

Introduction: Modernist Networks and the Concept of the Periphery

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CRITICAL ATTEMPTS TO STUDY modernity and modernism beyond the hegemonic order established in its Western iterations have proliferated exponentially over the last few decades. These attempts have offered powerful terminological, methodological, and theoretical strategies for overcoming the canonical and geographical limitations that defined the study of modernism ever since its inception toward the end of the nineteenth century.¹

Most recently, Alys Moody and Stephen Ross edited a remarkable anthology, *Global Modernists on Modernism*, which brings together translations of modernist texts from a wide variety of contexts and regions.² The diversity captured in this recent anthology, along with its commitment to bring together work by academics, writers, and practitioners alike, makes it an important milestone in the field. This book joins other works of the same genre—the anthology—in an attempt to remap and investigate the experience of modernism on a global scale.

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¹ We are building our theoretical discussions here on a long tradition of studies on modernism, the periphery, and literary networks, going back to models developed in Pascale Casanova's systems of literary value and circulation in *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), David Damrosch's *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, and Franco Moretti's related discussions of semiperipherality. But we turn our attention in this introduction to certain more recent literary and scholarly activities that have made substantial attempts both to rethink modernism beyond its conventional definitions and to interrogate the spatial, geographical, and curatorial metaphors in the process.

² Alys Moody and Stephen J. Ross, eds., *Global Modernists on Modernism: An Anthology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

The proliferation of anthologies committed to this project in the last decade is no coincidence. The anthology seems to be a compelling structural response to the various theoretical impasses observed and witnessed in recent critical accounts. Even though theoretical attempts to delineate the contours of—what various critics have called—global, peripheral, divergent, marginal, transnational, or planetary modernisms have all made it possible to interrogate our concepts and rethink our definitions, time and again these models have rearticulated similar structural challenges in different terms.

Here is an attempt to recap some of these challenges in very general terms: Can we genuinely close our eyes to Western modernism and look elsewhere for entirely new and original articulations of this aesthetic and historical paradigm? Is a comparative mode inherently flawed if it cannot escape the problem of designating the West as the measure by which we approach other contexts? How realistic is it to accept modernism as a historical rupture? Should we not think of modernism as part of a larger ideological extension of the project of modernity? Are not the terms by which we think about modernism already laden with the ideological vocabulary that makes modernity inextricable from political narratives of progress? How appropriate is it to use the formal and rhetorical strategies associated with the canonized works of Western modernism to study modernism in other contexts? If the periphery is inherently defined in relation to the hegemonic core, can this dualism have any promise as part of a comparative method?

These questions are essential to our field. They should disturb and inform the comparative outlook that we bring to our investigations as scholars. But often there emerges a mismatch between theory and practice. The complex and labyrinthine theoretical attempts to identify a once-and-for-all method to decouple modernism from its established definitions and contexts fall short in practice. As Moody and Ross argue in their recent anthology, “Modernism has always been global, and this global disposition is inextricable from the radically unequal power relations that characterize modernity itself.”³ In a similar way, Eric Hayot acknowledges that “there is no point external to the system of European modernism from which we might rethink the history of the term.”⁴

In their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough hint at this problematic when they recount a discussion from the 2010 meeting of the Modern Language Association:

During the question-and-answer session, the panelists were asked whether modernist studies could do without some long-standing points of reference, such as modernism as a crisis of representation, as anti-realist or experimental, and whether there is any value in identifying particular aesthetic forms or techniques as intrinsically modernist, such as collage, montage, interior monologue, or the day-in-the-life novel. The questions were meant as provocation to what seemed an unstated ideal of unboxedness, a conception of modernism liberated from definitional corners and dead-ends. There was insufficient time, of course, to thoroughly debate such questions, but despite some cautious intimations from the audience that, in the words of E. M. Forster, “We must exclude someone from our gathering, or shall be left with nothing,” some panelists engaged in a bravado refusal of limits, one professed no longer to care about distinctions between modern and modernist, and the session concluded inconclusively.⁵

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴ Eric Hayot, “Chinese Modernism, Mimetic Desire, and European Time,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 153.

⁵ Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough, introduction to Wollaeger and Eatough, *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, 11.

Since then, similar discussions have persisted in the field, along with the continued production of various promising methodological tools. But what seems to be one of the most important developments is the increasing demand scholars have come to feel to reimagine the way in which we collate information about this topic. The ever-proliferating machinery of theoretical modeling, though always powerful and necessary, seems to some degree to have failed to catch up with modernism and with the modernist dedication to new forms, collages, manifestos, revolutions, and the concrete.

Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz had predicted the important place information would eventually have to occupy in the scholarly struggle to redefine the study of modernism:

we are today enduring a crisis of information—a feeling as old as modernity itself, perhaps, but especially acute in recent years, thanks not only to the cognitive unsettlement attending the rhetoric of globalization but also to changes in the regulation and organization of mass media. . . . Clearly, one challenge for twenty-first century intellectuals is to understand why and how new domestic and transnational debates about media intersect with fierce resurrections of old ones. It would be surprising if modernist studies, centered as it is on times and places marked by especially dramatic changes in the politics of information, ignored this pressing challenge.⁶

Mao and Walkowitz were right. In addition to publications exploring these issues, recent attempts at rethinking modernism have tried to find new modes of collating and conveying information by turning to different genres and media or by reimagining the tenor and methods of critical montage. *Global Modernists on Modernism* is one such example. *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, coedited by Eric Hayot and Rebecca Walkowitz, is another.⁷ Each chapter in this latter volume focuses on terms and concepts like “slum,” “alienation,” “puppets,” and “obsolescence” that “ostentatiously do not belong to the general list of terms that govern the study of modernism today.”⁸ As a result, these studies amount to a refreshing and striking reconceptualization of the modernist paradigm.

The success of these exciting projects owes partly to the understanding that the understudied or obscured instances of modernism require more creative and elastic efforts. In other words, rather than refuting or committing to the methodological promise of a single theory, these curatorial efforts bring together different degrees and permutations of relation between entities that may be described as central, core, peripheral, national, international, or global. Rather than having to decide between cultural and acultural theories of modernity as outlined by Charles Taylor, it may be more productive to attune our critical consciousness to the potential benefits and costs of moving between multiple critical registers.⁹ In this way, even the seemingly established critical terms that we use such as “periphery” and “core” turn into elastic concepts whose meanings change upon each insight and discovery. This restless process is not so antithetical to the ambitions of modernism in many contexts around the world.

The rising interest in curatorial projects, anthologies, speculative analyses of missed encounters, and critical volumes seeking rapprochements between seemingly irreconcilable theoretical

⁶ Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 746.

⁷ Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds., *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ Charles Taylor, “Two Theories of Modernity,” in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 172–96.

models all anticipate new maps, roads, nodal points, and intersections. Futurity, as developed by Amir Eshel, surfaces as a central concept here. Eshel describes futurity as “the potential of literature to widen the language and to expand the pool of idioms we employ in making sense of what has occurred while imagining whom we may become.”¹⁰ In recent studies on modernism we can observe a notable emphasis on futurity, in terms of both the anticipated deliverances of experimental critical methods and the subject matter itself.

Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, for example, describes the way “alternative modernities produce combinations and recombinations that are endlessly surprising.”¹¹ Likewise, Hayot and Walkowitz explain their use of the adjective “global” before “modernism” by stating that “the expanded lexicon we are imagining is not yet established and that it ought to be thought of as a future whole or, rather, a whole whose wholeness is infinitely deferred into a future that extends well beyond anything even imagined here.”¹²

The idea of futurity is also important in terms of how one defines the beginnings and ends of modernism. Recent scholarship, most notably the “planetary” model developed by Susan Stanford Friedman, calls attention to the need to think of “*modernity* and *modernism* outside the long twentieth century, outside the post-1500 temporal frame commonly understood as the *period* of the *modern* in its stages from early to late.”¹³ The first response to this invitation may be to broaden our timeline and discover modernity-laden impulses and contexts even and especially when these fall outside the cherished timelines of modernity. But it feels equally important to think of what comes *after*. Works that have been categorized as postmodern are too often difficult to separate from the aesthetic or political paradigms which characterize the modernist period. One of the most important challenges for us is to investigate what happens when we relax our chronologies in the periphery.

We selected peripheral modernisms as the theme for *Dibur*'s two-volume special issue. Though the center-periphery divide may have its shortcomings, we still believe that orienting our attention toward the periphery can have promising potential. It may be that this divide authorizes a hierarchy that we are paradoxically trying to break. But that is by no means the only possible outcome. What we consider to be the periphery may disrupt our whole understanding of the center, making us question claims about originality, authenticity, and the direction of the flow of influence. We may observe previously undetected relations between different peripheries, allowing us to notice new geographical centers and patterns of influence. In a world where established canons of modernism still make it difficult, rather ironically, to live up to the ambition to “make it new,” the concept of the periphery remains important.

