2

Method

FORMALISM FOR SURVIVAL

OVER THE PAST HALF CENTURY, two methods have proved especially pervasive and resilient across the aesthetic humanities: close reading and historicizing. Even as scholars have turned their attention to new problems and new objects—from affect theory to animal studies—they have continued to put both close reading and historicizing to work, often together in the same project. What makes these two methods so durable? In keeping with the aesthetic and political values we explored in the last chapter, these methods are especially good at training us to resist prediction and expectation, surprising us out of conventional wisdom and beckoning us to an unknown beyond. That is, they sustain the long-standing commitment to anti-instrumentality.

Close reading involves concentrating slow and careful attention on a brief passage or detail and then connecting what we find there to the larger work.[1] Its defenders have long argued that as we dwell on the specific moment, the text reveals a radical alterity, which then resists and unsettles prevailing doctrines and systems of belief. This argument spans generations, going back as far as R. P. Blackmur, who argues that close analysis of texts produces a "bewilderment" devastating to dogma, up through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who attends to the subtle details of texts as a way of countering the "monolingual, presentist, narcissistic" perspective of imperializing power, to Jane Gallop, who favors close reading as a way of "resisting and calling into question our inevitable tendency to bring things together in smug, overarching conclusions." Most recently, Nan Z. Da argues that reading for fine distinctions is the best way to resist the propaganda strategies of authoritarian regimes.[2]

Focusing on history, meanwhile, means analyzing cultural objects as responses to specific political and material contexts, from prevailing stereotypes

and religious movements to state violence and media markets. Since the 1980s, most historicists in the aesthetic humanities have seen their work as seeking out "the singular, the specific, the individual"—the "myriad little connections, disjunctions, and conjunctions" that refuse monolithic or unifying accounts of social worlds.[3] Historical research thus reveals the contingency of practices and beliefs, disturbing imperializing and naturalizing assumptions in order to make way for a rich variety of alternatives. Like close reading, "History opens up the possibility of strangeness."[4]

The first chapter argued that opening up to strangeness is not the best framework for social and environmental justice now. In an age of precarity, the most basic needs, like clean water and safe shelter, are increasingly elusive and unpredictable. While close reading and historicism have been well-suited to interrupting entrenched habits and assumptions, other methods will be needed to follow these crucial moments of surprise and alterity—approaches to strategizing and building ongoing basic capabilities. For that, I will argue in this chapter, we will need an expansive version of formalism, one that is drawn in part from the study of the arts but also reaches beyond the aesthetic.

Formalist Premises

For critics in the arts, the word "form" typically refers to the patterns, shapes, and structures that organize aesthetic objects, from plot and meter to montage and vanishing-point perspective. In my own work, I have deliberately defined form more broadly than is usual in the arts—as any shape or configuration of materials, any arrangement of elements, any ordering or patterning. I have argued that it is useful to employ the same term for both aesthetic and social forms so that we can see how these work together, and how we are everywhere shaped by lots of different kinds of arrangements, from sonnets to public transportation systems.[5]

Politics, according to this definition, is very much a matter of form. Politics entails imposing order on space, for example, such as segregated neighborhoods or borders around nations. Power operates through organizations of time, too, from the age of consent and the forty-hour work week to the global pace of historical progress, with Europe famously imagining itself as the vanguard, consigning the rest of the world to the "waiting room of history."[6] Many of the worst injustices take shape as a third form—the hierarchy: a vertical order, one that ranks its elements according to their higher and lower relative status, giving shape to ongoing material inequalities, including the power of

white over Black, masculine over feminine, rich over poor, and straight over queer. Politics involves distributions and arrangements. Or to put this another way: *politics is the work of giving form to collective life.*

Just as plots and rhyme schemes give shape to literature, zoning laws and racial hierarchies give shape to political communities. That does not mean that artistic and political orders are the same. It is clearly crucial to distinguish coercive political forms that are literally matters of life and death from imaginative and speculative works of art. But my point here is specifically *methodological.* Just as a historical scholar can give a rich contextualizing account of many kinds of events, from diplomacy to childbirth, and just as a statistician can track patterns across many different kinds of objects, from gene mutations to income disparities, a formalist scholar can analyze the shapes and patterns of a *Bildungsroman* or a school system. And that means that aesthetic critics have methodological tools that are portable beyond the aesthetic.

Some humanists have argued strenuously against an expansion of formalist reading to include politics,[7] but a movement back and forth between aesthetic and political forms is already one of the most ordinary practices in the aesthetic humanities. A scholar of poetry, for example, will attend to both the aesthetic and social orders at work in a given poem—connecting metrical patterns to the rhythms of industrial labor, for example—and will be particularly interested in how these intersect, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes undermining one another.

Let me offer a few deliberately various examples from recent scholarship to show how routine it is for scholars across media and periods to read for the relations between aesthetic and political arrangements. Barbara Fuchs understands the unreliable and meandering forms of the picaresque novel in early modern Spain as a challenge to the unified authority of imperial power. Juliana Hu Pegues reads Shoki Kayamori's early twentieth-century photographs as offering "multivalent expressions of space and time that extend beyond the limitations of settler colonial logic." Hongmei Sun shows how the first animated Chinese film, *Princess Iron Fan* (1941), made at the moment of the Japanese invasion and occupation of China, encouraged ordinary people to band together in a united collective to fend off foreign invaders. And Anthony Reed interprets Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*—with its fragmented structure, its mix of visual and verbal media, and its multiple first-person perspectives—as indexing a shattered, partial, precarious, incoherent racialized subjectivity in the contemporary United States.[8]

In some of these readings, we are invited to see how the art form registers or reinforces a dominant political order, while in others the aesthetic form unsettles or cracks open the political form. But in all of these cases, the scholar is offering some account not only of the art object but of a specific political arrangement, whether that is the unified imperial state or the fragmented subject. Even in the aesthetic fields, in other words, form is not an exclusively aesthetic problem.

And yet, while critics insist on the importance of the shapes and patterns of sociopolitical life—the liberal subject, the rhythms of labor, the walled settlement—the aesthetic humanities do not give these as much careful analytic attention as the cultural forms that we take to be our primary objects of analysis. That is, while aesthetic scholars usually give a rich, complex account of the complexity of cultural forms, they leave an understanding of political forms thin—and, this chapter will argue, misleading.

For understandable political reasons, most critics focus attention on violent and oppressive structures and arrangements, celebrating texts that unsettle naturalized narratives of national progress, for example, or explore gender expressions beyond the dominant binary. But this practice also leads to the understanding, often left implicit, that *all* constraining forms are violent and coercive. It is for this reason that we find critics across schools of thought, from feminism to thing theory, arguing that we should refuse the fixity of forms in favor of ephemerality, fluidity, and dissolution.[9] We can see this logic at work in a powerful recent essay in my own home field, titled "Undisciplining Victorian Studies." Here, Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong argue that Victorian studies has been built around two kinds of container: the aesthetics of "formal closures" and the "self-protective containments of race and geography." This form, they warn, entails "exclusion, especially of the non-canonical, the racialized, and the seemingly unrecognizable."[10] This is a deeply persuasive and, I would add, consummately formalist account: the authors single out a specific organizing form—the container—and point out that this succeeds in organizing politics, aesthetics, and scholarship in Victorian studies to troubling ongoing effect. But what is interesting is that the authors then use this formalist analysis to reject formalism as a method. Because form is *always* a matter of enclosing and excluding, they argue, Victorian studies should turn away from the study of forms. Implicit here is the logic that all forms are containers, and that all containers are politically repressive. The proper work of the critic, by this logic, is to resist form.

