For the Sake of Appearing

An Interview on the Diversity of Queer Forms

ANNABEL BARRY AND RAMZI FAWAZ

ANNABEL BARRY: Your work in *Queer Forms* (2022) advocates for a renewed emphasis on form within queer theory, a discipline that, as you write, has largely coalesced around a belief in the personal and political expediency of the formless. How did you become frustrated with this emphasis on formlessness, and what have you found enabling about form for queer and feminist purposes?

RAMZI FAWAZ: I was inspired to write *Queer Forms*, in part, as an intellectual response to two developments in queer studies that I found deeply troubling: first was the field's increasing obsession with framing queerness as an abstract, ephemeral, even otherworldly force that somehow transcends lived social relations; and second was the elevation of certain key works in this school of thought from important intellectual interventions into inviolable sacred texts. When I was in graduate school, a series of now-canonical books including Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*

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(2009), and Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds* (2010) were taking on some of the biggest ontological and political categories of experience—like space, time, and being, nation, economy, and environment—and explicitly queering them. A profusion of newly minted concepts like *heteronormativity*, *chrononormativity*, queerness as a *utopian horizon*, *queer negativity*, *queer inhumanisms*, and *homonationalism* linked the seemingly local, intimate, private aspects of sexual divergence and desire to vast scales of human and nonhuman existence in surprising and unexpected ways that seemed to expand the field's sphere of interest indefinitely. I initially found this theoretical ferment totally compelling because it allowed me to think about queerness far beyond the rubric of same-sex desire or the socially prescribed identity categories of gay, lesbian, and bisexual; instead I could begin to imagine queerness as a kind of free-floating force or energy that circulates throughout the social body (and perhaps even the universe itself), intentionally deforming, disrupting, or transforming the world as we know it.

Years later I was fascinated and concerned to discover that many of those same texts had seemingly transmuted from provocative and timely theoretical innovations to a kind of religious orthodoxy. These thinkers were now revered like academic saints rather than inspiring and agonistic interlocuters (which is what scholars are supposed to be to one another). As feminist legal theorist Janet Halley reminds us in *Split Decisions* (2006), theories are not unshakable truths or incontrovertible facts but rather critical hypotheses or conjectures about worldly phenomena that must be rigorously tested, revised, and rethought in different contexts. In the wake of his untimely passing, for instance, a hagiography of sorts developed around Muñoz, which transformed his view of queerness as a utopian horizon from a lyrical and enchanting metaphor into a universal truth. Yet it remained unclear to me how queerness understood in this utterly abstract, almost spiritual sense could possibly benefit the everyday lives of actual brown queer people, which is what Muñoz claimed he was doing in rejecting Edelman's polemical argument on behalf of queer negativity. How does a queerness that is always, in Muñoz's famous phrase, "not yet here" help us figure out how to shape the world we live in *now*, aside from cultivating some modicum of hope for a changed future?[1] His charge was undoubtably affectively inspiring, but difficult

to translate to programmatic change in the present. Similarly, Puar's concept of *homonationalism* quickly went from being a necessary critical approach to understanding and resisting queer people's absorption into the structures of Western imperialism during the so-called war on terror to an all-purpose bludgeon to describe and discredit nearly all queer political projects perceived of as liberal, quietist, or remotely normative. Ultimately, in their embrace of high theory; their unrelenting critique of so-called liberal gender and sexual politics; their valorization of avant-garde and experimental forms of queer art and cultural production; and their general turn away from queer and feminist historiography, many of these writers unintentionally left younger queer and feminist scholars and activists without a usable history, painting prior gay and feminist social movements like women's and gay liberation as retrograde relics of a monolithic past now superseded by the fresh radical force of queer theoretical insight. The inability of queer theory to offer meaningful answers to the question of how we might decide to appear to the world within the genuine constraints of our bodily existence leaves people in an impossible bind, desperate to be seen, heard, and understood in all their dimensions but terrified that doing so will permanently rob them of their queer potential for infinite malleability and change. This is a very confusing and unpleasant place to be.

Thus I found myself increasingly turning to that most foundational concept of form in literary studies, because form gives shape to abstract feelings, ideas, emotions, or meanings without being permanently rigid or fixed. Form refers to the process of taking a shape (rather than eluding or escaping it), which might include figuring something in the mind's eye, inhabiting an identity, or creating a map, structure, or outline of your worldview, just for the time being, until another figure, identity, or structure becomes more meaningful to you. Form, then, is simply an imaginative placeholder for something else, a creative container for how we want others to understand, say, our gender (for now), or how we intend to describe or render queer sex, or how we want to concretize the notion of feminist freedom, or you name it. I take my lead here from Lucas Crawford's brilliant and understudied book *Transgender Architectonics* (2015), in which he introduces the concept of "the body as a short-term lease."

Against the melancholic tendency in trans discourse to see the body as failed or inadequate home for containing the full reality of one's gender expression, Crawford encourages us to see the body as shape-shifting placeholder or evolving form that we mold in one way, then another, then another over time, moving deliberately through successive versions of ourselves.[2] Armed with this flexible view of forming or taking shape, I realized that all the people who wrote in the earlier tradition of queer theory, especially Muñoz, were essentially formalists. They were studying cultural objects and their formal properties, from the gay male poetic work of Frank O'Hara to the geometric subway graffiti art of Keith Haring, from the gestural performance art of Kevin Aviance to Fred Herko's queer interpretation of modern ballet. But the people who were reading that scholarship were conveniently forgetting all the formalist analyses in those projects, instead only seeming to absorb the theoretical attachment to the idea of gender and sexuality's formlessness, fluidity, evanescence, and fleetingness. I wanted to push back against that.

