

Modernism and the Marketplace

Literary Culture and Consumer Capitalism
in Rhys, Woolf, Stein, and Nella Larsen

Alissa G. Karl

Modernism and the Marketplace

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*In memory of my grandparents,
Ernest and Florence Karl*

Contents

<i>Permissions</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
 Introduction: The Uneven Marketplace of Modernism and Consumer Capitalism	 1
1 “Just the sensation of spending, that’s the point”: Jean Rhys’ Marketplaces of Discipline and Desire	16
2 Consumerism and the Imperial Nation in Virginia Woolf’s <i>The Voyage Out</i> and <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i>	43
3 The Enterprising Modernisms of Gertrude Stein and Sylvia Beach	80
4 Consumerism, Race and Rationalization in Nella Larsen’s <i>Quicksand</i>	113
 Coda: Consumer Capitalism as a Style of Life	 140
 <i>Notes</i>	 149
<i>Bibliography</i>	173
<i>Index</i>	179

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Introduction

The Uneven Marketplace of Modernism and Consumer Capitalism

I know when my Madame and Madame wake up in the morning. I know the sounds that come from behind their bedroom door when they think that I am not around. I know the cigars that they smoke. I know the postcards that they collect and the women who recline naked on them. I know the old-woman gasses that escape from them, and the foods that aggravate them. Brussels sprouts, if *you* must know. I know the faces of those who are invited often to dinner. I know the backs of those who are asked never to return. I know the devotion that my Mesdames have for each other. I know the faith that they both have in GertrudeStein. (Binh, in *The Book of Salt*)¹

In her novel *The Book of Salt* (2003), Monique Truong imagines an alternative modernist mythology with her story of Binh, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas' Vietnamese cook at 27 rue de Fleurus. Gertrude and Alice's voluntary expatriatism in Paris lies in distinct contrast to Binh's journey to the imperial metropole, which is compelled by multiple paternal abuses at the hands of his own father, an alcoholic Catholic holy man of sorts, and those of the French colonial government and its agents. Binh's movement from the colonial Governor-General's kitchen in Saigon to the private kitchens of Paris—and eventually to the kitchen of Stein and Toklas—exposes the uneven economic, political and racial conditions upon which Western modernist production, and many of our continued readings of modernism, rest.

Binh's subservience to French rule in his own country, his exile upon the discovery of his sexual affair with the French *chef de cuisine* of the Governor-General's household, and his marginalization as an *asiatique* in Paris, begs the question as to where the title of "Lost Generation" is most appropriately applied:

[My yellow skin] flagrantly tells my story, or a compacted, distorted version of it, to passerby curious enough to cast their eyes my way. It stunts their creativity, dictates to them the limited list of who I could be. Foreigner, *asiatique*, and, this being Mother France, I must be

2 *Modernism and the Marketplace*

Indochinese. They do not care to discern any further, ignoring the question of whether I hail from Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos. Indochina, indeed. We all belong to the same owner, Monsieur and Madame. . . . My eyes, the passerby are quick to notice, do not shine with the brilliance of a foreign student. I have all of my limbs so I am not one of the soldiers imported from the colonies to fight in their Grande Guerre. No gamblers and whores joined to me at the hip so I am not the young Emperor or Prince of an old and mortified land. Within the few seconds that they have to consider me before they stroll on by, they conclude that I am a laborer, the only real option left. Every day when I walk the streets of this city, I am just that. (BOS, 152)

A colonial whose presence is intelligible only within frames of imperial reference, Binh's story exposes how global hierarchies are reproduced within the metropolises from which so much modernist literature emerged, where the relationships that lead us to qualify modernism as a movement took root, and where the conditions of the technologically modernizing, cosmopolitan cultures about which modernists have so much to say coalesced.

