Another way to distinguish between the two is to say that deconstruction is a reading strategy that carefully follows both the meanings and the suspensions and displacements of meaning in a text, while humanism is a strategy to stop reading when the text stops saying what it ought to have said.

-Barbara Johnson (2014, 347)

The Barbara Johnson Reader aptly introduces Johnson’s writing with her meditation on the distinction between the “readerly” and the “writerly” text. Johnson borrows these categories from Roland Barthes, who uses them to frame a polarity for the evaluation of literary texts. For Barthes, Johnson explains,

The readerly is constrained by considerations of representation: it is irreversible, ‘natural,’ decidable, continuous, totalizable, and unified into a coherent whole based on the signified. The writerly is infinitely plural and open to the free play of signifiers and of difference, unconstrained by representative considerations, and transgressive of any desire for decidable, unified, totalized meaning. (2014, 6)

To illustrate this distinction, which, Johnson notes, marks a defining moment in the historical emergence of deconstructive criticism, Barthes meticulously dissects Balzác’s short story, “Sarrasine,” diagnosing it as a paradigmatically readerly text. The story itself, narrated by an arrogant seducer who unwittingly pursues a castrato, offers what Johnson calls a “subversive and unsettling formulation of the question of sexual difference” (5).

In “The Critical Difference: BartheS/BalZac,” Johnson exercises her unparalleled skill as a reader to show how, on the one hand, “Sarrasine” already theorizes and disrupts Barthes’s categorical opposition between the readerly and the writerly text, and that, on the other, Barthes’s analysis inadvertently exposes his own self-difference—a tension between his valorization and disavowal of castration—which makes criticism,
“in the final analysis, literary” (13). Thus foregrounding Barthes as both critic and author, a hybrid status Johnson will interrogate and occupy throughout her oeuvre, Johnson’s opening essay raises three questions that are echoed and reformulated throughout the *Reader*, and that illuminate the striking self-referentiality of the collection itself: 1) What is a reader? 2) What is the relationship between literature and criticism? 3) Who, or what, is Barbara Johnson?

**What is a Reader?**

Compiling exemplary texts to sketch an intellectual portrait of their author, readers tend to assert a more or less fragmented narrative of that author’s career. For a scholar as prolific, with interests as widespread, as Barbara Johnson, the curatorial project of compiling a reader brings additional challenges. This volume charts a thematic itinerary through Johnson’s work, organized in four units by four of Johnson’s former students: “Reading Theory as Literature, Literature as Theory,” “Race, Sexuality, Gender,” “Language, Personhood, Ethics,” and “Pedagogy and Translation.” Structurally refusing a chronological or developmental narrative, the *Reader* allows lovely, unexpected threads to develop between and among Johnson’s texts. For example, Johnson’s effort to read “as a lesbian” in “Lesbian Spectacles” is followed by her analysis of D.A. Miller’s effort to read Barthes as a homosexual, and then by an anecdote in which Johnson reflects on the experience of being seen reading Sappho on an airplane (162). The essay “Muteness Envy” is followed by a description of apostrophe as the poetic addressee’s “mute responsiveness” (218). To its great credit, this organization does more to orient the reader to Johnson’s major preoccupations than to posit a summation of her thought.

First and foremost, *The Barbara Johnson Reader* is a master class in close reading. Johnson’s method, as the *Reader*’s subtitle suggests, relies on an openness and attention to surprise, “the surprise of otherness” experienced through repeated encounters with a text. In “Nothing Fails Like Success,” Johnson offers a forceful defense of deconstructive reading while acknowledging the banalization that has accompanied its institutional legitimacy. Johnson performs a similar defense less explicitly in “Strange Fits,” where she describes the interpretive frenzy that follows the utterance of a single word, “nevermore,” in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven.” With characteristic lucidity, she points out, “The plot of ‘The Raven’ can be read as the story of what happens when the signifier encounters a reader” (53). As the editors attest, “[Johnson’s] essays can read like detours that turn out to be shortcuts from and to the heart of a literary text or issue” (xiii). Certainly, the *Reader* itself is a pedagogical instrument—a model of and exegesis on literary analysis. But might it also be possible to read Johnson’s *Reader* as autobiography?

