At the close of 1979, the *New York Times* identified “women’s lib” as one of the major and defining publishing phenomena of the previous decade.¹ Yet the novel that *Times* author Ray Walters chose to exemplify this trend, Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973), was largely disdained by members of the women’s liberation movement that it supposedly represented. Despite the fact that journalists like Walters had no trouble discerning feminist content in the novel, by 1985 *Fear of Flying* had come to be viewed by many in the movement as “ultimately ‘not feminist’,” according to critic Rosalind Coward.² In 1998, however, Lisa Maria Hogeland included Jong’s novel in her analysis of women’s liberation novels, arguing vigorously that previous analyses had overlooked the novel’s genuinely feminist critique of the sexual revolution, and, by 2008, some feminist critics at Columbia University felt positively enough about the novel’s politics that they organized a symposium celebrating its thirty-fifth anniversary as a “feminist classic.”³ Bringing the process full circle, the pop-feminist website *Jezebel* responded to a report on a family fracas at the conference by debating whether Jong’s unsanctioned fictionalization of her sister’s marriage in *Fear of Flying* should be considered an anti-feminist act.⁴

In fact this checkered history suggests that *Fear of Flying* may indeed be an exemplary American postwar feminist novel, though not precisely in the way meant by the *New York Times*. Rather, the contentious yet circular trajectory of the discourse surrounding the novel provides a case in point of the myriad literary-critical dilemmas that accompanied the growth of postwar feminist fiction. On the one hand, many agree that something changed in the realm of fiction written by and for women after the mid-1960s, and that this something was related to second-wave feminism; on the other hand, there has been little consensus regarding how to define this transformation, its political consequences, or its literary merit. Of course, debates regarding the parameters of literary-critical categories never really cease, and according to some poststructuralist critiques, such categories are necessarily tautologous.
in any case. Yet feminist fiction carries the added burden of being defined in relationship to a term, “feminism,” that has itself been subject to decades-long contestation. In order to define what feminist fiction is, one must first define what feminism is, and this is an issue even those who have marched under its banner have never been able to settle decisively. As the famous debates regarding Marxist aesthetics in the 1920s and 1930s make clear, such definitional problems plague any category of art with overt political affiliations. However, Marxists at least have the benefit of a single, foundational author as a ground for their competing readings; feminists must first decide who to read in the first place.

Attempting to sidestep such chicken-and-egg dilemmas, Rita Felski’s *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* took as its origin point her concept of a “feminist public sphere,” and then subjected literature associated with that sphere to analysis. By making the locus of feminist debate a matter of note, Felski kept this context from being a transparent and naturalized one; in so doing, she helped shift critical focus beyond the question “Is it feminist?” and toward the question, “Feminist for whom?” Such a focus on reception and context does not eradicate the necessity of individual value judgments, but it does put those critical value judgments in dialogue with larger questions in both aesthetic and political debates, enabling critics to consider which definitions of feminism circulate in which social arenas and how the particular technologies of the novel propagate or transform those definitions. In what follows I outline an understanding of the field of feminist fiction in this vein, focusing on post-1945 fiction that has either been received as feminist by literary critics or been the subject of significant debate regarding whether it might be considered feminist. Traced over time, I argue, this contested canon is structured by its engagement in literary and political struggles over the representation of historical change itself.

In most descriptions of feminist literary history in the postwar period, the trajectory of feminist fiction is a teleological one, developing from almost-feminist works to fully feminist works and falling off into less-than-feminist works as feminist tropes become disseminated, adulterated, and dissolved into a less politicized “women’s literature.” Despite marked differences in judgments regarding which periods constitute the apex and decline of this narrative arc, most key accounts of twentieth-century feminist literature pay scant attention to the period 1945–1965 – moving more or less directly from modernist to second-wave literature – or focus on poetry produced by women in this period rather than on fiction. When women’s fiction from the 1945–1965 period is subject to significant analysis, it tends to be read as a kind of feminist literature manqué. Works frequently noted as producing pre- or partially feminist fictions in this era include Gwendolyn Brooks’s
Maud Martha (1953), Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959), Tillie Olson’s short-story collection Tell Me a Riddle (1961), and Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar (1963). Gayle Greene’s influential Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition (1991), for example, includes The Bell Jar but finds it falls short as feminist fiction because, while the novel documents the suffering caused by the heroine’s confrontation with her limited options as a woman, it still fails to identify patriarchy’s oppression of woman as the root cause of these limitations. Similarly, Mary Helen Washington appreciates Brooks’s Maud Martha, which she notes is an important example of black women’s writing; however, Washington argues that Brooks fails to connect her heroine’s quest to a larger communal struggle, a failure that leads to a sense of “incompleteness” in the narrative. 8

