Jane Elliott's Previous Publications


Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory

Representing National Time

Jane Elliott
Introduction

The simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise is something in which there has been depressingly little belief of late. For all the intellectual enthusiasm for change manifest in the debates about postmodernism, there is probably at present less of a sense that things might actually “proceed otherwise” in Western capitalist societies... than at any time since the early 1950s.

—Peter Osborne, “The Politics of Time”

 Allegories are far less often the dull systems that they are reputed to be than they are symbolic power struggles.

—Angus Fletcher, Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode

In the final pages of the flagship women’s liberation bestseller, Marilyn French’s The Women’s Room (1979), the narrator recounts a recurring dream that encapsulates the novel’s central dilemma. In the dream, the narrator is chased by a rapist and eventually runs to the police for help. The police place her in an empty apartment and insist that she will be safe once the door is locked. The catch is that the door can’t be unlocked from the inside, so if the narrator locks the rapist out she will also trap herself inside. Given the absolute emptiness of the apartment in which the narrator is supposed to take refuge, locking out the rapist means locking out everything else as well, so that the narrator faces a devil’s choice between a world in which she will be raped and no world at all.

Read as a political parable, this dream presents a shockingly grim picture of the fate of second-wave feminism: when every form of resistance is also a form of domination, there can be no viable avenue for transformation in women’s lives. Moreover, if attempting to shut out oppression means retreating to a space defined solely by its emptiness—that is, shutting out the world entirely—then the appalling corollary is that oppression is the world. Once domination is subtracted, it seems, there is simply nothing left. In the face of these two equally untenable alternatives, there can be no way forward and no way back, leaving the women’s liberation movement stilled in its tracks—merely marking time in a world where the possibility of change has been eradicated. While the narrator’s dream presents this horrific vision in capsule form, The Women’s Room as a whole returns again
and again to this sense of stalemate, inscribing the emptiness of a time in which positive action, much less positive change, seems impossible.

In passages such as these, The Women’s Room describes the sense of negativity and malfunction that often appears to accompany the experience of time when transformation is foreclosed—when we do not believe that “things might proceed otherwise,” as Peter Osborne puts it in one of the headnotes of this chapter.¹ Like a prisoner marking off days on a cell wall, the narrator of The Women’s Room finds that time without change is merely a means of measuring the duration of one’s entrapment and hence a kind of punishment in and of itself.² I refer to this experience of time devoid of significant change as static time.³ As the following chapters will illustrate, the problem of static time forms a recurring trope across the body of popular feminist fiction, linking together novels as disparate as The Stepford Wives (1972) and The Joy Luck Club (1989). From the white, middle-class housewife stuck in repetitive domestic labor to the woman of color haunted by the traumas of history, the popular feminist literary vision turns on the experience of time without meaningful change, consistently representing women’s oppression as a function of their experience of time.⁴

While we might expect this trend to develop during the long backlash against feminism that began in the early 1980s, this depiction of time divorced from change takes center stage in novels published as early as 1972, the high-water mark of second-wave feminist energy and promise. Feminist critics who have taken note of this discrepancy have often assumed that such grim visions were deployed as deliberate propaganda—as a means of consciousness-raising that would win readers to the feminist cause. However, such readings beg the question of what readers would find so appealing in a cause that is depicted as hopeless: emphasizing the evils of patriarchy might spark women to anger and action, but there is a crucial difference between highlighting oppression and representing it as a seamless and ineradicable world system. Despite the bleak and apparently unrewarding nature of this reading experience, the representation of static time occupies center stage in a body of literature so popular as to be identified as one of the major publishing phenomena of the late twentieth century.⁵ If popular feminist fiction has been fixated on depicting static time, it seems that American popular culture has been strangely hungry for such depictions.

In what follows, I analyze the centrality of static time in popular feminist fiction and argue that a crucial relationship exists between this negative depiction of time and the declining sense of American history as a unified teleological process. Skepticism regarding such progress narratives has consistently been considered a defining feature of contemporary culture. In particular, belief in American history as a linear, progressive entity seemed to erode at both ends of the United States’ political spectrum in the last three decades of the twentieth century, with those on the Right fearing that America was in decline and those on the Left losing faith in an immanent Marxist revolution.⁶ That each side of the debate saw its opponents as setting a course that was leading America to ruin suggests something of the inscrutability of the discourse of American decline: from precisely opposite vantage points, both camps perceived the same dethroning of their particular agenda and the same dire fate for America. Although this sense of defeat waxed and waned in the changeable political climates of the 1980s and 1990s—for example, the Reagan era produced a surge in conservative optimism that lasted for most of the 1980s—underlying economic factors contributed to the persistent sense that American progress could no longer be expected after 1973, including the decline in real wages, the dissolution of the industrial economy, and the growing disparity between rich and poor.⁷ Despite the all-consuming nature of this sense of stasis, however, we have usually assumed that only those cultural tropes traditionally associated with narratives of national development—for example, the war hero or the Western outlaw—served as a zone for working through this sense of failed progression in popular culture.

