

# My Narratology

## An Interview with Frederick Luis Aldama

*DIEGESIS*: What is your all-time favorite narratological study?

*Aldama*: That's easy. Seymour Chatman's 1978 published *Story and Discourse*: 10% nostalgia and 90% generative usefulness. His translation of Gérard Genette's core ideas along with his applications are the gift that keeps on giving.

Let me first explain the 10% nostalgic part of the equation. As an undergraduate at Berkeley in the late 1980s, I found my way to Chatman, literally and physically. On the campus, students spilled out of lecture halls, stretching necks to hear Avital Ronell. I'll be honest. When I tucked my head in for a second to hear an introductory lecture, wafts of fetid odors swiftly choked up my brain. I hurried down Dwinelle's hallways to find refuge. I found Chatman's classroom – and with lots of fresh air to breathe.

This leads me to that 90%. Chatman patiently ferried us handful of students through theorists like Genette, Booth, Barthes, and Todorov. He opened our eyes to the important findings in the narratological domain from Aristotle to the Russian Formalists. He carefully unpacked through textual application generative concepts like story-space and discourse-space. As his white-chalked fingers moved from left to right on the chalkboard, his carefully laid out formulations and algorithms took us on an exhilarating journey through the many shaping devices that give kinetic energy to all variety of narrative types: alphabetic (literature), visual and verbal (comic strips), and visual and auditory (film).

Chatman led me to reflect deeply on the tools – techniques, point of view shaping devices, worldview particulars and approaches – that gave each story (the event or sequence of events) its specific qualities, nature and shape. He revealed just how potently powerful and generative the discourse (master-shaper of story) is. I understood for the first time that while I apprehended given narrative fiction a gestaltic whole – story / discourse – that there are conceptual tools that would allow me to see story and discourse as discrete units that are brought together to generate meaning and represent experience. Indeed, this conceptual separation allowed me to see for the first time the incredible generative capacity of the discourse in its power to shape an infinite number of stories from a finite number of them – the awesome and resplendent narratives of all types (alphabetic, illustrated, filmic, comics, etc.) that make up our planet's story artifacts.

I couldn't get enough. I enrolled in more and more of his classes, teleporting concepts learned and approaches taken into my quickly developing deep

interest: US ethnic and postcolonial literature. The tools and concepts of narrative theory cracked wide open a way for me to move beyond character or thematic analyses. They allowed me to see how authors like Sandra Cisneros, John Edgar Wideman, and Salman Rushdie, to name but a few catching my eye at the time, gave shape to narratives that made new my perception, thought, and feeling about the world. They allowed me to better understand how authors construct all variety of signposts to guide and shape our co-construction of their narratively built storyworlds.

As I motored through undergrad then grad school, Genette via Chatman's story and discourse as the *sine qua non* of narrative fiction continued to play an important role in my scholarship. Indeed, it allowed me to push decisively away from a character- or theme-only analysis of representations in my studies of Latinx and postcolonial literature. This foundational story-discourse distinction was the springboard for the writing of a trilogy of theory books: *Postethnic Narrative Criticism* (2003), *Brown on Brown* (2005), and *A User's Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderland Fiction* (2009).

In these theory books and those that I've written since, I've been able to further clarify, refine, and formulate an arguably more capacious understanding of this conceptual apparatus as it determines the generative operator of the discourse: discourse as the collected shaping devices that shape and give its specificity to each story. Authors select their narrative devices, such as focalization or free indirect discourse, and so forth, for specific purposes dictated by the narrative they have in mind and more largely by the aesthetic aims they wish to achieve.

Indeed, all the devices analyzed by Genette via Chatman, among others (Cohn, Prince, Lanser, and so on who have been adding to the periodic table of shaping devices), are inscribed within the very general category of what I have formulated as the *will to style* and the large domain of the *discourse operator* with its abundance of generative properties: free indirect discourse, discordant narration, psychonarration, and all else that make up the periodic table of narrative elements. The generative operator of the discourse concept reminds us that the story as such is essentially a material means to an aesthetic end. What matters is how the sequence of events are shaped and transformed by the discourse operator.

