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## **“Like a dry-skin itching for growth on our bodies”: Katherine Mansfield and Una Marson’s Modernist Fantasies of Objecthood**

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*Katherine Mansfield’s travel writing in the Urewera Notebook and story “The Woman at the Store,” and Una Marson’s poems, “Little Brown Girl” and “The Stranger,” share politically charged strategies for representing the psychological violence of imperialism. Although they write about diverse socio-political contexts, both Mansfield and Marson aestheticize the surfaces of bodies in stylistically commensurable ways in order to highlight how the forces of imperialism shape racial and gendered politics in the early twentieth century. The complex interrogations of race and gender performativity found in Mansfield and Marson’s representations of Māori and Afro-Caribbean women, and their dramatized treatment of these women as objects, help transnational feminist scholars recover unrealized lines of modernist affiliation. These lines, this article demonstrates, are formed by affectively shared, and yet historically distinct, experiences of colonial politics and forms of legitimation that make their marks upon the surfaces of female bodies.*

Una Marson / Katherine Mansfield / race and ethnicity / transnational modernism / weak theory

### **Introduction**

Katherine Mansfield and Una Marson might at first glance appear to have very little in common outside of the alliteration of their last names. Both women were born in British colonies and both spent portions of their lives in London, where they moved on the outskirts of modernist literary circles. Yet by the time that Marson first arrived in London in 1932 at the age of twenty-seven, it had been almost ten years since Mansfield had passed away in Fontainebleau. And while Mansfield may have found herself always marked with the taint of the “little Colonial,” she did not face the racial discrimination that Marson experienced as a woman of color in the metropole. Where Mansfield’s early attempts at representing both Māori and European settler subjects had petered out by the end of her life, Marson’s literary production shifted in the opposite direction: her early mimics and pastiches of canonical British writing and her inclination to write devotional poems about love cast in the language of slavery were gradually cast aside in favor of forms and subjects which were more overtly linked to her political activist work.

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What these two writers do have in common is their treatment of ethnic and racialized bodies. Both writers aestheticize bodily surfaces in their works in order to highlight and critique the politics of race, ethnicity, and gender as they are shaped by imperialist discourse. The biographical and thematic connections between the two writers might at first appear thin, but as Brent Hayes Edwards has shown through his discussions of black internationalism, attending to how discourses “are translated, disseminated, reformulated, and debated in transnational contexts marked by difference” allows us to examine and lay bare obscured patterns and intellectual histories (7). This article places a selection of Mansfield’s writing from *The Urewera Notebook* (1907), and her early story “The Woman at the Store” (1912), in collage with two of Marson’s poems from *The Moth and the Star* (1937)—“Little Brown Girl” and “The Stranger.” This defamiliarizing *décalage* of Mansfield and Marson’s works reveals how the two unexpectedly share aesthetic strategies which open up a space for politically and ethically charged representations of the politics of race, ethnicity, and gender in early twentieth-century settler-colonial New Zealand and the British imperial metropole.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, such a collage offers an example for why the field of transnational modernist studies needs urgently to pay closer attention to the missed connections and wayward encounters of socially disparate modernists like Mansfield and Marson.

Comparative readings of socially disparate writers generate new insights precisely because they place writers in reciprocal defamiliarization with each other and in relation to the regional, national, and transnational systems out of which they come. As R. Radhakrishnan has argued, all comparison is necessarily “initiated in the name of the values, standards, and criteria that are dominant” (74). The danger of comparative work is that “once the comparison is articulated and validated, the values that underwrote the comparison receive instant axiomatization as universal

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values” (74). The very fact that all comparison is “already anointed with universal aroma well before the historical dynamics of the comparison itself” (73), however, means that it is not enough to say either that the valued norm that sets a comparison in motion is “irrelevant, in which case the comparison falls apart,” or that we should accept the use of value-laden norms which only leads to the penalization of the other for its “incomparable difference” (74). An alternative, Radhakrishnan argues, is to place components in reciprocal defamiliarization with one another. Such reciprocal defamiliarization allows us to take “meaning out of its system and thus expose it merely as one among myriad contingent [...] possibilities” (86). Bringing disparate elements together in this way ultimately problematizes those components “in relationship to each other and in acknowledgement of the transcendent authority” of the supposedly “natural” systems out from which they are drawn (87). By comparing Mansfield and Marson’s works, this article draws each writer out of the systems which have hitherto provided the dominant criteria for analyses of their writing and politics. It does so in order to uncover new insights about the intersections between Mansfield and Marson’s politics and aesthetic strategies.

While both Mansfield and Marson travelled during their lifetimes into the British metropole and produced work based on their experiences there, they also came from geographically disparate regions of the globe and their paths did not ever cross. Each woman wrote in different genres and from different social positions, and although they were both from middle class backgrounds it is impossible and unhelpful to claim that Mansfield’s white New Zealand settler-family origins or queer sexual orientation is commensurable with Marson’s heterosexual Afro-Caribbean background. Mansfield’s early work depicts indigenous Māori from the position of the privileged white settler in New Zealand during the years in which the country was transitioning from British colony to dominion. Her depictions of Māori are primarily based on her

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experiences with indigenous communities while on a camping trip through central North Island bush in 1907. Meanwhile Marson, the daughter of a Jamaican parson and the woman who Delia Jarett-McCauley would come to name “the first black British feminist to speak out against racism and sexism in Britain,” created Afro-Caribbean poetic voices that were grounded in her own personal experiences of racism and sexism in London (vii). Unlike Mansfield’s indigenous representations, Marson’s *The Moth and the Star* contains a series of poems which give direct voice to black subjects in both London and the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup>

What links these two writers, as I will demonstrate first through an analysis of Mansfield’s informal writing in the *Urewera Notebook*, and then in her story “The Woman at the Store,” before moving on to discuss Marson’s “The Stranger” and “The Little Brown Girl,” is the fact that they both incorporate racist discourse into their first- and second-person narrative and poetic voices. Neither writer attempts to explain away the use of such discourse nor recuperate the subjects who use it, thereby leaving readers with what Anne Anlin Cheng has called “the gift of discomfort” (“Psychoanalysis without Symptoms” 93): these are, as Cheng writes, moments when a work refuses “to redeem the continued existence of racism and other forms of violent discrimination,” giving us “not the fact of discrimination, but its unruly etiology and the education of desire that it has instilled in both the dominant and minority subject” (93). Rather than attempting to redeem the experiences of those who face racist discourse as part of their quotidian lives, both Mansfield and Marson generate uneasy and uncomfortable moments in their works by aestheticizing this discourse and localizing its effects upon the surfaces of bodies that they depict. Both Mansfield’s use of an ambiguously raced and gendered first-person narrator, and Marson’s use of ironic poetic voices, thereby force readers to *look* again at bodies that speak, and to ask what objectified others might have to tell us about that very condition of objecthood.

