Modernism in a Global Context

Peter Kalliney
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An aesthetics of motion

The feeling that modernism is an aesthetics of motion is evident from the very earliest stirrings of the movement, long before it would ever be called modernism. Charles Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil* [*Les Fleurs du mal*] (1857–68), commonly described as the first instance of European modernist literature, uses travel to depict the restless, unsatisfactory temperament that would become a familiar feature of later poetry. When the volume was revised and republished in 1861, it closed with “Le Voyage,” the final poem in a section called “Death” [“La Mort”]. As we might expect, the opening sequence in the poem alludes to travel, both real and imagined:

For the boy playing with his globes and stamps,  
the world is equal to his appetite—  
how grand the world in the blaze of the lamps,  
how petty in tomorrow’s small dry light!  
...  
But the true voyagers are those who move  
simply to move—like lost balloons! Their heart  
is some old motor thudding in one groove.  
It says its simple phrase: “Let us depart!” (part I, lines 1–4, 17–20)

Unlike the ingenuous child, whose dreams of travel are grand but also evanescent, the “true voyager” has neither lofty illusions nor a changeable nature. The genuine traveler is blown about the world as an untethered balloon, with little sense of direction and no will to resist the forces of nature that cause the movement. The lyric speaker’s thudding soul, unlike his mobile body, is stuck on one monotonous track, repeating the imperative of movement without cease. The need to move lacks obvious motivation, being
mechanical, and the speaker does not seem to care much about the direction of movement.

Later in the poem, the speaker licks his emotional wounds by reflecting on the bitter knowledge travel brings. A weary traveler might crave some rest, but not Baudelaire’s subject, who would not remain stationary by choice:

How sour the knowledge travellers bring away!
The world’s monotonous and small; we see ourselves today, tomorrow, yesterday, an oasis of horror in sands of ennui! (part VII, lines 1–4)

The more this speaker travels, the more he seems to need to travel, although the more he travels, the more the world seems monotonous and monochromatic. Over the next few decades, visual and sound reproduction technologies would make the world seem smaller, and, to a surprising extent, just as monotonous and monochromatic as before. The need to travel is fueled by the speaker’s ennui, and yet seeing the world only adds to that sense of boredom and fatigue. At last, only in the closing stanza of the poem, do we get a clearer sense of what the speaker hopes or expects to find through his journeys:

Only when we drink poison are we well—
we want, this fire so burns our brain tissue,
to drown in the abyss—heaven or hell,
who cares? Through the unknown, we’ll find the new.
(part VIII, lines 5–8)

The blunt paradoxes and deep ambivalences of these final lines recur throughout modernist writing as it emerges and develops around the world. Only poison makes our bodies feel well; only when we are fevered do our minds function properly, understanding the world for what it really is. The difference between heaven and hell is of no consequence to this disillusioned secularist—who cares, he asks, as long as it gives us a remarkable experience. Encountering the unknown, the speaker concludes, will allow us to find the new. The concept of newness, the possibility of encountering the unknown, is virtually the only thing to excite the speaker’s jaded mind.

In Baudelaire’s lyrics, the poet figures himself as a conduit to novelty, and yet he broods on the impossibility of discovering
anything new. This paradox is a signature feature of modernist literature. As Michael Levenson reminds us, “Modernity remains haunted both by a search for novelty and by the recollection of precursors,” creating the impression that new experiences are both highly desirable and likely to be compromised by the existence of precedents (2). Not infrequently, modernism’s invocations of aesthetic novelty hinge on representations of travel, translation, and cultural difference. The cultivated, agonized self-consciousness on display in Baudelaire’s lines finds fitting expression in the motif of travel. This sense of spiritual desolation is not caused by obvious external factors—the loss of a loved one, being spurned by a lover, or questioning one’s faith are common causes of emotional turbulence in earlier literary traditions—and hence the solution might strike us as equally unconventional. It is the sense of restlessness so pervasive in modernist literature that the present book hopes to document and to analyze. This restlessness reflects both the allure and the evanescence of novelty.

Travel and translation are right at the core of modernism’s aesthetics of motion and dissonance. Sometimes, cultural exchange followed the routes set by European imperialism. E. M. Forster’s and George Orwell’s depictions of British India and their relationships with subcontinental intellectuals, such as Mulk Raj Anand, fit this rough pattern. Anand, Forster, and Orwell share an anti-imperial outlook that informs their aesthetics, but they came into contact through imperialist cultural institutions, including the BBC. Similar things might be said about Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon, whose political, philosophical, and aesthetic concerns were shaped by a shared anti-imperialism, and yet they too began a dialogue through the channels of French imperialism and its cultural networks. It was Raymond Williams, in “Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism” (1985), who first theorized this relationship between imperialism and the emergence of modernism in specific metropolitan locations, such as London and Paris. These cities had the specialized cultural institutions to support a small group of intellectuals, but these cities also had access to vast colonial regions from which to recruit talent and discover raw material. And yet informal or defunct empires, and sometimes colonies or ex-colonies, with large metropolitan centers were also able to serve this function. Barcelona, Berlin, and New York City, but also Buenos Aires, Cairo, and Ibadan have been sites of significant modernist
activity because these cities attracted intellectuals from a diverse range of places. Modernism’s attachment to novelty is in some way connected to its proliferation at cultural crossroads.

