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Queer Formalism

Abstract: Queer formalism challenges the idea that queerness only subverts, disrupts, or negates; it insists that queerness takes perceptible shapes, and that formalist attention to these shapes can further the politics of queer radicalism. This chapter builds on queer formalism to argue that narrative has important affordances for queer life. Narrative unfolds queerness as an affective and social relation that may persist over time. Putting queer formalism and narratology into conversation, I theorize the relationality of form, or the means by which forms enable or foreclose particular relational patterns, arrangements, and structures across cultural domains. I argue that queer formalism attunes us to patterns of relationality that enable queer intimacies and attachments to endure, which is a necessary basis for queer community and politics. Pushing back on classical formalism's investment in 'literariness,' I conclude that queer formalism can be a methodological bridge between cultural and social scientific approaches to the study of gender, race, and sexuality.

Keywords: Queer formalism, relationality, affordance, queer of color critique, interdisciplinarity

When interpreting a literary text, formalists privilege 'form' over 'content,' or the means of expression over the meaning expressed. Formalists ask: What is the relationship between a text's shape and its subject? Generally, formalism has been criticized as a conservative approach to literature and art.[1] Early formalists, such as the New Critics, tended to detach literature from its social, historical, and political contexts, which they saw as non-aesthetic and thus beyond the parameters of critical analysis. They understood form as a singularly 'literary' quality and thus the most important focus for professional close reading. Yet, by dismissing context, formalists marginalized writing by women, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and the working classes. Their literature was seen as too parochial, too political, too focused on a message to be sufficiently transcendent. In this way, formalism gave support to the ideologies of whiteness, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and the upper class. Similarly, formalists such

as the Structuralists diminished the material circumstances that shape a work of art. Seeking universal 'rules' for linguistic expression, formalists de-emphasized social difference and cultural change over time. Indeed, by conceiving of itself as empirical and scientific, classical formalism pushed subjectivity to the margins of analysis, invalidating any consideration of authorial intention, readerly reception, or the emotional experience provoked by the work of literature.

Queer formalism challenges nearly all of classical formalism's methodological and ideological assumptions. To do so, queer formalism builds on New Formalism, which has grown in prominence over the past two decades.[2] Whereas New Critics saw form as uniquely literary, New Formalism redefines it as simultaneously aesthetic and non-aesthetic. Form is an 'organizing principle' that cuts across a wide swath of social, discursive, and literature domains. Because formal principles move between art and politics, they cannot be completely distinct; rather, they share a formal ontology, or common logics of organization. In fact, new formalists such as Caroline Levine go so far as to argue that literature grants a window onto the forms that arrange social life as such. These forms include wholes, hierarchies, rhythms, and networks, which combine, collide, and reroute one another in a complex choreography. Notably, Levine identifies narrative as an especially valuable form for tracking how forms unfold across time (2015, 19). This is because narrative also incorporates aesthetic and non-aesthetic forms and moves promiscuously across social domains; narrative is never solely 'literary.' Of course, literature has distinct formal 'affordances,' or latent possibilities for action in the world. But those affordances derive from how it arranges forms, not from any intrinsically literary quality. Hence, new formalists argue that literature is not a passive 'symptom,' or mere reflection, of its historical context. Literature is a form with agency to alter other forms; it responds to and rearranges the structuring principles within its social orbit.

Queer formalism builds on the core tenets of new formalism, but it adds a fresh emphasis on the 'sensual' dimensions of form.[3] For queer formalists, art works on and through the body. For example, Brian Glavey redefines formalism "as a relational rather than an ontological category: a way of attaching to objects rather than a testament to their autonomy" (2016, 3). Hence, form has specifically affective affordances. It

arranges feeling, emotion, desire, and sensation, and it unleashes these forces on readers, spectators, and audiences. Whereas classical formalisms downplay subjectivity, queer formalisms stress the visceral impact of art on the body that experiences it. Queer formalism thus foregrounds the embodied relations of the aesthetic object. To do so, queer formalists draw on methods that often center the body, such as affect theory, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, performance studies, trans studies, Black studies, and queer of color critique.

