

Modernist/Provincial/Pacific: Christina Stead, Katherine Mansfield and the expatriate home ground

FIONA MORRISON
University of New South Wales

In *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (2006), Rebecca Walkowitz identifies a brand of 'critical cosmopolitanism' inherent in the work of British modernists such as Joyce, Conrad and Woolf. She argues that their critical awareness of the transnational dimensions of modernity operates at the level of literary style, where their writing, for example, 'disorients the conventions of national literature and cultural distinctiveness by adding new experiences' and thus both enhance and disable local points of view (2). Walkowitz's delineation of this critical transnationalism operating at the imperial centre encourages us to ask the equally pressing question about transnational modernism articulated from the imperial periphery or indeed *between* imperial centre and periphery. In particular, settler-colonial expatriate woman modernists are a key category of writers working *from the other direction* (as it were) because they provide unsettling and critically disorienting visions of the local. In this sense and in many others, the modernist writing by expatriate women that emerged from provincial and regional points of origin, often written between national centres and between centre and periphery, has a great deal to add to contemporary discussions of the transnational, the modernist and the colonial. This paper will investigate the powerful, disruptive and often experimental return to home ground in the shape of Christina Stead and Katherine Mansfield's modernist narratives about their provincial cities of origin on the Pacific Rim. This paper takes as its starting point Christina Stead's early work, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934), in order to examine Stead's participation in both Pacific and transnational modernism in her rendition of Sydney. Katherine Mansfield's earlier New Zealand story, 'The Woman in the Store' (1912), will provide further and quite different material for Pacific-oriented speculation about the nature of the expatriate modernist woman's worldly recuperation of her colonial hometown.

Seven Poor Men of Sydney, Christina Stead's first novel, was composed before, during and after her expatriate voyage from Sydney to London in 1928. Composition of the early drafts of this novel functioned as part of Stead's intense literary ambition and equally intense willed survival, and as she went on to redraft the novel in London in 1928 and Paris 1929-1934, it became a practice that stabilised the disorienting terrain between the inside and the outside of nation space and the realities of her longed-for mobility between provincial colonial city and imperial centre(s). The inside/outside geography of expatriate experience is explicitly figured in the opening scenes of Stead's 'Sydney' novel, where Stead returns with powerful imaginative focus to her home-town, indeed to her provincial harbourside scene of departure. This is not a nostalgic return but a worldly one, where the settler colonial relation to the wider world is acknowledged in the city's fundamental orientation (economic and geographical) to the epic world of global shipping:

Early in the morning, through the open window, the people hear the clatter of anchors falling into the bay, and the little boys run out to name the liners waiting there for the port doctor, liners from Singapore, Shanghai, Nagasaki, Wellington, Hawaii, San Francisco, Naples, Brindisi, Dunkirk and London, in the face of all these old stone houses, decayed weatherboard cottages, ruinous fences, boathouses and fishermen's shanties. (Stead, *Seven Poor Men* 2)

It is the confrontation between the endlessly mobile capital of global/colonial trade and the local scenes of everyday poverty and marginality that may be the consequences of this trade with which Stead's opens her first expatriate work. Her list of ports moves from the Pacific Rim first and foremost, arriving rather patchily at certain northern ports, producing a sequence that inverts the normative imperial direction of north to south and centre to periphery. Although the proper names of ocean liners are chanted by the young boys, it is the inclusion of the names of ports, rather than host countries, that indicates the relative unimportance of nation as a category and signals the significance of another kind of grouping; one that is dependent on regional and oceanic geography, economics and circuits of capital exchange.¹ Stead's list of ports indicates an antipodean decentering of imperial hierarchies, just as her work constantly challenges the familiar national canons and canonical temporalities of modernism. Stead's provincial origins are always understood as belated in imperial terms, but, in another antipodal move, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* at certain moments figures Sydney and its environs as the site of the monumental pre-modern as well as authoritatively aged, with old stone houses, ruined fences and decaying cottages included above. This antipodean effect of de-centring space and time is a crucial contribution to modernism made by expatriate modernist women writers, since they sidestep the reification of the primitive with which we usually associate modernist literary relationships with the colonial and offer instead complex and experimental accounts of region, gender and geography.

