

Jan Rupp

Unbound and Rebound: New Perspectives in Feminist and Queer Narrative Theory

- Robyn Warhol/Susan S. Lanser (eds.), *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press 2015. X, 398 pp. [Preis: EUR 83,50]. ISBN: 978-0-8142-1280-6.

As **Robyn Warhol** and **Susan S. Lanser** explain in the introduction to their co-edited volume, its title including »a term of Promethean audacity« is in reference to »a field that is no stranger to derivations from the Greek« (1). Yet, paradoxically, part of what feminist and, more recently, queer approaches have been up against is precisely narratology's structuralist legacy of a formalist, ahistorical and frequently Greek-inflected inventory of terms and distinctions. What is more, the field's male and masculinist outlook in terms of founding representatives and concepts, as well as possible heteronormative connotations of narrative as a forward-driven phenomenon putatively in line with a reproductive imperative do not exactly add to making narrative theory a likely candidate for feminist and queer appropriation. In any case, the mythological metaphor in the present volume's title underscores the titanic measure of the task at hand. It is taken up by an interdisciplinary group of US-based scholars working with narrative, feminist and/or queer theory, who met for a Project Narrative Symposium organized by Warhol in 2011 and whose contributions are gathered in the collection under review.

One of the major strengths of *Narrative Theory Unbound* is that it succeeds in preserving, as much as possible, the lively, multivoiced and also conflicting discussions of the original symposium. Fifteen full-length essays are arranged in four large sections, with another set of five shorter response essays called »commentaries« coming in the volume's fifth part, which in turn is followed by a concluding afterword. The commentaries review closely the preceding contributions and draw or highlight connections, maintaining a sense of the dynamic, back-and-forth character of oral debate and conversation, which is complemented by frequent cross-references within and between the longer essays. Because of the linearity of print, the result is not quite a »hypertext« (16), as Warhol and Lanser suggest might be fitting, but the volume is not a streamlined, let alone definitive account, either. It deliberately chooses open-endedness over closure and strict teleology, and as an academic publication productively enacts qualities which feminist and queer critics have found to be underrepresented in the study of narrative.

This quasi hypertext provides an undogmatic and flexible framework in which to take stock of past achievements and sound out future prospects of queer and feminist narrative theory. Given the proliferation and marketability of cultural and context-sensitive, so-called »postclassical« narratologies over the past few decades, such a collaborative, volume-long consideration seems almost overdue. Feminist approaches are rightly credited with pioneering contextualizing readings of narrative by building cultural aspects like sex and gender into the formalist analyses of »classical« structuralist narratology. Lanser's and Warhol's own individual work in formative articles and monographs from the 1980s onwards is frequently invoked in the pages of *Narrative Theory Unbound*. However, this is the first collection of feminist narrative criticism

in almost twenty years, as the editors point out, and the first-ever collection of queer narrative theory.

Generally, the essays gathered are written in a spirit of »exhortation over celebration« (40), to borrow a phrase from Lanser's contribution »Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology«. To be sure, celebration plays a big part as well, not least by dint of many personal anecdotes which lend the book an air of collective memoir, of a field in which the lines between academia and activism are characteristically blurred. As for exhortation, the essays can be seen to delineate and already practice one or several of four major directions of future research in combination: a continued or renewed interest in form and the critical apparatus of narratology; a concern with intersectionality theory; a call for extending canons of texts against which queer and feminist readings have been tested; and inclusion of non-literary and non-fictional narratives as well as interdisciplinary projects.

While the four directions or foci of this research agenda do not square neatly with the volume's four main sections, in fact often cut across them, including the fifth section of commentaries, the case for »more« narratology is arguably most pronounced in Lanser's programmatic essay, which opens the volume's first section »Narrative Discourse Unbound«. In it, she reemphasizes the role of narrative form as cultural content and raises the question, among others, whether free indirect discourse might be revalued as a particular formal strategy employed by writers like Henry James, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield in their capacity as »queer(ish) folk as well as modernists« (31). The other essays in the volume's first section are similarly invested in aspects of form. In »Out of the Bind: From Structure to System in Popular Narratives«, **Judith Roof** analyses a wide range of remakes of »Little Red Riding Hood«, arguing that these and the gender concepts inscribed in the fairy-tale are not reducible to an underlying structural pattern of binary elements, but the result of narrative as a multiply recombinant system which »offers conceptual tools for revising the impasses of gender inequality« (57). In »Giving an Account of Themselves: Metanarration and the Structure of Address in *The Office* and *The Real Housewives*«, Robyn Warhol details how by using metanarration and a different camera-mediated form of address, which directly involves the audience, the former show manages to convey gendered subjectivity in a way that paradoxically feels more »real« than in the latter. **Peggy Phelan**, in her essay »Hypothetical Focalization and Queer Grief«, turns to this term coined by David Herman for a type of focalization entertained as conceivable but not realized in a given text, suggesting that it »seems particularly valuable for reading queer autobiographies« in which »a hypothetical perspective about sexuality becomes a requisite one for the narrator« (83).

