Cunard, Nancy (1896-1965)

Denell Downum (Montclair State University)

A poet, journalist, publisher, radical intellectual, and political activist, Nancy Cunard operated at or near the center of multiple modernist discourses. Her early poetry, especially the long poem *Parallax*, was deeply engaged with experimental forms and themes characteristic of high modernism. In 1928, she became a noteworthy figure in the small press movement, establishing the Hours Press and publishing work by avant-garde and modernist writers including Samuel Beckett, Laura Riding, and Ezra Pound. Cunard conceived the *Negro* anthology in 1930, eventually closing her press to focus on compiling this monumental exploration of transnational black culture. Published in 1934, the oversized volume included important African American intellectuals and key figures of the Harlem Renaissance among its 150 contributors, but it proved controversial and sold poorly. As war threatened Europe, Cunard joined the anti-Fascist struggle, exposing atrocities as a reporter during the Spanish Civil War, publishing a political pamphlet called *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War*, and working tirelessly to organize opposition to first Franco and then Mussolini. During World War II, Cunard continued to write against fascism and in support of the French Resistance, while also collaborating with George Padmore to produce the anti-imperialist and anti-racist tract *The White Man’s Duty*. Following the war, her work became more retrospective in character, encompassing memoirs about Norman Douglas and George Moore as well as her own Hours Press.

The only child of British shipping magnate Sir Bache Cunard and leading society hostess Lady Emerald Cunard (Maud Burke), Cunard was born on 10 March 1896. Following a brief marriage to Sidney Fairbairn in 1916, she broke away from her family’s social circle and formed her own friendships with avant-garde writers and artists. Her London connections included Edith Sitwell, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Virginia Woolf, and T.S. Eliot. She settled in Paris in 1920, forming friendships with Janet Flanner, Richard Aldington, Samuel Beckett, William Carlos Williams, Tristan Tzara, and Louis Aragon, among others. Associated with literary modernism, Dada, Surrealism, and Communism, Cunard was embedded in numerous modernist networks. She was the model for characters in novels, plays, and films, as well as the subject of photographs by Man Ray, Cecil Beaton, and Barbara Ker-Seymer. After becoming romantically involved with African-American jazz musician Henry Crowder in 1928, Cunard became one of the few figures linking white and black modernism. Charismatic, glamorously unconventional, and sexually adventurous, Cunard was an icon of the Jazz Age, but her own work and her significant left political commitments were often overshadowed by popular fascination with her image. Her writing and political activism largely ignored, she died alone in Paris on 17 March 1965.

The conflation of Cunard’s striking appearance, her flamboyant public persona, and her literary and political work in part reflects Cunard’s own interrogation of the boundaries of aesthetic, personal and political spheres, but it has also at times been baldly misogynistic. Maureen Moynagh notes the double standard by which Cunard was condemned for participating in the same sexual freedoms that many male modernists enjoyed; for instance, two of her lovers (Michael Arlen and Aldous Huxley) subsequently published unflattering portraits of Cunard in their own work (23). In a groundbreaking essay that aims to recuperate Cunard as ‘a major intellectual and political figure of the Twentieth Century,’ Jane Marcus argues that Cunard’s work was suppressed in part because of her embrace of international communism, a cause that made possible ‘a commitment to social justice that goes beyond nation’ (9). This commitment was expressed in the anti-imperialist as well as anti-racist ethos of the *Negro* anthology, including Cunard’s own assertion that ‘it is Communism alone which throws down the barriers of race as finally as it wipes out class distinctions.’ The anthology’s revolutionary politics clearly contributed to its suppression in some circles, while others objected to the primitivism and white romanticism that they perceived in its pages (Lemke 133). After years of neglect, there has been a resurgence of interest in Cunard’s work, including the *Negro* anthology, since the publication of Marcus’ essay. Nancy Cunard’s passionate commitment to social justice, her performative conflation of the personal and the political, and her transgressive crossing of the borders of race, gender, class, and nation may be finding a more receptive audience in the early twenty-first century than they did in her own time.

Selected Works

Cunard, Nancy (1921) *Outlaws*, London: Elkin Matthews and Marrot.

------ (1923) *Sublunary*, London: Hodder and Stoughton.

------ (1925) *Parallax*, London: Hogarth Press.

------, ed. (1934) *Negro: An Anthology*, London: Wishart.

------, ed. (1937) *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War*, London: Left Review.

------ (1942) *The White Man’s Duty*, with George Padmore, London: W. H. Allen & Co.

------, (1966) *These Were the Hours*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

------, (2002) *Essays on Race and Empire*. Ed. Maureen Moynagh. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.

References and Further Reading

Benstock, S. (1986) *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Gordon, L. (2007) *Nancy Cunard: Heiress, Muse, Political Idealist*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Kaplan, C (2013) *Miss Anne in Harlem: The White Women of the Black Renaissance*, New York: Harper: 279-338.

Lemke, Sieglinde (1998) *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marcus, J. (1995) ‘Bonding and Bondage: Nancy Cunard and The Making of The *Negro* Anthology.’ *Boarders, Boundaries, and Frames: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies.* Ed. Mae G. Henderson, New York: Routledge.