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# Unformed Forms: Genre Theory and the Trouble with Caroline Levine's *Forms*

James Dorson

This essay reconsiders the distinction between form and genre that undergirds Caroline Levine's recuperation of formalism in her influential book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* from 2015. My aim is to show that while Levine's new formalism takes literary studies in productive new directions, it also needs to provide a better account of the relationship *between* forms. A closer examination of how forms interact in turn raises a question about the viability of Levine's generalization of form in terms of "affordances" based on design theory. To better account for the relationality of forms, I propose to distinguish between different kinds of forms, particularly between what I call "hard" and "soft" forms. By first comparing Levine's theory of form with recent genre theory, and then by taking two examples, one from society and the other from literature, I argue that Levine's new formalism would benefit from a more process-oriented, reflexive account of formal differentiation.

**Keywords:** New formalism, New Historicism, genre theory, Caroline Levine, *McTeague*, *Herland*

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It is as if there was something unfinished, even unformed, about forms.  
— Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*

In a review essay in *PMLA* from 2007, Marjorie Levinson asks, “What Is New Formalism?” While she identifies a range of new approaches seeking to make formal analysis the centerpiece of literary and cultural studies again, she also notes the wide disparity among emerging formalist approaches. More like a scattered movement, new formalism, she argues, “does not advocate for any particular theory, method, or scholarly practice” (562). The publication of Caroline Levine’s book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* in 2015 changed this. Widely discussed in the humanities, including sparking a *PMLA* issue responding to the book, Levine’s approach is by far the most influential variant of new formalism in the marketplace of ideas today. Her book not only programmatically lays out a formalist approach based on a new expansive definition of form. Part of the reason for the popularity of the book is no doubt also that it synthesizes a number of different formalist approaches, providing a toolkit for aspiring formalists, and that it seeks to bridge the tribal divide between formalism and historicism. Moreover, it advocates the “uses of literature,” to borrow Rita Felski’s phrase (7), at a time when the legitimacy of literary studies has been called into question. In sum, throughout *Forms* Levine develops a methodology that answers the question “What Is New Formalism?,” and shows how the skills of the literary critic may be employed broadly to describe the interaction of different forms in society.

But even as the interaction of forms is central to Levine’s argument, I would like to suggest here that her theory of formal interaction is precisely where her formalism falters. Two of the key claims of Levine’s book are that societies as well as texts consist of multiple forms – i.e., that no form reigns absolute (moving away from the moncausal explanations that have dominated New Historicism) – and that different forms overlap and interact in ways that have the potential to redirect or undercut each other (moving away from complicity critique). By emphasizing the constantly shifting constellations of different forms of organization, both of these interventions seek to provide a more dynamic model of social change than (New Historicist) accounts of the social in terms of a totalizing and determining power. Nevertheless, I argue that Levine’s initial abstraction of forms from historical processes in order to define them in terms of essential qualities works against this goal – and ultimately, in spite of her emphasis on

change, provides a rather static model of social and aesthetic forms. The aim of this essay, then, is to show that while Levine's interventions may take literary criticism in productive new directions, new formalism also needs to provide a better explanation of the relationship between forms – one that, I suggest, genre theory can point us in the direction of. By first comparing Levine's theory of form with recent genre theory, and then by taking two examples, one from society (seen through the lens of organizational sociology) and the other from literature (using Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and Frank Norris's *McTeague* as case studies), I argue that Levine's new formalism would benefit from a more process-oriented, reflexive account of formal differentiation – in other words, to paraphrase Angela Leighton, that there is always something unformed about forms.

### New Formalism and Genre Theory

Although Levinson notes the wide disparity among emerging formalist approaches, she nevertheless distinguishes between two overarching strains of new formalism. On the one hand, there is what she calls “activist formalism”: largely a formalist turn within New Historicism, which seeks “to restore to today's reductive reinscription of historical reading its original focus on form” (559). Activist formalism thus foregrounds “the dialectical model of the artwork,” and it draws on “sources foundational for materialist critique – e.g., Hegel, Marx, Freud, Adorno, Althusser, Jameson” (559). On the other hand, Levinson identifies a “normative formalism,” a reaction *against* New Historicism, whose account of form is derived from “the Aristotelian model (stable and generically expressive self-identity),” and which seeks rather “to bring back a sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature” (559).

