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Toward an Affirmative Instrumentality

SCHOLARS ACROSS THE HUMANITIES RETURN, again and again, to three key moves: the pause, the rupture, and the dissolve. The pause: open-endedness, suspension, undecidability, illegibility, opacity, complexity. The rupture: revolution, resistance, fragmentation, shock, break, unsettling, dismantling, disorder. The dissolve: fluidity, process, liminality, hybridity, boundary-crossing, flow. These moves often overlap. Sometimes they are indistinguishable. Hybridity can rupture a system dependent on binaries. Dismantling the status quo can open a new space for reflection. Taken together, these three basic moves bespeak a single common purpose: to crack the world open to alternative ways of thinking and being—to get in the way of business as usual.

But what is it, exactly, that keeps humanists so focused on interrupting the settled routines of the administered world? This chapter will begin by making the case that there is one key value at work across schools of thought. It shapes and subtends all of the fields that I call the *aesthetic humanities*—literary studies, art history, musicology, and media and cultural studies. We find it guiding thinkers as different as Lionel Trilling and Fred Moten, Theodor Adorno and Gloria Anzaldúa, Stephen Greenblatt and Bill Brown, Rosi Braidotti and Kandice Chuh.¹ It is so pervasive across our fields that it does not even need to be justified: it seems to speak for itself. And so, like all norms, it carries its own limitations, repetitions, and exclusions. The name I will use for this value here is *anti-instrumentality*.

This chapter will investigate the appeal of anti-instrumentality across the aesthetic fields, and then it will argue for moving beyond it to the practical work of designing, building, and maintaining collective life. This will entail a

new set of grounds for understanding art and politics and the connections between them. And it will mean recasting the pause, the rupture, and the dissolve as necessary preparatory work—but not as ends in themselves.

The Long Lure of Anti-instrumentality

Max Weber and, later, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School made a powerful case against what they called instrumental rationality—*Zweckrationalität*.² They argued that capitalism and totalitarianism rest on a kind of means-ends thinking that calculates value according to the efficient, rationalized achievement of economic and technical progress. Instrumental rationality emerged out of modern Europe, feeding the “hungry furnaces” of capitalist accumulation by turning the world into objects for its own use and profit.³ For centuries, Europeans and their white inheritors have used instrumental rationality to justify themselves as the only real subjects of history and to treat non-European people and homelands as objects to be exploited for their ends.⁴ *Zweckrationalität* has thus justified the destruction of Indigenous traditions, the abduction and enslavement of Black people, the expropriation of homelands, and the ravaging of ecologies.⁵ And so, across politically minded scholarship in the humanities—including Marxist, deconstructive, critical race, postcolonial, queer, environmental, and feminist criticism—scholars for several decades have sought to unsettle and resist Western assumptions about the human subject: implicitly white, straight, adult, able-bodied, European “Man,” who invokes his exclusive capacity for rationality to exploit all others.

This critique has been persuasive and significant. But the argument against instrumentality has gone a step further than Weber’s *Zweckrationalität*. That is, the most influential theorists in the aesthetic humanities have warned against *all* instrumentality—not just Western-style instrumental rationality but all means-ends thinking. All plans and programs are dangerous. Even the most utopian visions of a revolutionary future, we are told, only reentrench existing dominations. As Michel Foucault puts it: “to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system.”⁶ Theodor Adorno, though deeply unlike Foucault in many ways, shares this position: “One may not cast a picture of utopia in a positive manner,” he writes. What is productive instead is to draw attention to “what’s missing”: “the determined negation of that which merely is . . . which always points at the same time to what should be.”⁷ According to this logic, we do our best political work when we dwell in restless

negativity, using imperfections to point beyond themselves to something other, the undefined to-come.

This argument has lasted robustly into our own time. For Fredric Jameson, it is crucial “to bring home, in local and determinate ways, and with a fullness of concrete detail, our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself; and this, not owing to any individual failure of imagination, but as the result of the systemic, cultural, and ideological closure of which we are all one way or another prisoners.”⁸ Jared Sexton argues against praxis, prescription, and prognosis in favor of reaching for “an indiscernible *something* beyond” Being: “imagining it in and as the ruins of Being, after the end of the world, in an entirely other relation to the nothing from whence it comes.”⁹ Or as Jack Halberstam puts it, “Revolution will come in a form we cannot yet imagine. . . . We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming.”¹⁰

For these thinkers, the resistance to instrumentality is political. But of course, anti-instrumentality also underpins major theories of aesthetics. Since Kant, up through Adorno and into our own time, theorists have defined the aesthetic precisely by its disturbance of means-ends thinking. Art cannot be reduced to exchange and profit or to the communication of moral values or information. It halts the reflexive rush to calculability, efficiency, and utility.¹¹ This is the definition of art that leads the aesthetic humanities—different from history and philosophy, in this respect—to return, again and again, to anti-instrumentality. Jonathan Kramnick, to give a recent example, argues that a disciplinary training in the arts means “spelling out the open-ended or the unresolved.”¹²

