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*British Fiction and Cross-Cultural Encounters: Ethnographic  
Modernism from Wells to Woolf* by Carey J. Snyder (Palgrave  
Macmillan, 2008)

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In *British Fiction and Cross-Cultural Encounters*, Carey Snyder argues that British modernist writers were more deeply engaged with the study of ethnography, its methods, and its texts than current criticism reflects. All of the literary works discussed in the book represent ethnographic encounters between British travelers and non-western indigenous or imagined cultures. Three main claims recur throughout the chapters: first, the modernist writers discussed employ the “liminal perspective” of modern ethnographic field journals and monographs, wherein the narrator oscillates between “insider” (local, indigenous, “native”) and “outsider” (critical western observer) perspectives; second, the literary works are generally more interested in depicting cross-cultural encounters for the purpose of satirizing or otherwise criticizing British culture than to gain any profound understanding of the other culture itself, which leads them to focus disproportionately on how such encounters affect the observer rather than the observed; and finally, the literary works show a general skepticism of the possibility of knowing other cultures, thus undermining the project of ethnography even while employing its techniques. By bringing together readings of canonical modernist and anthropological texts, popular fiction, essays, field journals, travel diaries, and archival research, Snyder effectively argues the case for an ethnographic influence on modernist fiction.

The first two chapters depict the various ways in which the writers that Snyder considers “outsiders” to mainstream British culture “emulat[e] ethnographic techniques on a narrative level” (1). They are also, at the same time, “questioning the very premise of ethnography through a pervasive attitude of epistemological uncertainty” (1). The first chapter reads Rider Haggard’s African

romances alongside the explorer ethnographies of Richard Burton and Henry Stanley. All three writers “felt marginal to the British mainstream” and gained notoriety through their claims to insider knowledge of African cultures (27). Haggard’s protagonists are similar to Burton’s and Stanley’s depictions of the ideal anthropologist, that is, the “man-on-the-spot” or the field observer (32). Such an observer, in contrast to the traditional armchair anthropologist, values empirical evidence over theoretical musing; he is courageous, confident, and infinitely resourceful. Through a series of close readings (which sometimes lose steam in a mass of details) Snyder reveals that Haggard undercuts, even while employing, such depictions of the explorer-ethnographer. Moments in Haggard’s texts reveal the observers’ unease brought about by an uncanny recognition of the self in the other and the other in the self, a theme that gains prominence as the book continues.

The second chapter deals with the writings of another set of outsiders: Mary Kingsley, H. G. Wells, and Joseph Conrad (marginalized by gender, class, and ethnicity, respectively). Kingsley foregrounds the “disequilibrium” experienced by the participant-observer and argues that the observer’s “surrender” to feelings of “bewilderment, disorientation, and alienation” is a necessary step on the path to cultural understanding (72). Insightfully, Snyder proposes that Kingsley’s model of the “dissolving self” is a transformation of Victorian women’s self-effacement (in the service of domestic and familial duties) into a legitimate, even ideal, scientific method. The most significant reflections in the chapter, however, appear in Snyder’s analysis of Conrad. She argues that Conrad’s works abandon the aim of accurate interpretation of other cultures and instead document the horrific realities of Kingsley’s methodological ideal: the observer’s disintegrating identity at the site of the cross-cultural encounter.<sup>1</sup> Not discounting his racism and imperialism, Snyder argues that Conrad alone, among the outsider authors, develops an innovative

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<sup>1</sup> Snyder reads Kurtz as a character who follows Kingsley’s advice and Marlow as one who refuses to adopt it, and thus is able to get out of Africa alive.

narrative style (and significant aesthetic contribution to high modernism) out of the ethnographer's bewilderment. Literary impressionism (characterized by vague language, partial knowledge, and the privileging of imagination over accuracy) is directly informed by Conrad's preoccupation with debunking the ethnographic goals of authoritative observation and understanding of others.

Such moments when Snyder makes connections between stylistic invention and observer psychology are among the most developed and well-argued in the book. In the discussion of Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, for instance, she posits that the protagonist Rachel Vinrace develops into a "nebulous, incoherent, fragmented 'modernist self'" as a result of a process that can be compared to the anthropological concept of "self-nativizing," or turning the "ethnographic eye back on the home culture" (99, 98). Snyder writes that the "extravagant otherness" of South American culture makes visible the equal strangeness of British culture, an estrangement of the familiar that, once realized, progressively erodes Rachel's coherent self (98). Though estrangement as a literary technique is hardly limited to ethnography, to modernism, or to Woolf, it is clear that in this case, Rachel's estrangement possesses a particularly ethnographic quality: an encounter with a cultural other is turned inward to reflect the otherness of the self. Like self identity, the "everyday details of English life" also begin to appear "incoherent and strange" when "decontextualized" in the Amazonian jungle (112). The novel "anchors meaning" in the moments when the characters see "the shape of their culture coming into focus" as a contoured and variegated pattern (112). Snyder connects this tendency with Ruth Benedict's depiction of world cultures as a disparate, heterogeneous mosaic in *Patterns of Culture* (1934). The ethnographic tendencies of *The Voyage Out* manage to destabilize the image of an authoritative British identity and an omnipotent British empire by offering a pluralistic view of national culture.

