

Transnationalism and Modern American Women Writers: Introduction

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Introduction

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Introduction

Deborah CLARKE and Anne REYNÈS-DELOBEL

- 1 In F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1931 story "Babylon Revisited," the protagonist Charlie Wales, returning to Paris several years after leading a tumultuous life there in the 20s, comes to a disquieting conclusion as he looks around the Ritz bar: "It was not an American bar anymore—he felt polite in it, and not as if he owned it. It had gone back into France" (616). This story encapsulates the essence of American expatriate modernism; the claim of ownership highlights an arrogant assumption not only of internationalism, but of American imperialism. Yet it's also a classic modern story, where disruption underlies the sense of national cultural appurtenance and dominance. The feeling of ownership and at-homeness is transitory, and the bar becomes doubly de-familiarized: first by Americans commandeering it and second by Americans losing it. This leads to the question of how the issue of transnationalism bears upon the understanding of what constitutes American space and what role Americans play within that space. For women writers such issues are further complicated by gender; to what extent can women claim transcultural space and what options are there for American women writers to explore these contested intersections? These are the kinds of concerns that will be explored in the contributions to this issue of *E-rea*.
- 2 This volume of essays explores modernism, modernity, transnationalism, borders, and American women writers¹. While numerous books and essays take on these topics either singly or in conversation with each other, this volume brings all into conversation. By covering over a half century of women's literary transnationalism(s), it also aims to invite comparison between writers who are rarely considered together, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Katherine Anne Porter and Anita Loos, as well as to shed light on still little-known works or artists, such as Janet Flanner's lesbian novel, *The Cubical City*, or Mexican-born anthropologist and historian Anita Brenner.
- 3 This approach requires several methodological clarifications. For a start, the term « transnationalism » does not simply mean opening new territory beyond national borders—even if the women writers under consideration were experienced travelers and, for some of them, true globe-trotters— nor understanding the national story in wider context. Instead, it problematizes the idea of identity altogether by

interrogating, as Paul Giles has argued, “not only the boundaries of the nation-state, but also the particular values associated implicitly or explicitly with it” (Giles 284). By focusing attention on moments when the foreign becomes constitutive of an elaboration of the domestic, the transnational “focal” brings to the fore not only forms of invigorating encounter with otherness and estrangement, but also ethnocentric positionings leading to “new mappings of cultural prejudices” (Katz 27). The essays included here examine how the work of well-known and lesser-known women writers address forms of cultural translation by distancing themselves from any clear and unequivocal sense of national cultural identity. In so doing, some of them engaged with discourses of racism and primitivism which underline the ambivalence—and even paradox—of their national identifications and positionings. For others, deep-seated cultural and literary Europhilia became the site of a confrontation with the issue of national authorship and authority. Whatever boundaries they endeavored to push—race, class, gender, or sexuality—all of them invested in a cross-cultural perspective which both questioned and complicated their identitarian poetics.

- 4 The experience of these women writers demonstrates that distancing from home also provided the opportunity of a dialectical encounter with modernity. As Fitzgerald defamiliarizes the space of Paris in “Babylon Revisited,” so they interrogate place, mobility, and female autonomy, re-imagining what a gendered modern transnationalism might look like and mapping new spaces for women. However, this quest for new space is less that of “a point of origin that marks a new departure,” as Paul de Man’s famously asserted in his description of modernity (de Man 148), than the seeking out of a critical interval in which past and present, proximity and distance converge and diverge in illuminating ways. Though these writers worked in different national, intellectual and social contexts, they explored the tensions between tradition and innovation across a range of literary genres and conventions. The way they renegotiate the past to negotiate the present forces us to recognize that transnational modernism can profitably be read not as a narrative of newness and rupture, but as one preoccupied with return.
- 5 Indeed, recent scholarship has noted the gaps in transnational scholarship, with Matthew Hart arguing that much of the theoretical work “is oriented toward theorizing the nature of modernity rather than the transnational as such” (Hart 158). Furthermore, as Jolene Hubbs points out in a recent article, much transnational theory uses language that may erase or objectify female characters. Among the “gendered blind spots” Hubbs identifies is transnational modern studies’ conception of movement as progress: “[B]y fetishizing movement without sufficiently accounting for the forces that promote and impede circulation, we have unintentionally woven gendered inequality into the fabric of our own critical practice” (Hubbs 4). On the hunt for such unconscious biases, several of the contributors to the present volume demonstrate that transit and transaction are often perilous for women, thus expanding the scope and application of transnational modernism and highlighting the potential for further innovative theoretical work.
- 6 As the continuing expansion of modernist studies into new—temporal, spatial, disciplinary and now digital—territories increasingly re-shapes how we understand and interact with modernist practices, the essays included here also raise the question of the continuing usefulness of terms like “modernist.” Our authors make clear that there were many conversations going on regarding women and modernity from a

transnational perspective. In some ways, what we see here reflects what Sarah Robbins in her essay printed here identifies as a liminal brand of modernism, one that reminds us of multiple sites, multiple voices, and multiple modes of articulation. Putting Djuna Barnes and Mina Loy alongside Elaine Goodale Eastman and Edith Wharton thus points toward American modernism as the study of nodes of complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes.

