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Review

How to Cite: Keane, A, Miller, J and Muth, K 2020 Review Essays on Recent Scholarship: Keane on Morrison and Love; Miller on Bradbury and his Times; Muth on ReDescribing Feminist Aesthetics. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 8(1): 1, 1–35. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.gaddis.1994

Published: 24 April 2020

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Keane, A, et al. 2020 Review Essays on Recent Scholarship: Keane on Morrison and Love; Miller on Bradbury and his Times; Muth on ReDescribing Feminist Aesthetics. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 8(1): 1, 1–35. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.gaddis.1994

REVIEW

Review Essays on Recent Scholarship: Keane on Morrison and Love; Miller on Bradbury and his Times; Muth on ReDescribing Feminist Aesthetics

[A note from the Book Reviews Editor: we're actively aiming to supplement our regular single-book reviews with more of these extended surveys of recent work in particular fields and on particular questions. If you're interested in proposing a review-essay covering at least 3 books of recent scholarship on some aspect of post-1945 US literature, please contact us at reviews@pynchon.net]

Love, Trauma and Memory in Recent Toni Morrison Scholarship

Review of:

Juda Bennett. *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* (SUNY Press, 2014), 215 pp.

Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally, eds. *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 312 pp.

Jean Wyatt. *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels* (University of Georgia Press, 2017), 246 pp.

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With particular resonance since Toni Morrison's recent death at the age of 88, three recent books, by Jean Wyatt, Juda Bennett, and a group of scholars working under the auspices of The Toni Morrison Society, each explore in various and illuminating ways the tropes of love, trauma and memory as they repeat, develop, and interweave thematically across Morrison's *oeuvre*. These interrelated tropes have long been a central focus of Morrison's fiction, and the three studies mark not a disruption, but rather a valuable continuation and expansion of this key vein in Morrison studies. Wyatt, Bennett, and the anthology's authors present fresh and insightful analyses of related tropes – especially the role of love in all its guises as a protective and healing force, which can offer the possibility of at least partial recovery from violence past and present, personal and collective. The respective methodologies with which they treat this central career-long focus of Morrison's work are variously and usefully innovative. In *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels*, Wyatt crafts a unique approach that combines elements of psychoanalytic theory and narrative close reading to examine Morrison's works chronologically from the perspective of her later development as an author. In *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts*, Bennett offers the first sustained and original queer reading to span all of Morrison's

novels through *Home* (2012). *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning* presents an interdisciplinary *festschrift* of readings that emerged from a collection of literary tributes presented to Morrison in celebration of her 80th birthday. The shared emphasis on Morrison's later fiction, which these studies compare and contrast with her earlier iconic texts, will make them especially welcome to both Morrison specialists and other scholars of contemporary literature.

In the most recent of the three, Wyatt brings a methodology combining psychoanalysis, rhetorical narrative theory and close reading to Morrison's later fiction, especially to the recent novels' "structural and stylistic innovations and [...] successive models of love" (1). Starting with *Beloved* (1987) and continuing through *God Help the Child* (2015), Wyatt expands upon her own previous scholarship as she explores Morrison's claim that, in the later novels, "the structure is the argument" (Wyatt 1). Wyatt differentiates originally and compellingly between Morrison's early, more didactic novels and those, beginning with *Beloved*, that rely on structural experimentation to explore the trope of love, variously defined in its assorted manifestations, but typically represented as a powerful force in the context of memory and trauma. Drawing on psychoanalytic approaches, she emphasizes that, insofar as each text has a different form and structure, it also makes a different claim about love as a countervailing response to oppression.

As Wyatt describes her interpretive process: "I work from the inside out – from a close reading of particular passages and their linguistic anomalies to an overview of the narrative structure to a judgment about the implied rhetorical effects on a reader" (5). Central to her project is an exposition of how, in each of the later novels except for *Paradise* (1997), "Morrison reconceptualizes love and how narrative form bends to accommodate and reflect the idiosyncrasies of love or to challenge a reader's preconceptions about race, gender, and love" (16). For Wyatt, rhetorical narrative theory enables a sustained, nuanced focus on the complexity of authorship and reception in Morrison's fiction. This lens, Wyatt observes, "emphasizes the intersections between the aesthetic and the ethical and considers the intricacies of communication among author, implied author, narrator, implied reader, and flesh-and-blood reader" (4). Wyatt's analyses of these relationships are rigorous and

revelatory, as the narrative theory and psychoanalytic framework combine toward a reading of Morrison's endings as grounded in the African American oral tradition of call-and-response. She finds that the later novels' ambiguous and open endings invite the reader to continually "reinvent[] the story," even after they have finished reading the text (5), as each of Morrison's forms draws readers into a collaborative role in making meaning on the love/oppression axis.

The interplay of trauma and memory is also inextricably intertwined within this analysis. For example, Wyatt observes of *Jazz* (1992), that the novel "begins with a model of love as traumatic loss" (45), as the protagonist couple, Joe and Violet, are drawn toward "reenactments" of the early and tragic loss of their mothers (45), losses that are not only personal but that echo collective historical African-American experience during the Great Migration. As they revisit memory and loss against the backdrop of New York City during the Harlem Renaissance, both the unnamed narrator and her viewpoint characters come to an open and unexpectedly optimistic ending, one that "embrac[es] the idea of love as a continuing innovation" (45). This shift signals larger narrative stakes; with Joe and Violet freed from the pull of the traumatic past, so too:

> …the narrator has moved from believing in the straight line, the single direction toward a predetermined end, to an embrace of the innovative, the spontaneous, the unforeseen. That move encompasses a shift from Western literary tradition to African American oral tradition: in place of the old Western story where love leads ineluctably to the closure of death, the narrator adopts both the call-and-response pattern of African American art forms and the open ending of African American oral tradition (68).

Wyatt's chronological approach lets her complicate and extend her multifaceted analysis of love, trauma and memory as her book progresses. She offers particularly compelling insights about Morrison's last novel, *God Help the Child*, in which she discerns a significant shift in perspective about the aftereffects of childhood trauma: "[w]hereas the long line of Morrison's novels shows a consistently large and compassionate patience for the lingering vicissitudes of trauma, the narration of *God Help the Child* betrays an impatience with the residues of trauma that hold back its

characters from loving anew" (171). In this novel's open ending, Wyatt finds that protagonist "Bride's transformation into the embodiment of potential maternal love is consonant with Morrison's other efforts to show that childhood trauma can be overcome and unmothered children become loving mothers to the next generation. Or can they?" (187). As the patience for processing early trauma in *Jazz* shifts to impatience, motivated by a sense of urgency, in *God Help the Child*, Wyatt concludes that, "[r]ather than repeating themes of love worked out in earlier novels...[Morrison] turns on her earlier works to critique them" (189), even as she "calls on the reader to pick up the tale and improvise her own version" (194).

Importantly, Wyatt cautions that "[a]ny attempt to chart a traditional arc of career through the course of the later novels runs into the fact that Morrison 'breaks [her] mould' with each novel, in Virginia Woolf's phrase (*A Writer's Diary* 202, 220), inventing a new narrative form to express the new complexities of her subject" (Wyatt 18). Wyatt's project is especially distinctive for her focus on—and explicit acknowledgment of Morrison's literary accomplishment in presenting—a new form within each model of love in the later novels. Moreover – and perhaps offering a promising new direction in Morrison studies – she suggests that, in addition to the usual exercise of situating Morrison's narrative innovations in the context of postmodernism, "a broad contextualization of her experiments with style and form ought to include, as well, her early intimacy with modernist texts," particularly Woolf's and William Faulkner's (6).

