

Introduction
The New Modernist Studies
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Modernist and Other Studies

The century that witnessed the heyday of modernism in the arts also saw two flowerings, at least, of modernist studies. The first began in the late 1950s, as a number of critics and scholars sought to understand the nature, value, and fate of a range of innovations in art and literature of the preceding decades. The second, more centered in the academy and responsive to later-evolving currents in scholarship, emerged in the century's very last years. This more recent development, and its vibrant, complicated continuation into our present, is the topic of this volume.

The collection opens with two chapters offering fresh perspectives on the origins of the new modernist studies. The first of these situates the stirrings of the enterprise among key intellectual configurations of the end of the twentieth century; the second offers an institution-centered history based on recollections and assessments gathered from scholars and others associated with the evolution of the field over the past two decades. There follow twelve essays that attend to recent trends in modernist scholarship, not by way of summarizing the largest and most visible ones – a project that has been carried out elsewhere¹ – but in an effort to illuminate threads, and gaps, that might portend new lines of inquiry. *The New Modernist Studies* is thus intended to serve as a volume of record for the field's early years as well as a scene of speculation on a few of the directions (a very few out of innumerable possible ones) in which it might develop in the years to come.

The new modernist studies did not come into being at one stroke, nor have its qualities and boundaries been rigidly defined. Like many “studies” fields, it began to coalesce before a name for it went into wide circulation, and it has developed unpredictably over its short life. Still, we can here point to a few temporal markers – more will be forthcoming in the contributions from Michael North and Mark Wollaeger – and to a

number of characteristics, successes, and tensions that have characterized it so far and will undoubtedly shape its future.

As Wollaeger notes, the term “new modernist studies” first appeared no later than 1994, the same year that the journal *Modernism/modernity* commenced publication. The first conference of the Modernist Studies Association, called “The New Modernisms,” was held in 1999, and by 2006, Rebecca L. Walkowitz and I could, in our introduction to *Bad Modernisms*, enumerate key features of “the new modernist studies” or “the new modernisms” with some confidence.² As we suggested there and in a 2008 “Changing Profession” piece in *PMLA*, the new modernist studies has had, as “studies” fields go, an especially visible relationship to institutions.³ Its early trajectory was much tied up with *Modernism/modernity* and the MSA, and it is impossible to conceive of modernist studies today in separation from the journals, book series, and scholarly organizations that have, over the past twenty-five years, permitted scholars of modernism to come together and disseminate their work.

No less crucial to the shape of the new modernist studies has been its origin in a pushback against certain negative views of modernist art and literature. To be sure, in the last years of the twentieth century, “modernism” did enjoy exceptional institutional priority in one respect: in English departments in the United States, at least, it was not uncommon to speak of the four most recent periods of Anglo-American literature as Romantic, Victorian/nineteenth-century, modernist, and postwar/postmodern/contemporary. At the same time, many literature scholars offhandedly dismissed modernist works, especially in architecture and literature, as monuments to desiccated authorial egotism, to unnecessary difficulty, to quietist withdrawal from the real world. As both North and Wollaeger note in their chapters, this kind of dismissal had much to do with the dominance of “postmodernism,” which positioned modernism as the joyless other it had gleefully supplanted, though in later years more and more scholars would come to think of postmodernism as an extension of modernism’s projects merely disguised as a repudiation. The new modernist studies was partly driven by a desire to counter this reflexive disparagement, which is to say that one of its distinguishing features is its rooting in an effort to rescue canonical works from a mistrust associated in some ways with their very canonicity.

At least as integral to the new modernist studies, however, was an effort to stimulate exploration of authors and artists whose works seemed modernist in form, or in dialogue with canonical modernist texts, but who had not received the level of attention accorded more prominent figures. This

meant, above all, following the lead of scholars who since the 1960s had been working to counter the marginalization of women writers, writers of color, lesbian and gay writers, and writers working outside Europe and North America. It still comes as a shock to see Virginia Woolf's name absent from Terry Eagleton's list of "the seven most significant writers of twentieth-century English literature" in 1970's *Exiles and Emigrés*; such an omission would have been far less likely twenty years later, but as North and Wollaeger point out, the new modernist studies took some of its bearings from, and eventually contributed to, the transformation of the canon that had started before it arrived on the scene.⁴