From Marxist critique to Black and queer studies, and from deep ecology to aesthetic autonomy, the common logic of anti-instrumentality subtends otherwise conflicting schools of thought. And so, if you look at almost any essay or book in the aesthetic humanities, it will conclude with a kind of deliberate open-endedness—a soaring refusal to spell out the future. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt write: “we sincerely hope that you will not be able to say what it all adds up to; if you could, we would have failed.” Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* closes this way: “Justice involves feelings. . . . Where we go, with these feelings, remains an open question.” For Derek Attridge, “the opening up of possibilities that had remained closed, is—however risky—a good in itself, particularly when the process is a continuous one, allowing no permanent settling of norms and habits.” Robert McRuer concludes *Crip Theory* with the “promise that we will always comprehend

disability otherwise and that we will, collectively, somehow access other worlds and other futures.” The ending of Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects* goes like this: “Heidegger said that only a god can save us now. . . . *We just don’t know what sort of god.*” Dora Zhang reclaims the political potential of description on the grounds that it “challenges . . . teleology and instrumentality.” Peter Boxall invites us to “think our way into the unpictured world to come” by way of literature’s “unthought conjunctions.” At the end of *Black Aliveness*, Kevin Quashie issues “a call that exists and vibrates beyond the scope of the rule of the world as we know it—an imaginary that inflects how we *can* behold ourselves and each other.” And for Tim Bewes, the novel as a form is uniquely important because it gives us “access to a thought that, in its essence, refuses the ideological formulations of our world.”¹³ Critics of all stripes, that is, refuse the entrenched dominations of the status quo by beckoning to the indefinite, unmappable possibilities beyond.

Anti-instrumentality has proved an unusually tough and resilient underpinning for the aesthetic humanities, its basic presumptions managing to join critics who fiercely disagree with each other about everything else. Scholars who reject a traditional aesthetic canon in favor of popular culture, for example, like Ramzi Fawaz, will show how a superhero comic can unsettle dominant norms and systems,¹⁴ while critics who are adamantly opposed to making political arguments for art, like Helen Vendler, will defend the most canonical artworks on the grounds that these rupture convention and expectation.¹⁵

But there is trouble lurking in these arguments. First and foremost, it should seem strange and surprising that anti-instrumentality can ground the most urgent political projects, from feminism to postcolonial theory, while it also provides the justification for anti-political arguments for aesthetic autonomy. But if anti-instrumentality seems to do the heroic work of uniting opposing camps—political revolutionaries and defenders of the aesthetic for its own sake—I will argue that in fact it falls short on both sides. First, because autonomous art serves political ends. And second, because anti-instrumental politics does not in fact yield the revolutionary justice critics have so often hoped and claimed for it.

The Implicit Politics of Aesthetic Autonomy

Champions of aesthetic anti-instrumentality return, again and again, to the freedom that art brings. In *The Poet’s Freedom*, Susan Stewart argues that because art resists use, commodification, and mastery, the artist can embark

on a “process of possibility without resolution.”¹⁶ For Attridge, it is the reader who is freed by the encounter with art: “To read a poem and feel one is entering a new world of thought and feeling, to find oneself laughing at a surprising passage in a novel, to have one’s breath taken away by a speech performed on stage—these are experiences of alterity, of the impossible made suddenly possible, of the mind, and, sometimes, the body being changed by new configurations, new connections, new possibilities.”¹⁷ Nan Z. Da urges us to read closely for the many ways that “literature makes nothing happen,” because an attention to the complexity of literary language is the only way to free ourselves from authoritarian and imperial propaganda.¹⁸

For all of these, art yields pleasures and thoughts and possibilities that push beyond dominant routines and assumptions. And as art breaks free from dogma and determination, it frees *us* from the torpid conventionality of the status quo. But what this means is that we are already fully in the domain of the political. After all, freedom is nothing if not a political value. And that is why political and aesthetic arguments can so easily be yoked together.

The politics of aesthetic anti-instrumentality is no mere academic affair. It was put to powerful use in the Cold War. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Soviets charged that the United States was a shallow and materialist nation, obsessed only with wealth and military might. The U.S. State Department responded by trying to showcase the many ways that the United States was a consummately free society and turned to art as a shining example. One effort was a traveling exhibition called *Advancing American Art*, which featured a range of innovative modern American painters, including Georgia O’Keefe and Jacob Lawrence. Reports suggested that these bold and unexpected paintings actually began to persuade audiences in Eastern Europe and Latin America that the United States was capable of original art. The State Department planned to take the show to Guatemala, Iran, and Cambodia. But when the U.S. Congress and the press found out about the exhibit, there was a huge public stink. Public pressure forced the State Department to cancel the show.¹⁹

Concerned that the global image of the United States as a beacon of freedom was suffering from episodes like these, the strategists of the newly formed CIA launched a covert arts program.²⁰ Its role in cultural life is now widely known, but at the time they largely kept their global operations secret through fake foundations and front organizations. The Congress for Cultural Freedom funneled resources to the literary magazine *Encounter* and to the Chekhov Publishing House, which printed the works of Nabokov and other Russian emigres. It supported the Nigerian magazine *Black Orpheus*, which published

some of the most influential *négritude* writers, including Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor.²¹ *El Mundo Nuevo*, the Paris quarterly of Latin American writing, was exposed as a CIA venture early on, though it also published the first chapters of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* in 1966 and new works by Octavio Paz and Mario Vargas Llosa.²² The Cold War Program for Cultural Freedom was a major source of support not only for artists and writers but for the academic humanities. The CIA provided funding for programs in Asian and Latin American studies, foreign languages, and American literature.²³ MFA programs in creative writing drew support as weapons in the anti-Communist struggle.²⁴ Cold Warrior Richard Nixon poured vast sums into the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).²⁵ Cuts to the NEA and NEH began in 1990—shortly after the Berlin Wall fell. If we look back nostalgically to a time when there was ample support for the arts and humanities, we should not forget how important it was for Western governments to make impressive worldwide displays of artistic freedom.

