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This book is of interest to me on two primary fronts: first, as the author of a number of books about American allegory and, secondly, as a teacher who regularly offers a popular undergraduate course on women's liberation literature. So I bring a complex of expectations to bear on Elliott's work, though these expectations are quickly reduced to those relating to popular feminist fiction of the last thirty years. There is little here to interest theorists of literary allegory. Elliott uses the term in the popular sense of a fable, or level of representational signification that gestures towards a general and abstract level of meaning. This level is constituted by allegory as a cultural narrative, a narrative that organizes and lends meaning to the events of literal history. This narrative in Elliott's study is the American *mythos* of national progress and perfection, where progress is a teleological process variously interpreted by commentators on all points of the political spectrum, from the radically conservative to the revolutionary, leading to the full coming-into-being of the nation. I was frustrated that in her two lengthy introductory chapters Elliott does not explain precisely the contours of this narrative; indeed, her strategy focuses primarily upon describing the American national narrative of teleologically-organized time in negative terms, as what it is not or is no longer. She discusses at length the claim made by both conservatives and radicals that the decade of the 1960s signifies the failure of this narrative – but in the absence of specific historical examples of how this narrative has been articulated it is not always easy to follow exactly what Elliott is saying. However, her strategy makes sense when we ask what would be the consequences of a clear spelling out of this variously told national narrative? First, we would be led to ask the question: how do individual narratives signify on a level like that of the national narrative, which is so very abstract? If feminist fiction of the 1970s and later developed its own register of images, tropes, and narratives that chimed with the vocabulary of contemporary feminism, then how does this language similarly chime with the national, especially given the status of feminism as an oppositional discourse? This question requires the kind of attention to textual rhetoric – to allegory as figurative language – for which the model practitioner is perhaps Paul de Man and which Elliott resists. Then, if feminism is a privileged site that provides a discursive analogue to the sense of the national narrative in crisis, what kind of feminism is this – given that feminism has never been unified and monolithic, though Elliott uses the metaphor of “waves”, referring unreflectively to “second wave” feminism -- and what version of the national narrative are we talking about? If popular feminist fiction of the period since the 1970s is engaged in allegorizing the *mythos* of American national progress, then we need to know which feminism, which Americans, what nation, and what signifying or allegorizing relationship are we talking about? Elliott devotes space to a satisfying discussion of what she means by “popular” as a category of fiction that includes writers separated by a generation, by form, and style, and feminist commitment. However, in the absence of similarly clear definitions of her other key concepts, Elliott is not so persuasive as she could be. And this difficulty comes back to the absence of a theoretical explanation of how individual texts enact through their rhetoric this relationship with powerful cultural narratives. In place of a theory and an argument we have assertions such as: “The temporal problem of the oppressed woman thus offered a convenient and ideologically charged analogue for a widespread sense of temporal crisis, providing a set of images and narratives uniquely suited for representing the problems of time and teleology in postmodernity” (5).

Having made these criticisms about the methodology of Elliott's book, I have to emphasize that her basic thesis is very engaging and provocative. She focuses upon the issue of time, specifically time without the promise of change, which she calls “static time.” “From the white, middle-class housewife stuck in repetitive domestic labor to the woman of color haunted by the traumas of history, the popular feminist literary vision turns on the experience of time without meaningful change, consistently representing women's oppression as a function of their experience
of time” (4). This is Elliott's thesis and she develops her argument through a series of chapters, divided into three sections: “Temporal Politics,” “Feminism as Static Time,” and “Feminism as Futurity.” The chapters deal with The Women's Room and Vida; The Stepford Wives; Rubyfruit Jungle and Fear of Flying; Meridian and The Color Purple; and, finally, The Joy Luck Club and The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood. These texts represent an obvious chronological movement and encompass very different kinds of feminism, raising the question of whether this concern with women's time and national time is an artifact of Elliott's selection of texts, or of the kind of attention to women in time that interests these authors, or of the form taken by their feminist critique. Totalization of oppression that leads formally to narrative closure as repetition and reductionism of the kind thematically critiqued as characteristic of women's oppressed condition in the earlier novels. This repetition is embedded within the discourse of the uncanny in Elliott's quite brilliant chapter on The Stepford Wives. There, she shows how Levin's use of Gothic conventions presents women's entrapment in domestic time also suggests a way out: by liberating the housewife from her static experience of time we can also liberate public time back into a narrative of progress. In the chapter that follows, Elliott reads Erica Jong and Rita Mae Brown as representing a quest for authentic subjective experience, outside patriarchal time and outside the totalized narrative, through the use of picaresque literary form and plots focused on intense sexual moments or “events.” In the chapters that follow through to the end of her book Elliott addresses not white but women of color narratives – the work of Alice Walker, Amy Tan, and Rebecca Wells – thus repeating the structural implication she critiques of a chronological relationship between “white” and “ethnic” feminisms: “this turn in attention to various histories of oppression is often read as a sign of the post-1960s rejection of universals associated with teleological futurity, particularly the critique of the abstract ideal of American citizenship as a falsely and forcibly homogeneous model that eradicates particular histories of oppression” (113). Elliott uses this reading of identity politics to situate her chosen texts within the double bind of futurity as domination, figured as either totalization or as “static time.” Through the mother/daughter narratives of Tan and Wells, but developing out of narratives like Meridian, Elliott reveals a new variant of feminine “static time”: the future as change without (feminist) transformation troped as the daughter's necessary repetition of her mother's past. The brief “Coda” that ends Elliott's book intriguingly situates backlash novels like The Devil Wears Prada within the framework of temporal politics, arguing that these narratives resolve the issue of women's “double day” of work and housework by “stealing” time from other women. Thus the second-wave call for women's liberation into the professions is seen as having devastating consequences for those women whose time becomes a commodity for purchase by their wealthier sisters. In this short discussion, Elliott poses the question of how her discussion of “women's liberation” texts might be opened to more recent popular women's fiction. Some comment on the recent film version of The Stepford Wives would have been interesting in this connection. Elliott's book is more than a welcome addition to critical studies of popular feminist fiction, it is a valuable pedagogical tool that will guide curricular thinking as this field continues to develop.

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