

D I B U R

PERIPHERAL
MODERNISMS

Editors' Roundtable



Global Modernists on Modernism: A Conversation for Dibur

Alys Moody
Bard College

Stephen J. Ross
Concordia University

ABSTRACT: Alys Moody and Stephen J. Ross are the editors of one of the most recent collection of modernist writings: *Global Modernists on Modernism: An Anthology* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). This collection features translations of works associated with modernism in Latin America, the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab world, Turkey, Iran, the Caucasus, South Asia, China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, the South Pacific, the Malay Peninsula, and the Ashkenazi Jewish diaspora. As anticipated by its remarkable coverage, this volume is already having a transformative effect on discussions concerning modernism and its aesthetic, geographical, and cultural range. In their conversation for *Dibur*, Moody and Ross offer conceptual interrogations of various modes of rethinking modernism on a global scale, the Eurocentric power structures which, overtly or implicitly, come to undergird such approaches, and their broader methodology as editors.

IN 2020, we published *Global Modernists on Modernism*, an anthology of source texts for global modernism that represented the culmination of a years-long collaborative project seeking to better understand global modernism by assembling primary sources.¹ Since completing *Global Modernists on Modernism* we've continued to debate the virtues of our inductive editorial method, which involved first assembling texts by artists and groups who self-identified as "modernist" and then advancing from this empirical foundation to a broader theorization of (global) modernism. We pursued this method both as a practical guide to selection and as a way

¹ Alys Moody and Stephen J. Ross, eds., *Global Modernists on Modernism: An Anthology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

of managing, if not solving, the problem of reproducing Western models of modernism under the guise of a “global” one. We were keenly aware of our position as Anglophone scholars trained and now employed in Western institutions and were under no illusions about the prospects, or desirability, of taking up some neutral position “outside” this context. Indeed, working with the concept of the global militates against this fantasy precisely by forcing one to attend to the particularities of modernist cultural production across different scales (local, regional, national, imperial). Given the fraught conjuncture of the global and the modernist, then, the inductive method offered a way to avoid imposing a top-down synthetic account of modernism. Instead, our aim was to let programmatic modernist texts speak for themselves. In doing so, the work of anthologizing became an exercise in tracing vectors, constellations, and meridians of modernist practice as they traverse the globe.

When *Dibur* contacted us to ask us to reflect on our editorial practice, we took this as a cue to return to the assumptions and concepts that underpinned our work on the anthology. The conversation that follows reflects how editing this anthology—and letting our work on it percolate over the year and a half since its original publication—have challenged and shifted our thinking on global modernism as a scholarly project. The dialogic mode of our response reflects the main way our ideas developed over the course of this project and speaks to our belief that global modernism demands a collaborative approach.² The conversation has been transcribed and edited for clarity and concision.

ALYS MOODY: One of the things that we’ve been talking about recently is how to better understand the implications of the method we used in putting this anthology together, which we called the inductive method. The logic of this method runs that if we’re interested in what modernism is on a global scale, we shouldn’t approach it by developing our own supposedly comprehensive account of modernism, which will inevitably be derived from our training, which is British, American, and Australian. Instead, we should look to people who are thinking about modernism from outside those perspectives. One of the things I’ve been thinking about is the fact that this method is built on the multiple-modernisms/modernities model, which assumes that modernism and modernity are sort of preexisting concepts that we can find relatively discrete instantiations of in various locations at various times.

The problem that became increasingly apparent to me, however, as we were working on this anthology is that this approach assumes a kind of independence or self-containment for each individual manifestation of modernism or modernity that just isn’t true at this point in the development of the world-system. Actually, very few of the people that we’re looking at think that they’re developing anything like an autonomous or fully independent modernism. Even writers who are staunchly resistant to Western hegemony—I’m thinking, for instance, of people like Chinweizu or Suzanne Césaire, who both have essays in the anthology writing against Western overdetermination of

² We develop this position in more detail in Alys Moody and Stephen J. Ross, “On Global Modernism and Academic Precarity: A Reply to Claire Barber-Stetson,” *Modernism/modernity* Print Plus blog, <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/academic-precarity-reply>.

African and Caribbean literature respectively—even these writers are acutely aware that they’re writing into and against a world dominated by European colonial powers. For many of the writers that we included in the anthology, the whole reason they’re using the concept of modernism is because of what it indexes about what it means to be European, or to exist in relation to European and US hegemony. Listening carefully to what’s being said in different parts of the world—taking seriously the self-theorization of our subjects—is of course indispensable for any study of global modernism. But I’m increasingly unsure whether this method gets us fully outside the bind of Eurocentrism. It doesn’t actually produce a non-Eurocentric modernism, because modernism always exists in relation to modernity, and modernity describes, to a significant extent, the process by which Western hegemony was established and instituted globally. Modernism is always writing out of that world, or that world-system, even when it’s writing against it.

STEPHEN ROSS: Yes, and what you’re saying raises a related question for me that I’ve been mulling over since we completed the anthology, which is where the term “modernism” comes from. It is not neutral. Even when your methodology is inductive, like ours was, you still have to *supply* the term as an organizing rubric. So this begs the question of modernism’s origins. Historically, it’s been generated by and supplied from within a Western context. As you note, there are many examples of self-identified modernist artists who take up the concept of modernism as a useful shorthand for the West’s inimical and insidious presence. In this way, it can also be used to help clear space for political and cultural self-definition. I would say, then, that we’re not trying to evade the Western “contagion” of the term “modernism” or acting as if we can escape it. We’re trying to understand the many contradictory ways in which it is taken up as a tool.

In his excellent monograph *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut*—which I regret came out too late for us to consult for the anthology—Robyn Creswell writes about the emergence of the Shi‘r poets in the crucible of early Cold War struggles for cultural hegemony among those aligned with Western liberalism, those aligned with the USSR, and those not aligned with either. As he shows, these poets chafed against what Aamir Mufti terms “the logic of indigenization,”³ that is, the paternalistic demand that non-European artists be allowed to join the ranks of world literature and become “universal” only by acceding to Western notions of their particularity. I think this admonition speaks directly to our own concerns about how we assembled our anthology. You aptly bring up the issue of not presenting varied sites of modernist practice as autonomous vessels or signifiers of different modernisms. To that I would

³ Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 16; Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 38.

add that one needs to acknowledge that “modernism” itself is conceptually anterior to any concrete instance of it.

In any event, the concept of modernism *is* a powerful heuristic, and it *does* actually make legible cultural practices and production outside the West. It becomes a tool adaptable to many, many hands.

AM: Yes, and one important component of understanding where “modernism” as a term comes from is to grasp the larger historical structures that produced it. When we think about modernism on a global scale, it becomes clear that the term itself is elaborated and deployed in a range of different ways, all of them responses to a new way of organizing and structuring culture on a world scale, which develops over the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Once you get to that world scale, you’re not talking about a series of discrete cultures that are interacting with one another on equal terms; you’re talking instead about an integrated world-system of literature, which then is of course structured by existing power relations. This is a time of intense modernization pressures, and those pressures are structured hierarchically. The terms “modernity” and “modernism” are never innocent of those processes of modernization, and as a result, global modernism cannot get outside the hierarchical organization of the globe at this moment. If it tries to do so, it loses the ability to really see and understand the struggles *against* these power structures that many peripheral modernisms (to use the term that this issue of *Dibur* prefers) are engaged in.

What I’m realizing is that our project hedged on the debate about multiple modernities versus world-systems theory. The more I look at it, the more I realize that we’re using a method that comes from a multiple-modernities framework, which says that every culture will have its own modernity and modernism and, therefore, that the way to study modernism and modernity is to go to the cultures themselves—to encounter them on their own terms. What our attempt to do that actually revealed, though, was the opposite. What it revealed was that all of these cultures understood themselves as operating within and as structured in various ways by the antagonisms and the contradictions of an incredibly unequal world-system.

SR: Yes. How could any putatively “global” analysis of modernism disclose anything else?

AM: Exactly. And once you start to think about that, it allows you to see that one of the conceptual problems with the attempt to resist Eurocentrism is that that resistance sometimes risks inadvertently reproducing Eurocentrism itself. It reproduces it by pretending that it doesn’t exist—and so it ends up erasing the dynamics of oppression that people are struggling to free themselves from and that became the impetus for so much great modernist cultural production from outside the West.

SR: I think you might be right about the hedging. It's as if we use a multiple-modernisms model but evacuate it of multiple modernities. In the introduction, we side more with the Warwick Research Collective's Jamesonian analysis of a "singular modernity," our concern about the multiple-modernities approach being that it delinks modernity from a specific historical sequence that began around 1750 in the West. This theoretical disjuncture between the singular-modernity and multiple-modernities models, then, would be a product of trying to grasp non-European modernisms autonomously or in their discrete plenitude. It leaves me with a very difficult—and still unresolved—question that lies at the center of our entire project, which is how you go about assembling an anthology of "global modernism" while doing justice to two principles which were articles of faith for us: (1) not committing what Ayi Kwei Armah called "Larsony," that is, judging non-Western modernist art as modernist solely on its resemblance to Western modernist art,⁴ while (2) acknowledging that there is a global power imbalance that manifests as both development and underdevelopment.

AM: I think what we've been calling our inductive method actually proved to be a very effective way of getting at these problems. In a sense, the method was guided by assumptions about cultural difference, about discreteness at the cultural level. What it revealed though was the opposite: the way practices were linked into a single, hierarchical, and often exploitative system. And so in a sense I'm not sure that I take this as a critique of the method so much as a critique of the theory that was initially guiding the method and that I think still pervades a lot of work in global modernism. As a field, I think we're much better at thinking about difference than we are about power when we're thinking at the global level.

