

Creating Absence to Acknowledge Presence: Relational Subjectivity and Postmodernism in
Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between postmodernist discourses and feminist discourses, asking, firstly, whether or not feminist political action is possible within a postmodernist theoretical climate that scrutinizes the construction of universalizing group identities, and, secondly, how political action might be undertaken in such a theoretical climate. I contend that Carol Shields, reflecting the postmodernist ideology of Jean-François Lyotard and Patricia Waugh, creates Daisy Goodwill Flett's absence in *The Stone Diaries*. This absence, in turn, acts to acknowledge the gaps in knowledge that exist within self-legitimizing grand narratives. It demonstrates that Daisy's performance of these grand narratives, particularly heteronormativity, necessarily obstructs her voice and, thereby, marginalizes her ability to act politically within that narrative. *The Stone Diaries*, then, calls for a plural public space by exposing what remains unknown—women's lives and narratives—within the current public space.

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Dedication

For my father, who, perhaps inadvertently, initiated my descent into theoretical abstraction when he told me that I was not important, and for my mother, who believed when few others, including myself, did not.

In many ways, [Daisy] is like so many women of this century who became, in fact, nothing. Their lives did not hold many choices. They were this huge army of women, they were mainly voiceless, they were defined by the people around them. And that became the trick of writing [*The Stone Diaries*], to write a biography of this woman's life—but it's a life from which she herself is *absent*.

— Carol Shields (“Always a Book-Oriented Kid” 51, emphasis added)

I have this impulse to see fiction as a form of *redemption*, to redeem what otherwise might be lost.

— Carol Shields (“Always a Book-Oriented Kid” 52, emphasis added)

I begin with these two passages because they represent a fundamental paradox that has yet to be examined in Carol Shields's most celebrated work, her Pulitzer-winning novel *The Stone Diaries*. The first of the passages makes it clear that Shields means to concern herself with women's issues, particularly the erasure of women within historical narratives. Her creative works, which Marta Dvorak believes represent a “poetics of the quotidian” in their “uncanny ability to re/represent the details of everyday life, to anatomize the mundane” (57), demonstrate a belief in the need to redeem lost or marginalized voices, prompting Alex Ramon to suggest that her fiction may be viewed as “fundamentally (counter-)historical, offering the opportunity for a minute examination of the life and voices that ‘slip through the net of history’ and an excavation of its apparent ‘empty cavities’” (127, quoting a book review by Shields). Within *The Stone Diaries*, Daisy Goodwill Flett represents just such an “empty cavity,” but if Shields does intend to redeem Daisy, she goes about it in a seemingly counterproductive way, for Daisy remains absent throughout the novel. Consequently, a paradox is created that centers on the terms *redemption* and *absence* as they are used to describe Shields's art and Daisy respectively: redemption seemingly demands presence within one's socio-historical narrative in order to expose “what otherwise might be lost,” while absence, by definition, is the lack of presence. What would happen, however, if one looked at Daisy's absence as a way to challenge redemptive strategies themselves?

Most redemptive strategies that focus on creating a discursive space from which marginalized people can express themselves have focused on establishing a unified subjectivity capable of adequately representing *one* political ideology shared by their constituents. Through this subjectivity, members of the marginalized group can, in theory, discover the agency needed to begin challenging those grand narratives (gender, class, race, and so on) that limit their actions by prescribing normative behaviour. Freedom in this conception of politics is, as Linda Zerilli points out in *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, equated with sovereignty, as agency consists of achieving power over the Others who also inhabit the public space. Thus, in what Zerilli calls the “category of women debates of the late 1980s and 1990s” (11), it was postulated that, contra postmodernist discourses which seek the deconstruction of subjective positions, feminisms require the construction of unified feminine subjectivities to act as the center of epistemological frameworks capable of determining feminist political actions within the public space. Shields subverts this strategy for redemption by creating Daisy as a character who lacks that “kernel of authenticity, that precious interior ore that everyone around her seem[s] to possess” (75). Using the differences between the way that her characters Cuyler Goodwill and his daughter Daisy revise their identities, Shields demonstrates that women’s alterior social positioning leads to a deeply contingent and relational subjectivity. Such contingency restricts entrance into feminist conceptions of the public space that demand sovereignty acquired through unitary subjectivity. Therefore, redemption—in other words, recognition within the public space where narratives are recounted and enacted—must be conceived in another way. Daisy’s redemption, I contend, may be found in the liminal space that her absence acknowledges within the public sphere, as, far more than merely exposing the absence of women within historical narratives, Shields creates that absence in the middle of her book and, thereby, acknowledges what is unknown within these narratives.

Creating Female Subjectivity in the Postmodern World

Shields's comments regarding postmodernism offer insight into the role that postmodernist discourses play in her fiction. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, she says that "[s]ome postmodernists think there is no point beyond the language game, but I think there can be—and I don't know why we have to talk about these two forms of fiction [naturalism and postmodernism]. Why we can't have something in the middle—which is, I suppose, what I'm trying to do. Because postmodernist ideas do allow you to do things that you can't do as a naturalist" (44). Her concerns with postmodernist discourses seem commensurate with those that Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson raise in "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism." They suggest that postmodernist discourses are capable of "sophisticated and persuasive criticisms of foundationalism and essentialism, but their conceptions of social criticism tend to be anemic" (20), while feminist discourses, conversely, tend to "offer robust conceptions of social criticism, but they tend at times to lapse into foundationalism and essentialism" (20). Thus, Shields imagines that her work occupies the role of negotiator between two seemingly incompatible forms of fiction. In order to explore the way that Shields makes use of postmodernist discourses in her feminist fiction, I will examine the absence of Daisy in terms of the paralogical legitimation of knowledge espoused by Jean-François Lyotard in his important treatise *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, and examine her identity in terms of the complications and revisions that Patricia Waugh makes to postmodernist discourses about knowledge and the subject in *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard problematizes the production of knowledge in the Western tradition by noting that the grand narratives used to establish collective consciousness

are self-legitimizing structures that depend upon performance to maintain their coherence.

