INTRODUCTION

The Affordances of Form

If a literary critic today set out to do a formalist reading of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, she would know just where to begin: with literary techniques both large and small, including the marriage plot, first-person narration, description, free indirect speech, suspense, metaphor, and syntax. Thanks to rich recent work on the history of the book, she might also consider the novel's material shape—its size, binding, volume breaks, margins, and typeface. But unlike formalists of a couple of generations before, she would be unlikely to rest content with an analysis of these forms alone. Traditional formalist analysis—close reading—meant interpreting all of the formal techniques of a text as contributing to an overarching artistic whole. A contemporary critic, informed by several decades of historical approaches, would want instead to take stock of the social and political conditions that surrounded the work's production, and she would work to connect the novel's forms to its social world. She would seek to show how literary techniques reinforced or undermined specific institutions and political relationships, such as imperial power, global capital, or racism. Along the way, our critic would most likely keep her formalism and her historicism analytically separate, drawing from close reading methods to understand the literary forms, while using historical research methods to analyze sociopolitical experience. These would seem to her to belong to separate realms and to call for different methods.

But would our critic be right to distinguish between the *formal* and the *social*? Consider the early scenes in *Jane Eyre,* where Brontë first introduces Lowood School. In the morning, a bell rings loudly to wake the girls. When it rings a second time, "all formed in file, two and two, and in that order descended the stairs." On hearing a verbal command, the children move into "four semicircles, before four chairs, placed at the four tables; all held books in their hands." When the bell rings yet again, three teachers enter and begin an hour of Bible reading before the girls march in to breakfast.

Although this new world feels overwhelming at first, Jane—quick-witted and obedient—soon achieves success. "In time I rose to be the first girl of the first class."[1] Critics are used to reading Lowood's disciplinary order as part of the novel's content and context, interpreting the school experience as indispensable to Jane's maturation, for example, or as characteristic of trends in nineteenth-century education.[2] But what are Lowood's shapes and arrangements—its semicircles, timed durations, and ladders of achievement—if not themselves kinds of *form*?

This book makes a case for expanding our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience like those of Lowood School. Broadening our definition of form to include social arrangements has, as we will see, immediate methodological consequences. The traditionally troubling gap between the form of the literary text and its content and context dissolves. Formalist analysis turns out to be as valuable to understanding sociopolitical institutions as it is to reading literature. Forms are at work everywhere.

One might object, of course, that it is a category mistake to use the aesthetic term *form* to describe the daily routines of a nineteenth-century school. Surely the relation between literary and social forms is just an analogy, or an identity working at too a high level of abstraction—an expansion of the word *form* so broad as to make it meaningless. But a brief look at the history of the term suggests otherwise. Over many centuries, *form* has gestured to a series of conflicting, sometimes even paradoxical meanings. Form can mean immaterial idea, as in Plato, or material shape, as in Aristotle. It can indicate essence, but it can also mean superficial trappings, such as conventions—*mere forms*. Form can be generalizing and abstract, or highly particular (as in the form of *this* thing is what makes it what it is, and if it were reorganized it would not be the same thing). Form can be cast as historical, emerging out of particular cultural and political circumstances, or it can be understood as ahistorical, transcending the specificities of history.[3] In disciplinary terms, form can point us to visual art, music, and literature, but it belongs equally to philosophy, law, mathematics, military science, and crystallography. Even within literary studies, the vocabulary of formalism has always been a surprising kind of hodge-podge, put together from rhetoric, prosody, genre theory, structural anthropology, philology, linguistics, folklore, narratology, and semiotics.

Chaotic though it seems, this brief conceptual history does make two things quite clear. First, form has never belonged only to the discourse of aesthetics. It does not originate in the aesthetic, and the arts cannot lay claim to either the longest or the most far-reaching history of the term. To

bring the disciplinary techniques of Lowood together with the literary techniques of the novel is not then an arbitrary expansion of the notion of form, nor does it draw from outside the history of formalist thinking. Instead, an attention to both aesthetic and social forms returns us to the very heterogeneity at the heart of form's conceptual history. Second, all of the historical uses of the term, despite their richness and variety, do share a common definition: "form" always indicates *an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping*. Here, then, is where my own argument begins: with a definition of form that is much broader than its ordinary usage in literary studies. Form, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference.

Why adopt such a broad definition? The stakes, I want to suggest, are high. It is the work of form to make order. And this means that forms are the stuff of politics. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, I define politics as a matter of distributions and arrangements.[4] Political struggles include ongoing contests over the proper places for bodies, goods, and capacities. Do working-class crowds belong in the public square? Do women belong in voting booths? Does earned income belong to individuals? What land belongs to Native Americans? Sorting out what goes where, the work of political power often involves enforcing restrictive containers and boundaries—such as nation-states, bounded subjects, and domestic walls. But politics is not only about imposing order on space. It also involves organizing time: determining prison and presidential terms, naturalization periods, and the legal age for voting, military service, and sexual consent. Crucially, politics also means enforcing hierarchies of high and low, white and black, masculine and feminine, straight and queer, have and have-not. In other words, politics involves activities of ordering, patterning, and shaping. And if the political is a matter of imposing and enforcing boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies on experience, then there is no politics without form.

Literary and cultural studies scholarship has focused a great deal of attention on these various political ordering principles. We have typically treated aesthetic and political arrangements as separate, and we have not generally used the language of form for both, but we have routinely drawn on social scientific accounts of "structure"; we have certainly paid attention to national boundaries and hierarchies of race and gender. And it is a commonplace practice in literary studies to read literary forms in relation to social structures. So: the field already knows a great deal about forms. But it is a knowledge that is currently scattered across schools of thought and approaches. This book proposes to bring together the field's dispersed insights into social and aesthetic forms to produce a new formalist method.