As Greene’s and Washington’s suggestions attest, even critics who might disagree on the status of particular novels often had recourse to the same grounds for dismissal of these texts. Works that failed to measure up as fully feminist fiction were usually indicted for one of two reasons: a failure to connect women’s suffering to the patriarchal oppression of women or a failure to register some possibility of transforming this situation. Crucially, the insistence that fiction defined as “feminist” foreground women’s gender oppression has interacted in complex ways with feminism’s own internal politics regarding other experiences of oppression, including those of class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. In particular, feminist critics and writers have not always been able to discern feminist content in analyses and activism that focus on women’s experience of other axes of oppression, despite the concern of such texts with women’s oppression per se. In the collection The Feminist Memoir Project, for example, editors Ann Snitow and Rachel Blau DuPlessis responded to Barbara Emerson’s contribution about coming of age in the Civil Rights Movement by including a supplementary interview with Emerson, an approach they felt necessary because Emerson’s piece “mentioned feminism hardly at all.” 9 From another perspective, however, it is possible to view the Civil Rights Movement as inseparable from women’s liberation, since it had everything to do with achieving basic civil liberties for a large group of women in the United States.

Although such disputes regarding the relationship between gender and other axes of oppression have never ceased, they had particularly striking effects in the period of second-wave feminism usually associated with the women’s liberation movement, roughly from 1965 to 1980. The Women’s Liberation Movement expressly positioned being female as the primary ground for women’s oppression, and by and large the women’s liberation novel reflects this view. From realist novels of housewifery and the gradual “awakening” to feminist consciousness – for example, Sue Kaufman’s Diary...
of a Mad Housewife (1967), Alix Kates Shulman’s Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen (1972), Marilyn French’s The Women’s Room (1977), and Marge Piercy’s Small Changes (1973) – to picaresque romps, such as Fear of Flying and Lisa Alther’s Kinflicks (1976), the most famous women’s liberation novels were penned by, and focus on, white women.\(^8\) And this predominance is hardly surprising, given the women’s liberation movement’s reading of femaleness as the key category of oppression for women – which tended to exclude writers and movements that might have other or more complex priorities. Although there has been a laudable attempt to correct this focus on whiteness retrospectively through the inclusion of work by Alice Walker in newer histories of women’s liberation fiction, such attempts overlook the very different form and reception history of Alice Walker’s work from the 1970s, which was more experimental and much less widely read than best-selling women’s liberation novels such as Fear of Flying and The Women’s Room.\(^9\) While feminist fiction at large in the 1970s included works such as Walker’s Meridian (1976), the women’s liberation genre as it was marketed and consumed – and arguably conceived – did not.

Beyond the confines of the women’s liberation novel, however, a host of other feminist fiction was being produced in the 1970s that explored women’s simultaneous experience of various categories of identity, including race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. For example, works by African American women writers, including Walker’s Meridian, Paule Marshall’s The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969), Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970) and Sula (1973), and Gayle Jones’s Corregidora (1975) have become flagship texts in African American feminist literary histories and exemplify the ongoing evolution of forms capable of capturing the complexity of African American women’s experience.\(^10\) As part of their attempt to map the complex interaction of forces upon their heroines, these authors frequently adopt a much larger historical scope than do the women’s liberation novels, which usually feature a relatively compressed timeline that focuses on the heroine’s adult years or deals with childhood in an anecdotal fashion. In contrast, feminist work by women of color in the 1970s often draws on the conventions of historical fiction (Corregidora, The Bluest Eye) or illustrates the way in which place or location – geographical and social – is implicated in a complex historical frame that covers generations, sometimes even centuries (Sula, Chosen Place). To the extent that they follow the path of the novel of awakening, these novels often present their heroines as awakening to their position within a long history of suffering and resistance in which they must find their place.

These complex interactions between feminism, race, and novelistic form have led to the production of important feminist literary histories that trace
specific traditions for women that attend to particular intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. While postwar feminist novels must on the one hand be read in relation to these specific traditions, feminist fiction from across the canon can also be read as united by a struggle to represent some possibility of feminist transformation. Despite the privilege of its most conspicuous exemplars, for example, the women’s liberation novel has nevertheless been notable for its almost complete inability to imagine avenues of positive transformation for its heroines. This foreclosed avenue is staged again and again in French’s *The Women’s Room*, easily the most popular and iconic of the realist women’s liberation novels of the 1970s. French’s narrator awakens into a world so relentlessly structured by patriarchal oppression that she comes to view her raised consciousness as something of a curse. And certainly if, as the novel suggests, there is no experience not formed by patriarchal oppression, it is difficult to imagine how change might take place – from where would it come? Unable either to deny the extent of patriarchal oppression or to see how to escape it given this scope, *The Women’s Room* takes as its primary subject the simultaneous need for and impossibility of change in a totalized landscape of oppression.