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The embroilment of aesthetics with racist ideology does of course have a long and damaging history. As has been well-documented, the movement of traditional Euro-American modernism is deeply intertwined with cultural appropriation and romantic primitivism, both of which have historically served Eurocentric narratives about innovation. Both Mansfield and Marson have been affected by and implicated in these Eurocentric discourses. In Mansfield's case, critics have regularly found it difficult to reconcile the presence of Māori characters in the early fiction with their absence after 1912, and the charge of self-serving racial appropriation continues to be hotly contested in Mansfield studies.<sup>3</sup> Marson, in contrast, has been praised for her commitment to the struggle for black civil rights in England. Yet at the same time, as Allison Donnell writes in her introduction to Marson's *Selected Poems*, the "element of mimicry and pastiche in her works, along with her excessively devotional love poetry, and her use of orthodox poetic forms and archaic language continue to elicit embarrassed critical silences" (12). The progression from the two poems titled "Jamaica" in *Tropic Reveries* and *Heights and Depths*—in which the natural splendor of the island is depicted as an Edenic idyll without comment on the harsh material realities of life—through to poems like "In Jamaica" and "Heartbreak Cottages"—which refuse to shy away from images of material deprivation and disparity, even to the point of scathingly sadistic pleasure on the part of the speaker—is evidence alone of Marson's shifting commitments over time to the politics of race, ethnicity, and gender and their material effects. It is only after her arrival in London, as Donnell writes, that Marson demonstrates "an awareness of the ways in which political identities are shaped by race" (24).

Despite these uncomfortable elements of their work, neither Mansfield nor Marson's ambiguous treatments of surfaces, including the black and brown skins that they aestheticize, can or should be explained away simply as racial appropriation or romantic primitivism (on the part of

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Mansfield), nor as romanticized colonial mimicry or an unconscious internalization of racist ideology (on the part of Marson). But neither is it particularly useful to engage merely in a recuperative reading of this racial objectification by means of symptomatic analysis. As Cheng has argued, literary scholars today are “justifiably wary of reifying definitions of culture and certainly of essentialized notions of identity,” but “corrective theories of creolization, métissage, and hybridity” have at the same time “often ended up reinforcing the empirical, geographical, and biological fact of boundaries and borders, recalling the imperatives they seek to undermine” (“Psychoanalysis without Symptoms” 89). As literary analysts we hope that “the unveiling of repressed or suppressed meaning” might “bring about beneficial changes through the attainment of insights” (88). The problem however, as Cheng, Judith Butler, and others interested in the politics of identity have demonstrated, is that recuperative projects that seek to transform “objectified individuals into full, healthy subjects” by nature repeats and even at times reconsolidates “the very stereotypes that [they are] meant to dispel in the first place” (89). As Cheng points out:

The assignation of agency often comes at the price of neglecting the material circumstances as well as the afterlife of power, and it just as often presumes authorial intention and its effects. Agency is thus this highly prized yet severely undertheorized entity. Is there a third position besides that of the victim or the parodic? (89)

The question of the possibility of a third position, Cheng argues, is especially urgent when it comes to the raced subject who has historically been “both much too seen and not seen at all” (90). I approach Mansfield and Marson’s work from such an inquiry about the possibility of generating a third position by and for minority subjects, arguing that Mansfield and Marson find a way to do

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just this. Mansfield's representations of Māori in New Zealand and Marson's poetic engagements with the experiences of Afro-Caribbean peoples in London create an experiential position of objecthood for readers: by being placed in a position where they are forced to affectively experience what it means to be a particular object of discrimination, readers gain a recognition of the historical forces that shape the politics of race and gender. At the same time, however, these writers refuse to placate readers through the inclusion of a recuperative resolution in the face of the psychological violence they depict. Aesthetic fantasies of objecthood in Mansfield and Marson's work are thus proven to be an innovative resistance against racial discrimination and oppression, whether experienced directly or not.

### **Mansfield's Close Encounters of the Māori Kind**

When Mansfield undertook a camping expedition through the middle of the North Island in 1907, she found herself confronted by the effects of settler modernity upon the indigenous people. Her vivid and varying descriptions, in her *Urewera Notebook*, of the Māori individuals and communities she encountered demonstrate that she was thinking complexly about the politics of racial identity as they played out in early twentieth century colonial New Zealand. In past scholarship Mansfield's depictions of Māori in this notebook are often dismissed as romanticist idealizations, but as Anna Plumridge has shown in her edition of the *Urewera Notebook*, Mansfield's reactions to Māori people and culture are far more complex than previous accounts have allowed. As Janet Wilson has argued, it is clear that in Plumridge's edition of the *Urewera Notebook* "a sharpened, deeper understanding of Mansfield emerges, of a colonial metropolitan on the brink of her departure to Europe, a complex and divided individual conscious of her multiple cultural heritages [...]" (211). This is not to say that Mansfield's early writing is devoid of romantic

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primitivism, but rather that we see her perspective continuously shifting in the diary from such a monolithic understanding of Māori lives and identities toward one that is far more nuanced. By the end of her trip, Mansfield makes use of the surface level perspective of romantic primitivism precisely in order to critique socio-political discrimination against Māori.