Let me start by articulating five influential ideas about how forms work. These are ideas that have guided literary and cultural studies scholars over the past few decades, but they have remained largely implicit—and disconnected from one another:

1   *Forms constrain*. According to a long tradition of thinkers, form is disturbing because it imposes powerful controls and containments. For some, this means that literary form itself exercises a kind of political power. In 1674, John Milton justified his use of blank verse as a reclaiming of "ancient liberty" against the "troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming."[5] Avant-garde poet Richard Aldington made a similar claim in 1915: "We do not insist upon 'free-verse' as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as for a principle of liberty."[6] In our own time, critics—especially those in the Marxist tradition—have often read literary forms as attempts to contain social clashes and contradictions.[7]

2   *Forms differ*. One of the great achievements of literary formalism has been the development of rich vocabularies and highly refined skills for differentiating among forms. Starting with ancient studies of prosody, theorists of poetic form around the world have debated the most precise terms for distinct patterns of rhyme and meter, and over the past hundred years theorists of narrative have developed a careful language for describing formal differences among stories, including frequency, duration, focalization, description, and suspense.[8]

3   *Various forms overlap and intersect*. Surprisingly, perhaps, schools of thought as profoundly different from one another as the New Criticism and intersectional analysis have developed methods for analyzing the operation of several distinct forms operating at once. The New Critics, who introduced the close reading method that dominated English departments in the middle decades of the twentieth century, deliberately traced the intricacies of overlapping literary patterns operating on different scales, as large as genre and as small as syntax. Intersectional analysis, which emerged in the social sciences and cultural studies in the late 1980s, focused our attention on how different social hierarchies overlap, sometimes powerfully reinforcing one another—how for example race and class and gender work together to keep many African-American women in a discouraging cycle of poverty.[9]

4   *Forms travel*. Critics have pointed to two important ways that forms move. First, a range of recent literary theorists, including Wai-Chee Dimock, Frances Ferguson, and Franco Moretti, have noted that certain literary forms—epic, free indirect discourse, rhythm, plot—can survive across cultures and time periods, sometimes enduring through vast distances of time and space.[10] Something similar is true, though less often acknowledged, for social forms. Michel Foucault draws our attention to the daily timetable, for example, which begins by organizing life in the medieval monastery, but then gets picked up by the modern prison, factory, and school.[11]

The second way in which forms travel, critics suggest, is by moving back and forth across aesthetic and social materials. Structuralism, a school of thought that grew influential across the social sciences in the first half of the twentieth century, made the case that human communities were organized by certain universal structures. The most important of these were binary oppositions—masculine and feminine, light and dark—which imposed a recognizable order across social and aesthetic experiences, from domestic spaces to tragic dramas. Structuralism later came under fire for assuming that these patterns were natural and therefore inexorable, but one does not have to be a structuralist to agree that binary oppositions are a pervasive and portable form, capable of imposing their arrangements on both social life and literary texts. Some critics have also worried that aesthetic forms can exert political power by imposing their artificial order on political life. Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin argued against an embrace of totality in aesthetics, because it he believed it led to an embrace of totality in political communities.[12] More recent critics have often followed forms in the opposite direction: showing, for example, how a social form like a racial hierarchy moves from the political world into a novel, where it structures aesthetic experience.[13]

5   *Forms do political work in particular historical contexts*. In recent years, scholars interested in reviving an interest in form (sometimes called the "new formalists") have sought to join formalism to historical approaches by showing how literary forms emerge out of political situations dominated by specific contests or debates. Since the late 1990s, literary critics like Susan Wolfson and Heather Dubrow have argued that literary forms reflect or respond to contemporary political conditions.[14] Forms matter, in these accounts, because they shape what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context.

Forms: *containing, plural, overlapping, portable,* and *situated.* None of these ideas about form are themselves new, but putting them together will bring us to a new theory of form.

Affordances

How can form do so many different, even contradictory things? How can it be both political and aesthetic, both containing and plural, both situated and portable? To capture the complex operations of social and literary forms, I borrow the concept of *affordance* from design theory. *Affordance* is a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs.[15] Glass affords transparency and brittleness. Steel affords strength, smoothness, hardness, and durability. Cotton affords fluffiness, but also breathable cloth when it is spun into yarn and thread. Specific designs, which organize these materials, then lay claim to their own range of affordances. A fork affords stabbing and scooping. A doorknob affords not only hardness and durability, but also turning, pushing, and pulling. Designed things may also have unexpected affordances generated by imaginative users: we may hang signs or clothes on a doorknob, for example, or use a fork to pry open a lid, and so expand the intended affordances of an object.

Let's now use affordances to think about form. The advantage of this perspective is that it allows us to grasp both the specificity and the generality of forms—both the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford, and the fact that those patterns and arrangements carry their affordances with them as they move across time and space. What is a walled enclosure or a rhyming couplet *capable* of doing? Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities. Enclosures afford containment and security, inclusion as well as exclusion. Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization. Networks afford connection and circulation, and narratives afford the connection of events over time. The sonnet, brief and condensed, best affords a single idea or experience, "a moment's monument,"[16] while the triple-decker novel affords elaborate processes of character development in multiplot social contexts. Forms are limiting and containing, yes, but in crucially different ways. Each form can only do so much.

To be sure, a specific form can be put to use in unexpected ways that expand our general sense of that form's affordances. Rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms *do,* we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social

arrangements. An imaginative user, such as William Butler Yeats, deliberately pushes at the limits of formal constraints in "Leda and the Swan," a sonnet that captures the single moment that launches the epic story of the Trojan War—at once gesturing to the sweep of epic while remaining powerfully constrained by the sonnet's compact form.

Although each form lays claim to different affordances, all forms do share one affordance. Precisely because they are abstract organizing principles, shapes and patterns are iterable—portable. They can be picked up and moved to new contexts. A school borrows the idea of spectators in rows from ancient theater. A novelist takes from epic poetry the narrative structure of the quest. Forms also afford movement across varied materials. A rhythm can impose its powerful order on laboring bodies as well as odes. Binary oppositions can structure gendered workspaces as well as creation myths. While its meanings and values may change, the pattern or shape itself can remain surprisingly stable across contexts. But as they move, forms bring their limited range of affordances with them. No matter how different their historical and cultural circumstances, that is, bounded enclosures will always exclude, and rhyme will always repeat.

If forms lay claim to a limited range of potentialities and constraints, if they afford the same limited range of actions wherever they travel, and if they are the stuff of politics, then attending to the affordances of form opens up *a generalizable understanding of political power.* A panoptic arrangement of space, wherever it takes shape, will always afford a certain kind of disciplinary power; a hierarchy will always afford inequality.

But specific contexts also matter. In any given circumstance, no form operates in isolation. The idea of affordances is valuable for understanding the aesthetic object as imposing its order among a vast array of designed things, from prison cells to doorknobs. Literary form does not operate outside of the social but works among many organizing principles, all circulating in a world jam-packed with other arrangements. Each constraint will encounter many other, different organizing principles, and its power to impose order will itself be constrained, and at times unsettled, by other forms. Rhyme and narrative may structure the same text; the gender binary and the bureaucratic hierarchy may coincide in a single workplace. Which will organize the other? It is not always predictable. New encounters may activate latent affordances or foreclose otherwise dominant ones. Forms will often fail to impose their order when they run up against other forms that disrupt their logic and frustrate their organizing ends, producing aleatory and sometimes contradictory effects. We can understand forms as abstract and portable organizing principles, then, but we also need to attend to the

specificity of particular historical situations to understand the range of ways in which forms overlap and collide.