On the metropole's figurative food chain where Binh is a laborer, Gertrude and Alice are quite literally consumers of the food he prepares. Here the sustenance of the West (in this case of two American exiles) rests upon colonial labor, just as the Governor-General's household in Saigon is fed not merely by the creations of its imported chef, but more fundamentally by the provisions brought through its back gates by Binh and three beggar boys, who carry the day's food for the price of a bowl of *phở*. Truong's fictional version of modernist-era Paris thus challenges the assumptions from which discussions about modernism proceed; for instance, if modernism is frequently characterized as an outsiders' movement consisting of disaffected rebels, then Binh's experience relativizes that marginalization and brings into focus the economic, historical and geopolitical terrain from which modernism germinates.

Truong's text places the priorities of modernist literary culture in relief when Binh steals one of Stein's notebooks in order to please his lover Marcus Lattimore, an American doctor and Stein devotee. Binh consents to take the notebook in exchange for a photo of he and Lattimore together, "[a]n even exchange. A fair trade. A give for a take," Binh thinks. However, when Binh examines the notebook he discovers that the modernist marketplace is not one of such even exchange. He finds his own name, Anglicized as "Bin," throughout Stein's English text that is otherwise unintelligible to him:

With each sighting, I am overwhelmed by the feeling that I am witnessing myself drowning. There . . . I am, I think. Here . . . I am again. I am surrounded on all sides by strangers, strung along a continuously

unraveling line that keeps them above the water's surface. It is a line that I cannot possibly hold onto. Gertrude Stein knows it, and she has cast me there anyway, I think.

I did not give you my permission, Madame, to treat me in this way. I am here to feed you, not to serve as your fodder. I demand more money for such services, Madame. You pay me only for my time. My story, Madame, is mine. I alone am qualified to tell it, embellish it, or to withhold. (*BOS*, 214–15)

Though Lattimore claims that he only wants to examine Stein's notebook for one week, after which Binh can return it to the cabinet with the rest of her manuscripts, when Binh returns to his lover's apartment for their usual Sunday together, Lattimore has cleared out with the notebook, leaving only the receipt for the portrait studio so that Binh can collect their promised photograph. In his pursuit of economic security, dignity and love, Binh is doubly betrayed in the modernist metropole: his devotion to his lover is instrumentalized by this American tourist-collector, who exploits Binh's access (ironically a function of his status in the city's racial and geopolitical hierarchies) for the sake of the avant-garde artifact, while his name and story are appropriated by the modernist writer in a language that he does not even speak. More broadly, Binh's unfortunate exchanges with Americans in Paris effectively sketches the global economy in which modernism is situated—where dominant industrial and, as I will elaborate, consumer capitalist nations initiate uneven exchanges with other parts of the world.

In this instance, the modernist is imperialist not as a result of affiliation with imperialist nations, but through practices of appropriation and consumption, such that the imperial metropole serves modernist proliferation well. Set in a literary period often acclaimed for its cynicism and rootlessness, Binh's story and his desire for love and a home challenge us to reappraise the modernist literary and cultural mythology. We are reminded that the metropolises of Paris, London and New York, from which the texts in this study largely issue, are not natural founts of creative enterprise, but locations that are shaped by, and formative of, the global moves of capital, the shifting terrain of empire, and the daily routines wherein gendered, sexual, racial and national identities are inscribed. The heretofore unheard stories that unfold in Truong's novel ask that we consider modernist texts and our examinations of them within their economic and geopolitical conditions, and in terms of the privileges that such situations afford and the exclusions that they engender.