For example, in a moment of frustration brought on by her romanticizing perspective Mansfield expresses superficial thoughts about what it means to be Māori or to be, in contrast, a provincial European settler:

I am so sick & tired of the third rate article—Give me the Māori and the tourist—*but nothing between*—Also this place proved utterly disappointing after Umuroa, which was fascinating in the extreme—the Maoris here know—some English and some Māori—not like the other natives—Also these people dress in almost English clothes compared with the natives [t]here—and they wear a great deal of ornament in Umuroa & strange hair fashions—I found nothing of interest here. (97)<sup>4</sup>

Mansfield is using the term “native” not simply to differentiate between Māori and European settlers, but between those Māori whom she interprets to be living in a “natural” manner (i.e. a way of life that matches her romantic idea of a precolonial Māori existence), and those who do not. Yet her essentialized understanding of identity is not limited, in this moment, to Māori—she also presumes to know what an “authentic” English identity looks like, based on her travels in London the year prior, and she scorns what she sees as the marred copy of Englishness in the colony. These two stereotypes, the uncouth English settler and the indigenous colonial mimic or “Brown Briton”—i.e. the Māori individual who performs the lifestyle, ideologies, and perspectives

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of the European settler at the expense of their own peoples, cultures, and epistemologies—quickly become the dominant objects of Mansfield’s scathing criticism.<sup>5</sup> Her views of Māori in this comment, in particular, are undoubtedly shaped by imperialist, racist, and primitivist ideologies, but as Cheng has argued “the ideological suspects ([of] imperialism, white racism, etc.) are far from surprising, and surely it is our job as thinkers to do more than repeatedly point out the fixity of colonial culpability” (“The Wayward Life of Objects” 4). And Mansfield herself, in her encounter with a Māori family at the home of her camping group’s guide, comes to acknowledge precisely this point made over one hundred years later by Cheng. In this encounter, she moves beyond the simple recognition and acknowledgement of her colonial culpability and she does so by affectively identifying and empathizing with a Māori sense of objecthood.

In her encounter with her tour guide’s niece at the *Ngati Whare* settlement, Mansfield interrogates the figure of the Brown Briton and depicts the complexities of Māori identity in the wake of European contact in far more nuanced ways than the prior diary entry would suggest. She describes how Wahi “teaches me Māori” and “smokes a cigarette” while another girl, Johanna, remains “rather silent.” Johanna, we are told, is taught “fancy work,” “reads Byron & Shakespeare,” and “wants to go back to school” (98). Mansfield then describes Johanna’s room in a stream-of-consciousness style: “At night we go & see her,” she writes, “the clean place—the pictures—the beds—Byron & the candle—the flowers in a glass—sweet—the paper and pens—photos of Maoris & whites—too—Johanna stays by the door we see her jewellery, her Mothers—I got a Māori kit. [Wahi] thinks the old people at Umuroa so dirty—yes” (98). The Māori guide who Mansfield stays with at the *Ngati Whare* settlement was Albert Warbrick, and she describes in this moment her interaction with his niece, Joanna Kaua, who was of mixed Māori and European descent (Plumridge 12-13). Where Mansfield is intrigued by the aspects of Māori culture she finds

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at their home—i.e. being taught Māori and the kit, or *kete*, a woven flax bag—Johanna is shown to be far more invested in the trappings of the European world. Where Johanna wants to show off her Byron and jewelry, Mansfield's tepid interest in these things is cut short by the note about acquiring the Māori kit. Nevertheless, Mansfield expresses a haunting sense of commonly felt regret when she writes, shortly afterwards, of Johanna's silent, studious, and Europeanized existence: "there is something sad about it—all" (98). In comparison to this empathetic moment, Mansfield's agreement that the Māori community at Umuroa are "so dirty" might seem to be a flippant statement based in racist assumptions. Yet when placed in such close contact with the description of Johanna's Europeanized existence, Mansfield's agreement comes to seem far more complex. When viewed in collage, these two observations suggest that Mansfield recognizes the costs both of taking up the mantle of the Brown Briton *and* of rejecting it entirely. In order to escape oppression and poverty and survive in this settler colonial world, Māori like Johanna are forced to take up the ideologies of settler-colonial New Zealand, but this can only be achieved at the expense of other Māori who are less well-off and who may not have access (or simply refuse) to take up this alternative. What Mansfield finds so sad is that Johanna admires European culture to the extent that she and her family must reduce all non-Europeanized Māori lives down to the observation that they are "so dirty."

Even so, Johanna's life does not prove fulfilling. Mansfield's closing note speaks to Johanna's restlessness and her tedious routine as she "again waters the flowers—soon she will go to milk the cow—then begin again—I suppose" (98). It is not simply that this life—influenced as it is by imperial ideology, Western gender norms, and European social conventions—ultimately fails to give Johanna pleasure beyond the surface décor of her bedroom; rather, Johanna's very identity is shown to be the result of the collapse of difference between person and representation

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through the aestheticization of a surface décor that envelopes her like a skin. Becoming a Brown Briton or refusing to become one, Mansfield's aestheticization of Johanna's racial identity demonstrates, is ultimately a zero-sum game—both options ultimately can only produce empty objecthood.

In contrast to this pessimistic entry, Mansfield subsequently drafts a vignette, written after the group had travelled from the Warbrick's home to Lake Taupo, that proves far more optimistic. In "Sunset Tuesday," Mansfield describes a young Māori girl who appears to have held onto her Māori worldview, even as she adapts to the changes that settler society forces upon her:

A young Māori girl—climbs slowly up the hill—she does not see me—I do not move—She reaches a little knoll—and suddenly sits down—native fashion—her legs crossed under her hands clasped in her lap—She is dressed in a blue skirt & white soft blouse—Round her neck is a piece of twisted flax & and [sic] a long piece of greenstone—is suspended from it—Her black hair is twisted softly at the neck—she wears long white & red bone earrings. She is very young [...]. She sits—silent—utterly motionless—her head thrown back—All the lines of her face are passionate violent—crudely savage—but in her lifted eyes slumbers a tragic illimitable Peace—

The sky changes—softens—the lake is all grey mist—the land is heavy shadow—silence broods among the trees [...]. The girl does not move—But [...] very faint & [...] beautiful—a star

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wakes in the sky—She is the very incarnation of evening—and  
lo—the first star—shines in her eyes. (107-8)

Here is a girl who has adapted in some ways to western culture by adopting the sartorial customs of this imposing settler society. At the same time she also holds onto Māori practices and customs, as evidenced on the surface by her greenstone and earrings. More substantially, Mansfield captures the affect bound up with Māori notions of *mana whenua* (the power derived from the land to which one belongs and to which one's tribal history is tied) and *kaitiakitanga* (a sense of being obligated to act as guardian rather than possessor of that land) through her depiction of the way that the land itself and this young girl are intertwined.<sup>6</sup> Her depiction of the young Māori girl who, in this solitary moment, is empowered by and not isolated from this land also collapses the difference between person (the unknowable girl Mansfield *actually* encountered) and representation (the aestheticization we get here in the notebook), but it does so in a manner which is based in Māori epistemology and not, as critics tend to argue, in the ideologies of romantic primitivism.