Many influential thinkers have taken the argument for the violence of formal constraints a step further, arguing that the various orders and arrangements that give shape to the social world—from architecture to law to romantic comedies—work together in dominant systems. For Foucault, this is the regime of the carceral. For Fredric Jameson it is late capitalism. For Lisa Lowe it is Western liberalism. For Jared Sexton it is anti-Blackness. For Lee Edelman it is reproductive futurism. Interestingly, all of these regimes both overlap and diverge. But whatever their relations, these models have helped to entrench a habit of thinking about political form: that different shapes and arrangements lock together in massive systems or structures of power.

Two assumptions about political forms, then, shape scholarship across the aesthetic humanities: first, that forms are oppressive instruments of control; and second, that very different forms, from police training to science fiction, work together to sustain regimes of domination. Are these assumptions justified? Attending to the *capacitating* potential of shapes and arrangements, this chapter argues otherwise. I ground my argument here in six formalist premises:

1. *No human collective can do without form*. Because humans are interdependent, we have always needed to figure out—and will probably always need to figure out—how to organize and distribute the materials of collective life. Even the most emancipatory *polis* of the future will require regular distributions of food and clean water, spaces for rest and sociability, and rules for decision making. This does not mean that there is a single, proper order for human life. As Anna Kornbluh argues, "Humans cannot exist without forms that scaffold sociability, even though the particular forms that human sociability takes are not fixed."[11]

2. No single form is necessary, but *there is a finite range of ways to organize materials for survival*. Living bodies need nutrients not once but over and over, which means that human communities have always revolved around repetitive rhythms—and especially the recurring labor of finding, growing, gathering, preparing, and serving food. Human collectives have also always depended on pathways to get food and water to the places where we live and to take waste away. And our bodies have always needed some form of enclosure to protect us from harsh weather and other dangers.

3. *Some ways of organizing the infrastructures of collective life are more just and capacitating than others*. Consider the difference between egalitarian

food-sharing to all members of a community and the allocation of the most nutritious food to men of property, or the difference between a thirty-five-hour work week and the continual forced labor of enslaved people. Egalitarian distributions and labor protections are not form-less; they are tightly organized. If the *polis* always entails some structuring of sociability, then the goal is not to push beyond all constraints but figure out which specific shapes are better and worse for collective continuance.

4. *Forms carry with them a limited range of capacities, which I call affordances.* Affordances are the actions or uses latent in certain materials or designs.[12] Wax is good for pouring and molding, but it is not strong enough to use for building bridges. The shape of the dining table affords small-scale conversation, eating, and the paying of bills, but it does not lend itself to mass protests. Inventive people can certainly put things to work for unintended uses—like slicing a cake with dental floss. This is an expansion of the *intended* affordances of dental floss, but it is still an affordance—a use latent in the materiality and design of the object. What this means is that forms and materials have a limited range of capacities: they will always be able to do some things well and others badly or not at all.

5. *Form is a materialist concern.* Formalism has long been associated with disembodied abstraction, aesthetic transcendence, and a deliberate withdrawal from politics.[13] But a formalist analysis that focuses on the shapes of the material world, including the rhythms of labor and the contours of public spaces, attends to the body, the everyday, and the social.

6. *Social, political, and aesthetic patterns and arrangements do not typically lock together in coherent systems.* Different forms follow different logics of organization—boundaries do not impose the same order as routes or tempos. For this reason, forms often destabilize each other, getting in each other's way and creating openings for change. The emphasis of my own work in *Forms* was on these aleatory possibilities, which was very much in keeping with the field's long emphasis on rupture and open-endedness.[14] And yet, it was also always clear that some forms dominate, and have staying power. White supremacy and patriarchy are especially—obstinately—sticky, enduring despite changes in law, economics, and culture. But because of our strong emphasis on unmaking in the aesthetic humanities, our fields do not know enough about *why* some forms work together over long periods, while others

unsettle each other and come apart. Thus we need formalist methods to understand how different forms work together in both destabilizing *and* stabilizing ways.

Form and Ideology

So: where does a formalist account of politics begin? Most cultural critics start with ideology. That is, they understand social and aesthetic shapes and arrangements as effects of specific systems of value and belief. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue, for example, that heteronormativity shapes "almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; education; plus the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture."[15]

The ideological explanation is persuasive. It is true, for instance, that a predominantly heteronormative culture produces and maintains some forms at the expense of others—like the sanitizing and policing of public spaces to make heterosexual couples and families feel safe and visible while concealing and criminalizing queerness.[16] But this account also assumes that forms follow from ideologies. Is it possible, instead, that beliefs and values grow out of material shapes and arrangements? For example, patriarchal values are clearly responsible for limiting women's wages, positions, and kinds of work. But does women's lower economic status then help to reinforce beliefs in male dominance? Could both be at work? If so, how would we know? Do forms and ideologies operate in a kind of feedback loop in which each reinforces the other? That is, could ideology sometimes be a cause and sometimes an effect?

It is my hypothesis here that material forms can in fact shape and engender some worldviews and practices of sociability while foreclosing others. That is, all kinds of arrangements—from occupied territories to environmental regulations to classroom seating—produce us as much as we produce them, not only organizing and constraining but also creating the very fabric of social relationships.

Imagine, for example, that you grow up in a city with inexpensive, safe, and accessible public transportation. As a teenager, you can explore the many corners of the city. You and your friends gawk at expensive homes, wander through queer neighborhoods, and sneak into music venues. You are crammed together with strangers on the bus every morning on your way to school, and

on the way home you make up funny stories about the few scattered adults who are sleeping on the bus. When it comes time to find a job, you are able to look across the whole city.

Now, imagine instead that you live in a rural area without public transit, where houses are spaced so far from each other that you rarely see your neighbors. If as a teenager you want to see your friends, you might have to ask an adult for a ride, and most often you are stuck at home. Your local school may be full of people who look like you, racially and economically, and when you start looking for a job you will need to borrow or buy a car just to get to the interviews.

In other words, your worldview may flow at least in part from the shape of the transportation infrastructure that you have inherited, perhaps from several generations before you. From this perspective, power is not best described as the work of dominant groups intentionally exerting control. It is true, of course, that the public transportation system is the result of human intention and design in the first place: it had to be planned, fought for, and built. Like all infrastructures, it also needs to be maintained over time, and some groups will deliberately allow public transportation systems to crumble. In this sense, people can make, unmake, and remake forms. And yet, once the public transportation system is in place, it will also give shape to the lives of many who are not responsible for making it for years to come. Thus a form held over from the past maintains its power to direct experience and shape values now and into the future, molding neighborhoods, daily routines, education, work experience, the freedom to roam, and the understanding of lives unlike our own. That does not mean that agency is altogether foreclosed, but it does mean that building and installing durable forms can have formative effects on beliefs, values, and practices for long periods to come.

It will be clear from the argument so far that this book focuses most closely on the shapes of human communities and the possibilities of human action. Environmental and animal studies readers will probably object that this is too human-centered a project. Yet, the formalist methods at work here in fact emerge out of posthumanist and ecological theory. It is this thinking that has allowed me to see how arrangements of non-human materials—from sewer systems to classrooms to beehives—capacitate better and worse collectivities. But I also deliberately keep my sights on humans in this book for a few reasons. First, because a certain anthropocentrism seems unavoidable in scholarly debate. As Matthew Flisfeder puts it, posthumanists do not try "to convince a rock that it is noumenal." We write to convince each other about our ethical

responsibilities.[17] Second, while the critique of the human subject that understands itself as separate from nature and seeks to master objects for its own use is persuasive and urgently important, it does not follow, as I argued in the first chapter, that all human action is conquest. And the desire to avoid all complicity is troubling in its own right, risking a principled inaction, a withdrawal from responsibility—and therefore an acquiescence to the violent forces of the status quo. "While it is obviously dangerous to overestimate human agency," Min Hyoung Song writes, "there is also grave danger in underestimating it."[18]

The definition of the human at work in this book is closest to Barbara Epstein's, who writes that "humans, like other animal species, have characteristics, including specific needs, abilities, and limits to those abilities." This account puts its emphasis not on mastery but on shared materiality, capacities, and constraints. "Socialist humanism," as Epstein defines it, "is based on the view that humans require social cooperation and support, are capable of collective effort and individual creativity, and are most likely to thrive in egalitarian communities dedicated to the common welfare rather than the pursuit of private profit."[19]

A formalist account can certainly work for multispecies collective continuance. Animals and plants, after all, also depend for their survival on forms, from seasonal cycles to sheltering spaces. Climate change is devastating for not only the forms that sustain human communities but those that support literally millions of other species as well. In this context, the goal is to figure out what I and whatever other willing humans can do, within the limits of our own capacities, to make the planet more livable for all species; and to see communities that include humans—and not only those narrowly counted as human by Euro-American settlers—survive, and do so with more justice than our current systems and practices allow.

