The Aesthetics of Collective Agency: An Introduction

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Following the brutal killing of the African American George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis at the hands of white police officer Derek Chauvin, the summer of 2020 saw the broadest public protests against racialized violence in U.S. history, spanning across all fifty states (Putnam et al.). The turnout was particularly remarkable in terms of its interracial bent, as significant numbers of white people took to the streets alongside people of color—in Los Angeles, New York City and Washington D.C., 54 percent of protesters were white (Fisher). According to a study by the Pew Research Center, 60 percent of white adults in the U.S. backed the movement in June 2020; among white liberals, support even reached 92 percent (Thomas and Menasce Horowitz). Hitherto, the George Floyd protests constitute the apex of the Black Lives Matter movement that started out with a tweet-turned-hashtag shared by three black queer women, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors, on Black Twitter in 2013 after Trayvon Martin's shooter, George Zimmerman, was acquitted of all charges (Garza 23). Seven years later, the persistent collective efforts of Black activists operating online and in the streets had succeeded not only in bringing the problem of structural racism into the mainstream national conscience, but also in inspiring related social justice movements all over the world.

In the specific form of its political protest, Black Lives Matter is emblematic for one shape collective organization takes in the twenty-first century: Activism operates outside formal political institutions, rejects hierarchical leadership roles in favor of horizontal and networked structures, and tightly interweaves online mobilization and street protest. The organizational forms of contemporary social movements come with their own specific affordances: They tend to bring people together on a platform of specific causes, often drawing on an affective register of indignation. In the case of Black Lives Matter, the precariousness of Black lives—most starkly visible in video footage that documents police violence—has become the center of political struggle (Koivunen et al. 2). Twenty-first-century (progressive) movements emphasize diversity and inclusivity and allow for varying forms of participation, including what has been labeled "hashtag activism" (see, e.g., Jackson et al.). If the range of possible participatory forms and low hierarchies enables movement visibility and bursts of engagement, this form of activism has simultaneously struggled

with becoming sustainable and achieving structural social change. Thus, if Black Lives Matter activists' campaign to "defund the police" in 2020 after Floyd's death resulted in the financial restructuring of police forces in some major American cities, budgets in many places had been restored again only a year later (Goodman).

The trajectory of the Black Lives Matter movement exemplifies how twenty-first-century culture is characterized by profound transformations of the forms of collective organization. The institutions of Western liberal democracies and their economic, political, and social systems (such as political parties, government agencies, unions and churches, corporations) still wield significant political power and continue to shape the ways in which states and societies are organized. Yet new forms of collective agency that are most visible in social protest movements like Black Lives Matter, MeToo, or Fridays For Future, but also the global rise of populism during the past decade, have increasingly put pressure on established systems of collective organization and challenged their legitimacy. Working across disciplinary divides, this volume sets out to interrogate the forms that collective agency takes in the twenty-first century, the conditions that have given rise to these new forms, and how both old and new forms of collective agency are interrogated in literature and media culture.

Our title highlights three organizing forms of collective life in the twenty-first century that speak to the continuity as well as the transformation in practices and aesthetics of collective agency. Corporations are both collective and individual entities, even subjects of rights and duties in the law. While maximizing shareholder value is not a legal imperative, the profit-motif certainly dominates corporate governance today and is a driver of neoliberal globalization. Over the past two decades, this development has accelerated in conjunction with the rise of digital media, as powerful media corporations have emerged and created new forms of collective cooperation that—despite the opportunities that they offer—also remain under the control of said corporations. In contrast to corporations, communities are defined by affective rather than legal ties. Communities are held together by common understandings, norms, rules, or etiquettes; they strive to establish a common history and traditions, which make them enduring rather than temporary. If a shared print culture was at the center of Benedict Anderson's seminal conceptualization of "imagined communities" (1983), in the twenty-first century, a shared digital culture has led to the proliferation of different kinds of communities while transforming established and institutionalized communal forms.