According to Lyotard, grand narratives are, in fact, metanarratives, for, as he states,

the people are only that which actualizes the narratives: . . .they do this not only by recounting them, but also by listening to them and recounting themselves through them; in other words, by putting them into “play” in their institutions—thus by assigning themselves the posts of narratee and diegesis as well as the post of narrator. . . . They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do. (23)

Far from representing knowledge, then, these metanarratives prescribe and, thereby, limit the speech and actions of those people who construct their knowledge based upon the narratives, and their consequent performance of these actions serves as validation for the narratives’ structure and augments their power. Thus, Lyotard’s short statement “[c]onsensus has become an outmoded and suspect value” (66) captures the spirit of many postmodernist discourses, which advocate the use of fragmentation, deconstruction, and skepticism as tools with which to challenge the existence of an Archimedean viewpoint (an all-seeing, all-encompassing subjectivity) capable of legitimating the denotative statements that construct knowledge.

Universalizing conceptions of knowledge are dispersed using these techniques, allowing the existence of *knowledges* as those people who were silenced within grand narratives are afforded the opportunity to present counter-narratives that challenge these accepted knowledge structures.

Deconstructing grand narratives, according to Lyotard, is possible because of the linguistic pragmatism used to construct them: all narratives, he contends, construct knowledge through reference to a singular initial axiom, so all subsequent denotative statements are

legitimated in accordance with their fidelity to this initial axiom (42). However, this structure leads to

[t]wo noteworthy properties of scientific knowledge. . . : the flexibility of its means, that is, the plurality of its languages; and its character as a pragmatic game. . . . Another result is that there are two kinds of “progress” in knowledge: one corresponds to a new move (a new argument) within the established rules; the other, to the invention of new rules, in other words, a change to a new game. (43)

What Lyotard advocates, then, is a knowledge that remains dynamic. Bombarded by the seemingly paralogical “new moves” or “*petits récits*” (little narratives) (60)¹ of those groups that are generally marginalized within grand narratives, postmodern theory is led to recognize and challenge the “metaprescriptives” or presuppositions that ground and stabilize knowledge in the Western tradition (65). The construction of knowledge in such an “open system” becomes accordant with a denotative statement’s ability to generate an idea as each statement is “deemed worth retaining the moment it marks a difference from what is already known” (64); consequently, knowledge, rather than being dependent upon legitimation established through performance, becomes more retrospective as others within the system interact with and challenge each new statement. Thus, postmodern thought, Lyotard suggests, is “theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical” (60) because it explains not what is present in knowledge but what is not present.

Postmodernist discourses such as Lyotard’s have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years as the very marginalized groups to whom they promise discursive freedom

¹ A paralogism is defined in the *OED* as “a piece of illogical or fallacious reasoning, especially one which appears superficially logical” (“Paralogism”). In Lyotard’s theory, this term is used to denote the continual destabilizing effect that “little narratives” have upon the linguistic pragmatism that structures knowledge. These “new moves” may appear illogical inasmuch as they do not conform to the initial axiom that structures language and knowledge within the grand narrative, but they are valuable according to Lyotard because they produce “blind spots and defer[re]d consensus” (61), inevitably creating a situation in which universality is abandoned and replaced with a conception of knowledge that remains in constant flux and is limited both temporally and spatially (66).

challenge the applicability of postmodernist ideas to their specific critical needs. Christine Di Stefano, in "Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism," succinctly defines four challenges that postmodernist discourses pose to continued feminist criticism:

First, that postmodernism expresses the claims and needs of a constituency (white, privileged men of the industrialized West) that has already had an Enlightenment for itself and that is now ready and willing to subject that legacy to critical scrutiny. Secondly, that the objects of postmodernism's various critical and deconstructive efforts have been the creations of a similarly specific and partial constituency (beginning with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle). Third, that mainstream postmodernist theory (Derrida, Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault) has been remarkably blind and insensitive to questions of gender in its own purportedly politicized rereadings of history, politics, and culture. Finally, that the postmodernist project, if seriously adopted by feminists, would make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible. To the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or subject, namely, women, the postmodernist prohibition against subject-centered inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency. (75-76)

These four points may be summarized in two questions: 1) Can postmodernist discourses adequately represent the narratives of marginalized groups such as women? 2) Can marginalized groups act politically in a postmodern world skeptical of group identities? The former question focuses on the theoretical framework that grounds much postmodernist discourse: as a specifically masculinist framework, in claiming the inauthenticity of all grand narratives, these discourses refer to a very specific position of masculine subjectivity within grand narratives and

neglect the different subjective positions that women and other marginalized groups occupy within this narrative. Examined in this way, postmodernist discourses may be understood as a final attempt to assimilate difference by presuming that a supposedly universal understanding of subjectivity underlies their deconstructive efforts. In effect, inclusion rather than exclusion is problematized by this question, as participation in these postmodernist discourses seems to require feminist acquiescence to the patriarchal understanding of history, phenomenology, and subjectivity that serves as the foundation of these discourses, decreasing the supposed plurality of an “open system” of knowledge like the one Lyotard envisions. The fear of naïve participation in these patriarchal foundations has, not surprisingly, all too often resulted in ominous and apocalyptic predictions concerning the future of feminism within postmodernist discursive spaces: Seyla Benhabib, for example, in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, purports that “postmodernist position(s) thought through to their conclusions may eliminate not only the specificity of feminist theory but place in question the very emancipatory ideals of the women’s movements altogether” (213). Benhabib’s prediction expresses concern for the continued political efficacy of feminism, but it points to a crisis in legitimation that is becoming increasingly prominent in third-wave feminist discourses as subjectivity, either masculine or feminine, becomes increasingly suspect.

