

1. FEMINISM AND THE POSTMODERN IMPULSE

Until very recently, feminist critics tended to distance themselves from postmodernism. Even now, when many of them are actively engaging postmodernism, they remain skeptical and ambivalent about the possibilities of a constructive intersection between feminism and postmodernism. The chief problem stems from questions of politics. Many feminist critics, along with others (such as Marxist critics), criticize postmodernism as apolitical and ahistorical and thus as incompatible with feminism, all varieties of which are concerned with the specific historical oppression of women and seek to redress the ills women have had to bear. However, an active interest in questions of history and politics, rather than a retreat from them, emerges from an analysis of much recent fiction discussed in terms of postmodernism. While charges that this fiction is apolitical and ahistorical do not stand up to close scrutiny, these charges clearly arise from some aspect or impulse within this fiction and within postmodernism that has produced ambivalence in feminist critics. This ambivalence indicates that certain modes of engaging the political may indeed be incompatible with feminism. However, the question remains whether postmodern modes of engaging the political are *necessarily* incompatible with feminism.

Although Don DeLillo's novel *Libra* (1988) raises questions about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, it does not follow the conventions of the thriller in which questions are ultimately resolved. Instead of a neat delineation of a conspiracy with a set scheme, the novel unravels a proliferation of conspiracies whose plots interweave and acquire lives of their own. Nicholas Branch, CIA historian, sums up this position near the end of the novel: "the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance. Deft men and fools, ambivalence and fixed will and what the weather was like."¹ In the world of DeLillo's novel, plots rather than conspirators "carry their

own logic" (221). Branch is forced to recognize that the overabundance of collected data related to the assassination is all "marked by ambiguity and error, by political bias, systematic fantasy" (15), and that there is no such thing as "simple facts" (300). But, rather than use Branch's recognition as a step toward a new but still constructive political reading of the assassination, the novel proposes that all that can be derived from the masses of data are various patterns of coincidences.

Another strand of *Libra's* narrative depicts the harsh material conditions of Lee Oswald's life, primarily through his mother's defense of him. Marguerite Oswald's incessant bid to connect her son's problems to his economically deprived childhood exists in tension with the novel's presentation of Lee Oswald as little more than "a quirk of history," "a coincidence" (330). While the novel treats Marguerite Oswald as a victim of sociohistorical forces, it presents Lee Oswald as a man trying to make himself into an active subject with a self-fabricated role in history; in the end, however, history sucks him in. *Libra* thus simultaneously uses and problematizes the conventions of realism and the humanist notion of the subject in the depiction of its characters. The core of the novel displays a split between relations based on cause and effect and on patterns of coincidences, as well as between individual and corporate agency. Lee Oswald simultaneously constructs himself as the President's assassin and fits into a role of the imagined gunman scripted by one of the CIA-linked conspirators: "Mackey would find a model for the character Everett was in the process of creating" so as "to extend their fiction into the world" (50).

Libra's emphasis on coincidence and patterns of coincidences typifies many novels that have been discussed in terms of postmodernism—including Thomas Pynchon's highly acclaimed *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)—but raises serious problems for the feminist reader and critic. Feminism in all its variants is an active political stance; it critiques the dominant male-centered culture from a particular position and viewpoint, which takes into consideration the complex of power relations—particularly gender/sex relations—between people, institutions, ideologies, languages, and other systems that function within culture at large, and aims in various ways (depending on the type of feminism) to end women's oppression. Feminism is thus inherently an activist oppositional politics that

seeks specific social and cultural changes within the context of everyday material existence.² As such, feminism is engaged in both deconstruction *and* reconstruction. The problem for feminists with a novel like *Libra* is that to endorse coincidence as the ruling force behind events is effectively to deny individual agency and to diminish the possibility of direct, constructive, responsible political action. If “Secrets build their own networks” (22), then there are no clear origins or originators. Responsibility becomes diluted in a way that leaves open the door to various types of fascism or anarchy, to reactionary and/or potentially destructive politics.

As Fredric Jameson points out, “everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political,”³ in the sense that everything is a product of and engages in culture and the power relations that create and are perpetuated by the various systems (such as institutions, ideologies, languages) that make up a culture. There are no neutral positions; everything is situated vis-à-vis specific positions within the complex of power relations that is culture. While the claim that everything is political is a useful and radical formulation in its unveiling of the illusion of neutrality, it can also work to dilute the term *political* into near meaninglessness. One means of preventing such a dilution is to differentiate specific politics—that have political agendas with an “acknowledged commitment to a point of view”⁴ and to certain aims—from the broad general notion of the political. As I have suggested, feminism in its various forms is a specific oppositional politics whose aims are ultimately revolutionary—to eradicate women’s oppression. Novels like *Libra* are problematic for feminists precisely because they are ultimately political in an abstract general way with no clear politics or means of engaging issues of activism and constructive change. Although *Libra* moves toward a specific politics in its suggestion that the CIA was actively involved in the President’s assassination, the novel reduces its implied possibility of political action to farce as plots break down, transform themselves, and diffuse responsibility. *Libra* offers a new way of thinking about John F. Kennedy’s assassination and presents a gripping picture of the events and characters surrounding the assassination, but it finally frustrates its own depictions by setting chance and coincidence against sociopolitical forces in complex patterns of interference.

