# *Introduction*

*Len Platt*

*Modernism and Race* is comprised of new accounts of how literary practice in late modernity engaged with raciologies – the hypothetical premises about humankind, to paraphrase David Theo Goldberg, which, supported by once prestigious knowledge in such fields as anthropology, sociology, linguistics and biology, became embedded as commonsense culture. All the essays collected here are involved with such issues as how 'races' are imagined and represented in modern and modernist literatures. They interrogate the anxieties and desires that are expressed in or projected onto racialised figures, and examine how individual modern writers relate to the collective identities posited by race discourse. At the same time, these essays respond to the larger and more general claim that race is a central conceptual category in which the cultural project of modernism, however it be defined and historicised, took place. In this context, literary modernism and, indeed, the wider literature of the modern period, become inextricably related in complex and often ambiguous ways to the dynamics of the all-encompassing conception *modernity*, 'the general period emerging from the sixteenth century in the historical formation of what only relatively recently has come to be called "the West"'.[1]

The literary history addressed in *Modernism and Race*, then, is quite different from the kind of history implied in a tradition represented at its best by a book like Michael H. Levenson's *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1984).[2] The concern here is not primarily with tracing the development of literary form. Although many of the chapters in this book do make reference to modernist aesthetics and the course of a literary movement which defined itself around a 'doctrine of modernism', most are more fundamentally concerned with positioning literature in a wider social, cultural and political framework, one which takes in late Victorian and Edwardian race science and technology, historical linguistics, imperialist politics and gender politics, as well as 1920s internationalism and early twentieth-century historiography. Some move well beyond what has been

traditionally defined as literary modernism. In this sense *Modernism and Race* joins ranks with the approaches that have been evident in modernist studies for some time and continue to produce interesting results – as in Pericles Lewis's *Modernism, Nationalism and the Novel* (2000), or Rebecca L. Walkowitz's revaluation of modernist self-consciousness in *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism* (2007) – except that in *Modernism and Race* the primary focus is, of course, not on nationalist ideologies or urban style but specifically on how literary practice is shaped by ideas about racial identity, seen as central to the formation of modernism and the idea of modern literature.

This collection is not the first attempt at historicising modern literature in terms of race and raciologies. Indeed, since the 1980s, albeit in quite general senses initially, there has been intense attention paid to race as a category of analysis in modernism. One of the first full-length studies in this tradition appeared in the 1990s with Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature* (1994) and there has been a particular concentration of work on the area since 2000 – including Carole Sweeney's revisiting of the well-known connections between high modernism and primitivism in *From Fetish to Subject: Race, Modernism and Primitivism, 1919–1935* (2004); Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel's collection *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism and Modernity* (2004); Patricia Chu's *Race, Nationalism and the State in British and American Modernism* (2006) and Winkiel's work on modernist manifestos in *Modernism, Race and Manifestos* (2008). At the same time, there is a considerable body of work to which the idea of race, while not central, is nevertheless important because of its contingency to related contexts – Lewis's work on nationalism, for example, Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby's edited collected of essays *Modernism and Empire* (2003) and the 2009 collection edited by Richard Begum and Michael Valdez Moses, *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899–1939*. *Modernism and Race*, then, is part of a developed area of study which, for some critics and institutions of literary criticism, has not just substantially shifted modernist studies but, rather, threatened to problematise the study of modernism out of existence. As Phyllis Lassner and Howard J. Booth point out in their chapters in this collection, this is a result of the impact of theoretical traditions from deconstruction to postcolonial criticism, interrogating the reference points which once designated modernism as a prestige culture of 'the West' – including its temporal, spatial and, of course, cultural and political reference points. The title of a recent essay by Douglas Mao

and Rebecca Walkowitz – 'The changing profession: the new modernist studies' (2008) – focuses on the 'transnational' turn that has, at least for some, changed the nature of a modernist studies now crucially engaging 'with postcolonial theory and … the interrelation of cultural, political, and economic transactions'.[3] Postcolonial theory in particular, for some critics, has become virtually inseparable from modernist studies, which has led to a debate in some quarters as to whether the two can be intertwined or should be kept separate. A posting for the Modernist Studies Association convention round table discussion in 2009 refers to 'current trends in modernist studies that transgress definitional categories often treated as … the established divides between, for example: high/pop; secular/sacred; public/private; experimental/traditional; aesthetic/ethical; difficult/democratic; Nation/World; centre/margins; theory/history'. The posting goes on to ask the suggestive question, 'Have we reached the stage where we seek not merely to "add" non-canonical writers, but … to analyze all writing as participating – albeit in different ways – in a mixed and mingled world?'[4]

