Affordance

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The critical term "affordance" comes with its own set of affordances these days—at least when used in the context of academic literary studies. The terminology of affordances has mostly been attached to one camp in a lively, sometimes even fierce debate on methodology in the humanities during the height of the Coronavirus pandemic.[1] From this conceptual angle, the connection of affordances and collective agency figures strongly as it concerns the projected relationship of art works and other cultural products with their audiences. There are pronounced differences, however, in the way critics inquire into the conjoined questions of which types of collective agency aesthetic objects afford and which aesthetic forms may rise as a result of collective action. Rita Felski, one of the protagonists of this recent skirmish, has productively deployed the language of affordances in her advocacy of a new brand of postcritique.[2] Yet, the partly polemical appeal of Felski's postcritical program is not inherently bound up with the explanatory reach of the idea of affordances. In a broader context, Caroline Levine's adaptation of the affordance concept has likely done the most to turn this term into a spreadable notion in literary studies.[3] So spreadable, indeed, that Levine's "affordance formalism" has already received significant blowback.[4] This short essay looks beyond current method

1 See Brasch and Starre on what has been dubbed the "method wars" and on the broader conversation regarding methodology in literary studies.

2 See especially her most recent book *Hooked: Art as Attachment* (2020).

3 Winfried Fluck has usefully discussed both Felski's *Limits of Critique* and Levine's *Forms* in a review essay in *American Literary History*. As Fluck describes, Felski's call for postcritical literary studies resonates with Levine's work, even though Levine does not explicitly frame her work as a form of postcritique: "If one asks what book provides the most convincing countermodel to critique, Levine's is often the book mentioned first" (231).

4 In *Life-Destroying Diagrams*, Eugenie Brinkema takes issue with Levine's practice of reading for forms only "insofar as they can be instrumentalized for the sake of something else, converted into confirming the logic of the political or social" (259). Stressing her own approach of "radical formalism," Brinkema holds, "all affordance formalisms write around the great potential of reading for form, which is precisely that it neutralizes and suspends and disimplicates critical oppositions, inserts irresponsible difficulties, unsteadies, unseats, works over yes and even wrecks" (260).

debates, first sketching a brief history of the affordance concept in the humanities and then testing out its critical potential using several suggestive medial artifacts and aesthetic forms that emerged in the context of Black Lives Matter activism in the United States.

The ur-text for today's critical affordance discourse is James Gibson's brief chapter "The Theory of Affordances," published originally in 1979 in Gibson's collection *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Gibson, a psychologist and expert on the mind's processing of visual information, wrote in quite a blunt way about his development of the term: "The verb to afford is in the dictionary, but the noun affordance is not. I have made it up" (Gibson 127).[5] He originally theorized about this notion with regard to animals and their cognitive and behavioral interactions with the environment. In this context, "[t]he affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (127). Gibson stresses that while environmental affordances certainly derive from material properties, they are still tied to the specific experience of each individual animal species and therefore emerge in between animal and environment:

> An important fact about the affordances of the environment is that they are in a sense objective, real, and physical, unlike values and meanings, which are often supposed to be subjective, phenomenal, and mental. But, actually, an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer. (129)

In this formulation, the notion of affordances becomes somewhat of a media-theoretical concept. It probes the material-semiotic sphere between objects in the world and their perceivers or handlers. As such, it appears like a short intellectual path from Gibson's modeling of animals and their surrounding objects to the interaction of humans and the media that surround them.

