Narrative Theory Unbound
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he genre of the “after word” is a tricky one. The adverb “after” can indicate location or chronology, and implies that the important things come “before.” The singular noun “word” restricts length. And yet there it is: an “afterword,” its very inclusion implying that there’s still something left to be said. Something perhaps that is “in imitation of” or “in homage to,” that is “after” this volume’s impressive set of essays. Fortunately for me, there’s another way to look at my assignment coming from its homophone: afterward. As Toni Cade Bambara put it in her “Foreword” to one of the most paradigm-changing anthologies of second-wave feminism, *This Bridge Called My Back*: “It’s the Afterward that will count” (viii). I grew up in the wake of Second Wave feminism and was cheered to see so many Second Wave feminists referred to in this volume, not so much because of my own personal history as much as because I believe it’s important to acknowledge our intellectual genealogies. So with “afterward” and generations on my mind, I humbly share a story about Bambara in order to give some shape to my asking: What comes “after” *Narrative Theory Unbound*?

In May 1995 I had the profound honor of driving Toni Cade Bambara to our local airport after a conference on contemporary women writers and activism at Dartmouth College. I felt nervous because of my admiration for
Bambara, her novels and stories, and what she’d just been saying at the conference, and also because I had moved into the area less than a year earlier, was without a map, and really didn’t want to get lost on such an important mission.

I must have articulated some of my anxiety or maybe Bambara was reading it from my face. In either case, she put me at ease by talking about her daughter. I’m not sure what I responded that prompted her to say that the reason she got along so well with teenagers was because she listened to them and didn’t claim to have the answers. She asked me what I was working on, and when I voiced my worry about writing a first book so that I could get tenure and keep my job, she reassuringly reminded me that books get written like other things I had already managed: one word, one sentence, one paragraph, one page at a time. She spoke slowly and quietly. The buzz at the conference was that her cancer had metastasized, and at one point she’d gone back to her room to rest. Whether it was the illness or her natural manner, Bambara exuded a calm that seemed so different from that bravura many of us learn in graduate school to help mask our insecurities and also different from the affect I’d observed in the few celebrities I’d met before. I didn’t want the car ride to end as I hung on her every word.

There are also three points that I remember Bambara making at the conference itself. Her opening gesture was funny, humble, and biting at the same time. She remarked that she was the one organizers invited when they couldn’t get Toni Morrison. We in the audience laughed and then felt awkwardly embarrassed by the way she’d gone right to the heart of the star system. We wouldn’t have wanted to admit it, especially not in that moment, but of course we did consider Morrison a bigger star than Bambara. The second intervention I remember her making concerned “ethnic envy,” a phrase that I haven’t figured out if she coined, but one that I attribute to her. It’s functioned for me since as a helpful admonition, especially because at the very time those words were coming out of her mouth, I had been staring at her gorgeous dreadlocks and creamy skin, and thinking how beautiful she was. The third point that pierced me concerned working together. She remarked on the struggles during her own life of activism over/with allies in SNCC, the Black Panthers, and other movements. From looking back, she’d concluded that when different groups discover an issue they feel commonly passionate about, they find each other and figure out how to fight for it together. It’s useless and probably doomed to pick your allies in advance based on who you think they are, what you think you have in common, or what you think you know about them, their values, and their priorities. Useless, too, to assume once an ally, always an ally.
Being wary of worshipping stars. Noting feelings of envy. Creating alliances as relevant. Listening to the younger generation. Not pretending to have all the answers. Thinking back myself now, I see how much all the things I remember hearing from Bambara are related as various parts of the same nexus. In my mind I connect them to Sedgwick’s first axiom: People are different from each other. We have to acknowledge that fact of difference in order to accord respect to others and in order to effect change, including to hierarchy itself. By writing this out, I am reminded to exercise caution around pronouns. Who is the “we” who must acknowledge difference, listen to and respect others, and work for change? On a pragmatic level, I take my “we” here to involve all those who care to read this volume and these lines to think through with me an “afterward” for queer-feminist, feminist-queer narratologies; taking my cue from Bambara, I’d like to pick at three imbricated issues: breaking down hierarchies, managing envies, and working in alliance.

