A NARRATIVE OF HER OWN:
APPROPRIATING AESTHETICS FOR POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to investigate prevailing critical attitudes toward postcolonial feminism and postcolonial feminist texts. Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*, Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* are the primary texts of concern here. Drawing on the theories of Anne McClintock, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this project engages the work of Russian Formalism and New Criticism, and ultimately argues for a focus on form—albeit with an eye to the relationship of a particular form to political and social institutions. Furthermore, this thesis seeks to answer the question of whether a feminine form exists, and if so, to what extent gender affects literary form. Thus the latter part draws upon and challenges the scholarship of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Annette Kolodny, Toril Moi, and Elaine Showalter. Finally, the project seeks to appropriate aesthetics for postcolonial feminism, and ultimately suggests that it is in the interstices of feminism, postcolonialism, and narratology that the ethical critic finds her beginning.
To My Parents

And with gratitude for the unwavering encouragement of

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Chapter 1

Categories or Contexts: Narrative Theories Versus Feminist Agendas

Orhan Pamuk explores the relationship of politics to the novel in *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist*. His definition of the term “politics,” juxtaposed with the concept of the “novel,” demonstrates his perspective on the relationship between life and art, or the study of human interactions and the representation of such actions:

The political novel is a limited genre because politics entails a determination not to understand those who are different from us, while the art of the novelist entails a determination to understand those who are different from us. But the extent to which politics can be included in novels is boundless, because the novelist becomes political in the very effort to understand those who are different from him, those who belong to other communities, races, cultures, classes, and nations. The most political novel is the novel that has no political themes or motives but that tries to see everything and understand everyone, to construct the largest whole. (145)

Thus for Pamuk, the Nobel prize-winning Turkish novelist, politics and the novel are inseparable. Any author who attempts to understand others and who represents these “others” in language necessarily participates in political action. Pamuk’s concept of “construct[ing] the largest whole” engages the question of literary form, a matter I
consider two-fold, in that the author’s formal choices, as well as the reader’s understanding of those choices, are important in the interpretations, reception, and social impact of a given text. While I am concerned with the “genre” of the “feminist narrative,” itself a contestable category, and especially those narratives written in postcolonial or third-world contexts, I intend here to concentrate first on the ways that theories of narrative affect the reception of postcolonial feminist texts and second on how the narratives of these texts demand revisions to existing theories of narrative. Specifically, I will demonstrate how the methods of these schools of critique intersect and the ways that a revision of them can lead to more productive interpretations.

Both narrative and feminist modes of critique have become increasingly prominent in recent decades; however, the impulses underlying these approaches remain at odds. Feminist critics build their work on the promise of heterogeneity—the conviction that both the excavation of difference and discursive constructions of difference will lead to gender equity—while narrative theorists seek homogeneity, creating categories based on the differences they perceive among narrative forms. In short, feminist critics approach texts inductively, or from perception to representation, with the former being our perceived social reality, and the latter being narrative representation. In contrast, narrative theorists often begin their analyses at the level of the narrative, with the implication that either they or readers will draw conclusions based on these narratives about the perceived world. It is my project, then, to reconcile these approaches: by illuminating the reasons for the differing analytical modes, I hope to show how these theoretical approaches might exist in conjunction rather than in
opposition. Narrative theories, such as those purported by Northrop Frye, Tzvetan Todorov, and Gerard Genette, among others, tend to ignore both women’s modes of writing\(^1\) and feminist concerns, focusing primarily on male characters and masculinist constructions of narrative, such as those thematically centered on war, protest, nationalism, and patriarchy (Rooney 9). Likewise, feminists have yet to draw upon the power of narrative, in particular to recognize its performative nature, in advancing their aims. It is in the interstices of narrative and feminism, I argue, that a new, multifaceted, approach to the analysis of feminist—and particularly postcolonial feminist—texts emerges.

I begin, then, with an overview of prevailing modes of narrative analyses, highlighting commonalities among the modes in order to determine their efficacy in interpreting postcolonial feminist narratives. Although the theorists do not make ardent pleas to their readers to follow their approaches to narrative—their works are not overtly didactic—inherent in their proposals lies a number of ways to read and interpret that differ from those before them. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, for example, argues for a feminist narratology, providing examples of her interpretations of texts from a feminist perspective; while her clear goal is to convince others of the importance of feminism to narratology, it is implied that she hopes readers will adopt her perspective. Like other narratologists, DuPlessis contends that ethical considerations are the foundation for her

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\(^1\) Dan Shen explains the concept of a gendered narrative in “Why Contextual and Formal Narratologies Need Each Other.” He writes, “Although most narrative structures and techniques are shared by men’s and women’s texts, women writers in sociohistorical contexts may use much more frequently certain techniques and may produce certain types of plot that are not shared by men’s texts” (Lanser “Towards”). Thus the investigation of women’s narratives may lead to the discovery not only of neglected modes of narration, but also of new types of plot.” (Loc. 170-83)
perspective. She posits a relationship between the cultural and literary significance of
gender, discussing some women writers “who examine how social practices
surrounding gender have entered narrative, and who consequently use narrative to make
critical statements about the psychosexual and sociocultural construction of women”
(“Endings and Contradictions” 285). Thus for DuPlessis, representations of women in
literature necessitate ethical consideration; that is, not only should critics analyze
women’s texts rather than ignore them, but they should consider these texts on the texts’
own terms, not with a traditional (and often male-oriented) critical lens.

At stake in this discussion of interpretative frameworks is an ethics of
interpretation. When a reader inevitably adopts a given perspective, she necessarily
backgrounds other perspectives. There can be no “universal” way of reading, no way of
seeing a text from every possible perspective. Thus what I attempt here is a meta-
narrative of narrative analysis, a recounting, albeit abbreviated, of various modes of
interpretation and their associated ethical claims. Sometimes the authors make these
claims for themselves; other times they do not. As Jane Tompkins explains in Reader-
Response Criticism,

    focusing on the reader engenders a species of moral drama in the domain of
criticism. To adopt a particular conception of the reader is to engage in a
particular kind of virtuous action—the refining of one’s moral sensors (Gibson),
adding to the sum of human knowledge (Prince), coming ever closer to the truth
through attention to linguistic detail (Riffaterre), achieving self-transcendence
through self-effacement (Poulet), or building a better self through interpretative enterprise (Iser). (xv-xvi)

According to Tompkins, these narratologists—Gibson, Prince, Riffaterre, Poulet, and Iser—claim moral superiority for their respective methods of reader-response criticism; their various conceptions of “the reader” are the bases of their methods and the reasons for their disagreements. Their methodological differences are important, as we shall see later; yet, all act in accordance with Tompkins’ claim, that “once the reader enters, the critic can invent new analytical tools” (xii).

Whether or not we choose to acknowledge the role of the reader in our criticism, ethical questions remain: the adoption, conscious or not, of a critical perspective results in the inevitable foreclosure of other perspectives. Thus ethics are always involved in the act of reading. My contention is that literary criticism, especially that of postcolonial feminist texts, too often privileges the thematic nature of a work—its content—over the technical or structural aspects of it—its form. By ignoring the form, or by substituting a superficial for an in-depth approach to form, critics read these works unethically. In what follows, I suggest the significance of the relationship between literary form and ethical interpretation, and ultimately conclude that literary critics and lay readers alike have an ethical obligation to acknowledge the form of a narrative.

Axel Nissen, writing about Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, provides an example of the connections between literary form and ethical interpretation. Nissen explores the ethics inherent in fiction and demonstrates the significance of the study of form through a close reading of Morrison’s *Sula*; he argues that Morrison’s style and form reveal the
ethics of her novel. While he concedes that the plot of *Sula* illuminates the complexity of ethical questions, he considers the narratological structure equally important to the discovery of the ethics of the story. Delineating between the “ethics in narrative,” by which he means the moral lessons of the narrative, and the “ethics of narrative” (265), by which he means values inherent in the formal choices of the author, Nissen claims that readers can glean a greater understanding of the values and moral questions in *Sula* by examining the form and style of the novel. Nissen provides several examples of the way in which three formal devices—voice, perspective, and speed—affect the reader’s perception of the events and characters, and thus their interpretations of the story’s meaning. Nissen’s reading of *Sula* offers but one example of a productive intersection of ethics and form.

In *The Fantastic*, Tzvetan Todorov explores the influence of structuralism on genres in general, and on the genre of the fantastic in particular. Using Frye’s work on genre as a springboard, Todorov discusses the ways that genres come to be constituted as such. Inherent in the question of generic categories, then, is literariness: what determines whether a text is literary, and what determines the category, if any, to which it belongs? Todorov’s following analogy, in which he compares tigers to literary texts, reveals his conviction about the nature of genre:

> Being familiar with the species tiger, we can deduce from it the properties of each individual tiger; the birth of a new tiger does not modify the species in its definition … [but] the same is not the case in the realm of art or of science. Here
evolution operates with an altogether different rhythm: every work modifies the
sum of possible works, each new example alters the species (6).

Thus each new tiger does not change the concept of “tiger,” but each new text changes
the concept of “literature.” If, however, a text does not fulfill this condition, then that
text “automatically pass[es] into another category: that of so-called ‘popular’ or ‘mass’
literature in the one case; in the other, that of the academic exercise” (6). On this point
Todorov and Pamuk agree: a text gains historical significance if and only if it alters our
ideas about either history or literature (6). Yet if all “literary” works subvert genres,
how are we ever to determine characteristics of each genre?

Nevertheless, Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) attempted the task of drawing
lines between genres. Todorov’s summary of Frye’s six classifications is helpful, as he
clearly lays out the criteria Frye used in determining the classifications: the first type of
classification relates to the representation of the hierarchical relationship among the
hero—not the heroine, it must be noted—of the work, the readers, and the laws of
nature (11); the second relies on the degree of verisimilitude; the third on the hero’s
position in regard to society at the end of the narrative, with reconciliation indicating
comedy and isolation indicating tragedy; the fourth on archetypes that themselves are
created out of a comparison of reality to the ideal; the fifth on how the audience
receives the work, whether it is performed as in the case of drama, sung in the case of
lyric poetry, and recited in the case of epic poetry; the sixth on the opposition between
the intellectual and the personal, as well as between the introvert and extrovert. Todorov
acknowledges that these classifications are problematic, explaining that Frye divides
texts into genres based upon the factors that Frye considers most important. While Frye’s method is ostensibly harmless, it promotes as “good literature” the texts that have the characteristics that he desires.

