

INTRODUCTION

*London, 1880–1940: Liminal Sites
and Contested Identities*

London . . . , like a vast electric light, casting radiance upon the myriads of men and women who crowded round it. And here she was at the very centre of it all, that centre which was constantly in the minds of people in remote Canadian forests and on the plains of India, when their thoughts turned to England.

—Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*

They are the most interesting phenomena of the place to me, these women.

—C. L. R. James, “London: First Impressions”

Modern urban women and their associated spaces are central to British literature and culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a remarkably wide range of London narratives dating from the 1880s through the 1930s, we may trace a shared, multifaceted preoccupation with middle-class women’s new participation in the urban scene.¹ From naturalist fiction to canonical high modernism, from middlebrow novels to lowbrow musicals, from sociological journalism to fine art, in an astonishing range of genres and venues, the modern woman and her sites take center stage. It’s a preoccupation that runs through narratives authored by both men and women, who are of origins rural and urban, English and colonial. That this resounding presence hasn’t been adequately noticed or accounted for in modernist literary studies suggests a resemblance to Poe’s purloined letter, hiding in plain sight. This book examines how and why these women and spaces attracted so much interest and registers their impact in both thematic content and narrative form. It orients the era’s literary production at the intersection of gendered and raced identities, urban space, and narrative, encompassing diverse writers and texts often left out of even broad conceptions of British modernism. Attending to the

¹ Here and throughout the book I consider “middle class” quite broadly, encompassing both lower-middle-class service workers and their upper-middle-class employers.

role of women and to colonial residents of color (both male and female) in shaping the city and its literature, it argues that the recurrent trope of the modern woman in liminal urban spaces provides a method for bridging modernism's formal experiments and its social investments.

We can begin to appreciate the complexity and persistence of the preoccupation with modern urban women by considering two textual moments, separated by nearly twenty years, and penned by authors who differ in sex, nationality, and artistic generation. Henry James's "In the Cage" (1898) and Dorothy Richardson's *Honeycomb* (1917) each take up the perspective of a young, unmarried woman of "the educated class" who, owing to a downturn in her family's fortunes, is obliged to earn her own livelihood. Each young woman finds herself on her own in London in the last years of the nineteenth century, navigating a matrix of class and gender connotations and managing the nuances of sexualized roles only half understood. In each case, the protagonist faces interpretations generated by her presence in a London post and telegraph office, one of the city's liminal spaces, neither wholly public nor entirely private, where changing gender and class roles came head to head with conceptions of female respectability organized through spatial limits.

Henry James's unnamed protagonist works "in the cage," taking and sending telegraphs, "closed in" with two men behind a screen of wood and wire at the back of a grocery in the tony neighborhood of Mayfair. Though she regrets "the intense publicity of her profession," which involves serving strangers in a commercial establishment and thus compromises her claim to middle-class respectability, she takes great pleasure in observing the well-heeled customers (129). When she encounters a frequent customer who has been the subject of her most intense scrutiny on the street outside his residence, she must reconcile her private fantasies with her sense of her own propriety, even as she negotiates the connotations elicited by her profession. Of this unscheduled, yet yearned for, meeting, the narrator recounts:

[I]t was to be, later on, a thing of remembrance and reflection for her that the limit of what, just here, for a longish minute, passed between them was his taking in her thoroughly successful deprecation, though conveyed without pride or sound or touch, of the idea that she might be, out of the cage, the very shopgirl at large that she hugged the theory she was not. (169)

When the protagonist indicates by undefined, soundless means that she is not a "shopgirl at large," that is, not a girl to invite up to his rooms, she refuses not an invitation (for she has preempted that indignity), but an association with a type, "the shopgirl." The moment is indicative of the

uncertainty surrounding the respectability of women in clerical and service work around the turn of the century and how the struggle to understand their significance often involved comparison to other gendered roles and urban typologies. James's labyrinthine sentence draws to a close with a much-delayed point – that she tacitly but successfully “conveyed” her rejection of belonging to that dubious type – but the final clause admits the possibility that that refusal of type is but a cherished and self-delusional “theory.” There is a yet further wrinkle, as is so often the case with James. This particular communication – this transmission of a message from her to him – was the “limit” of unspecified greater depths of information, as though there can be no successful communication beyond typological knowledge.