SR: I also want to point to a practical issue in doing the kind of work you're describing—and this is getting more into the nuts and bolts of editing an anthology like this—which is that you need a deep familiarity and fluency in a particular culture to understand how it is determined by these larger structures of power. You would need to have on-the-ground, inductive gathering of sources and information to be able to reach that level of analytic reflection. Throughout the project, we were wary of what we called "top-down theorization of modernism." But you do need to distill the empirical evidence into theoretical principles. It's not like it's going to just somehow distill itself from the material record. This comes back to our strong sense that global modernist scholarship must be collaborative.

⁴ Ayi Kwei Armah, "Larsony, or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction," *Asemka* 4 (1976): 1–14. In this essay, Armah, a Ghanaian novelist, coins the pun "Larsony" to characterize American critic Charles Larson's misreading of his work after the lights of James Joyce in *The Emergence of African Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).

AM: This also comes back to a conversation we've been having about how to organize a volume like this, and whether in hindsight we'd have done it differently. We opted to organize it largely geographically by region or country (or, in the case of the Ashkenazi Jewish section, by ethnicity). I stand by that choice. I think in some ways what's useful about the organization that we've chosen is that it shows how there are in practice multiple fields of production, multiple conversations in which the authors we've assembled are writing. The global or transnational nature of this project is possible only in and through local knowledge and on-the-ground engagement. The structure of the book tries to hold texts that are in conversation with one another in that conversation, while encouraging readers to see those conversations as not fully local but also traversing and structuring the world as a whole. This is why we built the anthology around geographical distinctions but then supplemented these sections with "alternate tables of contents," which encourage people to read essays within alternate, transnational groupings, whether they be political positions or artistic movements and styles or forms or themes or institutions. What the alternate tables of contents are trying to do is to show different meridians, so to speak, to read across. The footnotes are often trying to do something similar—a lot of the footnotes and headnotes try to make those connections and underscore the way in which a particular local manifestation of, say, conservative modernism has echoes or reappears in different contexts. This is what we were ultimately trying to do: to encourage readers to read locally, which I think is indispensable, and then to read transversely across these local contexts.

SR: To come back, then, to this question of where the term "modernism" comes from: one useful way of framing it (I've learned this from you) is to think of it as a heuristic. I'd like to try to hold open that questioning or conditional space, where instead of judging what is and isn't modernist, one asks: What would it mean to read this or that text as modernist? What are the stakes? What becomes legible or illegible? That just takes you right out of the quagmire of whether we should read modernism as coterie, modernism as certain formalisms, modernism as representational crisis, modernism as print cultures and small magazines, and so on. It allows us to say that we aren't trying to supply positive definitions, or even definitions at all. That's why I find the ten theses that structure our introduction to the anthology so useful—they are meant to be tested and questioned. This is the methodological orientation that still makes the most sense to me.

AM: Yes, in a sense, one thing that we've always been conscious of is that all we can really do as editors of an anthology like this is assemble texts for people—ourselves or others—to subsequently do things with. I think it's at that level that the question of modernism's heuristic value comes into focus. It encourages us to ask: If these are some of the texts from various parts of the world that assemble under the banner of modernism, then what is it that

modernism as a conceptual category is allowing us to see? And one of the things that it allows us to see is how modernism's global nature develops within the logic of a highly Eurocentric world, without ever being fully determined by it. At the same time, one of the things that reading modernism in that way would require of us is to think a little bit about modernism's canonizing function. It would ask us to recognize that by providing an account of global literary and aesthetic and cultural production that's structured around modernism, we're actually selecting for those texts that are most invested in what was often understood as a predominantly European and American category, texts that are concerned with the question of being modern (loaded term that *that* is), that are concerned with a very particular formulation of world literature that operates on a model of global exchange, those exchanges structured predominantly, particularly post-World War II, by and around and sometimes in the very explicit service of the nation-states of Europe and increasingly also the US. So it prompts us to think about which models of the global the category of modernism produces.

I think that it's really important for us to acknowledge that "modernism" isn't a neutral term. The fact that we're looking for texts that get called modernist—that starting point does a certain kind of work already. It selects in advance for texts that are oriented, globally and aesthetically, in particular kinds of ways, and that are so because of the way modernism is bound up in the trajectory of a Eurocentric world-system. But while I think we need to be able to think carefully and critically about the role of Eurocentric power structures in shaping understandings of modernism globally, we should also say clearly that we're not studying modernism in this way because we think that Europe is the yardstick by which everything should be measured. We're studying it in this way because it's vital to understand the modes of cultural production from and within which Western power secures and expands its hegemony. That isn't and shouldn't be taken as an endorsement of that hegemony. To the contrary, it seems useful to me because it lets us develop an account of the way in which the category of the modern is itself intimately connected with the global hierarchies that capitalism and colonialism are producing at this point in time. This, I think, is the only way we'll be able to see the transformative work that's being done under the banner of modernism—and also to see the way modernism itself has operated in some places precisely as a force *against* radical or revolutionary transformations. This kind of analysis is, I think, crucial to really grasping the work that modernism as a category does on a global scale. A

At the Edges of Yiddishland: Editorial Praxes on the Jewish Translingual Threshold

Ariel Resnikoff

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

*if this were not the end of the world
it would be a junction to everywhere*
—Muhammad Mazal

what's poetry? source & translation
—Avot Yeshurun¹

ABSTRACT: As the editor of the “Modernism of the Ashkenazi Jewish Diaspora” module in *Global Modernists on Modernism: An Anthology* (2020), Resnikoff constellates the writings of six transnational Ashkenazi Jewish modernists who engage with Yiddish not only as a mother tongue but as an expanded conceptual poetic mode. The module includes work by Mikhl Likht, the New York–based Introspectivism group, Avot Yeshurun, and Dvoyre Fogel. Resnikoff contextualizes his praxes as a translingual (language-crossing) editor, translator, scholar, and writer working at the thresholds of late-Yiddish modernisms and their variegated afterlives in other tongues. He concludes the present essay with a short work of poetics as a test or case study for the speculative expanded-Yiddish language-scape that his editorial practice, writing, and translation together attempt to cast into relief.

¹ From an unpublished interview found in Yeshurun’s papers; published here with the permission of Helit Yeshurun. This is the first part of a two-part answer, the second part of which concludes this essay.



Border through a Double Mirror, photograph by author

GO AFTER WHAT'S LOST

WHAT HAPPENS TO JEWISH LANGUAGE when it is projected into extinction? What gets caught in the gears of assimilation between the mother tongue and an-other? What doesn't ultimately pass? What residues remain of Jewish language-scapes erroneously imagined dead? What survives, not out in the open, but hiding in plain sight?

These are some of the core questions driving my current editorial, curatorial, and scholarly praxes, which explore late-Yiddish modernisms and their vast afterlives in translation *as poetry*. I see my work as an editor and curator, scholar and translator, writer and educator, as going after *what is lost* in Jewish-language literatures and cultures rather than what is easily found, which seems to me to be our existing condition and direction. I aim in my work to hold and behold the hidden whispers, rasps, gasps, screams, howls & guttural growls of Jewish ghost languages long forgotten and to record/transcribe these dissonant echoes onto the fabric of our contemporary moment, as scores of speculative pasts (and futures) previously elided, eclipsed, or else altogether erased.

TRILINGUAL HIERARCHIES AND TRANSLINGUAL SUBVERSIONS

Historically, the ever-moving Jewish civilization of diaspora Ashkenaz operated in three internal primary languages: Yiddish (vernacular German-Hebrew-Slavic fusion), Hebrew (Biblical/Mishnaic), and Aramaic (Talmudic). Externally, in almost all cases, these Jewish people also spoke the multiple and ever-shifting languages of their neighbors, as they traveled by forced migration over the centuries, east, then west, and back again, and beyond. The internal trilingualism of Ashkenazi diasporic life contained a projected language hierarchy with Yiddish as the base, lowly language of the everyday, Hebrew as the holy middle way, and Aramaic, the language of yeshiva study, as the highest form of literacy. Yiddish was coded—for many centuries, since its

debated origins around the turn of the first millennium in the Rhineland, until modern and even contemporary times—as a primitive language, a mishmash pidgin of German and Hebrew, a servile and dark language, a feminine language, a sick language. The primitivist-sexist-racist-ableist stigmatizations of Yiddish from its earliest days could certainly fill the contents of an entire book, and indeed, Dovid Katz’s *Yiddish and Power* addresses this issue at length.² Yet, as Jerome Rothenberg famously suggests at the start of the first edition of his *Technicians of the Sacred*, “primitive means complex.”³ And this proves deeply true in the case of primitive projections of Yiddish as well, which is, I should probably say, Rothenberg’s own *mame loshn* (mother tongue) and an important conceptual precedent for the development of (his) ethnopoetics in particular.

What Katz so rightly terms “Yiddish antisemitism” frames a great deal of discourse around Yiddish language and culture; and what I often think of simply in terms of the historical hatred of Yiddish, as scapegoat language and perpetual other-tongue, continues to influence the ways in which Yiddish is understood in the contemporary moment. Quite recently, for example, while I was studying Jewish history and literature at the University of Oxford, I met a number of young graduate students and professors who spoke of Yiddish as a primitive German or else as a folksy nostalgic language of the Jewish kitchen. Of course, there have been great strides taken in Yiddish studies to convince the academy of Yiddish’s legitimacy, but the overarching popular mythology has infiltrated the universities as much as anywhere else, and you would be surprised at how many PhDs I have met who were convinced before speaking to me that Yiddish is a dead or at least dying language. (Hint: It is not and never has been dying or dead, despite the millions of Yiddish speakers murdered in the twentieth century.)

Here is the popular contemporary mythology as I understand it: *Yiddish was a pidgin of European Jews and recalls a nostalgia for the old world of Jewish Europe, which was destroyed in the Holocaust. And there are, of course, various variations on the myth; many ultra-Orthodox Jews, in fact, believe that Yiddish became tainted by secular Jewishness during the Jewish Enlightenment, and the Holocaust was a punishment for this impurity and cleansed Yiddish of a secular majority, leaving it to the pious and religious to use within the traditional holy trilingual structure.*⁴ The common noninitiated person today simply thinks that *Yiddish died in the Holocaust with the Jews themselves, and it is no longer relevant to our lives except as a token of the past, or as grand symbol of the “lachrymose conception of Jewish history.”*⁵

Yet these mythologies cover over the powerful afterlives of modern and contemporary Yiddish and do not take into account the fact that Yiddish was and has always been a language of translation and adaptation. Therefore, it could not and would not die but was forced to adapt in many different directions at once. The hatred became too much, the threat too great. And so Yiddish was buried in the floorboards, in the walls, in the casks of other languages.⁶

² Dovid Katz, *Yiddish and Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

³ Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xxi.