Faced with the skepticism of postmodernist discourses and the poststructuralist theories of gender espoused by critics such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, which reject gendered subjectivity as a metaphysical construct created within a linguistic and philosophical game that maintains coherence using binary oppositions,² third-wave feminism is beginning to question the

² Much of this skepticism was grounded in the poststructuralist theory of critics such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes. Kristeva, following the poststructuralist theory of Derrida, espouses that women should abandon the masculine/feminine dichotomy altogether because “the very dichotomy. . . as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*,” which prompts her to ask “[w]hat can ‘identity’, even ‘sexual identity’, mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged” (qtd. in Moi 12-13)? Likewise, Cixous uses poststructuralist thought to conclude that women are

necessity of establishing a strategic feminine subject position. If postmodernist discourses, as Waugh writes in *Feminine Fictions*, express the “loss of belief in the concept of the human subject as an agent effectively intervening in history” (9), and “[f]eminism seeks a subjective identity, a sense of effective agency and history for women which has hitherto been denied them by the dominant culture” (9), then have critics not come to an impasse regarding the future of feminism as a political movement? Toril Moi, in *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, notes the importance of acknowledging deconstructed forms of feminism but insists that “it still remains *politically* essential for feminists to defend women *as* women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression that precisely despises women *as* women” (13). Moi’s claim essentially asserts, therefore, that challenging the sovereignty of patriarchally produced and legitimated narratives requires the construction of a feminine identity that is capable of expressing counter-sovereignty when faced with these narratives. Feminine subjectivity in this political strategy comes to act as a legitimation tool for feminist political actions because it establishes a specific and predetermined end toward which feminist actions act as the means. Merely a “justificatory strateg[y]. . .to guide choices in theory, research, and politics” (Harding 89), feminine subjectivity becomes the center of an emancipatory movement that, like the limiting patriarchal grand narratives it challenges, demands performance from its supporters. Zerilli contends that, in the absence of this “justificatory strategy,” “third-wave feminism could be experienced as nothing other than a crisis: a virtual free-for-all in political opinions and judgments that can produce no knowledge whatsoever [and that] threatens to destroy the very possibility of coming to an agreement about what the proper ends of politics are” (132). To

subsumed within an oppositional relationship with men, suggesting that “[w]herever an ordering intervenes, a law organizes the thinkable by. . .oppositions” (264) before asserting that “hierarchization subjects the entire conceptual organization to man. A male privilege, which can be seen in the opposition by which it sustains itself, between *activity* and *passivity*” (265). Cixous suggests that this opposition which oppresses women may be deconstructed through the active realization and reiteration of its existence, for once one recognizes that the alterity of women is used by men to establish masculine superiority then the opposition necessarily becomes unstable and renders gendered subjectivity meaningless.

avoid this crisis of legitimation, Zerilli suggests that feminists abandon the “subject question” (the term she uses to denote feminism’s adherence to the construction of subjectivity) and transform their understanding of political action by making it independent from, indeed exclusionary to, sovereignty.

The latter of Zerilli’s calls to action—the reconfiguration of how political action should be undertaken—does seem to be necessary, but the complete abandonment of the notion of subjectivity seems rather dangerous given the immense social inequalities with which the feminist movement concerns itself. Zerilli relies upon the political philosophy that Hannah Arendt espouses in *The Human Condition* to make her critique of feminism, and Arendt’s theory takes as its framework the ancient Greek distinction between public and private space.

According to Arendt, relationships in the private space are “born of necessity, and necessity rule[s] over all activities performed in it” (30), leading to a hierarchized space that demands a sovereign who can decide upon appropriate actions. Conversely, the public space honours plurality because it represents a space in which “to be free mean[s] to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled exist[s]” (33).

Within this plural public space, Margaret Canovan asserts in her study of Arendt, the concerns of our constructed world are made visible, making way for a conception of unity that is not dependent upon our association with others “like” us but, rather, on the relational space that is created when people come together to discuss those narratives that affect all people (634).

However, the rise of the social sphere has conflated the private and public spheres and resulted in a situation in which political action becomes predetermined epistemologically, transforming the political group into a family-like entity that performs actions in accordance with necessity (Arendt 29). Arendt’s is an astute understanding of political action and illuminates the dangers of epistemologies in political movements such as feminism, but its atavistic reliance on ancient

Greek political ideology seems unrealistic in a modern Western society that has been so profoundly affected by the social sphere. For example, as Benhabib points out, through the extension of the social space “[t]he emancipation of workers made property relations into a public-political issue; the emancipation of women has meant that the family and the so-called private sphere become political issues; the attainment of rights by non-white and non-Christian peoples has put cultural questions and collective self- and other-representations on the ‘public’ agenda” (94). A return to strict distinctions between the public and private space may have the desired effect of removing sovereignty from the public space, but, and this is especially the case with an author like Shields who deals with the private lives of women and men, it may also limit the issues available for discussion within the public space. For Zerilli, feminism’s descent into the epistemology that Arendt warns against is a product of its fixation on feminine subjectivity, but I believe that all the tools needed to accomplish the abandonment of epistemology may, instead, be found in a reconception that highlights the similarities between ideas of women’s relational identity and postmodernist discourses that challenge unitary subjectivity. What seems necessary is a conception of feminine subjectivity that remains unconcerned with legitimation (effectively eliminating the limitations associated with feminist epistemologies centered on validating a universal subjectivity) but that still offers women the presence they need to effect change in a discursive space that is not yet equally willing to hear their voices.

Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement in *The Second Sex*, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (301), recognized that *woman* is a construction of masculinist imaginations, the result of an alterity that positions woman as the negative upon which man can define himself and find self-realization (157). Given this history of apparent inauthenticity, it seems natural that feminist discourses should look to women’s positions of marginality to begin (re)creating their subjectivities within the postmodern world. In *Feminine Fictions*, Waugh examines the

marginalized positions that women occupy within masculine grand narratives and argues that the principles of postmodernist theories of subjectivity have been represented in women's writing for many years and merely take a different route to the postmodernist conclusion that subject positions are contingent. The difference is found, she argues, in the way that masculine and feminine identity has been expressed throughout patriarchal history. Man, Waugh claims, has historically positioned himself as the sole creator of reality, so he has experienced postmodernism as destabilizing because it questions the individual's power to construct and affect narratives; woman, on the other hand, due to her historic marginalization, has come to recognize that identity is necessarily constructed by the community that she inhabits (9-10). This recognition means that the "insights gained as feminism passed through a *necessary* stage of pursuing unity have produced an alternative conception of the subject as constructed through *relationship*, rather than postmodernism/post-structuralism's anti-humanist *rejection* of the subject" (13). To understand subjectivity relationally is to understand that one is able to occupy a space that is both inside and outside one's own life story, making it possible to imagine a public space similar to that which Zerilli proposes. The public space becomes (rather than an agonistic space in which sovereignty is exerted over the Other) a plural space that represents an "objective and subjective 'in-between,' which at once gathers individuals together and separates them" (Zerilli 21, paraphrasing Arendt). Unconcerned with legitimating one's subjectivity through recourse to what Shields terms in *The Stone Diaries* a "kernel of authenticity" (whether that kernel be related to race, gender, class or another social categorization is immaterial), one is able to speak and act with freedom within a relational public space in which Others may interact with and challenge these actions. Creating knowledge in such a space would be congruous with the legitimation through paralogy that Lyotard advocates, as it would necessarily be created through retrospection and would embrace above all else the original input of all participants.

