Towards a Queer Feminism; Or, Feminist Theories and/as Queer Narrative Studies

It is now possible to imagine [queer people to have] a history; . . . to negotiate a future in which [women enter] the wage-time of the professions, and lesbians and gay men . . . the repronormative time of parenting; [to] move among [sexual] identities (or abandon them), or between or beyond genders; [or to] elaborate ways of living aslant to dominant forms of object-choice, couple-dom, family, marriage, sociability, and self-presentation and thus out of synch with . . . narratives of belonging and becoming.

—Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*

Queerness irreverently challenges a linear mode of conduction and transmission: there is no exact recipe for a queer endeavor, no a priori system that taxonomizes the linkages, disruptions, and contradictions into a tidy vessel.

—Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*

One critical intervention of feminist theory since the 1970s, an intervention quite pronounced in queer theory of the last few decades as well, is its destabilization of the host of hegemonic regimes that constitute what passes as order and sense. Feminist theorists of all stripes, but in particular feminist narrative theorists, have succeeded in demonstrating how the very framing of fields of inquiry can jury-rig and short-circuit underlying systems of thought. For example, scholars no longer deny the crucial impor-
tance of seemingly innocuous discursive maneuvers like naming, listing, or archiving, or in other words, the various mechanisms and manifestations of the Lacanian symbolic, especially when disciplines newly authenticate or, for that matter, newly delegitimize emergent academic fields. Feminist theorists have accordingly shown how the mere placement of one term before another can induce an arbitrary ascendance of that term above and against the term to follow, despite the ostensible equivalence of the “and” usually serving to unite them. Reversing the customary syntax of the catchphrase “husband and wife,” or referencing two of either spouse as a viable conjugal unit without need of a sexed antithesis, illustrates how little egalitarian such familiar couplings can be. Combining feminist and queer studies together can consequently divorce as much as unite those fields in conceptualization and application: constructing feminism qua feminism as not itself queer, or queer studies as not itself feminist, and thereby rendering the association between them simply an aggregation of one species of activity onto the presumptive alterity of the other. The slash between queer and feminist in this volume’s original working title, *Queer/Feminist Narrative Theory*, encapsulates the suspicion that feminism has rightly wrought on the often blinkered intercourse between language, knowledge, and power: simultaneously coupling and decoupling fields otherwise registering as discrete in substance and therefore, by implication, oppositional if not hierarchical in alignment.

It is in that same metacritical, skeptical, and, I believe, eminently feminist spirit that I would like to underscore the paratextual facets of this book collection. For almost without fail, the elements hovering on the fringes of a forum will condition the range of possible concepts unfolded within its precincts proper. What this approach reveals is that the tacit primacy granted to narrative theory over either feminist or queer theory, whether in the original title of the collection or in the title of the symposium first inspiring it, contravenes one of the signal achievements of feminism during the second half of the twentieth century; namely the comprehensive subversion of epistemological givens, not the least being the unexamined axioms of narratology as a structuralist discipline. Regrettably, in whichever sequence the adjectives “feminist” and “queer” happen to fall, the compound noun which they together modify, “narrative theory,” remains the implicit center of gravity and unspoken rationale for each. That arrangement in turn demotes feminist and queer theories to mere adjuncts of narrative theory—secondary, subsidiary, superficial figures to its seminal ground—and, more problematically, positions them as derivatives of the historically phallocentric institution of narratology. All of which belies the fact that by now feminist and queer theories,
not just narrative theory, have proved self-sufficient, even seminal, paradigms in and of themselves.

In the wake of poststructuralism, and in light of the increasingly intersectional, multidisciplinary, and yes ever more curiously queer climate of university research and teaching, neither narrative theory nor feminist theory, nor the comparatively recent array of queer theories, can assert explanatory authority over other modes of critical engagement. As with the reversible vase-face engraving through which Edgar Rubin famously elucidates Gestalt psychology, any one of these theoretical approaches is able to serve as the conceptual ground of the others; the partition established between figure and ground, foreground and background, is arbitrary yet uniquely adaptable, hinging less on the positive qualities of the subject at hand than on the particular lenses most suited to accentuating those qualities at specific times for specific audiences and purposes. Nor would situating any one of these approaches as the ground, and any one or more of the others as the figure, necessarily endow greater importance to that approach or render still other, quite possibly as viable, approaches less salient. If, for instance, some aspect of narrative is the main subject under investigation, feminist and/or queer theories, not just narrative theory, may afford the most suitable concepts and methodologies through which to attend to it; if, in contrast, some aspect of sexuality, gender, or embodiment is the main subject under investigation, narrative theory, not just feminist or queer theory, can lend that seemingly discrepant subject a kindred service in turn.