⁴ I experienced the power of this mythology firsthand during a brief stint I spent writing for the ultra-Orthodox newspaper *Hamodia*. The editor of the English edition refused to publish my feature on Yiddish history in the United States, because she claimed I did not address the issue of Yiddish being used as a “weapon against Torah” by the “enemies of Torah Judaism,” who, according to this mythology, were radical secular Yiddish writers and artists.

⁵ Thinking here specifically of Salo Baron’s critique of this conception in his seminal work, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).

⁶ The “Paper Brigade” of Nazi-occupied Vilne presents a material historical manifestation of this poetic idea; this was a group of Jewish residents of the Vilne Ghetto—led by the Yiddish poets Abraham Sutzkever and

The dark irony of the modern mythification of Yiddish is that, historically, it is the internal trilingual hierarchy itself that propagates a hatred of Yiddish most fiercely, since it exploits Yiddish as “coattail” or, worse, “footstool” of Hebrew and Aramaic.⁷ In the twentieth century, however, hatred of Yiddish and hatred of Yiddish-speaking peoples reached its peak; as the Nazis were building their death factories across Europe, in the United States the English-only movement was on the rise and Jewish immigrant children (along with all non-Anglo immigrant children) were being abused in primary schools on a daily basis in the Lower East Side and across the country for speaking with an accent or, worse, uttering a Yiddish or otherwise non-English word.⁸ In Mandate Palestine—and, later, Israel/Palestine—gang-style groups arose around a commitment to repressing and suppressing Yiddish language and culture. A gang calling themselves *Gdud meginei ha-safah* (Battalion of the defenders of the language) used tactics of intimidation and even physical violence to disrupt Yiddish readings, performances, and cultural events taking place in Israel/Palestine, with the motto: “Jew, speak Hebrew.” All this was done in the name of patriotism in order to strengthen the Hebraist cultural, political, and linguistic revolution. And it would seem that it was the Israeli Ministry of Education itself that propagated the myth that Yiddish was a dead tongue, which had gone “with the sheep to their slaughter.”⁹

Split between English and Hebrew ideological exclusions and the premature foreclosure of a European Jewish future, Yiddish in the twentieth century realized the full power of its historical powerlessness and survived by innovating its various forms. Thus, we find a wide range of radical twentieth-century practitioners who engaged with Yiddish as an expanded conceptual mode, inscribing/transcribing imagined diasporic afterlives as a poetics, in wide translanguing spirals outward, toward and into other languages. Again, translation here is key and, most importantly, the Yiddish translational concept of *fartaytshn un farbesern* (translating and making better), in which translation necessitates adaptation:¹⁰ working from the residues of Jewish assimilation, from the untranslatable, unadaptable bits, which don’t and won’t fit, these writers recall at all times the Yiddish traces of their diasporic lives.

In New York, for example, we find Mikhl Likht (1893–1953) saturating his Yiddish with variegated languages until it could no longer be read in/as Yiddish and was deemed

Shmerke Kaczerginski—who smuggled a large cache of Yiddish cultural objects from the YIVO (Yiddish Scientific Institute) and hid them wherever they possibly could throughout the ghetto in order to save them from imminent Nazi biblioclasm.

⁷ Thinking here specifically of I. L. Peretz’s short story “Sholem bayis” (Domestic harmony): “If the husband sits on a chair in the Garden of Eden, his wife is his footstool.” The translation is mine.

⁸ The permission for such aggressive tactics came from the highest offices of the American government; in 1907, for example, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote: “We have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house.” In Joseph Bucklin Bishop, ed., *Theodore Roosevelt and His Time Shown in His Own Letters*, vol. 2, no. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 554.

⁹ In Israeli culture this phrase, deriving from Isaiah 53:7, grew into a gruesome cliché about the Yiddish-speaking “old country” Jews of Europe; the predominant ideology of hatred and othering embodied by this cliché infected the national pedagogy, which, in turn, identified Hebrew with armed resistance in the Holocaust, and Yiddish with passive submission; in a Zionist history book from early statehood then we find that the Hebrew will to fight back during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was not merely heroic but also “compensated for the humiliating surrender of those led to the death camps,” who went “as sheep to the slaughter.” See Dan Porat, “From the Scandal to the Holocaust in Israeli Education,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 4 (2004): 622.

¹⁰ The Yiddish phrase first came into use in the nineteenth century as a subtitle to Yiddish translations of Shakespeare. This concept becomes key to the poetics of the expanded-Yiddish mode I’m attempting to describe, where adaptation precedes the need for origin.

“incomprehensible”—through and into a hyperabsorptive antiabsorbent poetics, which he shares with his poet kith contemporaries Louis Zukofsky (1904–78) and Mina Loy (1882–1966) across the language aisle.¹¹ Likht’s Yiddish-language contemporaries in New York included the high-modernist “Introspectivism” group, known more casually as Inzikh (In oneself): Yankev Glatshteyn (1896–1971), Aron Glanz Leyeles (1889–1966), N. B. Minkov (1893–1958), and Celia Dropkin (1887–1956), among others. Glatshteyn, Leyeles, and Minkov penned an Introspectivism manifesto in 1920, in which they argued for an American Yiddish modernism that was cut off from European tradition and born anew in North America and that was as lively and experimental and mixed as the Anglo-American strain. In Mandate Palestine and later Israel/Palestine, Avot Yeshurun (1904–92) was writing a Hebrew poetry built on a scaffolding of written Yiddish and spoken Arabic, a spectral poetic language for which he was derided and simultaneously accused of charlatanism and treason by his Hebraist literati contemporaries. In Poland, Dvoyre Fogel (1902–42) chose to write in Yiddish over German or Polish, even as the terminal threat of anti-Semitism was spreading across Europe at an alarming rate. She stared into the horrific gaping maw of European anti-Semitism—the projected total eradication of diaspora Ashkenaz—and resisted this imposed death as long as she could by translating the modernisms of neighboring (later hostile) languages into a hybrid Yiddish poetics she referred to as “white words” or “decorativism.” Fogel’s writing, which emphasizes repetition over coherence, tone over sense, and montage over narrative, was met with deep consternation by critics of her time, who claimed that her work was neither feminine nor legible nor traditionally Yiddish enough to merit any serious attention. Despite lack of critical support, Fogel persisted with her radical Yiddish experimentalism until she was murdered in the Lviv Ghetto in 1942.

Yiddish emerges in the works of these writers as a language that wears and bears its mixed and mixing dynamics on its sleeve and as a language that perpetually makes space for this mixture: rather than expelling the foreign, it accepts the stranger in its midst. Where Statist Hebrew dismisses the gentile as absolute other, Yiddish faces and even speaks to and through the goy. Where English demands a false national purity, Yiddish celebrates and sanctifies the impure. Where German and Polish seek to erase the language and culture of diaspora Ashkenaz, Yiddish resists this erasure by translating and adapting German and Polish sources, by “bettering the instruction,” as Louis Zukofsky writes, quoting Shakespeare’s Shylock.¹²

ASHKENAZI JEWISH DIASPORICS

As the editor of the “Modernism of the Ashkenazi Jewish Diaspora” module in the recently published *Global Modernists on Modernism: An Anthology*, I gathered and, in most cases, translated the writings of six transnational radical Jewish modernists—writers who all engage with Yiddish not only as a mother tongue but as an expanded conceptual poetic mode.¹³ The module includes Mikhl Likht’s “Every New Poet: Proem” (1932, USA); Yankev Glatshteyn, Aron Leyeles, and N. B. Minkov’s Introspectivism manifesto (1919, USA); Avot Yeshurun’s speech “From Whom Did I Take Permission?” (1979, Israel/Palestine); and the afterword to Dvoyre Fogel’s *Mannequins*

¹¹ By “hyperabsorptive antiabsorbent poetics” I refer to the absorption of surrounding languages and influences while remaining unabsorbed by the surrounding dominant culture.

¹² Louis Zukofsky, “Poem Beginning ‘The,’” in *Anew: Complete Shorter Poetry* (New York: New Directions, 2011), 17.

¹³ Alys Moody and Stephen J. Ross, eds., *Global Modernists on Modernism: An Anthology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

(1934, Poland). Taken together these works present a sub/section of a highly particular Jewish literary-language art and culture that arose in eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century and migrated west, as far as the Americas, and east, as far as Ottoman and Mandate Palestine (later Israel/Palestine) during the first half of the twentieth century. Although the works I include traverse numerous geographies, they are tied by a shared diasporic language-scape—what the Jewish Ashkenazi modernists themselves referred to as “Yiddishland”—a stateless, transnational territory manifested wherever and whenever Yiddish idiolects fused and grew. Yiddish functions, in these terms, as a powerful interlocutor language rather than as a “native” one; and indeed, though most of the writings featured in the module come “originally” from Yiddish, each piece extends by its very fusion and dialect/ic existence across expansive translingual tracts.¹⁴ Notably, one does not need to identify as a Jew to cohabit Yiddishland, but merely to cleave to Yiddish,¹⁵ a language specifically and particularly addressed to the displaced, who cling to the diasporic tongue without an “army and navy.”¹⁶

For these diasporic modernist artists, language functioned primarily in the plural tense—not (poe)theoretically, as say for Ezra Pound’s (1885–1972) pancultural multilingual English from the ancients, but by basic (and urgent) sociolinguistic need, shaped by the day-to-day realities of diasporic life.¹⁷ Neither were these artists necessarily “global” in any contemporary “multinational” sense; rather, we might consider their work as enacting a nonnational or even antinational politics—resisting the very categories of national(ist) affiliation by rejecting the national tongue. Against, and in the face of, political monolingual ideologies—enforced in the twentieth-century nation-state by psychological and physical abuse—these writers and artists cultivated a radical Jewish diaspora rhizome on the threshold, between the cracks of the official state-sanctioned culture.

