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Modernism/modernity, Volume 25, Number 1, January 2018, pp. 193-195
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2018.0009>



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Review Essay

Japan's Queer Modernity

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***Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities.* Christopher Reed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. Pp. 440. \$105.00 (cloth); \$35.00 (paper); \$34.99 (eBook).**

***Learning to Kneel: Noh, Modernism, and Journeys in Teaching.* Carrie J. Preston. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. Pp. 352. \$35.00 (cloth); \$26.00 (paper); \$34.99 (eBook).**

MODERNISM / *modernity*

VOLUME TWENTY FIVE,

NUMBER ONE,

PP 193–195. © 2018

JOHNS HOPKINS

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Two excellent new books explore the impact of Japanese art and culture on the emerging gender formations of Western modernism. Which is already a little odd, since there have been, until the present, pretty much zero book-length studies of that theme, and there are a few more to come in the next few years—including (full disclosure and god willing) one by me. *Learning to Kneel: Noh, Modernism, and Journeys in Teaching* by Carrie J. Preston and *Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities* by Christopher Reed together comprise a persuasive case that, in certain important respects, Western modernists learned their queer identity practices from their interpretations of Japan. These books bear a family resemblance to work published on modernism and China a decade ago by Eric Hayot, Christopher Bush, Haun Saussy, Steven Yao and others in *Sinographies: Writing China*, which explored the imaginative, aesthetic, and (occasionally) political consequences of Orientalist writing, circumventing the pedantic objection that such interpretations were, by and large, wrong.¹ Indeed, in certain ways these scholars sought to recover Orientalist wrongness itself as a critical tool to be wielded against the orthodoxies of Western-aesthetic chauvinism. Preston and Reed sharpen the point still further. Not only did major European modernists (such as Ezra Pound, Bertolt Brecht, and Walter Benjamin) turn to the Orient to shake off the fusty residues of Victorian rationalism, but a minor modernist tradition turned to Japan to subvert the Sinocentrism and masculinism of the main modernist stream. The two authors marshal different evidence towards a version of this argu-



194 ment. Reed recovers a breathtakingly rich and original archive of artists, writers, and collectors proximate to, but just outside of, our familiar narratives (Henri Cernuschi, Isabella Stewart Gardner, Bernard Leach, and Mark Tobey are some of the most powerfully described). Preston, conversely, focuses on the queering and minoritizing consequences of teaching a more recognizable canon (Pound, W. B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett) in such a way as to heighten its exoticism.

Addressing overlapping but distinct archives, then, these two books also present two very different methods of assessing transcultural connections: labors of very different kinds of love. *Learning to Kneel* offers anecdotes both pedagogical and vividly personal: the author's own body is frequently exhibited as a source of meaning and authority. Early on, Preston compares herself to the *waki* character in a *noh* drama, "persistently and self-consciously kneeling at the side of the stage, aware of my complicated position as a Westerner, woman, and scholar" (22). Each chapter includes detailed reportage from the author's classrooms—both the ones she convenes as a professor of literature (whose students, indeed, themselves appear as recurring guest stars) and the ones in which she submits, in the pose that the book's title describes, to the discipline of *noh* practice itself. Reed's scholarly pose, if it makes sense to talk in those terms, is the much more familiar one of expertise, specifically here of three Western art scenes (late nineteenth-century Paris, turn-of-the-century Boston, and mid-twentieth-century Seattle), hubs of japoniste activity, sociality, and creativity. The microcosmic approach serves Reed well: *Bachelor Japonists* teems with suggestive detail, biographical narrative, and tittle-tattle, and artfully told history, and is by far the most thorough cultural history of modernist japonisme to date. There is a different kind of personal disclosure throughout: Reed's own photographs, lovingly exhibited. And these books position themselves in relation to existing scholarship differently. The originality of Preston's approach endows each of her readings with a powerful vitality, even at some distance from prevailing scholarly protocols; though more conventional in one sense, Reed displays an effective mastery of a scholarly field whose coordinates were set by Earl Miner. Indeed, by re-orienting the question of "modernism and Orientalism" back towards Japan, both these books affirm the strange durability of Miner's 1958 book *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature*, which itself laid some of the foundations of American comparative literary studies out of which the Sinographies group developed. Perhaps that book is due for a reprint itself.