In other words, the CIA instrumentalized—we might even say, weaponized—the anti-instrumentality of the aesthetic. They saw that difficult, experimental art could stand for freedom from political ends and then they put that freedom to political ends. And this was not a misuse or misunderstanding of artistic anti-instrumentality. Freedom is the value that subtends arguments for aesthetic autonomy.

And yet, how could the same politics possibly unite thinkers as radically different as Jack Halberstam and Richard Nixon, Susan Stewart and Aimé Césaire? The answer is that aesthetic autonomy goes hand in hand with a specifically *indiscriminate* version of political negation. Peter Kalliney shows that African writers in the middle of the twentieth century embraced aesthetic autonomy for a wide variety of conflicting ends, including “emancipation from colonialism; independence from the postcolonial nation-state; avoidance of politics in order to foster collaboration among multiple constituencies; freedom from politics altogether as a professional disposition; and ideological neutrality in the Cold War.”²⁶ Motivating anti-imperialists, nationalists, Cold War spies, and those keen to avoid politics altogether, anti-instrumentality can—and does—set itself against all constraints, all rules, all plans.

My central argument in this book is that this politics is too indiscriminate. Anti-instrumentality lends itself to dreams of freedom from any and all norms. It does not necessarily serve collective well-being. But it also remains the primary mode of political thinking we find across the aesthetic humanities

today. It is what connects Afropessimism to the Frankfurt School's struggle against "the administered world" and what links deconstructive reading to Lionel Trilling's bleak humanism. While their political targets are crucially different, their moves bear a striking resemblance: point to repressive norms and call for their undoing; do not propose what should be built in their place. Susan Stanford Friedman refers to this political role as the "gadfly position."²⁷ As dominant institutions lumber along, imposing their oppressive norms, it is the job of the aesthetic humanities to act as constant irritants. But this means that the refusal of ends can go in any direction—resisting, unsettling, puncturing, any program at all.

It is especially clear in our own moment that the freedom from norms and constraints does not always align with the radical left or even with progressives. Authoritarian populist leaders have been celebrating resistance to rules in the interests—they say—of freeing people from state power. The Trump administration, for example, rolled back over one hundred environmental regulations, including fracking on Native lands, drilling in wildlife preserves, and dumping toxins in waterways. Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro has "gutted" the environmental agencies that limit and penalize deforestation. And Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India has deregulated the sale of crude oil.²⁸ From this perspective, the drive to resist norms has hastened the worst effects of climate catastrophe.

Climate denialism is itself oddly consonant with the humanistic values of opacity and open-endedness. Called "merchants of doubt" by historians Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes, a small group of anti-communist strategists turned lobbyists set about undermining the policy prescriptions of scientists who had in fact come to a consensus about urgent dangers, their causes, and the need for government solutions: first tobacco, then acid rain and chlorofluorocarbons, and then, most destructively of all, climate change. They conducted a series of public campaigns that focused on scientific uncertainty and irresolution, and always called for more studies to delay large-scale public action.²⁹

Tech companies, too, have vaunted open-endedness and disruption, claiming to free work from traditional office cubicles, regulations, bureaucracy, schedules, and hierarchies in favor of sharing, convenience, and "personal empowerment." This emancipation from traditional constraints has brought with it a terrible precarity for much of the labor force, as workers struggle to make ends meet by stringing together multiple unpredictable "gigs."³⁰ "Neoliberal subjects," as Wendy Brown puts it, "are controlled *through* their freedom."³¹

In all of these contexts, the pause, the rupture, and the dissolve have become perilously congruent with neoliberal precarity and onrushing climate catastrophe. This conclusion places particular pressure on the most influential thinking in the environmental humanities, which has put its most powerful emphasis on open-endedness. Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing*, for example, argues that we should withdraw ourselves from the push to productivity, pausing to focus on the places where we live, which in turn will open us to a new and more ecologically caring consciousness. Odell deliberately refrains from identifying any particular actions to follow from this new approach, ending instead with the celebration of "an aimless aim, or a project with no goal."³² The practical work remains gestural, an appeal rather than a plan.³³

Even when environmental humanists acknowledge the importance of practical politics, they often separate this from the open-endedness they see as proper to the humanities. Stephanie LeMenager, for example, entertains two different endings to *Living Oil*: the first, a single paragraph, invites us to "appreciate" political campaigns around renewable energy, including Germany's successful shift away from fossil fuels, and environmental justice and divestment struggles. The second ending draws far more of her attention: running over a dozen pages, it focuses on what academic humanists in particular can contribute to transforming the future of oil. The answer: "narrative itself."³⁴ Finishing with "an unresolved detective story" and a call for more stories, LeMenager says that the proliferation of narratives is "the humanistic complement to the work of engineers and geologists and hydrologists and city planners and county health agencies and environmental justice activists to create a more resilient energy regime."³⁵ Appreciating and supplementing the work of doers and makers and planners, the humanist dwells in narrative irresolution; no particular endings, but rather more and more stories to come.

Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence* ends in a similarly open-ended way. Nixon conjures up the image of a broad global coalition of constituencies coming together to demand action on climate change. He does not explore how this coalition will take shape and does not prescribe specific political aims or objectives for it. His focus remains on the writer-activist, who "will continue to play a critical role in drawing to the surface—and infusing with emotional force—submerged stories of injustice and resource rebellions." In the final line of the book, Nixon celebrates those writers who seek to transform society in ways that "their societies could never imagine, let alone demand"³⁶—that is, the unknowable to-come.