Queer formalism generally distinguishes the queerness of art from LGBTQ+ identity. In other words, a writer's identity does not necessarily mean their work is 'queer.' Similarly, the representation of gay characters or sex does not guarantee that a text has a queer relationship to form. This is because queer formalism tends to locate the queerness of art in the ways it undoes, unravels, or deconstructs gender and sexual identities. Like queer theory more broadly, queer formalism refuses to take identity as a stable, natural, or positive category. To do so, queer formalism critiques the reception of LGBTQ+ writing as an empirical or sociological document of identity-based oppression. It argues that such a reception tends to elide the significant formal and stylistic innovations of queer writing. In this way, queer formalism extends and yet radicalizes the New Critical investment in the aesthetic. Queer formalism shows how formal experimentation affords critical agency for marginalized writers and artists, enabling them to contest, revise, or elude the terms on which they are forced to be represented within the public sphere.[4]

Thus far, queer formalism largely ignores narrative as a distinct cultural form.[5] Currently, the field privileges the visual arts, such as abstract painting, comics, cinema, and performance art. This is not to say that narrative genres, such as the novel, do not matter to queer formalists. Yet analysis generally focuses on a text's non-mimetic elements of style, such as syntax, enjambment, and rhythm, or on rhetorical tropes that destabilize narrative coherence, such as irony, catachresis, or zeugma. The sentence has generally been the key unit for queer formalism as opposed to narratological scales of analysis such as character, sequence, story, or plot. There are complex disciplinary, institutional, and historical reasons for the lack of interest in narratological concerns within queer theory at large. Certainly, classical narratology's marginalization of

feminism, queer studies, critical race theory, and decolonial thought is an important factor, as well as its tendency to de-emphasize the imprint of cultural and political forces on narrative structure. Feminist and postcolonial narratologists have been at the forefront of redressing these gaps.[6] Yet queer theory has been slower to take up narratological methods. This is due, in part, to queer theory's deconstructive theory of representation, which underlies its skepticism of narrative as a cultural form. Queerness is often defined as the force that undoes, subverts, and denaturalizes representation. From this point of view, queerness cannot be represented because it is antagonistic to representation itself. Instead, queerness arises at the margins of a text, gnawing away at its false coherence.

Queer formalism challenges the idea that queerness only subverts, disrupts, or negates; it insists that queerness takes perceptible shapes, and that formalist attention to these shapes can further the politics of queer radicalism. This chapter builds on queer formalism to argue that narrative has important affordances for queer life. Narrative unfolds queerness as an affective and social relation that may persist over time. Putting queer formalism and narratology into conversation, I theorize the *relationality of form*, or the means by which forms enable or foreclose particular relational patterns, arrangements, and structures across cultural domains. I argue that queer formalism attunes us to patterns of relationality that enable queer intimacies and attachments to endure, which is a necessary basis for queer community and politics. Pushing back on classical formalism's investment in 'literariness,' I conclude that queer formalism can be a methodological bridge between cultural and social scientific approaches to the study of gender, race, and sexuality.

Queer for Form

Queer theory has always been ardently formalist in its methods. Think, for example, of the astonishing attunement to rhetoric, style, and genre in criticism by Leo Bersani, D.A. Miller, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Gloria Anzaldúa, Fred Moten, and José Esteban Muñoz. Queer theory arose through a vibrant intersection of poststructural theory, political activism, and literary studies.[7] Given their

fascination with language, it is no accident that many queer theorists detonate stylistic fireworks in their own criticism. From Edelman's dizzying irony to Moten's cascading rhythm, queer theorists invite readers to think through form. (Notably, Moten and Edelman, as well as Anzaldúa, Sedgwick, and Snediker, also write or wrote poetry.) Indeed, as Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant famously argue, queer theory reimagines what criticism can be; it pushes against professional norms of disciplinary legibility, coherence, decorum, and purity. Queer theory brazenly bends the staid form of professional criticism toward literary, poetic, and narrative flourish.

