

## *Introduction*

### Preface

This is a book about travelling, writing women. It is framed by the voyages made by women writers – Olive Schreiner, Sarojini Naidu, Sara Jeannette Duncan, Katherine Mansfield, Jean Rhys, Una Marson and Christina Stead – from various colonial locations to the heart of the British Empire in the period 1890 to 1945. These women's writing lives map a global network of journeys; the sea voyage to London is just one of many. Sara Jeannette Duncan, after leaving Canada, travelled back and forth between London and India. Christina Stead led a nomadic existence moving between various European and American urban centres: Paris, London, New York, Barcelona, Los Angeles. Sarojini Naidu's tireless campaigning for Indian home rule and women's rights took her not only around India, but also to South Africa, the USA and Canada. But despite their mobile careers, the extended sea journey to London had particular resonance. The desire to prove oneself at the heart of things was a common narrative of initiation for the colonial artist, overdetermined with its associations of modernity, cultural privilege and geographical centrality. But their journeys also emblemize other kinds of 'voyaging out', whether from the expectations of colonial womanhood or the hierarchies of imperial control.

By travelling the 'wrong way', these writers were subverting the logic of imperial movement. Women, in this period, were to be sent outwards to the colonies via assisted passage, or emigration schemes such as Lady Bruton's to Canada in *Mrs Dalloway*.<sup>1</sup> Colonial spaces acted as safety valves for the 'surplus woman problem' and an overcrowded and degenerating Britain. The transgressive mobility of colonial women writers parallels the shifting discourses of gender and empire in the modernist period, their voyages suggestive of their engagement (albeit in very different ways) with feminist and anti-colonial politics. Attention to women on the move allows for a dual focus on the material conditions of the voyage in (the sea journey itself, the new experience of life in London), as well as the discursive construction

of a mobile selfhood articulated in and against the contours of a changing empire. Invariably travelling alone, in search of employment, publication and asserting their rights to political, domestic and sexual freedoms, these women were figures of modernity. Whether testing their entitlement to London's cultural and historical privileges as British subjects, or bringing forms of cultural nationalism to the metropolis, their presence marked the changing political landscape for women, as well as the increasing autonomy of Britain's colonies and dominions. They were also, of course, travelling literally and metaphorically along the routes of empire, and were at times troublingly complicit with its racial hierarchies.

Arrival marks a challenge, a gauging of London's centrality. By writing about and in the imperial metropolis, they engaged with its cultural predominance – a predominance that framed their colonial upbringing – and negotiated their hybrid position as British colonial subjects. Their London writing, whether journalism, poetry, drama, fiction or memoir, deals in varying ways with the relationship between metropolis and colony. Constitutive of the city's modernity, their encounters with metropolitan writers and the cultural spaces of the city are an important, yet often overlooked, part of the history of modernist London and its literary networks.

This book also seeks to engage directly with recent shifts in modernist studies and the effects of critical paradigms on what is 'made visible'. Given that the 1920s – for some the pinnacle decade of high modernism – saw the British Empire at its height in terms of geographical scope, it is surprising that empire remained so long obscured in modernist studies. After rapid expansion in Africa and the Pacific, by the 1920s 400 million people lived in British colonies, dominions or protectorates.<sup>2</sup> In the early twentieth century, the rhetoric of empire became more blatantly economic, in terms of the importance of colonialism to the growth of global capitalism and the search for raw materials and new markets. Many of the settler colonies were already or soon to be federated (Canada 1867; Australia 1901; the Union of South Africa 1910), and made the transition from self-governing colony to Dominion in 1907. Despite the new label, foreign policy was still controlled from London; not until the Balfour Declaration of 1926 did the Dominions enjoy complete independence. During the Edwardian period, debates over the nature of economic and military connections between Britain and her Dominions, including the possibility of preferential tariffs, became heated. As we will see in Chapter 3, the question of tariff reform had particular resonance in Canada, where nationalism grew up alongside, yet in an uneasy relationship with, continued pride over bonds with Britain. As the

nineteenth century became the twentieth, colonial resistance movements gathered strength; Britain faced rebellion, for example, in Morant Bay, Jamaica (1865), in Matabeleland and Mashonaland against the British South African Company (1893–4) and following the partition of Bengal (1905). The drawn-out, second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), resulting in the annexation of two Dutch Republics, caused great anxiety about the health of the British military and the nation more generally. Popular culture was permeated with imperial propaganda in an attempt to counter the effects of a dissolving empire.

