

Introduction

MARK WHALAN

Modernism in America

The story of modernism and/in the US could do worse than begin in August 1967, when Gwendolyn Brooks – Chicagoan, Pulitzer Prize for Poetry winner, and recent convert to the Black Arts Movement – read occasional poems at two dedication ceremonies for two very different pieces of public art in her home city. Her first reading was of “The Chicago Picasso” at the unveiling of an unnamed, 50-foot-tall Pablo Picasso sculpture outside Chicago’s Civic Center, a building that – then as now – housed most of Cook County’s circuit courts. Brooks’ invitation came from Chicago’s formidable mayor, Richard Daley, who cemented his notoriety the following year by orchestrating the heavy-handed policing of the combustive 1968 Democratic convention. For Brooks, the Picasso sculpture was art with a capital “A.” As she put it in her poem, “Does man love Art? Man visits Art, but squirms.” Art such as this required adjustment, accommodation, *work* from its audience, who must “cook ourselves and style ourselves” for such a “requiring courtesan” – in contrast to the “easier,” “raw” state of staying at home, “the nice beer ready.”¹ Brooks later explained that “I really didn’t feel qualified to discuss what Picasso was doing or had intended to do,” and so wrote the poem “from the standpoint of how most of us who are not art fanciers or well educated in things artistic respond to just the word ‘art’ and to its manifestations.”² However, she made clear she understood art and Art as two different things twelve days later at the dedication for the “Wall of Respect,” a “mural painted on the side of

¹ Gwendolyn Brooks, *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987), 377.

² Gwendolyn Brooks, “An interview with George Stavros” (1970), in *Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks*, ed. Gloria Wade Gayles (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 37–53, p. 37.

MARK WHALAN

a dilapidated tavern on the southeast corner of 43rd Street and Langley Avenue in Chicago's impoverished Grand Boulevard neighborhood."³ The mural featured a gallery of African American heroes including Malcolm X, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ray Charles, Nina Simone, and Dick Gregory, and had been done without the property owner's permission by artists and photographers in the Visual Arts Workshop of the Organization of Black American Culture, a key Black Arts collective. The piece inspired a community mural movement that produced hundreds of art projects in Black neighborhoods across the US. As Brooks' poem celebrated, the dedication took place "South of success and east of gloss and glass," but represented "the Hour of tribe and of vibration . . . the Hour / of ringing, rouse, or ferment-festival."⁴

I begin this Introduction and collection with these contrasting artworks because they signal the culmination of a worldwide, fifty-year process of institutionalization and instrumentalization of modernism that had been spearheaded by American institutions. Moreover, they offer an orientation both to what modernism had become in the US and what it had excluded. For Brooks, capital "A" Art was sanctioned, funded, and perhaps even weaponized by the state (which placed the Picasso sculpture outside the court buildings that, then as now, saw Black men given custodial sentences in Cook County at hugely disproportionate rates). Capital "A" art was also unsettling and somewhat alien; its power resided in the solitary affective encounter; it was *difficult*; and it was best considered by experts. In a word, it was modernist. By 1967, as Leonard Diepeveen has documented, the aesthetic arguments of modernism had become the dominant terms for producing and consuming high culture in the US and Europe, terms that had difficulty as their defining feature. That legacy was powerful; for if "one's ability to move in high culture continues to depend, in large part, on how one reacts to difficulty," then "high culture has been living off a modernist inheritance."⁵ But that story is inseparable from the fact that by the 1950s, as Greg Barnhisel suggests, modernism was also a heavily "accredited" cultural style that had become central to the cultural diplomacy of the Cold War. Touted as the signal contemporary aesthetic example of Western liberal freedom, modernism was promoted by the

³ Patrick T. Reardon, "Chicago's 'Wall of Respect' inspired neighborhood murals across the U.S." *Chicago Tribune*, 29 July 2017. Available at www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-flash-wall-respect-black-0730-md-20170728-story.html.

⁴ Brooks, "The wall," in *Blacks*, 379–80.

⁵ Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2003), xi, xv.

