Narrative Theory Unbound

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A thread that runs through several of the essays in this volume—with varying degrees of prominence—is that of causality. Long a key category in narrative analysis, causality itself is a miniature narrative: “a caused b.” Suppose we hear the sequence of events: “The queen died and then the other queen died.” We wonder if event #1 caused event #2: “The queen died, and then the other queen died of grief.” Even if the causal link is not explicit, we wonder if post hoc, ergo propter hoc. Some might consider causality a solved problem or (still worse) a passé one. But in the spirit of trendiness-fatigue, I want to point out the diverse and rewarding ways that these essays have brought the notion of causality back to life.

Causality has been examined in detail by narrative theorists such as Emma Kafalenos in *Narrative Causality*. Because of space limitations, however, I will be discussing just two general kinds: (1) what causes what within a text, and (2) what a text causes in its readers. The first kind of causality—what causes what within a text—is addressed most explicitly in Valerie Rohy’s “Strange Influence: Queer Etiology in The Picture of Dorian Gray.” Questioning whether the etiology of homosexuality should be the fulcrum of argu-

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1. I am of course alluding to E. M. Forster’s distinction: “‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it” (86).
ments about gay civil rights, she posits causality as a rule made to be broken, as in Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*. Homosexuality pervades the text but cannot be named. “Influences” are often mentioned, but homosexuality is their absent effect. It is also an absent cause, so readers see a perversion of novelistic form. And in one sense causality stretches outside this text: insofar as the book *causes* Wilde’s relationship with Lord Douglas, the creator of the book is created by it. Rohy ends by asking more broadly what work is done by homosexuality in desire narratives. Although she does not see homosexuality as the same as queerness, it might still be valuable to extend her inquiry by asking whether lost causes like those of *Dorian Gray* might be present—or absent—in narratives that are more fundamentally queer.

Causality plays a more implicit role in Paul Morrison’s “*Maurice, or Coming Out Straight*.” He explains that E. M. Forster resembles Freud in that the novelist sees homosexuality as the prime mover (the cause) in *Maurice*, though the two writers otherwise differ. For Freud, it is as if there are no bad heterosexuals: if a problem arises in human development, he attributes it to homosexuality—in my terms, a perversion of causality. (Morrison also exposes a paradox in Freud’s notion of causality: the opposition to familialism is like the reproduction of familialism, presumably because the son’s opposition to his father is like the father’s opposition to his own father.) In *Maurice*, homosexuality is not phase-based, for it is a *rupture* of stasis and seems “out of time.” Morrison concludes by observing that it would be hard to show that as a positive model of queer temporality.

The second kind of causality—what a text causes in its readers—predominates in Sue Kim’s work on empathy in 1970s novels by women of color. Kim begins by wondering about allegiances shared by women of color across cultures, though she warns that the term “women of color” risks losing its political valence. She then moves to the theme I am stressing and warns that causality is hard to trace. One complex example is the literary marketplace, which both shapes novels and is in turn shaped by them. Kim draws on the work of Suzanne Keen to ask her main question about causality: “To what extent does empathy aroused by novel reading result in prosocial action?” She explains specific narrative strategies that her authors employ to evoke empathy, but she acknowledges limitations on what empathy can actually do. To use my term: even if a text can “cause” empathy, it cannot “cause” social change unless it is linked to understanding of social circumstances and tied to social movements beyond the text.

Kim’s essay brings to mind broader issues about the values in narratives. She apparently shares many of the values expressed in the novels she is examining, and therefore would hope the novels could convey those values to read-
ers. Might her theory change in any way if she applied it to narratives whose values she did not share, as Susan Rubin Suleiman does in *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as Literary Genre*? Others might question whether it is a good thing for novels to convey values, desirable or not, in the first place. Still others might assert that, whether or not conveying values is a good thing, it is unavoidable (although hard to control or measure).

Finally, Jesse Matz’s essay, while explicitly about temporality, asks implicitly about both kinds of causality: what causes what within a text and what a text causes in its readers (or viewers). It would seem that the queer narrative temporality in Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* has nothing in common with that in the “It Gets Better” videos and book project, but Matz demonstrates that, surprisingly, the project tries to meet Edelman’s demands. For example, the project emphasizes that the future awaits the narratee in the present, shows that change can be sudden, dramatizes the performativity of the promise, conflates the narratee with the past self of the narrator, and employs counterfactuality. The narrators play with temporality within the text in order to cause the narratees to do something outside the text: to refrain from drastic action, especially suicide.

