These remarks come from someone who does not work in the field of narrative theory but pursues research in queer and, to a lesser extent, feminist studies. Indeed, my ambivalence extends not only toward narrative theory but to queer theory itself, since my own work explores the lines of inquiry opened up by queer of color and queer diasporic analysis. A number of scholars have addressed the default, constitutive “whiteness” of queer theory as it emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s out of AIDS street activisms, Foucauldian approaches to histories of sexuality, and poststructuralist critiques of essentialist identity categories (e.g., Cohen, Hames-García, Perez). I will come back to the question of race momentarily. First, I wish to consider whether the framing questions of this collection—What is feminist or queer about one’s work on narrative? What is “narrative” about one’s work on sexuality and/or gender?—can generate research that is mutually reciprocal across these specific areas of expertise.

That I was invited to contribute to this volume speaks to the possibilities and generosities of cross-field dialogues. But I suspect that those of us represented here have various and differing commitments to its three framing concepts: feminism, queer, and narrative. As I consider our variety of topics—feminist narratology, morphings and perversity, affect and emotion, the brain and sexuality, queer (counter)archives and historical fragments, reli-
gion and transnational feminism, interracial intimacy and “post-race” discourse, 1970s women of color novelists and empathy, queer futurity and the “It Gets Better” project, queer temporality and rupture, and queer causality and etiology—my curiosities are aroused less by the internal developments and anxieties of narrative theory per se than by the way that those ideas are being broached and are perhaps breaching narrative study from somewhere else, however distant or proximate. Given the wide range of work represented here, I wonder whether these key concepts (intersectionality, systems, cortex, diaspora, affective labor, negativity, retrograde vocabulary, to add a few more) end up telling a story—a story of a shared project—or evoke a productive incoherence.

Several of these essays voice propositions that similarly speak to issues about inter- or cross-disciplinarity. Judith Roof suggests that we need to break down the terms being used lest we cover over the differences and hierarchies that constitute them. Sue Kim calls for narrative theory to widen its scope of texts and consider seriously the scholarship and intellectual traditions that have grown up around them. Is our project to theorize feminist and queer narratologies, subordinating “feminist” and “queer” to kinds or styles of narrative study, or to explore what happens when feminism, queer studies, and narrative theory as distinct fields in their own right converge or collide? Is there a built-in hierarchy of “feminist” over “queer” if only by virtue of the longer and more robust history of feminist narratology? What about the tensions between the potential of narrative theory’s imperialist appropriation (its treatment of narratives by women, sexual dissidents, or racial and colonized others as “raw material” for testing out the reach of theoretical frameworks), on one hand, and a genuine commitment to accounting for and historicizing racial, class, religious, and national differences and practices, on the other? Is the goal to explore how tools from narratology can bring renewed attention to issues of narrative form in feminist and queer expressive cultures? Or are we asking that narratology be impacted and reshaped by the urgencies presented by feminist and queer studies and politics?

These questions use the conjunction “or” and recur to a mode of binary thinking that the very project of this volume might seem roundly to criticize. But by phrasing these possibilities as not reciprocal, not moving freely and energetically in both directions, I am suggesting that the organizing principle of the volume—narrative—necessarily demotes other terms and fields to secondary status. Is it really possible, to focus on the fields I’m most familiar with, to break down the current conundrums and competing interests operating in queer studies and ethnic studies and their encounters with narrative theory? If we could, I would ask: What and whom are queer archives for?
If Monique Truong’s novel *The Book of Salt* (2003) is an extended improvisation on an archival fragment, an attempt to produce enduring presence where there was only fleeting ephemerality and interchangeability of colonial laborers, is it also a wishful desire for a permanent legible archive as well (Cvetkovich)? To what extent is Randa Jarrar’s novel *A Map of Home* (2008) a critique of Anglo-American queer literary history (Friedman)? Why is there such a noticeable disjunction between women of color fiction and lesbian of color critique during the 1970s and 1980s (Kim)? Does it matter who speaks in the highly mediated, and peculiarly individualized, construction of community of the “It Gets Better” project? What if the world that Chris Colfer, Margaret Cho, and Barack Obama represent is a world I can do without (Matz)? What difference have social differences in addition to class made in the construction of male same-sex desire across the twentieth century (Morrison)? What happens to the category of “queer youth” when the etiology of homosexuality is traced not to biology, god, or bad influences but to a practice of repressing the disorder of *sexuality* as such, resulting in a social disciplining whose effects are the very identity categories that incite violence, depression, and sentimental acts of YouTube charity (Rohy)?

