

Joshua L. Miller, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the American Modernist Novel*

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- 3 Rachele Dini
- 4 University College London

5

This new collection of essays on the American modernist novel traces both the parameters by which American modernism and the novel form were originally understood, and the ways in which those parameters have been tested, expanded and re-written in line with broader shifts in the humanities. All of the essays situate American modernism in a global context, reading its many different strands as implicitly imbricated with other cultures and languages, and as contesting the nationalist, hierarchical, gendered and segregated categories upheld by US society in the first half of the twentieth century. From a brief history of the major events that constituted the beginnings of American modernity and shaped the literary landscape between 1890 and 1940—the World’s Columbian Exhibition of 1890; the New York Armory Show in 1913; the invention of the Ford “Five Dollar Day” in 1914; the first transcontinental phone call, the US entry into World War I in 1917, and others—the book quickly moves on to address the influence of U.S. economic policy overseas,

immigration quotas, and the traumatic history of slavery. Particular attention is paid to the evolution of scholarly discussions of modernism, including the role that—for example—the New Critical and Cold War frameworks played in initially excluding particular writers from study, and the role of postcolonial studies, African American studies, feminist theory, and queer theory in recognizing their importance. The collection's three sections—"Movements" (the modernist novel, geospatial movement and national identity); "Methodologies" (analytical approaches to modernism); and "Textualities" (the modernist novel's relationship to visual culture, translation, music, and new media)—reflect this polyvalent approach.

6

In the opening essay of the book's first section, Harilao Stecopoulos argues that regionalism in modernist writers such as Willa Cather and F. Scott Fitzgerald, far from reflecting fascistic intolerance, is rather a form of "resistance against the totalizing tendencies of capitalist modernity"—a "means of generating political and cultural critique in and through place" (23).

7

Deniz Cruz similarly challenges received ideas about the "place" of Asian American writers of the early twentieth century in the following essay, demonstrating how their testing of the realist form, and their exploration of such themes as exile, alienation, and the reconstruction of modern subjectivity through literary form (among others) in fact renders them "transpacific modernists." Her analysis of how these writers engaged with—and problematized—what she terms "the market's objectification of Asian texts and bodies" is nothing short of fascinating (42).

8

Catherine Morley builds on these analyses in her discussion of ethnic-American modernism, which she argues is key to understanding American modernism as a whole. Noting that the surge in immigrant communities between 1880 and 1930 "contributed to New York's reputation as the center of modernism," and citing Werner Sollers' contention that "'ethnization and modernization go hand in hand'" (54), she demonstrates the extent to which modernist texts such as *Manhattan Transfer*, *O Pioneers!* and *The Bread Givers* interrogate the assimilationist policies of the period and explore otherness.

9

Finally, Kevin Bell's essay on Black literary modernism sheds light on the depiction of black people's relation to modernization by attending to modernist novels in which the themes of colonialism, enslavement, and capitalist exploitation come to the fore. Further, Bell shows the staging, in black modernist texts, of a "continual need to flex or move elsewhere," reflects an "agitated disposition toward the terminal character of station in any socio-geographic 'place' structured by Euro-capitalist cultural imperatives" that are "always already stratified by racialism" (80).

10

The collection's second section, "Methodologies," extends these discussions of spatial dislocation and hybrid identities through attention to "geo," "borderlands" and "queer" modernisms, each of which complicates established definitions of modernist literature. Beautifully complementing the arguments advanced in the first chapters, Yogita Goyal's essay on "geomodernism" explores the merits of analyzing the "place, position and perspective" of modernist texts and "broaden[ing] the modernist archive, rethinking established canons and including a variety of alternative traditions" (89; 90). Through readings of texts by Pauline Hopkins, W.E.B. Du Bois and Rabindranath Tagore, Goyal shows how "no simple polarity between the national and the transnational may be assumed, as each of these writers moves in, out, and across local and global circuits to show how place helps fashion the very meaning of modernity itself" (103).

11

Mary Pat Brady in turn draws our attention to the *modernismo* of Mariano Azuela, Olga Beatriz Torres, and Jovita González, which in their different ways draw attention to the "importance of cultural cross-fertilization" and question "eugenics as the stance structuring cultural analysis and change" (113). For Brady, borderlands modernism (modernism from countries bordering the US) "engage[s] with the machinery of empire building by disengaging from a narrative of progress and triumph" and examines "the dynamics of living together within a hostile field of death and loss" not through "hard" or opaque writing, but through stories that actively question the "violent dynamics of empire" (118).