Sometimes, however, modernists neither follow the pathways established by imperialism, nor do they confine themselves, their collaborators, or their work to a world city or its primary language. As David Damrosch points out in What Is World Literature? (2003), texts travel in all sorts of unpredictable ways, with all sorts of unpredictable results. Franz Kafka provides a textbook example of a writer whose work has circulated across linguistic and cultural borders and who has become a high priest of modernist writing in the anglophone world and beyond. Kafka, the Czech who studied Hebrew and Yiddish and wrote in German, was translated into English in the 1930s as a universal writer, a figure who captured the forms of alienation thought to be endemic to modern life across cultures. In more recent years, however, an ethnic Kafka has been rediscovered, with translators encouraging readers to see Kafka as part of Czech and European Jewish cultural traditions. Kafka is not the only writer whose status and identity has changed in the process of being translated into other languages and imported into other contexts. Rabindranath Tagore, lavishly but briefly hailed by W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, became a lasting poetic influence in Spain, where there was a major poetry award named in his honor; Roger Caillois, influential French editor, spent the Second World War stranded in South America and returned to France as a knowledgeable enthusiast of contemporary literature in Spanish, publishing much of the Latin American Boom in Paris; the young James Joyce so admired Henrik Ibsen’s drama that he learned enough Norwegian in order to correspond with his idol directly; Elizabeth Bishop lived fourteen years in Brazil, primarily for personal reasons; Paul Bowles and Claude McKay, an unlikely duo, both found refuge in Morocco; Sonallah Ibrahim and Ousmane Sembène spent formative years studying in the Soviet Union and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o finished drafting Petals of Blood (1977) there as the guest of the official Union of Soviet Writers. All these are examples of modernist writers whose work was profoundly influenced by travel and translation. Although imperialism had a determining effect on many of the cultural networks that were formed by modernists, other modernist writers and texts moved through channels relatively unconnected with imperial relationships. In some instances, writers
stayed close to home and were thus much less experienced travelers than the texts they produced.

In the next section of this Introduction, I provide an overview of five major theorists of global or transnational literature: Pascale Casanova, Damrosch, Paul Gilroy, Franco Moretti, and Gayatri Spivak. None of these scholars restricts himself or herself to modernism, I should note in passing. Collectively, their thinking about the global dimensions of literature has influenced the study of modernism in two key ways. First, these theorists have encouraged readers to compare geopolitical maps to their literary counterparts. We know that some nations and regions are more politically and economically powerful than others; is the same true of literature? Have some nations and groups—especially those most powerful in geopolitical terms—imposed their languages, their cultures, and their literary discoveries on less powerful nations? If this is the case, have less powerful nations embraced or resisted the imposition of exogenous influences—or have the literary cultures of the so-called periphery been more ambivalent, embracing some influences and rejecting others? Since modernism and Western European imperialism are at the very least historically coincident—some scholars have deemed them coextensive (Slemon)—this bundle of questions has shaped much recent scholarship on modernist writing.

Second, the vexed relationship between modernism (as a set of aesthetic tendencies across the arts) and modernity (as a broad historical marker associated with the global dominance of capitalism and an increase in intercultural contact) has been a crucial factor in this discussion, as Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers discuss in their introductory volume in this series. Do modernists reject modernity, are they enthusiastic about it, or perhaps the relationship is more agonistic than this simple binary would imply? Critics were long accustomed to reading T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) as an extended complaint against modernity, but recent trends in modernist studies have shown an Eliot who is more open to popular music, new technologies, and commodity culture than previous scholars had allowed. Similar things might be said of Chinua Achebe. Achebe's earliest readers hailed him as someone eager to record the traditions of Igbo culture before they disappeared into the maelstrom of modern society, but more recent studies reveal an Achebe who believed Nigerians could be more independent, both culturally and politically, not by rejecting
modernity, but by harnessing change in a way that might empower his fellow nationals. Casanova, Damrosch, Gilroy, Moretti, and Spivak each have instructive things to say about these debates.

David Damrosch

What is world literature?, asks Damrosch, in his field-defining book which takes that question as its title. It is a big question, as he readily admits, but his provisional answer is as deceptively, disarmingly simple as the question preceding it: “The idea of world literature can usefully continue to mean a subset of the plenum of literature. I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (4). Conceptually, Damrosch’s definition is delightfully straightforward and yet adaptable enough to be fitted to different circumstances. World literature is not all literature ever produced. Rather, a practical definition of the term is literature read beyond or across original cultural and historical contexts, in translation or not as the case may be. World literature consists of texts in motion. They might be ancient texts, read in the present, or contemporary texts read by people in various places. How texts are read—a question Damrosch explores at great length—is far more important than how they are produced, by whom they are produced, and through what mechanisms they circulate. A reductive way of looking at Damrosch’s definition would be to call it anti-New Historicist. One does not need elaborate discussions of historical and cultural contexts to read a writer effectively and meaningfully, from a world literature perspective. A more sympathetic (and faithful) way of reading Damrosch is that he makes room for the specialist, upon whom the generalist ought to rely for detailed information, while admitting the possibility of vast comparative reading projects across place and historical period. The generalist may not even be able to read the source language of a text to make interesting comparisons with other texts: this is no sin, and often a virtue, in Damrosch’s system.

