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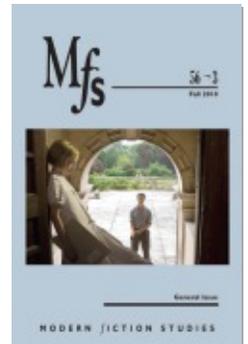
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## **Regional Modernism: A Reintroduction**

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## REGIONAL MODERNISM: A REINTRODUCTION

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**Scott Herring**

"Europe," crowed Iowa-based painter Grant Wood in a lesser-known modernist manifesto, "has lost much of its magic. Gertrude Stein comes to us from Paris and is only a seven days' wonder. Ezra Pound's new volume seems all compound of echoes from a lost world. The expatriates do not fit in with the newer America, so greatly changed from the old" (19). Wood—he of *American Gothic* fame—titled his snippy comments *Revolt against the City*, and in this 1935 essay argued for a quiet revolution that would stymie metropolitan-based modernisms: "But if it is not vocal—at least in the sense of issuing pronouncements, challenges, and new credos—the revolt is certainly very active. In literature, though by no means new, the exploitation of the 'provinces' has increased remarkably; the South, the Middle West, the Southwest have at the moment hosts of interpreters whose Pulitzer-prize works and best sellers direct attention to their chosen regions" (8). "Because of this new emphasis upon native materials," Wood went on to explain, "the artist no longer finds it necessary to migrate even to New York, or to seek any great metropolis. No longer is it necessary for him to suffer the confusing cosmopolitanism, the noise, the too intimate gregariousness of the large city" (22–23).

I do not want to dismiss Wood's anti-urbanism, his insufferable claims against cosmopolitanism, his social and most likely racial conservatism, and his emphatically American exceptionalism. But I do want to highlight that in the midst of these questionable politics lays an inchoate theory for a "regional modernism" decades before the phrase achieved wide currency in academic circles. The term "regional

modernism" first originated in architecture studies, where it came—and where it continues—to characterize building design that opposed the standardizations of an International Style promoted by the likes of architects such as Le Corbusier. "Collectively," notes Vincent B. Canizaro, regional modernism "is a theory that supports resistance to various forms of hegemonic, universal, or otherwise standardizing structures that would diminish local differentiation" (20).

As such, the anti-international term "regional modernism" harkens back to Wood as well as to the early twentieth-century theories of Frank Lloyd Wright and Lewis Mumford, who each offered treatises on the social need for "organic" architecture and regional design. Writes Mumford in his 1924 *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization*: "Before we can build well on any scale we shall, it seems to me, have to develop an art of regional planning, an art which will relate city and countryside in a new pattern from that which was the blind creation of the industrial and the territorial pioneer" (206). By doing so, Mumford predicted with confidence, "out of the interaction of the folk and their place, through the work, the simple life of the community develops" (197).

That Mumford, Wright, and Wood together insist on interdisciplinary links between American modernism and regionalism (what Wood terms "the artistic potentialities of what some of our Eastern friends call 'the provinces'") may seem odd to the ears of twenty-first-century literary critics (38). Studies in architecture see little difficulty in aligning regionalism with modernisms past and present, but the two have seemed rather incongruous in literary studies—and for several good reasons. Across the United States, the United Kingdom, and continental Europe, modernism's reliance on the metropolitan appears unshakeable. Its major movements crystallized in global metropolises such as London, New York, Paris, and Berlin. Publishing houses and small presses in these same cities vetted many of its major productions. Its affective repertoire often hinges on two acute responses to the supposed anonymity of the urban environment, shock and the blasé. And the gregariousness of a large city seems to nurture ideals of cosmopolitanism and worldliness that continue well into the present.<sup>1</sup>