Form across Disciplines

Aesthetic critics have analytic skills that we can take to the forms of social worlds, but we are not the only ones carrying a formalist toolbox. A vast range of objects, from sounds to neighborhoods to coral reefs, can be analyzed for their structures and patterns, which means that there are scholars attentive to shapes and structures working across fields, from religious studies to entomology to urban planning. In this respect, formalism belongs to all fields, or to none.

Formalism in fact has the potential to be a useful *metadisciplinary* method in two specific ways. First, a formalism that works across disciplines can help us recognize the limits and the possibilities of different forms of knowledge. My own disciplinary training has taught me to focus my attention on the novel, and in the past I, like many other critics, would have thought it was my job to ask how the novel seeks to understand and respond to a whole range of political problems, from gender inequality to racial capitalism. But a metadisciplinary formalism allows me to think as much about the limits as the capacities of the novel, and to see it as one form among others, with constraints that may be obstacles to both knowing and reshaping the *polis*.

The contemporary novel, according to Amitav Ghosh, "banishes the collective from the territory of the fictional imagination." He blames this limitation on the specific ideologies of our historical moment.[20] But it is also a long-standing problem of form. The realist novel has long been organized around plots and protagonists—exciting events and exceptional individuals—which makes it especially well suited to the scale of a few persons. Even when the classic nineteenth-century realist novel has aspirations to convey massive social structures and systems, as Alex Woloch has argued, it repeatedly narrows its attention to a small number of richly rounded characters at the expense of the mass.[21] A huge range of novels since then, from Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Yuri Herrera's *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo*, train our attention on a single protagonist or two in a specific historical situation. Many novels work in the Lukácsian mode, using one main character's experience to convey social structures or conflicts.[22] Sometimes the novel uses specific characters to stand for whole populations. The postbellum American novel, to give just one example, repeatedly joins a Confederate man with a Northern woman in its marriage plots, recruiting this narrative arc as an illusory resolution to the ongoing problem of national disunity.[23]

Janice Ho defines the novel *tout court* as "a genre preoccupied with the relationship between the protagonist and the social contexts in which he or she exists."[24] We could certainly cite experiments in the novel form that expand its usual cast of characters—from Honoré de Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* to Helena Maria Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them*. But we could also begin from an altogether different starting point. Instead of analyzing a field of objects defined in advance as aesthetic—like the novel—and from that point trying to cross the gap between art and politics, we could ask which forms—both those that are conventionally aesthetic and those that are not—most readily invite an understanding of collective life.

Let's take the political problem of wealth inequality. The traditional plot-and-protagonist form of the novel is good at exploring some aspects of this problem—and bad at others. Capitalism and urbanization clearly shape experience in Charles Dickens's Britain and Chris Abani's Nigeria, for example, but *Oliver Twist* and *Graceland* tell us little about the forces, structures, and political decisions that produce these effects. What we do learn from the novels is what it is like to struggle to survive in these conditions, with desires repeatedly thwarted and serious dangers always threatening.

Contrast the novel's accounts to a very different form, a Center on Budget and Policy Priorities bar graph showing average gains and losses in U.S. incomes between 1979 and 2007. The graph divides the population into five groups and focuses on a single variable across those groups, showing simplified general trends that gather together huge numbers—reducing vast quantities of people, jobs, and dollars to one stark comparison. What is most striking, of course, is not the specifics of the numbers but the remarkable contrast—the *Gestalt*: that incomes lagged for the bottom four-fifths of the population, while skyrocketing for the top 1 percent. The graph uses color to set off the top 1 percent as a separable category: blue bars mark the five quintiles, but then an extra bar in red registers a single percent within the top quintile. This contrast in color foregrounds the startling difference—with red evoking stop signs and emergencies—between the 1 percent and the rest.

There is a powerful and striking—even, one might say, aesthetically compelling—account of inequality at work in this bar graph. At the same time, it has clear limitations when it comes to our knowledge of wealth and poverty. It does not tell us how structural inequality came to be, a task for historical narrative. And it cannot give us a rich sense of what it feels like to live within and against the many structural barriers of poverty, bumping up against obstacles to transportation and adequate nutrition and racial justice and home-ownership and high-quality education. That is a task better left to the novel or the news story.

While some critics might insist that the novel does intrinsically better political work than the graph because it keeps us attentive to difference, refusing to agglomerate a vast range of situated experiences into knowable and governable categories, like "nation" or "population," a politics of social justice needs both. To understand poverty as a consequence of structural forces, rather than individual moral failure or bad decision making, we need to grasp the obstacles that constrain the lives of the pluckiest of characters. At the same time, any single case of hunger and hardship could be an anomaly; to

Average Gain or Loss in 2007 From Income Shift Since 1979
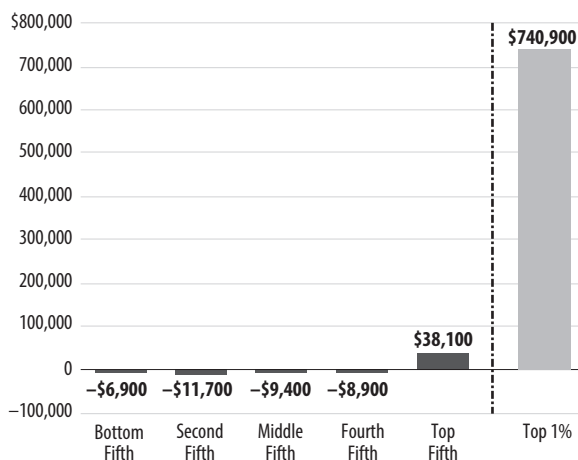*Relative to Average Incomes If 1979 Distribution Had Prevailed*

FIGURE 1. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities,
https://www.cbpp.org/blog/enough-is-enough-on-tax
-cuts-for-wealthy.

understand the reach of powerful structures like race and disability across so-
cial groups, we need to be able to recognize large-scale patterns. Both the novel
and the graph thus afford a knowledge as well as an ignorance. And each re-
veals the limits of the other.

In the university today, our disciplines typically divide forms from one
another—we put statistics in one department, history in a second, poetry in
a third, visual images in a fourth, and the ethnographic interview in yet a fifth.
Even within literary studies, we have experts in fiction who do not study
drama, and vice versa. But what if we need all of these forms, precisely because
each has powers and limits that the others do not? A map can show the distri-
bution of world hunger, but it does not give us a sense of what it is like to wake
up every day to an empty stomach; a photograph can show the devastating
effects of war on a civilian scene, but it does not tell us how the violence
started. In short, the first reason to use formalism to move across the disci-
plines is that we need many forms to know the world, and we need formalists
to help us see what it is—and how it is—that we know.