The girl that Mansfield aestheticizes in this vignette does not impose herself upon the land, but rather is consoled and given vitality through her connection to it. While Mansfield stands frozen in the shrub—encountering the rigidity of a “cold, grey” steel-like lake which resists her and a land that refuses to awake to her foreign presence (107)—the girl's still presence animates and is animated by this land. The girl becomes a conduit for the spirit of the land itself, while Mansfield's presence seems to quash that spirit into unconsciousness. While the fate of the girl in “Sunset Tuesday” may be “tragic,”<sup>7</sup> she is also illimitably at peace in this land, and she is welcomed by it. Despite the terror derived from the ravaging of land and of Māori culture by white settlers (whom the figure of Mansfield stands in for here in this passage), this young girl is able to hold onto an innate still pride and sense of Māori spirituality which Johanna's restless

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Europeanized existence lacks. Ultimately, these realizations that Mansfield has, during this camping trip, about the culpability of European settlers, and the effects of this upon Māori, then begin to influence both her aesthetic and political strategies in her subsequent stories featuring Māori characters. This includes, as I will argue in the following paragraphs, the early story first published in Jonathan Middleton Murry's *Rhythm* in 1912— "The Woman at the Store."

"The Woman at the Store" does not explicitly describe an easily identifiable Māori character, but after examining Mansfield's writing in *The Urewera Notebook* it becomes clear that she utilizes the aesthetic strategies that she worked out in this notebook in order to comment on the ethics and politics of Māori Europeanization in the first decade of the twentieth century. For many critics, this tale about the woman at the store—a European woman who has been physically and psychologically destroyed after years of an unhappy marriage and a life of isolation in the bush, leading to the murder of her husband—is one that speaks to the white-settler's sense of brutality and isolation in the backblocks of New Zealand. By focusing my analysis on the narrator of the story rather than its subject, however, I offer a new reading. The narrator, who remains largely undescribed in the story with the exception of a couple key moments, is a Māori woman. The ethical indeterminacies that arise through the Europeanization of Māori (as Mansfield experiences them during the camping trip) are localized upon the site of this Māori narrator's body.

When the travelers arrive at the unnamed woman's store, Jim explains that the woman's loneliness is due to the fact that "the only people who come through now are Maoris and sundowners!" (27). Based on this comment, previous critics have assumed that the three travelers are sundowners—i.e. that they are white settlers looking for a place to camp for the night. But when the woman first comes out of the store at her mad daughter's insistence, she exhibits surprise at encountering this group: she tells them, with her rifle in hand, that she had thought they were

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hawks because her daughter Else had run into the house saying “‘Mumma [...] there’s three brown things comin’ over the ‘ill’ [...]” (24). Generally, critics have drawn conclusions based on this miscommunication about the supposed hawks in symbolic terms. Anna Snaith, for example, argues that this misinterpretation of people for hawks emphasizes how “boundaries between human and animal” are unstable in this story, just as the boundaries between “dream and nightmare, fantasy and reality” are porous in this “brutal and unforgiving landscape” (130). While this is certainly an accurate assessment, it is also worth asking what might be revealed if we take this mad child at her word? What would it mean to presume that these three travelers literally have brown skin? Accepting the suggestion that one of Mansfield’s characters—even a mentally unstable one—might describe indigenous people as “brown” is certainly an uncomfortable critical exercise, but taking Else at her word and paying attention to this surface-level textual evidence reveals that Mansfield depicts “brown” bodily surfaces in order to make apparent the psychological violence of settler colonialism upon Māori.

It is important to note that despite her aberrant personality, Else is the most insightful and literal-minded figure of the group. The narrator herself recognizes this when she says that Else’s drawings are the “creations of a lunatic with a lunatic’s cleverness” (30). And Else’s description of the three travelers as “three brown things” is not in fact out of line with Mansfield’s own descriptions of indigenous peoples. Early in the *Urewera Notebook*, for example, Mansfield describes the Māori man that she eats lunch with at Woodeville as a “great brown fellow” (90). Furthermore, at the opening of the story Mansfield’s narrator provides readers with an almost cinematic view of the travelers in the landscape:

All that day the heat was terrible. The wind blew close to  
the ground; it rooted among the tussock grass, slithered along the

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road, so that the white pumice dust swirled in our faces, settled and sifted over us and was like a dry-skin itching for growth on our bodies. The horses stumbled along, coughing and chuffing [...]. Jim rode beside me, white as a clown, his black eyes glittered, and he kept shooting out his tongue and moistening his lips. (22)

In the context of Else's description of the travelers, the covering of Jim's brown face with white pumice dust appears in this passage to be an unwitting performance of something akin to black-face—or in this case, a performance of “white-face” by a Māori man. Jim is in this image a caricature of a Brown Briton who mimics his colonial master. Bodies, in this opening description of the travelers moving through the bush, become the canvases upon which Mansfield can paint the effects of psychological damage inflicted upon Māori by the settler-colonialism of New Zealand.