Finally, there is the concept of the crowd, which currently experiences a renaissance not only in the streets, but also in scholarly inquiry in the social sciences and humanities (see, e.g. Jonsson 2014; Borch 2012). First theorized by Gustave Le Bon as a distinct form of collectivity in 1896, crowds have traditionally been conceived rather negatively as primitive, violent and suggestible. They were associated at once with mass democracy and mass tyranny, at times configured as "the people" or "the mob"

(Dean 8–11). In the twenty-first century, they have received an inverted valorization with the idea of the "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki 2004) at work in the collective production of knowledge in the digital sphere. This appropriation of a form associated with political resistance for capital gain significantly impacts on the nature and conditions of political agency in the twenty-first century. Corporations, communities, and crowds therefore not only speak to the potential that forms carry to organize collective life and to the role that cultural conditions play in their unfolding. They also represent different degrees of institutionalization and hence of temporality: from the long durée that is encoded in the (potentially) immortal body of the corporation to the transitory existence of crowds. Such continuities and differences, we argue, point to the latent potentialities of different forms of collective life, as literary scholar Caroline Levine puts it (6), and therefore also to different forms and perhaps degrees of collective agency.

Collective agency, however, often seems elusive—whether as the goal of social movements or as a concept of scholarly inquiry. In their introduction to a recent special issue on group actors, Thomas Gehring and Johannes Marx note that the dominance of methodological individualism in the social sciences has heretofore prevented "a reliable conceptualization of non-hierarchical collective actors" (8). Rather than using the common, simple shortcut by which collective actors are treated as if they were individuals, they demand that scholars attend to the specificities of *collective* agency. As Simone Knewitz likewise notes in her essay in this volume, the concept of collective agency "remains haunted by the framework of individualism, which impacts our ability to conceptualize the collective capacity to act" (24). In the humanities, and in particular in North American literary studies, collectivity and collective agency have somewhat fallen out of fashion as the (realist) novel of the second half of the twentieth and the twenty-first century turned rigorously to the individual: from postwar concerns over *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* to the new sincerity of David Foster Wallace's generation. But as the essays in this volume demonstrate, the social, cultural, and environmental developments since the turn of the millennium have not only contributed to the proliferation of collective forms of organization and agency but have indeed brought new urgency to their study. In this volume, we examine their entanglement in such technoscientific, political, and environmental transformations as well as the narratives of critical futures that they afford, and to do so, we approach them from the vantage point of aesthetic form.

Our conceptualization of collective agency via its form(s) offers us the opportunity to create a dialogue across disciplines: The concept of form on which our conversation builds derives from a broad and functionalist understanding of aesthetics that has emerged in recent scholarship in English and American Studies. In the work of scholars such as Anna Kornbluh and Caroline Levine in particular, form refers to patterns, shapes, and configurations that create order—whether they are aesthetic, political, or social. Abandoning the post-structuralist credo of disruption

that has dominated Anglo-Saxon criticism since the second half of the twentieth century (and in many cases continues to do so), this revalorization of aesthetics is one that understands form as essential to order and order as a value (contrary to poststructuralist suspicions). In the words of Kornbluh, "[f]orm is composed relationality." She argues "that forming is a value unto itself: a value that animates literature, and a value that formalist literary critics can embrace as an alternative to destituent theory. Formalism should study how to compose and direct—rather than ceaselessly oppose—form, formalization, and forms of sociability" (4). This concept of form is explicitly transdisciplinary. In her study *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Levine encourages scholars to analyze how forms carry over their specific affordances into different materials. "[F]orm," Levine writes, "always indicates *an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping*" (3). At bottom, she insists, it is the primary work of *all* form to make order, and, as Kornbluh emphasizes, this order is essentially relationality.

This renaissance of aesthetics and in particular of the affordance formalism à la Levine is not without critics, of course. In *Life-Destroying Diagrams* (2022), Eugenie Brinkema presents an approach to form that runs explicitly counter to Levine's, a "disaffordance formalism" which reads form for form's sake rather than for politics (259). Levine's cheerful invitation to literary and cultural scholars to find forms at work basically everywhere is precisely the problem for Brinkema:

> Projects of finding and recovery […] operate at the expense of the ongoing generation of new and unforeseen lines of thought. The point of radical formalism is not merely to displace contextualist readings, but to activate and launch the speculative potential of texts, one only available through readings that proceed without guarantee. Which is the heart of what reading form entails. One does not know in advance what is as yet undiscovered. (259–260)