Exposing a Subjectivity “Written in Imagination’s Invisible Ink”: Shields’s *The Stone Diaries*

Postmodernist discourses are certainly the catalyst for Shields’s deconstruction of Daisy’s subjectivity in *The Stone Diaries*—indeed, Shields described the book in interviews as a “postmodern box-within-the-box, within-the-box” (“Golden Book” 58 and “Always a Book-Oriented Kid” 50). Lyotard’s theory of absence seems particularly pertinent to this novel, as Shields suggests “it’s a search for meaning or authenticity and it isn’t found” (“Always a Book-Oriented Kid” 53). Nevertheless, many critical interpretations of the novel have attempted to discover what is “real” within the novel. Many of the critics who have written about *The Stone Diaries* recognize that postmodernist discourses are the impetus behind Shields’s complex examination of subjectivity, yet many of them, despite pointing out the ways in which Shields deconstructs Daisy’s subjectivity, have trouble managing not to reconstruct Daisy in some way so as to locate something (anything) authentic within the apparent vacuity of Daisy’s life. For example, Hans Bak suggests that Daisy’s absence reveals Shields’s recognition of the poststructuralist/postmodernist challenge to unitary identity and, in effect, positions the reader as biographer, asking him or her to reconstruct Daisy from the scant information provided (14). Simone Vauthier examines the genre of the novel and suggests that Shields creates a liminal space in which fiction and biography collide to establish chaotics (the recognition that small events may have large effects or vice versa) as the best representative of human subjectivity. The reader, she suggests, cannot create a complete understanding of Daisy’s subjectivity but may create order from disorder by following the tenuous connections between the various pieces of Daisy’s life (187). Likewise, Gordon Slethaug purports that Shields uses chaotics to challenge traditional humanist narrative forms, a strategy that he believes leads to the conclusion that “the subject is the site of contradictory impulses and multi-vocalic utterances, which are always-

already never our own—but which, Shields maintains, the imagination can seize and reshape” (59). Finally, David Williams, in two articles on *The Stone Diaries*, examines Daisy’s autobiography in terms of the problems it presents in relation to subject unity, stating that Daisy’s isolation and absence makes it necessary for her to imaginatively (re)construct her subjectivity through those around her (“Re-Imagining a Stone Angel” 136). In “Making Stories, Making Selves: ‘Alternate Versions’ in *The Stone Diaries*,” he equates the reader’s search for Daisy with her own search for self, suggesting that Daisy is able to reconstruct her life because she has “been able to gather enough scraps of family history that, in keeping with the dominant scripts of culture, allow her to invent corroborating witnesses for her story, setting these ‘witnesses’ in a form of dialogical counterpoint that belatedly does the work of [the] ‘memory talk’” (15) in which families generally engage.

In one way or another, all of these articles correctly expose the postmodernist challenge to the humanist self in *The Stone Diaries*, but they fail to consider that the root of Daisy’s subjectivity is different than that expressed in traditional humanism. While these critics recognize that Daisy creates her identity relationally (indeed they understand that Daisy as a subject is often constructed through or by those around her), they see this relational subjectivity as a puzzle from which one may extrapolate something that approaches the authenticity that humanism seeks to achieve through unity. Bak’s insistence that the reader must piece Daisy together, Vauthier’s suggestion that connections both big and small capture “more of ‘reality’ than the constraints [humanist unity] from which the novel breaks away would allow” (187), Slethaug’s projection that Daisy’s imaginative reinvention of her identity establishes her as the “nexus of a system of dispositions and her own agency” (60), and Williams’s suggestion that Daisy recreates her identity by imagining the “memory-talk” of her family all hinge on the presupposition that subjectivity requires legitimation from some “kernel of authenticity.”

Essentially, these accounts of Daisy's relational subjectivity attempt to impose unity on a character who evades it at every turn, acting to re-stabilize Shields's deconstructed protagonist; Shields seeks fragmentation, lack of definition, and contingency in *The Stone Diaries*, so rather than (re)constructing Daisy, a more prudent approach is to ask not *who* is constructed within the novel but *how* the self is conceived within the novel.

In traditional biographies and biographical fictions, subjectivity, inasmuch as it is coherent and unitary, is used to facilitate the construction of *a* real or authentic self. Humanist ideology suggests that this authentic self "is the *sole author* of history and the literary text" (Moi 8), offering the narratives one uses to recount oneself "a firm perspective from which to judge the world" (Moi 9). Such a perspective may be thought of as a center or "kernel of authenticity" around which one can create an identity, but Daisy's entire life story is deeply fragmented, blatantly bringing the reader to understand that what he or she is receiving from Daisy is merely a verisimilar version of events. Daisy, the reader is told, "possesses. . .the startling ability to draft alternate versions" (190) of her life, and if one were to ask her to narrate her life story it would be "written with imagination's invisible ink" (149), producing "an edited hybrid version" (283) that would represent a "blend of distortion and omission" (283).³ Just how ambiguous and contingent Daisy's version of events is becomes apparent when one examines the interaction between Daisy as first-person narrator and the third-person narrator who narrates a substantial portion of the novel. As Wendy Roy notes in "Autobiography As Critical Practice in *The Stone Diaries*," Daisy is often displaced within her own story by "an omniscient or judgmental narrator who refers to Daisy in the third person, who undercuts her version of events, but who may represent the ironic or questioning voice of Daisy herself" (118). In one passage, for example,

³ These are but a few small quotations from much larger passages in which Daisy's authority is questioned. Throughout the book, there are five large passages that one may look to in order gain an appreciation of how suspect Daisy's authority is. They occur on pages 75-78, 148-49, 190-192, 282-83, and 357-360, and, as Wendy Roy points out, most occur at different stages in Daisy's life while she lies in bed contemplating her life (130).