This atmosphere of violence is further captured upon another series of surfaces that the narrator encounters when invited into the woman's house to collect an ointment for her horse's sores. While waiting for the woman to return with the lotion, the narrator observes the small room and takes keen notice of the walls plastered with dated periodicals. Her attention is then drawn toward the color print of Richard Seddon, the stalwart of colonial era politics who initially opposed women's suffrage and who had at best a sympathetic but paternalistic attitude towards Māori. Seddon's populist and autocratic inclinations meant that his government tended toward privileging the modernizing advancements of European settler society over and above Māori concerns; Mansfield's careful allusion to Seddon in this moment highlights the similarities between the subjugation of women in the colony and the state of Māori welfare. The narrator herself takes note

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of this white woman's banal existence while waiting, and she thinks to herself, "good Lord, what a life! [...]. Imagine being here day in and day out, with that rat of a child and a mangy dog. Imagine bothering about ironing. *Mad*, of course she's mad!" (25-26).

Early in the story, the narrator ruminates over how "there's no twilight in our New Zealand days, but a curious half-hour when everything appears grotesque—it frightens—as though the savage spirit of the country walked abroad and sneered at what it saw" (25). Previous critics have shown how one thing that is being "sneered" at by this land, and thus by Mansfield, are the presumptuous actions of European settlers who believe unquestionably that they can master this wild landscape and establish a new Britannia in the outreaches of the empire. What has not been discussed in detail is how this savage spirit sneers equally at the narrator too. While their experiences are not entirely commensurable, the lonely and ravaged woman at the store and this Māori narrator (like Mansfield and Johanna) do share certain things in common which should open up a moment of radical receptivity between them—while white settler women struggle to survive in a harshly patriarchal world, Māori are being ravaged by the physical and psychic violence of European settlement and imperial rule.

But the narrator's emotionless encounter with the newspaper-plastered walls, describing endless imperial affairs, and with Seddon's portrait, points to her failure to recognize her own subjugation, reflected as it is upon the surfaces of this room and this white woman's ravaged body. All that the narrator feels in response is an inexplicable sense of fear: "Sitting alone in the hideous room," she says, "I grew afraid" (25). As a brown Briton, she feels afraid because the pleasure which she finds in mimicking and mastering European settler culture is even more so an object of scorn for this spirit of the land that she intuits. The "savage" Māori "spirit" of the country, in other

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words, sneers at the Māori woman whose whiteness is, in Mansfield's own words, "like a dry skin itching for growth" on her body (22).

When the story comes to a close after a sleepless night in the storeroom for Jim and the narrator (and a passionate night in the woman's bedroom for Jo), and after Else reveals that the woman killed her husband and buried him in the garden, the narrator and Jim leave the woman, her store, and the love-struck Jo behind. This departure and the implication that they will leave this frighteningly uncivilized stopping place for an enlightened European settlement after days in the bush is, however, rather ominous: the final sentence states, with foreboding, that after "a bend in the road" the "whole place disappeared" (32) as if it did not nor should not have ever existed. The reader is left with many unanswered questions, not least of which is the question of what will happen to the unsuspecting Jo. The narrator and Jim may feel relief at having escaped unscathed, and yet Mansfield undercuts this relief and a feeling of nervous foreboding overwhelms the reader. This ending reminds readers that, as a Brown Briton plagued with the itch of white skin, the narrator cannot simply "escape" the insidious violence of life in colonial New Zealand in the same way in which she has escaped this mad woman and her store, and so neither does Mansfield offer any such cathartic resolution for her readers.

### **Marson Burning an Illusion**

Marson's poem, "The Stranger," describes the experience of a woman of color who is approached, in a condescending manner, by a Londoner who likes "talking to people like [her]" (Marson 98). The poem begins with what seems initially to be this woman's sincere, but naïve, response to a racist comment:

You liked talking to people like me

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You said, with a wistful smile  
That enchanted me, so the pause  
That came before I spoke  
Must have seemed strange to you. (98)

Although in reality the speaker's interaction with this man ends almost as soon as it begins (she simply returns "the compliment" after this brief pause), in her imagination she incisively cuts him down to size in the following three stanzas. She employs the romantic language of this man's primitivist discourse in order to highlight how ridiculous his assumptions are:

You like to hear the tales I tell  
Of a tropic Paradise,  
Of sunkissed woods and mountains high  
Of skies that are bluer than ever  
Skies are blue in your Nordic clime:  
Of magic sunsets and marvelous seas,  
Of waterfalls clattering down,  
Stars so near, and the moon so large,  
And fireflies, stars of the earth. (98)

While this stanza begins and ends with two balladic quatrains, it is split in the middle, as if interrupted, by an awkwardly inserted central tetrameter. This foreign insertion in the center of the stanza highlights the artificiality of this Caribbean fantasy.

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The romantic image of the island that the woman mockingly offers the man is drastically different from the images of destitution that Marson provides in other poems. In “Foreign,” for example, an old Afro-Caribbean man tells a young woman that:

In foreign I never see people go like we –  
Tear pants and soil shirt. In foreign  
Dey not so poor as we – and talking  
'Bout eating – in foreign wit de army  
How we eat! Not like the starvation  
Little food we eat here from day to day  
Dat mek us weak and sick – [...]. (153-4)

Yet it would be incorrect to assume that “The Stranger” is any less ethically and politically charged than a poem like “Foreign.” For one, “The Stranger” describes the experience of a woman of color in London who has been objectified and treated as an exotic commodity (i.e. made into a “stranger”) by a condescending Englishman who both desires and disavows his desire for the racialized other through this encounter. Unlike the man in “Foreign,” the woman in “The Stranger” must confront not only the racist idealizations of a white Englishman, but also the belittling arrogance of his gendered assumptions—as the woman says, by “people like me” this man specifically means “foreign girls who are brown of skin / And have black kinky hair/ And have strange black eyes” (98). And indeed, the retort that the woman makes—the impetus for the poem itself—is made as an internal rumination after the fact of the encounter precisely because the woman has learned that a description of the hard realities of socioeconomic destitution in her home island would ultimately fall on deaf ears, even if she attempted such a direct reproach.

