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# Abstracts

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## ABSTRACTS

Kirsten Strom

### Reinventing Art and Ethnography in Haiti: Dunham, Deren, and Hurston

While ‘modernism’ has been theorized by some as an age based on the Enlightenment pursuit of the purity of isolated disciplines (with post-modernism framed conversely as a corrective era of interdisciplinarity), this essay considers the work of three figures practicing decisively interdisciplinary research in the very heyday of the modern era. Indeed Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and Maya Deren, each of whom traveled to Haiti in the decade between 1935 and 1945, all practiced both the fine arts and the social sciences, very frequently at the very same time.

Before treating the three figures individually, however, the essay briefly discusses the question of Haiti’s significance, framing it within the context of the progressively intended anthropological discourses of the era. Indeed, both Franz Boas, Hurston’s mentor at Columbia, and Melville Herskovits, one of Dunham’s advisors, practiced a relativist anthropology with the specifically declared intent of generating a greater respect and understanding of cultures widely dismissed as ‘primitive’ by the white, Western mainstream. The religion of Haitian Voudoun, in particular, had been widely stereotyped throughout the US as an irrational and violent cult based on witch doctors and zombies. As if in response, Hurston, Dunham, and Deren each conducted participant-observer research in Haiti which inspired both anthropological texts and works of art in the media of fiction, dance, and film respectively.

Zora Neale Hurston’s time in Haiti yielded the text *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, which effectively fused the genres of ethnographic reportage and autobiography, while delivering the text in a distinctively literary narrative voice. While several recent scholars have commented on the hybridized nature of her ‘ethnographic’ work, they have tended to privilege her work with rural African-Americans, leaving *Tell My Horse* in need of additional consideration, which this essay begins to provide.

Katherine Dunham journeyed to Haiti in 1938 with a calling card marked, ‘Dance and Anthropology’. Her completed Master’s Thesis, ‘Dances of Haiti’ was later hailed by Claude Levi-Straus specifically for the uniqueness of Dunham’s interdisciplinary credentials. Indeed, as Dunham herself has claimed, ‘I explained that I was there to learn dances because I like to dance; to a people for whom dancing was an integral, vital expression of daily living this explanation seemed natural enough’. Thus she established her own credibility as a transparently interested person who liked to dance,



rather than as a peculiarly detached and culturally parasitic scientist, studying humans as one might study insects. Her ensuing career was to include decades of choreography inspired by Haitian and other Caribbean dances in both 'high art' and popular venues.

Filmmaker Maya Deren traveled to Haiti on a Guggenheim grant, intending to produce an 'art film', that would be a document of the visual forms of Haitian dance. Somewhat to her own surprise, the ultimate product of her time there was the now classic text *Divine Horsemen: Voodoo Gods of Haiti*, an effort perhaps somewhat more 'anthropological' than 'artistic'. What Deren had concluded was that the forms of Haitian popular dance could not be severed from their context. Therefore, she, like Dunham and Hurston, provides an alternative to 'primitivist' models which evacuated non-European forms of their content and cultural context in order to reinvent them as aesthetic modernism.

The essay's conclusion suggests that the work of these three artist-ethnographers indeed warrants a broadened concept of modernism, one which more fully acknowledges the intellectual diversity and interdisciplinarity of those who had already fully recognized the social and political implications of arts and culture.

Tace Hedrick

Of Indians and Modernity in Gloria Anzaldúa's  
*Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*

In this essay, I suggest that the work of Chicana lesbian feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa, especially in her 1987 *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*, belongs to a long-standing history of Latin American as well as United States conversations about race, sexuality, and modernity. Her late 20<sup>th</sup> century Chicana lesbian-feminist viewpoint is often read as the antithesis of a modernist viewpoint, and indeed it provides a lens through which modernist ideas are refracted. Yet her appeals to the fusion of (racial) opposites and her romanticizing of 'the Indian woman in us' find some of their most basic language and imagery in longstanding 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican discourses of mestizaje (indigenous and white Hispanic race-mixing) and indigenismo (romanticized readings of indigenous oppression). In fact Anzaldúa's invocation, in *Borderlands*, of the Mexican politician and thinker José Vasconcelos' 1926 *La raza cósmica* (The Cosmic Race) alerts us to the place of her work in the history of modernism in the Americas.