Writing nearly twenty years later but remembering the London of 1895, Dorothy Richardson has her protagonist, Miriam Henderson, impulsively duck into a post and telegraph office in London's West End to write a letter to a male acquaintance. Once again the neighborhood is Mayfair, though now we are at its edge, in a “gloomy interior” off Regent Street (*Honeycomb* 418). Standing between expensively dressed customers filling out telegram forms, Miriam “feared the officials behind the long grating could see by the expression of her shoulders that she was a scrubby person who was breaking the rules by using one of the little compartments, with its generosity of ink and pen and blotting-paper, for letter writing.” The crossing of class lines expressed spatially and through rhetorics of posture and clothes creates gender anxiety as Miriam looks at her strong, masculine handwriting and tries to “feminize her attitude,” a futile task without the “expensive clothes with West End lines” of her neighbors:

She felt her hard self standing there as she wrote, and shifted her feet a little, raising one heel from the ground, trying to feminize her attitude; but her hat was hard against her forehead, her clothes would not flow. (419)

The short awkward phrases, and the deflection or softening effect of the use of past progressive (the thrice repeated “ing” of standing, raising, trying), echo the subtle shifting in her stance as she tries, without success, to “flow” in what she perceives as a male preserve. Miriam's use of the compartment and writing materials literalizes her more significant but metaphorical straying into unsanctioned territory, her choice to write to the male acquaintance, which he will interpret as a romantic advance that leads her finally, “defying the whole world,” to visit “Bob's bachelor chambers” near the end of *Honeycomb* (477). For the moment, in spite of the anxiety raised by her gender and class transgressions, Miriam finds her visit to the

post and telegraph office leaves her with a riotous joy she attributes to the city around her: “London reveled and clamoured softly all round her; she strode her swiftest, heightening its clamorous joy.” Her actions in the office have even contributed another facet to her evolving identity, one that is simultaneously public and hidden and that is tied to the region that birthed it: she has now “a mysterious secret face – a West End life of her own” (419).

In these two moments, as in their work more broadly, Henry James and Dorothy Richardson probe how London’s threshold spaces produce class and gender identities that are often ambivalent. We glimpse how, in generating uncertain, even mysterious, identities, such spaces elicit narratives that wrestle with the difficulty of categorization itself. Indeed, representation is of key concern for James and Richardson in multiple ways. Both devise protagonists who are writer figures: James’s telegrapher earns money by relaying messages, while her imagination elicits comparison with the creative mind of a writer; Richardson’s Miriam not only pens a letter in the scene, but Miriam’s development as a writer also parallels her author’s early career. I return later in this introduction to the significance of writers and writing in relation to modern urban women and their associated spaces. First we need to consider how and why the narrated scenes are indebted to, even generated by, the *frisson* of “respectable” women in public urban places.

It may now be common knowledge that the last decades of the nineteenth century found middle-class women in Britain (and elsewhere) occupying new venues of work and pleasure in ever growing numbers. Their emergence as autonomous workers and pleasure-seekers in the city challenged Victorian distinctions between the public, masculine sphere and the private, feminine sphere that undergirded many social structures. Scholars have amply demonstrated that while separate sphere ideology was more of a cultural desire than a reality, it was nevertheless a powerful influence on notions of where men and women belonged.² For many contemporary observers, the sense that middle-class women were expanding their boundaries, both in terms of where they circulated without chaperonage and in terms of what they were able to do, made them representative of an age that seemed, for better or for worse, to be moving beyond the conventions and restrictions of the past. In the first decades of

² See Mary Poovey, Deborah Epstein Nord, and Judith Walkowitz (*City*) for foundational work on middle-class women’s various negotiations of separate sphere ideology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Regarding men in private space, see John Tosh.

the twentieth century, as female suffragists resorted to militant tactics and women gained more positions in the public work force, women's "place" remained under perennial scrutiny.³ This attention was primarily directed at women of the middle classes who are, consequently, the focus of this study. Poor women had always been of necessity in the city's public spaces while the rich seemed to exist in a world apart.

