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Introduction

Adam Stock and Miranda Iossifidis

It seems to me that you are grasping ideas that I have tried to express, much more fumblingly, in fiction. But you have gone much further and I can't help envying you—as one does those who reach what one has aimed at.

— Virginia Woolf, letter to SF author Olaf Stapledon, 1937¹

This cluster takes as its theme the entwinement of modernisms and science fiction, alternative and counterstories, against a planetary backdrop.² One is a mode of cultural production that in its early years frequently positioned itself as a consciously elitist pursuit, which only those with the most advanced knowledge and understanding would appreciate, and the other is modernism. Virginia Woolf's response to SF author Olaf Stapledon's book suggests that they share significant concerns and ideas. But the *manner* of the response, at once hesitant yet enthusiastic, might also point to some of the more complicated ways in which science fiction

¹ We would like to thank Anne Fernald, Carolyn Cargile, and Clémence Sfadj for their careful editing and Debra Rae Cohen for commissioning the cluster.

Quoted in Kim Stanley Robinson, “Science Fiction: The Stories of Now,” *New Scientist*, accessed 24 August 2020, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20327263-200-science-fiction-the-stories-of-now/>.

² We wish to thank our anonymous reviewers for their thorough, helpful, and generous comments.

and modernism are intertwined, as cultural responses to the experience of modernity. In this context, Roger Luckhurst's statement that science fiction is "a literature of technologically-saturated societies" holds just as true for early twentieth-century modernism.³

The intersection of modernist and SF studies is marked by the frequency of dialectical approaches to the interrelation of science fiction and modernism. In Paul March-Russell's *Modernism and Science Fiction* (2015), modernism and science fiction are understood as parallel responses to cultural desires and anxieties of the early decades of the twentieth century. March-Russell outlines a Hegelian dialectic in SF *and* modernism in which they are pulled between the poles of immanence and transcendence, building on an identification of SF with Christianized gnostic philosophy.⁴ In a more materialist and Marxist vein, meanwhile, Phillip Wegner synthesizes the work of Fredric Jameson and Darko Suvin. From Suvin, Wegner takes a formalist definition of science fiction as "the literature of cognitive estrangement."⁵ According to Patrick Parrinder, Suvin works with the term "cognition" because of its reference points "roughly equivalent to the German *Wissenschaft*, French

³ Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 3.

⁴ Paul March-Russell, *Modernism and Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 4–6.

⁵ Phillip E. Wegner, *Shockwaves of Possibility: Essays on Science Fiction, Globalization, and Utopia*, Ralahine Utopian Studies, volume 15 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014); Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," *College English* 34, no. 3 (1972): 372–82, 372.

science and Russian *nauka*.”⁶ “Estrangement” meanwhile derives from both Bertolt Brecht’s concept *Verfremdung* and Victor Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* (Suvin, “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,” 372). Parrinder explains that Suvin’s compound term implies “fiction with a scientific explanation,” an epistemological stance that relies on what Suvin calls the *novum*, a term associated with Marxist utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch, describing “what H. G. Wells in a much-cited essay called the ‘fantastic element’ or ‘the strange property or the strange world’” (Parrinder, “Revisiting Suvin’s Poetics of Science Fiction,” 37). Wegner uses Jameson’s concept of the “ideology of form” to argue that “*all* later science fiction is modernist, from the most formally daring to most formulaic” (Wegner, *Shockwaves of Possibility*, 8). At the same time, Wegner asserts that periodizing terms such as “modernist” are arbitrary, and in some respects a means of bringing narrative order to questions of historical change. Thus, he argues that “all periodizations are themselves science fictions, forms of the subgenre of . . . *alternate history*” (2). Leaning on Jameson’s Lukácsian understanding of “realism as identified with *narrative*” Wegner suggests “we might re-characterize science fiction as a form of *realist* (cognitive) *modernism* (estrangement)” (17). This, for Wegner, constitutes a “unique dialectical third practice that subsumes aspects of both of the other two terms” (13).

Noting that modernism is commonly associated with the “epistemological ruptures” of modernity, Susan Stanford Friedman also draws on Jameson, but she argues that both

⁶ Patrick Parrinder, “Revisiting Suvin’s Poetics of Science Fiction,” in *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 36–50, 37.

modernism and modernity are in fact “multiple, polycentric, relational, and recurrent.”⁷ We want to suggest that this also holds for science fiction. If the epistemological ruptures of modernity come into focus as “a paradigm shift, a geohistorical transformation on a large scale” then through this lens, modernisms and SF are both planetary concerns pertaining to world-changing developments, which frequently adopt contradictory or ambivalent stances in relation to such change (Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*, 4). Central to this dynamic is the relationship of SF and modernisms to the planetary history of colonization and imperialism.

