Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2018

Les mots pour le dire. Vocabulaire politique et
propagande dans une perspective transatlantique

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/13301>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.13301

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFEA)

Electronic reference

Margaret J. Schmitz, "Liesl Olson, *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis*", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2018, Online since 01 February 2020, connection on 07 February 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/13301> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.13301>

This text was automatically generated on 7 February 2023.

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REFERENCES

Liesl Olson, *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, 373 p., ISBN: 9780300203684, \$35

- 1 The main achievement of Liesl Olson's latest book, *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis*, is her argument that Chicago was a nexus for transatlantic modernism. Olson presents an intimate account of Chicago's literary scene in the early twentieth century by analyzing its connections with the city's artistic community, architectural character, and minority culture. She reveals the significant role the city and its cultural arbiters, especially its women, played in the development of international modernism. *Chicago Renaissance* also productively examines how Chicago's literary renaissance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shares aesthetic and social sympathies with the Chicago Black Renaissance of the 1920s. Olson claims that we lose a significant element in the story of modernism when we look at these two "renaissances" in isolation. On the whole, this book is a testament to the relevancy of archival research. This research method is particularly useful for a study of Chicago's cultural groups and publishing houses because extensive administrative and editorial activities were needed to facilitate such bold artistic experimentation. Olson is the Director of Chicago Studies at the Newberry Library and is a leading expert on Chicago modernism. She has written extensively on twentieth-century art and literature. Prior to *Chicago Renaissance*, Olson published *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford University Press, 2009) in addition to several articles and reviews on the

modernist culture. With this recent work, Olson adds to the story of modernism by disclosing Chicago's centrality to it.

- 2 There are several reasons why a case study on Chicago's contributions to modernism can alter our understanding of the way the movement evolved. Because Chicago grew faster than any other American city at the turn of the century, its artists and writers witnessed the transforming effects of modernization firsthand. A sense of the future gestated in the city's incessantly changing urban landscape. Therefore, Chicago's big business culture inevitably produced a milieu of leftist thinking. Its stockyards, and looming skyscrapers were noticeable, not to mention smelly, spectacles of capital. This had a profound impact on the way that writers and artists depicted their city. Olson eloquently supports this assertion with an analysis of works that reflect the political, sociological, and economic dynamics particular to Chicago. This is evident in Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*, with its horrifying portrayal of stockyard wageworkers. In a city where capitalist enterprise had such a visible impact on daily life, it makes sense that, as Olson states, writers utilized social realism to "uphold a mirror as a means of social protest" (19). In other words, Chicago's modernist "revolution was to speak straight" (19). Chicago also contributed to transatlantic modernism through its various little magazines. Margaret Anderson's *The Little Review* and Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, for instance, garnered an international readership and contributors. While Olson reveals that *The Little Review* took a more orthodox stance on promoting formally modernist work, Anderson's antipathy toward mainstream culture equaled her disinterest in catering to an exclusively elitist readership. These were editorial stances that blurred the line between high and low literary cultures. Ultimately, Chicago's most radical writers, editors, and publishers are shown to have contributed to international modernism, not only through their formal and conceptual experiments, but because they expressed an intimate awareness of their audiences.
- 3 *Chicago Renaissance* is separated into five chapters. Synopses of each chapter are not provided in the book's introduction; therefore, I will supply them here. Chapter one focuses on Harriet Monroe at the turn of the century and illustrates Chicago's industrial titans as unlikely sources of funding for radical literary modernism. The chapter provides a valuable analysis of Monroe's primary contributions to transatlantic modernism: the launch of *Poetry* and her championing of non-Western art. Just as Monroe acted as a "hinge" figure between her audience and modernism, so too did *Poetry* act as a cultural liaison between the Far East, England, and the United States. Olson reveals the way Monroe disseminated classic Chinese and Japanese poetry in her magazine and editorials on the art and culture of the Far East. Consequently, the chapter demonstrates how Monroe asserted the need for her Anglo-American audience to move beyond their Western purview to experience the formal and conceptual experimentation of Chinese and Japanese aesthetics. Remarkably, Olson situates Monroe as a key figure behind the formal experiments of Ezra Pound and others from this period.
- 4 There is an excellent instance of interdisciplinary analysis in this chapter, which may be useful to literary critics and art historians alike. Monroe's acquisition (and subsequent gift to the Art Institute of Chicago) of a painting from the imperial palace in China is highlighted as a visual example of the sparse and enigmatic values she was becoming interested in as she curated the composition of Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro," published in *Poetry* in 1913. These intertextual analyses are few and far