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Marson therefore depicts an encounter wherein a woman of color adopts the condescending language of men, like this one, in order to open up a moment of radical receptivity on the part of the reader. Resistance comes in this poem not from an immediate angered response (as it does for example in a poem like “Nigger”), but through a poetic reconstruction of the affective experience of having been made into an object in this way. The woman speaks as an object-ified other not only to this man but to the reader, who becomes his stand-in. The oppressed object, in other words, can all of a sudden make the racist and discriminating subject the object of *her* anger through the act of poetic composition itself. She takes up this wistful fantasy that turns her into a gendered and racialized object precisely in order to escape the burdens of race enforced upon her, and upon women of color “like her.” This allows her to shift the terms of engagement so that it is the Englishman who becomes the “stranger” figure.

This strange man is wistful for an idea of “home” that he cannot know and which ultimately does not exist, and yet he needs these picturesque images of exotic lands, tinged with naiveté and primitivism, in order to sustain the illusion of his own “great country.” The woman in contrast does not need strange fantasies of unreal worlds in order to feel as if she has an identity which belongs to her. But she does, however, desire to fantasize about being an object who can offer this man a description of the island he so desires. The poem itself is such a fantasy, and yet it is a fantasy that allows her to reveal the etiology of this Englishman’s desire for her and her home as an exotic object. As the woman says, she enjoys listening to this man in this imaginative reconstruction of their encounter “not to hear of [his] great country / And tales of [his] marvellous land” but to “watch the wistful smile / That plays around [his] mouth” and see the “strange look” in his eyes as he speaks in a “calm sweet tone” (98). Unlike this Englishman, the speaker cannot herself be wistful when she knows intimately the socio-economic realities of life in the Caribbean

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caused by Britain's imperialist project. If she is wistful for anything, it is the experience of wistfulness itself that she sees on this man's face; she is wistful for a wistfulness that only those unaffected by the systemic oppression of imperialism can know. Her fantasy of objecthood allows her to indulge this wistfulness and reveal the violence of this Englishman's fantasy of subjecthood in the process.

The power of this poem therefore lies not in the way in which it tells a narrative about a woman who directly challenges imperialist assumptions about racial or ethnic identity, or life in the Caribbean (as do other poems by Marson like "Nigger," "Heartbreak Cottages," "At the Prison Gates," or "Foreign"). Rather, the power of the poem lies in the ways in which this poetic entity, this specifically female speaker, is able to reflect these kinds of persistent fantasies back onto the subjects who create them, disrupting the reader's perception of their own subjecthood in the process. The depiction of the "strange look" in this man's eyes" and the "calm sweet tone" of his voice as he compares his "marvelous land" with her tales of "magic sunsets and marvelous seas," in the final stanza, ultimately shows that this man is himself delusional. His belief that he is a progressive and assured member of the British imperial family in the early twentieth century depends entirely upon the fantasy of a gendered and racialized subjecthood that does not and cannot exist. The ethical and political power of the poem thus lies in the reader's recognition that even though the speaker may find herself in the position of a disenfranchised and objectified other, her wry response and refusal to let the stranger see anything other than the surface fantasy that he demands is ultimately a politically and ethically charged aesthetic strategy which uncovers the instability at the center of this man's sense of subjecthood. Ultimately, the poem uncovers the emptiness at the heart of the very idea of a British Imperial family.

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In “Little Brown Girl,” Marson’s interrogation of the ways in which subjecthood is formed is directed not at metropolitan subjects via a black woman’s body, but at the woman of color herself who has found that her own sense of subjecthood has been fractured after a long period of sustained discrimination in the metropole. In “Little Black Girl,” the speaker describes an Afro-Caribbean child wandering through the “great city / Of London” and depicts the discrimination she faces (92). Originally titled “Autobiography of a Brown Girl,” the poem makes use of the entire spectrum of personal pronouns in order to describe the child, the white Londoners she encounters, and the Caribbean people she has left behind. Multiple voices are ventriloquized and the speaker aligns herself with multiple ethnic groups, bringing the identity of the speaker into question.

In the second stanza, this speaker distances herself from the child when she asks her “why do *you* start and wince / When white folk stare at you?” (92), before then also going on to separate herself from these “white folk” too:

Don’t you think *they* wonder  
Why a little brown girl  
Should roam about *their* city  
*Their* white, white city? (92, my emphasis)

But then in the following stanza the speaker switches voices again and aligns herself with these white Londoners through the use of the first-person plural:

Why did you leave  
Your sunlit land  
Where *we* sometimes go  
To rest and get brown

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So *we* may look healthy? (92, my emphasis)

By the fifth stanza, the speaker is again referring to both the white Londoners and the people of color who live in the Caribbean in a manner that suggests that she belongs to neither group: “*the folks* [in London] are all white,” she says, and “*they* all seem the same” (93, my emphasis). And neither are there any “Black faces, pearly teeth”:

[No] weary laden women

Balancing huge baskets

So cleverly on *their* heads

While *they* greet each other

And tell of little things

That mean so much to *them*. (93, my emphasis)

The speaker thus alternates throughout the poem between voicing the thoughts of a self-assured white Londoner and the thoughts of a more impartial observer. By ventriloquizing various voices in this way, Marson highlights the psychological violence that racist discourse and discriminating actions engender. Ultimately, it is revealed through the poem, that the speaker is ruminating over her own experiences as a “little brown girl” in London and the distance that she, as an adult, has come from that position of naïve youth.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker wonders what the child is “seeking” and she tells her that there is nothing to be seen in this city but “people clad / In Coats, Coats, Coats,” a “city of coated people” (92). The repetition of the word “coats” is then echoed in the observation that comes just a few lines afterwards: “And the folks are all white – / White, white, white.” Finally, the speaker asks the little girl, “Wouldn’t you like a coat”? (93). Whiteness, for the speaker, is a coat or layer

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of skin that the little brown girl needs to clad herself in if she is to survive the coldness of the city and its white inhabitants; it is the coat that the speaker has come to believe “little brown girl[s]” must learn to wear in London if they are to survive the daily onslaught of discrimination. She then goes on, in the sixth and seventh stanzas, to provide this child with an example of the kinds of racist comments she will encounter:

Why do you stop and look  
At all the pictures  
Outside the theatres?  
Do you like shows?  
Have you theatres  
In your country?  
And from whence are you  
Little brown girl?  
I guess Africa or India,  
Ah no, from some island  
in the West Indies,  
But isn't that India all the same?