Within London, particular new and transforming locations both enabled and were enabled by middle-class women's increasing urban presence. Their growing occupation of public spaces transformed the city's architectural and social terrain in a circular fashion: shops, clubs, and restaurants catering to women sprang up to accommodate the women who came to the city because there were such venues, as well as because they offered a welcome respite from nearby places of labor. Those locations and the routes between them (which offered their own pleasures and labors) were thus inevitably associated with the women who shaped them and were shaped by them, in turn. As this book argues, these women and their associated sites provided the vocabulary and the scene for discussions of a world in transition.

While, and perhaps because, the increasing presence of middle-class women in the urban landscape elicited ambivalent and contradictory responses, representations of that change consistently served as means for wrestling with yet broader transformations. Cultural production of the period demonstrates how gender roles and relations are connected at a thousand points with other identity categories and social conditions, from national identity and imperialism to technologies of communication and travel. As the scenes from James and Richardson suggest, and as further chapters will demonstrate in greater detail, representations of new occupational and recreational options available, at least in theory, to middle-class urban women stood in for promises and threats of modernity writ large. More than any other figure, I posit, these new public women were *exemplary* modern subjects.

I use the term *new public women* to signal the primacy of their public presence for both their celebrants and their critics, and to reference their contradictory associations with both the "new woman" and the original "public woman," the prostitute (a genealogy I develop in Chapter 1). As ambivalent figures of modernity, new public women offered a way to consider other new subjects, including racialized "others" within the

³ These were developments in a long history of women seeking improvements in their social, economic, and political position. See Richardson and Willis for a brief summary of the women's movement from which fin-de-siècle feminisms emerged (1–9).

imperial metropole, a group that most white British writers had not yet found the means to represent overtly or in depth. In the London writing of some of these perceived outsiders, such as C. L. R. James, who provides an epigraph to this introduction, the phenomenon of the new public woman provided a method for articulating their own belonging in the imperial city.⁴ The idea of the new public woman thus brings together in a single figure visually differentiated social actors, changes in class, gender, and imperial relations, and technological and cultural transformations. Further, as we saw with the examples discussed earlier, she was not only a spectacular symbol of modernity, but also a frequent stand-in for the writer. I suggest that she was, more particularly, a trope for the self-consciously modern writer. The new public woman epitomized modernists' representational dilemma: how to reject old methods of representing the world while continuing a deep commitment to holding the mirror up to contemporary society. Through the ideas and locations of the new public woman, the particulars of which evolved from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, British cultural producers tried to make sense of the modern world and to find new strategies to represent it.

The history and representation of the new public woman, and her role in modernism and modernity, engages identity studies (especially regarding gender and its intersections with race and class), spatial theory, and narrative studies. In the remainder of this introduction, I consider aspects of these overlapping and interpenetrating fields as I mobilize them in this book. I begin with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity as figured in the urban environment, and within imperial London in particular, and proceed to the still underappreciated role of gender in spatial analyses of cities and their modernist representations. I then enlist spatial theory's articulation of the effects of material locations in human experience and cultural constructions in order to theorize how widespread sociopolitical and cultural changes were mediated and understood through the urban sites newly occupied by middle-class women.

London, the New Public Woman, and Modernist Studies

For many writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the urban milieu, with its rapidly changing technologies, architecture, and

⁴ "London: First Impressions," from which the epigraph is taken, refers to a series of six articles James published in the *Port of Spain Gazette* between March and September 1932. The quotation comes from the article subtitled "The Houses" (July 27, 1932).

social relations, epitomized the modern life they sought to represent. It is with good reason that the city has been a central facet of conceptions of modernism from the field's inception. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's seminal book, *Modernism: 1890–1930*, identified how cities were “often novel environments, carrying within themselves the complexity and tension of modern metropolitan life, which so deeply underlies modern consciousness and modern writing” (Bradbury 96). Though the modern psyche is not necessarily urban, modern writing frequently associated it with the city. Georg Simmel was one of the first to theorize the city's influence on inner life. In “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1905), he famously described how the stimulation of the city – “the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions” (410) – produce a reserved personality, remarkable for its intellectual distance and “blasé attitude” (414). The image of the city in modern literature was metaphorical as well as material; it stood in, as Burton Pike argues, for the writer's ambivalent relation to culture.⁵