Feminism has been linked to such concerns primarily through its ability to critique such narratives and their reliance on remasculinization as a means of retrieving national futurity or through feminism’s own critiques of teleological time as a problematic approach to history and transformation.⁸ Exploring the way in which the declining belief in progressive time coincides with the growth of popular second-wave feminism, I argue instead that the appetite for feminist stories of women stuck in time is linked to the anxieties about the breakdown of progressive time in the American popular imagination from the 1970s through the end of the twentieth century. From the daughter unable to separate from her mother to the suburban housewife repeating an endless round of chores, popular feminism’s literary inscription of women trapped in time resonated with the fears of a nation no longer convinced it could progress. The temporal problems of the oppressed woman thus offered a convenient and ideologically charged analogue for a widespread sense of temporal crisis, providing a set of images and narratives uniquely suited for representing the problems of time and teleology in postmodernity. Ultimately, I argue that popular feminist fiction served as a central means of registering this crisis, so that freeing women from static time came to appear as a means of retrieving the experience of positive futurity for the culture at large.
While building on the significant body of work that has explored the relationship of second-wave feminism to teleological, historical time, I thus shift the terms of this debate away from the question of whether or not feminism should rely on such teleological narratives and toward the question of how feminism was used to think about the problems and possibilities of teleological time after the 1960s. In other words, I ask not what historical teleology can (or cannot) do for feminism but rather what feminism has done for historical teleology. In particular, I suggest that from the early 1970s through the end of the 1990s, feminist fiction offered a means of waging a battle against the overriding perception that teleological futurity was no longer possible. The goal of this book is to reread second-wave feminist literature for the ways in which it represented these ongoing issues regarding the crisis in temporal progression—to uncover the way in which the story of the problem of positive futurity after the 1960s was told as a story of what it takes to change the lives of women. To put it in the terms of my title, this argument posits that post-1960s popular feminist discourse had a previously unrecognized, allegorical function in the political imagination of the United States in the last decades of the twentieth century, one centrally connected to the experience of historical time.

Although this reading offers an unfamiliar approach to late twentieth-century popular feminist fiction in the United States, we are in fact quite used to interpreting feminist discourse in this allegorical fashion in other geographical and historical contexts. For example, Rita Felski argues that in "early twentieth century [Europe] the figure of the New Woman was to become a resonant symbol of emancipation, whose modernity signaled not an endorsement of an existing present but rather a bold imagining of an alternative future"; thus, debates about the New Woman were used as a means to conceptualize and think through the rapid accelerations of the culture as a whole. In a similar reading of a slightly later moment and a different geopolitical context, critics have analyzed the way in which the unveiling of the woman in Egypt came to symbolize the removal of British power from the region, so that women's liberation functioned as an allegory for national decolonization. In both of these examples, the issue is not simply that the body of the woman stands in for body of the nation, as has so often been the case, but rather that the liberation of women stands in for the liberation or transformation of the nation. Despite our tendency to read feminist discourse as a form of national allegory within the so-called third world, the possibility that second-wave feminism might have served a similarly allegorical function in the contemporary United States has rarely been raised. For example, feminist critics have often noted the way in which imperialist discourse deploys the issue of women's rights as evidence that the West is more advanced than other parts of the globe; however, we critics have rarely considered that feminism might serve a similar symbolic purpose within those Western nations themselves, registering internal anxieties about national development or the lack thereof.

It seems to me that this critical oversight has persisted in part because feminist critics have found the manifest content of second-wave feminism in the United States so necessary and arresting. By stirring up potent wishes and fears related to changing gender roles, popular feminist discourse has sparked the most heated sorts of debates, capturing and holding the attention of feminists and conservatives alike. Even when American feminists critiqued this popular feminist discourse as covertly serving reactionary agendas, they suggested that it was reactionary in its imagination of gender ideology, not that it was serving purposes unrelated to gender politics. To see what other functions debates regarding feminism and gender might have served has understandably not been a central concern. Yet, I would argue, the compelling nature of this discourse only makes it a more potent vehicle for negotiating other cultural crises. Precisely because the possibility and desirability of feminist transformation has been the subject of intense interest in American popular culture, feminist discourse could offer a ubiquitous and highly charged ground for the negotiation of more overarching questions about time and transformation after the 1960s. Feminist fiction slips into this dual role so easily because women's fiction, of which it is a variant, had long served such double purposes. For example, the rise of the domestic novel and the courtship plot has been read not only as a sign of the changing status of women in English society but also as a means of representing and working through major class and economic transformations in England of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Similarly, in the nineteenth-century American sentimental novel, women's intimate relationships stood in for various political struggles on the national stage. In both cases, women's narrative forms offered convenient allegories for problems in the nation at large. One of the central arguments of this book is that this allegorical function did not disappear with the start of second-wave feminism—rather the reverse.

