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978-1-107-08395-0 - The Cambridge Companion to: The American Modernist Novel

Edited by Joshua L. Miller

Excerpt

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## I

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## Introduction

The twenty-first century's second decade is awash with centennials, including those of the New York Armory Show (1913), the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the completion of the Panama Canal, the Ford "Five Dollar Day" (1914), the first transcontinental telephone call, the sinking of the ocean liner *Lusitania* (1915), the opening of the first birth control clinic (1916), and U.S. entry into World War I (1917).

In the midst of such commemorations, however, we may overlook signal moments 75 and 125 years ago that bookend the cultural and political ferment of U.S. literary modernism. In 1890, literary works that would become important forerunners of modernism were published in the United States by Mary E. Bradley (Lane), Henry James, William James, Sarah Orne Jewett, Jacob Riis, and Oscar Wilde. That eventful year saw statehood for Idaho and Wyoming, the Sherman Antitrust Act, a national census (the first to be machine tabulated) declaring the closing of the Western frontier, and the Wounded Knee Massacre. The same year, Chicago was selected as the site of the World's Columbian Exposition, the first major American imperial spectacle of civilizational progress. In the midst of a national economic recession, the exposition was a commemoration itself of Columbus' arrival in the Americas, a commercial opportunity, and an assertion of U.S. prominence in the world. The spectacular, ephemeral, and aptly named "White City" opened to the public in 1893, powered by Westinghouse Electric (chosen over rival Thomas Edison's General Electric), with buildings dedicated to mining, electricity, fine arts, administration, technology, agriculture, and women. The latter building was designed by twenty-one-year-old Sophia Hayden and introduced with an address by Susan B. Anthony.<sup>1</sup> Organizers' reluctance to include exhibits of African American contributions led to protests and calls for a boycott. Frederick Douglass served as Haiti's representative and also contributed an introduction to Ida B. Wells' pamphlet *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*. The first Parliament of the World's Religions was

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held at the exhibition to bring into dialogue leaders of varied faiths throughout the world; it is considered the earliest large-scale gathering of figures representing Eastern and Western religions. Frederick Jackson Turner presented his “frontier thesis” based on 1890 census data. A visiting Henry Ford first saw a one-cylinder, gas-powered engine developed by Gottlieb Daimler on a platform quadricycle, though it was overshadowed by a large display of steam locomotives and other transportational technologies. Visitors were introduced to an amusement park with the first moving walkway, the original Ferris wheel, and the first commercial movie theater, where Eadweard Muybridge gave lectures and demonstrated his zoopraxiscope. Scott Joplin made a name for himself and early ragtime.

The United States was a particularly active participant during this era of public celebrations of empire and globalist progress at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition (Buffalo), where President William McKinley was fatally shot; the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition (St. Louis); the 1907 Jamestown Exposition (Norfolk); the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition (San Francisco); the 1918 Bronx International Exposition of Science, Arts, and Industries (New York); and the 1933–1934 Century of Progress International Exposition (Chicago).

The events that took place three-quarters of a century ago in the hinge years of 1939 and 1940, situated between the Depression and U.S. entry into armed conflict in World War II, are similarly indicative of ongoing U.S. collective preoccupations with the country’s place in the world. Notable literary works appeared in those years, authored by James Agee and Walker Evans, Willa Cather, Raymond Chandler, John Fante, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, John Steinbeck, Nathanael West, and Richard Wright. The year 1939 also saw the openings of the New York World’s Fair and the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco, the “Pageant of the Pacific.” The latter’s aim of centralizing Asian Pacific peoples required some creative balancing of primitivist nostalgia and techno-futurism in its architecture, exhibitions, and events. Diego Rivera foregrounded this tension in the mural he contributed to the Exposition, *Pan-American Unity*. Describing its themes, he wrote: “My mural . . . is about the marriage of the artistic expression of the North and of the South on this continent, that is all. I believe in order to make an American art, a real American art, this will be necessary, this blending of the art of the Indian, the Mexican, the Eskimo, with this kind of urge which makes the machine, the invention in the material side of life, which is also an artistic urge, the same urge primarily but in a different form of expression.”<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the dynamic fusions in Rivera’s painting, the Exposition’s photographic exhibition was more protective of what curator Ansel Adams declared “a decisive American art.”<sup>3</sup>

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FIGURE 1.1: Stuart Davis, “Study for *History of Communication Mural*,” 1939.  
9 5/8 × 29 7/8 in. image; 14 7/8 × 34 in. sheet.