All the texts I include in “Modernism of the Ashkenazi Jewish Diaspora,” with the exception of the Introspectivism manifesto, appear in English translation for the first time and have, until the publication of *Global Modernists on Modernism*, been all but lost to a twenty-first-century English readership. But the afterlives of Yiddishland must not to be underestimated; and these Jewish modernist source-texts radiate powerfully into our contemporary diasporic scene, as the number of stateless persons rises by the day.

CODA: POETICS // A ROAMING “G”¹⁸

as in *goles*, meaning “diasporics,” which inflects my national cultural host; a (g)host constituting a parenthetical supplement to/of the language knowledge I believe I “possess”—as speculative experiment in polyvalence, as way out, or, perhaps, reverse engineering of the word as such. any

¹⁴ In the case of Avot Yeshurun, who wrote primarily in Hebrew, Yiddish (a)rises again and again, as an insistence on and resistance to Zionism’s attempted erasure of the (Jewish) diaspora.

¹⁵ Take, for example, the great Yiddish artist Marek Szwarc (1892–1958), who converted to Catholicism in 1919.

¹⁶ Quoting the Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich in *YIVO Bleter* 23, no. 3 (May–June 1944).

¹⁷ Of course, these realities were not limited to diasporic Ashkenazi culture in Eastern Europe and beyond but pertained also to Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish diasporas across Europe, Africa, and the Near and Middle East. The poet and editor Tom Haviv and I are now discussing the possibility of compiling and editing a wide-ranging compendium that would include work from radical practitioners spanning the full gamut of Jewish diasporic traditions.

¹⁸ I break here from a conventional discursive style in order to present a poetics (my own) as a test or case study for the speculative expanded-Yiddish language-scape that my editorial practice, writing, and translation together attempt to cast into relief.

word uttered (might) contain therefore a plethora of (g)host words not uttered, tho having once “been” (perhaps), now buried alive in ambient present.

expanded yiddish as a roaming and combing of the translational dimensions of the (g)host writing oneself in and out of the host. Édouard Glissant so powerfully understands this dynamic through his vision of coast and coastal tides, semipermeable, highly adaptive breaks in a landscape. a limit which is not a limit (for a bird, or even unnatural migrator). a limit which is an invitation in its limitlessness. an errant relation to land as much as to language.

breshis tirgum—translation genesis:

in many versions. convergences and divergences. the implacability of the singular irreducible seed. not language but languages abound. not places but faces proceed. the traces of the places facing the sea (we cannot see).

we must start then in translation. the block of gloss is not enough. spool of *drash* (commentary)—not *dvash* (honey)—but like *lo(k)shn* (noodling language) hangs on. it is not our story therefore that must be told. it is the other story that cannot not be. it is the nostory not told that cannot be. the untellable story none tells, as Paul Celan writes: “No one bears witness for the witness.”¹⁹

that is, none enunciates, emaciates, is pronounced dead, then buried in language—as “dead” language or culture—understood as anonymous, anomalous. buried in the word, still breathing tho silent. the screams of silenced peoples (silenced by the *silent*), people forced into silence, people murdered en masse without a chance to survive—thrown off ships, or starved; slaughtered in oceans, forests, fields, factories—the screams which end in utter silence rising up from the catastrophic fallout of the very contemporary air we breathe.

not only because these facts have changed and poisoned the very air we breathe, not only because they now inhabit our dreams at night and permeate our thoughts during the day—but also because they have become the basic experience and the basic misery of our times. Only from this foundation, on which a new knowledge of man will rest, can our new insights, our new memories, our new deeds, take their point of departure.

—Hannah Arendt²⁰

what's a poem? air.

—Avot Yeshurun²¹

A

¹⁹ Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 104–5.

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, “The Image of Hell,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome John (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 200.

²¹ From an unpublished interview found in Yeshurun’s papers; published here with the permission of Helit Yeshurun. This is the second part of a two-part answer, the first part of which opens this essay in the form of an epigraph.

Reports from an Outpost of Modernist Studies

Andrew Reynolds and Bonnie Roos

West Texas A&M University

ABSTRACT: Andrew Reynolds and Bonnie Roos are the coeditors of the collection of essays *Behind the Masks of Modernism: Global and Transnational Perspectives* (University Press of Florida, 2016). The essays in this diverse collection reconsider the meaning of “modernism” by taking an interdisciplinary approach and stretching beyond the Western modernist canon and the literary scope of the field. In this essay Reynolds and Roos describe some of the thought processes that contributed to their decision to publish their collection, the complexities that emerged from the blending of modernist studies with postcolonial approaches, and the rationale behind their use of masks as a unifying thematic thread.

WE LIVE IN THE TEXAS PANHANDLE, a region predominantly rural, politically conservative, and notably isolated. Our institution draws about 50 percent first-generation college students and showcases its programs in agriculture, business, nursing, engineering, and education. Our positions carry 4/4 teaching loads and heavy service loads. We often feel ourselves left behind in an outpost of academia. But we suspect that we have plenty of colleagues who feel the same way. Being specialists in modernism in our circumstances might have led us to become generalists, as we do not often get to teach in our fields, and it is challenging to stay abreast of the critical avant-garde. But by being modernist scholars in spite of it all, we have been forced to find strategies to manage our work, and this has led us to some different—and we think valuable—insights on our field.

One strategy is collaboration, a necessary adaptation for research in our field. When we talked about our shared interests, we knew we wanted to learn about race, nation, and diaspora within global modernist studies—though we had no idea that we would later come to focus on masks. A global modernist studies collection was ideal for our purposes, because working together, and working as editors of others’ work, would enable us to learn about the texts, objects,

and ideas of other communities and countries we know so little about and would help us imagine how we might articulate these ideas to our students, many of whom are future educators of our community. We began with the premise that, in order to build connection and sympathy between our insular place here in the Texas Panhandle and the world at large, we needed both to affirm difference—which is surely the point of any global modernist studies collection—but also to remind ourselves, and our students, of our shared humanity with other people in other places. Sometimes in our academic communities, we find our conversations so caught up in what makes us individuals and how our experiences are unique that we forget our global commonalities: we all eat, sleep, think, dream, love our families and our friends, cope with and find pleasure in our environments. Because we are white, tenured full professors, we are surely speaking from a position of privilege to be able to assert the importance of common grounds. Yet this shared humanity is also an essential tool to help our students to see the interconnections between communities, to validate the resonances between their cultural artifacts and those of other peoples, to learn to care for and value these interconnections. So the question we contended with in this collection was how to emphasize our shared human values while still respecting those critical differences.

We saw two different ways to address these concerns. In one case, we could ask each scholar to write about an important modernist text or object, and then as editors, we could frame the collection theoretically, or, in other words, assemble their ideas into an orderly composite that illuminated their thoughts and, to explain the coherence of the collection, helped our contributors appear to arrive at somewhat the same place. But this effort would have positioned ourselves, as editors, as unifiers, which we did not see as our place. After all, even such theories as those that claim to include all difference are mechanisms to define and control that which is not necessarily structured. Isn't it Trinh T. Minh-ha who asks whether Western writers can look for a structure without finding it? Even if we accept the refusal of structure as appropriate or desirable in a global modernisms collection, it leaves us without the strengths that come with seeking common ground. bell hooks noted something similar when she observed that atomizing US postmodernist theory became vogue at precisely the moment women's and civil rights groups were beginning to make gains as a result of their perceived unity. We see hooks as commenting on both the suspicious timing of such theoretical movements and noting that the failure or success of any unity always lies in its compulsion to generalize and compromise. For all of the failures it may have meant, we decided on compromise. Which is part of what determined our refusal to distinguish between modernism and modernity in the context of global modernist studies.

Like other critics, we find Fredric Jameson's efforts to tie race to working-class issues compelling and persuasive, but we struggled with incorporating "modernity" as a unifying principle of our collection. If we assume that every culture is in some form of development toward late-stage capitalism, as demonstrated through an increasing access to technology and thereby further social atomization, we are forced into a dichotomy that at once "privileges" those cultures with less access to technology as ennobled—more communal, closer to the land and mode of production—but also subjects them to all the pitfalls of romanticization. But as scholars of a "singular modernity," we are then forced to relegate these cultures to a "pastness" of our own history that disqualifies or at least minimizes their contributions as less technological than those of more advanced (because more "enslaved" to a late-stage capitalism) communities. Meanwhile, unable to undo our own access to technology, we are left to revel in that privileged fetishization of "modernity" to which we are so often prone in modernist studies—the latest fashions,

the slickest cell phones, the coolest restaurants (all in the name of pedagogy and learning, no doubt)! Jameson's teleology inadvertently privileges the "center," reinforcing the paradigms of urban and privileged over rural and peripheral. For cultures with less access to technology, the effect is a Spivakian double-silencing—once because their poverty deprives them of access to the technologies of other cultures and a second time because their lack of access to technology disenfranchises them from "modernity." And we suppose that here in the isolated Texas Panhandle, where the pandemic has highlighted how our working-class students' irregular access to meals, let alone Wi-Fi, for instance, makes us attuned to the unevenness of technological access, in our own country as well as others. Because it highlights "alternative modernities," Dilip Gaonkar's writing moves us out of these paradigms, allowing us to foreground particularities and differences of "modernities" and catalyzing the reframing and remaking of our history. It empowers us to shape futures different from the (singular) one Jameson lays out.