The fact that the modernist period, as traditionally conceived, coincided with both the height and destabilization of the British Empire, but that critics have attended only belatedly to engagement with the shifting empire in the work of British and colonial modernists, attests to the persistence of early definitions of modernist culture articulated in formalist or aesthetic terms. Antoinette Burton urged, over a decade ago, that ‘more attention needs to be paid . . . to the cultures of movement that brought a variety of colonial subjects – Indian, African, Caribbean, Chinese, and even Irish – to England’s “green and pleasant land” and made them visible on the cultural landscape well before the immigration trends of the post-1945 period’.<sup>3</sup> *Modernism and Empire* (2000), edited by Howard Booth and Nigel Rigby, was one of the first book-length studies to treat the intersection of modernist culture and empire in detail. Since then, however, Burton’s call has been answered in an explosion of work on transnational or alternative modernisms, generating numerous books, articles, conferences and special issues of journals. In their manifesto-like account of the ‘new modernist studies’, Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz draw attention to this ‘expansive tendency’ operating in ‘temporal, spatial and vertical directions’.<sup>4</sup> The ‘transnational turn’ has meant fresh attention to the engagement of familiar Anglo-American modernists with racial or cultural otherness.<sup>5</sup> It has meant more globalized and nuanced accounts of sites of modernist cultural production, and the movement of artefacts, ideas and writers across oceans and national borders. It has revolutionized our understanding of the presence of colonial writers, artists and intellectuals in Britain, thus remapping the collaborations and intersections of colonial and metropolitan writers in the modernist period.<sup>6</sup>

Black and Asian students, entertainers and activists quickly learnt to navigate the city via a network of venues where they might be welcomed, places like the International Students’ Club, the Drury Lane Club (established for non-white colonials and African American soldiers) or the homes of progressive-minded individuals like Winifred Holtby.<sup>7</sup> It was at Amy

Ashwood Garvey's Florence Mills Social Parlour on New Oxford Street that C. L. R. James founded the International African Friends of Ethiopia in 1935 (which became the International African Service Bureau in 1937), just prior to Italy's invasion.<sup>8</sup> Histories of resistance, anti-colonialism in this case, are shaped by the material circumstances in which like-minded intellectuals can find safety and solidarity. Organizations like the West African Students' Union, founded by Nigerian Lapidó Solanke in 1925, the India League founded by Krishna Menon in 1928 or the League of Coloured Peoples set up in 1931 by Jamaican doctor Harold Moody were focal points for activism, collaboration and artistic production. Particularly in the 1930s, London became 'a unique incubator for radical black internationalist discourse'.<sup>9</sup> As we will see in Chapter 4, from the 1910s when Duse Mohammed Ali, who published in *The New Age* alongside Katherine Mansfield, founded the *African Times and Orient Review*, the development of pan-Africanism in the heart of empire began to draw colonial intellectuals like C. L. R. James and George Padmore to the city. London operated as an 'intellectual organiser', to use Bill Schwarz's term.<sup>10</sup> It offered publishing opportunities, literary networks, political organizations and an expanded readership. Many intellectuals travelled for the freedom of speech not always available in colonial locations in this period. The 'centre' of the British Empire, as a key site for transnational political organization and resistance, became, ironically, a crucial catalyst for its dissolution.<sup>11</sup> John McLeod has written of postcolonial London: 'it is important to proceed with an historical understanding of London as a much more complex and conflicted location than that implied by the totalizing and abstract concept of the undifferentiated colonial "centre"'.<sup>12</sup> The same could be said of the city in the pre-war period. Analysis of this colonial writing reminds us again that space, to follow Henri Lefebvre, is socially produced, not abstract, empty or geometrical. This is so with any number of kinds of spaces, but the ideologically loaded nature of London for these women travellers means that their 'London' writing is particularly attuned to the tensions between official representations of space and the imagined spatial formations that resist such hegemonic mappings.<sup>13</sup> Space is produced by 'spatial practices', the everyday movements and activities of humans in particular spaces. These writers 'produce' London in ways that reflect their outsidership, and always with an eye to the relational nature of national spaces within the empire.