Amitav Ghosh is more pessimistic than either LeMenager or Nixon. He ends *The Great Derangement* with a scathing critique of “a deadlocked public sphere, with the actual exercise of power being relegated to the interlocking complex of corporations and institutions of governance that has come to be known as the ‘deep state.’” Ghosh is equally withering when it comes to climate marches and demonstrations, which amount to “little more than an orgy of democratic emotion, an activist-themed street fair, a real-world analogue to Twitter hashtag campaigns: something that gives you a nice feeling, says you belong in a certain group, and is completely divorced from actual legislation and governance.” Ghosh holds out a glimmer of hope that global religious movements and climate activists might converge on the project of “drastically reducing emissions without sacrificing considerations of equity.” But like Nixon, he tells us little about how this might take shape, and like Nixon and LeMenager, he ends with the open-ended possibilities of the aesthetic: the hope that a new generation will “rediscover their kinship with other beings, and that this vision, at once new and ancient, will find expression in a transformed and renewed art and literature.”³⁷

Scholars working at the interdisciplinary crossings of the sciences and the humanities, too, typically steer clear of specifying plans and programs on principle. Donna Haraway urges us to recognize our complex mutual entanglements with a range of beings—from pigeons to estrogen—in order to “cut the bonds of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene.”³⁸ New multispecies collaborations will then prompt us to refuse the usual “dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function”—that is, programmatic thinking—and shift us instead to “the realm of play.”³⁹ In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff exposes the anti-Blackness that shapes geology as a discipline, and in that context urges a “destabilization of the mode of encounter” and “an insurgent geology for the end of the world.”⁴⁰

These are just a few examples. We might also think of Stacy Alaimo’s invitation to “dwell in the dissolve,” Chelsea Frazier’s call to “construct alternative conceptions of ecological ethics within our present world and beyond it,” and Kyle Devine’s appeal to hear the environmental and political conditions of recorded music so that “we may be motivated to change them.”⁴¹ Across the environmental humanities, we find scholars calling for new modes of attentiveness and concluding with hopes—but not plans—for the transformations to follow.

All of this has been—and will continue to be—deeply important work. There is no question that as long as dominant structures of violence, dispossession, and

oppression try to pass themselves off as nature or common sense, we will urgently need both critique and resistance. In this context, aesthetic objects that startle and surprise and baffle will help to stop us in the midst of other instrumentalizing pressures, to recognize the limits of dominant ideologies, and to imagine ways of being and thinking and feeling otherwise. For this reason, the particular strengths of the aesthetic humanities—pausing in the face of business as usual, envisioning alternative worlds, and telling many specific stories—remain indispensable.

What has come to concern me, however, is that these have become their own common sense across the aesthetic humanities—a set of unquestioned presumptions. I myself wrote three books that revolved around unsettling dominant structures before realizing how strange it was that I had never even *imagined* a different set of purposes. And as soon as I began to think directly about them, they seemed limiting and partial. And disturbing. What if open-endedness justifies an avoidance of planning and building, and reinforces the notion that it is not our job to find practical strategies to work against anthropogenic climate change and its calamitous and uneven consequences? That is, what if it disempowers all of us who are working across the aesthetic humanities?

In this book, I am, like other humanists, struggling to find alternatives to systems that reentrench injustice. I am also looking for effective ways to refuse the terrible rush to conquest and profit. In these respects I am building on the massive body of work that has been done in the past few decades in the aesthetic humanities, and in many ways, this book is not a break as much as a refocusing and a revaluing. But it is my hypothesis that the practice of concluding with calls to ever more complexity and possibility instead of sketching out plans of action is feeding the logic of climate denialism and neoliberal atomization. It is supporting collective inaction. As long as the aesthetic humanities stress humility, wild imaginings, the unmaking of prevailing values, and dense entanglements, we push off the work of organized collective action to another moment. Barbara Leckie argues that while this “preparatory work” can be rightly “slow and laborious,” there comes a moment when “both individuals and collectives need to transition to . . . action.”⁴² But how? So far, the daily work of teaching and writing in the aesthetic humanities remains overwhelmingly caught in the pause before action, rarely focusing on how to gather forces, how to plan and strategize for a different set of conditions, how to face the tough, imperfect struggle of making collective decisions and reclaiming *res publica*—public goods.⁴³

Environmentalist thinking, Ursula K. Heise argues, has long been caught up in contradictory temporal frames. On the one hand activists have encouraged

a resistance to the technological speed of modern life, calling for slow food, slow reading, and long pauses for deep reflection. On the other hand, environmentalists have worried that current institutions are too slow to respond to the rapid pace of anthropogenic climate change. As Heise puts it: “The newbie environmentalist may be forgiven for wondering what the appropriate response is to the slowness of natural processes and the accelerated rhythms of global modernity—or is it the rapidity of ecological transformations and the foot-dragging responses of political actors?”⁴⁴ Both Leckie and Heise invite us to notice the temporal forms that organize and disorganize our relationship to climate catastrophe.