While Brinkema's critique does not question the project of formalist aesthetics itself, but, one could say, merely its hermeneutic horizon, Dorothy Wang points to what she sees as troubling omissions in New Formalist conceptions. Wang criticizes Levine for her disregard of writers that have long theorized the relationship between the formal and the social, in particular "a long and substantial tradition of black intellectuals and cultural critics and practitioners who have thought hard and at great length about the inseparability of the formal and the social in the 'real world': Stuart Hall, C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, Amiri Baraka, Édouard Glissant, and, more recently, Fred Moten and the Afropessimists, among others." Wang thus faults the New Formalism for insufficiently engaging with form in the context of "larger sociopolitical structures" including "colonialism and white supremacist racial hierarchies" (223), and thereby makes evident that the New Formalism is neither as new nor quite as comprehensively attuned to the entanglements of social, political, and

aesthetic forms as it projects. Therefore, if many of the scholars in this volume do rely on Levine's work, we urge that it will be only the *beginning* of a longer and more diverse conversation about aesthetic and social forms, patterns, and configurations that shape the cultural imaginaries of collective futures and future collectivities.

While each scholar brings their own disciplinary backgrounds and approaches to the discussion of form, it is the concept of *affordance* that has indeed emerged as significant in many of the contributions and as lending itself particularly well to transdisciplinary inquiries. As Alexander Starre outlines in his contribution to this volume, the term, originally coined by psychologist James Gibson in 1979, was first picked up in design theory, most prominently, in Donald Norman's book *The Design of Everyday Things* (1988), then adopted by Levine to refer to "the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs" (Levine 6; see also Starre 52). In doing so, Starre suggests, she and other scholars working in similar directions "have found a fitting rhetorical tool that can be used to tie together aesthetics and agency" (54).

In this spirit, the structure of *The Aesthetics of Collective Agency* seeks to afford and sustain such scholarly conversations across disciplines. It begins with a section of concise articles in which contributors discuss a number of key concepts (*collective agency, crowd, affordance, genre, digital affect*) that are particularly relevant to the discussions of collectivity and collective agency in this collection. These articles do not attempt to offer encyclopedic breadth or definitory surety but seek to encourage readers to make connections between the contributions, no matter how different their materials or approaches may appear at first. In the first of these, Simone Knewitz examines the overarching concept of collective agency by tracing the twenty-first-century conversation on political organization among political and cultural theorists of the left. She proposes that within these debates, collective agency functions as a desideratum—in the face of urgent global political, social, and ecological problems that can only be solved collectively, the pressing question appears to be how opportunities for political participation, all but eliminated by neoliberal individualism, can be reinvigorated. The article creates a dialogue between hegemonic and post-hegemonic conceptions of agency in contemporary political and cultural theory, but ultimately proposes a move beyond binarisms in the collective quest for a more desirable and sustainable future.

As Knewitz highlights, recent theoretical debates on collective agency have been very much animated by the new social movements of the twenty-first century that registered in the public sphere in the form of—both physical and virtual—crowds. Martin Butler's contribution approaches the concept of the crowd as a highly ambiguous signifier that has been used to render collectivity and collective agency in a variety of historical and medial constellations. Butler examines crowd discourse and its normativities in different domains ranging from politics to scholarship to popular culture. His article focuses on the discursive reemergence of the crowd in new media environments in the twenty-first century both to illustrate how this reemer-

gence is connected to the rise of new social movements in the recent past and to shed light on the ways in which the crowd as collective subject is constituted and takes shape in and through digital media, which, Butler argues, both require and provide different forms of making the crowd visible.

As already noted, the concept of affordance has recently become a widely discussed notion in the humanities, offering a productive way to model the complex relationships of art works and other cultural products with their audiences. Affordance thinking 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. Alexander Starre's essay thus first sketches a brief history of the affordance concept in the works of Gibson, Norman, and Levine, before exploring, in the second part, the affordances of several suggestive medial artifacts and aesthetic forms that emerged in the context of Black Lives Matter activism in the United States. As Starre shows, forms as varied as the *New York Times* "1619 Project," crowdsourced anti-racist reading lists, and so-called "hashtag syllabi" reshape collective agency as they engage the constraints and potentialities of contemporary reading culture.

James Dorson approaches the concept of genre by arguing that the new respectability of genre fiction in twenty-first-century literature is not only symptomatic of a dissatisfaction with literary realism for representing changed realities, but also suggests new possibilities for imagining collective responses to the crises we face. By honing in on two critical aspects of genre fiction—institutionality and temporality—his essay shows how genre fiction shapes patterns of thought that are more amenable to thinking the collective than artistic forms centered around the singularity of creative expression. As a model of literary production based on the mutually constitutive relationship between parts and whole, genre fiction models a process of assemblage congruent with organizational logics. Besides the institutional affordances of genre fiction, popular genres also afford a more expansive definition of time than literary fiction centered around the individual psyche does.

