CHAPTER 1

Introduction: manifestos, race, and modernity

From Blackwell Publishing’s Manifestos series to the Zapatistas’ six declarations from the Lacandon jungle, the manifesto continues to generate cultural and political controversy. Short, spirited, and straddling the boundary between theory and practice, the manifesto communicates an experience of crisis and a conceptual break with the past. As its urgent tone pushes ongoing debates and practices to new realms of possibility, it seizes the present moment in order to intervene in history. This history-making self-consciousness reached its apogee in the first part of the twentieth century, when hundreds of political and aesthetic manifestos circulated throughout the world as part of an immense cultural and geopolitical shift. As these manifestos declare a series of breaks from traditional aesthetic, cultural, and political forms, they enact the quintessential gesture of modernity: they proclaim themselves the arbiters of the new and the “now” and reject the past. This call to alter history now is the reason why manifestos provide a crucial interpoint for rereading modernist aesthetics through the lens of transnational racial politics.

Modernism, Race, and Manifestos makes the case that we should reappraise the formative role of manifestos in staging alternative modernist communities and producing counter-histories of modernism and modernity. They provide a useful framework for rereading other modernist forms (anthologies, experimental literature, protest novels, and essays) in terms of their shared attempts to interrupt received meanings. Manifestos have too often been regarded by scholars of modernism as: (1) ephemeral documents important only for stimulating the later creation of canonical work, such as The Waste Land and Ulysses (Bradbury and McFarlane); (2) ridiculous, loud advertisements that anticipate the co-optation of avant-garde art by commodity culture (Bürger, Morrisson, Comentale); or (3) platforms that lay out a program of art or politics that rarely reaches fruition (Levenson).1

1 Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930 (New York: Penguin, 1976); Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde (Minneapolis: Minnesota
I suggest, however, that critics take manifestos too much at their bombastic word and fail to recognize the work undertaken by this liminal genre as the modernist form par excellence, poised as it is between action and theory, politics and aesthetics, and the new and the old. It – more so than the work of art or literature that follows – seeks to integrate art with life. In this reading, the manifesto is a formative, not merely reflective, genre in imagining and shaping the future.

Manifestos signal a crisis in narratives of progress and the temporal dimensions (past, present, and future) that narrative structures. They interrupt the steady flow of history and provide a useful frame for rereading modernism in terms of its performative elements of community formation and historical agency in the present moment. This study asks: how is history imagined in manifestos and other modernist texts, and how does this history construct an alternative community to that which is condemned as oppressive, stale, degenerate, or obsolete? These new communities are usually defined in contrast to another, vilified community, or, as I show in the second part of this book, as porous and inclusive of different groups. But in either case, they are formed in response to worldwide crises of imperialism in which the geopolitical boundaries of the world become shifting and unstable. And whether community is defined through kinship bloodlines or merely through geographical proximity and shared history, community frequently defines itself through a racial dimension. Modernism, Race, and Manifestos suggests that modernists grapple with race in order to imagine revolutionary change and, in the process, make evident the performative – that is, the contested and contingent – nature of race and racial belonging. Though many of the manifestos I examine are staunchly pro-imperialist, their rewritings of history and national myths make visible competing versions of community formation. They thereby open a space for anticolonial contestations of Anglo-European racial myths. Rather than follow a progressivist path from imperial center to colonial periphery, one that unfolds history without interruption, this book tracks a discontinuous history and geography. Its first part critically rereads manifestos and other performative texts circulating in pre-World War One London; its second tracks anticolonial and antiwar protest writing from across England and the Black Atlantic.
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world in the 1930s. While the first part reads the ambiguities and instabilities within metropolitan texts as symptomatic of a crisis of empire and imperialism, the second section shows how anticolonial writers translate and transvalue these instabilities from their own location and thereby produce alternative modernisms. In interrupting a continuist literary historical narrative, I hope that this book will prove “eventful” in its own right.

Modernism, Race, and Manifestos suggests that modernist scholarship too often follows the canonical modernists themselves by cordoning off colonized writers and colonizer-colonized relations from what counts as modern. Because the recent resurgence in manifesto criticism pays little to no attention to imperialism or racial difference and because interpretations of British modernism and avant-gardism also tend to overlook race, this topic is only beginning to receive the serious treatment it demands. This book redresses such racial blindness by considering Dusé Mohamed Ali’s anticolonial writings in the pre-eminent modernist journal The New Age, Rebecca West’s short story about an interracial marriage in the vorticists’ journal Blast, and the racial dynamics internal to British women’s suffrage manifestos and a movement novel. In addition, it places Nancy Cunard’s neglected anthology Negro as well as C. L. R. James’s The Black Jacobins within their London environs, teeming with many overlooked anticolonial journals, manifestos, and organizations.

