Modernism after Postcolonialism: Toward a Nonterritorial Comparative Literature by Mara de Gennaro (review)

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Note

1. "On the Abolition of the English Department," a collaborative effort by (then-named) James Ngugi, Henry Owuor-Anyumba, and Taban Io Liyong, is reprinted in Ngũgĩ wa Thing'o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture, and Politics* (London: Heineman, 1972).

Modernism after Postcolonialism: Toward a Nonterritorial Comparative Literature. By Mara de Gennaro. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. xi + 224 pp. Hardcover $94.95. Paperback $34.95, E-book.

Mara de Gennaro's study is ambitious and impressive. It pursues a rich variety of ideas, it chooses texts for reasons familiar to modernist and postcolonial scholars but pairs them in surprising ways, and its innovative close readings justify these pairings. De Gennaro's methodologies require parsing before my discussion of how she illuminates works by four major modernists, four major postcolonial figures, and various anglophone and francophone theorists.

Though de Gennaro does not gather the following aims into a mission statement, they undergird her analyses.

—*Modernism After Postcolonialism* synthesizes an anticolonial and antiracist project spanning global literature and theory throughout the modernist and postcolonial epochs.

—It critiques anxiety, including its indirect textual manifestations. As de Gennaro explains, anxiety for what Heidegger called a "reassuring world picture" leads people to build walls and to oppress or conquer others. Writers might, to their credit, *display* anxiety, for example, by depicting protagonists who fail to understand themselves or their racial and sexual others. Or writers might, to their discredit, *repress* anxiety—though it will likely affect their texts nonetheless. In either case—or when authorial intentions are irrelevant—de Gennaro teases out anxiety's formal manifestations.

—Critiquing anxiety cuts more than one way. It doesn't only mean exposing how white male authors or protagonists wrestle with their waning "mastery." It also means doubting the wisdom of Negritude, the concept that grounds anticolonial resistance in an essential identity. (Although Aime Césaire is known as the father of Negritude, de Gennaro argues that his thought is more complex than suggested by this label, which is often wielded against him by his critics.) De Gennaro disputes scholars whose anxious impatience for condemnations of racism leads them to impute prejudice to novels by Gertrude Stein or J. M. Coetzee—when such critics fail to work through the textual difficulties that these novelists artfully develop.

—Critiquing anxiety also means valuing *créolité*, a nonessentialistic attitude toward identity and aesthetics that Afro-Caribbean critics including Édouard Glissant developed in response to Negritude. De Gennaro traces créolité in literary and critical texts, and she employs it in her own exegeses, which value "ambivalent" and "heterological articulations of resistance," rather than single-minded ones (149).

—In the spirit of high modernism, de Gennaro values difficulty, "opacity" (a term borrowed from Dipesh Chakrabarty), and even "beauty" (as elaborated by Woolf, Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, and others). De Gennaro examines how authors employ unreliable narrators, counter-focalization, multivocalism, polysemy, simultaneity (rather than temporal linearity), "wavering" authority, failed self-deciphering, and irresolution—all to pose challenging questions and to withhold premature answers.

—In keeping with her valuation of difficulty, de Gennaro doubts the purported rational-communicative transparency of literary realism and science. She doubts poet-seers' presumed epiphanic capacities, and what some theorists imagine as the "transparency" of "unity." To borrow a term from E. M. Forster, "muddling" through the challenges of intercultural intimacy from an acknowledged position of partial knowledge strikes de Gennaro as more ethically responsible than epistemologies that promise comprehensive insights.

—De Gennaro pursues "nonterritorial" comparatism, as per her subtitle, avoiding both humanist universalism and theories of incommensurability. She pairs works by white anglophone modernists—Stein, Eliot, Forster, and Woolf—with works by diverse postcolonial figures: Coetzee, Césaire, Chamoiseau, and Edwidge Danticat. Rather than subsuming such ostensibly "discrepant" writers under a universalist banner, and rather than assuming

that their works cannot illuminate one another, de Gennaro makes the comparatist's wager that—with critical ingenuity—they can advance shared goals.

De Gennaro's method is so elaborate that before any chapter discusses its two primary texts, it performs preliminary comparisons, pairing a francophone theorist with an anglophone novelist, for example, or pairing the titular modernist with an *additional* postcolonial figure. She models how critics can be master-arrangers. Yet her thematic motifs—including *créolité* and the world's radical heterogeneity—never feel imposed. She draws them out of the texts that she pairs. She does this in part by discussing texts' *internal* comparisons—for example, between the epistemologies of different characters, or of a narrator and a character—in keeping with Robert Young's observation that, in postcolonial works, "comparing takes place in the literature itself, through form and content" (145).

—Each of de Gennaro's chapters rereads a modernist classic in light of an idea or formal technique that a postcolonial text might elaborate more fully. This method supports Eliot's belief that the present can shape our understanding of the past as much as the past informs the present. That de Gennaro's and Eliot's political sensibilities radically differ supports her idea that complex theoretical ideas and literary strategies are not reducible to ossified agendas.