Introduction

soft-power apparatus of big American philanthropy and the American state in their global struggle for hearts and minds against what it presented as the anti-individualist dogmas of Soviet socialist realism. Fredric Jameson calls this “the ideology of modernism” and classes it as “an American invention” that did serious Cold War cultural work by stamping modernism as committed to the idea of the autonomy of the aesthetic, and to a hermetic formalism devoted to the purification and unfettered exploration of its own medium – aesthetic characteristics that often read *prima facie* as difficulty. In political (and propaganda) terms, this was the ultimate expression of an artistic individuality that only capitalist democracies could fully guarantee.⁶ As the novelist Paul Goodman grumbled, “we cannot dedicate a building of Frank Lloyd Wright’s in New York without our Ambassador to the United Nations pointing out that such an architect could not have flourished in Russia.”⁷ Moreover, as Barnhisel notes, by the 1960s modernism was instrumental not only to cultural diplomacy but also to middle-class taste; for it had been effectively denuded of its anti-bourgeois energies to take on a new life as an elite commodity style. In consequence, “modernism came not to bury but to *adorn* bourgeois life, colonizing its houses and its products and its entertainments,” having undergone a “rhetorical reframing that capitalized on the conjunctions of government, business, and elite cultural institutions (museums, foundations, and universities) particular to America of the 1940s and 1950s.”⁸ This sanctioning of modernism by both state and elite taste is wryly signaled by Brooks’ suggestion that we must “cook ourselves and style ourselves” for this kind of art – modernism could lend a sheen of hifalutin legitimacy to the Cook County courts precisely through a style that had been so fully accredited (and domesticated).

Modernism in America had indeed come a long way. In 1913, students at the Art Institute of Chicago burned an effigy of Henri Matisse, Picasso’s peer, in protest at the traveling Armory Show.⁹ A year later, Margaret Anderson relocated the editorial offices of the *Little Review* to a tent by Lake Michigan when her advertisers dried up because of the magazine’s enthusiastic coverage of Emma Goldman’s anarchism. In the 1920s, modernist masterpieces

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2012), 165.

⁷ Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 25.

⁸ Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists*, 4, 2.

⁹ Laurette E. McCarthy, *Walter Pach (1883–1958): The Armory Show and the Untold Story of Modern Art in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 48.

MARK WHALAN

such as Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Wallace Stevens' *Harmonium*, William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All*, and Mina Loy's *Lunar Baedeker* all sold fewer than 1,000 copies on their initial release; even Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* took a year and a half to sell its initial 1789-copy printing.¹⁰ In contrast, by midcentury Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* had sold 5.3 million copies in two days in *Life* magazine; modernist authors had their work on Ivy League syllabi and regularly traveled to Stockholm to collect Nobel Prizes.¹¹ Marianne Moore even cowrote a poem with Muhammed Ali, and – by request – supplied Ford Motor Company with a name for their new automobile model (although her suggested “Utopian Turtletop” was rejected in favor of the “Edsel”). The literary canon coalesced around what Charles Altieri would dub “high” modernism, which favored the earlier half of modernism's classic period (to 1929), works by white and male authors, and poetry; and was institutionalized across America's booming higher education sector by scholars working primarily with the methodologies of New Criticism. Any story of American modernism must perhaps begin with this acknowledgment of the Americanism of modernism, a recognition of how modernism's emergence as a canonical, institutionalized field in the postwar Anglophone academy (and the shape it took) is inseparable from a context of Cold War cultural diplomacy and its deep links to the tastes of a booming postwar cultural economy. For even as modernist studies looks very different today – as this collection will fully demonstrate – these earlier paradigms continue to credentialize, inform, and haunt the field.

In part, this is because this midcentury account of modernism made a series of claims that continue, if not unabated, then at least as a lingua franca among modernist scholars. This narrative observed that cultural production in Europe and North America across (and between) media from roughly 1890 to 1950 had gone through a period of extraordinary change and experiment that was directly related to the similarly extraordinary transformations in technological, political, social, material, and even psychological experience in those societies. It noted that some of the most exciting and innovative writing of the early century had broken with the forms that had oriented much of the literature of the preceding historical period – such as the realist novel, the Romantic lyric, the five-act play, and the representational painting; and had often done so through an aesthetics of spectacular

¹⁰ Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 247.

¹¹ Donal Harris, *On Company Time: American Modernism in the Big Magazines* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 25.