In so doing, this study builds upon George Yúdice’s and Timothy Brennan’s recent arguments that the avant-gardes were in part a response to imperial crises and anticolonial militancy. Brennan, in particular, claims that “[European artists and intellectuals from 1880 to 1939] were working for the first time within a structure of interactive, cross-cultural contacts that combined an aesthetic of ‘primitive art,’ on the one hand, with political uneasiness toward a colonial system, on the other.”

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suggestions, and I agree, that anticolonial writers borrow from and transform these European discourses for their own use. By situating colonial resistance next to avant-garde modernism, this book is in dialogue with contemporary critical discussions of globalization. These discussions suggest that modernity should be considered as a form of uneven development that is experienced through time-lags and disjunctions at the imperial “core” as well as the “peripheries.”

Modernism, Race, and Manifestos contributes to these discussions as it excavates the modernist history of global connection and cosmopolitan engagement with cultural and racial differences.

By restoring modernism to a conflictual terrain occupied by colonial writers, flooded by militant women’s movement literature, and fragmented by the avant-garde, Modernism, Race, and Manifestos contests a singular notion of modernism, whether defined by periodization, location, or form. It selects manifestos that cross a range of aesthetic practices, from British women’s suffrage manifestos to the literary avant-garde’s rethinking of linguistic practices and to anticolonial writers’ challenge to racial myths of modernity. My wide-ranging choices reflect a commitment to considering canonical modernism in dialogue with concurrent aesthetic practices that engage modernity differently. These multiple, competing practices of modernism depend, in part, upon the manifesto to delineate what modernism, where, and to what aim. This book reads manifestos as a form that redefines racial difference, reimagines modernity, and outlines new aesthetic practices that imagine a radically different future. Given our contemporary dearth of political alternatives, I believe that a critical return to modernist manifestos, with their stirringly creative calls to action and visions of change and community, might allow for a fresh assessment of the alternative histories and unclaimed future possibilities that lie within our own unevenly experienced modern and postmodern moments.

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In reading manifestos as a staging of modernist community formation, I treat the manifesto as a constituent feature of modernism. Manifestos, and the little magazines in which they frequently appear, are documents of the archive. Foucault has defined the archive as that which generates the conditions of what can be said. In other words, I use the term “archive” to mean a discursive system that regulates the enunciative possibilities, forms, appearances, and intelligibility of particular statements and practices. The analysis of the archive, Foucault says, disrupts linear histories: “it deprives us of our continuities; it dissipates that temporal identity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history.” It is precisely Foucault’s emphasis on the archive’s breaks in historical continuity that allows us to see the manifesto’s proximity to imagined and real transnational revolutionary change – articulated amidst other archival material: pamphlets and broadsides, posters and little magazines – in ways that disrupt the temporal and spatial parameters that underlay narratives of modernism.

Growing critical and pedagogical interest in modernist manifestos is evident in a recent spate of manifesto books. The publication of two anthologies, Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents and Manifesto: A Century of Isms, provides a multitude of manifestos as source documents for modernisms worldwide. Recent textbook publications, The Longman Anthology of British Literature and The Longman Anthology of World Literature, have included early twentieth-century manifestos as part of their survey. In addition, scholarly interest in manifestos has been stimulated by several critical studies on the historical avant-garde. To date, however, there have been no examinations of the manifesto form in terms of race and imperialism. Martin Puchner’s recent Poetry of the Revolution focuses on the global circulation of manifestos and how this worldwide trend leads to a “qualitative change in the conception of the artwork,” especially in terms of art’s engagement in the time and space of modernity. Other manifesto criticism can be divided into that which focuses on Anglo-European avant-gardes and that which considers manifestos from the so-called periphery. Investigating the former, Luca Somigli’s Legitimizing the Artist examines symbolist, decadent, futurist, and vorticist manifestos in terms of their attempt to regain artistic legitimacy in the eyes of their public and to differentiate the field of cultural production from other domains. Janet Lyon’s genealogy of the manifesto

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1 Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge (New York: Random House, 1972), 129.
2 Foucault, ibid., 131.
traces revolutionary artistic and political movements from the English and French Revolutions to contemporary radical lesbian and feminist groups. Investigating avant-gardes on the “periphery,” Vicky Unruh’s work on Latin American manifestos focuses on their status as a form of activity. Though all of these studies have deepened a critical estimation of the role of manifestos in modernism, none has focused on how manifestos underscore the political and aesthetic conflicts between various locations along the color line and their relations to global modernity. Modernism, Race, and Manifestos suggests that the Eurocentric presumptions that such studies reproduce need to be critically examined, and it demonstrates how they were challenged from within modernism itself.