To be sure, queer theory's formalist playfulness has drawn ire. Queer theory is often criticized as 'bad writing' that no reasonable reader could stomach.[8] Yet such judgments underscore how profoundly queer theory alters the experience of reading through experiments with form. It stretches the sentence, and the critical essay, into new shapes. In this respect, we might think of form as a particularly intense queer attachment, an object that queers take seriously. Sedgwick famously argues that queer reading often arises in childhood through an attachment to style that outstrips manifest content. In her words, "we needed for there to be sites where meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love" (1993, 3). Here, queer formalism has an affective bent; it is not a disinterested, cold, abstract, or scientific approach to art but a relation infused with feeling. Sedgwick imagines queers as vernacular, amateur, and lay formalists, who do not necessarily need professional training by the academy to grasp the queer affordances of form. Indeed, she depicts queer reading as a practice of "smuggling" (ibid.) meanings where they have been prohibited or obstructed by official channels. As David Getsy writes, "There have been many times when formal manipulation has been the only vehicle through which queer insubordination can be conveyed" (2017, 254). Whether Comstock Laws, the Hayes Code, or the closet, queerness has often been pushed to the inexpressible margins of a text.[9] Hence, queer readers look for oblique, indirect, and unconscious textual moments that hint at non-heteronormative desires, pleasures, or experiences. Such forms give life to queerness, a way to survive in the face of social violence and cultural erasure.[10]

Because of its fascination with obliqueness, queer theory often resorts to tropes of 'subversion' and 'explosion' to describe the effect of queerness on form (e.g., queerness 'explodes' narrative closure, or 'subverts' the sonnet's conventional structure). This may seem paradoxical, given queer theory's ardent attachment to form. Yet queerness has generally been defined as a force of instability. Queerness throws a wrench in the gears of meaning; it smears and smudges the lenses that see the world as straight. To 'queer' a text means reading it aslant of it its explicit or apparent meaning, but also to twist it against itself, to see its implicit, unspoken, or unspeakable queerness. In this sense, queerness has an antagonistic relationship to form. It eludes formal capture. Here, we can see the vital legacies of poststructuralism on queer theory's conception of form. Poststructuralism aligns linguistic representation with social and ideological reification. Thus, it understands language as a key domain of symbolic struggle. This is why queer theory seeks to 'explode' binaries and other organizing principles, linguistic and otherwise, which it sees as fundamentally oppressive constraints.

Queer formalism draws on the legacies of poststructuralism, but it does not celebrate rupture as inherently progressive or radical. Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez imagine queer formalism an extension of queer of color critique, which theorizes sexuality as structured by race and ethnicity as much as by gender, class, and other vectors of social oppression. (We might think of 'intersectionality' as a supremely formalist shape as it spotlights how structures of social oppression fuse into complex networks.) For Amin, Musser, and Pérez, formalism illuminates important aesthetic reservoirs of minoritarian knowledge. Such knowledge is lost when queer BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) art is taken as mere testimony, and when aesthetic form is understood as a suffocating bind rather than an enabling constraint. As they show, formal experimentation is one way that queer of color artists address systemic violence; far from being disinterested in the social, queer aesthetics directly 'intervene' in disciplinary regimes of power and knowledge, such as capitalism and colonialism. Moreover, formal manipulation can create queerer structures of reception and interpretation among viewers, readers, and audiences. In this respect, queer formalism recovers the distinctly aesthetic and affective agencies of queer of color

artists. As Amin, Musser, and Pérez argue, queer formalism "displaces the primacy of the visual—the regime within which queer bodies and bodies of color have been most violently subjected to the demands of cultural legibility" (2017, 228). In this way, formalism challenges the assimilation of queerness to identity politics and points out the queer potential of illegibility and opacity.

