Narrative Theory Unbound
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Twenty-First-Century Turns, or:
Queer and Feminist Work in an Age of Affirmation

In mapping recent theoretical developments, scholars have proclaimed a range of overlapping turns—including, in alphabetical order, the “aesthetic,” “affective,” “biological,” “cognitive,” “ethical,” “evolutionary,” “(neo-)formalist,” “neurological,” “phenomenological,” and “religious” turns. In all their disparity, these twenty-first century paradigms share, I will suggest, orientations that have also been associated with the end of (capital T) Theory (see Elliot and Attridge). While obviously no less theoretical, in the sense of speculative and analytic, than their predecessors (postmodernist, discourse-oriented, linguistic, ideology-critical, cultural studies paradigms . . .), they disband the reign of critical reflexivity—or, the challenging of commonsense notions—that may have united the diverse branches of late twentieth-century Theory.1

Without necessarily ignoring the legacy of these critical reflexivities, twenty-first-century approaches have variously argued for reaffirming experience, art, nature, or tradition, to the effect of championing both universal and smaller-

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1. See Culler, who makes this reflexivity into a crucial part of his definition of (critical) theory (14–15).
scale collective identifications. To the internal “hermeneutist of suspicion,” it
must perhaps seem questionable whether these returns to the evolutionary or
religious foundations of culture, the shared human capacity for empathy, or
the value of classical art forms leave significant conceptual room for a contin-
ued exploration of sociosymbolic regimes of difference and inequality. And
if new universalisms thus evidently threaten to displace feminist (as well as
antiracist) investigations, the fate of queer studies in the twenty-first century
seems even more dubious, given the assault on identity inscribed in their very
conceptualization, as well as their focus on sexuality. Is the category of sex, in
the very moment of its heightened politicization in this country, not pushed
into renewed critical marginality by the combined forces of the cognitive turn
against psychoanalysis, the evolutionary focus on reproduction, and the shift
to the formations of affect in experience?

The fantastic news brought by this volume, however, is that the assembled,
heterogeneous community of scholars interested in feminist and queer con-
cerns is still and ever-differently doing it. We see here how deeply involved
queer and feminist work is in the emerging twenty-first-century paradigms
and, conversely, how deeply provocative (or imaginatively surface-reading) femi-
nist and queer work undertaken through them can be, especially if devel-
oped in the spirit of what I will call critically affirmative theoretical bricolage.
Taking up the challenges articulated by recent paradigm shifts (for example to
the automatized responses of a “hermeneutist of suspicion”) without forget-
ting the crucial insights of late twentieth-century critical reflexivity enables
complex modes of participation in twenty-first-century theory. As Kay Young
demonstrates in her work on the gendered imaginaries of new brain research,
such a qualified participation allows queer and feminist scholars to explore
the diversity and complexity of contemporary approaches, critically engaging
with individual premises and conclusions rather than redrawing global fron-
tiers (including those old ones between the humanities and the sciences).
Such detailed engagement may in fact result in the identification of con-
ceptual breaking points, or at least in a cautious close-up on conceptual
regions of serious friction, for example regarding the degree to which the
centrality of reproductive heterosexuality in most, if not all accounts of evo-

2. See Sedgwick’s plea for a reparative epistemology overcoming what Paul Ricoeur
called the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Sedgwick and Frank 124).
3. See, e.g., Sedgwick, Tendencies 8; on queer theory’s contemporary perspectives, see
Halley and Parker.
4. See also Edelman’s critique of the discussion about an “after sex” moment even in queer
theory itself (“Ever After”).
5. See Best and Marcus’s critique of depth models.
olution threatens to newly marginalize not only nonreproductive sexualities but also nonsexual layers of gender. Simultaneously, however, this detailed engagement allows for exploring productive alliances, for example by returning to Darwin’s fascination with the beauty of “endless forms.” While the list of promising research foci in the spirit of such bricolage is no less endless, this volume explores a few in particular. Instead of choosing between investigations of affect versus sexuality, there is a lot of productive work to be done in investigating what are perhaps not so much conceptual marriages as “polyamorous relations” between affect and sexuality in the study of culture: that is, in mapping the multifaceted, plural, and contextually changing ways in which feelings are sexualized and desires imbricated in affective orientations (see also Cvetkovich 172). Sue Kim’s work underlines the need for analyses that detail the equally multifaceted relations between affective engagements, social structures, and histories. If the twenty-first-century turn to “positive feelings” threatens to displace attention to the histories that block such positive feelings (see Ahmed 50), then a challenge for queer and feminist, or more broadly egalitarian and critically engaged, scholarship in the present condition is to equip our investigative sewing kits (and butch tool belts) for weaving these histories into cautiously reparative theoretical assemblages, that is, a mesh of conceptual devices that chain together disparate critical moments and modes of engaged thought. As I argue below, narrative theory can play a central role in these endeavors. But that very suggestion demands a quick detour.