The essays in the second section, »Intersectional Narrative Theories«, all enrich feminist and queer readings by correlating sex and gender, and accommodating their intersections, with additional identity categories such as race, class, and region. Religion, as another important but so far little studied factor is added in **Susan Stanford Friedman's** instructive genre-mapping discussion of the female Muslim *bildungsroman* in »Religion, Intersectionality, and Queer/Feminist Narrative Theory: The *Bildungsromane* of Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, and Randa Jarrar«. Drawing on her complex previous work on narrative empathy, **Suzanne Keen** combines intersectionality with a promising interdisciplinary perspective for queer and feminist approaches in »Intersectional Narratology in the Study of Narrative Empathy«. **Sue J. Kim** pursues similar questions in »Empathy and 1970s Novels by Third World Women«, while again bringing aspects of race, class, and location into the picture. Taken together, the three essays offer a welcome and much-needed complication of queer and feminist analyses in and of the West, importantly also by turning to new bodies of texts.

In »Lifewriting, Gender, Sex«, the collection's third section, the value of new canons, including non-fictional and non-literary narratives, as well as of interdisciplinary collaboration is further demonstrated. In »Screenshots in the *Longue Durée*: Feminist Narratology, Digital Humanities, and Collective Biographies of Women«, **Alison Booth** presents a project on identifying patterns in a database of nineteenth- and twentieth-century short biographies of famous women. Her essay offers a point of convergence with Lanser's interest in empirical methods such as Franco Moretti's concept of ›distant reading‹, for the possibility it might offer to trace feminist- and queer-inflected narrative forms across a wider geographical and temporal space. In »The Space of Graphic Narrative: Mapping Bodies, Feminism, and Form«, **Hillary Chute** adds a topical genre to the debate and explores its autobiographical potential for women writers and for feminist criticism. The remaining two essays in this section attend to queer lifewriting. Both »The Narrative Case for Queer Biography« by **Wendy Moffat**, author of a biography of E.M. Forster, and **Jesse Matz** in his »›No Future‹ vs. ›It Gets Better‹: Queer Prospects for Narrative Temporality« document but also modify existing scepticism against temporality and teleological narrative in queer theory.

In »Emplotment, or the Shapes of Stories«, section four of *Narrative Theory Unbound*, the first two essays explore topics related to queer lives and life stories, with **Paul Morrison** and **Valerie Rohy** reading two classics of the queer literary corpus in »*Maurice*, or Coming Out Straight« and »Strange Influence: Queer Etiology in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*« respectively. By contrast, the other two contributions in this section turn to somewhat different narratives and disciplines. Thus, in her essay, **Susan Fraiman** looks at »Gendered Narratives in Animal Studies«, while **Kay Young** engages with stories told by neuroscientists about sex, gender and the brain in »Sex–Text–Cortex«. Specifically, Young rejects »narratives which define us in terms of a crude biological determinism« (316), and highlights the ways in which these construct notions of gender identity and sexual orientation, rather than presenting scientific facts.

Tellingly entitled »Challenges: Un/doing Narrative Theory«, the book's fifth section assembles five commentaries by **Abby Coykendall**, **Martin Joseph Ponce**, **Claudia Breger**, **Ellen Peel** and **Shalyn Claggett**. It is worth singling out two of the more provocative voices, which underline the collection's deliberately provisional character, hinted at by Warhol and Lanser at the end of their introduction: »our story is not likely to come to closure any time soon« (19). In the commentaries, this goes for discussions around individual essays as well as for notes of warning about the volume's project at large. Thus, in »Towards a Queer Feminism; Or, Feminist Theories and/as Queer Narrative Studies«, Coykendall suspects lingering hierarchies and orders of precedence in which the debate is framed. With a view to paratexts such as the collection's title she points out a »tacit primacy granted to narrative theory over either feminist or queer theory« and warns against treating the latter »as derivations of the historically phallogocentric institution of narratology« (326). She also prefers »narrative studies« as a more flexible and interdisciplinary rubric over the »exclusionary legacy of an ›ology« (332). In his »Queer/Feminist/Narrative: On the Limits of Reciprocal Engagement«, Ponce expresses similar reservations when he objects to »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)« (335). Moreover, he is sceptical of the supposedly easy intersectional alliance between feminist or queer and ethnic studies, observing that »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« (337–338).

No doubt a landmark publication, it is to the credit of *Narrative Theory Unbound* that it accommodates constructive dissent on precisely how to unbind narrative theory, or whether at all, and on how to tie narratology or narrative studies to feminist and queer concerns in turn.

This Promethean task is positively unfinished and ongoing, but the present volume covers some crucial new ground and will be indispensable reading for scholars working in the fields of narratology, queer and feminist studies. The articles collected significantly expand extant studies of narrative form from the perspective of gender and sexuality, and they combine their analyses in novel ways with interdisciplinary and contextualist approaches from areas as diverse as the digital humanities, neuronarrative research, intersectionality theory, and postcolonial studies. Whether and how these lines of enquiry will be taken up will also depend on greater resonance with mainstream narratological debates in a situation where recent anthologies have given only little room to issues of sex and gender, as Coykendall laments, pointing to a larger »ongoing devaluation of feminist and queer studies« (328). Another open question, highlighted by **Irene Kancendes** in her afterword, concerns the »Anglocentrism« (367) of North American academia. This is a question of canons and texts as well as of which scholarly communities select, read and discuss them with which other communities. For the time being, the present collection is a tribute to the intellectual and institutional context it is facilitated by, while it might also be culturally specific to it.

PD Dr. Jan Rupp
Universität Heidelberg
Anglistisches Seminar

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