Levine's new formalism clearly identifies with activist formalism. She expressly states that “the primary goal of this formalism is radical social change” (18). What makes her formalism activist is what one reviewer describes as her “awesomely broad” (Alworth) definition of form as “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (Levine 3). This expansive definition entails that form is inherently political, since politics, too, “involves activities of ordering, patterning, and shaping” (3). In other words, form is not a symptom of the

political, but is itself the political. The goal of the critic, therefore, cannot be to dig beneath the surface of a text in order to reveal the political unconscious structuring it. As such, if Levine's politicized understanding of form places her in the activist camp of new formalists, her formalism is also aligned with the surface reading that has recently challenged the symptomatic approach characteristic of New Historicism.<sup>1</sup> Borrowing Heather Love's formulation, "close but not deep," Levine holds that the task of the formalist critic is to seek "out pattern over meaning, the intricacy of relations over interpretive depth" (23). Another tenet of New Historicism that she rejects is the search for a single predominant framework determining a text – such as capitalism, racism, nationalism, etc. – because everyday life, as well as texts, for Levine, consists not of "a single hegemonic system or dominant ideology but many forms, all trying to organize us at once" (22). Thus, instead of looking for the underlying cause of something, we should look for how different forms "collide" – a key term for Levine, which she understands as "the strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology" (18). In order to trace these collisions, the critic must attend to the different principles of organization found in any text. Rather than the heroic disclosure of a text's unconscious by the New Historicist critic, then, the aim of new formalism, even as it aspires to "radical social change," is more modest: "a careful, nuanced understanding of the many different and often disconnected arrangements that govern social experience" (18).

So far so good. The trouble with Levine's theory of form arises when she seeks to account for the relationship *among* forms. One of her opening moves is to distinguish form from genre. Form and genre, she argues, "can be differentiated precisely by the different ways in which they traverse time and space" (13). The crucial difference, she observes, is that while genre is "a historically specific and interpretive act" (13), forms are not: "More stable than genre, configurations and arrangements organize materials in distinct and iterable ways no matter what their context or audience. Forms thus migrate across contexts in a way that genres cannot" (13). In other words, while genres change as they move from one context to another, and from one audience to another, forms do not. This definition of forms as "porta-

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Best and Marcus. Levine notes that she builds on their argument (154, n. 42).

ble" (7), to use Levine's term for how forms move without changing, has implications for how forms interact with one another.

If we turn to recent genre theory, the contrast becomes clearer between the different ways that genres and forms interact. Ralph Cohen, in his influential 1986 essay "History and Genre," stresses that genres can only be understood in terms of their interrelation:

A genre does not exist independently; it arises to compete or to contrast with other genres, to complement, augment, interrelate with other genres. Genres do not exist by themselves; they are named and placed within hierarchies or systems of genres, and each is defined by reference to the system and its members. A genre, therefore, is to be understood in relation to other genres, so that its aims and purposes at a particular time are defined by its interrelation with and differentiation from others. (207)

This relational view of genre departs radically from the classical model of genre as a category that contains texts sharing the same features. John Frow describes this change as "a shift away from an 'Aristotelian' model of taxonomy in which a relationship of hierarchical belonging between a class and its members predominates, to a more reflexive model in which texts are thought to use or to perform the genres by which they are shaped" (25). Instead of fixed categories, the "reflexive model" implies that genres should rather be understood as historically contingent formations that change with every new reading or addition to the overall system of genres. "Genre systems," Frow writes,

form a shifting hierarchy, made up of tensions between "higher" and "lower" genres, a constant alternation of the dominant form, and a constant renewal of genres through processes of specialization and recombination. Genres, it follows, are neither self-identical nor self-contained. (71)

Wai Chee Dimock, too, in her 2007 introduction to a special issue of *PMLA* on genre, underlines the porousness of genre implied in Cohen's process theory. Genres for Dimock are "open sets endlessly dissolved by their openness [...] not taxonomic classes of equal solidity but fields at once emerging and ephemeral, defined over and over again by new entries that are still being reproduced" (1379). Perhaps a bit carried away by the metaphorical fluidity of genre, she writes that we should think of genres

as swimming in a pool, a kind of generic wateriness. This medium not only allows for capillary action of various sorts, it also suggests that the concept of genre has meaning only in the plural, only when that pool is seen as occupied by more than one swimmer. (1380)

Put in this way, the contrast between genre, understood as an open-ended process, and Levine's definition of form is striking. While forms for Levine are likewise plural, they are neither open nor fluid. Her choice term "collision" to describe the interaction of forms suggests their essential hardness. When forms collide in her book, they may "disrupt," "unsettle," or "reroute" one another, but they are never constituted by their interaction. To use Levine's own formal categories, Dimock's description of genre as "a kinship network [...] resting always on some kind of fluid continuum" (1380) makes clear that the form of genre for recent genre theorists is a *network*. In contrast, the form of form for Levine is a *bounded whole* – i.e., perpetually colliding with other forms, but nevertheless strictly demarcated from them.