I heard you speak  
To the Bobbie,  
You speak good English  
Little brown girl,  
How is it you speak

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English as though it belonged

To you? (94)

Her embodiment of these belittling voices from the white London masses then begins to change and it comes to seem that the questions that the speaker puts to this “little brown girl” are rhetorical. It is as if the speaker is addressing a younger version of herself who likewise had to learn to wear a coat of white precisely because people stared at her, “reminding [her] of [her] colour” and making her feel strange and “so often alone / In a crowd of white” (95).

In the final stanza, this woman tells the little brown girl that in London she is “exotic,” and she makes the speaker “wonder / All sorts of things” as she strolls “about London / Seeking, seeking, seeking [...]” (95). The child’s exoticism and the speaker’s melancholy become intertwined in this moment: the little brown girl is exotic to this woman of color precisely because the girl is *still* a child who is able to “toss [her] head / As though [she is] proud / to be brown” (94). As an adult who has spent her life in the metropole and has faced a sustained onslaught of racist discrimination, the speaker in contrast has lost this ability to feel proud and she looks out at the little brown girl with a haunting sense of melancholic regret. Ultimately, however, the speaker informs the child that based on the look she sees in the child’s eyes, the thing that she seeks “to discover in this dismal / city of ours” does not exist (95). For the speaker, it does not matter what the child is seeking. Based on her experiences, the child’s hopes and desires for her life in London will remain forever unfulfilled simply because she is not white. The speaker knows this because she too once had the exact same look in her eyes.

Despite this dire ending to the poem, the speaker’s own expressed lack of fulfilment is ultimately what generates a lingering sense of hope. This hope is generated precisely by the way that Marson positions the reader of the poem (through her use of the second-person voice) as the

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speaker who is voicing these thoughts. The reader becomes this woman who looks cynically out and into the eyes of a “little brown girl” and it is by being placed in such a position that they can affectively grasp the kind of psychic violence and assaults upon selfhood that are experienced by people of color in a “white, white, city” like London. In this way the poem ultimately offers the child the potential for a radically alternative future.

## **Conclusion**

In her unpublished *Autobiography of a Brown Girl*, Marson describes a friendship that she had in the 1930s with an Englishman who could just as likely have been the wistful man of “The Stranger.” She describes being interested in a “smart young man” who “was probably interested in me because to him I was strange and exotic” (qtd. in Jarrett-Macauley “‘When Does it Stop?’”). Their friendship, she writes, “was an experience I would not have missed and I learned a great deal that was an eye opener to me about the young men of this ‘brave new world’” (ibid.). It seems that what Marson learned was that these Englishman were “very anxious that I should see them, but equally anxious that people should not see them with me” (ibid.). Race, as the work of Frantz Fanon has shown us, is an “epidermal schema” (112). It is, in Cheng’s words, “something ineluctably tied to the modality of the visible,” and so racial difference “teaches us *to see*” (*Second Skin* 7). And yet, as Cheng asks, when it comes to depictions of race, ethnicity, and gender in modernist works of art, “are we in fact seeing what we think we are seeing?” (7). Like Cheng, I have not been interested in this essay in what visibility (or voice, for that matter) hides; rather, I have sought to ask questions about what and “how it is that we have failed to see” (8) things on the surface of bodies, spaces, stories, and poems in Mansfield’s and Marson’s writing. As Cheng writes, “the early Modernists were in many ways more frank than we are about the seductions and

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efficacies of otherness in the acts of self-making” (14). In addition to “acts of greed, misrecognition, and borrowing” European modernists like Mansfield “immersed themselves in skins that were not their own and constructed themselves as imagined subjects through that inhabitation” (166). What is surprising is that the modernist “desire to remake oneself as object” can in fact be “shared by those we think would be most allergic to such transformation” (166). Marson, as a Jamaican woman burdened by the epidermal schema of Western imperialist racism, is certainly one of these surprising additions to the ranks of those who desire to remake themselves as objects. Nevertheless, as this article has shown, individuation for Afro-Caribbean subjects in London in Marson’s poetry “does not always take the forms of exercising power and agency in the traditional sense, but may instead be achieved through self-evacuation as well as self-syntheticization” (166).

In the *Urewera Notebook*, “The Woman at the Store,” “The Stranger,” and “Little Brown Girl,” both Mansfield and Marson reject the impulse to recuperate disenfranchised subjects by restoring agency on their behalf. They refuse this restoration of identity because it would ultimately only allow for the redemption of the subject who has become uncomfortably aware of his or her culpability in both the material and psychological obliteration of a disenfranchised other. Instead, both writers create a fantasy of objecthood that works to disrupt the assured subjectivities of those who hold all the power within the psychological dyad of subject and object, self and other, whether that object is an actual or fictional person, or a literary text itself. In creating such fantasies that place readers in an experiential position of objecthood, both Mansfield and Marson leave readers with a recognition of what it might *feel* like to be objectified in this way, and what it would mean to experience the material reality of these kinds of objectifications that occur at the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender.

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Mansfield and Marson's projects are in this way akin to what Wai Chi Dimock and Paul Saint-Amour have described as weak theory.<sup>8</sup> In the past several decades, transnational modernist scholars have been calling for renewed attention to previously obscured modernist "mediators" who "reopen closed cases and undo any naturalized hierarchies" (Dimock 736). According to Saint-Amour, these mediators of weak social ties—i.e. these agents who are treated not as "passive links among a finite set of givens" but as actors who "introduce new elements, new directions" and alter "the dynamics among several newly connected and jointly differentiated neighborhoods" within larger networks of exchange (Dimock 736)—"have for a while now" been given "pride of place" as we have traced "the social networks in which modernist cultural producers were embedded" (Saint-Amour 447). Somewhat contradictorily, however, Saint-Amour demonstrates the "*centrifugal* nature of the spin-offs" advocated by Dimock's weak theory (Dimock 737) through reference to the now well-known photograph of Una Marson centered in a coterie of transnational modernists who were affiliated with the BBC Eastern service: these modernists were drawn together, he writes, by the "*centripetal* object" of the microphone (Saint-Amour 450, my emphasis). This conflict between centripetal and centrifugal forces that is brought to the fore in Saint-Amour's portrait of weak social ties is ultimately the issue that has motivated my own weak (perhaps *weaker*) theorizing in this article. Despite the radical rethinking of transnational connections in Saint-Amour's article, even his framework does not accommodate the kinds of modernist missed-connections that this article explores: the photo of Marson at the BBC ultimately can only metonymize "networks of writers, editors, and translators" who are nevertheless still "joined" by "post, telegraph, and radio" (450-1), or "who never met in person" but "were connected through print—through the writing of appreciative reviews, introductions, critiques, parodies, even diatribes" (449). Centripetal forces and direct social connections, rather than

centrifugal spin-outs and wayward paths, continue to govern how we approach and understand the circulation of objects through modernist cultural networks.