Against this kind of context *Modernism and Race* extends beyond a self-contained literary history and what was once the traditional canon of modernist writers and texts to understand modernism both as a much contested term but also as an idea which by definition shifts its boundaries to include new categories and perspectives. One aim of this introduction is to map and illustrate the many strands and traditions that have come together to produce these critical literatures on modernism and race, to understand what they write to, what their dimensions are and how they are currently being developed, in terms both of the new ways they attempt to map modernism and of their impact on the more familiar, conventional modernist canon.

## UNIVERSALISM, INDIVIDUALISM AND THE AMERICAN MODERN

In a well-known and influential formulation, literary modernism was once constructed very differently, not as the overdetermined ideological entanglement implied above but as a 'revolution in taste and practice',[5] and a muscular liberation from history – that absolute break Wyndham Lewis described in 1914 as an escape 'clean out of history'.[6] For a good part of the twentieth century, modernism was seen as a pursuit of personal freedom and a deeply individualist culture devoted to 'self-realization, the situation and process of consciousness, [and] the inner divisions of the

self',[7] against which the racial obsessions, class antagonisms and political conservatism of many, indeed most, conventionally high-status moderns became marginalised as aberrational – a matter of personal psychology and largely irrelevant to the 'real' literary work, as David Ayers points out in his contribution to this collection. Where 'race' impinged on this culture at all, it did so primarily as part of an appropriative dynamic, with the 'primitive' cultures of Africa and other regions being recruited to what was seen as the central and 'spiritual' motivation of modernism – the desperate struggle aimed, according to the American scholar Cleanth Brooks, at preventing the increasing reduction of mankind 'to a mechanism, a mere thing'.[8]

As many critics have pointed out, however much Britain may have been perceived as an important site of modernism between the 1880s and the 1920s, it played a relatively minor part in the critical elevation of modernism after 1945. Indeed, in Britain the critical term 'had little more than a walk on part …, and could easily be written into the category "modern" or dismissed by Larkin's kind of provincial snobbism'. The 'enduring modernist orthodoxy' outlined above was largely a product of an authoritative American academy, and its national and nationalist dimensions were everywhere inscribed.[9] Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (1971), for example, was unashamedly patriotic, insisting that America, 'unencumbered by the worldliness with which Europe had learned to inhabit the European world', effectively made the modernist world. 'Thus it was Whistler, not anyone English, who had known how to make Turner's heritage fructify.' Ezra Pound, the frontiersman, took centre stage with regard to poetry and Henry James remade the novel for modern times.[10] This Americanisation of the modern was powerfully evident in the ideologically charged emphasising of modernism as individualism, and the pairing of those terms with the seemingly contradictory notion that the modern evolved progressively from the nineteenth century.

*The Modern Tradition* (1965), compiled by two eminent American/Atlantic critics – Charles Feidelson, from 1988 Bodman Professor of English literature at Yale, and Richard Ellmann, arguably the most influential Joycean of the post-war period – demonstrated both key characteristics. It insisted on modernism's essential concern with 'the theme of human freedom' and 'subjective life at its most intense … personal and private, wholly individual', although simultaneously, and for all their apparent subversion, the most important moderns were also typically seen in terms of continuity – as 'classicists, custodians of language, communicators, traditionalists in their fashion'.[11] Kenner similarly understood

modernism as a 'rectification of twentieth-century letters' coming out of the 'best of nineteenth-century culture'.[12] In a sixties eulogy to the end of modernism, one of many written by American literary scholars at that time, Harry Levin was even more explicit, describing a liberal formation that materially facilitated the modern, unknowingly engineering its own assault at the hands of Wyndham Lewis's iconoclasts – 'the men of 1914' who were busily 'making it new'. For, according to Levin, in a golden age of selflessness and civilisation, liberalism 'permitted a maximum leeway for an emergence of individuality; it educated individuals thoroughly; it collected art and fostered science; it cultivated human relationships; it developed temperament and talent. Into its world the Modernists were born', the tiny elite constituting 'one of the most remarkable constellations of genius in the history of the West', and crucial to the process by which modernity deconstructed and, at the same time, perpetuated its own mythologies.[13]