Given its embrace of experimental aesthetics, queer formalism might seem fundamentally modernist, but it is not inherently opposed to representation, narrative, or popular culture. For example, Ramzi Fawaz argues that comics, science fiction, and Hollywood cinema give perceptible shape to queerness, particularly within the 1970s and 1980s. Fawaz critiques "the assumption that formlessness or fluidity is the most radical quality of divergent genders and sexuality" (2022, 6). This is why he outlines the perceptible forms that gender and sexual dissidence takes in popular genres, which in turn inspire the political imagination of queer life. These forms expanded the social possibilities available to LGBTQ+ people, charting rebellious paths for queer lives to follow. In this sense, queer formalism does not evaluate forms according to their autonomous aesthetic value so much as their relational potential for queer communities.

Thus, queer formalism does not mark a break from queer theory. On the contrary, it renews queer theory's foundational attachment to form, illuminating how form, style, or design can unfurl queer relations with readers and audiences. These formal relations are rife with affective, epistemological, and imaginative affordances for queer politics. Embracing the popular and the avant-garde, the lowbrow and the highbrow, queer formalism widens the range of aesthetic forms that matter to queer theory and politics. In the process, it unsettles post-structural assumptions about the oppressive nature of form. To be sure, queer formalism recognizes the disciplinary and regulatory aspects of form. But it also values form's capacity to sustain, extend, and transmit queer resistance.

Narrative's Queer Affordances

What, then, can queer formalism bring to the study of narrative? From a queer formalist perspective, narrative is a dynamic structure that entwines many different

forms, aesthetic and non-aesthetic. These forms include conventional narratological categories, such as character, plot, story, focalization, setting, worldbuilding, scene, sequence, suspense, and so on. Unlike classic narratology, however, queer formalism does not seek to identify the primordial or irreducible essence of narrative; it does not search for foundations because it understands every form as an assemblage of other forms. Moreover, the affordances of any given form arise from its dynamic relations with other forms. As Levine argues, forms "collide," and their contact produces friction, tension, and possibility (2015, 8). Queer formalism is similarly attuned to collision and affordance rather than cause and effect. Narrative is an especially demonstrative example of how the interplay of a limited set of forms can generate an almost infinite series of variations, as Vladimir Propp (2009 [1928]) so memorably demonstrated.

By bracketing essentialist questions, queer formalism embraces a practical, strategic, and relational approach to narrative, which resonates with rhetorical, feminist, and postcolonial narratologies. It examines the explicit and latent queerness of a narrative's arrangements; how different forms collide or combine within narrative space and time, generating queer potential; and what queer affordances a narrative (or elements of a narrative) may have for audiences, particularly as it travels across contexts and is reshaped by new scenes of address.

By examining narrative's affordances for queer communities, queer formalism departs from the antinarrative foundations of queer theory. These foundations are perhaps most apparent in Michel Foucault's scathing account of confession as a disciplinary form. For Foucault (1990 [1978]), confessional narrative codifies sexuality as 'secret' interior truth that must be expressed, managed, and surveilled. In a parallel vein, queer theorists influenced by Lacan similarly understand narrative as a conservative form that interpellates subjects into the heteronormative Symbolic Order.[11] Despite their significant differences, these theories depict narrative as a mechanism of ideological control, which seduces us into normativity with the promise of meaningful closure. To be sure, teleological closure is key to many narratives, and it may be central to the desires that many readers bring to stories. However, queer formalism does not presume that that teleology is the backbone of narrative as such. Nor would it agree that teleology is always the most significant form within a narrative, or that it necessarily

curtails the agency of other forms in a story. Even when it is present in a narrative, teleology is an ordering principle like any other, susceptible to change through its interaction with other forms. By conflating narrative with teleology, antinarrative theories risk transforming narrative into an Ur-form rather than an especially powerful form that circulates within a whole world of forms.

Queer formalism thus departs from the equivalence between narrative, teleology, and mimesis that underlies queer theory's antinarrative suspicions.[12] To avoid conflating narrative with mimesis, I propose that queer formalism prioritize 'figuration' as a more capacious category of analysis. 'Figure' can be a noun and a verb, a shape and the act of giving shape. Figuration spotlights the dynamic work of forms within a narrative. Figuration does not necessarily equate to mimesis, although it certainly can take mimetic form.[13] As a concept, figuration subordinates mimesis to one style among others, and it allows for mimetic and non-mimetic styles to collide within the diegesis. Certainly, narrative includes mimetic and metaphorical figuration, but it also relies on other patterns, designs, and ordering principles.