Despite very different themes and techniques, a similarly vexed engagement with temporal progression may be traced in texts that fall far outside the confines of the women’s liberation novel. In the 1970s, many key novels by women of color addressed the problem of imagining a feminist, anti-racist future through an excavation of individual and collective pasts that might offer some key to the future. In Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975), for instance, autobiography and fiction combine in an experimental form composed of memories of the narrator’s childhood, stories her mother imparted to her of her family’s history, and retellings of Chinese “woman warrior” legends with herself as a protagonist. Kingston’s hybrid approach presages what comes to be a key facet of feminist fiction in the 1980s and 1990s: a retrospective account of familial relationships, usually mother–daughter relationships, that attempts to explain the heroine’s inability to progress in the present. For Kingston, this predicament arises from a double bind in which her family demands that she act with fealty toward them and a Chinese village she has never seen, at the same time that they teach her that girls have no value to the family, the community, or the nation. Marked by an experience of identity in which rejection constitutes the very ground of her belonging, the narrator is hostage to competing desires for attachment and escape that make every path the wrong one – a foreclosure of forward motion that is reflected in the tipping of the entirety of the narrative toward the past. The narrator’s simultaneous desire to escape this stasis is registered in her repurposing of
the woman warrior figure, who seems to offer another, potentially less self-excoriating ground for identification – though the success of this effort at leveraging the past to open the future is left uncertain.

As these descriptions of *The Women’s Room* and *The Woman Warrior* suggest, the desire to access feminist futurity inevitably had effects on the way that 1970s feminist writers employed the representational technologies of the novel. Some of these texts focused on reworking traditional forms of plot and genre, in order to access less conventional and imprisoning fates for their heroines, an approach famously encapsulated in DuPlessis’s term “writing beyond the ending.” For DuPlessis, writing beyond the ending requires inventing transgressive narrative strategies that disrupt the harnessing and channeling of desire within conventional structures, such as the romance plot. Most 1970s feminist novels can be read as part of this attempt to write beyond the ending of conventional narrative forms, producing transgressive feminist revisions of the *bildungsroman* in particular. However, other, more experimental novels attempted to thwart the process of narrative cohesion as a form of oppressive control in its own right. For example, Bertha Harris’s *Lover* (1976) has been read as breaking with patriarchal narrative progression in favor of an anarchic representative mode in which characters seem to meet on an interior plane. Frequently compared with the work of Djuna Barnes, Harris’s novel expresses its utopian drive not only through its cast of outlandish, sexually adventurous women, but also through its thwarting of the novel’s conventional association with discernable plot and cohesive character development.

When even feminist plots come to seem hostage to dangerous forms of epistemological control – that is, when “feminist plot” comes to seem a contradiction in terms – access to the future becomes doubly difficult for feminist fiction: not only is it difficult to imagine and represent the path to a feminist future, but it is also potentially hazardous to do so. Although it takes the shape of a thought experiment rather than a formal deconstruction of narrative, feminist science fiction in the 1960s and 1970s offered its own exploration of these dynamics. Some feminist science fiction classics from this period, including Ursula Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975), use the speculative nature of science fiction to catapult the reader into a world with no historical relation to the present, imagining a vastly different way of experiencing gender, while others, such as Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), deploy the science fiction genre to interrogate the intersection of race and gender oppression in the past and the relationship of that past to the present. In Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), the generic conventions of science fiction become a means of exploring historical causality and individual
contributions to the creation of feminist futurity, providing a vision of a utopian feminist future that bears a complex and contingent relationship to the historical present.

Despite very different judgments regarding what constituted the most successful form of 1970s feminist fiction, feminist literary-critical accounts focused on this period frequently end on a mournful note, describing a falling off from a truly feminist form of analysis in novels of the 1980s and 1990s. In part this judgment may be explained by the location of 1970s feminist fiction in a historical moment that for many constituted the highwater mark of second-wave energy and influence. In contrast, the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s came to be associated with a move toward individualized and depoliticized women’s fiction. For example, novels such as Sue Miller’s *The Good Mother* (1986) were seen to preserve a focus on women’s experience of contemporary gender roles while deleting the structural analysis of these roles that would make such depictions feminist. The appropriation of forms developed by feminist writers for conservative purposes is certainly a trend of note in the 1980s and 1990s, but this period must also be understood as one in which academic feminism’s increasing engagements with questions of race and ethnicity were mirrored in a boom in publication of fiction by women of color and a huge demand for some of these novels among nonacademic readers, most notably *The Color Purple* (1982) and *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). If the 1980s produced backlash fictions such as *The Good Mother*, they also produced an incredible variety of important feminist novels, popular and otherwise – including Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* (1982), Marilyn Robinson’s *Housekeeping* (1980), and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984).