Using the two-way traffic signs of regional studies on one hand and transnational modernism on the other, I want to compare these two early works by Christina Stead and Katherine Mansfield as examples of the imaginative return of the colonial expatriate woman writer to the scene of provincial origin for the raw materials, ethnographic specificities and imaginative resonances that were to become folded into early experimental writing undertaken at the heart of the empire. Mansfield's short story 'The Woman at the Store' (1912) and Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) are texts written only a few years after expatriation and both offer strikingly energetic presentations of the colonial home ground, involving both a critique of colonial-provincial social structures as well as a detailed and highly invested re-creations of setting or locale. These Pacific re-visitations, produced in London and Paris for a European audience, are often hard-eyed, canny and elegiac in complicated and productive ways. As recent postcolonial work on James Joyce and colonial modernity suggests, the dialectical relay between settler colonial experience and imperial literary production was not merely a matter of stable literary commodification. The domestic 'raw materials' in Joyce, Mansfield and Stead were often volatile and ambivalent, and both Mansfield and Stead dramatise the unsettled space of antipodean colonial modernity, where forms of suspension, ambivalence and alienation are everywhere evident, especially in the context of art, artistic production and gender. At the same time, in installing intricately crafted scenes of rural, urban and vernacular localities in their early modernist work there is a sense in which the vitality of these locales is commemorated and not merely appropriated for an elite European readership avid for quasi-primitivist accounts of the outposts of empire. What is strikingly evident in the early work under examination here is the intriguing combination of specific representations of the materiality of vernacular idiom and more generally Gothic (and eventually surreal) modalities, which married the vernacular with registers of the strange, the alienated and sometimes the marvelous.

Katherine Mansfield left on her colonial 'voyage-in' twenty years earlier than Christina Stead, moving from her wealthy settler colonial family in Wellington to London (for the second time) in 1908. In London she came into contact with a range of key influences, not least John

Middleton Murry, editor of the *avant-garde* periodical *Rhythm: A Quarterly of Modern Literature and Art* (1911-13). In order to announce his rejection of Englishness, narrow aestheticism and anything remotely Georgian, Murry promulgated an aesthetic manifesto on the last pages of the first issue of *Rhythm*. He declared the first priority was ‘in creation to give expression to an art that seeks out the strong things of life...our intention is to provide art...which shall be vigorous, determined, which shall have its roots below the surface...both in its pity and its brutality it shall be real.’² In this manifesto Murry embedded a central rallying cry adapted from Irish playwright, John Millington Synge: ‘before art can be human it must learn to be brutal.’ Synge was an intriguing choice in this context—an Irish writer of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, with complex colonial politics with respect to Ireland, national identity, language, regional affiliation and the proper subject of art. Certainly Synge had dramatized with great energy the violent and sometimes surreal underpinnings of Irish regional life and regional vernacular in *The Playboy of the Western World*, and these were aspects that were resonated so strongly in Mansfield’s early stories published by Murry; the ‘strong things of life,’ which were ‘vigourous and determined,’ strongly founded and ‘real.’ John Middleton Murry published ‘The Woman in the Store’ in 1912, reportedly thrilled with Mansfield’s account of the mid north-island region: ‘the great pumice plain between Rangitaki and the Waipunga River’ (Gordon 70). Murry much preferred Mansfield’s colonial stories to earlier work influenced by fairy tales. Gordon and Alpers claim she wrote this early successful short story with her notebook from a trip around the Urewera region in 1906 open beside her (later published as *The Urewera Notebook*, edited by Gordon). The ‘brutality’ to which Synge seemed to refer and which Murry promulgated was therefore summoned up by Mansfield as an almost ethnographic rendition (with ‘roots below the surface’) of her experience with people and places in the heart of the north island of New Zealand six years earlier.³

As the opening indicates this is a dystopian tale, relating transgressions of patriarchal law, social and sexual propriety. Colonial isolation, gendered experience and their combined derangements are the key themes in this short story, as Lydia Wevers has demonstrated (Wevers 1988, 10-12). The realism of the low-brow yarn comes under intense pressure from the Gothic in this early Mansfield story; the Gothic mode saturates the description of setting in particular, and I would argue this modality of the Gothic deepens into registers of the surreal—in anticipation of Apollinaire and Breton by several years—because, rather than in spite of, Mansfield’s eerily good rendition of settler colonial vernacular speech. I want to suggest that although Mansfield’s literacy in colonial narrative form and content is everywhere evident, it is not a residual authentic colonialism that she is attempting to capture and commodify. Rather, I would argue that Mansfield reaches for a more original and daring movement forward into the hybrid forms we might more usually associate with postcolonial fiction:

All that day the heat was terrible. The wind blew close to the ground—it rooted among the tussock grass—slithered along the road, so that the white pumice dust swirled in our faces—settled and sifted over us and was like a dry-skin itching for growth on our bodies... Hundreds of larks shrilled—the sky was slate colour, and the sound of the larks reminded me of slate pencils scraping over its surface. There was nothing to be seen but wave after wave of tussock grass—patched with purple orchids and manuka bushes covered with thick spider webs. (10)

The antipodean Gothic is registered in the representations of disorientation: of heat, uncanny silence and figuration of the human as animal (humans anthropomorphised as snakes—‘dry skin itching,’ and later misrecognised as hawks) and the inability to see that is instantiated in the stone dust that obscures things, the thick spider webs covering the native manuka bush and echoed in the narrator’s later dream. This inhospitable landscape, where the pastoral larks are ‘shrill,’ produces decadent colours of black, white, slate and purple and in the face of this hot and dusty wasteland, the travellers seek shelter at ‘the store’ of the title, come upon in ‘a curious half-hour when everything appears grotesque’ (13). The proleptic account of a curious half-state comes with the recounted dream that connects the narrator to her childhood and the figure in the carpet, an intriguing reference to Henry James’ novella of 1896 which thematises the difficulties of *interpretation*. Registers of irrationality and violence, the grotesque drawings of the six-year old girl—these are also surreal disruptions and extensions of the colonial yarn modality:

I half fell asleep, and had a sort of uneasy dream that the horses were not moving forward at all—then that I was on a rocking horse, and my old mother was scolding me for raising such a fearful dust from the drawing-room carpet. ‘You’ve entirely worn off the pattern of the carpet,’ I heard her saying, and she gave the reins a tug. (11)

During the narrator’s half-waking state as she rides, there is a sense of status evoked in the deathly return to childhood scenes of punishment, with the carpet dust and the pumice dust linking the dream world to the world of the journey through heat and dust. The horses become inanimate in the dream, and the sense that the pattern has been ‘worn off’ suggests that interpretation will not be possible (the figure will not be found) because of dusty repetition *ad infinitum*. The mother, presaging the volatile and non-maternal mother in the tale (no breast milk, four miscarriages), contributes to further stasis—she ‘gave the reins a tug’ to stop the horse (11). Here, the Gothic commonplace of the uncanny dream is extended and complicated by its proximity with the colonial setting and vernacular idiom, and this in turn represents an extension of the colonial ghost story. Noting the profound implications of the ineluctable presence of the indigenous in colonial narrative, Wevers suggests the colonial ghost story ‘typically represents the presence of otherness which positions the cultural separated colonial self not as place or work, but as supernatural and Maori’ (Wevers 1988, 10).

The store is presided over by a grotesque figure, an exhausted working-class white woman, who (à la Hoffman’s uncanny doll) looks like she is made up of ‘sticks and wires’ (12) and she has an equally stick-like child. The story told by this woman is initially one of failed maternity (not enough breast-milk, serial miscarriages) and the stunted growth of her child testifies to the material inhospitality of body, landscape and moral environment. Her undersized girl-child sits at the heart of this story. In the beginning the little girl hides behind her mother, and as the visitors stay on, she lurks around the edges of their company. She seems disordered in her movements with her laughing and trembling, her association with flies and sudden savage gestures. The marginal grasp on reality evident in the mother is differently coded in the child, who functions in some respects as a traumatised provincial artist—abused, stifled, misunderstood and disordered in this backblocks setting. As the narrator comments:

those drawings of hers were extraordinary and repulsively vulgar. The creations of a lunatic with a lunatic’s cleverness. There was no doubt about it,

the kid's mind was diseased. While she showed them to us, she worked herself up into a mad excitement, laughing and trembling, and shooting out her arms. (17)

The indications of madness and mental disease are also part of the 'extraordinary' quality of the drawings. The girl's 'trembling' and 'shooting out her arms' is almost machinic or automatic (broken/gun) and the doubled categories of vulgar and extraordinary, lunatic and clever make her an ambivalent and surreal locus of settler colonial productivity and derangement.