Scholars committed to revitalizing the study of modernism in the 1990s were interested in more than reexamining canonical works and expanding the canon, however. They also wanted to study both new and old objects differently. Susan Stanford Friedman has suggested that what was most centrally new in the new modernist studies was its openness to methods and values associated with other studies' approaches,⁵ and in his contribution to this volume, North shows how the characteristic procedures of the new modernist studies render it legible almost as an application or subdomain of cultural studies – one whose belated emergence had perhaps to wait for the decline of a postmodernism with which cultural studies was long and somewhat strangely entangled. Of course, in seeking new modes of analysis, scholars of the "new modernisms" aligned with scholars in the studies fields upon which they drew. Feminist scholars, scholars of race, postcolonial and queer theorists, and practitioners of cultural studies have never, in their engagements with literature, been devoted exclusively to the project of adding more women writers, writers of color, non-Euro-American writers, queer writers, or "popular" writers to the canon. Their effort has also been to change the interpretive and evaluative lenses through which texts are read. Similarly, the new modernist studies' widening of its range of primary materials has been inextricable from an effort to enlarge the toolkit of methods and perspectives that can be brought to bear on those materials. In this respect, it would be a mistake to emphasize the expansion in "temporal, spatial, and vertical directions" that Walkowitz and I described in the *PMLA* essay at the expense of the recognition that the new modernist studies was as much a matter of fresh approaches as of larger range of objects studied.⁶

That the contributors to the present collection were not asked specifically what modernist studies might glean from other approaches makes it the more noteworthy that all of them indicate, sometimes obliquely but often directly, how the field has learned and must continue to learn from

studies areas and disciplines that have in no way “belonged” to it, nor ever can. This is especially evident in the contributions from Friedman and Maren Linett, who make clear that as scholars of modernism pursue questions of belief, theology, and secularity and of mobility, weakness, and the non-normate body, they have much to gain from drawing upon – and much to lose from failing to attend to – the insights of religious studies and disability studies. Edwin Hill and David James point to the scarcely tapped resources, for scholars of modernism, of sound studies and affect theory, while Paul Saint-Amour invites us to a productively disorienting reframing of modernist time in terms of ecomaterialist inquiry. Race studies and Black studies furnish crucial points of departure for Miriam Thaggert as well as Hill, and also in key ways for Gayle Rogers and Sarah Cole. Sara Crangle’s chapter adumbrates ways in which modernist studies will continue to be transformed by feminist and meta-archival approaches.

Steven Lee’s contribution, meanwhile, illustrates how the global turn in modernist studies must engage with ethnic studies (including explorations of the historical construction of ethnicities), while María del Pilar Blanco draws on versions of global theory from a number of fields to assess modernist studies’ “planetary” turn. Contributors to this volume also illuminate how scholarship in other disciplines (or in “studies” areas that have become quasi-disciplinary by dint of institutional recognition) continues to furnish crucial paradigms and lenses. This is particularly true of Hill on film, Thaggert on the visual arts, Cole as well as Aarthi Vadde on the history of science and technology, Rogers on the history of sociology and economics, and the comparative literary practice of Blanco, Friedman, Hill, Vadde, and Lee. While only some of this volume’s contributors reflect explicitly on cross-field interchange, then, they collectively emphasize how other fields may intersect *at*, as well as with, modernist studies, and how projects originating within modernist studies can contribute to other areas of inquiry. They make a case, that is, for the continuing productivity of modernist studies’ porousness.

Two other features shared by this collection’s contributors may at first appear in tension with the one just named: that they hold appointments within literature departments and that their chapters nearly all focus on written works. These features arise from the volume’s publication context and my own view of what, given this context, such a book might try to do. *The New Modernist Studies* was commissioned for the Twenty-First-Century Critical Revisions series from Cambridge University Press, joining volumes such as *The New Emily Dickinson Studies*, *The New Pynchon Studies*, and *The New Jewish American Literary Studies*. The capacity of