The title of de Gennaro's chapter 1, "Unspeakable Figures of Métissage in 'Melanctha' and *Disgrace*," promises a discussion of racial mixing in Stein's and Coetzee's works—with an emphasis on textuality made possible by the etymology of the French term "métissage" that gets lost in the English "miscegenation." But before arriving there, de Gennaro visits multiple texts. First, she discusses the use of counter-focalization at the conclusion of *Things Fall Apart*. When Achebe depicts the District Commissioner's callous attitude toward a hanged body, de Gennaro says, this encourages readers to focus on the bulk of the novel's immersive realism, which humanizes the Igbo people.

This leads de Gennaro to reexamine the ending of "The Good Anna," from Stein's *Three Lives*, wherein a minor character's brief letter reveals an important plot point, and by extension the "partiality" of "all narratorial views." Like Achebe, Stein employs counter-focalization—though not for identical reasons—in effect telling readers "Be wary about where you direct your attention." We can "better recognize" Stein's skeptical "conception of knowledge," de Gennaro argues, thanks to the "cumulative effects of transdisciplinary postcolonial efforts," from literature to theory.

All of this prefaces de Gennaro's argument that *Disgrace* can help us better appreciate "Melanctha." Thematically, she joins these texts by discussing "convergence" between francophone theories of métissage and anglophone theories of subalternity (Spivak being one of de Gennaro's inspirations). Formally, she joins them by admiring their indeterminacy. Each text has been accused of racism: Coetzee's for articulating white grievance and Stein's for failing to disown its characters'—including its eponymous protagonist's—attitudes. But these accusations miss two important points. First, each protagonist is a "wanderer," a term that de Gennaro borrows from Glissant. Wanderers are not bound by conventional ways of thinking; their views change and are hard to pin down. Second, each protagonist is fallible. Though each text's narrative point of view *hews closely* to that of its protagonist, the two do not *merge*. The divergence between narrator and protagonist creates the epistemological instability that helps modernism—and especially postcolonialism—to undermine the essentialisms of racist regimes or ideologically rigid resistance movements.

De Gennaro's next three chapters offer similarly illuminating chains of comparisons. Chapter 2 builds on the work of Trinidadian historian C. L. R. James in comparing Eliot's *Waste Land* to Césaire's 1939 *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, another "opaque magnum opus of modernist poetry." This comparison enables James *not* to read *Notebook* as an "unconditional affirmation of African culture." Franz Fanon praised *Notebook* in these terms, but creolist critics turn Fanon's words against Césaire, seeing his poem as an expression of pro-black racism. James understands Césaire's "negritude" not as a monolithic expression of racial pride, but as sensitive to the fluctuating lived realities of Afro-Caribbean communities during a particular era. Equipped with this appreciation of Césaire's thought, James recognizes *Notebook*'s polysemy. James's one limitation (he is not a literary critic, after all) lies in his limited attention to *Notebook*'s form—a shortcoming that de Gennaro rectifies in her attention to *Notebook*'s "protean evocations of community" through its use of "diverse rhetorical modes" that are not "personal voices" (87). She brings the same appreciation of polysemy to her discussion of *The Waste Land*, in distinction to critics who accuse its poetics of "simultaneity" of reifying "timelessness and immutable values." Reexamining *The Waste Land* without this preconception—and without worrying about its author's politics—de Gennaro highlights why the poem has inspired liberation-minded Afro-Caribbean poets including Césaire and Derek Walcott.

Before discussing *The Waste Land* and *Notebook*, chapter 2 weaves a tapestry of modernist and postcolonial calls and responses. De Gennaro discusses Walcott's review of Chamoiseau's 1992 novel *Texaco*, which he compares to *Ulysses*, and Eliot's translation of the 1924 poem *Anabase*, by the French Guadeloupean St.-John Perse, which employs techniques used in *The Waste Land* (and *Notebook*). Thus de Gennaro reinforces the ideas, first, that postcolonialism learned a lot from modernism, and second, that modernists' uses of parataxis, irresolution, and other difficult styles are best appreciated in light of the comparative epistemologies favored by postcolonial authors like Césaire (and comparatist critics like de Gennaro herself).

Chapter 3 further reinforces these ideas about both literary history (how modernism partly anticipates postcolonialism) and the role of critical theory (how scholars can review modernism in light of postcolonialism, to highlight what they value in it). The chapter does for Forster's *Passage to India* what the first two chapters do for "The Good Anna" and *Disgrace*. It defends *Passage* against charges of prejudice—such as Edward Said's claim that its depiction of India as unreadable is "Orientalist"—by attending to its perspectivalism, that is, its internal comparisons.

