

Ethnic American Literatures and Critical Race Narratology

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Introduction

Narrative Encounters with Ethnic
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Introduction

Narrative Encounters with Ethnic American Literatures

Alexa Weik von Mossner

In *Narrative, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States* (2017), James Donahue reminds us of Toni Morrison's important role in inspiring "a generation of scholars to study the complexities of race and ethnicity in American literature" (1). But while Morrison's critique in her seminal *Playing in the Dark* (1992) led to an invigorating discussion of the contributions by non-white writers to the American literary canon, Donahue notes that narrative theorists have only recently started paying more attention to issues of race and ethnicity. Pioneering works that combine an interest in narrative form with attention to race and racialization in the United States include Frederick Luis Aldama's *Brown on Brown* (2005), Sue Kim's *On Anger* (2013), and Paula Moya's *The Social Imperative* (2015), along with a string of more recent publications such as Christopher González's *Permissible Narratives* (2017), Stephanie Fetta's *Shaming into Brown* (2018), Donahue's *Contemporary Native Fiction* (2019), Wyatt and George's *Reading Contemporary Black British and African American Women Writers* (2020), and Stella Setka's *Empathy and the Phantasmic in Ethnic American Trauma Narratives* (2020). Together, these scholars have started the important work of "decolonizing" narrative theory (Kim, "Introduction" 233) by engaging in "critical race narratology"—a form of investigation that considers "how race and ethnicity might force us to reconsider what we know about the *nature* of narrative" (Donahue, "Introduction" 3), and thus challenge and change our understanding of narrative theory.¹

Ethnic American Literatures and Critical Race Narratology aims to continue this important investigation, and many of the abovementioned pioneers of critical race narratology are among its contributors. Their individual chapters draw on a wide range of concepts and theories—from Gérard Genette's explorations of focalization and temporality to recent work in transmedia narratology—in order to shed light on the complex and varied ways in which American authors use narrative form to engage readers in issues of race and ethnicity. They cover a wide range of texts—from historical novels and memoirs to speculative fiction, comics, and film—that belong to the literary traditions of African American, Arab American, Asian American, Jewish American, Latinx,

and Native American communities. And they demonstrate that the best way to engage with the formal features of ethnic American literatures is by bringing narrative theories in conversation with these texts, expecting that both will be elucidated in the process.

In this context, it is important to say a few words about the gestation of the volume. *Ethnic American Literatures and Critical Race Narratology* has grown out of the research project “Narrative Encounters with Ethnic American Literatures” that was funded by the Austrian Research Fund (FWF) and involved all three editors of the book. In addition to our exchanges with the contributors, the volume received important impulses from a related conference that was held online in September 2021, and which culminated in a roundtable discussion on the final conference day. From these contributions, conversations, and discussions, a number of critical concerns emerged that have also found their way into the structure of this book. Before giving an overview of its individual chapters, I thus want to briefly introduce and contextualize some of these critical concerns. While it is by no means an exhaustive list, it appears that the following concepts and issues are among those that are especially salient to the narratological study of ethnic American literatures at the current moment.

Alternative Temporalities, Historical Recentering, and Spatial Renegotiations

Reimagining narrative time, space, and history in ways that challenge or run counter to established literary and cultural conventions is a feature of many texts by authors identifying with racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States. This is apparent, for example, in the use of cyclical narrative time that James Donahue analyzes in his chapter in this volume on contemporary Native fiction. It also emerges in the relationship between Ted Chiang’s use of temporal hybridity and his view of race as a polymorphic phenomenon that is Matthias Klestil’s focus in his analysis of two of the Chinese-American writer’s science fiction stories. As Mario Grill demonstrates in his chapter on Mario Alberto Zambrano’s *Lotería*, alternative temporalities can be a means to narrate traumas in Chicana communities that are both personal and cultural. They also play a central role in the retelling and reimagining of American histories and futures that is explored in Marlene Allen Ahmed’s chapter on Afrocentric perspectives in literature, television, and film, and in Elizabeth Garcia’s chapter on healing historical narratives in Latinx young adult fiction.