The rest of this chapter outlines the manifesto’s history in relation to race and modernity by tracing the manifesto from its earliest appearances to anticolonial manifestos that critique and adapt Enlightenment theories of modernity. Following this overview, the subsequent chapters explore how the manifesto’s shock of the new interrupts received meanings and allows for a recovery of the overlooked transnational and racial dimensions of modernist texts. Specifically, the discontinuous temporality of the manifesto provides the methodological focal point for demonstrating that modernist texts: (1) open the present moment to temporal reconceptualizations of history and historical agency; (2) stage alternative cosmopolitan and transnational communities through the structure of feeling of racial belonging; and (3) move across spatial and temporal boundaries in ways that reflect nonsynchronous but contemporaneous positionalities within modernity and express a range of alternative modernisms. My argument concludes with a brief discussion of the manifesto’s contemporary legacy through an examination of the Caribbean manifesto “In Praise of Creoleness” (1989). There, I suggest that manifestos continue to challenge modernity in the postcolonial era, where the new universalism has become transnational difference, formed in the course of articulating the occluded history of the present.

This notion of transnational difference, as Aihwa Ong argues, signifies less a state-imposed national identity than an ambivalent allegiance to global labor markets. Transnational difference suggests a flexibility between the demands of state, capital, and kinship ties. It denotes, as Ong suggests, “a cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space” that alludes “to the transversal, the transactional, the translational, and the

transgressive aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination that are incited, enabled and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism.”

I begin the next section by offering a genealogy of the manifesto that follows the historical developments of the black diasporic world and European colonialism. The manifesto, in my estimation, is a predominantly transnational form and reflects the uneven developments of modernity worldwide. It moves across nations, transgressing, translating, and transacting dreams of modernity within a wide range of modernizing societies. The manifesto is crucial in reconceiving the relation between modernity, race, and modernism.

**THE “NOW” TIME OF THE MANIFESTO**

This section extends the brief survey of recent work on manifestos made above to argue that existing scholarship on the manifesto and Western metropolitan modernisms more generally has tended to exclude racial difference from being considered constitutive of modernity. The “now” time of the manifesto has been critically appraised as constituting a break from the past and heralding the new. But this understanding of the manifesto’s rupture is informed by a Eurocentric notion of history that sees it advancing unproblematically forward, steadily improving. In proposing the view that European manifesto writers attempt to transcend history – as well as racial and gendered embodiment – critics neglect a very different understanding of history and rupture that manifestos from the colonial “periphery” propose.

In re-examining modernist manifestos, I apply a postmodernist understanding of historicity that goes against the grain of history understood in the Hegelian sense of a progressive unfolding of a rational system of world history. This revision of progressivist history, or historicism, was begun with modernists themselves. In trying to awake from “the nightmare of history,” modernism, as Robert J. C. Young suggests, “self-consciously [set] itself against the past, and reject[ed] forms of historical understanding.”

This awakening is not rupture as novelty, a simplistic “improvement” over the past. Rather, it takes the form of an event that, to draw on Foucault’s description of discontinuous history, “suspend[s] the continuous

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accumulation of knowledge, interrupt[s] its slow development, and force[s] it to enter a new time, cut[s] it off from its empirical origin and original motivations, cleanse[s] it of its imaginary complicities.”

These literary events – of which the manifesto is exemplar – can alter the framework through which history is represented. In interrupting historical narratives, modernists sought to reconceptualize modernity and its relation to the past.

For instance, the modernist cultural critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin developed a methodology of historical materialism to critique the “homogeneous, empty time” of rationalized societies and their understanding of history as progress. Benjamin called this understanding “historicism” and argued that it removes attention from the historical present because it reduces history to an instrumental flow that seamlessly advances from barbarism to civilization and from the primitive to the modern. This narrative reproduces the past – as it flows steadily onwards – and thus helps to reproduce existing power structures and beliefs. For instance, historicism understands racialized societies on the colonial “periphery” as being less than modern because they are dissimilar to (and therefore irrational in comparison with) Western societies. In contrast, Benjamin’s historical materialism does not simply invert this paradigm by privileging the heterogeneity of “primitive” peoples who are “outside” modernity and therefore might yet redeem it. Instead, Benjamin argues that the task of the historian is, as Keya Ganguly puts it, to understand the “collective temporal catastrophe” of both past and present that “betokens the predicament of modernity.”