In many cases, when forms meet, their collision produces unexpected consequences, results that cannot always be traced back to deliberate intentions or dominant ideologies. In a brief but familiar example, most women in academia experience a powerful tension between the biological "clock"—the years when the female body is capable of biological reproduction—and the tenure clock—the university's timetable for evaluating probationary faculty. This is one reason why a disproportionately high number of women opt for academic jobs as adjuncts and part-timers.[17] Since the tenure system predates the entry of women in any substantial numbers into the academy, these consequences do not flow from any particular patriarchal intention or ideology other than the assumption of an uninterrupted adult life.[18] In other words, this clash of temporal forms does not result from an intention to keep women in their places; it is an unplanned collision between two temporal forms, one biological and the other institutional.

Even a prison cell, the grimmest of social forms, does not enforce its simple, single order in isolation. The cell itself is a straightforward enough form: it encloses bodies within surrounding walls. But the prison always activates other forms as well: prisoners are subjected to temporal patterns, including enforced daily rhythms of food, sleep, and exercise; educational trajectories; and the length of the prison term itself. They take part in networks that operate not only within a given prison, but also reach outside the confines of prison walls, including illegal smuggling rings, gangs, and correspondence networks. The latter—from Amnesty International to personal notes to the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"—have long been crucial forms in prisoners' lives. And at the same time as prisoners are contained in cells, patterned in time, and linked to various networks, they are also subjected to numerous painful hierarchies, ranked according to the status of their crimes and their gender and sexual identities. As these forms overlap, some may disrupt the prison cell's containing power. The enclosure of the cell itself does not readily afford expansion or breakdown, but the temporal form of the prison sentence affords shortening or lengthening. And one surprisingly literary form has occasionally cut short the time of a prison term: a story of remorse or redemption can sometimes prompt a pardon.[19] Thus the arc of a narrative can in its own way pry open a cell's enclosing walls.

This analysis of forms—constraining in different ways, bringing their affordances with them as they cross contexts, and colliding to sometimes unpredictable effect—points to a new understanding of how power works. And yet, one might object, if so many things count as forms, from sonnets

to prison cells to tenure clocks, then the category is just too capacious. What in this account is *not* form? Is there any way outside or beyond form? My own answer is yes—there are many events and experiences that do not count as forms—and we could certainly pay close attention to these: fissures and interstices, vagueness and indeterminacy, boundary-crossing and dissolution. But I want to make the case here that these formless or antiformal experiences have actually drawn *too much* attention from literary and cultural critics in the past few decades.

That is, the field has been so concerned with breaking forms apart that we have neglected to analyze the major work that forms do in our world. We have tended to assume that political forms are powerful, all-encompassing, and usually simple in themselves: a sexist or racist regime, for example, splits the world into a crude and comprehensive binary, its stark simplicity—black and white, masculine and feminine—contributing to the regime's painful power. We have therefore learned to look for places where the binary breaks down or dissolves, generating possibilities that turn the form into something more ambiguous and ill-defined—formless. Scholars in recent years have written a great deal about indeterminate spaces and identities, employing such key terms as liminality, borders, migration, hybridity, and passing.[20] This work has been compelling and politically important, without any doubt, and it will surely continue to be productive to analyze formal failures, incompletion, and indefinability. But while it may be possible to rid ourselves of particular unjust totalities or binaries, it is impossible to imagine a society altogether free of organizing principles. And too strong an emphasis on forms' dissolution has prevented us from attending to the complex ways that power operates in a world dense with functioning forms.

Perhaps this account of form still seems too abstract, too divorced from material conditions and the ways that power operates on and through embodied experience. A continued focus on affordances will help us here. The term *affordance* crosses back and forth between materiality and design. It certainly helps us to understand the capacities and limitations of materials. Wood affords hard, durable structures. It does not afford fluid streams or spongy softness. A wire affords connection and transmission, and chocolate affords structured shapes as well as a certain gooey viscosity. With affordances, then, we can begin to grasp the constraints on form that are imposed by materiality itself. One cannot make a poem out of soup or a panopticon out of wool. In this sense, form and materiality are inextricable, and materiality is determinant.

But patterns and arrangements also shape matter, imposing order on stone and flesh, sounds and spaces. Constraint moves in both directions.

Things take forms, and forms organize things. The prison cell cannot do its work without the hard materiality of metal or stone, but it also operates as an iterable way of organizing experience, a model of enclosure that can and does travel across many contexts. It is both a thing and a form. Henry S. Turner suggests that we can discover forms from two opposite starting-points: we can begin with the immaterial, abstract organizing principles that shape material realities, or we can begin with the concrete, particular material thing and abstract from it to general, iterable patterns and shapes.[21] From either perspective, forms travel across time and space in and through situated material objects.[22]

The relationship between materiality and form has long been of interest in literary studies. Critics have often assumed that the materiality of a text's content lends itself to certain literary forms: patterns of labor or rhythms of the body yielding certain repetitions in poetry, for example. In one recent essay, Stephanie Markovits argues that nineteenth-century literary writers in different genres often chose to write about diamonds because these objects are suited both to the "containment of lyric" thanks to their perfectly chiseled shapes, and to the motion of narrative, thanks to their extraordinary durability over time.[23] Or to put this in terms of affordances, the materiality of diamonds affords specific experiences of time, including stillness and durability, which the critic then reads as shaping the literary forms that incorporate them. There is a rich suggestiveness in this kind of analysis, but it is important to note that the materials described or evoked by literary texts do not determine their forms in the same way that stone determines durability. Literature is not made of the material world it describes or invokes but of language, which lays claims to its own forms—syntactical, narrative, rhythmic, rhetorical—and its own materiality—the spoken word, the printed page. And indeed, each of these forms and materials lays claim to its own affordances—its own range of capabilities. Every literary form thus generates its own, separate logic. The most common literary formalist reading method involves binding literary forms to their contents, seeking out the ways that each reflects the other, as Markovits does with diamonds. But a typical novel or poem will touch on so many different objects—diamonds and hair, chocolate and the ocean—that it could not possibly adjust its own forms to every material it incorporates. Thus a reading practice that follows the affordances of both literary forms and material objects imagines these as mutually shaping potentialities, but does not fold one into the other, as if the materiality of the extratextual world were the ultimate determinant.