Gender remains the most intriguing aspect of Mansfield's triangulated account of female narrator, female murderer/mother and the child-artist whose drawing reveals the true extent of strangeness and derangement at the inhospitable store. The girl-child artist spies on the female narrator while she is bathing, turning one of the few lyrical moments of the tale into a queer scene of forbidden looking: 'I looked at her where she wouldn't see me from' (15). This subverts the otherwise dominant heterosexual desire between the narrator's brother and the child's mother, which all members of the small colony must accommodate, and centralises a dominant perversity about what can and can't be seen or told. At a certain point, the girl says to the narrator about her drawings, 'You're not to look' (17), so the gaze between visitor and young girl cannot be reciprocal at the site of the Gothic secret. The girl later insists that 'she won't be laughed at' (18-19) with the seriousness of a committed artist, and as part of stung pride draws the picture she has been instructed not to—revealing that her mother shot and buried her father. The broadly libidinal pull of the visit to the *whare* therefore transforms into a cautionary tale about the destructive nature of heterosexual and settler colonial desire, which frightens the visitors and endangers the narrator's brother (a set of desires in which they are nevertheless profoundly implicated). The summation of the departing travelers is not to comment on the crime, but its cause—the 'loneliness' (17, 19) and alienation of an unsettled existence between cultures and between coasts. Loneliness and stasis, as well as the settler-colonial fate of existing in-between imperial and indigenous cultural and geographical knowledges, is the theme of Mansfield's short story, and it is a familiar theme too in James Joyce's work about another settler colonial milieu in *Dubliners* two years later. The impossibility of this milieu for the artist, most of all, is also the theme of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

Aspects of the comic and the vernacular are as significant in this story as the uncanny renditions of the haunted colonial house and its deathly drives. The dandy brother and his singing and the uncanny impersonation of backblocks speech might have had, or perhaps should have had, the effect of pulling the story back to more broadly realist codes familiar from the colonial low-brow yarn. I want to argue, however, that the vernacular cooperates with the Gothic in a way that extends rather than interrupts the disturbing quality of the texts. I see the vernacular as a way in which these texts display experimental rather than strictly realist impulses, and I would argue that the vernacular was a source of specific modernist linguistic interest, and a full-blooded radical formal interest at that. Miriam Hansen, a European film academic, extracted the term 'vernacular modernism' from its original context in studies of architecture and applied it to Hollywood film of the 1920s. Hansen sees vernacular modernism as an informal, non-standard set of aesthetics that participate in projects of modernity while not being subordinated to high modernism of the early twentieth century:

I take the study of modernist aesthetics to encompass cultural practices that both articulated and mediated the experience of modernity...I am referring to this kind of modernism as “vernacular”...because the term vernacular combines the dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, with connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity, and translatability. (Hansen 60)

Hansen argues that ‘vernacular modernism’ allows for discussion of modernism across both standard canonical and non-canonical boundaries—and we can see its ready application (already evident in studies of the built environment) in regions, and as part of colonial and post-colonial representation. In his fascinating work on American vernacular modernism, Brooks E. Hefner sees the term as enabling a ‘thorough consideration of the authentic dialogue between experimental vernacular language and modernist aesthetics’ (Hefner i).

Vernacular idiom was one of the calling cards of ‘local colour’ realism in American nineteenth-century regional tales and Mark Twain comes immediately to mind for the vital and satirical subversiveness of his vernacular stories, so strongly set against the ‘genteel’ tradition. Vernacular speech in Mansfield and Stead attests to similar (Twainian) feats of memory and the interest in precise renditions of character in terms of nation, region, custom, class and ethnicity. Yet it is also indicative of the experimental interest each writer had in what I think of as the dramatic or vocative choreography of storytelling (Synge comes to mind again, but also Stead’s fondness for Strindberg). Rather than the relationship of the Gothic and the vernacular being on either side of the Romanticism/realism divide, they both disrupt dominant modes of realism. The almost anthropological/ethnographic recording of speech in context does put us in mind of Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s work on national language in the Caribbean, but in this settler colonial context it seems to indicate how unsettled, out of place and deeply strange this white habitation might be even as it tells us a great deal about social and class positions. The regional idiolect, in all its materiality, therefore works more for the uncanny depth rather than realist and regionalist surface with which it is more usually associated. I would also suggest that the rendition of settler colonial speech by Stead and Mansfield registers their commitment to and ease with different linguistic textures and linguistic experimentation in general.