Modernist London starts to look very different when we can locate Jamaican Claude McKay, in London between 1919 and 1921, at the '1917 Club', the haunt of Fabians and Bloomsbury intellectuals. After meeting Sylvia Pankhurst at the International Socialist Club in Shoreditch, McKay

became involved in the Workers' Socialist Federation and published poems and articles in its periodical, the *Workers' Dreadnought*.<sup>14</sup> Through his involvement with British Communism, McKay mixed with anarchists, Sinn Féin supporters and anti-imperialists. In his 1937 autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, he was outspoken about the racism he encountered in Britain, yet emphasized the transformative aspect of his stay: 'if there was no romance for me in London, there was plenty of radical knowledge'.<sup>15</sup> Susheila Nasta has recently explored the diversity of the Indian nationalist, Mulk Raj Anand's role as a public intellectual in London between 1924 and 1945, situating him not just at familiar sites such as the BBC and the Hogarth Press (where he worked as a proof corrector), but positioning him in a wide, eclectic network of organizations and sites of cultural production: the 1935 Paris conference of International Writers in Defence of Culture, International PEN, and periodicals such as *Indian Art and Letters*, the *Congress Socialist* and *Left Review*.<sup>16</sup> As well as locating colonial writers and artists in those sites conventionally associated with modernist London (the Café Royal on Regent Street, the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel on Percy Street or cabaret clubs such as the Cave of the Golden Calf in Soho), we need to construct alternative maps that depict the resistant spaces and networks that worked to counter an urban architecture that monumentalized imperial power.<sup>17</sup>

While Elleke Boehmer has warned against consistently routing histories of anti-colonialism via London, it is worth emphasizing that *one* way to read modernism transnationally is to focus on the imperial metropolis.<sup>18</sup> London facilitated inter-colonial exchanges, such as those between Irish and Indian nationalists: the Irish nationalist Alfred Webb (President of Indian National Congress in 1894) with Dadabhai Naoroji (Liberal MP for Finsbury Central 1892–5) or Shapurji Dorabji Saklatvala (MP and prominent member of the Communist Party of Great Britain) with Irish republican and suffragette Charlotte Despard.<sup>19</sup> Sarojini Naidu met Gandhi, with whom she was to collaborate closely for the rest of her career, in London in 1914. Una Marson's work at the BBC's Foreign Service brought her into contact with T. S. Eliot, William Empson and Mulk Raj Anand, and she met C. L. R. James, George Padmore and Paul Robeson through the League of Coloured Peoples. To consider Naidu's relationship with W. B. Yeats (see Chapter 2), or Marson's with George Orwell (see Chapter 6), is certainly not to offer validation through connections to more canonical modernists, but to recognize the transformative exchanges that took place between colonial and metropolitan writers, some, like the collaboration between Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, notoriously ambivalent. One can

no longer consider Englishness, or urban space, in the period without thinking transnationally. As Peter Kalliney argues in his study of twentieth-century Englishness and imperial decline, 'England's economic viability and political authority were dependent on an extrinsic imperial geography', therefore Englishness can only ever be considered in the context of empire.<sup>20</sup>