the third-person narrator, addressing the reader directly, warns that “you want to take Daisy’s representation of events with a grain of salt, a bushel of salt” (148), while in an earlier passage the reader cannot be sure which viewpoint he or she is receiving. Contemplating Daisy’s childhood illness with the measles, the narrator(s) state that “[t]he long days of isolation, of silence, the torment of boredom—all these pressed down on me, on young Daisy Goodwill and emptied her out” (75). Rapidly shifting from first to third person, this passage and others like it create ambiguity as Daisy herself is marginalized by a third-person narrator who claims objectivity by displacing Daisy’s subjective “I,” making the establishment of authenticity impossible as the reader becomes increasingly aware that all points of view may originate from the subjective viewpoint of Daisy. In essence, it seems as if Daisy “lives outside her story as well as inside” (123) as she retrospectively comments upon the events in her life. Indeed, as Williams points out, one is not remiss in believing that “imagination might be the only sure ground of subjectivity” in this novel (“Re-imagining a Stone Angel” 135), because everything may be imagined by Daisy herself. This view seems to give Daisy incredible power within her own life, for she appears able to reimagine her own identity, but a closer examination of how she constructs her subjectivity and how she imagines that her father, Cuyler Goodwill, constructs his subjectivity reveals that Daisy, at least in part, understands that her self is created relationally in accordance with her social positioning.

Daisy imagines that both her father’s identity and her own are fluid throughout their lives, but there is a fundamental difference in the way that she understands his subjectivity as compared to her own. This difference focuses on the positions that men and women occupy within their own life narratives and becomes evident in a passage that comes after her tragic and short-lived marriage to Harold A. Hoad:

Men, it seemed to me in those days, were uniquely honored by the stories that erupted in their lives, whereas women were more likely to be smothered by theirs. . . . Why should men be allowed to strut under the privilege of their life adventures, wearing them like a breastful of medals, while women went all gray and silent beneath theirs? The stories that happen to women blow themselves up as big as balloons and cover over the day-to-day measure of their lives, swelling and pressing with such fierceness that even the plain and simple separations of time—hours, weeks, months—get lost from view. (121-2)

As the protagonists of their own stories, it seems to Daisy as narrator, men are positioned at the center of their stories, controlling their narratives and deciding what part people, objects, and events will play in their reality. Thus, she imagines Cuyler's life as a series of selves clearly delineated by temporal periods, each with a center that provides his identity a definition that, while changing over time, confers upon him authenticity.

Respectively, love, religion, art, and commerce all captivate Cuyler Goodwill at one time or another during his life (91-2), and these centers help to structure his subjectivity and his actions. When he is married to Mercy, for example, "Niagara in all its force" (7) is the image that Daisy as narrator uses to describe the intense ardour that she imagines her father expresses toward her mother; she also imagines that it is through his love for Mercy that he "learn[s] to feel the reality of the world or understand the particularities of sense and reflection that others have taken as their right" (34-5). For Cuyler, then, his love for Mercy acts as the center of his reality and he comes to understand the world based upon that love. It allows him to overcome "the poverty of his own beginnings" (35) and affects the way he constructs reality, evident in his revitalized interpretation of the communities he passes on his way home from the quarry: "A number of Galician families have settled lately in this area, building their squat windowless

cottages which the women plaster over with a mixture of mud and straw. At one time [Cuyler] would have looked at such houses and imagined nothing but misery within. Now he knows better. Now he has had a glimpse of paradise and sees it everywhere” (36). Imbued with the spirit of love, Cuyler (in Daisy’s imagination) reconstructs the reality that he inhabits in order to make it fit with his own experiences; he inscribes his love with ontological status inasmuch as it provides him with the “kernel of authenticity” that allows him to establish *an* identity that serves to unify his understanding of the world. Mercy’s death disrupts this center, however, and necessitates the re-stabilization of his identity with a shift to a new center. Inspired by the sudden appearance of a rainbow, he dedicates himself to religion and, believing Mercy’s gravestone “pitifully inadequate” (58), builds a stone tower to commemorate the person who formerly served to legitimate his identity. When people begin to take notice of the beauty of his tower, he replaces the religious fervour that initiated the tower with artistic fervour, choosing to define himself through a devotion to art. Each incarnation affects the way that Cuyler understands his world and is always accompanied by a (re)discovery of his voice, for by obsessively recounting himself and others through the center that defines each incarnation he is able to redefine the world constantly to accord with his current narrative.

The Stone Diaries presents several theories to explain Cuyler’s ability to speak so fluently, and each theory attends to the various incarnations he goes through, denoting the role that language plays each time he recreates his reality. Initially, according to Cuyler, his ability to speak came while he was married to Mercy. “[T]he stone in his throat became dislodged” (84) during their brief time together as, lying in bed with his wife and facilitated by the love that then structured his subjectivity, he expressed all his longings to her in whispers that Mercy met with “a kind of mute encouragement” (84). Having not been made to feel foolish or awkward in these musings, Cuyler realizes the power of speech, understanding Mercy’s silence as her agreement to

the private narratives he uses to recount their lives together and encouraging him to begin constructing all of reality as if he were its sole creator and love its language. Thus, while Cuyler finds his voice within his relationship with Mercy, it is accompanied by her “sighing acquiescence” (33) as she, recognizing “the value of half a loaf” (33), puts up with his eager advances because he is able to provide her with the house she never thought she would have. As the “object rather than the subject of desire” (Roy 128), Mercy is ironically (perhaps tragically) marginalized within Cuyler’s narrative; she is at once the muse of his perception and that which is ultimately silenced and, therefore, obscured.