**Breaking Down Hierarchies**

The star system doesn’t just exist among creative writers, of course. It’s well entrenched in academia, with gaps in salaries—to take just one metric—of professors in different fields (most notably between fields like law, medicine, business, economics, and the natural sciences at one extreme and nursing, humanities, and arts at the other) and between staff, professors, and administrators at most schools, opening ever wider.1 Closer to home, that is, within our literature departments, there are some indications that the spread between the best paid and the least well paid tenure-track people is less wide now than it was when Duke, Emory, and other schools set up our particular version of the star system. As Michael Bérubé in his 2013 MLA Presidential Address, the MLA, the AAUP, and many others have recently been pointing out to us, however, the use of various types of nontenured and part-time lecturers has been increasing at a delirious and exploitative rate, creating salary, benefits, workload, and prestige gaps.2 Our working toward narrowing those gaps could be one “afterward.”

1. Data on university salaries are notoriously hard to come by and even harder to compare because they tend to include different groups in the averages given. The AAUP and the MLA both keep databases and offer tools to analyze particular data an individual might want to investigate. For one comparison of salaries by field and rank see “Average Faculty Salaries.” On income gaps widening at the top of the professoriate and between university presidents and professors, see “Income Gap Widens.”

2. The MLA’s adjunct project and the New Faculty Majority <http://www.newfacultymajority.info> offer some sobering statistics on numbers and salaries of non-tenure track teachers in American higher education.
To limit what’s under examination even further, we can note that narratology itself never seemed to produce the kind of adulation that led to academic megastars like those in, say, deconstruction or postcolonial theory, though, to be sure, we have our preferred guest speakers and invited contributors. Precisely against this backdrop, the conference organizer as well as this volume’s editors are to be commended for the wide range of people they included. Especially at the 2011 conference, individuals occupying every position on the academic ladder not only were present but also were given genuine opportunities to contribute. To my sensibility, nothing in the conference setup or actual proceedings smacked of stars; all interventions were received respectfully and evaluated for their ability to further the dialog. Setting up other conferences in this way could be another afterward.

To take a different indicator of hierarchy, I find the essays here much more legible than academic work being published during my graduate school years, that is to say, during the poststructuralist, deconstructivist reign. Still, I find myself wondering what would shift if we questioned more deeply not only from whom we care to hear, but also to whom we are addressing ourselves and from whom we are willing to learn? What would happen if we tried to communicate more directly with queer youth, worker advocates, animal rights activists, popular lifewriters and biographical subjects, reality-television audience members—a direction indicated by moves of authors of essays in this volume? Finding out what would shift in our rhetoric, in our research questions, in our goals as a result could lead to yet other afterwards.

I take great inspiration from someone we might want to salute as an alternative kind of academic star. Susan Stanford Friedman has certainly achieved success by our profession’s markers. Yet her total commitment to her work rather than to her status has impressed me over the many years I’ve had the opportunity to listen to, interact with, and read her. I’m thinking specifically now of her choices of interlocutors in the many senses of the term in the work we do: topics, narratees, readers, and so on. Consider her essay in this volume and its engagement with novels and novelists concerned with gender and Islam. I remark the outcome of that engagement as calling us, her readers, to rethink our reflex to connect religion with oppression, especially women’s oppression, and therefore to replot our foundational concept of intersectionalities. The main lesson of Friedman’s work for me is that we mustn’t just “add” stories from other parts of the world to our corpuses. Rather, we must be open to the way interaction in the form of genuine I–thou dialog with those stories will inevitably change us and the assumptions and theories by which we operate. More possible afterwards.
Managing Envy