It is hard to disagree with these intimacies between modernism and the metropolis, yet it is also not too difficult to see that the urbanized orientations of modernist studies can take a graceful swan dive into metronormativity.<sup>2</sup> In its tried-and-true formulae, a hallmark of a modernist text—new or old—is a breakaway from the region in terms of migration and affect. Its keyword is deracination, and it likes to think that it has uprooted itself from provincialism as a way of life and the provincial as a geographic entity when it leaves

any pretty how town behind. An early example of this worldliness crops up in Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*: "Looking backward, I feel that our whole training was involuntarily directed towards destroying whatever roots we had in the soil, toward eradicating our local and regional particularities, toward making us homeless citizens of the world" (27). Another comes to us from Carl Van Doren, who sounded regionalism's death knell in his 1922 overview *Contemporary American Novelists, 1900–1920*. In this lofty takedown of the "now moribund cult of local color" (1), Van Doren dismissed regionalism as "quaint interiors scrupulously described; rounds of minute activity familiarly portrayed; skimpy moods analyzed with a delicate competence of touch" (16). In contrast to the "Old Style" of "local color," Van Doren proselytized a more robust "New Style"—a "Revolt from the Village"—whose torch was carried by the likes of Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Zona Gale, Floyd Dell, and F. Scott Fitzgerald (146).

While we should be wary of collapsing metropolitanism with modernism and regionalism with ruralism, this scenario remains commonplace in contemporary literary criticism. Through guilt by association, regions become sites of eradicationism and regionalism—as a genre—becomes a discarded literary mode, the case study of an isolate, or, scraping the bottom of the ideological barrel, the henchman of the nation-state. Conflated with a quaint local color, "regionalism" thus figures as an antiquated and effeminized (dainty, delicate, minute, skimpy) literary form that international modernisms eclipsed, and despite the rich recent scholarship on regionalism's complex formations, its movements can often seem antimodernist at best, the "antithesis" to modernist studies at worst (Duvall 242).<sup>3</sup> Hence when scholars consider the role of regionalism in modern twentieth-century literatures, they often stereotypically relegate it to singular case studies. Willa Cather's *Red Cloud*, William Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha County*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Eatonville*, and *The Vanderbilt Agrarian's* supremacist *Deep South* come to mind when one considers the American scene, and these sites have often been treated as geographic curiosities removed from larger global impulses. Such a picture inevitably paints a highly restricted field that neglects the importance of locality to modernism's world-imaginary.

Time will tell if there is also something of a shame factor going on here, as one of our essays on Katherine Mansfield and the nonurbane attests implicitly (modernist urbanity is easy to admire; regional chic is met with a question mark). Yet if one takes a minute to review the sheer volume of little magazines produced outside New York City—*Double-Dealer* (New Orleans, 1921–26); *Prairie Schooner* (Lincoln, 1927–present); *The Midland* (Iowa City, 1915–33); *Southern Review*

(Baton Rouge, 1935–42); *The Fugitive* (Nashville, 1922–25); *The Frontier* (Montana, 1920–39); *Kenyon Review* (Gambier, 1938–59); and *Southwest Review* (Dallas, 1924–present)—a different picture of literary regional modernism starts to emerge ("Little"). We begin to remember, as one scholar of popular American music contends, "if modernity was made in the clubs of Harlem, the back rooms of the Tenderloin, and the cafés of the Lower East Side, it surely, too, was made in the hollers of Appalachia and the bayous of French Louisiana" (Mancini 215). We also begin to recall a chunk of Raymond Williams's incisive remarks in *The Politics of Modernism*:

This means, above all, seeing the imperial and capitalist metropolis as a specific historical form, at different stages: Paris, London, Berlin, New York. It involves looking, from time to time, from outside the metropolis: from the deprived hinterlands, where different forces are moving, and from the poor world which has always been peripheral to the metropolitan systems. This need involve no reduction of the importance of the major artistic and literary works which were shaped within metropolitan perceptions. But one level has certainly to be challenged: the metropolitan interpretation of its own processes as universals. (47)

Borrowing a page from Williams, some recent turns toward the transnational in modernist scholarship have shed light on how we might reconsider the regional differentiations inherent in many modernist productions. Even as others continue to insist that an emphasis on the regional or the local neglects "modernism at large" (Huysen 9), critics such as Sara Blair find that "the move to nationalize and transnationalize modernist cultural production has tended to obscure its life as a local phenomenon" (814).<sup>4</sup> In a different yet not unrelated vein, Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz likewise propose that many critics now "globalize modernism both by identifying new local strains in parts of the world not always associated with modernist production and by situating well-known modernist artifacts in a broader transnational past" (739). Such a premise buttresses Susan Stanford Friedman's expansive definition of modernity as "wherever and whenever the winds of radical disruption blew," a definition whose "wherever" widens the geographic scope of modernist productions within and without the West (503).

