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Crude Matter, Queer Form

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³ See: Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁴ *Insecure*, “Insecure as Fuck,” Episode 1, directed by Melina Matsoukas, written by Issa Rae and Larry Wilmore, HBO, October 9, 2016.

⁵ Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy, “Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation,” *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (2013): 61–63.

⁶ I am thinking of Fred Moten’s work on black aesthetics and expressive modes of black performance emerging from the resistant theatricality of objecthood in artist and philosopher Adrian Piper’s works in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). I am also thinking of Anne Anlin Cheng’s writing on shine and the ornamentalism of Anna May Wong’s stylized Oriental costumes and performance as impervious to the consuming gaze of early twentieth century Hollywood cinema and visual culture in “Shine: On Race, Glamour, and the Modern,” *PMLA* 26, no. 4 (2011): 1022–41.

⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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CRUDE MATTER, QUEER FORM

KYLA TOMPKINS

What is crude matter and what does it have to do with the queerness of form? I want to think, in this brief note, about the matter of crudeness, with its multiple resonances for scholars of materialism who seek to integrate the insights of queer theory—particularly those of queer of color theory—with research into questions of aesthetics and politics. Crudeness appeals to me as a window into form because, like the queer, it signifies so much that is Wrong (or “Rong with a capital ‘R,’” as my friend Matthew says). Crudeness as rawness, for instance, like “crudités”; crudeness as the unrefined or uncivilized, in Claude Lévi-Strauss’ terms; or perhaps crudeness as insolubility or indigestibility. The indigestibility of the crude is both literal and figurative. For example, Ben Jonson described a “crude stomacke” as one that is afflicted by

indigestion, while Milton used the term to describe an inability to digest and synthesize knowledge: “Deep verst in books and shallow in himself, Crude or intoxicate, collecting toys, And trifles.”¹ Crudeness also signals the barbarism of base aesthetics: rough, rude, and blunt, lacking finish or maturity. According to the online urban dictionary—perhaps the right place to go to get the definition of “crude” without conceding to the racialized coding of “urban”—“crude” refers to “a slightly more vile form of the word ‘rude.’ A combination of ‘crap’ and ‘rude.’” Rude is when you throw your underwear at the wall, says the OUD; crude is—well, I’ll let you look it up.²

You can see here that I like crudeness, particularly in its affiliation with what is vulgar or crass. I’m particularly interested here—and I’m still feeling my way through this argument—in the line that we can draw between crude materiality and aesthetic form: that is, if crude materiality is unfinished and raw, does its aesthetic form amount to a rejection of form, aspiring, like spit, toward no form at all—toward the material formlessness that Georges Bataille calls for in his short piece titled “L’Informe”? Or does it perhaps aspire to a form-to-come, a form in the process of formation? A form is that which, by definition, emerges into social—which is to say, politico-aesthetic—legibility, and thus it is worth asking whether formlessness can be seen at all. Isn’t that which is formless by definition illegible? Or by crude materiality do we instead mean organic form, as in the chemical or biological sense of a shape or relation

not mediated by human intervention? In his note on “L’Informe” in the seventh issue of his journal *Documents*, Bataille wrote,

formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world [*“un terme servant à déclasser”*], generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed [*écraser*] everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit [*un crachat*].³

Art historians have wrestled with the question of the form of formlessness and its relation to informal art. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, for instance, famously took up Bataille’s provocation as a manifesto for a kind of anti-modernist art practice.⁴ The art produced in the wake of those conversations explore natural and organic forms, including some that really interest me, such as viscosity, foam, mud, and fat—although the art that explores those organic textures sometimes seems less interesting than the writing that provoked it. I wonder whether this is because, in its commitment to the object-ness of materiality, even the most plastic of art practices tends

to abandon the critical engagement with sensation, movement, and mutation that in fact galvanized Bataille's interest: the onomatopoeic ejaculation of spit (*crachat*) or the crushing (*écraser*) of a spider. It's important not to lose sight of the deep pun that rests on Bataille's use of the term "déclasser," which means to de-categorize but also to render classless, in the Marxian sense. "Classless" here might mean not having social status, or being "low" in class designation—having, in short, socially unacceptable "bad taste." Or no taste at all.

I raise onomatopoeia here (*crachat*) to signal the confusion of the senses I believe Bataille wished to evoke in his writing. But I also want to linger over the haptic phenomenologies and sensualities evoked by the force and movement behind those words. Another way to say this is that movement is the modality through which both form and formlessness can perhaps most productively be understood. Taking up movement and phenomenality as optics through which to put formalism more intensely into conversation with formlessness and, in turn, with crude materiality might bring us to the more creative senses of crude materiality obscured by formalism's traditional investment in consistency, pattern, recurrence, and legibility. Here I diverge from Caroline Levine's recent book on form in which she defines form as "shapes and configurations, all ordering principles [. . .] patterns of repetition and difference" and emphasizes that "it is the work of form to make order."⁵ I want to query Levine's emphasis on consistency and order that structures disciplinarity, with all of its institutional

violence, and that informs, as it were, all of her propositions about what form is. That is, I am not so much in disagreement with Levine as I am coming at the question from a different direction, in thinking about form according to a different temporality. Rather, in more Deleuzian terms, I'd like to think about form as it decays, morphs, and improvises against and ahead of disciplinary programatics. I'm moved here by Deleuze's work in his book on Francis Bacon, in which he writes that Bacon's method is to disrupt representational form via a process of deformation in which "insubordinate colors and traits" interfere with the original: "There is indeed a change of form, but the change of form is a deformation; that is, a creation of original relations which are substituted for the form." This process, Deleuze writes, produces an aesthetic that allows for "haptic" encounters with form in the *process* of formation and deformation.⁶

