

BOOK FORUM

## Caribbean Modernism and Cleary's *Modernism, Empire, and World Literature*

Michael Malouf

George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA  
Email: [mmalouf@gmu.edu](mailto:mmalouf@gmu.edu)

### Abstract

Joe Cleary's *Modernism, Empire, and World Literature* critiques Casanova's theory of World Literature and adapts it to a new model of transatlantic modernism. This review essay recasts Cleary's theory through a Caribbean perspective by applying it to the poetry and early career of Claude McKay

**Keywords:** Cleary; McKay; Walcott; Joyce; Jamaica; Harlem; Modernism

Some time ago, in an article on Casanova and Irish literature, I pointed out the seductive quality of her literary system by using none other than Joe Cleary's 2006 review of *World Republic of Letters* as an example.<sup>1</sup> This was not meant as a criticism; rather, in so far as I had any point, it was to illustrate the fact that despite many reviewers' general skepticism about her Parisian-centric model, there was a game-like quality to its paradigmatic structure that inspired speculation. Cleary's new book develops his initial review into a fully developed literary theory that is also just as inviting for speculation.

Judging at least by its keyword-laden title, Cleary's stirring account of how modernist form developed out of the interregnum between the British and the US empires, and was validated as an aesthetic by the US postwar consensus, has as one of its goals to counter the over-use of the term modernism and ahistorical conceptions of world literature. By connecting the first two terms together as part of a single historical convergence, Cleary sets limits to the former and

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cleary, "The World Literary System: Atlas and Epitaph," *Field Day Review*, 2 (2006): 196–219. The article was "Problems with Paradigms: Irish Comparativism and Casanova's *World Republic of Letters*," *New Hibernia Review* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2013), 48–66.

grounds the latter. As many critics have lamented over the past decade, one problem with the expansive conception of the New Modernisms over the past thirty years has been to bring into question the term's own descriptive value.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, as Eric Hayot and Pheng Cheah, among others, have pointed out, the world literature studies that arrived in the aughts was more the "world" of world-systems theory than geographical worlds, as Cleary acknowledges in his introduction.<sup>3</sup> Cleary's response appears to be pluralist and monist at the same time: many literary centers—not just Paris and London, but Moscow, Berlin—yet a singular literary system defined by peripheral competition for consecration by a more powerful center. What he describes in his introduction is a theory of literary history based on this example of interwar modernism, when "the most ambitious literary works" seek consecration by challenging the center they are able to reproduce the system "into their own forms."<sup>4</sup> It is this last part that I found most appealing about this new theory in that it does not just read the historical past but suggests a mode of interpretation that can assist us in reconsidering the literary field in terms outside of national literatures or periodization, which was always the most attractive aspect of World Literature Studies in its inception that has been lost in the many debates surrounding it. Yet in the subsequent chapters, Cleary's book becomes less about a theory of world literary systems than a more focused book about transatlantic modernism.

As brilliant and enjoyable as these individual readings of James, Eliot, Joyce, O'Neill, and Fitzgerald are to read, I kept wondering why these authors and not others? It is not a new understanding of American literary history that competition with British writers and critics has shaped its history. The subsequent chapters on a small selection of canonical texts by a few white, male, heterosexual authors writing in English raises the question of its applicability as a theory of world literature. Maybe I am letting a misreading of "World Literature" in the title to shape an expectation for geographical worldliness, yet even within the London–Dublin–New York axis there could be included more than London–Dublin–New York writers. What about writers from other peripheries who moved into and were shaped by this axis?

For instance, how might Indian writers and activists such as Tagore, Coomaraswamy, and the "Indian Yeats" Sonia Naidu who moved between London and New York during the interwar period fit into this model? What about women writers in this scheme? Isn't Katherine Mansfield an example of a peripheral writer developing modernist style as part of a rivalry with someone, Virginia Woolf, in the center? Why could not this analysis be applied to Synge as part of a non-British modernist aesthetic as seen in his use by James Weldon Johnson?

---

<sup>2</sup> On problems of definition within the modernist field, see Douglas Mao's Introduction to *The New Modernist Studies*, edited by Douglas Mao (Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 2021), 5–10. On the problem of history and World Literature see the critique by the Warwick Collective, "World-Literature in the Context of Combined and Uneven Development," in *Combined and Uneven Development* (Liverpool University Press, 2015), 1–48.

<sup>3</sup> See Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham ; Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Cleary, *Modernism, Empire, and World Literature*, 47.