between, however. Olson occasionally misses opportunities to further support her own assertions about Monroe's instrumental role in the dissemination of modern visual art. For example, in 1914, *Poetry* was one of the few little magazines to advertise the British-based Vorticist movement. Chicago native, John Storrs, whose abstract sculptures celebrated the skyscrapers being built in the metropolis drew heavily from Vorticist aesthetics.¹

- 5 The chapter also discusses another important intercultural aspect of Monroe's liaising activity. Olson carefully analyzes Monroe's participation in the "Indian craze" during the second decade of the twentieth century. Increased interest in Native American aesthetics during this period fed the broader interests that Western modern artists had regarding non-Western aesthetics, which perpetuated mythologized ideas about Native life as being nostalgically located in a historicized past. Olson eloquently acknowledges Chicago's role within the power dynamics of settler colonialism during this time. Chicago was a gateway to the West, which made it easier for people to commodify the Native traditions of the Southwest. Native ceremonies, villages, and dances were marketed as tourist experiences made possible by the Santa Fe Railroad, which snaked its way across the country from Chicago. Meanwhile, wealthy Chicago industrialists plundered the West and Southwest for its natural resources.
- 6 Chapter two continues Olson's intertextual analysis as she explores the impact of modern art on the city's writers. Olson provides a detailed assessment of how men such as real estate mogul Arthur Aldis and art critic Arthur Jerome Eddy promoted and arranged the Armory Show's Chicago leg, and uncovers the hidden story of women within the Arts Club of Chicago, which was formed shortly after the Armory Show. Beyond the Armory, the Arts Club was one of the earliest places to see modernist art in the United States. These female cultural arbiters, including the club's president Rue Carpenter and exhibition coordinator Alice Roullier, played key roles in introducing the Midwest (and its writers) to modernism. The chapter demonstrates how the abstract and mysterious works on display at the Armory Show and Arts Club impacted the development of emerging modernist writers in Chicago, particularly Sherwood Anderson. Anderson's prose depended less on dialogue and more on pared-down language to create its emotional impact. Therefore, his work is shown to lie somewhere between social realism and the radical forms of new art and literature he was experiencing.
- 7 Chapter three focuses on the often overlooked, but formative, time Ernest Hemingway lived in Chicago. Hemingway lived in Chicago from 1920 to 1921. This period directly preceded the writer's mythologized Paris years, during which he wrote his most celebrated novels such as *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Olson connects Hemingway's tendency for second-person narration in these books – which, according to Olson boast "specialized [ardently masculine] knowledge of violent or frank subject matter" (152) – with his early, editorial writing completed for various journalistic publications while in Chicago. Olson studies the Midwest audience Hemingway instructed in the early 1920s because this audience proved to be central to his narrative direction. Olson argues that Hemingway directs his shocking subject matter and instructional voice – his frequent use of the word "you" in his novels – specifically to the middle-class women of his upbringing in Oak Park and the Chicago literary critic to the masses, Fanny Butcher. This chapter's analysis of the way

Hemingway addresses audience provides a major contribution to our understanding of the writer.