Levine's "hard" definition of form is the result of her generalized understanding of form from design theory. Here different materials and forms have different "affordances": "A fork affords stabbing and scooping," Levine notes. "A doorknob affords not only hardness and durability, but also turning, pushing, and pulling" (6). Forms are therefore not a matter of context or interpretation; they have inherent qualities that offer themselves to distinct uses. This has significant consequences for how we read. "Rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms *do*," she writes, "we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent – though not always obvious – in aesthetic and social arrangements" (6-7). Levine's understanding of form in terms of affordances is meant to counter the tendency in literary and cultural studies to emphasize how forms impose limitations rather than to explain what they enable, and therefore to prioritize that which breaks with form.<sup>2</sup> But translating the concept of form from design theory to culture and society in general effaces any distinction between different kinds of forms. Taking issue with this idea, Langdon Hammer insists in his critique of Levine's book that "not all forms are equivalent" (1202). Drawing on

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Levine: "the field has been so concerned with breaking forms apart that we have neglected to analyze the major work that forms do in our world" (9).

Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, he argues that forms are conceived and interact in very different ways depending on whether they are determined by their use value, their labor value, or their exchange value. "Wood is one thing," he writes, "a table another, and the commodity yet another" (1202). The social relations of forms, their deep ties with history and entanglement with other forms that give them meaning, are not only important for understanding how forms interact, but also what they *are*, given that they cannot be understood apart from how they move in the world.

To be sure, social context for Levine is important – but only after the fact. "We can understand forms as abstract and portable organizing principles," she writes, "but we also need to attend to the specificity of particular historical situations to understand the range of ways in which forms overlap and collide" (7-8). In other words, Levine first defines forms in terms of their affordances, their latent potentialities, and only then does she set them in motion to observe how they collide with other forms. Which is to say that Levine's theory of formal interaction assumes that forms exist prior to their encounters with other forms. Methodologically, then, her theory of forms is less a reconciliation of formalism and historicism than a mandate to first be formalist, and then historicist – instead of both at once. As Hammer's critique suggests, this introduces a dualism between what forms are (their essential qualities) and how they function (their social behavior). The idealization of forms that Levine's theory implies shows its close affinity with normative formalism in spite of the activist commitment that Levine announces. It also makes her new formalism look very much like old genre theory: instead of a reflexive model of form as process, Levine's account of form is essentially taxonomic.

### Forms in Society: The Case of Organizational Sociology

Levine's premise that forms are portable – i.e., that forms "are not outgrowths of social conditions; they do not belong to certain times and places" (12) – takes organizational sociology as a case in point.<sup>3</sup> Specifically,

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<sup>3</sup> See Hoyt for a critique of Levine's use of sociology. The focus of Hoyt's criticism is different from mine in what follows. While Hoyt criticizes Levine for not embracing the

she draws on an article by Marc Schneiberg from 2007, which argues that even as the corporation became the dominant form of economic organization during the Progressive Era, it was rivaled by other forms – municipals and cooperatives – which stemmed from earlier social struggles, but which continued to exist and provide sustenance for alternative models of organization. Schneiberg thus departs from the “organizational synthesis” in business history and organizational studies, which mapped the historical ascendancy of a single form, the corporation, in the twentieth century. While the appeal for Levine of Schneiberg’s argument that society contains several economic forms contending with one another is obvious, it should be noted that Schneiberg also stresses the historical struggles *among* organizational forms that account for their rise during one period and their reemergence during another. The municipal and cooperative forms that he examines are not self-contained, but “were rooted historically and geographically in those times and places where the fights against the corporations were most intense” (66). Unlike the material objects of design theory, such as forks and doorknobs, economic forms are inherently relational: corporations, municipals, and cooperatives are shaped and reshaped by mutual struggle as they move across time and space. Moreover, forms are impure and unstable in Schneiberg’s account. His “internal structuralist approach” (51) emphasizes the development of alternative forms of organization from within a given system, in contrast to the “external structuralist approach” (51), which regards organizational change as the result of outside pressure. From this perspective, Schneiberg writes,

institutional paths are not as uniform, complementary or pure as some analyses would have it. To the contrary, they often, if not inevitably, contain within them ambiguities, multiple layers, potentially decomposable components or competing logics which actors can use as vehicles for experimentation, conversion, recombination and transformation. (51-52)