Some of this work is, certainly, already being done. Recent literary criticism has examined the imperial dimensions of modernist texts and production, as well as the role of commercialism in modernist movements.² In addition, the recent focus on geography and transnationalism in modernist studies is troubling the national and temporal parameters of modernism. Introducing their concept of "geomodernisms," Laura Doyle

4 *Modernism and the Marketplace*

and Laura Winkiel emphasize the importance of examining “aesthetic self-awareness [that] expresses a *geocultural* consciousness—a sense of speaking from the outside or inside or both at once, of orienting toward and away from the metropole, of existing somewhere between belonging and dispersion.”³ This study aims to contribute to these investigations by scrutinizing how dominant capitalist economic procedures are coordinated with formations of imperialism, national and international politics, and their related understandings of gender, race and ethnicity. I see consumerism and consumer capitalism as specific entryways for interrogating such pervasive phenomena—and as a good partner to literature in this task—precisely because they are large-scale procedures within national and global economies, even as they incorporate the more mundane acts of everyday life. Beyond this, consumer capital and economics can help us to understand the histories from which they are derived because they also are themselves representative discourses that render social life and value systems in particular ways—and frequently to significant effect. In the chapters that follow I trace these valences of consumer capital through transatlantic modernist literary texts in order to read their engagements with economic and political life on and across individual, local, national and global scales.

When I began this project, I set out to examine the conceptualization, function and impact and of consumer capitalism in women-authored modernist texts and moments. I soon discovered that it was not possible to discuss adequately the ideologies and operations of consumerism without considering the ways that consumerism and modernism alike interfaced with procedures of capitalist economies more broadly, with the classed hierarchies that organize capitalist cultures, with shifting but still active nation- and empire-building, and with racial and ethnic dynamics of societies in demographic flux. As such, I use these the modernists’ depictions and commentaries on consumerism as a way of tracing consumerism’s interactions with other forms of practice and power. Through my readings of modernist texts and their contexts, I demonstrate how consumer capital proves to be a flexible format that is integrated with the logics of capitalist economics as well as with ongoing imperialisms; the management of women, foreigners, non-whites and economically marginalized subjects; and the designation of modernist culture itself.

In addition to bringing economic histories to bear upon literary texts, I also use these women writers’ treatment of consumer capital to discern their economic imaginations and to consider how these imaginations augment or contest dominant economic histories. In *Modernism, Cultural Production and the British Avant-Garde*, Edward Comentale determines how the texts and textual dynamics of several British modernists reveal anxieties over capitalism and its burgeoning markets, but also how their projects are conditioned by those very market factors, “preoccupied” as their texts are “with their own production and consumption,”⁴ and influenced in part

by the exaggerated economic cycles that many witnessed in the overblown economy of the first world war. Comentale writes: "The violence by which our history has been repeatedly overturned, the continual production and consumption of cultural difference, the ceaseless labor and endless discourse that shapes our own [critical] profession—these phenomena all feed as they affirm the activity of a voracious market."⁵ If, as Comentale argues, high modernists incorporated the tropes of these "voracious markets" into their texts as a way of working through the big questions the marketplace raises—prominently, the relationship of "individualism and totality," or between parts and the whole—then I contend that these women modernists' engagements with consumer capital, its marketplaces and commodities undertakes a similar kind of work. Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Beach and Nella Larsen collectively model consumer capitalism as a dialectic between individuals and social, political and economic structures, wherein consumer activities and commodity forms are pivotal to the negotiation of social subjects. Various positioned as they are within literary circles and national cultures, they offer a collective, though certainly not homogeneous picture.

Certain prominent commentaries on consumerism in the modernist period are well-known, such as the criticisms of the Frankfurt School and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's warnings against the Culture Industry.⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer argue that, in an age of burgeoning mass production and mass media, a principal effect of the alienation of labor is dependence upon homogenized, standardized cultural forms; individuals are compelled to consume under a capitalist regime that promises distinction, yet erodes autonomy through the forced consumption of the "myths" of individuation. Andreas Huyssen reinforces a version of this view of consumerism with his well-known concept of the "Great Divide," which reads in modernist literature and culture a pervasive "contamination anxiety" that is fearful of an encroaching, feminized mass culture.⁷ More recently, John Xiros Cooper has offered a less conventional view of modernists in the marketplace by arguing that even as many avant-gardes shunned the economic, social and political commonplaces of their day, their cultures and communities pioneered what Cooper terms our contemporary "unrestrained market society" and the widespread sexual, class and social emancipation that he believes it has occasioned.⁸ It is Cooper's contention that in becoming mainstream, modernism's resistance has made us all (or, more accurately, those of us living in economically dominant parts of the world) better off today. As I suggest at later points in this book, these prominent views on consumerism influence our contemporary readings of modernism, such that modernism often fits readily into a narrative of resistance, marginalization and outsider-dom that emphasizes its supposed suspicion of and hostility toward popular or mass-cultural forms.