The idea of modernism is equally problematic. In Western traditions, a century-long cult of author/artist has elevated avant-garde styles of fragmentation or allusive, nonlinear, nonrepresentational narratives (we mean Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Picasso's cubism) as the privilege of white, male intellectuals who had the time and leisure to experiment with technique and form at the expense of making actual meaning for an audience with their works. Our concomitant Western fetishization of abstraction and efforts toward "democratic" education via New Criticism mean that even today, though we admit we still do not fully agree on what actually happens in these works, let alone what they are about, we are hard-pressed to deny their value to our students of modernism: a canon by acclamation and ordination rather than understanding. Postcolonialism, which so often highlights the same formal craftsmanship, has instead almost always been critically situated within a sociohistorical context: fragmentation highlights disruption, colonial oppression, trauma. It is still a worthy decentering project to ask ourselves whether the postcolonial theories we use to make sense of formal avant-garde strategies that we find in postcolonial writing are the way we should have been judging the Euro-American modernist tradition all along—because in the case of postcolonialism, we read highly representational works alongside those of formal pyrotechnics without such hierarchies. Through a postcolonial lens, we embrace those writers who could never forgo the urgency of their message, instead of relegating their works to "kitsch." Here, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's more representational writings are as subtle and fierce as Derek Walcott's more abstract ones. Spanish American modernismo, known for its intense dialogue with French symbolism and Parnassianism, is just as revolutionary as Brazilian modernismo, typically classified as a vanguardist movement. In the Western tradition, despite the growing influence of works like Kristen Bluemel's collection on rural modernism, for instance, which highlights the influence of more representational texts, and objects from smaller, more isolated places, we run the risk of critically undervaluing as modernist interventions those works written with a clear imperative, an agenda, to convey a message—an urgency that often overlaps with that of women and BIPOC writers and artists. We did not want to import a conventionally "modernist" critical hierarchy into a global modernisms collection, and so in the end, we found ourselves as uncomfortable with the word "modernism" as we were with the word "modernity." Our inelegant solution was simply to let our contributors speak to modernism/modernity as they understood it themselves. This was a solution we relied upon repeatedly and, we find, with success.

But even here we found ourselves challenged with a paradox. To make our collection readable for a Western audience, readable to ourselves, we also needed our contributors to tell us something about the history and culture from which their object or text was produced. Framed in terms of modernity, we needed to know what technologies were available to a given nation or community in order to understand the importance of the text or object; framed in terms of modernism, we needed to know the cultural history of the national or community field in order to understand the technical interventions that were introduced in the work. As outsiders to the analytics of these objects, we needed some sort of background to understand their significance. But the nonexistence or fragmentation of such formal and cultural histories is precisely what postcolonial writers so often find themselves addressing. Whose history, then, were we reproducing for the purposes of this collection? We could not determine this for other communities, and so once again, we relied on the expertise of our contributors. We requested their help in situating us in their fields and in acclimating us appropriately to the stories and objects they wished to explore—to have them tell us which histories were the most relevant to their writing.

Having left both the subject of modernism/modernity and the establishment of field/history up to our contributors, we returned to the problem of how to establish a unifying thread of humanity between the texts, to underscore their (our) commonalities. We needed a theme, and we wanted to talk about race. But, as white scholars, we found that asking BIPOC scholars to speak about race was to participate in that tokenism we so often condemn in our own classrooms and fields. Franz Fanon reminds us that race is often a mask that BIPOC scholars cannot remove; we did not want to reproduce this experience by pigeonholing BIPOC scholars in such a way, one that assumes their research is always reducible to issues of race. And yet, how to publish a global modernisms collection that wasn't about race?

We decided that what we really wanted to learn was what issues global scholars saw as important in their own scholarship. If race, then fantastic. But if not, we wanted to know what issues were important to them. We did not want to be responsible for controlling the outcome of the conversation, and yet we needed some sort of theme that allowed the writers and chapters to speak to each other. We thought about a number of possible themes: “identity” seemed too atomizing and vague; “games” was more modernist but carried with it baggage of patronizing, child-like associations we did not want to highlight in a global modernisms collection; “typewriters” or “printers,” for instance, assumed technologies not necessarily available universally or visible among the most important modern artifacts of a given nation or community. We finally hit on the idea of “masks.” It was rooted in the same inclusive efforts we had tried to adhere to elsewhere. Every culture—no matter how modern or how traditional—has its masks. We all wear various kinds of masks every day. Masks serve as a physical and/or a metaphorical iconography, visible in any text or context we could imagine. But having decided on this theme as universal enough to allow anyone to speak to it, we failed to take into account how constraining others might view it in an advertised call for papers (CFP). After all, how many people are there who just happen to work in (global) modernist studies and happen to see the CFP and happen to write in English, and who also just happen to research masks? It was only through the quality of the writing and the thoughtfulness of our contributors that we were able to compensate for this editorial miscue. Where we might have faltered here in our ambitions, our contributors recognized the value of what we were trying to do, were patient with our interventions into their writing, and produced a series of chapters of which we are sincerely proud to have been a part. What is more, from our

perspective, the chapters resonate with each other. Our contributors hit the mark on the inclusive human thread we were seeking.

In unexpected ways, the plains of West Texas and our small, isolated place became an ideal nexus for the production of *Behind the Masks of Modernism*, because the problems we think about in this collection are also our own lived experience. We struggle with our contentious history and culture. The peoples here have been both exclusionary and excluded. We reside on the lands of displaced indigenous communities. African American populations are culturally segregated, and many live in underresourced communities. Immigrants and refugees are often unwelcome, except in the context of work that US citizens do not want to do. The art, cultures, and literature of marginalized communities here are just now starting to be discovered. The layers and masks of our region run deep. But our community is also a vibrant one, with a strong public muralist movement, a burgeoning poetry community, and a dedication to musical arts of all kinds. And so thinking of global modernist studies here is imperfect and audacious and aspirational. The connection of our community with a global contingent of scholars, many of whom also come from rural areas and small universities like our own, created a rich site of production for such hopes. A

Modernism and Its Concepts

Eric Hayot

Penn State University

Rebecca L. Walkowitz

Rutgers University

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Melih Levi

Boğaziçi University

ABSTRACT: In 2016, Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz published *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, which was the first anthology about global modernism to invite essays organized by intellectual keyword, or concept, rather than by geography or national literary history. Sixteen leading critics working at the conjunction of modernism, comparative literature, and world literature agreed to participate in the venture. The result: drawing on archives beyond the European center, contributors showed how new global approaches are transforming the intellectual paradigms we have long associated with modernism and also bringing an idiosyncratic array of new paradigms into view. In an interview conducted in spring 2021, Hayot and Walkowitz reflect on whether they were imagining new durable concepts for global modernism or instead were imagining a new approach to the history of concepts and the way they have shaped the field and could shape it going forward. They choose the latter.

MELIH LEVI: How did your understanding of modernism, or the concepts we employ to characterize modernist aesthetics, change while working on this volume?

REBECCA L. WALKOWITZ: One of the challenges we set for ourselves and for the contributors we invited to participate was to think about the dialectical

process of bringing together analysis and text, methodology and archive, and to ask ourselves how the changing location and language of our objects within modernist studies might alter the frameworks we bring to those objects. If modernism is typically defined by its engagement with tradition, its obsession with antiquity, its privileging of style; if indeed modernism's best-known artists and thinkers were in fact not exemplars but makers of those concepts; what ideas of tradition, antiquity, and style emerge when we shift our attention to less-known artists and thinkers in non-European languages and locations and when we turn our attention to the networks of circulation and dialogue among writers across many spaces? That was one of our chief questions, and we realized that it was not simply that global modernism would create brand-new concepts—words we had never heard before or whose conceptual meaning had not registered—but also that global modernism as an enterprise would change the meaning of words we already have and think we know.

ERIC HAYOT: Right. We were wagering that by *beginning* with “global” modernism—beginning, that is, with a modernism whose origins were not obviously in Europe, were not obviously formal, were not obviously historical in the ways that we had been taught they were—we could end up with something interesting and new. Part of this reflected our understanding that, having gone through a first phase of breaking open the house of modernism (with the arrival of women writers, of African American writers, with the acknowledgment of the internationalism of modernism and of its many non-European sources and influences), it might be possible now (and only now) to push through to a second phase. In this second phase the relationship between center (European, male, modern, creative) and periphery (non-European, non-male, classical, inspiring) would itself be undermined. Our goal was to ask: What happens if we stop thinking of the work of globalizing modernism as the work of *extending* or *recognizing* from the European point of origin and instead work on seeing forms of extension and recognition that do not necessarily have an origin in this strong sense—not just that originate elsewhere but that invite us to think in more complex ways than the usual (one) something originates, (two) something propagates model about how cultural modes and forms like modernism appear at all.

ML: One of the first invitations in *New Vocabulary for Global Modernism* is to shift our attention from a descriptive approach to modernism to one that surveys and interrogates “the foundational concepts of modernism” in a global context. I do not want to make it seem like you harden this distinction as an either/or kind of approach, but I do want to ask about the exhausted engine of *descriptive* attitudes in modernist studies. To what extent do you mean formal here? How much does this descriptive attitude owe to the aesthetic claims emerging from modernism itself (image-oriented traditions, descriptive accuracy, the prioritization of linguistic surfaces)? These may not be characteristics

of modernism at large, even in the Western context, but they nevertheless hold some sway in critical consciousness.

EH: Are you asking whether our resistance to description reproduces, in some sense, the very logic of modernism itself? Maybe. The form/content distinction has already been mobilized by any number of critics—perhaps most obviously Franco Moretti, in his famous distinction between “foreign form” and “local materials”—to describe the circulation of aesthetic innovation like modernism around the globe. Jahan Ramazani’s criticisms of the limits of that model in the book seems right on to me, though I do want to add that of course it is compelling (and somewhat cynically satisfying) to imagine that the patterns of literature work essentially on a Wallersteinian center-periphery model, in which the center extracts resources (in this case, ideas, local color, etc.) from the periphery and turns those into finished products that it then sells back to the periphery. As Jahan shows, that model gets a lot wrong. But in any case, it does suggest that—because the form/content relation has such a central place in our thinking about modernism—it would be very hard to think about modernism without producing a kind of recapitulation of that concept at the level of the criticism. That said, I don’t think that any discussion that centers on form rather than description (and of course we could say much more about whether description is the same as content) is by definition therefore aligning itself with or reproducing modernism. Modernism didn’t invent the form/content distinction; it just mobilized it in one particular way.

