

QUEER AND FEMINIST NARRATIVE THEORIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBYN WARHOL

Margarida McMurry
University of Birmingham

Virginia Pignagnoli
University of Zaragoza

This special issue collects articles that reflect on how the effects of the cultural changes the sixties have produced are still relevant fifty years later. Is there a critical text from that period that has been foundational in forming your critical thinking as feminist narratologist?

It wasn't published until 1970, but because the work emerged in the previous decade I would cite Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* as an important 1960s influence on feminist literary criticism in general and feminist narratology in particular. With Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), it was one of the first works of literary criticism to consider the role gender plays in the production, reception, and interpretation of texts, and its appearance helped inspire the revival of Woolf and de Beauvoir in the 1970s. Millett takes on male authors whose novels were considered classics or classics-to-be in the 1960s: D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet. These authors were also, as Millett demonstrates conclusively, profoundly sexist. Each of them is evidently unable to represent a female subject who is not merely an object or projection of a misogynistic consciousness. Her critical readings go beyond the question "Is this novel good?" to address the more pressing issue of "Whom is this novel good for? Who benefits from the worldview it perpetuates?" By modeling a feminist critical position attuned to gendered representation and gender-inflected reading practices, Millett gave us the kind of culturally situated analysis that is one of feminist narratology's main goals.

Over the last forty years, Queer and Feminist interventions helped narratology to widen its scope and priorities. Where, in your opinion, are further interventions most needed to help narrative theory maintain its relevance in the field of literary studies?

Almost as big a concern today as it was 25 years ago is the relative scarcity of scholars of color among those who explicitly practice narrative theory. Frederick Aldama has long been a pioneer in this respect, though I would describe the narrative theory he has developed as more universalizing than situated, and rising stars like Sue J. Kim, James Braxton Peterson,

and Christopher González bring much-needed perspectives on race to their contributions to the fields of contemporary fiction and comics. Many narrative theorists, including all the feminist narratologists I can think of, have focused our attention and our method on selected works by authors of color, but the narrative-theoretical canon is still predominantly white. I am embarrassed, after all these years, to look around at the 350-400 scholars who attend the annual International Conference on Narrative and to see so few non-white faces. The more fundamentally intersectional feminist narratology that scholars like Kim, Susan S. Lanser, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Suzanne Keen have been calling for is crucial, though I am fully aware that “intersectionality” is already considered a *passé* approach in many fields of feminist theory. These scholars and others have usefully shown what happens to narrative analysis when you understand that categories like race, religion, sexuality, class, and nationality are integral to what “gender” means. The challenge is to keep all these balls in the air while making descriptive statements about the workings of narrative and while doing close readings of individual narratives that test or extend the theory. One of the main assumptions of feminist narratology is that the author’s and reader’s identity positions will inevitably come into play in writing and reading novels. All the different valences of identity now have to be part of that analysis, most pressingly—in my opinion—racial difference. The more seriously we take this imperative, the less reflexively we posit “white” as an unmarked default in our analyses, the more relevant we will remain.

How has feminist narratology changed the way you read fiction?

This is hard to answer, since feminist narratology arose, in part, from the way I was reading fiction in the first place. I have long been fascinated—since the 19th-century British Novel class I took from Thomas Pinney my junior year in college—with the interaction between the author, narrator, implied reader, and reader of any novel. In college and graduate school I was taught that some novelists, like Thackeray and James, use that interaction brilliantly and deliberately while others, like Stowe and Gaskell, do it in an amateurish, sentimental way. I loved Thackeray and James, but Stowe and Gaskell moved me much more deeply, so as a student who had no authority to make literary value judgments, I wondered: if these novelists’ narratorial technique is so poorly executed, how can it be so effective? My dissertation never raised the issue of gender, following the example of my graduate school mentors like Ian Watt; instead, I made a taxonomy of different narrators’ stances *vis à vis* the reader without trying to place the novels in their mid-Victorian historical context. As I waded into new English translations of narratology to find the vocabulary that could describe the phenomena I was observing, I was perplexed by the 1960s structuralist insistence that fictional discourse had no referentiality. It seemed to me that my body’s reactions to emotions evoked by fiction were a clear sign that the text was not hermetically sealed off from the world. When I was revising my thesis into a book inspired by Barbara