In the middle of ‘The Woman at the Store,’ the ‘woman’ delivers this monologue:

‘Now, listen to me,’ shouted the woman, banging her fist on the table. ‘It’s six years since I was married, and four miscarriages. I says to ’im, I says, what do you think I’m doin’ up ’ere? If you was back at the Coast, I’d ’ave you lynched for child murder. Over and over I tells ’im—you’ve broken my spirit and spoiled my looks, and wot for—that’s wot I’m driving at.’ She clutched her head with her hands and stared round at us. Speaking rapidly, ‘Oh, some days—an’ months of them I ’ear them two words knockin’ inside me all the time—“Wot for,” but sometimes I’ll be cooking the spuds an’ I lifts the lid off to give ’em a prong and I ’ears, quite sudden again, “Wot for.” (16)

The woman demands to be heard as she recounts a one-sided dialogue with her murdered husband. Violence, lawlessness, isolation and loss are summed up in the constant repetition of the phrase ‘Wot for,’ a question which surfaces suddenly and uncannily even in domestic life: ‘knockin’ inside me all the time.’ ‘Wot for’ is a question about meaninglessness and waste— and allegorises the empty centre at the heart of colonial settlement. The repetition of

the empty centre of female settler colonial experience is allegorized in the repeated miscarriages and this in turn echoes the Gothic modality of deathly compulsions to repeat. The woman's idiomatic delivery, attentively re-created, speaks not only to the extreme provincial marginality of the woman and her child, but to the specifics of her gendered existence at the haunted and unsettled centre of territory frequented otherwise by Maoris, who belong there though they have been violently displaced into 'the spirit of the land,' and the white 'sundowners' who are even more unsettled than the occupants of the *whare* (though perhaps more free).

The comparison between the early work of Katherine Mansfield and Christina Stead offers an example of what Lionnet and Shu-Mei see as a bequest of the contemporary interest in the transnational: 'minor to minor networks that circumvent the major altogether'; a kind of 'transversalism' that allows for 'the emergence of the minor's inherent complexity and multiplicity,' not least of which is captured in the 'nonstandard languages tonalities and rhythms' (8) of 'The Woman at the Store' and *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. These 'minor-to-minor' networks of Sydney and the Urewera unfold on the coasts and in the heartland of the regional space of the Pacific Rim, with its marvelous semiotic load of 'last ocean'—a hitherto encircled void of reviving, miraculous emptiness. When positioning Australia for international readers of *For Love Alone* in 1944, Stead identified first with the larger worldly category of the water hemisphere or what we might think of as the marine south, an orientation evident from the opening of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as well. The Pacific Ocean system is charted by Stead under the sign of antipodean natural bounty and hospitable excess rather than magnitude and isolation:

This island continent lies in the water hemisphere. On the eastern coast, the neighbouring nation is Chile, though it is far, far east, Valparaiso being more than six thousand miles away in a straight line. (1)... There is nothing in the interior; so people look to the water, and above to the fixed stars and constellations which first guided men there... Overhead, the other part of the Milky Way, with its great stars and nebula, spouts thick as cow's milk from the udder, from side to side, broader and whiter than in the north; in the centre the curdle of the Coalsack, that black hole through which they look out into space. The skies are sub tropical, crusted with suns and spirals, as if a reflection of the crowded Pacific Ocean, with its reefs, atolls, and archipelagos. (1-2)

This opening, drafted in the early 1940s, unfolds with a kind of enchanted materiality that puts in play the regime of marine geography and topography experimented with in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* but deployed in *For Love Alone* with much greater ease since it is a work more interested to the genre of romance and its lyrical possibilities. Stead's interest in capturing a kind of vital materiality is seriously under-represented in the impressive canon of critical work about her. This vital materiality encompasses her accounts of the natural world, the strange and sometimes marvellous (sometimes profoundly alienated) experiences of colonial modernity and it also characterises her relationship to speech.

Stead's early work produces two distinct yet connected varieties of realism in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*: the use of the direct speech (indicating the desire for energetic verbal presence that marks much of Stead's prose) and the deployment of surrealism, indicating the commitment here to an *avant-garde* privileging of unrestricted flights of imagination and working as an extension of her realism. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* circulates both modes in a

dialectical relationship between the socially embedded nature of speech acts (with the rhetorical action they suggest and material power they seek), and the revolutionary liberation of desire inherent in the automatic writing and the melasmatic power of several of the work's most difficult and rewarding surrealist passages. Both the spoken and the surreal offer forms of sustained materialism, both bear directly on colonial modernity and antipodean experience. The shift between Mansfield's Gothic evocation of the uncanny and Stead's related but more overt dramatisation of the marvelous is surely accounted for by the advent of World War One and the emergence of surrealism in the early 1920s as an *avant garde* effort to think/engage in an artistic and social set of practices that engaged both Freud (freedoms of the unconscious) and Marx (social freedom) in the aftermath of such obliterating violence on such an extraordinary scale. The provincial surrealism in Mansfield's pre-war short story deepens and widens into fully-fledged surrealism in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, composed fifteen years later but addressing the years in provincial immediately before, during and after the first world war.