Collection Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul. Art © Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

The New York World’s Fair claimed futurism as its theme, “Building the World of Tomorrow with the Tools of Today.” The temporal shift away from rescripting the present (as the apogee of progress) to projecting the future suited the gloomy global outlook of the late 1930s, but it also conveyed popular understandings of the cultural momentum of literary modernism’s long-standing vanguardisms. As in previous fairs, corporate, commercial, scientific, and technological priorities prevailed – in sleek exhibits featuring General Motors’ “Futurama”; AT&T and RCA’s demonstrations of long-distance telephone calls, tape recorders, FM radio, and a television studio; Goodrich’s “tire guillotine,” demonstrating rubber’s durability; the railroads pavilion; Democracy, the metropolis to be; and Elektro, a seven-foot-tall robot – though cultural expression also played a prominent role, particularly visual culture, in architecture, design, lighting, exhibits, and murals.

Modernist painter Stuart Davis, whose early work appeared in the Armory Show, contributed the mural *History of Communication*, which survives today only in a study (Figure 1.1).<sup>4</sup> An artist influenced by (and influencing) abstraction, pop art, and cross-media experimentation, Davis incorporated elements of language and photographic images throughout his career. His *History* mural recontextualizes familiar iconography (based on photographs from the New York Public Library’s Print and Photography Division) within a blurred timeline that evokes contiguities and transformations in the historical relations between technology and expressive media.<sup>5</sup> The stark white-on-black composition, too, implies affinities with earlier modes of visual expression, while repurposing corporate logos from an advertising industry dependent on the sophisticated deployment of visual signs. Davis’ mural runs on a leftward continuum from gestural and alphabetic communication to electronic and visual forms. The icons of

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modernity's mechanized devices are cluttered, overlapping, and self-reflexive (as in a letter addressed to the New York World's Fair postmarked "SF CAL," perhaps sent by the Golden Gate Exposition planners), narrating the increasing massification of communication, which culminates in cinema and television, new cultural platforms with the global reach of visual transmission. Davis' expansive, antididactic *History* does not provide a univocal assessment of the modernist American mediascape, but rather invites further interrogation. For our purposes, we might ask: Where in his scheme would Davis fit the modernist novel? And how did awareness of the newly global scope of U.S. art affect the production and reception of those novels?

The history of U.S. World's Fairs offers vivid snapshots of popular, technological, scientific, commercial, and artistic projections of Americanist engagements with the world. Rather than operating in a void, U.S. modernist authors wrote with these contemporary developments in mind, though they set them in rather different contexts in crafting juxtapositional forms and techniques within experimental novels that critiqued central tenets of expansionist modernity. As one example, we might relate Konrad Bercovici's account of New York City as "not a city but a world" – a modern, immigrant-surcharged successor to the "world cities" of London, Paris, and Rome in *Around the World in New York* (1924) – to John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), whose textual cacophony includes newspaper and song fragments, vernacular and multilingual dialogue, hairpin perspectival shifts, and the clatter of mechanized urbanity.<sup>6</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, Gertrude Stein, and Zora Neale Hurston drew on emergent and shifting paradigms in sociology, anthropology, and medicine in their narrative representations of gendered and racialized interior experience and collective im/migration. Meanwhile, visual art depicting intranational and international tensions intervenes in mixed-media modernism by varied novelists, such as Julian Benda's illustrations in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918), Milt Gross' and Miné Okubo's graphic novels, Works Progress Administration collaborations between photographers and authors, and Djuna Barnes' illustrations. Dos Passos' grandiose, centrifugal narrative, like the World's Fairs themselves, attempts to discern patterns formed across the era's movements of thought and bodies.

Reverberations of these concurrent social and cultural trends continue to resonate in studies of what Marjorie Perloff has called "21st Century Modernism," as well as in what other scholars have termed "alternative modernities," "digital modernism," "global modernism," "pop modernism," "ethnic modernism," "Afromodernism," "virtual modernism," and "geomodernism."<sup>7</sup> The field of modernist studies has been greatly enriched in the past two decades by new methodologies informed by studies of

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transnational/global and hemispheric cultures, new media, race and gender, science and technology, visual culture, translation and multilingualism, sexualities, and many others. *The Cambridge Companion to the American Modernist Novel* draws on each of these ongoing scholarly trends, with particular emphasis on how they generate fresh insights for investigations into the transnational substrates and superstrates of national literary movements.