If the first reason to turn to a metadisciplinary formalism concerns knowl-
edge, the second has to do with action. Both the novel and the bar graph lead us
to understand something about inequality, but neither form readily invites us to

gather together or to pursue particular political strategies. Typically absorbed in silence and solitude, the material form of the paperback affords isolation and separation—even a temporary retreat from social pressures and responsibilities.[25] Novels can of course be read aloud in classrooms, clubs, pubs, and other collective spaces, and the serialized novel and unfolding news story afford the interruption of private absorption with pauses for collective reflection, as audiences gather over the water cooler or on the internet between episodes to reflect on the work so far and to speculate about what is coming. But other forms more readily afford the *production* of collectives. Live theater, for example, brings people together into a shared space, where audiences may be prompted to share laughter, applause, or song, and sometimes even erupt into riotous violence. The conflictual and dialogic forms of dramatic plots also afford radical questionings of authority and sovereignty, which together with its crowds have made drama seem like an especially threatening political form over the centuries.[26]

The public square, a less conventionally aesthetic form, has afforded many of the most famous political protests of recent years, including Tiananmen, Tahrir, and Trafalgar Squares, and New York's Zuccotti Park. Because these public spaces afford highly visible vast crowds, they are well suited to putting the sheer enormity of collective resistance on display. But the "movement of the squares," as we will see in a later chapter, has also been sporadic and ineffective at exerting and sustaining a lasting political force.

In short, all forms afford certain possibilities and foreclose others. And a formalism not limited by discipline can ask: what versions of collective life is it possible to know and build with different forms? This is not an aesthetic question, exactly, but it is not outside of aesthetics either. It allows us to ask how art forms interrelate with political arrangements and how they may give shape to worlds. But it does not prompt us to seek out works that are particularly innovative or beautiful or complex objects in themselves. It does not focus on the ways that cultural forms express specific contexts. It does not try to track the particular values and associations that different forms have accrued historically. Instead, this approach asks us to look for forms of all kinds that might help us fight for, design, build, and maintain a just and sustaining *polis*.

Formal Survival

Up to this point, I have argued that an expansive formalism can help us understand how some forms afford particular kinds of knowledge and action more effectively than others. Now let's turn to the particular challenge of collective

continuance. Scholars in the aesthetic humanities have tended to privilege discomfiting processes, unruliness, and flux over fixed and stable structures. But collective continuance requires an understanding of that which lasts. What forms afford stability, reliability, and predictability over time? And are there ways to design and build just and capacitating forms—like public transportation or food security—so that they can take hold and endure?

For this we need an account of what I call *formal survival*. That is, we need to understand which social arrangements manage to stay in place over time. Many forms that take a robust material shape, like walls and roads, are built for the long term, but how do less literally inert forms, like racial hierarchies, manage to take hold and last over centuries, despite major changes in law, culture, and economics? My working hypothesis here is that *shapes and arrangements are most likely to endure when they operate in self-reinforcing configurations*—when material and ideological forms, for example, support each other, and so keep each other going over time.

A well-known example will help to make this clear. In 1934, the U.S. government established a system of defining certain neighborhoods as too risky for federal banks to invest in them. They drew red lines around these areas on city maps. The Federal Housing Administration was willing to guarantee loans only in neighborhoods occupied by "the race for which they are intended" and where local schools "should not be attended in large numbers by inharmonious racial groups."[27] This explicitly racist law subsidized mortgages for houses being built in neighborhoods in the suburbs, as long as only white people lived there, and blocked mortgages for prospective homeowners in urban Black and Latinx neighborhoods. Redlining then shaped other forms, like the construction of mass transit systems that linked downtowns to white suburbs while bypassing minority neighborhoods. Sewage treatment plants often ran to high-income subdivisions but offered no access to the urban poor.[28] Since public schooling in the United States is largely funded through local property and sales taxes, segregating neighborhoods deepened inequality between urban and suburban schools. Lack of access to public transportation and high-quality education in turn intensified poverty for Black and Latinx city dwellers.[29]

In this model, racial hierarchy organizes *other* forms. It starts by separating neighborhoods by race. It then directs the routes taken by roads, mass transit, and clean water. The lack of access to jobs and healthy food then entrenches and deepens poverty and inequality, which in turn feed a cultural myth of white superiority. Racism is an intentional ideological force in the first place,

but then it persists by organizing *other* forms. And since rock and steel can outlast the intentions of their first construction, these material forms can prolong the work of racial hierarchy through later historical moments. A sewer is designed to be invisible, to function without the conscious attention of most of its users. It can therefore last well beyond the ideology that built it in the first place, continuing to shape and organize collective life without much in the way of ongoing justification, celebration, or consent to keep it going. With redlining, multiple durable forms of organization—housing law, school systems, sewer lines, trains, and roads—thus worked together to write racial hierarchy into the built environment for the long term. Simply to call this ideology is, I think, to miss the actual mechanisms of endurance, which depend on the arrangement of mutually reinforcing forms. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 could remedy some of the most unjust loan practices, but by that point racial hierarchy had written itself into the very shapes of the *polis*.

This story might well prompt us to want to fight forms and systems, but I am going to take the argument in the opposite direction, to make the case that the success and durability of this formal model also has a valuable lesson to offer to those working for justice. If we understand how portable, generalizable models work together to reinforce one another over time, those who want to work for collective continuance could use these lessons to develop our own sturdy alternatives—constellations of forms that could reliably produce and reproduce fairness over time.

To this end, let me offer the more hopeful model of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, nicknamed "the city that ended hunger." A leftist government in the early 1990s developed policies to guarantee food as a right for this city of more than 2.5 million. Nearly a fifth of all children in the city were suffering from malnutrition at the time, and there were high rates of child mortality.[30] Rather than proposing an emergency program or targeting a particular neighborhood or population, Belo Horizonte introduced a cluster of twenty integrated solutions across the city, which they call a "food security system." Elements include nutritious school meals, subsidies for fruits and vegetables, training programs for bakers and chefs, seed distribution to school and community gardens, and licenses for food trucks to move around the city with the stipulation they spend a certain amount of time in poor neighborhoods selling fresh foods at a fixed low price.[31]

Perhaps the best known of all the programs has been the "Popular Restaurants." Located in busy areas, these restaurants serve locally farmed, nutritious meals at very low prices. With high-quality food and a pub-like

FIGURE 2. Restaurante Popular in Belo Horizonte, Brazil (2011). Prefeitura de Belo Horizonte.

atmosphere—sometimes including live music—the Popular Restaurants attract people from across the socioeconomic spectrum, about a quarter from the middle and upper classes, with the consequence that eating there does not stigmatize the poor. Many people eat together at long tables, with students, elderly, professional, and unhoused people sitting side by side.[32]

Belo Horizonte's food security system has had some dramatic effects. Since the 1990s, infant mortality and child malnutrition have dropped by half, and poverty rates have declined significantly.[33] There is also evidence that Belo Horizonte's programs have contributed to local biodiversity by encouraging ecologically sound farming practices.[34]

But what is perhaps most notable about this food system is that it has long outlasted expectations. At the start, commentators predicted that it would fall apart as soon as the political pendulum swung right. They assumed that food security depended on a kind of political will that would simply disappear with the next election or economic crisis. Now that it has been in place for more than two decades, however, scholars are instead trying to find explanations for the food system's longevity. As food policy scholar Cecelia Rocha

puts it, "Having more than 25 years of an approach to food and nutrition secu-
rity is unique."[35]

A formalist analysis would have it that Belo Horizonte's food security
system is sustainable because its different elements work so well together, as
in the redlining example—in a kind of formal feedback loop. The Popular
Restaurants offer all city dwellers affordable and healthy meals, for example,
but they also bring people from different walks of life together to share food
in a deliberately pleasant atmosphere, which—as opposed to so many deliber-
ate forms of segregation—helps expand and deepen feelings of solidarity and
connectedness across differences like race and class, which in turn encourages
the political will for continuing collective solutions.

