**Introduction: Futures for Feminist and Queer Narratology**

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In a survey of concepts and theories of narrative in 2000, Brian Richardson noted that ‘[t]he history of modern narrative theory is more accurately depicted as a cluster of contiguous histories rather than a single, comprehensive narrative’. He also reported that ‘Feminism … has (as should be expected) utterly and fruitfully transformed narrative theory and analysis.’[[1]](#endnote-1) Taken together, these claims suggest that feminist narratology, as it was formulated by Susan S. Lanser in 1986, had not developed as a distinct poetics, but rather that the influence of feminist principles and methodologies had been felt more widely across different strands of narrative theory and textual analysis.[[2]](#endnote-2) What is the evidence for this? Many of the new directions in modern theories of narrative, and in post-classical narratology in particular, are more attentive to context than their formalist predecessors, and some of these contextual interests emerge from feminist frameworks or issues in gender studies. There are very few monographs that openly identify with something called *feminist narratology* – Ruth Page’s 2006 *Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Feminist Narratology*[[3]](#endnote-3)is one – and many more feminist works that attend to the relationship between narrative structure and sexuality more generally, as Lanser herself acknowledged in her original essay, in the manner of Judith Roof’s 1996 *Come As You Are*.[[4]](#endnote-4) Is it then the case that feminist and gender-based narratological readings of texts have not so much been absorbed by different strands of narrative theory, but rather that narratological methods and issues have found their way into a broader tradition of feminist and intersectional reading? If so, does feminist narratology have a distinct identity at all, beyond being a contribution to, perhaps a slight sharpening of feminism’s analytical tools?

It can certainly appear, in the twenty-first century, that feminist narratology is still not regarded as a separate or distinct project in narratology as such. In 2011, Greta Olson’s *Current Trends in Narratology* makes no mention of feminism, gender or sexuality, instead describing three broad strands: cognitive, transmedial and nationally or historically-inflected narratologies.[[5]](#endnote-5) It would make no sense to suppose that feminism had not been a significant force in at least the last two of these categories, and much more sense to agree with Richardson that its influence and relevance is more diffuse. The call in transmedial narratology, for example, to apply existing typologies to new objects of study echoes one of Lanser’s demands from the start, that narratology should build its findings on a much broader and more diverse corpus of texts, which must expand as new narrative medias develop. At the same time the idea that gender-based narratology has been so successful that it has achieved a kind of invisibility is a cause for concern, and a tenet that is both pursued and questioned by the contributors to this special edition of *Textual Practice*.

Early objections to the idea of feminist narratology, as a kind of contamination of the neutral descriptive system of classical narratology by ideologically motivated analysis, have long been discounted. Nilli Diengott’s angry response to Lanser’s 1986 manifesto, for example, that feminism had no business with narratology, has been overruled by what has happened since 1988, and as Richardson described the situation in 2000; to her question of whether feminist critics can desist in the ‘attempt to appropriate to their feminist enterprise others of a totally different nature?’, we might want to answer that the difference has since been eroded or erased.[[6]](#endnote-6) That is to say, the slightly confusing language that has emerged in contemporary narrative theory, that named formalism and structuralism as the classical phase of narratology, also announced a broad postclassical epoch in which the founding assumptions of semiology were developed, challenged and rejected, and in this transition the precepts most obviously hostile to ideological critique or contextual study were systematically displaced. It no longer seems possible to regard narratology as a neutral linguistic science, nor to close the gates to the diaspora of approaches which considered the contexts of sexual difference, desire and psychoanalysis, race, history, and more recently queer theory, and cognitive or mind-based theories. Gerald Prince’s resistance to Lanser’s call for political contexts, his call for narratologists to resist ‘the interpretative temptation’ (which belongs to criticism not narratology), may be upheld in some determined branches, but all around them, others flourish in the new postclassical mix.[[7]](#endnote-7) Theories of narrative, like forms of narrative themselves, are permanently in flux, and accordingly, the formulation of feminist narratology by its named practitioners has dissembled into diverse queer and feminist theories of narrative. The development of feminist narratology is doing nothing other than shadowing the complicated and unplottable development of feminism at large, which was always factional, formed into a complex kind of academic unity in gender studies, forged new relationships and alliances with emerging areas such as queer theory and stands now as one vector in intersectional approaches. Many of the basic analytical problems of so-called classical narratology – the relationships between story and plot, narrator and author, the text and its analysis – are still present in this expanded narratological universe, but they tend to be addressed in very specific contexts and often at the expense of the global systems and master sciences that presided over narrative semiology in its classical phase.