We may try to do away with the center-periphery dualism in our comparative methodology, yet the concept of the periphery continues to be relevant, as a starting point, as a point of intersection, and as a point of contention. The study of peripheral modernisms perpetually creates new positions from which we may “look back” at modernism in the geographical or canonical centers. Ascribing such revisionary functions to the periphery may feel antithetical to the ambition

¹⁰ Amir Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 5.

¹¹ Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “On Alternative Modernities,” in Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities*, 23.

¹² Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, introduction to Hayot and Walkowitz, *New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, 9.

¹³ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 7.

to decentralize and disturb orthodox conceptions of modernism. This is especially true if we reduce the periphery to a convenient vantage point from which to “look back” in anticipation of concordances in style and historical consciousness. We must be prepared to face what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls those “infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle—perennially, precariously, but unavoidably—to ‘world the earth’ in order to live within our different senses of ontic belonging.”¹⁴

The contributions to the first volume of *Dibur’s* dual issue on peripheral modernisms display a variety of styles and theoretical approaches. In conjunction with the recent developments outlined above, we made an attempt to curate perspectives from a variety of geographical locations and encouraged each contributor to advance their own theoretical apparatus on and beyond the existing models of conceptualizing transnational encounters. We also tried to bring together essays and scholarship in a variety of styles to strike a balance between theoretical conceptualizations of the periphery and the more immediate implications of this concept.

One immediate implication involves the identity of the reader and the critic. As in any hermeneutic endeavor, it is difficult to separate our desire to identify connections between different locations, contexts, and textual geographies from how we interpret our own position. In defending the cultural theories of modernity, Charles Taylor argues that “[w]e cannot be without *some* sense of our moral situation, *some* sense of our connectedness to others.”¹⁵ The same is true, of course, for the practice of reading and writing about literature. As we seek to encounter and demonstrate relations between different contexts and traditions, it is difficult to ignore our own relational dynamics. It is rather necessary that we should do so.

This necessity is most compellingly foregrounded in the essay that brings our issue together: an ingenious meditation by Ilan Stavans in which the critic addresses his former self in the second person, remembering the experience of reading the Talmudic story of “The Oven of Akhnai” as a Jew growing up in Mexico. Stavans begins by recollecting his first reactions to reading the story “in a bilingual Hebrew/Spanish edition from Buenos Aires.” The interpretation of this narrative soon gets entangled in the complex and multilayered textual universe of Latin America: descriptions in the Talmudic text invite compelling associations with magical realism, which sends Stavans into a maze of contemplations about divergent modernisms, precursors, politics, the past, the present, and the future. The second-person address offers a promising model for critical discussions of modernism, as it foregrounds the positionality of the critic and the works discussed in a more dramatic and dynamic manner.

Our issue begins with Shoshana Olidort’s article, “Subverting Hebrew’s Gender Binary: Grammar, Poetry, and Performance in the Work of Esther Raab,” which investigates the performative strategies that Raab uses to challenge “the constraints of Hebrew’s highly gendered grammar.” Olidort’s absorbing study of the relationship between grammar, performance, and authority brings the spotlight on the first woman poet of the Israeli state, demonstrating how Raab manages “to enact her own identity as a female Jewish poet writing in a nascent modern Hebrew tongue.” Raab’s work was clearly produced within a complex and politically charged multilingual setting. Olidort conveys the force of this context through a detailed analysis of the poet’s language and through her exciting translations of selected passages from Raab’s work.

¹⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 254.

¹⁵ Taylor, “Two Theories of Modernity,” 195.

Writing about a similar period and context, Dina Berdichevsky's "The Jewish December 1910; or, The Parting of Ways of Eretz Yisraeli Prose and Hebrew Modernism" studies discursive incommensurabilities between the modernist style of some of Israel's most canonized authors and the politics of the nation-building project. Berdichevsky's masterful interpretation of Y. H. Brenner's 1910 novella *Nerves* offers a compelling frame to understand the affective and psychological journey of the modernist inflections in Hebrew and their gradual disappearance upon a national migration and "the migration of language and style."