If Wyatt almost tangentially suggests this new direction for Morrison scholars, Bennett, in *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts*, explores new ground directly, with a queer reading that reframes Morrison's explorations of memory and loss in the context of love around two terms – "queer" and "ghost" – which, for Bennett, "structure themselves upon the tension between known and unknown, visible and invisible, familiar and strange" (3). Bennett, like Wyatt, focuses on the "love, memory and trauma" constellation across Morrison's *oeuvre*, but his extra terms take him in different directions. Bennett's use of the keyword "queer" is always linked to the "ghostly"—the book's draft title was *Queering the Ghost* (xi)—which invokes the trope of memory. "Haunting" is another keyword here; indeed, "Haunts" features in each of Bennet's chapter titles, each time connecting an earlier Morrison novel with a later one.

The haunting "ghost," for Bennett, is intrinsically "queer" by Judith Halberstam's foundational definition – "'queer' refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" – even as he acknowledges "the implicit demands of such a flexible term" as "both its strength and weakness" (6). Employing a methodology that draws upon both black studies and queer studies, Bennett develops a core argument that "Morrison queers the ghost in order to address some of [the] silences" that are imposed upon outsiders and to "examine the interlocking forces of racism, sexism, and heterosexism" (7). His work expands scholars' understanding of the scope of love in Morrison's fiction, as he presents a first queer reading of all of the novels in sequence from *Sula* (1973) (framed as "haunting" *Beloved*) to *Home*. His analysis begins with Morrison's most famous ghost, Beloved, then asks, addressing her other spectral characters and figures – for example, young Dorcas in the photograph in *Jazz*, or aged, mythic Circe, who breaks a family silence in *Song of Solomon* – what we might learn about these "ghosts" by "asking all of them to speak in chorus" (1).

For Bennett, each of Morrison's "ghosts" is "uniquely rendered" (6). Indeed, some of them are not characters at all, "such as the haunting music in *Song of Solomon* or the ornate embezzler's house in *Paradise*" (6). While acknowledging that this expansive definition "may strike some of my readers as applying the term too loosely" (6), Bennett defends his approach as "in the service of testing the limits of the hermeneutical possibilities of these tropes, which are also methodological approaches" (10). Bennett's close readings support the overall thesis that, throughout her works, Morrison repeatedly queers the trope of the ghost "to examine the interlocking forces of racism, sexism, and heterosexism" (3): this allows him both to deepen our understanding of widely studied questions of memory and trauma in Morrison, and provide an original intervention through his bringing these questions together in relation to queer studies and love. Reading the novels intertextually, Bennett titles each individual chapter with a pairing that conveys how one story thematically "haunts" the next. He sustains his interpretive throughline deftly, showing how Morrison's ghost figures are, in unique and various ways, "disruptive, otherworldly, transgressive" and how they can be both "easily queered" and "lead inevitably toward the most fruitful

and provocative challenges to conceptions of love" (9). He argues convincingly that "a queer reading not only seems possible but fills an essential lacuna in our understanding of Morrison's lifelong project to investigate love and its boundaries" (11). Ultimately, that investigation leads to an open irresolution: "Morrison's ghosts frequently sit outside…temporal frames, haunting what perhaps never was or was never given a chance to be, and giving voice to undercurrents of resistance" (161).

Introducing further new and innovative readings of Morrison's fiction, Carolyn C. Denard's Foreword to *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning* notes this collaborative work's context. Developed from a range of papers and creative tributes that the Toni Morrison Society presented to Morrison on her eightieth birthday (xiii), this published version is "simultaneously commemorative and celebratory" (xvi). Although the collection focuses primarily on scholarly essays, it retains two compelling framing poems by Rita Dove and Sonia Sanchez. The essay chapters are organized thematically into five parts, with each section headed by a quote from *Home* as an epigraph. Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally's editorial Introduction notes that the essays are arranged in sequence "as they relate to or engage themes also prevalent in *Home*" (xviii). (*God Help the Child*, which came out after the collection had gone to press, fits just as well as *Home* does with this analytical framework, since it too focuses on love, traumatic memory, and the "ghostly" resonances of a mother's internalized racism and its continuing impact on her daughter.) As Seward and Tally observe, "perhaps the most dominant link among all the novels, and one that is central to *Home*, is Morrison's abiding concern with the nature of love" (xviii). The thematic throughline that treats love in conjunction with "memory and meaning" not only establishes resonances between the collected essays, but makes them worth reading in direct relation to Wyatt and Bennett's books.

The editors make sweeping claims for their collection's scholarly intervention—"to shift the paradigms for scholarship in religion, history, classical mythology, psychology, folklore, law, and philosophy" (xvi). This is hyperbolic, but the selection of essays is indeed wonderfully interdisciplinary, each of the five sections covering distinctive ground.

The theme of belonging is the focus of the first section ("This is where I belong"). The four essays in this section include Ann Hostetler's examination of the trope of the dead girl in Morrison's trilogy, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*. For Hostetler, these novels become narratives of resurrection, inviting the reader to reclaim alternative storytelling paradigms in the context of healing historical trauma.

In the second section, memory, the sites of remembering and revisiting the traumas of loss, exile and displacement, are focal. Here, Claudine Raynaud, like Wyatt, uses a psychoanalytic framework and Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber deploys a methodology drawn from neuroscience and social theory to conclude that, for Morrison, "attaining a positive sense of self occurs when personal memories can sustain subjectivity" (80). Raynaud both emphasizes that "[m]emory…is central to creation in Morrison's work" (66) and that "[o]ne can consequently shed light on the workings of Morrison's writing starting from a reflection on memory" (66). Then, using language that evokes Bennett's "ghosts," Raynaud observes that what Morrison calls "rememory" in *Beloved* "helps us understand the extent to which the staging of the workings of memory is akin to phantasm" (66). Alluding to Freudian and Lacanian assumptions, Raynaud notes: "The irreducible quality of phantasm translates into the fading of the subject behind the place of trauma" (72). But in Morrison's writings, memory can also become metaphor, a site for literary reclamation.

The third section examines religious motifs in Morrison's novels; here, Katherine Clay Bassard analyzes Morrison's vision of love as "an ethical mandate to break the cycle of racism, sexism, and other oppressions" (119). The fourth section ("Now it seemed both fresh and ancient, safe and demanding") is perhaps the most interdisciplinary of the collection, foregrounding questions of memory and identity: "[u]sing classical mythology, African-derived philosophy and spiritual systems, folklore, and legal history, these readings examine the ways in which Morrison both locates the protagonists in their historical moment and provides them with a usable past from which to move forward into a viable future" (xxii).

The final section, headed "You can keep on writing but I think you ought to know what's true", explores Morrison's aesthetics in a political context. Here, Jan Furman reads *Home* through a psychological lens, offering an analysis of

protagonist Frank Money's evolving sense of identity as he struggles with memory and trauma from his past in Georgia and as a soldier in the Korean War. For Furman, Morrison's shifts between first-person and third-person narration resolve structurally as Frank processes traumatic memory and finds refuge for himself and his younger sister Cee, whom he loves "selflessly" (235). Furman concludes that this 2012 novel reaches an indeterminate but hopeful ending, one that reflects but varies Morrison's use of a similarly indeterminate narrative voice at the conclusion of *Jazz* (241). Another illuminating contribution in this section is Lenore Kitts' "The Sound of Change: A Musical Transit Through the Wounded Modernity of *Desdemona*." Kitts offers an insightful, multilayered reading of Morrison's recent theatrical production, which she co-created with Rokia Traoré and Peter Sellars as a reimagining and interrogation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Not only in narrative but in this dramatic and musical form, "[t]he persistence of the past into the present" remains a key theme for Morrison. Kitts emphasizes that "[t]his creative principle guides Morrison's *Desdemona*," as she skillfully develops a reading of the work as one that empowers women's voices and that offers "a message of hope despite – or perhaps because of – the gravity of the issues it raises" (262) in the context of historical, gendered and colonialist violence. Crucially, all of the collected essays in this volume, like Morrison's novels, assume black subjectivity as a starting point for representing and revisiting historical experience – whether the trauma of slavery or its continuing resonances in the context of racism, sexism and economic injustices in the present.