- 8 Some interdisciplinary analysis is also present in this chapter since Hemingway's conception of audience was also influenced by the Impressionist work he saw for the first time at the Art Institute of Chicago. It is well known that Hemingway was especially taken with Cézanne and that it may have been the painter's celebration of medium that influenced his economic and stripped prose. However, Olson also points out that Cézanne made Hemingway think about how subject and form could impact a viewer/reader. To make her point, she cites Hemingway's assertion in *A Moveable Feast* that he wanted his work to "make people feel something more than they understand" (164). The chapter shows, to put it succinctly, that Hemingway's Chicago period developed his ability to write for, and shock, a mass audience. These lessons were garnered through his early experiences with modern art, his work in journalism, the suffocation of suburban Oak Park values, and the diverse and bohemian crowd he ran with in his Near North Side neighbourhood.
- 9 Chapter four analyzes the important impact Chicago made on Gertrude Stein during her American lecture tour between 1934 and 1935. Chicago was famously Stein's favorite American city and it acted as a hub while she conducted her tour. Olson uses Stein's Chicago leg as a case study to highlight the two divergent ways audiences have engaged with her work. On one hand, non-academic readers have interpreted her avant-garde experiments as being rooted in everyday language. Richard Wright's interest in Stein's experiments with African American vernacular in "Melanctha" (1909) is one such viewpoint. Stein's writing could be viewed, then, as a flexible and moving language that intimately drew from the masses. On the other hand, academic critics at the University of Chicago argued that Stein's texts should be viewed as impersonal, that they should be interpreted as independent of the reader. The chapter highlights Chicago as a site in which Stein could research and experiment with American culture and language. It also shows how her readers engaged with her work, highlighting the dissonance between reading Stein "as an experience and reading as a pursuit of ideas" (227). On the whole, Olson efficaciously ascertains that Stein's visits to Chicago can develop our understanding of her experiments with language.
- 10 Chapter five, "White City, Black Metropolis," is among the most thought-provoking sections of *Chicago Renaissance*. Olson traces the social and political motivations behind several key Chicago Black Renaissance works, as well as the literary and cultural organizations that supported Bronzeville's artists and writers. The chapter's foci includes Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and *12 Million Black Voices*; the magazine *Negro Story*; Gwendolyn Brooks's *A Street in Bronzeville*; Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter* (1946); as well as St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Jr's sociological study *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945). In addition to analyzing the formal, conceptual, and political foundations of such work, Olson, again, takes advantage of interesting opportunities for interdisciplinary analysis. Cases of note include her comparison of the painter Eldzier Cortor's figurative work and South Side literary circles. Both depicted the corporeal realities of black life in Bronzeville and played with the friction between modernist abstraction and realism. Equally significant is Olson's discussion of photography on the South Side. Wayne Miller's documentary photographs and the photographs published alongside Wright's commentary in *12 Million Black Voices* are explored in particular. What made these photographs

significant, according to Olson, was how documentary photography and philosophical ideas about the medium could highlight key issues surrounding black aesthetics and black visibility when discussed in tandem with Bronzeville literature. Such a case study portrays the polarity between the invisibility of black subjectivity and the visibility of blackness in the United States – identity politics these artists and writers routinely grappled with.

- 11 Between chapters, Olson includes five “creative interludes.” These interludes are the result of intense archival research combined with creative imaginings about key chronological transition points. Just as Chicago’s modernist writers spoke to both mass and niche audiences, *Chicago Renaissance* appears to embody this dichotomy with its brief creative interludes dispersed between academic chapters. Each is a narration of a singular moment in Chicago’s modernist history that signifies a chronological and cultural change in the story of Chicago modernism. The first interlude, for example, describes a single day in the life of Harriet Monroe. On October 21, 1892, Monroe recited her decidedly conservative poem *The Columbian Ode* at the opening of the World’s Columbian Exposition. This interlude marks the period at which the old world transitioned fully into the new. While Monroe’s radicalism and aesthetic prowess eventually culminated with her magazine *Poetry*, her poem in 1892 was “caught between two worlds – between the laurel wreath and the electric bulb” (47).
- 12 Overall, *Chicago Renaissance* has several use-cases. Those interested in literary modernism, art history and interdisciplinary analysis will find this book a productive resource. However, it should be noted that it does prioritize literature over visual art. Olson’s thorough research into various archives and primary sources has certainly advanced our understanding of several key audiences, motivations, and conceptual frameworks within modernism. Most importantly, this book establishes other peripheral figures as important contributors to modernism. On the whole, the book achieves its aim to exhibit the Midwest metropolis as a fundamental participant in transatlantic modernism. For many writers, this milieu provided a site for both radical aesthetic experimentation and a keen awareness of audience.

NOTES

1. “Blast,” *Poetry*, 4.2, May 1914, [n.p.].
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INDEX

Subjects: Recensions

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