

## Through the Looking-Glass: Conceptualizing Narratives of Race as Mimetic Non-Narratives

In literary criticism, narrative is associated with diegesis, or the telling of a story. By contrast, mimesis shows a story, re-presenting the story as if in a mirror. In *Republic*, Plato<sup>1</sup> distinguishes between diegesis and mimesis, writing:

[The] assimilation of [the poet] to another, either by the use of voice or gesture, is the imitation of the person whose character he assumes[.]

[...]

Then in this case the narrative of the poet may be said to proceed by way of imitation[.]

[...]

Or, if the poet everywhere appears and never conceals himself, then again the imitation is dropped, and his poetry becomes simple narration. (Book III; 188)

When the poet acknowledges his role as narrator, he narrates diegetically. When the poet conceals himself as narrator (re-presents the story as, or becomes the story, “himself”), he “narrates” mimetically. Because it is predicated on the idea of narrative (story-telling), diegesis recognizes its narrativity. However, in replicating the story without the precondition of narrativity, mimesis does not recognize its narrativity; it is a non-narrative in the sense that it is a narrative, yet it does not appear to be one. By re-presenting a story, a mimetic narrative suggests an alternate non-narrated story as veracious in appearance as reality. That is, while diegesis admits its falseness by acknowledging its narrativity, mimesis pretends to and confuses reality by introducing a false, but believable, story.

Narrative in the Platonic sense occupies the diegetic realm and is innocuous inasmuch as it limits itself from transcending its narrativity. However, narrative is more than a fictional story; it is the act of epistemologically ordering experience. In “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm,” Walter Fisher identifies the paradigmatic importance of narration when he defines narration as “a theory of symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. The narrative perspective, therefore, has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds” (266). In so writing, Fisher reveals the re-presentational link between stories and reality and the centrality of this

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<sup>1</sup> Plato’s definition of mimesis is one of the earliest recorded; following Plato, definitions of mimesis have expanded its philosophical breadth, encompassing fields ranging from psychology to feminist studies.

relationship to the idea of narrative. Narrative acts a source of knowledge about reality because it re-presents reality in terms of its subjective apprehension. Because of its contingency with reality, epistemologies of narrative influence reality. When a narrative is used as a discursive tool with non-fictional (real) ramifications, it leaves the diegetic and enters the mimetic realm, seeking not only to tell a story (however false that story may be), but also to confuse reality with a re-presentation<sup>2</sup> of reality. Narrative becomes mimetic when it advances a real discourse because its discursive intentions then target the non-fictional (mimetic) world. Narrative is diegetic inasmuch as it operates in acknowledgment of its narrative fictionality, but when narrative attempts to substitute a false<sup>3</sup> reality for reality, it becomes mimetic. When it takes the form of a discursive tool with real ramifications, narrative can be understood as a false, yet seemingly true, story (henceforth, a non-narrative), occupying the mimetic (re-presentational) realm. Narrative becomes dangerous when it transcends its diegetic disposition and advances a mimetic non-narrative based on its intentions to subvert reality.

Narrative is only narrative when it acknowledges its narrativity (when it occupies the diegetic, fictional realm); when it becomes mimetic and rejects its narrativity by falsely claiming reality (when it occupies the mimetic, non-fictional realm), narrative is better termed non-narrative, because it is a narrative that does not admit its narrativity. In their attempt to create a non-fictional correlate to the fictional idea of race, narratives of race operate in the mimetic realm and are, thus, non-narratives. I argue that narratives of race, in particular those that justify the superiority of whites to non-whites, are narratives of the mimetic type (non-narratives), which, in their attempt to perpetuate racial inequality, narrate false realities of race and racial inequality. I examine the ways in which textual and visual narratives construct and sustain false realities (non-narratives) in order to establish and entrench the idea of race and racial difference. I argue that the non-narrative of race and racial inequality has been accepted and that its acceptance represents the danger of non-narratives to turn individuals away from reality and to impel them to subscribe to false realities. I conclude by examining the ways in which non-narratives constitute meaningful realities and by suggesting that, because humans

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<sup>2</sup> I use “re-presentation” in the vein of bell hooks, who writes in “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” “Like fictions, [stereotypes as representations] are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretense” (44). I use “re-presentation” to mean the presentation of reality in a refracted light, so that the reality presented is not reality, but a distortion thereof.

