

Nuts and Bolts: Collective Action, the Divestment Movement, and Jane Addams

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FOR many years, I felt hopeless and helpless when it came to meaningful political action. Anything I could do seemed too insignificant to have any real bearing on urgent problems like global wealth inequality and racial injustice. What were my options? I could resist an institution here or protest against a law there. I could vote. I could post angrily on social media. I could introduce political debates into classes on Victorian literature and hope that students would become newly aware of historical and structural injustices. I could wait for revolution. But none of those felt adequate. So, I worried a lot, and did very little.

As the climate crisis intensified, and governments moved too slowly to forestall suffering on a massive scale, this inaction felt increasingly intolerable. But as soon as I started looking seriously for mentors or models to guide me in taking action, I was startled to find remarkably few. Most of the people I knew, including those engaged in political activism, insisted on powerlessness when it came to large-scale collective action on climate change. The environmentalists I knew were engaged in local projects like beekeeping and community gardens. Only governments can act at the pace and scale necessary to stop the catastrophe, some said, and there is too much oil money in politics for governments to act. Voters won't focus on the distant future, others insisted, and climate change can't draw the attention of people struggling with more urgent pressures, like inadequate health care and overwhelming debt. Technological solutions might save us or doom us, several argued, but that's for the scientists to handle. Capitalism, racism, and heteropatriarchy have too strong a hold on us, my radical friends said, and we have to undo those first before we can even begin to imagine climate justice. In classes

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on climate change, my students routinely railed against the university, corporations, and the state for doing too little about climate, while they focused their own political energies entirely around acts of individual consumption, like eating less meat and recycling their plastics. Everyone seemed to be arguing that there was no way for ordinary people to take substantial or far-reaching political action on climate change.

My own academic training in literary studies had also led me to a confounding set of conclusions about activist work. On one hand, feminist, queer, and Black and Brown scholars have long been putting pressure on the university to resist the narrowness of its traditional epistemologies, values, and canons. Literary and cultural studies scholars have also worked successfully to focus our attention on histories and ideologies of exploitation and violence. But while this scholarship has been changing academic departments—slowly, yes, but unquestionably reshaping the work we do—this recognition of pervasive regimes of domination has also reinforced a widespread “left pessimism,” a bleakness about all struggles for justice. Roderick Ferguson, for example, argues that programs in gender and African American studies have been easily co-opted, converted 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.”¹ Lauren Berlant makes the case that optimism presents its own version of entrapment, and Lee Edelman contends that criticism should not rest on “the hope of forging a more perfect social order—such a hope, after all, would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism.”² Walter Benjamin’s angel of history has appeared in criticism increasingly often since 1980, Bruce Robbins points out, entrenching an understanding of the past as “unmitigated catastrophe.”³ If we insist on a Benjaminian story “so grotesquely awful that we can only be redeemed from it by the coming of a messiah,” the result, Robbins argues, “is not merely the dismissal of progress as a self-satisfied triumphalist meta-narrative, but hostility or indifference toward any putative achievement, however minor, that someone has had the temerity to claim as a step forward.”⁴ If there can be no successes, no victories, then political struggle is always and only howling into the wind.

Even work in the environmental humanities has been frustrating in this respect. Most scholars in the field have deliberately steered clear of defining all courses of action. They understand the humanist’s role as welcoming unknowable, open-ended, even unthinkable possibilities.

Jenny Odell, for example, argues that we should withdraw ourselves from the push to productivity and turn instead to the celebration of “an aimless aim, or a project with no goal.”⁵ Finishing *Living Oil* with “an unresolved detective story” and a call for more stories, Stephanie 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.”⁶ Appreciating and supplementing the work of doers and makers and planners, the humanist’s work is to dwell in irresolution. Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence* concludes by conjuring 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 writer-activists, who seek to transform society in ways that “their societies could never imagine, let alone demand”—that is, explicitly beyond our collective capacity to articulate, plan, or build.⁷

Is it really impossible to take effective political action on climate change? Having registered what seems to me to be a troubling historical convergence between a broad public hopelessness about the climate crisis and a more specific disciplinary refusal to plot any concrete steps forward, I have pushed myself to ask new and unfamiliar questions. Although I have spent my academic career thinking about power, after all, I never learned a single lesson about effective political tactics, about mobilizing, strategizing, gathering force, and sustaining pressure. What I have missed is an attention to the nuts and bolts of collective organizing at scales large enough to effect structural change. Which groups, strategies, and actions have brought about, and could again bring about, systemic social transformations?