His second avatar, religion, coming as “that sudden rainbow, that October anointing” (85), confirms Cuyler’s growing confidence in his ability to place himself at the center of his own reality. Daisy as narrator imagines that he does not embrace religion in an effort to give his life meaning or to act as a framework capable of structuring reality, but, instead, bends and forms religion to his needs by using it to re-define the identity he loses after Mercy dies. Religion’s “narratives frankly puzzled him” (85) and when he does attend worship he feels marginalized by the excessive speech of others:

The noisiness of public worship—singing, praying, chanting, preaching—make him uneasy. The vestments of holy men, even the simple white Methodist collar, abrade his sensibilities, crowd him to the edge of his belief, and the dusted, rafted, churchy spaces assault him with their perfume and polish, belittling him, taunting him. Moreover, his natural instincts feel constrained by the order of holy service, the breathy invocations and amens and numbered hymns. . . . (62)

His feeling of alterity in the presence of religion’s powerful narratives drives him to a form of religion that is very private to begin with—little more than “a series of ritualized steps” and the recital of some chosen scripture (63)—but that becomes more public as Goodwill Tower grows

in size.⁴ Producing the tower becomes an obsession; he believes “that the earth’s rough minerals are the signature of the spiritual, and as such can be assembled and shaped into praise and affirmation” (63), so rather than the tower representing a physical expression of the new spirituality that flows through him, it comes to represent his control over and reconfiguration of religion. Once again, Daisy positions Cuyler as the sole narrator of his own reality, and her assertion that “[l]anguage spoke through him, and not—as is the usual case—the other way around” (85) denotes both the presence and the power within the public space that she as a woman does not possess, for although he adopts the grand narrative of religion as the language that he uses to establish his identity, Cuyler still remains powerful by ensuring he remains at the center of what this language is used to define. The equilibrium between retaining the power to construct his own identity and the submission of this identity to the religious center that gives it authority is possible because Cuyler believes that “the human and the divine are balanced across a dazzling equation: man’s creation of God being exactly equal to God’s creation of man, one unified mind bending like a snake around the curve of earth and heaven” (66). Such a statement, of course, appears paradoxical because it offers neither God nor humans precedence in creation. However, juxtaposed with Cuyler’s understanding that religion is a signifier of identity (his religious monument is as much a symbol of his identity as it is a symbol of his spirituality) rather than a narrative through which identity is signified, such paradox can be explained as a way to abate his fear of marginalization within the religious grand narrative.

His shifts from religious convert to artist to businessperson are, likewise, accompanied by shifts in Cuyler’s language as he reimagines his identity, and, as such, his conception of identity

⁴ I make my critique of this tower fully aware that the third-person narrator who periodically replaces Daisy notes that Daisy may have dreamed the tower into existence (76). Because it seems futile to question the existence of the tower when all the reader is given, in any case, is the subjective account of Daisy (who is undeniably unreliable), I use it as an example of the way that Daisy *imagines* masculine subjectivity. This analysis is intended to highlight the differences between the way Daisy constructs her identity and the way Cuyler, within Daisy’s imagination, constructs his identity, rather than to establish the authenticity of Daisy’s account of Cuyler’s life.

is largely synonymous with the problematic linguistic structure of knowledge that deconstructive ideology exposes. Jacques Derrida, for example, points out that the linguistic structures that Western society uses to construct knowledge “must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center. Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names” (90). The center limits what may be legitimately represented within the narrative’s boundaries by setting the conditions for inclusion and exclusion, so whenever a variable challenges the center of the narrative, the center must restabilize itself in order to maintain its coherence. In Cuyler’s re-formation of his identity from religious convert to artist, one sees this constant readjustment of his center, for “God has receded, a mere shadow, and as for Mercy—her grave so sunken and grown over—he cannot recollect the look of her face or the outline of her body” (73); consequently, his marriage and his conversion “seem no more than curious intersections in a life that is stretching itself forward” (73). He remains the center of his own narrative, only shifting periodically to readjust his identity when he either loses his center (Mercy) or discovers a new center (religion, art, and commerce). The ease with which Cuyler goes through these “metamorphoses” seems emancipatory, for, as he nonchalantly explains, each center represents “a chapter in [his] life” (92), which remains ever-welcoming to change and redefinition. However, the reader is asked to consider the constraints that Cuyler’s incessant search for some “kernel of authenticity” places upon his subjectivity because, as the third-person narrator (who may be Daisy) suggests, Cuyler’s search grows from a “tortuous biographical root” (92) that seems to demand unity. Cuyler may be flexible with regards to the way that he understands the dynamism of his identity, but his conception of identity is still founded upon the humanist principle that subjectivity must remain constant to a point of origin that may confer legitimacy. His search for unity may, therefore, be equated with what Roland Barthes calls the humanist critical search for the

“Author-God” that “is thought to *nourish* the book” (148), as he seeks nourishment for his life from the various centers he uses to define himself. Furthermore, just as Barthes asserts that “[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified” (149), Cuyler’s narrative is limited by his adherence to the centers he imposes on his subjectivity. He must live his life doing “[o]ne thing at a time” (92), so the centers of his identity are “attended by [an] abstinence” (92) that focuses his energy solely on that one thing. All that has come before the present notion of his identity is forgotten as nostalgic and useless, the casualty of an identity ever pushing forward and rediscovering itself: “[f]or days at a time he is able to forget that he is the father of a child, a little girl named Daisy” (59); his country of birth, Canada, may as well be “on the other side of the moon” (93) now that he has moved to Indiana; and his first wife, Mercy, eventually holds such a tiny place in his narrative that he forgets her name as he lies dying in his yard (275).

Daisy, in contrast to Cuyler, feels as if there is a “vacuum. . . in the middle of her life” (75) that creates absence where the “kernel of authenticity” should be; she is better represented as an accumulation of the various narratives that surround her and comes to realize that her biography “would be, if such a thing were ever to be written, an assemblage of dark voids and unbridgable gaps” (75-76; *sic*). No such pragmatic organization of her life into temporal or situational compartments is possible in Daisy’s life, for her contingent identity is a product of others’ needs or desires, an amalgam of the roles she fulfills throughout her life. Her dependence upon others’ representations of her to create her own identity becomes most evident as she imagines her own death and as those others try to theorize her depression. In the final chapter of *The Stone Diaries* Daisy is looking “forward toward her own death” (358) and wondering how she will be remembered through the random artifacts she leaves behind. Somewhere amongst the fragmented conversations, a luncheon menu (352), a recipe for lemon pudding (352), the

