
The Uses of Queer Scottish Form

Abstract

What's the use in talking about queer form in Scottish literature? If queer has been used to describe a resistance to dominant forms, where is the efficacy in locating projects of dissention within the confines of national imaginaries? This article thinks through some of the constraints and opportunities in elaborating what queer form might look like in Scotland. The first half of the article offers an overview of how queer form can be used to describe the coalescence of aesthetic and social registers of dissent. The article then turns to Maud Sulter and Jackie Kay to explore two case studies of queer Scottish forms (and why they might be useful).

Things take forms, and forms organize things.

Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*
(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 10.

Queer use might describe this potential for an explosion, how small deviations, a loosening of a requirement, the creation of an exit point, opening a door to allow something to escape, can lead to more and more coming out.

Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*
(Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 225.

Queer Scottish form is an exit point from the assumed alignment between social forms invested in (hetero)normativity and the dominant aesthetic forms that have helped to shape Scottish literature as a distinct canon. This article explores the temptation to take particular modalities of social form (in the case of this article, feminist, queer, and of colour) and read them as new, or recent, interlocutors in the aesthetic conditions of belonging in, or apprehending,

Scottish culture. In the article's most pessimistic reading, Scottish literature undergirds its rhetorical gesture towards inclusion (look at our diversity), without doing any serious accounting of what this means for the discipline, or the canons it shapes. The first half of this article responds to frameworks which take an additive approach to 'welcoming' the addition of 'new' Scottish forms which add minimal discomfort to dominant literary cultures. This article refuses to use the representation of LGBTQIA+ lives of colour in Scottish literature as an easy proof for any kind of aesthetically distinct or innovative world making. In this context, the recognition of LGBTQIA+ lives of colour are a 'diversity' exercise which continues to read and measure difference from the vantage point of an invisible and universalised norm; one that employs Scottish civic nationalism as a benign platform from which to host the work of diversity. The second half of the article focuses on Jackie Kay and Maud Sulter to consider how Scottish queer forms might be understood as dissonant registers that utilise oblique relationships with dominant form(at)ions of the nation to imaginatively expand the horizon of how Scottish forms can be apprehended. I argue that queer Scottish forms can offer routes into a 'useable' past for communities who are perennially positioned as new arrivals in the literary and cultural imaginary.

Form is everywhere. Concrete poetry, epistolary novels, didactic plays – there is abundant capacity for form to illuminate the conditions of social worlds through innovative arrangements. Ramzi Fawaz articulates the potential of queer forms as 'a range of aesthetic figures or structures that can give concrete shape to abstract identities, desires, and experiences.'¹ As Fawaz argues, this is a distinct departure from some tendencies in queer theory to foreground fluidity and illegibility as the queer resistance to stable or fixed vernaculars that may diminish horizons of potentiality (imagined as queerness). But this desire against form runs contrapuntally to our prevailing narratives of queer civil rights and liberation projects which are all about taking form (organised in social movements) in recognisable ways (having distinct characteristics). Fawaz seeks to resolve this contradiction by proposing a queer formalism as 'a method that perceives those instances when queer genders and sexualities, far from being repressed or negated, are actualized in legible but nuanced ways across media and to unanticipated audiences.'² When treated in this way, queer formalism is a series of socially orientated adaptive strategies which produces

an aesthetic of a broadly conceived protest. Fawaz and Roderick Ferguson are amongst the scholars who have returned to connected civil rights movements in the 1970s and 1980s to interrogate how minoritised communities created shared visual, literary, and cultural vocabularies that critiqued interlocking mechanisms of oppression. The imaginary segregation of progressive social movements (gay and lesbian; women's; Black; socialist/left) has been part of a disciplinary effect which Ferguson describes as

The ascendancy of a single-issue notion of gay liberation [which] also put in place a gay rights agenda that constructed the critique of racism, capitalism, the state, and their overlaps as outside the normal and practical interests of gay liberation.³

This article does not suture Black to queer; rather, it views the real points of solidarity across connected anti-oppression movements as the environment within which distinct aesthetic forms were elaborated to form registers of protest derived from a desire to imagine otherwise. Queer formalism is not a single-issue aesthetic.

