Modernism always required others. Perhaps this is true of any field of thought or artistic movement. Classification determines what a thing is not as much as it specifies what a thing is. Yet the ways in which otherness is constituted through definition vary. Early on in *Eccentric Modernisms: Making Differences in the History of American Art*, its author Tirza True Latimer returns to the moment in which abstract expressionism emerged as the preferred language of modernism. The jettisoning of figuration from the project of American modernism, Latimer argues, also amounted to a rejection of the social relations that representational practices have often affirmed. Whereas the idea of the eccentric could risk fetishizing the outsider status of an individual maker, Latimer instead conjures an experience of otherness that was shared by a community of artists.

Working from the edges, *Eccentric Modernism* renders peripheral certain protagonists who have been central to histories of modern art. The first of three studies focuses on the 1930 edition of Gertrude Stein’s *Dix Portraits* yet concentrates neither on the author of the book nor on its most famous contributor, Pablo Picasso. In a neat reversal of Latimer’s earlier writing on Stein—in which...
she likens the many hundreds of portraits that Stein sat for to the insistence on repetition in her experimental writing—this chapter pivots on a group of artists who surrounded the writer. The group of four painters, known informally as the neoromantics, included Christian Bérard, Eugene Berman, Pavel Tchelitchew, and Kristians Tonny. Alongside Picasso, all contributed portraits to illustrate Stein’s book. Latimer draws from analyses of these portraits to describe a series of intimate associations between these gay men, associations for which Stein becomes a kind of scaffold.

Eccentrics, inverters, foreigners, and homosexuals: of the many figures introduced through Latimer’s books, difference is a subject that endures. This emphasis on locating queer ancestors is not a simple matter of retrieval but of engaging critically with processes of historical memory. For example, in *The Modern Woman Revisited: Paris Between the Wars*, Latimer’s 2003 collaboration with Whitney Chadwick, the failure of history to realize the promise of the modern woman is recognized as a simultaneous attempt to efface her from the scene altogether. In *Eccentric Modernisms*, Latimer introduces the idea of queerness alongside the eccentric. The two terms, she writes, are used interchangeably, but also help one another along. Long since synonymous with homosexuality, the word queer signals the erotic attachments that joined the loose association of eccentrics described in the book. Like the sign “lesbian” in Latimer’s previous work, the two terms are used as free-floating signifiers, connoting shifting affinities rather than essential characteristics.
Not only yoked to a specific identity, the word queer also implies a mode of critical engagement. *Eccentric Modernisms* is indebted to the work of queer theorists like Elizabeth Freeman who have countered the mechanisms of historical narrative. The reverence of the neoromantics in the interwar period to an earlier phase of modernism (precubist) thus challenges, for Latimer, the inevitability of abstraction’s predominance in histories of modern art. The apparent failure of this challenge is useful since it reveals the dominant values—including those favoring the heterosexual and masculine—that organize histories of modern art both within and outside of this period.

