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Communal Modernisms: Teaching Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture in the Twenty-First-Century Classroom

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Book Review | Communal Modernisms: Teaching Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture in the Twenty-First-Century Classroom


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The editors of this noteworthy volume situate their work within a growing strand of modernist scholarship eager to shake up the traditionally “Monolithic Masculine Modernism” focused on Joyce, Pound, and Eliot (3). They propose a more inclusive lens, “communal modernisms,” inspired by Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin’s notion of “seemingly small, vibrantly lived, personal moments” as central to human history (2). The introduction also emphasizes the continued importance of feminism as a “key corrective” to studying and teaching modernism (4), as well as the vitality of “recovery, archival, and interdisciplinary work” to re-energize the Twenty-First Century classroom (5). The editors foreground Emily Hinnov’s concept of the “choran moment,” or “textual instant when characters or readers (re)cognize their connection with a larger, inherently unified whole,” in modernist texts as central to their recuperative project (5), and their overarching goal is to define modernism as a “conversation that resonates with our time as opposed to a master narrative of a past period” lacking in direct relevance for today’s students (8).

Each essay follows a similar template, with variations; each contributor develops an argument rooted in textual analysis, before introducing lesson plans to demonstrate how instructors can model interpretive insights for students. The authors privilege women writers and texts often marginalized or overlooked in traditional high modernist scholarship. Like most volumes including authors with distinctive styles, approaches, and interests, Communal Modernisms works best as a loosely connected group of intriguing parts, and less so as a uniformly cohesive whole, which is perhaps the point. Rather than presenting a potentially “Monolithic Feminist Modernism” or a grand unifying theory of what “communal modernisms” should look and feel like, this volume proposes often engaging and provocative ways to think about modern women’s writing without centralizing its insights into a single, prescribed way to “do” modernist scholarship.
Some essays' connections to the volume's “choran community” focus are tenuous, but yield inspiring interpretations regardless. Standouts include two essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner, a writer I suspect often gets left out of typical Modern British undergraduate syllabi, and essays that productively (rather than opportunistically) combine well-known or obscure authors with other media, like Hinno on Woolf and photography; Lauren Rosenblum and Judy Suh on advertising in Larsen and Rhys; Emily Wojcik on Fauset's Little Magazine editing; Kristen Ortega's pairing of Lola Ridge's The Ghetto with Jacob Riis's Lower East Side photographs; and Bonnie Roos on Nightwood's historical context. These essays not only meet the volume's stated goals—combining feminist approaches to archival or interdisciplinary scholarship with genuine attention to the pedagogical challenges of presenting students with often baffling or frustrating course materials—but also exceed them with thoughtful teaching strategies either woven throughout the essay or generously detailed in a separate end section.

Hinno's analysis of the "phantasmic mother" in Woolf's To the Lighthouse and photographs of mothers by Gertrude Käsebier suggests that “both artists made use of maternal longing in envisioning wholeness through their art” (22). Her essay carefully delineates her pedagogical strategies, such as reminding students of Late-Victorian ideals like the Angel in the House when analyzing Kasebier's photograph “The Manger, or, Ideal Motherhood” in relation with Woolf's portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay (through Lily's memories in the novel's final section) (26). Her lesson plan usefully models for literature instructors how to integrate more visual materials in their courses because it takes them seriously as 'texts' equally worthy of multiple and possibly conflicting interpretations in the classroom.

Rita Kondrath's essay on Warner's little-known poem Opus 7, and Noreen O'Connor's on the more canonical Lolly Willows, both present illuminating readings of the texts and generously helpful pedagogical strategies and resources. Kondrath provides a clear thematic focus, “non-combatant trauma” (111), to anchor her teaching of the poem to students presumably unfamiliar with Warner but all too aware of concepts like PTSD. She also draws attention to Warner's feminist critique of the “lack of available outlets through which non-combatant women might mitigate postwar identity trauma” (118) through the poem's foregrounding of alcoholism as symptom of the community’s failure to address non-combatant trauma. Kondrath effectively sheds light on a non-canonical text worthy of scholarly and pedagogical attention, and implicitly encourages other instructors to include Warner's poem on syllabi about war and postwar literature through a useful lesson plan. O'Connor similarly combines a challenging text, Warner's unclassifiable novel of female emancipation, with a careful feminist attention to the cultural and historical context governing single women's lives between the wars. She reads Lolly Willows's “modernist utopianism” (134) as a revision of the marriage plot that reimagines “women's roles beyond the strong binary power structure of patriarchy” (130). She foregrounds postwar cultural history for her students with research assignments designed to take advantage of increasingly available electronic resources, in order to stress the novel's engagement with gender and power and its “emergent possibilities for rethinking the very cultural structures” defining postwar women (130).