For literary scholarship to focus on the thematic constellation of love, trauma and memory in Morrison's novels is not new. But in these three volumes, the authors' range of methodologies is innovative and freshly original. Analyzing Morrison's formal innovation within each work while exploring a key set of persistent interrelated themes surrounding the tropes of memory and the mitigation of trauma through the varied powers of love, these perceptive, methodologically varied readings both deepen our understanding of her career, at a moment when both critical and popular attention affirm her literary and cultural achievements, and make a cumulative case for the importance of her later work within that understanding.

Review of:

Jonathan R. Eller. *Becoming Ray Bradbury* (University of Illinois Press, 2011)

Jonathan R. Eller. *Ray Bradbury Unbound* (University of Illinois Press, 2014)

Stephen Gronert Ellerhoff. *Post-Jungian Psychology and the Short Stories of Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut: Golden Apples of the Monkey House* (Routledge, 2016)

David Seed. *Ray Bradbury* (University of Illinois Press, 2015)

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Though he famously disclaimed the genre label, Ray Bradbury remains arguably the best-known and most widely-read modern science fiction author. Since his death in 2012, at least three books about him or his work have been published: the second half of a two-volume biography, a critical overview of his science fiction, and a "post-Jungian" analysis of selected short stories by Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut. These early post-mortems address two broad questions about Bradbury's legacy. One has to do with the question of his relationship to the science fiction genre and his mediating role in helping to dissolve the strict walls between the "ghetto" of popular genre fiction and the literary mainstream. The second concerns his evolution in the 60s and 70s into a cultural spokesman, lending a lyrical visionary voice to the hard-nosed scientific and political projects of the Space Age. Though two of the books under review present themselves as comprehensive studies, none follow his career much past the early 1970s: the implication is that while he continued to publish new work up to the month before he died, and remained a widely-read author and popular public speaker, his real cultural work was done between the start of the Cold War and the landing on the Moon.

Boyhood, especially adolescent boyhood, was one of Bradbury's recurring themes, and as Jonathan Eller notes in his introduction to *Becoming Ray Bradbury*, the first volume of his biography, Bradbury's own boyhood became the subject of

"thousands of anecdotes" repeated in interviews, speeches, and personal essays as an origin myth of his own creativity. Though Eller acknowledges the challenges this self-mythologizing presents to the literary biographer, he grants these anecdotes some explanatory power, rather than critiquing, let alone psychoanalyzing, them. (Bradbury seems ripe for psychoanalysis: an author whose fiction often dwells on the transition from childhood to adulthood, who lived with his parents and slept in the same bed as his older brother until the age of 27, when he married and finally moved out, yet whose rare remarks about his family often seem to hold them at a distance. Eller, however, largely refrains.) But the real foundations of Eller's narrative are documentary, not only Bradbury's unpublished papers but his voluminous correspondence. This shapes the focus of Eller's study, which is particularly strong in detailing Bradbury's friendships, influences, and professional relationships and endeavors. Eller is director of the Center for Ray Bradbury Studies at IUPUI and author, with William Toupence, of the magisterial critical survey *Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction* (2004). While that earlier book attempted to construct a thesis about Bradbury as an author based on readings of the texts—including their revisions as they were republished—Eller's two volume biography is a more conventional literary biography, grounded in the life rather than in the work.

Bradbury's family moved from Waukegan, Illinois, to Los Angeles when he was 13 (the age of many of his protagonists), and in high school he became involved in a local science fiction fan organization, editing and writing for its fanzine. It is at this point that a documentary trail begins to grow, and Eller spends useful time on this critical juncture, when a boy's interest developed into a serious hobby and thence into a career. He traces how Bradbury's fanzine work, and a trip to the first international science fiction convention in NYC in 1939, put him in touch with writers and future editors who would help him start and sustain his career over the next two decades. After high school, Bradbury lived at home, worked a few hours a day at a newsstand, and wrote almost full-time, at his peak turning out a finished story a week. Eller claims that at one point Bradbury had 200 finished but unpublished stories in hand or in circulation: even a successful writer like Bradbury often had to send a story to dozens of potential outlets before selling it.

Bradbury's creative method was intuitive, based on capturing emotions and images as they arose from his subconscious. Eller notes the well-known influence of Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer* (1934) on this method, but also Bradbury's early reading of Somerset Maugham's account of his own reliance on "reverie" as a source of creativity. Consequently, though he wrote in multiple pulp genres, including science fiction and detective stories, it is not surprising that Bradbury's more successful early stories, his first sales to the "slicks" (wider-market and better-paying magazines that published fiction aimed at mainstream readers), and his first story collection, *Dark Carnival* (1947), were in the "weird" genre: contemporary gothic fantasies filtered through a style that emphasized metaphor and emotion. These successes led to the publication of his science fiction story sequence *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and a second collection of stories mixing science fiction, weird, and even more realistic contemporary fictions, *The Illustrated Man* (1951). Both sold well beyond usual science fiction audience and gained endorsements from mainstream critics and a few high-literary boosters like Christopher Isherwood.

As Eller tells it, Bradbury's success to this point confronted him with two challenges to his view of himself as a writer. The first was echoed by publishers, agents, and some (though not all) of his writer friends: could he apply his methods and strengths to producing a novel? Much of the second half of *Becoming Ray Bradbury* follows his struggle to do so. *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) began as a novella-length work that Bradbury famously wrote in nine days on a rented typewriter in the UCLA library basement, but its expansion into a still relatively short novel was the work of years of thinking, re-thinking, experimenting, and editorial feedback (though Bradbury apparently typed the revisions and extensions on the same rented library typewriters, as if to reaffirm the myth of the story's creation). During this same period, he struggled to produce a realistic novel about growing up in a small midwestern town, eventually abandoning the attempt in favor of another story sequence on the theme, *Dandelion Wine* (1957). Though he would publish subsequent novels, including *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962) and a clutch of slim late-career detective novels, Eller concludes that Bradbury's essentially lyric creative process was simply antithetical to the construction of sustained, complexly plotted fictions.

The long gestation, and ultimately mixed critical reception, of what many saw as the overstuffed nostalgia of *Dandelion Wine* highlights a second question about the literary status of Bradbury's fiction. While sensitive to the anxieties of mid-century existence, the nature of Bradbury's "creative instincts," Eller argues, meant that he "could not simply mourn the loss of traditional values in the Modernist fashion; the more extreme Postmodernist viewpoint, which celebrated the destruction of traditional forms of culture, was even more unthinkable" (170). Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach," with its uncertain invocation of romantic faith as a response to existential despair, was a touchstone for Bradbury (an early but never-completed novel project had the proposed title *Where Ignorant Armies Clash by Night*); trying to find an appropriate box for Bradbury, Eller settles on the term "neoromantic." Much of Bradbury's best work from the late 1940s and early 1950s is quite dark and bleak, but by couching these darker visions in the fantastic, and presenting them as lyric moments rather than a sustained vision, Bradbury was able to incorporate modernist energies while not fully signing on to the modernist vision. As Eller writes, "his forays into Modernism would be thematic rather than formal, focusing on antimaterialist yearnings for lost values, his evolving and complicated mythos of loss and triumph in the ever-expanding space frontier, and his always ambiguous encounters with death" (178).