Queer forms are not just a series of literary experiments or variations whose primary interests exist in abstraction. The queering of forms is rooted in the refusal of racist, heteronormative, capitalist, and ableist templates for governing good, healthy, or successful realities. In their special issue on queer form, Amin, Musser, and Pérez issue an imperative: 'We strive to think the queer as enmeshed within – and indeed, activated and enabled by – the structures of aesthetic form, social inequality, and conceptual categorization within which the work of engaged artists takes shape.'⁴ The desire to lean into dominant national formations, and to render national literatures legible within the national imaginary, has focused on a politics of recognition and relatability that has struggled to critically unpick the contradiction between resistance and recognition. Writing about the emergence of the activist organisation Queer Nation in the 1990s, Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman observed that even disparate anti-hegemonic forces tend towards organised expression that can give them sustainable legibility: 'Even in their most parodic manifestations, gestures of sexual and national intelligibility – both oppressive and emancipatory – are part of a process of making norms.'⁵

By de-emphasising the nation as the primary anchor for belonging, queer forms use the imaginary to project relations to unknowability that question the ethics of incorporating or absorbing difference into epistemic structures rigged for narrow lines of commensurability and intelligibility. For queer form to have the potential to rearrange and interrupt dominant social and aesthetic formations, it has to be attuned to how power flows through gendered and racialised hierarchies. It is no accident that Scottish literary organisations committed to intersectional approaches to building solidarities and challenging discrimination find themselves to be particularly queer spaces.

One of the many strategies for curtailing this queer potential in mainstream Scottish national culture has been the excising of ‘negative’ histories as ‘British’ in order to bolster the image of Scotland as a historically subjugated nation (part of the mechanism that enables the myth of ‘Scottish exceptionalism’). An example of this can be seen through the displacement of anti-racist enquiry from the Scottish cultural imaginary through two types of deflection: 1. Scotland had a minor role in slavery and empire and 2. Scotland has, and historically has had, a low number of racially minoritised communities. The next section of the article turns to how we can network queer and anti-racist literary cultures to illuminate how difference and new forms use old material to bring aesthetic forms and social movements into proximal relationships through textual innovation. To put it another way, how can queer forms take exhausted social formations such as normative constructions of gender invested racialised and classed difference, and rework them into new socially and aesthetically desirable forms.

POLITICISED FORMS

The story of LGBT life in Scotland from the 1950s (as told through narratives of closeted life, post-Stonewall resistance and the uneven move to civic inclusion) has shaped existing narratives of what it means to be queer (here, referring to a broad umbrella term for various non-heteronormative identities) and Scottish, especially in the literary and cultural scene. Jeffrey Meek’s work on post-war Scotland provides an important insight into the work of gay organisations such as the Scottish Minorities Group (founded in 1969), which helped found the Glasgow Gay Centre in 1977.⁶ But the social, cultural, and legislative experience of homophobia made the safe and visible presence of organised lesbian and

gay communities difficult. Although institutions like the Glasgow Women's Library, Lavender Menace, and the Third Eye Centre/the CCA offered alternative cultural spaces, they had to remain aware of how to protect the safety and identity of their visitors. Invisibility was important, in some cases, for survival. Consenting sex between men (over twenty-one) was decriminalised in Scotland in 1981. But if the beginning of the 1980s heralded changing attitudes towards sexuality, the closing years of the decade would demonstrate that the policing of homosexuality would simply change form. The (failed) fightback against Section 28 placed queer life on lockdown in Scottish schools between 1988 and 2000. This was keenly felt in the broader environment of Scottish literature. Talking about his time in Scotland in the 1990s, Berthold Schoene comments, 'what I experienced in Scotland was definitely a step back in time. Especially disconcerting to me were people flaunting their homophobia in places where I least expected it, namely among supposedly enlightened and intelligent folks, in the university.'⁷ Schoene's observations can be layered with the experiences of racialised minorities in literary studies, especially in Scotland. And while many people in similar positions learn to develop affective callouses to ease some of the painful friction of institutional academic life, a queer of colour pragmatism can also let you know when to stop resisting and find other homes. If Scottish literature was finding its place in the university in the 1980s and 1990s, its advocacy for minority interests and rights remained relatively conservative. The cleavage between Scottish literature's cultural life, and the reality of the worlds it pressed against, has worked to occlude some of the possible points of emergence and arrangement for queer forms, something that can be seen in early attempts to collect and document what queer forms might look like.