Ortega makes a compelling case for selecting marginalized modernist texts focused on social justice to counter students' perceptions of irrelevance when faced with modernist literature. Her choice to pair Lola Ridge’s poem The Ghetto (1918) with Jacob Riis’s images of Lower East Side tenements both serves an explicitly feminist agenda, and challenges traditional definitions of modernism as supposedly non-political. Ortega argues for Ridge’s importance both in modernist genealogies, since her “long poem about the modern city” predates Eliot’s The Waste Land (71), and as an early feminist intervention, since it embodies women's experiences in its form (nine sections, to reflect
gestation) and its content. For Ortega, the poem serves as a key counterpoint to Riis’s photographs, where poor women are objectified and othered by the male gaze.

Wojcik raises questions around genre as much as canonicity in her thoughtful analysis of Jessie Fauset’s editing work for *The Crisis* and *The Brownies’ Book*. She argues for editing as a crucial form of creative engagement; resituationg texts by Harlem Renaissance writers in their original material context (little magazines) reproduces the original readers’ encounters with the texts and foregrounds Fauset’s careful choices and juxtapositions. For instance, Fauset’s placing of Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” next to a “politically motivated review of books about Africa” in *The Crisis* helps students notice the way Hughes raises the same issues Fauset “finds lacking in the sociological books” in her review (90). Wojcik takes full advantage of the Modernist Journal Project’s online resources by sharing original periodicals with her students and asking generative questions about the differences between encountering a text in its original context and in a traditional anthology.

Rosenblum and Suh both offer fresh approaches to better known modernist texts, Larsen’s *Quicksand* and Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*, by highlighting the ways each text grapples with the period’s material culture, especially advertisements conceived to reinforce traditional gender roles. For Rosenblum, Larsen’s protagonist Helga seeks recognition as a modern subject through her “participation in commodity consumption” (54) and ultimately fails to develop a coherent and independent self. Like other contributors, Rosenblum reminds us of the many online resources available to bring cultural contexts to life for Twenty-First Century students and facilitate their deeper understanding of the complex challenges women like Helga faced. Suh draws attention to the way ads featuring Englishwomen in *Voyage in the Dark* “act as objects of Anna’s identification” early in the novel; “imperial advertising” for products like cookies and cocoa insists on a “pure and innocent femininity” (103) that Anna ultimately figures as both aspirational and unattainable for herself as a colonial subject. Rhys uses ads to critique imperialism in its cultural and gendered ramifications, and Suh’s classroom strategies foreground the cultural work Rhys’s novel performs as the “product of a writer from the ‘poor world’ and the peripheries,” a text in which students might recognize their own interests in crossing “national and racial boundaries” (106).

Roos’s essay on teaching a notoriously challenging text, Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, offers many suggestive ideas, including her claim that history matters more to the novel than scholars typically believe. She encourages her students’ efforts to grapple with the “riddle” of the novel by comparing their analysis to “detective work,” because it is “our responsibility as readers to fill in narrative silences” within the novel’s fragmented form (159). For Roos, a great modernist text reveals much about its historical moment, and through research assignments and supplemental information she guides her students’ investigations to unearth clues to Barnes’s ideas. *Nightwood* invites this historically informed pedagogy, and Roos incorporates material about the 1920 vote for women and President Harding’s refusal to join the League of Nations as pertinent to the “sleepwalking” nature of the novel’s protagonist, Robin, who stands for women of the period who have internalized a “submissive suggestive position” (165) and have fallen prey to the “same pitfalls” of patriarchy as their male counterparts (166).

*Communal Modernisms* only lacks concrete evidence of student engagement and learning, a gap potentially resulting from the contributors’ efforts to provoke questions, invite recognition, and elicit interdisciplinary insights. The authors’ thoughtfulness and dedication as teachers are clear and impressive, and whether or not their methodology yields hoped-for results perhaps lies beyond the essays’ scope. Nevertheless, a book with "modernism" in its title and "teaching" as a central focus deserves acclaim in a field where authors often write as if scholarship exists in its own sacred bubble,
detached from the daily grind of bringing literary research to life for the population without whom scholarly pursuit would not exist: students. These contributors collectively demonstrate the importance of thinking creatively and pedagogically about one's scholarship, instead of pursuing increasingly narrow and esoteric research for an ever-diminishing number of similarly afflicted scholars.