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## Book Review: *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis*

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## Book Review: *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis*

by Andrés Ayala-Patlán



### About the Author

Andrés Ayala-Patlán is a doctoral student in English at the University of Washington, where he teaches courses in composition and exposition. His research focuses on the intersections of decolonial studies and the environmental humanities in the contemporary Americas, particularly in Latinx, Black, and Indigenous literatures. Focusing on decolonial imaginaries, planetary thought, and ecopoetics, his work contributes to the emerging field of decolonial planetary ecologies. His work appears in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, and he holds a BA in philosophy, an MH (Master of Humanities), and an MA in English, Language, and Literature.

## Book Review

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Levine, Caroline. 2023. *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Drawing on her previous work, *Forms* (2015), which suggests that formalist methods are especially well suited to understand art and politics and their relation, Caroline Levine's *The Activist Humanist* (2023) challenges the conventional distinction between aesthetic inquiry and political action in response to climate change. However, *Forms* faced criticism for its perceived detachment from real-world political engagement. Critics argued that while Levine's analysis of forms in literature is intellectually rigorous, it did not adequately address how literary forms translate into tangible social change. For instance, some scholars contended that *Forms* risked perpetuating the ivory tower critique by focusing heavily on literary and theoretical frameworks. John Jordan articulates that "the risk is that in teasing out the complex interplay of aesthetic and sociopolitical forms, the politically committed analyst may lose sight of longer-term goals and be unable to see beyond the intricacy of the forms she describes" (2016, 145). Likewise, Jonathan Loesberg argues that "As a political agenda [. . .] this proposal has one obvious weakness. The skeptical analysis of formal wholes or hierarchies worked by showing that they were political constructs rather than natural realities" (2016, 561). In other words, "[formalist] readings can only attest that the concepts work well to analyze the fictive cultures those narratives create," depending on "how persuasive we find the fictive cultures analyzed as forms or embodiments of our own cultural surroundings" (Loesberg 2016, 561). This leaves noticeable gaps between literary formalism and cultural analysis or literary and sociopolitical forms.

In *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (2023), Levine directly responds to these critiques by advocating for a practical and proactive environmental activism integrated with humanistic scholarship. This work marks a significant evolution in Levine's thought, as she moves beyond the abstract theorization of forms to

actively engage with the pressing issues of climate change and environmental justice. Levine impressively incorporates a wide range of real-world cultural sites and artifacts from transportation systems to historical social movements, art movements to film narratives. She illustrates how a rethinking and neutralization of forms and structures can foment stability in an uncertain world, countering critiques of structuralism that are all too saturated in the humanities. Levine sees the environmental humanities as actively participating in and reinforcing “a withdrawal from the public sphere” (2023, xi). Instead, Levine seeks to continue using “formalist strategies drawn from the arts to redescribe political power” (2023, xii). This approach is a direct continuation of her work in *Forms*, but with a much clearer focus on the application of these strategies to real-world problems. By doing so, she addresses some of the criticisms of *Forms* by demonstrating how formalist methods can indeed be employed to inspire and guide political activism in concrete, long-lasting, and impactful ways.

Levine’s chapter organization creatively shifts back and forth from theory to method, reflecting her commitment to both intellectual rigor and practical utility. For instance, in Chapter 1, Levine focuses on theory and argues that anti-instrumentality now “prompt[s] us to work against sustainability” (2023, xiv). She centralizes Kyle Powys Whyte’s “collective continuance” (2018)—a community’s ability to adapt in order to bring about a reliable livelihood in which all its members flourish. The primacy of collective continuance is particularly significant and useful for Levine’s intervention, as it exhibits Levine’s attempt to bridge the gap between abstract theorization and actionable strategies for environmental justice through Whyte’s measurable form of collective continuance.

Chapter 2 then shifts to method, depicting the practical ways formalist methods can help to “analyze social forms and *to design and build just and sustaining forms for collective life*” (Levine 2023, xiv; emphasis added). This chapter is especially important in the context of the criticisms leveled at *Forms*, as it shows how Levine’s theoretical insights can be operationalized to effect real structural transformation. Chapter 4 returns to the theoretical inquiry of aesthetics that may help to value infrastructures for collective life, amassing an assortment of cultural artifacts such as Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Americanah* (2013), the BBC series *Call the Midwife* (2012-), James Weldon Johnson’s poem “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (2000), and murals from David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and Diego Rivera during the Mexican Mural Movement in the 1920’s and 30’s.

Chapter 3 can be seen as building on method once again, outlining three major infrastructural forms—routines, pathways, and enclosures—that will be essential for

keeping life going. “Routine provisions of food and rest,” “pathways [that] carry food, water, and waste,” and “[s]heltering enclosures” such as homes and communities are essential for the maintenance of a just polis, Levine suggests (2023, xiv). Here, Levine’s work can be seen as directly and more effectively addressing the criticisms of *Forms* by providing concrete examples of how formalist analysis can lead to the design of sustainable and just infrastructures. Chapter 5 culminates in the pragmatic question of political action, asking how scholars should organize themselves to fight for collective continuance. She addresses successful political movements, such as The Montgomery Bus Boycotts, to highlight the ways formalist methods helped them succeed—to “expand political movements to large scale” questions, what she calls *hinge* (2023, xiv). By grounding her analysis in historical examples of successful activism, Levine shows how formalist methods can indeed be used to expand political movements on a large scale. Chapter 6 ends with a thoughtful amalgamation of academic argument and practical politics, utilizing the workbook form, a “hands-on experiment” to foster and sustain collective practices and life over time (2023, xiv). The workbook format is a particularly innovative feature of this book, as it provides readers with a practical tool to translate Levine’s theories into action, encouraging them to “move from the critical to the constructive” and actively engage in “designing just forms of collective life” (2023, 149).