As the eurocentrism of earlier genealogies of modernism loses its hold, new questions arise about how to define or situate alternative modernities, how to discuss the relationship between social modernization and cultural modernity, and what critical formulations might be used to explore the movement of modernity in terms other than mimicry or belatedness. How do we negotiate the deep-rooted influence of attempts to distinguish a high modernist avant-gardism from politically and ethically committed literatures? Given that much recent scholarship has turned afresh to the political engagements of modernist writers, it is unsurprising that imperial debates and anti-colonial movements feature prominently, as they did in the popular imagination in Britain and abroad at the time.<sup>21</sup> But how do organizing concepts such as race, nation, networks, mobilities, geopolitics jostle with the familiar co-ordinates of English-language modernism: selfhood, the unconscious, the urban, formal experimentation?

This reconfigured field is accompanied, or fuelled, by a newly politicized and ethical energy, a result of movements in contemporary theory, as well as a reaction against the tenacious hold of post-WW2, Anglo-American accounts of modernism. As Jessica Berman has argued recently, reading modernism transnationally 'shifts our perspective on the forms and commitments of modernism, asking us to recognize the rhetorical action its forms undertake and the continuum of political engagement that undergirds its world-wide emergence'.<sup>22</sup> This has led, as Mao and Walkowitz point out, to considerations of the relationship between modernism and postcolonialism. Were postcolonial writers influenced by aesthetic and political strategies initiated in the modernist period? Did the exhaustion of modernist form make space for the postcolonial?<sup>23</sup>

The expanded terrain of modernist studies has inevitably led to questions about what characterizes modernism, and how its 'distinguishing features' might be traced across time and space. Neil Lazarus, in 'The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism', an essay which argues against the 'conscious delimitation' of postcolonial studies beyond a narrowly postmodern-postcolonial canon, identifies the 'essential gesture of modernist literary practice' as that of disconsolation.<sup>24</sup> Modernism here, and elsewhere, is seen as a critical practice, a mode of responding to social and economic modernity

*Introduction*

7

that ‘refuses integration, resolution, consolation, comfort; protests and criticizes’, therefore one which continues after the 1950s.<sup>25</sup> It seems that with debates about the obsolescence of the term postcolonial – supposedly superseded by a globalized vision no longer harnessed to a colonial framework – the first half of the century is the new object of scrutiny of a postcolonial perspective. As modernism’s reach extends through the twentieth century, or becomes a mode of being rather than a time-bound phenomenon, the postcolonial is read backwards and the two collide.<sup>26</sup> Peter Kalliney, for example, reads ‘modernist and “metropolitan postcolonial” literature as part of the same literary and historical trajectory’.<sup>27</sup> Writers like E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf made ‘the urban environment more widely available as a language of English national identity’ and subsequently, writers such as Sam Selvon or Salman Rushdie write back to their modernist forebears.<sup>28</sup> This is certainly the case – Selvon makes explicit allusion to *The Waste Land* in *The Lonely Londoners*, for example – but well before WW2 colonial writers had been employing post- or anti-colonial discourse in their response to London’s urban spaces. Attention to colonial modernism, then, provides us with another way of thinking about the provenance of postcolonial literatures, one which predates the moment of independence.

This paradigm shift allows for reflection on the selectivity of critical practice: in only half a century, it seems, the field, particularly in North America, has turned about-face. But of course the traditional, ‘men of 1914’ modernism, that now seems passé to some, is a simplified critical construction produced to suit current agendas, just as it was a product of cultural, political and pedagogical agendas in the post-WW2 period. The ‘new’ relies inevitably on a simplification of the ‘old’. Jennifer Wicke has discussed the ‘re-branding’ of modernism as a process which erases underlying reliance on the brand itself: ‘those nouveau modernist critics who wish to enlarge the modernist canon . . . had better hope that the illusion of a modernist or high modernist canon stays in place, to permit rebranding along the edges of a very big tent’.<sup>29</sup> As Jessica Berman shows when she reads James Joyce alongside Mulk Raj Anand or Virginia Woolf alongside Jean Rhys, a comparative or transnational approach produces the ‘canonical’ anew.<sup>30</sup> The current project, too, sits new readings of more canonical women modernists such as Mansfield or Rhys, alongside lesser-known writers of the period, Sara Jeannette Duncan or Una Marson. The focus on London itself throws up new trans-cultural connections, given that these writers, Naidu and Duncan in particular, are invariably studied in their home environment. Their time in London, and the literary networks they formed