The first anthologies of Scottish LGBT writing appeared in the late 1980s and early 90s, and immediately acknowledged the responsibility and limits of a national creative LGBT project.⁸ In Joanne Winning's preface to *The Crazy Jig*, she states:

I am glad to have edited a collection which in acknowledging a black voice in Scottish Lesbian and Gay writing also acknowledges that presence within our communities. Although I'm aware that this presence within the book is not large enough, let us hope it is the start of something big.⁹

The Black voice is Maya Chowdhry, the transmedia storyteller, poet, and digital artist. Chowdhry's poem in the collection, 'Birth Certificate', brings queer desire, with Scottish and Indian identity (the birth certificate is anchored, but her desire and routes to belonging are not). Winning uses 'black' as an umbrella term for political blackness, but it is worth dwelling on the specificities of what Black Scottish might mean here. Francesca Sobande and Iaya Roxanne-Hill's *Black Oot Here* (2022) documents how political blackness in Scotland has been used to ensure the interests of the 'majority' minority are represented (South Asians), often at the cost of Black people of African descent, and Chinese communities. In practice, this has meant South Asian communities have benefited from more funding from the (then) Scottish Arts Council, support from the Scottish Council for Racial Equality, visibility in Black History Month programming, alongside visibility and representation in the Scottish Parliament and in local councils.¹⁰ Returning to the context of the anthology, the 'acknowledgement' of a 'black' presence in 'our communities' is an act of hospitality which displaces longer and entangled histories of racialisation and sexuality. At its best, it is a hope-centred imperative for the future. At its worst, its generosity enables white-led anthologies to avoid addressing Scotland's complicity in the historical forms of racism which shape contemporary cultural landscapes.

While political blackness has been integral for solidarities between racially minoritised people and communities in Scotland, the lack of attention to anti-Blackness within minoritised communities has rendered it problematic (especially when applied to South Asian heritage migrants, and their descendants, from India, Pakistan, Uganda, and Kenya). The intention is not to pit minoritised groups against each other; rather, it is to reflect on the poverty of space, resources, and materials to support diverse lives in Scotland. In this landscape, anyone who is not white gets to count as 'other'. The category of 'black' in a white-led anthology becomes allocated to a woman of colour without specificity to what or who is being evoked as Black, queer, and Scottish. While political blackness, when used by people of colour, can lend weight to solidarity projects, when it finds itself unmoored from the specificity of racialised bodies in relation, the texture of Black-brown encounters in histories of slavery, indenture, and imperialism, is lost. This focus has helped to keep Scotland's gaze away from the legacies of slavery, and anti-Blackness (within racially minoritised communities as well as in white majority communities).

The ‘additive’ approach to diverse and differentiated experiences of the nation is a stock trope of neoliberalism, and one that has been generously applied in Scottish cultural discourses as a marker of progressive and inclusive social outlooks. One of the best examples of this is ‘New Scots’, a term coined by a Glaswegian councillor in the 1990s that led to new labels such as ‘Scottish Asian’ and ‘Black Scottish’ to replace an increasingly inadequate location of identity: ‘British’. A cultural optimism fuelled by devolution fostered notions of self-determination through more localised governance that could shape distinct cultural responses to distinct social challenges. ‘New Scots’ became a Scottish Government-endorsed shorthand to describe various waves of twentieth- and twenty-first-century migration that have been facilitated by the more ‘inclusive’ routes to national belonging offered by discourses of civic nationalism. While the term has been extended to include a broader range of migrants, for example, from Eastern Europe, it was used originally to describe Black and brown Commonwealth citizens, the children of Empire, who settled in Scotland in larger numbers from the 1950s.