This line of questioning sent me, eventually, in the direction of the divestment movement. I regularly teach Erik Conway and Naomi Oreskes’s *Merchants of Doubt* and George Monbiot’s “The Big Polluters’ Masterstroke,” which show that the fossil fuel companies cannily and consciously turned public attention away from their continuing plans to mine and drill by encouraging us all to feel guilty about our own “carbon footprints,” that is, pointing the finger away from themselves toward you and me.⁸ Every semester, students confirm this account: they have all been working hard to police their own actions—or feeling guilty for failing to do so—but have never thought about coming together to topple the power of Big Oil.

In 2019 Bill McKibben Zoomed into Cornell with a list of compelling reasons why divestment is effective, prompting me to join the campaign

to divest the Cornell University endowment. In the end, we were a surprisingly small team—a couple of professors, a member of the Staff Assembly, and a handful of undergraduates from Climate Justice Cornell and the student government. Together we planned a strategic collaboration across student, staff, and faculty assemblies, undertook direct actions, and wrote a white paper that addressed the specific criteria the university trustees had articulated for divestment.⁹ Many of my colleagues met these efforts with skepticism. Some insisted that 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 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 fretted 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 buy. We worked to develop persuasive answers to all these questions, including research that confirms McKibben’s arguments that divestment does work, and not only as a symbolic gesture.¹⁰ We won the Cornell divestment battle in less than a year.

All this might seem to take me far from my home field of literary studies, but for some time I have been making an argument for a formalist method that expands beyond aesthetic objects, and I use this method to think about the forms of the institution and tactics for change. 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—as any shape or configuration of materials, any arrangement of elements, any ordering or patterning. Just as plots and rhyme schemes give shape to literature, zoning laws and racial hierarchies give shape to political communities.¹¹ I do not mean that these different orders are the same, but rather that we can address both with the same *methods* of analysis. This is, after all, what methods do: they move across multiple kinds of objects. Just as a historical scholar can give a rich contextualizing account of diplomacy or childbirth, and just as a statistician can track gene mutations or 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 which are portable beyond the aesthetic.¹²

A formalist analysis can reveal openings in existing institutions and power formations, and it can also point us to a range of forms we can use to organize *ourselves* for effective resistance. What spatial and media forms best allow people to gather? What forms of action—from boycotts to marches to occupations of the public square—succeed, and under what conditions? What goals and sequences might best organize activist campaigns?

Working with environmentalists has persuaded me that it is useful to think formally about activism for structural change. What allows people to gather collective power on large scales is a form I have come to call the *hinge*. We know that no local activist group can stop climate change on its own, and even a vast aggregation of specific actions will probably fail to add up to systemic transformation. But separate campaigns and actions can have major structural impacts if they can be linked and coordinated, amplifying and extending each other to shared ends. Hinges do not have to be totally streamlined or even fully intentional. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue, the French Revolution was, on one hand, the eruption of lots of “molecular” events, small peasant groups resisting in particular places, but on the other hand, these would have been frustrated and powerless without an increasingly collective use of “molar” organizations to inscribe these molecular events into new legal and political forms. It is always the combination of “aggregate and collective action” that makes a revolution.¹³

Individuals can be hinges—two scholars can connect separate university programs, for example—but so can whole organizations. Hinged organizations can succeed, even if they are ideologically composite or even incoherent, because of their massive size.¹⁴ There is no need for purity or consistency. In fact, precisely the reverse may be true: movements grow large and powerful in part by linking groups with views that do not necessarily align perfectly.¹⁵