As delays and open-endedness are put to use by fossil fuel companies and climate denialists, it seems clear that there is no intrinsically resistant tempo, no way of approaching time that will itself get us out of climate trouble. But it also seems clear that the aesthetic humanities has become stuck on the preparatory moment. In response, this book adopts a specific temporal framework. In place of the unimaginable future, the evanescent gap or glimmer, the overwhelming complexity of densely entwined ecologies, and long histories of violence and dispossession, it gathers examples from all over the past, and it takes these as workable blueprints here and now—models that can guide building and making in the near future, and can shape conditions that are capable of lasting over time. That is, I keep my eye on the practical work that I and others can do, even in the painful conditions of the present, to create more just and sustainable conditions for intergenerational justice.

Collective Continuance

The first step is to reframe the problem of instrumentality. There is something attractively pure about refusing complicity with capitalism and colonialism, but the lure of an innocence that puts nothing other to use is also, quite literally, the logic of death. There can be no life that does not have effects on the world around it, and there can be no life that does not put otherness to use. That is, what if living bodies can never altogether avoid instrumentalizing? Anna Tsing distinguishes between two models of use—one that is necessary to ordinary survival, “eating and being eaten,” and the other, a specifically capitalist instrumentality, that turns all kinds of lives into “resources for investment.”⁴⁵

In fact, any wholesale rejection of use—the notion that we could avoid instrumentalizing—may be itself a product of the Western mind-body split. The Indigenous peoples of the Columbia River Valley have articulated a

philosophy that centers on water and the sustaining of a balanced ecosystem that can renew itself over generations. This philosophy both recognizes water as a value in itself *and* understands it as useful for the preservation of human life and health. For “the people of the river,” writes Elizabeth Woody, “there is positively no concept of water as nonutilitarian.”⁴⁶ The most serious dangers lie not in use in general, that is, but, as Haraway puts it, in “unidirectional relations of use, ruled by practices of calculation and self-sure of hierarchy.”⁴⁷

In this context, a resolute anti-instrumentality actually turns our attention away from the basic conditions that sustain collective life, such as water, food, and shelter. So: what is the alternative? What I propose is an *affirmative instrumentality* for the aesthetic humanities. I turn here to Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte’s concept of “collective continuance,” a framework for justice that does not dispense with use. Whyte defines collective continuance as “a society’s overall adaptive capacity to maintain its members’ cultural integrity, health, economic vitality, and political order into the future and avoid having its members experience preventable harms.”⁴⁸ The continuity of food systems is one of Whyte’s examples. Different societies will have different ways of finding, harvesting, and distributing food, but all will treat food in part as useful—necessary to the task of keeping bodies alive over time. Food systems will always be subject to external forces and sudden shocks, such as storms and floods. For this reason, some adaptation and some flexibility will always be necessary. Collectives will also have to plan for the future, not to overharvest a food supply, for example, or to store water for a dry spell. For Whyte, this means moving away from an opposition between conservation and innovation, and between traditional and modern societies, and toward the requirement to plan and build conditions for intergenerational flourishing in the face of inevitable change. A society is just if it prevents foreseeable harms to future generations.

This definition allows Whyte to specify the injustices of settler colonialism. Colonizing forces destroy “the capacities that the societies that were already there—Indigenous societies—rely on for the sake of exercising their own collective self-determination over their cultures, economies, health, and political order.” For example, when European settlers built railroads or cleared land for timber and farms, they advanced their own interests while demolishing the conditions for the planting, hunting, and fishing practices developed by Indigenous communities to support collective health, strength, and political independence over the long term.⁴⁹ One especially violent settler strategy has involved forcibly moving Indigenous groups off traditional homelands where

specific foods thrive and then dispensing and withholding food rations as a means of political control.⁵⁰ California settlers pushed Karuk people away from the river, a long-standing food source, and then criminalized practices that had sustained harvests over generations, including controlled forest burns. Around the world, working systems of collective continuance are violently disrupted by “dams, intensive agriculture, urban development, pollution from industry and other land-use practices, including recreational activities.” The California Department of Fish and Game has in fact repeatedly favored fishing as a leisure activity over Karuk salmon harvesting.⁵¹

I rely on Whyte’s definition of “collective continuance” throughout this book. I find it especially powerful because it points to a kind of means-ends thinking that does not immediately fall back into the trap of instrumental rationality. Collective continuance is a just end that is *also* an ongoing means. That is, collective continuance is the establishment of political, cultural, environmental, and economic conditions that allow collective life-worlds to flourish over time: it is a set of enabling conditions—an infrastructure. To reject all ends as constraining and oppressive is to miss the ways that some fundamental material conditions—clean water, fertile soil, breathable air—are the preconditions for all other activity. Or to put this another way: collective continuance is a *capacitating* end, a crucial means of affording a range of other ends.⁵²

Another term for collective continuance might be “sustainability.” This term has long drawn fire from humanists and activists.⁵³ As often embraced by businesses as by environmental activists, sustainability implies the continuation of life as we know it, which for many in business and politics includes expectations of ongoing economic growth, competition, and accumulation. If we work to sustain current systems—like global markets and extractive industries—we become complicit with the most rapacious forces on earth.⁵⁴ Yet in fact, these dominant systems are dramatically unsustainable: the pace of extraction and emission is making the planet uninhabitable for humans and vast numbers of other species. What I want to suggest here is that sustainability is in fact a kind of *neutral* term: it refers to the capacity to keep any state of affairs going over time. In this sense, sustainability can refer to just *or* unjust conditions. What climate change has made suddenly clear is that sustaining must be a goal on the left as well as the right. We are now faced with a struggle to keep collective life going at all. Collective continuance describes a *genuine* sustainability—the vast and urgent project of sustaining collective life over generations.