Grappling with these alternative temporalities and spatial renegotiations often necessitates meeting them on their own terms because they are steeped in non-Western epistemologies and/or utilize narrative time and space to comment on complex histories of abuse and exploitation in ways that aim to shift readers’ understanding of those histories. As Jennifer Ho puts it pointedly in her contribution to this volume, “engaging with

these narratives ... honestly and with an understanding of how they are embedded in existing power structures, allows us to expand what literary knowledge looks like” (216). Such expansion can be a challenge for scholars with an interest in the scientific description of literary “devices” across genres and cultural traditions. As Kim has noted, one perceived tension between the study of Asian American literatures and the study of literary form is that New Critics and other formalist critics “sought a wide-reaching theory of narrative that would account for how all fictional narratives work” whereas “Asian Americanist criticism insisted on the centrality of Asian American history to understand the literature” (“What” 16). A similar focus on social-historical context can also be found in other fields focusing on the cultural production of ethnic-identified communities in the United States, which would thus seem to be at odds with approaches focused on formal features and literary universals.

However, as Kim also points out, “narratologists do not – and do not claim to – create narratological concepts out of a vacuum” (“What” 17). Their theories are based on examination of existing narratives and “if the formal elements are themselves products of history, the historical (or contextual) factors constituting them can arguably be understood as fundamental aspects of the narratives themselves” (17). From this vantage point, the reimagination of narrative time and space can be seen as both the product of a particular history (or context) and a way of talking back to that history (or context). As Dan Shen has suggested in a 2005 article in the *Journal of Narrative Theory*, formalist narratology and contextual narratology can in fact have a “mutually-benefitting relationship” in that the former provides “technical tools for the latter” while contextual approaches help seemingly outdated narratological concepts “to gain current relevance” (143). Engaging in critical race narratology, however, means to also accept that such concepts may have to be reconsidered and expanded.

(Re)focalization, Remembrance, and Emotional Memory

Another and related insight that has emerged from the contributions to this book is the importance of focalization and narrative perspective in the (non)remembrance of things past and present that are emotionally salient. The acts of (re)telling, (re)focalization, and remembering that take center stage in many of the texts emerging from these communities not only involve creating alternative temporalities and fictional geographies, but they also hinge on who gets to tell the story and who, if anyone, is the story’s central consciousness. Genette’s concept of focalization famously differentiates “between the question who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective? and the very different question who is the narrator—or, more simply, the question who sees? and the question who speaks?” (186). In nearly all the primary texts discussed in this book,

the characters whose point of view orients narrative perspective belong to communities that have been marginalized in American history and culture. Often, these characters are themselves marginalized within their communities, their painful emotional experiences of past and present ignored or discarded. When they see and/or speak, they push that marginalized experience to the narrative center and re-orient readers accordingly.

A formal feature such as focalization thus turns into a narrative and political act. It challenges readers to not only shift their perspective but also align themselves with the focalizing characters, sharing these characters' emotional states through liberated embodied simulation (Gallese and Wojciehowski) and narrative empathy (Keen), thereby involving cognitive "schemas" (Moya 1) and what Fetta has called the "soma" of both character and reader (25). It is this analytical focus on affective processes that also reverberates through many of the essays collected in this book. As Marijana Mikić points out in her chapter on Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, the novel not only "creates a literary space for ... marginalized voices ... but it also brings to light the ways in which slavery, colonialism, and institutionalized racism are *felt* across time and space" (112). Stella Setka's work on empathy in ethnic American trauma narratives is a powerful reminder that the *absence* of personal memory can be just as painful as its existence within communities that are haunted by collective traumas. Whereas Setka's chapter in this volume explores midrashic storytelling as a narrative means "to animate the voids and silences in Holocaust history" (116), thereby drawing on a mode of interpretation that has developed *within* the Jewish community and its traditions, the chapters by Michelle Wang and Patrick Colm Hogan show what can be gained by exploring the universal within the particular. Utilizing the tools of cognitive narratology, they demonstrate that literary works by ethnic American writers are both unique *and* built on emotional story structures that "feed into the broader energies of world literatures" (Wang 95, this volume).

Form, Intertext, Paratext, and, again, Context

This brings me to the third and last point I want to highlight here: the relationship between an individual work's form and its various intertexts and paratexts. As Aldama has put it, "while each author in each country and language is an innovator in subject matter, and sometimes also with respect to storytelling instruments or techniques," it is also true that they all pitch in to a "planetary toolbox ... in an ongoing process existing at least since Homer." If it is the content of that toolbox that "has become the substance of global literature," Aldama argues, "it is the toolbox itself that comprises the discipline called 'narratology'" ("How Reading"). Hogan's work on literary universals and narrative prototypes has shown a keen interest in this toolbox and in the ways writers across the globe have both taken tools from it and added new ones in an endless process of both continuity and innovation. In his contribution to this volume,

Hogan trains his critical lens on Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, demonstrating how the novel taps into cross-cultural story genres to urge "a reconnection of Native Americans (including those of mixed race) with their ancestral traditions" (179). And there are other ways in which ethnic American texts have used form to point beyond their own bounds. Derek Maus's contribution shows how Percival Everett and Kent Monkman have used "coordinating metaparatexts" to comment on the construction of "dehumanizing racial and/or ethnic discourses ... by the dominant (white) cultures of the United States and Canada" (184). Their satirical play with categories of fiction/nonfiction and notions of authority, authenticity, and identity speaks to a crucial issue that Ho raises in the final chapter of the volume about author functions and racial representations.