1929 was *the* crucial year for *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Stead was reading, working and living in Paris from February, witnessing the economic and political effects of the Great Depression as a fellow traveller working as a secretary in an international bank. Hazel Rowley reports that Stead socialised with the international expatriate community and lived on the fringes of bohemia toward the end of the Lost Generation era and well before Popular Front collective action against fascism and the associated aesthetics of crisis and Left coalition. In 1929 she read the French novelists Malraux and Gide, building on a strong base of reading in French and we can see from her letters that Stead was also excitedly reading the international modernists, Joyce, Lawrence and Mann. She admired Joyce and *Ulysses* in particular, an admiration that is obvious in her work and unproblematic in political and aesthetic terms until at least 1934.⁴ I would argue that Joyce's desire to capture the symphony of voices (internal and external) in provincial Dublin in 1904 proved to be hugely influential for Stead. Revising *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* in early 1934, Stead said she was trying to 'tone down the larrikin and increase the drama.' Her rendition of the 'larrikin' colonial voice in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, even 'toned down' by five years in Europe, is part of a lifelong fascination with speech as a means of representing personality, constructing place and examining what, for her, was the inevitable will to power. Stead's naturalist and empirical tendencies were never more evident than her desire to record 'from life,' to get the speech right by writing down actual words and sentences, raiding letters and diaries. If the speech was right, the whole set of historically specific discursive parameters, the whole milieu of the individual, would be right. In other words, the locality would be right. Speech is the most intense form of action in any Stead novel, trumping plot or purpose or narration. It was speech that carried material vitality; that revealed the living quality of characters so that they would not be 'puppets.' And the rhetorical marketplace in which Stead's characters exchange speeches, positions, comments, silence, was a symptom of her naturalist's detachment—Stead was determined to let the characters speak—to release them on to stage to see what would happen in 'the stew of these energetic and disputatious people' (176).

Stead's 'motion capture' of speech was always idiosyncratic. In fact, the register of quite a bit of the speech in this book is incredibly high and strange rather than the language of everyday life; the true artists trapped in the obscurity of working class life could be known by their elevated and often rhapsodic diction. The Bagenault half-siblings are particularly marked by their extraordinary internal and external voices. Stead was also interested in conversations people had in offices, at bars, at University classes, window-shopping and visiting family and friends. The vernacular record could be very overt, for example, from Tom Winter, the Union

organizer, talking to the young Joseph Bagenault:

‘Do yew know what Communism is?’

‘Well, it’s equal chances for all,’ said Joseph wearily.

‘Not at all. It’s the dictatorship of the proletariat. The proletariat, that’s yew. Can yew imagine yerself havin’ somethin’ to say in life? Instead of obeyin’ yer father and mother, the church, yer cousin, admirin’ the intellectuals like Baruch, goin’ to College to try to get a little better pay, knucklin’ under to Chamberlain, keepin’ yer mouth shut, bein’ too poor to have wife or child, to buy a decent coat or eat good meat every day—imagine, instead o’ all that, yew’ve got a right to say how the business should be run, how the machines should be improved, the workin’ hours altered to prevent yew gettin’ tired. Imagine yew bein’ able to go up to the head o’ the State, Sir Spinach Spinach, then Comrade Garlic, and sayin’, Comrade Garlic, yew don’t know a goddamned thing about printers, and he listenin to yew.’ (169)

There is a range of different dictions in evidence here—working class and theoretical Marxism are the most obvious. There is a broad comic energy in evidence too with the ‘Sir Spinach Spinach and Comrade Garlic’ which partners the topsy-turvy and subversive idea that a printer (who is used to a complex hierarchy to whom he must be obedient) might tell the head of state ‘what was what’ and be heard. This kind of ethnographic rendition of speech places it in Sydney city union organisers in the 1920s, a world carefully drawn and curated at some length in Stead’s novel. The world of the printing business as well as virtuosic set pieces on urban consumer culture, allows us to see *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as an example of vernacular modernism, a radical mode emerging from and interacting with regional and colonial modernity.

