Introduction

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> The fatalism by which incomprehensible death was sanctioned in primeval times has now passed over into utterly comprehensible life. The noonday panic fear in which nature suddenly appeared to humans as an all-encompassing power has found its counterpart in the panic which is ready to break out at any moment today: human beings expect the world, which is without issue, to be set ablaze by a universal power which they themselves are and over which they are powerless.
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> —Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

On or about the Zero Hour of 1945, Critical Theory propounded an essential relationship between modernity and destruction, between a purported rational order and the "noonday panic fear" of its violence, barbarism, irrationality. At the conclusion of the Second World War—with the victory over fascism, the murder of European Jews and others, mass civilian death, and the destruction of cities—a fundamental nature of modern societies was disclosed with material and ideological directness that led to universal questions of basic human rights that hitherto could not be asked. In the process, the global world system was recalculated on new terms predicated on a discourse of human rights, the dismantling of empires, ever newer means of destruction, and the emergence of the global economic system that we live today. Seventy-five years later, the global world order finds itself in another Zero Hour—the universal spread of disease that discloses, in startling and disturbing ways, the nature of global modernity and the inadequacy of its human guarantees. Also at this time, new questions are being asked: of the nature of the global system of production, distribution, and information, its impact on both humanity and the environment, but also of the basic rights of persons to life. In the United States, the wave of protests over the killing of African Americans George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks, is a continued iteration of a long history of racial violence. But not only was the violence toward individuals disclosed—the fundamental denial of a right to life—but the systemic underpinnings of that violence, in the unequal distribution of wealth, increasing precarity of existence, and access to basic social guarantees, from justice to education to health care. The present moment has indeed become a second Zero Hour, recalling the first, at which questions of a universal nature must be asked.

In asking the question of the universal in relation to the Zero Hour of modernity, I am pursuing

a line of inquiry that reflects over a decade and a half of research in Germany. The central concerns of my project, and its initial impact on the field of Modernist Studies, derive from its key terms: I propose to look at literary and cultural modernism not in relation to its origination and formal development, stemming from the often-cited date of 1910, as a primarily aesthetic movement. Rather, I want to show how modernism may be seen as primarily ethical in relation to the modern world in crisis at the moment of 1945, through its imagination and promulgation of transnational, universal standards that were envisioned, to begin with, using aesthetic means. Modernism, rather than being a form of rejection of alienated modernity, thus develops as a site for global comprehension, democratic imagination, and universal justice. At the same time, modernist writers, artists, and critics often came to their formulations of these universalist perspectives through negative means: through their rejection of the politics of the period leading up to World War II, in particular their antifascism, but also their skepticism toward liberal democracy and at times a commitment to a revolutionary alternative; and later through the necessity to account for and respond in aesthetic form to the massive destruction that attended the war. "Destruction," as it was both imagined and experienced, thus becomes the site for imagining universal standards of justice so that, in the formulation of Adorno's New Categorical Imperative, "Auschwitz should never happen again." The period of the war and immediate aftermath saw the creation of numerous modernist works with universalist scope and ethical arguments. My project thus sees modernism as engaged and political in its ethical transvaluation of its aesthetic premises, in dialogue with Critical Theory's questioning of the universal.

Hoping to continue and expand on this project, I proposed a seminar for the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association, scheduled for March 20-23, 2020 in Chicago. The seminar, under the conditions of the global pandemic, clearly could not take place, but participants agreed to a virtual seminar on the same days as the canceled conference. The remarkable results of that seminar, the seven essays presented here, were each read, discussed, responded to, revised, edited, and published during the first three months of our mutual sequestration; they are a work product of the new social organization of scholarly and critical exchange, an insistence on its continuing, and a discovery of the means to do so. The call for papers in this sense was ambitious, comprehensive, but also prescient of what it would mean to ask the question of the universal under conditions of a global emergency:

> This seminar will address the relationship between literary modernism (traditionally seen as having its end date at 1945, but expanded to include work in genres not usually associated with high modernism) with the Zero Hour of the end of World War II (seen as a crisis of modernity that decisively set in place processes of globalization). Seminar participants will read works of modernism, from American, European, and non-Eurocentric sources, that imagine and constitute while they challenge and critique "the universal" as an entailment of modernist forms (which are often seen as characterized by forms of parataxis and the foregrounding of particularity that suspend any notion of the universal). In the process of critiquing modernist particularity, we will also interrogate the vertical, idealist, and even authoritarian aspects of mid-century modernism and their entailments for the post-1945 order. High modernist authors could include Eliot, Woolf, Williams, Pound, Breton, Stein, Beckett, and so on in the Eurocentric tradition, but these figures

> may be placed next to lesser-known and nonliterary figures, movements, genres, and works. We would connect the aesthetic "universalist" aspect of these authors and works with political claims for universal ethical and aesthetic values, in historical frameworks that range from the Nuremberg Trials, on the one hand, to the rise of abstraction as a universalist aesthetic, on the other. Finally, we will move from the Eurocentric constructions of universals to query their possibility in "alternative modernities," represented at 1945 by Russia, China, and India as non-Western states and cultures, along with the decolonizing world, as anticipating non-Eurocentric frameworks for the emergent global order that must be taken into account in any notion of the "universal." The seminar will expand the implications of modernism for global and transnational pedagogy; should interest students of modernist, transnational, and postcolonial literature; and will engage theoretical concerns of Critical Theory and the gendering of modernity whenever possible.