Postmodern fiction’s tendency to reduce individual agency to corporate agency and sociopolitical forces to chance and patterns of

coincidences has understandably drawn sharp criticism from feminist literary critics and, unfortunately, has also led many to a wholesale rejection of postmodernism. But postmodern fiction is not inherently apolitical. DeLillo's *Libra* is a striking case in point, since its subject matter is a specific and highly charged event that has always been associated with the realm of the political. Rather than being apolitical, the novel demonstrates the pervasiveness of the political and of all types of politics; yet, paradoxically, it also blunts the more subversive implications of the specific politics that surface within its pages in an excess of overdetermined data linked to the assassination. Linda Hutcheon acknowledges that the "unresolved tensions of postmodern aesthetic practice remain paradoxes, or perhaps more accurately, contradictions," but argues that this "may be the only non-totalizing response possible"⁵; however, actually retaining unresolved tensions may be impossible, given that postmodernism underscores the illusion of any possibility of neutrality and objectivity within the dynamics of relations of power—especially within Western thought and culture, in which relations of power are structured on a model of hierarchical oppositions. In *Libra*, the tensions between relations of cause and effect and patterns of coincidences do not stay unresolved; the latter clearly dominate by the end of the novel.

With its depiction of the chaos ruled by chance and coincidence that ensues once the logic of cause and effect is challenged, *Libra* makes no attempt to address the possibility of radical social and metaphysical transformation and effectively mutes potential reconstructive impulses. Instead, the novel considers only the breakdown of the Western tradition and its version of political agenda and individual agency. *Libra* does not perform or move toward the reconfiguration that its challenge to Western tradition inherently implies.⁶ Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, with its looming figure of the rocket, its chaotic Zone, and its despotic and overstructured "they-system," offers an even more striking example of the way in which postmodern fiction has tended to internalize the contemporary destabilization of Western metaphysics and the subsequent descent into overdetermination (obsessive structures) or underdetermination (chance and coincidence), without offering any clear visions of a way out.⁷ Clearly not apolitical, these novels nonetheless fail to go beyond the chaos or obsessive structures brought on by their disruptions of the status quo.

However, many recent novels *do* consider the range of possibilities that open up once Western metaphysics is problematized at the same time as they use a variety of disruptive aesthetic strategies—that have been associated with postmodernism—to challenge the Western tradition.⁸ New forms of specific political engagement emerge as these novels seek constructive transformations beyond the chaos or obsessive structures created by their subversions of the status quo. Little attention has been given to this more positive or utopian trend within postmodern fiction, the leading examples of which are novels with feminist impulses that have only very recently begun to be discussed in terms of postmodernism. I refer here to novels with *feminist impulses* rather than to feminist novels, to avoid hypostatizing a collection of plural and dynamic practices. Furthermore, this formulation underscores the variety of strategies or elements located in most fiction (a variety that traditionally is effaced), even when certain ones dominate, and allows for the presence of differing degrees of any given strategy or element. This avoids rigid category markers and the exclusions that result and instead highlights the hybrid nature of fiction with respect to formal conventions. Rather than labeling a text as feminist or not feminist, I am suggesting that it is far more constructive to examine a text's feminist elements (to whatever degree they exist) and their relationship to other elements in the text. Likewise, it is more productive to speak of fiction with *postmodern impulses* rather than of postmodern fiction.⁹ For the sake of convenience and less convoluted sentence structures, I will often use the terms feminist and postmodern fiction; however, these terms will denote certain clusters of practices rather than fixed categories. I am thus proposing that a range of recent fiction demonstrates *both* feminist *and* postmodern impulses, even if the former dominate and have often been examined to the exclusion of the latter.

Aesthetic strategies that radically subvert Western metaphysics and are commonly associated with postmodern fiction are indeed prevalent in feminist fiction since the 1960s, even though these texts have for the most part been overlooked by literary critics who discuss postmodern fiction. These strategies include disruptions of traditional notions of subjectivity, character development, representation, language, interpretation, narrative, history, and binary logic in general (strategies that will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter), which take a variety of aesthetic forms such

as the juxtaposition or collage of various types of texts or discourses, the dislocation of traditional temporal and spatial matrices, the active and self-conscious refusal to provide narrative authority or closure, and the appropriation and reworking of popular forms. The use of postmodern features often gives thrust or power to feminist elements, so that the postmodern features become in themselves feminist. As an active oppositional politics, feminism transforms or translates the strategies it co-opts so as to satisfy its political aims. If certain postmodern aesthetic strategies can and do serve a feminist agenda, then locating the points at which feminism and postmodernism intersect becomes a potentially advantageous project for feminists. Literary examples of a fruitful intersection between feminism and postmodernism are surprisingly widespread; they can be found not only in radically experimental fiction with a very limited readership—like the novels of Kathy Acker and Christine Brooke-Rose¹⁰—but also in the novels of widely read and acclaimed writers whose texts contain feminist elements.

Recent fiction that uses postmodern strategies to further feminist aims is distinct from much postmodern fiction, however, precisely because feminist fiction is linked to a specific politics that cannot sever its ties to the material situation or to its activist goals. Although feminist fiction is not reducible to political tract or propaganda, it nevertheless cannot totally separate aesthetics from political practice. For feminists, literature has a “social function” to effect “changes in the cultural and ideological spheres.”¹¹ The problem with extreme forms of aesthetic experimentation (including ones often associated with postmodernism) is that they necessarily entail a small elite audience of those willing to engage in the unfamiliar and thus limit the wide dissemination of a text’s political implications. Furthermore, radical experimentation can be so deconstructive as to leave no grounds on which to effect reconstructions. Indeed, much recent feminist fiction uses the conventions of realism side by side with disruptive postmodern strategies, thereby transforming rather than completely eradicating traditional representation. This fiction performs a balancing act to ensure a large reading public and remain anchored to material conditions while simultaneously engaging in a subversive critique of the Western tradition in order to create a space for reconstruction. That much feminist fiction engages in such a balancing act is inextricably connected to its

need to find means by which to retain an active link to political practice in the material world.