The orality in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is often associated with the city, with politics, with print media (think of the Aeolus chapter in *Ulysses*), but there are some really extraordinary speeches made in suburban locations, too, such as Kol Blount’s extraordinary elegy for Michael Bagenault at the end of the novel. The vernacular, with all its materiality and specificity, circulates with the more obvious experimental aspects of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* evident in Michael’s surreal experiences of Sydney topography before and after the war. Stead’s material record of speech in everyday life was joined irrevocably to Michael Bagenault’s traumatic postwar epiphanies and marvelous visions:

‘A flake of air fell past my ear, sighing “Gone!” At my side was nothing but a violin planted in the sand. “Look yonder!” said the air, and the air became full of sounds, thicker and thicker, and the air began to roar and the sand to whirl and we were again in the full blast of the sirocco. In the following storm, which was a minute’s entire length, he bowed beside me, above, around, like half a dozen goblins; looked like a violin, scraped cries out his own stomach, turned into a mandrake, withered and swelled. The cloud of dust was full of people, rushing past with songs and kickings, old mutterers singular and angularly breaking into yells, bad children, fairies, old professors, confessors, aiders and abbesses, two legged palsied palimpsests, clerks, sharks, narks, shades, suspicions, university janitor, spiral-horned rams, stock exchange rampers, rabbits, whorlie-whorlies, willy-willies, whories, houris, ghosts, gouttes, knouts, ghouls, walking gourds, grimalkins, widdershins and withering wights, but in such a horrid, enlaced, perplexed, twisted and

lolloping rhythm as I shuddered to look upon....'As for him, fantasy filled him; he shouted, waved his legs, sang; he swayed the people into five lines and a key signature: he took it into his head to do a once-about and in the shut of an eye, the place was deserted. Then the moon shone, all was still. (269-270)

Stead's obsession with the Brothers Grimm and other Gothic fairy tales in her colonial childhood stands her in very good 'stead' here. The congeries of images and phrases are drawn from Michael's life both before and after the war, and the heuristic process brings the vision, in this colonial setting, very close to automatic writing. Indeed, Stead's early work contains a significant amount of writing that approaches automatic writing and her interest in dreams is persistent as well as associated parataxis and listing, the startling juxtaposition of images, sudden shifts in tone and register. It answers to Breton's requirement of himself in the 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism' (1929) to produce: 'a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties, a monologue consequently unencumbered by this slightest inhibition and which was, as closely as possibly, akin to *spoken* thought' (Breton 23, my emphasis). Michael's surreal experience in the moonlight yokes together the sudden experience of the marvelous that the surrealists saw crucial to the defeat of the reign of bourgeois reason, and it also approximates the speed of just writing things down as they come out of one's brain, 'akin to spoken thought.' Both this automatic methodology of surrealist marvel and the use of the vernacular circulate in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as modes of radical linguistic and literary experiment, answering to André Breton's notion, articulated in his 'First Manifesto of Surrealism' (1924), that surrealism was a style whose aim was to register 'the actual functioning of thought' (emphatically seen as *spoken*) and the 'omnipotence of dream' as a way of liberating the imagination into revolutionary repossession of desire over reason (Breton 26).

Seven Poor Men of Sydney demonstrates that Stead, like Breton, saw that everyday life, including dreams, sexual desire, conversation and the negotiation of urban space was the terrain in which the revolution of perception and the revolution of society could and should occur. The very pressing, if somewhat contested, political bonds between the surrealist movement on an actual social revolution, or actual Marxists, meant that Stead was aware of surrealism and attracted to it as a legitimate space in which to engage her more generally Gothic predilections and her enduring interest in psychology.⁵ Stead's Sydney landscapes offer a rich base for radical surrealist/modernist experiment, for a kind of 'enchanted materialism,' to cite Jane Bennett. The fit between the antipodean and the marvellous surreal is not satisfactorily acknowledged until the mid-century visual arts, which exposed a quite natural 'fit' between the vernacular, the surreal and the antipodean in studies of Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan. For James Clifford, the modern ethnographer is always already dealing with the interdependence of strange and the familiar and the surreal was therefore an inevitable and important register in ethnographic writing and Walter Benjamin certainly saw surrealism as 'a materialist anthropological inspiration' (*Reflections* 179). Stead and Mansfield were, of course, not ethnographers, although ethnographic desire informs their representations of both vernacular speech and the surreal moment in their early worldly publications. They were expatriates, and it is the ambivalence of the expatriate position (the two-way work of critique and identification) that dictated the terms of their worldly return, in imagination, to the antipodean home ground in order to capture their former milieu through speech and through the Gothic and surreal eruptions of the imagination into dominant registers of the real. Their early work offers markedly original, daring and forward-looking experiments in modernist writing that expands and re-constellates our sense of regional

(trans-Tasman) modernism in particular and the current impact of ‘the transnational turn’ on literary modernism as a whole.