Consciously or not, these credos to broaden modernist studies repeat earlier calls outside the field to attend to the subnational, the intranational, and the critically regional. Studies in architecture again point the way, much like they did with the term "regional modernism." In their theorizations of what they termed "critical regionalism"—first

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coined in 1981 and further developed by architectural and cultural critic Kenneth Frampton in 1985—Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre introduced a concept that could accommodate the political, aesthetic, and social elasticity of any regional-identified building design across the uneven movements of modernity. In theory and in praxis their critical regionalism "defamiliarizes regional elements" as scholars, artists, and architects nurture "the capacity of regionalism to keep redefining itself" ("Critical" 4). Such regionalism, Tzonis and Lefaivre offer, is also tightly bound to global movements that do not depend upon the destruction of local particularity. A critical regionalism would instead enhance these connections: "Critical Regionalism appears as complementary rather than contradictory in relation to trends towards higher technology, in relation to a more global economy and culture" (23). Other recent proponents of this critical regionalism such as Mary Louise Pratt, Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, José E. Limón, and Jennifer L. Fleissner—who has coined the choice phrase "diasporic regionalism" ("Earth-Eating")—agree.

We have now come full circle. This critical regionalism, when placed alongside the local-based productions of new modernist studies, returns us to the vibrant old debates that Grant Wood entered in the mid-1930s with both fists swinging. According to Michael Denning's account of popular front aesthetics in the Depression-era United States, regionalism was a "multi-accented banner" that "often overlapped with the proletarian culture avant-garde. For many of the young Midwestern, southwestern, and western writers collecting folklore and contributing stories to the little magazines, the 'regionalist' banner was adopted in the face of the metropolitan cultural left" (133). Denning then stresses that the "New York cultural left often ignored or rejected this radical regionalism: 'Regional', the left-wing regionalist Sanora Babb recalled, 'was the stinging word used by certain influential New York groups to try to keep writers outside New York in their places'" (qtd. in Denning 133). Like others I have mentioned in this introduction, Denning reminds us that a radical or critical regionalism did not fade in the wake of urbanized and urbane modernist experimentations. It was not always shunted to the "Old Style" of the late nineteenth century, and it showed an admirable capacity to keep redefining itself over the decades. Indeed, the so-called "'regionalist' banner" has been vital to the internal and internecine debates about modernity for three centuries. So often seen as adversarial, regionalism and modernism have always been compeers in terms of spatiality and in terms of periodization. This last claim begs a pressing question: what if the New Modernist Studies is as much the New Critical Regionalism?

Think of this special issue as a salon that mulls over this inquiry. It does not hope to rewrite the book on modernism, but it does try to keep the conversation flowing like bathtub gin in a speakeasy. Each essay minds Williams's challenge in spaces such as Southeast Asia, the rural Philippines, small town Mississippi, Manila, the settler colonies of New Zealand, London, Anasazi cliff dwellings in what would become the US Southwest, the hills of Los Angeles, northern Nevada, and Nashville, Tennessee. Each informs their close reading by incorporating other fields such as intellectual history, anthropology, film studies, feminist studies, postcolonial studies, queer studies, and Asian American studies into their critique. Each tracks the productive possibilities—and, in a few cases, the unexpected impossibilities—that regionalism produced for Filipino, Anglo-American, Indian, British, Asian American, and Māori modernisms. And each remaps the conventional cartographies of what counts—both back then and now—for a truly modernist study of regionalism within and without the United States.