The irony, of course, is that ‘New Scots’ is locked in a binary that never lets the generations of migrants who arrived, settled, and had lives here, get old. While ‘New Scots’ expands to include all waves of migration to Scotland, its mutability demonstrates the investment in a neoliberal multiculturalism that continues to protect the supremacy of ‘old’ Scottish forms invested in liberal modernity. The imperative to recognise diversity arranges racial, sexual, and other forms of difference into matrices for processing inclusion. Black, Black queer, and queer of colour criticism has made its presence felt in Scottish literary life through its influence on key cultural and artistic figures, but also as a reminder and echo of Scotland’s historical relationship to slavery, empire, and colonialism. Dominant national forms have been constituted through gendered, sexual, and racial difference. These are not new forms of identity that can be filed under existing subdivisions of the Scottish literary canon. From the imposition of anti-sodomy laws during the British Empire, to the criminalisation of sexual minorities, Scotland is part of intimate histories of discrimination across the former British colonies that used the sexual excess of racialised others as evidentiary fodder for ‘sexual deviance’. There is nothing particularly ‘new’ about Scottish entanglements with racialised and sexualised difference. An insightful case study of how these forms of difference become the pressure

points of normative life is explored in Lillian Faderman's *The Scotch Verdict*.¹¹ In 1810 two Edinburgh schoolteachers found themselves at the centre of a lesbian scandal after one of their pupils, Jane Cumming, confided in her grandmother that she thought there were improper relations between the women. Once this information was shared more widely, parents withdrew their children from the school. When the teachers sued for libel, one of the key pieces of evidence for undermining Cumming's credibility was that she had been born in India, to an Indian mother. The (in)credibility of sexual and racial minorities is always and already constituted through national imaginaries that do their border work through the policing and othering of second-order or deviant subjects.

While Scotland is tethered to whiteness, all other races, and ethnicities, remain as elements to be 'invited in' without differentiation. The only difference that counts is that they are not white. By expanding the limits of the Scottish imaginary, and the temporality of queer life, we can locate queer forms that have been erased by liberal sexual modernity. From recent work on queer the figure of the 'coolie' in the Caribbean, where Scottish-owned plantations supplemented the exploitation of enslaved people with indentured labour, to the histories carried in the names of prominent Black queer writers (for example, the Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay), queer of colour formations are not just expressions of minoritised lives, they are dimensions of life that take form against the pressure of normative projects. Fawaz offers a set of identifiers for queer formalists which includes someone who, 'attends to the overlooked and unexpected presence of alternative sexualities, gender, desires, and intimacies in the material and conceptual forms of cultural objects'.¹² This definition can be usefully deployed to assemble texts which use radically different registers and methods, but which collectively act as a useful index to the diversity of queer Scottish form.

QUEER SCOTTISH FORMS

Queer forms in Scottish writing are socially minded interventions in aesthetic forms that shift literary orientations away from the efficacy of being tethered to reigning points of relationality or belonging. However, they do not collectively form a genre or a body of work that, on the surface, share consistent characteristics. Take, for example, Elspeth Probyn's *Eating the Ocean* (2016), which reads

the figure of the mermaid (as that more than human, and non-reproductive figure of desire) alongside the oral histories of fishwives and herring quines. By sequencing the (mythical) time of the mermaid, with the season of herring fishing, and the cycles of labour-driven intimacy for fishwives, Probyn illuminates the relations between disparate forms that resists the conventional framing of gendered time that relies on regional, rather than national, orientation.¹³ Probyn's work is an extension of feminist and lesbian feminist projects to expand the affordances of 'woman', a move which layers the affective temporalities of labour and orality. Its queer work reinscribes the dimensions of femininity and its relationship to dominant formations of nation and history.