That highly exclusive and heroic version of literary modernism was, of course, a product of its time and culture, as all criticism must be – including the critical essays collected here. America's confident hegemony over modernism, reflected in quite material ways, was part of the cultural counterpart to its contemporary economic supremacy. The United States had ended the war owning almost two-thirds of the world's industrial production. In 1959 it still accounted for no less than 60 per cent of all the capital stock of all the advanced countries – it was the centre around which a world capitalist economy developed. Simultaneously, the modern was very much part of a culture perceived to be at dire risk from the 'spectre of totalitarianism'. Writing in 1958, Delmore Schwartz, the American poet and fiction writer, saw Europe as being both helpless in the face of a 'growing poverty' – the legacy of the last war – and threatened with utter chaos by a new 'destructive war' with communism. With this imminent destruction of the Old World, 'America, not Europe' became a refuge, the last 'sanctuary of culture'. Indeed, for Schwartz, the existence of civilisation itself was dependent 'upon America, upon the actuality of American life'.[14] In this way America was enlisted, in the name of civilisation, to the conflict between the heroic individual and collectivism, and so was literary modernism. Under these conditions race had little or no apparent bearing on modernism, except where the 'primitive' could be understood as joining forces with the modernist formulation, or, as in the popular culture of stage and screen, reproduced as fantastic testimony to the modern's astonishing capacity for spectacle and assimilation.

## THE TURN TO THEORY: POSTMODERNITY AND 'THE BLACK ATLANTIC'

The collapse of the modernist orthodoxy and the construction of a new condition of contemporaneity, sometimes theorised as the 'postmodern', invoke a complex cultural and political history well beyond the specific concerns of this introduction and the chapters that follow. The central and immediate point to be made is that although many of the specific discourses of postmodernism and deconstruction are now largely exhausted, the 'turn to theory' they represented once forced a spectacular clearing of the ground and had a fundamental impact on the American modernist tradition. Put simply, in exposing the ambiguities, gaps and inconsistencies in what Jacques Derrida called the 'onto-logico-encyclopedic field' (i.e. the Enlightenment 'project'), they removed the binding force of universals and exposed the ideological bases behind such concepts as the individual, creativity and subjectivity.[15] Deconstruction in particular was formulated by a large section of the Western academy as an assault on 'the most cherished preconceptions of Western culture', including, of course, the preoccupations underlying the American modern.[16]

Against this cultural history, the American modern becomes important to *Modernism and Race*, then, for a number of reasons. On the one hand it serves as a reminder of how literature and literary criticism have so often been implicated in cultural politics in the past and how much these both shape and are in turn shaped by national concerns, sometimes formulated through racialised discourses. But the once-authorised version of modernism also had a powerful effect on deciding the terms of postmodern cultural criticism generally, and modernist studies in particular, which wrote back to the American modern. It is an illustration of this powerful residual effect that while none of the chapters in *Modernism and Race* refers directly to the American modern, all write against its underpinning assumptions in one sense or another. Similarly, none uses deconstructionist or postmodern discourse, but most could not have been written without the epistemological and teleological ideas that rendered modernism up to these new kinds of question.

Max Saunders's work on Ford Madox Ford, which shows how in its presentation of Englishness Ford's writing operates with a wide range of European cultural and racial others, is in some ways linked to radical critical traditions that remain important. Similarly, only more so, with Finn Fordham's chapter in this collection. '"Until Hanandhunigan's extermination": racialised histories of the world – Joyce and China' is an

account which sees *Finnegans Wake* as a parody of an interwar fashion in accounts of world history, a blending of pattern and disordered complexity that offers no differential analysis between design and chaos. Here pattern, progress and grand narrative are revealed as myths of world historiography, and fully utilised for their comic potential, while chaos and the consequent ineffability of real and complex historical processes are presented as key to an appreciation of world history. In a reading that owes something to Derrida's sense of the *Wake* as a kind of deconstructive machine, 'race' gets caught up in a treatment that involves myths of progress and decline but also represents such constructions as crucial to authority's attempts at centralising the forms of its power – a very clear indication of the impact deconstruction still has and its significance for reading and defining the modern.[17]