Hilary Schor, alluding to the late resurgence of intersectionality as a paradigm, has cautioned that the central figure of the intersection is a place not simply of contact or collaboration, but of conflict and contention, “a place where there are traffic accidents” and, therefore, she advises, “a place where you need a cop.” Schor maintains that narratology “has been and should be” in command of that position, personifying it as a “kind of protector,” a “guardian of justice,” capable of supervising relations between feminist and queer studies, and adjudicating impartially whenever disputes arise. I would posit, on the contrary, that appointing a traffic cop, or any other authority figure, to oversee the proper ebb and flow of feminist and queer inquiries is neither warranted nor beneficial: feminist and queer studies are alike autonomous fields proficient in debating their own protocols and premises without deference to extrinsic fields. Moreover, each approach is, by nature, deliberately improper and quite properly so. The paternalistic disciplinary gaze that Schor ascribes to narratology, not to mention the infantilized, rivalrous terrain which that gaze projects upon feminist and, most especially, queer studies, would no
doubt prove unhelpful regardless. A pluralist, contextually attuned paradigm would trust no single theoretical lens to be any more uniformly objective or holistic than others; in fact, those perspectives granted most perspicuity may well prove least trustworthy precisely because of that exalted status.¹

A sure sign of the efficacy with which narrative, feminist, and queer studies can be interwoven without any one approach subdanging or subordinating the others is the frequency with which pioneering work in narrative studies has also been at the same time pioneering work in feminist and/or queer studies, and vice versa. Indeed, narrative studies can function as a specialized application of the latter fields as much as either can function as a specialized application of it. Notable examples of scholarship drawing upon narrative theory for feminist/queer purposes would be the chief inspiration for the current chapter, Susan S. Lanser’s phenomenal “Toward a Feminist Narratology” (1986), which I initially encountered in a gender-studies anthology, Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism, as well as Robyn R. Warhol’s Gendered Interventions (1989), Judith Roof’s Come As You Are (1996), or Lanser’s follow-up article in queer studies “Sexing the Narrative” (1995). Of course, this kind of scholarship likewise includes so-called “interdisciplinary” work, provided, that is, we follow two recent anthologies, A Companion to Narrative Theory (2005) and Postclassical Narratology (2010), in viewing feminist and queer studies as “external stimuli” that can somehow enter into “exogamous unions” with the principal discipline of narrative studies (Alber and Fludernik 11); or, almost worse, see them as autonomous if subaltern entities functioning within that discipline surreptitiously, a tenuous yet indigenous “series of subdisciplines” (Fludernik 37). Perhaps in consequence of the ongoing devaluation of feminist and queer studies, the latest collection in the discipline, Current Trends in Narratology (2011), features no contributions with an emphasis on gender or sexuality studies, while the preceding collection, Postclassical Narratology (2010), contains a lone chapter, Lanser’s own “Sapphic Dialogics,” which comprises less than 10 percent of the volume. Judging from the table of contents of these collections, exemplary scholarship in narrative studies only broaches feminist or queer issues on an ad-hoc basis, as outlying regions towards which a specialist need not ordinarily venture or logically stray. Seldom acknowledged are the profound structural ramifications that feminist and queer studies have had on the discipline of narrative studies as a whole, most tellingly, on its persistence

¹. The position articulated in this paragraph is greatly indebted to Donna J. Haraway’s “Situated Knowledges” in Simians, Cyborgs and Women (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–82, and Rey Chow’s “Interruption of Referentiality” (South Atlantic Quarterly 101.1 [2002]), 171–86.
as a discipline in need of discipline, as a territory rife with boundary disputes, stanch surveillance, and periodic efforts towards decontamination and quarantine.²

Arguably more consequential at the present time than the supposedly inter-, intra-, or sub-disciplinary scholarship above is the extensive amount of multidisciplinary scholarship in cultural studies that adapts and hones narrative theory for its own purposes rather than importing it deferentially from an extrinsic or superintendent discipline of narratology. This scholarship encompasses everything from the two books cited in the epigraphs above, Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds* (2010) and Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), to the numerous works in discourse studies proliferating during the 1990s—for example, Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* (1993) or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990)—to such ground-breaking feminist reassessments of the novel as Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). It remains a mystery why the authors of these works have not been hailed as fellow specialists in and practitioners of narrative studies, as opposed to extradisciplinary, albeit hospitably welcomed, visiting scholars and guests.³ Are the authors of *The History of Sexuality* (1978–1986) or, for that matter, *Nation and Narration* (1990), namely Michel Foucault and Homi Bhabha, not also authentic, even perhaps superlative, narrative theorists? Recognizing these and similar figures as narrative theorists in their own right would nonetheless require coming to terms with the fact that the vast majority of scholarly works published in narrative studies over the past few decades have emerged far afield of the official auspices of narratology, flourishing without overt sanction or appreciation from a conventional discipline.