Most of what Borges wrote was based on this principle – he takes from anywhere, including his own expository essays, and applies this generative operator of discourse and creates something completely new and aesthetically pleasing. And, the concept of the will to style identifies a given creator's bringing a high (or low) degree of artistic skill in the application of the discourse operator (voice, point of view, temporal play, and so on) in the shaping of their respective narrative. The will-to-style concept also takes into account the degree of willfulness – sense of *responsibility* – to the distillation and reconstruction of the building blocks that make up the reality they choose to focus on. For instance, in a recently published piece – “Brownface Minstrelsy; or a Defense of our Freedom in the Art of Latinx Storytelling?” – I call out the author Jeanine

Cummins for not exercising even a modicum of a will to style in her use of the discourse operator in her fictional reconstruction of the building blocks of Mexican immigrant political, sociolinguistic, and cultural realities.

Directly or indirectly, in all of the forty-odd books that I've published, I bring to bear the discourse operator and will to style concepts. One way or another, these concepts inform all of my writing and teaching. They allow me to invite along and share a journey that can and does deepen understanding of the set of the shaping devices that creators use to different degrees of willfulness in the making of narratives that make new our perception, thought, and feeling.

Genette via Chatman: 10% nostalgia and 90% generative usefulness. It has provided the basis for my formulation of a unified theory of aesthetics that, in my opinion, now needs to incorporate in a systemic, organic manner the findings of neuroscience.

*DIEGESIS*: Which narrative would you like to take with you on a lonely island?

*Aldama*: The world of stories is in fact universal. Already in high-school the discipline was referred to as "universal literature" (as it is still called in many places) and some very learned and audacious teachers even dared to declare that all literature is "comparative literature." And this is so because the creation of stories and the ambition to make them ever more interesting and appealing to audiences of all sorts are activities so-to speak wired in our brains. I will not go into any detail here, but the creative and aesthetic aims are part and parcel of the most universal and deep biological traits of our human constitution, of what makes us human. All human societies from the most ancient past to the anxiety-ridden present have created and keep creating without pause the stories we need to preserve this aspect of our human nature.

So, no matter which narrative I would choose to take to a lonely island, such narrative would necessarily be only an addition to the innumerable stories I already carry in my brain and all the others I would of all necessity have to mentally create to satisfy my human storytelling craving.

But to indulge in an impossible answer to an impossible question, I would perhaps choose Homer's *Odyssey*. Almost each page is an adventure in itself, a story waiting to be told beyond its limits. But most importantly, this work of art is an encyclopedia of human emotions and behavior. It is also the first that shows the direct link between art and nature and human creative work. Very few other narratives have accomplished this particular feat. It is the subject matter of the moving chapter where Penelope demands proof of Odysseus' identity and he responds with a lovingly detailed story of how he built their bed as part of an olive tree together with the whole upper floor, making it impossible to move. The preliminary image of the goal to attain, the material means and instruments needed for that purpose, the planned stages (the logistics) of the work to be done, the will to style aiming at making an exceptional, unique





Figure 2: Excerpt 2 from *Labyrinths Borne*

*DIEGESIS*: Why narratology?

*Aldama*: I think I began to answer this question already just now. Let me add, however, that discovering narratology provided the conceptual tools for me during a time (late 1980s and 1990s) when there were many other competing pressures in the academy – especially in the study of Latinx literature and film. I knew that narratology would prove a robust, reliable, and knowledge generating travel companion during this time. I knew that it would provide the tools for me to deep-dive into questions I had about creativity such as: how we create fiction as Latinxs and as human beings generally.