Given these differences in method, it is striking that both Preston and Reed ground their own research in a commitment to at least some of the premises of queer theory. For Reed, "the idea of Japan as antipode queers fundamental Western hierarchies of truth, propriety, and representation" (294). In her treatment of the aesthetic and pedagogical potentialities of submissiveness announced in her title, Preston positions herself against the "assertive individual" that, "[d]espite warnings by [Leo] Bersani and others," has come to stand as "the presumed ideal in most strands of queer theory, as it is in feminism" (221). As these citations make clear, the two appeals to queer theory belong to different orders: Preston's is, so to speak, diegetic, and concerns the queerness of an aspect of *noh* pedagogy—its emphasis on, and radicalization of, submission. Reed's is rather metadiegetic: the force doing the "queering" is nothing less than "the idea of Japan as antipode" itself.

These two books both make important contributions to an ongoing topic of major scholarly interest: the transnational formation of Western modernism. By grounding an account of that formation, moreover, in an Orientalist episteme that did not derive from Western colonial ambition, these books may contribute to a profound reorganization of modernist studies' relation to postcolonial and transnational scholarship more broadly. Some readers will find the theoretical analysis of Reed's book less compelling than its narrative; some will find Preston's personal disclosures more evasive than direct. I offer no such objection myself. Both these authors made very strong choices about how to organize their scholarship, and their convergence on a topic hitherto on the fringes of modernist studies only proves that, in modernist studies as currently composed, style hardly correlates with topic at all—a sign, I take it, of a flourishing intellectual ecosystem.

The only objection I do feel moved to make to these books is one that will seem especially esoteric in the present context: I am still not sure that "modernism" is really a good name for the variously preservationist, traditionalist, idiosyncratically aristocratic, and moralist aesthetic forms and styles these books describe. Or, since I anticipate that Preston and Reed would perhaps find ways to agree with me there, I am not sure why the distance of such forms from a given type

of modernism (whether construed in Preston's major, or Reed's minor, terms) is an especially interesting thing to note about them. As it goes, this hardly matters. The category of "modernism" comes closest to logical necessity in these books when it is deployed as an historical alibi for the essentialization of "abstraction" as an artistic principle. As Reed puts it, at the turn of the century,

it was still common for textual and visual representations of Japan (like [Mortimer] Menpes's paintings) to sustain conventional styles of representation in order to claim the authority of firsthand observation in conventional Cartesian terms (that is, by asserting a single vantage point from which a privileged viewer understands by seeing without being seen), but these were readily recognized as old-fashioned. In contrast, self-consciously modern deployments of Japan disauthorized Western systems of belief and representation, revealing their artificiality in ways that opened up possibilities to imagine alternatives. (10)

It's difficult to read these rather burdensome sentences without concluding that Reed himself treats the arrival of Japanese-style abstraction in the West with as much enthusiasm as his titular characters—and the straw man of "conventional Cartesian" techniques of representation has been given as short shrift in his Introduction as they gave it themselves.

One need not ontologize abstraction, or adhere to any other aspect of modernist ideology, to get a great deal out of either of these books, and they are both models of powerful intellectual commitment followed with integrity and rigor. Together, they prove, even somewhat against the orientation of their own field, that the aesthetic effects Preston and Reed describe with such vivacity—prose as somber, diffuse, and colorful as their subject matter—have as much to teach twentieth-century studies, as they did the twentieth century itself.

Notes

1. Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy, and Steven G. Yao, ed., *Sinographies: Writing China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).