Feminists cannot allow all struggle to be relegated to the realm of ideological struggle or of discourse, since this positioning of struggle tends to lose sight of women's physical daily oppression. Feminists must remain aware of what Michele Barrett refers to as "the integral connection between ideology and the relations of production" without collapsing the two spheres: "Ideology is embedded historically in material practice but it does not follow *either* that ideology is theoretically indistinguishable from material practices *or* that it bears any direct relationship to them."¹² Barrett's formulation is crucial in that it helps to explain why new aesthetic forms that subvert binary logic, including the classic oppositions between men and women and between male and female, do not necessarily entail a parallel subversion within material existence. In other words, aesthetic practices do not always either effect or reflect changes in material conditions. As Rita Felski asserts, "there exists no obvious relation between the subversion of language structures and the processes of social struggle and change," which leads her to posit that there is no "necessary connection between feminism and experimental form."¹³ While Felski's point is well taken, she seems to set up an opposition between experimental forms and realism that is artificial and does not account for much recent fiction. Indeed, much popular feminist fiction since the 1960s blends together postmodern (which is in many ways experimental) and realist forms.

One of the crucial intersections between feminism and postmodernism rests in their ties to material cultural practices and their "insistence on the link between the textual and the social."¹⁴ As I will argue in greater detail later in this chapter, postmodern aesthetics and theories cannot be divorced from the contemporary postmodern culture, condition, or social formation even if their relationship is often oppositional. In their concern "with a critical deconstruction of tradition," their questioning of "cultural codes," and their exploration of "social and political affiliations,"¹⁵ most postmodern theories and aesthetics directly engage cultural practices. Although some forms of postmodern fiction seem to sever ties to the material situation, this is not the case with much of postmodern fiction. Postmodern theories and aesthetics are very much interested in material existence but insist that access to it is highly problematic,

since that access is always mediated and therefore always plural and provisional. Indeed, much postmodern fiction both engages and problematizes the material and social, often by examining its construction into history.

The primary problem with postmodern fiction for feminism lies not with its severing ties to the material situation but rather with its tendency to move toward overdetermination or underdetermination. In contrast, recent feminist fiction tends to explore what lies in between those two extremes as it actively seeks possibilities for change. This utopian impulse derives from the specific political agenda of fiction with feminist impulses. As has often been the case with politically engaged literature, feminist fiction relies heavily on the conventions of realism even when it uses postmodern strategies that challenge those very conventions. Even though its politics are Marxist rather than feminist, the Frankfurt School's *Realism versus Modernism* debate is a useful starting point in the attempt to designate the features that distinguish fiction with both feminist and postmodern impulses from other postmodern fiction.¹⁶ Although Bertolt Brecht argues that "the realistic mode of writing" bears "the stamp of the way it was employed, when and by which class, down to its smallest details," he nevertheless calls for a new form of realism that would be "wide and political, sovereign over all conventions" and would "not bind the artist to too rigidly defined modes of narrative."¹⁷ As Jameson suggests, Brecht brings together "'realistic' and experimental attitudes" and rejects both "a naive mimetic position" and "purely formal experimentation."¹⁸ In much the same way, some recent writers are using subversive postmodern strategies to challenge the conventions of realism at the same time as they are attempting to forge new means of representing reality.

Theodor Adorno is a better bridge to a discussion of postmodernism and feminism, however, since he suggests that all art is both connected to and distanced from reality. He argues that the posited antithesis between "committed" and "autonomous" art that characterizes the *Realism versus Modernism* debate is precarious at best, since all creation originates in empirical or surface reality and yet is always at one remove from reality (representation as distinct from reality). Adorno's posited dialectic, which both preserves and negates the concepts of committed and autonomous art, is helpful in accounting for the postmodern process of difference and deferral

and the feminist political commitment found in fiction that has both feminist and postmodern tendencies.¹⁹ Although feminist texts that use postmodern strategies acknowledge that reality is always mediated by representations, they nevertheless stress the connection between representation and the material historical situation. In order to retain that connection, much recent feminist fiction does not totally jettison the conventions of realism, even as it questions and undermines those conventions.

As Catherine Belsey explains, "realism" reflects not the world but rather "the world constructed in language," "out of what is (discursively) familiar." While fiction that uses postmodern strategies to propel its feminist aims demonstrates its awareness that "what is intelligible as realism is the conventional and therefore familiar"²⁰ and, indeed, challenges the conventions of realism, much of this fiction also makes use of these conventions as a means of communicating with readers for whom the conventions of realism are the only, or at least the most familiar, codes by which they read/interpret texts. As Janet Wolff argues, "realism may be the only possible language of communication for a particular audience," so that a "subversion of realism" may create a "real problem of accessibility to popular audiences."²¹ Since this fiction's use of the conventions of realism is self-conscious, however, it forces its readers to recognize the constructed and artificial quality of traditional realism with its claims to mimesis and truth. Although Belsey is correct in her assessment of realism as "a predominantly conservative form" that confirms "the patterns of the world we seem to know" and effaces its "own textuality,"²² writers as diverse as Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Maxine Hong Kingston, Doris Lessing, Else Morante, Toni Morrison, Marge Piercy, Marilynne Robinson, Alice Walker, Fay Weldon, and Christa Wolf have appropriated the conventions of realism for more subversive feminist aims. By juxtaposing realist and postmodern strategies, these writers offer a representation of the world that is familiar and thus both accessible and plausible to the reader while, simultaneously, disrupting the conventions of realism by foregrounding their contradictions and links to a Western metaphysics implicated in material oppression. This strategy is politically effective in that it invites a large readership with its recognizable realist elements and yet challenges those conventions through disruptive strategies that allow for the creation of a space

for constructing something new. After all, fiction can be politically effective only in so far as it affects or transforms the consciousness of readers and therefore depends on some sort of convergence between reader and text.²³ These texts with feminist impulses may be an instance of what Belsey calls the “interrogative text,” which employs “devices to undermine the [realist] illusion, to draw attention to its own textuality” and “enlists the reader in contradiction.”²⁴ Unlike a writer like Brecht, however, these novelists do not distance their audience as a means of foregrounding contradiction; instead, they draw their readers into the text through their use of the conventions of realism and then use strategies that disrupt the status quo to force their readers to question those very conventions.