Similarly, the goal of an article from 2003 written by Naomi R. Lamoreaux, Daniel M. G. Raff, and Peter Temin is to challenge the purity of economic forms long taken for granted in organization studies. According to the “organizational synthesis,” corporate hierarchies replaced

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quantitative methods of sociology, my point is rather that her use of organizational sociology disregards its insights about the reflexivity of social forms.

decentralized markets as the primary form of organization during the Progressive Era. But the aim of Lamoreaux and her coauthors is to account for economic organization “beyond the simple markets versus hierarchies dichotomy” (405). While they argue, like Schneiberg, that “there is likely to be a diversity of coordination mechanisms at work in the economy at any given time” (409), they also underline the gradability between these different forms. Rather than dichotomous forms that exclude one another, they argue that businesses are organized along a spectrum from one organizational extreme to another:

At the left-hand extreme of the scale is pure market exchange – one-shot transactions based on price in which there is no ongoing connection between the parties. At the right-hand extreme is pure hierarchy – a permanent, or at least very long-lived, command relationship in which superiors issue orders to subordinates. (407)

It goes without saying that “pure” forms of economic organization are rare, and that there are a number of intermediate forms located along the organizational spectrum.

Other historians and sociologists of capitalism have further argued that the relation between markets and hierarchies is not only gradable but also inherently recursive. Giovanni Arrighi, for one, describes the historical shifts since the fourteenth century between the free-market system and regulatory forms of capitalism as a “pendulum-like movement” (251). Regulatory forms develop in response to market forms, and vice versa. “An organizational thrust in one direction,” he writes, “called forth an organizational thrust in the opposite direction” (340). Another notable example is Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), which demonstrates how the post-Fordist turn to flexible, decentralized forms of organization was partly a reaction against the hierarchical corporatist forms of Fordist capitalism. Like Arrighi, Boltanski and Chiapello are interested in accounting for how the organization of accumulation changes over time. While Arrighi’s metaphor of the pendulum suggests that the movement between free markets and regulatory capitalism is somewhat automatic, Boltanski and Chiapello rather stress the role that critique plays in the transition from one organizational form to another. Their Weberian premise is that forms of capitalist organization need to be perceived as legitimate by those participating in and perpetuating them. This renders economic forms

receptive to criticism that questions their legitimacy. Organizational change within capitalism is therefore a result of actors seeking to reestablish the legitimacy of a given form of accumulation by entering into compromises with other forms – just as economists and managers during the 1970s began to emphasize the possibilities of personal fulfillment within more flexible, networked forms of organization in response to the critique that corporate structures are alienating and oppressive.<sup>4</sup>

In all of these examples from sociology and the history of capitalism, then, forms of socioeconomic organization are conceived as interdependent, and their interaction as recursive. Forms move through time and space in relation to one another and enter into compromises as the result of internal or external pressures. And while they may be categorized as different forms, like markets and hierarchies, this difference is gradable, not exclusive.

#### Forms in Literature: The Cases of *Herland* and *McTeague*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist utopia *Herland* (1915) is a particularly lucid example of how forms interact in literature because, typical of the Progressive Era, the novel is obsessed with organization. The fictional country of *Herland*, which, as the title suggests, is inhabited only by women who have been isolated from the rest of the world for 2,000 years, is depicted as a highly ordered space. Reflecting the enthusiasm for bureaucratic organization at the time, *Herland* is organized like a hierarchical corporation with a strict division of labor and a centralized planning committee calling the shots. Interestingly, like Levine's account of form, Gilman's novel also idealizes form as something that exists prior to its interaction with other forms. The complete isolation of *Herland* for two millennia means that its corporate form developed in a historical vacuum independent from the pressure of other forms. Because the Herlanders have lived without men for thousands of years, their identity is similarly represented in non-binary terms. The effect of presenting both the identity and society of these women as having evolved in isolation is clearly a narrative choice that naturalizes them. Gilman wanted to show her contemporaries how a society