While I agree that in many cases modernist writers do locate (and indeed, market) themselves and their work outside of the mainstream to a multitude

of affects, I read the texts and authors at hand to derive a working model of consumer capital in the modernist period, and to understand how it interfaces with other material and ideological conditions. To the extent that modernists and their works circulate in literary marketplaces, they can also be said to deploy certain tropes of consumerism as a function of their material status; on the other hand, their textual depictions and engagement with their historical conditions allow us to theorize consumption in ways that move beyond the sometimes appropriate, yet often overly simplistic story of modernist antagonism toward the marketplace to sketch a broader view of, and to ask a different set of questions about, the significance of consumer capitals' apparent ubiquity.

THE STATUS OF CONSUMER CULTURE CRITIQUE

Consumerism and consumer capitalism have received scholarly attention in a few main forms over the past couple of decades. Consumer styles and preferences were scrutinized by many cultural studies scholars in the late 1980s and 1990s who sought to validate popular cultural forms as legitimate and politically important objects of study. Here, the marketplace was in many respects seen as a venue for the expression of ordinary people's desires, priorities and even subversions, where the individual could liberate herself by altering the meanings of commodities. In recent years this approach has taken a beating at the hands of commentators who dispute that individuals can choose freely under the auspices of such a pervasive and coercive structure as the capitalist market; indeed, recent critics contend that much of this cultural studies work in fact reproduces a capitalist, "free" market ideology that abstracts human value and labor in the form of the commodity to sell our freedom back to us at a price.⁹ To a large extent I share such a suspicion over the narratives of choice and freedom as they are encountered in the marketplace. I do, however, argue at certain points in this book that the desires cultivated by the marketplace can effectively undermine capital's supremacy through the impossibility of that desire's complete fulfillment.

A good deal of critical social- and cultural-historical scholarship has also been undertaken in the field of consumer culture studies, with a number of single-author books and collections being published since the mid-1990s.¹⁰ Much of this work explores how consumerism and commodity relations influence social, cultural and political life in highly industrialized nations. At stake are a number of key topics in cultural and social history, critical and cultural theory and politically-oriented cultural analysis: how individuals, social and economic classes, racial and ethnic groups, and genders are defined socially and politically as consumers, and how this impacts their public lives and efficacy; how consumerism is a metaphor or surrogate for political action (or, alternatively, how the stage for political action comes to be defined in consumerist terms); the relationship of women to,

and the definition of women in, consumerism and its corporate and capitalist frameworks; the gendering and classing of consumer practices; how mass consumerism distinguishes dominant cultures and economies from less affluent or dominated societies; what kinds of ethical or moral considerations are necessary or appropriate to any discussion of consumerism.¹¹ All of these issues are relevant in the chapters that follow. In using literary texts to approach such questions, I hope not only to bring literature into the discussions referenced above and hence demonstrate its relevance and its contributions to this field of study, but to elaborate upon the location of literary production and consumption within the politically and economically uneven networks of the capitalist marketplace.

Defining Consumerism

When I consider consumerism, consumer capitalism and consumption throughout this study, I define them not simply as the relationship between an individual and the object or act of consumption; rather, I treat consumerism as a practice that encapsulates economic conditions while articulating a range of other social and political formations. In this way, consumer/ist refers to literal and figurative marketplace practices that are conditioned by capitalism and its related imperial, political and cultural mandates, where human interactions and relationships are carried out in the manner of marketplace exchange and rest upon commodity relations. I consider a marketplace to be any literal or figurative site of economic exchange—in the chapters that follow, of money, sex, clothing, trinkets, husbands and wives, books, paintings, affection, recognition—though the marketplaces that this book considers are pervasively capitalist ones.