Deconstruction and postmodernism were decentring discourses that opened up the possibilities of modernism in relation to particularisms – subject positions conceptualised in critical tradition typically as racial and gender identities, which is why their traces appear throughout this collection and the literature on race and modernism generally. In other ways, however, these discourses threatened to close things down. Deconstruction theorised 'History' in abstract terms, but the same strategies that shattered universalist progressivism also barred the way to any meaningful alternative historiography, indeed, to any applied handling of a historical archive now rendered permanently and absolutely 'textual'.

In a curious echo of the modernism it effectively overturned, deconstruction repeated the idea of literature performing a 'revolution' beyond any specific historical determinacy. Some areas contiguous or otherwise related to modernist studies were able to function temporarily outside of precise historical dimensions. In Joyce studies, for example, Colin MacCabe's *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (1979) and Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer's *Post-Structuralist Joyce* (1984), marked the beginning of the theoretical turn where the late Joyce texts 'characterized by a foregrounded poetics or linguistic self-absorption … [are] turned in upon themselves … with the result that their "political" potential takes chiefly a metaphysical rather than historicized form' – not too far away at all from the spiritual, ahistorical revolt of the American modern.[18] Modernist studies more generally, however, were positioned very differently. A handful of texts, including *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, might have remained in the cultural now, but modernism was for the most part seriously displaced as a contemporaneous condition in the 1980s. At the very moment that the standard historiographies were being crucially

undermined, exposed as ideologically articulated inventions, modernism found itself as a culture which could only be approached historically, as a culture of a past that had to be in some way reproduced in the new age of the postmodern.

Partly as a result of being so firmly fixed by such paradoxes, a contrary modernist studies was able to adapt and hybridise quite quickly, combining what on the face of it could not be reconciled – deconstructive strategies with defiantly historicised reconstruction and cultural studies. For all the theoretical difficulties, a new approach to modernist studies, now sometimes distinguishing itself as *fin de siècle* studies, emerged in the 1990s with such publications as Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1992); Lyn Pykett's *Engendering Fictions: The English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century* (1995); the influential collection of essays edited by Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken, *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (1995) and Kelly Hurley's *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (1998). These texts and others used a combination of deconstruction, gender performance theory and historical analysis to challenge the 'clean break' tradition, understanding modernism not as being somehow 'above' history or in terms of an abstract 'metaphysical' revolution but rather in precise historical terms as 'a late-nineteenth century discourse of rupture'. Here 'the projected transcendence of history found in the works of what has come to be regarded as canonical high modernism' could be deconstructed, from the structural perspective of a new feminist historiography, 'as an attempt to build a new order from the ruins of masculine history – a degenerate (for some a feminized) state which prefigures its own end'.[19]

Studies of race and modernism were influenced by such groundbreaking work, which helped locate literary modernism in social Darwinism and eugenics, as well as gender politics, and their impact is apparent in the essays collected here – in Lassner's work which shows how gender was imagined by Nazi ideology as racialised, for example, and in Howard J. Booth's chapter on Claude McKay – although one of the defining characteristics of *Modernism and Race* is that it moves beyond the *fin de siècle* to locate modernism just as firmly in the 1920s, the 1930s and beyond. The other new historiography to emerge from the often difficult critical engagement across deconstruction, postmodernism and cultural studies was postcolonialism, one variant of which has had a particular influence on modernist studies since the 1990s. This is the revisionist grand theory evoked by the idea of 'the black Atlantic'.