<sup>3</sup> I use “false” to highlight the counterfeit nature of the narrated alternate reality, which is real in the sense that it exists, but which does not reflect the nature of true (in contradistinction to false) reality.

determine (narrate) reality, humans have the power to narrate realer non-narratives<sup>4</sup> of race.

Mimetic narratives advance stories that falsely re-present a non-fictional reality. In “The Richmond Narratives,” Thomas Ross identifies the different narratives advanced in *City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.*—notably, the narrative of Justice Antonin Scalia. Scalia’s narrative, in opposition to affirmative action, re-presents a false version of reality in which affirmative action becomes, for minority groups, an instrument of oppression. Scalia writes regarding James Madison’s warning of the oppressive power of small majorities, such as black contractors:

The prophesy of [Madison’s] words came to fruition in Richmond in the enactment of a set-aside clearly and directly beneficial to the dominant political group, which happens also to be the dominant racial group. The same thing has no doubt happened before in other cities (though the racial basis of the preference has rarely been made textually explicit)—and blacks have often been on the receiving end of the injustice. Where injustice is the game, however, turnabout is not fair play. (*City of Richmond v. J. A. Croson Co.*)

As Ross notes, Scalia’s narrative frames affirmative action as the “seed that will destroy whites,” because “[w]hen and where blacks are the dominant racial group, they will oppress whites” (85). Scalia’s narrative is predicated on the misconceived vengefulness of blacks and suggests that the implementation of affirmative action will result in the destruction of whites by blacks. Though he does not explicitly state it, Scalia’s circumspect language (“Where injustice is the game, however, turnabout is not fair play”) reveals the unnamed fear that blacks will retaliate for the injustices that they suffered. Scalia, moreover, appeals to the ideal of fairness (“turnabout is not fair game”), a catchword synonymous with the American tenet of “equality,” to suggest that black retaliation against whites, for its unfairness, infringes on what it means to be American. The implication of the narrative alienates blacks in their un-American-ness and suggests that blacks lust for revenge. Scalia re-presents reality by envisioning a reality of black dominance, catalyzed by affirmative action, and by implying that blacks are un-American because they do not conform to the American ideal of fairness, or equality; though the narrative is false, its believability (to the jurists) suggests that the false reality of Scalia’s non-narrative could usurp reality. The presence of two believable realities, one true and one false, confuses the reader as to which reality is true. By re-presenting reality in a false way to jurists, Scalia’s “narrative” is a non-narrative that intentionally asserts a false reality and in so doing rejects any notion of fictional narrativity. The

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<sup>4</sup> In other words, non-narratives that reflect the reality of the unreality of race and racial inequality. I recognize the contradiction.

non-narrative not only affirms the idea of racial difference but also presumes a relationship of hostility between whites and blacks.

Visual narratives of race, such as Annie Leibovitz's [April 2008 cover of \*Vogue\*](#), which features LeBron James and Gisele Bündchen, proliferate in the media and advance false realities of race and racial inequality. Critics have noted the visual allusion that Leibovitz's cover makes to the Harry R. Hopps poster [Destroy this Mad Brute: Enlist](#) and to Giorgio Olivetti's 1949 poster of [King Kong](#). Both references are to images of monstrosity, and James is aligned in posture and spatial position with both the brute and King Kong. Like the brute and King Kong, James is hunchbacked and has his feet set apart, a stance which enlarges his body in contrast to Bündchen (James occupies approximately three times the width of the cover that Bündchen occupies). James shows a conspicuous amount of teeth, like the brute and King Kong, which suggests carnivorousness, especially in association with the invocation of monstrosity. Like the two, James is black in skin and dress, a fact which, though it should not be significant, carries with it associations of danger and evil. The visual similarities between the photograph and the posters imply that James is of the type of the brute and King Kong—that he is a monster.

The photograph emphasizes James's "monstrosity" by contrasting it with Bündchen's gentility, which corresponds to the gentility of the woman in [Destroy this Mad Brute: Enlist](#) and [King Kong](#). Bündchen, moreover, resembles the [Statue of Liberty](#) in the color of her dress and in her posture, which features a slightly raised arm (though the right arm is not raised completely, as it is in the Statue of Liberty) and fingers closed as if she were holding a torch. As a visual icon of America, the comparison of the Statue of Liberty to Bündchen suggests that America itself is in the arms of the brute, King Kong, the monster. The photograph, by using real figures to allude to antecedent depictions of monstrosity and to a recognizable American icon, advances a re-presentation of reality (of real people) informed by a narrative that associates monstrosity with features of blackness, largeness, and carnivorousness. The narrative that the photograph advances is one that, though it suggests gentility between its figures, perpetuates a hierarchy in which the genteel white has greater connotative prestige than her monstrous black companion.