In the section's final contribution, Regina Schober introduces the concept of digital affect to highlight the complex affective relations that circulate between human and digital technology. She discusses digital affect, as a form of collective agency, in relation to three dimensions: Firstly, digital affect can be thought of in terms of network effects: Digital culture is shaped by networks, which function as patterns of complex interaction and exchange. Viral affective responses within these networks engender ambivalent and collective patterns of spread. Secondly, it relates to invisible infrastructures and the "digital banal": The normalization of affective interactions with digital media often obscures the affective stakes of digital experience. Thirdly, digital affect is salient in relation to artificial intelligence, which prompts an array of affective responses that mirror societal hierarchies and reveal human-centric biases. Schober argues that literary fiction can denaturalize as well as "de-

blackbox" digital technology, emphasizing posthuman agency and responsibility. A focus on digital affect reveals a complex interplay between humans and technology, underlining an ethics of care, collective responsibility, and an understanding of affect as a multifaceted and relational force in the digital landscape.

The three sections that follow provide specific case studies which interrogate social, political, and aesthetic forms that afford collective agency in twenty-first-century culture and which ask how these forms overlap, collide, or mutually sustain one another across a variety of materials and media. The second section, "Digital Environments," brings together contributions that reflect on the affordances of digital infrastructures and the discourses that have proliferated on digital technological innovation. Jan-Felix Schrape's essay thus traces the discourse on technology-driven decentralization within the community of technological innovators as well as public debates and social sciences discourses, from the Californian do-it-yourself subculture of the 1960s, the computer counterculture of the 1970s and 1980s, and debates on cyberspace and Web 2.0 in the 1990s and 2000s to present-day ideas of decentralized economic systems. These debates, Schrape argues, share the prospect of overcoming existing social power configurations, the belief that new technological solutions will enable the transfer of hitherto centrally coordinated socio-economic activities to distributed peer-to-peer networks, and the conviction that technologies foster self-organized collectives and new, more potent forms of collective agency. Yet, these optimistic visions tend to obscure empirical developments that point in a contrary direction, towards a recentralization in the Internet economy.

Matti Kangaskoski's article builds on the concepts of knowledge and automation in Bernard Stiegler's philosophy to investigate the affordances and aesthetics of collective agency in the contemporary digital environment. As he stresses, the digital environment, and more specifically digital cultural interfaces such as social media, news apps, streaming services, has a form, and, contrary to what the interfaces promote, this form is far from being neutral or "natural." Driven by the energy of a specific business model, this form encourages certain kinds of actions and modes of engagement and discourages others, while automatically predicting users' behaviors and desires. Kangaskoski proposes that the form of the environment should be considered aesthetic in the sense that it governs its users' senses, experience, and intellect. Viewed in this way, aesthetics is also politics, a question of the sensibility of the "we," of a collection of actors. His essay probes questions such as the following: To what extent, then, does this aesthetic afford the time and processes that foster knowledge? To what extent does the environment enable agency, individual and collective? Are there better alternatives to the current forms of the digital environment?

If Kangaskoski raises fundamental questions regarding the aesthetics and affordances of digital media platforms, Heather Woods's contribution provides a concrete case study by examining how collectives form and participate in collective ac-

tion on the social media platform TikTok. TikTok is a popular short-form social media platform that combines video, audio, text, and hashtags to produce a multimediated experience for users. While it is often dismissed in academic and popular culture as a space for irreverent performance (e.g., dancing), TikTok influences socio-political landscapes on and off the platform. While other social media facilitate collective action, TikTok is a distinct communicative channel that mobilizes platform logics to draw together both the individual and collective through a carefully calibrated experience with a particular, intertextual, hypermobile, and circulatory medium: memes. Woods argues that TikTok's socio-political platform affordances invite users to engage in collective action via the collaborative co-creation of memetic content. To make this argument, the article advances a theory of platform collectivity, or the social condition of contingent, bounded togetherness characterized by shared affiliation in digital spaces.