numerous lists about her life—books she read (355), groups she belonged to (346), shopping lists (353-354), things she never did (344), lingerie (349), health concerns (357), and homes (360)—and the miscellaneous death notices, eulogies, and tombstone engravings is located Daisy Goodwill Flett. Is she to be found in the eulogy that refers to her as “‘Grandma’ Flett,” loving wife of Barker Flett, mother of three, grandmother of nine, great-grandmother of three, and great-aunt of two (343)? Or is she truly discoverable in the college notes and essays she leaves for Warren (347-348), the product of an education at Long College for Women where she had once written eloquently about Camillo Cavour and Italian independence (251)? Or, further still, is she the “woman who made a terrific meatloaf, who knew how to repot a drooping rubber plant, who bid a smart no-trump hand, who wore a hat well, who looked after her personal hygiene, who wrote her thank-you notes promptly, who kept up, who went down, went down and down and down, who missed the point, the point of it all, but was, nevertheless, almost unfailingly courteous to others” (354)? The truth (by which I mean something closer to a summation of all Daisy’s selves than to the expression of authenticity) is that she is or has been all three and more. She is a construction of the narratives that surround her, a contingent representation of the position(s) that she occupies or has occupied in the social and familial web that she inhabits, and it is through the fractured segments of others’ conversations that she imagines her existence.

Rather than being the sole creator of *a* self capable of shaping and constructing her reality in accordance with a fixed subjectivity, she imagines her *selves* assembled for her, the result not of an internal essence but of an external presence in relation to others. Thus, while Cuyler remains at the center of the theories used to describe the discovery of his voice, the theories about the origin of Daisy’s depression seem to move progressively further away from Daisy herself. For example, Daisy’s daughter Alice suggests that her mother, having “veered,

accidentally, into her own life” (237) by becoming a columnist after Barker’s death, was depressed due to the recent termination of her job; Fraidy Hoyt contradicts Alice’s feminist beliefs concerning work and claims that Daisy’s suppressed sexual desire is responsible for her current depression (245); Cora-Mae Milltown attributes the depression to the fact that Daisy lost her mother at such a young age (255); and Skoot Skutari, noting his grandfather’s presence at Daisy’s birth, believes that the loneliness that attended Daisy’s birth never left her, even though he has never met Daisy and could not know of her depression (260). The speaker’s relationship to Daisy, not Daisy herself, becomes the focal point of each theory (which Daisy may herself be projecting onto the theorizer), so, as Roy points out, each theory “reveals much more about that *other* than it does about Daisy” (123). Roy understands Daisy’s absence aptly as a way both to express and to critique women’s relational identity in fictive life writing, noting that she almost becomes lost “in the interconnections that constitute her sense of self” (119). However, I argue, further, that Shields uses Daisy’s absence to demonstrate that a relational understanding of subjectivity can illuminate the liminal spaces that postmodernist discourses try to create by exposing those metaprescriptives that structure knowledge within grand narratives.

In order to understand the effect that metaprescriptives have on the production of knowledge and subjectivity, one needs first to establish the liminal position that Daisy inhabits between oftentimes competing narratives. Cuyler, in his marathon address “A Heritage in Stone” (86) to the female graduates of Long College, uses his favorite metaphor of Salem limestone—a freestone that “can be split equally in either direction, that. . .has no natural bias” (116)—to tell the young women eloquently that they may master their own narratives. He implores them to “think of this miraculous freestone material as the substance of [their] lives” (116), assuring them that with the “tools of intelligence” (116) received from the college they may “make of [their] lives one thing or the other” (116) and, in effect, construct their realities.

Freestone is, of course, a metaphor that fits Cuyler's own life perfectly, but another marathon speech—that given by Daisy's future mother-in-law, Mrs. Arthur Hoad—more accurately describes the technique that Daisy must use to form her identity:

First, let me say that you have had the benefit of a college education, and have acquired a certain range of familiarity in the liberal arts, but I do hope you won't let this advantage impinge on normal marital harmony. That is, I hope you won't be tempted to parade your knowledge before those who have not elected the same path. (102)

On one hand, Cuyler's loquacious address speaks of the power that these young women now possess to shape their lives in any direction; on the other hand, Mrs. Hoad's speech demands that Daisy "forget" this knowledge in order to make a more congenial wife to her son who did not pursue higher education. Daisy's identity, therefore, will be a hybrid representation of multiple narratives, and her realization of this polyvalent social positioning becomes apparent as she looks back on her memories about a childhood bout of measles. After concluding that even then the young Daisy knew the world would continue its course without her presence, the third-person narrator who takes over Daisy's voice revises this memory to include the "knowledge that here, this place, was where she would continue to live her life, where she had, in fact, always lived—blinded, throttled, erased from the record of her own existence" (76). The depth of this perception given "the solipsistic way of children" (76), combined with the passage's use of the third-person pronoun to describe a personal event in the distant past, demonstrates that Daisy occupies a rather different position in her narrative than Cuyler occupies in his. Her position is both inside and outside her own narrative: as an insider, she participates in the narratives that define normative behaviour, but as an outsider, she is able to recognize that her identity is a

makeshift result of the numerous narratives she lives within and that she is unable to occupy any one identity that may be called authentic.

The narrative that most profoundly exposes the multitudinous position that Daisy inhabits is the heteronormative narrative that Mrs. Hoad expresses in her premarital instructions, for Daisy, throughout her married life with both her first and second husbands, feels compelled to act in ways commensurate with contemporary conceptions of domesticity and femininity. Monique Wittig likens heterosexuality to a social contract that people “never formally enunciate[] but that nevertheless everybody knows and applies like magic” (“On the Social Contract” 39), and suggests that this heteronormativity confers upon women a “centuries-old commitment to childbearing as *the* female creative act” (“One is Not Born a Woman” 11), creating a “natural” gender distinction in which women’s inclinations and desires are subordinated to their social position as wives and mothers. Naturalizing gender in this way establishes the heterosexual relationship as that upon which both the economy and culture are dependent, and this naturalization produces a self-legitimizing closed system of knowledge that demands the performance of knowledge rather than the discovery of new ideas. The performance of gender is discussed in detail in *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler, who notes that gender is a performance inasmuch as it “is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (45). To perform gender is to recount oneself through and act in accordance with those actions that are considered gender normative within one’s society. While one can make a connection between Butler’s recognition that gender is performed and Lyotard’s recognition that knowledge is performed, a distinction must be made concerning the way each theorist believes performance is to be challenged. Butler’s radical skepticism about gender leads to her assertion that gender may be considered *performative*. Gender

performativity, in Butler's ideology, suggests that since one can ascribe to gender "no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute [gender's] reality" (185), it is possible to subvert gender by "acting out" gender's manifestations. Radical skepticism of gender roles does not, however, seem to be the intent of Shields's acknowledgement that Daisy performs her gender; instead, her intent is more commensurate with Lyotard's, who, contra Butler, believes that performance is to be challenged by recognizing and acknowledging those spaces and people that represent the unknown within grand narratives.