Or take Belo Horizonte's "Straight from the Countryside" program. Here,
small family farmers in outlying areas receive government support for growing
environmentally sustainable and nutritious fruits and vegetables, which they
sell directly to urban consumers in designated public sites, cutting out corpo-
rate middlemen. A public process determines which farmers are eligible, based
on the size of the farm and income level of the family; the government then
requires certain sustainable farming methods from participants and sets low
sale prices. The most important form here is the standardized quantity: small
farms, low prices. But a different form—the network—also plays a crucial role.
The program locates sales sites in busy urban thoroughfares where fresh food
is otherwise scarce. These sites are places where two *different* networks cross:
they are hubs for human movement, but they are gaps in the fresh food supply
chain, or "food deserts." The various forms at work then reinforce one another.
While city dwellers gain access to healthy food at low prices, rural farmers earn
a decent living, which helps stem the migration of the rural poor to urban
shantytowns, which in turn takes pressure off government programs, freeing
up ongoing resources for the food system. The city can then train more chefs
and urban gardeners, promote biodiversity, and put resources into keeping
food quality high. Overall health, nutrition, and income rise; the need for city
services to respond to poverty falls.[36]

Many of these elements exist separately in other cities, but part of what
makes Belo Horizonte's program endure is the careful design of its adminis-
tration across government departments. A single school gardening program
could easily be cut by a new party in power, but to undo an integrated city-
wide system with multiple interconnecting forms that span neighborhoods
and classes and municipal departments would involve a radical dismantling.
So far it has lasted through multiple political parties, which suggests that it is

indeed much more difficult to take apart a self-reinforcing system than a single ad hoc solution.

I have turned to these two examples, one deeply unjust, the other aimed at guaranteeing basic needs, to show how a formalist attention to social worlds can be useful to the project of sustaining collective life. I hope it is clear that I am reading cities in some of the same ways I would read a poem. Like the critic who connects Robert Browning's short end-stopped lines to the rhythms of train travel,[37] I am tracking different organizations of housing and the pathways of food and water through the *polis* as these interact and intersect. Sometimes social forms support one another, and at other times they get in each other's way, as when a food security system works against patterns of racialized poverty. But for the project of collective continuance, it is especially important to learn from mutually reinforcing forms. These are the formal feedback loops that afford sustainability over long stretches of time.

Designing for Collective Continuance

So far, we have seen how formalist methods are valuable in the effort to *analyze* sustainable social formations. Now I want to make the case that there is an aesthetic tradition that can help us to *participate* in the building of more just conditions. This is not the anti-instrumental canon of art that has been so central to the aesthetic humanities but rather the tradition of design, which is all about putting forms to practical use. In the work of design, forms move back and forth between aesthetic and social worlds. That is, designs are aesthetic in the sense that they are imagined and constructed, and they are material and social in that they give shape to matter, including the spaces, pathways, and objects that are everywhere organizing our lives.

Designers typically depend on *models*. A traditional architect, for example, might begin with a two-dimensional paper blueprint, which is then used to create an object in another medium, such as a skyscraper composed of steel and glass. As the design passes from sketch to building, what it is doing is abstracting forms—shapes and patterns—so that they can move from one material to another. The same rectangular shape organizes a small drawing of a window and a large glass pane framed by steel. Forms, in this sense, are portable.

In fact, the whole point of a designer's model is to be portable—from small to large, from possible to actual, from place to place. Models move across materials, media, scales. Think of a model of a city, shrinking and simplifying the

vast and teeming reality. Or consider a model apartment, the same size as all the others but existing in more than one place. Some models remain imaginary and two-dimensional, like an architectural plan that never becomes a building. Models do not have to be static, either: in a Bayesian macroeconomic model or a board game like Pandemic, the task is to test out multiple scenarios. Models are used in aesthetic, scientific, and social domains: an artist might make clay models for a bronze sculpture; a scientist might use digital models to understand genetic interactions; and an urban planner might design a model for neighborhood revitalization. Models can also cross domains: engineers in Japan turned to the bills of kingfishers to help them design a high-speed train that runs quietly.[38]

The way that models work is that they sharpen or set in motion our knowledge of a reality that is not available to direct perception. They deliberately abstract relationships so that we can grasp those relationships apart from their details. That is, *models allow us to understand forms at work across contexts*. By detaching shapes, orders, arrangements from particular media and circumstances, they invite us to play out the work of forms, especially in their interactions with other forms. The kingfisher's wedge-shaped beak, which allows it to make sudden dives without splashing when it hits the water, inspired the shape of a train that can quietly manage the sudden change in air resistance when it enters a tunnel.

The portability of forms is what allows designers to move from imagination to built reality. It is also what allows us to make some predictions about what forms will do as they travel across time and space. In the aesthetic humanities, scholars have often read aesthetic forms as responses to specific historical contexts. But many of the most common sociopolitical forms never begin anywhere *in particular*: we can find hierarchies and enclosures, triads and binaries, rows and circles, in most social arrangements—ancient and modern, Western and non-Western. Bridges arise independently in many cultures, and so do wheels. We find narrative quests and repetitive song refrains in many places around the world too.

As forms crop up across contexts, they carry their affordances with them, organizing materials in the same limited range of ways, with the same finite array of affordances. Let me offer a brief example. The protest chant "Un pueblo, unido, será jamás vencido" began as part of a 1970s Chilean working-class political movement, but it has since traveled across borders and generations with surprising effortlessness, taken up by protesters for many causes and translated into Persian, English, German, Tagalog, and Portuguese.[39] I first

chanted it myself in English as "A people, united, will never be defeated," marching against the anti-labor governor of Wisconsin in 2011. This short form affords easy memorization and recitation. Brief and catchy, rousing and rhythmic, it can pass quickly from protest to protest without instruction or explanation. It affords an experience of embodied solidarity, a joining of bodies and voices through shared spoken and marching rhythms. There is no question that the affordances of the chant will always be limited: it is too short and simple a form, for example, to do justice to the historical specificity of each protest, much less the particular perspective of each protester. It does not afford scientific evidence or plotted narration. But the affordances it does have are powerful: there are few forms better suited to quickly engendering a feeling of mass collective embodiment and purpose.

As each form moves from place to place, it will take its affordances with it, always able to do some things well and others badly or not at all. Borders will always enclose and contain, protect and exclude. A hierarchy of authority in one place and time will do some similar work to a similar hierarchy at another place and time. As Foucault says, "stones can make people docile and knowable," arguing that the arrangements of material in space produce and reproduce certain versions of subjectivity. But forms are not only troubling: they can also empower and enable a range of action. A network of durable tunnels underground, for example, affords the passage of clean water into my home and wastewater out, and in the process it also affords me certain freedoms: I do not need to walk hours each day to fetch water for washing and cooking, like many other women around the world, and I am not wracked by deadly waterborne diseases. The tunnels are an organizing form; they restrict and constrain matter, but, crucially, they also capacitate.

Drawing these claims together leads to a transhistorical and transcultural argument about politics and form. If collective life always depends on organizing forms, if similar forms can appear in multiple times and spaces, and if forms have general properties that they carry with them wherever they go, then it follows that *we can make some predictions about how political forms will work wherever they take shape*. We can then put that knowledge to use to design better forms for collective life.

Both redlining and the food system of Belo Horizonte are portable models. Redlining began as a federal program, replicated across the United States. Private banks then took their cue from government policy, denying loans to prospective homeowners in redlined neighborhoods. What followed was a similar pattern of white flight, suburban sprawl, school segregation, underfunded

city services, and increasingly entrenched racial inequality across U.S. cities. The same interlocking of material forms yielded similar patterns of injustice from Los Angeles to Detroit to Memphis, affording both a ready replicability and a terrifying endurance over time, helping to sustain racial injustice across generations.