Queer—Feminist—Narrative: Arrangements (beyond Althusser & Co)

The privileging of “queer” over “feminist” in the title of this volume may seem warranted as a political gesture of “affirmative action,” given the research results that Susan Lanser notes, which demonstrate that “feminist narrative theory” has in fact developed into a relatively established paradigm, whereas “queer narrative theory” remains severely marginalized. Such a (situational) political move should, however, not congeal into some neo-fundamentalist theoretical positioning of one category against the other. Rather, the larger theoretical as well as political task at hand is continuously to imbricate the two—as well as to plan follow-up forums that foreground the analysis of racism, class inequality, or the significance of religion in the interplay with both.

As to the privileging of “narrative theory” over its “queer” and “feminist” modifiers, Coykendall’s critique made me wonder how my own lack of discomfort with this arrangement indicates my entanglement in the twenty-
first-century theoretical trends outlined above. As someone whose academic trajectory took her from an initial focus on “cultural studies” approaches (or, specifically, the interrelations between gender, sexuality, and race) to a sustained interest in contextually informed aesthetic theory, I admittedly love to attend variously modified narrative theory conferences these days, while also importing narrative approaches to queer and feminist conferences. Nonetheless, I suggest that we think about other metaphors than those suggested by Coykendall. Affirming narrative theory not as “traffic cop” but as “elected chairperson with constitutionally circumscribed rights (to be amended as needed), for a set period of time, with the possibility of reelection,” might allow us to escape the Althusserian ghosts haunting the police metaphor, perhaps even without immediately falling prey to charges of naïve (Habermasian) ignorance vis-à-vis power. (A chair certainly has power, but as many of us know from our respective departmental contexts, it is a service position.) Seriously: In a spirit of critical affirmation once more, I suggest that we remain aware of the implications inscribed in our framings of the theoretical field (as Coykendall suggests) and that we emphasize their historicity and provisionality along with our agency in changing them, but simultaneously calm the inner hermeneutist of suspicion to the degree that we can comfortably work within a productive framing for, minimally, the duration of a specific occasion.

Reconfiguring Narrative—Narrative Reconfigurations

What, then, is the campaign message of hope offered by narrative, or its qualification for office? The contributions to this volume suggest little consensus in this respect as well. Whereas Susan Lanser powerfully insists that the art of telling a story is queer as such, Judith Roof answers her related question on whether otherness is already part of the story with a much more skeptical “I don’t know.” Such hesitations are haunted by long-standing controversies in cultural theory at large, echoing some of the post/modernist critiques of narrative which, in the age of Theory, forcefully challenged its authority in the name of categories like performance or space. At the same time, the fact that this critique echoes in question marks rather than programmatic statements these days may indicate that it has become overshadowed by the contrary vectors of narrative’s forceful return onto the critical stage in the 2000s. At

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6. On these (with a closer look, rather complicated) vectors, as well as some of the following, see my An Aesthetics of Narrative Performance.
its worst, this return, which has certainly fueled also the transdisciplinary expansion of narrative theory (beyond early proclamations of a “narrative turn” as part of the postmodern regime of reflexivity) can appear as part of the backlash scenario (with respect to a renewed marginalization of queer and feminist investigations) unfolded above. In the wake of Ricoeur’s phenomenological definition of narrative as the work of ordering “[our confused, unformed […] temporal experience,” some cognitive conceptualizations have, in fact, foregrounded narrative’s presumed power of establishing coherence and continuity, and told strongly universalizing stories.7