Johnson's observation that there was a clear gender divide between the categories of authors I was identifying, I found inspiration in Joanna Russ's hilarious *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983) and in the work of Jane Tompkins, who had been an advocate of feminist reader-response criticism in the early 1980s, especially her *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* (1986). She asked more bluntly than other critics: Why are the norms of male critics and male novelists the standard for "good" fiction? Why should "complexity" be an inherently superior feature of literary writing? Why is fiction about women and women's concerns less "universal" than fiction about men? Tompkins freed me to say that the novelists whose narrators evoked the deepest reactions from me were simply doing something different from what their male contemporaries had set out to do, and they were doing it brilliantly. Today, after decades of historical research showing the systematic devaluation of women and women's works throughout Western history, it seems so obvious to say, "These novels were written by women, and that's the reason they were automatically considered to be 'minor' or 'substandard' works." We have learned since I was doing that work in the early 1980s that a critical double standard demonstrably disqualified women's writing from "greatness." What feminist narratology has allowed us to do is to get into the specifics of *how* feminine-gendered writers' novels have differed from their masculine peers', and to celebrate their projects within the historical and cultural context which produced them.

Has the general raising awareness of the public and publishing authors' conscious effort to address questions of power inequality between genders and gendered role-models, including moments like the Me Too movement, changed queer and feminist narratology? If so, in what way, if not, do you think it will in the future?

I am not sanguine about predicting any change in the power dynamics of gender, inside or outside the institution of literary criticism. This is a factor of my age and generation, and I hope my younger colleagues can disagree with me. After 35 years of feminist activism in the academy, I am thoroughly discouraged about the persistence of gender inequality. A study in 2013 from the TIAA Institute showed that one in ten faculty women, or 9%, were full professors, up just 3% since 1993. Around 1995 I had postcards printed up for distribution on my campus that said, "It will take **142 years** for women faculty to reach parity with men [in the United States] as full professors." Therefore, at the rate we have been going, it will now take something like 118 years for there to be the same number of female and male full professors in the U.S. Not in my lifetime, not in my son's lifetime, and maybe not—if he has children and the tenure system in U.S. higher education happens to survive for 118 years, which seems unlikely—in the lifetime of his daughters. The research that inspired the postcards was based on the rate of increase of women full professors from 1975 to 1988; shockingly, the rate has risen only slightly since then. And don't even get me started on the

lack of parity between white full professors and full professors of color. As for queer and feminist narratologies, I have been bemused by the way they are typically recognized and then bracketed off from the rest of narrative theory, as well as by how little influence our approach appears to have had on the practice of other narratologists. Putting gender aside for the moment, the situated or contextual approach is still distinctively associated with feminist and queer narratology, as historical and identity-based differences of author, reader, narrator, or narratee seem not to have not come into the center of any other kind of narratological inquiry. So, as someone who has dedicated a career to “raising awareness” of the power inequality between genders, I don’t see radical change coming any time soon.

Although not explicitly engaging with feminist approaches, in a recent work co-authored with Malcah Effron (2019), we try to articulate how the audience receives the narrative communication, that is, the nature of reader responses, in order to emphasize, among other things, how the different starting positions of different audience members—rhetorical or otherwise—shape both the storyworld and the actual world. As female scholars who have worked predominantly within the rhetorical approach to narrative, we wonder if attending to the audience side of the narrative communication in the way briefly described above could be a fruitful way to apply feminist and intersectional interventions. Would you agree?

Yes, I love the idea of shifting the focus of rhetorical narratology to what you call the different starting positions of different audience members. Just as reader-response theory was one of the inspirations for the first feminist narratologies, this new turn of rhetorical narrative theory toward a focus on the flesh-and-blood reader will be a very positive development. The more we can link narratives to the historical circumstances of their production and reception, the more deeply we will understand how narrative structures vary, given their historical, political, and cultural purposes. And more significantly, we will better understand the cultural work that narrative does. Since history, politics, and culture are always inflected by the multiple identity positions of those who live them and those who create and receive representations of them, this situated approach can only be a good thing for rhetorical narratology.