AB: One of the things I really like is that you're drawing out of this original body of scholarship an implicit questioning of the world as it is, as well as a posing of possibilities. I'm thinking of how many of the propositions in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) come in the form of rhetorical questions, which I take to be an attempt to avoid the calcification of imaginative thought experiments into axioms that can then be wielded as imperatives in the way you're describing. It seems as though you're seeing something highly speculative in the original theorizing of queer formlessness that gets lost in the reception.

RF: That's beautifully said. One of the greatest speculative questions asked in that body of work is Butler's question: "What makes a life livable?"[3] The answer is always contingent: what is livable for some is not livable for others. Which simply means that what makes for a livable life is always changing dependent on different contexts, experiences, and worldviews. The notion that a livable life for a queer person can only or primarily be achieved through the expression of a formless, fluid, or anti-identitarian mode of existence is really up for debate because, as Butler often reminds us, living in a perpetual state of formlessness might also be a nightmare of illegibility, of being

always invisible to or misrecognized by others. Even if being illegible (hard to read, identify, or pin down) at times affords one the ability to take a radical position of otherness that can critique the heteronormative social order as it stands, it may not be the position that one wants to inhabit indefinitely.

AB: I have a follow-up question: What exactly is formlessness to you and what is form? I get the sense that sometimes people might actually be talking about form when they say they're talking about formlessness.

RF: I'll start by explaining what I think the abstract concept of formlessness describes on its own, and then I'll unpack what I believe it has meant to the field of queer studies. At base, formlessness is merely an ontological or existential description of the world as it is. From a Buddhist perspective, with each second that goes by, everything that has ever existed before is gone, lost to the sea of time. The universe, then, is formless in the sense that it is, as Muñoz says, an endless horizon of objects and beings, appearing, unfolding, changing, dying, being birthed, coming into being, and disappearing again. Thus *formlessness* is an apt term for the phenomenal nature of existence or being. In queer studies, however, the existential fact of formlessness is frequently hitched to a political logic: the basic idea that the world and its contents are ever-changing is transformed from a phenomenal reality into a vaunted radical ideal of gender and sexuality's ceaseless mutability that then paradoxically becomes worn like a badge of honor. If formlessness is the overriding concept behind this view—the belief in the infinite mutability and transformational possibility of every social, political, even existential category—fluidity is the corresponding *practice* of inhabiting or embodying that concept as a way of life. Fluidity frequently takes the form of constantly altering one's subjectivity, fashion, tastes, personality, or whatever, to avoid being pinned down or locked into a social category or identity (this is what is often meant by the idea of gender and sexual fluidity, though it can also refer to a state of mind). And finally, the figure for that practice of fluidity is liquidity, the image or metaphor of one's being as essentially aqueous and flowing like a river. So those are the three components of queer theory's political logic of formlessness:

formlessness is the foundational concept or ideal (we valorize the idea of infinite mutability); fluidity is the practice (we valorize the ability to elude or escape the "prison house" of constraining forms); and deliquescence or liquidity is the image that reflects the ideal and the practice (we valorize those queer creative practices that eschew all forms of traditional representation).

In this way, queer studies gets to have its cake and eat it too: with the political logic of formlessness in place, the field can claim to be against all identities (after all, we're radically "dissolving" them, right?), while simultaneously empowering people to take up fluidity as a way of life, so that fluidity itself now becomes a new, universally shared identity. To me this makes no sense, because you cannot make a value or a politics out of the simple existential fact of life's formlessness. Diversity, for instance, cannot be a political value because it is just a fact of life: the world is phenomenologically heterogenous. That's neither politically good nor bad; it just *is*. Diversity becomes something we imbue with value when we begin to talk about it in terms of multispecies thriving, or the ethical negotiation of our differences, or cosmopolitan encounter across cultures and ways of life—but this requires an articulation of the relationship of diversity to notions of civic life or the public good or ethical collective flourishing. I don't think that formlessness, articulated as a political value, does that very well, because it frequently ends up locking people back up into their own subjectivity, except now a type of selfhood that they imagine to be effortlessly and infinitely mutable. But of course it never is, because human subjectivity, our sense of who we are and how we want to appear to the world, is clunky and messy. It takes time to figure out. We can't simply unravel, mutate, transform into something else entirely in one second and call it a day; we have to actually work through different forms of self, which I often call *shape-shifting*—the deliberate, meaningful evolution from one state of being to another over time.