there (such as Naidu's with W. B. Yeats and Arthur Symons) often go unnoticed.

This study benefits from, and will, I hope, contribute to the new expansiveness of modernist studies. Some of these writers would not conventionally have been considered modernist – Schreiner, Duncan or Marson – as a result of periodization, or the political dimensions and/or popularity of their writing. But their critical engagement with modernity can be found precisely in their feminist response to colonialism. And that response, in turn, finds expression in a range of stylistic experiments with perspective, narrative voice, temporality and imagery. Their modernity resonates on many levels: as writers, as colonials, as single women on the streets of London, and through their challenging of the cultural and spatial hierarchies of global, imperial space. The combined focus on urbanism, capitalism and colonialism in their work constitutes a thoroughgoing consideration of the forms of modernity and its transnational manifestations. This writing attests to the ways in which experimentation and the inheritance of literary forms are, in part, products of both imperial ideology and anti-colonialism. As Simon Gikandi has argued, modernist art forms more generally, 'derive their energy from their diagnosis of the failure of the imperial enterprise' leading in turn to 'a radical reconceptualization of narrative forms and indeed of the idea of the aesthetic itself'.<sup>31</sup> When modernist studies turns its attention to global formations, 'the term *modernism* breaks open'; 'it unveils both unsuspected "modernist" experiments in "marginal" texts and unsuspected correlations between those texts and others that appear either more conventional or more postmodern'.<sup>32</sup> Such a re-assessment of 'periodization, genealogies, affiliations, and forms' necessitates a reconsideration of the relationship between politics and aesthetics.<sup>33</sup>

But the exuberance of the new can create its own blindneses. In her reflection on the altered critical terrain, Susan Stanford Friedman asks whether 'the field's boundaries [have] become so boundless as to incorporate everything and thus lose all definitional cogency or analytic utility?'<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, judging non-Western texts against the familiar criteria of Anglo-American modernism, can perpetuate rather than undo aesthetic hierarchies. Another potentially homogenizing effect of the transnational paradigm is a lack of attention to racial difference. As Urmila Seshagiri has argued: 'As this new wealth of research suggests, transnationalism has become modernism's new racial byword, evoking an egalitarian boundary crossing that occasionally diffuses the particulars of race into broader discussions about nation and culture'.<sup>35</sup> This is pertinent here, given not only the very different experiences of black and white colonial women on



*Introduction*

9

London's streets, but also the fetishization or cooption of racial difference by writers such as Jean Rhys or Katherine Mansfield as both a signifier of their modernity and a corrective to social modernization.

Similarly, attention to modernism 'in transit' must not lose sight of forced migrations, and the lived experience of those exiled. Without careful attention to the contingencies and particularities of the localized sites and movements of modernist culture, the project can look like a new version of primitivism, a 'modernist exotic', colonial writers and their cultural work used to confer political legitimacy on a languishing field.<sup>36</sup> Howard Booth, writing about Claude McKay, warns against simply incorporating non-Western writers into an expanded definition of modernism: 'the harsh, sundering hierarchies that operated between, for example, colonizers and colonized, races, genders and sexualities have too often simply been set aside'.<sup>37</sup> This homogenization is particularly pertinent in accounts of modernist London, easily transformed into some kind of playground of possibility, cross-cultural artistic and political collaboration taking place in every café and meeting house. The realities of the search for accommodation, employment, publication, as well as the racism encountered by writers like Una Marson or Claude McKay, sit alongside the sense of cultural excitement and opportunity.