In her moving afterword to the *Reader*, Shoshana Felman notes that Johnson had begun writing her memoirs toward the end of her life, but that as her illness progressed, she turned her attention to curating the literature and music to be read and performed at her funeral, her “own self-epitaph, her riddling epitaphic discourse” (422). Felman’s affecting analysis of Johnson’s selections by Blake, Thoreau, and Camille Saint-Saëns, shares a mournful tone with Judith Butler’s introduction, both scholars grappling with the loss of a cherished friend and reader. But Felman
approaches Johnson’s funereal texts as standing “in lieu” of her autobiography, suggesting that the *Reader*, too, might constitute a kind of supplement to the autobiography that never came to be—both its substitute and its complement.

In “My Monster/My Self,” Johnson considers the stakes of such an interpretive move, reading *Frankenstein, The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, and *My Mother/My Self* as autobiographies in order to draw out the relationship between autobiography and reproduction in the “struggle for female authorship” (180). For Johnson, to read the texts as autobiographies is to read them “as textual dramatizations of the very problems with which they deal” (180), problems endemic to the creative act in its enduring relation to sexual difference. She describes “the desire for resemblance, the desire to create a being like oneself—which is the autobiographical desire *par excellence*” (181). Such a desire cannot but foreground the difference within the authorial “I” that announces itself, destabilizing any apparent self-sameness in the “resemblance” of the child, monster, or autobiographical text. For Johnson,

the monstrousness of selfhood is intimately embedded within the question of female autobiography…The problem for the female autobiographer is, on the one hand, to resist the pressure of masculine autobiography as the only literary genre available for her enterprise, and, on the other, to describe a difficulty in conforming to a female ideal which is largely a fantasy of the masculine, not the feminine, imagination. (189-190)

The autobiographical trace is also apparent in “Bringing Out D. A. Miller,” in which Johnson draws an analogy between writing biographically and painting a portrait: the artist/author is always bringing out her own autobiography in the likeness of another. Autobiography is not the product of coming to know oneself, but a sexual modality of writing in its “infinite openness,” which affects the very “death of the author.” Foreshadowing the status of the *Reader* itself, Johnson concludes, “That is why it is impossible to know whether one is bringing out the person or the writings. And *that* is what Barthes means by ‘the death of the author’” (153).

The death of the *Reader*’s author haunts it, raising questions about whether or not the reader form might also function as a kind of wake. Introducing her epochal monograph, The Wake of Deconstruction, Johnson explains the multiple valences evoked by the term wake: “I had indeed wanted to allude to a service held for the not-yet-buried dead, but also to the expanding wedge of ruffled water that results from the passage of a ship (or whale) and also, somewhat less grammatically, to a state of nonsleep” (1994, 17). The *Reader* is at once an object of mourning, marking the loss of a revered teacher, colleague, and friend, and an occasion to awaken her work in the wake of its effects, and deconstruction’s effects more broadly, on the history of literary criticism.

**Literature and Criticism**

Johnson asserts that one of deconstruction’s major contributions to literary theory is that “it is no longer possible so serenely to separate style from thinking, idea
from language, thought from jargon” (2014, 339). In “Bad Writing,” she addresses the libidinal investments readers have in textual clarity, yielding an anxious hostility toward writing deemed “incomprehensible.” “The real mystery,” she argues, “is why ‘I don’t understand it’ should condemn the author rather than the reader,” or why it should elicit evaluative judgment at all (337). Even when “difficult or transgressive writing” is tolerated from authors, critics are not extended the same privilege. Johnson’s analysis of critical texts, by taking meticulous account of style, language, and jargon, is unique in its persuasive ability to identify the theoretical moves embedded in literature and the literary techniques indispensable to critical theory. By blurring the line between literature and criticism, Johnson shows that the difference between them “consists perhaps only in the fact that criticism is more likely to be blind to the way in which its own critical difference from itself makes it, in the final analysis, literary” (13).