It is important to remember that the sole center of gravity around which queer or diasporic subjects can circulate is their collective resistance to normativity, or, in other words, to the dominant cultural *narratives* that regulate

---

² The editor of *Current Trends*, Greta Olson (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), and the editors of *Postclassical Narratology*, Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik, each discuss the vexed relation between feminism and narratology in their introductions; however, earlier editors, such as Susana Onega and José Ángel García Landa of the 1996 *Narratology* (London: Longman, 1996) and David Herman of the 1999 *Narratologies* (Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 1999), include more chapters with sustained—and hence unmediated—treatments of gender and sexuality.

³ Ostensibly incidental gestures, like addressing scholars as experts in neighboring fields rather than as *de facto* members of the field itself, can make for immeasurable differences in constituting the identity of the scholar as well as the discipline as a whole. As Louis Althusser persuasively argues, institutions come into being through the incremental practices of subjects interpellated by and engendered through them: “ideas are [the subject’s] material acts inserted into material practices regulated by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus” in which that subject is hailed (186).
identity and difference. As a result, queer theorists tend to utilize narrative theory extensively in their reconceptualization of sex, gender, and sexuality, as the high correlation between “queer” and “narrative” in any MLA Bibliography or Google Books search will quickly confirm. In contrast, experts working in Women’s Studies or in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Studies retain the option of basing their research on apparently pre-existent, pretextual identity categories clearly delineating who does or does not count as a woman, or as a woman-loving woman or man-loving man, and thence as a potential object of scholarly inquiry. While many if not most of these experts choose to cultivate some degree of proficiency in narrative theory, or advance a social-constructivist, non-identitarian ethos in their scholarship, their colleagues in queer or transgender studies must do so by necessity. Extricating oneself or one’s academic field from heteronormative frameworks entails reading and re-reading cultural scripts as scripts, and rescripting those scripts accordingly.4

Unfortunately, even as feminist and queer studies have transformed the range and contours of what we regard as narrative and thus narrative studies within academe and beyond, the residually structuralist discipline of narratology continues to treat gender and sexuality as peripheral to its core research interests and practices. For instance, while the 2010 Postclassical Narratology collection grants the salience of these forms of study to narrative studies generally, and condescends to “accommodat[e]” them within the official province of narratology, the editors characterize them as “thematic” subcomponents with which the main cohort of the discipline can “cross-fertiliz[e]” and “innovative[ly] blend” (Alber and Fludernik 11, 3, 6, 15)—or, in short, with which it can marry and mate exogenously as Claude Lévi-Strauss might say. Some strands of feminism have regrettably followed suit vis-à-vis the comparatively new fields of queer and transgender studies: shoring up feminism as a discipline by disciplining the dissent perceived as encroaching upon feminism’s proprietary domain. The still disproportionate amount of scholarship produced on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British women’s domestic fiction, which, importantly, is likewise research on bourgeois Anglo-American heterosexuality, usually without the class, sexual, or geopolitical parameters of that demographic explicitly acknowledged as such, is here a case in point. As

4. Critical race specialists, from bell hooks in “Postmodern Blackness” (in Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics, Boston: South End, 1995; 23–31) to José Muñoz in the forthcoming Feeling Brown (Durham: Duke UP) likewise treat the process of racialization, not racial identity per se, as the focal point of their research. My own work in progress, “Class Camp and the Queer Imaginary,” explores the possibility of a critical class studies established along similar lines, that is, without the materialist critique presuming a stable material ground for the object of critique.
Lanser remarks in “Of Closed Doors and Open Hatches,” eighteenth-century women’s studies remains “quite heavily heteronormative to the impoverishment and perhaps distortion of the field” (275)—a problem extending to feminist and literary studies generally.⁵