Belo Horizonte's food security system is portable too, at least in theory. It has inspired the cities of Cape Town in South Africa and Windhoek in Namibia to consider instituting a set of interconnected food security programs on the Belo Horizonte design.[40] It could also work in the United States, where redlined neighborhoods are typically food deserts and where cities are often ringed by struggling farmers trying to make ends meet.

Critics sometimes argue that design serves neoliberal agendas,[41] but it also has powerful revolutionary potential. As it crosses back and forth between aesthetic and social domains, between the imagination and the real, it draws attention to the artfulness and the artifices of our social worlds. Both sonnets and public transportation systems are designed and made, which means they can also be *re*designed and *re*made. Design offers a field of practices that build on an understanding of formal affordances to reimagine and remake the shapes and arrangements of collective life. The goal here is not to determine, once and for all, what will work in all cases but to make sense of organizing forms that have worked in the past and to think about how and why certain constellations might support collective continuance. That is, to experiment with forms and to use them as equipment for social transformation.

The Forms of Institutions

Formalism can give us the analytical tools we need to understand how forms of many different kinds work together, and design can help communities envision and craft better forms. But remaking the world for climate justice is obviously a tall order, and I have promised a determinedly pragmatic approach to this work. What does this mean in practice? It is my argument, here, that we should start by working to remake the forms of existing institutions.

An emphasis on institutions may sit uneasily with many thinkers in the aesthetic humanities. Influenced by Foucault, Althusser, and Bourdieu, our fields have worked hard to reveal the oppressive power of major modern institutions—the family, the school, the military, the hospital, the prison, and the state—as these produce, coerce, and manage subjects. Historical work across the aesthetic humanities has also shown how less obviously violent

institutions, such as museums, archives, and novels, adopt techniques of imperial management and racial control.[42] Afropessimists have made particularly powerful arguments that dominant institutions have sedimented an inexorable anti-Blackness at their core. For Frank Wilderson III, the "White family and the White state" write anti-Blackness into "the genetic material of this organism called the United States of America."[43] And according to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, all institutions, including universities, do the work of prisons: "In the clear, critical light of day, illusory administrators whisper of our need for institutions, and all institutions are political, and all politics is correctional, so it seems we need correctional institutions in the common, settling it, correcting us. But we won't stand corrected."[44] For Dylan Rodríguez, "the university (as a specific institutional site) and academy (as a shifting material network) themselves cannot be disentangled from the long historical apparatuses of genocidal and protogenocidal social organization."[45] And Nikki Sullivan has argued that queerness works against "the straitjacketing effects of institutionalization."[46] For thinkers like these, aesthetic anti-instrumentality is one of the few ways to emancipate ourselves from institutional coercions. And so, it has become commonplace to "measure artistic radicality by its degree of anti-institutionality."[47]

But what if institutions like the university and the state are not as unrelentingly oppressive as the aesthetic humanities have so often claimed? Understanding institutions as combinations of different kinds of forms allows us to see both how institutionalization will be essential to sustainable justice and how even current, oppressive institutions afford some of the crucial materials for major structural transformation. I build here on a range of recent affirmative reassessments of institutions by Jodi Dean, Shannon Jackson, Benjamin Kohlmann, Lisi Schoenbach, and Robyn Wiegman, all of whom point to the power of institutions as the best or perhaps even the only way to congeal radical change into lasting structures—to take the energies unleashed by crowds and protests and convert them into ongoing formations to support collective life.[48]

What is an institution? According to social scientists James March and Johan Olsen, it is "any relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances."[49] Key concepts here are stability and organization—or, to translate these into my own terms, sustainability and form.

March and Olsen's definition certainly captures the oppressive institutions of a Euro-American modernity, like the mental asylum and the assembly line. But it also captures a range of less oppressive practices, like *satoyama*, the regular labor of preserving village forests in Japan described by Elaine Gan and Anna Tsing. These forests are rich in species, including ants and mushrooms that cannot thrive elsewhere. They depend on human labor—regular raking and pruning of tree branches and trunks—for their ongoing survival. When small farmers moved to cities in the twentieth century and stopped this work, new species took over these areas, creating dense forests where the older species could not survive. Satoyama revitalization groups are now deliberately working to reinstate these old agricultural practices and patterns. According to March and Olsen's definition, the mutually sustaining "multispecies collaborations" that make up satoyama forests are as much institutions as the modern factory or the prison.[50] They are a collection of practices organized and regulated over time, but they are neither exploitative nor punitive. Indeed, since all human collectives impose norms and patterns for the provision of food, including practices of finding, growing, distributing, and preparing food, it is impossible to imagine a total freedom from organizations that remain relatively stable over time—that is, a freedom from institutions.

Or to put this another way: both major qualities of institutions—stability and organization—are essential to sustaining life over time, and both will therefore be necessary to collective continuance. And even rigid regulations can be powerfully capacitating. While many contemporary businesses are proud of giving their workers freedom from old forms of temporal and spatial discipline, offering flexible work hours, creativity, and autonomy, these institutions are no less coercive for that. Employers can expect workers to internalize responsibility for productivity at all hours of the day and night. "Nimble" institutions can maximize profits by hiring workers only when they need them. Gig workers are increasingly forced to stitch together multiple unpredictable jobs to make ends meet. From this perspective, a rigid institutional form—such as the forty-hour work week—may be enclosing and limiting, but it also belongs in the tool kit of forms for sustainable justice.

March and Olsen's definition is deliberately loose and baggy: they call an institution "a collection of rules and organized practices." Hardly rock-solid and immovable, the word "collection" puts an emphasis on gatherings of separable parts, on the heterogeneous assembly. And this seems right. That is, even the most oppressive and hierarchical institutions cannot work as perfectly coordinated systems, as monoliths. They are composed of multiple

and sometimes discordant forms that work against one another as often as they consolidate or reinforce each other. While scholars across the aesthetic humanities have imagined institutions as coherent engines of rigid ideologies, the daily work of institutions suggests the opposite—that coordinating every moving part for the sake of shared ends often feels arduous or downright impossible.

The state provides one example. Composed of police departments and food inspectorates, elected legislatures and credentialed civil servants, health care systems and tax incentives, the state is not a single homogenizing force, and its various bodies sometimes sustain and at other times undermine one another. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), for example, has been attacked by the presidency, sued in the courts, and sometimes even divided against itself. In one case, the air pollution department of the EPA pushed for "scrubbing," which turns coal particles in the air into solid form—thereby undermining those in the same agency fighting for reductions in solid waste.[51]

For an example closer to home for many readers, we might consider the university, an institution that has been the focus of much anti-institutional critique. Rodríguez wonders whether the university "ought to be completely abolished."[52] It is true that universities around the world are built on stolen Indigenous lands and have responded to financial pressures and a culture of economic efficiency and privatization by adopting an increasingly neoliberal logic, including a dependence on precarious adjunct faculty.[53] And yet, it is also true that universities have conserved a motley array of other institutional arrangements, many of them very old, including sabbatical leaves, which have their roots in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus; libraries, dining halls, and music ensembles, all of which have ancient and medieval roots; area studies programs, which date to the Cold War; and departments of gender studies and African American studies, which students and faculty fought to create in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Roderick Ferguson has argued, powerfully, that these fields have been incorporated into the institution in ways that co-opt them, converting them into servants of the state and capital seeking recognition and legitimation. New fields do not shift power, according to Ferguson, but allow power to "restyle" itself, "dreaming up ways to affirm difference and keep it in hand."[54] This claim rests on the assumption that different pieces of the institution work together, coherently, all serving the same fundamental order, whereas universities are in fact much messier and more plural constellations of forms, shot through with competing pressures and forms

from different past moments that sometimes undermine and sometimes sup-
port each other. From general education requirements and core curricula,
which require a broad exposure to a range of disciplines, to financial aid for
students who cannot afford the full cost of a degree, which entails a limited
redistribution of wealth, universities sustain a range of forms that do not
exclusively serve genocidal or neoliberal agendas. And these "holdover forms"
last in part because institutions preserve them.[55] That is, institutions are con-
servative in a stranger sense than we usually mean: they are engines of con-
servation, and so they conserve all kinds of forms that are not parts of the
dominant order.