For many years, narratology has been a discipline where discussions can lead to better analyses and to better findings. It has a cumulative effect that

allows one scholar to build on the work of another and to bring the objects of study to scrutiny under new objective and comparative perspectives. After the Russian Formalists, narratologists were the *rara avis* who took seriously the need to study the materiality of narratives from a universal, comparative viewpoint. In my opinion, for scholars and students all endeavors not based on scientific methods and findings were a waste of time.

For this reason, I also found my way to insights offered by the cognitive and neurosciences. Narratology provided essential insights into the systemic nature of shaping devices used to create narratives of all kinds, but I also wanted to find answers to questions related to our brain's evolved capacity to imagine stories, to then sculpt a story present in the mind according to an artistic aim, and finally to realize materially this story and its aim either through typing of fingers to create words on a page, using sound and cameras to make a film, or using pencil and paper to geometrize narratives in the form of comics.

*DIEGESIS*: Which recent narratological trends are of particular interest to you?

*Aldama*: In my impulse to move beyond interpretation and to seek to develop a unified theory of aesthetics, the insights from early developmental cognitive science and narratology seemed to bear the fruit needed.

Alison Gopnik's work on children, storytelling, and the mind allowed me to understand more deeply the foundations of creativity and storytelling. This along with the work I'd already done in narrative theory opened up new vistas for understanding how, for instance when watching a film, our senses translate information into both emotion and intellectual imaginative responses.

The combination of narratology and insights from developmental cognitive science as well as neurobiology, neuroendocrinology, and last but not least social neurology offered passageways into the foundations of epistemological and semantic (material) equations. The anatomical and physiological foundations that we have evolved as a species for thousands of years have allowed us, for instance, to create a multinetworked brain where our emotion system interfaces with our prefrontal cortex when we create fiction. These studies and approaches have allowed me to begin to answer questions that are at the roots of who we are, how we are in the world, and how we create and transform the world.

Of course, the expression of innate capacities for creating are ultimately unique, idiomatic, particular and idiosyncratic. We share, for instance, long and short-term memory processes, the biological and social growing of emotion systems, and so on; however, these innate capacities grow in extraordinarily unique ways within specifics of time and place. They will ultimately grow into the many different personalities that make up the world. And, again of course, this growth, among its myriad material consequences will appear in the shape of many different planetary narrative objects informed by the will to style, in-

cluding the ethnoracially constructed comic book storyworlds built by Latinx creators.

This research program has helped me drive deeper into understanding certain foundations of Latinx creativity as situated in time and place. It has allowed me to sharpen my sleuthing skills in order to bring to the surface those resplendent devices in Latinx narrations that give shape to extraordinary storyworlds across all the storytelling modes, genres, and forms – comic books included as seen in my books such as *Your Brain on Latino Comics* (2009) and *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics* (2017).

Insights from narrative theory and cognitive and affective sciences have allowed me more expansively to understand better the making of and co-creating with literature, film, drama, music, dance, visual art, digital media, and comics, among others. We see this especially in several of my edited collections such as *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts* (2010) and *Analyzing World Fiction* (2011) as well as my single authored books like *Why the Humanities Matters* (2008), *Mex-Ciné: Mexican Filmmaking, Production, and Consumption in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2013), *Formal Matters in Latino Poetry* (2013), and in co-authored books such as *Conversations on Cognitive Cultural Studies* (2014) and *Aesthetics of Discomfort* (2016).

Indeed, looking back, then at my scholarly journey, narrative theory and cognitive narratology informed much of my work. I've found that this weaves itself in and through my work as its determining impulse and worldview. Indeed, discovering cognitive sciences in the early stages of my theoretical development gave me important insights into how our brains work and how we exercise our counterfactual capacities to create stories.

*DIEGESIS*: You synthesize the insights of multiple intellectual disciplines – narrative theory, ethics, aesthetics, and cognitive development – to explore, widen, and deepen concepts and formulations present in all variety of cultural phenomena?