The varied reception of this body of work is perfectly exemplified by the very different film adaptations of *Housekeeping* and *The Color Purple* – the former very much an independent film, the latter a high-budget extravaganza by one of Hollywood’s most successful directors. However, both novels are united by their adaptation and enhancement of forms that came to the fore in 1970s feminist fiction: the novel of the housewife’s entrapment and the novel of feminist awakening. From *Housekeeping*’s early image of the train that runs off its tracks into the deep stillness of the town lake, the novel foregrounds the problem of stilled motion, an issue that becomes intricately connected with the feminist trope of enclosure within the domestic sphere as a form of deathly stasis. Giving this trope what is arguably its most nuanced and sophisticated treatment, Robinson’s novel explores the notion of “keeping” within the house in relation to dense ethical and philosophical questions regarding the relations between inside and outside, community and individual, rest and motion, pattern and chaos. Yet the trope of housekeeping never
becomes merely a metaphor for a more general or generic human experience in the novel; instead, the gendered aspects of these oppositions continually return as the crucial lens through which they may be understood. The novel’s conclusion offers a related revision of earlier feminist solutions to these dilemmas: *Housekeeping* ends with two of its central female characters slipping the bonds of all scripted forms of belonging and enclosure, moving at will through the wild world in a way that escapes capture even within narrative form itself.

*The Color Purple* provides a similarly rich reworking of the 1970s feminist novel of awakening, in the process offering a solution to the sorts of temporalized dilemmas that mark much 1970s fiction, from the dead-end of totalized oppression in *The Women’s Room* to the double bind that structures texts such as *The Woman Warrior*, in which desire for feminist futurity wars with fidelity to the familial and community past. Drawing on African American literary tropes regarding writing and the process of coming to voice, *The Color Purple* offers an ingenious solution to such dilemmas: it shares the experience of a feminist present with the pre-feminist past. Set primarily in the decades leading up to World War II, the novel depicts an utterly downtrodden heroine, Celie, who by the end of the novel has gained all the personal and professional fulfillment that the second-wave feminist movement sought for women. While this erasure of historical reality might seem to raise ethical issues in its own right, the novel displaces such problems onto Celie’s sister Nettie, a missionary who tries to bring twentieth-century values to remote African villagers. In comparison with Nettie’s hubristic and fruitless attempts to graft the ideals of the present onto the past represented by the villagers, the proleptic, feminist fairy-tale awakening that the novel grants to Celie appears both innocent and commendable. In gifting Celie with this trajectory, *The Color Purple* finds a means of achieving the feminist futurity out of reach in most 1970s feminist fiction: it locates totalized oppression in a past so horrendous that the present comes to seem a site of possibility, and then it transports that sense of possibility back into the past.

Both *Housekeeping* and *The Color Purple* also participate in another widespread development in feminist fiction of the 1980s and 1990s: the turn to familial relationships, particularly mother–daughter relationships, prefigured in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. From Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street* to Lynne Tillman’s *Haunted Houses* (1987) to Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* (1993), a host of feminist fiction in the 1980s and 1990s explored the creation and experience of female oppression as it unfolded in the crucible of the family unit. Drawing on longstanding conventions of the domestic novel, which create complex allegorical relations between family and
nation, as well as on psychoanalytic tropes that placed the genesis of gendered subjectivity within the family unit, such novels explored the heroine’s relationship to her parents as both a cause of and a metaphor for her experience of oppression as a woman. The allegorical status of such narratives was particularly evident in novels that focused on sexual abuse of daughters by fathers, most notably *The Color Purple*, Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* (1991), and Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* (1993), all of which position the father’s abuse of the daughter as a stand-in for patriarchy’s oppression of women at large. Smiley’s novel, a rewriting of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* set on a Midwestern farm, is told from the perspective of one of the two loyal daughters, Ginny, who turns against her father and her upbringing when she recovers memories of her father raping and beating her; Cordelia, having been protected by her older sisters, escapes this history and remains loyal to him. In a complex mirroring of form and content, Smiley’s revision of *Lear* becomes analogous to Ginny’s recovery of her memories, as both Ginny’s past and Shakespeare’s play are revealed to harbor the same covert but violent patriarchal drive to dominate women, children, and the landscape itself.