Affordances point us both to what all forms are capable of—to the range of uses each could be put to, even if no one has yet taken advantage of those possibilities—and also to their limits, the restrictions intrinsic to particular materials and organizing principles. Ballot boxes, biological clocks, and lyric poems all take organizing forms. Each of these forms can be repeated elsewhere, and each carries with it a certain limited range of affordances as it travels. But a form does its work only in contexts where other political and aesthetic forms also are operating. A variety of forms are in motion around us, constraining materials in a range of ways and imposing their order in situated contexts where they constantly overlap other forms. Form emerges from this perspective as transhistorical, portable, and abstract, on the one hand, and material, situated, and political, on the other.

Rethinking Formalisms

With affordances in mind, we can see how forms can be at once containing, plural, overlapping, portable, and situated. But every major formalist tradition has limited its definition of form in a way that has missed or excluded one or more of these affordances. For example, we have long known that the New Critics missed something important when they understood literary forms as entirely separate from a situated and material social world. They overlooked the ways in which formal constraints might matter politically; they did not care that forms took shape in specific historical circumstances. But the New Criticism was also interested in some of the affordances of form that have been missing from other theories. In literary and cultural studies, we have a much less refined vocabulary for the differences between social forms than we have for aesthetic ones. Certainly we know that racial hierarchies and walled enclosures organize social groups in different ways, but we have not developed a language for those differences. The New Criticism, with its interest in the differences between forms, can actually point the way forward here, inviting us to develop a richer and more precise terminology for the work of social forms. The New Critics also showed that it is difficult—if not impossible—to exhaust the dense interweaving of formal elements in a short lyric poem. And if it is a challenge to identify and analyze the shaping elements of a single sonnet, then it is certainly impossible to capture the patterns constitutive of an entire society with a handful of categories, such as race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality, and disability. Thus the New Critics' focus on the extraordinary plurality of overlapping forms could prompt us to expand the logic of intersectional analysis dramatically, continuing to take the structures of race, class, and gender extremely seriously, but tracking the encounters of these with many other kinds of forms, from enclosures to networks to narrative resolutions.

The politically minded "new formalisms" that have emerged in literary studies recently have also overlooked one of form's crucial affordances. These critics have insisted on situating literary forms in particular political contexts. Mostly, they have followed one of two paths. Some have read literary forms as legible reflections of social structures. Herbert F. Tucker, for example, reads the meter of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, "The Cry of the Children," as revealing the uncomfortable disjuncture between the embodied time of human life and the jolting experience of factory labor. Barrett Browning's "stop-and-start versification mimics the strain and clatter of steam-driven machinery."[24] A second group casts literary form less as a reflection of a specific social context than as a deliberate *intervention*. Susan Wolfson argues, for example, that the Romantic poets were hardly unknowing purveyors of a "romantic ideology" that masked political struggle in unified "organic forms," as has often been charged: instead, she argues, they were fully aware of the constructedness of literary unities and purposefully deployed formal strategies to investigate problems of ideology, subjectivity, and social conditions.[25] Both groups of new formalists read literary form as epiphenomenal, growing out of specific social conditions that it mimics or opposes. Thus, neither camp takes account of one of forms' affordances: the capacity to endure across time and space. From the gender binary to rhyme and from prison cells to narrative prose, aesthetic and social forms outlive the specific conditions that gave birth to them: the scroll does not altogether disappear with the codex but in fact reemerges with surprising pervasiveness in the age of the Internet; the quest structure of ancient epic remains available to the contemporary novelist. None of these forms spring up anew in response to particular social facts but instead hang around, available for reuse. In this sense, forms are not outgrowths of social conditions; they do not belong to certain times and places.

And indeed, as sociologist Marc Schneiberg argues, it is precisely the endurance of "holdover" forms that can make a society promisingly plural, scattered with alternative ways of organizing resources and goods that could at any moment give rise to more hopeful arrangements. For example, in the 1950s when large, private, for-profit corporations started to dominate the US economic landscape, electricity—crucial to the whole economy—was delivered in significant quantities by local, state-owned enterprises and cooperatives. Every day, when corporate moguls turned on the lights, they remobilized the form of cooperative ownership. The story of US capitalism is therefore not only a deep-rooted dialectical struggle between capital and labor, but also "a path littered with elements or fragments of more or less developed systems of alternatives—a path ripe for exploitation,

institutional revitalization and assembly, and containing within it structural possibilities for alternatives."[26] What would enrich and deepen the "new formalism," then, is attention to the *longues durées* of different forms, their portability across time and space.

Genre theory, too, could benefit from more attention to the portability of forms. For many critics, the terms *form* and *genre* are synonymous or near-synonymous.[27] But this book argues that they can be differentiated precisely by the different ways in which they traverse time and space. Genre involves acts of classifying texts. An ensemble of characteristics, including styles, themes, and marketing conventions, allows both producers and audiences to group texts into certain kinds. Innovations can alter those expectations: an experimental epic might invite readers to expand their sense of the genre's themes, while the introduction of print extends and transforms a folktale's audience. Thus any attempt to recognize a work's genre is a historically specific and interpretive act: one might not be able to tell the difference between a traditional folktale and a story recently composed for children or to recognize a satire from a distant historical moment.[28]

Forms, defined as patternings, shapes, and arrangements, have a different relation to context: they can organize both social and literary objects, and they can remain stable over time. One has to agree to read for shapes and patterns, of course, and this is itself a conventional approach. But as Frances Ferguson argues, once we recognize the organizing principles of different literary forms—such as syntax, free indirect speech, and the sonnet—they are themselves no longer matters of interpretive activity or debate: "Even if you failed to notice that the sonnet that Romeo and Juliet speak between them was a sonnet the first time you read Shakespeare's play, you would be able to recognize it as such from the moment that someone pointed it out to you. . . . It could be regularly found, pointed out, or returned to, and the sense of its availability would not rest on agreements about its meaning."[29] Similarly, it is difficult not to agree on the shape of the classroom or the schedule of the prisoner's day, the hierarchy of a bureaucratic organization or the structure of a kinship system. There is certainly some abstraction entailed here, but once we have agreed to look for principles of organization, we will probably not spend much time disputing the idea that racial apartheid organizes social life into a hierarchical binary, or that nation-states enforce territorial boundaries. More stable than genre, configurations and arrangements organize materials in distinct and iterable ways no matter what their context or audience. Forms thus migrate across contexts in a way that genres cannot. They also work on different scales, as small as punctuation marks and as vast as multiplot narratives or national boundaries. Genres,

then, can be defined as customary constellations of elements into historically recognizable groupings of artistic objects, bringing together forms with themes, styles, and situations of reception, while forms are organizations or arrangements that afford repetition and portability across materials and contexts.

