, at first sight, with the new modernist paradigm of a globetrotting and expansionist view of modernism. But it is precisely his continuing absence in the new modernist scholarship that presses on the question of whether the new modernist studies have anything to offer for a reevaluation of works, such as Stevens's, that seem uneasily attuned to the critical mandates of the field's burgeoning canon. Given his absence among several other recent state-of-the-art collections, the answer might seem to tilt toward the negative. Yet the methods and theories advanced by the new modernist paradigm do seem to offer numerous productive angles from which to reconsider not only Stevens's work per se, but also its relevance for a deeper understanding of the shifting boundaries of modernist studies itself. After all, Stevens's work, despite numerous considerations of him as a non-modernist or an atypical modernist, has been at the center of some prominent debates that sought to determine the stakes of modernist theory, as in Marjorie Perloff's 1982 essay "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" and Glen MacLeod's introduction to the Fall 2002 special issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* that revisited the same question.

How does one read, from a new modernist studies angle, Stevens's envisaging of a migrant poet-figure like Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C,"

whose transatlantic travels provide an at once ironic and interrogative take on the artistic merging of diverse cultural materials and settings on a global scale? Like many of his contemporaries, Stevens did explore the effects and pressures of an intensified form of globalization on art and poetry, whether through the poetic integration of foreign materials and references in his work or through more abstract visions of the planetary embedded, among other ways, in his idea of poetry as “The Planet on the Table.” His imagining of a geographically and culturally expansive aesthetic, as distinct from his cosmopolitan counterparts’ more directly affirmative versions of cross-cultural borrowing and travel (think of Pound and Eliot), possesses broader critical implications for a reconsideration of modernism’s global reach. What does the new modernist studies’ focus on literature and mass culture offer to a re-reading of Stevens—for instance, to our interpretation of “The Man on the Dump,” in which everyday objects of mass production, global trade, and the news are brought together in a line of images collected by the poet? Or consider “A Thought Revolved,” in which Stevens’s modernist *flâneur* records the city’s urban material environment and culture (advertising signs, diners, cigar stores, and so forth) while at the same time keeping to his abstract walls of poetry. And last but not least, how does a new modernist studies framework engage with Stevens’s experimentation with alternative temporalities and nonhuman environments—the shifting climates and cosmological and geological formations of his poetic world that have kept scholars who work at the intersection of ecocritical and modernist studies intensely occupied in the past years?

These examples suggest only a few avenues for a rethinking of Stevens that intimately intersect with the theories and methods of the new modernist studies. Some of these topics have indeed been explored by Stevens scholars over the past decade, through revisionary readings that devote attention to the global, transnational, ecological, and queer contexts and impulses of his work (see, for instance, two other collections published recently by Cambridge University Press: *Wallace Stevens in Context*, edited by Glen MacLeod in 2017, and *The New Wallace Stevens Studies*, edited by Bart Eeckhout and myself and reviewed by Stephanie Burt in this same issue). The fullest possible implications of such reconsiderations of Stevens’s poetry for the new modernist studies and its theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary crossings still await deeper reflection and further analysis, demanding perhaps an even closer dialogic relation between recent Stevens scholarship and the new modernist studies. As Roger Gilbert claimed nearly a decade ago in the pages of this journal (Spring 2014, pp. 105–07), Stevens might seem to be at a disadvantage in the face of recent developments in the new modernist studies, yet the field’s critical trends offer a set of underexplored and innovative strands that prove undeniably relevant both for modernist and Stevens studies moving forward.

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