Amartya Sen’s influential “capabilities approach” allows us to see why understanding ends as means is crucial to the work of global justice. Sen turns away

from both abstract rights and the distribution of specific resources because these do not recognize or foster cultural heterogeneity: it does little good to have the right to a job if one cannot leave one's home, and it is not enabling to be offered food that it violates one's religion to eat. Justice lies in people's capacity to shape their lives according to a wide range of values. Most unjust are those constraints on specific groups that prevent them from pursuing the full array of possibilities that are available to others. It is unjust to force women to become dependent on male breadwinners for survival, for example, or to allow movement through the streets to remain unsafe for transgender people. For Sen, the ends must remain various: it is not for one group to decide and enforce a particular set of values for others.

Although Sen's model is deliberately pluralist, there is one set of conditions that he singles out as more fundamental than others. He assumes a broad global consensus around "basic capabilities": everyone needs minimal standards of health, food, shelter, and education as a precondition for achieving other ends.⁵⁵ These basic capabilities are what draw my attention in this book. They are not particularly complex or interesting to most philosophers, but climate change is threatening all of them right now, including air to breathe and water to drink. As homelands are made unlivable by droughts and floods, as arable land and safe shelter become scarce, and as violent conflicts over resources favor the armed, the powerful, and the rich, vast numbers of people will be forced to sacrifice other cherished ends—such as keeping families together or pursuing an education—for the sake of sheer survival. Whole populations will have to give up their homes in search of food and water. In Sen's terms, any acceptance of the onrushing consequences of global warming is therefore intolerably unjust. And so, I want to make the affirmative case here for capabilities, that is, a set of ends that are also a means: just and sustainable conditions that are themselves a means to allow a rich variety of lives to continue into the future.⁵⁶

This definition of justice allows us to draw a precise distinction between right and left politics. The right often justifies some amount of starvation and homelessness as a necessary spur to economic productivity and argues that this is ultimately good for everyone,⁵⁷ while the entire span of the left, from progressives to radicals, argues that it is unjust to deny the most basic necessities of survival to anyone. In other words, *the most important difference between left and right in our time lies not in our relationship to norms and constraints but in the ways we understand enabling conditions—the infrastructures of collective life.*

Despite many and very substantive arguments among us, then, the whole span of the left could begin from a shared basic version of justice that is both

an end and a means: the urgent work of guaranteeing basic capabilities for all. There is a universalism here, yes, but it is specifically a universalism of enabling conditions.⁵⁸ This is neither a top-down imposition of particular values nor an invitation to neglect racial and cultural difference. As Enzo Rossi and Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò argue, the temptation to privilege race at the expense of class or class at the expense of race misses the reason why it is crucial to address the two together, which is that anti-Blackness unjustly distributes the most basic capabilities that should be available to everyone—like adequate nutrition and health care—according to race. They make the case for “embedding antiracist policy within a universalist materialist politics.”⁵⁹

With collective continuance as our horizon, we do not have to choose between race and class. Nor do we have to choose between brutal exploitation and principled withdrawal, or between acquiescence to the status quo and change so radical that it is literally unimaginable. We can start doing the hard work of figuring out how to build durable material infrastructures for multiple life-worlds to flourish over time. It is true that we will need to break with dominant systems in order to get to new political and economic conditions, but it is my argument here that we should treat such ruptures not as goals in themselves but as waystations on the route to another, more just, set of ends. The struggle to build better conditions will be much harder and messier—much more imperfect and laborious—than resistance and negation, but to borrow Winnicottian terms, it will be a “good-enough” general guide for the political action that is urgent to undertake now, before so many of the globally devastating runaway effects of climate change have become irreversible.

Practical Action

Turning to the project of guaranteeing basic capabilities carries with it a new relation to political action. Instead of gesturing to unrepresentable futures, I ask: what materials, what agency, what strategies can build conditions for collective continuance here and now?

“Pragmatism” has often been a term of opprobrium in the aesthetic humanities, charged with confining us ever further within the brutal systems of the present. José Esteban Muñoz argues against “gay pragmatism” because it reentrenches the “corrupt and bankrupt social order,” and Karen Pinkus warns environmentalists against the “tyranny of the practical.”⁶⁰ Anything short of pulling this whole rotten society up by the roots is the same as quietism and complacency, wishy-washy liberalism, or worse, sinister neoliberalism. Radical

thinkers call for “burning it all down,”⁶¹ drawing on a long history of revolutionary thought that has opposed piecemeal reforms in favor of the shattering work of revolution.⁶² At least as far back as Marx and Engels in 1850, leftists have worried that social welfare programs like health care and social security provide just enough in the way of comfort and security to prevent workers from rising up as an angry mass but without changing fundamental economic structures.⁶³ Accelerationists go so far as to argue that we should hasten the worsening of conditions because desperation is the necessary precondition for revolutionary change.⁶⁴ The more moderate—and more pervasive—version of this logic, which we can see in such different thinkers as Jack Halberstam and Giorgio Agamben, is that we should not work for small changes or half measures because these will prolong our acceptance of a fundamentally violent and exploitative system.