But they are not entirely inert either. Institutional forms from different
moments tend to exert contradictory pressures that send them in different
ideological directions. Raymond Williams famously points to "residual" for-
mations, which are structures from the past that continue to shape institutions
long after they have ceased to be dominant. One of his examples is organized
religion, with its values of "absolute brotherhood" and "service to others with-
out reward."[56] These are very old values—dominant under feudalism—but
they also provide a critical rejoinder to dominant capitalist ideology, which
would have it that private accumulation is the only real human drive. And
so perhaps it is not surprising that the Black Lives Matter movement has
conserved these residual values for its radical ends: "Our continued commit-
ment to liberation for all Black people means we are continuing the work
of our ancestors and fighting for our collective freedom because it is our
duty."[57] For this new generation of activists, the fight for the future rests on
a collective duty to the struggles of the past, which includes a service to
others without reward and a sense of solidarity—values that date back many
centuries. Conservation of the past can itself provide a vigorous alternative to
prevailing values.

Or take the college-level teaching of literary studies today. Textual analy-
sis can be traced back to the ancient practice of biblical hermeneutics, and
much of our classroom reading focuses on—and preserves—texts from the
past. The credits and degrees students earn from these studies then serve the
dominant capitalist order by providing them with quantifiable workplace
credentials. But at the same time, the humanities classroom invites students
to explore aesthetic anti-instrumentality as a rich site for ways of living and
feeling that challenge dominant assumptions and make room for what Wil-
liams calls "emergent" alternatives to the status quo. Teaching literature in
an undergraduate class is therefore residual, dominant, and emergent all at

once. And if these are all at work in the same moment, then it is not right to understand even one discipline within the university as serving a single coherent ideology.

The case for the importance of turning to institutions, then, is twofold: first, institutions preserve elements from the past in ways that can help us understand how sustainability happens; and second, the multiple forms of institutions tend to be jumbled together in ways that are incoherent, and often preserve capacitating and just forms as well as oppressive ones, sometimes over very long periods. From this perspective, a resistance to institutionalization as such feels like a falsifying distortion and a misleading direction for politics. And if we pay a formalist's attention to the ways that institutions are organized, we can see how specific institutional forms can be effectively mobilized for structural change.

Starting Here and Now, with Existing Institutions

We are surrounded by opportunities to reshape institutional forms. A household can organize its ordinary labors of maintenance around egalitarian routines, and a teacher can establish rules for inclusive participation. We might dismiss these as insignificant because they do not get at larger, what we often call "structural" forces, but even the smallest and most local reorderings are in fact precisely *structural*. That is, structure—understood as synonymous with form in this book[58]—refers to the imposition of one order rather than another. Both structure and form are terms for the shaping and organization of materials. The difference between them is not a difference in kind but a difference in scale and stability. The equal division of tasks in a household cannot easily scale up to organize a nation, and a single decision to distribute labor equally can easily fall away without an ongoing effort to sustain it.

But it is just as important to note that the largest-scale and most enduring structures operate by way of smaller forms. That is, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy all exert and consolidate their power precisely through a variety of local orderings, patterns, and arrangements, from segregated neighborhoods to the daily work of childcare. One effective route for politics, then, is to change the smaller structures that work together to sustain the larger ones.

For example, the massive and disproportionate incarceration of people of color in the United States helps swing elections toward white interests, since those with felony records in many states are not allowed to vote. But we could just as easily approach this from the opposite direction: the formal

obstacles preventing African American voters from getting to the polls have meant that the people most affected by mass incarceration have a disproportionately small impact on political processes that might remake the justice system. Changes to either mass incarceration *or* voter suppression could have implications for the other. If racism is sustained by a cluster or constellation of mutually supportive forms, then reorganizing one form can also frustrate or hamper the others.

What this means is that effective political work involves keeping our eyes on mundane forms like congressional redistricting and school segregation—traditionally understood as "liberal" rather than "radical" approaches. But put another way, the work of revolutionary structural change can start with any number of organizing forms. Each structural shift may have implications for the strength and durability of other structures. To the most radical ends, then, I want to urge the formalist's sharp attention to the nuts and bolts of institutional arrangements—boundaries, regulations, tempos, norms, and pathways.

Specifically, let's consider the ways that existing institutional forms can be sites of meaningful and substantial change for climate justice. Individual actions like opting for hybrid cars and vegetarian diets are neither large enough nor structurally transformative. Meanwhile, many national governments have been swayed by energy interests, working to undo even the most relatively insignificant checks on fossil fuel emissions. Both scales often feel hopeless.

But it is possible to reshape the forms of many existing institutions, including universities, hospitals, churches, and even governments. I want to offer two promising models from my own experience with climate activism. The first is the movement for carbon pricing, an attempt to charge the real social cost of fossil fuels. The second is the divestment of institutions from fossil fuels. Neither of these will strike skeptical readers as sufficiently radical actions, but both have real and lasting impacts for climate justice and offer starting points for large-scale structural change.

Carbon pricing is divisive among leftists and environmentalists. Advocates argue that it will work to bring down emissions quickly and on a large scale: "Putting a price on carbon changes incentives. It encourages everyone—individuals, government agencies, and most importantly companies—to curtail their use of fossil fuels."[59] Detractors insist that calculating the cost of carbon in economic terms reinforces the dominant logic of capitalism and sustains the very modes of exploitation and extraction that caused the climate crisis in the first place.[60] Some carbon pricing models are rightly criticized as

regressive—like the sudden rise in food and gas prices that prompted the "Yellow Vests" in France to organize mass protests in 2018 or the proposal to redistribute revenues to private interests that pushed Washington State environmental groups to reject carbon pricing when it was on the ballot in 2016.[61]

A formalist perspective can resolve both of these objections. If we understand capitalism not as a single massive juggernaut that must be shattered all at once but a complex system sustained over time through multiple forms as various as security forces, extractive technology, inheritance laws, and narrative protagonists, we can see how carbon pricing works both for and against other capitalist forms: on the one hand, it continues the pattern of calculating all costs in terms of market values, but on the other hand, it has the potential to protect many of the poorest communities of the world from the climate devastation that will follow from unchecked emissions, and it supports ongoing common goods like clean air and water. Stockholm, for example, has the highest carbon taxes in the world; the city not only taxes fossil fuels but puts high prices on traffic congestion and parking and has invested in a strong system of biogas-run public buses and subways, green spaces, and the building of high-density neighborhoods designed for walking and cycling. Together, these measures have brought dramatic reductions in air pollution and carbon emissions and new pleasures for those who walk or bike through city streets and parks.[62]

The second objection—that carbon pricing unjustly burdens the poor—can be solved by focusing on the specific design of the pricing model. The Citizens Climate Lobby's "carbon fee and dividend" model is particularly well designed for justice and sustainability: if imposed in the United States, it would have the capacity to bring down global emissions quickly while protecting the poorest people from rising prices. It works like this: first, the U.S. government puts a predictably rising fee on fossil fuels; second, it redistributes the income collected in equal amounts to all households; and third, it imposes a national border adjustment so that products imported from countries that do not impose a comparable price on carbon will be more expensive. The rising price on fossil fuels offers a broad incentive to shift to renewable energy, while the dividend itself benefits those with the least wealth: studies show that about two-thirds of U.S. households will receive more back in the form of a monthly dividend than they will pay in rising prices on fossil fuels.[63] The border adjustment then discourages businesses from moving overseas to less regulated economies and encourages other countries to introduce a carbon fee so that they can collect the tax rather than sending it to the United States.[64]

Since the United States is the world's largest economy, its adoption of border adjustments would have immediate ripple effects worldwide, bringing down emissions on a global scale. Because carbon pricing does not disrupt the market, it draws support from right-wing thinkers. And this bipartisan support in the United States is not negligible: it is what will allow the "carbon fee and dividend" to outlast shifts in governing parties—in short, to be sustainable over time.[65]

Predictable, pragmatic, progressive, and sustainable, the carbon fee and dividend model is not an exciting shattering of oppressive institutions or a remaking of consciousness for a new world. And yet, this particular model of interacting forms has the real potential to sustain human and non-human lives around the world for a substantial period—long enough, perhaps, to allow us to get a genuine revolution started.