In their respective essays, Denise Cruz and Geneva M. Gano explore the antinational and subnational potential of regional modernism as well as some of its imperialist pratfalls. In her queer reading of Jose Garcia Villa's *Footnote to Youth: Tales of the Philippines and Others* (1933), Cruz deftly charts the promises and the oversights of Villa, one of transpacific modernism's most notable diasporic stars. Through a thick braid of literary history, biography, queer studies, and Asian American studies, Cruz reads the poetics of *Footnote to Youth* as symptomatic of queer of color modernist dislocation, focusing on how Villa deployed a Filipino regionality to advance an international modernism that also contradicted the ideological violence of international modernity (even as he neglected to voice the concerns of Filipina women). On a different register, in her witty close reading of Nathanael West's 1939 *The Day of the Locust*, Gano introduces what she terms a "New Deal regionalism" that West used to counteract the false promises of Depression-era nationalism in the United States. Focusing on West's mockery of the local color tradition found, surprisingly enough, in the developing tradition of the Hollywood novel, Gano then widens her critique to address the misogyny and racism that undergirds New Deal regional productions of the thirties.

David McWhirter and Eric Aronoff compose their investigations of regional modernism around two classic modernist concerns: mass culture and primitivism. McWhirter turns to the writings of Mississippi-based author Eudora Welty to explore how her supposedly small town fictions dialogue with world-productions such as silent film. This alone is worthy of note, but McWhirter takes his thesis several steps further to discuss how this complex dance between the regionalized US

South and global media networks was gendered and racialized by the segregated social codes of the Jim Crow era. Similarly, Aronoff takes a common trope of modernist studies—primitivism—and reveals how the figure of the Native American proved vital to much of American regional modernism's self-understanding and public promotion. Layering the Boasian ethnographic critique of Edward Sapir with Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* with New Critic pundit John Crowe Ransom's "The Aesthetic of Regionalism," Aronoff offers an entirely original account of modernist organic form as it relied on constructions of regionality and indigenous bodies.

Moving away from the transpacific as well as the transcontinental United States, Saikat Majumdar and Jessica Berman concentrate on relays between the global metropolis of London (or the urbanities of Bloomsbury) and its colonial regionalisms in South Asia and Australasia. Majumdar focuses on a key oversight in studies of Katherine Mansfield—her fraught relation to the settler colony of New Zealand—and attends to the affective shocks of trauma, boredom, and urbane envy sparked by settler life. His reading then expands to consider Mansfield's canonical relation not only to British modernism and the tradition of the domestic novel, but also to the advent of a Māori literary tradition that flourishes to this day. Berman also tackles movements from a center of metropolitan modernism to a centerpiece of metropolitan modernism through her biographical and literary analysis of Mulk Raj Anand, one of India's more celebrated twentieth-century authors. Theorizing what she terms "regional cosmopolitanism," she incisively reads Anand's interactions with London's literary scenes as the writer went on to produce modernist works such as *Coolie* (1936) and *Untouchable* (1935).

Finally, Stephen Hong Sohn examines the afterlife of regional modernism in contemporary works of US-based fiction by turning to Julie Otsuka's novel *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002). First contextualizing the novel amid the traumatic legacies of Second World War internment camps in the US, Sohn next illuminates how modern and modernist visions of the North American Western desert landscape continue to haunt the imaginaries of contemporary writers such as Otsuka. Questioning traditional geographic boundaries of Asian American literary production, Sohn uses Otsuka to interrogate the role of regionalist local color as it lives on in twenty-first century writings that continue to critique mythologies of the American West—mythologies that many regional modernist writers, painters, and architects helped to reinforce, if not reintroduce.

In their respective exploitations of the so-called provinces, these seven essays remarkably increase the parameters of modernist studies. They illustrate that as much as there will always be a

plurality of modernities, so too will there always be a multitude of regional modernisms. Speaking broadly, Wood would have termed this "regional activity in the arts and letters" (44). Today, we might call this a modernism at small even when at large.

## Notes

1. A most recent example of this comes from Jacques Derrida's *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, where the philosopher finds cosmopolitanism to be "a novel status for the city" (3).
2. For more on international modernism's tendency towards urbanism, see Felski (70).
3. A sample from my primary fields of interest would include Pryse, Fetterly and Pryse, Foote, Brown, Hsu, Kaplan, Hegeman, Farland, McGurl (135–57), Bone, Rowe, Scandura, and Baker Jr. on the "new southern studies" (9).
4. See Doyle and Winkiel on "which city, which hillside" (2), Baucom, Duggan, Smith and Cohn, and Povinelli and Chauncey for more on these interconnections between the local and the transnational in studies of modernism and modernity.

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