Isn't that an aspect of this US–Irish peripheral modernisms that Cleary foregrounds? Or, is there a version of this transatlantic transfer of influence that can be told through a comparison of the Chinese writers who converged in the United Kingdom in the 1920s to the career of Lin Yutang in the 1930s who went to New York instead?<sup>5</sup> I'm not sure how much these random comparisons hold up, but it is a sense of what might have been done if Cleary were more interested in the multipolar world literature part of his argument than the transatlantic modernist one.

Now, obviously I have already fallen into that Casanovian trap of playing with paradigms. It is just as possible to question the white, male Anglo-American centrism of Cleary's book in the same way that he criticizes her Parisian-centric theory yet reproduce his literary system as part of that criticism. Cleary's model suggests possibilities of developing interlocking readings among Irish, American, and Caribbean literary cultures but to develop those possibilities would require a more Caribbeanist perspective. Thus, I wanted to see how well I understood Cleary's argument by playing it, as it were, with a writer that he mentions as a possibility for considering this theory, Claude McKay.

## I.. McKay in New York, London, and beyond

Claude McKay might have been an apt figure for Cleary's study if for no other reason than the fact that he travels and publishes in all the metropolises in this study. Also, as he moves from Jamaican English to Standard English and then, in his later fiction, back to American and Black International vernaculars, he epitomizes the complex language politics of the Anglophone literary system.<sup>6</sup> McKay published poetry in Jamaica, London, and New York; fiction in New York and France; nonfiction in Moscow; and lived and wrote in Paris and Marseilles and Algiers. After publishing his first two collections written in Jamaican dialect in Kingston—*Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab's Ballads* in 1912—he went to the United States in 1916 to study agriculture in Kansas for a year before leaving for New York City where he worked as a railroad porter and wrote poetry and journalism for free-thinking and Marxist magazines like *Pearsons*, edited by Frank Harris, and the *Liberator*, edited by Max Eastman. In 1919, he went to London with the aspiration to meet his literary hero, George Bernard Shaw, and it also became a period of further radicalization for him—it is where he read Marx for the first time and comingled with anticolonial activists from Ireland and India.<sup>7</sup> In 1920, he published his first collection of poems written in standard sonnet form, *Spring*

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China*. Ebrary Academic Collection. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003. Qian Suoqiao, *Liberal Cosmopolitan: Lin Yutang and Middling Chinese Modernity*. Lexington, United States: Brill, 2010. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gmu/detail.action?docID=717612>.

<sup>6</sup> See Michael North, "Quashie to Buccra: The Linguistic Expatriation of Claude McKay" in *The Dialect of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 100–26.

<sup>7</sup> Memorably recounted in his insightful article "How Black Sees Green and Red" in *The Passion of Claude McKay: Selected Prose and Poetry, 1912–1948*, edited by Wayne Cooper (New York: Schocken Books, 1973)57–62.

in *New Hampshire*, with the London publisher Grant Richards including a preface by I. A. Richards. After returning to New York, he published his best-known collection, *Harlem Shadows*, in 1922 with Harcourt Brace (and a preface by Eastman). In 1923, he went to Moscow for a celebrated tour where he was asked by Trotsky to write about “Negro life in America” and from there he went to Paris where he met Hemingway and lived among the “ultra-moderns”<sup>8</sup> as he called the circle of Joyce and Stein, before departing for a life of vagrancy in Marseille and Algiers. I chart this trajectory to show how it fits into Cleary’s system. Publications in Kingston, London, and New York; consecration by meeting Shaw, and engagement with other literary systems in Moscow and Paris; all ending with his consolidation into an American literary canon based around postwar modernism.

There is also an interesting triangulation here of where he is publishing and what he publishes that reflects on Cleary’s thesis. First, in each of these locations, he is publishing through what he calls “White Friends.” In Jamaica that is the English aristocrat Walter Jekyll who encouraged him to write in Jamaican rather than in Standard English<sup>9</sup>; in New York he worked under—and against—the mentorship of Harris and Eastman; in London, he was introduced via Harris to George Bernard Shaw and his work was published by C.K. Ogden (in *Cambridge Magazine*) and I.A. Richards, who wrote the Preface to *Spring in New Hampshire*. Although each of them sought to promote a racialized image of McKay as a “pure Negro,” what that meant differed for each location. As a collector of Jamaican folklore, Jekyll sought an undiluted voice of the peasantry. In contrast, Richards situates McKay’s sonnets as part of an Africanist trend in modernist art such as “sculpture from Benin.” Eastman’s long preface to *Harlem Shadows* repeats many of these same themes with a Marxist slant.