12

From these explorations of "interstitial and fugitive" interrogations of empire (118), Scott Herring takes us through an analysis of the "queerness" at the heart of modernism. Building on Susan Stanford Friedman's re-conceptualisation of modernity and modernism as "'the condition of sensibility of radical disruption and accelerating change wherever and whenever such a phenomenon appears'" (123), Herring provides a fascinating account of how queer modernism "resisted inchoate forms of normalization not just for individuals but for the spaces they inhabited and the new objects they used" (125). Drawing an explicit connection between these different expressions of subversion and the background of "aggressive nativism" against which they occurred, Herring shows how the modernist novel grappled with standardization, normalization, and rationalization not only through the restructuring of subjectivities, but through "perversions of unorthodox goods" that called into question the "increasing uniformity of modern consumer cultures" (125).

13

Steven Meyer's essay on the American modernist novel's engagement with science extends these discussions to consider the

influence of particular epistemological shifts such as Jamesian physiological psychology at the level of both narrative and form. Usefully—particularly for undergraduate students—Meyer attends to the difference between naturalist novels' explicit attention to science, and the modernists' subtler registering of scientific advances.

14

The last section of the collection, "Textualities," builds on the previous two to examine medium and form—specifically, the American modernist novel's engagement with visual culture (Jeff Allred); jazz and blues (Emily J. Lordi); translation (Daniel Katz) and new media (Julian Murphet)—before concluding with a final chapter on American modernism's reception globally.

15

In the first of these essays, Allred examines how the "landscape of an emergent modernity left its impress on literary forms," most notably in the revision of the process of looking (159). Allred demonstrates how modernist novels deploy aesthetic form to "represent the sublimity of mobile, urban modernity and interrupt the 'administered' continuities of fabricated visual spectacles" (162). For these texts, "vision is not mimetic, but productive looking is a form of labor that constructs knowledge and identity rather than mirroring them" (162). Through attention to depictions of the visual—and its limits—in Jon Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein, James Agee and Walker Evans, Allred sheds new light on the questions of race, class and gender foregrounded in the previous essays.

16

Lordi's essay on modernism's relationship to jazz and blues similarly draws connections between form (in this case, the history of jazz and blues modernism) and broader questions about race and gender, addressing both the gender dynamics in jazz and blues novels, and the continued exclusion of female jazz musicians and writers from contemporary scholarly accounts of the period. Likewise, Katz's essay on translation considers not only the history of particular writers' reception overseas, but the relationship of expat writers such as Stein and Hemingway to the language of their host country, and the critiques of xenophobia implicit in their discussion of foreign languages and translation. Murphet's eloquent analysis of new media meanwhile demonstrates the extent to which the experimental methods of American modernism—which for Katz include the hard-boiled prose of Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain—were fuelled by the increasing contact and technical intermingling of the traditional print media with new technologies such as photography, cinema, and radio (213). Indeed, the crises of representation that occur in some of these texts can, themselves, be seen to comment upon "the very impossibility of writing in a world wired for inane sound and driven by automatic mechanisms" (224).

17

The collection's final essay, by Gayle Rogers, brings together these very different strands to reflect upon the reconceptualization of

modernism following the “transnational turn” in American studies, and to consider the implications of this shift towards the transnational for future scholarship. It is not enough, Rogers points out, to include previously excluded authors and texts, while tracing a “transnational America” according to the spaces occupied by the U.S. during the period 1890-1940 would be an outright mistake, as this would merely “replicate the process of territorial acquisition itself” (228). Instead, Rogers proposes we probe American modernists’ multivalent internationalism dialectically, recognizing the significance to their work of both phenomena enabled by empire (global mobility, new idioms) and movements against empire (socialism, black internationalism, the battles for women’s rights and queer identities). In turn, Roger’s analysis of place in Faulkner, which she describes as a “version of modernist regionalism that turned ‘minor’ spaces into global ones not by way of social or literary realism, but by channeling myth, allusions, cyclical or disrupted temporalities” (238) brings us back full circle to the collection’s opening.

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The Cambridge Companion to the American Modernist Novel is a rich, dynamic, and intensely interesting collection of essays that will be of interest to both undergraduate students encountering American modernism for the first time, and seasoned scholars. What emerges from these fourteen essays is not a linear narrative, or indeed a univocal explanation of what American modernism “is.” Rather, it is a constellation of interconnected ideas, that together enliven the reader to the hybridity, pluralism, internationalism, and multi-faceted nature of American modernism and challenge established ideas about its locus, thematic concerns, and form. The conclusions they draw are provocative and exciting in equal measure, and will doubtless inspire readers to read the individual texts discussed in a fresh light.

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