Many of the trajectories of feminist literary theory and criticism are discernible in the history of feminist narratology, whether because feminism absorbed narratological methods or because narratology incorporated feminist perpectives. Some of the early calls for a narratology inflected or influenced by feminism were for a larger corpus of texts: a diversification in the object of study that would challenge, modify or deny ‘a universalizing model of narrative.’[[8]](#endnote-8) Sometimes the need for rudimentary feminist arguments for an increased attention to texts by women were compelling; Robyn Warhol found that only two of Prince’s eighty-plus examples in his ‘Introduction to the Study of the Narratee’ were drawn from female-authored texts. Sometimes these interventions would bring to light those elements of narrative which would be affected by a consideration of gender and which would not.[[9]](#endnote-9) Lanser thought that whilst ‘theories of plot and story may need to change substantially […] theories of time’ might not, a line of thought which has been interestingly reshaped by subsequent queer theorists including Lee Edelman, as Sam McBean points out in her essay in this volume, and which is also addressed by Maria Tamboukou’s ‘conceptualisation of narrative as force’.[[10]](#endnote-10) Using a letter from a nineteenth-century anthology which seems to utilise an unusual double construction to send a private message in a public missive, Lanser sought to demonstrate the importance of the rhetorical context of narrative in a way that broke new narratological ground. The rhetorical complexities of the letter presented, for Lanser, a range of analytical problems around its authenticity, its censorship and its status as a parody of the form, and enabled Lanser to open a new set of questions -about ‘narrative level, context and voice’ - for ‘the plot that may be generated by the relationship between the narrator and narratee.’[[11]](#endnote-11) These early developments, in other words, combined some of the old problematics of narrative structure and address with some a new question about the gender of voice to produce a different kind of encounter between narrative voice and its context, and a different kind of deployment of narratological tools. One of the problems in Lanser’s developing approach in *The Narrative Act* (1981)and *Fictions of Authority* (1992) was her identification of a narrator with a gendered human.[[12]](#endnote-12) In 2011, Robyn Warhol and Lanser held a symposium on queer and feminist interventions and in the collection that followed Lanser recasts this earlier problematic as she outlines her development from a feminist narratology to a queer one:

my own work on narrative voice has argued that the gender of an otherwise unmarked heterodiegetic (i.e., ‘third person’) narrator will derive from the gender of the textually inscribed author. So compelled was I to attribute gender to narrators that in some quarters that linkage came to be dubbed as ‘Lanser’s rule.’ I speculated, however, that the authority given to male voices might override that link in the case of a woman writer, in effect already queering my own proposition.[[13]](#endnote-13)

In the works that have self-identified as feminist narratology, Free Indirect Discourse (in which the voice of a character and the narrator are merged and the answers to the questions ‘who speaks?’ and ‘who sees?’ may be different) has been a central concept for this kind of argument: that the novel has always specialised in unidentifiable identities and undecidable voices, from long before such things were known, and perhaps in ways that were simply unknown, in the theory of gender and sexuality. Patricia Matson’s essay on Virginia Woolf’s textual politics, in Kathy Mezei’s 1996 collection *Ambiguous Discourse*, reads *Mrs Dalloway* in this light ‘as a novel that involves readers in a heterogeneous, exploratory, and spiralling process’, one which refuses the reader mastery by collapsing the binaries upon which conventional realism depends, dispersing focalisation, and frequently employing the word ‘it’ in long sentences which defer ‘its’ meaning.[[14]](#endnote-14) Here the imprecision or ambiguity of the pronoun allows the unspeakable to be spoken of. In this kind of approach to the imprecision of pronouns, we can see an articulation of problems also at work in contemporary thinking about a more widespread kind of pronoun use: the deliberate deployment (sometimes considered as grammatically ‘inaccurate’) of the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’ to refer to a single subject. In such cases, gender is not specified as part of a refusal of a binary-gendered identity, as if non-binary-gendered identities were linguistically known before they were accepted, a queer disruption to linear time examined by both McBean and Young in their essays in this edition.

