

Race, Nationalism and the State in British and American Modernism. By Patricia E. Chu. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xi + 196 pp. \$96.00 paper.

In a much-needed and multifaceted study of non-canonical works, Patricia E. Chu argues that far from being detached from the political concerns of modernism, writers such as Ellen Glasgow and Sara Jeannette Duncan were architects of an alienated modernist subjectivity. Drawing on films that range from *White Zombie* to *The Birth of a Nation* and writers from Rebecca West to Zora Neale Hurston, Chu shows that the early twentieth-century self is best understood in terms of its relationship with intensive bureaucratization and state technologies that prominently include but are not limited to colonial governance and the institution of marriage. Entirely excluded from the canon of modernist fiction, novels by Duncan and Glasgow created early twentieth-century identities through an engagement with the governing functions of the modern state, thus providing a compelling narrative of the relationship between the modern self and modernization.

A consistent goal of *Race, Nationalism and the State* is to reconsider the parameters of “modernist” form through an analysis of early twentieth-century non-canonical narratives; Chu demonstrates that these texts’ engagement with state power led to realist forms that connect aesthetics and the historical-political contexts of modernization. As she points out, the exclusion of Katherine Mansfield’s and Duncan’s works from the league of modernist empire fiction, usually epitomized by Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of*

Darkness, can be attributed to their realist technique which is perceived by modernist criticism as an inability to “aesthetically engage empire” (17). Modernism and empire criticism’s “claim to connect history and aesthetics” (18) remains unrealized because of its reluctance to engage with realist fiction’s representations of the state and its imperial project that shape a “rational, consent-driven” modern identity (18). For Chu, Mansfield’s and Duncan’s fictions challenge critical views of modernist aestheticism and expose their contradictions.

Chu’s juxtaposition of “modernists” and lesser-known writers of the period helps to destabilize the aesthetic structures of modernism, often leading to a reevaluation of the aesthetic features of modernism and a reading of canonical “depoliticized” modernist texts in relation to political issues of governance and administration in the early twentieth-century state. Thus, in one of *Race, Nationalism and State*’s most innovative moments, a reading of Victor Halperin’s neo-colonial film *White Zombie* (1932) is accompanied by an examination of T. S. Eliot’s changing critical opinion of Rudyard Kipling’s poetry. This highly unorthodox pairing demonstrates, according to Chu, that both Halperin and Eliot sought to understand aesthetic choices in relation to larger geopolitical issues of governance and individual agency. Similarly, Chu connects aesthetics with the racial politics of the modern state when she analyzes Jean Toomer’s *Cane* in the light of Ellen Glasgow’s realist *Barren Ground* from the same period. The latter move firmly positions Glasgow’s southern text within the currents of modernism by highlighting *Barren Ground*’s realist-sentimental genre as germane to its exploration of modern identity.

Arguably *Race, Nationalism and the State*’s most valuable contribution is to offer an interpretation of the modern female subject’s agency and her relationship with the state. Chu’s choices underscore the near invisibility of writers such as Glasgow and Duncan and certain texts of Mansfield and West in studies of modernism. Thus, Mansfield’s 1911 story (“The Woman at the Store”) on “colonizing New Zealand” and Duncan’s 1906 novel on colonial India, *Set in Authority*, depict the relations between gendered imperial discourses and subjectivity that are in “excess of strictly representational ends” (60) and yet differ from the aspect of an anti-materialist “will-to-literature” in *Heart of Darkness*. A focus on gendered imperatives of national identity and the state’s role in shaping the latter is seen to constitute the “modernism” of West’s works. Through an analysis of West’s *Return of the Soldier* (1918) and her account of the radio traitor William Joyce in *The Meaning of Treason* (1947), Chu argues against a tendency to separate West’s early “modernist” work and her later work on trial and crime reportage and makes a compelling case for situating West’s modernism in terms of an exploration of “state infrastructure’s role in constructing (modern) subjectivity” (80). The twin aspects of marriage as a signifier of

the subject's consent to modern institutional power and its reputation as a "form outside modernism" (115) form the crux of Chu's remarkably astute reading of Glasgow's *Barren Ground*. As Chu demonstrates, Glasgow's use of the sentimental trope of marriage and its enmeshment in the "political, social and economic aspects of modernization" (143) renders this feminine and "transparent genre" a "paradigm for modern subjectivity" (118) which cannot be simply opposed or dismissed in favor of "a metropolitan feminist modernism" (117).

Race, Nationalism and State's other substantial contribution to modernist studies is its integration of a postcolonial perspective that situates the state's governance of the early twentieth-century Western subject in a "political, economic and cultural context of imperial and neo-imperial modernization" (165). In perhaps the best chapter of the book, Chu explores the significance of Haiti in the construction of rational and modern "individual political agency" through an engrossing analysis of the 1932 film *White Zombie*. However, *Race, Nationalism and the State's* early contention that the "intersection . . . of the white metropolitan bureaucratized citizen-subject and the twentieth-century 'black Jacobin'" (12) was influential in shaping modernist subjectivities is not fully realized as Chu's analysis turns out to have a more selective focus. The black Haitian Zombies' lack of agency in the film represents an erasure of the identity of the "nationalist colonized" black Jacobin (9), and anti-colonialist Caribbean modernity is less a focus of the film than, as Chu's analysis underscores, the representation of liberal political anxieties about the white subject's loss of agency and autonomy in US administered Haiti. Although Chu's analysis does not go in the direction of "understanding the 'native' rather than the 'colonizer' as the subject of history" (13), as she claims in the introduction, it is highly insightful in its examination of the relationship between imperialism and "Western philosophies of the self" (13).

It would be fair to say that Chu's postcolonial perspective on the intersections of modernism and modernity is specifically trained on modernism's "supremacist" considerations of Black or colonized subjectivity that help to shape early twentieth-century representations of the relation between state and Western subjectivity. Chu's examination of *White Zombies* brilliantly illuminates the role of marriage between the Western characters in the recuperation of agency and citizenship as a solution to the degradations of labor and neo-colonization in Haiti. Similarly, at the end of her book Chu returns to the scene of "Caribbean modernity" in Zora Neale Hurston's anthropological study of Haiti and juxtaposes it with D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* to articulate a distinctive understanding of primitivism and its political uses in the conceptualization of modern Western selfhood.

Despite Chu's modest disclaimer that the broad history entailed

in the relationship between modernism and “political modernization” prevented her from writing a “comprehensive study,” her book engages with the political contextualization of literary modernism with the help of an expansive array of writers and narratives that draw our attention to the broader geographical influences upon Anglo-American modernism. In her wide canvas, Chu successfully integrates different aspects of twentieth-century political bureaucracy (“the national map, marriage, the franchise, the treason trial, colonial governance,” etc (17)) under the rubric of modernism, and in so doing restructures the literary and historical parameters of modernism.

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