The biography's second volume, *Ray Bradbury Unbound*, traces the decline, from the late 1950s through the early 1970s, in Bradbury's output of original fiction, even as his status as a public figure associated with a Kennedy-esque optimism about the future grew. As Eller explains, this optimism was based not so much on the promises of technology as on Bradbury's faith in the capacity of the human imagination, the same source he relied on for his own artistic inspiration. Bradbury had been captivated as a child by movies and had haunted the LA studios as an adolescent autograph hound, and his imagination had always been attracted to strong visual imagery. Living in L.A. and solicited by Hollywood as many other popular writers of the day were, he was eager to apply his talents to visual media; the pay, of course, was better too. But Bradbury's often frustrating attempts to move into movies, television, and theater disrupted the methodical working routine that had allowed him to produce a story a week in his heyday.

Eller's first volume makes clear the importance of mentors—fellow authors and sympathetic editors—in Bradbury's development as a writer. The first half of *Unbound* details Bradbury's relationships with three forceful non-literary personalities. Director John Huston provided Bradbury with his first—and ultimately most successful—opportunity to work in film, when he brought him to Ireland for six months to work on the script for *Moby Dick*. Bradbury followed this trying experience with a sojourn in Italy under the tutelage of Renaissance art scholar Bernard Berenson, where Bradbury found endorsement for what literary critic Gilbert Highet described as his "neoclassical fabulist" aesthetic. Back in Los Angeles, actor Charles Laughton (and later his wife Elsa Lanchester) encouraged him in various theatrical endeavors, which turned out to be personally if not financially rewarding. A leitmotif of the second volume, which continues a theme of the first, is Bradbury's talent for friendship: with almost humorous regularity, famous figures or celebrities are introduced with some variation on "with whom Bradbury had become close friends."

While Bradbury's successes as a fiction writer "unbound" him to pursue opportunities in other media, they also primed him to play the role of what Eller calls an "inspirational cultural force." In the 1950s he began to address university writing classes and science fiction fan audiences, discovering a talent for public speaking. Bradbury's first public expression of political opinion was a "Letter to the Republican Party" criticizing McCarthyism, published in *Variety* in 1952 (later in the *Nation*). In the context of the times, *Fahrenheit 451,* published a year later, was also an act of political protest. As Eller notes, Bradbury's defenses of free speech, and particularly of the value of books and imaginative work, were of a piece with his idealization of the imagination as a source of hope. As the paranoid 1950s turned into the Kennedy 1960s, Bradbury found that his romantic, metaphor-rich prose was a fitting rhetorical vehicle for the visionary optimism the Space Program offered amid a plethora of problems foreign and domestic. Bradbury eagerly volunteered his voice in support, sending his books to key Kennedy administration figures, many of whom, it turned out, were already fans. His essays appeared regularly in mainstream publications such as *Life* magazine, often presenting the exploration of space as an avenue out of the vexing problems of the day. He was asked to write the narration for the American

pavilion of the 1965 World's Fair, which celebrated American technological prowess as the vehicle to a brighter global future. Eller's two volume biography winds up in the early 1970s, with Bradbury providing color commentary on the moon landings.

Eller develops a detailed and sensitive account of Bradbury's perception of his own relationship to his times and to the literary landscape in which he wrote. Not surprisingly given his biographical approach, he offers less insight into the cultural tides of the day that made the mainstream reading public receptive to fantasy and science fiction, and particularly to Bradbury's unique iteration of these genres. Vonnegut and Tolkien, and even more solidly SF authors as Heinlein and Asimov were also finding audiences beyond genre fandom for speculative and fantastic fiction. The explanations for this are complicated, of course, but Bradbury's popularity was not just a function of the intrinsic qualities of his fiction but of the times in which it arrived.

Another question Eller leaves unanswered—perhaps it's unanswerable—is how Bradbury developed his distinctive lyrical style. He notes some possible sources, such as Bradbury's early interest in the fiction of Thomas Wolfe, and spends some time showing how Bradbury learned, with the help of a handful of early mentors, to trim stylistic excesses, a common affliction of young writers. But the question of what made Bradbury such a distinctive stylist, which is certainly central to an understanding of his literary career, may ultimately be (perhaps for any writer) one of alchemical difficulty.

David Seed's brief critical survey, *Ray Bradbury*, an entry in the University of Illinois Press' *Modern Masters of Science Fiction* series, also takes up the related questions of genre and culture that Eller's assessment of Bradbury's legacy raises. Seed's book has much to offer, though it sometimes seems a bit hastily assembled: there are occasional lapses in basic sentence editing, and the conclusion seems oddly abrupt. The structure is somewhat unwieldy: the first and last chapters form a coherent argument situating Bradbury in the broader genre landscape, while the middle two chapters analyze his two most popular and studied longer texts, *The Martian Chronicles* and *Fahrenheit 451*, both published in the early 1950s. In both cases Seed provides useful cultural context, as well as persuasive analyses of the works themselves.

While Eller argues that science fiction was a congenial but not the only form for Bradbury's intuitive approach to imaginative writing, Seed tries to reclaim science fiction as the essential genre in which Bradbury's imagination dwelled. It was the genre that had sparked his childhood imagination, and it remained for him a vehicle more for fantasizing than speculating. For Bradbury, science fiction tropes were primarily symbolic, used to explore broader social and psychological themes, and his fiction tended to eschew technical details (unlike many of his fellow science fiction authors, he had no particular scientific or technical training—or interests, for that matter). Nevertheless, Seed argues that despite Bradbury's occasional claims that he did not really write science fiction, "his positive statements about SF's capacity to distance us from familiar reality among other functions outweighed disclaimers" (37).

The first chapter, "Out of the Science Fiction Ghetto," explores how Bradbury managed to expand the boundaries and audience for science fiction. Seed notes that Bradbury was part of a general emergence of science fiction from the pulp genre "ghetto" in the post-war years (part of the explanation is economic: the end of World War II made paper cheaper, leading to a boom in the publication of inexpensive paperback books). While it did not quite acquire the cachet of "literature," science fiction seemed to be seeping into the wider popular culture, not just in fiction and film, but in the sudden advent of technological change from the living room and kitchen to the headlines of the Cold War. Bradbury justified his literary ambitions in part by insisting that "this is a Science Fiction era we live in" (29). More optimistically, he argued, science fiction was a "literature of ideas," and America was a "country of ideas": as Seed writes, "Bradbury related the emergence of the genre [within America] to a national tradition of experiment and speculation" (38).

Seed surveys Bradbury's writing on a number of traditional science fiction themes and tropes, such as time travel and robots. He tries to situate Bradbury's non-science-fictional work, such as the romantic realism of *Dandelion Wine*, within the notions about creativity that informed his science fiction. Still, Bradbury found himself somewhat anomalous within the science fiction trends of the time, more interested in rockets as symbols than as material possibilities. As Asimov said, "People who didn't read Science Fiction … found that they could read and understand Bradbury" (qtd in

Seed 39). Seed addresses the question of the nature of Bradbury's science fiction in the final and strongest chapter of his book, "Bradbury on Space." There may be no more fundamental trope in the genre than the setting of stories elsewhere than on Earth, so the title of the chapter may seem at first glance almost cheeky, but Seed nicely traces space's emotional meaning to Bradbury from his childhood responses to films like *Things to Come* (1936) through his evolution into a Whitmanesque public booster of the space program from the 1960s onward (well after his output of science fiction had dwindled to a trickle). This chapter neatly condenses—and in fact extends—the narrative that Eller's two volumes attempt to stitch together.