While this article makes use of the kind of “transnational optic” theorized by Jessica Berman, it has also sought to problematize the circulation model of transnational modernist studies that even Saint-Amour’s weak practice is drawn toward (28).<sup>9</sup> Jed Esty has already demonstrated how the circulation model risks “turning comparative analysis into an exotic catalogue of pure differences and thus risk[s] an inadequate historical reckoning with the facts and legacies of European/Western power” (198). Similarly, by focusing on the non-existent social ties of Mansfield and Marson (two modernist cultural producers who act *not* as “intermediaries” amongst the coteries of London modernity but as “mediators” within a network of global modernities), this article has further sought to demonstrate how the circulation model of transnational modernism might also run the risk of missing the critically important anti-imperial links brought about through the weakest of weak ties—i.e. through those “ties” that find no socially concrete centripetal object to draw them together and yet which nevertheless exist because of a shared modernist aesthetics, politics, and ethics of embracing discomfort and dwelling in a crisis of self-recognition.

As with Latour, Dimock, and Saint-Amour’s theorizing of the centrifugal forces of modernism and modernity, Cheng’s work offers a model of reading “that is willing to follow, rather than to suppress, the wayward life of the subject and object in dynamic interface” (“The Wayward Life of Objects” 4). By “confronting these sites and sights of visual pleasures and exchanges,” as I have done in this article, we are made to “read promiscuously: to “be led by and to attend to what the ‘objects’ have to teach [us]” (4). Lastly, by placing these transnational modernists in collage with one another and in dialogue with these practitioners of weak theory, I have demonstrated that the kind of anti-suspicious “new modesty of literary criticism” described

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by Jeffrey Williams (“The New Modesty in Literary Criticism”)—a practice which Cheng has called a “hermeneutics of susceptibility, rather than suspicion” (“The Wayward Life of Objects” 4)—is anything but new.<sup>10</sup> The reparative potentialities of affect and the work of seeking to “know but not necessarily know better than [the objects we study]” will hopefully continue to “irritate” the field of modernist studies into “a state of self-scrutiny” (Saint-Amour 444, 442)—but it is also crucial to acknowledge that the kind of “crisis of self-recognition” (442) that Saint-Amour foresees for the field has already been modeled for us in radical ways in the weak and wayward encounters that occur (or did not occur) between transnational feminist modernists.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Susan Stanford Friedman has argued, collage as a method of reading analytically involves “the scholar’s act of paratactic cutting and pasting. It establishes a montage of differences where the putting side by side illuminates those differences at the same time that it spotlights commonalities” (*Planetary Modernisms* 77).

<sup>2</sup> Comparing two such disparate writers is admittedly a risky enterprise. This is especially the case given the historical use of comparison as an authoritarian “tool of the dominant,” as Susan Stanford Friedman phrases it, and given the risks that searching for commensurability can become a means by which scholars end up replicating “the violence done to the particularity of the other” (“World Modernisms” 505). Undertaking such risky comparisons however can help to elucidate previously obscured radical politics and ethics.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Snaith, for example, argues that Mansfield’s representations of Māori are part of her performative identity as a colonial outsider in London: Mansfield, she writes, co-opts New Zealand indigeneity in order “to shock, to make herself different, as well as to respond to newness in avant-garde literary London,” but “in doing so, she came up against the act of representation, the violence of making something over” (133-2).

<sup>4</sup> All references to the *Urewera Notebook* are from Plumridge’s edition.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of this and other stereotypes prevalent in early twentieth New Zealand see James Belich’s *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000*.

<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth discussion of *mana whenua* and *kaitiakitanga* see Huia Tomlins Jahnke and Malcolm Mulholland’s *Mana Tangata: Politics of Empowerment*.

<sup>7</sup> The assumption, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was that Māori were a dying race. This resulted in attitudes which were often paternalistic, nostalgic, and patronizingly compensatory. See for example Elsdon Best’s *The Māori As He Was* and Belich’s *Paradise Reforged*.

<sup>8</sup> In “Weak Theory: Henry James, Colm Tóibín, and W. B. Yeats,” Wai Chi Dimock points out that Bruno Latour’s work in *We Have Never Been Modern* “urges us to think [...] about tangential processes, wayward lines of association, oblique to an existing system, pulling away from it and stretching it in unexpected ways.” Taking his lead from Dimock, along with other practitioners of “weak theory,” Saint-Amour points to transnational modernist projects that trace “weak social ties” as examples of how modernist studies scholars have already been paying close attention to how the “centrifugal forces” which Dimock describes function within modernist networks.

<sup>9</sup> For Berman, reading modernist works through a “transnational optic” involves undertaking a critical practice that treats modernism as a “constellation of rhetorical actions, attitudes, or aesthetic occasions, motivated by the particular and varied situations of economic, social, and cultural modernity worldwide and shaped by the ethical and political demands of those situations. Its rhetorical activity exists in constant and perpetual relationship to the complex, various, and often vexing demands of the social practices, political discourses, and historical circumstances of modernity and the challenges they pose to systems of representation—even as its forms and attitudes sometimes hide this fact” (7-8).

<sup>10</sup> For another more skeptical view of “new” modesty’s lack of newness see Bruce Robbins’s “Not So Well Attached”—for Robbins, “new modesty” is not simply not “new,” but is in fact “not really modesty” either (373).

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