There have been many developments in feminist and queer theory in recent years. Olson proposes that we have now moved beyond gender studies, but there seems to be many directions to go from here. Where do you place your work in feminist narratology in these recent developments and are there any paths you think are ‘dangerous’ for theorists to follow in the near future?

I’m not sure what it would mean to get beyond gender studies, especially if we understand a feminist approach as being thoroughly intersectional. I doubt that Greta had this in mind,

but to the extent that getting past gender would mean a return to generalizing something like “the human,” I think that would indeed be a dangerous path for any critical approach to follow. The old feminist objection to essentialism still holds for me. Any definition we can come up with for “female” or “woman” will exclude someone who identifies as such, in another culture if not in our own. Trying to define the “human” in connection with something as complex as the production or processing of narrative is even more impossible to do without defining many persons out. Everyone’s perspective matters, including—for example, people who are on the autism spectrum. Any approach that has to acknowledge exceptions to its conception of “the mind” is marginalizing some minds, and that’s not acceptable. Attending to difference—gendered difference among all the others—is as important now as it has ever been.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

De Beauvoir, Simone. 2012 (1949). *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage.

Effron, Malcah, McMurry, Margarida and Pignagnoli, Virginia. 2019. “Narrative Co-Construction: A Rhetorical Approach.” *Narrative* 27, no. 3, October:332-352.

Millett, Kate. 2016. *Sexual politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Olson, Greta, Horn-Schott, M., Hartley, D., & Schmidt, R. L. (Eds.). (2018). *Beyond Gender: An Advanced Introduction to Futures of Feminist and Sexuality Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

Russ, Joana. 2018 (1983). *How to suppress women’s writing*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Tompkins, Jane P. 1986. *Sensational designs: The cultural work of American fiction, 1790-1860*. Oxford: Oxford University Press on Demand.

Woolf, Virginia. 2014 (1929). *A Room of One’s Own*. In *The People, Place, and Space Reader*, edited by Giesecking, Jen Jack, Mangold, William, Katz, Cindy, Low, Setha, and Saegert, Susan, 338-342. London and New York: Routledge.

Margarida McMurry is a Teaching Fellow in Portuguese at the University of Birmingham. Her research focuses on how narrative establishes communicative relationships between authors and readers, between characters within novels and, more interestingly, between narrators and narrative/authorial audiences. In 2012, she was a Project Narrative visiting scholar at Ohio State University. Her latest publication is the article “Narrative Co-Construction: A Rhetorical Approach” (co-authored with Malcah Effron and Virginia Pignagnoli; *Narrative* 2019).

Virginia Pignagnoli is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Zaragoza, Spain, Department of English and German Philology. She published articles in *Narrative*, *Poetics Today*, *EJES*, *AJCN*, *CoSMo*, *RSA Journal* and she contributed to several edited volumes with essays on contemporary North-American fiction. She edited, with Lorenzo Costaguta, the Forum section “Teaching American Studies in Europe: Challenges and New Directions for the Twenty-First Century” (*RSA Journal* 2018) and, with Silvia Ulrich, *Open Literature. La cultura digitale negli studi letterari* (Università di Torino 2016). Her current monograph project is titled *Narrative Fiction in The Digital Age: A Rhetorical Approach*. In the past two

years (2017-2019), she served as co-chair for the Graduate Forum of the Italian Association of North-American Studies (AISNA).

Robyn Warhol is Arts & Sciences Distinguished Professor of English and Chair of the Department of English at Ohio State University, where she is a core faculty member of Project Narrative. Her most recent books are *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (co-edited with Susan S. Lanser, Ohio State University Press, 2015) and *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Narrative Theories* (co-edited with Zara Dinnen, Edinburgh University Press, 2018).