The interest in queer relations to time can be seen in a recent collaboration between SPAM Press and the Edwin Morgan Trust (2022) that brings Morgan, as a proto-internet poet, into queer encounters with the post-internet through a new generation of poets engaged in experimental practice.¹⁴ Stellar Quines, the Scottish BPOC Writers Network (formerly the BAME Writers Network), and Fringe of Colour, are just some of the artistic networks that have worked to centre the voices of Black, queer, and queer of colour writers, unashamedly using the language of advocacy and activism to drive aesthetic experimentation. Stellar Quines' May 2023 show 'Riot' asked, 'What does it take for us to riot? How do we sustain our activism? What is the just future that we should be speaking up for?'¹⁵ The aesthetic potential of 'engaged' art finds itself anchored to public anxieties and reactions to right-wing populism nurtured by political regimes invested in depressing the value, and viability, of art and culture.

Long-form resistance to dominant conventional forms (of form; of genre; of language) have been used to add dimensions to queer proto-realities, as can be seen in Josie Giles's *Deep Wheel Orcadia* (2021), a science-fiction verse-novel written in Orcadian.¹⁶ Published by a poetry press, awarded the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2022, and written in a Scots dialect influenced by Norn, *Deep Wheel Orcadia* has defied market-driven imperatives for discrete audiences and recognisable craft forms to stage questions of belonging in space-time. Giles's aesthetic experiments in hybrid and speculative forms are in-fiction critiques of real-world practices of exclusion and violence. In 2021 Giles also wrote about the experience of being trans in Scottish literature, especially in the wake of discrimination and derogatory language at the Scottish Poetry Library in relation to gender self-identification. Giles commented: 'No-one in a position

of authority at a Scottish literature organisation has ever offered to help.¹⁷ In response to her art exhibition at Dundee Contemporary Arts, which included the publication *Wages for Transition*,¹⁸ another Scottish writer alerted a transphobic blogger to Giles's work, triggering a hostile attack. In response to their article on the history of transfeminism,¹⁹ Giles received comments including: 'There is something fundamentally wrong and disordered here. Pathological.'²⁰ Who pays the price for queer forms? Who performs the everyday labour to make the creative possibilities of queer lives possible, let alone sustainable? In our embrace and celebration of 'queer' in various literary traditions, whose lives have been valorised, and whose lives have been undeserving of protection? As Ahmed suggests: 'Rocking the boat is riskier the more precarious you are [...] But the more secure you are, the more you have to conserve.'²¹ There is a distinction to be made between queer forms which reorganise imaginary worlds, and queer forms tethered to conditions of inequality which result in violence and oppression. The selective use of axes of difference (say, gender) necessarily bounds our understanding of the operation of form and can occlude the lives of more minoritised positions.

If the social conscious of queer forms is located in left liberatory projects that critique normativity, and which are temporally and geographically expansive, does being Scottish matter at all? This work is led, mostly, by queer-identified people whose aesthetic experiments lead out of intricate engagements with violent contemporary realities. Writers such as Mae Diansangu and Raman Mundair demonstrate the importance of transperipheral political and aesthetic solidarities, and break the assumption that this creative work always or inevitably finds its home in the central belt of Scotland. Artists and writers such as Raisa Kabir, Kei Miller, Nat Raha, and Dean Atta have all made contributions to what queer form might look like and have undertaken some of that work in Scotland. But these are not writers who have an easy place in Scottish literary culture (or would even necessarily want to be associated with that label or term). What happens when many of your influences and the vectors of your aesthetic connections point elsewhere? The last section of this article turns to two Black lesbian poets whose politicisation, especially through the 1980s, demonstrates how social and aesthetic forms have coalesced in the fraught and freighted terms of Scotland.