Narrative should be central to queer formalism precisely because it laminates multiple figures into complex palimpsests. By tracing these vital arrangements, queer formalism can expand the ways that queerness may 'appear' in a narrative and thereby increase the range of affordances for queer storytelling.

As an example, let's briefly consider the 'coming out' story, which is a narrative genre that would seem to confirm the antinarrative hypothesis. After all, many coming out stories chart a path from shame to acceptance, confusion to celebration, incoherence to coherence. In this arc, the coming out story can collapse a more radical account of queerness into a seamless, apolitical LGBTQ+ identity. Yet these endpoints are not inherent to the form itself. At minimum, the coming out story relies on three ordering principles: a spatial binary (*in vs. out*); a present participle verb (*staying in vs. coming out*); and a temporal trajectory (i.e. *before vs. after, now vs. then, now vs. later*). These three forms can lock together to codify sexuality as identity and collude with Western consumerism, heteronormativity, and colonialism. Yet they can also do the exact opposite: a coming out story could, for example, trace a movement from liberal identity toward the awakening of a revolutionary queer consciousness. The coming out

story's conservative telos is a product of interlocking social forms working in tandem, not a default setting hardwired into narrative form itself. Thus, the forms that compose the coming out story can be put to surprisingly queer ends. The coming out narrative has such popularity as a vernacular cultural form because its ordering principles do not dictate content or trajectory: one can 'come out' as a vegan, a nerd, a Trump voter, or an environmental activist. Such trajectories can decenter sexuality as the singular "truth" of identity and spotlight the contingency, ephemerality, and historicity of the coming out narrative as a form. Of course, the form's appeal stems from the fetish for identity that infuses Western culture, but its uptake may also proliferate queer affordances that may work against that same discursive regime.

Clearly, the coming out story changes depending on social and historical context, but it is also vulnerable to being rerouted by forms that circulate within its diegesis. One might extend the scenes of opacity, hesitation, and confusion to a such a degree that they dominate the story and undermine any celebratory closure. One might weave together multiple types of coming out within a single story (say, coming out as bisexual and trans, or nonbinary and asexual, or queer and a victim of sexual abuse) to highlight irreconcilable tensions between identities. Alternately, one might exploit the form's equivalence between identities by deprioritizing sexual or gender identity in favor of a more idiosyncratic one, such as 'roller derby player' or 'lover of cult horror films.' One might also amplify the recursive potential within the coming out story by incorporating previous tellings into the tale. As a narrative mode, 'coming out' implies that the telling always takes place in the present tense. The reaction one receives to *this* telling could become part of the tale in the future. (This often happens when the act of coming out to one's family subsequently becomes an event within the story.) When we say that 'coming out' is a never-ending process, this is not solely because compulsory heterosexuality is an omnipresent social norm; it is also because the coming out narrative relies on a queer form of present tense, which keeps the tale open to revision, inconsistency, and change. In short, the coming out story can never reach an endpoint as long as one continues to tell the story.[14]

At the same time, the affordances of the coming out story are profoundly relational, contoured by its social scene of narration. These contours are partly shaped

by what the storyteller hopes to 'do' with their story: build solidarity, teach a lesson, flirt, call someone out, satirize the coming out genre, become a feminist killjoy, and so on. We could consign all of these affordances to the rhetorical dimension of narrative, but it is important to remember that the scene of narration is also shaped by non-rhetorical (or not-entirely-rhetorical) forces, such as space, time, setting, and medium, which can trouble a teller's rhetorical intentions. It makes a difference, for example, whether a coming out story appears in a physical letter, text message, or Instagram story. The medium has ordering principles that infuse, constrain, and collide with the message. The context of narration as well as its addressee may contort the tale: a coming out story shouted in a crowded gay bar over drinks will require a different rhythm and tone, for example, than one read before a silent university audience gathered for National Coming Out Day.