If these questions imply a doubtfulness about the possibility of reciprocal engagements across queer, feminist, and narrative theory, my reservations stem less from imagining the respective practitioners’ disciplinary isolationism, defensiveness, or stubbornness, or from positing that an individual scholar cannot be well versed in more than one field, than with the incongruous intellectual histories and political commitments of the different fields. It seems to me that the central issue with which each field grapples—sexuality, gender, narrative—inevitably inflects the emphasis, if not the full content, of the analysis. Such argumentative emphases or “interventions” are made legible and intelligible when framed within a given field’s internal developments and trends—in short, within its respective intellectual tradition. This is not to say, again, that disciplines are autonomous, impermeably bounded, and monolithic, but that the specificities of what makes a piece of scholarship “new,” “original,” or even meaningful is determined by its place within a particular intellectual genealogy. And those genealogies are themselves informed by certain political aims that overlap only partially, at most.

To return to the field in which I work, queer studies has rapidly traversed a great deal of ground in its relatively brief academic existence, quickly moving past the essentialism versus social constructionism debate to investigate such questions as citizenship, colonialism and postcolonialism, race, ethnicity, religion, age, able-bodiedness, affect, popular culture, archives, counter-
publics, cultural differences, tourism, international migration, political economy, political asylum, biopolitical governance, indigenous sovereignty, and “terrorism,” among others. Given this wide array of issues, it would be rather misleading or reductive to ask what impact queer studies might have on narrative theory since “queer studies” is itself heterogeneous and self-contentious. To be sure, many queer studies scholars examine narratives of all sorts evoked in all sorts of media. And some of the sophisticated analytical insight examining “how narrative works” drawn from narrative theory might very well enhance and enrich the study of those expressive practices. But it is another thing to ask whether the knowledge produced in queer studies scholarship will be (or has been) directly routed back toward narrative theory as a field, or whether narrative theory would welcome and rigorously take that knowledge into account.

One way to put this point is to say that the limits of reciprocal engagement may lie in the orientations of our scholarly modes of address, those fields with which we aim to be in dialogue. It may be perfectly conceivable that an individual scholar is able to converse with equal facility with narrative theory and queer studies. But it seems to me that unless queer studies (to continue with my example) views narrative theory as a significant and necessary analytical framework for coming to terms with its most pressing problems, and incorporates and adapts its insights into its critical repertoire, such an “intervention” would be heard as a mere whisper in the wind. That is, narrative theory would need to become an indispensable part of queer studies’ intellectual genealogy. The same would be conversely true, I would surmise, in order for the full range of queer studies to influence the shape and practice of narrative theory.

In this regard, we might compare, in highly abstracted terms, how narrative theory and queer theory narrate their respective histories. As I understand it, the former story begins with classical, structuralism-based narratology dominated by “male theoreticians” and “male writers” and moves to postclassical narratology that has refocused attention on gender, sexuality, social context, and the role of readers in making meaning (Herman and Vervaek 130), and has interfaced with “ideas from fields that did not extensively cross-pollinate with earlier research on stories” such as feminism, Marxism, and postcolonialism (Herman 16). Although queer theory’s origins, according to one version of the story, have not been dominated by male theorists (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Teresa de Lauretis, and Judith Butler, among others, are frequently cited among early influential practitioners), and although queer theory has acknowledged intellectual and political debts to feminism, it has
nonetheless tended to elide the work of theorists and activists of color (James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and so on) as constitutive of its genealogy in favor of (white) poststructuralist thinkers.

In this connection, I am reminded of Barbara Christian’s classic essay “The Race for Theory,” in which she challenges the academic ascendancy and presumptions to totalizing authority of what she calls the postmodernist “New Philosophy” for excluding the thought and expressive practices of the Black Arts and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, and for coming to prominence at precisely the moment “when the literature of peoples of color, black women, Latin Americans, and Africans began to move to ‘the center’”: “Because of the academic world’s general ignorance about the literature of black people, and of women, whose work too has been discredited, it is not surprising that so many of our critics think that the position arguing that literature is political begins with these New Philosophers” (71). Christian’s argument, however, is not just about struggles over the history of ideas and who is granted the legitimacy to be recognized for them; it’s also about the very practice of “theory”—what it is, what it’s for, and what forms it takes: “For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?” (68; emphasis mine).

What I am suggesting, in the end, is that the relations of feminist, queer, black, and other ethnic studies to narrative and to narrative theory are highly contingent and variable, engaged with varying degrees of investment. As Christian’s essay indicates, even the fundamental terms “narrative” and “theory” can be conceptualized and valued in radically different ways, and what it means to tell stories and theorize about a certain social group’s experiences can be a matter of power and survival. If seen as alien and threatening to a specific culture’s intellectual, artistic, and social traditions, narrative theory proper may not attain the sort of validity in the corresponding academic field that it has acquired in others. At the same time, there’s no reason to believe that its postclassical iterations and widening directions may not eventually be taken up by a critical mass of queer and ethnic studies scholars to the point where those theoretical tools and insights, translated and transformed to address relevant problems in the field, become integral to the field’s self-conception, critical lexicon, and modes of analysis.
Works Cited