In other words, Frye’s intention is not only to categorize texts and to create criteria that determine the value of those texts, but also to set out a prescriptive method of reading, a method that aligns with his personal preferences. Disagreeing with Frye, Todorov explains that Frye’s criteria are based upon philosophy and psychology, not upon literature. Additionally, Todorov takes issue with Frye’s presumption of outlining criteria important to him as well as the role of criteria in delineating genres. How are we to decide who is authorized to pick the criteria? Indeed, Chandra Talpade Mohanty discusses this very problem in Feminism Without Borders, in the often-anthologized first chapter entitled “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” She writes, “Any discourse that sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit referent, i.e., the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others [is ethnocentric]. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse” (55). Frye’s generic criteria, though not intended belligerently, in fact embodies Mohanty’s conception of ethnocentric discourse and therefore perpetuates a discourse that is grounded in the values of the privileged Western male. Wayne Booth explains this predicament further, noting that the dominant critical theories “are mainly still inclined to assert an ethical neutralism” (“Are Narrative Choices Subject to Ethical Criticism?” 60). Booth’s insight reflects the larger phenomenon that a dominant culture—here, that of the white male—considers its own characteristics and values normative.
Perhaps Russian Formalism might offer solutions to this debate, in that the formalists agonized over the “literary,” rather than the philosophical or psychological, aspects of texts. One of the faults of the formalists was to ignore the role of the reader, to elide even the possibility that a text gains meaning by being read. In this model, the text serves as the media through which writer and reader communicate. Robert Scholes explains the connection between reader response theories and structuralism in his introduction to *The Fantastic*. He writes,

Poetics, from Aristotle on, has concerned itself with genres as codifications of procedures and responses. A tragedy does this kind of thing to produce that kind of response. And this is precisely what we shall find Todorov doing in the present study, examining the codes shared by writer and reader that enable a certain kind of communication to take place. A literary text is a linguistic event—but an extraordinary one, with literary coding superimposed on the language itself. So say the structuralists and so said Aristotle, though not quite in the same words. (viii)

The “means of communication” do indeed shape the message, and the ways that this happens are the subject of my concern here.

While some theories of genres consider the role of the reader, or the relation of the reader to the text, protagonist, or author, I first discuss how the text engages the reader and then propose an ethical paradigm for reading texts, one that involves the consciousness of the reader and one that always considers the context of a text. Todorov is correct in arguing that “every theory of genres is based on a hypothesis concerning
the nature of literary works. [...] We must therefore begin by presenting our own point of departure, even if subsequent efforts lead us to abandon it” (19-20). In what follows, I propose a reconciliation of theories of narrative and those of reader response, but with an ethical bent. How can we read postcolonial feminist texts in a way that acknowledges the position of the reader to the text, that ignores irrelevant criteria—such as that about the always male hero—that attends to gender and hierarchical concerns, that privileges form without obscuring content, that is “political” in Pamuk’s sense—it has no overtly political themes and tries to “see everything and understand everyone”—and that yokes the narratological impulse to categorize with the feminist demand to contextualize?
Chapter 2

Politics, Please: Challenging Russian Formalist and New Critical Methods

The term [postcolonialism] becomes especially unstable with respect to women. In a world where women do two-thirds of the world’s work, earn 10 percent of the world’s income and own less than 1 percent of the world’s property, the promise of ‘postcolonialism’ has been a history of hopes postponed. *(Imperial Leather 13)*

Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* (1995) exquisitely charts the progress of the postcolonial world in respect to gender and gender agency. Her book outlines the detrimental effects of women’s exclusion from the achievements of postcolonial activists and scholars. Of course, she explains, there is more work to be done, both to achieve a truly postcolonial world and to achieve gender equity within that world. Her work participates in a conversation about the relationship between postcolonialism and feminism, one that Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-Me Park, authors of “Postcolonial Feminism / Postcolonialism and Feminism,” consider not merely a variety of postcolonialism or feminism but instead “an intervention that is changing the configurations of both postcolonial and feminist studies” (53). Conventional female-focused narratives often marginalize women as well, creating a detrimental cycle of actual and narrated marginalization, as re-presentations mimic lived experience.

As DuPlessis explains, “Once upon a time, the end, the rightful end, of women in novels was social—successful courtship, marriage—or judgmental of her sexual and
social failure—death.” (282). In other words, the experiences of women have largely aligned with that of their narrative representations. DuPlessis and others such as Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, Sandra Gubar, Susan Gilbert, and Toril Moi have primarily focused their analyses of so-called “feminist narratives” upon novels of the nineteenth century, such as those of Austen and Eliot, among others. During this time, it is fair to say that, working within societal constraints, women had only one “option”: ensnare a man. Over a century later, women have more choices, yet feminist critiques of narratives have largely failed to notice the formal aspects of more contemporary texts, texts that reflect a broader array of options and of which many are now socially acceptable. Still, narrative criticism pays more attention to the outcomes of women (in relation to men) in postcolonial situations than to the effects that result from their respective outcomes. Even more, narratological criticism of feminist narratives focuses on plot, examining the thematic outcomes of narratives at the expense of other aspects of women’s lives.

Despite the potential problems of the term “feminist narrative,” most notably feminist theory’s resistance to the idea that women represent a homogeneous monolithic group, I have chosen to use it for the analysis that follows. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter outlines three major phases of the historical development of women writers, stages which she claims are common to all literary subcultures. The first, called the “Feminine Stage,” consists of texts that both imitate and internalize the dominant tradition; the second, the “Feminist Stage,” consists of texts that protest the standards of the dominant group; the third, the “Female Stage,” consists of texts that are filled with
“self-discovery, a search for identity, and freedom from the dependency of opposition” (13). While these stages, which last from 1840-80, 1880-1920, and 1920 to the present, respectively, do provide a helpful construct through which to conceive of the development of literature written by women, Moi’s critique of Showalter’s stages in *Sexual/Textual Politics* resonates even louder.

For women writing out of postcolonial or third-world contexts, these stages are untenable. Writers such as Edwidge Danticat, Toni Morrison, and Arundhati Roy do not fit neatly into these categories; they likely experience the former two stages simultaneously as they internalize oppression and protest that oppression at the same time. However, these women are aware of not just one source of oppression, but two or more, as they are all women, indeed, but are also women of color. Facing the burdens of intersectionality, they have written their narratives while embodying at least two of Showalter’s stages. These three writers, all to some degree “postcolonial or third world women,”2 represent some of the earliest and most successful attempts by “subaltern” women to gain prominence in Western literary scenes. As such, their texts do not fit neatly into Showalter’s categories, and I therefore must consider a new definition for the texts of these women.

Almost all terms that attempt to encapsulate women will fail to some extent, yet it is still helpful to give women’s texts a name. I choose “feminist narratives,” even

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2 Chandra Mohanty’s “Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,” serves as the introduction to the anthology she co-authored with Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. While I do not agree with her definition of “third world” because it elides the benefits and pitfalls of location, it is helpful to some extent: “Third world is defined through geographical location as well as particular sociohistorical conjunctures. It thus incorporates so-called minority people or peoples of color in the U.S.A.” (2).
though at first glance the term could include stories written by women, stories that
feature women, stories that engage women’s issues, or stories by men that represent
women. This latter category historically included criticism termed “Images of Women”
critique, in that, as Showalter describes, women sought to identify and challenge literary
representations of those characters of their gender. Indeed, as Annette Kolodny, notes,
terms that women use to describe themselves are both contestable and elusive; she
offers similar options in her potential definitions for “feminist critique,” which she lists
in “Some Notes on Defining a ‘Feminist Literary Criticism’”:

(1) Any criticism written by a woman, no matter what the subject; (2) any
criticism written by a woman about a man’s book which treats that book from a
“political” or “feminist” perspective; and (3) any criticism written by a woman
about a woman’s book or about female authors in general. (75)

While the potential definitions Kolodny posits are different than the ones I need, as she
includes all types of writing and is considering criticism—secondary texts only—rather
than fictional work, her categories illuminate the extent of the debate about a term that
is ostensibly so clear.

I choose, therefore, to define “feminist narratives” as fiction written by women.
It is not the representation of protagonists or issues relevant to women about which I am
concerned; rather, I am interested in the forms and narrative techniques that women use,
the way their experiences structure their narratives, rather than vice versa. Charlotte
Brontë is helpful here: “Come what will . . . I cannot, when I write, think always of
myself and what is elegant and charming in femininity; it is not on these terms, or with
such ideas, that I ever took pen in hand” (qtd. in Showalter 7). In contrast to Brontë, Kolodny believes that “we may arrive inductively at a number of conclusions about feminine style in literature” (70). Moi critiques, perhaps too harshly, Kolodny’s analytic. She disagrees with Kolodny’s proposal that literature written by women has common features and explains that because “gender is a relational entity, it is clearly impossible to locate a difference of style or content without comparison” (71). For Moi, even a broad category such as “literature written by women” is of little use, as she considers gender a social construct, one defined only in terms of its designated “opposite.”

Moi censures Kolodny for her reliance on New Criticism, or, in other words, for abiding by the philosophy that mandates the separation of aesthetic judgments and political matters (72). Yet I agree with Kolodny on the point that patterns can exist within women’s writing and among women writers. Kolodny explains two of these patterns, reflexive perception and inversion, which I discuss later, to make her point that it is possible, though not always the case, that patterns exist among women’s writing. While not universal, such patterns, and the recognition of them as such, could provide a unified sense of purpose against forces and constructs dangerous to all women. When Carolyn Forché discusses the importance of “the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination” (29) in the introduction to her anthology, Against Forgetting, she implies that experience can and does indeed affect form. The assumption underlying her statement is that personal experience and poetic form are interrelated. While the “extremities” experienced by the poets in her collection vary significantly, all
nevertheless “bear the trace of extremity within them” and are therefore evidence of the
given extremity, “regardless of ‘subject matter’” (30). For example, writes Forché, “Not
surprisingly, a large number of poems in this selection, written in conditions of
extremity, rely on the immediacies of direct address” (36). While for Kolodny formal
similarities include reflexive perception and inversion, for Forché one similarity is
direct address. Forché’s assumption, then, is that a certain condition—here, extremity—
manifests in literary form—here, in poetry. Merging Kolodny’s argument on patterns
within women’s writing with Forché’s about the significance of circumstance to literary
form, I contend that women writing from postcolonial contexts resist some forms and
share others, and that those commonalities, whether they appear as tropes, structures, or
modes of resistance, demand a different kind of narrative analysis than that which we
find in Frye, Todorov, and Showalter. Applying Kolodny’s reasoning to postcolonial
works would, of course, bring new challenges, but to deny the existence of such
patterns, tropes that gain force in their repetition, would be analogous to ignoring the
kind of “strategic essentialism” Gayatri Spivak posits in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

Such essentialism, albeit strategic, necessarily warrants ethical considerations.
Mohanty, likewise, is critical of Western white feminists’ homogenization of third-
world women, and she laments the use of the label “women” as a category of analysis
“prior to the process of analysis” (Loc. 264). In other words, she argues that Western
feminists, among others, often build their analyses on the premise that the word
“women” represents a homogenous monolith, an “already constituted, coherent group
with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic, or racial locations” (Loc.
Western feminist discourses, as well as feminist narratives themselves, are entwined in the contexts in which they were produced. Thus the necessity of acknowledging one’s position belongs both to the critic and the writer. In “Endings and Contradictions,” DuPlessis focuses on the ethical aspects of feminist narratives, picking up on Mohanty’s point\(^3\) that any discourse or narrative is inherently ideological, that “there can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship” (Loc. 217), for any person who produces scholarship is inevitably situated in geographic, historical, and ideological contexts. In regard to the work of the writer, even tropes are not empty of ideology. “Any literary convention,” writes DuPlessis, as an instrument that claims to depict experience, also interprets it. No convention is neutral, purely mimetic, or purely aesthetic” (283). Furthermore, DuPlessis draws a parallel between narrative and ideology, arguing that “narrative may function on a small scale the way that ideology functions on a large scale—as a system of representations by which we imagine the world as it is” (284).