In the climate movement, one example of an effective hinge is 350.org. It connects many different organizations that have the common goal of stopping institutions—churches, universities, pension funds, banks, and insurance companies—from financing climate destruction. The resulting campaign is not a single, tightly structured operation, but nor is it an agglomeration of entirely separate actions. Rather, 350.org acts as a hinge, encouraging, training, and linking local divestment groups as they build their own campaigns, and then sharing

accumulated lessons and contacts with all new groups that emerge. The member organizations are ideologically various, including such groups as the Union of Concerned Scientists, One Earth Sangha, the Lakota People's Law Project, and Greenpeace. At the time of this writing, 350.org has fostered and connected environmentalist groups in 188 countries who have now pushed 1,500 institutions to divest over \$40 trillion dollars from fossil fuels, with serious consequences for coal, oil, and gas.¹⁶

Are there ways of bringing this knowledge of political forms back to literary studies? The more I have tried to work at large collective scales, the more troubled I have been by the tendency of literary works and literary critics alike to stay small: the single passage, the single text, a highly localized context, and within texts, an individual speaker, a pair, a household, a network of friends, a small community.¹⁷ While some texts and some critics certainly strain beyond this scale to the very large, most do so evocatively, gesturing outward to bigger collectivities but rarely staying for longer than a glimmer.

One place I have found a theorization of aesthetic forms and collective life is in the work of Jane Addams, who represents a bridge for me between Victorian literature and political organizing. Looking back now, I think I had been drawn to the Victorian period in the first place for its interest in collective life. Alfred Tennyson's "Lotos-Eaters" and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Cry of the Children" refuse the solitary subject of Romantic lyric in favor of the group utterance. The genius of the dramatic monologue, too, is that it manages to enter deeply into a first-person perspective while also embedding that experience in a world populated by others. Robert Browning's duke, for example, shows us the terrible violence that can come from only hearing the sound of one's own voice in a world where there are other people. And the dramatic monologue is also a democratizing form, a way to give voice to those who are usually silenced by other, more dominant voices; thus Augusta Webster chooses this form for "The Castaway," which explores the perspective of a woman driven into sex work.

What Victorian poetry teaches us is that we have never been lone agents. The nineteenth-century British novel, too, is deeply interested in this problem. Franco Moretti praises the Continental bildungsroman for refusing to reconcile the urge for self-determination, on one hand, and the pressures of socialization, on the other, arguing that the Victorians produced "the worst novel of the West" because the British novel always ends up coercing the solitary, adventuring individual back

into the banal institutional constraints of marriage and law.¹⁸ But there is another way to understand this difference: Dickens and Eliot insist on the inextricability of persons and institutions. For the Victorians, we are *always already collective*.

Yet relatively few of these Victorian writers were also organizers, and the determinedly domestic endings of *Bleak House* (1853) and *Middlemarch* (1871–72)—as well as the scathing accounts of philanthropists and reformers in both texts—give us no help when it comes to models of effective political action. But Jane Addams’s Hull House in Chicago offers a productive model. Inspired by the British settlement house movement, Hull House combined social services—childcare, an employment office, communal dining spaces—with opportunities to learn English, crafts, and music and to meet for clubs, political debates, and union organizing. Over time, settlement house residents and their allies figured out how to use their knowledge and their networks to push for solutions to problems like inadequate housing, schooling, and sanitation in Chicago neighborhoods. They built parks, playgrounds, and libraries. At the state level, they succeeded in passing laws to regulate child labor and women’s work and wages.

Addams argues that one important means of forging politically powerful collectivities is shared aesthetic experience. “We are only beginning to understand what might be done through the festival, the street procession, the band of marching musicians, orchestral music in public squares or parks, with the magic power they all possess to formulate the sense of companionship and solidarity,” she writes.¹⁹ As Addams witnesses people on the streets discussing theatrical performances and athletic events, she groups the arts together with all kinds of other means of collective assembly. Folk dancing, public speaking, orchestral music, and street festivals all do similar work. She is much less concerned with any specific medium or style, in other words, than with the ways that art, among other shared experiences, gathers people together in public.

Even the novel, so often read in privacy and isolation, plays a surprisingly collective role in Addams’s world. Within a few weeks of the opening of Hull House, a group of women met for a “reading party” to discuss George Eliot’s *Romola* (1863), set in fifteenth-century Florence. They took the occasion to eat and wash dishes together and look at photographs of Florentine sites.²⁰ For Addams, people who want to discuss the novel or sports or union organizing are all political collectives in the sense that they make solidarity possible, and together these smaller

bodies form the large coalitions that successfully pass legislation and reform urban neighborhoods.