- 7 From both a literary and a sociological perspective, it is, furthermore, worth noticing that the writers under consideration are all well-off and well-educated white women who were, for the most part, well-established in the literary market and print culture of their time. This privileged position enabled them to address the relationship between celebrity and literary culture, and fashion their own celebrity images through various kinds of public performance among literary elite circles or by balancing high culture with popular culture as a way to evolve a sophisticated discourse for the representation of radical issues—including the redefinition of sexual orientation and gender identity. By situating both well-known and lesser-known women writers into this context, we believe that our authors help to enlarge our understanding of highbrow, lowbrow and middlebrow categories in very valuable and productive ways².
- 8 The essays included in this issue of *E-rea* explore transnational modernism from a variety of perspectives. The first four all engage some sort of travel. Leslie Petty's piece on Elizabeth Cady Stanton considers how her European travel in the late 1880s and early 90s served as a catalyst for her evolution as an activist. Petty's nuanced argument avoids merely celebrating or condemning Stanton, as has frequently been the case, in favor of exploring the contradictions and tensions in her transnational writing and activism. For instance, by focusing on Stanton's interest in Darwinism, honed while she was staying in Europe, Petty sheds new light on the contradictory arguments employed by the writer in relation to Irish Home Rule, and hence on the blend of radicalism and nativism that mark her late work. Sarah Robbins looks at a less-explored form of transnationalism in her study of Elaine Goodale Eastman, that of the borders of Native American nations. Goodale Eastman, she argues, contributed to the development of Native American literatures, though her engagement was somewhat vexed, and ultimately can be seen as formulating a kind of border modernism. Tabitha Morgan looks at how Katherine Anne Porter and Anita Brenner used their travels in Mexico to celebrate indigenous art and to attempt to challenge—even if sometimes ambivalently—colonialist impulses to silence indigenous voices. By articulating the viewpoint of the practicing artist (Porter) and that of the scientist/historian (Brenner), this essay brings new emphasis on the tension between aesthetics and politics in the artistic revolution of the 1920s. Finally, Yasna Bozhkova's exploration of Mina Loy's poetry reveals the influence of Loy's transnational travels. Using the idea of the Baedeker as a parodied convention, Bozhkova makes a case for reading Loy's transnational stance and poetics against the grain of most readings of her radical poetics and cosmopolitanism. In addition, her focus on the political background, commitment and manifestos bring an extra resonance to the themes explored in this issue.
- 9 The second section takes on the ways that transnationalism may de-familiarize one's sense of home and place. Johanna Wagner examines the role of the *flâneuse* in the work of Jean Rhys, Djuna Barnes, and Anita Loos, arguing that when women serve in this quintessentially modern role, they interpret "the urban and the social in ways thoughtful, provocative, and unique." The essay not only offers important insights on

the connection between modernity and mobility, but it also complicates the productive tension between Barnes and Rhys by placing them in conversation with Loos's middlebrow modernism. Rai Peterson looks at a little-known novel, Janet Flanner's *The Cubical City*, as an example of early lesbian modern fiction, a text that engages different kinds of boundaries and borders, and the ways that one may try to deal with sexuality by moving from place to place. By investigating the novel's investment in female masculinity, masculine femininity, and women's promiscuity, Peterson demonstrates that Flanner pushes back against heteronormativity—even if she cannot imagine a complete escape within the novel itself—in ways that are perhaps not adequately described by the terms “trans” or “nonbinary.” A piece on Edith Wharton follows where Virginia Ricard destabilizes the common understanding of Wharton as a cosmopolitan writer by arguing that while she is known as a writer whose characters are frequently in transit, a sense of place and belonging is necessary to individual growth.

- 10 As examples of women writers engaging in various forms of transnationalism and border crossings, these pieces all help to fill out the space of transnational modernism by insisting on inserting women fully into that space. While the quality of their fiction may not always rise to the standards of canonical modernism, all have valuable contributions that expand and enhance our understanding of how modernist studies and American literary studies continue to evolve.

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NOTES

1. The essays in this volume were largely though not entirely selected from those presented at the 2017 Society for the Study of American Women Writers International Conference. The conference was held at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France, from July 5 to July 8 2017 on the subject of “Border Crossings: Translation, Migration, & Gender in the Americas, the Transatlantic, & the Transpacific.”

2. On the subject of women and celebrity culture, see Faye Hammill’s *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture between the Wars*. University of Texas Press, 2007. On the subject of the feminine middlebrow novel, see Nicola Humble’s essay in Joannou 2013.

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