The relationship between SF and empire has been addressed by the likes of Patricia Kerslake and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, whose intentions are comparable to Friedman’s attempt to address the relationship between modernism and modernity as an ideological “invention of the West, as a product of the West’s exceptionalism” (*Planetary Modernisms*, 3).⁸

Notwithstanding the importance of such scholarship, dominant modes of thinking about modernism and modernity across the social sciences and humanities continue not to fully account for the “elision of colonialism and empire as constitutive aspects of modernity’s development.”⁹ This cluster follows Bhabra’s approach in “taking these alternative histories seriously,” in terms of the difference they make “to our existing conceptualizations of

⁷ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity across Time*, Modernist Latitudes (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2.

⁸ Patricia Kerslake, *Science Fiction and Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007); Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, “Science Fiction and the Imperial Audience,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 26, no. 1 (92) (2015): 7–18.

⁹ Gurminder K. Bhabra, “Comparative Historical Sociology and the State: Problems of Method,” *Cultural Sociology* 10, no. 3 (September 2016): 335–51, 336.

modernity; that is, not to pluralize the standard approach but to transform it” (339–40).¹⁰ Indeed, we consider modernity as not a linear evolution from the center to the periphery or a “linear movement from a traditional past to a modernized future,”¹¹ but rather in terms of what Bhabra calls “connected histories,” “placed in a frame of interconnections, or networks, of peoples and places that transcend the boundaries established within the dominant approaches” (152), developed in the context of colonialism, exploitation, and capital accumulation.

As such, at a philosophical and grammatical level “*modernity* is a term at war with itself, a term that unravels its own definition” (Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*, 36). Without wishing to risk conflating the terms modernism, modernity, and science fiction, we can also see overlap between Tim Armstrong’s assertion that modernism is “characterised by contradictions” that are both political and aesthetic,¹² and Csicsery-Ronay’s claim that the

¹⁰ Bhabra points to the Haitian Revolution—one of the most important foundational moments in the emergence of the modern world, more radical, egalitarian, and democratic than the French or American Revolutions, but rarely taught alongside them—as opening up paths of counter-modernity. See Bhabra, “On the Haitian Revolution and the Society of Equals,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 32, no. 7–8 (December 2015): 267–74; and also Eduardo Grüner, *The Haitian Revolution: Capitalism, Slavery, and Counter-Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

¹¹ Gurinder K Bhabra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 57.

¹² Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5.

term “science fiction” is an “oxymoron” that “invokes and delivers dichotomies, insoluble dilemmas, deceptive solutions.”¹³ The future-oriented worlds of SF are “suspended in anticipation” (3) in what Caroline Edwards describes as the Blochian tense of the “not-yet.”¹⁴ In our everyday lives we have frequent cause to respond to experiences as being what Csicsery-Ronay terms *science-fictional*, “as if they were aspects of a work of science fiction” (*The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, 2).

We suggest that telling alternative and counterstories of the entwinement of modernisms and science fictions against a planetary backdrop is also to address the emergence of specific technologies, modes of critique, and description. As a result, this cluster is at once introspective and ambitious; it queries how SF and modernism have been influential in the development of disciplinary knowledge production. The essays presented here situate such developments within wider cultural and historical shifts, and the epistemic ruptures of modernity. Such work crosses and challenges the boundaries of disciplinarity and periodization, ranging from social sciences to conceptual art and photography, and from the early twentieth century to contemporary fiction and projected near futures.

One such fruitful entanglement is that of modernism, sociology, and SF—all concerned with understanding and describing modern life and imagining society otherwise, as well as epistemological questions about how such aims are possible—in W. E. B. Du Bois’s

¹³ Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 8.

¹⁴ Caroline Edwards, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 17, 23–25.

Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil (1920). In her brilliant essay “The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance,” Saidiya Hartman describes the collection as:

A red record (Wells, 1895) of modern whiteness in the twentieth century, a chronicle of the settler republic and its routine violence, an atlas of “a world in flames,” a litany for the slaves and natives exploited and murdered by European and New World masters.¹⁵

The book presents an experimental arrangement of essays, poetry, fiction, and autobiography organized into ten sections of paired writings and a “credo” as introduction. In the essay “The Souls of White Folks” (paired with the poem “The Riddle of the Sphinx”), Du Bois continues his groundbreaking work on race as a technology and outlines the connection between modernity and whiteness. His short apocalyptic story “The Comet” meanwhile (paired with “A Hymn to the Peoples”), which was written “after the pandemic of 1918, after the Red Summer of 1919, and in the context of colonial expansion and atrocity,” explores the persistence of racism in science-fictional futures (Hartman, “The End of White Supremacy”).