Before the concept ever entered literary and cultural studies in any substantive way, however, a few more decades passed. Donald Norman's book *The Design of Everyday Things*, originally published in 1988 and then revised and expanded in 2013, modified Gibson's framework and zeroed in on the human-made environment and the ways in which it suggests or forecloses certain types of behavior. Norman adapted "affordances" for the field of design and simultaneously popularized the concept with his succinct definition of affordance as the "relationship between a physical

5 The *Oxford English Dictionary* indeed credits James Gibson with the original coinage of the term, citing a paper by Gibson from 1966 as the first recorded instance ("affordance, n.", def. 2).

object and a person (or for that matter, any interacting agent, whether animal or human, or even machines and robots). An affordance is a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used" (Norman 11).[6] Hardly any critical modeling of the term these days fails to integrate Norman's work.[7] In his book, Norman recounts how he developed his approach in close intellectual (and personal) exchange with James Gibson, with whom he ultimately disagreed on the perceptual and mental processes that influence human agency vis à vis the use of objects.

The big bang for the spread of affordance-thinking in literary studies arrived with Caroline Levine's book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), perhaps the most widely read, discussed, and cited book of literary theory from the 2010s. Levine's critical intervention merges an interest in literary forms with the relational impulse of Gibson's and Norman's thinking, seeing affordances as "the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs" (*Forms* 6). For Levine, affordance thinking usefully and strategically extends across aesthetic and political registers. For one, this merger appears urgent to Levine because it can rearticulate the literary and the social reach of various forms:

> Every form constrains, but it also enables—it capacitates. If an enclosed space shuts in and excludes, it also affords security and shelter, a desirable space away from noise and cold. If the welfare state needs to tag everyone with an identification number to make sure they receive adequate nutrition and healthcare, or if the university needs to establish a timetable to make sure that all classes can find spaces to meet, these are not only structures of domination: they are forms that enable collective health and education. ("Not Against" 257)

One can see here how, rhetorically, Levine coordinates constraints and potentialities via the notion of affordance. For another, Levine claims that thinking in terms of affordances injects new energy into progressive political action *and* socially engaged literary criticism. Thereby, literary hermeneutics may become a tool translatable to the study of collective agency in non-literary domains: "To my mind, then, the value of literary studies lies not in our objects but in our methods, which we can bring to

6 For an up-to-date and comprehensive overview chronicling the rise of affordance thinking in design studies, see Davis's chapter "A Brief History of Affordances" in her book *How Artifacts Afford* (25–43).

7 While Levine pays her debts to Norman only in a brief footnote (Levine, *Forms* 152, fn. 15), studies by Serpell and Dahn, who expand on Levine's work, discuss Norman's influence more explicitly (see Dahn 9–10; Serpell 21–22). Serpell also notes that Eleanor Gibson, James Gibson's wife, published work that applied the theory of affordances to the psychology of reading and the formal features of text (Serpell 22; 315, fn. 85).

many urgent sites of injustice, from prison systems to climate change and from urban inequality to contemporary racism" ("Not Against" 257). The path outlined here has recently taken Levine towards questions of ecological sustainability, leading to suggestive revaluations of literary forms, e.g. novelistic happy endings, which suddenly appear to offer a viable aesthetic response to the biospheric pressures of the Anthropocene. In the nonfiction narrative of Matthew Desmond's *Evicted*, a prize-winning and widely read sociological account of poverty and homelessness in the U.S., Levine locates a model of a "collective happy ending," arguing that this is "precisely the aesthetic form that we need most urgently now, in this age of mass precarity" ("Not Against" 259).[8]

I would argue that it is no coincidence that Levine uses a sociological account as one of her key examples for an agentic narrative form. In her book *Forms*, she had already resorted to the quasi-sociological vision of the television series *The Wire* as the network-narrative that best represents her literary-theoretical investments. In the concept of affordances and the operative term "to afford," scholars like Levine, Felski, and Serpell have found a fitting rhetorical tool that can be used to tie together aesthetics and agency. Deployed in this form, the concept steers clear of several forms of determinism: text determinism (i.e., the notion that the literary text implants its meanings directly in the reader, often associated with the New Criticism); reader determinism (i.e., the notion that active readers can bend textual meaning in surprising ways, as reader-response criticism or British Cultural Studies stressed); or finally technological or medial determinism (i.e., the paradigm of McLuhanite media studies, which sees the phenomenal form of carrier media trump their ideational content). Affordance thinking thus complicates critical accounts that accord direct political agency to texts just as much as it curtails conceptions of agency exclusively attuned to anthropocentric understandings of social and cultural environments.