Recent writers whose works exhibit feminist tendencies are faced with the same crisis of representation that all contemporary authors face, a crisis brought on by the theoretical and philosophical undermining of the subject, reality, language, interpretation, representation, history (which I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter); and many feminist novels are engaging postmodern aesthetic strategies as a means of meeting this crisis. At the same time, however, their political agenda makes them retain stronger ties to realism. For instance, they do not engage in as radical a dispersion of the subject even though they question the humanist subject, because their feminist commitment necessitates that they highlight the connection between subject positions and the human beings that inhabit them, that they retain some kind of notion of individual agency, and that they reach as large a readership as possible.

Before investigating the ways in which specific literary texts since the 1960s have made use of strategies that disrupt the status quo to further feminist aims and how these strategies might point toward radically new forms of feminist aesthetics,²⁵ it is necessary to examine certain issues surrounding feminism and postmodernism more specifically: the plural and constructed nature as well as the cultural context of both postmodernism and feminism; the relationship between feminism and postmodernism, including how feminist critics have responded to postmodernism and why the intersection between feminism and postmodernism has not been overwhelmingly embraced by feminist critics; a broad outline of what the area of intersection between postmodernism and feminism consists of and how it might be useful to feminism.

The Plural and Constructed Nature of Postmodernism and Feminism

To counter limited and misleading definitions of postmodernism, it is essential to recognize postmodernism as a plural rather than a singular entity. The same can be said of feminism. It would thus be more accurate to speak of *feminisms* and *postmodernisms*.²⁶ Feminism and postmodernism in fact defy not only definition but also categorization: they cannot be labeled or reduced merely to a period, historical cultural condition, sociopolitical movement, philosophy, critical approach, or aesthetics, but rather encompass all of these. Ihab Hassan's claim that postmodernism must be viewed as both "an artistic tendency" and "a social phenomenon" is, for instance, also an apt formulation of feminism.²⁷ Linda Hutcheon takes a different tack by differentiating between "the cultural notion of *postmodernism*" and "*postmodernity* as the designation of a social and philosophical period or 'condition'."²⁸ While it is potentially useful to differentiate between the postmodern condition or social formation and postmodern cultural practices, especially since the latter are often critical of the former, postmodern cultural practices can also be separated into aesthetic and theoretical/philosophical practices—practices that are related but not equivalents—and, furthermore, each of these broad categories encompasses sets of plural, heterogeneous, dynamic practices.²⁹ Although postmodern aesthetics draws on postmodern theory/philosophy's critical deconstruction of Western metaphysics and cultural norms, it is for the most part less esoteric, more accessible, and more intricately connected to the material world than the theory/philosophy. For example, postmodern theory's rejection of the hierarchical opposition between high art and mass culture is actively enacted within postmodern fiction through a variety of aesthetic strategies, such as the co-optation of popular literary forms like science fiction, detective stories, thrillers, ghost stories, tall tales. Discussions of postmodernism must take into consideration its various designation as cultural condition, theory/philosophy, and aesthetic practices, all of which are interconnected and yet distinct and all of which are always plural and in flux or in process.

In addition, both postmodernism and feminism are terms that have been constructed. Their constructed nature is important to

consider not only because these terms cover a broad spectrum of interrelated but distinct practices but also because these terms are constructed strategically. The dominant contemporary versions of postmodernism in its various guises as cultural dominant, theory, and aesthetics have been formulated within a highly specific Western and chiefly academic cultural context that remains very much male-centered. This tendency by critics (particularly male critics) to construct male-centered paradigms is widespread and points to the difficulties of escaping a male-centered Western metaphysics that continues to dominate even as it is being challenged. For instance, in *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), Brian McHale makes the useful observation that postmodernism is not “some kind of identifiable object ‘out there’ in the world” but rather is constructed: “postmodernism exists discursively, in the discourses we produce *about* it and *using* it.” He further argues (again usefully) that “constructions ... are *strategic* in nature, that is, designed with particular purposes in view,” so that “the issue of *how* such objects [as postmodernism] are constructed ... becomes crucial.” However, McHale does not question who the “we” producing these discourses consists of and thus overlooks the essentially male character of this “we” (something I will explore more fully later in this chapter). Although he posits postmodernism as “a plurality of constructions,” his assumption of an unexamined and undefined “we” limits the variety of constructions of postmodern fiction that he outlines and the specific literary texts that he investigates.³⁰ As a result, his only extensive analysis of fiction written by a woman is that of Christine Brooke-Rose’s work, which he treats with no references to gender, sex, or feminism. What I am suggesting is that, like many other critics focusing on postmodernism, McHale does not question the male-centered aspect of the various constructions of postmodern fiction he explores and helps to create, even though he asserts and purports to understand that constructions are always strategic and therefore political. If, according to McHale’s own theoretical discussion, literary critics construct/define what postmodern fiction is, then I am proposing to critique existing constructions as male-centered and to revise/reconstruct established versions of postmodern fiction so as to take into consideration recent fiction with feminist impulses that have been barred from the discussions because they do not quite fit the models/constructions established by mostly male

critics. Indeed, many feminist texts are not discussed as postmodern fiction precisely because they engage conventions of realism; however, upon close analysis, I have found that much recent feminist fiction simultaneously uses and undermines realism using strategies that are both feminist and postmodern, indicating the existence of politically specific forms of postmodern aesthetic strategies.