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<sup>4</sup> The methodological implications of this are more fully developed in Boltanski and Thévenot, who theorize social change as a “cycle of critique and justification” (347).

would look if women were left to organize for themselves without the interference of masculinist competition and the imposition of gender norms. In reality, of course, the idealized corporate form as well as the non-binary gender of Herlanders are mobilized by Gilman *against* what she considered the male-skewed organization of markets and the artificial gender binary in society at the time. The efficient organization of Herland is contrasted with the chaotic disorganization of the world outside, the dog-eat-dog world of market capitalism represented by the three male protagonists who accidentally come across Herland. The difference between corporate and market forms is therefore also gendered. The rational organization of the Herlanders presents a sharp contrast to the most impetuous of the visiting men, who is described as embodying the “masculine spirit of enterprise” (111). And the novel reads as a refutation of his comment, “We all know women can’t organize” (59).

In short, what looks like formal isolation in Gilman’s novel is, in fact, formal differentiation. The forms of corporations and markets, and binary and non-binary gender, crisscross one another in a literary mesh where each is inextricable from and shapes the other. Finally, it is also evident that the formal contrasts played out in the novel are related to genre. Utopias by definition contrast the actual with the imagined. But the utopian genre in *Herland* and the notorious uneventfulness of the utopian plot is at the same time aligned with both the lack of gender antagonism in the Herlanders and the smooth operations of the corporate form, where all friction has been eliminated. In contrast, both the market and masculinity are aligned with the headlong action of the adventure genre. As the character embodying the “masculine spirit of enterprise” again notes: “Can’t expect stirring romance and wild adventure without men, can you?” (46). The differentiation between rational female utopia and wild male adventure thus proceeds in the same way that forms are differentiated in *Herland*. Which is to say that forms and genres in the novel behave identically. And both the use of forms and genres in Gilman’s novel suggests not only that they are mutually differentiated – that forms react to forms and genres react to genres – but also that forms and genres give shape to each other.

Another example from the period, which at first glance appears to lend itself well to a new formalist reading on the terms that Levine sets out, is Frank Norris’s 1899 naturalist novel *McTeague*. The novel reveals a reflexive awareness about the multiplicity of organizational forms in social life. The

preparations leading up to a wedding scene between the main characters, McTeague and Trina, are particularly chaotic because the regimented military organization of Trina's father collides with the domestic organization of family rituals. "The two systems of operation often clashed and tangled" (111), the narrator explains. Such a clash between different forms of organization structures the novel throughout. Examples include the daily rhythm of life in San Francisco organized around clock and calendar as well as the natural diurnal rhythm; the stroke of chance represented by Trina's winning the lottery, which upsets this rhythm; the machine politics that one character becomes involved with; the laws of supply and demand that structure economic exchanges – as well as romantic relationships – in the novel; and the bureaucratic form of professionalism that impinges on McTeague when he is prohibited from practicing dentistry because he has not attended a dental college. These forms are played out in various encounters throughout the novel's plot in ways that a new formalist account à la Levine could trace. As they collide, they could be said to redirect or unsettle one another.

Yet, at the same time as these forms unfold in the course of the narrative, the narrative itself takes on different forms of representation. One of the defining aspects of literary naturalism for most critics is the relentless determinism of its narratives. This is typically traced back to the influence of Émile Zola, who borrowed his understanding of cause and effect from the experimental medicine of Claude Bernard. Translating Bernard's experimental model from medicine to literature introduced a hierarchical divide between narrator and character resembling that between doctor and patient. Like patients who experience symptoms without knowing their causes, characters in Zola's novels, as well as in Norris's, are blind to the hereditary and environmental forces that determine them. In contrast, the narrator (and therefore also the reader) sees clearly the reasons for their inevitable decline. For Zola, thus, the role of the narrator is diagnostic – the aim of naturalist literature is to "experiment on man [and] dissect piece by piece this human machinery" (25) in order to reveal "the laws of thought and passion" (17).