Works Cited

- Alpers, Anthony. *The Life of Katherine Mansfield*. New York: Viking Press, 1980.
- Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton U P, 2001.
- Breton, Andre. *The Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1969.
- Connery, Christopher L. ‘The Oceanic Feeling and the Regional Imaginary.’ *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*. Eds. Wilson, Rob and Wimal Dissanayake. Durham and London: Duke U P, 1996. 284-311.
- Doyle, Laura and Laura Winkiel, eds. *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 2005.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. ‘Planetary: Musing Modernist Studies.’ *Modernism/modernity* 17.3 (2010): 471-499.
- Gordon, Ian A. *Katherine Mansfield*. London: Longmans Green, 1963.
- Hansen, Miriam. ‘The Mass Production of the senses: classical cinema as vernacular modernism.’ *Modernism/modernity* 6.2 (1999): 59-77.
- Hefner, Brooks E. ‘You’ve Got to be Modernistic: American Vernacular Modernism, 1910-1937.’ Diss. CUNY, New York, 2009.
- Lionnet, Françoise and Shu-mei Shih, eds. *Minor Transnationalism*. Durham and London: Duke U P, 2005.
- Mansfield, Katherine. ‘The Woman at the Store.’ *Katherine Mansfield: Selected Stories*. Ed. Angela Smith. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2002. 10-19.
- Mansfield, Katherine. *The Urewera Notebook*. Ed. Ian A. Gordon. Auckland: Oxford U P, 1978.
- Mao, Douglas and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds. ‘The New Modernist Studies.’ *PMLA* 123.3 (2008): 737-748.
- Rowley, Hazel. *Christina Stead: A Biography*. Sydney: Heinemann, 1993.
- Stafford, Jane and Mark Williams. *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature 1872-1914*. Wellington: Victoria U P, 2006.
- Stead, Christina. *For Love Alone*. 1944. Sydney: Angus and Robertson (Imprint Classics), 1990.

Stead, Christina. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. 1934. London and Sydney: Angus and Robertson (Sirius), 1981.

Synge, John Millington. *Poems and Translations*. Churchtown: Cuala Press, 1909.

Walkowitz, Rebecca. *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*. New York: Columbia U P, 2006.

Wevers, Lydia. 'How Kathleen Beauchamp was Kidnapped.' *Women's Studies Journal* 2.4 (1988): 5-17.

Wevers, Lydia. 'The Sod Under My Feet: Katherine Mansfield.' *Opening the Book: New Essays on New Zealand Writing*. Eds. Mark Williams and Michele Leggott. Auckland: Auckland U P, 1995. 31-48.

Wilson, Rob and Wimal Dissanayake, eds. *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*. Durham and London: Duke U P, 1996.

Winkel, Laura. 'Gendered Transnationalism in 'The New Modernist Studies.'" *Literature Compass* 10.1 (2013): 38-44.

¹ This kind of spatial grouping is familiar in contemporary studies of transnational literature, including Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake's 1996 publication of *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, and more recently the 'transnational turn' in studies of literary modernism, including the essays and edited work by Douglas Mao, Rebecca L. Walkowitz, Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel.

² Murry's statement is a modified version of comment made by Synge in the preface to his 1909 publication, *Poems and Translations*: 'Before verse can be human again, it must learn to be brutal.'

³ The sense of the 'redaction' of experience is commented on by Ian Gordon in *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (56, 58) and more convincingly fleshed out in Jane Stafford and Mark Williams' chapter 'Katherine Mansfield: A Modernist in Maoriland' in *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature 1872-1914*. Wellington: Victoria U P, 2006. 142-170.

⁴ The portrait of a colonial artist as a middle-class young man, however, is rewritten in *The Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as the portrait of young men and women as workers who had the potential to be artists, but poverty, in the main, defeats them. Stead's project was to give these men and women voice in wildly lyrical terms—to look at the 'undergrowth' of the imaginative life of working people. And not just one privileged young middle-class man, but a web of interconnected working-class 'friends of youth.'

⁵ In a conversation in 1987 with Ruth Hall, Stead's stepdaughter, Hazel Rowley established that Blake and Stead 'followed the *Transition* debates with interest.' This was a Parisian quarterly filled with discussions of Dada, surrealism, Futurism, Joyce and Stein featured regularly, alongside translations of Breton, Thomas Mann and Kafka. (Rowley 114)