The medium of photography (of capturing real images) contributes to the sense that the narrative re-presents reality. The image is believable because it narrates using real figures. The juxtaposition of James and Bündchen in the photograph emphasizes the contrast between a white female and a black male, a contrast which draws not only on racial difference but on gender difference as well. The image of a beautiful white female, whose posture resembles the Statue of

Liberty, suggests virtue and, in its connection to the Statue of Liberty, America. This virtue stands in contradistinction to the “brute”-like,<sup>5</sup> King Kong-like<sup>6</sup> viciousness (read: vice) of James, whose posture underscores the impression of monstrosity. The association of virtue with Bündchen and vice with James causes the viewer to associate moral difference with racial difference (and gender difference, though the use of gender serves to underscore the helplessness of the white figure Bündchen and the aggressiveness of the black figure James; that is, gender punctuates a racial stereotype). The hierarchy implied by the juxtaposition, in which virtue is greater than vice and white is greater than black, finds expression in the subtle, yet significant, foregrounding of Bündchen and backgrounding of James. The narrative that the image advances is one in which a set of social values (color, gender, nationality—in two words, cultural normativity) is registered on a moral scale, which is then used to evaluate the two real figures in the image—James, the viewer determines according to the associative criteria set forth by the photograph, is vicious, while Bündchen, representing characteristics associated with virtue, is virtuous and the moral superior to James. When viewers extrapolate the messages conveyed by the image, they apply the same criteria to their evaluations of others and, in perpetuation of the non-narrative of racial difference, reinforce the idea that blacks are (morally) inferior to whites. The photograph represents reality by implying the existence of race as a true concept and of racial difference between persons of different colors. Because it seeks to undermine the reality that race does not exist (at least not as a biological reality; it is a social construct), the photograph does not acknowledge its narrativity; instead, it pretends to represent reality and to tell the true narrative of reality. The photograph of James and Bündchen, thus, constitutes a mimetic non-narrative that brutalizes blacks and gentrifies whites, and perpetuates the belief that white is superior to black.

The consonance between the non-narratives of Scalia and Leibovitz reveals a narrative undercurrent to the history of race and racism in America. Both Scalia’s narrative and Leibovitz’s narrative narrate the existence of race and racial difference, and present paradigms of racial relations in which whites are morally superior to blacks. Scalia and Leibovitz present narratives which portray blacks as hostile outsiders, as monsters who can and will “destroy whites,” and as, overall, non-conformists to American ideals of fairness, or equality, and virtue. Both Scalia and Leibovitz perpetuate the idea of racial difference and underscore the differences between the races by politicizing relations between blacks and whites. The

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<sup>5</sup> The message of *Destroy this Mad Brute: Enlist* is particularly troubling, yet reflective of white-black relations, for its message of violence toward the brute, which, in the photograph, is a black person.

<sup>6</sup> King Kong is native to “Skull Island,” a fictional island in the Pacific Ocean; the contrast of America and a “foreign” figure is xenophobic.

juxtaposition of blacks and whites (especially by Leibovitz) does not reveal the parity of the races; instead, it defines the races in contradistinction to each other, implying a hierarchy of power governed by principles of American normativity. As such, both Scalia and Leibovitz define American normativity in terms of whiteness, gentility, and fairness, and both present whiteness as something to be defended against black aggressors (blacks are vengeful and destructive, to Scalia, and blacks are monsters, to Leibovitz). The non-narratives of Scalia and Leibovitz, though temporally disconnected, commonly perpetuate racial difference according to a code of American normativity. The persistence of this non-narrative of American normativity until the present moment reveals the entrenchment of the non-narrative of racial difference and the associative register of (American) racism. Non-narratives, it stands, have the power to institutionalize false realities of racial inequality.