In “On a Postcolonial Narratology,” Gerald Prince offers explanations as to why postcolonial and narrative studies have been at odds for some time. He both defends and provides examples of potentially productive intersections of the two theoretical perspectives. Although postcolonial scholars often focus on aspects of postcolonial texts related to resistance, oppression, and representation, argues Prince, it may also be helpful to examine postcolonial texts from a narratological perspective. While he

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\(^3\) Mohanty elaborates that “feminist scholarship, like most other kinds of scholarship, is not the mere production of knowledge about a certain subject. It is a directly political and discursive practice in that it is purposeful and ideological.”
provides some examples of this union, Anthony Lane and Susan Stanford Friedman offer deeper analyses of the narrative aspects of Arundhati Roy’s texts, analyses which I employ here as representative samples. In “The Optical Unconscious: Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things,” Lane analyzes the novel from a Derridean perspective, suggesting that Roy deconstructs logocentrism, that is, according to him, the idea that “pure” speech is better than the “impure,” and consequently exposes the oppressive origins of binary oppositions (103). “The framework of binary oppositions,” he writes, is “not neutrally brought into existence; instead, one side of the opposition will forcefully take priority over the other side” (103). Friedman’s critique likewise relates narrative form to political intent. Her essay, entitled “Spatial Poetics and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things,” has implications for both narrative and postcolonial studies. Friedman argues that scholars of narratology often focus on issues of time at the expense of space, and she proposes that in fact the two are more integrated and co-dependent than previous critics have considered them to be. Additionally, Friedman indicates that in Roy’s novel, space, rather than time, propels the narrative forward and that space itself serves as a commentary on British imperialism in India.

In what follows, I attempt a similarly multifaceted goal, that of examining the texts of Danticat, Roy, and Morrison in regard to the intersections within their texts of narrative form and politics. In doing so, I remain concerned of the ethical implications of my position as well as theirs, and by looking at their texts in conjunction, I am able to propose an ethical attitude for reading and analyzing their texts, one that will lead to more productive, politically engaged ways of reading not only postcolonial “feminist
narratives,” but also texts that emerge from historically marginalized regions or those that experiment with narrative form.
Chapter 3

Ancient Greece, Modern Haiti: Bakhtinian Narratology Illuminates Injustice

While the Russian Formalists faced criticism for being too formulaic and mechanical in their methods, as well as for ignoring authorial, contextual, and historical factors of texts, their dissections of narrative form continue to have implications today. In the early part of the twentieth-century, experimental forms in fiction were far less common than they are today, and the formalists’ methods and vocabulary reflect this. More recent fiction, such as that which Brian Richardson examines in Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction, not only employs techniques for which the formalists did not have names, but also subverts traditional techniques for specific, often subtly persuasive aims. One such technique, the chronotope, as posited by Mikhail Bakhtin, falls into this latter category. In what follows, I suggest that Edwidge Danticat’s employment of a chronotope, Bakhtin’s concept of the unity of time and space, is counter-hegemonic.

I argue that Danticat’s narrative technique contributes to subversive discourse. It is important as well to distinguish my aims and perspective from Danticat’s text, and Danticat’s text from Danticat herself. By that I mean that although I read Danticat’s chronotopic presentation as subversive, I do not also mean that she intended the device to operate in a didactic manner. Rather, I hope that by exploring one narrative technique of the many that she uses, I may offer one example of what I consider to be a productive intersection of narrative, postcolonial, and feminist studies.
In regard to space, I look to Susan Stanford Friedman’s aforementioned essay on the role of space in *The God of Small Things*. In regard to time, I look to H. Porter Abbott’s distinction between “clock time” or “abstract or regular time [that] always relates to itself,” and “narrative time” that “relates to events or incidents” in the text (4). In other words, I seek to understand how the differences between the time spent reading the story and the representation of time complicate issues of temporality and challenge the reader’s conception of time. While I cannot apply a similar distinction to types of space, I will be able to analyze the story in terms of its clock time, narrative time, and spatial representation. Drawing on Friedman’s and Abbott’s work, I seek to understand not how space or time alone, but rather how the interplay of the two dimensions, represents a form of narratological resistance toward empire as well as toward discursive representations of imperialism that continue to affect members of the Haitian diaspora.

In “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Towards a Historical Poetics,” a chapter in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin names and chronicles manifestations of the chronotope. Beginning with an analysis of the Greek “adventure novel of ordeal” (88), Bakhtin charts the development of the trope throughout literary history. Several key characteristics of the genre, such as the one that follows, illustrate the extent to which literary representations of time have changed:

There is a sharp hiatus between two moments of biographical time, a hiatus that leaves no *trace* in the lives of the heroes. [. . .] Such a form of time, in which they experience a most improbable number of adventures, is not measured off in
the novel and does not add up. [...] In this kind of time, nothing changes: the world remains as it was, the biographical life of the heroes does not change, their feelings do not change, people do not even age. This empty time leaves no traces anywhere, no indications of its passing. This . . . is an extratemporal hiatus that appears between two moments of a real time sequence. (90-91)

Regardless of the reason for the immutability of character and place over time, the Greek focus on a victory over an obstacle, rather than on the transformation of a person’s character as a result of an adventure, indicates the Greeks’ preference for expressing actions rather than thoughts, or exteriority over interiority.

However, this preference may in fact be a reflection of a cultural zeitgeist, a predominance of concerns regarding a collective and heroic battle against an enemy as well as a preference for an autochthonous identity (Isaac 39). In “Proto-Racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity,” Benjamin Isaac elaborates on this manifestation in ancient Athens: “The Athenians attached enormous importance to the dual myth that they had lived in their own land from the beginnings of time without ever abandoning it, and that they were a people of unmixed lineage” (39). Furthermore, while the Greek predisposition toward those of “pure lineage” (39) proved damaging to non-elites, females, and foreigners in ancient Greece, four other types of proto-racism, claims Isaac, also prevailed; they are as follows: “environmental determinism, the inheritance of acquired characteristics, a combination of these two ideas, [and] the constitution and form of government” (35). Thus from Isaac’s analysis of Greek ideology and Bakhtin’s interpretation of Greek literature, I propose that the Greek predisposition toward a
“hegemonic chronotope,” one that I describe as supporting the interests of the state and its elites, arises from Greek proto-racism.

In other words, the Greeks’ consistent “othering” of foreigners, as expressed below by Aristotle, suggests that Greek literature’s stable sense of time and space reflects their culture’s ideology of ethnic purity and geographical superiority. While Aristotle’s meditations on what is now called “environmental determinism” present an argument for the superiority of the Greeks and thus the choice of the Greeks to subjugate those they “othered,” it constitutes part of the foundational thought on exclusion based on geography. Isaac cites Aristotle’s *Politica*:

> The peoples of cold countries generally, and particularly those of Europe, are full of spirit, but deficient in skill and intelligence; and this is why they continue to remain comparatively free, but attain no political development and show no capacity for governing others. The peoples of Asia are endowed with skill and intelligence, but are deficient in spirit; and this is why they continue to be peoples of subjects and slaves. The Greeks, intermediate in geographical position, unite the qualities of both sets of peoples. They possess both spirit and intelligence: the one quality makes them continue free; the other enables them to attain the heights of political development and to show a capacity for governing every other people if only they could once achieve political unity.  

It is apparent that the Greeks believed it their duty to enslave those who were unlike them. Again, this sentiment is reflected in Bakhtin’s assessment of their literary

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chronotope, in that the “Greek adventure novel of ordeal” maintains a stability of time and place; that is, its heroes remain unaffected by any and all adventures they undertake. In their literature, as in their culture, the Greeks could see no reason for which their customs, characteristics, or heroes would change in the slightest: as their civilization was the superior one, they possessed impenetrable boundaries against any other cultural influences.

Yet, in contrast to the Greek adventure novel, Danticat’s story privileges interiority and centers on a hiatus that leaves a remarkable trace, a trace that does not contribute to, but instead structures, the narrative. In fact the central characters, an unnamed man and his wife, change drastically during a gap of time and space. After seven years of living apart, they unite in New York City, only to discover within a week that their relationship is not the same as it was when they wed. Their meeting splits the story in two: the man’s anticipation of his wife’s arrival, and his wife’s inability to understand his world. As the story shifts from one mode to another, focalization shifts as well: the reader sees the first part of the story from the man’s perspective, and the second half from his wife’s. It is also important that “his wife” remains defined as such, and not as anything more. The concept of a “meeting,” as Bakhtin writes, often serves as an indication for chronotopicity. He explains that “in any meeting the temporal marker . . . is inseparable from the spatial marker. In the negative motif (“they did not meet”) the chronotopicity is retained but one or another member of the chronotope bears a negative sign (97). By “negative sign,” he means that the characters were either not in the same space at a given time or not in a given space at the same time. As I
mentioned above, what I term “Danticat’s chronotope,” her particular representation of
the union of time and space, complicates the paradigm that Bakhtin proposes,
particularly that of the Greek adventure novel. Although her characters do meet in time
and in space—they do not exhibit the “negative motif”—their meeting does not
materialize the way the man hopes it will due to the passage of time and the separation
in space. Thus while time and space superficially align when the couple reunites at the
airport, after a week of living together, they realize that time and space have, in effect,
become agents, annulling their previously romantic relationship.