Matz’s method involves finding traces of Edelman in “It Gets Better”; what if we also try the reverse? The project privileges survival: might we find traces of that in *No Future* as well? In a sense, Edelman’s work is a paean to negativity (including the death drive), to its ability to persist in the face of the narcissistic fantasies and self-delusions entailed by “reproductive futurism” (2). In fact, he argues that, even if society did not position queers as the figure of negativity, that structural position would remain (27). He ultimately says that everyone occupies that niche anyway, even if unwittingly (153). Ironically, by claiming in effect that “it never gets better,” Edelman is asserting the survival of negativity.

I will close by offering a few of my own reflections—less a response to Matz himself than to the two approaches he is analyzing. How might we avoid the “hopelessly convincing” negativity of Edelman and the “hokey” “sentimentality” of the “It Gets Better” project? Perhaps, instead of throwing out the child along with the bathwater of reproductive futurism as Edelman does, and instead of embracing the occasional reproductive sentimentality of “It Gets Better,” we can move to a queer version of children and reproduction, if not of futurism. Queerness opens up new possibilities, not only in the literal realm of “It Gets Better,” but also in the (mostly) nonliteral realm.

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2. Keen addresses related issues through her concept of “empathetic inaccuracy” (136–40).
3. Matz used the terms “hokey” and “sentimental” during the question period.
of *No Future*, where we can consider queer children and reproduction as figures.\(^4\)

We can open up reproduction beyond Edelman’s heterosexual emphasis. Queer adults do reproduce themselves in various ways, either nurturant or procreative.\(^5\) He acknowledges the possibility of nurturing through adoption, but—as Susan Fraiman says in her respectful critique of an earlier version of *No Future*—he suppresses “procreative queerness even as he brings up lesbian and gay parenting. [He ties] this firmly and exclusively to adoption” (133). She comments: “What remains unthinkable is queer pregnancy . . . [and] queer men with kids genetically their own” (132). Those possibilities have existed for millennia, and nowadays in vitro fertilization and other kinds of assisted reproductive technology make possible procreative reproduction without intercourse. In the future—for better or worse—procreation may be even less heterosexual, indeed almost asexual, to use a term that Edelman associates with queerness (building on Baudrillard \(^61\) and Lacan \(^82\)). Already turkeys can reproduce by parthenogenesis, and cattle and sheep by cloning. The figurative possibilities of such processes are just beginning to be tapped, as in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*.

Moving beyond parenthood, whether nurturant or procreative, we come to subtler kinds of nurturing. Fraiman introduces the concept of “the butch maternal” (147), exemplified in some of Jess’s feelings and actions in Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). One instance occurs “when [Jess is] dreaming of what she would do in an ideal world. . . . This is clearly not a dream of conceiving or even adopting offspring, but it is a dream of tending and attending to children as well as plants” (152). In addition, when Jess takes care of another woman’s children, her unconventional gender helps in “their struggle to discard old axioms in favor of the new knowledge [about gender that] Jess embodies” (153). Jess’s effect on the children reproduces her knowledge, especially about queer gender.

The idea of nurturant reproduction that passes on knowledge brings us to education. Matz calls the “It Gets Better” narrators “pedagogical” and “parental”; this pedagogy is especially parental because what it aims to give the narratees is (continued) life itself. More broadly, this teaching reminds us that in a sense all education, formal and informal, is a kind of reproduction, a passing on of part of oneself. In the classroom, queer math teachers pass on their

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4. I acknowledge that Edelman is not talking about literal reproduction and children (11), but he’s not not talking about them either. To say his figural Child has nothing to do with the child would be like saying Lacan’s phallus has nothing to do with the penis.

5. Edelman does remark, “It is true that the ranks of [queer] parents grow larger every day” (17).
conception of calculus, and queer narrative theorists pass on their conception of storytelling. Nowadays some queer teachers even pass on their conception of queerness. Outside the classroom—in the “It Gets Better” project, for example—queer people teach informally as well; in fact, a major complaint of homophobes is that homosexuality reproduces itself, through teachings about queerness (or through teachings of queerness—those unnamed “influences” in *Dorian Gray*).

Thus human reproduction involves causality in two ways. The first is procreation, *causing* a person to live (an act of commission—an almost melodramatic, aorist moment in the case when sperm meets egg; a more prolonged event in the case of labor [not a moment but still, thankfully, a limited time]). We need to recognize that in addition reproduction involves nurturing, *causing* a person not to die (an ongoing, low-key, progressive process that encourages an act of omission). This latter process ranges from feeding an infant to preventing an adult from committing suicide. To use William Faulkner’s terms in a queer way, causing a person to live or not to die can mean not only to endure, but to prevail. Queer reproduction can cause a person—causality that has figurative as well as literal power.

**Works Cited**


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6. “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail” (“Banquet Speech”).