The tendency to use the term postmodernism without questioning its chiefly male constructions is widespread and certainly not limited to literary studies. Recently, a good number of feminist critics in various fields have begun to investigate the constructed character of postmodern theory. As Meaghan Morris argues, “in spite of its heavy (if lightly acknowledged) borrowings from feminist theory, its frequent celebrations of ‘difference’ and ‘specificity’, and its critique of ‘Enlightenment’ paternalism, postmodernism as a publishing phenomenon has pulled off the peculiar feat of reconstituting an overwhelmingly male pantheon of proper names to function as ritual objects of academic exegesis and commentary”—she lists “Habermas, Lyotard, Rorty, Jameson, Huyssen, Foster, Owens, and so on.” Furthermore, “Participants in a postmodernism debate are ‘constrained’ to refer back to previous input, and to take sides in familiar battles on a marked-out, well-trodden terrain.”³¹ In much the same vein, Chantal Mouffe asserts that “Too often a critique of a specific thesis of Lyotard or Baudrillard leads to sweeping conclusions about ‘the postmoderns’,”³² and Judith Butler points out that grouping “together a set of positions under the postmodern” enacts a “gesture of conceptual mastery” and a “ruse of power.”³³ Again, the problem for feminist critics and feminist aesthetics is that in practice the term postmodernism already is marked as a given—notwithstanding theoretical arguments to the contrary. To construct postmodern theories or aesthetics that include and account for feminist work requires a critical rereading of established constructions to establish their blind spots (including but not limited to a blindness to feminist practice) as well as a creative rereading of feminist texts that pays close attention to the strategies that exist alongside feminist strategies and/or propel forward specific feminist aims.

Similarly, feminism is not only plural but also strategically constructed. Although the postmodern debates have to a certain extent excluded feminists through their specific ways of constructing postmodernism, feminists have tended to construct feminism in

monolithic terms and in opposition to equally monolithic versions of poststructuralism and postmodernism (which are often collapsed). Recently, however, many feminist critics have begun the task of re-evaluating the relationship and possible intersections between feminist and postmodern theories. As Mouffe argues, to explore the relevance of the postmodern "critique of essentialism" for "feminist politics" entails engaging "all its modalities and implications and not quickly dismiss it on the basis of some of its versions."³⁴ Linda Singer also warns against "what is often offered as a facile distinction between feminism's political engagement and postmodernism's aestheticized self-absorption."³⁵ Indeed, as I will argue, postmodernism is neither essentially or necessarily apolitical nor aestheticist. An argument can also be made for certain forms of feminist practice that become examples of "aestheticized self-absorption" (see my discussion of Brophy's novel later in this chapter).

Although the contemporary phases of both feminism and postmodernism are plural and constructed, they do have one basic thing in common: they are products of and, simultaneously, contribute to the present global climate. They are shaped, among other things, by the recent history of two world wars and mass racially and ethnically motivated genocides, the threat of atomic annihilation, the cold war (until very recently) and the wars it created and supported (particularly the Vietnam War), the growing gap between first and third world nations, multinational corporations, the proliferation of mass media, and the recurrent clashes between right- and left-wing thought and policies. Furthermore, the philosophical shifts that these historical events and transformations have engendered, particularly the questioning of the Western metaphysics which underlies them, also affect recent forms of feminism and postmodernism. In addition, contemporary forms of feminism and postmodernism are situated in the public domain as well as in private elitist institutions such as universities and museums. This public presence results in part from the very public eruptions of "cultural and ideological conflicts" such as "the student and civil rights movements of the sixties," "the growth of the women's movement in the seventies," and the gay movement and the abortion rights campaigns in the eighties and into the nineties: movements directed at "prevailing cultural modes" and highlighting the "multiplicity of arenas of oppression within [existing] social and personal life."³⁶

At the same time as they are products of the post-World War II cultural and intellectual climate, recent forms of feminism and postmodernism also contribute to that climate. They participate within cultural practices and in the theoretical assault on Western metaphysics that has increasingly characterized much of intellectual life and activist campaigns in the decades since the 1960s.³⁷ As Hassan suggests, the only pattern that can be discerned in postmodernism is its “revisionary will in the Western world, unsettling/ resettling codes, canons, procedures, beliefs” as it reaches “for something other, which some call posthumanism,”³⁸ something it has in common with recent feminism. Indeed, Singer asserts that the recurrent practice in both feminism and postmodernism is “an explicit discursive strategy of challenging the terms, conventions, and symbols of hegemonic authority in ways that foreground the explicitly transgressive character of this enterprise”³⁹; and Wolff echoes Singer’s words, adding that this challenge “is the promise of postmodernism for feminist politics.”⁴⁰ Although these formulations might seem too abstract and overarching, they point to a prevailing impulse that underlies most postmodern theoretical and aesthetic practices (but perhaps not necessarily postmodern culture itself) and that is echoed in feminist practices. A more detailed examination of both postmodernism and feminism may provide a means of better understanding why the relationship between the two trends has remained tenuous and of delineating a space in which they might coexist and, more importantly, benefit each other.