While the nonconformity of “Seven” to the Bakhtinian chronotope can serve as
a fascinating frame through which to examine the story, I am more concerned with the
function of Danticat’s chronotope, which embodies subtle resistance to Western literary
and economic hegemonic structures in that it protests the attempt by (neo)imperial
powers to use discourse to construct truth. In the analysis that follows, I “interpret,” in
Bart Herman and Luc Vervaeck’s sense of the term—”the attempt to connect the
content . . . of a literary text with its form” (7)—several passages in “Seven” that
illuminate Danticat’s particular chronotopic representation. Herman and Vervaeck
explain that “form always implies content, and content in turn clarifies the meaning of
form. Such a connection is by no means readily evident. The reader has to discover it,
and such a discovery always reveals a certain ideology” (7). In interpreting the story, I
demonstrate not only the relationship between narrative form and postcolonial content
but also the generative nature of the relationship between the two modes of analysis.
From the story’s exposition, time does not align with space; that is, the man and his wife remain separated by both years and an ocean. In a state of anticipation, the man looks backward and forward at the same time: “Next month would make it seven years since he’d last seen his wife” (35). Here, Danticat’s use of the conditional “would” brings the reader into this moment of anticipation. The text soon skips forward to the day the man’s wife will arrive, collapsing his final month of waiting. Later on the same page, the narrative skips backward in time as the narrator describes the man’s living arrangements during those seven years. With these two sudden time shifts, Danticat represents the extent to which the trauma of living apart from his wife affected the man.

The beginning of the story, like the remainder of it, skips around in time, mimetically reproducing the man’s mental confusion and demonstrating the way that temporality affects his consciousness.

Time—in this case, the way that the man’s knowledge of his wife’s imminent arrival signals an end to his current way of life—affects his behavior as well as his psychological state. He tells his roommates “not to mention those nights out again” because “his wife wasn’t to know that he’d ever done anything but work his two jobs” (38). By refusing to speak of his experiences with other women, and by defining the terms of any discussion about his past, he erases his transgressions from the record. At this point, the reader understands that the man’s character, unlike that of the heroes of Greek literature, has changed as a result of the time he spent with other women. In the following sentences, the reiteration of “gone” and the parallel structure express a sense of loss: “Gone were the early-evening domino games. Gone was the phone number he’d
had for the last five years, ever since he’d had a telephone. (He didn’t need other women calling him now.)” (38-39). His realization of the need to make these material changes, although not made explicit in the text, demonstrates that he is preparing himself for a psychological change. This concept of character development may seem rudimentary; however, his change represents a necessary result of their separation and thus demonstrates an aspect of the temporal dimension of Danticat’s chronotope.

Space and time are agentive; that is, they act on the characters, and they are implicitly put into motion in this story by United States foreign and immigration policies. In the above passage, time acts upon the man, compelling him to change his lifestyle. Space, too, acts as an agent in the story, as it and time are together complicit in unraveling the couple’s emotional ties. Rather than acting as a backdrop for the action, the dimensions act in tandem, serving as oppressive forces that eventually pull the couple apart. With the view that space and time (deployed in service of American strategic interests) constitute and simultaneously repress the Haitian immigrants, the agentive dimensions function analogously to the “kinship, legal, and other structures” (72) through which, as Mohanty explains, Western feminists should view third-world women. In other words, she argues for contextualization rather than homogenization within feminist discourse; drawing on her work, I consider contextual structures important, and in “Seven,” time and space are those very structures. By exposing the couple’s relationship as constructed by the spatial and temporal terms set by the United States government, Danticat critiques the policies that require such a long separation, one that results in the dissolution of a marriage.
Despite their separation, the man fails to consider that he and his wife might relate to each other differently than they had before they parted. Upon her arrival, he attempts to express his love to her, but because learning English has made speaking Creole difficult, he struggles to convey his feelings. The Haitian Creole word for “like,” renmen, which had plenty of meaning in Haiti, does not translate to an English-speaking context. The man, with his knowledge of the English sign, “love,” considers the Creole renmen insufficient. Therefore, he attempts to compensate for this inadequacy, going so far as to quantify his love in terms of time and space:

It’s too bad, he thought, that in Creole the word for love, renmen, is also the word for like, so that as he told her he loved her, he had to embellish it with phrases that illustrated the degree of that love. He loved her more than there were seconds in the seven years they’d been apart, he babbled. He loved her more than the size of the ocean she’d just crossed. (43)

By stating his love for her—abstract and intangible—in terms as objective as seconds and the size of the ocean, he attempts to overcome the time and distance that have come between him and his wife. His professions of love indicate that he has internalized the American perception of Haitian Creole as inferior to English and that he considers his love for her more powerful than the time and distance that separated them for so long.

However, his gratuitous praise—excessive to the point that it exposes its own insecurity—actually indicates the frailty of his love; the separation does affect their relationship. As the narrator soon reveals, even laws cannot maintain their marriage: “That’s why he had seen to it [their marriage] on the night before he left. So that
something more judicial and committing than a mere promise would bind them. So that even if their union became a *victim* of distance and time, it couldn’t be easily dissolved” (44, emphasis added). The choice of “victim” to describe their union suggests that distance and time can, in fact, act upon their marriage. The legal contract should protect them from their separation in distance and time as sanctioned by the US government. Paradoxically, legal institutions play a role in the formation and collapse of their marriage: a marriage contract unites them while immigration policies keep them apart.

In spite of these legal institutions, the man first attempts to relate to his wife on the affective register. He tries to see New York as she does—as if for the first time—and second to see her—as if for the first time—yet fails in both instances. He has assimilated into American culture so thoroughly that he cannot perceive the world the way he did as a new Haitian immigrant. This story so far resembles that of a typical “American Dream” chronicle: a man emigrates to a better land, he finds a job and saves money, and then he “rescues” his wife and/or children from their third-world existence. But “Seven” does not end as happily as these stereotypical stories; rather, an inversion occurs, as the following incident reveals. This inversion, in which the husband cannot rescue the wife, and the wife cannot live independently in her new “home,” renders the woman powerless. Not only can she not support herself, but she cannot rely on a husband to support her. In this way, Kolodny’s claim that inversion appears in women’s fiction is true, at least in this narrative.

Late in the story, the man and his wife take a trip to Prospect Park on a public bus. On their way into the city, they become spectators of each other: “She turned back
now and then to look at him sitting next to her. There was still a trace of sleepiness in his eyes. He watched her as though he were trying to put himself in her place, to see it all as if for the first time, but he could not” (50). Rather than look at each other, as might be expected for a couple sitting side-by-side, they watch each other as if from a distance. The implied author omits the reason for the man’s inability to understand his wife; perhaps their emotional disconnect is a product of each one’s infidelity to the other, or perhaps it results from each one’s interpellation into the culture-specific values of their respective environments. These incidences of infidelity are significant to the story’s resolution, as they foreshadow the dissolution of the couple’s marriage later.

On their way home, their emotional distance—earlier expressed in visual terms—is now expressed in spatial terms. The man, as he does throughout the story, makes a decision about seating arrangements; the “he,” not the “her,” acts as the subject of this sentence: “On the nearly empty bus on the way home,” Danticat’s extradiegetic narrator explains, “he sat across the aisle from her, not next to her as he had that morning” (52). Aware of his eyes, she soon notices that “he was watching her again. [But] this time he seemed to be trying to see her as if for the first time, but he could not” (52, original emphasis). The ambiguities in the passage—”seemed” and “the first time”—do not have, respectively, a clear connotation and a clear referent. “Seemed” can suggest that he intends to see her, or it could point to the wife’s (over)analytical reading of her husband’s facial movements. “The first time” could refer to the first time he ever saw her, the first time he saw—in the sense of understanding—her, or the first time he saw her when she landed in New York. The narrator’s evocation of an
emotional state sets the tone for the couple’s relationship; it is this evoked mood, instead of an overt statement, that lends despair to the couple and likewise to the sympathetic reader. Despite the multiple ambiguities in the passage, which demonstrate the couple’s inability to understand each other, it is, at the very least, apparent that the physical distance between them changes as they realize that their relationship has changed.

While their seating arrangements on the buses indicate their emotional separation, their relative positions reveal even more about their relationship when juxtaposed with their earlier closeness in bed. When the man greets his wife at the airport, he realizes he wants to collapse the distance between them instantly, thinking, “He simply wanted to get her home, if home it was, to that room, and to reduce the space between them until there was no air for her to breathe that he was not breathing too” (41). Because so much distance separates them for so long, his urge to be close to her is stronger than it might otherwise be. He attempts to take revenge upon the limits of space and time as they are defined by the US, and in his desire to become intimate with his wife, he does all that he can do to compensate for the time and distance they lost. For him, time and space seem insurmountable; that is, in regard to bringing his wife to the US, he had very little control over the time it would take to get her green card, which would enable them to live together—in the same place, and at the same time.

Their chronotopicity, then, is ostensibly “positive” at the airport and, later, in their bedroom. Finally, they appear to have overcome time and space; yet, within a
week, it is clear that their marriage contract alone cannot keep them together and that time and space have acted as agents, ones catalyzed by immigration and foreign policies, to keep them apart and to ultimately annul their marriage. Ironically, it is only when the two meet, and pretend to live happily married, that their positive chronotopicity disintegrates. Even though they live together, they are not, metaphorically speaking, living in the same place. Thus Danticat’s chronotope, her spatio-temporal integration, differs from the ones Bakhtin envisioned in “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” as it exposes the figurative nature of the chronotope and demonstrates the agency that time and space can possess. By characterizing Danticat’s chronotope as counter-hegemonic, I mean that her representation of the intersection of space and time subtly critiques American hegemony—specifically, the unstated and uncontested but ever-present economic and foreign policies that protect commercial interests—by demonstrating how these policies affect fictional individuals. I suggest, then, that U.S. hegemony in regard to immigration is analogous to Greek hegemony regarding conquest: while the U.S. has instituted restrictive policies about who to admit to the country, the Greeks considered it their responsibility to rule or enslave those who looked or acted differently. Danticat’s chronotope, in that it protests the version of Greek hegemony present today—that of U.S. immigration—thus typifies counter-hegemony. Unlike the chronotope of the Greek adventure novel, which supports the interests of the elite male citizens of Greece, the chronotope of Danticat’s story critiques discriminatory ideologies as well as the policies that emerge from those ideologies.
In a sense, Danticat portrays time and space as agents, preventing the man and his wife from reaching “positive” chronotopicity. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park situate postcolonial feminism at the intersection, rather than as part of, either postcolonialism or feminism. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw’s term, “intersectionality,” in conjunction with Rajan and Park’s perspective, we can see that the kind of postcolonial feminism that the former posits is itself a certain kind of intersectionality; that is, it signifies the compounded oppressions associated with being both a woman and a citizen of a former imperial power. Danticat’s text emerges from such a diasporic, if not also postcolonial, feminist context, and it is therefore productive to consider how these intersections appear in “Seven.” Yet, I propose that for Danticat, time and space function analogously to colonialism and gender in that both pairs serve the interests of the imperial powers at the expense of individuals in formerly colonized regions. Although “Seven” represents but one case study and one representation of a counter-hegemonic chronotope, the story nevertheless contributes to the discourses of the diaspora, offering a new narrative about the history of Haitian-American relations.
Chapter 4

Femini(ne)/(ist) Voices: The Question of Female Style

Like Danticat, Indian writer and human rights activist Arundhati Roy, whose novel *The God of Small Things* chronicles the ramifications of the human desire for power, remains committed to ordinary people and to the amelioration of their living conditions. Both women write and speak about the shortcomings of their respective governments, and both have become representatives, even spokeswomen, for people in their home countries. Roy and Danticat face intersectional oppressions: while they have gained respect among people in India and Haiti, they remain on the margins in the West due to their gender and the color of their skin.