Introduction

iconoclasm and shock that changed much about the experience of perceiving the artwork or text. This narrative saw modernism as fundamentally international and obsessed with time, in multiple manifestations. And midcentury modernism lauded both modernists' invention of new forms – such as the imagist poem, the stream-of-consciousness narrative, and the expressionist play – and their reconfiguration of others in wholly original directions, such as French symbolism, the epic poem, the bildungsroman, and the manifesto.

Of course, even at its high-water mark, this version of modernism was accompanied by a vigorous debate about the term, one that turned – as it so often has – on its connection to specific formal practices (can you recognize modernism when you see it?) and its relation to radical politics. In the early 1950s influential critics such as Harry Levin, Lionel Trilling, Karl Shapiro, and Graham Hough began to agonize about the defanging of modernism, and wondered how its striking protest against the cultural and social norms of Western bourgeois culture could ever have been so successfully integrated into the official institutions and normative tastes of Cold War America.¹² (Indeed, this issue would become a staple of modernist scholarship, which has been almost as interested in – or troubled by, or keen to disabuse – the issue of the sanitization, institutionalization, and co-option of modernism as it has been in the textual qualities of the literature itself.) Moreover, as Brooks' twin poems intuited, the "official," state-sanctioned version of modernism left most of early twentieth-century culture outside some pretty forbidding gates. For most midcentury readers, modernism was seen as fundamentally distant from the politically radical, familiar, communal, or accessible; nor was it illegal and assertively Black (all in contrast to the Wall of Respect). Even as William Faulkner was sent to Brazil, Japan, and Venezuela on state department tours, or as Wallace Stevens was receiving an honorary doctorate from Yale, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Mina Loy's *Lunar Baedeker*, and Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* were out of print; Larsen, Toomer, and Loy had faded into silence and obscurity. The ideology of modernism left little space for the personal, lyric, often sentimental, and undeniably modern poetics of sonneteers such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Countee Cullen, and Helene Johnson, or the free-verse tradition that took Whitman as its lodestar. It had a hard time accommodating theater, especially work in the tradition of "fragile realism" that Katherine Biers explores in this volume (Chapter 18).

¹² See Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, *Modernism: The History of an Idea* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 78–83.

MARK WHALAN

It disqualified work with an explicit politics, including the politics of race and ethnicity, which eclipsed the entirety of the Harlem Renaissance, the work of Native American and Latinx modernists, and much of the left modernism that consistently animated the American tradition, especially in the extraordinary efflorescence of the “cultural front” of the 1930s. It suppressed much of modernism’s innovative aesthetics of gender and sexuality, especially by women and queer writers. And even as it worked to popularize modernism in an expanded middlebrow sphere, it was keen to keep a firm cultural hierarchy in place. Such thinking often failed to see many of the era’s extraordinary innovations in popular culture as modernist in their own right, or even as integral and energizing components of formally experimental modern literature. Instead, they were more often viewed as threatening contaminants menacing the borders of high culture. A modernist studies that widens its optic to all these forms, politics, identities, and cultural economies is represented in this collection, just as it has been in much of the expansionist impulse of the “New” modernist studies of the past twenty-five years, but the residue of this exclusionary history is palpable too.

Crucially, while this midcentury context saw “modernism” coalesce as a coherent scholarly term and field, the same was true of “America.” The emergent academic discipline of American studies also often served as a lever of US soft power in the era, with its hefty support from the American state, its flourishing institutionalization in western Europe, and its orientation toward often triumphal narratives of American exceptionalism. Foundational figures often had feet in both disciplines – Norman Holmes Pearson, Cleanth Brooks, Irving Howe, Malcolm Bradbury, and Malcolm Cowley, to name but a few – even as those disciplines disagreed on issues such as the degree to which culture was nationally bounded, the genres and politics they favored, the place of vernacular and popular cultures in their respective analyses, and how the sociohistorical contextualization of works should be practiced. The connections – and fault lines – between these two disciplines are a recurrent theme in this volume, which sometimes tacitly and sometimes explicitly comes back to a series of questions prompted at the intersection of these two fields. What are the adequate territorializations and mappings for a field imaginary of American modernism? How do the very different legacies of the study of race, colonialism, and ethnicity in these two disciplines relate to one another? Are there generic preferences in both methodologies that the other can highlight and perhaps diagnose? What does each have to say to the other’s moves to self-credentialize by moving decisively away from their midcentury legacies? And, most radically – as Melanie Benson Taylor states in

Introduction

her essay in this volume (Chapter 34) – what are the implications of recognizing “settler colonialism and racial capitalism as the underlying, instigating features of both *modernity* as a historical process and *modernism* as the intellectual and cultural responses to inhabiting its conditions and institutions”?