So far, then, we have seen that the New Criticism missed the political power and the situatedness of constraining forms, intersectional analysis has overlooked the extraordinary plurality of forms at work in social situations, and the new formalists and genre theorists have too often neglected the capacity of forms to endure across time and space. Let us think finally about what has been missing from the Marxist tradition, the most complex and robust school of formalist thinking in literary and cultural studies.

Many Marxist thinkers, from Georg Lukács and Pierre Macherey to Fredric Jameson and Franco Moretti, have cast literary form as an ideological artifice, a neat structuring of representation that soothes us into a false sense of order, preventing us from coming to terms with a reality that always exceeds form. Hayden White, for example, argues that narrative form teaches people to live in "an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formations in which they are indentured to live out their lives and realize their destinies as social subjects."[30] White contrasts reality—which he calls "social formations"—with the unreal coherence of narrative form. But if we understand social formations—such as the gender binary and the prison timetable—as themselves organizing forms, then we can see that White's real-unreal distinction does not hold. Literary forms and social formations are equally real in their capacity to organize materials, and equally *unreal* in being artificial, contingent constraints. Instead of seeking to reveal the reality suppressed by literary forms, we can understand sociopolitical life as itself composed of a plurality of different forms, from narrative to marriage and from bureaucracy to racism.

The Marxist emphasis on aesthetic form as epiphenomenal—as secondary—has some distorting effects. First, it prevents us from understanding politics as a matter of form, and second, it assumes that one kind of form—the political—is always the root or ground of the other—the aesthetic. Let me offer an example of what it would mean to read literary forms not as epiphenomenal responses to social realities but as forms encountering other forms.

The gender binary is a form that can impose its order on the home, the laboratory, the prison, dress, and many other facts of social life. Now let's consider an encounter between the gender binary and a narrative, Thomas Hughes's best-selling novel *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857). The narrative

begins by establishing a fiercely masculine world: the all-boy Rugby School, which is a training-ground for Christian colonial power.[31] Tom, the protagonist, undergoes a series of adventures: a race, a football match, a fight with bullies. In every case, he succeeds by standing firm, and as a result the first half of the novel becomes remarkably repetitive, testing the hero in the same way over and over again. He meets each challenge, like "all real boys," by refusing to give ground.[32] But the narrative form of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* takes an odd turn halfway through. It becomes more narratively interesting, and also, strangely, suddenly feminine. The wise headmaster Thomas Arnold decides that Tom and his friends must become more mature. He assigns Tom a new boy to look after, "a slight pale boy, with large blue eyes and light fair hair, who seemed ready to shrink through the floor . . . would be afraid of wet feet, and always getting laughed at, and called Molly, or Jenny, or some derogatory feminine nickname" (217–18). Saddled with responsibility for another, Tom becomes anxious and learns to submit to God. He is so careful of the younger boy's welfare that he becomes feminine himself, "like a hen with one chick" (231). If the hero is victorious in the first half because he manfully withstands a series of assaults, the second half turns him into a pliable, recognizably feminine character: yielding, submissive, and open to alterity. The narrative suddenly becomes a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of development, filled with lessons learned and changes in the protagonist's outlook and values.

What is going on here? One could say that Thomas Hughes wanted a narratively rich resource like the *Bildungsroman* to transform his repetitive, static story of boyish adventures into a more satisfying arc. The gender binary would have come in handy for this purpose, since the opposite of the brave, unyielding masculine character was the anxious, feminine one, open to change in precisely the way required for *Bildung*. According to this account, Hughes would have incorporated femininity into the text as an aftereffect of his narrative desires. Conversely, we could argue that because he valued a submissive Christianity, Hughes gravitated to the yielding character of the *Bildungsroman*, tractable in a way that fell on the feminine side of the gender binary, and adopted the narrative form of the pliable character as an aftereffect of his religious convictions. We don't know which came first. What we do know is that both the literary and the social form—*Bildung* and the gender binary—preexist the text in question. Both move from other sites into this text, carrying their own ways of organizing experience with them. While we might speculate about which form is primary, or about Hughes's own motivations, the text itself shows us something interesting about what happens when narrative form encounters the gender

binary and the two begin to operate together. In fact, a predictable, generalizable hypothesis about form unfolds from this collision, regardless of the author's intentions or the origins of either form. As long as pliability—the susceptibility to development—falls on the feminine side of the gender binary, the *Bildungsroman* will have to be a feminine genre, even when its protagonists are male.

Most Marxist formalist critics would approach the narrative form of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* as the working out of an ideological position or as an "abstract of social relationships."[33] Most politically minded new formalists would read the text as a response to the immediate social world around it. The formalism that emerges here is different: I read narrative and gender as two distinct forms, each striving to impose its own order, both traveling from other places to the text in question, and neither automatically prior or dominant. One might say that I am flipping White's terms upside down: rather than hunting for the buried *content of the form*, I propose here to track *the forms of the content*, the many organizing principles that encounter one another inside as well as outside of the literary text. Instead of assuming that social forms are the grounds or causes of literary forms, and instead of imagining that a literary text has *a* form, this book asks two unfamiliar questions: what does each form afford, and what happens when forms meet?

From Causation to Collision

The first major goal of this book is to show that forms are everywhere structuring and patterning experience, and that this carries serious implications for understanding political communities. This starting-point entails a *Gestalt* shift for literary studies. It calls for a new account of politics and of the relations between politics and literature. In theory, political forms impose their order on our lives, putting us in our places. But in practice, we encounter so many forms that even in the most ordinary daily experience they add up to a complex environment composed of multiple and conflicting modes of organization—forms arranging and containing us, yes, but also competing and colliding and rerouting one another. I will make the case here that no form, however seemingly powerful, causes, dominates, or organizes all others. This means that literary forms can lay claim to an efficacy of their own. They do not simply reflect or contain prior political realities. As different forms struggle to impose their order on our experience, working at different scales of our experience, aesthetic and political forms emerge as comparable patterns that operate on a common plane. I will show in this book that aesthetic and political forms may be nested inside one another,

and that each is capable of disturbing the other's organizing power.