London took on many levels of metaphoric significance in the cultural imagination. It was repeatedly reified as the archetypal city even as it was figured as a singular place, and a riddle of contradictions. By representing London, writers examined the material and ideological transformations of the age. London, wrote Ford Madox Ford, was “the apotheosis of modern life” (173). From the early nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, London was repeatedly and increasingly represented and dissected in British fiction.⁶ The next chapter examines the outsize interest in London through the coevolving representation of the new public woman. For now, it is enough to observe that the appeal of London as setting and object for analysis often derived from the city's very contradictoriness. London was exemplary of modernity, but what “modernity” meant was as subject to debate as it is today.

One of the arguments of this book is that, in apparent contradiction to Simmel's portrait of the “blasé attitude” of the psychologically distant

⁵ For other explorations of the relationship between the material city and the city as a metaphorical construct, see Christine Boyer, Mary Ann Caws, Harold Dyos, Michael Wolff, Lynda Nead, and Richard Sennett.

⁶ See my essay (coauthored with Matthew Wilkens) on the contours of London's dominance in British fiction, as evinced by computational analysis of 10,765 volumes published in the UK, 1880–1940, and digitized by HathiTrust (Evans and Wilkens). In a separate study of nineteenth-century novels, Stanford's Literary Lab found that “London-related topics had become significantly more frequent in the course of the [nineteenth] century” (Heuser, Moretti, and Steiner 1).

“metropolitan type,” women were repeatedly imagined as intimately and emotionally responsive to the urban scene. In the work of women writers, that response to the city often stimulates individual growth. Woolf provides a well-known example in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) when Elizabeth voyages by omnibus up a bustling street, the Strand, and is inspired to imagine a career in productive work outside the home: “She would become a doctor, a farmer, possibly go into Parliament, if she found it necessary, all because of the Strand” (136). Importantly, Elizabeth’s new ambition stems not from the intellect but from how “buildings without architects’ names” and commuting “crowds of people” have a visceral “power . . . to stimulate what lay slumberous, clumsy, and shy on the mind’s sandy floor to break surface” (137). Less familiar but no less powerful examples are found in Richardson’s novel sequence *Pilgrimage*, which figures London in its entirety as vital in the protagonist’s development as person and as artist. As Richardson would remark, “what London can mean as a companion, I have tried to set down in *Pilgrimage* (“Data” 18). Her protagonist’s intimate relationship with the city includes a range of affective bonds. The city comes to belong to Miriam – it is “her London, her beloved territory” – and is a part of herself: she would sleep, “tingling to the spread of London all about her, herself one with it, feeling her life flow outwards, north, south, east, and west, to all its margins.”⁷ Miriam also imagines “the spirit of London” as a “mighty lover, . . . engulfing and leaving her untouched, liberated and expanding to the whole range of her being” (*Revolving* 272). Unlike human companions who make their own demands, London offers Miriam freedom and expanded life, though, as we saw in the passage discussed earlier, *Pilgrimage*, like Woolf’s novels, also depicts the unspoken but powerful rules that circumscribed women’s movements in the city.

London was not only a forum for individual development, however; it was also inextricably connected to national history and imperial ambitions. It figured, often ambivalently, both as synecdoche for the English nation and as a world city. The first epigraph to this introduction encapsulates both aspects, as Mary Datchet in Woolf’s *Night and Day* considers London as what those encamped in far-flung colonies imagine when they think of England and as a beacon for all those who cluster around its light –

⁷ *Dawn* 267 and *Revolving* 273. When citing Richardson’s thirteen-part novel series, *Pilgrimage*, I reference the individual novel. All but the final two novels were published individually before they were collected in volumes. Hereafter, citations will be in the text. I discuss *Pilgrimage*’s publication history in Chapter 3.