My second example of institutional change is divestment. In 2019, I joined a group of Cornell faculty, students, and staff who were working to pressure the university to divest its $7.3 billion endowment from fossil fuels. Many of my colleagues in the aesthetic humanities met these efforts with immediate skepticism. Some insisted that the administration and the trustees would never agree to divest because Cornell had too much invested in fossil fuels to be able to afford the shift; others maintained the opposite—that there was so little invested that divestment would be purely symbolic and would have no substantial economic effect. Several had been discouraged by the failure of efforts to persuade the trustees to divest in 2016 and argued that the struggle against the neoliberal administration was hopeless. Many worried that it was hypocritical to ask the university to divest when we ourselves were still flying and driving cars, and quite a few worried about what divestment meant, exactly—was it even possible to figure out which companies were bound up in fossil fuels? A few claimed that divestment itself was counterproductive: it would just drive down the price of fossil fuel stocks, making them cheaper for other investors to snap up.

Most of my colleagues tried to convince me that there was no point in trying. But a small group of faculty and staff looked into each objection and concluded that even a symbolic move by a respected institution like Cornell could have meaningful ripple effects, sending the public message that fossil fuel companies were exceptionally dishonest and destructive actors and encouraging other institutions to join the growing movement. We knew that there had been a major shift in public opinion since 2016, with large universities like the University of California having divested, and 60 percent of

Americans claiming to have become either "concerned" or "alarmed" about climate change.[66] A majority of college-bound students in the United States now included environmental concerns in their decisions about where to apply.[67] Given the fast pace of climate change, it seemed to make sense to move sooner rather than later.

The trustees themselves had also created an opening for a new campaign. After they had voted against divesting from fossil fuels in 2016, the board laid out specific criteria they said would have to be met before they would consider divesting in the future.[68] They articulated a clear standard for us to meet. But how would we get to the trustees? The first form that mattered was an informal network of students, faculty, and staff who had met through other climate activist organizations. We met and pooled our knowledge of the various relevant institutional forms and developed a strategy to put them to work.

Cornell's by-laws stipulate that the trustees must consider any resolution that has gained the support of all five university governance assemblies—undergraduate, graduate and professional students, staff, faculty, and University Assembly, which joins representatives of all of these bodies. Robert Warren Howarth, a Cornell scientist and member of our informal network whose research had exposed links between methane emissions and global warming, had become chair of the University Assembly in order to hold Cornell to strict environmental standards. This position required him to meet regularly with the Cornell president, Martha Pollack, and they had developed a friendly and trusting relationship. Although the president had said that she was opposed to a divestment resolution, her conversations with Howarth began to shift her understanding of the science and of the importance of divesting. This form, the recurrent obligation to talk one-on-one, brought two kinds of power and knowledge together—a top university administrator in ongoing conversation with a leading climate scientist—and it proved surprisingly powerful. Howarth also had the power to appoint faculty representatives to the Campus Infrastructure Committee, where the last divestment resolution had gotten its start. He appointed me, and I drafted a document that was designed around the trustees' criteria for divestment, taking their explicitly articulated standards as its organizing form.[69]

Meanwhile, Climate Justice Cornell (CJC), a student group committed to divestment, had organized visible direct actions, deliberately disrupting trustee meetings and stopping campus traffic at busy crossroads to draw attention to the cause.[70] These events were intended to halt business-as-usual and grab attention, but they also depended on existing institutional forms to make

their impact: they staged a mock wedding between the university and the fossil fuel industry at a busy network hub on campus, held a silent protest in one of the main libraries during its hours of heaviest use, and invited the daily student newspaper to report on these events.[71] This group is itself a durable institution, founded in 2001, after the United States rejected the Kyoto Protocol. With a long history of organizing sit-ins, demonstrations, educational campaigns, and petitions, CJC had been instrumental in pushing Cornell president Skorton to sign on to the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment agreement and to become the first campus to commit to carbon neutrality.[72] Cornell has since garnered recognition as the most sustainable university in the Ivy League.[73]

Our team put all of these forms to work together. The Campus Infrastructure Committee brought a divestment resolution to the University Assembly for a vote in January 2020. Students, faculty, and staff asked questions and raised objections, but voted unanimously in favor of divestment. This was an entree to every other assembly. Representatives from different constituencies presented to all of the other bodies, urging them to adopt the same resolution for the sake of creating a united front and gaining formal access to the trustees. By March 2020, all five assemblies had passed the resolution.

At their May meeting, the trustees announced a moratorium on all new fossil fuel investments. Cornell University had divested its endowment. We will never know exactly which specific piece of this effort carried the most force—the shift in public opinion, the declining value of fossil fuel stocks, student protests, Cornell's eagerness to maintain its reputation as "the greenest Ivy," an open-minded president, the organizing of all five assemblies around a common resolution, or the trustees' recognition that their own criteria for divestment had been met. I propose to think of it as a kind of collaborative creative effort, a making of new social worlds out of the materials afforded by institutions. As in a symphony or theatrical production, we were working with existing scripts, materials, and instruments to craft new economic shapes and patterns at the level of the institution.

It is true that neither carbon pricing nor divestment from fossil fuels is enough in itself to stop climate change. But both are contributions to a large and growing movement, led most prominently by Bill McKibben, that is successfully diverting massive flows of money away from fossils.[74] Both are much more politically significant than individual consumer actions. Both suggest that our most pessimistic colleagues may be wrong about the possibilities for institutional change. Both provide a training ground for participation in

collective action going forward, which is crucial to building power on the left. And most importantly here, both campaigns give us formal models to work with to realize sustainable models for climate justice.

As we turn our attention to institutions, let's not forget the aesthetic humanities, with our own paradoxical institutionalization of anti-institutionalism, our sometimes anti-formalist forms of teaching, reading, publishing, debating, and convening. I have suggested that our long-standing insistence on anti-instrumentality has sustained a libertarian logic that draws us away from working together effectively for lasting political change. We teach and argue in favor of breaking the rules, and we rarely imagine crafting new rules; we celebrate disrupting organizations, and we do not often enough organize ourselves for change. "Left pessimism" can readily find theoretical support in the writing of the aesthetic humanities, from Adorno's "Resignation" to Lee Edelman's *No Future*, which offer explicit justifications for refusing to throw our energies into conventional political action. But also, more broadly and subtly, scholars have put our unrelenting emphasis on the virtues of the shimmering and the evanescent, glimpses of feeling or being in common that are valuable precisely because they are transitory, excessive, contingent, experimental, improvised— that is, free from the shackles of organization and institutionalization. It certainly makes sense to pause and take stock of the habits and pressures that might prompt a headlong rush into the wrong kind of action. It also makes sense to allow imagination to take flight, to break free from familiar worlds to envision them otherwise. As phases, as stepping-stones, as respites, this humanities thinking is indispensable. But not as an end in itself. The exciting anti-formalism at work in resisting organizations and institutions ultimately reinforces both solitude and powerlessness. What this book seeks to do, then, is to honor the importance of critique while countering the pessimistic, principled refusal to organize—and to get to work on designing and building lasting forms for climate justice.