Methodologically, we could consider ethnography as a form of estrangement from lived experience, a form of Suvin’s concept of “cognitive estrangement” (“On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,” 372). In this sense we can see a constellation of authors—Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Ursula Le Guin, and Octavia Butler—who take inspiration from

¹⁵ Saidiya Hartman, “The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance,” *BOMB Magazine*, 5 June 2020, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/the-end-of-white-supremacy-an-american-romance/>.

ethnographic descriptions and accounts of people, place, and society to trouble such forms of modernist knowledge production *through* science fiction.¹⁶ Bringing sociology into dialogue with speculative thought, Du Bois predated by over a century work that has sought to explore the congruence of sociology and utopianism, both engaged in the imaginary reconstitution of society and in “making explicit the processes and relations embedded in the social imaginary while themselves forming part of it.”¹⁷ As such, “The Comet” is an early experiment with “speculative methods”—an approach to social thought and method that “suggests the need,” in modernism, science fiction, and social sciences “for windows into alternative realities,

¹⁶ Du Bois pivoted from empirical sociological investigation to depiction of a matriarchal utopian community in *Quest for a Silver Fleece* (1911) informed in part by his visit to an experimental community in Lowndes County, Alabama (Maria Farland, “W. E. B. DuBois, Anthropometric Science, and the Limits of Racial Uplift,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 4 [2006]: 1017–45.) Hurston was both an anthropologist and writer. Le Guin famously draws on her father’s anthropological work. Butler coined the word HistoFuturist to describe herself as “a memory worker and historian who extrapolates from the human past and present as well as the technological past and present” (Shelley Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making Through Science Fiction and Activism*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018, 72).

¹⁷ Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstruction of Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 83–84.

even if it is just a glimpse, to challenge ever-present narratives of inevitability as they relate to both technology and society.”¹⁸

Du Bois’s foundational contribution to sociology, modern thought, and science fiction was for a long time underacknowledged, reflecting the wider pattern of Black writers’ contributions to modernism and science fiction being overlooked, underplayed, and actively erased.¹⁹ This is partly a result of the close relationship between the history of modern science and white supremacy in which both western SF and modernism have been steeped. An intellectual seam can be traced from the prejudices of Enlightenment thinkers like Immanuel Kant and David Hume through nineteenth-century physiognomists, the early racist micro-evolutionary beliefs of T. H. Huxley, Herbert Spencer’s positivism, and the popularity of Francis Galton’s eugenics across the hard *and* soft sciences in the early twentieth century. Authors in the modernist and SF canons draw upon the epistemological foundations of modern science, at their best failing to acknowledge its most racist aspects, and at their worst emphasizing them.

¹⁸ Ruha Benjamin, “Racial Fictions, Biological Facts: Expanding the Sociological Imagination through Speculative Methods,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 2 (17 June 2016): 19.

¹⁹ See Evan R. Lee, “‘More than Our Reasoned Acts’: Du Boisian Philosophy and Imaginative Fiction” (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2019). Lee notes that Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman’s *The Black Imagination* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2013) offers some historiography in its introduction, and Samuel R. Delany notes in “Racism and Science Fiction” in *Dark Matter*, edited by Sheree R. Thomas, (New York: Warner Books, 2000) that many early marginalized writers used pseudonyms.

In the 1940s, “golden age” hard SF in the tradition of John W. Campbell and Isaac Asimov frequently engaged in scientistic thinking, which found its apotheosis in the “Dianetics” movement of L. Ron Hubbard in the early 1950s.²⁰ Meanwhile, modernist science-fictional texts like Charlotte Haldane’s *Man’s World* (1926) and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) treated racial hierarchies with ambiguity, reflecting perhaps the ambivalent attitudes toward eugenics of scientists and philosophers among their friends and family like J. B. S. Haldane, Julian Huxley, and Bertrand Russell. As modern forms of cultural production, science fiction and modernism are tied to a modern world system of racial capitalism, dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide.²¹

The durability of modernist technologies—racial capitalism, colonial and racist social relations, forms of motorized travel—in science-fictional imaginaries is evident from early science fiction. Returning to “The Comet,” which takes as its premise an ironic inversion of Wells’s novum of a comet that brings reason to humankind in *In the Days of the Comet* (1902), allows us to consider the interrelation of modern technologies: race, gender, motorized travel, and telecommunications. In Du Bois’s story, the comet releases deadly gases, killing everyone in New York City except—it seems—Jim, an African American bank clerk. Hartman notes that “in the wake of the disaster, the messenger, the last black man on earth, will be permitted to live as a human for the first time. ‘I am alive, I am alive,’ he could

²⁰ Adam Stock, *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought: Narratives of World Politics*, Popular Culture and World Politics (New York: Routledge, 2019), 189–93.