With regard to distinct twenty-first-century developments at the intersection of aesthetics and collective agency, the evolving media constellations in the field of cultural production and consumption appear as perhaps the most decisive sea change. As I have written elsewhere, the affordances of print media have shifted considerably—in Gibson's relational fashion—since screens have become the ubiquitous medium of display and dispersion (see Starre, *Metamedia*). Where some forms of printed communication, for example pamphlets and periodicals, have afforded greater flexibility and spreadability across the nineteenth and twentieth century than the codex book, the introduction of cell phones and tablets has mobilized textual communication even further, such that a printed copy of a daily newspaper today possesses wholly different medial affordances than one produced in the 1990s. In turn, digitization has allowed scholars to see previous communication systems

8 For another consideration of Desmond's work and its relevance for literary and cultural studies, see Starre, "Thick Description."

in a differential light, highlighting in a much clearer fashion the affordances of "old" media that can now be studied anew. Eurie Dahn's work on the magazine networks of the Jim Crow era is an excellent example of this trend in scholarship. Building on Norman's and Levine's affordance concepts, Dahn outlines the medial constraints and possibilities that periodicals embody: "Periodicals by their very form explicitly […] afford [a] non-linear mode of reading and overall fluidity via tables of contents that offer the option to pick and choose what the reader might read and in what order. […] Periodicals also afford non-linearity through the incorporation of calls to turn to certain pages to read the endings of various articles and insertions of advertisements that often interrupt articles, both visually and narratively" (11). As Dahn further explains, the network structures inherent in magazine production demand models of distributed agency on the part of critics.

As we have seen, affordance thinking has triggered renewed interest in the distribution of agency among various mediators (to use Bruno Latour's terminology) in the process of social (and aesthetic) communication. Yet how can we scale up this framework to the unprecedented levels of collective agency that became visible and readable in the digitally enhanced social movements of the twenty-first century, from Black Lives Matter to Fridays for Future?

For one, I would suggest, Dahn's historical insights into the network-building affordances of print magazines also apply in the age of social media. One of the most crystallizing and polarizing flashpoints of the recent reckoning with the legacies of slavery and racial domination in the United States took the form of a magazine: the hotly debated special issue of the *The New York Times* called the "1619 Project," published in 2019 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first ship carrying enslaved Africans in the colony of Virginia. The whole project—spanning across the Sunday, August 18, 2019 edition of the *NYT* and including an extended, lavishly designed online feature on the newspaper's website—is an instructive case study in the affordances of medial objects in a multimedia ecology. Conceived by the journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, the 1619 Project's core is a special issue of the *NYT Magazine*, which comprises a framing essay by Hannah-Jones, several historical and critical pieces by experts and columnists such as Matthew Desmond, Linda Villarosa, Kevin M. Kruse, Jamelle Bouie, and a "literary timeline" featuring creative works by contemporary Black artists and writers reacting to historical events or notable figures. In the age of printed mass magazines at the beginning of the twentieth century, the periodical form stood as the mobile, flexible, somewhat fleeting medial counterpart to the steady print culture of the book. Periodicals in the age of Jim Crow, as described by Dahn, were instrumental in creating and sustaining translocal networks of Black readers and Black activists. In today's hybrid social movements that pair "old" forms of public protest in the street with "new" forms of digital networking and hashtag activism, the form of the printed magazine carries a different set of affordances. The 1619 Project solidified and archived the public reckoning with

the legacy of race in the U.S. in the late 2010s. Then, in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder and the even more widespread Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the 1619 Project became part of a national conversation and a fierce symbolic struggle surrounding the 2020 presidential election.