America in Modernism

Perhaps in consequence of these tensions between American studies and modernist studies, the notion of a specifically American *literary* modernism was a rather belated one. Yes, the cultural institutions of the Cold War consolidated modernism with a distinctively American cast; and yes, single-author scholarship on Faulkner, Stevens, Eliot, Pound, and Frost flourished before 1970. But it was not until 1975 that the Library of Congress initiated “American modernism” as a subject heading in response to Hugh Kenner’s landmark book *A Homemade World*.¹³ A dominant core–periphery paradigm that privileged European metropolises in modernist studies had also disadvantaged American literary modernists – who were largely ignored in influential work on modernism by critics such as Raymond Williams and Perry Anderson, or positioned as at best belated and at worst derivative vis-à-vis European models by important early scholars of American modernism like Daniel Singal and Dickran Tashjian.

American modernism, then, was late to the party, but from the vantage point of 2022 a more pressing concern is its seeming anachronism when measured against the two-decades-long turn toward transnational and/or global accounts of early twentieth-century culture. This “turn” has been methodologically central to both American studies and the New Modernist studies, and tracks the weakening of Cold War cultural imperatives that began in the 1990s.¹⁴ As modernist studies worked to rethink the inevitability of the western European metropolis serving as both the birthplace and the privileged incubator of modernist aesthetic practice, so American studies

¹³ See David Ball, “Revisiting the new: Recent fault lines in American modernist criticism,” *College Literature* 37.3 (Summer 2010): 184–92, p. 185. Of course, while the Library of Congress’ classification systems are important indicators of the viability of a field, there had been previous, important precursors to Kenner’s study – Alfred Kazin’s *On Native Grounds* (1942) or even Paul Rosenfeld’s *Port of New York* (1924), for example.

¹⁴ For discussion of the “crisis” in modernist studies in the early 1990s, see Latham and Rogers, *Modernism*, 149–50. The most important document in American studies in this context is Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease’s edited collection *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

MARK WHALAN

critiqued earlier exceptionalist models to excavate how America's often obfuscated imperial and settler-colonial history had crafted a global economic and political system completely imbricated in transnational circuits and relations of power. Both developments identified American literary modernism as a prime candidate for transnationalist reevaluation; for as Walter Kalaidjian notes, the moment of modernism coincided with the Americanization of the global public sphere, as American imperial power increasingly registered in cultural dimensions and was "glocalized" across the world. Moreover, the modernist scholarship of the transnational turn has often showcased the porosity of the US to various global cultural and political forces of the first half of the twentieth century, even as its domestic politics focused so regularly on shutting such porosity down. Even in an era of rampant nativism, white nationalism, and immigration restriction, therefore, phenomena such as the golden-door period of mass immigration that characterized the Progressive era; the influx of political refugees in the early twentieth century; or the work of the Communist International, to take just three examples, networked the US to modernist cultures across the globe. Gayle Rogers' remarks about the American novel in this era are apposite – they "appear to be 'global' in most every way, full of foreign settings, plots, languages, and characters, and often written by expatriates or by foreign-born nationals within the United States. They frequently engage the roles of imperialism and colonialism, transnational and multilingual cultures, and exile and displacement in creating what was understood to be a distinctly 'modern' mode of experience."¹⁵ If a remapping oriented to border-crossing, the inter- and transnational valences of translation, and globalized circuits of political/cultural praxis and institution-building now serves as the default territorialization of modernism, America often features in that remapping as a crucial waypoint, destination, market, or antagonist.

All of this is to agree with Joseph Rezek's assertion that after the transnational turn "the burden of proof now lies with those scholars who still wish to treat literary history in strictly national terms."¹⁶ Nonetheless, this collection will showcase how the unfolding of the social and economic patterns of modernity in the US, and the mediation and configuration of that modernity through expressive culture and the culture industries, had specific features

¹⁵ Gayle Rogers, "American modernisms in the world," in *The Cambridge Companion to the American Modernist Novel*, ed. Joshua L. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 227–44, p. 227.