Is the problem of depicting the gender fluidity, now attracting much media attention, already solved through the use of plural pronouns? It has been there all along but only now that we see it more widely in the world can we recognise it? Lanser is understandably cautious but suggests ‘putting to the narratological test D.A. Miller’s proposal that formal innovation may be the displaced project of queer fiction.’[[15]](#endnote-15) Lanser asks ‘Is it accidental, for example that Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, Marcel Proust, Colette, Nella Larsen, Djuna Barnes, Katharine Mansfield, and Gertrude Stein – and maybe James Joyce – were queer(ish) folk as well as modernists who pioneered the practice of FID?’. By asking this question, Lanser proposes a connection, perhaps an implicit affiliation, between an author’s sexuality and narrative form, following a kind of inductive method through which queerness is uncovered in texts rather than discovered deductively through a universal systemic framework.[[16]](#endnote-16)

In ‘Queering Narrative Voice’, Lanser returns to the question of narrative voice and the body, taking ‘up all three meanings of the verb “to queer”—to transgress normative sexualities, to dismantle sexual fixities, and to dismantle all fixities---to ask what we might gain by bringing any one of these to bear on fictional narrators.’ Her series of essays in gender and sexuality studies has always hoped for the emergence of first a feminist narratology, then a queer one but she finds in 2017 that the latter ‘remains underdeveloped’ and here argues against the fears of others, that a feminist and queer approach can be combined without loss to the ideological aims of either. At once recognizing the benefits of a fluid intermingling of these meanings of ‘queer’ for her status as a ‘queer-invested scholar’, here Lanser writes as a narratologist to see precisely how each is ‘constrained […] by its narrative environment.’ In seeking ‘to critique the pervasive practice of tautological reading, whereby queer author = queer narrator and to emphasize instead the value of asking how a queer narrative voice might be coded through formal practices’, Lanser acknowledges that she has to rethink the ‘assumption that has been deeply rooted in [her] formulations of a feminist narratology: that the gender of an author carries into the gender of an unmarked narrative voice.’ This reconsideration is taken up not only in her essay but those of Tamboukou and Kukkonen in this edition too.

It does not follow that the experimental text is forged by the queer body, nor that realism is a form which promotes hereonormativity, but rather that narratological perspectives might have some purchase on the relation between surface narrative features on one hand and the gendered body, particularly when supplemented by contextual or rhetorical frames. Back in 1988, Nicole Brossard stated that a ‘lesbian who does not reinvent the word is a lesbian in the process of disappearing’ but in this edition, we interrogate the alignment of authorial body with text.[[17]](#endnote-17) McBean challenges it through examination of the most banal of forms, an MTV sitcom. She shows how the BFF (Best Friends Forever) epithet, which seems to conceal same-sex relationships under a veneer of friendship, may actually enable queer narratives. McBean looks at MTV’s *Faking It* (2014-16), a sitcom in which two female high-school students, Amy and Karma, are misrecognised as lesbians, a reversal of the social-media trend in which celebrity women’s accounts were scoured for signs of friendship, which in fact masked sexual and romantic relationships. McBean connects ‘this contemporary erasure […] to a longer history that explores the textual invisibility of the lesbian.’ At the alternative school Amy and Karma attend, lesbian identity is a way of attaining status, so the two embrace rather than deny it, and the faking of their relationship leads to strong feelings of desire in Amy for Karma. McBean’s essay demonstrates that *Faking It* ‘in binding the lesbian story to a narrative of friendship, […] challenges a contemporary politics that refuses or resists friendship as only a ‘cover’ for lesbianism.’ McBean reconsiders the relationship between a coherent sexual or gender identity, power and visibility (as do Warhol, Shuman and Young in this issue). Her essay does so with recourse to the ‘substantial body of queer work that considers queerness a product of a relationship to temporality’, but crucially, brings the theory to the analysis of popular media. McBean shows that ‘*Faking It* offers a queerer chronology’; instead of being ‘born gay’ ‘Amy’s desire is awakened precisely because she fakes being a lesbian for her BFF.’ Linear chronology is disrupted, she argues, so that the conventional ‘coming out’ scene also involves a queering of the serial form where Amy and Karma worry ‘about how long the eventfulness of their relationship can be sustained.’