²¹ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (New York: Verso, 2000 [1983]).

shout in the streets of Manhattan, without fear of punishment or reprisal. He is alive because the world is dead” (Hartman, “The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance”). Jim travels around the metropolis with freedom until he comes across Julia, an Upper West Side white woman. As the pair try to find family members around the city, the story maps the structures of anti-Black racism and begins to question how the norms of gender relations are reproduced. Central to the text is the relationship between the two protagonists and contemporary technologies that shape the spatiality of modernity, including the motorcar and the airplane: Julia’s sports car has them “flying to Harlem on the wind. The Stutz rose and raced like an airplane.”²² Speeding around the five boroughs by car, the protagonists observe a city without neighborhoods sharply delineated by ethnicity and diasporic community, class, gender, or race. Finally, they turn to the promise of technology to contact the world beyond the city: “The long distance telephone—the telegraph—night rockets and then—flight!” (154). Just as they begin to believe they represent the only possible future for humanity, Julia’s father and fiancé reappear and reassert a violent patriarchal white supremacy: “the visceral violence that accompanies the restoration of the world, to remind him of the hatred that is its substrate. The clock has been turned back, and once again he is barred from the human” (Hartman, “The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance”).

If the promise of “technology” as commonly understood in terms of progress and machines brings the future into contact with the present, then the forceful, persistent return of Julia’s white supremacist father shows the durability of other, racist, and gendered technologies. Using common themes in early twentieth-century European modernism of speed and travel, technology, and the city, “The Comet” demands to be read in the context of an avant-garde

²² W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Verso, 2016), 153.

and experimental literary culture, while stylistically, via the Wellsian novum of the comet, it relies upon naturalist descriptions.

By drawing together the fantastic and the experimental with an estranged narrative of the everyday experience of racism in the 1920s US, Du Bois's story returns us to Csicsery-Ronay's description of science fiction as an oxymoron that refuses easy resolutions. Such work reminds us of the importance of counter-narratives and alternate genealogies to both science fiction and modernism. These alternate genealogies of modernism and alternate histories of modernity are a central concern of this cluster. Our contributors posit diverging ways of reading disciplinary developments in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, offer alternate genealogies of artistic and literary movements, and assert the importance of anti-racist feminist criticism.

Nick Hubble's contribution begins this cluster with a discussion of some of the ways that science fiction and modernism engender estrangement from the everyday. Hubble's argument—considering modernism as “indistinguishable from SF”—uses close reading to tease out the science-fictional nature of modernist estrangement. They examine ways in which SF and modernism “disrupt linguistic norms in order to explode symbolic ones,” to trace a genealogy of feminist science-fictional imaginaries in the work of Virginia Woolf, Naomi Mitchison, and Gwyneth Jones. This rich discussion of “radically altered social conditions and gender identities” interrogates the relationship between SF and modernist estrangement.

The productive potential of alternate modernist genealogies is also explored by Carolyn Lau, who reads Kathy Acker's novel *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) as a late modernist work, via

a genealogy grounded in a mode of feminist “affective relationality” that reaches back to Mina Loy’s “Aphorisms on Futurism” (1914) and Valentine Saint-Point’s “Futurist Manifesto of Lust” (1913). For Lau, Acker’s novel practices collage techniques—plagiarizing and rewriting texts including William Gibson’s cyberpunk classic *Neuromancer* (1984)—and constitutes textual piracy, woven into a plot centered on “biopiracy,” in which “hacktivists . . . destroy the bio-code library.” Lau reads Acker’s novel as a dynamic critical utopia that challenges the heteronormative patriarchal utopian imagery offered by the likes of Marinetti. Re-framing futurism via Acker’s novel, Lau stresses “the power of the imaginal” and the urgency for radical change. Here, Acker’s piracy becomes not just a technique but a method of “social organization” that “dismantles sexual taboos” and provides radical energy for an anticolonial, deviant, and critical utopian impulse.