“studies” to fall anywhere on a spectrum from the fully performative (establishing what was not there) to the fully ostensive (pointing to what is already there) is nicely illustrated by the somewhat odd fit of *The New Modernist Studies* within this configuration: unlike these other volumes, it cannot remotely be understood as helping to call its subject into being. With this intersection between the character of the Cambridge series and the history of “the new modernist studies” in mind, I chose to solicit views from scholars who have in recent years worked a little or a great deal within the field – which does remain literature-centric in spite of the early aspirations to interdisciplinarity that Wollaeger details in his chapter. The present volume does not, then, aim to reconceive the new modernist studies from a point of view external to it – though such a project would be enormously valuable – but rather to draw on the experience and imagination of scholars familiar with its trajectory in recent years. This should by no means be taken to imply that the long-range future of modernist studies will or should be one in which scholars working principally outside literature play little part. Indeed, it would seem that most scholars working in modernist studies today believe that the field’s original pursuit of interdisciplinarity should be reclaimed.

Modernist Studies Studies

As the question of interdisciplinarity’s fate suggests, the interchange between the new modernist studies and the other fields just described furnishes a backdrop against which to examine the achievements and disappointments of the former over the past two-plus decades. For some, the new modernist studies has been characterized by continuous and generative transformation, by an admirable restlessness that has made it a model of productive interchange across scholarly boundaries. Proponents of this view might hold up in evidence developments such as the “global” turn, an expansion of attention to women writers and writers of color, increasingly sophisticated and frank appraisals of the politico-economic matrices in which modernism and its readers have operated, an ever-growing body of work on intermedial interfaces, and a promising if nascent engagement with digital platforms and large-data research methods. For others, by contrast, the “new” in the new modernist studies must to varying degrees read as ironic or inapt. Lamenting the field’s failure to learn sufficiently from other fields and disciplines, let alone to metabolize their methodologies and values, holders of this position might observe that the gravitational center of the new modernist studies remains in the global

North, that its culturalist slant has hardly wavered since the turn of the century, that it has if anything grown more literature-dominated than it was at its inception, that its canon of authors remains disproportionately white and male, that it has been slow to consider how some of its key assumptions are challenged by new perspectives on race and indigeneity, and that it remains less politically engaged than some of its close compeers. For still others, the new modernist studies has been all *too* flexible. Noting, for example, how imperatives from other studies areas have contributed to the tendency to expand the reach of the term “modernism,” the exponent of this perspective might urge that the new modernist studies has never been as intellectually coherent as it ought to be, or that it has been diminishingly so, and that it courts losing whatever specificity of aim it once had because its objects of analysis are essentially unlimited.

Debate on this last question – that of how far the term “modernism” can usefully be extended – has of course been front and center in the new modernist studies’ already considerable body of self-scrutiny, which has accrued in books, journal issues, online discussions, and face-to-face forums. So ubiquitous has been this question that the skeptic might, adapting Thom Gunn’s two-line poem “Jamesian,” propose “Their scholarship consisted / in deciding if its object existed” as modernist studies’ motto.⁷ Yet for many, contention over the parameters of “modernism” has been necessary and indeed fruitful, less a drain on attention that might better be directed elsewhere than a useful goad to assessing the field’s values, politics, promise, and blind spots. Even where scholars doubt the value of trying to settle the question once and for all, they often remark how beneficial has been the unsettledness of scope associated with the field’s central term. In *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea* (2015), Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers argue that “modernist studies has been strengthened by the lack of resolution over what exactly modernism *is*.”⁸ In “Weak Theory, Weak Modernism” (2018), Paul Saint-Amour argues “that modernist studies’s emergence as a field has been concomitant with a steady weakening of its key term, *modernism*. Ours has become a strong field – populous, varied, generative, self-transforming – in proportion as it has relaxed its definitions of modernism and learned to ask other questions of a work, than ‘But is it really modernist?’”⁹

One thing on which scholars mostly agree is that the reach of the term “modernism” has never been securely fixed. If in the middle years of the twentieth century “modernism” came into its own (among English-language-centric intellectuals) as an umbrella term for an array of related movements of earlier decades,¹⁰ still, as Latham and Rogers observe, the

“sharp rise in the use of the word ‘modernism’ and its kin (modern, *modernisme*, *modernismo*, *Modernismus*) in the later nineteenth century” suggests that even by this time, “writers, artists, and thinkers around the world believed that *something* was happening, that the established conventions of realism, representation, and poetic form seemed to be failing in the face of new experiences, new audiences, and new things.”¹¹ In recent years, contestation over the application of “modernism” has been fueled by efforts to bring into consideration works of earlier and later date as well as artifacts, including works of popular culture, whose formal characteristics would not have made them “modernist” according to mid-century standards. But the most energetic debates about the reach of the term have been associated with the turn to “global modernisms.”