Roy’s emphasis on women and their rights—or lack thereof—in India in *The God of Small Things* is readily apparent. In addition to representing female characters and exposing their systematic discrimination, the novel critiques British colonization and the insufficiency of languages: in particular, systems of binary oppositions, notions of linguistic superiority, and the effects of language on culture, the latter clearly reminiscent of and in agreement with the philosophy of Ngugi wa Thiong’o⁵. Indeed, from the very first chapter of the book, Roy’s extradiegetic narrator blames language for the tragedies of the Ipe family:

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⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong’o explains the complicated relationship between language, culture, and identity in his book, *Decolonisation of the Mind*, writing that “[colonialism’s] most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world” (1135).
Still, to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it. Equally, it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendancy [. . . ] It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag. That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much. (32-3)

This passage’s thematic content includes historical events as well as elements of the text; Roy implicates both ancient and recent history in the downfall of this fictional family. The passage’s formal characteristics, which include prolepsis and metalepsis, provide extra-textual information. The prolepsis, or the “flash-forward,” appears in the first sentence, as the narrator intimates that “it all began” but does not inform the reader of the clause’s referent. This technique creates suspense and reveals the horror of the “it,” in that the event remains un-named because it is too terrible to be named. The metalepsis occurs in the repetition of “it could be argued,” as this passive clause first indicates that the narrator is extradiegetic, or outside the text, and second that the narrator is outside the “storyworld”6 or the world of the novel, a move which draws the reader’s attention to the fact of the text as merely a text. The narrative techniques in this passage can be found throughout The God of Small Things, and as I will demonstrate, they operate in subversive ways, attacking cultural assumptions about coloniality and gender. While the narrative form of “Seven” constitutes a counter-hegemonic

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6 “Storyworld” is a term H. Porter Abbott introduces in his The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative.
chronotope, as I discussed above, the narrative form of *The God of Small Things* is also counter-hegemonic, albeit in different ways.

The narrative does embody what Kolodny terms two “stylistic features of female fiction,” reflexive perception and inversion, and to great effect, but it also contains heteroglossia and the representation of consciousness\(^7\), two tropes I consider common among feminist narratives. By reflexive perception, Kolodny means “a habit of mind that, itself, becomes a repeated stylistic device, as character after character is depicted discovering herself or finding some part of herself in activities she has not planned or in situations she cannot fully comprehend” (79). In particular, the following type of reflexive perception resembles a characteristic of women’s writing that I will discuss later—representation of consciousness: “This particular device can both explore and reveal a character’s internal and subconscious dilemmas” (79). In essence, Kolodny sees a thematic pattern in women’s emotional and psychological growth, noting that women writers often structure their narratives so that their female protagonists experience a revelation. This move has multiple implications. At the risk of suggesting an autobiographical element to women’s writing, I suggest the possibility that female authors may be, in these turns, experimenting or expressing a reality that they themselves were unable to achieve. The second possibility is that the narratives of these female authors could be subtly didactic, in that their protagonists could serve as models for their female readers. Of course, asserting that these two aims are the objects of

\(^7\) Porter asserts that the “representation of consciousness” is a characteristic of fictional writing that distinguishes it from historical or nonfictional writing. Authors of the latter genres do not usually represent the consciousnesses of their characters, as consciousness is something that is rarely recorded and almost impossible to represent truthfully.
women writers reduces their artistic capacity. Nevertheless, regardless of whether the
writers attempted these aims, their texts can nevertheless achieve them—and do so
without compromising the artistic license of their authors.

In Sexual/Textual Politics, Toril Moi accuses Kolodny of being “contradictory,” as
Moi interprets Kolodny as questioning whether there is a “feminine style” of literature
but at the same time insisting that if we only read enough literature by women, we will
find patterns. But while Moi does have a point, she fails to acknowledge that Kolodny
indeed recognizes the inherent problem in posing a question about “feminine form”:
“To begin our criticism by looking for even the possibility of such underlying factors,
however, would leave us in danger of discovering what might not be there—since the
form of the question necessarily predisposes the outcome of the inquiry” (Kolodny 76).
Kolodny understands this potential contradiction, but her acknowledgement of it allows
her to move beyond it so that she might engage in fruitful analysis. Citing Virginia
Woolf, Kolodny simultaneously contextualizes and argues for a distinctly feminine
existence, a gendered experience of life that inevitably affects literary production:

Neurologically, Woolf’s assertion that “the nerves that feed the brain ... differ in
men and women” (A Room of One’s Own 78) cannot be accepted; but if she
intended her comment metaphorically, as most feminist critics have decided to read
it, then she was quite accurately (if overdramatically) pointing to the fact that
women’s experience of the world differs from men’s—a fact we no longer even
debate. (Kolodny 78)
Read metaphorically, Woolf’s comments allow us to acknowledge that gender affects life experience, and that life experience consequently affects both the form and the content of what one writes.

Gender, of course, impacts life experience, yet the heterogeneity of experiences may in some cases be greater among women than necessarily between men and women: “The variations among individual women may be as great as those between women and men—and, in some cases perhaps, the variations may be greater within the same sex than that between two particular writers of different sexes” (Kolodny 79). Indeed, “the struggle to create a form, a means of articulation,” writes Kolodny, “is a struggle shared by every artist, male or female, in every medium” (85). So while gender does influence experience, it is the experiences themselves—no matter whether they are gendered or arise from conditions of extremity—which guide the artist.

Rahel, the novel’s focalizer, belongs to three traditionally oppressed groups—she is a woman, an Indian, and a Syrian Christian in a male-dominated, formerly colonized and primarily Hindu country—and as such sheds light on the psychological state of intersectional oppressions. This condition of multiple, overlapping, and intersecting oppressions resonates with other postcolonial feminist writers, as they, too, stage battles both literary and political, to expose the compounding negative effects of these oppressions. The text opens with Rahel’s return to Ayemenem, her hometown, after living in North America for several years. The narrator introduces Rahel and her twin brother Estha as “dizygotic” twins, since they were “born from separate but simultaneously fertilized eggs” (Loc. 71-87). Their biological similarities bring them
close emotionally, leading them to think of “themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. As though they were a breed of Siamese twins, physically separate but with joint identities” (Loc. 71-87). Just a few lines later, the narrator appears again, drawing attention to the artificial nature of the story; the presence of this extradiegetic narrator serves as a kind of metalepsis, reminding the reader that the text is only that—a text. “Anyway,” explains the narrator, in this extradiegetic moment, “now she [Rahel] thinks of Estha and Rahel as Them, because, separately, the two of them are no longer what They were or ever thought They’d be” (Loc. 87-102, original emphasis). As this moment foreshadows tragedy, it also demonstrates Rahel’s evolving consciousness. Importantly, Rahel changes the way she thinks about herself as her brother from “they” to “them”: in other words, from subject pronoun to object pronoun. This case shift demonstrates the absence of agency the twins will experience after their tragedy, as yet unbeknownst to the reader.

Although Kolodny’s example of reflexive perception involves first-person narration, as in the passage that follows, Roy’s representation of Rahel’s reflexive perception achieves a similar result. Kolodny quotes and explains an example of reflexive perception in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*: “I was surprised to find my feet moving,” says Atwood’s heroine, Marian, and in that statement (as in many others like it) Atwood clues us in, grammatically, to the amputated self-perception which is so much the subject of her novel” (79). Atwood’s Marian “discovers herself” in the sense that she acknowledges the movement of her body after the fact; Roy’s Rahel “discovers herself” in that she changes the way she discusses
herself. Because Rahel’s discovery is in the third-person, and thus is reported, rather than represented in dialogue, the reader gains a different kind of access to Rahel’s mind than to Marian’s. Marian and Atwood’s readers realize Marian’s discovery at the same time; their recognition of Marian’s “feet moving” is synchronous. Rahel’s choice of a new term to describe herself is asynchronous with the reader’s discovery of Rahel’s discomfort with her new position. Atwood and Roy accomplish similar goals—illuminating their respective protagonists’ reflections—but do so through different kinds of narration.

When the Ipe family attends *The Sound of Music* in Cochin, another instance of reflexive perception occurs. The family leaves early after a vendor, the Orangedrink Lemondrink man, sexually abuses Estha, making Estha sick. Ammu, unaware of this incident, comments about the man as the family leaves: “He doesn’t look it, but he was surprisingly sweet with Estha,” she says. Then Rahel speaks up, insulting Ammu: “So why don’t you marry him then?” (Loc. 1845-65). Almost immediately, Rahel reflects, wishing she could take back the words she had just spoken, her horror apparent in her body language and in her thoughts.

Rahel froze. She was desperately sorry for what she had said. She didn’t know where those words had come from. She didn’t know that she’d had them in her. But they were out now, and wouldn’t go back in. They hung about that red staircase like clerks in a government office. Some stood, some sat and shivered their legs. (Loc. 1845-66)
Again, the narrative is in the third-person. Roy employs a simile to relate Rahel’s mistake to political ineptitude, a technique that renders Rahel’s mistake a more significant gaffe than it might otherwise appear to the reader. While the narrator coalesces Rahel’s thoughts with commentary here, the passage still represents an instance of reflexive perception as Rahel realizes the import of her words after she says them.

While the above examples indicate the presence of reflexive perception, a trope that draws the reader closer to the text in that its representation of consciousness reveals the mind of a character to a reader, inversion also takes place. Kolodny writes of inversion:

Extrapolated to thematic concerns, the “inversion” pattern may even structure the plot, by denying our conventional expectations for a happy ending and substituting for it an ending which is conventionally unhappy, but which, in terms of the particular work, pleases or satisfies nonetheless. (81)

Of course, the inversion of stereotypical plots is important, to female as well as to male writers. She writes, “The stereotyped, traditional literary images of women—as, for example, the loving ‘Mom,’ the ‘bitch,’ the ‘Sex Goddess’—are being turned around in women’s fiction, either for comic purposes, to explore their inherent absurdity, or, in other instances, to reveal their hidden reality, though in new ways” (80). While Kolodny glosses the functions these inversions serve, she falls short by failing to explain the reasons for these inversions; she explains that the inversions can have comic purposes,
but she does not demonstrate the effects or potential consequences of instances of
comedies or the laughter that may result.