Benjamin understands modernity to be the totality of the present moment as a product of the past that has become a tool of the ruling classes. In other words, history is written by the victors to rationalize the present order of things. Benjamin famously summarizes the racial unconscious of modernity that results from this rationalization as: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”

In accounting for this dilemma, histories of both imperial “center” and colonial “periphery” must be taken into account. Benjamin’s historical materialism – in which civilization and barbarism coexist catastrophically – is crucially important for reclaiming alternative modernisms. This is so precisely because the dialectical tension of historical materialism is not simply a reclamation of the nonsynchronous

(the fact that modern and traditional societies exist coevally, a formulation that allows for primitivist and racist formulations because “the traditional” is still considered anachronistic). Rather, Benjamin believes that historical materialism may yet create a just society by means of “the time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit].” Historical materialism makes visible the various temporal positions that range from the modern to the primitive within modernity, and potentially allows for “primitive” knowledge and practices to generate alternative modernisms and to reconceptualize modernity itself. This fashioning of alternative modernisms occurs when “the time of the now” appears as scraps of the past and present that might, Benjamin argues, “seize hold of memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” in order to “wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.”

As powerfully suggestive as Benjamin’s historical materialism is, he critiques history from within a European frame of reference. The “other” who lies outside of the totality of history remains excluded (whether marked by gender, sexual, and/or racial differences) from the frame of history. In contrast, Homi K. Bhabha demonstrates how colonized subjects writing from occluded historical locations can displace Eurocentric narratives of modernity. Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon, Bhabha is concerned to historicize founding categories of modernity, such as “Man,” reason, progress, race, and the nation, because they were constituted when most of humankind was considered not fully human. Rather, it was deemed primitive, irrational, superstitious, and outside of history. In received meanings of modernity, then, a metaphysics of race and nation prevails, one that totalizes (fixes and delimits) who can be modern by means of ahistorical and ideological categories that exclude on the grounds of race as well as gender categories.

For instance, as I discuss later in this chapter, the Haitian Revolution was removed from histories of modernity and the Age of Revolution (French and American) because the notion of a sovereign, black, modern nation was unthinkable at the time. Seeking to redress the erasure of black peoples from the modern, the Caribbean novelist, journalist, political theorist, and cultural critic C. L. R. James, writing in London in the 1930s, rethinks the manifesto as an interruptive event from the perspective of the Haitian Revolution. He does this in order to project a

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modernity that *might have been* and perhaps *will be* possible in the future. This fold in time, expressed through the future anterior tense, suggests the complex rethinking of modernity and history offered by anticolonial writers as a simultaneous recuperation of the disavowed histories of modernity *and* alternative vision for the future. C. L. R. James’s future anterior, Benjamin’s “time of the now,” as well as the temporalities theorized by poststructuralists Bhabha and Jacques Derrida, offer alternative understandings of history. Their interruptive temporalities interrogate a modernism predicated on a totalizing metaphysics of race and nation that excludes non-Western peoples from the modern. Their complex notions of time allow other positionalities within modernity to interrogate Western hegemony.

For example, in his essay “‘Race,’ Time and the Revision of Modernity” Bhabha draws upon Fanon’s observation of the belated emergence of colonized subjects to modernity (always coming after the white man). He develops the notion of a “time-lag” that forms a new temporality in which formerly colonized subjects can articulate themselves in ways other than those assigned by the colonizer. Through the time-lag, colonized subjects can transform the narratives produced by and about “the center.” The time-lag allows formerly colonized writers to displace progressivist historical narratives and to produce an understanding of the past as a future anterior (Bhabha says it acts as a *projective* past). Writing through the time-lag, they recover the disavowed histories of modernity and point to “forms of social antagonism and contradiction that are not yet properly represented, political identities in the process of being formed, cultural enunciations in the act of hybridity, in the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences.”

In Bhabha’s formulation, the time-lag interrupts closed dialectical systems that generate history’s totalizing narratives. It allows, as Sibylle Fischer argues in her study of the Haitian Revolution, for “a revision of the concept of modernity itself so that past struggles over what is means to be modern, who can claim it, and on what grounds can become visible again.” The manifesto, of all genres, makes visible this struggle to claim and define the modern. A critical reappraisal of manifestos from the colonial “periphery” as well as from the “center” revises modernity by revealing its occluded history of racial, gendered, and geographical exclusions. These exclusions have shaped the very meaning of modernity.

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18 Bhabha, *Locations of Culture,* 252.  
19 Bhabha, *ibid.,* 252.  
20 Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed,* xi.