The question of translation is no more vexing to Damrosch, whose no-nonsense approach to the matter has ruffled a few scholarly feathers. As a text moves into the sphere of world literature, “far from inevitably suffering a loss of authenticity or essence, a work can gain in many ways.” This is not to say that a text is somehow
unchanged or preserved when it circulates in translation, nor is it to suggest that there is no difference between bad and good translations. Rather, it again directs the interpretive eye away from the text, the unique, one and only source text, and toward the reader, who does not always need to know every facet of the source culture to get something tangible and interesting out of the experience of consuming a text (Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said, by contrast, insist that the homogeneity of source cultures is not tenable; every culture is hybrid). Damrosch also undercuts the myth of the author, but not necessarily in the mode of deconstructionist high theory; some authors write with translation in mind, anticipating foreign audiences for their texts, but this does not mean that textual indeterminacy reigns supreme in this account. Damrosch spells out the theoretical implications of this general position: “To understand the workings of world literature, we need more a phenomenology than an ontology of the work of art: a literary work manifests differently abroad than it does at home” (6). Texts can gain, as well as lose, when borne across languages and cultures. In the case studies he presents in his book, Damrosch tracks individual texts, such as The Epic of Gilgamesh, as they have moved around the world.

Damrosch’s book, like Spivak’s Death of a Discipline (2003), ought to be read as a powerful defense of the humanities in a time of perceived crisis. When Damrosch states in the conclusion that world literature is a mode of reading (rather than a mode of writing, we might say), he implies that literary language is something special and powerful, that it cannot be explained by historical and political contexts alone. Describing world literature is really an attempt to define literature full stop:

Literary language is thus language that either gains or loses in translation, in contrast to nonliterary language, which typically does neither. The balance of credit and loss remains a distinguishing mark of national versus world literature: literature stays within its national or regional tradition when it usually loses in translation, whereas works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation. (289)

Bracketing, for the moment, the issue of whether or not we can talk of translation so generally as a practice (rather than as a deliberate attempt to shift from one reading context to another), Damrosch
here defines literature succinctly as something that either loses or gains in the process of being translated. Nonliterary texts, or documents with no aesthetic pretensions, need not fear or crave translation. If the goal is simply to communicate information, any unadorned language that meets that goal successfully will do the job. Not so with literature: because it is figurative, perhaps, it makes the job of translation both more challenging and more rewarding. The aesthetic dimension of literature is most readily perceived in the effects of translations.

It is noticeable that Damrosch’s method is steeped in close reading. Each chapter fastens on one text or writer, demonstrating how translation changes the way we can read, opening interpretive possibilities for the creative literary consumer. The book seems to move effortlessly through time and space, from ancient Babylon to Milorad Pavić’s Dictionary of the Khazars (1988). Each interpretive gesture rests, very simply, on the premise of reading carefully. The difficulty, as some of his critics have pointed out, is that he offers no diagnosis of how and why literature moves the way it does. Translation happens, but not randomly, his critics would aver. Although Damrosch shows great awareness of this fact—several of the chapters take pains to document the translation histories of individual writers, such as Kafka—he never develops any theory of translation that goes beyond the particular instance, elucidating a general principle. This nimble but uncomplicated approach to translation forms the basis of Emily Apter’s lengthy rebuttal to Damrosch in Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability (2013). And unlike Pascale Casanova’s work, which is very concerned with how translation governs relationships between cultural centers and peripheries, Damrosch is unperturbed by the fact that translation is not necessarily a politically innocent practice. Given that so many practitioners of global literary criticism are interested in expanding the modern canon beyond its European and North American base, Damrosch’s relative lack of interest in this question has provoked substantial debate.

Franco Moretti

From one angle, Moretti’s work on global literature, especially his articles “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000) and “More
Conjectures” (2003), is diametrically opposed to What Is World Literature?. Where Damrosch notes how individual texts have been translated and adapted to fit new contexts, Moretti uses the provocative phrase “distant reading” to describe what is badly needed in world literary studies. If we want to understand something useful about how literature functions in a world system, we need to adjust the unit of analysis—we need different types of evidence, more than the singular example, or a small canon of overworked texts, can provide. We require big data and fewer, agonizingly detailed close readings: summaries of many novels, formal definitions of genres, a few basic, common features that determine how closely the individual text hews to the generic type, and lots and lots of data about where and when the genre started, when it began to proliferate in a given place, and when it started to move to other places. We might learn more about the system if we focus far less on the particular instance and focus more on the big picture, identifying some of the key features of a genre, as well as local variations. If such a study could include both geographical and longitudinal information, tracking the number of instances of a genre in both space and time, we would be able to see how genres develop, proliferate, stagnate, mutate, and eventually die. The global literary critic should know statistical information about when novel production began to take off in multiple countries: not only in Britain and France, the core of novel production, but also in Brazil, India, Japan, and Nigeria—rather than lots of information about Don Quixote or Robinson Crusoe in isolation from their innumerable predecessors, siblings, and offspring.