The last two chapters take the question of empire in a different direction, examining its relation to tourism and

ethnography in the works of E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, and Aldous Huxley. Analyzing the four main characters of *A Passage to India* within the context of their responses to Indian culture, Snyder concludes that “even the ‘anti-tourist tourist’ [Adela Quested] who claims to connect with the local population may ultimately see with imperial eyes,” and that even Mr. Fielding, who derides tourism of any kind and believes in the possibility of genuine transcultural friendship, is inextricably bound to the imperialist project he rejects (135). And whereas Adela and Fielding preserve too much outsider distance when confronting Indian culture, Mrs. Moore falls victim to too much insider sympathy. Even the narrative voice finally proves unreliable. According to Snyder, the novel’s oscillating narrative voice is reincarnated from Forster’s field journals, in which he meditates on his role as participant-observer. It is an attempt to maintain the kind of balance between insider and outsider perspectives necessary for a successful cross-cultural encounter.

The discussions of Lawrence and Huxley serve to reinforce the inextricability of tourism, ethnography, and empire. To these readings, Snyder effectively adds the use of archival material, most notably magazine ads for ethnological tourism in the southwest United States.<sup>2</sup> Comparing the writings of Lawrence and Huxley to these popular sources, Snyder argues that the authors were never able to completely break away from the racist and commodified images of Native Americans from which they wished to distance themselves. Lawrence viewed such spectacles as Indian souvenir vendors and performances of ritual dances for white audiences as calling into question the possibility of retaining authenticity in cultural acts that have become “object[s] of tourist consumption” (164). Yet, as much as Lawrence decries the degradation of “real” native culture through its visibility to tourists, Snyder argues that he betrays his own attraction to displays of difference in stories

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<sup>2</sup> The book’s illustrations of these ads are legible, well-chosen, and visually dramatize the ways in which advertisers created idealized images of the encounter with the other for commercial ends.

where his protagonists seem to “spy” or “trespass” on cultural secrets (171). While Lawrence seeks the “antidote to the moribund modern condition” in the authentic other, Huxley exposes such primitivist ideas as fantasy (171). Huxley draws from ethnographic writings less to understand other cultures than to highlight the deficiencies of his own. Snyder reads *Brave New World* as a text that juxtaposes the civilized and the savage in order to contend that modern civilization has degenerated into a state of savagery; thus, Huxley employs the language of tourism advertisements to satirize both the primitivists and those who think themselves civilized.

While Snyder’s arguments for a general ethnographic influence on British modernist fiction are convincing, it is often unclear whether she sees particular stylistic conventions of ethnographic writing as influencing stylistic conventions of modernist writing, or if instead it is the thematic concerns of ethnography that influence modernist style. In other words, it is difficult to discern when the book is comparing the writing style of certain ethnographic texts to the writing style of certain works of literature, and when the book is arguing that literary style merely reflects ethnographic content. Sometimes the ethnographic is an attitude, a tone, or an “outlook” that manifests itself in the literary text; sometimes it is a set of fieldwork methods applied by characters to their imaginary encounters with cultural others; and at other times it is a set of formal techniques employed by authors to elucidate the interior geography of their protagonists. Perhaps a more robust theoretical discussion in the introduction that delineates what constitutes the ethnographic project and what constitutes its writing style would provide some clarification and guidance.

The book might also benefit from an analysis of how British modernist fiction influenced anthropological texts of the mid-twentieth-century and onwards. Although Snyder states that modernist writers prefigure certain aspects of postmodern anthropology, she does not examine the issue in much detail. Perhaps a coda which posits a dialogue between modernist fiction

and some specific postmodern anthropological texts or theories would help to situate this study within ongoing investigations of the connections between literature and anthropology. The book could further benefit by considering how it might fit into the burgeoning subfield of transnationalism within modernist studies, an area that already benefits from interdisciplinary conversations with other social sciences (politics and political theory, economics, sociology) but has yet to engage substantially with anthropology. Such a discussion might be a helpful addition to the Forster chapter, where the author discusses Mr. Fielding's (and Forster's own) belief that cross-cultural friendships might in time trump national loyalties once the yokes of colonialism and imperialism are removed.

One important contribution that *British Fiction and Cross-Cultural Encounters* makes to the field of modernist studies is to remind us that the cultural context of British modernism is not circumscribed by British culture or British literary writing. The book also gestures toward areas of investigation that lie outside of its own scope. In other words, Snyder centers her study on observers rather than the observed because the authors and texts she analyzes do so. But future projects that explore the intersection between modernist fiction and ethnography may need to take a closer look at the observed rather than the observers, and at the ways in which non-British and non-European modernisms developed (and are developing) as the result of cross-cultural encounters. Snyder's well-researched and informative study highlights the importance of both inward and outward looking for future modernist scholarship.