As the parallel with the domestic novel should suggest, I'm not arguing that popular feminist novels were consciously produced to serve this allegorical purpose or that readers of these novels consciously consumed them as allegories of national time any more than readers of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century courtship novels necessarily perceived themselves to be reading allegories of the rise of the middle class. In other words, these novels can't be classed with what Northrop Frye calls
“continuous allegor[ies],” or texts in which the writer “explicitly indicates the relationship of his images to examples and precepts, and so tries to indicate how a commentary on him should proceed.” Popular feminist novels can only be viewed as continuous allegories if we focus on the way in which the heroine of the feminist novel stands in for the situation of women under patriarchy—that is, if we read for the feminist meaning that we assume was intended by the novelists in question. However, as countless analyses of popular culture have taught us, allegorical meanings do not have to become explicit in either production or reception in order to be operative in the consumption of popular culture texts: popular culture’s ability to work through national anxieties and fantasies arises in large part because of its ability to do so covertly and in a register that offers imaginative possibilities outside those of the national news and the voting booth.¹⁴

The danger of such readings is, of course, that they may render every text equally allegorical so that the term comes to be almost meaningless. However, a more specific link exists between the operations of allegory and the particular dilemma of time and totalization I have been describing. As Fredric Jameson puts it, allegory “arises from a crisis in representation (a historical and specific crisis, it should be understood, and not some timeless and eternal one).”¹⁵ The process of narrativization associated with allegory, its position as an “extended metaphor,”¹⁶ arises because of the need to respond to this crisis: in Jameson’s terms, “[a]llegory is a narrative process precisely because it needs to tell the narrative of the solution to its representational dilemma. . . . [I]n allegory the crisis of representation and of meaning is conceived precisely as a dramatic situation that the allegorist is called upon to resolve in some way.”¹⁷ Thus, for Jameson, allegory amounts to “the expression and the result of a crisis in representation on the one hand, and of narrative on the other.”¹⁸ It is much the same combination, I will suggest, that accompanies the breakdown of teleological futurity I have been describing. As J will argue at length in Chapter 1, this breakdown is closely linked to a conception of epistemological closure that has profound and destabilizing effects on the politics of representation, generating a crisis of the sort that Jameson describes. Even more crucially, the connections between narrative progression and teleological futurity inevitably invigile the process of narrative itself in this dynamic: on the one hand, narrative progression seems to be required as a solution to static time, while on the other hand, narrative results in static time through the experience of closure associated with narrative telos. Thus, as in Jameson’s description, the feminist allegory of static time “designates difficulties, if not outright impossibilities, in meaning and representation, and also designates its own peculiar structure as a failure to mean and to represent in the conventional way.”¹⁹ Feminism’s own position as a seemingly new discourse, one that was both involved in but perceived to follow the political cataclysms of the 1960s, allows it both to represent political difficulties it is assumed to share and to offer the seemingly fresh and more fruitful ground signified by its perceived difference from the political movements that had come before. To put it another way, the problem of static time was a problem ripe for allegorization, and popular feminist discourse was positioned in a way that made it ripe for the production of such an allegorical register.

As I have already indicated, this approach resonates with readings of third-world feminist discourse as what Jameson famously termed a “national allegory,” or a text that allegorizes the state of the nation as a whole.²⁰ However, for Jameson, the totality of the national allegory, its ability to sweep the entirety of the national situation into its net, is a definitive element. In contrast, the popular feminist discourse I analyze fixates on one specific aspect of the national situation: the conjoined temporal, political, and representational problems generated by an apparent loss of teleological futurity. While critics have found ample evidence of anxieties about this loss in popular culture, the particular temporal and epistemological problems created by the breakdown of teleological history have largely been considered the purview of academic debates, especially those between poststructuralists and Marxists over the concept of totalization and the “end of history.”²¹ In general, critics and theorists associated with poststructuralism rejected the totalizing concept of History with a capital H, instead promoting an experience of time marked by heterogeneity, aporia, and incoherence.²² Wendy Brown, for example, finds new access to futurity in this version of “politics out of history,” arguing that “out of the breakup of this seamless historiography and ground of settled principles, new political and epistemological possibilities emerge.”²³ For thinkers in the opposed camp, most often exemplified by Marxist theorists such as Jameson and David Harvey, Left totalization is by contrast a deeply desired but seemingly unachievable goal in the wake of the 1960s. For such thinkers, the prominence of end-of-history theories in this period arises from the global permutation of capital, a “situation that blocks our imagination of the future” because “the entire world is suddenly sewn up into a total system from which no one can secede.”²⁴ Without the ability to generate Marxist totalization that might counter the political and epistemological closure of global capital, time becomes heavy and useless—merely a marker of our inability to create genuine transformation; even the accelerated and fragmented time associated with postmodernity does not disturb this all-pervasive system.²⁵ Thus, despite their different ways of approaching
this situation, both camps explore the experience of politics in the absence of historical teleology and the linked epistemological and temporal aspects of that experience.