To support this reading of *Passage*, de Gennaro draws on *Texaco*, which she calls "a metafiction in the guise of a metahistory." Chamoiseau's novel presents itself as a Word Scratcher's revised version of an oral history narrated to him by an aged Marie-Sophie before she dies. The novel begins late in this history, when an urban planner arrives to raze the Texaco settlement for a modernizing city council. The urban planner is nearly killed by a stone thrown by a squatter, until he is resurrected and Marie-Sophie recounts her people's history to him, converting him to the cause of preserving their colony.

While this cause seems just, as the cause of Indian independence seems just in *Passage*, each text is enriched by "edifying unclarity." In *Texaco*, where do Marie-Sophie's testimony end and the Word Scratcher's revisions begin? In *Passage*, where do Fielding's (fallible) perspective end and the narrator's (also fallible) perspective begin? *Passage*'s trial scene is also edified by unclarity: when Mrs. Moore doubts her memory of assault—and resists the prosecutor's tendentious line of questioning—the case against Aziz collapses. Despite *Passage*'s "apparently realist coherence," reading it in the light of *Texaco* helps us see its canny ambiguities, and thus how ambiguities also enrich intercultural contact and jurisprudence.

Chapter 4 generates yet more insight by attending to texts' internal comparisons. It notes how Césaire's 1950 essay *Discourse on Colonialism*, Woolf's 1938 *Three Guineas*, and Danticat's 1998 novel *The Farming of Bones* all compare fascist practices that their audiences abhor to locally tolerated forms of exploitation. Césaire acknowledges the pitfalls of historical comparisons, but nonetheless juxtaposes contemporary colonialist aggressions to those of the Roman empire, and—in a *coup de grace*, in a celebrated passage about Hitler—says that, from the perspective of the humanistic twentieth-century bourgeois, the dictator's crime has been to humiliate the white man in ways that Arabs, Indians, and Africans have long been humiliated by European colonizers.

Employing subtler indirection, *Three Guineas* compares comments in a 1936 *Daily Telegraph* article on the evils of women working to a speech that year (that Woolf slyly leaves unattributed) by Hitler to a Nazi women's association.

With such precursors' examples to learn from, Danticat juxtaposes Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo's 1937 massacre of Haitian immigrants and Afro-Dominicans with the spread of fascism in Spain. Set in Trujillo's Dominican Republic, *Farming* features Amabelle, a Haitian immigrant who works as a servant to the Spanish expatriate Papi. As she watches Papi listen in horror to radio reports of Franco's ascendancy in Spain, readers grasp the irony: Trujillo is an equally menacing figure, right where Papi and Amabelle live. Intensifying the irony, Papi's daughter marries one of Trujillo's obedient soldiers—a threat to Amabelle.

This summary recapitulates only a portion of de Gennaro's chapter 4, as my earlier discussions recap only portions of her other chapters, all of which have long chains of intertextual comparisons. *Modernism After Postcolonialism* has much to offer. It confronts a dilemma—or trilemma—that will continue to challenge teachers and scholars of canonical works that are implicated in historical forms of oppression, or accused thereof. Should we stop reading them? Should we engage them in a spirit of castigation, assuming that we have transcended—but must maintain vigorous opposition to—their provincialism and racism? Or should we reinterpret them in ways responsible to their formal and thematic complexity, sensitive to their capacity to mean different things to different audiences, and generous with regard to their potential as gateways to an understanding of the world's radical

heterogeneity? If the third option proves sustainable in the coming decades, then ingenious studies like de Gennaro's will deserve credit for this success.

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Borges, Buddhism and World Literature: A Morphology of Renunciation Tales. By Dominique Jullien. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. xxv + 126 pp. 51.99 €.

Within the revival of World Literature Studies, the oeuvre of the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges has performed a variety of roles. In his seminal essay, "The Argentinian Writer and the Tradition," Borges can be seen as a Latin American cornerstone in the defense of the periphery's equality to the center; in "The Translators of The 1001 Nights," Borges acts as a precursor to the cultural turn in translation studies and to the notion that world literature is one that *gains* in translation; in a plethora of other works, Borges intertextualizes world literature, whether through his interpretation of Kafka's works, his essays on Dante's *Commedia*, or his interest in the Kabbalah.

In her fascinating new study, *Borges, Buddhism and World Literature: A Morphology of Renunciation Tales*, Dominique Jullien, who is professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Santa Barbara, convincingly makes the case for yet another role that Borges is perfectly fit to play within World Literature Studies: that of continuator and further disseminator of the Buddhist Renunciation Tale as a morphological archetype in fictional literature. Jullien considers the aesthetic and political implications that the renunciation tale has on his work, first by reading Borges's own interest in the archetype against the background of the rise of Peron's left-wing populism in Argentina during the 1950s—the decade that Jullien sees as Borges's Buddhist decade—and then by proceeding to tease out the implications that the renunciation tale has on Borges's own philosophy of literature as seen in multiple examples of his vast oeuvre.

Thus, Jullien's book reframes Borges as a significant node in the propagation and creation of a literary intertextuality that has its origin in the story of the historical/fictional Buddha—a story Borges detailed in the cowritten