This work offers scholars radical new methods for advancing social change with fresh, precise, and insightful analysis. It is truly impressive the ground Levine covers in this short work, from the eschewal of the totalizing critiques of Adorno and Horkheimer’s the culture industry to real-life examples of sustainable transportation infrastructures in Brazil. She examines Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” (2015) for its unifying and rallying cry for racial justice and films such as *Coach Carter* (2005) and *Stand and Deliver* (1988) to underline the struggling team narratives in popular culture, underscoring already-present forms of collective ethos and engagement. Chapter 4, however, follows a more traditional literary critical methodology, analyzing works such as *Oliver Twist* (1838) to highlight the humanities’ aesthetic challenges. Yet, I was left wanting more of how these works analyzed “[d]issolve the usual dividing line between aesthetics and activism” (Levine 2023, 125), how they transfer to direct political action. Other critics have also noticed this disconnect in *Forms*, where “Levine gives short shrift to the rise of institutional critique within her own field of literary studies [. . .] label[ing] ‘new’ what many literary scholars—especially those working at the intersection of institutional critique and literary history—accept as *de rigueur*” (Liming 2017, 663). Levine thereby falls victim to her own underlying critique of the limits of literary criticism to some degree in this chapter.

Similarly, *The Activist Humanist* falls short of blurring the distinction between small and large scaled projects, often invalidating or disregarding individual acts in unclear or contradictory ways. These individual acts, however, are crucial for informing larger structural changes, particularly through her workbook form, which is itself an individually contextualized task. Levine’s approach risks overlooking how exactly the aesthetic humanities can bridge the affective gap between individual and collective actions, a connection that needs to be strengthened to fully harness the potential of her formalist methods.<sup>1</sup> This gap is particularly evident when Levine states “that individual actions are not enough to halt the juggernaut of climate change” (2023, ix), undermining how the aesthetic inquiry and formalist reading strategies that her work offers inform activists about what types of analyses and acts lead to larger successful structural changes for collective life. She loses ground when stating, “Each aesthetic reading feels small-scale and specific, confined to expert readers and classroom discussions, and for this reason it is tempting to retreat to modesty as the proper scope of our disciplines, but a formalist training in reading works of art can also equip us to understand the importance of connecting forms, hinges between agents and sites that can gather our power on large scales rather than insisting on our continuing isolation and separation” (2023, 139–40).

However, this is an impressive and exceptionally theorized compendium of theorists, artists, authors, and activists that revolutionize and reframe the formalist methodologies of the aesthetic humanities to better effect collective continuance. Ironically enough, however, the sheer number of cultural artifacts, infrastructural examples, and social movements depicted in this work does leave the reader a bit overwhelmed and discombobulated, sensing a slight desperation on Levine’s part to adequately prove the viability of her theories by analyzing an abundance of historical examples. Nonetheless, I applaud Levine’s *The Activist Humanist* as it attempts to radically transform the aesthetic and environmental humanities’ ability to take pragmatic political steps to change our world amidst unrelenting climate change. Personally, I greatly appreciated and admired the ways Levine directly attempts to address the complicated and pervasive question of “where to start?” regarding climate injustice on a global scale (2023, 149). She thereby resists the urge for passivity, neoliberal scapegoating, and debilitating defeatism. Her experimental workbook is also gripping, refreshing, and engaging in novel ways, contemplating modes of collective action based on one’s specific values, attributes, and positional capabilities. It prompts readers to immediately complete the workbook, aiming to transform open-endedness into concrete, goal-oriented actions, “to make the transition from critique to action” (2023, 150). Yet, it leaves unexplored crucial opportunities for more robust theorizations regarding the

connection between molecular and molar affective structures that could better inform the relationship between aesthetics, politics, and collective continuance.

In conclusion, *The Activist Humanist* serves as a groundbreaking contribution to the field of environmental humanities in ways that support new scholar-activist theorizations and practices with tangible efforts to combat the climate crisis. Levine's approach is both groundbreaking and necessary, offering a roadmap for scholars who wish to make their work more relevant to contemporary social and political struggles. This work not only builds upon but significantly advances the arguments made in *Forms*. Levine addresses previous criticisms by moving beyond abstract theorization to offer practical tools for activism. Her work exemplifies how the humanities can play a vital role in addressing the most pressing issues of our time. Through her inventive use of formalist methods, Levine offers both a theoretical framework and practical strategies for environmental justice, making *The Activist Humanist* an essential contribution to twenty-first-century critical thought and activism within the environmental humanities.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Fred Moten's *Black and Blur* (2017). Moten's *Black and Blur* is volume one in his larger *consent not to be a single being* trilogy. *Black and Blur* and Caroline Levine's *The Activist Humanist* share an underlying concern with the relationship between aesthetics and politics, but they approach the connection between aesthetics, collective identity, and resistance to power quite differently. Moten explores the aesthetic forms of blackness as a mode of existence that refuses boundaries, blurring the distinctions between politics and aesthetics and individual and collective actions. His conception of blackness disrupts Western categorical thinking, particularly the binaries that structure humanist thought, such as the separation of the individual from the collective. As I see it, this resonates with a core critique of Levine's work: her formalist approach to activism, while valuable for its systematic analysis of forms and structures, fails to fully acknowledge or deconstruct the individual versus collective dichotomies as seen in Western humanist frameworks. Moten's work better addresses this limitation by showing how black aesthetics generate forms of social life and resistance that challenge or do not rely on Western frameworks. Levine's formalist approach can benefit from Moten's perspective on aesthetic blurring. Moten offers a way to bridge the affective gap between individual and collective identities and actions that Levine briefly identifies but struggles to fully address in this work.

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