The reading of *The Martian Chronicles* in the second chapter is arranged thematically. Following Bradbury's lead, Seed regards Mars as a "mirror" reflecting both contemporary concerns, such as the fear of nuclear war and racial conflict, and perennial themes, such as the nature of home and the inevitability of death. Seed's discussion of the cultural and literary contexts of *Fahrenheit 451* is more concise but in many ways more thorough than Eller's, which retains a narrower focus on Bradbury's own opinions about McCarthyism and the value of books. Seed situates Bradbury's first actual novel within the broader cultural responses to the Cold War, noting that the novel "belongs in that body of SF published just after the Second World War, which gradually took over the function of social criticism previously performed by realist fiction" (93). The chapter reviews and occasionally takes issue with some of the voluminous criticism of the novel. It concludes with an extended look at Truffaut's film of the novel. Throughout, Seed is sensitive to the influence of film on Bradbury's style.

In contrast to Eller's and Seed's career surveys, Steven Ellerhoff's *Post-Jungian Psychology and the Short Stories of Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut* seems at first glance to squeeze itself into a pretty tight niche—or three. But it in fact proves to a useful effort to contextualize these two popular writers within the post-war American culture in which they arose and thrived. While Seed incorporates such contexts into his readings of Bradbury's two most read longer works, Ellerhoff approaches the question thematically: identifying "myths" that each author seems interested in, and reading individual stories as part of an ongoing interrogation of those myths. His

most innovative move is to adopt the practice of reading the stories in the contexts of the original periodical publications in which they appeared, noting relevant cultural meanings in the illustrations and even advertising that surrounded the texts.

Pairing these two authors (who, Ellerhoff claims, met in person only twice) is also a clever move. Born two years apart, both first became well-known in the post-war years as science fiction writers whose reputations then transcended the genre, though in different ways. Bradbury remained identified in the popular imagination (if not always by his peers) as a science fiction writer whose work nevertheless garnered mainstream popularity and some measure of critical respect. Though Vonnegut's novels retained science fictional or fantastic elements, they were generally regarded as popular literary works. The ultimate arbiters of genre classification, the bookstore shelves, placed Bradbury in the sci fi section, while Vonnegut settled into the far right-hand of fiction/literature. Stylistically, Bradbury's writing is lyrical and rich with metaphor and poetic cadences, while Vonnegut tends towards an understated comic plain style, and the rare lyric flights are generally ironized. Vonnegut's dominant mode is satire, but much of Bradbury's fiction also critiques "myths" of American culture in its moment of global ascendance, albeit in a different key.

A crucial difference in their development, Ellerhoff argues, was their experiences during World War II. Vonnegut lived the horrors of war first hand, and while he was away at war, his mother committed suicide. Bradbury was spared military service due to poor eyesight and spent the war in his parents' house in Los Angeles. In Ellerhoff's "post-Jungian" reading, this difference is expressed through the archetypes or myths that each interrogates in his work. His two chapters on Vonnegut deal with the myths surrounding war and heroism, and on the fragmentation of the American myths of life, liberty, and happiness. The two chapters on Bradbury focus on stories that deal with myths of family life and stories incorporating the archetypal figure of the sun as a symbol of wholeness and Jungian individuation.

The book begins with a chapter reviewing Jungian and post-Jungian approaches to the study of literature, useful in its own right. Ellerhoff makes a particular defense of Joseph Campbell against critics who, he argues, have misunderstood the complexity of Campbell's views based on narrow readings of his most popular works.

Throughout the book, Ellerhoff invokes a pop culture simile from Wendy Doniger to explain how myth manifests itself in cultural artifacts: "'Like the Invisible Man, who could only be seen when he was wrapped in bandages or dressed in a hat and a coat, the archetype can only be 'seen' when it is enveloped in the bandages that each cultural manifestation swathes it in'" (qtd in Ellerhoff 10).

Ellerhoff's actual readings, though, do not always clarify the relationship between the myth or archetype and its "cultural manifestation." The two Bradbury chapters illustrate this difficulty. The first discusses seven well-known Bradbury stories dealing with family dynamics. Ellerhoff's readings are detailed and fruitful, and this chapter contains some of his most effective uses of the contextual advertisements published around them in magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, marketed to upper middle-class white family audiences. But the "myths" generating expectations of how such "normal" families should look, and which, as Ellerhoff demonstrates, the stories interrogate in penetrating ways, seem so specific to a particular historical moment, and even to a particular class of readers living within that moment, that "myth" seems the wrong term for them. By contrast, in his second Bradbury chapter, Ellerhoff reads the sun symbolism in the four stories he discusses as a fairly classic, ahistorical Jungian symbol of individuation or "wholeness." He makes some attempts to situate this set of stories, all of which are set in a clearly science fictional future, in the historical context of the space race of the 1950s and 1960s, but these connections seem extraneous to the power and meanings of the central symbol.

Ellerhoff limits his attention to short stories published by both authors between 1945 and 1963. This makes it possible to situate the stories in the shared cultural settings represented by the periodicals in which they originally appeared. Otherwise, though, it seems a somewhat artificial limitation, especially when dealing with Vonnegut, who in fact published very few short stories, mostly at the beginning of his career; inevitably, Ellerhoff is forced to bring in corroborating evidence from Vonnegut's novels. Ellerhoff also admits that short stories lend themselves to his critical method: as he explains, "Jungian interpretations require a lot of space on the page," so such analyses are more feasible with shorter texts. For example,

Ellerhoff often begins the readings with etymological analyses of characters' names, though these tend not to be very persuasive (he concludes his final chapter with a brief self-parody of this strategy, on sun symbolism, discussing the relevance of Bradbury first name—Ray). Ellerhoff offers a stronger justification for focusing on the genre in his opening chapter, where he invokes Charles May's argument that the short story is a more primitive form of narrative, closer to the mythic desire to transcend mundane experience in moments of epiphanic insight or connection to the sacred.

There is a fitness to the fact that Bradbury's final publication before his death was an autobiographical essay in a special Science Fiction issue of the slickest of the "slicks," *The New Yorker* (June 4 & 11, 2012), where it appeared alongside works of or on science fiction by Ursula Le Guin, Margaret Atwood, Junot Diaz, Colson Whitehead, and China Miéville. The books reviewed here, particularly Eller's and Seed's, offer important insights into Bradbury's role in the dismantling of genre "ghetto" walls that has been so crucial to the evolution of contemporary fiction. They also expand our understanding of the complex relationships between the lyrical visions of Bradbury's fiction and the experiences, fears, and fantasies of his childhood and of the times in which he wrote his defining works. Of course, we would not still be reading his work and asking these questions if Bradbury had not developed the distinctive style that accommodated his imaginative visions so evocatively: none of the books under review make a serious attempt at analyzing the sources, formal features, or stylistic effects of Bradbury's writing. Taken together, though, these critics suggest a paradox in Bradbury's accomplishment: while his success owed a lot to timing, to offering a literary voice that responded to the anxieties and desires of the post-War decades, he was able to transcend the genre "ghetto" thanks to his talent for using genre tropes to explore common human questions. Thus, Bradbury's future reception remains an open question, dependent in part on whether his ability to aestheticize anxieties about the future in accessible works of fiction, and his optimistic faith in the potential of the human imagination, remain credible responses to future conditions.

Feminist Aesthetics at the End of Critique

Review of:

Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr, eds., *This Book Is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 280pp.

Georgina Colby, *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2016), 312pp.

Ellen E. Berry, *Women's Experimental Writing: Negative Aesthetics and Feminist Critique* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 224pp.