The problems exhibited by some critics in their approaches to postmodernism derives in part from a failure to address the plural and constructed nature of postmodernism. Although the notion of an institutionalized postmodernism seems like a contradiction in terms given Hassan’s description/definition, many critics (feminists in particular) assume a fairly standardized version of postmodernism as ahistorical, as apolitical, as relativistic, as doing away with the subject and with notions of individual agency. However, at least theoretically, most critics specifically engaged in the postmodernist debate reject such rigid definitions and acknowledge postmodernism as a plural or heterogeneous phenomenon. For example, they account for the distinct notions of postmodernism exhibited within different disciplines, nationalities, and periods of time.⁴¹ Although Hassan, an influential postmodern critic, has repeatedly

insisted that postmodernism is not monolithic and varies from field to field, his 1982 list of postmodernist traits, which he differentiates from modernist traits, has become the standard means of delineating postmodernism for many critics. More specifically, critics tend to focus on his inclusion of *deconstructive* traits such as "Play," "Chance," "Exhaustion/Silence," "Indeterminacy," "Decreation/Deconstruction," "Schizophrenia," "Dispersal," "Difference-Differance/Trace," while ignoring potentially *reconstructive* traits such as "Desire," "Process/Performance/Happening," "Participation," "Text/Intertext," "Irony," "Immanence."⁴² Indeed, in a 1986 essay, Hassan explicitly states that postmodernism contains both "deconstructive" and "reconstructive" tendencies. Nevertheless, his inclusion of "*self-less-ness*" as a deconstructive characteristic of postmodernism has helped to secure the often-cited notion that postmodernism does away with the subject.⁴³

Within the literary establishment, a similar disjunction is apparent between the version of postmodern fiction that is assumed by those critics directly engaged in the postmodern debate and the tendency of many critics to conflate postmodern and contemporary fiction. As Hans Bertens demonstrates in his 1984 survey of postmodern fiction, the range of fiction discussed in terms of postmodernism includes the works of such disparate authors as Sukenick, Malamud, Federman, Bellow, Mailer, Brautigan, and Pynchon.⁴⁴ I would argue, however, that the works of novelists such as Bellow appear under the rubric of postmodernism through the mis-association of postmodern and contemporary fiction. Postmodernism is not, however, a synonym for contemporary, even though it certainly is present in the contemporary context. Much fiction produced in recent years contains no or few subversive strategies that could be linked to postmodern aesthetics and instead holds on uncritically to realist, Victorian, or gothic conventions, an assertion that is reinforced by a quick examination of the paperbacks lining the shelves of airport newsstands and chain bookstores. Attempts to define postmodernism have also led critics to engage in misguided arguments aimed at establishing whether recent postmodern fiction differs from modernist fiction in degree or in kind. It is more apt, however, to view postmodernism as simultaneously a continuation of *and* a reaction against modernism. As Hutcheon suggests, postmodernism's relation to modernism is complex, in that it involves both a

“retention of modernism’s initial oppositional impulses, both ideological and aesthetic” and an “equally strong rejection of its founding notion of formalist autonomy.”⁴⁵ Moreover, Andreas Huyssen convincingly argues that postmodernism is a reaction against an institutionalized version of high modernism, which has “domesticated” modernism by “burying the political and aesthetic critiques of certain forms of modernism.”⁴⁶

Anti-postmodern literary critics, including many feminists, generally associate postmodern fiction specifically with extreme forms of experimentation of the early 1970s, such as the novels of Sukenick and Federman. Generally referred to as surfiction, these texts are characterized by formal innovations and anti-referential tendencies.⁴⁷ They intentionally avoid stable subject positions as the focus of the text becomes aimed increasingly at language or writing itself, reinforcing many critics’ fear that postmodernism spells the death of the subject. Self-reflexivity dominates in many of these novels, to the extent that satiric or parodic force and political resonance are reduced or muted, since satire, parody, and engaged politics require some kind of at least temporary grounds or matrix of shared values; as a result, opponents of postmodernism have declared these novels apolitical. While challenging referentiality is certainly not an apolitical move, surfiction is political in a theoretical sense that remains distanced from engaged politics. By effectively disallowing (rather than problematizing) referentiality, these texts tend to sever language and representation from the material historical situation to such a degree that they disallow any exploration of the ways in which they are interrelated and are both functions of complex relations of power. Furthermore, these novels presuppose a highly educated audience and are consequently read by a very small elite, which severely limits any wide communication of their disruptions of the status quo. Although these texts have been the target of anti-postmodern criticism, they in fact constitute only one small strand of the great variety of novels that have been termed postmodern.

Writers of the late 1970s and of the 1980s have moved away from such a direct concentration on formal innovations and anti-referential stances and are more overtly addressing history and politics; yet many detractors of postmodernism are still equating postmodern fiction with this handful of early works of surfiction. As

Larry McCaffery suggests, it may be that certain formal “experiments proved to be dead ends or were rapidly exhausted and then discarded,” which supports the notion that postmodern fiction is neither homogeneous nor static.⁴⁸ In addition, the public oppositional movements grounded in specific politics that developed in the 1970s and 1980s, and that help to shape the current cultural climate, have necessarily affected the production of fiction; after all, fiction, as a cultural product, cannot be divorced from its material and ideological conditions. In a related vein, Huyssen discusses postmodernism in terms of recent historical development, delineating a series of “phases and directions” since the 1960s that emphasize “some of the historical contingencies and pressures that have shaped recent aesthetic and cultural debates.” While Huyssen acknowledges a certain “affirmative” strand of postmodernism during the 1970s and early 1980s that “had abandoned any claim to critique, transgression or negation,” he emphasizes its coexistence with an “alternative postmodernism in which resistance, critique, and negation of the status quo were redefined in non-modernist and non-avantgardist terms.” Moreover, he suggests that this latter movement’s critical edge was a product particularly of “the art, writing, film-making and criticism of women and minority artists.”⁴⁹ I would argue that this “alternative” strand of postmodernism surfaces within much recent fiction but has not been explored thoroughly enough because of the rather limited notions of postmodern fiction that (mostly white male) critics have developed as a result of their almost exclusive focus on the texts of white male writers.⁵⁰