Perhaps most importantly, the coming out story is altered by its relation to other social forms, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and age. After all, the closet does not operate in a uniform way for all lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, asexual, and queer people. Indeed, coming out for white and non-white queers often takes distinct shapes, because of the ways that non-white sexualities are racialized, surveilled, and pathologized. In some contexts, the closet may not even be a significant or particularly relevant form within the narrative. Similarly, the age at which one comes out, or at which one narrates coming out, can extend or shorten the narrative arcs projected beyond the telling. In sum, the variability of coming out stories derives from the complex choreography of forms that unfold within, through, and around the figurative act of telling a coming out story.

Therefore, the queer affordances of any given narrative form—even a seemingly identity-bound form like the coming out story—are not limited to punctual moments of incoherence, irresolution, or illegibility. While these have been the primary tropes for reading queerness within a text, queer formalism unlocks additional sites for interpreting the queer agency, creativity, and relationality of storytelling. Queer formalism would even urge us to question whether forms defined by coherence, closure, and legibility are *always* oppressive constraints. As drag performers and fan fiction writers have so

memorably taught us, even the most degraded, simplistic, or accessible narrative forms contain affordances that can be activated for dramatically queer ends.

The Relationality of Form

We have seen how queer formalism can reframe and expand queer theory's understanding of narrative. But how might the analysis of narrative, in particular, broaden the horizons of queer formalism? Queer formalism has a reparative impulse; it is concerned with the capacity of aesthetic forms and cultural practices to sustain queer lifeworlds. Narrative should be central to queer formalism, then, because it is a form that extends relationality over time. As Judith Butler argues, "Narration has some propitious relation to survival" (2005, 60). Butler's phrase, "some propitious relation," does not dictate the link between narration and survival. Butler does not say that life *must* take the form of a story to endure, or that narration guarantees survival. Rather, we compose a narrative and, in the process, confront the limits of our self-knowledge. Unlike many queer theorists, Butler does not "celebrate a certain notion of incoherence" as an end in itself (ibid., 64). Instead, they argue that "our 'incoherence' establishes the way in which we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us" (ibid.). In other words, narrative incoherence arises from our queer implication in the lives of others. Narration thus presents an opportunity to glimpse *how we are formed through relationality and how relationality takes particular forms*.

Viewed in this way, narrative affords a queer ethical challenge: Can we render an account of ourselves in a way that reveals our relational dependencies? Such a narrative would transform life-sustaining bonds into aesthetic and social knowledge. By doing so, it would give figurative shape to the affective and political infrastructures of queer life. However, as it unfolds, narrative walks a tight-rope pitched between coherence and incoherence, continuity and discontinuity, causality and contingency. *Too much* narrative coherence can produce a "break with relationality," thereby perpetuating individualist fantasies of self-determination and pure autonomy (Butler 2005, 63). But *too little* coherence can lead to traumatic and even unlivable states of

fracture.[15] At either extreme, narrative may atrophy our relational capacities. The 'relationality of form' thus assesses the extent to which a given form enables or forecloses our recognition of relationality as the basis for survival, endurance, and flourishing.

At the same time, the relationality of form spotlights how particular narrative figurations of relationality extend queer bonds out into the material world. The extension of relational capacities is one place to locate a specifically queer politics of form. For example, Alex Brostoff argues that narrative intertextuality enacts a mode of queer kinship that "extends across the false spatiotemporal divisions of genre and gender in repeated gestures of renewal" (2021, 110). Insofar as kinship is defined by "the repeated performance of life-sustaining functions," Brostoff argues, "intertextual kinship" is a potent form for stretching queer bonds across time and space (ibid., 109-10). In a parallel vein, Kevin Quashie argues that the first-person essay, as a form, possesses a "relational praxis" (2021, 70) that brims with "black aliveness," or the capacity to make Black lifeworlds that can endure beyond "the everywhere and everyway of black death" (ibid., 1). Quashie argues that "the drive to narrate, which might imply control and mastery, exists in negotiation with the surprise that narration exposes" (ibid., 70). In this sense, the first-person narrative essay can be a 'genre of encounter' rather than demonstrative argument headed toward a single point. Understood as a relational encounter, the essay-form unlocks what Quashie calls the "intelligence to be had in being through relationality, an aliveness that is of us and of the textual worlds we make" (ibid., 29). Taken together, Brostoff and Quashie exemplify narrative's potential to provoke and extend relationality as an experience, an intelligence, and a praxis, which is utterly crucial to queer worldmaking.