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In 1989, Rita Felski decried the possibility of a feminist aesthetic. Arguing that feminist politics could hew to no single "normative theory" of aesthetic form, she took aim at critics who celebrated the subversive possibilities of antirealism and other experimental modes (Felski 1). Specifically, of course, she was responding to Toril Moi, who had argued in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) for the disruptive potential of avant-garde textual practice by writers like Virginia Woolf and Monique Wittig. Moi herself called attention to the shortcomings of Anglo-American feminism's liberal humanist impulses, championing instead what she saw as the more radical provocations coming out of France. Witheringly, she rejected American feminists' insistence on consciousness-raising realism, arguing that humanism itself and, by extension, realist aesthetics are hopelessly implicated in patriarchal oppression. Felski and Moi stood in opposing camps: one invested in the sociology of texts and another committed to literary hermeneutics. In today's terminologies, we might say that Feski practiced a certain kind of surface reading, while Moi read form as an ideological symptom.[1]

[1] See Felski 1989, Moi 1985, and Best and Marcus.

Thirty years later, Felski and Moi are allied in the broad project of postcriticism. Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015) unpacks how literary criticism after theory became enmeshed with a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that turns readers into paranoid sleuths, calling instead for a reading practice that recognises the implication of literary texts within a network of interconnected—and affectively invested—objects, persons, and institutions (11). Moi's *Revolution of the Ordinary* (2017) picks up Wittgenstein's later notions of language-games and meaning as use to explore how ordinary language philosophy can inform literary criticism after critique. Both celebrate postcriticism's flexibility, its pragmatism, its inclusiveness. We might well ask, though, what becomes of feminism's legacies in such a critical atmosphere. How should we handle the sleuthing that gave us, for example, Kate Millett's justified excoriation of Lawrence, Miller, and Mailer? Or that allowed us to see the fragility of Gilbert and Gubar's secret sisterhood?[2] How do we now frame the second wave's productive unveilings and righteous exposures in a postcritical age of affect, flatness, distance, and surface?

The books under consideration here—Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr's collection on *Feminist Print Culture*, Georgina Colby on *Kathy Acker*, and Ellen Berry on *Women's Experimental Writing*—participate in the larger project of reconciling second- and third-wave feminist aesthetics with the contemporary turn toward descriptive studies. Each reconsiders the relationship between feminist experimentalism and the wide range of political and philosophical motivations that underwrote feminist literature in the latter half of the twentieth century. Breaking with the critical orthodoxy of symptomatic reading in which literatures support or subvert the ideological matrices in which they are embedded, these authors seek to understand late-twentieth century feminist aesthetics not as expressions of some deeper ideological unity or disunity but, rather, as heterogeneous and contingent engagements at the intersection of aesthetics and politics.[3] To varying degrees and, indeed, with varying levels of self-consciousness, these projects take part in what Heather Love

[2] See Millett 1970, Gilbert and Gubar 1979.

[3] See Best and Marcus; Felski 2015.

has called "flat reading," or a mode of critical attention that privileges description over interpretation (Love 375).

Feminist critics in the mid- to late-80s—just a decade after Patricia Meyer Spacks, Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar argued for women's literature as an object of study and a category unto itself—negotiated very recent history indeed when they tackled the relation of aesthetics and politics. The project of recovering, analysing, and canonising women's literatures as distinct from the masculinist traditions that excluded them was undertaken alongside the various, often competing, political projects that defined the so-called second wave. Debates about real-world theory and praxis frequently carried over into debates about critical method. Today, the "descriptive turn"—reinforced by object oriented ontology, actor network theory, distant reading, and the other "new sociologies of literature"—has coincided with reinvigorated commitment to an inclusive feminist politics (Love 373). That feminism itself is motivated by understanding the systemic and material inequalities that underly everything from the wage gap to epidemic sexual violence. Looking back toward the often similar immediate pressures that galvanised second-wave activists, scholars have begun to re-evaluate that activism and its attendant aesthetic productions with an eye to internationalism, local organising, global and regional mobility, queer politics, antiracism, and decolonisation.[4] The books under review here belong to the same matrix of descriptive criticism.

Harker and Konchar Farr situate second-wave feminist writing within a vibrant and diverse field of feminist print production, and in so doing demonstrate the polyvalent expressions of feminist principles and sentiment in the 1960s and 70s. Colby's extended reading of Acker sidesteps the vexing question of whether her aesthetics are politically valuable by focusing meticulous attention on how the intricacies of her textual experimentation draw on a long tradition of avant-garde practices, some explicitly feminist, some not. And Berry identifies how writers like Acker participate in a peculiar form of avant-garde artistry—what Berry calls a "negative aesthetic"—that turns modernist experimentalism to feminist ends through deft manipulations

[4] See Bracke, et al; Malony and Nelson; Maxwell and Shields; and Downing and Cox.

of formal disruption and affect. Each of these studies offers a compelling reconsideration of feminist discourse and women's writing in the latter half of the twentieth century. Taken together, they bring to light how critical orthodoxy around the turn of the millennium oversimplified the range of second-wave feminist aesthetic practice. They also suggest that the ideological matrices of criticism and literary history in the aftermath of the second wave obscured the lasting influence of feminist aesthetic innovation, literary communities, and material networks.

This Book is an Action is the most concretely historicist of the three. Taking as its starting point the observation that the literatures of second-wave feminism have been too often judged culturally meaningful but aesthetically bereft, the volume recuperates a feminist print culture that amounted to nothing less than an "American literary renaissance" (2). The editors look to the emergence of publishing and distribution venues owned and operated by women at the height of the second wave in order to highlight some of the ways feminist discourse in the period encouraged formal innovation, avant-garde experimentation, and new modes of consciousness-raising through literature. Ecumenical in their attention to form and genre, the essays in *This Book Is an Action* are divided into two sections: the first outlines some of the material structures that supported feminist print culture in the 60s, 70s, and 80s; the second comprises readings of individual figures or texts, pointing to new modes of analysis opened up by consideration of "the feminist culture of letters" described in part one (14). The volume's stand-out essays are Jennifer Gilley's comparative case studies of mainstream and independent feminist publishing, Agatha Beins's analysis of intertextuality in feminist newsletters, Julia Enszer's history of feminist book distribution, Yung-Hsing Wu's assessment of close-reading's importance to feminist consciousness-raising projects, and Lisa Botshon's reading of politicised metafictional play and generic experimentation in the work of Anne Roiphe. The volume's contribution to feminist print history is an obvious strength. More subtly, however, the volume also demonstrates how better understanding second-wave publishing history can reframe under-appreciated formal features in even the most canonical feminist texts.