In theory, this approach has the great advantage of accounting for the vast majority of texts ever produced, nearly all of which remain unknown to literary critics. Most literary critics know a wealth of information about a mere shelf or two in an enormous library. And Moretti himself speaks as a very able close reader of particular texts, as he shows in The Way of the World: The “Bildungsroman” in European Culture (1987). He contests Damrosch’s account in another important way: where Damrosch does not make the question of cultural power centers, peripheries, and the relationship implied between them an integral part of his model, Moretti takes it for granted that there is a symbolic struggle between core and periphery. In what Moretti describes as a sort of “law of literary evolution,” in cultures from “the periphery of the literary system
(which means: almost all cultures, inside and outside Europe), the modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials” (“Conjectures,” 58). Studying the world literary system thus involves identifying family trees, where there are lines of descent and family resemblance, as well as the wave patterns, as genres spread out and diversify across the world.

The identification of a dense literary hub, and a dispersed outer rim, immediately became a point of contention for his critics, who asked if literature always moves from self-evident core (Britain, France) to equally self-evident periphery (Brazil, India, Japan, and Nigeria in this example): Could not the flow be reversed in some instances? Moretti’s riposte is unequivocal: “Yes, forms can move in several directions. But do they? This is the point, and a theory of literary history should reflect on the constraints of their movements, and the reasons behind them” (“More Conjectures,” 75). Thus, the short answer is actually “no”: in the case of the novel, the flow is largely one-directional. Novels emanating from the periphery tend to import plots but employ local characters and local narrative voices; writers from the center, by contrast, systematically ignore the developments on the periphery. Moretti hedges a bit in the pages that follow, noting that there is a substantial semi-periphery—Germany, Ireland, Russia, and Spain spring to mind in the case of the novel—allowing some degree of two-way interface between core and periphery. But to this we might add: Moretti’s explanation of how the novel moves works well if we describe its growth in different parts of the world, but what if we look at the form’s long-term evolution and development? In mid-twentieth-century Britain, many locals believed the metropolitan novel was in great distress, encouraging critics and readers to look elsewhere—especially to colonies and former colonies, or what became known as the Commonwealth—for the most exciting literary developments. The novel may have begun at the core and spread to a periphery, but the core did not retain its dominance indefinitely. Such an observation is not precluded by the theory Moretti offers here, although it is not a point he seems inclined to develop, either.

Moretti certainly has his detractors. Because the practitioners of literary studies have substantial investments in close reading, it will surprise no one that his conviction that close reading is only so much misspent effort would be met with staunch resistance.
There are, however, more substantive criticisms to be made. In particular, Moretti’s practice of distant reading, with its reliance on large numbers of local data points, is very good at showing where and when literary genres move, but it is so far unable to theorize how or why genres grow, move, change, and die. How literature leaves its place of origin, the precise mechanisms by which it moves from one region to another, can be an interesting and ultimately more rewarding question to pose, requiring richer data but also more interpretive nous. For example, when Moretti observes that the novel moves in similar ways as it travels around the world—in Brazil, India, Japan, and Nigeria, he notes, novel production goes from nonexistent to substantial in the span of about two decades—the expression of this general law of literary movement suppresses as much as it exposes. In Nigeria, for instance, the proliferation of the novel in English at mid-twentieth century is driven by a few key factors: the transition from British imperialism to nominal independence, the exponential growth of secondary school and university populations (tutored in English), and the creation of the African Writers Series to serve those constituencies. Studying the interface between politics, education, and publishing ventures in the Nigerian case tells us a great deal about how and why the novel burst onto the scene at mid-century. In theoretical terms, we might say that there is much to be studied in the yawning gulf between big data and close reading: namely, in the many institutions of literary production which help translate or transfer literature between different cultural contexts. Chapter 4 takes up this very question.

The implied disagreement between Damrosch and Moretti will be instructive for approaching modernism as a global movement. Damrosch’s work shows us how a select canon of modernist writers—Kafka serves as one of his major examples—moves across cultural contexts. The question is not whether or not Kafka has been translated badly or well, but how the movement of his texts into different reading contexts has generated interesting readings of his work. Moretti, by contrast, encourages us to be skeptical of any definition of modernism that consolidates the reputation of any particular writer at the expense of reading widely, indiscriminately. The advantage of his approach, for students of modernism, is that it allows us to see the uneven flow of cultural influence: if modernism is on the move, we should attend to the questions of how, when, and for what purposes it moves.
Pascale Casanova

Similar to Moretti’s “Conjectures,” Casanova’s The World Republic of Letters [La République mondiale des lettres] (1999, English 2004) seeks to explain how the whole system works. For her, the world literary system is not a mode of reading, as it is with Damrosch, but instead a global pecking order: there are richly endowed literary cultures and languages, as well as literary cultures mired in poverty and obscurity. For perhaps a century and a half—at least through the 1930s—Paris was the undisputed center of cultural production, and more important, the center of global tastemaking. The social and intellectual freedoms offered by Paris, as well as the international status of the French language, combined to help make Parisian intellectuals the arbiters of the world literary system. For an aspiring writer of almost any nation or region—Eastern European, sub-Saharan African, Irish, North American, South American, Chinese—being recognized by the authorities in Paris represented the pinnacle of literary achievement. This was because the Parisian literary establishment fashioned itself, paradoxically, as the antithesis of local or national interests. In this account, writers from nations with a limited literary tradition have two stark options: (1) stay at home, write in a local language, and appeal to national authorities, or (2) opt for exile in Paris (usually a literal exile, but sometimes only a literary expatriation), abandon national prejudices and limitations, and seek a global audience through appeals to the literati. As this synopsis would suggest, Casanova’s model seems to be drawn from the example of Joyce above all—the aspiring writer, frustrated by local standards and limitations, takes refuge in Paris in an attempt to go beyond national or regional categories.