I understand *form* as a term that describes any instance of shaping, organizing, or molding that takes place within the world's formless horizon. If the world appears to each of us as a perpetually unfolding wave of sensory data, different things come to matter to us within that ocean of appearances by separating themselves from

universe's formless mass—an object here, a body there, a desire here, a concept there. In other words, *form is the coherence of independent objects of attention out of the existential formlessness of the universe*. Without it we would be nothing; we would be evanescent and thus unable to distinguish ourselves or other beings and objects from the universe itself. Form, to me, is the medium through which we negotiate our differences in a deeply formless universe. It's how we come to single things out. So, in some sense, form is the endless expression of radical differences—the perpetual differentiation or distinction of things from one another. Paradoxically, people often think that when something takes form or is given shape it becomes fixed, rigid, or immutable. But this is simply phenomenologically untrue. Forms are always changing and evolving; they are flexible, adaptive containers. But forms also change because they arrive to different people's perceptions and impact their imagination in vastly diverse ways. If you and I look at the same body, the same shape, the same form, we will have distinct interpretations of it based on our personal histories, personalities, current mood, reading habits, tastes and proclivities—you name it. And those highly individuated interpretations will also change the meaning of the object as it travels through time and space. So, to my mind, forms are absolutely indispensable for coping with the world's existential formlessness. Even the concept of formlessness takes on different forms—when the very word is invoked you might think of the aqueous flow of liquid matter, or a fluffy cumulus cloud, or a swarm of bees. All of those referents would *seem* formless, but they are really just forms with less determinate outlines or rigid shapes. Ultimately, you cannot live without forms, or you will actually lose your mind trying to take in the entirety of the universe.

AB: It seems like being formed is a requirement for human cognition and for human modes of relation.

RF: Instead of the word *forms* or *being formed* here, the political theorist Hannah Arendt might use the word *appearances*. An existential fact of life is that we appear and, as she says, at some point we will all disappear. She famously quips (and I'm paraphrasing): We came from a nowhere and we're going to disappear into a nowhere.

But in the brief time that we exist in this dimension, appearances are all that we have.[4] We are in fact endowed with sensory organs that allow us to see, touch, feel, taste, and register the appearances of other beings and things. So yes, forming is also an existential fact of life. My interest became: How do you intentionally think about giving things shape? How do you transition from simply accepting that things have a shape to manipulating those shapes in the purpose of a greater good—namely, to expand people's imaginations about what possible shapes or forms can exist simultaneously in dialogue with one another, which would presumably help people process and negotiate difference and diversity in a more ethical, generous, and joyful way?

AB: Your definitions of form and formlessness seem to take place on a different plane than Georges Bataille's claim that "formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form."[5] On the one hand, similarly to Bataille, you are troubling the boundaries between the concepts of form and formlessness by pointing out how even shapes deemed formless, like the swarm of bees, or Bataille's notion of the spider, are themselves really forms. On the other hand, I see you departing from Bataille in questioning whether forms are merely institutionalized norms that generate abject entities that have "no rights," as opposed to also iconoclastic strategies for challenging norms and expanding rights. I want to introduce another distinction between terms here: In queer and feminist contexts, what does an attention to form give us that goes beyond a politics of representation?

RF: It allows us to abstract specific identities—like woman, gay and lesbian, or transgender—into material shapes or figures that can then travel to new contexts and appear before a wide range of potential viewers. We all know that part of what representation does is depict recognizable people, identities, ways of life, or entire worldviews rendered before our eyes ("I see a character in this novel that reminds me of myself, a gay Arab American man"). There is great value in seeing one's own life, identity, or experience reflected in media representations: it can potentially confirm our social value, invoke feelings of

belonging, or allow us to be liberated from having to explain our identity and way of life to others. But one of the problems with this type of representation is that it can tend to reaffirm what we already know (or think we know) about ourselves and the world. Form refers not only to the content of any given representation, but to *the way* it's being represented. Form is really about how the shapes, vehicles, and structures through which representations are funneled to us appear. When the form of a cultural representation is doing something innovative or new, it presents something to us that we thought we understood—an identity, a concept, a lived experience, a group of people or demographic, a political event, or a historical narrative—from an angle that shocks our system so that suddenly we're viewing this thing in a way we never thought possible.

In my book, for instance, I proffer the example of the feminist consciousness-raising circle as a distinctly political form that became incorporated into film and literary media to alter the way audiences conceived of gay male and feminist solidarity. When we think about feminist consciousness-raising in the 1970s, we tend to imagine a group of white middle-class women, usually in New York City, sitting in a circle and talking about their experiences of sexism and misogyny (especially things like having to fake orgasms to please their male partners or struggling to feel like they are an important part of left-wing activist movements). That's already a very potent form: the geometric shape of the circle, with women's physical presence constituting its contours. In 1970, however, the controversial gay film classic *The Boys in the Band* depicted a group of diverse gay men sitting in a circle in a New York apartment, fighting about their experiences of homophobia and unrequited love. Suddenly the formal structure of the circle is represented to audiences in a completely new way, so that the idea of the feminist consciousness-raising circle gets translated into a different but related context: the internal struggle of a gay male friendship group to come to terms with their differing experiences of homophobic oppression. As a result of this imaginative play on the form of the consciousness-raising circle, people in the audience are encouraged to start considering their own friendship networks as already-existing or potential consciousness-raising groups. This representational practice quite literally expanded the possibilities

of what consciousness-raising could be, who could participate in it, and how it could change the way women and queer people relate in both their private and public lives.[6]

In that sense, focusing on the concept of form grants the ability to think of creative acts or shaping techniques as *translation devices*. It's not merely about mirroring our life experiences back to us; rather, it's about translating one specific experience (say, feminist consciousness-raising among predominantly white women) to other people (including gay men and people of color) so that it can travel to new contexts. In most cases, regardless of what our identity may be, the majority of the fictional characters and scenarios we encounter in novels, television shows, or theatrical productions are nothing like us. And yet all of us seem to be pretty capable of imaginatively scaling the distance between our lived reality and the fictional reality that's presented to us in media representations: a cisgender man can easily find ways to identify with "the final girl" in a classic horror film; a white, Asian American, or Latinx woman can see elements of her experience echoed in the Black women characters of Toni Morrison's novels; and a heterosexual person of any gender can find themselves personally transported by the illicit gay romance of André Aciman's novel *Call Me by Your Name* (2008). Form is the medium through which this translation of our experience is made possible. And that is a really amazing imaginative practice that goes far beyond representation as mimesis or the one-to-one replication of everyday life. It is the translation of everyday life into other terms, which have the potential to upend, alter, or transform our relationship to the world.