For Freud, laughter can have a variety of effects, such as catharsis, distancing,
and fostering of cynicism. As he elaborates in *Jokes and Their Relation to the
Unconscious*, “Their [jokes’] function consists from the first in lifting internal
inhibitions and in making sources of pleasure fertile which have been rendered
inaccessible by those inhibitions” (160). Seen through this lens, feminist narratives that
invert typical plot structures can be understood to serve as vehicles through which
women express scenarios that they may not be able to express in literal or direct terms.
Instead of merely bemoaning their discrimination at the hands of domineering men,
women authors can turn these situations around, assuming the superior position by
making a joke at the expense of someone else. As Charles Baudelaire explains in his
essay “On the Essence of Laughter,” the very concept of “[laughter] is the consequence
in man of the idea of his own superiority” (153). In other words, humor, as generated by
inversion, serves as a way for female authors to assert a subtle superiority, to express
the impermissible. Furthermore, writes Freud, a joke can “shatter respect for institutions
and truths in which the hearer has believed” (163). Applying this proposition to
postcolonial feminist texts, it is possible to see that instances of plot inversion can lead
to humor, which can then serve as social critique.

In addition to Kolodny’s failure to elaborate the performativity of inversion, she
does not discuss the difference between inversion and dramatic irony. Both inversion
and dramatic irony surprise readers by subverting their expectations, but for the
purposes of this thesis, I will distinguish them as follows: irony reverses the expectations an audience gained based on textual (or, if performed, dramatic) evidence, while inversion reverses the reader’s politically and socially shaped expectations for a character in a given demographic. In short, irony counteracts text-based expectations, and inversion social expectations.

Moi critiques Kolodny for the unoriginality of her stance, noting that exposing the comedy or absurdity of women’s roles is “an early version of Gilbert and Gubar’s theory of the subversive strategies located beneath the surface of women’s fiction” (72).

What are the reasons for instances of inversion? It could be argued that women writers invert typical plot—and life—structures because they see no alternative to the status quo than its opposite. In other words, are the women writers who use inversion, as identified by either themselves or critics, unable to see any possibilities between reality and the inversion of that reality?

The end of Roy’s novel offers what is ostensibly a prime example of inversion. Roy’s resolution, as we will see, involves much more than simple inversion. Ammu, Estha and Rahel’s mother, sleeps with her childhood friend, Velutha—the family’s Untouchable, albeit very helpful servant. Their choice was a costly one: “Once he was inside her, fear was derailed and biology took over. The cost of living climbed to unaffordable heights; though later Baby Kochamma would say it was a Small Price to Pay. Was it? Two lives. Two children’s childhoods” (Loc. 5495-5513). The price includes Velutha’s death and Estha’s expulsion from the family. Only after many years, when Estha is “re-Returned” and Rahel travels from the United States to see him, does
resolution occur. As we see in the passage below, this dénouement is in no way typical or expected; rather than craft the narrative so that Estha and Rahel fall into heterosexual love and live happily ever after, Roy unites the two in an unpredictable, emotionally wrought way.

But what was there to say? Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. Only that there was a snuffling in the hollows at the base of a lovely throat. Only that a hard honey-colored shoulder had a semicircle of teethmarks on it. Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief. Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. (310-311)

While I do not want to simplify, an inversion does occur in that damage caused by Ammu and Velutha’s intercourse finds resolution in Estha and Rahel’s. Both couples transgress borders, the former caste and class, the latter the “Love Laws.” Strangely, the second breaking of rules—as we see in Estha and Rahel—counteracts the first, yet also represents a logical conclusion to Estha’s and Rahel’s separation, a separation that is itself a result of transgressive relations.

Though I discuss the role of trauma in greater depth later in this chapter, it bears mentioning that this instance of reconciliation represents a manifestation of Cathy Caruth’s conception of trauma. Indeed, when Estha and Rahel engage in sexual intercourse, the “sorrowful voice that cries out [is] a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound” (2). It is a moment of mourning—“what they shared that night was
not happiness, but hideous grief” (Loc. 5380)—but also one that functions as a sort of release. This kind of inversion resembles the second kind that Kolodny describes, as she explains, “Extrapolated to thematic concerns, the ‘inversion’ pattern may even structure the plot, by denying our conventional expectations for a happy ending and substituting for it an ending which is conventionally unhappy, but which, in terms of the particular work, pleases or satisfies nonetheless” (81). While it would be flippant to consider the end of *The God of Small Things* “pleasing,” the narrative’s conclusion nevertheless offers fulfillment, in that redemption and hope are, in fact, possible: Estha and Rahel are not forever doomed to the silence and emptiness they carried for so long.

While I agree with Kolodny that both inversion and reflexive perception are evident in women’s fiction, I contend that they are only mildly helpful as tools through which to analyze feminist narratives. By asserting the presence of these two tropes among women’s fiction, Kolodny essentially insists that readers focus on the appearance and purpose of these tropes rather than look at women’s texts more broadly. I find inversion less useful than reflexive perception, as it more often involves the structure of a narrative’s plot than the type of writing in a given passage. Although a structuralist approach allows for an understanding of the structure of the plot itself as a formal characteristic of narrative, plot-based inversion is neither new to women’s texts nor to literary criticism.

I consider reflexive perception more insightful on Kolodny’s part, for it involves both thematic and formal techniques: thematic in that the woman realizes something about herself that she had not before—and often this epiphany relates to her agency or
lack thereof—and formal in that the “sujet” and “fabula” do not align, that is, that the linear representation of the events does not match the chronological order in which those events occur. Reflexive perception involves the reader, as she must perform an additional interpretative step beyond comprehension to reconstruct the chronological order in which the events occur.

Therefore, I propose two additional formal elements—heteroglossia and the representation of consciousness—that critics can employ in their analyses of feminist narratives. In the fourth chapter of The Dialogic Imagination (1975), entitled “Discourse In The Novel,” Bakhtin introduces the concept of heteroglossia within a larger schema regarding the relationship between form and ideology. He posits, “The study of verbal art can and must overcome the difference between an abstract ‘formal’ approach and an equally abstract ‘ideological’ approach. Form and content in discourse are one” (Loc. 3689). Indeed, the integration and inseparability of form and content represents a large portion of my goal here, that is, to examine the relationship between form and content in postcolonial feminist narratives and thus to suggest alternative ways of reading these and other texts. Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia, characterized as follows, holds even more significance when we consider that Bakhtin imagined the formal structure of heteroglossia to be correlated with a given attitude or ideological perspective: “heteroglossia is Bakhtin’s way of referring, in any utterance of any kind, to the peculiar interaction between the two fundamentals of all communication” (Loc. 104). Thus the various voices within a novel constitute utterances that make up the “voice” of the whole novel. Bakhtin considers “the style of a novel … to be found in the
combination of its styles; the language of a novel is the system of its ‘languages’” (Loc. 3728). The possible “compositional-stylistic unities” are as follows:

1. Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants);
2. Stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration (skaz);
3. Stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.);
4. Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech […];
5. The stylistically individualized speech of characters (Loc. 3722).

As we will see, these forms appear throughout *The God of Small Things*, consistently reminding the reader of the sheer number of perspectives represented. Michael Holquist, in his introduction to the tome, recognizes this quality—“this extraordinary sensitivity to the immense plurality of experience”—as an essential and defining feature of Bakhtin’s work (Loc. 110).

In *The God of Small Things*, all the above “compositional-stylistic unities” appear, but due to the limitations of space, I will examine only two examples here, one of the “stylization of various forms of semiliterary everyday narration,” and one of “the various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech.” As Bakhtin mentions, the third category includes such written items as the letter and the diary. The narrator does provide excerpts from Baby Kochamma’s letters to her father while she was in the convent. To convey her displeasure to her father, Baby Kochamma pretended that she had a friend who was unhappy, a friend who missed her family, and so on—until her father came to remove her from the convent. The purpose of the narrator’s description
of Baby Kochamma’s letters is two-fold: the presence of letters diversifies the types of writing that appear in the novel, and the content of the letters—covert communication—evinces the extent of the struggle that Baby Kochamma and others like her experienced during that time in India’s history.

Likewise, Estha and Rahel’s interactions with Baby Kochamma’s missionary friend, Miss Mitten, result in “semiliterary” writing with a subversive intent. The twins, accustomed to reading works such as The Tempest, “were deeply offended” when Miss Mitten gave them a “baby book” called The Adventures of Susie Squirrel (Loc. 954-74). The narrator’s following description, riddled with excess capitalization, emphasizes the extent of the cultural differences between the twins and the foreign missionary.

First they read it forwards. Miss Mitten, who belonged to a sect of Born-Again Christians, said that she was a Little Disappointed in them when they read it aloud to her, backwards. ‘ehT surtnevdA fo eisuS leriqS.’ […] They showed Miss Mitten how it was possible to read both Malayalam and Madam I’m Adam backwards as well as forwards. […] It turned out that she didn’t even know what Malayalam was. (Loc. 960 – 76)

The representation of Estha and Rahel reading this book backwards constitutes “semiliterary everyday narration” and results in the creation of more semiliterary narration: the twins are able to read the book backwards because of its simplicity, and in response Miss Mitten punishes them by making them write, “In future we will not read backwards” a hundred times (Loc. 975-91, original emphasis). Yet the fact that this fictional event—intended to silence and embarrass the twins—paradoxically renders
their voices louder functions as yet another critique of cultural and linguistic imperialism.

This instance of semiliterary narration illuminates the strength of heteroglossia as both a formal and ideological device. Together, Rahel’s and Estha’s “backwards” speaking and “forwards” writing can be understood as a moment of narrative metalepsis in that they draw the reader out of the “storyworld” and brings her to a recognition that the text is only a text. In doing so, the narrator reminds the reader of the social realities that underlie this text’s production, and the reader cannot help but become more conscientious about the historical events represented—and this change in thought evinces the extent of the text’s performativity. Heteroglossia thus diversifies experience and expression by allowing a multiplicity of spoken and written voices to be heard. The presence of heteroglossia in this and other feminist narratives advances the feminist agenda in that the device replicates underlying impulses of feminism: multiplicity, diversity, and contextualization.

Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, while useful, does not stand alone as a characteristic of women’s writing. H. Porter Abbott considers the representation of consciousness a fundamental characteristic of fictional writing that distinguishes it from the historical. While the representation of consciousness is not unique to women’s writing, I do contend that this device is both particularly prevalent and significant to feminist narratives, especially those emerging from the postcolonial or developing regions. These elements, heteroglossia and the representation of consciousness, are more concerned with voice, speech, and representation—issues central to not only
postcolonialism but also feminism—than are Kolodny’s characteristics. As such, these devices allow both writers and readers to delve deeper into the thematic matters with which they are grappling. For the remainder of this chapter, I demonstrate the presence of heteroglossia in *The God of Small Things*, showing the strengths and potential weaknesses of the device. Then, I discuss a narrative aspect particular to Roy’s novel—the resemblance of the plot structure to the psychological manifestation of trauma.