Pierre Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology and Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory, which also inform Moretti’s project, provide much of Casanova’s theoretical framework. Ideas such as cultural capital (the recognition a writer may achieve in the area of cultural production, which may not be recognized by other fields or in other contexts) become interesting concepts in Casanova’s hands. Individuals within the cultural field engage in competition with one another. When an aspiring modernist writer attacks the figures and institutions of the establishment, we should read this less as a pure statement of aesthetic preferences and more as a conscious strategy,
an attempt to siphon away or redirect some of the symbolic capital attached to others. Languages and nations, as much as individuals and institutions, have forms of cultural and linguistic capital at their disposal. Paris may have been the undisputed cultural capital of the world for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but its position was always under attack by rivals and pretenders. In the latter half of the twentieth century, both London and New York City presented fierce challenges to Parisian dominance. Nations, regions, and languages, too, are in a constant struggle to tilt the field to their own advantage, as any seasoned observer of the Nobel Prize will know from watching campaigns for particular writers.

In contrast to Damrosch, for whom the questions of cultural power and inequality are fairly distant concerns, Casanova’s account is all about competitive struggle. Any critic of global literature who hopes to describe the imbalances and politics of world literary space must reckon with Casanova’s and Moretti’s work. Furthermore, Casanova’s account is worth studying in some detail because it retains a strong sense of the nation as a culturally significant unit. Thus, while Damrosch and Moretti consider how texts move across boundaries, Casanova is far more concerned with how nations and regions remain distinct cultural entities competing within a global system.

More than one interlocutor has questioned the apparent Parisian bias of Casanova’s account, along with some of her depictions of national literary traditions, such as the Irish example. Others have quibbled with her readings of North and South American writers: it may be going too far to claim that without Parisian recognition, figures such as Joyce, William Faulkner, or Gabriel García Márquez would have been consigned to regional recognition only. Beyond this, some of her critics remain unsure of whether her depiction of a clear, antagonistic division between national and global literary culture is tenable. As Casanova says:

One of the peculiarities of the relationship that deprived writers [i.e., those from the literary periphery] maintain with the literary world has therefore to do with the terrible and inescapable dilemma they have to confront and then resolve in their various ways, regardless of differences of political, national, literary, or linguistic history. Faced with an antimony that is unique to their situation (and that appears only to them), they have to make
an unavoidably painful choice: either to affirm their difference and so condemn themselves to the difficult and uncertain fate of national writers (whether their appeal is regional, popular, or other) writing in “small” literary languages that are hardly, or not at all, recognized in the international literary world; or to betray their heritage and, denying their difference, assimilate the values of one of the great literary centers. (180)

This general model may work well for some writers, but the empirical evidence does not seem to support this in other instances. Could we really assert that a writer such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, political leader of postcolonial Senegal, cofounder of the négritude movement, and inductee to the Académie française, subordinated his regional or national aspirations in order to achieve recognition in Paris? The fact that he elected to write in French does not mean that he unequivocally “assimilate[d] the values” of Paris. Or in the case of Achebe—did his choice to write in English, and his ability to garner an international reputation, involve a repudiation of the Igbo language or of Nigerian autonomy? As Achebe would say, he helped bend English into a Nigerian shape, making it a tool suitable for nationalist writers engaged in the struggle for postcolonial autonomy, cultural and political. It seems more likely that some literary figures, whether through talent, luck, or skillful negotiation of different regimes of value, are able to succeed in the international cultural marketplace without sacrificing their commitment to local or national systems. The clear divide between assertive parochialism, on the one hand, and untethered cosmopolitanism, on the other, seems open to question if we consider the careers of some postcolonial writers who both reached global audiences and maintained strong connections with their nations and regions of origin.

**Gayatri Spivak**

In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak calls for “planetarity,” or a form of reading that invokes the planet as a category of thought, over and against the global. Globalization, she reckons, involves

the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. In the gridwork of electronic capital, we achieve that abstract ball
covered in latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines, once the equator and tropics and so on, now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Information Systems. . . . The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. (72)

In many respects, this is a very old-fashioned understanding of globalization, as Spivak herself is well aware. Marx and Engels certainly write of it: capitalism contrives to expand across the world by way of abstractions. Exchange value, in which any commodity can be exchanged for any other commodity only by varying the number of units; latitudes and longitudes, the abstract geographical grid that permits the world to be navigated more predictably; actuarial tables, allowing financiers and insurers to turn unique objects and people into statistical averages; and now our computers, which convert any information into immaterial records. There is some playful irony here, too: Spivak, the master of abstract, theoretical language, argues against the ubiquity of abstraction.

