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Creative Composites: Modernism, Race, and the Stieglitz Circle by Lauren Kroiz (review)

Marcia Brennan

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and literary inspiration. This group of intellectuals, the *centenaristas*, turned toward “primitive” and “spiritual” indigenous thought as a mark of difference from Europe, questioning the alleged “progress” of the west in the years following the First World War (cf. Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*).

Alejo Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos* parodies this representation of the tropical forest as a mythical, irrational, prehistoric space devoid of the complications of modern life. Rogers maintains that Carpentier exposes the flaws and futility of the desire to “go native.” In this novel, the tropics are a palimpsest of different layers of writings by writers who have projected their own perspective of the new world: “Where does this mythical, literary jungle come from? As González Echevarría has noted, the protagonists of these tropical forest quest narratives are surrounded by a forest made of books” (139). The narrator of the novel is tied to writing his experience in the tropics, being unable to articulate it without this medium. Although Carpentier’s novel does not use the same medical language that the others use, Rogers maintains that, as a one time member of the surrealist movement, Carpentier must have been acquainted with psychiatry (most surrealists were), and he definitely had a strong interest in ethnography, a discipline that brings myth and the sacred closer to the sphere of science. Carpentier delves into Afro-Caribbean culture from the scientific perspective of an ethnographer, a move that is reflected not only in *Los pasos perdidos*, but also in other works such as *¡Écue-Yamba-O!* and *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*).

Jungle Fever is an excellently written and well-argued study of how the west has imagined the tropics. However, its overall conception is perhaps too constrained to the field of literary studies; other dominant discourses of the tropical archive—anthropology, journalism, politics, education—are not considered (cf. studies such as David Spurr’s *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 1993, or Gilbert, LeGrand, and Salvatore’s *Close Encounters of Empire*, 1998). Although Rogers tries to expand her scope beyond novels to television series and documentaries like *Lost* and the Travel Channel’s *Mark and Olly: Living with the Machigenga*, her primary focus is on canonical literature influenced by medical discourse. In this sphere, though, the book brilliantly accomplishes its task.

***Creative Composites: Modernism, Race, and the Stieglitz Circle.* Lauren Kroiz. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. Pp. 267. \$49.95 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Marcia Brennan, Rice University

The literature on the Alfred Stieglitz circle represents an extensive and thriving area of inquiry for both academic and museum audiences in the United States and Europe. Lauren Kroiz’s *Creative Composites: Modernism, Race, and the Stieglitz Circle* contributes significantly to this literature by offering a complementary perspective on the photographer and entrepreneur and on his extended modernist circles. From the turn of the twentieth century to his death more than four decades later, Stieglitz was associated with a diverse and often provocative group of artists, critics, and cultural theorists. In this analytically insightful and beautifully illustrated volume, Kroiz focuses on a group of important but under-examined figures in the Stieglitz circle, including the German-Japanese critic Sadakichi Hartmann, the Mexican caricaturist and entrepreneur Marius de Zayas, and the Sri Lankan curator and filmmaker Ananda Coomaraswamy. Drawing on a deep historical and archival base, Kroiz skillfully reconstructs how period discourses on race, ethnicity, and identity informed the critical thinking and artistic productions of Stieglitz’s “first” and “second” circles, the groups that coalesced around him before and after the closing of his groundbreaking art gallery 291 in 1917. At the same time, Kroiz’s scope extends well

144 beyond Stieglitz's inner circles as she considers the complex ways in which national debates on race, ethnicity, immigration, urbanism, and assimilation shaped the production and exhibition of this composite modernist project, one that arose in one of the most influential artistic venues of the early twentieth century.

Creative Composites opens with an intricately developed account of how national debates on assimilation, pluralism, and ethnic diversity were reflected both in Hartmann's critical writings and in Stieglitz's straight photographs of the 1890s and early 1900s. Hartmann first theorized the concept of "straight photography" in 1904; the term referred not to photographs that emulated traditional media like painting to produce romanticized pictorial effects, but rather to photographs that showcased qualities that were distinctive to the new technological medium. Straight photographs included "objective" representations of subjects that were typically presented in sharp focus and crisply printed. As Kroiz points out, neither Hartmann nor Stieglitz used the term "straight" to promote a unified or essentialized conception of American identity, but rather to describe an aesthetic approach that they saw as particularly suited to New York's newly pluralist, immigrant, urban contexts. Notably, Kroiz is careful to contrast the differences between Hartmann's and Stieglitz's respective approaches. While Hartmann the critic sometimes produced sensationalist accounts that characterized straight photographs as being at once picturesque and real, Stieglitz the photographer took an approach that was more complex and ambiguous. As Kroiz observes of Stieglitz's photograph of a lower Manhattan immigrant neighborhood, *Five Points, New York* (1893), "The pictorial resistance and moral ambiguity of Stieglitz's photograph provoke questions of how and why to visualize the unique diversity of new urban populations" (28). In short, Stieglitz sometimes walked a delicate line through an urban voyeurism that offered privileged audiences glimpses into immigrant neighborhoods and other unfamiliar settings; some of these representations remained unclear no matter how "straight" the photograph.

