Peter J. Kalliney


Peter Kalliney’s fine book combines a subtle historical sociology of literature with skillful close readings of literary texts to provide a new mapping of the period of late literary modernism and early postcolonial literature. Modernism and postcolonial literature have too rarely been studied together; Commonwealth of Letters makes that critical neglect even more startling by showing that each field was inextricably bound up with the other. Building on the work of Simon Gikandi, Neil Lazarus, Nicholas Brown, and others interested in the convergence of modernism and postcolonial literature, Kalliney emphasizes the ways in which “affiliation, patronage, emulation, and competition” (p. 118) characterized the relationship between “metropolitan modernists” and late colonial/early postcolonial writers in London, with Anglophone Caribbean and African writers at the center of his story. Kalliney argues that we should look at the postwar period in literary culture in the Anglophone world as a brief moment when exchanges, collaborations, and partnerships were possible between the aging generation of metropolitan modernist writers/cultural gatekeepers and a new generation of colonial and decolonizing writers and intellectuals. Each group, according to this narrative, needed the other. The modernists, dispirited by the turn to a kind of bland, welfare-state realism in literature after the war and by the threat of commercial mass culture, sought rejuvenation and kindred spirits among a group of émigré writers from the Caribbean and Anglophone Africa who had been educated in the literary curriculum exported to the colonies by the Leavisites and modernists who had seized control of English literary studies before the war. For their part, the colonial and newly postcolonial writers, ambitious for literary success and already skeptical of the trend toward corruption and philistinism among their compatriot anticolonial politicians, sought the access to cultural capital and the comforting embrace of literature for its own sake that they could only find among the metropolitan modernists.

Kalliney does not sugar-coat this history; he certainly acknowledges that cultural imperialism, metropolitan paternalism, and sometimes simple racism were all active and important features of postwar British literary culture. (Pursuing the more sinister side of “sugar-coating,” he extends his analysis in an afterword to account for the colonial commercial framework of the Booker Prize for fiction, launched by a company, Booker-McConnell, whose fortunes were made in sugar production and processing in Guyana and elsewhere in the Caribbean in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.) But Kalliney
also argues that colonial and postcolonial writers had much to gain from affiliations with metropolitan modernists, and that they exploited those connections to the fullest extent possible. Ultimately, this book functions as a history of mid-twentieth-century cultural institutions, the material and intellectual spaces in which literature was nurtured and produced: the BBC, Faber & Faber, the Caribbean Artists Movement, the Heinemann African Writers Series, and so forth. (Universities are strikingly absent from this account, however.) For Kalliney, fundamentally, these places were “sites of exchange between metropolitan and colonial writers” (pp. 3–4, emphasis added).

Kalliney’s book, therefore, complements and challenges Jed Esty’s influential A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England (2004), which argued that late modernism produced a turn to insular, nostalgic versions of Englishness as a way for British writers to cope with the loss of cultural influence at the end of the empire. Commonwealth of Letters, by contrast, argues that the remarkable flourishing of a group of West Indian writers in London in the 1950s—George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, Wilson Harris, Jean Rhys, V.S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, Andrew Salkey, and others—represents “a particular culmination, not a general repudiation, of interwar modernism” (p. 132). There are some intriguing, unusual juxtapositions that result, not least the pairing of Kamau Brathwaite with F.R. and Q.D. Leavis in Kalliney’s third chapter. Kalliney argues that there is a strong affinity between the project of the Leavises in Cambridge—to identify the “great tradition” of English literature as the expression of the “living language” of the (rural) English people—and Brathwaite’s theory and practice of “nation language” in the Caribbean. Emphasizing the insurgent aspects of their work—the Leavises shaking up the stuffy, clubby provincialism of academic English studies up to the 1930s and Brathwaite’s challenge to the mimic men and women of Caribbean letters—Kalliney makes an intriguing case that the connections between figures like the Leavises, Brathwaite, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o are more important than the evident differences that also separate them. In the end, he argues, “black Atlantic writers were the twentieth century’s most eloquent and committed defenders of aesthetic autonomy” (p. 5), which Kalliney sees as the hallmark of modernism.

Some readers might wonder, however, on what grounds Kalliney sees “aesthetic autonomy” as the principal, definitive feature of modernism? What does it mean to select this criterion from among the others that would have been plausible (formal and linguistic experimentation, explorations of alienated and/or heightened states of consciousness, innovations in the representation of time and space), none of which would have served his argument quite so well? And if aesthetic autonomy is so capacious a category that it can be advocated by figures as diverse as Matthew Arnold, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Amos Tutuola, as
it is in Kalliney’s book, then what is specifically “modernist” about the desire for aesthetic autonomy? Likewise, if Leavis, the BBC, C.L.R. James, and Heine-mann Educational Books are all to be linked together under the heading of “modernism,” then we are dealing with a definition that would not be readily accepted by many critics of modernism. This may be no bad thing, of course. One of the virtues of the book is that it represents a spirited intervention into the critical history of modernism itself, reminding us that it is precisely during this postwar period that “modernism” came to be named as a literary movement and period. In fact, one of the most striking and persuasive claims of the book is that black Atlantic writers were themselves instrumental in developing an enlarged concept of modernism; for example, by drawing attention to T.S. Eliot’s interest in jazz and vernacular speech: “Postcolonial intellectuals such as Brathwaite have decisively shaped our current understandings of what metropolitan modernism was [and] what it now represents” (p. 100).

Kalliney has a rare gift for joining clear, consistent argument to subtle analysis that is open to complexity and contradiction. The archival research, especially on publishing and radio history, is extremely impressive and judiciously used. The literary close readings are strong, sometimes brilliant—though occasionally perhaps overextended. This book should change the way that scholars of postcolonial literature and modernist literature view the cultural history of this period.

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