If this medical model for literature geared toward determining causal chains gives the form of naturalist narrative a hierarchical structure, however, this is not the only form that shapes naturalist narratives. Particularly its American variant was equally informed by evolutionary discourse. Unlike

Zola, who had not yet absorbed Darwinian theory, and whose ideas about natural heredity were Lamarckian, the concept of nature that US naturalist writers drew on was derived partly from post-Darwinian evolutionary theory and partly from the Transcendentalist movement.<sup>5</sup> Both of these understood nature as a complex web of relations and emphasized mobility and adaptation as the organizing principle of life. While hierarchical relationships were implied in evolutionary science's notion of progressive stages of development superimposed on the kinship networks of nature, lending itself to theories of racial hierarchization, as well as in Transcendentalism's version of nature as organized by a "transparent eyeball," the view of nature as an interconnected and constantly shifting web undercut the mapping of direct causal relationships that Zola identified as the primary goal of the naturalist novel.

In *McTeague*, both of these ways of structuring the narrative are evident. On the one hand, the novel is clearly invested in diagnosing the causes for McTeague's and Trina's characteristic – for naturalist plots – descent into the gutter. McTeague's hereditary dipsomania and Trina's avarice, compounded by environmental circumstances, are not only demonstrated throughout the plot as leading to their downfall, but underlined through frequent narratorial intrusions. McTeague is repeatedly referred to as "stupid" and "blind,"<sup>6</sup> while the narrator is able to see clearly to the bottom of what ails him: "Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer" (25). On the other hand, this hierarchical form of the narrative comes into tension with the sublime form of representation that the narrator resorts to whenever depicting the massive scale of natural forces. Here the narrative switches from the hierarchical form of the medical model penetrating beneath surfaces to a cumulative form used to represent macroscale phenomena. Thus, once McTeague sets foot in the mountains, we find a distinctly Darwinian representation of nature:

As far as one could look, uncounted multitudes of trees and manzanita bushes were quietly and motionlessly growing, growing, growing. A tremendous,

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<sup>5</sup> See Walcutt for the influence of Transcendentalism on American literary naturalism.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell aptly describes this as "narrative bullying" (69).

immeasurable Life pushed steadily heavenward without a sound, without a motion. (298-99)

Here the sublime scale of nature (“uncounted multitudes [...] immeasurable”) defined by a paradoxical movement without motion (“motionlessly growing”) reflects the constant but gradual change of Darwinian evolution. In order to represent something as expansive as evolutionary processes, Norris adopts a form, often paratactic, that extends itself in long sentences through the accumulation of similar terms, such as “vast,” “gigantic,” “colossal,” “Titanic,” etc.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the closure that the narrative intrusions impose on events and characters by diagnosing them, the description of natural forces is potentially endless, confined only by the limits of representation. Instead of the epistemological hubris of the diagnostic form, these passages convey rather an epistemological humility.

Unlike the numerous other forms that play out in *McTeague*, these two forms are not so much evident in the plot as they inform the novel’s strategies of representation. As such, they might be said to function on a higher level than the other forms, as they are superimposed upon them and shape their conditions of expression. In this sense also, then, Levine’s insistence that all forms are equal means that it is impossible to account for differences between forms that inform *what* is represented and forms that structure *how* it is represented. Moreover, while it is beyond the scope of this essay to show how the many forms on the level of the novel’s plot are mutually differentiated, the case can easily be made that the dominant forms of representation in the novel – the hierarchical form of the medical experiment and the network form of Darwinian evolution – exist in dialectical tension with each other, frequently merging in Norris’s style to produce mixed effects of depth and breadth, hierarchy and network. The reason for this is that Norris’s aesthetic project is divided by two goals that often work at cross purposes: on the one hand, a commitment to diagnosing the social

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<sup>7</sup> Norris’s 1901 novel, *The Octopus*, takes this form of representation to an extreme. Here the sprawling sentences and stacking of words that all mean more or less the same is not meant to further understanding – as when the novel famously describes a locomotive as “a vast power, huge, terrible [...] the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus” (51). The point of such passages is not their semantic meaning but their cumulative effect and the patterns they establish by their repetition throughout the text.

ills of industrial capitalism, to which the medical model of representation lends itself well; on the other, a commitment to providing a more inclusive portrayal of the varieties of social and natural life than Norris felt the realism of William Dean Howells and others could offer – a goal that the evolutionary model helped him realize. The disciplinary history of the two sciences, too, medicine and evolution, while they have often collided, is rather a story of differentiation and compromise: Bernard defining the experimental method against the emerging statistical sciences that would later be used to solve problems in evolutionary theory; Darwin showing the limits of the experimental method in face of the large-scale complexity of natural selection;<sup>8</sup> and the two forms combining in recent advances in evolutionary medicine. In sum, then, the interaction of the two major forms of representation in *McTeague*, as well as the disciplinary genealogies of the methods they draw on, is less a question of collision than of differentiation and intersecting genealogies.