As these examples suggest, the relationality of narrative form does not simply entail representing certain relational modes; more capaciously, it theorizes how a form enacts, produces, and performs relationality itself and especially how a relational form interacts with others in the world. This does not mean that cultural production can enact political change solely through symbolic means. Consider, for example, the queer goal to create more freedom for gender experimentation. Such a goal cannot be achieved simply by telling a different story about gender formation. Of course, the proliferation of

many such stories may be helpful, including those that communicate the joyful pleasures of gender exploration. Yet their effectiveness requires social forms that give narrative authority to the voices of queer and trans children, whose accounts of themselves and their desires are broadly distrusted as false consciousness.[16] Moreover, the impact of these narratives would be too ephemeral without formal arrangements that sustain them across discursive domains, from the public school to the doctor's office to the children's birthday party to the psychologist's couch. In this respect, the relationality of form impinges on ordinary and mundane scenes of address, which are just as significant as more iconic ones, such as the birth certificate, the gender reveal, or the wedding.

An attunement to narrative thus bolsters the political capacities of queer formalism, enabling us to see how the aesthetic forces can ripple into non-aesthetic contexts. In Glavey's words, "Art offers a pedagogic space of affective connection where one might learn to take an interest in the world with the aim of acquaintance rather than mastery" (2016, 42). In his account of queer art, Glavey goes so far as to redefine the "power of the aesthetic" as a "space where creativity, cooperation, and surprise might be conjured within the cramped constraints of a repressive and open unsurprising social world" (ibid., 8). Here, queer formalism reimagines the aesthetic as a potentially transformative affective pedagogy, with the capacity to refresh and reorient our relational capacities. By looking to narrative through the eyes of queer formalism, as I have urged, we can glimpse these relational affordances even within discursive spaces that may otherwise seem inhospitable to art.

Queerly Crossing Disciplines

There are important debates still to be had about the centrality of the aesthetic to queer formalism. In this chapter, I have argued for a strategic approach to form that does not solely rely on the aesthetic. This is not because I do not value the aesthetic as a category; on the contrary, art possesses crucial affective and imaginative affordances that other modes of expression lack.[17] Yet I prefer to distinguish form from the aesthetic for three reasons. First, queer modes of expression have often been dismissed as anti-

aesthetic, lacking in literary or artistic merit, so I am wary about any account of form that risks marginalizing popular, lowbrow, or putatively trashy texts; while such texts may not appear on syllabi or anthologies, they matter to queer readers outside of the academy and possess critical affordances for these communities. Second, aesthetic theories of queerness tend to marginalize narrative and other apparently representational forms; they argue that queerness arises in a text's non- or anti-narrative elements, which become exemplary of queer style. Such theories underestimate the affordances of narrative to enable, sustain, and extend queer relationality across space and time. Third, by dismissing narrative, queer theory risks isolating itself from other disciplines, which are not particularly invested in aesthetics. Narrative is a prominent category of analysis for many social science disciplines, including law, sociology, economics, anthropology, history, political science, geography, and psychology. These disciplines still have much to learn from queer theory and especially a queer formalism attuned to the figurative, relational, and political work that narrative affords.