This is not to say, however, that the world of forms is a happy free-for-all. The second major goal of the book is to think about the ways that, together, the multiple forms of the world come into conflict and disorganize experience in ways that call for unconventional political strategies. Critics and theorists have tended to assume that powerful social institutions integrate and homogenize experience; they put into practice coherent ideologies that organize and constrain experience. This book puts an emphasis on social *dis*organization, exploring the many ways in which multiple forms of order, sometimes the results of the same powerful ideological formation, may unsettle one another. And yet, disorganization is not always better than order, and we will see how competing forms can sometimes produce pain and injustice as troubling as any consolidation of power.

Approaching form in this pluralizing way to include both social and aesthetic forms, and arguing that no single form dominates or organizes all of the others, moves us away from one of the deepest political convictions in the field: that ultimately, it is deep structural forces such as capitalism, nationalism, and racism that are the truly powerful shapers of our lives. Critics are not wrong to hold on to such explanations: our lives are certainly organized by powerful structuring principles, and it would be a grave mistake to overlook them. But at the same time I would argue that an exclusive focus on ultimate causality has not necessarily benefited leftist politics. It has distracted us from thinking strategically about how best to deploy multiple forms for political ends.

My work has been influenced here by Brazilian legal theorist and politician Roberto Mangabeira Unger, who makes the case that too strong an analytic emphasis on deep structures is disabling for radical politics. It limits our attention and our targets to a small number of the most intractable factors, factors so difficult to unsettle that most people abandon the attempt altogether. What if we were to see social life instead as composed of "loosely and unevenly collected" arrangements, "a makeshift, pasted-together" order rather than a coherent system that can be traced to back to a single cause? Unger argues that such an approach would draw attention to the artificiality and contingency of social arrangements and so open up a new set of opportunities for real change by way of feasible rearrangements.[34] Like Unger, Jacques Rancière too draws attention to the radical potential that lies in acts of rearrangement.[35]

The formalism I propose here draws from Unger and Rancière to shift attention away from deep causes to a recognition of the many different shapes and patterns that constitute political, cultural, and social experience.

I draw attention in particular to the ways that different arrangements can collide to strange effect, with minor forms sometimes disrupting or rerouting major ones. In a context of many overlapping forms, the most significant challenge for political actors is the fact that complicating any single form one might advocate are multiple organizing principles always already at work, often clashing and interrupting and rerouting one another. These overlaps open up unfamiliar opportunities for political action and show why the most effective route to social change might not be traditional ideology critique, which aims to expose the false and seductive discourses and cultural practices that prevent us from recognizing human unfreedom, that universalize and naturalize the oppressive social structures that stand in the way of emancipation. If forms always contain and confine, and if it is impossible to imagine societies without forms, then the most strategic political action will not come from revealing or exposing illusion, but rather from a careful, nuanced understanding of the many different and often disconnected arrangements that govern social experience.

Carolyn Lesjak has recently argued against the version of formalism I articulate here, because she sees it as a recipe for political quietism.[36] But in fact the primary goal of this formalism is radical social change. All politics, including revolutionary political action, will succeed only if it is canny about deploying multiple forms. Revolutions must mobilize certain arrangements, certain organized forms of resistance—the takeover of the public square, the strike, the boycott, the coalition. And any redistribution of the world's wealth, which I strongly favor, must follow some kind of organizing principle. Marx's classic slogan, "From each according to one's ability; to each according to one's need," is a careful balancing of inputs and outputs, a structural parallelism that might well govern the organization of energies and distributions in a radical and just new order. Which forms do we wish to see governing social life, then, and which forms of protest or resistance actually succeed at dismantling unjust, entrenched arrangements?

My focus on the movement and assembly of forms prompts me to rely on a kind of event I call the "collision"—the strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology. I offer many examples of such collisions, in part to unsettle the power of another explanatory form in literary and cultural studies: the dialectic. Literary and cultural studies has of course long been influenced by Marx's dialectical materialism, and the structuralists, by identifying binary oppositions as a basic structure of social life, broadened dialectical thinking beyond Marxism within the field. Indeed, since the structuralist moment, it has been easy to spot dialectical structures at work everywhere, their dynamic op-

positional energies providing the animating force behind historical change: "the dialectic of good and evil, but also that of subject and object; the dialectic of rich and poor and also that of male and female or black and white; the dialectic of Right and Left, but also of poetry and prose, high culture and mass culture, science and ideology, materialism and idealism, harmony and counterpoint, color and line, self and other, and so on...."[37] But while it is no doubt true that much painful historical experience has emerged out of deep social contradictions, I argue in this book that the binary opposition is just one of a number of powerfully organizing forms, and that many outcomes follow from other forms, as well as from more mundane, more minor, and more contingent formal encounters, where different forms are not necessarily related, opposed, or deeply expressive, but simply happen to cross paths at a particular site. Suspending the usual models of causality thus produces new insight into the work of forms, both social and aesthetic.

Narrative

The form that best captures the experience of colliding forms is narrative. It is by no means the only form I will use or examine in this book, but it is a particularly helpful one for the analysis of forms at work. What narrative form affords is a careful attention to the ways in which forms come together, and to what happens when and after they meet. Narratives are especially appealing for a skeptical formalist reader because they tend to present causality metonymically, through sequences of events, rather than by positing some originary cause. They afford "conjoining," to use David Hume's words, rather than "necessary connexion."[38] Narratives are valuable heuristic forms, then, because they can set in motion multiple social forms and track them as they cooperate, come into conflict, and overlap, without positing an ultimate cause.

Since social forms can move across contexts, taking their range of affordances with them, they can reveal their potentialities in fiction as well as nonfiction. We saw gender at work in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. As a formalist reader, I put my stress not on the fact that gender is a social fact being conveyed or registered by the literary text, but that it is a binary form that *carries its affordances with it into the novel*. Bruno Latour mentions in passing that fiction writers often do better than sociologists at capturing social relations because they are free to experiment, offering "a vast playground to rehearse accounts of what makes us act."[39] Like Latour, I treat fictional narratives as productive thought experiments that allow us to imagine the subtle unfolding activity of multiple social forms.

My interest in the collision and unfolding of forms prompts me to pay an unusually serious kind of attention to plot. Not all plots are equally interesting, and I focus most of my attention here on a few extraordinary ones. Sophocles's *Antigone*, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, and David Simon's *The Wire* present the movement of forms in exceptionally shrewd and unconventional ways that expand a conventional sense of how social worlds work. I spend time in this book describing narrative unfolding in each of these works.