BLACK QUEER SCOTTISH FORMS

The final section of this article considers two variations on the (disaffected) lyric from Black queer Scottish women. In an interview in 2002, the interviewer and Kay reflected on why Scotland wasn't a place Kay could raise her son:

[Kay] left home because she was tired of having to assert herself as a black person in Scotland – despite a burgeoning racial mix, Glasgow is not known for its multicultural harmony. 'There is a funny thing when people accept you and don't accept you. I love the country, but I don't know if the country loves me.' She didn't want this for her son.²²

Decades after her son's birth, as Scottish Makar, Kay wrote the poem 'Welcome Wee One' which was included in the Scottish Government's baby boxes. The baby boxes had been introduced to give every baby in Scotland an 'equal start' in life, the baby box as an object offered a re-imagining of an inclusive Scotland where every child's future matters. These two versions of Kay, the poet who leaves a Scotland that cannot welcome her son, to the poet whose words welcome all new children in Scotland, is an example of the way socially minded interventions can be small acts that close the distance between social and aesthetic dimensions of literary value, care, and attention.

Maud Sulter (1960–2008) and Jackie Kay (1961–) were young poets and artists from Glasgow supported by the eruption of insurgent Black feminist politics, art and aesthetics during the 1970s and 1980s.²³ Connecting different civil rights struggles across geographical and cultural distances, projects around political blackness and Black feminism were attempts to enable meaningful solidarities across planes of difference that did not erase the specificity of lived experience, for example, of anti-Black racism, or lesbianism. Representing different African diasporas in Scotland (Ghana for Sulter, Nigeria for Kay), Sulter's and Kay's work are examples of the ongoing work of diasporisation, as their substantial careers and lives outside of Scotland made them part of the Scottish diaspora (although they have been more readily recognised as part of African rather than Scottish diasporas). This section considers how they fashioned a lyrical form that drew on feminist and Black diaspora aesthetics, politics, and practice, to imagine a Black lesbian-centred relationality

that expanded the singular 'I' to a the collective 'I' of racialised and sexualised difference in Scotland.

Sandeep Parmar and Bhanu Kapil have used the universality-via-whiteness of the lyric's 'I' to open conversations on how the form interpellates the subject and the reader: 'Its border guards are the literary gatekeepers of shared assumptions about experience, language and tradition.'²⁴ Parmar and Kapil have helped to foster a debate about poetry criticism, especially in Britain, as part of an ongoing effort to read poetry by BIPOC poets as something more sophisticated than the relatable and experience-driven expression of identity politics via existing forms. The rendering of non-white subjects of poetic form as 'sympathic' relies on many of the coded intentions of the lyric, where the expressive 'I' uses the poem to illuminate the relational tension between the speaker and the reader, via the temporary shared terrain of the text. Xine Yao's *Disaffected* (2023) demonstrates how the racist underpinnings of cultures of sentimentality and sympathy have consistently placed racialised minorities at an unrelatable distance (through figurations including 'Oriental inscrutability' and 'unsympathetic Blackness').²⁵ That unrelatability, the failure of positive associational value that produces affinity instead of dissonance, becomes a mode of refusal or obdurance to the expectations of hegemonic whiteness that Yao calls 'disaffection'. The echoes of Glissant's work on opacity, Audre Lorde's invocation to dismantle the master's house, Clare Hemming's 'affective dissonance', and Sarah Ahmed's feminist killjoys can be heard in a renewed critical imperative for literary and creative resistance to oppressive regimes that demand recognition and intelligibility as a prerequisite to deserving emotion. To put it another way, demonstrating the 'right' emotions as a prerequisite for the right to emotions. Yao turns this into a critical imperative:

To depend upon white feelings as the catalyst for social change reinscribes the world that enables their power. No more business with white sentimentality. Withhold from those colonial intimacies. Refuse to feel according to the hierarchies of the biopolitics of feeling. Be disaffected.²⁶

