Reading Contemporary Black British and African American Women's Writing: Race, Ethics, Narrative Form
Ed. Jean Wyatt and Sheldon George
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In the first essay in this collection, Catherine Romagnolo points out that 'reading at the crossroads of form, content and ideology is not a simple task' (p. 15). I would concur, having been also engaged in reading Black British women's writing by paying attention to aesthetics, attempting to shift critical models away from seeing them predominantly as 'social texts' (p. 11). Romagnolo continues, though, that 'it must be accomplished if we are to challenge historically limited ways of reading literature by writers of color' (p. 15), and this is something this collection of essays achieves admirably.

The essays in this volume explore the formal structures of texts by Black British and African American women writers, focusing on three elements: race, ethics, and narrative form, as in the subtitle of the volume. The intention is to reconceptualize narratology to account for race in literature and culture (p. 2) against the New Critical traditions that excluded writers of color. Combining attention to form with attention to historical context and 'ideologies that inform a text' (p. 3), the essays explore how formalist approaches can be used to study race in literature.

As noted by the editors in their introduction, there has been an emerging focus on narrative theory in the twenty-first century in discussions of how 'aesthetics and ethics work together to produce ethical change in readers' (p. 1). For example, they cite ideas developed by Martha Nussbaum and Paula Moya around the power of reading to create empathy in understanding the material effects of race, class, and gender on other lives. Initially, such discussions may have been more about content than form, but the essays in this volume show how form works equally strongly to draw attention to those material effects. Added to this are ethical questions around the 'lens' through which Black authors write. As Deirdre Osborne notes in her chapter on Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, Evaristo 'problematizes reading her text through a racially deterministic lens, even though this remains a resilient critical practice' (p. 234). This opens questions not just of contextual versus formal readings of the text but also broader practices within the academy and publishing industries relating to an approach that tends to discount texts by writers of color as literary. Similarly, Sheldon George notes in his reading of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* that the text 'aims to constitute in readers an ethical cynicism about literary representation of race' (p. 122), pointing out the self-reflexivity

of many of these texts in their awareness of how they knowingly resist the normative (socio-cultural) interpretations of texts categorized as 'Black British' and 'African American.'

In her chapter on Zadie Smith and humor, Sarah Ilott provides the good advice (via John McLeod) to pay attention 'to what [the novels] seem to say, rather than what we want them to say.'[1] This is important when moving towards new ways of 'reading' Black British and African American writing proposed here with a focus on a close reading of narrative form. The volume's insistence on connecting close reading to ethics to '[urge] readers toward ethical reevaluations of race' (p. 2) focuses in on the tendency to make assumptions about what these texts will be saying; this line of argument also threads through George and Herman Beavers's contributions to the volume. Beavers develops this in his discussion of *Jazz* and *Home* by Toni Morrison, exploring how the use of 'I' (in first person narration) does not necessarily verify 'black personhood' (p. 73), complicating narrative point of view away from the merely grammatical. Several of the essays are interested in the use of narrative point of view in the texts and how unreliability destabilizes essential notions around race. Polyphony and heteroglossia are also explored (for example in Stephanie Li's essay on Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and Agata Szczeszak-Brewer's on *Small Island* by Andrea Levy) for similar purposes: how multiple narrators can provide alternative discourses or expose gaps in dominant discourses. Over-arching structures of binaries and narrative frames (as found, for example, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and explored by Jennifer Terry) similarly seek to explore the uses and subversions of traditional structuring devices. Readings that understand the complexity of Black-authored texts as being about more than race (although still absolutely about it) consider an aesthetics of humor (Ilott discussing Zadie Smith's work) and an ethics of adoption (Goulimari on Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*).

The volume illuminates Romagnolo's point that it is challenging to sustain a focus on the discussion of form and ethics when considering texts by writers of color. Pamela Bromberg's essay clearly delineates the issues between a reading encouraged by the deliberately 'sociological' content of Buchi Emecheta's novels and one that pays attention to form. At times, some essays drift away from purely formalist considerations. This is not a criticism, but a recognition – shared by the editors of the volume – of how well-drilled we are as literary critics to pay attention to the way the texts 'document' Black lives (p. 10). Readings have a tendency to slide back to those more sociological concerns even when they began with a consideration of the formal qualities of the text, ultimately eliding the question of form as a central concern in readings of literature by writers of color. It is admirable that all the discussions in this volume are rooted in an

attention to formal characteristics given the strong current of critical attention that assumes the main interest in these texts is sociological.

The consideration of texts that cross over between the US and UK is an acknowledgement that all of the texts 'write out of multiple cultural heritages and occupy multiple geographical locations' (p. 7). For example, the essay by Jennifer Terry on *Americanah* shows how the parallel structures of the narratives based in the US, the UK and then Nigeria produce systems of repetition that undermine normative notions of privilege. Equally, the crossover reinforces a literary heritage that highlights formal qualities of the texts by making connections across a specific author's work or across time to show the operations of literary tradition. In George's article, *Jazz*'s responses and challenges to modernism connect that text to both the Black literary tradition – referencing Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) – but also to other canonical modernist texts by Woolf and Faulkner (p. 136). Milo Obourn compares Nella Larsen's *Passing* with Morrison's 'Recitatif' to show how both texts destabilize fixed racial identities. Hence, these essays broaden the idea of tradition to suggest ways contemporary texts build on and challenge their forebears. The essays themselves tend to be based on the most mainstream (in terms of status and popularity) writers (in the US Adichie, Morrison, Ward; in the UK Smith, Levy, Evaristo) but expand how these authors are situated within this wider field.

This is such an important volume for developing an under-explored area of critical theory, and there is a sense of urgency about the endeavor of this collection, shared across essays. It establishes an excellent foundation for future work in the field. For example, the recognition of experimentation in Black British and African American women's writing (i.e., in Romagnolo's discussion of Rankine's use of second person narration as 'an experimental technique' found in postmodern writing (p. 27); or in Osborne's reference to 'women's experimental writing traditions' (p. 238)) could be developed into a more formal challenge to narrative theory and post-structuralist, post-modernist, and experimental writing. As work in this area advances, it will be possible and desirable to widen the scope of texts to include less-recognized authors together with awarded writers. Many of these writers deliberately and self-consciously experiment in their writing. For example, Wyatt notes how Helen Oyeyemi, as a contemporary Black British writer, is building a reputation as part of a new(er) generation of writers who all share a proclivity for formal experimentation. Coupling the traditional practice of close reading as a means of appreciating the writer's craft with explorations of race and gender, as this volume does, produces a powerful challenge to readers' perceptions of the value of Black writing itself and establishes it firmly as 'literature' (p. 10).

Notes

1. John McLeod. *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*. Routledge, 2004: p. 43.