Book Review

Queer and Feminist Theories of Narrative. Tory Young. Routledge, 2021. ISBN: 9780367681098, 120pp.

A queer intervention into the study of narrative is long overdue. Despite the rise of feminist narratology in the late-1980s, its contributions have been partially subsumed into broader traditions of narrative research and otherwise neglected in favour of new methodologies. Originally published as a special issue of *Textual Practice* in 2018, this book argues for the centring of queer and feminist perspectives in narrative theory. *Queer and Feminist Theories of Narrative* reframes narratology as a site of entanglement where narrative voice is always shaping and being shaped by concepts of gender and sexuality. Profoundly interdisciplinary in scope and approach, the book proposes an urgent intersectional disruption of contemporary narratology.

It is fitting that *Queer and Feminist Theories* begins with Susan S. Lanser's invitation to explore the queer possibilities of narrative voice. Considered the 'founder' of feminist narratology, Lanser's foundational work provides the crucible in which these queer and feminist theories intermingle and the catalyst for their explosion. Each contributor returns to feminist formulations of narrative voice as 'a site of ideological tension' (Lanser, 5), expanding narratology's scope to consider the gendered and sexual contexts in which narratives are composed and received. Scholars undertake an eclectic queering of narrative theory by spotlighting: issues

of visibility and power, representations of lesbian desire in popular media, the queer narrative voice, embodiment in cognitive poetics, and the (mis)reading of racial codes.

In 'Queering Narrative Voice', the first chapter of this collection, Lanser responds to her 1987 paper 'Towards a Feminist Poetics of Narrative Voice' and re-defines herself as a 'queer-invested scholar' (6). She begins with an overview of the three forms of the 'queer' narrative voice: 1) a queer-identifying narrator, by virtue of sex, gender or sexuality; 2) a textually ambiguous voice that subverts the conventions of sex, gender or sexuality; or 3) a voice that, in multiple ways, defies our impulse to categorise it. The nuances of this third 'queering' will unfurl across the work of her fellow contributors.

The chapter 'Queering Narrative Voice' draws on all three of the above connotations to trouble an assumption crystallised into 'Lanser's rule': that the binary of gender inevitably shapes writerly and readerly engagement with narrative voice. In an engaging admission of her own heteronormative perspective, Lanser explains how she – and feminist narratology more broadly – resisted the queer possibilities of ambiguous narratives. Rather than a deductive approach to gender and sexuality, Lanser argues for textual practices that uncover queerness in the inherent instability of narrative voice. Reframing free indirect discourse as a queer technique, for example, highlights moments of slippage from one voice to the next as intentional rejections of singularity or even duality. Such revisions of theory are fundamental in promoting a queer *and* feminist textual practice that celebrate the power of subversive narrative acts – ones that narratology has historically sought to resolve.

Chapter two further destabilises Lanser's early research. In 'Rethinking the Subject in Feminist Research', Maria Tamboukou departs from 'the death of the subject' within feminist narratology and 'the death of the author' within poststructuralism. Departing from these 'deaths' Tamboukou recovers Désirée Véret-Gay, a French socialist feminist, from the margins of the historical archive (30). To piece together Véret-Gay's life from fragments of her political writings, Tamboukou develops the 'narrative persona': an interlocuter between the narratological historian and her research; a figure embodied as a

historical subject but also embedded in historical subjectivity (32). Tamboukou's intervention is feminist in its focus and methodology and defies the textual regulation of identity and expands the scope of narrative studies to include women's auto/biographical narratives. In her concept of the 'narrative persona,' which transgresses the boundaries of concept and aesthetic, philosophy and art, Tamboukou provides an innovative impetus for more critical work tracing feminist genealogies through epistolatory narratives.