In the following chapters, I argue that popular feminist fiction's stories of static time offer a means of representing and negotiating such complex perceptions regarding the end of teleological history and the struggle to retrieve the belief in positive political futurity. Yet, I will argue, in allegorizing the various elements of this dilemma, popular feminist discourse did not so much rehearse Left academic debate as offer a parallel, contemporaneous negotiation of an ideological nexus in which the academic Left participated but it did not produce. In other words, we might say that both discourses explored the same problem in different ways, for different audiences, and with different results. In particular, I will argue, in popular feminism fiction, certain views regarding time and totalization that have usually been opposed in academic discourse—such as the desire to escape teleological history on the one hand and the longing for it on the other—could be fused into a single narrative form. This ability to bring seemingly contradictory perspectives together into a coherent narrative trajectory enables popular feminism to negotiate those perspectives in different ways and ultimately to offer different solutions than those found within Left academic debate.26

In order to make this relationship clear, however, the usual assessment of the links between historical teleology, postmodern time, and the literary aesthetics of postmodernity must be reimagined. In general, literary criticism of the novel in postmodernity has focused on only one version of the perceived breakdown of historical teleology: the release of time from the unifying, homogeneous properties of history. As Brown's argument in favor of "politics out of history" suggests, when history is itself an unacceptable form of totalization, then time after history can be seen as roughly equivalent to what might be called "detotalized time," or a heterogeneous time of incommensurate and unstructured temporalities.27 This assumption that contemporary time equals detotalized time has been reproduced in the most influential criticism of the relationship between postmodern literature and postmodern time, which has largely focused on the literary depiction of time freed from the totalizing exigencies of history—for example, through the early focus on "historiographic metafiction" in defining the postmodern literary impulse.28 Given this equation, it is not surprising that poststructuralist theory has appeared to offer the best vocabulary for describing the literary representation of postmodern time. Poststructuralism is often perceived to "wage a war on totality," in Jean François Lyotard's infamous and much-cited phrase; defining postmodern time as detotalized time thus suggests that representations of postmodern time will be in keeping with poststructuralist epistemological and aesthetic principles.29 In particular, because narrative's organizing teleology may itself be perceived as a mode of totalization, the poststructuralist aesthetic usually valorizes that which falls out of or opposes narrative's powers of organization and coalescence. Thus, the representation of postmodern time in contemporary novels has usually been keyed to literary forms that thwart narrative coherence and control.30 For example, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth extols avant-garde novels by Alain Robbe-Grillet and Vladimir Nabokov for their ability to "subvert[ ] . . . historical time" and escape the linear, unified representation of narrative temporality.31 Ermarth views postmodern fiction as "restoring powers that have been suppressed" by history, an assessment that is deeply indebted to Lyotard's vision of the postmodern as the unrepresentable within the modern itself.32 The "reader events" Ermarth finds in postmodern fiction thus encapsulate temporalities that evade the controlling illusions of linear narrative and history.

While such approaches have often been deployed in readings of the first generation of postmodern novels, including those of Nabokov and John Barth, they persist in the criticism of novels associated with the second generation of postmodern fiction as well, which is more often linked to the boom in the production and consumption of minority literatures.33 To take one particularly well-known example, the veritable industry of criticism surrounding Toni Morrison's Beloved in the 1990s foregrounded the novel's engagement with a past at odds with representation itself, a series of events so traumatic that they have not been and perhaps should not be merely subsumed in teleological narratives of American history.34 While there is no doubt that this thematic nexus is at the heart of the novel itself, it is also clear that the epistemological signature of the traumatic past—its position as both ethical demand and unrepresentable experience—resonated with overarching commitments to the unrepresentable within the fields of both poststructuralism and postmodern literary criticism in the 1980s and 1990s. Later work in postmodern literature and history, perhaps best exemplified by Amy Elias's Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction (2001), opened up this conversation in new directions by acknowledging that postmodern fiction retains a longing for what Elias identifies as a "secular-sacred ontology that is History."35 Elias's approach is particularly subtle, foregrounding the way in which postmodern fiction not only "subverts" history but also engages in a sustained consideration of what has been lost in this subversion and what, if anything, can be substituted for the reassuring narrative of history. While Elias tracks a desire for history and total representation that was not acknowledged in
previous work on the novels she examines, her focus on the “historical sublime” foregrounds an aesthetics of the unrepresentable that resonates with poststructuralist approaches to time. For Elias, history is “the site of the recognition that there is something that cannot be said,” a Lyotardian reading that privileges the aporias and paradoxes of attempts at totalization.16