Crudeness—in the sense of a condition prior to formation—points us toward this immanent labor of aesthetics, naming both the accidents and the concerted work through which something comes into social coherence as an aestheticized object. Here my thinking is very much shaped by my colleague Colleen Rosenfeld, in her forthcoming book *Indecorous Thinking: Figures of Speech in Early Modern Poetics*, specifically her patient explication and understanding of form as process, but also, in some senses, as thought itself.⁷ Crudeness might also point us toward the social resonance of Bataille's term "déclasser"—as the unclassed or even lower class ("déclassé")—and thus

toward the productive possibilities of thinking with the discarded and the deviant. Spit; the sticky. Kinaesthetic and synaesthetic re-orderings. Movements between and below frames of legibility.

To be clear, I understand deviance to encompass the aesthetic expressions that govern the many modes of living that lie outside of aesthetic and political normativity and thus I hope to put my critique into conversation with African American political theory's critique of "respectability politics." Deviance for me thus exists as what Jacques Rancière has defined as the outer limits of politics, a limit he defines as being governed by aesthetics itself. The line from these two schools of thought to the queer is clear, particularly when we foreground the centrality of racialized sexualities to the history of queer deviance itself. And indeed, the crude and the *déclassé* have been queer and minoritized aesthetic weapons since white camp first stole from Black culture in order to cut its teeth in twentieth-century queer life. Deviance, with all of its resonances with departure or movement away from the norm, is the *locus classicus* of queer and otherwise-minoritarian life.

My argument here has been very much shaped by the essays of political scientist Cathy Cohen in which she argues that attentiveness to the social arrangements and choices created by working-class African-Americans, who have, as she points out, always been classified as sexually deviant, might yield resources for thinking through future political formations.⁸

As I already mentioned, I am also influenced here by Rancière's thinking about the link between aesthetics and politics: about the everyday organization of the *sensus communis* as a structure through which the boundaries of what counts as political, and what seems merely aesthetic, are produced.⁹ Finally, too, I want to draw a line between my thoughts on aesthetics here and recent work in disability studies that seeks to understand disability as more than simply another minoritarian rights-based movement, but actually as productive of critical epistemes of its own. As Tobin Siebers and others have noted, from within the political and epistemic project of disability studies, disability might be a mode through which the social might well find that new, future-oriented (re)forms might emerge.¹⁰

But finally and most centrally, my impetus to write this piece has been a deep dislike and distrust of formalist work on aesthetics that seeks to preserve for aesthetics a space of speculation and creation that is apart from politics or history itself, usually via a re-prioritization of literary form. What I have referred to here as "deformation" both represents and acts out how the deviance of crude matter aligns with a project of a *déclassement*—a queer, perverse, or non-normative aesthetic through which scholars and artists might access alternative organizations of the *sensus communis*. Such a project would engage the aesthetic and affective work of art, but it would also center the art—and the artfulness—that emerges from the everyday life of socially deviant peoples, people rendered deformed by capital, or

simply understood as deformed within normative aesthetic frames.¹¹

In thinking with crude matter, then, I wish to offer a different proposal for a neo-formalist aesthetics. Aligned with other minoritarian thinkers, I wish to propose a materialist aesthetics grounded in historical reading but uninterested in Kantian ideals of beauty, or in tracking consistency in the classically formalist sense, or in protecting art from its messy interconnections with the world. We might wish to call this project deformatism. It begins in my understanding of the queer, but it seeks to answer to much, much, more.

/ Notes /

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “crude.”

² *Online Urban Dictionary*, s.v. “crude,” <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=crude>

³ Georges Bataille, “Formless,” *Documents: Doctrines, Archéologie, Beaux-Arts, Ethnographie*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gradhiva, 1929), 382; rpt. in *Vision of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stockl, trans. Allan Stockl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31.

⁴ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A user's guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

⁵ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (New York: Continuum, 2003), 158. My thanks for Hentyle Yapp for pointing me to this text.

⁷ Colleen Rosenfeld, *Indecorous Thinking:*

Figures of Speech in Early Modern Poetics (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

⁸ See Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437–65. See also Cathy J. Cohen, “Deviance as resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1, no. 1 (2004): 27–45.

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

¹⁰ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

¹¹ In this sense, my idea of “deformatism” also draws on Jasbir K. Puar’s contributions to disability studies in “Prognosis time: towards a geopolitics of affect, debility and capacity,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 19, no. 2 (2009): 161–72.

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