In the past twenty-five years, queer and feminist narrative theory has covered an incredible amount of methodological and theoretical territory and has been usefully applied in fields ranging from literary studies to neuroscience. It thus seems particularly important to identify those areas of inquiry from which we have the most to gain. We have built out; now what will we build up? In an effort to provide a partial answer to this question, I want to pinpoint and enlarge upon a particularly knotty issue which, for lack of better terminology, I simply call “the human problem”: the difficulty presented by the fact that by virtue of its political and ethical dimensions, feminist and queer narrative theory must take stock of extratextual significance while at the same time distinguishing between real-world context and its representation. I will first attempt to identify why this problem has remained overlooked and undertheorized, and then focus on two potential solutions suggested by participants at the Queer and Feminist Narrative Theory Symposium that inspired this volume.

Throughout this volume, oppositions—whether identified as illusory, heuristic, or reductive—are recognized as a continuing obstacle for feminist and queer narrative theory. As Susan Lanser pointed out in 1986, feminist narratology is itself a refusal to recognize seemingly incompatible methodologies; specifically, the “false opposition” between the ostensibly “scien-
tific, descriptive, and non-ideological” investments of narratology and the “impressionistic, evaluative, and political” interests of feminism (674). Resistance to a host of other oppositions organizes many of these essays, each critique accompanied by its own unique solution. For instance, both Judith Roof and Lanser cite the enduring pervasiveness of essentialist binaries that continue to inform narrative approaches to gender, and both suggest a methodological solution that would allow for a more fluid and holistic conception of identity (Lanser through intersectionality and Roof through systems theory). Suzanne Keen and Kay Young identify the assumption of biologically determined binary distinctions as equally pervasive but also illusory: neither the paradigm of the gay/straight, male/female brain nor the nature versus cultural context divide, it seems, is consistent with scientific research.

Such responses, however, prompt a question: if queer and feminist narrative theory consistently identifies multiple sets of oppositions to which it must respond, is the structure of the response necessitated by the phenomena examined, or is it, too, a product of a convenient organizational logic, albeit one based in well-intentioned critique? In other words, is our poststructural inheritance becoming a rhetorical conceit? If not, it seems that the next step is to discover some larger and more comprehensive set of categories that can embrace, or at least connect, the seemingly disparate ways “out” of binarism without endorsing a single approach. Surely it is neither feasible nor desirable for all feminist/queer narrative critics to become practitioners of intersectionality or unilaterally embrace systems theory—but is it possible to identify the key underlying interests that such approaches share?

The particular terms used to describe what narrative approaches to gender should be aiming at—terms such as “node,” “nexus,” “vector,” “intersection,” “product-in-flux”—seem to carry similar connotations, but viewed from a strictly narrative perspective, they suggest a clear division of interest over whether the concept of identity addressed in any given approach exists within or outside of the text. It is often very difficult to tell if feminist/queer narrative critics are talking about human psychology or its representation—or, if both, how those two things are connected. Of course, narrative theory attempts to account for both the text and the various modes through which it is interpreted, but its great strength compared with other approaches making the same claim (e.g., new historicism and cultural studies) is its ability to account for the connection between text and reader with rigor and specificity. Many of these essays connect narrative to a real-world context through analogy, with arguments explicitly or implicitly taking the form “these aspects of the story function in this way, which is similar to / models / calls into question these existing social relations . . . .” As effective as analogy may be,
the pervasiveness of this kind of parallelism suggests either a shared belief that it is not crucial to *directly* connect the storyworld to the social world, or (what seems more likely) an ideational impasse. One way to get around (or through) this difficulty is to focus on the actual reader, either through cognitive psychology, neuroscience, or reception studies. The great benefit of such approaches is that they focus on the site of transfer from the textual to the phenomenal world. Narrative, however, is both what affects the mind and is its product. Understandably, narrative’s wide-ranging relevance in representing human subjectivity is precisely what the move toward analogy seeks to maintain, even if it is not a viable solution.

Two potentially useful but as yet undertheorized areas of scrutiny might offer a way to more directly address this problem: character and nonfictional narrative. Character, as one of the most basic categories of narrative theory, offers a particularly promising site for analyzing the connection between the actual and the represented world. As Lanser notes, character is lamentably ignored in narrative studies in general and in feminist and queer narrative theory in particular. Situated at the liminal space between the literary and the human, character might offer the most promising entry point into a rigorous application of narrative theory in questions of gender at the level of culture. As Mieke Bal has observed, one of the first major contributions of feminist criticism was the attention it brought to how female characters functioned (often marginally) in certain kinds of texts (124). Such longitudinal examinations of character, however, seem to have fallen away in favor of interpretations of particular cultural works that challenge or complicate narrative conceptions of gender. This is not to say that focusing on such texts is not a valuable and important enterprise, but only that it is equally important to theorize how the arsenal of techniques narrative theory has accumulated since its structuralist beginnings can be used to examine character understood as human personality, rather than exclusively focusing on character as literary device.