RW: I think it’s fair to say, and indeed smart to notice (thank you, Melih), that we were trying to bring more modernism to the critical mechanism for thinking about global modernism. From the design of the book to the organization of the chapters, including the open-ended quality of our argument and the vocabulary, we were keen to experiment with the order of things. We felt the field could afford to destabilize the time and place of “origination” and “propagation,” as Eric puts it above.

ML: While introducing your methodology, you think about the potential of the words/concepts chosen for the volume to “cut diagonally across the ways we have thought modernism until now, slicing the centers and the margins into new configurations” [5]. Can you elaborate more on this methodology? Many recent volumes on global modernisms foreground individual writers, styles, or interactions in the periphery, but your volume stands out for devoting each chapter to conceptual categories that need to be rethought once cherished geographical and temporal limits are lifted. What was your goal in adopting this structure?

RW: One of the things I was thinking about, and of course I’m thinking about it more and more now in the wake of the resurgent nativism of the past four to

five years, is that intellectual life organized around nation and territory has a way of reifying nation and territory in ways that create the impression of separation and distinction that may not have functioned historically or, in a different register, may block new insights about overlapping intellectual or cultural projects. So, we began by asking what we could see if we didn't begin that way. We wanted to invite our contributors to start with the ideas and see which works, which artists, gathered around them; or to start with a concept that they have found resonant by virtue of working with those artists and allow it to rise to the surface and become the tenor of the argument rather than an incidental vehicle.

EH: Yes, exactly. We were trying to shift the level of analysis to concepts that were going to be undoubtedly more *general* than any nation or any author or even any era. To see, for instance, that if your lens is antiquity or puppets or whatever—and remember that antiquity and puppets long predate modernism—you would end up seeing patterns and connections that did not rely on origin-dispersal patterns.

ML: In the introduction, you make the point that the word “global” in “global modernism” is kind of redundant since the “question is already decided.” You leave “global” there as a reminder to continue seeking “in local instances of modernism . . . the traces of world thinking and world imagining” [7]. This is especially interesting in light of the title of your volume and the general proliferation of critical terms in the field: global, planetary, minor, ultraminor, peripheral, divergent. What do you think about this critical proliferation? How far can these categories take us? Can this proliferation lead to an idealistic scenario where eventually these descriptive terms all become redundant? Or might these categorical distinctions lead us to further internalize hierarchical relations between various geographical and cultural contexts?

EH: The problem with single words is that every one of them is by definition both a proposition and a negation. A proposition, a kind of reaching out, to some concept or set of concepts that the word brings together. And a negation because of course in this reaching out a number of other things are excluded. “International” excludes “intranational”; “the national” excludes “the local” or “the global”; and so on. Part of the work of humanistic scholarship is to repurpose old words or create new ones that seem to grasp some essential structure or concept in a new or newly graspable way. Think of the power of something like “performative” or “power/knowledge” or “queer” or “deconstruction” and you get some sense of how this works. And at the same time, we humanists are also incredibly sensitive to the negations that make any such concept, no matter how powerful, also a kind of limit or stricture on the ways we can think and see. So we get people saying, “Global,” then someone says, “No, ‘global’ is bad, it’s too cold, let’s use ‘planetary,’” and then someone says, “But ‘planetary’ doesn’t capture this one part of the way we might think about the globe,” and someone

else says, “What about ‘worldly?’” and then someone else comes in and says, “All these are spatial metaphors! We need metaphors that highlight structures of power!” And so you get “peripheral,” “minor,” and the like.

I think that’s just the way things work. There’s no master term. There’s just people trying to do the work of exploring how certain words help us think certain things, and then how those same words which were really useful for a while now seem to be blocking us more than helping us. We went with “global” because we were trying to move past “international” or “transnational,” concepts that took the nation (or the national language) as a starting point. We also went with “global” because we were trying to dehistoricize—at least in the especially linear model of history writing—some of the work that we and others had been doing in the couple decades prior to the book. So “global” was solving problems for us. Whether it still would today—I doubt it. I would hate to hear someone say, “Hayot and Walkowitz were right about ‘global’! We all should be using ‘global’ and not these other words!” That would not be in the spirit of exploration and openness that we were trying to inculcate—for our authors and for ourselves.

RW: I really like what Eric says here about the important role that the humanities plays in historicizing the language of thinking and conceptualizing. That’s one of the things we do that other intellectual traditions—the physical sciences, the behavioral sciences—don’t do.

ML: Your introduction postulates an imaginary future when an “expanded lexicon” capable of doing justice to modernism on a global scale will emerge: “a whole whose wholeness is infinitely deferred into a future that extends well beyond anything even imagined here [9]”. If you’ll allow me a momentary playfulness, this infinite deferral of a comprehensive vocabulary sounds a bit like a marriage between Lacan and Borges. What is the significance of this gesture?

RW: Oh, yes, I think we were thinking about Borges, or I certainly was, as I was finishing a monograph about the in-some-ways-fantastical idea of a “born-translated” text. For both of us, I think, pedagogy has always involved the invitation to enter into and transform a critical project, rather than simply to ingest it. We liked the idea of an open-ended book, a book that postulated its own future editions and thus its intrinsic incompleteness, which would therefore invite readers to contribute their own concepts to an emerging rather than a closed field of inquiry. This was a Borgesian gesture in two ways: one, because it participates in the humorous, impossible, and self-aggrandizing idea of creating an infinitely open text; but two, because it acknowledges that the global in global modernism in fact assumes ongoing patterns of circulation, revision, and new creation—not expanding origins so much as multiplying copies, collaborations, and translations.

EH: That's such a great question, and a great answer. I have nothing to add.

ML: What about the time frame? Would you allow a similar generality to the time frame we use to situate modernism in history? Some critical accounts emphasize the need to stretch the timeline of modernism beyond its conventional periodization from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. Similar claims have been made for the concept of "modernity" as well. What do you think? It would also be interesting to hear more of your thoughts on the anxious relationship between modernism and modernity.

EH: Here's where you invite me to start on my two-hour lecture on why Susan Stanford Friedman, who was, along with Rebecca, in the decade that preceded this book, one of my two or three most important interlocutors, and who is a brilliant, creative, and generous thinker and writer—I have to say these things because I'm about to disagree with her—is wrong about global modernism, and why I'm right, and also on how historical concepts can and should work. But no one wants to hear that lecture, especially not here, so I'll just say briefly: absolutely YES to the radical dehistoricization of time frames, especially those around modernism and modernity (which themselves are the origins of a great deal of time-framing). And NO to the idea that this dehistoricization could or should somehow delete the historical specificity of the emergence of phenomena—including those of modernism and modernity—in order to allow us to declare that "everyone has a modernism" or that "there are all kinds of modernities." That for me would be a historical and rhetorical mistake. It's a hard one to avoid, but avoiding it is worth the price you pay for doing so.

RW: This is really a question about whether we're any more keen on expanding and propagating modernism through time than we are about expanding and propagating modernism through space. Eric has a strong reply, and I won't add to that. However, I think it's worth noting that while Susan Stanford Friedman's work has been important to testing both boundaries, she was, long before her book *Planetary Modernisms*, one of the most influential scholars to draw our attention, through several important essays in *Modernism/Modernity*, to the historical contingency of our critical concepts and for the need to revitalize them. Our work in this volume was made possible by that. A

Central Issues in Studies of Modernist Peripheries

Mark Wollaeger
Vanderbilt University

ABSTRACT: The essay reflects on key issues of definition in modernist studies and comparative modernisms by returning to the author's edited volume, *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (2012). In particular, it assesses the continued relevance of center-periphery models of global study and the formal dimension of modernism while speculating on the future of modernist and literary studies in the university.

SOMETIME IN 2010, when I was contemplating cover images for *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, I remembered being in a New York gallery a few years earlier where I had experienced an installation, *Uncertain Museum*, by Olafur Eliasson, an Icelandic-Dutch conceptual artist whose work inspired the kind of productive disorientation I wished to generate in my collection.¹ The installation featured a spiral-shaped steel structure wrapped in a projection screen. Inside the structure hung four glass disks, coated with mirror rings in a concentric pattern, one larger than the other three; the disks rotated slowly, and a spotlight cast shadows onto the screen. As the shadows morphed from circles to ellipses and back to circles, light reflected from the mirrored rings floated across the curved inner walls of the steel structure; the overlay of shifting shadows created a moiré effect, or interference pattern, that reminded me of the image I had found for my monograph *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda* (Princeton, 2006): Berenice Abbott's *Interference of Waves*. Kismet.

I wrote to Eliasson's agent for permission to use a photograph of *Uncertain Museum* and received a note back saying that the artist preferred to reserve photographs of his work for the covers of his own books. Undeterred, I composed a letter to Eliasson explaining just why the decentering effect of his installation chimed perfectly with the aims of my collection, and I asked

¹ For more on Eliasson's *Uncertain Museum*, including images and commentary, see Olafur Eliasson, *The Uncertain Museum, Artwork*, accessed 18 May 2021, <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK100853/the-uncertain-museum>.

the agent to forward it directly to the artist. A week or so later I received an email granting me permission at no cost to use any of the high-definition images to which the email linked. You may well ask, What is the point of this story?

Mainly, I want to underscore the aptness of the title *Uncertain Museum*: the project of tracking what counts as modernism across the globe remains as uncertain today as when I wrote the introduction to my collection nearly a decade ago. But I also want to pay Eliasson back a bit for his generosity: I was a little dismayed by the tiny font used to acknowledge him on the back cover and for several years mistakenly believed Oxford had failed to include proper acknowledgment at all. Here's to you, Olafur.