Any discussion of fiction with postmodern impulses is necessarily complex, since postmodern aesthetics are neither singular nor static. Although tendencies toward anti-referentiality and formal innovations persist, they cannot be equated with all postmodern fiction. Indeed, I am suggesting that much recent fiction with postmodern impulses emphasizes resistance, transgression, and critique of cultural institutional and ideological structures; it is this “alternative” strand of postmodernism (as Huyssen calls it) on which I will focus my discussion. Such acclaimed novels as Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*, Don DeLillo’s *Libra*, E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, D.M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel*, and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, all of which have been discussed in

terms of postmodernism, overtly engage history and politics at the same time as they problematize the notions of history and politics as well as the possibility of representing them. Although some of these novels in the end dilute their own political edges by seemingly rejecting any forms of individual agency, as in the case of *Libra*, others, such as *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, insist on individual agency as a tool of political action: Sarah's deliberate decision falsely to claim herself as the French lieutenant's mistress is an active strategic, and therefore political, move. Not only do these particular novels participate in an alternative radical critique of the status quo, using subversive aesthetic strategies associated with postmodernism, but many other novels not currently discussed in terms of postmodernism also do so—particularly recent fiction with feminist impulses.

Although in many ways a strong and engaging critical study of feminist fiction and its modes of experimentation, Molly Hite's *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative* (1989) severs feminist fiction from postmodern fiction precisely because the book does not engage postmodernism as a plural and constructed entity with wide ranging and sometimes contradictory tendencies. Hite's book presumes, without exploring, the disjunction of feminist and postmodern fiction, as indicated in the question that launches the discussion: "Why don't women writers produce postmodern fiction?" Hite assumes a singular and exclusively *deconstructive* postmodernism when she argues that "experimental fictions by women seem to share the decentering and disseminating strategies of postmodernist narratives, but they also seem to arrive at these by an entirely different route, which involves emphasizing conventionally marginal characters and themes, in this way *re-centering* the value structure of narrative." However, Hite's notion that "the context for the innovation [of feminist fiction] is a critique of culture and a literary tradition apprehended as profoundly masculinist"⁵¹ can also be applied to much fiction that has been associated with postmodernism—for example, Thomas's *The White Hotel* and Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Acknowledging that postmodernism is plural and dynamic, encompassing a wide range of subversive tendencies, that postmodern theories have been constructed in ways that have tended to exclude feminism in practice if not in theory, and that post-World War II

postmodern and feminist fiction are (at least in part) products of the same cultural condition, leads to a recognition that recent experimental fiction with feminist impulses cannot be totally disassociated from fiction with postmodern impulses. Indeed, I am suggesting that it is more apt and potentially more productive to view certain trends within some recent feminist fiction as signaling a more engaged version of postmodern fiction, which might conceivably influence the direction of fiction in general by opening up the category of postmodern fiction to include other previously ignored practices and thus acknowledge and promote those practices.

As in the case of postmodernism, feminism's plural nature must be accounted for before an intersection between feminism and postmodernism can be posited. Although many different types of feminisms are collected under the generalized heading of feminism, they can be divided loosely into two broad trends with distinct philosophical approaches: 1) feminisms that primarily aim for women to achieve equal status with men within existing social structures; and 2) feminisms that reject the possibility of women's achieving total emancipation under existing social structures and, therefore, seek to dismantle and restructure the social system. It must be noted, however, that these two types of feminisms are not polar opposites and do not exist in binary opposition to each other. Both strands of feminisms are grounded in the same basic drive to expose and counter the traditional oppression of women; the difference between them lies in their philosophical underpinnings, specific aims, and strategies for achieving those aims.

The first type of feminism's adherence to existing social structures necessarily entails a certain degree of allegiance to and collusion with the system of thought from which those structures are derived: the thought systems of today's Western cultures are still firmly grounded in Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment ideals, which were developed primarily by and for white bourgeois males. The inherent contradiction in the stand of these feminists is that they embrace certain humanist and Enlightenment notions that lie at the heart of a deeply male-centered Western metaphysics. They have had a difficult time coming to terms with contemporary theory—demonstrating discomfort with and even hostility toward it, especially during the 1970s—which is indicative of an unyielding adherence to a humanism that a variety of recent

theoretical approaches (especially poststructuralism) question and challenge. These feminists initially were reluctant to recognize that theoretical assumptions of some kind underlie all criticism and writing, whether or not those assumptions are acknowledged, and that all theoretical paradigms are political in nature: there are no neutral positions.

Within literary studies, feminists working within a liberal humanist tradition get caught in a bind when they attempt to use an aesthetics that is grounded in male-centered humanist assumptions in the pursuit of feminist political goals. Toril Moi convincingly argues that, within literature, the often unquestioned use of realism to depict the various inequities faced daily by women gives rise to a “radical contradiction” between “feminist politics and patriarchal aesthetics.” She explains that realism is anchored on a mimetic theory of art that views the humanist self as the “*sole author*” of the literary text, so that the text becomes the expression of this unique and traditionally male creator.⁵² As Moi suggests, many feminist literary critics have been slow to rigorously question the assumptions or political basis of the realist aesthetics they appropriate. During the 1970s, feminist critics worked fruitfully to give women a voice in order to redress the historical suppression of women’s experiences and stories; however, these critics tended to uncritically take up the position of authorial authority in relation to other women that they criticized men for taking. Their attempts to pinpoint some kind of definitive representation of women’s oppression led them to treat literature written by women as a direct reflection of women’s experiences. This “appeal to experience as uncontested evidence” is problematic, according to Joan Scott, in that it posits “individuals who have experience” rather than “subjects who are constituted through experience” and thus makes unnecessary the exploration of “how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world”; in short, it “reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems.”⁵³ As Hite notes, “the notion that women are in this sense ‘natural’ or ‘straight’ writers, who manage to get reality—particularly their own experiences—onto the page with a minimum of art or decision making, has informed a whole practice of feminist criticism, so that some of the most important examples of this criticism have fostered the association between women’s writing and aesthetic conser-

vatism.”⁵⁴ Although the foothold gained by critical theory within academia has forced all critics to reassess their relation to theory and to examine their own interpretive strategies, a humanist tendency nevertheless prevails in some feminist literary criticism. While theoretically informed in many ways, for example, the work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar remains based on the assumption that literature reflects almost unproblematically the struggles being waged in the real world.⁵⁵