A paradigm for understanding narrative based on its position between diegetic and mimetic poles applies to narrative in general and can gauge the intentions and effects of a narrative. The scope of the paradigm encompasses all narratives, because the paradigm measures narrativity. As such, the paradigm is a useful definitional framework. However, the difficulty of understanding narrative based on its diegetic and mimetic qualities lies in determining whether a narrative is diegetic or mimetic. I have suggested that diegetic and mimetic narratives differ in their commitment to fictional and non-fictional goals. Yet the language of this metric does not account for the fact that fiction and non-fiction sometimes bleed together,<sup>7</sup> confusing a sense of whether a narrative is diegetic or mimetic. A more useful distinction can be made between diegetic narratives and mimetic non-narratives (such as narratives of race) by determining the extent to which a narrative acknowledges its narrativity and, subsequently, the extent to which it re-presents reality. The narratives of Scalia and Leibovitz present false versions of reality in which race and racial difference exist. The narratives that they advance do not recognize their falseness; instead, they rely on the pretense of reality to promote alternate realities of white superiority. The discursive nature of these narratives and their own narrative incognizance identify them as mimetic non-narratives, as opposed to narratives that acknowledge their narrativity.

An understanding of narrative in terms of its mimetic or diegetic qualities simplifies the complexity of narrative and suggests that a diegetic narrative cannot, in the fictional realm, inform, for instance, the discourse surrounding race. Of course, the idea that diegetic narratives cannot act in discursive ways is false and represents a fault of the paradigm. The myth of Oedipus, for example, by admission

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<sup>7</sup> Plato notes this bleeding, writing, “And narration may be either simple narration, or imitation, or a union of the two?” (Book III; 186)

of its mythical nature, acknowledges its narrativity; yet, it has also given psychoanalysis one of its central paradigms. The difference between mimetic and diegetic narratives lies in the way in which diegetic narratives inform discourse. Whereas mimetic non-narratives attempt to confuse reality with alternate false realities, substituting false discourses (for example, discourses of racial inequality) for the discourse of reality, diegetic narratives, though their stories inform the discourse of reality, are limited by their admission of narrativity. While diegetic narratives have discursive potential, they are hindered by their acknowledgment of narrativity; the reader can identify diegetic narratives that admit their narrativity with greater ease than she can identify mimetic narratives, and with this knowledge she can resist the discursive implications of the narrative. Thus, while the paradigm suffers from its simplification of narrative into diegetic and mimetic types, it also, by providing the reader a measure of narrativity, provides the reader with the means to resist and render useless the discursive potential of diegetic narratives.

I have conceived of narrative as a false reality in opposition to reality. Yet I have not defined reality *per se*, because to do so would validate one version of reality and invalidate the others. For example, race is not a real thing (a thing of reality) in the sense that it occurs naturally; rather, it is a social construction,<sup>8</sup> a narrative that narrators narrate. Yet race as a false idea has become integrated into the reality of life. Though it is not real, race exists. Narratives of race have realized race and given it currency in reality. I have argued that narratives substitute false realities for reality. Yet, I cannot say that, in areas such as race where false realities have become reality, the false reality is any longer false, because it has become the reality that people know; it has become real. The idea that a narrative can constitute a meaningful reality suggests that reality does not exist in and of itself, but rather that it is perceptively constituted—that reality is, and exists because it is, perceived. If people perceive narrative to be reality, then narrative is reality. Thus, the relationship between narrative and reality as people know it may not be contentious, but rather constitutive, with narrative constituting meaningful reality.

Narrative philosophers and linguistic theorists support the idea that reality is narratively constructed. In *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Alasdair MacIntyre writes, “man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions,

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<sup>8</sup> In “AAPA [American Association of Physical Anthropologists] Statement on Biological Aspects of Race,” Solomon Katz writes, “Generally, the traits used to characterize a population are either independently inherited or show only varying degrees of association with one another within each population. Therefore, the combination of these traits in an individual very commonly deviates from the average combination in the population. This fact renders untenable the idea of discrete races made up chiefly of typical representatives.” In so doing, he debunks the misconception that race has a genetic basis.

essentially a story-telling animal” (201). The proclivity of humans for narration in both “practice” and “fiction” suggests that both the fictional and non-fictional worlds of “man” are narratively constituted. Mimetic non-narratives of reality are subjective interpretations of reality re-presented as reality. Thereby, reality becomes less about its inherent reality-ness and more about its constitutive-apprehension by humans (humans constitute meaningful reality by apprehending, interpreting, and re-presenting their subjective perceptions of meaningless reality). Reality is nothing more than a narration, the greatest mimetic non-narrative told. In “Science and Linguistics,” Benjamin Lee Whorf advances a theory that suggests that language shapes thought. He writes:

[T]he background linguistic system... of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas.... We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way. (117)

Whorf argues that language shapes how individuals perceive reality. His argument, though contested, suggests a constitutive relationship between language and reality, similar to the constitutive relationship between narrative and reality posited above. If language can shape reality, then it stands to reason that narrative (the ordering of lexical and visual language into a story) can also shape reality. The realization of the false reality of race suggests that reality may be a narrative, as narratives of race are responsible for presenting the false reality of race. If reality is a narrative, then it is a mimetic non-narrative that does not acknowledge its narrativity because it doubly functions as reality. Yet, if reality is a narrative and if narrative is the representation of a narrative reality, discursively informing reality, then the narratives we tell have the power to reconstitute and re-narrate reality and to deconstruct the narrated reality of race and racial inequality.

The suggestion that narratives constitute reality finds an example in Naomi Zack’s recent remarks about the effectiveness of the Black Lives Matter nomenclature. Zack notes that the expression Black Lives Matter is a statement of fact and that “no one would claim that black lives [...] do not matter.” Underlying her claim, however, is the fact that the phrase Black Lives Matter needs to be articulated. The state of reality (the reality of racial violence<sup>9</sup>) does not reflect an appreciation of black lives, nor does it reflect an appreciation of lives in general. Zack’s claim that “no one would claim that black lives [...] do not matter”

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<sup>9</sup> The Federal Bureau of Investigation notes that 48.2% of hate crimes (~3956 crimes) were racially motivated, and that 70.0% of racially motivated hate crimes (~2764 crimes) were the result of anti-black bias (“Hate Crime Statistics [2010]”).

represents a capitulation, on her part, to the non-narrative of equality (the non-narrative to which Scalia appeals). In reality (I mean reality, not a mimetic reality), there are people to whom black lives do not matter, or do not matter to the degree that white lives matter, which amounts to the same thing. A white person will kill a black person if he (the white person) believes that the black person poses a threat. When officers Timothy Loehmann and Frank Garmback shot and killed Tamir Rice, whom they believed carried a firearm (it was an Airsoft gun), Rice's life did not matter as much as their own (white) lives did; Loehmann and Garmback did not consider Rice's life with the weight that they considered their own. Zack, who criticizes the discourse (non-narrative) that creates the illusion of equality, claims that equality does not exist, but fails to recognize the non-narrative (false reality) of equality to which she, in stating that "no one would claim that black lives [...] do not matter," subscribes. Zack's subscription to a mimetic, non-narrated, false reality of equality demonstrates the deceptive, yet also constitutive, relationship between narrative and reality, in which the non-narrative of racial equality constitutes Zack's meaningful reality.

The concept of narrative is usefully framed in terms of its diegetic and mimetic qualities. An understanding of narrative based on these qualities categorizes narrative by examining the extent to which it acknowledges its narrativity and re-presents reality. Though they have discursive potential, diegetic narratives acknowledge their narrativity and do not re-present reality. By contrast, mimetic non-narratives seek to create alternate realities by presenting false versions of reality. In particular, narratives of race, such as the narratives of Scalia and Leibovitz, present versions of reality in which the false ideas of race and racial inequality exist. By not acknowledging their narrativity, these narratives (non-narratives) assume the appearance of reality. The non-narrativity of the narrative—its denial of narrativity and its pretension to reality—enables the mimetic non-narrative to act in a discursive capacity, capable in its resemblance to reality of confusing what is true (the non-existence of race<sup>10</sup>) with what is false (the idea of race). The closeness of the relationship between narrative and reality, in which narrative becomes, for all intents and purposes, reality, suggests that the former constitutes the latter, if not exactly, then meaningfully. Theories of narration and language suggest that humans narrate their realities and that the only meaningful realities are the subjective, interpreted re-presentations of meaningless reality. Thus, narratives of race propose realities of race and racial difference. However, if reality is a narrative (a mimetic non-narrative), then narrators have the power to re-narrate reality to reflect a reality more faithful to and conscious of the unreality of race and racial inequality. Though it can only offer a necessarily false image of

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<sup>10</sup> I recognize the paradox.

reality, the looking-glass affords the only means of attaining, through representation, true reality.

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