But what if this refusal of pragmatic action is wrong? What if institutional changes, techno-fixes, and legislative reforms do not necessarily get in the way of large-scale structural change and can in fact serve radical ends? A different tradition of revolutionary thinkers has understood organizing for achievable ends as important, even necessary, steps in a larger revolutionary struggle. For Rosa Luxemburg, famously, the opposition between revolution and reform was a false dilemma: “The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim.” Women’s suffrage was for Luxemburg a crucial example.⁶⁵ Raymond Williams, too, understood reformist tactics as more effective at mobilizing working-class people than the demand for an immediate smashing of capitalism.⁶⁶ In our own time, Chantal Mouffe advocates a “radical reformism” as a crucial tool for building a powerful populism of the left.⁶⁷ Against passionate arguments from fellow radicals, Angela Davis has defended the legal reforms of civil rights and the election of Barack Obama as important pieces of the Black radical struggle, not obstacles to it.⁶⁸ Similarly, Sherry Wolf, a socialist organizer for LGBTQ rights, has argued for the importance of gay marriage not as a concession to an assimilationist pressure but as part of a larger fight for civil rights for all.⁶⁹ And here, perhaps surprisingly, is Slavoj Žižek:

In the developed Western societies, calls for a radical revolution have no mobilising power. Only a modest “wrong” choice can create the subjective conditions for an actual communist perspective: whether it fails or succeeds, it sets in motion a series of further demands (“in order to really have universal healthcare, we also need . . .”) which will lead to the right choice. There is no shortcut here, the need for a radical universal chance has to

emerge by way of mediation with particular demands. To begin straightaway with the right choice is therefore even worse than making a wrong choice, as it amounts to saying “I am right and the misery of the world which got it wrong just confirms how right I am.”⁷⁰

The insistence on revolution in wealthy countries actually turns into the opposite—a kind of perfectionism that gets stuck because it does not have sufficient mobilizing power. In this scenario, revolution *itself* gets in the way of revolution.

Despite many important differences, these thinkers agree that large numbers of people are most inclined to mobilize around immediate causes of suffering and concrete demands. And because revolutions take shape through the collective energy and organization of big groups, practical struggles to transform existing conditions and institutions, such as the fight for labor protections, voting rights, and same-sex marriage, are necessary to the building of the revolutionary left. Or to put this another way: it is a mistake not to recognize the revolutionary potential in any campaign that draws and mobilizes large numbers for expanding or transforming existing institutions, even if these ends are not thoroughgoing transformations of current conditions in their own right, like marriage equality or national health care.

The crucial question here is a strategic one—how social, economic, political, and cultural transformation actually comes about. In place of the fantasy of a spontaneous revolution where, as Bruce Robbins puts it, “Everything Is Suddenly and Utterly Changed,”⁷¹ I turn to the revolutionary tradition that invites us all to struggle with imperfect and near-term political ends, to focus on mobilizing, organizing, and planning, and to engage in the unromantic, demanding work of social transformation through all existing channels for political struggle, including elections, battles for legal rights, and institutions like the university and the state. Practical politics is also crucial to building skills, organizations, and collective power on the left, all preconditions for radical structural change.

If no stark decision has to be made between revolution and reform, if movements across the left grow powerful by joining forces in messy, impure coalitions, and if short-term, practical struggles have the potential to serve long-term radical ends, then the wholesale refusal of pragmatism is troubling indeed.

But what kind of action will be most meaningful? When it comes to climate change, radicals have often been quick to critique political proposals. We

should not hope for techno-fixes, for example—whether wind power, geoengineering, or wildlife reclamation projects—because an ongoing reliance on technical knowledge only reentrenches the assumption that human subjects can dominate and manipulate nature and deepens inequitable social relations.⁷² Nor does it make sense to seek change through electoral politics, at least in the United States, because this “carbon democracy,” dominated by a “politics of economic calculation,” depends on fossil fuels.⁷³ We should not fight for carbon pricing, even if it will bring down emissions globally and quickly, because this reinforces the logic of capitalism.⁷⁴ The Green New Deal is troubling either because it does not go far enough or because it sustains the long history of Euro-American colonialism and the exploitation of the Global South.⁷⁵

All of these critiques have merit. But too unflinching a focus on the problems obscures the ways that change actually happens. Kai Heron and Jodi Dean argue, for example, that three groups—scientists, social justice activists, and Indigenous leaders—have created a compelling coalition for environmental justice, despite serious differences in political and epistemic positions and methods: “Allied with science, environmentalists shed their eco-hippy personae to become representatives of a fact-based critique of mass consumption.” Meanwhile, “the leadership of indigenous people [grew] to national and international prominence as they forged collective opposition to pipelines and fracking.” And then “attention to sacrifice zones, slow death, and the persistent deprivations of environmental racism helped environmentalists move beyond the elitist image long associated with conservationism.”⁷⁶ Increasing numbers of university scientists have found their knowledge transformed for the better by alliances with Indigenous communities, and racial justice organizations, from the NAACP to Black Lives Matter, have incorporated the fight against climate change and pollution into their daily work.⁷⁷ Heron and Dean argue that this coalition has successfully shifted the whole mainstream of public opinion away from climate denialism. In other words, different environmental movements, each marginal or troubling in isolation, have strengthened and transformed each other, and together have provided momentum for larger and larger scales of change.

“Left pessimism,” according to Heron and Dean, is not only mistaken but outright dangerous. It has displaced climate denial from fossil fuel interests—where it began—onto the left’s “own arguments, shielding themselves from the overwhelming burden of action.”⁷⁸ The burden of action is overwhelming indeed if we assume that no work is worth doing apart from immediate and

total revolution, demolishing every constraint and every institution, or if we must conduct pure and virtuous campaigns that avoid all imposition of human subjects on the world. But the burden lifts if we imagine ourselves as working with the conditions we have to build a larger and larger movement for collective continuance. That is where the hard, imperfect, meaningful, transformative work starts, and that work will be the focus of the pages that follow.