My understanding of consumerism here is derived in part from the notion of the pervasiveness of the commodity form and from the cyclical proliferation of consumption. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1920–23), Georg Lukács explains reification as the requirement “that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange.”¹² The commodity fetishism of industrialized capitalist societies is a function of the fundamental tenet of capitalist economics, capital accumulation, and specifically of the alienation and exploitation of labor that such accumulation requires. Lukács explains that when one’s own labor becomes an object outside of oneself, all forms of perception and valuation can fall within the same conceptual framework—especially when, in the industrial societies dominated by Taylorism in Lukács’ day, even the smallest components of work are broken down, segmented and quantified, and where “rational mechanization extends right into the workers’ soul.”¹³ Lukács narrates the process of reification thus: “The objectification of [the worker’s] labor power into something opposed to their total personality (a process already accomplished with the scale of that labor-power as a commodity) is now made into the permanent ineluctable reality of their daily

life. Here, too, the personality can do no more than look on helplessly while its own existence is reduced to an isolated particle fed into a system.”¹⁴ Reification is thus the process by which capitalism expands beyond the factory and inscribes itself in all areas of life, making the whole of society into a capitalist marketplace so that “[j]ust as the capitalist system reproduces itself on economically higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man.”¹⁵

As such, the commodity relation is transformed into a thing of “ghostly objectivity” that “stamps its imprint on the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can ‘own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world.”¹⁶ Lukács’ formulation of reification is central to how I discuss consumption and consumer capital throughout this book since he articulates the commodity’s status in terms of broader social totalities; writing around the same time as Lukács, the authors in this study also render economic categories as simultaneously social, political and emotional.

Furthermore, in the *Grundrisse* (1857–58) Karl Marx explains the recursivity of capitalist production and consumption such that one cannot be considered without the other. Consumption is inseparable from the modes of capitalist production because 1) “a product becomes a real product only by being consumed” (that is, what’s the point of a product that is never put to use?), and 2) “because consumption creates the need for *new* production,” or is the motive for production.¹⁷ This “immediate identity” of production and consumption articulates the relationship between these two procedures as cyclical—where the means, structures and ideologies of the former are imparted upon the latter, and vice versa.¹⁸ Marx gives the following examples:

Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. . . . The need which consumption feels for the object is created by the perception of it. The object of art—like every other product—creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty. Production thus creates not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object.¹⁹

On the other hand, as the medium through which the ideologies of the commodity form are disseminated, consumption assures the proliferation of capitalism as a system.

From these characterizations of the reification of the commodity form and the identity of production and consumption, consumption and consumer capital can be understood in terms of 1) their encapsulation of capitalist accumulation and its attendant procedures and 2) their further deployment of such procedures at the level of values, ideologies, identifications and

perceptions. My readings of consumerism thus attempt to always account for the material conditions of abstracted commodity forms and desires, and I proceed with an interest in understanding how consumerism deploys the conditions of capital's proliferation through economic, cultural and even emotional means.

EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY CONSUMER CAPITAL IN THE U.S. AND BRITAIN

In the immediate pre-World War I and interwar years during which the works in this study were produced, Britain and the United States experienced unprecedented economic phenomena, from the persistent unemployment that plagued Britain's economic recovery from the war to the U.S. economy's sudden dive from "prosperity decade" to the Great Depression. When painted in broad strokes the early twentieth century can be—and for many economic historians is—challenging to sum up as an economic epoch, but one prevailing current across economic cycles and across the Atlantic was the instantiation of consumer capital as a lived experience of increased daily consumption, and as a key feature of economic theory and policy. As economics itself became oriented toward consumption, economic elites codified the necessity of consumption for the continued expansion of capitalist economies.