Rereading my introduction to the collection for this dual issue of *Dibur* on peripheral modernisms, I remain proud of the work I did there. The process of assembling and editing the essays was enormously challenging, and I was grateful to have Matt Eatough's help along the way. But introducing the collection felt like an even greater challenge: such diverse materials, such big questions.² One strategic decision had clear advantages as well as a shortcoming. Rather than rely on the usual overview followed by brief accounts of each contribution, I decided to interweave commentary on the essays into my theoretical and historical account of modernism to produce what I hoped would be a seamless unfolding of a developing train of thought. But experimental form comes with risks: at least one reader (a close friend) stopped reading the introduction two pages into its full nineteen because he assumed that when I touched on the opening cluster of essays, the rest of the introduction would consist of an obligatory (and therefore likely tedious) account of the remaining twenty-six essays. But—surprise!—from that point I instead shifted to a brief history of modernist studies as a prelude to addressing questions raised by what was becoming known as “the new modernist studies,” all the while using individual and clusters of essays to illustrate my points. Too clam dever by half, perhaps, insofar as the approach courts the imitative fallacy: when does disorientation become nonproductive?

But the structure also had its affordances. Anticipating a question about what it might mean in practice to engage in “a double movement of acknowledgment and decentering” in order to move past “an older understanding of cosmopolitanism” and its “view from nowhere,” I did not simply cite Hannah Arendt's concept of “enlarged thinking” as a cognate dynamic but also pointed to some examples of the double movement in the collection—contributions by Janet Lyon and Peter Kalliney.³ That was my way of acknowledging that the introduction was designed not as a master discourse but rather as a deconstructive metacommentary, one that repeatedly dissolves back into the instances that made generalization possible. I could just as well have cited Jessica Berman's ability to acknowledge the fact of European influence on Indian fiction even as she complicates the supposed binary between the modernist and indigenous by showing how aspects of what later came to be termed modernism in European and Anglo-American circles

² For more on the editorial challenge, see my “Where and When Is Modernism: Editing on a Global Scale,” *Kritika Kultura*, no. 16 (February 2011): 5–14, accessed 18 May 2021, <https://journals.ateneo.edu/ojs/index.php/kk/article/view/1430>. This article, written as I was editing the collection, was in part a trial run for the introduction I later wrote but includes additional thinking. And for a deeper dive into issues of comparison and politics that I broach later in this essay, see my “The Global/Comparative Turn in Modernist Studies: Two Points Bearing on Praxis,” *English Language Notes* 49, no. 1 (2011): 153–56.

³ Mark Wollaeger, introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. Mark Wollaeger with Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5. Subsequent references to the introduction will be given in parentheses in the text.

“already seems to inhabit the early twentieth-century Indian novel in English.”⁴ Short of the ideal hypertextual edition I imagined in the introduction—a possibility only slightly more likely now than it was then—this sort of thematic apposition, in which I drew together articles with critical affinities from across the collection in order to substantiate the conceptual story I wanted to tell, seemed to me a good way to proceed.⁵

While I do not want to rehash my take on the various controversies I discuss in the introduction, I do want to comment a little on an issue that I’m surprised remains an issue—call it the center-periphery debate—and on a problem that seems to me increasingly acute: the degree to which field coherence hinges on the distinction between “modernist” and “modern.”

First, the center-periphery dispute implicates the term “diffusionist,” and the key text here is Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000), whose argument against long-standing accounts of the diffusion of modernity from Europe to the rest of the world has helped transform comparative studies of literature and culture. And yet reflexive dismissal of center-periphery models as intrinsically biased against the periphery or studies of influence as necessarily tracing only a one-way flow from privileged sites to lesser ones (metropolitan to provincial, European to non-European, high culture to low, etc.) ignores the simple fact that some cultural phenomena did spread out from a center and that such centers became sources of radiating cultural energy owing to their relative economic and cultural power. Nothing about this material imbalance necessitates understanding peripheral locales or cultural forms as secondary, unoriginal, or backward. The moment of cultural reception is also always characterized by specific forms of creolization, and transformation continues through ensuing cultural dialogue. The idea that center-periphery thinking presupposes some form of cultural echoing is a straw man. So as I put it in my introduction, “rather than dissolve through the agency of relativization or disappear through the stigmatizing of models of cultural diffusion, concepts of center and periphery still operate in many of the essays, though not in the rigidly binary way that characterized some older ways of thinking about world literature” (6). I’m confident that Matt Eatough’s contribution to this issue will elaborate on the claim, advanced in the introduction, that “world-systems theory provides a materialist account for why the terms ‘core,’ ‘periphery,’ and ‘semi-periphery’ should still matter”: “they map the unequal distribution of economic power across the globe” (6). To pretend otherwise by rejecting the concepts of center and periphery tout court is to sacrifice verifiable historical fact to self-blinding political tendentiousness.⁶ Everyone wants to be on the right side of history—empire has been responsible for many terrible things—but certain reflexive gestures seem not only pointless but counterproductive insofar as they crowd out more complex (and precise) analyses.

Second, I also asserted in 2012 that “the relationship between ‘modern’ and ‘modernist’ is clearly fundamental to the field” and that criticism had yet to confront “the full implications” of an erasure of the distinction (10). Although I’m pretty sure I’ve been losing this argument, it

⁴ Jessica Berman, “Neither Mirror nor Mimic: Transnational Reading and Indian Narratives in English,” in Wollaeger with Eatough, *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, 206.

⁵ I borrow the term “thematic apposition” from my undergraduate honors thesis adviser at Stanford, Ian Watt, who used it in *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) to describe one of the affordances of Joseph Conrad’s disjunct chronologies.

⁶ For more on the continuing viability of influence models, see my “Reading Ngūgĩ Reading Conrad: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Emergence of the Postcolonial,” in *Modernism, Postcolonialism, Globalism*, ed. Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 55–80.

still seems to me that modernist studies risks losing its coherence as a field of study if no one bothers to reflect on what makes something recognizably modernist. No one wants to be mired in definitional squabbles, but efforts to define need not instantiate an inflexible set of criteria or be viewed as attempts to freeze a canon of acceptable modernist masterpieces. A continuously evolving polythetic definition makes fruitful professional exchange possible. Or, as I have argued elsewhere, “the institutional history of recent modernist studies . . . suggests that if the forum to discuss modernism provided by the [Modernist Studies Association] and associated professional organizations is to remain a useful space for sharing, continuing efforts of recursive definition must accompany efforts to unravel the edges of the field.”⁷

What’s more, part of any viable definition will necessarily, I believe, include formal criteria, though no single formal element or set of elements should be considered the *sine qua non* of modernism. This is a matter of both field and discipline. The field’s seeming reluctance to continue acknowledging modernism partly through formal terms does not mean that modernist scholars are disassembling the airplane even as it tries to hold them aloft. But if modernist studies is to remain a field within literary criticism, then close attention to particularities of language and form must remain in the mix. By the same token, if literary studies itself is to remain viable in universities of the future, some version of close reading and reflection on textual form must remain in play in order to justify the claim that the study of literature has something to offer that cannot be found in philosophy, history, or sociology.⁸

For now, the precarious state of the humanities in the United States—that is, falling enrollments, axed departments, shrinking public funding—has not yet undermined the chief means of affiliating as a modernist, the Modernist Studies Association, whose membership, composed largely of literary scholars, has remained steady over the last five years or so, though it is hard to say how the pandemic will affect membership in the long term. At the same time, however, the job market in modernism seems to have collapsed over the last few years, with positions that once might have been listed under the rubric of modernism being subsumed into twentieth-century positions more generally, and twentieth-century positions often asking for forms of expertise that do not specify modernism. Modernism and literary study, in other words, are in danger of becoming peripheral in the figurative sense—marginal, not of direct concern to culture at large.

The aesthetic, it seems, is always being rediscovered and redefined in literary criticism, with “a turn to the aesthetic” heralded periodically, from aesthetic critiques of cultural studies in the early 1980s to surface reading as an alternative to symptomatic analysis over the past decade. Obviously I welcome such turns—re-turns, really—and consider them salutary for the future of modernist and literary study. Otherwise, it seems certain, such things will end up languishing in a museum. A

⁷ Mark Wollaeger, “Scholarship’s Turn: Origins and Effects of the New Modernist Studies,” in *The New Modernist Studies*, ed. Douglas Mao (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 57; the following discussion draws on the section “How New Is New?” (54–57).

⁸ For an especially strong version of this argument, see Michael W. Clune, *A Defense of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). For an argument about the urgent need in today’s highly instrumentalized world to justify the humanities, see Eric Hayot, *Humanist Reason: A History, an Argument, a Plan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

Global Modernisms Reconsidered

Matthew Eatough

Baruch College, City University of New York

ABSTRACT: *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* is a collection of essays devoted to investigating the geographic and temporal scope of modernism. The assembled essays include historical surveys of specific modernist movements, comparisons between different national traditions, and theoretical reflections on the nature of global modernism. In my reflections on this collection, I consider how the volume sought to define the terms of relationality that would guide the field of global modernism in its subsequent years. I then proceed to make a case for the utility of world-systems theory for modernist studies, using as my primary example the Sestiger movement of 1960s South Africa.

LOOKING BACK ON *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, what strikes me is just how interested the collection was in defining “relationality.” By the time that the volume was published in 2012, modernist studies was already well into the so-called “global turn.” As a result, the handbook’s contributors were not so much interested in arguing that literature from the Global South *was* modernist as they were in assessing *how* we should characterize the relationship between Southern modernism and its European and North American interlocutors. If modernism is a species of “family resemblances” shared by the high-modernist canon and certain other types of literature, as Mark Wollaeger puts it in his introduction to the collection,¹ then what terms and ideas should be used to trace these resemblances? Should scholarship focus on direct lines of transmission—say, Picasso’s debts to West African sculpture, or Mulk Raj Anand’s time among the Bloomsbury Group? Or should stress be placed instead on the formal characteristics of the literary work? If this latter option, then should formal analysis identify a set of common techniques (stream of consciousness, collage, free verse, etc.), or should it examine

¹ Mark Wollaeger, introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. Mark Wollaeger with Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12.

broader processes of experimentation and formal innovation? Or would the best approach be to examine the shared historical conditions that gave rise to modernism across the globe: rapid industrial modernization; a proximity to social and political revolution; a sense of a radical break with the past; the professionalization of writing and an increasing level of specialization within publishing industries; and the growth and dissemination of little magazines?