Ethnic envy. Sexuality envy. Theory envy. Field envy. Or to connect more directly with Bambara’s point about the star system: status envy. I’ve experienced all those, as ridiculous as that might sound coming from a full professor at an elite university. Maybe one point is that everybody has these kinds of feelings in some realm at some stage in their education and work life. Was career envy behind Bambara’s comment about pecking order with Morrison? Not to let myself off the hook: I’ve already admitted to my own envy of Bambara’s beauty at the very moment she was making this point. I could share numerous additional autobiographical examples. I will never forget my feelings of attraction, wonderment, despair, admiration—in quick succession and also simultaneously—when as a student I read Judith Fetterley’s groundbreaking work, The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature (1978) and, as a beginning assistant professor, Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992). The gaps between my own previous readings of the American classics and the readings that Fetterley and Morrison conducted were cavernous. I worried whether I could ever learn to read as they were reading, to myself detect how women readers were positioned to read as men and how American literature was untouched by the black experience. Their readings seemed so much more correct, more interesting, more sexy than mine. Looking back now, I notice how being made aware of my ignorance led to jealousy, to my setting up new hierarchies—that is, that reading for emasculation and intersectionalities is superior to my current methods and me—not to genuine inquiry, at least not at first. I was too embarrassed at where I found myself.

What if we framed our “envies” the way we’ve learned to frame prejudices (and of course envy is a form of positive prejudice)? That is to say, what if we acknowledged more quickly that we had such feelings and then moved with alacrity to decisions about how we planned to act or not act on them? In the case of my readings of Fetterley and Morrison, I needed to realize these older sisters were not showing off, they were showing the way. They’d made that (missing) road map for me, and I could try to follow it and be grateful. I’m wondering, too, what would happen if we used envy as an additional method to understand our dependencies. I’m thinking about bridge-building between Susan Fraiman’s argument from Haraway about recognizing dependence on bodies other than our own as a fundamental aspect of our creaturely lives to Suzanne Keen’s discussion of “amae” as the comforting feeling of attachment and belonging. In other words, what if we used (individualis-
tic) envious urges (I don’t have x and she does) as a way to query ourselves about possible need for and acceptance of new (social) attachments or alliances (maybe I need to tell her I need x, maybe it’s okay for me to depend on her for x, and maybe she will share x or show me the way to it)? Letting go of expertise as the (sole) core of our identities and allowing ourselves to be more dependent on each other, in our intellectual pursuits as well as in our creaturely lives, might constitute other afterwards. Which brings me to the third cue I’m trying to take from Bambara.

**Working in Alliance**

We need alliances, but which ones and how to make them? What are the issues that will lead us to our future allies? Or, rather, if the point about dependencies above is correct, we’ll make alliances for sure, so: which issues will lead which of us to which allies? This volume itself is of course an investigation into and an experiment with alliances: queer and feminist, feminist and queer narratologists talking to each other—or not . . . To take it one step further and to paraphrase a question of Susan Lanser’s, could narratology matter to scholars who don’t practice it as its own end? Could it ever matter to nonscholars?

Having spent a fair amount of my professional life thinking about the differences between oral and literate cultures, I’m always astounded anew by the linearity of print. I mention that in this context because when I think back to the conference that preceded this book, I immediately re-experience a din, a joyous if not delirious, multidirectional, multivoiced set of animated conversations. Threads were spun not only by actual talks and the discussions that followed, but also by the murmured or scribbled side comments during the talks, the formal responses, and most especially the facial expressions, glances, and bodily gestures of scores of participants. It seemed so eerily quiet in my study as I was reading through the first draft of this manuscript.

To be sure, even in print, everyone who writes here argues and confers with interlocutors. Yet the “silence” I was registering weighed on me nonetheless. The monovocalism seemed louder due to the echoes and images from the conference in my head. I longed to develop some new charts, more complex than even the most inclusive diagrams about narrative communications’ senders, messages, and receivers; narrators, texts, and narratees. I wanted to map all that oral, visual, and written messaging that had been zooming around the conference room and that I could still feel in my bodily memory. I couldn’t quite figure out how to do it and, besides, charting the past din felt
slightly less urgent as I found myself desiring and even staging conversations between the essays in the volume before me. I wanted to overhear Fraiman and Kay Young debating the usefulness of neuroscience to narratologists, Frederick Aldama and Judith Roof of systems theory; Friedman and Lan- ser (and half the other contributors) on redefining intersectionalities; Keen, Peggy Phelan, and Robyn Warhol on using autobiographical anecdotes in academic writing; Hillary Chute and Phelan comparing notes on intergenerational autolove (Eve Sedgwick and Phoebe Gloeckner); Alison Booth and Roof on gallant ladies, carnal misdemeanors, and bawdy overtones; Wendy Moffat, Paul Morrison, and Valerie Rohy tussling about gay icons. I wanted Jesse Matz to take up empathy with Sue J. Kim and Keen.