The third section, "Narrating Collectivity beyond the Human," brings together essays which investigate texts that seek to narrate collectivity beyond the human. Marco Caracciolo's contribution thus examines the forms of collectivity that underlie the experience of online video games. If multiplayer gaming is often plagued by problems such as toxic remarks or skill-based harassment, this tendency can be countered by innovative forms of multiplayer games that are designed to constrain players' interactions and steer them towards more responsible or constructive behavior. Caracciolo focuses on two formal strategies that are implemented by games such as *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2019) and *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware 2022): asynchronous gameplay and constrained communication. While these devices would seem to limit online play, they often have the opposite effect: They encourage creative interactions that are seen by many as particularly meaningful, not only during active gameplay but also in the exchanges that surround game experience. In this way, the article offers a case study on how formal constraints on aesthetic experience may enhance community building.

Stefanie Mueller's contribution examines the affordances of a bureaucratic register for the literary representation of collectivity in times of climate change. In her article on Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) she argues that the novel represents collectives and seeks to build collective agency by drawing on a type of discourse that is representative of the organizational form which is at the center of the novel's plot, a bureaucratic organization. Her analysis identifies the aesthetic and narrative strategies that draw on such a bureaucratic register—from meeting minutes to historical summaries, for example—and highlights their potential to represent collectives democratically. Yet, by discussing bureaucracy's inbuilt tendency towards impersonality, Mueller also questions whether the novel can address readers affectively or provide them with a *feeling* of shared agency.

The volume's final section, "New Forms of Collective Activism," delves into the new forms of political activism that have emerged in the twenty-first century.

Natalya Bekhta's contribution explores the discursive aspects of collective agency within the context of the war in Ukraine. She examines how Ukrainian society in the midst of war works towards finding a new language capable of articulating the dramatic transformations of the social reality and of the nation's own collective (self-)image. She traces this search for language through the function of personal pronouns in a range of works by Serhiy Zhadan and Kateryna Kalytko, including their interviews, essays, dramas and poetry. These two writers have a highly influential standing in contemporary Ukraine, which often leads them to explicitly grapple with the socio-aesthetic stakes of presuming to speak on behalf of a national community—that is, of presuming to speak a language of shared meanings.

If Bekhta highlights the power of language in constructing a national community, Katharina Motyl draws our attention to online platforms as spaces of collective radicalization and dissemination of right-wing ideologies. Her essay analyzes digital anti-feminist forums which encourage users to embrace alt-right ideologies at large, notably white nationalism. This contribution first introduces the four major groups constituting the anti-feminist manosphere and thinks through interconnections between digital media ecologies, anti-feminism, and the alt-right. Subsequently, it highlights the medial strategies alt-right agitators use to entice isolated, disaffected users to join the alt-right collective. Next, it identifies the aesthetics and affective appeals alt-right activists mobilize to conjure a sense of masculine and white domination, to then outline the arguments they make to present anti-feminism and white nationalism as ideologically congruent. The article concludes by arguing that the alt-right has succeeded in convincing white, male users that their feelings of marginalization constitute subversive knowledge regarding the true power dynamics in Western societies, which allegedly not only oppress men, but also privilege racial minorities over white people, who will soon be replaced unless they start resisting.

The final contribution in this section by Katharina Fackler traces how twenty-first-century climate change poetry re-imagines collective agency through tropes of oceanic kinship. It registers how notions of kinship have become central to scholarly, artistic, and activist interventions in debates about the relationship between the human and the more-than-human world. Analyzing Aka Niviâna and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's 2018 video poem "Rise," the article is particularly interested in the ways in which climate change poetry adapts and combines varying forms of oceanic kinship across different social and geographical scales. It suggests that the language of kinship can help nudge climate change discourse beyond dominant settler capitalist and settler environmentalist paradigms by centering Indigenous onto-epistemologies.

As a volume contributing to a book series on "Critical Futures," our essay collection overall is invested in establishing a dialogue between different critical perspectives on contemporary discourses, narratives, and practices that shape our collec-

tive visions of "the future." As the challenges to imagine more ecologically as well as socially and politically equitable futures rise in the twenty-first century, so does the need to interrogate hegemonic narratives of collectivity and collective welfare and to diversify standard concepts of collective agency. Taken together, the articles in this volume provide a rich and multi-faceted starting ground for a transdisciplinary discussion of collectivity and collective agency that acknowledges and takes seriously the crucial role that aesthetic forms play in how they emerge as well as in how they can be sustained.

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