However, the overflowing “home/world improvement belt” of narrative theory—including recent cognitive narrative theory—also offers quite different perspectives to queer and feminist scholars. Itself an object of the suggested practice of critically affirmative theoretical bricolage, narrative can simultaneously become its conceptual framework. Narrative scholars affiliated with otherwise diverging approaches have similarly insisted on the performative dimension of narrative in recent years, on the importance of the practice or “action” of telling (Jacobs and Sussman x; Herman 23; Phelan 4). As an act and process of worldmaking, however, narrative certainly offers space for “otherness,” or queer affects and aesthetics. While I share Sedgwick’s impatience with the “always”-proclamations of Theory & Co (see Touching Feeling 125), and thus would be careful to claim that narrative is inherently queer or feminist as such, I will make a strong plea for its potential as a medium of egalitarian articulations. In theoretical terms, the conceptual bricolage constituting this model revamps notions of performative resignification through twenty-first-century foci on affect and phenomenology. Thus, Judith Butler’s act of localizing resignification at the intersection of Derrida and Bourdieu in Excitable Speech can serve as a starting point for a model of narrative as a process of performative reconfiguration. Starting from Butler’s insistences that speech acts, including counterhegemonic ones, remain embedded in relatively stable social power structures and histories of signification without therefore becoming entirely powerless themselves, I have conceptualized narrative as a process intertwining rupture and repetition; in other words, as the critically affirmative rearranging and reshaping of socio-symbolic building blocks (see Breger). Although I insist that these building blocks of narrative reconfiguration are necessarily shot through with signification (which puts this model of narrative at odds with some of the antisignificational emphases in recent affect theory; see Gregg and Seigworth), there is no need to identify

7. Ricoeur xi. Coherence assumes a central status, e.g., in Ryan; for the return to universals, see Hogan.
them primarily as linguistic units and thus remain within the orbit of more or less poststructuralist resignification theories. Instead, I conceptualize the process of narrative reconfiguration as a worldmaking assemblage of affects and variously mediated archival scraps, including memories, images, and sounds as well as words.

Rather than remaining bound to specific, usually hegemonic plots, representational techniques, and temporalities, such a model of narrative reconfiguration recognizes that narrative comes in a vast plurality of forms. Here, aesthetics—in the sense of an intermedial poetics—is promising as a methodology of mapping and evaluating possibilities. For example, it can productively mediate interventions into ongoing debates on queer temporalities. Exploring queer forms of temporality in Dan Savage’s controversial “It Gets Better” project, Jesse Matz’s essay thus takes on Lee Edelman’s radically antinarrative insistences on “dis- or de-figuration,” on the “ahistoricism” and “incoherence” of sex, and by extension, his programmatic No Future proclamation for queer theory. Matz does so by underlining the prominent use of present tense forms and spatialized tropes, which bring the future into affective proximity. As I would contextualize them, such techniques have more generally been developed in much contemporary culture as a powerful ensemble of presence-oriented techniques of narrative performance. Some scholars have articulated discomfort with the imaginary collapsing of actual lapses in time through these rhetorical techniques, with their sentimentalism as well as their disregard for the temporality of trauma (“it doesn’t get better”). For my part, I do also see the promise of the presence techniques in reaching many of the LGBTQ youth targeted by the project, but would nonetheless advocate for the continued exploration of alternative techniques. To be sure, the alternative solution of 1990s queer theory, which underlined the theatricalizing techniques of parody, camp, and, generally, heightened artificiality, may in some respects seem difficult to reappropriate for the age of affirmation. Nonetheless, more broadly conceptualized theatricality or simply distancing techniques of various kinds should perhaps not be altogether discarded from the multifaceted formal archive of queer narrative reconfiguration. (Perhaps all-too-plainly: “even if it doesn’t get better, you can get better at dealing with it”).

More generally, exploring the rich ensemble of (performative-)narrative techniques probed in the multimedia archives of historical as well as contemporary queer, feminist, and other egalitarian-minded cultural production allows us to counter the grand theoretical gestures of negativity as well as

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8. Edelman, “Ever After” 470–71; Freeman xxi; both with reference to Edelman’s earlier No Future.
“antinegativity.” While queerness is certainly not exclusively bound to Edelman's Now, it is also not necessarily “about the rejection of a here and now,” as José Esteban Muñoz has suggested in his reconceptualization of queerness in and for the age of affirmation (1). While it is, as I will underline with Muñoz, about “enact[ing . . .] new worlds,” theorizing these worlds through the concept of narrative reconfiguration outlined above allows attaching “hope” not only to the realm of utopia but also to the messy and variously compromised, but changing, spaces of actual collective and individual lives. As suggested by Elizabeth Freeman, whose Time Binds begins to explore such possibilities for queer narrative, delving into the “pleasure and power of figuration”—or, as I would word it, narrative reconfiguration—provides us with a host of ways of “encountering pasts, speculating futures, and interpenetrating the two in ways that counter the common sense of the present tense” (Freeman xxi, xv; see also Matz). In short, I can certainly see myself voting for that narrative chairperson again: There is a lot of work she can still do for us.

Works Cited


9. Muñoz 1–4. Anticipating cynical rebuttals, I should perhaps add that the sphere of contemporary U.S./American politics evoked by my rather incautious metaphorical play may not necessarily present a very strong example for possibilities of effective change.