Spivak installs the planetary imagination, based in humanistic learning, as the foil of capitalist globalization. The effective difference between them is largely the difference between being an agent, which globalization encourages us to believe we are, and being an object, of which the planetary reminds us. The planetary alerts us that humans occupy the planet on sufferance, on loan as she puts it, and not by right. This realization ought to lead to another insight: “To be human,” she claims, “is to be intended toward the other” (73). In a bracing turn, Spivak offers a number of brief close readings in an attempt to think more expansively about the elasticity of the collective, turning to Sigmund Freud’s concept of the uncanny, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, Mahasweta Devi’s “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha,” Diāmela Eltit’s *The Fourth World*, José Martí’s “Wandering Teachers,” and W. E. B. Du Bois’s “The Negro Mind Reaches Out.” The overarching goal of these textual excursions is to show how literature allows us to incorporate Freud’s uncanny into our understanding of cultural differences. Among other things, a nuanced understanding of the uncanny, with all its overdetermined gender dynamics, will help us get beyond the Manichean binaries of early postcolonial theory—white-black, metropolitan-colonial,
modern-traditional—and toward a more interdisciplinary criticism in which both comparative literature and area studies can learn from one another.

There are several notable differences between Spivak’s account of transnational literature, on the one hand, and those of Moretti and Casanova, on the other. First, and most obvious, Spivak has a very different notion of what center and periphery might look like. For her, critics ought to get away from the habit of thinking that “new immigrant groups” are the key to unlocking the question of cultural difference (84). Instead, Spivak urges us to look beyond urban space, as well as beyond identity politics that lean too heavily on homosocial masculinity. Second, Spivak is unapologetically committed to retaining close reading as the foundation of literary studies. She offers a rebuttal to Moretti’s “Conjectures” that could easily be extended to include Casanova’s project as well. Surprisingly, Spivak and Damrosch, for all their clear differences, are of one mind about the status of close reading in the new comparative literature. Aside from emphasizing close reading, Spivak underlines the importance of learning other languages—given her interest in the relational qualities of reading, this makes a great deal of sense. Finally, and perhaps most important, Spivak claims that the criticism of globalization ought to be inseparable from thinking about gender. Literary representations of gender are a kind of test case for the literary critic who would like to question the function and failure of our collective imagination. Hence her reliance on the uncanny as the principle of planetarity: knowing more about representations of gender not as the aberration, but as the rule of operations, will help us recognize the magnitude of the planet and the fiction of the autonomous subject.

Paul Gilroy

Although Paul Gilroy is not noted for his attention to gender in his analysis of the black Atlantic, he and Spivak share some key principles. The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993) refuses to fetishize racial difference as some cultural studies thinkers are wont to do. He begins the book with a lengthy discussion of African American criticism and British cultural studies, insisting that both are too nationalist in scope. And like
Spivak, who argues that the “precapitalist cultures of the planet” are of value to the contemporary critic (101), Gilroy’s depiction of the African diaspora’s intellectual community as a “counterculture” of modernity is predicated on ethical judgments.

Following the lead of C. L. R. James, who in *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938) contends that Haiti’s slaves were the first modern, industrial proletariat, Gilroy argues that the shared experience of “middle passage” and slavery made black Atlantic thinkers the most advanced, most progressive thinkers of their day. As in Baudelaire’s poetry, Gilroy’s model of dissonant and critical modernity is an aesthetics of motion: “It is particularly significant for the direction of my overall argument that [the main examples in the introduction are black] sailors, moving to and fro between nations, crossing borders in modern machines that were themselves micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity” (12). Literary and intellectual traditions, at least where the African diaspora is concerned, cannot be described by reference to simple national formations. While Gilroy’s account predates Moretti’s vision of global literature by several years, we might read Gilroy anachronistically as offering an implicit criticism of Moretti’s core-periphery scheme of literary evolution. For Gilroy, the intellectuals of the African diaspora are paradoxically more modern than their contemporaries and also more emphatically anti-modern at the same time. Although he is not primarily a scholar of modernist literature, this formulation makes him sound a bit like one: his description of Black Atlantic intellectuals as both relentlessly up-to-date and yet at odds with modernity in some fundamental way is precisely how most modernist scholars describe the writers they study. Gilroy shows little patience for the notion that ideas (or literary forms) originate in one place and spread from there. The black Atlantic does not exist without motion, exchange, and a degree of reciprocity. Cultures are inherently hybrid formations, and so are aesthetic forms.

Because of its ambition and influence, *The Black Atlantic* also presents a big target for critics with different ideas. Some readers have not been entirely satisfied with Gilroy’s level of attentiveness to the function of gender; his black Atlantic networks are largely, though not exclusively, populated by men (and even some men with fairly retrogressive ideas about women). Equally important, Gilroy’s networks cluster most densely between North America,
the anglophone Caribbean, and Western Europe. Major centers of black Atlantic consciousness, such as Brazil and Haiti, receive only passing references in his account. Even more noticeable is the peripheral impact of African intellectuals. This gap is less surprising if we recall that slavery and the middle passage are privileged sites of consciousness-building in his account of the cultures of the diaspora. Finally, despite Gilroy’s efforts to refuse ethnocentric categories, there is some question of whether he goes far enough in his analysis. Is it legitimate to describe a black Atlantic intellectual history that exists apart from, and hostile to, a “white” Atlantic? Perhaps Gilroy’s model does not allow for enough cross-racial intellectual traffic even as it rejects national boundaries. Such an intellectual history would emphasize not only how black intellectuals have responded to their white colleagues, but also how white North Americans and Europeans reckoned with the cultures of the African diaspora as they formulated their ideas about art and literature.