Notably, Richards remarks that McKay came to England in 1920 with the purpose of getting his works published.<sup>10</sup> Although this is not true, it is a revealing assumption in terms of Cleary’s literary system. For Richards, London would still be the place for a peripheral poet to aspire for publication and consecration. Yet this is not how McKay perceived it. He was disappointed with the collection in many respects—namely, that Shaw refused to write a preface, and the reviews that followed Richards’ lead and commented only on the unique case of a Black poet writing traditional sonnets. Yet, when he publishes *Harlem Shadows* in New York a year later, this changes. Although *Harlem Shadows* reproduces most of the poems from *Spring*, there was one important addition. McKay had been advised in London to withhold his most famous poem, “If We Must Die,” from *Spring in New Hampshire*. First published in *The Liberator* in 1919, the poem was composed in response to racist violence in the United States after World War One.<sup>11</sup> After McKay returned to New York, Harris strongly criticized him for leaving the poem out and, as a result, McKay “resolved to plug hard for an

<sup>8</sup> Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home: An Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1937:1970), 248.

<sup>9</sup> Winston James, Michael North, and Wayne Cooper have all written at length on the influence of Jekyll on McKay’s early poetry.

<sup>10</sup> Maxwell, *Complete Poems*, 308.

<sup>11</sup> On the publication history of the poem, see *Complete Poems: Claude McKay*, edited by William J. Maxwell (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 332–333.

American edition, which would include the omitted poem.”<sup>12</sup> As a result, it is with *Harlem Shadows* that McKay first publishes what he takes to be a true collection of his poems.

So roughly charting out this interpretation (holding off for lack of space on the Jamaican poetry)<sup>13</sup>: in London, McKay participates fully in the Casanovian aesthetic politics of consecration: seeking out influential critics, publishing with a mainstream London publisher, and omitting work that might be controversial. William Maxwell describes him during this time as having “walled off his professionally eager *Spring* persona” from his work as journalist for Sylvia Pankhurst’s radical newspaper, *The Dreadnought*.<sup>14</sup> The poems also act out this desire through their own “mimetic aesthetic rivalry”—to use Cleary’s term—with the sonnet tradition. McKay’s disappointment with the racialized reviews indicates that what he intended as “rivalry” was seen more as “mimesis.” It is only in New York that he can publish his work in full. Though, notably, it is not New York that makes this possible as much as Harris’s encouragement and Harlem which gave him a real audience and an alternative sphere for consecration by figures like James Weldon Johnson. In this way, New York helped to break the colonial binary of London–Jamaica that affected his work. By just including a poem like “If We Must Die,” with its provocative rewriting of Shakespeare<sup>15</sup> into a call for racial solidarity in protest brings out the sense of rivalry and difference that was missing from the more passive English collection. McKay’s voice not only comes through in the poems but he is also given the opportunity to frame their reception through a foreword that both counters Eastman’s racialized exoticism and defines his relationship to current modernist trends like Imagism. Acknowledging his preference for traditional poetic forms, McKay justifies them as part of the rhythm that he learned from Jamaican songs and stories and claims the right to use “overworked” phrases and “decorative metaphors.”<sup>16</sup> These two publications, then, illustrate the differences between late Empire London that defines modernism as the poetics of the other and New York which—at that time—allows for voices establishing their own aesthetic terms.

McKay would follow his return to New York with a celebrated visit in 1923 to Moscow where he would meet Trotsky and publish a well-received poem in *Pravda* thus establishing himself within another pole of world literature that Cleary gestures toward in his introduction. Afterwards he goes to Paris during the period of what he called in his 1938 memoir the “ultra-moderns” (248). As if confirming Cleary’s thesis, McKay does not see Paris as the center for literary consecration, rather, he perceives it as only the site for a specific form of modernist orthodoxy. It is here that he reads “*le maître* of the ultra-moderns,” James Joyce (he writes that “A good friend gave me a copy of *Ulysses*. A bad friend swiped it”<sup>17</sup>) and scandalizes

<sup>12</sup> McKay, *Long Way From Home*, 99.

<sup>13</sup> For more on his Jamaican poetry, see Winston James, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and his Poetry of Rebellion* (New York: Verso, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Maxwell, *Complete Poems*, 308.

