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Book Review: Elitist Writers, Popular Appeal—an Uncharted Synergy

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On Company Time: American Modernism in the Big Magazines. Donal Harris. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. 275 pp. \$60.00 hardcover.

Donal Harris, an assistant professor of English at the University of Memphis, specializes in analyzing how various social institutions have helped shape post-Civil War American literature. In *On Company Time: American Modernism in the Big Magazines* (2016), he explores the uncharted symbiosis between mass magazines that kept “commercial success and enormous readerships at the center of their business model” (p. 7) and several major American modernist writers.

In each chapter, Harris spotlights a modernist author and the magazine that supported and shaped that writer. His selection of literary figures represents a range of magazine roles, such as editor, managing editor, publisher, and writer. In his introduction, Harris explains the formative influences that both writers and magazines experienced as a result of their partnerships:

The authors I discuss—Cather, Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, James Agee, T. S. Eliot, and Ernest Hemingway, among others—are mostly remembered as exceptional innovators of literary form and standout theorists of literary culture and authorship as it relates to the marketplace. But they often did their innovating and theorizing from inside the editorial offices of groundbreaking popular magazines—*McClure's*, *The Crisis*, *Time*, *Life*, *Esquire*—while influencing the editorial mission statements and house styles that made these periodicals thrive. The relationship works in the other direction as well. That is, ‘modernism’ as a loose, often tacit set of ideas about the relationship between aesthetics and the literary market, as well as a malleable set of tropes, provided a useful cultural formation against which popular magazines could leverage their own ideas about and experiments in the print marketplace. (p. 5)

Harris posits that despite the original nature of modernist literature, written to appeal to educated elites, the act of becoming a professional author necessitated at least some degree of mass-market success. Therefore, it was both practical and necessary for modernist writers and popular magazines to form a relationship. Throughout the book, Harris is intent on accomplishing three goals: (1) “to bring modernist studies to bear on commercial magazines and vice versa”; (2) “to show that a cluster of questions regarding office culture and periodical design can help us discuss magazines that are not often grouped together”; and (3) “to trace how the organizational and aesthetic developments in specific magazine

offices feed forward into the literary writing of key figures in American literary modernism” (p. 8). In the process, Harris addresses significant social issues, including race, racism, and gender roles in the workplace, though these are not his main focus.

In chapter 1, Harris details how Willa Cather’s literary approach was defined by her work as managing editor at *McClure’s*. Cather’s vision of the perfect editor, Harris argues, was “one whose work goes undetected”—just as Cather “theorizes a version of authorship in which true artistry consists of what a writer leaves off the page” (p. 23). Thus, Cather’s editorial success was reminiscent of her achievements as an author. She managed to “standardize *McClure’s* gentlemanly voice across its content and to do so without either alienating the name-brand journalists and authors who supplied *McClure’s* with content or upsetting S. S. McClure” (p. 42).

In the next chapter, Harris examines how William Edward Burghardt Du Bois used *The Crisis*, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, “to experiment with different versions of how to embed racialized authorship and editorship in the style of a magazine” (p. 69). Some magazine scholars may take issue with Harris’s characterization of *The Crisis* as a “big magazine” rather than an association publication, but he justifies it by pointing to Du Bois’s “unprecedented achievement” in raising the magazine’s circulation (p. 64). *The Crisis* communicated African American achievements to a wide audience “so as to provide a counterhistory to racist mass culture” (p. 69). Teachers of magazine production or design may be interested in this chapter because of Harris’s unique exploration of how print production and graphic design can shape “the visual reproduction of race” (p. 80). As the chapter suggests, “even the most sympathetic and adept representations of racialized bodies will be undermined simultaneously by a history of racist caricature and the material limitations of reproducing skin color with cheap ink on cheap paper ...” (p. 83).

Another chapter examines Time Inc.’s relationship to modernism. Harris explores the “emergence of a corporate voice” as reflective of “modernist impersonality held up to a dark mirror” (p. 111) and the influence of Time’s news writing style on several modernist writers. *Time’s* style was not unlike the modernist literary technique of compression, Harris contends. Novelist James Agee illustrates the influence: his work at Time Inc. soon impeded his ability to write in anything but the magazine’s style. Others, such as Kenneth Fearing, “took pains to keep” their literary writing separate (p. 121)—an effort evident in how Fearing’s “suspicion of work ... colors every aspect” of his novel *The Big Clock*” (p. 122). In spite of their mutual influences, *Time* and the modernists realized their successes in vastly different contexts—the former in mass mainstream culture, and the latter in “primarily the university, which affixes to it a unique readership and niche in periodical literature, one that Time Inc. does not see itself in competition with” (p. 148).

Harris concludes with a study of Hemingway’s significant contributions—25 columns and six short stories—published in *Esquire*, from its first issue in October 1933 to

February 1939, when it had established itself as “the decade’s premier men’s magazine” (p. 175). Harris writes that Hemingway’s work with *Esquire* “gave him reliable access to one of the largest, most sustained readerships of any American author in the twentieth century” (p. 176). Hemingway went on to sell *The Old Man and the Sea* to *Life* magazine, where it appeared one week before it became available as a stand-alone novella. Harris surprises the reader by drawing a new parallel between magazine writing and Hemingway’s literary work:

Hemingway is not modern for his terse cablese, but he is modern in the way that magazines are: overabundance. As much as his bibliography can make it look like there are long dry spells, he was prolific and ever-present from his earliest moment on the American literary scene. (p. 188)

Literary critics and magazine scholars alike should find merit in *On Company Time*. Scholars passionate about the history of magazine media will appreciate Harris’s research and relish details relevant to the development of the industry. However, one downside is that the book’s style is evocative of a basic five-paragraph essay structure: Harris tells the reader what points he’s going to make, makes those points, and then tells us that he made them. Students and scholars who will appreciate Harris’s literary analyses likely do not require the handholding inherent in such structure. The use of literary criticism devices to analyze magazine history further results in a dense tome—more akin to a dissertation than a classroom text. This is why *On Company Time* has limited potential in an undergraduate setting, though it may be useful as supplementary reading for an upper-level undergraduate or a graduate course in American modernist literature.