While the relationship between heteroglossia and postcolonial feminism is easily apparent, that between trauma and postcolonial feminism is less apparent, yet no less real. Both feminist and postcolonial thought emerge from widespread inequality ranging from mild discrimination to political oppression to physical violence; both modes of thought, therefore, in that they inflict harm on their victims over time, exhibit the repercussions of traumatic events. Those who suffer due to male chauvinism or cultural imperialism experience a kind of mental violence typical of that of a victim of trauma: their psyches are split, unable to reconcile the actual occurrence of the traumatic event with their understanding of it. For victims of chauvinism and imperialism, the long-term presence of these oppressions makes the actual event of trauma more difficult to discover, and thus, in some cases, results in its victims’ abilities to process the event as trauma.

Geoffrey Hartman, in his 1995 article, “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies,” asserts that two events exist for every traumatic encounter: “One is the traumatic event, registered rather than experienced. It seems to have bypassed perception and consciousness, and falls directly into the psyche. The other is a kind of
memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split . . . psyche” (537). In addition to discussing the psychological aspects of trauma, Hartman articulates the complications of its literary representations, stating, “The literary construction of memory is obviously not a literal retrieval . . . [but] relates to the negative moment in experience, to what in experience has not been, or cannot be, adequately experienced” (540). Literary representation, then, serves as a means to illuminate trauma, to understand it in ways that are impossible outside of the realm of metaphor and fiction.

Idelbar Avelar, drawing heavily from Marx and Fanon in his book, *A Letter of Violence*, writes, “Nothing insults the experience of the victim more than the assumption that trauma is easily representable and understandable” (46). Despite the novel’s ostensible ability to represent trauma, trauma’s psychological complexities render its representations inherently problematic. Roy’s narrative indicates that she understands this dilemma, as the structure of her narrative mirrors a psychological response to trauma. Rather than attempt to exhaustively represent the multiple, intersecting traumas of imperialism, the oppression of women, religious intolerance, and caste discrimination, among others, Roy’s narrative structure, just as much as the content of her novel, addresses and re-presents these traumas.

Several instances in particular reflect the consequences of these traumas. Throughout the narrative, the twins undergo several traumatic encounters. For instance, while Rahel and Estha’s family watch *The Sound of Music*, Estha, like Sister Maria, the lead character, sings out for joy: “There was a nun in the audience. Heads twisted like
bottle caps . . . Hissing mouths with teeth like sharks. Many of them. . . . ‘Shhhh!’ they said together. It was Estha who was singing” (96). Ammu, Estha’s mother, also discourages his participation, chastising him to “Sit up please. And watch. That’s what you’ve been brought here for” (102). Roy juxtaposes the impulse to sing and consequent expulsions of Estha and Sister Maria from the theatre and from the abbey, respectively. Once expelled, Estha idles outside the theatre and cannot defend himself against the sexual advances of a nearby vendor, the Orangedrink Lemon drink man. This abuse, coupled with the condemnation Estha receives for singing, both foreshadow and caution him of the perils of speech and song.

Later in the text, Baby Kochamma falsely condemns Velutha to the police for causing the death of Sophie Mol. When the police inspector realizes the political consequences of condemning Velutha, an Untouchable involved in the Marxist movement, he presents Baby Kochamma with a choice: either one of the twins must condemn Velutha, or else Baby Kochamma will be charged with lodging a false criminal offense. She decides to use the twins to save herself by manipulating them: “When she had stamped out every ray of hope, destroyed their lives completely [by telling them that they and their mother will go to jail], like a fairy godmother she presented them with a solution” (301). She essentially tortures Estha into speaking what he knows to be untrue. “The inspector asked his question. Estha’s mouth said Yes. Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt” (303). Estha’s forced utterance, the word “yes,” in that it saves Baby Kochamma from legal trouble and condemns Velutha to death, is the cause that effects the trauma within his psyche. In this scene, Baby
Kochamma functions as a torturer, compelling Estha to produce an utterance that, as Avelar writes, “eventually buries . . . [him] into silence altogether” (45). Estha’s torture colludes in his descent into silence, fulfilling Avelar’s conviction about the effects of torture on speech: “Torturers make you speak so you will forever hate speaking, so you will never want to speak again” (45-46).

The extensive “disordering” of the fabula and the sujet on the scale of the entire narrative reflect the collective influence of individual traumatic instances such as the ones above. The narrative begins in medias res, introducing the reader to the story at the point at which Rahel returns to Ayemenem to see her forcibly estranged twin brother. The narrator describes Rahel’s state of mind and interactions with Baby Kochamma upon her return. At first, Rahel cannot communicate with Estha; this is not surprising, as Estha will not speak to anyone. “He doesn’t recognize people anymore!” shouts Baby Kochamma to Rahel, emphasizing to Rahel that she is no longer special to Estha. Then the narrative transitions from Baby Kochamma’s thoughts about Rahel to Rahel’s about her baby grandaunt. In two consecutive sentences, the narrator first represents Rahel’s consciousness and then comments on the validity of Rahel’s unspoken observation: “She’s living her life backwards, Rahel thought. It was a curiously apt observation” (23). From this point, the narrator discusses Baby Kochamma’s slovenly ways at the present time and engages in analepsis to describe her past and the reasons she is a Catholic, TV-watching, bitter and jealous old woman.

Then, skipping backward in time, the narrator switches the narrative to analepsis, to the time when Rahel and Estha were eight years old and were awaiting the
arrival of their half-English cousin, Sophie Mol. The opening lines of chapter two set the scene: “It was a skyblue day in December sixty-nine (the nineteen silent). It was the kind of time in the life of a family when something happens to nudge its hidden morality from its resting place and make it bubble and surface and float for a while” (35). The ellipses, combined with the eerily vague description of the events to come, prepares the reader for the horror to come. Using a material object as the focus for this opening, Roy subtly emphasizes corrosive effects of materialism—which she attributes elsewhere to the cultural imperialism of the West:

A skyblue Plymouth, with the sun in its tailfins, sped past young rice fields and old rubber trees on its way to Cochin. Further east, in a small country with similar landscape (jungles, rivers, rice fields, Communists), enough bombs were being dropped to cover all of it in six inches of steel. […] The Plymouth used to belong to Pappachi, Rahel and Estha’s grandfather. Now that he was dead, it belonged to Mammachi, their grandmother, and Rahel and Estha were on their way to Cochin to see The Sound of Music for the third time. (35, emphasis added)

Roy’s employment of the past progressive tense moves the narrative effectively back in time, situating the reader during a moment that happened in the past. These instances of analepsis abound in the narrative, rendering the story more of an overlapping between analepsis and prolepsis moving toward the present than a story told in chronological order with occasional instances of analepsis. As such, the narrative itself is mimetic, as it reflects in form Rahel’s—and any individual’s—psychological split that results from
trauma. The traumatic events coalesce with the memory of those events, allowing this mimetic technique to convey the difficulty of processing a traumatic event.

While we cannot wholly embrace Kolodny’s characteristics, we can however suggest an ethical attitude with which to examine feminist narratives. We can acknowledge those purported by Frye and others to be incomplete and parochial; we can propose that heteroglossia (with its consequent awareness of positionality) as well as the representation of consciousness, are prominent in postcolonial feminist texts; we can realize that no set of tropes can characterize a given category; but, importantly, we can embrace an attitude, one that is relational, conscious of context, and therefore ethical.
Chapter 5

Remember the Reader: Can Narrative Strategies Encourage Engagement?

The engagement of “feminist narratives” in reader response theories works similarly to Showalter’s second kind of narrative, those that she calls “feminist,” in that they respond to “masculinist” or, more broadly, traditional narratives. In particular, Toni Morrison’s most recent novel, *A Mercy*, provides a counter-narrative to familiar tales of early American history. While the novel engages political issues, it resists simplification. It is not conducive to the kind of deciphering that La Vinia Delois Jennings claims for it in her review: “Morrison’s plotting of *A Mercy* makes the case with Jacob Vaark’s accumulated household and conversion to investing indirectly in the slave trade what history bears out: economic expediency led the shift to non-white slavery” (648). Jennings’ phrase, “makes the case,” reveals that her approach to this book is a didactic one: she attempts to flesh out the narrative’s moral intentions. While Morrison writes purposefully—she is socially engaged, not aloof—it is reductive to attempt to encapsulate her aims in one sentence, as Jennings does. Flannery O’Connor attests to the purpose of reading a story in *Mystery and Manners*:

A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the
The only proper thing is to tell him to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning. (O’Connor 96)

Morrison’s essays, speeches, and books such as *Playing in the Dark* elucidate her opinions on political issues both past and present. Her persuasions, then, are not a secret. Her fictional work does not add to this body of opinion and instruction; rather, it structures an experience for the reader, allowing her to develop political and historical perspectives inductively. The act of reading does not turn the reader into a passive receptacle but rather an active participant, or in Iser’s terms, a “co-creator.”

Earlier critics have extensively analyzed themes in Morrison’s work, such as the obvious issues of race, class, and gender, as well as the more subtle questions of ancestry, patriarchy, heterosexuality, tradition, rootedness, motherhood, masculinity, love, and death, among others. Critics Elizabeth Abel and Jean Wyatt have diverged from these typical interpretations, writing about theories of feminism and racial construction, and the ethics of Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit* temporal structure, respectively. Others such as Jane Lilienfeld have deviated from the standard template of thematic analysis to consider Morrison’s lyrical prose, temporality, narrative progression, and her employment of other such techniques. While we should not ignore the significant and nuanced themes inherent in Morrison’s texts—and analyses of these themes *do* prove helpful in understanding her narratives—neither should we ignore the significance of reader participation. I propose that we privilege readers’ responses to the aesthetic qualities of the text; in doing so, we will discover ethical questions that underlie these themes’ textual representation.
With the novel *A Mercy* and the story “Recitatif” I seek not to uncover direct messages within Morrison’s amalgam of themes; nor do I intend to propose a reading of Morrison’s oeuvre as a representation of Wayne Booth’s conception of a challenging, yet friendly understanding between writer and reader⁸ that is meant to effect change; rather, I employ a seemingly un-Morrisonian interpretation of Morrison’s narratives, one which will reveal the relationship between the narratological structures of her texts and the various ethical paradigms they embody.

As Herman and Vervaeck insist pointedly in defense of narrative theory, “It would be wrong to forget the narrative aspects of a story and to focus exclusively on content” because “it is the way a story is narrated that turns it into what it is” (7). Hence I concentrate on the narrative techniques that underpin Morrison’s narrative and, in conjunction with reader participation, allow for the exploration of ethical issues. I ostensibly privilege form over content; however, it is this act of privileging—this ongoing, cyclical process of reading and interpretation⁹—that allows for a closer interaction with the text and thus a deeper understanding of its meaning. A focus on Morrison’s narratological style, particularly the way she complicates and undermines reader expectations in regard to narrative voice and authority, carves the story into relief; in other words, in the process of considering how the stories do what they do, they draw us yet closer to what it is they do and mean. Paradoxically, my approach aligns more closely with Morrison’s own aims than do traditional critical perspectives.