Warhol and Lanser are committed to ‘pluralist *bricolage*’ like ‘Franco Moretti’s maps, graphs, and trees’ or ‘Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of assemblages.’[[18]](#endnote-18) Their call, which shares the preference for plurality over the universal in the original call, turns to the body, not of the author, but of the reader;

And, too, after thirty years of dwelling on the politics of form, feminist and queer narrative theories may be ready to turn from poetics and hermeneutics to take on a politicized aesthetics, conceived perhaps as an erotics of narrative that would be focused on the reader’s body.[[19]](#endnote-19)

The focus on the reader’s body has an unexpected connection to another major strand in narrative research, however antithetical it might appear to a political queer or feminist narratology, namely the tendency outlined by Olsen towards a cognitive narratology. In a way that significantly departs from the orientations of classical narratologists, mind-based theories are contextual, transmedial and concerned with the processes and cues which inform interpretations. As Karin Kukkonen points out ‘Cognitive narratology does not traditionally consider gender perspectives […] because the gendering of brains into ‘male’ and ‘female’ is deeply problematic.’; so problematic in fact that *The Living Handbook of Narratology* claims even those ‘working on issues that fall within this domain do not necessarily identify their work as cognitive-narratological, and might even resist association with the approach.’[[20]](#endnote-20) In moving from the brain ‘to the larger connections between the brain, body and their situatedness in the world’, Kukkonen proposes new directions for feminist narratology that are actually enabled by the cognitive turn, and explores these possibilities through a compelling reading of Hilary Mantel’s short story ‘The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher.’ Kukkonen acknowledges that the contexts within which Mantel may be usually studied (as a ‘modern, British, female’ writer) are those which, for a cognitive narratologist, ‘tend to be side-lined in favour of seemingly neutral notions such as narrators, focalisers (or fictional minds), prototypical story scripts, as well as fictional worlds’. The bind of a feminist cognitive narratology, she argues, is that the recognition of gender at the cognitive level – if male and female brains are proposed as different – invites a charge of ‘neurosexism’, but if there is no difference then gender is not a pertinent aspect of enquiry. Kukkonen’s proposition employs ‘current perspectives on cognition as an embodied process of probability and prediction that connect easily to cultural modes of meaning-making’ and enters them ‘into a conversation with feminist narratology and feminist literary theory.’ In Mantel’s story, an assassin targeting Thatcher invades the flat of a curiously dispassionate narrator; the two figures (narrator and assassin) are not explicitly identified as a middle-class female and a working-class male but are figured as such through their language use alone. For Kukkonen, ‘[g]ender-oriented sociolinguistics […] and the embodied approach in cognitive linguistics are arguably compatible’ for the analysis of the scenario. She demonstrates how the narrator relates to Thatcher’s ‘body image’, the way she ‘dresses, presents and comports herself’, and the assassin ‘in counterdistinction, seems to focus on the way in which her body is experienced pre-consciously, that is, the “body schema” of Thatcher.’ This results in an exchange of embodied perspectives through which, according to Kukkonen, ‘Mantel develops a multi-layered image of sheaths of embodiment’ in her story.

Maria Tamboukou also considers someone who is ‘embodied as a historical subject that has actually intervened in the social, political and cultural formations of her geographies and times’ in order to develop the ‘figure of the *narrative persona*’. Despite this active engagement with nineteenth-century revolution, the papers of Désirée Véret-Gay, seamstress, labour activist and writer ‘who founded the first feminist newspaper *La Femme Libre*’ have not been gathered and her biography remains unwritten. Tamboukou introduces ‘the notion of the *narrative persona* as a mode of moving away from the post-structuralist “death of the author” without losing some very important insights that discourse analytics have offered in the field of feminist narratology.’ In this essay, Tamboukou looks not at Véret-Gay’s political writings but her passionate love letters to Enfantin, leader of the Saint-Simonian movement, and it is here that she ‘reconsiders the crucial link between time and narrative’; instead of building a picture of Véret-Gay through study of an archive (the *fond* is the French version) Tamboukou wants to know her in ‘”the here and now” of her epistolatory relationship with Enfantin. Taking her place in a tradition of feminist critics such as Nancy K. Miller and Gayatri Spivak who have incorporated autobiographical revelations into the critical act, Tamboukou asserts her own position ultimately reading her subject as ‘an interlocutor with me as a feminist researcher who reads and inserts Désirée’s narratives in the archives of feminist history.’ Using Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of radical immanence, focus on ‘moments of being’ does not mean that the story she develops of Véret-Gay’s *narrative persona* ‘represents the real essence or character of who Désirée really was […] but to point to the limitations of hers and indeed anybody’s personal and political narratives to convey the essence of who their author is.’ Tamboukou positions the figure of the *narrative persona* as a response to Lanser’s ‘purely textual’ narrator as one who is instead ‘both embodied and embedded as a historical subject’.