As many have documented, the era of modernism was one in which nationalisms coincided with varied, clashing, and parallel internationalisms: immigration, Marxism, aesthetic movements, hemispheric expansionism, consumerism, anarchism, mass culture, and so on. Not unrelatedly, the decades between the 1890s and the 1940s bore witness to unprecedentedly rapid and diverse demographic changes to the composition of the United States and an extraordinary economic expansion. Consequently, U.S. cultural trends were infused by alternating tensions of inward incorporation and outward expansion; discursive homogeneity and alterity; institutions of order and celebrations of eccentricity/individualism; tourism and impoverishment; and structures of formal and informal border surveillance, segregation, imprisonment, exclusion, and banishment. Modernist novels of the United States drew upon these varied vectors of movement through formal experiments with narratorial perspective, genre blurring, linguistic code-switching and translation, mixed media, and synesthesia, among other forms.

The institutional establishment of university programs of study in American Literature (and those of writing/composition and descriptivist linguistics) coincided with the emergence of experimental modernist narratives, a paradox that the chapters in this volume use to convey a sense of the period's complex affinities for chaos/fragmentation/mixture on the one hand and order/wholeness/purity on the other. Recent scholarship on U.S. literary modernism has prioritized the cultural implications of trends in immigration, expatriation, and imperial expansion as they intensified the anxieties, fantasies, pleasures, terrors, and grandiosity coursing through the novels of the age. Such work has complicated high/low, inside/outside, timeless/ephemeral binaries and demonstrated that a diverse range of authors navigated both sides of the mixture/purity and chaos/order dynamics. Rather than viewing authors in one context (as radical, fascist, ethnically or sexually other, expatriate, nationalist, etc.), this volume's contributors offer conceptually nuanced and historically sensitive perspectives on both the novels and the era from which they issued.

Scholarship on and compendia of both world and comparative literature have offered reconsiderations of literary genealogies from the nineteenth century onward, frequently (in the United States) posing challenges to the primacy of English departments. One such salvo, written in 1949 by

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W.P. Friederich and Clarence Gohdes, called for establishing a “Department of American and Comparative Literature,” since U.S. literature was at least as influenced by French, German, Scandinavian, and Russian sources as English ones. Moreover, “modern America is what it is” because of its “rich mixture” of immigrants’ cultural traditions.<sup>8</sup> The literature of the United States ought to be read as a part of world literature, they contend, and thus be paired methodologically with comparative literature. Quixotic as this particular proposal may have been, its authorship by two distinguished scholars (who later served as editors of the journals *American Literature* and *Comparative Literature*) conveys the significance of efforts then and afterward to engage “the new internationalism of our post-war world” through a new field of study that “represents America as a whole in its relationship to the outer world as a whole.”

Literary criticism since the 1980s has undertaken systematic reconsiderations of national(ist) traditions it once presumed. Multidisciplinary investigations of nationalism have been both extended and interrogated by treatments of inter-, trans-, and post-national relations. Subsequently, the currents of both modernist and Americanist literary studies were redirected by waves of scholarship that unsettled prior consensuses regarding transnational, diasporic, and indigenous aesthetics and temporalities; the role of visual and musical arts in narrative experimentation; media paradigm shifts; allegiances among and across racial, ethnic, gendered, and sexual social groups; and reception (translations, adaptations, intertextuality). Since assertions of autonomy from history through the artistically “new” are themselves famously part of both modernist and Americanist self-fashioning rhetorics, the academic work of “New Americanists” (as in the Duke University Press series launched in 1993) and that on “New Modernisms” (the initial Modernist Studies Association annual conferences starting in 1999) has scrutinized the boundaries of inherited binaries of new/old, core/periphery, domestic/foreign, and so on, in order to reconsider the New Critical and Cold War frameworks that shaped both areas of study in the 1950s.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars in each field have challenged presumed boundaries in time (when modernism began and when, or if, it ended), space (whether and how American studies should encompass the Caribbean, Asia-Pacific, and/or Latin America), language (to include U.S. works written in non-English or mixed languages and modernist works written in non-European languages), and media (unconventionally published works and those drawing on visual and musical forms). Efforts to comprehend the lived experience of social heterogeneity in nuanced, inclusive, and historically illuminating studies have led to efforts at pluralizing Americas studies and modernisms, as in

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the formation of the International American Studies Association and the journal *Comparative American Studies* (founded 2003). As is already evident, the notions of U.S. literature as part of world cultures and of modernism as a global set of phenomena are not in themselves new, but the implications drawn, the range of literary works considered, the methods of critical interpretation, and the conceptions of transnational cultural crossings are all twenty-first-century contributions to these long-standing conversations.<sup>10</sup> In these ways, modernist studies and American studies, though very different fields methodologically, have supported pathbreaking cross-field comparative conversations.