Radical change is also at the heart of Ibtisam Ahmed’s essay on Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain’s short story “Sultana’s Dream,” a feminist anticolonial utopian text first published in Bengal in 1905. Ahmed historicizes the text within the history of Bengal as focal point for acts of colonial resistance from the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 onward and the eventual British tactic of dividing the province via the 1905 Partition between the Hindu-majority West and Muslim-majority East so as to ferment communal tensions. The essay thereby asserts alternate modernist *and* science-fictional geographies as well as genealogies. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s figure of the feminist killjoy, Ibtisam Ahmed argues that a conception of justice as a moral rather than legal concern in the story is central to issues around empowering marginalized people and reversing systemic oppressions.

Eric Aronoff’s essay echoes Ahmed’s concerns by focusing on the colonial assumptions of “modernist anthropology.” Even as such anthropologists imagined cultural pluralism being

deployed against colonial ideologies, they extended such ideologies in new ways. Using a story from Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, Aronoff examines the power dynamics embedded in the "narrative techniques of both science fiction and modern[ist] ethnography." This interdisciplinary intervention in debates about culture *as* form and the narration of difference elucidates the surprising resonances between the modernist anthropology of Franz Boas and his students—modernist authors like Willa Cather—and Bradbury's own holistic SF Martian worldbuilding.

In contrast to Aronoff's exploration of a (science-fictional) interplanetary culture depicted as whole, bounded, and complete, Elysia Balavage approaches the study of space as the abyss beyond our planetary atmosphere and the philosophical confrontation not with otherness so much as with *nothingness*. Balavage examines how light and darkness are used by modernist writers including W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens in comparison with novels by interwar SF writers David Lindsay, S. Fowler Wright, and E. E. "Doc" Smith. Drawing on Csicsery-Ronay's invocation of Kantian and Burkean sublimines, Balavage shows how darkness and emptiness are figured as "double-edged": both terrifying and full of potential, generative of existential truth. If, as argued above, for Hubble modernist and science fictional estrangement from the everyday are indistinguishable from each other, then for Balavage this overlay becomes legible just at the moment of absence—that is, like the "high" modernism of Yeats and Stevens, the excitement, mystery, and thrill of the SF genre becomes clear in its confrontation with philosophical nihilism and the unknown in the aftermath of the Great War.

The nexus of existential questions and speculative thinking likewise motivates Javier Padilla's provocative essay on what he terms "theory fiction" as both a modernist *form* and a science-fictional praxis. Padilla charts a planetary course between texts from across the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries ranging from Franz Kafka through Clarice Lispector, Octavia Butler, Paul B. Preciado, and Reza Negarestani. Noting the etymological origins of theory (from the Greek *theoria*, meaning “contemplation” or “speculation”), which already hints toward interrelations with SF, Padilla uses these texts to offer a reading of the work of Mark Fisher’s work on “theory-fiction” as a parallax view on modernity. Padilla’s planetary approach draws connections between academic disciplines and cultural modes. He is one of several of the contributors to this cluster, including Carolyn Lau and Nick Hubble, who excavate elements of alternate modernist genealogies by tracing formal, methodological, and thematic concerns across the uneven development of the twentieth century and beyond.

Julia Chan’s superb essay rounds off this cluster. Focusing closely on the uneven geographies of modernism and science fiction alike, Chan maps the important effects of a shift in early Soviet SF to an aerial view of Earth from above. Reversing the outward gaze into the void of space that Elysia Balavage charts and the displacement of the ruins of colonized indigenous peoples that Eric Aronoff finds in Bradbury’s depiction of Mars, Chan traces some of the semi-peripheral spaces of both early twentieth-century modernism and science fiction by re-examining how they were influenced by the new perspective on space afforded by views from airplanes. Chan argues that SF modernism responded to the world as “defamiliarized under a new logic of history based on the Bolsheviks’ reinterpretation of the Marxist-Hegelian sense of revolution and historical progress.” Just as Ahmed’s essay on the Bengali story “Sultana’s Dream” points to the need to rethink western-dominant conceptions of the canonical utopian tradition, Chan’s essay challenges a view of modernity in which a “unidirectional metropolitan influence” of western visions of technology and futurity are diffused outward toward peripheries. Instead, Chan argues, early Soviet and British SF modernism converge in their treatment of new technologies’ opening up new perspectives on

the peripheries of the world system. Both “grapple with the paradoxes of modernity in its combined and uneven development.”

The essays in this cluster reconsider modernist and science-fictional thinking, production, and reception. The contributors raise important questions about the epistemological conditions in and through which we make knowledge claims about these two cultural modes. As responses to the experience of modernity, both science fiction and modernism are sources of important alternate histories and counterstories. We hope the cluster provides a generative and interdisciplinary contribution to contemporary debates in the essays’ distinctive approaches to alternative genealogies of SF and modernism rooted in a variety of geographic, cultural, historical, and disciplinary perspectives.