Toward the end of the twentieth century, scholars from several disciplines initiated a powerful reconsideration of the assumption that modernity is principally a property of the West.¹² And this quickly led to the question of whether alternative modernities imply alternative modernisms. In a 2001 essay, Friedman, citing multiple-modernities work by Sanjay Subrahmanyam and others, asked provocatively whether the Tang Dynasty in China, Timbuktu at the height of its influence, and Mughal India must not be considered among the “times and places of modernity” if modernity is a condition of “accelerated societal change” wherein “new technologies, knowledge revolutions, state formations, and expanding intercultural contacts contribute to radical questioning and dismantling of traditional ontologies, epistemologies, and institutional structures.”¹³ In their 2005 collection *Geomodernisms*, Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel sought a “break[ing] open” of the term “modernism” into a “geomodernisms, which signals a locational approach to modernity.”¹⁴ By 2010, Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gasiorek, Deborah Longworth, and Andrew Thacker could propose, in their continent-traversing *Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, a view of modernism “as an overdetermined, overlapping, and multiply networked range of practices . . . always caught up in a dialectical process of affirmation and negation.”¹⁵ In 2012’s *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, Wollaeger would advocate understanding “modernism” in the manner of “Wittgenstein’s family resemblance, a polythetic form of classification in which the aim is to specify a set of criteria, subsets of which are enough to constitute a sense of decentered resemblance.”¹⁶ Friedman would then offer the most extensive elaboration of her argument for “planetary modernisms” in her 2015 book of that name; the following year, Walkowitz and Eric Hayot would, in *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, offer the hope that in time “global modernism” will fall out of

use – the term being replaced just by “modernism,” under a general understanding that “the global [was] there from the beginning.”¹⁷ In “Weak Theory,” Saint-Amour particularly highlights modernist studies’ spatial “expansion” in pointing to concerns about modernist studies’ expansionism – about how to balance “the obligation to broaden narrow canons” with “the dangers of overreach and appropriation.”¹⁸

As these examples may suggest, the extension of what “modernism” can designate has raised at least three entangled questions. One is whether “modernism” ceases to have analytical purchase if anything can potentially be modernist; a second is whether in enlarging the reach of its central term, modernist studies has operated imperialistically and appropriatively; a third is whether the widening of the scope of “modernism” is really a repackaging of an honorific term as a descriptive one.¹⁹ These questions remain vitally unresolved, and this introduction is not the place to try to settle them. But I would like to contribute a very small data point that may say something about the status of “modernism” and “modernist” at this moment.

On a recent syllabus for a thematically oriented graduate course on modernism, I included Mike Gold’s 1930 novel *Jews without Money* and Jean Renoir’s 1935 film *Toni* – two works that, from the standpoint of “modernism” as once understood, would look like very curious choices. Gold was a vigorous opponent of what we would call modernist tendencies in writing; *Toni* is regularly cited as one of the key inspirations for Italian neorealism and as an early and particularly pure instantiation of a certain anti-modernism that André Bazin and others would champion in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*.²⁰ These well-known features of Gold’s and Renoir’s texts notwithstanding, it occurred to me only *as* I was teaching *Jews without Money* that there was something ironic about putting it on a syllabus whose other entries Gold might largely have disdained, and only *as* I was teaching *Toni* that it might seem odd to include in a modernism course a work exhibiting so many anti-modernist features. What does this delay in recognition tell us?