The trope of recovered memory is indicative of the temporal modes most commonly adopted by the feminist familial novels of the 1980s and 1990s, which were frequently either set in a traumatic historical past, engaged with such traumas through characters’ retrospective accounts of past experiences, or both. The most prominent and complex engagements with the traumatic past came to be associated with the mother–daughter novel, a form that rose to prominence with the commercial success and critical industries that have come to surround Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) in particular. In a fashion similar to *The Color Purple*, Tan’s novel presents a temporalized contrast between a more feminist present and a less feminist future but personifies this contrast through the figures of mother and daughter, who come to represent the past and the future respectively. Marked by traumas that the novel associates with a putatively more patriarchal Chinese culture, the mothers sacrifice themselves to grant the daughters access to a feminist future characterized as uniquely American, but the daughters have all been too damaged by their relationships with their mothers to grasp these opportunities for happiness. Although the inability of each daughter to take advantage of her opportunities seems at first to keep feminist futurity out of reach, the transfer of these dilemmas to the family makes a crucial difference. In contrast with the mother’s suffering in the past, the daughter’s present comes to appear defined by the availability of feminist fulfillment, and, given that the daughter is blocked from this fulfillment by her own emotions, transformation now requires only the daughter’s catharsis. Once
access to progress hinges only on the daughter’s interpersonal relationship with her mother, all the previous difficulties in accessing feminist futurity can be transcended – dissolved in a flood of reconciliatory tears.

While *The Joy Luck Club* was taking part in the creation of the mother–daughter novel as a feminist genre, a host of other novels were engaging in very different, much more formally experimental feminist explorations of the relationship between history and futurity. From Cha’s *Díctee* to Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) to Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street* to Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School*, these novels drew on a host of genres, literary and otherwise, to suggest the way in which the rethinking of representation itself was crucially linked to any successful imagination of feminist transformation. In both *Díctee* and *Blood and Guts in High School*, for example, familial relationships remain key but are subject to a form of fragmentation and replication that bars any straightforward genealogies. In Acker’s text, poetry, drawings of sex organs and a pornographic revision of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* combine to document the life of Janey, who is variously the daughter and girlfriend of Johnny, her boyfriend/father. In a much more experimental fashion than in Smiley’s novel, *Blood and Guts* intertwines incestuous familial relationships and textual revision, creating a powerful analogy between Janey’s heterosexual masochism and her recourse to linguistic representation to explore her life; in both cases, the novel suggests, Janey attaches herself to the very thing that is causing her suffering. Such critiques of what Jacques Derrida famously called “phallogocentrism” are similarly evident in *Díctee*, though in Cha’s novel patriarchal experience is complexly intertwined with colonial history. Constructed of multiple languages and genres as well as visual images, Cha’s novel utilizes the central metaphor of *dictée*, or the dictation exercises customary in French schooling, to interrogate both the creation of colonial history and the intergenerational transmission of female experience. Through this metaphor, *Díctée* suggests the punitive qualities of the drive for representational coherence, at the same time that it challenges this drive through its own fragmented form. For some critics this strain of experimental fiction constituted a feminist version of postmodernism, sharing with other postmodern novels a suspicion of the totalizing properties of narrative and a critical relationship to received history.

While novels such as *The Joy Luck Club* offered a much more powerful experience of feminist fulfillment than the deliberately vexed and halting gestures toward transformation found in postmodern feminist fiction, much feminist literary criticism has placed a higher value on the formal literary experimentation found in novels such as *Díctée*. In part, such a judgment reflects the value conventionally placed on difficulty and complexity.
by literary critics, but it also reflects political discomfort with the powerful affective experiences of feminist transcendence offered by novels such as The Joy Luck Club or The Color Purple. Required to represent not only the capacity for feminist futurity but also the full extent of women’s oppression, fictions that err on the side of feminist fulfillment can be charged with offering a novelistic substitute for genuine political change – a kind of literary opiate for the oppressed female masses. And this judgment might be considered justified, given that the 1990s saw the birth of “chick lit,” a conservative genre largely devoted to the easy narrative resolution of dilemmas familiar from earlier feminist fiction. Although it remains unclear as yet what twenty-first-century feminist fiction will become central to literary critical discussions – and whether it will make any challenges to the entrenched nature of chick lit in the realm of popular reception – it can be expected that the most groundbreaking forms, both politically and aesthetically, will continue to be those that find new ways to accommodate the contradictory demands that women’s oppression be represented as both overriding and subject to change.

FURTHER READING


NOTES


Feminist fiction


