WHY TRANSTNATIONAL MODERNISM CAN’T BE ALL IN ONE LANGUAGE

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As Richard Handler reminds us in New Literary History, the practice of comparison presupposes the practice of grouping.1 Comparison involves both the claim of similarity (A is like B) and the claim of difference (A is not like B). Sometimes, comparison involves the conversion of difference into similarity, or the assertion of similarities that are not yet visible. As Handler puts it, one isn’t supposed to compare “apples and oranges”—they are proverbially incomparable—but sometimes one is trying to correct a distinction that has gone without saying. Comparison may serve to display a likeness that has not been known, or not been acknowledged. The perception of likeness can give us a new way of understanding the objects in question.

As teachers and scholars, we establish likeness at every turn. Through individual and institutional choices, we create containers for archives, curricula, departments, and literary histories. The various intellectual projects that Douglas Mao and I have described as “the transnational turn” in modernist studies have sought to create new groupings that exceed, modify, or supplement the collectivity of the nation.2 The principal methodology has been expansion through comparison. Adding new literary texts to the conversation has, in some important ways, changed the conversation.

To take the example of my own discipline, we now seem to agree that English literary history can’t be all in one nation. As modernists, I suspect that few of us ever differentiated sharply between U.S. and British writing, but now we might also fan out geographically and chronologically to include literary works that hail from, say, India, the Caribbean, South Africa, and Canada. Anthologies and studies of global Anglophone literatures have proliferated, and this has been salutary in several respects.3

First, it has allowed us to question the organizing principles of twentieth-century literary history and to develop new principles. Second, it has allowed us to examine in greater detail and with greater sophistication the circulation of English-language writers throughout the world. Third, it has allowed us to notice that migration and globalization are engines of literary innovation as well as conditions of literary production. Fourth, it has allowed us to provincialize European modernism as one among several global responses to modernity and—at the same time—to rethink the distinction between Europe and its Others that has been central both to modernist art and to modernist scholarship.

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NOTE


Wolkowitz argues that the rise of computer technology has led to a new way of writing and communicating. He contends that the traditional notions of authorship and the relationship between writer and reader have been fundamentally altered by new technologies. Wolkowitz suggests that the future of writing will be characterized by a new kind of collaboration and interaction, where the writer is no longer the sole creator of text.

Wolkowitz's work is significant because it challenges the traditional notions of authorship and the relationship between writer and reader. His essays are a valuable resource for anyone interested in understanding the impact of technology on writing and communication.
3 Some of my argument here has appeared previously in MLQ 72, no. 1 (March 2011): 120–24. I am grateful to the editors for their permission to reprint.


8 I take this up in “For Translation.”


10 Ibid., 551.