Expanding the feminist project in the opposite temporal direction, chapter three, '"We Fuck and Friends Don't Fuck"', investigates queer narratives in *Faking It*. The MTV sitcom's subversive treatment of the 'BFF epithet' makes a persuasive case for the rich narratological potential of banal contemporary media. Amy and Karma are best friends misrecognised as a lesbian couple, reversing the still normative masking of same-sex female desire as 'close friendship' (36). Sam McBean's analysis challenges received perceptions of queer (in)visibility and coherent sexualities, but her most significant contribution uncovers a 'queer chronology' (41) that has infiltrated popular culture. The disruption of conventional narrative structures in *Faking It*; crucially, Amy publicly coming out before self-identifying as a lesbian, effectively popularises a substantial body of queer theory about the temporality of sexuality. Popular culture, McBean's reading suggests, is lucrative ground for the queering of narrative chronologies and feminist narratology would be remiss to neglect it (49).

In chapter four, Karin Kukkonen considers the potential of a cognitive approach to queer feminist narratology. 'A Moving Target' approaches the issue of embodiment in Hillary Mantel's *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* and anticipates new perspectives in feminist narratology enabled by the so-called 'cognitive turn' (64). The story's varied embodiments of the former Prime Minister, Kukkonnen argues, enable the collision of cognitive and cultural aspects of narrative. Her analysis reveals literature's inherent capability to engage readers in complex interactions of narration, body images and schemata, and metaphorical language. In addressing a longstanding neglect of interdisciplinary feminist and cognitive narrative study, Kukkonen's 'embodied feminist

narratology' (66) is a significant development that models readers' cognitive-embodied immersion in fictional worlds.

Chapter five returns to questions of representation and power, offering a nuanced timely perspective on unmarked and unnarratable identity. In 'Invisibility and Power in the Digital Age', Tory Young uses Ali Smith's highly experimental novel *How to be both* to propose a new formula for the queering of narrative space and time. Young's 'becoming-simultaneous of narrative sequence' (70) captures the chronological indeterminacy fundamental to Smith's novel, yet it also uses the text's palimpsestic composition to query notions of blank space (the 'unnarratable') and visibility (70). Extending Peggy Phelan's 1993 critique of visibility politics into the digital age, with its mantras of 'you can't be what you can't see', Young reveals feminist theory's ongoing failure to disturb 'the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility' (Phelan, 6). A new, empowered understanding of the 'unnarratable' emerges out of her analysis: 'you cannot always see what you can be' (Young, 82).

The 'unnarratable' is also a central concern for the final essay in this collection. Amy Shuman and Robyn Warhol bridge their respective disciplines –linguistic anthropology and pop-culture-centred literary criticism– through an intersectional feminist analysis of Toni Morrison's only short story, 'Recitatif'. For Morrison, 'Recitatif' is an 'experiment in the removal of all racial codes' from a narrative in which racial identity is nonetheless 'crucial' (Morrison, xi). While race in this story is 'unnarratable', the authors also illuminate the 'unreadable' in Morrison's inclusion of Maggie: a disabled character whose presence unsettles the reader's assumptions about silence and invisibility. Warhol and Shuman's literary-linguistic analysis is persuasive, yet far more significant is their demonstration of interdisciplinary narratology's productive capabilities. In this way, their intersectional feminist methodology also exemplifies the collaborative potential of intersectional feminist research.

It would take several volumes to demonstrate queer feminist narratology's potentiality, but this collection offers an exciting and accessible glimpse at its rapidly broadening scope. In outlining

trajectories into historical archives and popular media, representation and embodiment, the unnarratable and the unreadable, these authors make a compelling case for gender- and sexuality-centred narratology. Their most engaging arguments, however, emerge where disciplines, methodologies and ideologies intersect. While *Queer and Feminist Theories of Narrative* showcases the myriad possibilities of its (re-)emerging field, perhaps researchers joining its ranks should ignore its introductory calls for a 'distinct identity' (Young ix). Feminist narratology, after all, is at its most 'queer' when it resists determinacy and explodes definitions – including its own.

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