For Addams, then, art is connected to politics not by the form of the art object but by the forms of solidarity and companionship that the activity of sharing aesthetic experience affords. I think this version of formalism can help us to see why some art objects lend themselves better to collective gathering than others. Singing appears frequently in Addams's work, and songs have certainly helped rouse and sustain political movements in the past. Because catchy and repetitive songs afford easy transmission and memorization, they are especially well suited to the work of energizing crowds and bringing bodies and voices together to march for a common purpose. British Chartists drew on the rousing and familiar anthem of the French Revolution, for instance, singing "La Marseillaise" at local meetings through the nineteenth century.²¹ Suffragists then rewrote the lyrics in the early twentieth century for "The Women's Marseillaise."²² Another example is Friedrich Schiller's poem "An die Freude" (Ode to Joy), made most famous by Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which speaks to the joys of a brotherhood united against tyranny. This call to solidarity proved inspiring to Chilean protesters, who sang the "Ode to Joy" during demonstrations against Augusto Pinochet.²³ Later, Chinese students would rig up loudspeakers to broadcast the song loudly as the military descended on Tiananmen Square. "We used the Ninth to create an ambience of solidarity and hope, for ourselves and for the people of China," explained Tiananmen leader Feng Congde.²⁴

Recently, Black Lives Matter protesters have turned to Kendrick Lamar's 2015 song "Alright."²⁵ The song stresses the endurance of Black people through long struggle and holds out hope for a better future. "God's got us," Lamar sings: "We gon' be alright." This line reportedly electrified the first Black Lives Matter conference at Cleveland State University. "The whole damn place went nuts," said one of the attendees. "You were moved. There was no way you could just sit back and not feel the effect of that song. Everybody was singing in unison. It was like being at church."²⁶ Now called the "unifying soundtrack to Black Lives Matter protests nationwide," "Alright" has become the unofficial anthem of the movement, sung repeatedly at protests against police brutality from Ferguson to Sacramento.²⁷ Unifying, inspiring, and deliberately, insistently repetitive, "Alright" takes a form that sustains collective struggles for racial justice.

If critics since the Frankfurt School have argued that repetitive mass culture keeps workers from resisting domination through unsatisfying

distraction and empty amusement, and so have paid the bulk of our scholarly attention to challenging, unfamiliar, experimental literature, we have missed one of the other affordances of the catchy refrain as a form, which is to draw people together in shared rhythmic joy.

None of these large-scale musical-political gatherings would have been possible without another, less conventionally aesthetic, form—the public square, which has formed the crucial infrastructure for many of the most famous political protests of recent years, not only Tiananmen, but also 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” has also been sporadic, suffering from “fitfulness” and “an incapacity to sustain themselves over time,” an “inability to scale up in a viable way, and a tendency to fall apart when they tried to do so,” and a “propensity to demand large investments of time and energy from participants in return for little by way of clear strategy and decision-making.”²⁸ In order to keep exerting pressure long enough to push powerful people and institutions to change, movements often rely on narrative—teleological narratives, in particular, that chart a clear path to victory. Residents of the small coastal town of Lamu, Kenya, for example, waged a long campaign of resistance against the building of a \$2 billion coal-fired power plant.²⁹ Coordinating protests in Lamu and Nairobi, letter-writing campaigns, a poetry competition, a lawsuit, and frequent invitations to the media over a span of three years, local groups worked together with national and global environmental and human rights organizations, all in the interest of a single shared goal: to prevent the building of the plant.³⁰ In June 2019 they won: Kenya’s National Environment Tribunal revoked the power company’s license to build.³¹ This was a battle against huge powers by relatively powerless people. As the Lamu organizers put it, they “stopped a giant in its tracks.”³² Although literary studies scholars have often been deeply critical of teleology, this case suggests that end-oriented narrative does not only reinforce the status quo; it also affords effective resistance to corporate power.