The trend towards postclassical narratology, a neologism positioning narrative studies against what might be called poststructural or postmodern narratology, is further symptomatic of the marginalization of the typically poststructuralist approaches of feminist and queer studies. A narratology thus named is at once under- and over-representative in scope. Everything, except the customary classics of Greece and Rome, would be post-“classical” in the classical sense—a tautology compounded by the fact that this narratology’s own classical forerunners, the twentieth-century structuralists Gérard Genette and Roland Barthes, would, from a historical perspective, be virtually as postclassical as their professed descendants. Meanwhile, the unspoken foil of postclassicism, poststructuralism, remains vital and dynamic, diversifying and transforming a wide array of fields notwithstanding its lack of an equivalently lofty rubric. The taxonomy of postclassicism may therefore signal less contemporary advances within the discipline than a conservative gesture to temper if not thwart them; that is, to reactivate the structuralist core of the once-dominant narratological orthodoxy, albeit with a minimally original, poststructuralist guise. What better way than the tendentious tidying-up apparatus of periodization to make that discipline’s by now irrevocably postmodern milieu disregard the long unadorned truth that narratology, like all other master narratives of modernity, is an emperor without clothes? Postclassicism essentially co-opts the insights yet domesticates the critique that poststructuralism continues to pose to narratology as a discipline.⁶

The characterization of feminist and queer studies, and cultural studies generally, as “extrinsic developments” from which an otherwise apolitical, history-free zone of narratology can be immune suggests that the upshot of this rubric is to obfuscate the world-making, world-replicating power of discourse, which, I believe, can and should be a prime object of narratological concern. In addition, it serves to safeguard the expedient fallacy that ideology taints only some minoritarian narratives, allowing investigations of more

---

⁵ Lanser’s essay is reprinted in the collection *Heteronormativity in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, coedited by myself and Ana de Freitas Boe (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015; 23–39). I am judging the disproportionate amount of scholarship on normative subjects based on the number of submissions which I receive each year as an editor of *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory*.

mainstream narratives to proceed apace without assessments of how they too may be situated materially and culturally. Nevertheless, those very texts seeming to elude sociopolitical trappings, those so tightly enmeshed in hegemonic customs and canons as to pass as universal, are also those necessitating the most critical scrutiny. Moreover, whether heeded or unheeded, discourses of gender and sexuality, not to mention race, class, and geographical region, will continue to inflect the entire expanse of narrative studies, not just the diminutive portion set aside for feminists, queer theorists, or other cultural critics to study. Feminist theory, like other forms of critical theory, “expands the terrain of narrative theory not because it enumerates variously sexualised authors and characters, but rather because it provides alternative models of narrative structure and notes the queerness already registered in the classic models of structuralist narratology” (Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 478). The feminisms of the 1970s thus did not stop short in seeking the inclusion of women’s works within the then highly homosocial enclave of narratology, but sought as well to expose the self-authorizing, self-replicating force of phallocentrism engendering and rationalizing that homogenization.

The difference between postclassical and other narratologies is ultimately of less magnitude than that between narratology and narrative studies. Whereas the framework of postclassical narratology implies an unbroken genealogy from classicism to postclassicism without any counter-discourse of poststructuralism intervening—the “ology” symptomizing the outdated affectation of the new narratology as a positive science—that of narrative studies underscores the integral interdisciplinarity distinguishing it and analogous fields like postcolonial or disability studies. Narrative studies, unburdened with the exclusionary legacy of an “ology,” is better suited for the intersectional, intellectually porous landscape of today. Whatever rubric adopted, however, feminist and queer studies should not be treated as extraneous, extradisciplinary addendums to narrative studies proper, much less as subaltern or subdisciplinary quasi-constituencies within the larger narratological fold. Despite the apprehensions of some participants at the Queer and Feminist Narrative Theory Symposium, the demise of narratology as a master discourse transcending and translating the lay vernaculars of other fields need not portend the dawn of nonsense or chaos. Multidisciplinarity, like multilingualism, lends narrative theorists more expertise and fluency, not less, while also fostering dialogue among the divergent constituencies invariably interacting within any discipline.

I would like to close by cautioning that after forty years and counting of what Robyn Warhol calls the “feminist-epistemological critique of objectivity” (342), neither narrative studies nor feminist studies—nor, for that matter,
queer studies—can feign the authority or claim the prerogatives of a positive science. As Warhol rightly notes, “systems of meaning are never neutral,” of necessity “bear[ing] the (gendered) marks of their originators and their receivers” (ibid.). To these inscriptions of gender, I would add those of class, race, nation, sexuality, among a host of other hierarchical classifications that remain operative even after feminist narrative theorists have transitioned from emergent outsiders to relatively mainstream players of the once tacitly, now tenuously, dominant stronghold of narratology. If, having gained that comparative security, feminist narrative theorists were to forsake their oppositional stance and seek the kind of institutional cachet which they earlier obliged structuralist narratologists to abandon, they would jeopardize feminism’s systematic and, by this point, successful dismantling of structuralism as a disinterested, metadiscursive science. That would be a pyrrhic victory indeed in deterring other emergent scholarship and feminism’s own more resistant formations from joining, transforming, and perhaps altogether abandoning the narratological field.

Works Cited