A second chapter continues this interest in deviation through which “an alternative future for modernism and its history” might emerge (47). Again, this occurs in proximity to Stein, this time through a reading of her collaboration with the composer Virgil Thomson on the libretto *Four Saints in Three Acts*. The opera that Mabel Luhan declared would “finish modern opera” was first performed at the Wadsworth Athenaeum museum in Hartford, Connecticut in 1934. It marked the opening of a retrospective dedicated to Picasso, his first in America. Foregrounding the opera, Latimer decentralizes the great artist and geographic centers such as New York or Paris at a time when “the two terms modern and art had only recently been united in discourse” (47). In turn, by focusing on a souvenir program produced for the occasion—admittedly “a production in its own right”—Latimer refuses the conventional objects of art historical enquiry (49).
Whereas little magazines and limited-edition print publications are central to the discursive field of literary modernism, they have often performed only a supporting role in histories of modern art. Conversely, for Latimer the circulation of texts has often served as a proxy for the networks she is interested in. In *Women Together/Women Apart* (2005), for example, she uses the term corporeal to describe paper ephemera, invoking the bodies that invitations or promotional leaflets are passed between. Crucially, in *Eccentric Modernisms* the bodies that are invoked through consideration of the *Four Saints* souvenir program are those of the performers as well as authors of the work. Latimer confronts the power dynamics of racial difference that underpinned the play, which was performed by an all-African American cast to a predominantly white audience. Two corresponding issues of legibility come into view here. Engendered through historical processes of African American subjectification, the bodies of the performers were simultaneously organized by dynamics of hypervisibility and erasure. So “racist stereotypes clearly dictated the terms of the opera’s production and reception” and Latimer’s argument attends to a modern spectacle in which a queer imaginary, and a queer spectacle in which a modern imaginary, are constituted in part through a colonial fantasy (71). This is not, however, only a site of foreclosure and reflects instead the condition of possibilities of a historical moment. The event opens up what Latimer refers to as a “discursive space for cultural agents who did not fully exist in 1934.” “Only decades later,” Latimer writes, “would they look back, from the other side of the New Negro movement,
the Civil Rights movement, and the Black Arts movement, as well as queer liberation movements, to view *Four Saints* as path-breaking in artistic and extra-artistic ways” (75).

The final chapter in *Eccentric Modernisms* takes as its subject the literary journal *View*, initially a six-page tabloid that expanded to include an eclectic mix of visual art and non-English texts in translation. The poet Charles Henri Ford founded the magazine with his ex-lover, the critic Parker Tyler. Established within the horizon of the Second World War, the magazine responded, according to San Francisco poet Robert Duncan, to the “Permanent War Economy.” Latimer describes how, despite their sympathy with various antiauthoritarian struggles, the editors viewed art, as did many of their contemporaries, as an apolitical arena. Thus the journal engaged in challenging certain orthodoxies of practice more than it aligned itself with ideological positions.

Latimer’s consideration of the magazine settles on three issues published between January 1943 and October 1945. All of these focused on America and a careful analysis of the three publications allows the author to consider the subject of sexual difference in dialogue with American national identities toward the end of the war. Supported by a small but dedicated readership and a “cadre of gay patrons,” the three magazines carried work by artists such as Joseph Cornell, Florine Stettheimer, and Wilfredo Lam. As with *Four Saints*, the magazine employed overdetermined significations of racial difference around which an expanded notion of nationhood might emerge. Keeping in view the way that
fantasies of racial difference have often facilitated expressions of queer culture, Latimer’s essay demonstrates how the magazine employed subversion as a mode of critical engagement. View was a space of for outliers, a “creative community as an alternative to nation” (109). The inclusion of Lam, who sought an art of decolonization from the location of native culture, allows “the cultural complex formed by modernism, primitivism, and colonialism” to be formulated differently (93). Of the editors, Latimer writes, “they had envisioned a culturally heterogeneous America, enlivened by fantasy and eccentricity, resistant to all forms of orthodoxy” (p. 109). Yet, she goes on, “neither indigenous minorities nor the artistic avant-garde could hold out for long against the forces of global capitalism’” (93). The effects of post-war economic expansion, arguably underwritten by American imperialism, thus accounts for Latimer’s earlier suggestion that ‘the fact that few now have ever heard of the magazine suggests that its views, when tested by time, did not survive” (79).

Eccentric Modernisms is published at a moment when an interest in differencing histories of modern and contemporary art in both the academy and the museum responds to a broader context of political upheaval in the United States and elsewhere. One of the accomplishments of this book is to forgo progress narratives surrounding the avant-garde for a far more capacious reading of the social and political dynamics that characterize any historical moment. What is at stake in this project is perhaps most clear in Latimer’s reference to the late art historian Douglas Crimp, who asked “history to what purpose?” Though difference
was the demand of modernism, it was also the thing that was “pushed to the periphery” in the production of cultural legitimacy (119). Latimer’s work considers what dynamics are at work in the desire for, and performance of, difference in histories of American modernism. It sounds at a different moment. Like many of the artists that she writes about, Latimer returns to a human subject when the question of who counts as human is itself highly contested.