This may seem like a surprising approach for a formalist reader. Following the plot has rarely been considered a sophisticated or valuable interpretive practice by any literary school, and describing the movement of narrative events might risk what New Critic Cleanth Brooks most strongly decried as the "heresy of paraphrase." For Brooks, literary objects are unlike other texts because they are organized by a "principle of unity" that ultimately harmonizes unlike and sometimes conflicting elements—rhythms, images, connotations—into a balanced whole. The problem with paraphrase, in his view, is that simple statements or propositions about the world always fail to capture the poem's subtle interactions among various parts.[40] In the next chapter of this book, I will subject Brooks's insistence on unity to critique. But in the meanwhile, I want to suggest that my enthusiastic embrace of plot paraphrase does take up his New Critical project in one specific way: plot is difficult to reduce to a single message or statement, and as a form it too mobilizes the subtle interrelations of multiple elements. Unlike a taxonomic chart that organizes forms into separate categories, narrative privileges the interaction of forms over time. Paraphrasing plotted narrative thus yields an irreducible complexity that is ironically consonant with the aims and values of the New Critics.

To return to *Jane Eyre*, for example, we can read the section that deals with Lowood School as a thoughtful investigation of how disciplinary forms can unfold in intricate interrelation, their patterning of experience capable of crossing back and forth between fiction and the social world. Sometimes the school's forms work perfectly together: a timed bell signals a shift in spatial order; a student who obediently follows both spatial and temporal arrangements successfully climbs the ranks. But not always: an unjust punishment by the top of the school's patriarchal hierarchy gives rise to a dissident, nonpatriarchal network as Miss Temple, Helen Burns, and Jane Eyre come together to create a new social form, a triadic "counter-family."[41] In the sheltered privacy of Miss Temple's room, other forms then come into play. Miss Temple invites Jane to defend herself against the accusations of Mr Brocklehurst according to the rules set forth

by courts of law. Jane gives her own testimony "coherently" and in a "restrained and simplified" manner that convinces her audience of her innocence and allows her to be publicly cleared (83). Thus a clandestine network of women, a closed room, the rules of the courtroom, and a newly organized and controlled kind of storytelling come together to resist Mr Brocklehurst's authority.

This interaction of forms also brings with it some strange side effects. It throws into an odd kind of disarray another form—the binary division between public and private—as the secret courtroom, which joins intimate storytelling with the adoption of impersonal, public rules, permits a public exoneration of Jane. The hierarchy of the school, too, becomes oddly double, emerging as both enabling and tyrannical, since Jane's exoneration gives her the confidence to climb Lowood's ladder, while at the same time refusing Mr Brocklehurst the power that is supposed to derive from his place at the top of the same ladder. Meanwhile, the model of the courtroom teaches Jane how to tell stories that work for her own ends—carefully arranged and simplified to win over audiences. Thus the plotted form of the narrative itself takes shape at the intersection of a number of other forms—a hierarchy, an enclosed space, a network, and a set of legal rules.

This is an example of a reading practice that does not fit any familiar formalism. But it draws from all of them.

Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network

Organizing this book are four major forms. These are by no means the only forms, but they are particularly common, pervasive—and also significant. Though we have not always called them forms, they are the political structures that have most concerned literary and cultural studies scholars: bounded *wholes*, from domestic walls to national boundaries; temporal *rhythms*, from the repetitions of industrial labor to the enduring patterns of institutions over time; powerful *hierarchies*, including gender, race, class, and bureaucracy; and *networks* that link people and objects, including multinational trade, terrorism, and transportation. All of these have resonant corollaries in literature and literary studies: the bounded whole has long been a model for lyric poetry and narrative closure; rhythmic tempos organize poetic meter and sometimes literary history itself; hierarchies organize literary texts' investments in certain values and characters over others; and networks link national cultures, writers, and characters.

Each chapter takes up one of these forms as it organizes literary works, social institutions, and our knowledge of both literature and the social—

that is, scholarly conversations in the field. For each of the major forms we will encounter in this book, I will ask four sets of questions:

1   What specific order does each form impose? The chapters that follow make the case that simply attending carefully to the affordances of each form produces some surprising new conclusions: for example, that what we call narrative closure does not in fact enclose, and that one of the most famous of the supposedly formalist New Critics paid not too much but too little attention to lyric form.

2   How has scholarly knowledge itself depended on certain organizing forms to establish its own claims, and how might a self-consciousness about scholarly forms shift the arguments that literary and cultural studies scholars make? I spend time here showing how some of the most determinedly antiformalist scholars have necessarily depended on organizing forms in their own arguments.

3   How should we understand the relationship between literary and political forms? Moving beyond the practice of reading aesthetic forms as indexes of social life, I consider ways in which literary and social forms come into contact and affect one another, without presuming that one is the ground or cause of the other.

4   Finally, what political strategies—what tactics for change—will work most effectively if what we are facing is not a single hegemonic system or dominant ideology but many forms, all trying to organize us at once? If politics operates through different kinds of forms—spatial containers, repetitions and durations over time, vertical arrangements of high and low, networks of interconnection—then resistance to one of these may not emancipate us from the others. It might even establish or reinforce the power of another form. The most significant and challenging claim of this book is that many, many forms are organizing us at all times. Where exactly, then, can we locate the best opportunities for social change in a world of overlapping forms? Can we set one form against another or introduce a new form that would reroute a racial hierarchy or disturb exclusionary boundaries? I argue that we need a fine-grained formalist reading practice to address the extraordinary density of forms that is a fact of our most ordinary daily experience.

A great variety of formal examples will make their appearances in this book: theme parks and management hierarchies, classical tragedies and well-wrought urns, literary history and gender theory. This wide-ranging array establishes the portability of the method, showing that this approach can productively cross sites and institutions, from medieval convents to modernist sculpture, from the early American postal system to postcolonial criticism. Though I will draw many examples from Victorian Britain because this is the field I know best, this is a project that necessarily carries us far from any given period of literary or cultural study.

A final chapter will offer a surprising, even counterintuitive, paradigm for bringing all four major forms together. HBO's remarkable recent television series, *The Wire* (2002–2008), conceptualizes social life as both structured and rendered radically unpredictable by large numbers of colliding social forms, including bounded wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks. Dependent on a narrative logic that traces the effects of each formal encounter on the next, it refuses to posit a deep, prior, metaphysical model of causality to explain its world. By tracking vast numbers of social patterns as they meet, reroute, and disrupt one another, *The Wire* examines the world that results from a plurality of forms at work. I argue that this series could provide a new model for literary and cultural studies scholarship.