Although readings of this type have proven a remarkably potent interpretive lens for the work of many eminent postmodern novelists, they also reflect and reinscribe an understanding of postmodern time deeply influenced by one version of the perceived breakdown of historical teleology—that which reads the end of history as releasing time from totalization.17 In particular, conceiving of time in postmodernity as detotalized time has led to the assumption that formal experiments that disrupt narrative totalization are the key means of representing time in postmodernity. From this perspective, realist and other popular forms often adopted by bestselling feminist authors seem inevitably to reflect an outdated vision of teleological historical time as a still functional and powerful entity. Even feminist critics who defended the recourse to realism during the feminist aesthetic debates of the 1980s shared this assumption; for such critics, realism and other less experimental forms were thought to enable feminist progress precisely because they had not fallen prey to poststructuralist critiques of teleology.18 However, simply because realism cannot depict detotalized time does not mean that it is incapable of engaging with the temporal crisis I have been describing. In fact, as I will argue in Chapter 2, realism’s associations with epistemological mastery and closure make it particularly suited to exploring the version of the end of history lamented by critics like Jameson: the version in which the failure of Left totalization has generated a horrific world of totalized oppression against which every form of resistance seems already defeated. By thus driving a wedge between the aesthetics of poststructuralism and the representation of time in postmodernity, Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory reveals the way in which popular novels of various types, from the realist to the picaresque to the sentimental, deploy the formal characteristics of their respective genres to represent and to attempt to resolve the crisis in time and totalization that characterizes postmodernity.19

Uncovering feminism’s answer to this dilemma requires reading popular feminist fiction askant in order to see how the conventions of these novels resonate with issues surrounding the decline of historical teleology. Several of these conventions have already been identified in the key feminist literary studies of twentieth-century women’s literature, which defined and explored most of the types of novels that I examine here, including the feminist picaresque, the mother/daughter or generational novel, and what Susan Rosowski terms the female “novel of awakening.”20 While my work draws on these key studies, I shift my approach not only by reading these novels allegorically but also by intensifying attention to the popular.21 Because the goal of this book is to explore a particular role played by feminist discourse in negotiating a widespread cultural concern, it aims not to define which novels might constitute genuinely feminist fiction, but rather to examine those novels that have been perceived as tied to feminism in popular culture. This association might be made, for example, through repeated references to feminism as an explicit political entity within a popular novel, the profile of the author, marketing or packaging, and so on. While it is true, for example, that novels like Ira Levin’s The Stepford Wives, Marilyn French’s The Women’s Room, and Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club do not have much in common in terms of form or content, all three novels have been tied to feminist issues in the public imagination, providing a flashpoint for debates and conversations about the conditions governing women’s lives. Moreover, these novels were perceived to speak in a way sympathetic to feminism, to promote rather than critique a feminist way of understanding women’s current state and past history; in this way, their profile differs dramatically from backlash novels that have been perceived to depict feminist issues or that have sparked debate regarding gender roles, such as John Updike’s The Witches of Eastwick or Michael Crichton’s Disclosure.22

This focus on the popular means that I don’t attend to some of the most celebrated examples of late twentieth-century American feminist narrative—for example, Marilyn Robinson’s Housekeeping (1980) or Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior (1976)—but this approach also reduces some of the problems with definition that so plagued feminist fiction studies of the 1980s. For what might be called the first generation of criticism of second-wave feminist novels, this problem became a debate between warring camps of feminist critics and theorists over what constituted a truly feminist aesthetic.23 As Felski notes in her review of these debates, some feminist literary critics disparaged realist and other popular novels for retaining modern notions of coherent subjectivity and transparent representation, while others critiqued avant-garde forms for a frivolous and apolitical embrace of the latest theoretical fashions; in both cases, delimiting the body of feminist fiction had everything to do with the individual critic’s position on contemporaneous controversies over epistemology and aesthetics.24 These debates made it clear that approaches to feminist literature as a genre tended to beg questions that only produced more contention among critics. Because genre
studies both evolve a definition of a genre from a given set of texts and use that definition to select the texts that define the set, they inevitably rest on circular reasoning.34 Yet this inevitable problem is magnified in studies of the feminist novel genre, which must begin by defining the highly contested political entity “second-wave feminism” rather than a set of literary conventions such as those governing the picaresque or the bildungsroman.35

I don’t mean to suggest that this dilemma can be avoided entirely: in order to create a grouping of “feminist fiction,” some definition of feminism must be employed and someone, most likely the critic in question, must choose it. However, rather than finding novels that match a preset definition of feminism, this book focuses instead on examining prominent novels that have been received as feminist in the most general sense, even if the definitions of feminism employed by those doing the receiving are widely divergent, the result of clever marketing, repugnant to important feminists, or even created by men. This approach allows me to consider what purposes an association between feminism and a popular novel might serve for the culture at large. In choosing the novels that make up my archive from among the many possible texts, I select both works by the most well-known authors associated with feminism—for example, Marge Piercy, Marilyn French, and Alice Walker—and novels like The Stepford Wives and Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood (1996), which have seemed to operate as symbols of feminism in the popular imagination, whether or not the authors have been associated with feminism or have written other well-known novels. This group includes some novels with dubious claims to feminist politics, and many such novels have fallen outside the critical purview of studies that begin from a preconstituted definition of feminism. In other words, the more problematic the portrayal of feminism at work in these novels, the less critical attention we have usually devoted to them. In contrast, this project explores the different ways of imagining feminist transformation that captured the popular imagination during the last thirty years and makes it possible to speculate on what the popularity of these conceptions might mean.