Their sustained interest in the formal features of texts notwithstanding, the contributions to this volume—and work on the intersection of ethnic American literatures and critical race narratology more generally—thus also suggest that literary form must inevitably be understood within its larger social-historical context. This includes issues of access and gatekeeping within the publishing and media industries, and it requires us to think through questions of (multiple) audience(s) and reception. As González has noted, "the aim of narrative theory has been to determine how narratives are made, how they work, and how they are consumed" (2). And because readers bring their own preconceived notions to a text—cognitive schemas, as Moya would have it (1)—they are likely to find it easier to engage with the kinds of texts they are accustomed to or that appeal to them for other reasons. That's why González proposes that "we begin speaking about narrative permissibility" (3) and the ways in which it circumscribes not only what kind of writing will find a readership but also what kinds of narratives are being created or, at the very least, which kinds of narratives get published and produced. Some authors have responded to these limitations by producing easily "digestible" narratives, others have done quite the opposite, challenging their readers to the point of (re)training their reading habits. What unites these authors, and their texts, however, is that they enrich and expand not only the imaginations of their readers but also the ways in which we think about narrative.

Overview of Chapters

The 12 essays in this collection are grouped into three parts that focus on different aspects of our narrative encounters with ethnic American literatures and on the critical issues I have discussed above. The first part, "Narrating Race and Ethnicity across Time and Space," highlights alternative temporalities and spatial renegotiations. It opens with James J. Donahue's "Indigenous Time/Indigenous Narratives: The Political Implications of Non-Linear Time in Contemporary Native Fiction."

Rather than applying established narratological concepts to Native American texts, Donahue draws on the work of Indigenous thinkers and activists in his analysis of various representations of time—drawn from works across genres, produced by artists from different tribal nations. Grounded in the work of such theorists as Gerald Vizenor, Paula Gunn Allen, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, the chapter explores various means by which Native narrative artists have represented non-linear time, and the political implications of such representations in these works.

The second chapter, Matthias Klestil's "Time(s) of Race: Narrative Temporalities, Epistemic Storytelling, and the Human Species in Ted Chiang," draws on classical and postclassical narrative theory, and on Chiang's view of race as a polymorphic phenomenon, to demonstrate how the science fiction writer deals with racialization by playing with temporal and epistemic elements of narrative. The alien encounter narrative "Story of Your Life" involves a temporal hybridity formally realized through Chiang's handling of verb tense and temporal markers that lays bare fundamental facets of the human as potentially racializing experience. "Seventy-two Letters" addresses race through an epistemic storytelling that interweaves historical and alternate epistemic layers into the story's fantasy version of Victorian times, thus drawing attention to racialization at the intersection of Anthropocene narratives and biopolitics. By exploring Chiang's stories through time-related narratological concepts, Klestil reveals their underlying racial dimensions and interlinks the means of critical race narratology with concerns over a perceived imbalance between formal and sociopolitical analyses in Asian American studies.

The focus on narrative time is further elucidated by Mario Grill's "Polychronic Narration, Trauma, Disenfranchised Grief, and Mario Alberto Zambrano's *Lotería*," which uses a cognitive approach to highlight that Zambrano's novel employs polychronic narration as an emotionalizing strategy in its relation of a young Chicana's disenfranchised grief. Resulting from sexual abuse, physical abuse, and the psychological repercussions of a violent police encounter that lead to the death of her sister, the traumas that haunt Luz are never acknowledged by the society around her. In her first-person account, Luz only gradually reveals the causes for her debilitating grief and pain in a fractured and unchronological manner. Drawing on David Herman's concept of polychronic narration, the chapter explores how *Lotería*'s fuzzy temporalities highlight the difficulties of narrativizing loss while inviting readers to perceive Luz's traumas the same way she remembers them. Grill argues that the fractured and unassimilated nature of polychronic narration is what allows Luz to re-enact her traumas while cueing readers to mentally witness them and feel along with her not only when she experiences pain but also when she copes and eventually reclaims agency over both her racialized body and her narrative.