The notion of art as a direct reflection of reality not only assumes that a fixed objective reality exists and can be recuperated but also veils the ways in which a work of art is an artificial construction that can never exactly mirror what it is attempting to represent. Literary texts are clearly shaped, among other things, by the intention of its author, by the perspective and interpretation of its reader, by the socio-historical context of its production and of its readership, and by the language and discourses in which it is written. As Barrett suggests, a literary text can offer at best “an indication of the bounds within which particular meanings are constructed and negotiated in a given social formation.”⁵⁶ Indeed, feminist scholarship as a whole has developed a much more incisive analysis of its own critical methods and theories during the 1980s and into the 1990s.

As soon as feminists begin to unveil and challenge the theoretical assumptions of the dominant systems of thought that have traditionally oppressed women, they belong to the second strand of feminism—which seeks to change social and metaphysical structures themselves. Exposing and analyzing the underlying assumptions of a culture that has always been male-centered is the first step toward challenging that culture’s social and ideological structures. Thus, this type of feminism contains points of intersection with postmodern theories and aesthetics, and the discussion of feminism from this point on will refer to this strand of feminism unless otherwise noted. A brief and general working definition of this type of feminism, which envelops without erasing the differences between the various feminisms it encompasses, will suffice as a basis for this discussion: it is a political and critical stance that focuses on the sexual and gender biases inherent in society and its cultural products and on the social construction of gendered beings and of sexuality. It aims to expose the ways in which Western male-centered culture

works in order to retain its power, to subvert those means and challenge the very structure of society, and ultimately to offer blueprints for a restructured and new society.

The Relationship between Feminism and Postmodernism

Many of postmodern theories' and aesthetics' aims are in fact similar to those of feminism—to expose and subvert Western metaphysics and its cultural products—although they do not focus primarily on the construction and role of gender and sexuality. The challenge to the Western notion of the subject, however, leads directly to issues of gender and biology, since Western culture has traditionally associated the subject or self with man, while woman has been relegated to the position of object or other.⁵⁷ Furthermore, postmodern theories' energetic critiques of the system of hierarchical binary oppositions that undergirds Western thought destabilize the classic dichotomies between man and woman, male and female, masculine and feminine. Since these hierarchically charged oppositions have ensured the dominance of both men and Western metaphysics, challenges to them have the potential of being in concert with feminist aims.⁵⁸ Although the positions of postmodern and feminist theories and aesthetics with respect to the culture they are criticizing are not equivalent, since feminist theories and aesthetics are grounded in an activist political stance that seeks to end women's oppression while postmodern theories and aesthetics merely have political potential in their tendency to problematize Western metaphysics and the ways it is encoded within cultural and ideological structures, it appears that some of their ultimate aims are to a certain extent compatible.⁵⁹ Indeed, feminist and postmodern theories and aesthetics may mutually stand to benefit from a *rapprochement*, given that the former have been criticized for lacking both stringent critical modes and radical aesthetic strategies, while the latter have been criticized for lacking a clear political direction and possessing an ambivalent sense of social criticism.⁶⁰ The possibility of using postmodern critical and aesthetic strategies to counter the criticism aimed at feminism is of particular interest, since feminism is widely regarded as a politics with liberatory potential and yet at the same time has demonstrated conservative or traditional tendencies.

However, many feminists have rejected postmodernism outright

(along with poststructuralism, to which it is often mistakenly equated, as I will discuss later in this chapter), regarding it as just another masculinist conspiracy. The major obstacle seems to be postmodernism's questioning of the humanist notion of the subject. These feminist critics reject the idea that, just when women have finally attained the position of being able to define themselves as subjects, the subject is in their view being eradicated. As Felski has succinctly argued, "In the earliest feminist writings on literature ... female subjectivity provided the central category around which a feminist aesthetic was defined, and feminist critical response was validated on experiential rather than theoretical grounds."⁶¹ Indeed, various feminist critics such as Rita Felski, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Nancy Hartsock, and Patricia Waugh (among others) have worked recently to distance feminism and postmodernism. For instance, Hartsock's rejection of postmodern theories as useful for feminism is apparent in her reiteration of the question, "Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than object of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic."⁶² Within literary studies, feminist critics like Waugh and Felski argue that, while they share some concerns, feminist fiction and postmodern fiction are fundamentally at odds with each other and have moved in different directions. Waugh asserts that, while postmodern fiction articulates "the exhaustion of the existential belief in self-presence and self-fulfillment" and "the dispersal of the universal subject of liberalism," women writers are beginning "to construct an identity out of the recognition that women need to discover, and must fight for, a sense of unified selfhood, a rational, coherent, effective identity."⁶³ Although Felski notes that "Feminism can in fact be understood as an example of a 'postmodern' worldview which is fundamentally pluralistic," she warns against "a postmodern relativism" that is incompatible with feminism and chooses to focus her analysis of "feminist literature" on "autobiographical realist narrative." Felski acknowledges "the value and importance of contemporary experimental writing by women," but she seems to set up an opposition between esoteric experimental and popular realist fiction.⁶⁴ What I am suggesting, however, is that such an opposition is false, that much popular feminist fiction combines realist and experimental modes.