What, then, does it mean to read U.S. modernism in relation to something called world or global cultures? As in any emergent area with broad scholarly interest, widely varying and, at times, incompatible approaches have emerged. Scholars have argued for increased attention to undervalued texts or traditions; distinctively comparative methodologies; alternative periodizations or temporal models; and new genealogies of formal techniques, cultural practices, or concepts derived from multiple national traditions. Reparative, comparative, revisionary, and recontextualizing projects have arisen under the aegis of global, hemispheric, and postcolonial modernist studies. But, as Mark Wollaeger notes, this diversity of approaches need not be reconciled, and he argues for a self-aware, decentered “perspective [that] must be mobile and continuously provisional,” not a classificatory scheme, but sets of “polythetic” family resemblances.<sup>11</sup> Paul Saint-Amour suggests that scholars moved away from a singular, static Modernism in favor of those that are “pluralized, adjectivalized, decoupled from high culture, and rethought as a transnational and transhistorical phenomenon.” This “general weakening of the theory of modernism” has “strengthened” the field by becoming “less axiomatic, more conjectural, more conjunctural.”<sup>12</sup> Saint-Amour’s arguments regarding weak theory and modernism both explain and exemplify the virtues of methodological and perspectival pluralism.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, the *Cambridge Companion to the American Modernist Novel* provides a wide range of perspectives by eminent scholars in the field, reflecting innovative work on novels crucial to twenty-first-century U.S. modernist studies. It is designed to supplement and extend Walter Kalaidjian’s *Cambridge Companion to American Modernism* (2005) by focusing on narrative experimentation during the half-century-plus between the 1890s and the 1940s.

This *Companion* is organized into three parts, each of which highlights a particular domain of research: historical, methodological, and generic. Attentive readers will note that some of the chapters share common thematic and methodological engagements. This reflects a salutary development of the



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conceptual contributions of interdisciplinary, comparative, and theoretical studies. Rather than treating literary domains as separate silos (for example, restricting analysis of gender, race, or region to one chapter), the chapters in this *Companion* draw different implications from some of the same critical terms or authors. The collective effort is to pursue the ambitious goal of distinguishing among coeval modernities and modernisms while attending to the structural forces they share.<sup>13</sup> For example, African American modernism, frequently called the Harlem Renaissance, has been reconsidered as a global constellation taking shape in multiple nodes of translation networked across numerous cultural centers writing to and about transnational black communities.<sup>14</sup> The themes and techniques of African American modernists are significant to a range of scholarly approaches and thus are referenced in multiple chapters. Blurred boundaries in novels that defy discrete categorical divisions – between formal experimentalism and putatively conventional realism as well as among generic distinctions of prose, poetry, and drama – are important themes of multiple chapters as well.<sup>15</sup> Mixed, impure, and “mongrel” modernisms have been crucial sites of research since Michael North, Ann Douglas, George Hutchinson, Andreas Huyssen, and others demonstrated the many ways in which literary modernism was characterized by inter- and cross-racial, generic, sexual, media, and other mixtures rather than purist or elitist binaries, even as U.S. society at large steadfastly sought to uphold nationalist, hierarchical, and segregated boundaries.<sup>16</sup>

The first part, “Movements,” contextualizes novelistic experimentation in interwar U.S. novels by examining historical trends spurred on by movements of bodies and of ideas: industrialization, nationalism, geopolitical expansion, regional integration, immigration, and internationalist movements (Marxist, cosmopolitan, tourist, lumpen, anarchist, émigré, and many others). Urbanization has long been a topos of modernist studies, which deemed literature of rural and provincial life un-, anti-, or a-modern. However, Harilaos Stecopoulos argues that such long-standing assumptions obscured vital and distinctive critiques of modernity within regionalist narrative experiments with form. The complexity of modernists’ engagements with place and locally situated perspectives unearths what he calls “radical localism,” intense and ambivalent engagements with modernism’s prioritization of the disjunctive new/now by representing communities whose present day has complex links to its past(s). In an era of nationalist standardization, regionally specific contexts and features recur significantly in literary works from early detective noir to expatriate fiction and throughout interwar modernism. Stecopoulos suggests that these critical insights regarding place, temporality, environment, language, and narrative form can be brought to bear on the work of authors who have not traditionally been



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described as regionalists, such as Nathanael West, Ralph Ellison, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Their works respond to the normative pressures to standardize and homogenize through their representations of distinctive features of place: urban neighborhoods, architecture, antiuniversalist politics, vernacular speech forms, and so on. Stecopoulos' reading of localist elements of *The Great Gatsby* demonstrates that Fitzgerald's critique of modernity depends on its representation of place, specifically its regional, rather than urban or cosmopolitan, features.