To get a sense of the volume's handling of publishing history, we might look to an exemplary chapter: Gilley's reading of *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (1970) and *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). Taking as case studies the publishing histories of these two feminist anthologies—one by a corporate press and one by a series of independent women-run presses—Gilley unpacks some of the complications writers and editors faced when they tried to infuse publishing practice with feminist politics. Insightfully, she argues that to understand feminist publishing, one has to move beyond thinking in the binary terms that polarised some debates about feminism's relationship to mainstream (male-dominated) publishing houses. Further, and more pointedly, she suggests that long-standing debates about corporate money and "the potential deradicalization" of feminist content published in mainstream venues miss the point that, as Rita Mae Brown put it, the apparent incongruity between feminist aims and corporate ones was an invitation to "be imaginative" (30). Gilley goes on to outline how Robin Morgan demanded that *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (*SIP*) be put together by an all-woman production team at Random House, that the book be published straight to paperback to increase accessibility, and that all royalties from the book be redistributed back into movement collectives through a transparent fund Sisterhood Is Powerful (SIP), Inc. Her Random House experiment was only successful to a point, but it highlights the ways feminist authors and editors could increase distribution and visibility while remaining committed to principles like collectivism, equity, and anticapitalism. As Gilley puts it, "although Morgan's creation of the SIP Fund with her royalties did not effect any kind of political change at Random House, it did pioneer a way in which the resources of a corporate press could be harnessed to benefit feminism, not just as a distributor of ideas, but as an economic engine" (34). In contrast, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa refused to compromise when they published *This Bridge Called My Back*, and the anthology went out of print three times, with three independent feminist publishers, before being acquired by SUNY Press for the 2015 Fourth Edition. While granting that "an anthology of bilingual writings by third-world lesbians would undoubtedly never be a bestseller in the way *SIP* was," Gilley portrays Moraga and Anzaldúa's decision

to publish with independent presses as a studied one privileging Moraga's commitment to turning "feminist theory into action by supporting a lesbian business and altering traditional economic paradigms" over Anzaldúa's keenness to reach a wider audience through a mainstream publisher (36). Of course, the problem, Anzaldúa reminded Moraga again and again as one feminist publisher after another went out of business and *This Bridge* came in and out of print, is that in order to reconfigure the economics of publishing, one needs access to the grounds of those economics. In other words, in order to redistribute wealth, you have to get your hands on it. Nevertheless, through uncompromising tenacity, Moraga and Anzaldúa kept their anthology in circulation, and today it is hailed as a landmark of feminist thought. In each case, feminist principles shaped how authors and editors negotiated the male-dominated world of publishing with ingenuity and creativity in order to expand the readership for feminist writers.

Essays like Gilley's, or like Enszer's history of the Women in Distribution network, shift our attention from the ideological content of second-wave feminist texts to the networks and local communities that supported them. Thus even readings that attend more explicitly to formal or thematic features than to material history—like Botshon's analysis of *Up the Sandbox!* (1970), for example—are informed by a publishing landscape that allowed women writers to develop a shared set of tropes, syntaxes, and rhetorics by which to communicate both to one another and to ever wider audiences. These shared languages, the volume makes clear, did not necessarily reflect coherent ideological commitments or unified political aims. Rather, they emerged in an unstable and contingent nexus of artists and activists. Though one wishes the editors had exerted more pressure in ensuring contributors attended explicitly to the print-historical emphasis of the collection, Harker and Konchar Farr's volume will be important for scholars looking to understand the manifold histories of feminist print culture as well as the intersections between publishing institutions and activist networks.

With *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible*, we turn our attention from activist publishing to the materially vibrant and disruptive aesthetics of one post-punk feminist. The great strength of Colby's analysis is the set of powerfully illuminating

through-lines she draws between modernist avant-garde practice and later practices engaging explicitly with poststructuralist theory, second-wave feminism, and punk aesthetics. Dismissing earlier research on Acker's aesthetics as too easily consigning Acker to a postmodern experimentalism "conflated with" poststructuralist theory, Colby instead situates Acker in a long modernism, exploring how her work develops ideas from Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gertrude Stein, Hannah Höch, Viktor Shklovsky, Maya Deren, Luis Buñuel, and others—often filtered through figures like Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Jackson Mac Low, Eva Hesse, Denise Riley, and Elaine Scarry (Colby 16). In its substance, Colby's book demonstrates provocatively how Acker's peculiar engagement with her own contemporaries in practice and theory drew her into a modernist lineage that we sometimes cavalierly dismiss when we assign the "post" of "postmodern." The continuities between pre- and postwar avant-gardism illustrated in Acker's difficult and coyly erudite texts should give us pause whenever we are tempted to return to hard lines of periodic division that drew critics in the 70s and 80s to argue so strenuously for the difference between modernism and its rebellious child. Writers like Acker challenge those discontinuities, and Colby has cottoned on to how some of Acker's readers get seduced by her apparently guileless appropriation of philosophical contemporaries like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri or Luce Irigaray. One can raise an eyebrow at Colby's more or less absolute dismissal of Acker's self-avowedly postmodern intertexts, but her correction towards a long modernism is a good thing on balance—for Acker criticism, surely, but also for our broader understanding of postwar experimentalism.

In unpacking so fastidiously Acker's attentiveness to Fluxus, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, automatic writing, cut-up, typesetting and paste-up, ekphrasis, montage, and a staggeringly wide range of appropriative practices, Colby reminds us that writers produce texts in specific multivalent contexts. They do not set out to establish texts which exemplify *x* or *y* feature critics identify with periodic taxonomies. Rather, they work through and between intersections arising out of chance encounters, idiosyncratic affinities, and curious intertextual wanderings. Thus, the appropriative techniques of *Don Quixote* (1986) differ from those of *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978) which in turn differ from those of *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990). In *Blood and*

Guts, Acker's "(r)écriture feminine" disrupts European male avant-garde discourse to express an anxiety about women's self-description gleaned from readings of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and (precociously) Judith Butler (Colby 83–90). "Acker's experiments [in appropriative collage and disruptive typography]," Colby writes of *Blood and Guts*, "voice indeterminacy and point to the impossible by recognising the space as part of the composition and not subordinate to the mark" (98). In *Don Quixote*, by contrast, Acker's rewriting—what Colby, following Kristeva, identifies as "paragrammatic writing-through"—is generative and relational, exposing the chaotic networks through and within which literary texts emerge (116). Colby likens Acker's practice in *Don Quixote* to feminist translation, and highlights, following Caroline Bergvall, Acker's exploitation of the "deviant" potentials of translation more generally (128). Colby's reading of Acker's Catullus is deft, indeed, and its paratactical opposition with Louis Zukofsky's "transliterations" of the same source brings out all the more sharply Acker's pointed innovation (127). The modes of "writing-through" explored in *Don Quixote*, then, find an even fuller expression in *In Memoriam*, where Acker goes beyond exposing the chaotic networks of literary history and develops a "practice of reintegrative intertextuality, whereby intertextuality functions to create communal relations between the voices of the narratives" (166). Thus we find in Acker's rewriting of Arthur Rimbaud and Mrasaki Shikibu "a gesture of intimacy, textual relationality, and solidarity," a rewriting which is "expansive, rather than reductive" (166, 167). Colby has here demonstrated a range of practice that refuses, in its own right, reduction to the umbrella term "appropriation" favoured in some of the earlier criticism.

Colby's work will be a touchstone not only for its careful attention to the specificity of Acker's experimental approaches but also for its rich documentation of her archive at Duke University. Colby's treatment of typography and hand-pasted layout in *Blood and Guts*, of illustration in *In Memoriam*, and of ekphrastic abstraction in Acker's late work, for example, will be essential for Acker scholars seeking to understand the materiality of her writerly practice and her conception of the interdependence of literary language with the plastic arts.

The book's weakness, on the other hand, lies in its uneven argumentation with respect to modernism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism. Colby's articulation of Acker's place in a long modernist tradition is belied by her frequent reliance on poststructuralist theory, and the addition of contemporary artists, writers, and theorists further muddies the literary-historical waters. The book's broad argumentative aims could have been clarified by closer attention to periodicity throughout. If Acker is a modernist, for example, then does Colby mean to imply that by dissociating second wave feminism from a radical modernist avant-garde, we have misunderstood it as well? She doesn't say, and one gets the sense that perhaps the book's insistence on modernism's importance and postmodernism's irrelevance is cover for a critic unwilling to re-litigate old debates about period, politics, and form. In that, though it could be more self-conscious about the fact, *Writing the Impossible* stands in good company, a timely addition to a body of work focused on heterogeneity and complexity rather than on hegemonic conceptions of literary style and always-already belated assignations of writers to periodic holding cells.