<sup>15</sup> Maxwell, ed., *Complete Poems*, 333.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Maxwell, *Complete Poems*, 315.

<sup>17</sup> McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, 246.

received opinion by labeling Joyce a “Decadent” and expressing his preference for D.H. Lawrence and Hemingway. Of all the Parisian modernists, McKay feels the most strongly for Hemingway, who, he writes, provides “an artistic illumination of a certain quality of American civilization...the hard-boiled contempt for and disgust with sissyness expressed among all classes of Americans.” This “rough attitude,” McKay writes, “is altogether un-European.”<sup>18</sup> In this way, McKay reaffirms the centrality of an American form of modernism as defined against the waning empire of Europe.

McKay provides a unique perspective on the US–Irish–British axis afforded by Anglophone Caribbean writers that existed long before Walcott or even, as Cleary acknowledges, the writers who emigrated to London in the 1950s.<sup>19</sup> Cleary uses Walcott’s experience with *Omeros* as an example of how writers from the peripheries encounter limitations as part of the US consolidation of the literary system. He importantly notes the significance of Walcott’s move to the United States as part of the aesthetics that would culminate in *Omeros*. Cleary quotes an admittedly unreliable narrator, Naipaul, to understand this shift as based in the exhaustion of local Caribbean sources. However, Walcott explains his choices himself in his 1974 essay “The Muse of History” where he laments the narrowness of postcolonial politics in the Caribbean. As his biographer Bruce King notes, Walcott felt excluded and threatened by the Black Power movement in the Caribbean.<sup>20</sup> This account of his move to the United States is not, as Naipaul would have it, a rejection of the periphery, but rather a feeling of being rejected by it. In “Muse,” Walcott attaches himself to a peripheral modernist aesthetics by a Joycean epigraph, “History is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake,” from Stephen Dedalus in the third episode of *Ulysses*. Tellingly, he misattributes Stephen’s thoughts to Joyce as a means of borrowing Joycean authority to justify his own political ambivalence—a method he repeats years later in *Omeros*.<sup>21</sup> This is an authority that depends upon the apolitical modernism established by his aspirational audience in New York City.<sup>22</sup> This might be the test of what it means to be in the center of the literary system: where McKay felt constrained in London and Paris, yet published freely in New York, now Walcott is limited by the conditions in the US.

The process of Caribbean modernism as experienced by McKay and Walcott suggests a neglected aspect of Arrighi’s analysis of the transfer from British to a US empire: Arrighi argues that the primary difference between the two economic systems was that the US system consolidated and centralized what had been, in typical British fashion, ad hoc and dispersed.<sup>23</sup> This is one way to

<sup>18</sup> McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, 252.

<sup>19</sup> For an excellent Casanovian analysis of this generation of writers see J. Dillon Brown, *Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> See Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 255.

<sup>21</sup> I have written elsewhere about the irony in Walcott’s adoption of Stephen as an artistic avatar. *Transatlantic Solidarities: Irish Nationalism and Caribbean Poetics* (University of Virginia Press, 2009), 145–8.

<sup>22</sup> King, *Derek Walcott*, 190–1.

<sup>23</sup> See Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth-Century: Money, Power, and the origins of Our Times* (New York: Verso, 2010), 290–2.

understand how the postwar invention of literary modernism consecrated a similar conception of “international style.” This centralizing effect of the US pole of the world literary system is an important aspect of the form assumed by postwar Modernism. Although McKay would largely disappear from the canon after dying penniless in a Chicago hospital in the 1940s, he would later be appropriated as a depoliticized “American” writer who was part of a US-centric version of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>24</sup> Such is the centripetal force of empire that Cleary describes wherein worlds of movement, circulation, and difference are reduced to a unipolar American modernism.

**Competing interest.** The author declares none.

**Author biography.** Michael Malouf is a Professor of English at George Mason University and the author of *Transatlantic Solidarities: Irish Nationalism and Caribbean Poetics* (UVA Press, 2009) and *Making World English: Literature, Late Empire, and English Language Teaching, 1919-39* (Bloomsbury, 2022) as well as essays in various journals and edited collections.

---

<sup>24</sup> See Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 2003) 2–3, on McKay 47–8; the Harlem Renaissance association was reinforced in the title of the landmark biography of McKay by Wayne Cooper, *Claude McKay: A Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

**Cite this article:** Malouf, Michael. 2025. “Caribbean Modernism and Cleary’s *Modernism, Empire, and World Literature*.” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2024.24>