Approaching the 1619 Project as a literary scholar from the angle of affordances, one would neither exclusively seek to analyze individual essays, visual items, or poems in the magazine (though close readings remain important micro-level components). Nor would one solely attempt to measure the magazine's impact with relation to what it says about or does to some grand, abstract entity like "U.S. society." Rather, a critical account of the magazine's affordances would address the meso level (in Simone Murray's terms) or the midlevel scale (in Rita Felski's terms).[9] In its institutional and medial framing, the 1619 magazine certainly aims to foster collective agency. On its final pages, it features a message to educators, pointing them to a dedicated website at the Pulitzer Center that includes lesson plans, historical resources, suggestions for activities. Furthermore, the Pulitzer website contains a downloadable PDF of the entire magazine, suggesting that the contents can be spread free of charge and outside of the *New York Times* paywall. On the aesthetic side, another insert to the *NYT* special edition deserves notice: a sixteen-page insert formatted in the traditional broadsheet paper dimensions, featuring visual reproductions of items from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. This expansive format is underscored by its front page, which features a reproduction of a broadside print from 1858, advertising a slave auction in New Orleans. Superimposed across this striking image is a slogan from the late historian John Hope Franklin reading "We've Got to Tell the Unvarnished Truth." The slogan is rendered in a glaring yellow font, replicating the slab-serif lettering of the slave auction broadside. In this aesthetic format, the magazine affords a reflexive confrontation with the print culture of the American slave system. The mediated historical forms of American racial subjection collide with a contemporary media product geared towards progressive historical revisionism and racial justice. The *NYT* 1619 Project, we may conclude, figured as a materialized node in the Black Lives Matter moment of contemporary US politics.[10] In triggering both progressive and reactionary responses, the mass-produced and widely circulated print object briefly syn-

9 See Felski, *Hooked* 144–45 as well as Murray, "Varieties".

10 In his ecological theory of political organization, Rodrigo Nunes holds that non-hierarchical collectives can benefit from "nodes or groups of nodes that animate an area or network, performing the function of concentrating the collective capacity to act in certain directions" (203). From the angle of media affordances, I would submit that it is not just groups of people or organizations which can fill this node position, as Nunes suggests, but also aesthetic objects. In her chapter in this volume, Simone Knewitz expands on the conceptual benefits of Nunes's work for modeling collective agency.

chronized the multifarious public conversations and offered a sustained attempt at shaping collective identity (e.g. in the emphatic "we" of Hannah-Jones's lead essay).

As a literary scholar with an interest in print culture and the institutional frameworks of American literary history, I find myself drawn towards similar moments during which we can observe the coalescing of collective agency (a really difficult phenomenon to track) into more ordered and recognizable communities and groups. Murray's description of the "mid-level" in the twenty-first-century literary field is on point in this regard: "[I]n the literary studies context, the various institutions of authorship, publishing, retailing, reviewing, and readership provide compelling 'mid-level' analytical frames for compiling thick descriptions of precisely how digital media are fundamentally reconceptualizing literary culture" (par. 8). There are multiple ways in which the Black Lives Matter moment has been reshaping the American literary field, running the gamut from a renewed interest in Black literary history, to increased diversity efforts at publishing houses, and to new bookselling strategies attuned to "books about race."[11] At the intersection of social activism and U.S. literary culture (or at least: reading culture), the past few years have seen the emergence of two closely related, crowd-driven forms that afford specific forms of aesthetic engagement and collective agency: the hashtag syllabus and the antiracist reading list.