Using this rubric for delimiting my archive, however, means that the archive reflects the racial myopia of popular literary culture. As most of the monographs on the women’s liberation novel make clear, popular feminist fiction of the 1970s was largely written by and concerned with white women, and most readings of women’s liberation fiction as a genre have historically been readings of white women’s fiction, though sustained engagement with Alice Walker’s Meridian (1976) is evident in more recent work on 1970s feminist novels.36 This focus on Walker’s early work clearly reflects a laudable desire to both acknowledge and retroactively correct the white focus of much 1970s feminist discourse rather than merely reproducing it in yet another critical volume. In contrast, my concentration on the popular necessarily prohibits such a corrective approach, instead following in the tracks of mainstream literary consumption as it moved from the white women’s liberation novels that defined popular feminist literature in the 1970s to the blockbuster novels by women of color that took center stage in the 1980s and 1990s.

The trajectory of popular consumption falls in line with the commonplace story of feminist phases, in which the white feminism of the 1970s is replaced by the feminism of women of color in the 1980s and 1990s. As many critics have pointed out in various ways, this story of feminist phases produces a “denial of coevalness,” or a form of temporal distancing, that positions the feminism of women of color as coming after and necessarily either adopting or critiquing a pre-existing white feminism.44 Certainly this narrative overlooks the large corpus of literature by women of color from the 1970s, including now-canonical texts such as Kingston’s The Woman Warrior (1975) and Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970). However, foregrounding the trajectory of popular feminist fiction enables us to ask key questions regarding how and why feminism was characterized in certain ways at certain points in time. For example, while the whiteness of popular feminist fiction in the 1970s has seemed to need remediation, it has not seemed to require explanation: given both the racial failings of second-wave feminism at the time and the racism of the country as a whole, the popular focus on white feminism in the 1970s has appeared only too predictable. The problem with such reasoning, however, becomes clear when we consider the voracious consumption of novels of joint gender and racial oppression like Walker’s The Color Purple (1982) and Tan’s The Joy Luck Club just a few years later. While a similar shift toward the fiction of women of color took place in the academy during the same period, this trend was usually understood as a part of an ongoing response to the critiques of white feminism by women of color—an ethical shift that it would be difficult to attribute to the culture as a whole. Instead, the mainstream reception of Walker and Tan has taken place without significant positive alterations in American racial politics. If changing tastes in heroines can’t be assumed to result from improved American attitudes to race, it becomes necessary to consider what has caused these different versions of feminist fiction to take center stage in the public view when and how they did.

Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory argues that one way of understanding these transformations is by attending to the
different negotiations of time they enabled. In particular, white women's liberation narratives were largely uninterested in the past, either familial or historical, which they saw as merely providing more evidence of the continuing oppression of women; therefore, their emphasis was largely on escaping the ongoing stasis of the present for a different, more open future. In contrast, the discourse of popular, multicultural feminism that followed reflected the interest in the past associated with the development of identity politics: the novels by and about women of color that became popular in the 1980s and 1990s returned to shaping events in history, including slavery, segregation, immigration, the Chinese revolution, and so on. While such a fixation on the traumas of history might seem to offer even less of an escape from the breakdown of historical progress than women's liberation narratives did, I demonstrate that the turn to the past encoded in stories of joint racial and gender oppression experienced by women of color provided a means to rethink and eventually sidestep the trap of static time. In particular, I suggest that the imagination of the woman of color as wounded by divided loyalties to an ethnic past and a feminist future offered a new means of representing the simultaneous dangers of and desire for totalization, a transformation that allowed for the development of new solutions to this double bind.19

In order to track this evolving set of narrative strategies, I begin with a chapter that explores the historical and theoretical background of popular feminist literature's struggle with the postmodern crisis of time and totalization. Returning to the moment in which this crisis emerged, the end of the 1960s, I demonstrate that the linked conceptions of time, totalization, and immediacy lock the narrative of the 1960s into a seemingly inevitable implosion of Left political energy. In particular, I examine the way in which important and influential historical narratives of the late 1960s depict the conclusion of the decade as a dead end past which it was impossible to progress, generating an experience of static time that permeated beyond the confines of the radical movements associated with the decade. As I move into Part II, I explore the way in which popular feminism perceived itself to have inherited the problem of stasis that haunted the end of the 1960s. In Chapter 2, this haunting takes almost literal form in Marge Piercy's Vida (1979), which tells the story of a white female revolutionary who has been on the run since the late 1960s for crimes against the state. By comparing Vida's futile, phantom-like existence to that of her sister, a feminist radical, the novel struggles to hold out the hope that feminism can avoid the dead-end fate of 1960s radicalism. Turning to French's The Women's Room, I demonstrate that its struggles with a vision of complete patriarchal domination lead to much the same experience of static time. French's novel enables and illuminates the parallel between a feminist awakening to overriding patriarchal domination and the post-1960s awakening to the failure of historical progress. Like post-1960s radicals, the narrator of the novel engages in a pitched battle against her own perception of totalized domination, fighting to gain access to a positive futurity that her own analysis places offstage and out of reach. Both novels, I argue, allegorize the double bind created by the implosion of 1960s politics: they are caught between the rejection of totalization as a form of overriding domination and the desperate need to recover totalization if change is to be possible once more. As the two perceptions collide into one another, the novels sink into a miasma of static time with profound resonance for the culture at large.