Before concluding, this article touches on two poems by Sulter and Kay which may not look obviously 'queer' on the surface (they are not poems frontloaded

with content on lesbian or queer sexual desire). To ignore them as queer though, or to pick ‘better examples’, is to diminish the affordances of queer form. Sulter’s and Kay’s work was in direct dialogue with Black feminist, woman of colour, and Black lesbian philosophy and practice from the 1980s; this is the work that has been foundational for contemporary Black queer and queer of colour scholarship. The erasure or subsumption of queer dimensions of negativity (the refusal of life, a future) and queer interventions in form (where a racialised ‘I’ uses dissonance to open the possibility of ‘other’ routes to desire) in the work of writers and artists such as Sulter and Kay flattens the dimensions of resistance to oppressive regimes of normativity in their work.

The conceit in Jackie Kay’s ‘In my country’ (1993) riffs off a racist (micro) aggression that does not date: where do you come from? The poem opens in a register that mixes the rhythm and imaginaries of ballad and Black American folk: ‘walking by the waters / down where an honest river / shakes hands with the sea.’ Sharing a lexical plane with integrity and sincerity, the distinct character of the river meets the boundlessness of a body whose intentions are withheld, or not immediately apparent. This encounter between river and sea, a meeting of different bodies, becomes the setting for scrutiny as ‘a woman passed round me / in a slow watchful circle.’ The flow of the water shifts to the calculated circle of the woman who turns the speaker into an object of curiosity. Rather than the speaker of the lyric organising the imaginary world of the poem, here the speaker is placed and fixed in a scene through white scrutiny. In their discussion of whiteness in poetry, Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda suggest, ‘To be a person of color in a racist culture is to be always addressable, and to be addressable means one is always within stigma’s reach.’²⁷ The ‘I’ of ‘In my country’ is realised through the matrix of racism. The speaker is viewed by the woman as ‘a superstition’, ‘or the worse dregs of her imagination’. The stanza break between ‘superstition’ and ‘imagination’ creates two kinds of symmetry: of sound, and of abstraction. If superstition is a belief unmoored from reality, then the woman’s circling becomes the embodied enactment of prejudicial impulse designed to wrench the ‘I’ from reality. When the woman speaks, ‘her words spliced into bars / of an old wheel. A segment of air.’ Combing the wheel of tradition and the wheel of time, the real superstition here is revealed as divisive bias. The ‘segment of air’ holds the speaker in suspension, a segment

which holds the anticipation of what will come next in a short foreclosed breath, 'Where do you come from? / Here, I said, Here. These parts.' The poem ends in a refusal grounded in immediacy and determination; this is the refusal of superstition. The repetition of 'Here' and the use of 'These parts' to hold the different metaphorical landscapes of the poem together (the river and the sea; the old wheel) simultaneously lays claim the time of the river (geological time) and the time of whiteness (founded on racial prejudice). The 'I' of the poem has always been there, the 'I' of the poem is 'Here' because you were 'there'.²⁸

Maud Sulter was part of the landmark Institute of Contemporary Arts *The Thin Black Line* exhibition in 1985, which celebrated the 'arrival' of a generation of Black and Asian woman artists working in Britain. This was the year of major 'race riots' in Britain in reaction to police brutality (including the police shooting of Dorothy Groce, and excessive use of stop and search as part of a regime of police surveillance and intimidation). At the same time, Greater London Council was investing in initiatives which were emerging from broad-left coalitions of anti-racist, queer, and feminist action that aimed to take intersectional approaches to anti-oppression. Much of this work found expression in local government and community arts and culture, in other words, through forms more easily accessible through grassroots organising. The rare recognition by the ICA of Black and Asian woman artists in 1985 then, which included prominent Black lesbians, was a provocation rooted in a specific social and political framework of resistance. *Zabat* (1989) and *Hysteria* (1991) were collections that sought to visually map the (non)journeys of Black women in history through depictions of Black women as ancient muses, and stories of Black female erasure and disappearance.