In August 2014, the city of Ferguson, Missouri was reeling from the aftermath of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson. The nightly unrest on the streets of Ferguson was met with a fierce response by local police, which employed military-style tactics and equipment. The scene became a media event and it sparked the Twitter campaign #FergusonSyllabus to pair direct forms of activism with a reading-centered approach, initiated by Marcia Chatelein, a history professor at Georgetown University.[12] After several more horrific instances of racialized violence in the years after Ferguson, the hashtag syllabus became a recognizable form, for example in the most formally ambitious hashtag syllabus: the Charleston Syllabus, conceived in 2015 by Chad Williams and Keisha N. Blain in response to the white supremacist terrorist attack at a Black church in Charleston, South Carolina. Since then, further U.S.-American hashtag syllabi emerged to address momentous concerns and events, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, the Trump presidency, and Indigenous resistance to a pipeline on native land (#StandingRockSyl-

11 On the peculiar marketing strategies regarding "books about race" in the U.S., see McGrath.

12 In an essay in *The Atlantic*, Chatelein remembers how she started this activity: "My idea was simple, but has resonated across the country: Reach out to the educators who use Twitter. Ask them to commit to talking about Ferguson on the first day of classes. Suggest a book, an article, a film, a song, a piece of artwork, or an assignment that speaks to some aspect of Ferguson. Use the hashtag: #FergusonSyllabus."

labus).[13] These digitally curated syllabi are not merely imitations of collegiate documents, as Alyssa P. Lyons summarizes:

> Unlike the syllabi found in your typical college classroom, hashtag syllabi are found on the internet and are user-generated, crowdsourced, and strive to be open-access. Hashtag syllabi are often compiled by people inside and outside of the academe, including activists and scholars and are often People of Color, women, and other minoritized peoples. Some associate the open access aspect of the hashtag syllabi to imply low quality or not peer-reviewed academic work. In reality, this allows users—members of the broader public—to read, access, sometimes modify, and contribute to the works contained within the syllabi. (17)

Lyons stresses the process-driven, somewhat messy quality of these born-digital syllabi, which sets them apart from the carefully worded and intricately structured documents distributed to students on the first day of class on campus.

In the aftermath of the George Floyd protests of 2020, a much tidier, but also often collectively authored format emerged alongside the hashtag syllabus: the antiracist reading list. The writer and activist Ibram X. Kendi had already published an antiracist reading list in the *New York Times* in May 2019. In 2020, a slew of American institutions followed Kendi's lead, with colleges, publishers, non-profits, and other cultural institutions offering up similar reading lists.[14] While many of these lists lean heavily on historical and sociological accounts, most of them also accord considerable space to poems, novels, or memoirs. While it would be a worthwhile undertaking to consider the *contents* of these syllabi and lists, I wish to briefly inquire into what it would mean to ask for the *affordances* of hashtag syllabi and antiracist reading lists in today's media culture.

As Eva von Contzen has usefully argued, lists have been a feature of script and print culture for a very long time. Yet despite the historical stability of this specific textual format, the affordances of lists have undergone considerable evolution, driven by the changing media environment in which lists are produced. A central affordance of the list format, according to von Contzen, lies in its practical familiarity to readers (322–23). Lists, as compared to more complex aesthetic forms, are mundane, everyday objects that permeate our lived routines (the shopping list, the to-do list, the invitation list …). What is more, in the digital sphere, lists function as the antidote against the informational sprawl contained in the "feeds" of social media and

13 For further references and resources, see Caldwell.

14 The following lists appear somewhat representative of the proliferating antiracist reading lists in the United States: "Anti-Racist Books and Resources for Our Readers" by Penguin Random House; "Racial Justice, Racial Equity, and Anti-Racism Reading List" by the Harvard Kennedy School; "Schomburg Center's Black Liberation Reading List" by the New York Public Library.

news websites: compare the endlessly refreshing stream of Twitter to the brevity and precision of a list of top ten books or films. In this complexity-reducing precision, lists have a paradoxical effect on readers: on the one hand, they exude a seemingly democratic ethos ("you could write a list like this, too"); on the other, they inherently make a claim to authority ("this list of the best books is superior to all other lists").