The problem with character, as narrative theorists have long and insistently observed, is that characters are not people, although they continually tempt readers to see them as such. As John Frow explains, character has remained “the most undertheorized of the basic categories of narrative theory” precisely because “the concept is not specific to the discourse of literary theory but is necessarily dependent upon cultural schemata defining the nature of the self” (227). Reacting against the tendency of earlier critics who treated characters as independent, expressive agents, structuralist theorists including A. J. Greimas, Philippe Hamon, and Tzvetan Todorov took as their point of departure the premise that the mimetic quality of character is not relevant to serious
analysis of the text’s structure of signification. Such a perspective, which Alex Woloch succinctly summarizes as the “excision of the human from narratology,” has since become “the price of entry into a theoretical perspective on characterization” (16, 15).

To treat character as a technical function within the totality of the text’s semantic structure, however, risks relegating the work of narrative theory to considerations of the literary and aesthetic due to the constructedness of the text—something that feminist and queer narrative theory strives not to do. The seemingly obvious observation that characters are not people does not mean that the category of “character” does not come into play for human subjects. People cast themselves and others as characters in their own narratives in accordance with, or in defiance of, the social and cultural scripts available to them. Particularly illuminating in this regard is Jonathan Adler’s work on narrative identity in relation to mental health. In a recently published study, forty-seven patients were asked to write short narratives throughout their experience of psychotherapy in order to assess the degree to which personal agency correlated with mental health. As expected, mental health increased throughout the course of therapy, as did the degree of agency formally expressed in the narratives related to the experience of therapy. Far more surprising, however, was the study’s finding that the narration of agency preceded patient-assessed improvement. As Adler put it at the conclusion of his paper, “the results indicate that individuals begin to tell new stories and then live their way into them” (“Living” 385). The significance of such a finding for feminist and queer studies is twofold: first, it underscores that it is possible for individuals belonging to historically marginalized groups to claim agency within oppressive systems. Second, it identifies narrative as the tool through which self-actualization may be achieved.

Of course, what social and cognitive psychologists mean by “narrative identity” does not quite correlate with any existing narratological concept. Nevertheless, “narrative identity” most resembles direct characterization, when a character’s traits are “stated by the narrator [or] the character herself” (Prince 13). In a recent interview about this study, Adler observed that “people tend to really like the realization that they are not only the main characters in their stories, but they’re also the narrator,” with the protagonist position correlating to an idea of self that acts and is acted upon by external

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1. For examples of criticism that emphasizes the mimetic and expressivist quality of character, see Q. D. Leavis, F. R. Leavis, Rawdon Wilson, and W. J. Harvey.

2. Adler defines narrative identity as “the internalized, evolving story of the self that each person crafts to provide his or her life with a sense of purpose and unity” (“Living” 367).
circumstances, and the narrator position corresponding to the way in which one “makes meaning” of the things that happen to the protagonist. From a narratological point of view, these distinct modes of conceiving of the self correspond not just to character and narrator, but also to the categories of story and discourse and the actantial roles of object and subject. Of further potential interest to narrative theorists, Adler’s study did not focus on what patients reported (content), but rather tracked the way in which they told their stories (form). For example, one of the key ways in which the study identified an increase in projected mental control was the narrator’s shift in framing the protagonist from passive object to active agent. In what can perhaps be best described as a close reading of a particular case study, Adler discusses the patient’s growing awareness of a “distinct story line,” comments on how she “framed herself” as a main character, and draws attention to “agentic narrative constructions” that replace the patient’s former tendency to use the passive voice (“Living” 380). He further observes that “Significantly more often than not, participants recounted their experiences in treatment as episodes in an unfolding story, sometimes with compelling imagery, characters, and symbolism” (384). In short, the interpretation of psychological data on narrative identity offers just one example of an area in which narratological techniques might be usefully employed to better understand human identity outside of the text. One way to get around an ideational impasse, after all, is to come at it from the other side—not by examining how the real is represented or how the represented is like the real, but how the represented becomes real, in direct and measurable ways.