It is evident from the beginning of the courtship between Daisy and her second husband, Barker Flett, that Daisy believes she is performing a social and gender obligation by marrying him. As if following the advice of Mrs. Hoad, Daisy constrains her own "intellectual ease and energy" (251) as she writes her letters to Barker "girlishly, frivolously," with sentences that are "apocalyptically incomplete" (145). Eventually she accepts her imminent marriage to Barker based not on "what is possible, but rather [on] what possibilities remain" (147) to her as "a woman on the verge of middle age" (147). Feeling as though she is a person out of options who has been "accidentally misplaced" (147), she accepts "'it' [marriage] without protest, without question, for what choice has she" (150). Daisy is compelled to marry Barker because, as a woman, she feels obligated to become a wife and mother, so Daisy, regardless of what she actually desires, fulfills this *natural* obligation. By acting in accordance with the heteronormative narrative that structures her society, Daisy discovers presence within the narrative through performance, a performance that becomes even more noticeable once she is married to Barker. After making a meal in a sweltering kitchen, Daisy goes upstairs to fix herself up before Barker's return, amazing her young son Warren with her refreshed appearance which reminds him of the women in Oxydol ads (160). As "part of the mid-century squadron of women who believed in centerpieces" (236) and well-planned meals, Daisy performs domesticity

in order to conform to the contemporary understanding of gender roles within a heterosexual relationship. She discovers this understanding of her gender role from women's magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *McCalls*, and *The Canadian Home Companion* (185), which Betty Friedan notes confined women to "the physical care and serving of husband, children, and home" (31). Therefore, Roy points out that even though, "[a]s Daisy's kitchen language shows, she finds domesticity a kind of hell" (137), she performs this hell as it is depicted in "magazines that Friedan decries as essentializing and restrictive" (137); consequently, one comes to understand that Daisy is, in fact, participating in a masquerade that hides her within gender performance. Such masquerade is apparent in the Fletts' sex life, too, as Daisy, remembering one magazine article that suggested that you should "[t]ry to make your husband believe that you are always ready for his entreaties" (186), lies "bathed, powdered, diaphragmed, and softly nightgowned" (186) awaiting her husband and his imminent sexual ardor with trepidation. Daisy once again finds strength in women's magazines that propagate the ideal that women "find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love" (Friedan 37), and she comes to the conclusion that sex "is something that has to be put up with" (186).

The fact that Daisy willingly participates in this masquerade does not necessarily mean that she does not understand that she is part of a performance. Daisy partially understands that marrying, first Harold (because "it is 'time' to marry," 117) and then Barker ("for what choice has she," 150), is a gender performance, and by acknowledging as much to the reader she reifies those spaces neglected in grand narratives by presenting her own absence. In a passage that immediately follows her acquiescing to marriage with Barker, the third-person narrator (who may be Daisy herself) admits that "[c]uriously, she is not afraid, knowing as she does that love is mostly the avoidance of hurt, and, furthermore, she is accustomed to obstacles, and how they can be overcome by readjusting her glance or crowding her concerns into a shadowy corner" (147).

By crowding her concerns into a shadowy corner, she reinforces her own absence, creating a situation that acknowledges that which is unknown or hidden by her performance augments the power of heteronormativity. Essentially, Daisy becomes “a mute hollow structure that deflects meaning and points relentlessly away from her” (99), as Winifred Mellor aptly points out in “‘The Simple Container of Our Existence’: Narrative Ambiguity in Carol Shields’s *The Stone Diaries*,” but this deflection is not as much a warning that her subjectivity is inauthentic as it is a recognition that what is perceived to be authentic, the self that she presents to the world, demands her absence. She readjusts her glance to perform her heteronormative obligations while, at the same time, the reader is unable to readjust his or her glance because he or she is constantly reminded of the absence that this decision creates. Thus, Shields’s novel challenges the construction of meaning by drawing the reader’s attention to those aspects of Daisy’s identity that are not represented within her marriage and motherhood as opposed to those aspects that are represented.

Discussing postmodernist aesthetics in an essay entitled “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?”, Lyotard gives this very succinct definition of postmodernist art:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.

(Appendix to *The Postmodern Condition*, 81)

Postmodernist art in this conception makes readers and viewers aware of what is missing; it challenges knowledge by exposing the alterior spaces that become hidden as grand narratives are performed. While feminist literature, much of which focuses upon exposing the gender

inequalities that repress the actions of women within the public sphere, could benefit from a conception of art that values the redemption of lost or marginalized voices, the relationship between postmodernism and feminism has been strained due to the seemingly impossible task of undertaking feminist political action within a postmodernist theoretical climate that remains skeptical of gendered subjectivity. However, Carol Shields's work, as Ramon suggests, attempts to create this relationship through its commitment "to developing a liminal form which combines the experimental techniques associated with postmodernism with the humanist focus of realist fiction" (61). Using this hybrid form in *The Stone Diaries*, Shields emphasizes the absence of her main character by exploring the contingent and relational nature of feminine subjectivity, a strategy that, on one hand, provides poignancy to her social criticism concerning the erasure of women, yet, on the other hand, avoids essentializing feminine subjectivity by demonstrating that Daisy's fragmented identity subverts humanist ideologies that presume the existence of some "kernel of authenticity." By expressing Daisy's identity as relational, Shields links feminist discourses about women's marginality and subjectivity with postmodernist discourses that demand contingency, creating a liminal discursive space in which feminist social concerns are not subverted by postmodern theories of deconstruction. Thus, Shields redeems Daisy by presenting her as the unrepresentable in a public sphere that denies her voice, relentlessly acknowledging the unknown within this sphere by not letting the reader forget that Daisy is absent from her own existence.

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