Cultivating New Aesthetic and Political Values

All of this will, of course, seem very far from the arts. But I have been making the case that there is always already a politics at work in aesthetic study, and that the art and politics favored by the aesthetic humanities sustain each other in kind of a circular logic. Ruptures and open-endedness are valuable in art; and art is valuable because it teaches us to break free from the known world into an unrepresentable otherness to come. The challenge, then, is to rethink the politics and the aesthetics together. Throughout this book I have turned to several traditions of thought that have helped to guide me away from a celebration of the pause, the rupture, and the dissolve and toward the work of sustaining collective life.

I have drawn particular inspiration from feminist thought, which has long argued that the art world's emphasis on revolutionary ruptures has meant too little respect for the mundane and repetitive tasks that are crucial to keeping bodies alive. Feminist thinkers like Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Silvia Federici, Luce Giard, bell hooks, Susan Fraiman, Talia Schaffer, and Marquis Bey have argued that artistic and political traditions have too often ignored or devalued the labor necessary to ordinary day-to-day survival, so often women's work—from literal reproduction to the ongoing care of bodies through the preparation of food, care for the sick, and the daily upkeep of environments. As Bey writes: "Is not the obliteration and ending of the world, the burning shit down, as it were—which, it seems, is one of nihilism's demands—a decidedly masculinist endeavor that forgoes black feminist movements of living in the turmoil (living here precisely because here is where we deserve to be) while refusing to concede that here must remain how it is, while bringing the kids, the laundry, the bills . . ."79 The labor of material maintenance is not necessarily creative or heroic or radically emancipatory. It is practical and repetitive. It has to happen in many of the same ways every day. But no human sociality has ever taken shape without it. And to work for collective continuance will therefore mean revaluing the mundane work that keeps life going over time.

Against a long-standing insistence on rupture and innovation, repetitive-ness itself emerges as an aesthetic and political value. It models endurance and persistence, rather than retreat or dissolution after an initial failure. This conclusion has prompted me to revalue the formulas of popular culture. The Frankfurt School's analysis of the "culture industry" as a top-down purveyor of oppressive ideology is particularly critical of repetition, and its arguments remain very much alive in the aesthetic humanities today.⁸⁰ For an alternative, I have looked to the Birmingham school of cultural studies, which has made the case for taking working-class people seriously, not as passive dupes of the culture industry but as thoughtful and self-conscious agents working through cultural materials, and translating these into a range of dynamic social practices.⁸¹ This perspective has allowed me to see how repetitive mass pleasures might express authentic and politically productive desires and suggests that publics do not always need to be shaken into a new and unfamiliar consciousness.⁸² Not all popular forms will encourage the making of just worlds, to be sure, but they can and some—already, sometimes—do.

It was something of a surprise to me that the questions I posed in this book kept returning me not only to the repetitive patterns of popular culture generally but specifically to realism. Realist fiction has been particularly out of favor with most thinkers in environmental studies until recently. Amitav Ghosh famously argues that the conventional scope and scale of realism are too limiting to capture the strangeness and vastness of climate change.⁸³ Both artists and critics have often turned to speculative fiction and fantasy for ways to imagine ourselves beyond the present. Afrofuturists have mostly been drawn to science fiction.⁸⁴ Elizabeth Chang makes the case that realism cannot push our imaginations to take up the perspectives of non-humans, including plants, which cannot be assimilated to human consciousness.⁸⁵

And yet, several scholars, including Sourit Battacharya, Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinic, and Jeff Diamanti, have recently begun to reevaluate the importance of realist aesthetics for climate politics.⁸⁶ Realist art has often been condemned as conservative, making the world as it is seem inert and inevitable.⁸⁷ But as my own readings will show, far from naturalizing the tasks of everyday survival, realist texts often go to some trouble to *defamiliarize* the ordinary struggle to keep life going over time—to draw our interest to this task. In this respect, realism is not so much conservative as *conservationist*.

Realism's confinement to the plausible is especially valuable, too, for thinking about practical political action. While fantasy, science fiction, and experimental art give shape to surprising and unfamiliar worlds, the conditions they

imagine are often radically different from what we can make or build now. These works open our minds to new and exciting possibilities, but they also often reinforce the sense that we must wait for a radical rupture from the present before we can take meaningful action. In this context, I want to draw attention to *attainable* social worlds that we might in fact fight for and build here and now. Realist texts can be put to use as models—design blueprints—for real social formations.

And so, the aesthetic in this book will turn out to be, well, not very aesthetic in any traditional sense: it will be instrumental and popular and pragmatic, comforting and functional and quite deliberately mundane. My own canon of sustainable aesthetics includes Diego Rivera's murals and Mierle Laderman Ukeles's "Maintenance Art," protest chants and the BBC television series *Call the Midwife*, and a motley assortment of narratives, from Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* to the movie *Fame* to Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. It also includes shapes and patterns organizing experience that do not fall under the usual heading of the aesthetic at all, from the routines of toothbrushing to transportation infrastructures and from kneading bread to sewer systems.

But before we get to these social and aesthetic objects, I want to lay out a case for the importance of formalist methods to the project of collective continuance. Formalism does not belong to the arts, or in fact to any particular discipline, as we will see, but the aesthetic humanities have strong traditions of formalist thinking that will help us move back and forth between art and politics—and to design, build, and fight for sustainable forms for collective life.