Narratives that employ subtle modes of formal experimentation are also central to the next chapter, "Transpacific Modernisms." Denise Cruz points out that Asian American modernists embedded formally self-reflexive, psychologically complex, and genre-mixing narratives within seemingly conventional realist narratives. Her chapter brings critical considerations of place, history, immigration, race, and identity to novels of transpacific crossings. Early twentieth-century Asian American authors, she claims, sought out narrative forms that could be simultaneously realist and experimental, autobiographical and inventional, in efforts to render the fraught interstitial experience of U.S. life during the era of anti-Asian citizenship restriction; racialized, gendered, and sexualized stereotypes; everyday violence; oppressive labor conditions; exoticization; and silencing. From the 1882 Exclusion Act to Japanese American internment during World War II, Asian American novelists treated modernist themes while facing distinctive denials of their humanity and limits on their movement, belonging, and expression. Included in this analysis are Kathleen Tamagawa, H.T. Tsiang, Younghill Kang, Lin Yutang, Winnifred Eaton, and Carlos Bulosan, who composed narratives in which protagonists struggle with multiple forms of nonbeing: unwelcome in their countries of origin and noncitizens in the United States. In scenes depicting literacy, labor, exile, and romance, their works draw on techniques of fiction, life-writing, and performance to develop political and aesthetic engagements that register resistance even to norms they avow.

In her chapter on transatlantic "Ethnic American Modernisms," Catherine Morley considers the range of literary efforts to represent mass immigration in U.S. narratives as negotiations of gender and space. She points out that awareness of the demographic changes in U.S. cities and towns during these decades stoked interest in novels that represented both urban and rural communities transformed by the visibility of ethnic others. Morley demonstrates that authors as diverse as John Dos Passos, Henry Roth, John Steinbeck, and Michael Gold experimented with novelistic conventions to prioritize the representation of nonnative Americans' psyches as what Priscilla Wald has termed "selves in transit."<sup>17</sup> In the works of Anzia Yezierska, as well as Willa Cather, Morley locates important instances of

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the gendered mastery of space – characters marked as ethnically other and female who encounter both domestic and social/national constraints on selfhood and who struggle to define and defend Woolfian rooms of their own. Possession of spaces of selfhood and development are both literal and conceptual; the physical cultivation and management of tenement interiors and prairie exteriors represent the emergence of new ethnic femininities.

The author most frequently associated with meditations on modernist self-reflexivity, W.E.B. Du Bois, reemerges in Kevin Bell's chapter on "The Worlds of Black Literary Modernism" as a theorist and historian of the tradition of aesthetic creativity surfacing from the ongoing dehumanization of Afro-diasporic subjectivity. Bell puts Du Bois' famous formulation of double consciousness in dialogue with transnational U.S. novelists of black personhood and dislocation in an era shaped by the flow of global economic expansion. When viewed from this Du Boisian perspective, the ontological challenges that emerge in the experimental prose narratives of James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and Chester Himes, among others, have newly urgent implications for understandings of literary modernism, subjectivity, genre, labor, gender, and community. Aesthetics of decadence, propriety, musical innovation, disposability, hyper- and in-visibility, psychic rupture, revision, exoticism, and deep interiority run through African American novels from the late nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth.

The second part, "Methodologies," brings together chapters mapping current approaches to analyzing modernist novelistic themes and techniques. These chapters draw on recent scholarship on distant geographies and temporalities, sexualities studies, empiricism and science/technology studies, objects and material cultures, imperialism and transborder identities, rural and nonurban modernisms, and popular culture. Yogita Goyal's chapter on "Gender and Geomodernisms" demonstrates that comparative studies of gender, genre, and geography have informed one another in crucial ways throughout early twenty-first-century scholarship. She points out that the historical periodization, canon formation, and epistemologies of literary modernism have been under discussion since its inception, but the complexity of the locations and sites within narratives have only recently received significant attention. As empire, nation/nationalism, race, and gender have come to the fore in the present age of globalization, literary studies have found new implications of the transnational movement of peoples, ideas, capital, and objects. Goyal brings the concept of "geomodernism" – the term Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel coined to identify cultural works that complicate setting, place, and locality by representing transborder and transoceanic crossings and histories – to discussions of works by Pauline Hopkins,