*Aldama*: I'm singularly driven to understand deeply how we create and actively receive, make our own, then recreate cultural phenomena in materially transformative ways – in my books and classrooms.

A few summers ago at Stanford, for instance, I had the pleasure of reading and learning with a gaggle of middle schoolers. We read Monterroso, Borges, Kafka, Cortázar, Morrison, Kincaid, Baldwin, Alexie, Woolf, among others. Together we explored how fiction can take us to radically new and unpredictable places, to the most surprising locations where all sorts of questions are posed and offered to our scrutiny, leading us to feel anew and to reflect about things like memory, intersectional identities, gender and race oppression, aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics from standpoints constructed in remarkably unsuspected ways. We explored and put into practice a few basic narrative devices such as the shaping and generative ones of syntax, imagery, point of view, and tense. For instance, we considered why Jamaica Kincaid uses the second-

person narrator and the semi-colon sign to shape her story “Girls,” and how she creatively appropriates the stream-of-consciousness device deployed by Virginia Woolf in “A New Dress.” We deliberated over whether Julio Cortázar’s use of grammatical devices to shape “Continuity of Parks” places the story within a temporal and spatial network of world fiction that now includes authors like Jorge Luis Borges, Augusto Monterroso and Ana María Shua. We also deliberated over the mental mechanisms used to imagine, create, and actively co-create fictions that can and do lead to intellectual wakefulness and material transformation of our world. In other words, and without necessarily having them explicitly front and center in our readings, we synthesized the insights of multiple intellectual disciplines –narrative theory, ethics, aesthetics, cognitive science and cognitive development – to explore, widen, and deepen our concepts and formulations of how literature works and why literature matters.

Indeed, narratology doesn’t just inform my scholarship and teaching. It also informs my creating of fiction. In 2017 I published my first book of fiction, *Long Stories Cut Short: Fictions from the Borderlands* with the University of Arizona Press. Knowing well how narrative works through its formal study, I chose to use the shaping devices of flash fiction in two languages and the visual arts to recreate the experiences of all walks of Latinx life. Like many in the US Latinx community who imagine, think, speak and act in and across two languages, I wanted the collection to exist in the world as both English and Spanish and to exhibit a strong link to the visual art of drawing. In a more recently published short fiction, “Monelle’s Sisters Across the Atlantic,” I deploy three different narrators to give shape to the horrors of forced emigration of Latinas from Mexico to the US. I reconstruct “Le Livre de Monelle” (1894) by Marcel Schwob – an author who had a huge influence on Jorge Luis Borges and Roberto Bolaño. Moreover, in a metatextual move, I remark at the story’s end:

I have before my eyes a story and text about the story and still another about the circumstances in which it was written. But there is more: Who authored each one of these narratives? That is, how many authors are present here? Are there several authors, or only one? There are clearly several narratives, so by narratological necessity, consequence or scientific rule, there must be several authors (one for each narrator), since narratology says writer must always be separated from narrator. (Aldama 2017, 153)

Understanding better how shaping devices guide young readers to co-create deeply informs my writing of children’s books, including *The Adventures of Chupacabra Charlie* that was published this June 2020 by The Ohio State University Press. Here and elsewhere in my fiction making capacities, I hope to create narratives that are compelling to readers. As an active creator of fictional narratives, I hope my presence will be strongly felt in several aesthetic fields.

*DIEGESIS*: What is the future of narratology?

*Aldama*: Narratological theories, categories, and concepts are useful only in so far as they sharpen our eyes to see texts in all their complexity and richness. They are to be grasped as fluid, ephemeral, evanescent, and ultimately dispos-

able. They are means to get us to the top of the ladder so we may better see the whole picture and the whole landscape; then, the ladder must be kicked away and the literary phenomenon must appear naked with all or almost all its affective and cognitive power. That is why a narratological-only approach to flash fiction, short stories, novels, or poetry could *only ever* be provisional and never be petrified into substance or essence and deemed foundational.

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