Thus I argue that the conceptual scaffolding for *Borderlands* inherited some key modernist assumptions from early 20th century Mexican thought, when discourses of mestizaje and indigenismo were employed in building a modern future on an ancient indigenous past. Such a project was modernist in that it assumed fundamental differences between 'modern' and 'indigenous' people: modern people were rational, scientific, light-skinned, and future-oriented, while indigenous peoples were primitive, dark, timeless, and more naturally spiritual. Tracing Anzaldúa's connection specifically to Mexican modernism resituates her work within a transnational genealogy of ideas about race, sexuality, and race-mixing, from the early decades of the 20th century in Mexico to the later decades of Chicano civil rights movements in the United States, and to the publication of *Borderlands* itself.

Giorgio Mariani

'Safety is in our speed': Reading Bauman Reading Emerson

Taking the lead from John Tomlinson's call to think of modernization and globalization not only in terms of 'metaphors of territory and borders, of flows and the regulation of flows', but also as 'shifts in the texture of the modernity', the essay offers a tentative exploration of how mechanical velocity and acceleration have contributed to the reshaping of the American cultural imagination. The essay focuses in particular on a few passages from Ralph Waldo Emerson, read through the lenses of Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity*, and argues that the former's response to speed is not only ambivalent, but for the most part paradoxical. Speed is certainly a feature 'of a generalized global modernity' and therefore, as Tomlinson argues, it makes little sense to think of it 'as the original property of any one national culture'. On the other hand, the essay insists that global traits of modernity may be differently perceived and culturally constructed within specific geo-cultural spaces. Emerson, for example, tried to come to terms with mechanical velocity by imagining that abundance of 'free' spaces could attenuate the more disruptive consequences of velocity, a notion inherited by some of the more visionary US counter-culture of the Sixties and Seventies.

Cyraina Johnson-Roullier

'Blackness', Modernity, and the Ideology of Visibility in the Harlem Renaissance

This essay examines the relationship between race and modernity through a critique of interracialism in the Harlem Renaissance. The essay argues that the exploration of interracialism put forward by George Hutchinson in his groundbreaking study *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Harvard, 1995) cannot adequately interrogate the modern significance of white and black participation in the Harlem Renaissance, because the notion of interracialism on which it is grounded holds at its core an uncritiqued and uncontested understanding of 'race' that subtly and simultaneously reinforces a binary logic existing between conventional notions of 'white' and 'black'. The new vision of the Harlem Renaissance suggested by analysis of its underlying interracialism can only become fully possible in modern terms to the extent that this conventional binary, white/black, is also pulled apart to expose the cultural significance of the opposition between the two terms, through which the hidden nexus by which they are joined comes violently to the fore. Thus, in order to construct new (racial) boundaries between modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, the examination of interracialism in the Harlem Renaissance is not enough to effect a radical and transformative change in the way in which either movement is perceived. This is because it leaves the essential dichotomy between 'white' and 'black' - by which the two movements are covertly described - in place, rather than seeking to understand what may lie beneath this received discursive, often material and visual reality. Leaving this hidden dichotomy unexplored and uncritiqued will necessarily obscure the compelling new insights that the examination of these unexplored depths may bring



to an understanding of one or the other of modernism or the Harlem Renaissance, or both. This study is derived from a larger project that investigates the role of gender in unraveling the complicated relation between race and modernity in the Harlem Renaissance.

Sonita Sarker

Modern America: Gwendolyn Bennett and Victoria Ocampo

Capture the Continents

This project presents the ways in which early 20<sup>th</sup> century national and continental consciousnesses, both of which contain universalizing tendencies, become key points in the identity making of ‘Americans.’ It juxtaposes Gwendolyn Bennett, the Harlem Renaissance writer of the *Ebony Flute* series with Argentinean Victoria Ocampo, the editor of the literary magazine *Sur*. This comparative analysis of ‘minor’ and ‘major’ women intellectuals argues that a kind of ‘American Literature’ emerges through particular formations of specific racialized and gendered identities creating, and created by, the politico-economic battle between modernist capitalism and socialism. The project is part of a larger work—including Virginia Woolf (England), Grazia Deledda (Italy), and Cornelia Sorabji (India)—that maps how the making of racialized and gendered ‘natives’ in the frames of political philosophies produces types of literature that are conflicted in terms of local and global aspirations. This synchronic study also has a diachronic dimension in that it traces the legacies of identity, nation, and literature for our own modernities.

