

**Book Review**

**Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. xii, 451.**

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In *Planetary Modernisms*, Susan Stanford Friedman employs the popular modernist trope of the journey to address what is most exciting about recent developments in the field of modernist studies, while identifying the source of its most acute anxieties. One of the leading advocates of the global turn in modernist studies, Friedman insists that the imperative to examine modernism as a global phenomenon can lead to a reevaluation of the very idea of the “modern.” She suggests that while a decade has passed since Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz pointed to “expansion” as the driving force of “the new modernist studies,” a central problem remains unresolved in the field, namely the tropes within the critical literature that continue to shape the aesthetic and sociopolitical frame of modernity in relation to an Anglo-European center. For Friedman, then, the present imagining of global modernism is “insufficiently planetary,”<sup>1</sup> for it still oscillate between the critical imperatives of needing to expand beyond Anglo-European socio-political centers, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, and simultaneously needing, as Frederic Jameson insists, to retain enough finitude to be critically useful. In order to navigate this Scylla and Charybdis of the new modernist studies, Friedman launches “definitional excursions,” exploiting the radical disjunctions of meaning contained in the terms “modernity” and “modernism,”<sup>2</sup> arguing for a critical approach that focuses on the contradictions and creative instabilities of these terms.

Even as the book's premise sounds quite daunting, and the style it adopts is rather experimental, the manner in which *Planetary Modernisms* charts its main points is relatively straightforward. First, Friedman attempts to spatialize the temporality of modernity, rejecting the traditional periodization of the term, which defines it as a post-1500 European development. In this perspective, modernity comes to mean "a paradigm shift, a geohistorical transformation on a large scale."<sup>3</sup> To support this redefinition, she presents various cases of non-Western modernities from earlier historical periods, including the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties in China, the Mongol Empire of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and the Mughal Empire of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Ultimately, the result is a dismantling of the Eurocentric, *longue durée* framework for the concept of modernity. This enables Friedman to argue for a polycentric, recurrent concept of traveling and interlocking modernities in which Western modernity is just one among many; some modernities precede it, some are concurrent with it, others subsequent to it.

In a similar way, Friedman moves away from the traditional view of modernism as a fixed set of aesthetic conventions originating in early-twentieth-century Europe; instead, she defines modernism as "the expressive domain of modernity,"<sup>4</sup> which can be found at any given time in history—whether in the poetry of Du Fu from the Tang dynasty, the cobalt-blue ceramic glaze of the eighth-century Arabic-Islamic Abbasid Caliphate, or the performance poetry of the Indian mystic Kabir in the fifteenth century. In many ways, this is a persuasive definition, for it allows us to expand the term to new geographies and historical moments without entirely relinquishing the long-standing sense that the term has at least some degree of historical specificity. And, perhaps most importantly, it allows us to discuss modernism outside the "familiar Eurocentric boxes,"<sup>5</sup> without framing non-European modernisms as simply derivative, pale imitations of the modernism of the Western metropolises.

In the final chapters, Friedman tests out her theories of planetarity with several collage structures, performing "contrapuntal reading"<sup>6</sup> of modernist literature from the long twentieth century. She argues that

these collages can “break open purely post/colonial logics to expose the fissures of modernity within each location as well as the relation between them.”<sup>7</sup> In the first collage, Friedman juxtaposes Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1898) to Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) and E. M. Forster’s *Passage to India* (1924) to Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997). These juxtapositions bring into focus the roles of gender, sexuality, race, and class in breaking apart the binaries of tradition and modernity in colonial and postcolonial narratives. The next collage places Virginia Woolf’s “Shakespeare’s Sister” alongside Rabindranath Tagore’s real-life sister, Swarnakumari Devi, to dismantle the narrative of “first in the West, and then elsewhere,”<sup>8</sup> specifically by foregrounding the trope of the female writer and identifying vernacular as the idiom of modernity in the context of empire. In the last collage, Friedman couples Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal / Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939) with Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* (1982) to examine their different notions of “home,” the recurring modernist trope of linguistic and post(colonial) dislocation in diasporic modernisms.

*Planetary Modernisms* aligns with Theodor Adorno in understanding the modernist aesthetics of resistance as providing a “critical edge against the real”;<sup>9</sup> the book, then, is concerned with the inseparable formal, historical, and political dimensions of modernism as they have emerged in various global locales. Friedman is well aware that the scope of her project may provoke a “Babel of debate,”<sup>10</sup> openly admitting that the book reflects the limitations of her expertise, contains ambiguities in certain arguments, and raises questions she is unable to resolve. Perhaps chief among the self-avowed limitations is her reliance on translation for non-Western works. However, Friedman continually reiterates that her main intent is “to provoke more debate, not close it off,”<sup>11</sup> extending discussions of the “global” or “planetary” within the discursive field of modernist studies. As a non-Western reader, though, what strikes me is the lack of critical voices who are not part of the Western academic establishment in this “Babel of debate” Friedman seeks to incite. While she seems keenly aware of the absence, warning how her concept of planetarity can also “reproduce the logic of imperialism,” her only real prescription to avoid the continued marginalization of non-Western

critical voices, the “transnational circulation of ideas,”<sup>12</sup> is somewhat vague and dissatisfying.

If we are to understand and discuss modernism on a global scale, it seems we must think of it as an ongoing task, as Gayatri Spivak argues of world literature. While Friedman’s planetary approach to modernist studies may overcome certain limitations of Jameson’s “singular” model of modernity, there still remain pitfalls. Perhaps most significantly, the new modernist studies’ leading role in expanding the concept of world literature compels us to confront the implications of the hegemonic dominance of Anglophone culture and scholarship in the field. As Rebecca Walkowitz points out, significant problems arise when readers of the “dominant language,” to use Pascale Casanova’s phrase, are treated as a uniform group. Ideally, Friedman’s notion of planetarity, and its consequent “Babel of debate,” can provoke both Western and non-Western scholars to reflect on their own positions and roles within the new modernist studies. This is to say, to think about who is included and who is excluded, even unintentionally, in the current “global” discussions of modernism.

Although nearly a decade has passed since the proclamation of the “transnational turn” in modernist studies, my recent trip to the Modernist Studies Association conference left me with the distinct sense that the new modernist studies largely remains a field of and for Western scholars writing in English. Friedman, of course, is highly sensitive to this situation, insisting that modernist studies can never truly “be planetary if it is monolingual,” “reproduc[ing] the linguistic hegemonies of modernity’s imperial legacies” and “remain[ing] within the confines of global English today.”<sup>13</sup> Her imperative of “studying, reading, and empowering the vernaculars,”<sup>14</sup> emphasizing the specificity of local context in critical inquiries into the relation of modernity and modernism, is thus a welcome, if essentially aspirational, corrective. From an East Asian perspective, at least, it seems the difficulty of realizing a sufficiently planetary modernist studies, a critical discourse whose methodology meaningfully redresses “modernity’s imperial legacies,” should not be underestimated.

*Planetary Modernisms* invites us on a journey worth taking, even as

it refuses to lead to a final destination, contributing, instead, to “the interminability of debate about modernity.”<sup>15</sup> The challenge of navigation itself will hopefully prompt readers to initiate their own novel excursions in the field. For Friedman, “planetary” ought to spur us to “leav[e] the comfort zone for the contact zone,”<sup>16</sup> and the book succeeds in leaving readers in that less comfortable but more exciting and potentially fertile space.

## Notes

Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Christian Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 196.

<sup>10</sup> Friedman, *Planetary*, 343.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 315, 335.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.