¹⁶ Joseph Rezek, *London and the Making of Provincial Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 5.

Introduction

that continue to make American modernism a coherent and compelling field – even as those features simultaneously developed in global circuits of power, traffic, and transit. Simply put, the nation-state mattered as an entity in political, economic, legal, and cultural terms. Demographically, the innovations of American literary modernism grappled with the shifting politics (and populations) of mass immigration; with rural depopulation, sometimes as a result of environmental catastrophe; and with the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities – cities that had been technologically and architecturally transformed within a generation and were increasingly racially segregated. Politically, the US contended with the shifts attendant on a society that saw “little role for the federal government other than delivering the mail” in the pre-World War I years being transformed into one governed by a powerful and centralized federal nation-state, an apparatus that saw its greatest transformations in moments of crisis.¹⁷ This empowered state also oversaw imperial expansions and interventions in both the hemisphere and the Pacific; the ethno-purist immigration restrictions of 1924; prohibition; the franchise for women; an allotment policy for Native Americans that continued to strip land ownership from tribes; a variety of responses to the hardships and dislocations of the Great Depression; and in modernism’s later phases, the superpower capacity that constructed the political, military, and economic institutions of the Western post-World War II settlement.

National laws also cemented key features of US modernism. Censorship statutes channeled gay and queer literary production into a comparatively oblique queer modernism in the US, which, as Benjamin Kahan suggests in this volume (Chapter 2), was more open only in sites that were relatively opaque to censors’ scrutiny – notably, African American writing and the theater. Lisa Siragarian’s recent work suggests that legal framings of corporate personality influentially established by the US Supreme Court in 1886 meshed with literary explorations of collective intention in ways that structured American literary modernism, as “corporate personhood functioned as a philosophical debate, occurring simultaneously yet dissimilarly in American literature and in law, stimulating some of the most ambitious thinking on intention in the twentieth century.”¹⁸ *Plessy v. Ferguson* gave national *de jure* sanction to a seventy-year era of Jim Crow practices that had profound social

¹⁷ Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War One and the Making of the American Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), dust jacket.

¹⁸ Lisa Siragarian, *Modernism and the Meaning of Corporate Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

MARK WHALAN

and cultural effects, as did the absence of other laws – most notably, the continued non-criminalization of lynching at the federal level. And national and local laws governing reproduction produced distinctive modernist cultural responses – particularly America’s deep implication in eugenic social policy (which at its most extreme enacted racial-genealogical registries to prevent interracial marriage, and enacted involuntary sterilizations on the mentally disabled) and ongoing restrictions on the circulation of information on birth control.¹⁹

Given these largely national contexts to what felt to many like a headlong rush into a new era – what Hart Crane called the “new verities” of “Power’s script” – it was unsurprising that many of the earliest commentators on US modernism did so within the paradigm of cultural nationalism.²⁰ Critics such as Waldo Frank, Van Wyck Brooks, H. L. Mencken, Constance Rourke, Lewis Mumford, and Alain Locke cast modern American culture as distinctive, and often identified its most salient characteristics as grounded in specifically American folk or vernacular cultures of speech, song, performance, or humor. Moreover, most of these critics – and many of the key authors of US modernism – were guided to varying degrees by traditions of philosophical pragmatism, relativist cultural anthropology, and urban sociology that had been incubated in American universities by figures such as William James, John Dewey, Franz Boas, and Robert Park. As George Hutchinson has argued, if “all the vectors of social power were being organized increasingly along national lines” – and he itemizes nongovernmental institutions, the federal government, and America’s corporate structure (including its cultural corporations) among those vectors – then “the cultural responses were bound to focus upon struggles for the national ‘soul.’”²¹

While this is true, it is also the case that American modernism reflected a rapidly changing, uneven, and incomplete sense of national territorialization that troubled the often-told story of national life as a developmental process of increasing integration, urbanization, incorporation, and standardization. This

¹⁹ See Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Beth Widmaier Capo, *Textual Contraception: Birth Control and Modern American Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007); and Layne Parish Craig, *When Sex Changed: Birth Control Politics and Literature Between the Wars* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

²⁰ Hart Crane, “Cape Hatteras,” in *Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, ed. Mark Simon (New York: Liveright, 1993), 77–84, p. 79.

²¹ George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1995), 11.