Margaret Mills Harper

‘I wind my veil about this ancient stone’: Yeats’s Cuchulain and Modernity

Analyses of Irish modernity require attention to diaspora, and global emigration from Ireland, totaling some seventy million people, is often figured in hemispheric terms. In particular, a transatlantic paradigm is relevant: there are many more Irish Americans, including Irish Canadians and emigrant communities in Latin America, than there are people living in Ireland. America was a fabled land of opportunity but also a Solomonic choice. Daughters and sons who emigrated were both lost, in that they did not return, and saved, from inhospitable conditions ranging from penury to famine. The imagined relation between Ireland and America expresses this profound relation. America appears in direct and indirect form in a number of cultural productions that speak of the instabilities and attractions of this hemispheric relation. The figure of Cuchulain, a character in medieval sagas that was recycled in 19<sup>th</sup> century popular culture and reinterpreted by the poet and dramatist W. B. Yeats, interestingly demonstrates the ambivalencies of a gaze across the Atlantic. Yeats used Cuchulain as part of a project to create a usable past for Ireland, turning figures such as the sacrificial soldier and the lone adventurer from imperial discourse against the very empire that birthed

them. At the same time, Cuchulain, who appears in a sequence of Yeats's plays and several poems, is British modernist in style, appearing by means of costumes, set design, and dance that are shot through with British and European modernist modes. But Cuchulain is a multiply overdetermined sign, deeply gendered and racialized, an embodiment of anxious masculinity undone in the face of feminized otherness and a subject that is, we might say, islanded, indefinite, with the promise of completion just over the water. This hero must fight the waves in one play and die in another at the hands of the weakest of male foes, tied by an old lover's veils to an 'ancient stone.' Finally, Cuchulain disappears into what Yeats would call a phantasmagoria, a reverie, that relocates him in a space of water and the vaguely articulated lands beyond it and a no-time that is that of change itself. Cuchulain signifies the need to invent Irishness, of the complex crossings that this project entails, of its inevitable failures in a post-independence Ireland and a transatlantic-focused Europe, and of its end in the relentless economies of diaspora, as the hero dies at the hands of a blind beggar.

Steven Yao

#### A Rim with a View: Modernist Studies and the Pacific Rim

This essay outlines an agenda for the study of modernist cultural production that focuses on the dynamics of movement and transformation within the context of a particular geographical formation, namely the 'Pacific Rim.' In such an approach, I argue, the rigors and opportunities of an expressly transnational comparative methodology take center stage. The conscientious development of a 'view from the Rim' entails more than simply acknowledging the fact of geography. Rather, it involves a dedicated attention to tracing the manifold historical and material relations among groups within the area and beyond along a number of different vectors, as well as attending to how these relations at once occasion and condition cultural production. For literary concerns in particular, such vectors include, but are by no means limited to, the particularities of language and various dimensions of power such as asymmetrical economic arrangements underwritten by military and political domination expressed through a variety of channels. In advancing this set of concerns, I also suggest that Modernist Studies in general can enrich its approach to both the decidedly international cultural scope and subsequent global spread of Modernism by entering into an engagement not only with Area Studies, but also with more recently emergent (as well as non-historically defined) fields such as Ethnic Studies.

Laura Doyle

#### The Riptide Currents of Transnationalism

This paper suggests that it may be useful to think in terms of three interacting streams of transnationalism in modernity, especially as they shed light on modernist practices: imperialist transnationalism, regional transnationalism (including the hemispher-



ic), and activist or diasporic transnationalism. My comments are provisional, a thought experiment prompted mainly by the reading of everyone's papers. The intention is to give us a way to understand some of the relations among our very diverse materials.

I am not aiming to offer a taxonomy of transnationalism or of our papers. Instead I conceive of something more dialectical. I propose that these three streams of transnationalism unfold together historically and they interact. Over time, into the present, they continuously constitute, strain, redirect or, in pockets, break up each other. In the end I ask two questions: 1) how might these transnational actors deliberately or simply by their presence break up, or redirect, or create aporias within the imperialist and regional forms of transnationalism—and vice versa? And 2) how might (geo)modernisms arise out of these interactions?