The second site of interest for addressing the human problem is through the study of nonfiction, including but also outside of lifewriting. Narrative theory’s reluctance to address nonfictional nonautobiographical texts is understandable, since textual construction and social construction are clearly not the same thing. The former arises from a discrete set of information filtered through an individual consciousness and motivated by all the social, historical, and personal imperatives called into play by the more or less conscious construction of an implied author; the latter, from a far more amorphous and ambiguous hailing to assume a limited set of possibilities that exist provisionally within a given time and place. Far more than narratology in general, feminist and queer narrative theory has interrogated this dividing line, but has not yet explained how we can get from one side of the equation to the other. As “analogy” readings have ably demonstrated, social construction resembles and influences the construction of fictional narrative, but narratology proper fiercely guards against this conflation.
This defensive position is perhaps most eloquently and elaborately demonstrated in Dorrit Cohn's *The Distinction of Fiction* (1998), in which she convincingly critiques Hayden White's work by arguing that the shared use of emplotment does not render fiction a subcategory of history simply because the latter plays by one of the former's rules. Here, however, narratology has an advantage, because the fact that rendering history fictional fails to account for the distinction of fiction does not necessarily mean that the tools developed by narrative theory cannot be used to account for how non-literary historical (and not just literary or cultural) artifacts deploy many of the techniques identified by narrative theorists. In other words, rather than making narratology's claim to relevance through an inductive reading of literary texts and claiming, repeatedly, that the dynamics examined resemble structures in the actual world, narrative theory might usefully deploy the tools it has already developed in laying bare the otherwise implicit agendas or implications of political policy, religious doctrine, scientific research, and legal writing.

Admittedly, the application of narrative theory to nonfiction entails an ethical dimension that has, perhaps, dissuaded ever-vigilant feminist and queer theorists from engaging directly with nonautobiographical referentiality. Asking why nonfiction other than autobiography has been overlooked by feminist narratology, Alison Booth observes that nonfictional modes like biography occupy a “messy” ethical space, whereas autobiography implicitly appeals to a feminist/queer interest in self-fashioning. By the very fact of its existence, particularly when in defiance of heteronormative or patriarchal values, autobiography forcefully announces individual agency. Biography, however, by virtue of the fact that it “speaks” for another, potentially threatens to rob the subject of agency. Yet another reason why the stakes are higher, here, is what James Phelan has termed the “ethics of referentiality,” the “tacit understanding between author and audience in historical narrative that the historian’s narrative is rooted in the events and facts that have an existence independent of that narrative” (219). Misrepresenting the qualities of a fictional character makes one a poor reader; misrepresenting the qualities of an actual person makes one a liar.

Despite these potential pitfalls, however, it seems crucial for feminist and queer narrative theory to address nonfictional texts not *despite* but *because of* the ethical dimension. The well intentioned desire to be scrupulous about not reproducing the repressive dynamics of a cultural discourse that has historically spoken for disempowered groups has ultimately left a great deal unsaid (and potentially unsayable). One of the seminal questions of feminist and
queer studies is how one writes about an unrecorded history. In the paper she delivered at the Queer and Feminist Narrative Theory Symposium, Ann Cvetkovich suggested that queer historical fiction imagines a possible past that does not so much dispense with the ethics of referentiality as productively play with the concept. Booth shows that we may not so much lack historical texts as lack the texts we would like to examine. Verifiable reference is a luxury, and nonfictional texts outside of autobiography can and do tell us something, if not about what “actually happened,” at least about how it was represented, and narrative analysis can be usefully employed in determining for what purpose, how, and why. As Lanser remarked in 1986, what feminist and narrative studies most notably share is a commitment to that which is “practical.” It seems, to me, that it is entirely impractical to remain reluctant about addressing nonfictional texts. Such texts have and will be written about, by historians who are and are not invested in narrative theory. Now is the time to make a bid for relevance, not merely for the sake of our theoretical commitments, but, more importantly, for the emergent archives that are now coming to light and are more increasingly available to readers of all kinds in the digital age.

I have attempted here, however tentatively, to address the “human problem” from two potentially fruitful angles for narrative theory in general, and feminist and queer narrative theory in particular: first, at the level of individuals who conceive of the conception of self in narrative terms, and second, at the level of how people are represented and understood. These sites are psychological and cultural, but neither is, properly speaking, literary. As Mieke Bal has observed, the reason why narratology has “traditionally been confined . . . to the category of story-telling, mostly literary, mostly novelistic” is largely because narrative’s omnipresence in the real world makes it particularly difficult to justify interpretations beyond simply establishing narrative status or classifying types of narratives (226). Feminist/queer critics, however, have a ready answer to the question of which narrative cultural artifacts deserve analysis; namely, those that matter to social equality. As Hilary Schor stated in response to the papers delivered at the Queer and Feminist Narrative Theory Symposium, “justice” is precisely what “feminist narrative theory should be about.” Outside of aesthetic judgments, “justice” happens (or fails to happen) outside the realm of the literary, and in that respect, the “human problem” is far more than a theoretical difficulty or omission in scholarship—it is political, social, and ethical. In the coming decades, perhaps the most direct way that feminist/queer critics can address these concerns is through a rigorous narrative analysis of texts that express, contour, or delimit the lived experience of actual people.
Works Cited


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