The so-called economic boom of varying duration that followed World War I in the U.S. and Europe has been attributed in part to "pent-up consumer demand" that accumulated during the war, and to the drive to replenish raw materials and productive apparatuses that the war itself had consumed.²⁰ The war remained a catalyst for economic growth in the U.S. during the 1920s, and in consumer industries especially, where as economic historian Douglas Dowd points out, "the technology of warfare translated easily into the consumer and producer goods of peacetime—dramatically so in the electrical and automotive realms."²¹ Along with the productive stimulus of the war, a number of economic, political and cultural moves created the cultural terrain upon which mass-consumerist projects were carried out, and rationalized the U.S. demographic in the promotion of capitalism as a shared national vision. Of particular note is Herbert Hoover's tenure as U.S. Secretary of Commerce from 1921–28, during which time the Federal government began to perform systematic commercial research to collaborate with business interests and cultivate ever-more production, consumption and economic growth.²²

The U.S. economic boom of the 1920s was instrumental in creating a nation of consumers. Particularly in white collar and service industries, real wages in the U.S. rose throughout the decade; Gary Cross cites an estimated average increase of 40% in purchasing power between 1910 and 1929.²³ Stuart Ewen notes the following declaration from business advisor Christine Frederick in 1929: "the greatest idea that America has to give

the world' was 'the idea that workmen and masses [should] be looked upon not simply as workers and producers but as consumers. Pay them more, sell them more, prosper more is the equation.'²⁴ Though certainly not uniformly distributed or experienced,²⁵ the prosperity decade also saw a shift in how Americans viewed business interests. The anti-corporate sentiments of the pre-World War I years softened and a growing "sentimental association between the 'corporate boardroom' and the 'consuming crowd'" developed in its place.²⁶

The general rise in wages and more receptive attitudes toward big business coincided with the increasing professionalization of the advertising and public relations industries, which engineered public attitudes toward commodities and toward the businesses that offered them, as well as toward a government that became ever more accommodating to corporate interests as the twenties wore on. These industries animated the U.S. consumer economy with sophisticated advertising campaigns, installment plans and seemingly endless shelves of consumer goods for sale. As Daniel Horowitz points out, the "pay them more, sell them more, prosper more" ethos was applied by "[m]any members of the business community—bankers and advertisers especially—[who] spoke largely in materialistic terms, as if an increased standard of living were justified by itself or by its ability to sustain corporate capitalism through the creation of demand."²⁷ Horowitz also notes that this logic of consumerism as growth and progress was met by a concern on the part of intellectuals over mass consumption's perceived homogenization of the populace, and a call from those commentators for consumer education and training to mitigate such impact.²⁸

While the promotion of mass consumption among Americans was one form of capitalist discipline deployed at the level of everyday life and presented as a general social improvement,²⁹ the U.S.'s racial and ethnic demographic was deliberately engineered during this period in the interest of national security and economic growth. Recent immigrants, who frequently occupied the bottom tiers of the socioeconomic ladder and performed the dirtiest, most strenuous and poorly-paid jobs, were the subject of intense suspicion regarding their loyalty to the U.S. Anxieties about the politically subversive potential of new immigrant populations (the U.S. government, for instance, specifically sought to mitigate anti-war sentiment among immigrant groups),³⁰ and about the implications of new immigration during the first World War for national identity were prominent when the flow of new arrivals into the U.S. was tightly controlled in the 1920s. This legislation heavily favored Northern and Western Europeans in an effort, as Cheryl Shanks puts it, "to ensure social and institutional stability."³¹ Thus, while the trends between World War I and the stock market crash of 1929 certainly suggest economic growth and increases in the standard of living in the U.S., it is critical to note how these trends are accompanied by distinct privileges and exclusions