## Conclusion

One of the ways that Levine distinguishes new formalism from New Historicism is by how the former scales up:

Most accounts of social relationships in literary and cultural studies encourage us to focus our attention on the ways that a couple of formations intersect at any given moment: imperialism and the novel, for example, or the law and print culture. But what happens if we change the scale of our formal perspective and begin with many forms? (132)

What happens is that the form of the theory changes. The goal of reading for multiple colliding forms is to trace the network of formal relations in a text or society. If Levine conceptualizes forms as bounded wholes, her *theory* of form takes the shape of a network. In contrast, the most frequent criticism of New Historicism is the hierarchical divide it presupposes between a text, regarded as unwittingly complicit with the power structures determining it, and the discerning critic able to see through the surface of a

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<sup>8</sup> For an insightful discussion of the experimental method in Bernard, see Schiller. For a discussion of Darwin's methods in relation to statistics, see Ariew.

text to its underlying structure – a divide between critic and text which replicates the divide between narrator and character in naturalism (because symptomatic reading draws on the same medical model as naturalism does).<sup>9</sup> To understand Levine's prioritization of formal networks without the context of the hierarchical form of New Historicist criticism that she argues against is simply to miss an important dimension of her argument. Even the form of Levine's own theory, then, cannot be properly understood apart from the theoretical form it defines itself against.

To understand such processes of formal differentiation better, my argument here has been that new formalism, rather than distancing itself from the process theory of genre, could learn something about how forms interact. While form and genre often function differently, the ways that they differ depend on their context. As Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian write, form “is not a word without content but a notion bound pragmatically to its instances” (661). To derive a general theory of form based on the forms found in design theory may work for certain forms and their interactions, but not for others. Not all forms are as “hard” as forks and doorknobs, and therefore they also interact differently. The examples of forms in society, in literature, and even in theory that I have discussed here are all examples of “soft” forms – i.e., forms that are always in a process of being formed. For Kramnick and Nersessian, “formalism need not, indeed cannot provide a single definition of form because form is an entity known by occasion, through encounters with its subsidiary phenomena” (664). This pragmatic dimension of form resembles that of genre, which can also only be known through its instances. To distinguish between the hardness of form and the softness of genre is to misrepresent both what form is and

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Geertz on the similarity between theory and the practice of medicine in his essay on “Thick Description,” which has influenced New Historicists such as Stephen Greenblatt: “To generalize within cases is usually called, at least in medicine and depth psychology, clinical inference. Rather than beginning with a set of observations and attempting to subsume them under a governing law, such inference begins with a set of (presumptive) signifiers and attempts to place them within an intelligible frame. Measures are matched to theoretical predictions, but symptoms (even when they are measured) are scanned for theoretical peculiarities – that is, they are diagnosed. In the study of culture the signifiers are not symptoms or clusters of symptoms, but symbolic acts or clusters of symbolic acts, and the aim is not therapy but the analysis of social discourse. But the way in which theory is used – to ferret out the unapparent import of things – is the same” (26).

how it works in the world. In her book *On Form* (2007), Leighton defines form by its porosity:

Although it looks like a fixed shape, a permanent configuration or ideal whether in eternity, in the mind, or on the page, in fact form is mobile, versatile. It remains open to distant senses, distortions, to the push-and-pull of opposites or cognates. While most abstract nouns lend themselves to philosophical whittling, to definitions which reduce their sense for clarity and use, form makes mischief and keeps its signification open. (3)

As I have argued here, this open, unformed quality of social and aesthetic forms can only be understood in terms of reflexive processes. Levine's *Forms* is part of an important debate in the humanities today that has forced us to reexamine New Historicist orthodoxies in the field. But while new formalism rejects the subordination of form to history, of text to context, the solution is not to reverse the relationship between form and history, which Levine's understanding of form as preexisting history does. Before new formalism settles into a new orthodoxy, we can only hope that it finds ways to deal with history that do not reduce it to a stage on which preformed forms enact their dramatic collisions, but which understand history as inherently part and parcel of how forms become what they are.

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