The next set of articles in the issue traces literary connections between different regions and suggests new models for interrelating textual traditions. Daniel Behar's "The Shape-Shifting Margin: Patterns of Change in Arab Modernism Past Beirut" traces various developmental patterns in Arab modernism after the midcentury institutionalization of the avant-garde through the *Shi'r* movement established in Beirut around famous poets like Adonis. Behar maps the "centrifugal motion of Arab modernism" by paying attention to two different dynamics: poets like Sargon Boulus who experienced "vagaries of displacement, migration, experiential contraction and expansion" and those like Mohammad Bennis and 'Abdallah al-Ghaddāmī who were "situated in territorial literary fields on the fringes of Arab cultural centers."

Delia Ungureanu's "The Revolutionary Force of the Periphery: *The Levant, Nostalgia*, and World Literature" studies two works by the Romanian writer Mircea Cărtărescu, produced shortly before and around the December 1989 Revolution. Ungureanu masterfully reconstructs the intertextual layers of the verse epic *Levantul* (The Levant) and the poetic novel *Nostalgia*, illustrating the generative influence of writers like Dante, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf in Cărtărescu's literary universe. But rather than pursuing a linear account of the influence of the Western canon on Romanian literature, Ungureanu studies influence to investigate processes of authorial and national self-fashioning. Concurrently, Ungureanu problematizes Cărtărescu's traditional association with postmodernism by identifying the modernist inflections at the heart of *The Levant* and *Nostalgia*.

Irena R. Makaryk's "Periphery or Center? Ukrainian Modernism in Kyiv" questions the validity of spatial dualisms like the periphery and the center. She offers instead the "mathematical metaphor [of] the Möbius strip" to schematize her intriguing study of Ukrainian modernism in the city of Kyiv between the 1905 Revolution and the consolidation of Stalin's authority. Makaryk offers a detailed account of the "tumultuous" first decades of the twentieth century in Kyiv and how this political climate energized modernist experimentation with exciting connections to aesthetic revolutions elsewhere in Europe. Through the model of the Möbius strip, Makaryk reveals the complexity of the threads of influence which informed this modernist episode in Kyiv, combining "myriad influences and traditions—Western, as well as Far Eastern—with a concomitant desire to digest, reformulate, and transform them," in the process creating "its own distinctive Ukrainian voice."

Likewise, Lilah Nethanel's "Hidden Contiguities: Zalman Shneour and Leonid Andreyev, David Vogel and Peter Altenberg" offers unique terms and methods for questioning and rethinking the mapping of modern Jewish literature. Through investigating "contiguities" between different "contact zones," Nethanel draws new maps of influence surrounding the work of two Eastern European Jewish writers, Zalman Shneour and David Vogel. The flexibility of Nethanel's model of the "contact zones" works brilliantly for the study of Jewish literature in Yiddish and Hebrew in the early twentieth century. This model allows Nethanel to link Jewish literature to contexts

and political events such as the revolutionary period in Russia. As Nethanel states, “potential influence, together with its typical uncertainty, may well be the most fascinating feature of the conditions of writing and reading a literature in a minor language in an overarching literary and lingual constellation.”

Finally, Giddon Ticotsky’s comparative study of two peripheral modernisms, “Self-Fashioning in Front of a Distorting Mirror: Interwar Jewish Literature Gazing at Classical Chinese Poetry, or Second-Order Modernism,” approaches this question from the lens of alterity. But Ticotsky’s study departs from “traditional postcolonial research that tends to examine Self-Other or majority-minority relations” and instead pays attention to “how one peripheral culture gazes at another.” Ticotsky charts the historical process by which Jewish writers were exposed to Orientalist accounts of Chinese poetry in Europe and subsequently absorbed this exposure into their own works and made it an integral part of the literary project of self-fashioning. This study also introduces an important term, “second-order modernism,” to describe “the mediation, adaptation, and translation to which the values of modernism—commonly identified with a major and dominant culture—have been subjected on their way to the peripheral, minor culture.”

Articles in this current issue of *Dibur* provide a rich and dynamic account of the experience of modernism in the periphery. Some provide new vocabulary and methods by which we can more compellingly conceptualize the global scales of modernism, while some question the validity of the periphery-center distinction and advance more complex theoretical models.

Rather than finding *the road on the map*, articles in this issue identify various roads on multiple maps between languages, including Yiddish, Hebrew, Arabic, Romanian, Ukrainian, Chinese, Spanish, Polish, and Russian. It is our hope that readers of the issue will be provoked to think through and beyond the networks of influence between these languages and what our contributor Lilah Nethanel calls “contact zones.” A