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⁸ In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne Booth argues for a friendly relationship between the writer and her reader.

⁹ I am referring to James Phelan’s concept of the “recursive loop” or feedback loop as he discusses it on page 4.
in that I build my analysis of Morrison’s text on the premise that they are “writerly” ones in the Barthesian\textsuperscript{10} sense, as they necessitate engagement, or “writing,” on the part of the reader.

A line from the first chapter exemplifies the significance of heteroglossia as a way to diversify experience and simultaneously hands agency to the reader. Florens narrates,

Confession we tell not write as I am doing now. I forget almost all of it until now. I like talk. Lina talk, stone talk, even Sorrow talk. Best of all is your talk.

At first when I am brought here I don’t talk any word. All of what I hear is different from what words mean to minha mãe and me. Lina’s words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress’s. (6)

Estranged from home when her minha mãe, as she calls her mother, trades her to pay off debt, Florens has lost even the ability to understand and communicate through language. When she explains, “All of what I hear is different from what words mean to minha mãe and me,” the critic realizes that Florens’ sense of language is destabilized, that for her, sign and signified do not match. With this in mind, the reader interprets Florens’ experiences cautiously. As Florens must interpret the world around her, so too does the reader have to actively engage with the text of \textit{A Mercy}.

This plea to the reader resembles the one the narrator makes at the end of \textit{Jazz}, although in the case of the latter, it is the book, not a character, who addresses the

\textsuperscript{10} Philip Page references Morrison's claim in regard to Barthes' distinction on page 55 of his article, “Traces of Derrida in Toni Morrison's Jazz,” in which he writes, “In short, Morrison requires that her novels be regarded, in Roland Barthes' terms, as texts, not works (\textit{Work} 74-79).
reader: “Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now” (229). It is almost as if Jazz were asking for a reader with whom to “co-create” meaning. This kind of conspicuous interaction with the reader represents, on Morrison’s part, an attempt to bestow agency upon the reader. It also signals the presence of heteroglossia in that the “text to reader” interaction is a form of “literary but extra-artistic authorial speech.” Even though the text of A Mercy does not speak to the reader so directly as that of Jazz, the insights of Jazz allow us to better understand the significance of the relationship of heteroglossia to reader reception.

Within A Mercy, a variety of types of narration—first person, second person, and third-person omniscient—represent voices both intradiegetic and extradiegetic. The variety of these types of narration, as well as the fact of the story’s narration by different characters, constitutes heteroglossia. Traditionally, readers give greater credence to a narrator’s representation of events than to other characters’ different representations of those very same events. In the case of a text that allows only one narrative voice, that narrator exerts sole authority over the reader; however, a heteroglossic text diversifies authority, lending a variety of characters—often of varying ages and social strata—significant, if not equal, voices. Thus heteroglossia plays with what James Phelan terms the “narrative authority” of a text. Morrison’s employment of heteroglossia challenges the tradition of individualistic narrators and demonstrates the significance of narrative voice to notions of authority.
Heteroglossia also promotes reader engagement, as the device demands that readers re-negotiate their position in relation to the text as the role of narrator passes between one character and another. Florens’ mother narrates the final chapter, yet her assumption of the role of narrator is not immediately apparent. Her reflections, which Morrison uses to bracket the tale of Florens, do not align with the time of the narrative. “Neither one will want your brother. I know their tastes,” Florens’ mother explains as the chapter begins in the present tense, situating the reader in the moment of the chapter’s action; however, Morrison soon shifts to past tense as Florens’ mother recollects the events leading up to the moment when she parts with her daughter:

When the tall man with yellow hair came to dine, I saw he hated the food and I saw things in his eyes that said he did not trust Senhor, Senhora or their sons. His way, I thought, is another way. His country far from here. There was no animal in his heart. He never looked at me the way Senhor does. (163)

The repetition of simple sentences with these past tense verbs creates a sense of rhythm and contextualizes the recollections in a time long passed. Yet amid this recounting, Morrison uses Florens’ mother to express the following sentiment about women’s experience in the present tense: “To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal” (163). The fact that this metaphor is in the present tense indicates Florens’ mother’s understanding of this condition of women as both universal and timeless. This critique of men’s consistent abuse of women, nested within a heteroglossic text and spoken by a disenfranchised woman, more effectively engages the reader than a simple, direct statement voiced by a lone narrator because the reader must do the intellectual
work of determining the subject and the object of the narrative voice at a given time.
Therefore, deliberate readers of Morrison cannot help but find themselves engaged in
her texts, consciously or unconsciously engaging in “participatory reading” (Bennett
212) and therefore assuming agency in the production of the text’s meaning.

Like *A Mercy*, Morrison’s short story “Recitatif” demands reader involvement.
A reader who fails to determine who is the narrator at a given moment will, in the case
of both texts, fail to understand not only the meaning of the story but also the events
represented in the story. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison writes the following: “The
only short story I have ever written, ‘Recitatif,’ was an experiment in the removal of all
racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial
identity is crucial” (xi). Her story represents a successful experiment, according to
David Goldstein-Shirley in “Race [Gender],” in which he claims that the story is “a
distillation of Morrison’s grand project of deconstructing racism” (97). I agree;
additionally, it is her deployment of one narrative strategy, what I term “multilayered
antiphonies” and define as calls and responses that occur between one character and
another as well as between the text and the reader, that make this story successful: it
engages readers, shaping both their initial reactions and later interpretations of the
story’s ethical, political, or moral meanings. The multilayered antiphonies in “Recitatif”
serve Morrison’s “grand project” as they represent an explicit demonstration of the
construction of race. This story shows, therefore, how a particular narrative strategy—
multilayered antiphonies—illuminates a particular ethical question—the social
construction and internalization of race.
As Twyla and Roberta call and respond to each other, so do the text and the reader. This process represents what Phelan considers a “recursive relationship (or feedback loop). . . among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response” (4). Drawing on Bennett, who writes that “Recitatif” creates parallel investigations of constructions of race (212), I interpret these parallel investigations as examples of Morrison’s antiphonal structure: Twyla and Roberta struggle to recall Maggie’s race while readers attempt to determine the races of Twyla and Roberta. Again, Bennett states, “Recitatif” “allows us to read the codes according to our conditioning and then asks us to examine that” (212). In crafting this multilayered antiphony in this story and in her novels, Morrison stages a debate first between characters in the text and second between the text and the reader. While this strategy of engaging the reader proves especially successful in “Recitatif,” it operates in her other narratives as well, as they omit not racial codes but other information. In fact, in an interview with Elissa Schappell in 1992, Morrison explains the importance of omission in her writing: “One has to work very carefully with what is in between the words. What is not said. Which is measure, which is rhythm and so on. So, it is what you don’t write that frequently gives what you do write its power” (66-67). Through her careful decisions about the inclusion and exclusion of information, Morrison entices her readers to imagine the descriptive details themselves, a process by which they construct the story in their minds and therefore embody the “response” part of the call and response narrative convention.
Finally, Morrison’s sometimes ambiguous and often metaphorical language engages her readers; she attempts, as Goldstein-Shirley’s paraphrase of Steven Mailloux suggests, to lead them into becoming “actors in the drama they are watching” (105). “So,” Morrison says, it is “the structure [that] is the argument. Not what this one says, or that one says . . . it is the structure of the book . . . [that] makes all the difference” (Schappell 74). Iser echoes this sentiment, stating that “effect and response arise from a dialectical relationship between showing and concealing” (45). In this interplay between what is said and what is not, the reader finds a space in which to begin a dialogic interaction with the text. Morrison’s antiphonies, then, “initiate ‘performances’ of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves” (Iser 26-27).

The antiphonies in “Recitatif” and the play with narrative authority in A Mercy are representative of Morrison’s other works in that these texts not only challenge readers to participate in the making of a story’s meaning, but also force readers to reconsider their own views on controversial issues. For Morrison, then, as for Danticat, Roy, and others, reader participation proves crucial to the significance of their texts as cultural artifacts. If they did not engage their readers as effectively as they do, their works would draw the attention of far fewer people, undercutting their books’ abilities to foster thoughtfulness and attract attention for their respective progressive ideals.

Of course, texts written by men often engage readers in the “co-creation” of the text’s meaning; yet I contend that feminist narratives such as the ones I have discussed employ distinctive narrative strategies—heteroglossia, the representation of consciousness, the inclusion of diverse narrative authorities, reflexive perception, and a
resemblance to trauma, among others—that compel the reader to participate in the production of meaning. In this way, reader participation functions analogously to heteroglossia: if readers, like characters, participate in the making of a text, then they too gain a voice when they read the texts. It is thus the expansion and acceptance of a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that ultimately characterize feminist narratives.

To conclude, therefore, I propose that the emergence of postcolonial texts, feminist texts, and postcolonial feminist texts necessitates the adoption of a new attitude, or a particular ethical disposition, on the part of both the critic and lay reader. This attitude or disposition is ethical in that it privileges not one voice but celebrates many—both internal and external to the text. It allows us to conceive of women writing from conditions of extremity across the globe as part of a larger mission to achieve gender equality, but this disposition does not permit dangerous essentialism. It embraces a strategic essentialism, welcoming authors whose aims regarding women may be similar, but who live in vastly different areas of the world. Awareness of a text’s historical and cultural contexts provides a reader with the ability to understand the conditions that precipitated its production. Bridging the theoretical divide between biographical criticism and the so-called “death of the author” mode of thought, this ethical disposition considers the author and her place in the world when interpreting the text.

To be sure, I am not encouraging a wholehearted acceptance of any and every text a woman writes. I endorse what Toril Moi terms a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” the assumption that “the text is not, or not only, what it pretends to be, and therefore
searches for underlying contradictions and conflicts as well as absences and silences in the texts” (75-6). This kind of hermeneutics, she writes, “seems to be reserved for texts written by men” (75-6). Although critics engage in a “hermeneutics of suspicion” in regard to men’s novels, it does not follow logically that to engage in such a hermeneutics is to deny the femin(ine)/(ist) quality of a woman’s writing. Furthermore, Moi, critical of Elaine Showalter’s “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” (1981), writes, “There is no indication here that the feminist critic concerned with women as writers should bring other than sympathetic, identity-seeking approaches to bear on works written by women” (75). I agree with Moi on this point as I contend that critics must approach feminist narratives with rigor and must consider the textual relationship between form and content—narrative technique and theme; to do otherwise would be to compromise both the value of literary study and the work of the individual writer. It is thus in the interstices of feminism, postcolonialism, and narratology that the ethical critic finds her beginning.


Goldstein-Shirley, David. “Race/ [Gender]: Toni Morrison’s ‘Recitativ.”’ *Women on the*


Nissen, Axel. “Form Matters: Toni Morrison’s Sula and the Ethics of Narrative.”