Finally, *Women's Experimental Writing* is the most ambitious of the books considered here. Drawing on formally radical texts by Valerie Solanas, Acker, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Chantal Chawaf, Jeanette Winterson, and Lynda Barry, Berry argues for the importance of an alternative tradition to the realist consciousness-raising traditions privileged in much scholarship on women's writing, multi-ethnic literatures, queer writing, and graphic memoir. Moving beyond the kinds of purely formal disruption central to deconstruction and other postmodernisms, Berry defines the general category of "negative aesthetics" such that it incorporates as well negativities of affect and concern: "e.g., an emphasis on extreme, bizarre, or violent situations especially involving the female body; the traumatic and pathological nature of human relations within contemporary capitalist heteropatriarchy; anarchic and apocalyptic visions" (2). Thus, Berry brings together the formal disruptions of poststructuralist theory with everyday "ugly feelings" to offer a novel understanding of how negativity provides a capacious critical framework for reading texts as wildly divergent as Cha's *Dictee* (1982) and Solanas's *SCUM*

Manifesto (1968).[5] Indeed, the study's shared attention to form and affect grounds its most provocative conclusions. Positioning her work in a rich lineage of scholarship on women's experimental writing by critics such as Marianne DeKoven, Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, Susan Rubin Suleiman, and Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue, Berry also takes cues from the "antisocial turn" of queer critics like Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam. Halberstam's "shadow feminisms"—or cultural expressions that "dwell in the murky waters of a counter-intuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal" (Halberstam 2)—mark a particularly visible line threading Berry's six case studies, from Solanas's "homicidal feminism" and Acker's "fatal strategies" to Winterson's "pathological" melancholia and Barry's "hillbilly gothic" (Berry 9, 125, 129).

The most successful elements of these readings incorporate sophisticated reflections on how negative feeling works alongside formal techniques such as antinarrative, deconstruction, self-reflexivity, and elision to define an aesthetic peculiar to feminist writing. Affect, in other words, distinguishes a feminist negative aesthetic from the experimental poetics of a masculinist avant-garde. Berry's insight produces some powerful readings—most notably of Chantal Chawaf's *Redemption* (1989) and Lynda Barry's *Cruddy* (1999). Her lucid and incisive assessment of Chawaf's self-aware manipulation of horror tropes in the service of feminist theory centres the book, cementing the force of the chapters preceding it and illuminating the implications of those that come after. "Chawaf's use of innovative non realist narrative techniques and an extremely intimate close-up method," Berry writes, "force the reader not simply to contemplate [the novel's pathological central character] Charles's life-destroying behavior but also to inhabit the state of abjection it so relentlessly explores, to 'feel it,' in Benjamin's words" (102). Thus, Chawaf "rewrites the universalist focus of Kristeva's theory of abjection and insistently politicizes it [...], symbolizing a historically specific type of violence and elaborating the pathology of self-other relations at the heart of certain contemporary heterosexual relations so that our culture might

[5] See Ngai. Though Berry doesn't cite it directly, Sianne Ngai's reading of late-modernist anxiety and unrest certainly set the stage for Berry's inquiry into how negative affect inflects later experimentalisms.

evolve beyond them" (103). Chawaf's unflinching handling of abjection and her self-conscious attention to poststructuralist theory provides the clearest example of how postwar and contemporary experimental women's writing can bend affect to the purposes of highly developed revolutionary critique. Berry goes beyond the simple equation of experimental form and experimental politics to show, instead, how ugly affect contributes to the political power of feminist theory-fiction.

Women's Experimental Writing's particular reliance on affect becomes clearer in later chapters than it is in earlier ones. The chapter on Acker, for example, a version of which was first published in 2004, frames the violence of *Blood and Guts in High School* less in terms of feeling and readerly engagement than in terms of exception. Turning to Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Berry identifies the "howl" of pain in *Blood and Guts*'s coming-of-age disarticulation not so much with a productively ugly feeling but, rather, with the unspeakability of an abjection that in its otherness defines normalcy: "the exclusionary matrix of heterosexuality," she writes, "requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings and uninhabitable zones of social life that are necessary to to circumscribe the domain of the normal subject" (59). Or, in Butler's terms, "the threat and disruption of abjection is a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility" (qtd. in Berry 59). Janey's "'DEFIES DEFIES DEFIES NOT THOUGHT, BUT DEFIES every howl of pain is a howl of defiance'" fills a structural position, marking "the site where signification and the corporal begins," but in filling this structural position, it does not drive the politicisation of Acker's extreme negative aesthetics in the way affect unbalances the too-simple homology of revolutionary form and politics (58). This chapter bears the traces of an earlier critical moment, and one wonders how it might have been nuanced by an engagement with the kind of detail-abundant archival reading Colby offers. One senses, too, in the chapters on Cha and Winterson a bit of tension between the book's attention to anger in particular and its treatment of formal negation—*Dictee*'s mournful absences, *Written on the Body*'s (1992) indeterminate "they." Indeed, *Women's Experimental Writing* itself inhabits something of a liminal space—somewhere between symptom and surface, between the witnessing and identification of a feminist humanism and the flatness

of postcritical description. Between, too, the insistence of certain second-wave thinkers on the category of "woman" even as they trouble the boundaries of that domain, and the openness of intersectional and radically non-conforming twenty-first century activism. The many modalities of negativity employed in these readings allow for a flexibility of critical frame that leaves the study's overall critical position—and at times its political valence—somewhat unfocussed. That said, critics going forward will find much to admire in Berry's subtle attention to the texts she reads and to the plays of expression, affect, and form that energise them.

Though in some ways, these three books are as heterogenous as the literary communities and strategies they describe, taken together they shed light on some of the ways our current descriptive "moods" (as Felski might put it) facilitate more open consideration of the contributions and shortcomings of late twentieth century feminist expression.[6] They add, of course, to the historical record, and they do so with welcome distance. But they also suggest that there's more to learn from the so-called second wave, that reevaluating the community-building strategies writers, artists, and activists employed in the 70s and 80s can teach us something about today's intersectional feminist communities, even as the latter inhabit digital rather than mimeographed media environs. Instead of outlining the ideological or political failures of prior feminist communities, descriptivism allows us to explore how ideas travel, how social networks were made and unmade, and how political and philosophical arguments get translated into aesthetic practice. We find in second-wave print culture the roots of today's Instagram and Tumblr activist-artists. In Acker's avant-garde mash-ups, we might see a precursor to feminist meme culture. Chawaf's genre-bending abjection might find good company with Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) or Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018).

Indeed, throughout these volumes, autotheory is a spectral presence. Without explicitly acknowledging the prehistory they are writing, the critics gathered here contribute to a fuller understanding of the communities and practices that inform some recent quite provocative explorations at the intersection of criticism, memoir,

[6] See Felski 2015.

fiction, and politics—hybrid works like Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) or Rachel Cusk's *Outline* (2014). If critics of a particular moment too easily identified second-wave feminist discourse with consciousness-raising autobiography or realism, or if they, conversely, too simply identified aesthetic subversion with political progressiveness, critics and creatives today revel in the porousness of theory and practice, art criticism and its object, politics and poetics. In their attentiveness to the materiality of feminist aesthetics, to the flexibility of avant-garde practices, and to imbrication of affect with literary form, Harker, Konchar Farr, Colby, and Berry have begun to historicise our current enthusiasm for experimentation in critical-creative synergy.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Keane, A, Miller, J and Muth, K 2020 Review Essays on Recent Scholarship: Keane on Morrison and Love; Miller on Bradbury and his Times; Muth on ReDescribing Feminist Aesthetics. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature,* 8(1): 1, 1–35. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.gaddis.1994

Published: 24 April 2020