In my own essay, I read Ali Smith’s 2014 *How to be both* in order to reconsider the relationship between visibility and power in the digital age. Smith’s formal experimentation in this novel is extreme; it exists in two formats, chance determining whether the reader starts with a Part One set in 21st-century Cambridge or a Part One set in Renaissance Italy. I argue that Smith’s spatial presentation makes us see what is absent in her texts, and that blank spaces in particular can be seen as ways of staging questions of gender and invisibility. Much of Ali Smith’s novel can be seen (like its two interchangeable sections) as a refusal of sequence, or a spatialisation of time, such as the fresco at the novel’s centre, which renders the cycle of the months in a single moment. I propose a formula - a *becoming-simultaneous of narrative sequence* – which functions like Lanser’s indeterminate gender voices, to queer the distinction between space and time. The question of vision is central in this argument – of what can be seen and what is unmarked – and I propose that the novel links the question of what cannot be seen to the opacity or invisibility of the future more generally. It does this at the level of the graphic and visual surface of the text, and also in relation to grammatical structures, to develop a connection between power and invisibility which feminism can elucidate as a political power of possibility, of what you can see in relation to what you can become.

The ‘unmarked’ is also at work in the contributions of Robyn Warhol and Amy Shuman, both of whom identify as ‘feminist narratologists’, and here combine their different perspectives (Warhol from literary studies, Shuman from linguistic anthropology) to analyse a text which is racially ambiguous. Toni Morrison’s only short story ‘Recitatif’ is ‘an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial.’[[21]](#endnote-21) When they ‘combined Amy’s interactive, ethnographic method with Robyn’s literary, structural analysis … [they] … perceived an underlying logic in the story’ that neither would have discovered alone. As with my discussions of Smith’s fiction, Warhol and Shuman consider the power of prose narrative as a medium in which identity signifiers do not have to exist. Textual production of ambiguous markers, like the textually unmarked, upset social categories by involving readers in a recognition of the principles of their construction. Warhol and Shuman’s conclusion, that the ‘“insanity of racism” and the misprision of disability won’t be solved by sentimental reconciliations bridging the alterity between the African-American and the white, the not-yet-disabled and the disabled’ perfectly represents the impulse behind this edition, and of the theorists who have contributed to it, that writing is a form of social activism.

1. Brian Richardson, ‘Recent Concepts of Narrative and the Narratives of Narrative Theory’, *Style*,34.2 (2000), pp. 168-75, p. 168, p. 172. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Susan S. Lanser, ‘Toward a Feminist Narratology’, in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (eds.), *Feminisms: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), pp. 674-93. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ruth E. Page, *Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Feminist Narratology* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Judith Roof, *Come As You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Greta Olson (ed.), *Current Trends in Narratology* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Nilli Diengott, ‘Narratology and Feminism’, *Style*, 22.1 (1988), pp. 42-51, p. 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Gerald Prince, ‘On Narratology: Criteria, Corpus, Context’, *Narrative*, 3.1 (1995), pp. 73-84, p. 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (eds.), *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist* Interventions (Columbus, Ohio: University of Ohio Press, 2015), p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. As Prince himself noted in ‘On Narratology: Criteria, Corpus, Context’. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Lanser 1997, p. 676. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. p. 689. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Susan S. Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981); Susan S. Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Susan S. Lanser, ‘Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology’, in Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (eds.), *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist* Interventions (Columbus, Ohio: University of Ohio Press, 2015), pp. 23-42, p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Patricia Matson, ‘The Textual Politics of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*’, in Kathy Mezei (ed.), *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 162-86, p. 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Lanser 2015, p. 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Nicole Brossard, *The Aerial Letter*, trans. Marlene Wildeman (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Warhol and Lanser, p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/cognitive-narratology-revised-version-uploaded-22-september-2013> [Date accessed: 19 February 2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York, Vintage, 1992), p. xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)