

MODERNIST STUDIES  
RECONSIDERED

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(Susan Stanford Friedman. *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, 472 pp)

Susan Stanford Friedman's study, published as part of the Modernist Latitudes series of Columbia UP, undertakes an ambitious and provocative re-examination of modernity and modernism, offering new perspectives on the development of the world literature. The title itself points to the basic goal – a planetary approach to modernity, aiming to go beyond its traditionally acknowledged geographical and temporal boundaries. Resisting the conventional definitions of modernism, which attach this term to the art movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the author prefers the plural form of the noun to suggest the heterogeneity of “modernist” aesthetic practices in different times and places.

As clarified at the beginning of the “Preface,” *Planetary Modernisms* “proposes a paradigm shift to reorient the way we think about *modernity* and the aesthetic *modernisms* that contribute to its creation” (ix). Rather than accepting the traditional view of modernity as the invention of the West in the post-1500 period of Europe's eventful development, Friedman sees modernity as “a planetary phenomenon across the millennia” marked by “instances of transformational rupture and rapid change” in the spheres of culture, politics, economics, and technology (ix).

Friedman's study is divided into seven chapters, grouped within three larger parts, “Rethinking Modernist Studies,” “Rethinking Modernity, Scaling Space and Time,” and “Rethinking Modernism, Reading Modernisms,” all of which is preceded by an introduction and followed by the author's concluding remarks. Friedman takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining the illustrations from literature and fine arts with references to the works of scholars in various fields – literary critics, historians, social scientists, philosophers, anthropologists, political theorists, and economists. Intending “to provoke questions, not to settle them” (2), Friedman proposes “a fundamental rethinking of modernity that posits it as a geohistorical condition that is multiple, contradictory, interconnected, polycentric, and recurrent for millennia and across the globe” (4). In rethinking time, one of the key concepts in the book is that of the *longue durée*, borrowed from the contemporary historiography and adapted to surpass all definitive temporal boundaries, whereas space is rescaled to include “the Rest” as much as “the West” in an attempt to avoid any form of Eurocentrism. Throughout the study, the author is careful not to pose the Western modernity/modernism as a yardstick for others, but regards it as one of the many equally significant manifestations of modernist practices. Friedman indicates that “planetary” also points to “a world beyond the

human, even beyond the Earth,” which, therefore, “opens up the possibility of thinking about nonhuman modernities or the interconnections of the human and nonhuman in rethinking modernity and modernism” (8). This is one of the most problematic ideas in the book, which, although the author supports it with certain concepts from ecocriticism, still requires a more convincing explication.

The first part of *Planetary Modernisms*, “Rethinking Modernist Studies,” lays the terminological and methodological groundwork for Friedman’s further analysis by re-evaluating and expanding the definitional, spatial and temporal frameworks of what has conventionally been considered modernity/modernism. Chapter one, “Definitional Excursions,” opens with the discussion of different, frequently opposite, meanings of the term *modernity*, which are examined by means of “parataxis,” i.e. through a series of juxtapositions. Friedman proposes two routes for bypassing the terminological contestation: grammatical/philosophical and political/cultural. Rather than offering yet another definition, the author examines the (dis)advantages of the nominal and relational approaches to defining modernity and advocates avoiding definitions based on binarist, circular, and metonymic relations, which brings her to the preferred concept of multiple modernities.

In chapter two, “Planetarity,” the author develops her idea of “a *transformational* planetary epistemology” (50), which implies rethinking the whole field from a global perspective, instead of simply adding stories of different modernities worldwide to the dominant, European one. Using Wallace Stevens’s poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” as an analytical principle calling for the re-examination of an issue from various standpoints, Friedman discusses the relation between modernity and modernism, the problem of Eurocentrism, the concepts of multiple, polycentric, and recurrent modernities, the role of colonialism, the importance of multilingualism and translation, and other topics that are to be further explored in the course of the study. Towards the end of this chapter, as part of “Blackbird Twelve” considerations, the author proposes four critical practices that are vital for her planetary approach: Re-vision, Recovery, Circulation, and Collage.