Marlene D. Allen Ahmed's chapter, "Whole New Worlds: An Exploration of Narrative Strategies Used in Afrodiasporic Speculative Fiction," engages with the temporalities of Afrofuturism, demonstrating how Black American science fiction extends narrative traditions inherited from the slave narrative into futuristic storyworlds. Allen Ahmed analyzes speculative storytelling that features the experiences of characters of African descent across a range of media, including Steven Barnes's alternate history novels *Lion's Blood* and *Zulu Heart*, Justina Ireland's zombie tales *Dread Nation* and *Deathless Divide*, the Marvel superhero film *Black Panther*, and the Netflix series *Always a Witch*. Drawing on critical race narratology, her chapter shows how these works treat Afrofuturist themes such as the fraught-filled relationship between Black people and technoculture in their reimaginings of Afrodiasporic pasts and presents and their visualizations of Black futures, arguing that they create "whole new worlds" that differ from those often presented in mainstream speculative fiction.

Part two of the book, "Haunting Memories: Narrative, Race, and Emotion," explores another reoccurring feature of ethnic American literatures – difficult attachments and tormenting memories – on both the thematic and the formal level. It opens with W. Michelle Wang's "Emotions that Haunt: Attachment Relations in Lan Samantha Chang's Fiction," which shows how Chang's autodiegetic narration mediates ongoing processes of encoding and elaboration to demonstrate the salience of the moral/ethical in her characters' attachment relations. Taking Chang's novella "Hunger" and her short story "San" as her case studies, Wang draws on scholarship from cognitive narratology, moral foundations theory, and Asian American studies to explain how such moral situatedness of attachment relations is a dominant feature of many ethnic American literatures. By attending to how autodiegetic narration mediates ongoing processes of encoding and elaboration, the chapter highlights the value of attending to the stories' emotional structures.

Marijana Mikić's contribution, "Race, Trauma, and the Emotional Legacies of Slavery in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*," is similarly interested in haunting emotions. Arguing that Gyasi's neo-slave narrative imaginatively interrogates the emerging science of epigenetics through literary form and content, Mikić shows that the characters' affective experiences lay bare the effects of epigenetic transmission of both trauma and resilience. Drawing on Josie Gill's *Biofictions* and Patrick Colm Hogan's account of "affective narratology," it pays special attention to how the text represents the cross-generational emotional effects of slavery and anti-Black racism as well as individual and collective strategies of resilience that the novel's Black characters develop in the face of racial trauma and injustice. Mikić argues that studying the ways in which *Homegoing* negotiates the possibilities and consequences of epigenetic inheritance not only offers a way of making sense of the implications of epigenetic

findings, but it also points to the relevance of ethnic American fiction in shaping the stories we tell about epigenetics and race.

Stella Setka's chapter, "‘There Were Strands of Darker Stories’: Reading Third-Generation Holocaust Literature as Midrash," also explores the residual effects of inherited trauma, focusing on how texts by third-generation Jewish American writers such as Boris Fishman's *A Replacement Life* and Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch* adapt the Jewish exegetical tradition of midrash as a tool for responding to the gaps and silences in the historical record and their inherited memories of the Holocaust. The chapter shows that these works evince the transference of loss and the ways in which residual transgenerational trauma carries the weight of history into the future. Setka argues that, through their use of midrash, these texts encourage an active discourse between writer, text, and reader, enabling a *felt* connection to the tragedy and a critical engagement with the way that it continues to haunt our contemporary world.

The last chapter in this section, Alexa Weik von Mossner's "Stories, Love, and Baklava: Narrating Food in Diana Abu-Jaber's Culinary Memoirs," explores the way in which Abu-Jaber uses the sensual evocation of Middle Eastern food along with the accompanying recipes as a structuring device that builds bridges not only to her own emotional memories but also to readers. *The Language of Baklava* traces Abu-Jaber's life journey from the United States to Jordan and back, highlighting the crucial role that food has played on those transnational relocations. The chapter approaches the memoir from a cognitive narratological angle to highlight how affectively charged food memories are related to issues of language and cultural identity while also serving as a formal structuring device. It argues that the combination of life writing, vivid food evocations, and accompanying recipes encourages readers to use the memoir as cookbook and to thereby extend their engagement with Arab American culture beyond the reading experience.