The forms of the hinge, the repetitive refrain, the square, and the ending all afford the mobilization of collectives in ways that have surprised me and stimulated new thinking about material and discursive forms at work. I have been drawing together theories, methods, and models from literary and cultural theory to ask unfamiliar questions, analyze institutions, and brainstorm strategies. And in turn my political

engagements have reshaped my practices of reading, my canon of art objects, my theory of aesthetics, and the political thoughts I am willing and able to think. It has been hard work, and often lonely. Even in the midst of activist projects, I am usually the only humanist, and in my university context, activism is often cast as eccentric and unprofessional. And yet when I work on a team to pick through webs of financial transactions that uncover the \$78 billion in fossil fuel investments deliberately hidden by retirement giant TIAA—the manager of my retirement fund and perhaps also yours, reader—I feel right at home.³³ This is research and writing for the public good.

I hope you'll consider joining the TIAA-Divest! campaign or any of the other groups pressuring universities, banks, and retirement funds to stop financing climate destruction.³⁴ I think you'll find that there is intense intellectual pleasure in understanding how social worlds work and how they change, and even more pleasure in gathering, in feeling solidarity. "Many hands make light work," as a Victorian might say, and "Many hands together make merry work." Drop me a line at Cornell. I'd love to hear from you. Let's join forces.

NOTES

1. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, 12.
2. Edelman, *No Future*, 4.
3. Robbins, *Criticism and Politics*, 155.
4. Robbins, *Criticism and Politics*, 154–55.
5. Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 201.
6. LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 195.
7. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 279–80.
8. Conway and Oreskes, *Merchants of Doubt*; Monbiot, "The Big Polluters."
9. Cornell, "White Paper on Divestment"; Kamis, "Climate Justice Cornell Blocks"; and Kamis, "Climate Justice Cornell Protests."
10. Cornell, "White Paper on Divestment"; see also Klein et al., "Policy Brief."
11. See Levine, *Forms*.
12. A number of critics have argued strenuously against this expansion of formalist reading to include politics. See Kramnick and Nersessian, "Form and Explanation"; Hammer, "Fantastic Forms"; and

- Macpherson, “The Political Fallacy.” I believe that they are missing the ways that studies of literary form already move back and forth between aesthetic and political forms. See Levine, *The Activist Humanist*, 24–25.
13. Nunes, *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal*, 24–25.
 14. Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 109.
 15. See Munson, *The Making of Pro-life Activists*, 126–27; Norris, *Exonerated*, 148–49; and Walder, *Agents of Disorder*.
 16. Klein et al., “Policy Brief”; Shell itself claimed in 2017 that the demands of divestment activists “could have a material adverse effect” on their operations: “Strategic Report,” 13.
 17. See Levine, “Literary Studies and Collective Life.”
 18. Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 214.
 19. Addams, *The Spirit of Youth*, 98.
 20. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 101.
 21. Jones and Tombs, “The French Left in Exile,” 186.
 22. Nelson, *Literature*, 170–71.
 23. Höyng, ““The Gospel of World Harmony.””
 24. Quoted in Mitchell, “Tiananmen Square Massacre.”
 25. Kennedy, “Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Alright.’”
 26. King, “The Improbable Story.”
 27. Coscarelli, “Kendrick Lamar on the Grammys.”
 28. Nunes, *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal*, 1.
 29. UN Environment Programme, “Lamu Coal Plant Case.”
 30. Organizations that worked with the Lamu group included the Decoalanize Campaign, the Katiba Institute, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 350 Africa, the Centre for Human Rights and Civic Education, Sauti Ya Wanjiku, Muhuri-Muslims for Human Rights, Natural Resources Alliance of Kenya, the American Jewish World Service, and the Center for Justice Governance and Environmental Action. See Ullman, “When Coal Comes to Paradise.”
 31. Namwaya, “Tribunal Stops Kenya’s Coal Plant Plans.”
 32. Jacobs, “Corporations Aren’t Demi-Gods.”
 33. Center for International Environmental Law, “TIAA Participants File a Complaint.”
 34. <https://tiaa-divest.org>. Divestment organizations include Stop the Money Pipeline, UK Divest, Fossil Free Europe, and Climate Safe Pensions.

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