Most of all, I wanted the whole crowd to pause, stare at each other, and start vigorously interrogating themselves—and me and us—about allegiances across cultures besides feminist and queer ones. To paraphrase Kim: “Can North American academia ever stop being so Anglocentric?” I almost screamed aloud at regular intervals. Some parts of the conversations I’d been imagining were realized through the addition of the “Commentaries” section and the airing of even more voices, those of Abby Coykendall, Joe Ponce, Claudia Breger, Ellen Peel, and Shalyn Claggett. Creating even more chatter or wagering answers to my insistent question about Anglocentrism could become other afterwards to this endeavor.

Let’s imagine together a few more. As I write this afterword, the “afterward” of the textile factory collapse in Bangladesh has been announced as more than one thousand dead. Rios Montt has been convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity in Guatemala, but Rodriguez Sanchez, his intelligence chief, was acquitted, and Perez Molina as the current president enjoys immunity from prosecution. The Indian government, police, and justice systems flounder in stemming gang rape of the most vulnerable victims. GLBTQ youth continue to commit suicide across the world at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts. The ocean rises ever higher on Fiji. The only trees remaining in Malawi are those growing on traditional burial lands. By the time you read this, you might need to switch out some place names, but the crimes, tragedies, and impending disasters are likely to be similar.

Which of these issues will mobilize which groups to try which tactics to address them? What will we need to learn to take effective action? With whom will we narratologists tell new stories? Which idioms will facilitate the creation of those stories? Will our theorizing about those stories impede or facilitate new alliances? Will we be able to “take the narrow out of narratology,” as Greta Olson has urged us to do recently, and notice how our spe-
cialized terminology might be reproducing ideological biases of our wider
culture, as Olson herself has done by exposing the gendered, classist, and rac-
ist assumptions behind the idea of “unreliability”?  

It would be against the spirit of openness of the kinds of afterwards I’m
hinting at to try to tie up all these questions posed with one more story. How-
ever, in the concomitant spirit of not letting myself off the hook, I offer the
following anecdote from my own recent work, that I hope reflects the perme-
ability of life as lived, stories, and theorizing about stories in the context of
hierarchies, envies and alliances.

In the wake of the appearance of Art Spiegelman’s genre-breaking Maus,
numerous memoirlike texts have been offered by the offspring of Holocaust
survivors. 4 I got interested in these texts partly due to my work on testimony
of Holocaust survivors, partly through my association with Marianne Hirsch
and her concept of postmemory, 5 and partly because of my own family’s
complicated connection to the tragedies of mid-twentieth-century Europe.
In reading what I have since proposed we call “Holocaust family memoirs”
because of their generational structure, 6 I found myself experiencing all kinds
of confusing emotions including jealousy, despair, incredulity. How did those
kids get their parents to talk about their pasts? How were they able to pro-
duce coherent narratives of their traumas? I was suspicious, but I decided I
couldn’t really critique these memoirs in print until I had made yet another
try at investigating my own family history. While that challenge led to a
very satisfying intellectual and emotional process that included producing a
“paramemoir” with some interesting data to support theories like the critical
influence of the gender of the narratee on choice of stories that get told within
families, 7 what I want to emphasize here is how my original negative, critical,

3. Presentation at ISSN annual conference held at Manchester Metropolitan University, 28
June 2013.

4. Panels of Maus started appearing in 1973, and a two-volume version was published in
1991 (New York: Pantheon). Some other examples include Lisa Appignanesi, Losing the Dead:
A Family Memoir (London: Chatto & Windus / Random House, 1999); Helen Epstein, Where
She Came From: A Daughter’s Search for Her Mother’s History (Boston and New York: Little,
Brown, 1997); Helen Fremont, After Long Silence: A Memoir (New York: Dell / Random House,
1999); Anne Karpf, The War After: Living with the Holocaust (London: Minerva / Random
Martin’s, 1999).