AB: What you're saying is making me think of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," which appears in *Touching Feeling* (2003), where she talks about the assumption that we have in literary studies and in queer theory in particular that if you make something visible, you've already done a kind of political work.[7] By this logic, the work of criticism is to uncover the unconscious of the text and reveal a secret that's buried or silenced underneath. The problem is that there are many situations in which knowing something about the world doesn't necessarily change it. That seems like another argument for the idea that representation is

not the same thing as transformation. Making something appear might be necessary, but then you have to rethink it and move it somewhere else.

RF: This problem, that knowing something doesn't necessarily lead us to do anything about it, is central to the work of feminist political theorist Linda Zerilli. In her 1998 essay "Doing Without Knowing: Feminism's Politics of the Ordinary," Zerilli begins with an anecdote: "I assign an article by Anne Fausto-Sterling, 'The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female are Not Enough,' to my undergraduate class in feminist theory. The feminist biologist shows that at least 4 percent of the population are born intersexed, that is, with some mixture of male and female characteristics. Depending on how one classifies them, there are five sexes, maybe more. . . . Will my students now relinquish their belief in a world that is naturally and exclusively divided into male and female?"[8] For Zerilli, the fact or reality of gender's diversity cannot alone undo our deeply ingrained societally agreed-upon assumption that, on trend at least, two genders still dominate. For her, knowing that there are more than two is not the same as figuring out how you can inspire people to *behave differently* toward the reality of gender and sexual heterogeneity. In my view, that transformation of one's imaginative horizon which might affect changes in attitudes and behaviors can only happen through form. Form is a necessary but not sufficient condition for culture's ability to alter hearts and minds. After all, part of what form does is to *deform*, expand, or recalibrate what people even think is possible in a given moment.

In my research for *Queer Forms* I learned that the leap from the expansion of one's imagination to a material change in the way one might behave in the world involves creating public spaces where people can dialogue about their competing perspectives on, or interpretations of, the forms they are encountering. People don't just watch a smart intersectional feminist movie and then suddenly become less racist or sexist; they become less racist and sexist through an ongoing process of talking to other people about how they interpret that movie, what their response was to its form and content, and how it might impact their worldview moving forward. That dialogue incites

others to share their own perspectives in a spirit of mutual exchange, and it is this ongoing exchange of views that makes it possible for people to begin to incorporate new ways of thinking into their material actions.

Today, with the declining influence of mass print culture in people's daily lives and the increasing expansion of micro-media climates forged by highly refined algorithms that frequently atomize us from one another, one of the last places where this kind of transformative dialogic work happens is in the humanities classroom. This is because literature and cultural studies courses are among the rare spaces in our society where people have recurrent, sustained weekly conversations about their collective interpretations of cultural objects. What the society no longer provides in terms of shared cultural experience we intentionally curate in the form of nine- to fifteen-week group learning sessions, in order to provide an environment where students can share their perspectives and take what they've learned into their everyday experience. The humanities classroom is thus a laboratory for attempting, often unevenly, to translate knowing into doing. That's an amazing thing.

AB: We've already talked a little bit about the importance of feminist theory to your work. To me, one of the most exciting accomplishments of *Queer Forms* is that you demonstrate the historical inextricability of feminism and gay liberation, two political and intellectual movements whose co-development has—shockingly—not previously been detailed in any sustained way. Along the way you prompt readers to reconsider what you call the supersessionary narrative that says that earlier, more white, liberal, and essentialist feminisms were superseded by a later, more sophisticated, intersectional feminisms and by queer theory.[9] This narrative not only presents an illusory scenario in which straight, white, cisgender women have primacy as the originators of feminism, but also inhibits us from learning from the real complexity and diversity of the feminist movement across its iterations. Why do we need new forms for thinking feminist history now?

RF: Forms are absolutely necessary for thinking feminist history now, precisely because they offer us a multiplicitous view of what

feminist politics has been in the past. I think it's fair to say that contemporary US feminisms of all stripes are primarily (though not always) movements aimed at ameliorating harm towards women: from the #MeToo movement's project of publicly documenting the rampant sexual abuse and harassment of women; to intersectional feminism's careful attention to the multiple, interlocking nature of heteropatriarchal oppressions; to trans feminism's necessary focus on halting the unrelenting violence against trans women.