conjuring pervasive imagery of the city as center and source of enlightenment that draws people from around the world.⁸ In *Pilgrimage*, Miriam's appropriation and possession of the city may be understood as the means by which she "authorizes her status as a universalized subject of empire" and by which the novel values Englishness, as Jane Garrity convincingly argues (*Step-daughters* 86). As the political, economic, and ideological center of a vast empire, more than any other city, London seemed to gather the world in its folds. Booker T. Washington wrote from London in 1899, "Nowhere can one get such a good idea of what is transpiring in all parts of the world as in London" because "the English colonial system brings every year hundreds of representatives of all races and colors from every part of the world to London" (qtd. in Green 238). In 1911, W. E. B. DuBois observed in the pages of *The Crisis*, "more and more the streets of London are showing" that the British "empire is a colored empire" (159). DuBois had traveled from the United States to London to take part in The First Universal Races Congress, an international effort to improve race relations, which is suggestive of how, even as the city drew visitors from around the world, its influence also radiated outward.⁹

Journalistic and sociological writing around the turn of the century made much of London's status as a global city, remarking on the diversity of its people. *Living London*, a collection of essays edited by George R. Sims, included "Oriental London," "Indian and Colonial London," "Cosmopolitan London," and "Italy in London" among the city's "sights" and "scenes." Recent scholarship has made important inroads in recovering the experiences of African, West Indian, African-American, Asian, and South Asian visitors and residents in Britain prior to the well-known wave of immigration following World War II.¹⁰ More difficult has been the tracing of their experiences in the British modernist literary cannon, in which characters from abroad are nearly always visibly white, often heralding from Britain's settler colonies. Though white colonials occupied an ambivalent place in imperial Britain's racial hierarchy, they seem to have been representable to white British writers when people of color were not. As Urmila Seshagiri suggests in *Race and the Modernist Imagination*, the presence of such racial others was registered more obliquely, often on the plane of metaphor.

⁸ For Woolf, herself, her love of London was her "only patriotism," she wrote in a letter of 1941 as she contemplated bombs falling on the city (*Letters*, VI, 460).

⁹ See Doreen Massey's *World City* for a powerful argument about this dual role in present-day London.

¹⁰ Significant monographs include works by Barbara Bush, Peter Fryer, Jeffrey Green, C. L. Innes, Sukhdev Sandhu, Jonathan Schneer, Marc Matera, and Rozina Visram.

A better understanding of the racial politics of modernist Britain, I believe, requires an expanded archive as well as what Edward Said theorized as “contrapuntal reading,” which opens a text “out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded” (*Culture and Imperialism* 67). In examining the London writing of “resident outsiders” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I build upon work by Jessica Berman, Sara Blair, Mary Lou Emery, and Anna Snaith, who have investigated the modernism of such occasional London residents as Mulk Raj Anand and Sarojini Naidu (both of India), C. L. R. James (of Trinidad) and Una Marson (of Jamaica). I also strive to recognize ways in which white modernists’ anxieties about racial others are sublimated in stories about middle-class white women. This contrapuntal approach not only provides the means to appreciate the diversity of those taking up new roles in modern London from the 1880s through the 1930s, but it also destabilizes simple gender divisions that often dominate, and sometimes distort, conceptions of women in the modern European and American city. While it may seem surprising to focus on London when recent work in modernist studies has rightly challenged the centrality of American and European metropolises in the history of modernism, geographic locatedness highlights differences in perspectives and experiences of the same space and can reveal other forms of transnationalism.

Threshold Modernism

I posit that the most significant locations in narratives about London from the 1880s through the 1930s were associated with the controversial presence of newly visible urban women. Indeed, narratively significant spaces were frequently articulated through their accessibility – and likely danger – to “respectable” women. These were locations beyond the home, where middle-class women gained a new presence that challenged lingering Victorian associations of sexual availability with unchaperoned women in public places. I’ve selected three distinct types of locations for extended analysis in this study: shops and department stores, streets, and women’s clubs. While there were other notable sites (including commercial and philanthropic offices, cafés and restaurants, theatres and music halls, hotels and hospitals, parks and exhibition grounds), I’ve chosen these particular locations because they represent a range in the nature of the debates they inspired, because they were all subject to extensive commentary by both male and female writers and by “resident outsiders” of color as well as white observers, and because they were either new or newly available to middle-