In its late formulation the black Atlantic was developed by the British sociologist and cultural studies theorist Paul Gilroy from the work of such central figures as W. E. B. Du Bois and C. L. R. James. But its literary application has, again, been substantially the work of the American academy, largely in the context of a developing black studies but also as a response to the struggles of American liberalism – more or less developed versions appear in Houston A. Baker's work, including *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1989); W. Lawrence Hogue's *Race, Modernity, Postmodernity* (1996) and, more recently, in Nathan Grant's *Masculinist Impulses: Toomer, Hurston, Black Writing and Modernity* (2004) and Anita Patterson's *Race, American Literature and Transnational Modernism* (2008). The importance of the 'black Atlantic' thesis is that it specifically focuses on, and gets discursive drive from, a conjunction of race and modernity. It involves the anti-Hegelian strategy of 'following the money', splicing the cultural politics of modernity, its civilising agenda, to the savage realities of economic exploitation. Using 'an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective', black Atlantic theory exposes and refutes Eurocentric versions of cultural value, bringing together 'race' and the 'modern' in a 'dialectic' of 'double consciousness' which renders the modern experience in new culturally contingent and, sometimes, inclusive forms.[20] The implications for literary studies include a powerful challenge to the traditional and hegemonic canon, but also involve a going beyond to where the relationships between traditionally high status texts and the conventionally marginalised are re-thought, as is well illustrated by Laura Doyle's study, *Freedom's Empire: Race and the Rise of the Novel in Atlantic Modernity, 1640–1940* (2008).

Drawing on the work of scholars who have tracked the genealogy of Western race-thinking, from its linguistic, sociological and genetic definitions, to its formation within a 'geographic regime' and its shaping of European aesthetic theory, Doyle focuses on the network of co-formations that emerged under colonial conditions in the Atlantic Triangle. In this network, intra-European distinctions between Germanised – Saxon, Norman, Celtic, Gothic and Teutonic – racial identities interacted with distinctions among European, African, Oriental, or Amerindian identities. Here Doyle studies a long-lived and central pattern of raciology in Western modernity – the discourse in which races are ranked by their capacity for freedom. In her account, the British, in particular, came to pride themselves on having both a powerful will to freedom and the institutions to protect it. She examines in English-language literature the narrative pattern expressing this identity – the story of an Atlantic

crossing that entails an experience of tyranny, exile and ruin but ultimately drives towards freedom. The origins of this racialisation of freedom, Doyle argues, lie in the early seventeenth century, when Parliament members, religious refugees and new Atlantic merchants together generated a racial rhetoric by which the English fashioned themselves as a native, freedom-loving, Anglo-Saxon people struggling against a foreign, tyrannical king. Doyle shows how in novels, memoirs, pamphlets and national histories, stories of a near-ruinous yet ultimately triumphant Atlantic passage to freedom constituted the narrative expression of this heroising Anglo-Saxon identity.

The 'hidden contingency' of this seemingly singular freedom narrative becomes particularly exposed when taken in conjunction with African-Atlantic history and literature. These Atlantic texts covertly register the presence of Africans (and others) as the enabling condition and the 'dialectical counter term' of Western racial identity. Furthermore, African-Atlantic authors such as Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs and Pauline Hopkins seize back the racialised freedom plot. 'Claiming a differently racialized will to freedom, they place their agency at the origin of a transracial "freedom" on the Atlantic. Deconstructing the ways that Anglo-Atlantic writers have appropriated the black Atlantic experience, they unveil the dialectical, contested ground of race identity, in all its economic, political and rhetorical dimensions.'[21]

The black Atlantic perspective, illustrated by Doyle's work, has been important to *Modernism and Race*, as several contributions to this collection of essays show. In part as a result of its manifestation in anti-colonial movements and imperial conflicts of the early twentieth century, the contradictions inherent in the coupling of race and freedom come more sharply into view and under strain in Atlantic modernism – for writers across the 'dialectic'. Doyle's chapter in *Modernism and Race*, 'Atlantic modernism at the crossing: the migrant labours of Hurston, McKay and the diasporic text', for example, considers authors who disrupt the Atlantic-crossing freedom narrative that is so entwined with the race narrative. They do so by telling stories of Atlantic wandering, portraying characters involved in migrant labour and practising 'errant' sexuality. In texts such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Banjo* (1930), these authors challenge the racial policing of sexuality (a requirement of race reproduction) by straying off the master-route of a 'crossing-over Atlantic journey and discovering instead a migrant, non-teleological world – of sexualities and labours that do not reproduce and sustain the surplus-and-profit economy'. Hurston and McKay thus divert the 'triumphant