Since the publication of Gilroy’s book over two decades ago, modernist studies has changed dramatically. More than anything else, it has expanded: geographically and culturally (modernists can be found anywhere), linguistically (there are a greater range of texts available in translation), politically (from fascists to social democrats to anarchists, from imperialists to anti-imperialists, from feminists to misogynists), textually (modernism appears in many media, not just in conventional literary forms), and temporally (the dating of modernism from 1890 to 1940 is neither as widely accepted nor as closely observed as it once was). As a result, we now have a richer archive of modernism (there are lots more modernists than there once were). In what remains of this introductory chapter, I try to provide an overview of some of the most interesting research developments during this period of rapid change.

Space and temporality

As we might expect, scholars with an interest in expanding the cultural basis of modernism have sought to be more geographically inclusive. Recent years have witnessed substantial efforts to bring old modernisms (read: North American and Western European) into dialogue with modernist formations from around the world (Doyle
Susan Stanford Friedman has been even more emphatic in arguing that studies of modernism need to be more geographically open-ended. She uses a form of “locational feminism” to contend that feminist criticism has a future only if it learns to be more attentive to comparative cultural contexts (Mappings, 18). In her more recent work, she also shows an inclination to expand the temporal frame of modernism, reading texts from the Mongol Empire to the current moment through the prism of modernism (Planetary Modernisms). Rethinking the temporality, as well as the geography, of modernism has become a major concern (Dimock; Hayot). So long as we continue to define modernism and modernity in the same old way, these scholars insist, we will keep finding them, roughly, in the same old places and saying many of the same old things.

Other scholarly interventions have treated the question of space more literally. Christie McDonald and Susan Rubin Suleiman turn to GPS networks as a relational model for thinking about francophone literary history. They are drawn to the idea that GPS devices allow for constant recalculation (pace Casanova and Moretti, no center, no periphery), but they also recognize that such technologies were developed first for military uses, productively dulling the utopian longings of academic writing about global thinking. Other scholars take a more historicist approach, showing how modernist literature evolves in conjunction with mapping techniques and geographic thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Bulson, Novels; Hegglund; Moretti, Atlas; Thacker). The black Atlantic paradigm has allowed scholars to consider environmental factors as well as racial subordination in the workings of modernity (Baucom, Specters; DeLoughrey).

Translation

Attempts to establish literature on a global footing have certainly reinvigorated debates about translation. Brent Hayes Edwards’s The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (2003) and Apter’s The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature (2006) put translation theory to work on two very different fields of play. Whereas Edwards traces the function of slipping and sliding between French and English,
primarily, in the formation of a radical black Atlantic during the high period of modernism, Apter’s more deracinated study thinks about the effects of translation in the contemporary world, ranging from the hypothesis that everything is translatable to its antithesis, that nothing is translatable.

Apter’s interest in classical philology is shared by Christopher GoGwilt, who attempts to delineate “a philology without guarantees, but oriented toward as full as possible a retroactive accounting for the coordinates of transnational modernism” (243). Decolonizing the modernist archive, GoGwilt suggests, involves a comparative framework in which the development of English and the development of other modern languages, such as bahasa Indonesia, may be brought into a direct, non-hierarchical relationship. Christopher Bush, on the other hand, charts fascinating correspondences between literary translations, mistranslations, and the function of media—which, after all, tend to translate words, sounds, and images into other forms. Bush’s reading of the modernist archive suggests that the development of new media encouraged some modernist writers to think of themselves as uniquely equipped to carry ideas and texts from other cultures, especially China, whether or not they knew much about the source culture in question. Although Bush notes the hubris attached to such translation efforts, he also suggests that China figures in unpredictable ways in modernist texts, not merely as empty signifier. In more general terms, the call to compare languages and literary cultures has been sung loud and clear (Baer; Chow, Not Like; Dimock; Felski and Friedman; Spivak; Walkowitz, Born).

Racial and ethnic difference

Given the prominence of postcolonial literary studies and the cultural relationships created by imperialism and anticolonialism, it is not surprising that considerations of racial and ethnic difference have figured prominently in writing about modernism in a global context. There is a diversity of work on this broad topic (Arnold; Emery; Gikandi, Writing and Maps; North, Dialect; Seshagiri; Winkiel). Much of this scholarship complicates longstanding scholarly narratives about modernism and depictions of racial difference. Jessica Berman’s Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and
Transnational Modernism (2011) self-consciously disrespects racial and imperial boundaries, arguing that writers from a wide range of cultural situations may share ethical perspectives. Nuanced considerations of gender difference have added another level of complexity to the discussion (Edmondson; J. Marcus; Stephens). No longer are modernist critics content to segregate white and black modernism from one another. Aside from Chapter 2 in this volume, which considers the effects of imperialism on modernism, there is a separate book on modernism and racial difference planned for this series.

Genre

One of the most robust and unexpected twists in the discussions about modernism in a global context has been the attention paid to literary genres. Moretti’s “Conjectures” proposes that we study the movement of literature around the world by tracking genres, but even scholars with no great sympathy for Moretti’s approach have seized on the problem of literary genres in an attempt to get some purchase on the vast topic of global literature. In one of the earliest treatments of modernist fiction and globalization, The Novel and the Globalization of Culture (1995), Michael Valdez Moses posits the continuing relevance of generic categories, suggesting that the global novel relies very heavily on a theory of tragedy. A recent special issue of PMLA (2014) on tragedy confirms this general outlook; an article by David Scott in the issue argues that tragedy is the quintessential genre of the postcolonial world in the post-Bandung era.