Powerful and necessary as the critique of women's oppression is, it is important to recall that the amelioration of harm against women was but one of a panoply of projects that 1970s radical feminism was invested in. Its most ambitious and ultimate aim was the complete destruction of heteropatriarchy, a goal which would presumably liberate people of *all* genders from the yoke of gender hierarchy. We too easily forget that feminism is also a liberatory project for cisgender men. It can create the pathway to less suicidal, self-destructive, and annihilating ways of inhabiting masculinity that are also socially, erotically, and interpersonally desirable for everyone.[10] The point of 1970s radical feminism was not that gender would disappear entirely; rather, it was believed that gender would become completely voluntary and nonhierarchical, which would essentially mean that it could be or become *anything*. The very notion of gender and sexuality's infinite future possibilities finds one of its origins in the worldmaking projects of 1970s women's and gay liberation. But those movements invested not in the liquification or dissolution of gender but in the proliferation of queer and feminist forms, understood as recognizable yet surprising icons of political freedom for gender and sexual dissidents that modeled the kind of world these liberation movements aspired to. Queer and feminist history is flush with anarchic figures of freedom, from the so-called political lesbian to the unmarried woman, from revolutionary "faggots" to acid drag queens, from feminist consciousness-raising circles to queer "logical" or chosen families, from gay male living collectives to lesbian separatist communes. If you cannot know what gender and sexuality will be in advance of a genuinely free world, you're going to need forms to imagine these categories in as many arrangements as possible.

In her book *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* Zerilli claims that we often hold a misconception that 1970s radical feminism grew out of women's discovery of their shared oppression under patriarchy. Counterintuitively, she says that the feminist analysis of patriarchy could only have taken shape as a result of the proliferation of figures of feminist *freedom* in the 1950s and 1960s, which gave women a picture of other ways of existing in the world outside the idealized image of the domestic housewife or child bearer.[11] Consider that starting in the early 1940s, women watched one another take up factory jobs during WWII, go to college in the postwar period, run for public office, and sometimes choose not to have children. The simple fact of seeing these alternative possibilities made the depredations and limitations on women's freedom become all the more apparent and unbearable. In other words, women *first* began to witness figures of freedom and *then* realized how far they were from being able to collectively achieve that goal. The discovery of that gap between what was possible and reality led to the development of a social movement, women's liberation, aimed at bridging it by means of a visible rebellion against heteropatriarchal norms. I think today we live in a moment in which we are so mired in the nature of gendered oppression that we don't really know what freedom looks like. We often assume that the analysis of the chasm between our present oppressed conditions and our future equality or freedom is itself enough to bridge the divide. This leaves us without a clear articulation of what queer or feminist freedom might look like were it to be achieved. Forms are going to be absolutely indispensable if we want to reclaim the radical promise of feminism as the broader project to free us collectively from gendered hierarchy.

AB: You mention that the injured woman is the paramount form for feminism today, and I think another form that a certain neoliberal co-option of feminism offers is the "girl boss," which is still a form that is based on hierarchy. It's as though many people can only imagine freedom as the inversion, rather than the dismantling, of power structures. It also feels as though our ability to imagine not only what feminism might be, but also what it has been historically, is so conditioned by certain specific forms in a way that solidifies our ways of

thinking and talking about it. Here I'm thinking of the form of the wave. It seems like we could use more expansive forms for thinking the feminist past in addition to the feminist present and future.

RF: Absolutely. Not all queer and feminist forms are equal, and some can be used in highly limiting or rigid ways: the injured woman and the girl boss frequently have the unintended effects of delimiting what women can be rather than being world-opening like the form of the consciousness-raising circle. But I also think we can see alternatives to these limiting figures in contemporary popular culture. Consider the recent Pixar film *Inside Out* 2 (2024), which is now the highest-grossing animated movie of all time. The film imaginatively takes viewers inside the mind of a teenage hockey player named Riley as she enters puberty. Riley has a deeply ingrained perception of herself as a good person: her "sense of self" is molded by her memories and the emotions she attaches to them (like the memory of her parents celebrating her scholastic achievements, which makes her feel worthwhile). Riley's sense of self takes a distinct form in the movie, appearing as a literal sculpture in the shape of a verdant white tree with curving branches. The crisis of the film emerges from Riley's discovery that her best friends will be going to a different high school, which galvanizes her to aggressively try to make new friends from an opposing hockey team. Very quickly she becomes selfish, jealous, envious, and angry, acting highly out of character and alienating her friends; as this happens her sense of self begins to flicker and die out, which we discover is a result of anxiety taking over her thoughts. Across the arc of the movie, all of her original emotions (Joy, Anger, Fear, and Disgust) frantically work to save Riley from being consumed by anxiety and self-loathing. In the end, however, what they realize is that anxiety is born from trying to achieve a singular fixed form of being—the impossible standard of always being a "good," "perfect," "worthy" person. As a result of this insight a new form emerges to take the place of Riley's previously rigid self-perception, a shape-shifting abstract sculpture that is ever-changing. One minute Riley is a good person, the next the form shifts and becomes a different shape: now she's selfish, now she wants to belong, now she's a good friend, now she's ambivalent, now she's strong, now she's afraid. The message

of the movie is simply that people are multidimensional and that accepting that offers a road to individual and collective flourishing.