Johnson also emphasizes the literariness of psychoanalytic writing, turning not just to Freud and Lacan, but to Winnicott, Klein, and even Kohut, to show how the grammatical articulation of object relations routinely blurs any possible distinction between subject and object. Winnicott’s theory of the transitional object is a case in point; in “Using People: Kant with Winnicott,” Johnson recognizes the ambiguity of the “object” not only in its capacity to mediate a developmental transition into subjectivity, but because it is impossible to stabilize the shifting grammatical agent in Winnicott’s verbal account of childhood development. Johnson’s analysis of Lacan’s mirror stage likewise complicates the relation between people and things, emphasizing the extent to which subjectivation occurs through an aesthetic encounter: “What happens in the mirror stage is the conflating of libidinal investments with beautiful forms: the fantasmatic and the aesthetic are henceforth the ‘reality’ of the self. And the definition of ‘person’ would then be: the repeated experience of failing to become a thing” (286).

Who, or what, is Barbara Johnson?

In a special issue of differences devoted to readings of Johnson’s work, Avital Ronell narrates her effort to “locate” Johnson in “Euphemism, Understatement, and the Passive Voice” (2006, 142). That essay introduces the Reader’s section on “Race, Sexuality, Gender,” examining the rhetorical strategies through which black authors discredited by Richard Wright for their political passivity work, in fact, to mark sites of profound injustice: “Protest may not yet be voiced, but at least the spot has been marked” (Johnson 2014, 104). Reflecting on Johnson’s approach to authorial identity in this essay, Ronell anecdotally recalls occasions on which her colleagues identified Johnson as a black scholar based on her literary archive. In response, Ronell wonders, “Does Barbara Johnson know that she’s an African American critic?” (2006, 143). The question, which Ronell answers speculatively in the affirmative, resurfaces in the title to Mary Helen Washington’s comments in the same special issue: “Barbara Johnson, African Americanist: The Critic as Insider/Outsider.” This framing draws attention to the ways in which Johnson’s writing grapples with the political implications of identity as it is mobilized through the practice of reading, and of being read.
For example, in “Lesbian Spectacles,” Johnson sets out “to read explicitly as a lesbian, to take account of my particular desire structure in reading rather than to make generalizations about desire as such” (2014, 141). Rather than limiting her interpretive frame, reading as a lesbian expands Johnson's critical horizon by mobilizing the analytical through the libidinal. It also models an experimental mode of interpretation that eschews secure boundaries between subject and object of critique. “Lesbian Spectacles” concludes with Johnson’s humorous and unseemly observation that her own desire is structured by a libidinal investment in power, bringing her “face to face with the political incorrectness of my own fantasy life” (145). The ethics of this posture, face to face, is crucial to Johnson’s understanding of the political. It reappears in “The Postmodern in Feminism,” Johnson’s analysis of Mary Joe Frug’s final, incomplete essay, composed just before Frug’s murder in 1991. Johnson identifies a “lesbian gap” in Frug’s sentence fragment that begins, “Women who might expect that sexual relationships with other women could” (quoted in Johnson 2000, 191). Reflecting on this gap, Johnson writes:

A feminist logic that pits women against men operates along the lines of heterosexual thinking. But conflicts among feminists require women to pay attention to each other, to take each other’s reality seriously, to face each other. This requirement that women face each other may not have anything erotic or sexual about it, but it may have everything to do with the eradication of the misogyny that remains within feminists, and with the attempt to escape the logic of heterosexuality. It places difference among women rather than exclusively between the sexes. (2000, 194)

Sadly, “The Postmodern in Feminism,” is missing from the Reader, but it is a testament to Johnson’s tremendous acumen that such a copious collection could exclude several of her classic works.