As readers will see, there was no real consensus among our contributors on how to approach these questions. The assembled essays survey a wide variety of methodological approaches, many of which would exert a strong influence on modernist studies over the coming years. Well-known theories of multiple modernities, world literature, vernacular modernism, uneven development, world-systems, and planetarity all make appearances in the collection—each with its own language for describing modernism’s global geography, and each with its own toolbox for tracing connections between different times and places.

Regardless of their precise methodological approach, all the essays in the collection blend formal analysis with an attention to historical context and lineages. The key difference lies in *how* they do so. Take, for instance, Susan Stanford Friedman’s concept of “polycentric modernisms,” which insists that modernist form is simply “the expressive dimension of modernity”—and therefore is not unique either to Europe or to the historical avant-garde.² Friedman’s elaboration of this idea is framed as a direct rebuke to Marxist-inflected theories of modernism, which tend to historicize modernist form as a response to a specific transitional moment in the capitalist world-system—one in which rapid development of new media technologies, mass immigration and urbanization, and global uneven development combined to encourage an attention to matters of literary and artistic form. In contrast, Neil Lazarus’s essay, “Modernism and African Literature,” contends that it is precisely by considering modernism within the context of global capitalism that scholars can best understand the shared connections between the historical avant-garde and African modernism. Similarly, Harsha Ram’s brilliant comparison of Russian and Italian futurism, “Futurist Geographies: Uneven Modernities and the Struggle for Aesthetic Autonomy,” turns to one of Friedman’s particular objects of critique: the world-systems methodology of Pascale Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters*. Leaning on the well-known world-systems distinction between core and periphery, Ram suggests that futurism was a series of movements that enabled rapidly modernizing nations to challenge Paris’s cultural hegemony and to imagine themselves as the centers of a new international aesthetic.

Personally, I find Ram’s contribution to be not only a compelling work of literary history but also a great example of the utility of world-systems theory for literary analysis. As seen in Ram’s essay, world-systems theory provides a supple vocabulary for describing structural homologies between literary movements rooted in different times and places, and for doing so in a way that attends to both the historical contexts that shaped these movements and the transnational networks that govern their exchanges with one another. But I think it is also important to acknowledge criticisms of the world-systems model—not so as to discard this methodological lens but rather in the interest of explaining how it can be applied to the study of global modernism in a thoughtful and nuanced manner.

At their most basic, critiques of world-systems theory point to two aspects of the approach that they find questionable. First, critics argue that the methodology places too much emphasis

² Susan Stanford Friedman, “World Modernisms, World Literature, and Comparativity,” in Wollaeger with Eatough, *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, 510, 513.

on the rise of capitalism—an emphasis which, given Europe’s central role in the development of capitalist institutions and culture, will by its very nature lead to disseminationist accounts of literature. Second, they worry that the main schema for describing the capitalist system—the division of economic processes into core, semiperipheral, and peripheral functions—is a static model that leads to rigid distinctions between the North and the Global South.³

To avoid these pitfalls, we need to be attentive to the fact that the core/semiperiphery/periphery model is first and foremost a *relational* one and not a description of geographically demarcated zones (e.g., the North versus the South). As Stephen Shapiro explains, “Each spatial level (area, national, regional, urban, familial) contains its own core-periphery differences. . . . None of these levels is either wholly independent of the others or mechanistically determined by them. They often intersect each other in wholly unpredictable ways because the relations of one level are not necessarily analogous or contiguous to each other.”⁴

Put simply, the world-system is made up of multiple overlapping processes, few of which are directly aligned with one another. The virtue of the world-systems approach for literary analysis in general—and for the study of global modernism in particular—is thus how it provides us with a language for describing the complex web of social, cultural, and economic relations in which literature is situated. Indeed, when considered from this perspective it would be extremely reductive to label any given work or movement as an example of “peripheral” modernism, or even to credit modernism as a whole with a “peripheral” positionality vis-à-vis established literary institutions. Rather, what world-systems analysis shows us is how modernism emerges out of specific conjunctions of core and peripheral functions—some of which are common to modernism as experienced in diverse places and times, but others of which are reconstellated in new and telling ways depending on one’s historical context.

Let me offer one brief example from my own area of specialization, South African literature. South African writers had begun to experiment with modernism as early as the 1920s and 1930s, but it was really not until the 1960s that modernist aesthetics would find a lasting purchase in the country. Then in November 1963, a small but important collection of writers launched the literary journal *Sestiger*, which loosely translates as “Writers of the Sixties.” This journal, and the movement to which it would lend its name, featured many of the playwrights, poets, and fiction writers who would dominate Afrikaans literature in the coming years: André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Etienne Leroux, Ingrid Jonker, Jan Rabie, Bartho Smit, and Adam Small, among others.

Most notably for our purposes, it was also a movement that was self-consciously modernist in its aesthetics and that framed this modernism through the language of peripherality. We can see both of these elements in the playwright Bartho Smit’s introductory remarks to the first issue of *Sestiger*, where he characterizes the magazine as a revolt against a sedimented Afrikaans culture that was in danger of being “left behind” by the rest of the world.⁵ Echoing several of the foundational tropes of the avant-garde—the speed of modernity, the contrast between the new

³ The distinguishing feature of world-systems theory since its initial articulation in Immanuel Wallerstein’s four-volume *Modern World-System* has been its division of the globe into three distinct regions: a strong core that monopolizes high-value economic functions (usually Europe and/or North America); a weaker periphery that supplies the core with natural resources and other unfinished products (i.e., the Global South); and a semiperiphery that mediates the transactions between these two blocs (mid-power states, merchants, etc.).

⁴ Stephen Shapiro, *The Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel: Reading the Atlantic World-System* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008), 33–34.

⁵ Bartho Smit, *Sestiger* 1, no. 1 (1963). All translations are my own.

and the traditional arts, the value of experimentation, and the hollowness of existing cultural institutions—Smit goes on to stress how South African culture was standing in the way of artistic progress: “Man and his existence,” explains Smit, “have become so fluid that they no longer fit into traditional forms.” But the modern Afrikaans writer has been unable to develop new forms because his work is constantly being “attacked by critics who still assess [literature] by formal criteria that the author is deliberately trying to avoid.”

Smit’s point is that South African literary culture exists outside the core literary institutions located in 1960s Europe and that this has produced a dated, anachronistic form of literature. Borrowing as much from the language of modernization theory as from modernism, *Sestiger* presented itself as an attempt to import cutting-edge literary techniques from abroad—a goal that Smit and his fellow writers pursued by experimenting with language and formal structure, as well as by confronting taboo topics (sex, apartheid, racial inequality, etc.).

And yet, it is important to note that the *Sestiger* movement benefited from proximity to a number of core state institutions. Not only were the *Sestiger* writers almost all white (and thus members of a privileged white minority protected by the apartheid system), but their publications were financed by publishing houses that enjoyed sizable state subsidies. The first planned venue for *Sestiger* writing, the literary journal *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, was funded by the publishing house Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel (APB), a firm that was so well connected to the National Party (NP) that three NP cabinet ministers sat on APB’s board, including the then prime minister Hendrik Verwoerd. Senior executives at APB quickly rescinded funding for the proposed journal, citing concerns over the magazine’s iconoclastic avant-gardism and its editors’ decision to offer a “Coloured” writer, Adam Small, a position on the editorial board. Even after this break with APB, though, the *Sestigers* continued to publish with state-supported firms, such as the smaller imprint Human and Rousseau. Indeed, the limited market for *Sestiger* writing—a consequence of the small national market for literary fiction and widespread hostility toward the *Sestigers*’ ideas within the Afrikaans community—made it virtually impossible for the movement to remain commercially viable without outside funding of some kind.

My point is that South African modernism was a product of a number of overlapping core, semiperipheral, and peripheral processes. The limited commercial viability of modernist writing necessitated support from a strong welfare state (of the sort associated with the North American and European core in the mid-twentieth century), while a perceived sense of peripherality enabled *Sestiger* writers to characterize modernist aesthetics as a countercultural force within South African society. (It should not be forgotten that these were the years when modernism was in the process of being institutionalized in North American and European academe and that an equation between modernism and counterculture was by no means automatic.) All this took place in a country where resource extraction continued to be one of the dominant industries and where the persistence of colonial power relations found expression in a radically uneven internal geography (one characterized by stark divides between black and white, rural and urban, and “literary” versus “political” writing).

Using the language and ideas of world-systems theory thus provides us with some insight into the genealogy of South African modernism, but only if we recognize the inherently relational status of these terms. Far from being static labels applied uniformly to vast regions of the globe, the core/semiperiphery/periphery triad constitutes a vocabulary for describing the *unevenness* of any given social formation—that is, for describing how it is both peripheral to some networks

and central to others. And considering how modernism is generally seen to be an expression of epochal transitions—one which emerges at the intersection of residual and emergent practices, often by making what was once peripheral into a new dominant—identifying a critical language capable of attending to these shifts and of embedding them in a thick description of local and global contexts is an absolute necessity. Such a language can help us to think modernism in all its divergent moments and movements: as an aesthetic and an ethic that is expressed in the bohemian and revolutionary avant-gardes of the early twentieth century; but one that is also, and somewhat paradoxically, institutionalized in the post-World War II American university; and one that is *also* promoted for its countercultural potential by certain dissident intellectual groups in 1960s South Africa; and one that is present in countless other cultural and institutional spaces spread across India, West Africa, South America, and the Caribbean (among many, many others). A