The antiracist reading list, and by extension the hashtag syllabus, combine the practical affordances of the list with an ethos of reading. As Ibram X. Kendi described the goals of his reading list: "To build a nation of equal opportunity for everyone, we need to dismantle this spurious legacy of our common upbringing. One of the best ways to do this is by reading books." While Kendi and others carefully present their reading lists as provisional and limited, the formal affordances of the list point in another direction: a list with five, or ten, or fifteen books nudges the recipient of these recommendations to treat it like a checklist. In the form of the syllabus, this inherent affordance becomes even clearer: One cannot master a proposed course of study if one does not do the reading. The list carries another affordance: its itemized structure suggests to the list-user that the items on it will fulfil a unified purpose—in this case, further an antiracist education. By the same token, the list form conceals the divergent individual features of its items—and this is especially consequential with regard to aesthetic differences.

Lauren Michele Jackson has criticized antiracist reading lists for their pernicious genre blending:

> [E]ssays slide against memoir and folklore, poetry squeezed on either side by sociological tomes. This, maybe ironically but maybe not, reinforces an already pernicious literary divide that books written by or about minorities are for educational purposes, racism and homophobia and stuff, wholly segregated from matters of form and grammar, lyric and scene. Perhaps better to say that in the world of the anti-racist reading list genre disappears, replaced by the vacuity of self-reference, *the anti-racist book*, a gooey mass.

Jackson points out that the innovative formal features and the complex rendering of language and subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*—a perennial favorite on such lists—may get completely lost in the checklist framing of antiracist reading. Conversely, the ubiquity of these reading lists and the urgency with which they have been circulated in recent years have opened up a broad segment of the market for Black authors and authors of color, propelling Claudia Rankine, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Michelle Alexander and others to the top of the bestseller list. As such, these lists have afforded considerable collective agency, although perhaps in a less explicitly political, than in a commercial way. Nevertheless, the sense of collective identity engendered by the idea of being part of a collective of "antiracist readers" cannot be completely dismissed, even if it overlaps with the market dynamics of U.S. publish-

ing. After all, the radical potential of suggesting or circulating reading materials has long been part of American civil rights movements, from abolitionist pamphlets in the nineteenth century to the bibliographies compiled for the NAACP magazine *The Crisis* under the editorship of W.E.B. Du Bois in the early twentieth century.

In a final twist, these contemporary syllabi and lists export their educational ethos outward from the academy into the public. On campus, the syllabus does not just guide student learning, it also fulfils the functions of a contract between instructor and student and of a permanent institutional record, as Jay Parkes and Mary B. Harris have argued. In the digital reading public, the hashtag syllabus is not contractual; yet it attempts to interpellate a wide array of readers as students. In the U.S. context, this projected expansion of the culture of the school coincides with dwindling numbers of humanities majors and with sustained attacks on humanities education by conservative state governments. Seen as a permanent record, the sprawling archive of reading lists provides a glimpse into the work of canonization under the dictates of a digital attention economy.[15] According to Jackson, the affordances of the reading list severely curtail the aesthetic potentials of Black literature. Nevertheless, these lists and syllabi can also be seen as a strategic attempt by academic readers to foster a para-academic culture of reading that transcends the walls of the neoliberal university. This would entail a much more inclusive sense of canon formation than the one incorporated in the traditional college curriculum. The "rhetorical agency" that allows one to write in an articulate form and effect change through participation in public discourse is of necessity an individualist entity, especially when tied to the legal status of authorship.[16] The act of reading, a likewise solitary endeavor often associated with passivity, has the potential to be reshaped by new forms of curation, aggregation, and medial dissemination into a crucial practice contributing to the formation of collective agency outside of traditional institutions.

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15 As John Guillory has argued, a syllabus is never actually outside the logic of canonicity: "Changing the syllabus cannot mean in any historical context overthrowing the canon, because every construction of a syllabus institutes once again the process of canon formation" (31).

16 See Campbell for an influential rhetorical framing of agency that also stresses collective and participatory dimensions.

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