The second part, “Rethinking Modernity, Scaling Space and Time,” focuses on modernity as the broader social context within which modernism, as its aesthetic dimension, appears. Chapter three, “Stories of Modernity,” discusses the problems of spatialization and periodization. Friedman argues against periodization and stresses the necessity of considering modernity/modernism in the context of the *longue durée*. One of the arguments supporting this view is that the traditional periodization tends to be Eurocentric and exclude modernities of the postcolonial world, the nation-states which began developing after World War II. “Declaring the end of modernism by 1950 is like trying to hear one hand clapping” (91), asserts Friedman underlining the vital role of postcolonial voices in the constitution of modernity. To demonstrate that certain phenomena commonly attached to the post-1500 modernity can be found in previous times in non-Western societies, the author tells two stories – the story of

the Tang and Song dynasties of China (7<sup>th</sup>—13<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the story of the Mongol empire (13<sup>th</sup>—14<sup>th</sup> centuries). Particularly interesting is the second story, which cogently disproves the popular understanding of nomadic peoples as “less modern” or even “less civilized.” By telling these “stories,” Friedman also foregrounds the narratological dimension of modernist studies and indicates that, as with all stories, the storyteller’s point of view, the setting, themes and reader response play a crucial role. The stories that follow illustrate three different “patterns of response to the metanarrative of Western modernity”, (132) -- internalization, cannibalization, and translation, detected in Shanghai in the 2000s, Brazil in the 1920s, and Goa in the 1500s/Leiden in the 1700s, respectively. Chapter four, “Figures of Modernity,” discusses the “relational keywords,” which “establish *provisional* characteristics that different modernities through time and across space might share, however various their geohistorical articulations, however fluid their categorical boundaries” (144, my emphasis). These keywords are organized in a network according to specific features they refer to:

Multiple

Rupture : Conjuncture : Vortex

Speed : Acceleration : Velocity

Network : System

Circulation : Route : Contact

Divergence : Discrepancy : Fissure

Utopia : Dystopia : Heterotopia

Thinking about modernity in these terms shifts the perspective from the traditional “nominal” definitions, based on nouns such as *capitalism*, *nation-states*, or *the West*, to the “relational concept,” which emphasizes the questions of degree, intensity, and scale.

Part Three, “Rethinking Modernism, Reading Modernisms,” begins with chapter five, “Modernity’s Modernisms,” discussing the connection/disconnection between modernity and its aesthetic domain, modernism. What follows from this relation is that modernism can be identified wherever and whenever modernity exists, which is illustrated by three “case studies” of pre-1500 non-Western modernist practices: the poetry of Du Fu, written during the Tang Dynasty of China (8<sup>th</sup> century), the cobalt-blue ceramics of Basra in the Abbasid Caliphate (8<sup>th</sup>—13<sup>th</sup> centuries), and the phenomenon of Kabir, a poet/singer from Benares, North India (14<sup>th</sup>—15<sup>th</sup> centuries). Chapter six, “Circulating Modernisms,” returns to the time frame conventionally associated with modernism – the long 20<sup>th</sup> century. Employing collage as an analytical method, Friedman presents three comparative studies, juxtaposing Joseph Conrad and Tayeb Salih, E. M. Forster and Arundhati Roy, and finally, Virginia Woolf and the siblings Rabindranath Tagore and Swarnakumari Devi. These “collages” focus on the problems of colonialism, class, caste, race, gender, and sexuality, with

the aim of breaking “the chronological, diffusionist, unidirectional model of modernism” (278) and introducing alternative reading strategies. Similarly, chapter seven, “Diasporic Modernisms,” contrasts the works of Aimé Césaire and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, highlighting their common search for “home,” wherever or whatever it might be.

In an effort “to provoke more debate, not close it off” (311), the concluding section, titled “A Debate with Myself,” singles out some of the controversial ideas presented in the book. Pre-empting potential disputations and misunderstandings on the part of her fellow scholars, Friedman presents arguments both in favor and against some of her core concepts, thus allowing for and even inviting further discussion. Therefore, despite all the misgivings and certain unpolished notions, *Planetary Modernism* is a daring and innovative work, which stimulates further research in the field of global literary studies.