The relation between the “what” and the “who” of Barbara Johnson is directly implicated in Judith Butler’s introduction to the Reader, where she describes the challenge of “treating ‘Barbara Johnson’ as the author and, on the other hand, Barbara Johnson as a teacher” (2014, xvii). The extent to which these identities may be treated on separate hands is a question Johnson asks in her provocative reflection on the discovery of Paul de Man’s collaborationist papers. In “Poison or Remedy? Paul de Man as Pharmakon,” Johnson examines the ways in which her mentor’s “pedagogical self-effacement,” what we might call his disavowal of the autobiographical, led to his personal idealization, “as if the teacher as person could simply be deduced from the teacher function” (367). This moment in the text is crucial to the Reader as an attempt to situate Barbara Johnson, who comes to the conclusion that one lesson the Teacher, evacuated of subjectivity, can teach the student is not to ask certain questions. It is no accident, she remarks, that few students ever asked de Man what he had done during the war. “Paul de Man seemed to want to distinguish between the person of the teacher and the intellectual process in which he or she is engaged” (366), but the
effect was to foreclose interrogation of the dominant literary canon, and to evade
the politics of the pedagogical relation.

Johnson’s effort to think the pedagogical alongside the autobiographical is con-
sistently at work in the Reader itself, evidenced by a striking archival gem buried in
one of Felman’s footnotes to the afterword. There, Felman reproduces the full text of a
brief “self-portrait” Johnson wrote during her junior year of high school. After noting,
“The most important sculptors of my life are teachers,” Johnson writes: “as my form
emerges from the marble and I begin to tingle with new twinges of individuality, I
look forward to the day when some of the props which hold me to the base will be
chipped away, and I can stand secure, but free” (quoted in Felman 2014, 430 n.11).
In her always incomplete transition from student to teacher, perpetually in dialogue
with the figures and institutions that shaped her thinking, Johnson’s essays do not
encourage statuesque stasis. On the contrary, even read as a wake, the collection en-
courages and makes room for teachers to sculpt questions differently in the present.

But why wake Barbara Johnson now? What does Johnson’s signature method and
style of deconstructive reading trouble, or make possible, within the fields of femi-
nist theory, critical race theory, and postcolonial theory—fields in which Johnson’s
groundbreaking work has lately been neglected? Might a return to the literary, by way
of Barbara Johnson, enable more productive questions to be asked of the political?
Butler’s introduction gestures toward this point as she highlights Johnson’s radical
departure from existing discourses on fetal personhood through poetic analysis:
“In the abortion poems that Johnson considers, she is clear that figuration does not
simply humanize. The direct address to the ‘you’ who is the aborted fetus does not
presume that the ‘you’ is human” (xxiii). This address allows the speaker a position
from which to mourn the loss of her fetus without assuring the independent person-
hood of the lost object. It also allows Johnson to read the political scene of abortion
beyond the terms set by pro-life and pro-choice rhetoric.

Johnson makes a similar break with the limits of political discourse in “Moses
and Intertextuality: Sigmund Freud, Zora Neale Hurston, and the Bible.” She argues
that Freud and Hurston, rewriting the story of Moses in 1937 and 1939, respectively,
challenge universalizing accounts of group identity and racial community:

Neither Freud nor Hurston proclaims that the phrase ‘my people’ has no
meaning or that difference does not exist. On the contrary, they both are
acutely aware of differences, but they refuse to confine the notion of differ-
ence within a logic of identity. “There is no The Negro here,” asserts Hurston.
Both Freud and Hurston describe participation in a people as an experience
of self-difference. (134)

Reading identity politics through Johnson demands a reformulation of existing cat-
egories of difference. Rather than asking what constitutes Jewishness or blackness
in the texts, Johnson argues that the questions Freud and Hurston pose are of a
very different order: “How is hatred transmitted?” and “How is culture transmitted?”
These authors destabilize narratives of origin to consider history in terms of un-
documented inheritances and “unconscious intertextuality” (129). As the Reader’s editors observe, literature enables Johnson to locate and investigate a “continuity between…the rhetorical analysis of linguistic otherness, or repressed ‘difference within,’ and the political analysis of oppressed otherness in the world, or social ‘differences between’” (xii). The stakes of such an enterprise are high, as it challenges the notion that literature and the real world are divisible entities, or that deconstructive analysis would disregard their imbrication. Reading with Barbara Johnson is an urgent reminder of the ways in which literature reflects and extends the political imaginary.