To me that is the fundamental concept of feminism. Nineteen seventies radical feminism was driven by the acknowledgment that women, just like everyone else, are multidimensional. In fact, that's a universal reality about all people, but women historically have borne the weight of being delimited and constrained to one set of denigrated qualities or characteristics that mask their full potential. Feminists argued: it doesn't matter what your gender is, you can be loving and hateful and selfish and magnanimous and all of these different things in any physical body. It's all about creating a world where people, regardless of their gender, can inhabit the multiplicity of their being in a nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental way. Second-wave feminism was a movement focused on reclaiming or retrieving the multidimensionality of humanity for *everyone*. I love that *Inside Out 2* ends with this image of a shape-shifting form. It's fluid in the sense of being able to be flexible and adaptive, but it's not just liquid, it doesn't just dissolve; instead, it's able to change shape in response to different emotional contexts. That's such a beautiful message, and it has clearly resonated with audiences.

AB: Your comments on *Inside Out 2* anticipate another question I have. In your work you focus on popular cultural objects, from the comic strip to the Hollywood film, finding in these objects a repository of cultural forms that expand what is thinkable. Yet, I wonder, as an explicitly gay cultural politics proliferates new forms that are taken up, replicated, and transmuted across heavily commodified and mainstreamed genres, do these forms lose their original radical potential? I have in mind something like Peter Bürger's famous critique of the modernist avant-garde, which derives its putative political force from a shock value that inevitably wears off as the forms it generates become repeated and familiar.[12]

RF: A form only loses its original historical context as it travels across space and time. But everything else about it, including what meanings people come to attach to it, its political effects or potential to transform hearts and minds, is completely dependent on what people decide to do with that form. Once popular culture enters the

universe of mass interpretation, we don't know what will happen to it, since it begins to infiltrate the social and imaginative universes of countless people. To give a striking example: James Cameron directs the movie *Avatar* (2009), and it becomes a national blockbuster. Critics in the United States talk about how racist and fetishizing it is, how it thinks it's offering this amazing critique of Indigenous genocide but is in fact reproducing the very logics of white supremacy.[13] And then, within months of the film's original release, Palestinians are painting their faces blue and wearing Elvin ears just like the oppressed alien tribe depicted in the movie, the Na'vi.[14] Suddenly, an imaginative form understood as politically retrograde in one context is taken up to do radical decolonial work in another. Of course, today, the Na'vi can no longer function as a figure of radical freedom for Palestinians living under nigh-apocalyptic conditions.[15] This form had a certain shelf life; maybe it will come back later, or maybe it won't. A form, a style, a rebellious way of being in the world, can be completely co-opted in any number of ways: transformed into a consumer style, made mainstream, appropriated by people who know nothing about its cultural origins—you name it. Once it's in the world, every form will run out of its use value politically, but that doesn't mean it can't accrue new meanings or return revivified under unexpected conditions. The point is that if we want to be invested in transformative social-justice politics, we always have to be inventing new forms, leaving them to the world as a gift, and letting people do with them what they will. And when we see that a certain form or figure or popular representation seems to be running aground or reaching its limit, we craft something else. We don't have to throw that earlier form away. We don't have to negate it. We just have to add to our storehouse of ideas. Form is a proliferative, additive logic rather than a subtractive one.

We might recall here Edward Said's concept of "traveling theory."[16] He uses this idea to trace how vibrant theoretical concepts emerge out of specific historical conditions and then travel to new places, sometimes diluting the original theory but at other times enlivening it. Popular cultural objects all travel—to new contexts, platforms, and audiences—and they do things for people in different environments that can never be anticipated. As Said underscores, the role

of the cultural critic is to understand the original worldly context out of which a certain novel, movie, drama, political speech, poem, or critical theory emerged, so that we can then grasp how it is altered or deformed in its unpredictable travels. Only with this rich dual understanding of the text's origins *and* its unfolding movement across time and space can the critic judge whether its formal content is being vitalized or diminished wherever it goes next.

AB: There are plenty of people who claim that certain cultural objects are so completely commodified and appropriated as to be useless, or that they embody many forms of violence. I think it's a helpful exercise to also ask what we *can* do with these objects. Or, as I hear you saying, if capitalism can appropriate and re-signify forms, so can we. Why could we not? I also think we often have this turn of phrase in literary studies or cultural studies where we say "the text does this" or "the object does this" or "the form does this." That's an obfuscation of the real critical labor that goes into unearthing how it does something or making it do something. It's a fetishistic transfer of the reader's work onto the now personified object of critique. By contrast, it seems like, for you, the power of forms is also a question of the power of formalist interpretation.

RF: Exactly. It's the power of the interpretive encounter between the reader and the text. And, if it's not that, then why do we care about it? There's a million ways to get at or illuminate the interpretive moment when the formal qualities of a given cultural object collide with the imagination of a specific audience. It doesn't mean you have to go do qualitative sociological analysis of audiences, though you certainly could. But you could also interview some readers every once in a while, read online comments and blogs, invite fans to write you about their love of certain cultural texts, talk to the creators of the works you're studying, interview local bookstore owners, or whatever other method inspires you.

AB: Reader response theory as it was originally set out often assumes what a universal "reader" is getting out of the text or covertly says what the specific reader—as in, the individual critic who is writing—is getting out of the text. There's less research into how

these texts are actually being read and interpreted by their primary, public audiences. I found that really compelling in your chapter about Armistead Maupin's serial in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Tales of the City*.[17] As I read your claims in the introduction of *Queer Forms* about how popular forms have the potential to change minds, I found myself thinking, Well, how do we know? We always say stuff like that. But then I read the chapter in which you actually went out and interviewed readers of *Tales of the City* to see if their minds had changed.