Kroiz follows her discussion of Hartmann and straight photography by exploring how the "abstraction and constructive miscegenation" (49) of de Zayas's caricatures provided an effective counterpoint *and* complement to Stieglitz's contemporary photographs. Stieglitz and de Zayas's collaborative relationship extended between 1907 and 1917; throughout this decade, de Zayas produced caricatures that ranged from traditional figure studies to modernist abstractions that sometimes featured cryptic symbolic languages involving chemical formulas and mathematical equations. De Zayas characterized these representations as a form of "constructive miscegenation," a term that he used to describe the productive interbreeding of diverse elements within a new, composite American modernism. Drawing on sexually and racially charged language, de Zayas saw American modernism progressing through fertile ethnic and artistic intermixing that, he posited, would produce a vital, new synthesis. In her multilayered account, Kroiz looks both outward and inward as she locates de Zayas's theories in relation to period discourses on racial stereotypes, eugenics, and physiognomy, as well as in relation to the diverse photographic exhibition program that Stieglitz was pursuing at the same time at 291.

The third chapter represents another valuable contribution to Stieglitz-circle literature as Kroiz examines Stieglitz's relationship with the filmmaker, photographer, and Indian art curator Ananda Coomaraswamy. Through Coomaraswamy's advocacy, a selection of Stieglitz's photographs first entered the permanent collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts as recognized works of art. In addition to reconstructing Coomaraswamy's important historical role in institutional photography collection, Kroiz explores Stieglitz's and Coomaraswamy's attempts to engage new technological media to promote what they considered to be a shared vision of modernist spirituality, one that was enacted through the choreographed poses and expressive gestures of the human body. From complementary vantage points, both men pursued photography's potential to present a universal symbolic language, Coomaraswamy through ethnographic films of traditional Indian dancers, and Stieglitz through his *Equivalents* series and composite portrait photographs

of Georgia O'Keeffe, some of which entered the MFA's permanent collection during the 1920s.

In addition to examining the under-explored contributions of various individuals in the Stieglitz circle, *Creative Composites* also includes an analysis of some of the least-discussed works by one of the group's best-known members, Arthur Dove. In 1925, Dove assembled a striking combination of bamboo, denim, buttons, wood, and oil on panel in a composition that he entitled *Nigger-Goes-a-Fishin'* or *Fishin' Nigger* (later called *Goin' Fishin'*). While this abstract modernist artwork was purchased by the influential Washington art collector Duncan Phillips, the piece is contemporaneous with another body of work that scholars have been equally reluctant to discuss—the caricature illustrations of African Americans that Dove produced for *Life* magazine and other popular periodicals during the mid-1920s. Approaching these materials collectively, Kroiz reads the images as representative of how conceptions of race, region, and nostalgia became invested in typological identities and material objects, both in the visual arts and in anthropological discourses of the period. Kroiz argues that in Stieglitz's second circle, Dove's images of African Americans symbolized the culture of the southern United States, while O'Keeffe's artistic engagement with Native American and Hispanic artifacts represented the culture of the southwest. Kroiz concludes that “this assignment of a racial identity to a region relied on and perpetuated established stereotypes of each group, even as it celebrated regional diversity and difference as essential to the development of composite American culture” (146). In turn, this interplay of stereotype and diversity further complicated established conceptions of “race” and “identity” as well as conceptions of “regional” and “national” within the Stieglitz circle of the 1920s and 1930s.

As the above complexity suggests, *Creative Composites* offers a rigorous, multilayered account of key issues that shaped not only the history of American art but of American society and culture as well. The text itself represents a “creative composite” that moves us toward a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the relations between aesthetic and social domains within the hybrid currents of American modernism.

***The Zukofsky Era: Modernity, Margins, and the Avant-Garde.* Ruth Jennison. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp.x + 232. \$60.00 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Bob Perelman, University of Pennsylvania

In this book, Ruth Jennison makes an uncompromising case for the political incisiveness of objectivist poets in the late 1920s and 1930s, and she supports her claim with illuminating close readings backed by fluent Marxist historiography and critical geography. Her primary texts are limited to three poets' early work; she examines George Oppen's *Discrete Series*, four early Lorine Niedecker pieces, passages from Louis Zukofsky's “A”-6, -8, and -9, his “Mantis,” and a few of his shorter poems. This exclusive focus on the early period of objectivism, along with the fact that two of the Niedecker pieces only recently emerged from the archives, might suggest that we should take *The Zukofsky Era* as a project of scholarly recovery, but that would not be accurate. Jennison does not place an overlooked Zukofsky era back into the historical record; she posits it as an exemplary poetico-political condition with ongoing transformative potential.

The large ambition of *The Zukofsky Era* is obvious from its title, which insists on a comparison to Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era*. The differences between the two scholars are obvious. Kenner is an encyclopedic raconteur, anti-theoretical, clinching arguments via palpable details; Jennison is a committed theorist, beginning her book with “the key concepts of materialist aesthetics—the tyranny of the commodity form; the text (and its producer) as an active mediation of a history that precedes it; the contest between the intra- and international uneven spaces of