Sulter's poem 'As a Black Woman' (1985) uses the form of the lyric to explore the dimensions of a racialised and gendered life that severs Black women from hopeful futures. The eleven-stanza poem is structured around a series of declarations without entreaty. The poem opens with, 'As a black woman / the bearing of my child / is a political act'. The pared down stanza offers a contrast to the weight of destruction violence it alludes to, ranging across slavery (the child as white property), forced sterilisation and targeted testing of contraception (the denial of a child), and public health panics (AIDS as Black contagion threatening white lives). The bearing of a child becomes a

political act, rather than a natural expectation, because of the structured work to eliminate the future and reproduction of Blackness. In that context, the bearing of a child becomes an act of refusal. A refusal to allow those histories of violence to continue their genealogies from the past into the future. This breadth of connections, the abstraction of Black lives from individual to collective, allows the singular framing of a 'black woman' to act as a declarative resistance to the lives of Black women in regimes of whiteness. Writing in 1988, Sulter deliberately used Black lesbian feminist philosophy, via figures such as Audre Lorde, to create solidarities across bodies whose sexuality was cast as a site of abhorrence: 'Throughout the same Black Triangle where one hundred million died in slavery days, too many are dying of this epidemic [AIDS] of many which includes our rape, our murder, our poverty, and our criminalization.'²⁹ 'As a Black Woman' uses the specificity of white forms of racialised violence (for example, lynching) as navigational markers in a Black womanhood where to assert the declarative 'I', to be a person, is to stake a claim. The poem closes with, 'As a blackwoman / the personal is political / holds no empty rhetoric'. The refusal of the transcendent or universalised 'I' for the embodied and worldly political blackwoman emplots the lyric in a narrative of entangled lives where to live, to persist, is an act of refusal.

Writing about the lack of funding and recognition for Black women artists in 1988, Sulter made a prescient observation:

Being written out of history can happen to you. There is no safety in collusion with those who want to oppress our art and suppress our voices. They will turn their weapons on you, and who will be there to help you if your contemporaries no longer exist? Who makes Black women's work visible if not other Black women?³⁰

The uneven canonisation of Sulter's own work is testament to this. An article in the *Guardian* in 2000 spoke to a range of scholars in Britain working in the broad field of race studies, who were leaving the country or reflecting on the particularly British challenge of doing work on race. Paul Gilroy was quoted saying, 'Even to be interested in race, let alone to assert its centrality to British nationalism, is to sacrifice the right to be taken seriously.'³¹ For too long work on

‘race’, ‘sexuality’, ‘disability’, and other social categories has been collapsed into the narrow confines of identity politics or the fidelity of social representation. How has the study of form, codified in historicised literary studies, equipped contemporary critics to respond to fundamental shifts in social norms and forms around us? What does it mean to ask this question in the wake of a former First Minister finding themselves at the centre of a bitter public and political debate about the Gender Reform Act, and the Scottish Police declaring they were institutionally racist? Queer forms emerge from deviant work in the social status quo. They are gestures of refusal without pessimism, they defy to illuminate.

Notes

- 1 Ramzi Fawaz, *Queer Forms* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), p. 5.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.
- 3 Roderick A. Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), p. 8.
- 4 Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, 'Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social', *ASAP/Journal*, 2.2 (2017): 227–39 (p. 228): www.doi.org/10.1353/asa.2017.0031.
- 5 Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, 'Queer Nationality', *Boundary 2*, 19.1 (1992): 149 www.doi.org/10.2307/303454.
- 6 Jeffrey Meek, *Queer Voices in Post-War Scotland: Male Homosexuality, Religion and Society* (New York: Springer, 2015).
- 7 Berthold Schoene, 'A Queer Affinity', in *Out There: An Anthology of Scottish LGBT Writing*, ed. by Zoe Strachan (Glasgow: Freight Books, 2014), pp. 11–17 (p. 11).
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