RF: Interviewing readers of *Tales of the City* was a life-transformative experience for me. Because the fact is, as literary and cultural studies scholars we are incredibly skilled at explaining the multidimensional meanings that spin out of texts in various contexts, but we are really bad at explaining how culture actually changes the way people think and act in the world. Cultural objects work on our imagination and psyches in tandem with millions of other factors that are shaping our lives at any given moment. And we can't always distill what exact effect that object is having in any singular way. But you can bridge a lot of that gap by talking to actual people who read and watch the texts you intend to study. In doing so, you can start to make much richer and more convincing arguments about how cultural objects affect people's lives by going and learning more about the people who read, view, and engage with this material and what it did to them.

What moved me deeply in my research on *Tales of the City* was the realization that the narrative's bold depiction of queer sex and friendship was colliding with the everyday lives of San Franciscans. It was the collision of the text with the historical moment of the queer and feminist 1970s, reader's everyday sex lives, and the conversations they were having with friends, family members, and coworkers that was working on and transforming them collectively. When I interviewed original readers of *Tales of the City*, many of them told me that they found themselves and their friends becoming less homophobic over time as they read that story in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. This was happening because Maupin's audience members were communally reading a story about queer friends trying to make it in San Francisco, while those same readers were continually sharing their

own experiences of trying to carve out a new life in a rapidly changing metropolis with one another. Expressing their distinct viewpoints on Maupin's narrative soap opera was by extension a way of revealing their own approach to navigating life in an increasingly gay and multiracial city, which slowly but surely inspired friends, roommates, family members, and coworkers to consider relating to one another's lives in new and unexpected ways. Moreover, Maupin's constant references to gay cultural sites in the city—like the Stud nightclub or the so-called social Safeway, where gay and straight grocery shoppers would regularly go to cruise—also encouraged readers to visit queer urban spaces they might have otherwise ignored or avoided, thus helping them ingrain new bodily habits while developing greater ease and comfort entering unfamiliar queer social and sexual environments.

As a result of these interviews, I was able to actually show the through line between reading a queer cultural text and material changes in how people thought and lived in the latter half of the 1970s. That was a true intellectual gift. I think that more people in literary studies should be doing this kind of research to strengthen our ability to make bolder arguments about how literature and culture impact the way people live and behave. We often make grand theoretical pronouncements about large systems like neoliberalism, white supremacy, and late capitalism, but we really don't talk a lot about what's happening on the ground to actual people and when they encounter cultural products.

AB: Your current project, as I understand it, focuses on the coalescence between psychedelic and readerly experience. What are you working on now, and how does it relate to your previous work on form?

RF: I'm writing a new book titled *Literary Theory on Acid: Reading for Diversity in the Psychedelic Era*. This project explores how psychedelic experience can be a powerful tool for helping people negotiate difference and diversity in more ethical ways during a period of seemingly unrelenting xenophobia. It strikes me that one of the great crises of the contemporary moment is the increasing inability of people to simply deal with diversity nonviolently. The basic

reality that other people are not like you seems to have created such levels of stress, anxiety, and frustration that people often choose to deal with it by annihilating others. I'm horrified by this, of course. But I'm also fascinated why it is that the contemporary humanities—which since the 1960s has set about preparing young people to understand and positively respond to the world's inherent diversity—seems to have failed to make our populace more attuned to and ethically oriented toward difference. By focusing and drilling down so aggressively on studying ideological structures that create systemic harms, we ended up not really training young people in *negotiating* diversity but simply in being able to identify, name, and analyze the ways we fail to do so. To be clear, humanities education is by no means to blame for the world's rising xenophobia; in fact, in some ways it's one of our last best hopes for stemming the tide of xenophobic hatred that is overtaking our society. But I do think the humanities inadvertently contributed to a disconnect between *recognizing* structural oppression and actually *practicing* cosmopolitan encounter with strangers, which is a necessary part of coming to terms with radical difference in an immediate, material way.

The contemporary psychedelic renaissance shares uncanny parallels with this quagmire because its primary project is to help people heal from systemic harm. Psychedelic therapy uses psychoactive substances to help people recover from addiction, obsessive compulsive disorder, depression, and PTSD—forms of psychic distress caused by structurally dysfunctional realities like patriarchal oppression, white supremacy, environmental crisis, war and displacement, and endless forms of sexual and emotional abuse. Under certain contexts, psychedelics have the potential to radically alter the frameworks within which one understands the world and their relationship to it, thus helping to break down deeply entrenched or rigid habits of thought. What I want to do in the book is to create a dialogue between psychedelic studies and literary and cultural studies to show that both of them have a lot to learn from each other as healing projects that use the transformative power of aesthetic experiences—on the one hand, affectively rich encounters with art and culture, on the other, equally ecstatic somatic experiences—to affect long-term positive psychological change. Literary studies needs to relearn some of its own

most radical ideals by being psychedelically transformed (figuratively dropping acid), which would break the field out of its obsession with focusing on harm, marginalization, and oppression. This is not to say we need post-critique or surface reading. It's not to say that we should be leaving behind actual critical thought. It is to say that we should be expanding the entire sensorium that we use to study the world. Psychedelic experience is intense; it activates all of the senses and can under certain circumstances help attune us to the world's astonishing diversity and multiplicity. Literary studies needs to be revivified in just this way. Correspondingly, psychedelic studies has much to glean from the interpretive multiplicity of cultural analysis. After all, we're learning that a lot of the reason people heal when they take psychedelics in a therapeutic setting is because of the ways they interpret the experience they had while they were on a psychedelic journey. Interpretation, of course, is the province of literary and cultural studies. That's what we do for a living: we study different modes of interpretation. Why doesn't psychedelic studies learn something from us?