In Chapter 3, I shift my focus to the different ways that static time appears in more mainstream, liberal feminist vehicles, taking as my example the iconic popular feminist tale of the 1970s, Levin's 1972 novel The Stepford Wives. Analyzing this gothic tale of brainwashed robot-wives literally "programmed" by patriarchy, I argue that the novel draws on the image of the doppelganger to offer a chilling picture of domestic labor as itself uncanny. I demonstrate the way that the novel works to confute the horror of uncanny repetition, which Sigmund Freud associates with both the double and the repetition compulsion, with the recurring tasks of suburban housewifery. Although the novel has often been viewed as a cynical attempt to "rip-off" the women's movement, this vision of the horror of domestic repetition was strikingly faithful to the critique of suburban domesticity offered by white liberal feminist treatises like Betty Friedan's The Feminist Mystique (1963). For Friedan, the central problem for housewives was that their lives possessed no future goal to organize their lives after marriage—no more plot to give shape to their time. I argue that both The Feminist Mystique and The Stepford Wives depict women's oppression as intrinsically connected to the dead-end experience of time without hope of further transformation—that is, to an experience of static time much like the one that follows history's end. Unlike The Women's Room, however, The Stepford Wives offers a potential solution to this dead end: the exit of the suburban housewife from domestic repetition into the supposedly future-oriented world of the career woman. Once the static time of the housewife becomes an analogue for the static time of the nation, releasing her into a public, teleological career narrative seems to offer a means of releasing the nation as well.

I analyze attempts to employ this strategy in Chapter 4, focusing on classic popular feminist novels of artistic striving: Rita Mae Brown's Rubyfruit Jungle (1973) and Erica Jong's Fear of Flying (1974). Both
novels depict heroines diametrically opposed to the Stepford wife: fiercely ambitious, sexually adventurous, and above all else mobile, these women seem not to have seen the inside of a kitchen, much less been trapped in one. However, these heroines encounter a problem not envisioned by novels like The Women’s Room and The Stepford Wives: they find that they must constantly struggle against narratives of development and maturation that would confine rather than liberate them. From this perspective, I suggest, both heroines’ embrace of promiscuity reads as a resistance to plot as well as a resistance to conservative sexual mores: the episodic, self-contained character of the casual sexual encounter derails the courtship narrative, which attempts to place each romantic encounter in the service of some final, culminating union. The picaresque genre employed by both novels, I argue, perfectly encodes this resistance on the level of form: serial rather than teleological, the picaresque depics its hero or heroine as continually moving through new places and situations without being transformed by any of them. Yet this is an unbroken narrative, since both heroines find themselves unable to abandon the desire for artistic development, which requires precisely the sort of incremental progression they resist. In a fashion familiar from post-Marxist debates, these novels find themselves unable to choose between the prison of teleological progress and the prison of its lack—a trap that ultimately creates an even more tenacious version of static time.

In Part III, I examine the way that feminism’s role as an ally for national time transforms as the white women’s liberation novel comes to be replaced by the multicultural popular feminist text. The attempt to use career narratives as a solution to static time explicitly relied on the whiteness of the women’s liberation movement, leveraging the class mobility that comes with whiteness to mitigate the gender oppression of otherwise privileged women. When The Color Purple became a bestseller in 1982, however, it initiated a shift in popular U.S. feminism from white women’s liberation discourse to the ethnic popular feminism of the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, rather than being hampered by its lack of access to class mobility, The Color Purple instead escapes the dead end that plagued women’s liberation novels for ten years: it depicts a heroine who overcomes totalized oppression to achieve a dazzling triumph of futurity and fulfillment. In Chapter 5, I analyze the way in which The Color Purple avoids the trap of static time. Examining The Color Purple as a response to Walker’s 1975 novel, Meridian, I argue that both these texts create a relation of debt and obligation between past and future. The problem here is not that women can’t change but rather that embracing feminist transformation means escaping and thus failing to honor the suffering of earlier generations. Because it arises from unpaid debts, feminism signals a futurity that is available but is inauthentic and illicit. In order to cancel this debt, The Color Purple literally rewrites the past: it describes a woman of an earlier generation gradually accruing all the benefits that we associate with contemporary feminism. By undoing the oppression of the past in this fashion, the novel voids the unpaid debt caused by the suffering of previous generations. However, this process also eradicates newness and difference: change in the present is acceptable in the novel precisely because it is no longer change—because a balance between past and present has been restored. Ultimately, I suggest, this approach produces change only by making change and stasis almost indistinguishable.