5. Hirsch first developed the concept “postmemory” as part of her analysis of the pho-
tographs in Spiegelman’s Maus and tied it to the concept of families (see Hirsch 22). In a vol-
ume that she and I edited together, she defines the term more broadly as “an intersubjective
transgenerational space of remembrance, linked to cultural or collective trauma which is not
strictly based on identity or on familial connection” (Hirsch and Kacandes 14).

6. See Kacandes, “‘When Facts Are Scarce.’”

unproductive affective response eventually led me back to others’ memoirs with different questions on my mind. These concerned paratextual and textual strategies of the authors to authenticate the stories of their parents’ lives that for many valid historical reasons related to surviving persecution left little documentation of the type biographers would normally use to recreate personal narratives.8

As I was doing this work, these types of memoirs and the idea of postmemory were coming under attack from various individuals inside and outside of academia. Charges of “identity theft”9 and of claiming someone else’s memories as one’s own (Weissman 16–17) can only be made, I realized, when a reader fails to appreciate that anchoring parents’ stories in “real” history is partially accomplished by foregrounding how that history made itself felt in the offspring-authors’ own lived experiences. For this reason, in addition to propagating the subgenre of “Holocaust family memoir,” I proposed the concept of “autobiography once removed” as a useful framework for reading certain passages in the texts in my corpus.10 To explain briefly, I located numerous instances where an event in the parent’s life that could not be authenticated in a standard way (that is, by documents like arrest warrants, letters, diary entries, etc.) was narrated rather in terms of how the memoirist herself came to know about the event (e.g., my father told me). By virtue of being narrated in the first-person of the offspring-memoirist, such an event comes under Lejeune’s autobiographical pact and thus requires on some level no further authentication (4–5).

In the terms of the discussion here, it seems to me that another way to describe this phenomenon is to consider it as a productive act of alliance on the part of the offspring-memoirist with the parent-biographical subject. Readers become part of that alliance when they accept that the “I”-author-narrator-protagonist is telling the truth as best she knows it. Critics, too,

8. The record-keeping-obsessed Nazis put enormous effort into erasing their own criminal trail, especially once it was clear that they were not going to win the war. Thus, documenting certain aspects of the Holocaust has been notoriously difficult. A second and related point is that many Holocaust family memoirs try to trace lives that were preserved precisely through targeted individuals’ success in hiding or erasing signs of their (Jewish) existence. Not only generally chaotic circumstances or perpetrators’ desire to save themselves from postwar retribution, then, but also survival strategies deployed by the subjects of these texts during the persecution may have been responsible for destroying documents that the offspring of the victims will later search for in vain.


could become part of the alliance if instead of accusing the offspring of trying to steal their parents’ identities, or claim that their own experiences are “just as valid,” those critics would recognize such narrative moves as ways of engaging precisely our imaginations and our ethical commitments to come to knowledge of what the persecuted experienced and how they felt about it. It seems to me—though I have yet to do the research to prove it—that there is a good chance autobiography once removed or strategies similar to it might be mobilized in any range of texts where one group is trying to bear witness for another. Perhaps in relation to historical and geographical contexts other than the Holocaust, these moves are also being misapprehended as appropriative rather than being identified as solidarist. Pointing that out could be another task of our afterward.

An Afterword / Afterward to the Afterword

I’m not really privy to how they felt about each other, but I note in closing that after Toni Cade Bambara’s death from colon cancer at age 56 in December 1995, Toni Morrison oversaw the publication of various short texts by Bambara under the title Deep Sightings & Rescue Missions: Fictions, Essays and Conversations (1996), as well as of Bambara’s posthumous novel Those Bones Are Not My Child (1999). Solidarity in deed.

Works Cited