The third and final part of the book, "Race, Ethnicity, and Paratexts: Genre Structures and Author Functions," extends the view beyond the individual text. It opens with Elizabeth Garcia's chapter on "Healing Narratives: Historical Representations in Latinx Young Adult Literature," which analyzes the strategies employed by Latina writers to create historical narratives that present healing possibilities not only for the fictional protagonists of these texts but also for their actual teenage readers. Sonia Manzano's *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano* and Guadalupe Garcia McCall's *All the Stars Denied* both feature young Latina protagonists in the midst of key historical moments in Latinx history in the United States: the activist years of the Young Lords Party in New York City, and the repatriation of Mexican Americans during the Depression era, respectively. Latinx feminist theorists and writers have consistently included healing as a vital component of Latinx feminist empowerment. The chapter explores narrative strategies used

by Latinx young adult authors to create healing historical narratives, pointing to possible intersections between this literature and critical race narratology.

Patrick Colm Hogan's chapter, "Blood and Soil: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*," considers the novel's participation in cross-cultural genres. It argues that Silko's widely celebrated novel includes heroic, romantic, and sacrificial narrative sequences that reveal its complex relationship to cultural, rather than political, nationalism. While the sacrificial sequences are the most prominent, providing the work with its overall narrative arc and characterizing most of the mythic and folkloric interpolations, Hogan demonstrates that Silko develops the sacrificial and romantic structures in a way that demarcates a racialized in-group that at least appears to suggest a natural relation of social identity groups to particular cultural traditions and to particular geographical places—a virtual definition of nationalism. This cultural nationalism is only partially qualified by the more global concerns about ecological devastation and nuclear war touched on briefly in the course of the novel.

Derek C. Maus's chapter, "Metaparatextual Satire in Percival Everett's *The Book of Training* and Kent Monkman's *Shame and Prejudice*," argues that both works utilize what transmedia scholar Matt Hills—building on the work of Genette and others—has called "coordinating metaparatexts" in creating scathingly satirical commentaries on the manner in which dehumanizing racial and/or ethnic discourses have been constructed and disseminated by the dominant (white) cultures of the United States and Canada. The chapter shows that although Genette's original language of paratextual "subordination" is not necessarily political, the ways in which Everett and Monkman play with apparent paratextual relationships absolutely are. The elaborate impostures of paratextuality in their respective works are not meant to conceal their ardent criticisms, but rather to underscore the ways in which rhetorical and aesthetic strategies have promulgated racist ideologies.

In the final chapter of the book, "Author Functions, Literary Functions, and Racial Representations or What We Talk about When We Talk about Diversifying Narrative Studies," Jennifer Ho continues this focus on the cultural construction of ethnic identities by critically interrogating how Asian American literature tends to be categorized through the body of the author, a practice similarly taken up in other ethnic literary studies. Authors, authority, and authenticity are the three words that Ho believes guide questions and conversations about racial representation and diversifying narrative studies. The chapter looks at author functions and racial representation to work through what it means to diversify the study of narrative, probing what goals are being accomplished in the classroom and in the scholarship we produce when we make claims for diversifying narrative studies.

Ethnic American Literatures and Critical Race Narratology seeks to open new discursive spaces at the disciplinary intersection of narrative

theory and what we have come to call ethnic American literatures, ending with Ho's important intervention that calls into question the way we attribute ethnic labels to texts based on their author's body and other problematic "markers" of race and ethnicity. Once opened, these discursive spaces should invite further inquiry into the relationship between narrative theory and a literary archive that is becoming increasingly diverse, diversified, and inclusive. The book is conceived as a steppingstone and encouragement for new research that uses narrative theory as a lens to explore formal features and narrative strategies in the diverse field of American literary production while opening itself up to the needed rethinking and reconceptualizing of narrative theory itself.

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Note

- 1 Labeling a diverse body of American literature as "ethnic" as we do in our title and elsewhere in the book is not without its problems. On the one hand, "ethnic American literature" is a convenient umbrella term that can be found in book publications and college courses alike. On the other hand, like most convenient umbrella terms, it comes with its own set of problems. As Donahue puts it pointedly, there is really no good reason why Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* is labeled ethnic American literature, whereas a text by a white American writer is simply considered American literature without any additional markers ("Narrative, Race" 8). While our book is to some degree complicit by using this marked/unmarked binary, it also interrogates such binaries and their use in scholarship and the publishing industry. Jennifer Ann Ho's chapter in particular is an exercise in dissecting not only the marked/unmarked binary between ethnic and white American fiction but also considers authors with multiracial identities and asks what happens if an "ethnic" writer chooses to write about another ethnic group.

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