I investigate the further development of this perception of feminist futurity in Chapter 6, examining two bestselling mother/daughter novels from the 1980s and 1990s. These novels complete a turn to previous history begun in the work of Walker by creating a retrospective form in which mother and daughter have become locked in static time as a result of their shared past. Whereas women’s liberation novels struggled to find even the smallest evidence of feminist transformation, the particular profile of the mothers in these novels—for example, first-generation Chinese immigrant women in The Joy Luck Club—seems to provide clear evidence of difference over time: in the context of these mothers’ suffering, contemporary women seem not so much trapped in as liberated by history, born after the worst of women’s suffering had passed. Yet the suffering undergone by the mother filters through to the daughter through their relationship: damaged and stunted herself, the mother cannot help but damage and stunt her daughter, making the daughter incapable of enjoying the advantages bestowed by her place in history. Exploring the relationship between these novels and pop-feminist mother/daughter discourse of the 1970s and 1980s, I argue that the mother comes to symbolize the weight of a painful but authentic past, while the daughter symbolizes a futurity that is seemingly available but so insubstantial that it cannot actually be grasped and inhabited. I compare this vision of the relationship between past and future to that in contemporary theory, especially the familiar conception of postmodern futurity as ephemeral and insubstantial—a flimsy postmodern copy of a weighty modern original. Exploring the way in which such visions interact with the temporal imagination of identity politics in particular, I argue that these novels draw on the long-standing power of sentimental narratives to generate a mother/daughter reconciliation that offers feminism’s most potent solution to the problems of static time—a solution, however, that involves the eradication of time itself.
Finally, in a brief Coda, I reverse the interpretive lens used throughout the book in order to consider the effect that feminism's allegorical association with temporal problematical has had on the perception of feminist politics rather than on the perception of national time. Turning to backlash texts like Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003), I demonstrate that they rely on the association between feminism and the breakdown of progressive time to suggest that feminism is locked in a losing battle against the clock: by turning women's struggle for progress into the working woman's futile struggle to meet the temporal demands placed on her, these novels insist that feminism has taken on a force it can never best—the passage of time itself. More generally, I consider the way in which feminist politics may have been shaped by feminism's position close to the heart of the national imagination after the 1960s and by its displacement from this central position after 2001. If feminist politics drew some of its energy from the intense national cathexis to stories of women and static time after the 1960s, then it may be that the turn to different types of stories after the attacks on the World Trade Center has exerted a similar influence, in this case draining away the sense that feminist concerns are significant and vital in this transformed political milieu. Understanding the extent to which feminism's allegorical function has caused feminism to acquire and lose urgency in different political climates may make it possible to denaturalize the contemporary sense that only certain types of stories now matter, enabling us to ask new questions not only about the role of feminism in the present political moment, but also about the stories we are currently using to make sense of our national landscape.

Chapter 1

The Problem of Static Time

Totalization, the End of History, and the End of the 1960s

In the 1980s and 1990s, the perception of failed futurity in America was registered by "end-of-history" discourses from across the political spectrum. In 1992, the neoconservative thinker Francis Fukuyama argued that, with the demise of communism, American-style capitalist democracy had finally triumphed and was gradually remaking the entire world in its own image. Despite the fact that he relished capital's permutation, Fukuyama nevertheless found that this version of the end of history still resulted in empty and meaningless time: without the need or desire to improve upon this best of all possible worlds, humanity would inevitably become lost and aimless. Arguing from across the aisle, Wendy Brown suggested that the sensation of blocked futures on the part of the contemporary Left stemmed not only from a sense of lost Marxist unity but also from a failure to recognize the futurity inherent in new political forms—for example, identity-politics approaches that have often been perceived as a threat to Marxist analysis; without a Marxist conception of historical teleology, it seemed to such thinkers that history itself had ended.1 As both Brown's and Fukuyama's arguments imply, there can be something noticeably wishful about this perception that history has come to an end: Fukuyama predicts the total, permanent, and inevitable triumph of the politico-economic system he endorses, while Brown suggests that Marxists refuse to believe that Left history can continue if it abandons Marxist principles.2 In a similar vein, Lutz Niethammer argues that *pétition* discourses that conflate the end of history with the "end of Europe" must be read as expressions of dismay regarding the demise of white centrality, while Hazel Carby views contemporary American discourses of apocalyptic "national crisis" as an expression of the fear that white superiority is under threat.3 As Brown implies, what is at an end in many of these discourses is less history or