By contrast, Jahan Ramazani throws down the gauntlet for reading lyric poetry as the preeminently global form, arguing counterintuitively that poetry—long read as the most local of literary forms—subtly captures the restlessness of modernism (see also Hart). Discussing figures as diverse as Louise Bennett, Okot p’Bitek, Melvin B. Tolson, and W. B. Yeats, Ramazani and Hart each show that comparing vernacular poetry in English from different regions can show that a scrupulous attentiveness to questions of form can be compatible with revisionist accounts of modernism; we need not abandon formalist reading habits in order to redraw the cultural parameters of modernism along
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more global lines. The twentieth-century novel, it will surprise no one, has been plumbed extensively for its transnational depths: Jed Esty (*Unseasonable*) and Joseph Slaughter both examine the bildungsroman as the preeminent transnational literary form, while Peter Hitchcock makes a similar case for the serial novel.

Drama, manifestos, and performance art have also attracted interest as border-crossing genres. Following the work of Marjorie Perloff, critics have noted the paradoxical combination of spirited internationalism and recrudescent nationalism that proliferates among the avant-garde (Caws; Puchner; Winkiel). Perloff, who reads the avant-garde as both fugitive and fungible, demonstrates that the manifesto probably ought to be classified as a piece of performance art, designed to attract maximum notice and capable of moving easily across national borders.

What follows

If modernism offers an aesthetics of motion, the ensuing chapters follow modernism’s urge to move around. Each chapter begins with an overview of the most relevant criticism. These critical introductions are designed to offer a survey of the theoretical landscape. The objective is to outline critical debates, pointing to salient areas of agreement and disagreement. The tone, I hope, will be fairly even-handed, the goal being to introduce readers to points of intersection and divergence among critics without necessarily endorsing one approach or method. The fact that this book is a critical introduction to the topic of modernism in a global context gives me some justification for this approach. Although the book covers a wide range of critical perspectives, these chapters attempt to orient the reader by highlighting specific points of discussion. These chapters are not comprehensive on this front: they omit some critics who might otherwise be present, and they often reduce the complexity of arguments for the sake of clarity. Space, and of course my own competencies and limitations, help explain these gaps. I encourage interested readers to dig more deeply on their own.

After an overview of the critical landscape on a particular research question, each chapter provides a number of short applied readings, offering somewhere between five and perhaps a dozen case studies. Again, my own interests and limitations guide my choices. I make
some effort to reach different sections of the world, but these case studies are far from comprehensive. The case studies are meant to be suggestive, showing readers how a comparative method can yield interesting results. In a sense, everything and everywhere are grossly underrepresented: no individual text and no regional canon receive anything like a full treatment. These limitations, I hope, are offset by other gains, notably a widening of perspective that attempts to grapple with modernism’s restlessness.

The book’s four main chapters each focus on one of the most promising research areas in international modernist studies. Chapter 2 shows how the emergence of postcolonial theory has dramatically changed the way scholars of modernism now regard the movement. A chapter on modernism and imperialism is therefore an obvious choice for inclusion here. Chapter 3 focuses on cosmopolitanism. Euro-American modernist literature has been associated with cosmopolitanism for quite some time, and recent thinking about the value and ethics of cosmopolitanism has reinvigorated treatments of modernist writing. Chapter 4 considers the burgeoning interest in literary institutions, from little magazines and anthologies to literary prizes and cultural festivals. Finally, Chapter 5 turns to media and technology—especially the new transmission and storage devices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—suggesting how modernists both embraced new technologies as a way of imagining broader audiences and also questioned the cultural impact of sharing and archiving reams of sound and visual data. New technologies promised to allow the willing artist to transcend narrow boundaries of culture, language, and race, and yet some modernists were quite keen to emphasize that better connections with far-flung places do not always mean better communications.

With these four main chapters, this book will not aim for complete coverage of modernism in all its regional variants. Every region of the world has contributed to modernist literature, but the point of this book is not to take readers on a global tour, to compare writers from what is sometimes called the periphery with writers from what is often regarded, implicitly, as the center. In fact, I largely resist the urge to read any literary object strictly, or primarily, in reference to other texts from the regional canon to which it belongs. To my mind, an area studies approach to modernism—a chapter on North America, South America, Western
Europe, Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, Southern Asia, Micronesia, and so on—is both too straightforward and not straightforward enough. Too straightforward in that it might offer literary histories of individual regions, thereby giving us a false sense that we understand all the components of the whole; too straightforward in that it would be more difficult to draw culturally, geographically, and linguistically inconvenient connections between writers in different places from different generations; and not straightforward enough in that a strict coverage model would limit our ability to see modernism as an inherently global movement, not easily bounded by a smaller geographical units of analysis. A truly global perspective should alter our perceptions of the cultural center, whatever that might be, as well as the cultural margins, wherever those might be. If the book has an underlying argument, it is that categories such as European, African, or Latin American modernism should seem to us somewhat limiting, enticing us with a comfortable sense of cultural specificity at the expense of a more uneasy, a more expansive understanding of what modernism does when it is on the move.