Ultimately, I'm creating this dialogue in order to say there's an extremely crucial role that the humanities has to play in this next period of human history, which is to train generations of young people to be able to access the full range of their emotions, which can potentially improve their ability to encounter the world's variation with curiosity, gentleness, and wonder, rather than fear, anxiety, or defensive rage. From this view I encourage humanists to rethink our work as basically another form of psychedelic therapy. The humanities classroom might be reconceived of as a place where we use books and cultural objects instead of psychoactive drugs to viscerally impact the minds of students, while providing a welcoming weekly space to process and make meaning of the materials they've encountered. This space isn't a replacement for clinical therapy. But it is certainly *therapeutic*, providing a setting to work through complex emotions in the name of producing less abusive, less traumatized, more emotionally expansive and flexible members of a putatively democratic culture whose mature relationship to life's complexity enables them to be effective judges of what constitutes the good life in distinct contexts.

AB: It seems like there's an analogy to be made between the ability of a psychedelic way of reading to transport a student beyond a kind of narrow sense of self and its ability to transport the discipline of literary studies beyond what has become a perverse and all-consuming anxiety about and interrogation of its own self-worth.

RF: Amen! I love how you put it. If we could learn one lesson from psychedelic therapy, it would be the necessity to heal and move on from our core wound: the painful injury of our low sense of self-worth as literary and cultural studies scholars. The field's perennial anxiety about its own value is essentially a narcissistic or navel-gazing project of remaining mired in our unprocessed trauma. If we are going to try and help young people work through the devastating effects of late-stage racial capitalism, we need to actually get over our own personal hang-ups about the meaning, value, or worth of the study of literature (capital or lowercase L, however you prefer). By moving past this seemingly endless melancholic attachment, we can revivify literary and cultural studies as a healing practice that has material psychological benefits for the entire species.

AB: One thing that I have noticed across your work is an emphasis on culture's capacity to positively reshape us, to enlarge our sensoria, to dissolve our inhibitions, and to attune us empathically to others. You have written that literature has a "therapeutic role" that can remind us to "live and think far beyond cynicism, paralysis, or despair."[18] What is lost when queer theory focuses only on unpleasant or ambivalent affects?

RF: Well, number one, what is lost is our hold on real life. Real life is everything, everywhere, all at once, right? Real life is "all the feels." It's the worst, it's the best, it's beauty, it's love, it's ugliness and bile, it's confusion and bewilderment, it's awe and splendor, it's boredom and exhaustion, it's peace and contentment. Life is never composed of any one set of affects or states of mind but all of them. In sum, by allowing negativity to take up so much space in our intellectual imagination, we lose a sense of groundedness in worldly reality, we lose the capacity to produce meaningful knowledge about the queer and feminist past, and we lose a sense of culture as a living laboratory of ideas

that ultimately exceeds all of our theoretical frameworks. The beauty of culture is that it will never be captured by any of our theories, any of our ideologies, or even by the history in which it was produced. It will always escape; it will always travel. Ellen Rooney says it best: "When the text bites back, it rewrites [our] assumptions and commitments. . . . Form is its sharpened tooth."[19] What she means is that form is that thing which will always escape any attempt to explain or contain a cultural object with our most ironclad theories or concepts, because it will travel to new contexts and do things we could never expect or anticipate. What I wish for is our willingness to accept that we cannot know what shape or form queerness, femininity, transness, Blackness, or any other of our most cherished categories will take in advance of their emergence. Instead of trying to adjudicate what is queer or what is not, what is radical or what is liberal, what looks like constraint or what looks like freedom, what if we allowed the cultural around us to provide fresh, unexpected, and dazzling forms of life that may very well upend, reframe, or reject these frames completely? That requires an imaginative openness to unpredictability that popular culture is so good at exploring, and my work is dedicated to traversing the unknown paths it invites us to travel.

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Notes

1. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
2. Crawford, *Transgender Architectonics*, 32.
3. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 39.
4. "In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*" (Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 19).
5. All quotations in this paragraph appear in Bataille, "Formless," 31.
6. See Fawaz, *Queer Forms*, 159–96.
7. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 123–51.
8. Zerilli, "Doing without Knowing," 435.
9. Fawaz, *Queer Forms*, 18.
10. See Fawaz, "Feminism Is for Beginners."
11. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 93–124.
12. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 55–82.
13. See, e.g., *NPR*, "'Avatar' a Box Office Hit."
14. *Telegraph*, "Palestinians Dressed as the Na'vi."
15. More recently, Indigenous people have spoken out against the appropriation of Indigenous culture in a sequel, *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022). See Chery, "Indigenous People Slam *Avatar* (Again)."
16. Said, "Traveling Theory."
17. See Fawaz, *Queer Forms*, 197–245.
18. Fawaz, "Literary Theory on Acid," 139–40.
19. Rooney, "Form and Contentment," 39.

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