Attending to networks of colonial peoples in modernist London creates an uneven and unpredictable map of the city's resistant spaces. London was home, for example, in the pre-war period, to a group of Indian revolutionary nationalists at India House in Highgate. The assassination of Sir Curzon Wylie, Aide to the Secretary of State for India, by Madan Lal Dhingra at the Imperial Institute in 1909 was masterminded from India House. In a surprising intersection of Bloomsbury with extremist nationalism, David Garnett became involved with the India House activists, particularly in the aftermath of the assassination.<sup>38</sup> New maps are not just laid over the old; they act to reconfigure the existing terrain. This is particularly pertinent in Bloomsbury, which was often the first port of call for colonial travellers given the area's bohemian associations and the possibility of finding accommodation in bedsits or boarding houses. Recent research on the African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian presence in modernist London has remapped this area with startling results that reflect back on the area's conventional modernist associations.<sup>39</sup>

Mulk Raj Anand's *Conversations in Bloomsbury* (1981), published decades after his arrival in London from India in 1925, provides another way of thinking about this area and the unevenness of 'colonial' London more broadly. The memoir recounts his discussions with the Woolfs, to whom

one edition of the text is dedicated, as well as Clive Bell, Nancy Cunard, T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, Lytton Strachey, Eric Gill, Arthur Waley and D. H. Lawrence amongst others. He talks to Nancy Cunard about the *Negro* anthology and D. H. Lawrence's primitivism, to Eliot about Hinduism, to Leonard Woolf and E. M. Forster about the links between public school ethos and imperialism, to Clive Bell about 'significant form' and the erroneous distinction between craft and art, to John Middleton Murry, Lawrence, Aldous Huxley and others about Indian nationalism, art, and poetry. On one hand, *Conversations* performs the kind of cross-cultural and cross-racial debate and exchange that the new modernist studies are in danger of fetishizing. But the text is also an example of what Mary Lou Emery, following Homi Bhabha, has called contra-modernism: a concept that locates 'the constitutive alterity within modernism, the ways in which colonial émigrés shaped and re-circuited the aesthetic, political, and ideological projects of the inter-war years and after. Rethinking modernism in this way is not just a matter of recovering lost or suppressed writers and artists; rather, it is a matter of recognizing the unassimilated as necessarily so'.<sup>40</sup> Anand expresses gratitude to be mixing with the eminences of Bloomsbury, but simultaneously, as a political exile following nationalist activism in India, he critiques the ignorance and complacency of his interlocutors. *Conversations* interrogates the cross-cultural signification of the values central to Bloomsbury's self-definition (both the geographical location and the Group). It simultaneously performs open debate, or verbal exchange, whilst marking its impossibility in the context of colonial violence. As Anand writes: 'there can be no dignity in the personal relations of British and Indian intellectuals unless British writers realize that the freedom of speech and opinion which they take for granted is denied to their Indian friends'.<sup>41</sup> Through its topographical detail, Anand literally charts his claim over the spaces of Bloomsbury: the Poetry Bookshop, Tavistock Square, the British Museum and the Hogarth Press. His is not the observing gaze of a tourist, but through dialogue and debate, he positions himself as a producer of space, creator of an alternative map of modernist London.

But another potential consequence of the transnational turn, and one which this study seeks to highlight, is the removal of feminist politics from the critical frame. Just as the first wave of postcolonial criticism arguably paid only minimal attention to gender, there is the sense that racial, cultural and geopolitical concerns somehow supersede the focus on modernist women writers of the 1970s to 1990s. It is as though that primarily recuperative project is now complete, and critical momentum needs to look elsewhere. In Mao and Walkowitz's article, they identify 'gender' and