Far from a conservative retreat to the aesthetic, then, queer formalism possesses a radical horizon to move across disciplines and domains. As Levine (2023) argues, formalists trained in literary and cultural studies are especially adept at mapping the elaborate choreographies of forms. Formalist methods are kaleidoscopic, glimpsing dynamic patterns as they overlay, collide, and twist against one another. The effects can be beautiful or strange, in an aesthetic sense, but they can also generate other affordances, such as new social arrangements, connections, and relations. Moreover, the sensual dimensions of form are by no means limited to aesthetic objects. Art can make the sensuality of form especially visible or apparent, but queer formalism underscores that *all* forms strive to organize affective relations: manifestos, menus, bylaws, seating arrangements, witness testimony, and so on. Forms arrange bodies in ways that produce particular desires or sensibilities, and they can interrupt and disarrange our desires and sensibilities toward any number of social ends—radical, reactionary, and otherwise.

As social science disciplines increasingly take up queer and trans studies, they would do well to adopt queer formalism's attunement to the capacious figurative possibilities of narrative. Narrative is never simple: it can never be entirely purged of its

aesthetic and imaginative elements, nor can it ever fully transcend the material impingements of social and historical context. Certainly, narrative can provide an imaginary resolution of real contradictions, giving readers a false sense of coherence and closure. But it can also do the opposite, rupturing smooth coherence into textured palimpsests. Perhaps most importantly, narrative can unfold new designs, patterns, and arrangements that can be sustained beyond the diegesis and into the real world.

Queer formalism runs a finger along the grooves of these figures, charting their relational affordances and constraints. It understands that stories are a binding force for queer relationality—they weave figures that enable queer relations to endure. These figures dance wildly across the boundaries of disciplines and across the lines of social and cultural domains. Queer forms take hold wherever queerness yearns for extension. To glimpse their radical potential, perhaps all disciplines will need to become more queerly formalist.

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[1] See Levinson (2007) for an overview. Of course, some formalisms, such as Russian Formalism and its theory of defamiliarization, were neither conservative nor dismissive of context.

[2] On New Formalism, see Levine (2015 and 2023), Kornbluh (2019), Hensley (2016), and Dango (2021).

[3] For theories and practices of queer formalism, see Amin, Musser, and Pérez (2017), Bersani (2010), Bradway (2023a and 2023b), Brostoff (2021), Fawaz (2022), Freeman (2010), Doyle and Getsy (2013), Glavey (2016), Ohi (2011), Lucey (2006), McCallum (2018), Nyong'o (2018), Simmons (2021), and Snediker (2008 and 2021).

[4] See Harper (2015), Musser (2018), and Nyong'o (2018).

[5] For an elaboration of this argument, see Bradway (2021).

[6] See Kim (2012), Warhol and Lanser (2015), and Young (2021).

[7] On this genealogy, see Bradway and McCallum (2019).

[8] See Warner (2002, 125-58).

[9] For an insightful example, see Kahan (2023).

[10] See Muñoz (2009).

[11] See Rohy (2018).

[12] For a fresh and important reassessment of mimesis in queer theory, see Glavey (2016).

[13] On queer figuration, see Snediker (2021).

[14] One could argue that this is true of all autobiographical narratives and life writing more generally. These narratives continually change and, at any point, a twist may arise that reorients the meaning of the whole story, such as retrospectively realizing that a chosen path was a regrettable mistake.

[15] While Butler critiques narrative coherence as the normative telos of psychotherapy, they also affirm the practice of self-narration as key to survival and flourishing. For a psychological account of the relationship between narrative coherence and mental health, see McAdams, who argues "Life is messier and more complex than the stories we tell about it. Yet the stories need to convey some of that complexity if they are to be viewed, by the self and by others, as credible and life-affirming" (2006, 118). See also Adler, who notes "Although coherence is not the only way of assessing the unifying function of narratives, the ways in which an individual structures his or her narrative do have important implications for mental health" (2012, 369). For a narratological theory of 'broken narratives' that powerfully reorients the field's understanding of narrative coherence/incoherence, see Nünning and Nünning (2016).

[16] See Gill-Peterson (2018).

[17] See Bradway (2017).