The proposals received reflected the breadth of the call for papers: the Zero Hour of modernity would be considered through the twin lenses of modernist aesthetics and historical event, entailing in some manner a "question of the universal" stemming from their conjunction. Clearly, not every question proposed in the call could be answered adequately at one time, and that is the point: to open a series of questions as an open-ended, continuing process.

The styles, methods, and goals of the critical and scholarly work presented here are thus of necessity quite various. All in some way locate the aesthetic projects of literary and visual modernism as central to asking larger questions at the historical moment of Zero Hour and beyond into the construction of the post–1945/postcolonial/global world. "Modernism" is interpreted broadly, in the two-decades-long tradition of the New Modernist Studies, as at once formal and philosophical, canonical and revisionist, nonnarrative and historical. One pole of thinking "modernism" in this way relies on a formal and critical architecture that connects modernism to modernity—from Baudelaire's notion of the modern at the intersection of the "transitory" and "eternal"; to Critical Theory's stress on the self-reflexive subjectivity of its forms; to modernism's critique of representation, from mimesis to abstraction. Canonical figures do appear as anchors or touchstones of this discourse, but in the articles that follow one also finds a wide range of revisionist and recovered modernists: writers and artists such as Lee Miller, Hannah Höch, Eugene Jolas, Ernst Gomringer, Marguerite Duras, Babette Deutsch, Francis P. Ng, Anne Spencer, Ray Durem—also post-1945, postmodern, and/or postcolonial authors such as Amiri Baraka, Meena Alexander, Jorie Graham, and M. NourbeSe Philip. Historical figures such as the German diarist "Anonyma" and the American physicist William Francis Gray Swann complement the aesthetic series, while at the same time being read as modernists. What bridges the historical gaps between authors and works is their question of the universal in the particularity of form: thus, in many instances, close readings, material texts, and archival materials become sites for putting the question. Poetics, as a discourse of the making of the work in its condition of possibility, thus finds a special relationship to the event—of Zero Hour or its durational aftermath.

In order to avoid the impression of a univocal project—even of asking the question of the universal—I will let each contributor lay out the terms of their projects individually. Here, I will point out the felicitous relationship between questions that mutually inform the series of essays, seen as the product of our virtual seminar and subsequent interactions. As well, there is no necessary agreement

on the nature or necessity of the Zero Hour itself—the conceptual form of the historical date is a point of departure, a way of asking questions, rather than any claim to an epistemic shift or periodic break though it is suggestively asked, in the ensemble of this work, how a research agenda beginning with 1945 may be pursued. In my own contribution, the Zero Hour becomes a moment of disclosure that occurs with the historical date, May 8-9, 1945, in the experiences of three women artists/writers. For Maggie Rosenau, Zero Hour amounts to a period shift in the goals of avant-garde aesthetics in the early postwar decades in search of a new standard of objectivity. Herman Rapaport charts a literary project aligning with Derridean deconstruction in the writing of Marguerite Duras after Zero Hour, but then reconstitutes the Zero Hour in two works written generationally or historically apart from it by Jorie Graham and M. NourbeSe Philip. For Lauri Scheyer, the Zero Hour is *not one* for African Americans, who could only partly share in the liberatory victory over fascism while the denial of rights under Jim Crow Law persisted; for African Americans, Zero Hour returns with terrible regularity as what Baraka called "the changing same." Writing on two neglected modernist poems of the 1930s, David Kellogg shows how the retrospective determination of Eliotic modernism after 1945 has unduly narrowed its creative project. Parvinder Mehta, in her postcolonial reading of the contemporary author Meena Alexander, demonstrates the relationship between modernist self-reflexivity and the development of a hybridized postcolonial and global subjectivity. Finally, Gary Huafan He proposes a critical prehistory of the Zero Hour of the Manhattan Project in a "thought experiment" that brings together modern science and the concepts of Entropy and Fate in German romanticism. The interconnections and divergences of these several projects are, and hopefully will be, productive of further inquiry and insight. But what is also characteristic and remarkable about them as a whole is their response to the moment at hand, the Zero Hour we now live.

June 2020
Detroit