Certainly, one might claim that *Jews without Money* contains a suite of formal innovations that make it modernist against itself, or that *Toni* demonstrates how difficult it is to maintain a distinction between modernist and non-modernist innovation when the art in question is cinema.²¹ Or one might maintain that both texts are, for various reasons, essentially anti-modernist after all. What seems impossible to imagine, however, is a future in which Gold’s novel or Renoir’s film would be excluded from modernist studies research and syllabi. In writing about and teaching such texts, we should undoubtedly register where and how they were pitched

against investments associated with modernism at certain times, but to eliminate them from consideration by the field would be pointlessly impoverishing. As Michaela Bronstein has noted, modernist studies cannot limit itself to works that are evidently or possibly modernist: “we can consider ourselves responsible *to* a broader history without declaring ourselves responsible *for* it. Modernist studies . . . must be a broader field than the particular works it labels as its objects of study – however various and diverse those may become.”²²

The essays in the second part of this volume attest to the continuing generativity of studying interchanges between modernist works, on the one hand, and phenomena that can be construed as non-, anti-, or not quite modernist, on the other. Linett, for example, tests the boundaries of the canon in reading one of modernism’s most famous monuments together with less-discussed texts by a writer increasingly central to modernist studies. Thaggert begins with a short story that has so far received relatively little attention from scholars but seems poised, for many reasons, to attract a great deal more. In taking up texts and paratexts associated with social(ist) realism, James and Lee participate in a recent turn away from the assumption that realism is modernism’s defining other and toward the view that the modernism-realism binary is more a useful heuristic than a hard fact. On the other side of what we might call the reality-effect spectrum, Cole opens with a novel, and Rogers closes with one, that might not be modernist because science fiction or might be *more* modernist because science fiction. Hill, meanwhile, examines confluences of *noir* film and jazz, two forms once set in opposition to high art that, though long since read through high-art protocols, remain provocative of valuable questions about where the boundaries of modernism lie.

If Cole, Hill, and Rogers evoke modernist studies’ illumination of the permeability of the high-low boundary – the “vertical” dimension of culture – other contributors point to the rethinking of modernism’s horizons that has occurred along temporal and spatial axes. Thaggert and Crangle, as well as James briefly, read in texts published well after the early twentieth century that deploy modernist formal strategies while also engaging modernism’s associations with patriarchy, white privilege, and putatively self-indulgent introspection; Cole’s own analysis moves back and forth between novels published in 1897 and 1952. Blanco, Friedman, and Vadde, meanwhile, take up literary texts whose non-European origins might once have put them outside the modernist ambit but now call forth the kinds of questions about modernism’s global reach that we remarked above. Moreover, Vadde presses in an additional way on the question of

what modernist studies can encompass, inasmuch as she reads extensively in texts – in this case, early and mid-twentieth-century debates on international auxiliary languages (IALs) – that are very difficult to construe as literary. In this, she joins several other contributors to the volume, most notably Lee, who examines official and quasi-official public proclamations, and Saint-Amour, who weaves passages from Virginia Woolf together with reports in aerial archaeology. To encounter Vadde, Lee, and Saint-Amour on these documents is to feel, at least for a moment, the impossibility of asserting definitely that these non-literary texts are not “modernist.” It is to appreciate especially keenly the fuzziness of the line between modernist contexts and modernism.

Modernism *contra* Studies

The question of context deserves a bit more reflection at this moment in the life of modernist studies and of literary study as a whole. The description of the MSA that appears on its homepage, which as Wollaeger notes in his chapter has carried over from the founding of the organization, begins as follows: “The Modernist Studies Association is devoted to the study of the arts in their social, political, cultural, and intellectual contexts from the later nineteenth- through the mid-twentieth century.” Much might be said about the temporal boundaries named here, which as already noted have lost a good deal of their force over the past two decades, and much too about the non-literary arts, which again have not received as much attention as might have been predicted at the MSA’s inception. On the other hand, “contexts,” unquestionably the pivotal noun in the description, seems to capture very well what many contributing to the new modernist studies felt they were taking on in the early years and what many concern themselves with today. At least from our present vantage, it is hard to see what would be left of modernist studies if the study of contexts were suddenly proscribed.

In other quarters of literary study, however, context has been thrown some notable metacritical shade. In his widely read *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (2017), Joseph North argues that since the 1980s, scholarship has been dominated by an assumption “that, for academic purposes, works of literature are chiefly of interest as diagnostic instruments for determining the state of the cultures in which they were written or read”; he proposes that a radical left agenda may be truly served only by a return of genuine criticism that would displace this “‘historicist/contextualist’ paradigm.”²³ For the title of her final chapter in the no less