Intended to act as a methodological starting-point, this book proposes a way to understand the relations among forms—forms aesthetic and social, spatial and temporal, ancient and modern, major and minor, like and unlike, punitive and narrative, material and metrical. Its method of tracking shapes and arrangements is not confined to the literary text or to the aesthetic, but it does involve a kind of close reading, a careful attention to the forms that organize texts, bodies, and institutions. "Close but not deep," to borrow Heather Love's elegant formulation, this is a practice that seeks out pattern over meaning, the intricacy of relations over interpretive depth.[42] And yet, at the same time, this is also a method that builds on what literary critics have traditionally done best—reading for complex interrelationships and multiple, overlapping arrangements. I argue that it is time to *export* those practices, to take our traditional skills to new objects—the social structures and institutions that are among the most crucial sites of political efficacy. I seek to show that there is a great deal to be learned about power by observing different forms of order as they operate in the world. And I want to persuade those who are interested in politics to become formalists, so that we can begin to intervene in the conflicting formal logics that turn out to organize and disorganize our lives, constantly producing not only painful dispossessions but also surprising opportunities.

THE WIRE

Most accounts of social relationships in literary and cultural studies encourage us to focus our attention on the ways that a couple of formations intersect at any given moment: imperialism and the novel, for example, or the law and print culture. But what happens if we change the scale of our formal perspective and begin with many forms? Paying attention to numerous overlapping social forms may seem daunting, if not impossible, but if it is in fact true that forms very often find their organizing power compromised, rerouted, or deflected by their encounters with other forms, then a formalist cultural studies interested in how power works will need to take account of what happens when a great many social, political, natural, and aesthetic forms encounter one another. What would such a formalist cultural studies look like?

I am going to make the eccentric claim here that it could look something like David Simon's superb television series, *The Wire* (2002–2008). The method I have favored in this book entails not only analysis but also detailed description—a willingness to observe and follow the impact of different kinds of forms on one another—and *The Wire* is a rare exploration of the ways that social experience can be structured and also rendered radically unpredictable by the dense overlapping of large numbers of social forms. When the series began, it looked something like a conventional television cop drama, with a police force pitted against drug dealers, but it widened its emphasis with each season to take in new institutions: first unions, then city politics, then education, and finally the press. Though the focus shifted with the seasons, the series built intersections with earlier institutions rather than replacing them, probing the sites and moments where they overlap, influence one another, and collide.

There are numerous bounded wholes and enclosures in *The Wire*, including prison cells, foster homes, administrative offices, and "Hamsterdam," a designated zone for legalized drugs. These take shape amid many conflicting and colliding social rhythms, from the testing of schoolchildren to the fast tempo of news stories and the slower movement of election cycles. Hierarchies matter here, too, of course. The series explores not only points of

contact between the uncannily parallel, highly bureaucratic organizations of police force and drug dealers, but also other bureaucracies, including the law, education, and politics. These major institutions are ordered and disordered by different structuring hierarchies—racial, administrative, and generational. Finally, networks are perhaps the most noteworthy of all of *The Wire's* forms, as the name of the whole series suggests. There is the web of economic transactions, which links Barksdale drug money to downtown real estate and international terrorism. There are social networks organized by class, from the boys in the pit to political fundraisers. There is the space of the city, which brings characters like Jimmy McNulty and Stringer Bell into contact through the accident of sheer proximity. There is gossip, which cascades up and down the social ladder. There are small-scale social groups, including the boxing ring and the Narcotics Anonymous group, which often cross paths with the organized network of Baltimore churches. And there is kinship, from the Barksdale code of family loyalty to Wallace's grandmother down at the shore.

All of these are structured according to different organizing principles, which run up against one another in unexpected and often frustrating ways. But together they produce experience, and do so from childhood onward. *The Wire* makes clear that children at Tilghman Middle School do not begin outside of political forms and institutions and move into them as they mature; rather, we see how even before birth the patterns of family and school are already meeting and informing one another, and how both are rerouted and reshaped in encounters with electoral politics, drug trafficking, police administration, social services, and the law. Each child's story emerges out of a complex collision of social forms that can never be limited to one or two dominant social principles—race, economics, the city, the family, politics, the law, or education—but takes shape amid the pressures of all of these and their constantly colliding patterns. Thus *The Wire* allows us to ask what happens if we change the scale of our formal perspective to begin with an account not of two or three forms only—marriage and career, or meter and the state—but of vast numbers of social forms meeting one another.

There is something perverse, to be sure, in finding a theory of the social world not in science, not in philosophy, not in experience, but in fiction. *The Wire* may be realist in some ways, but it is obviously not the real: it is constructed and stylized, and it is hardly free of ideology or narrative artifice. And yet, to turn to *The Wire* as a theorization of the social is to be faithful to the roots of the word *theory*, which comes from the Greek word for "a looking at," "spectacle," or "contemplation." *Theoria* entails the possibility

that one might be able to extrapolate generalizable rules about the world from the experience of a spectacle, and here I am suggesting that there is in *The Wire* precisely this potential for theorizing the social.

Sociologists Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson agree, pointing to the particular affordances of fiction that can elude conventional sociological scholarship, a field that acknowledges the power of multiple social forms but nonetheless tends to isolate one pattern at a time for analysis:

> As a work of fiction, *The Wire* does not replace rigorous academic scholarship on the problems of urban inequality and poverty. But ... the show demonstrates the interconnectedness of systemic urban inequality in a way that can be very difficult to illustrate in academic works. Due to the structure of academic research, scholarly works tend to focus on many of these issues in relative isolation. A number of excellent studies analyze the impacts of deindustrialization, crime and incarceration, and the education system on urban inequality. It is often implicitly understood among scholars that these are deeply intertwined, but an in-depth analysis of any one of these topics requires such focused attention that other important factors necessarily receive less discussion.[1]

The Wire emerges as valuable here for its capacity to represent multiple forms operating at once, providing a serious analytical alternative to the usual scholarly attention to one or two forms at a time.

I will pay my closest attention in this chapter to a formal element of *The Wire* not always understood to lend itself to theory: its plot. Here I am following the lead of Fredric Jameson, who argues that in this series "plot construction ... has a theoretical or philosophical dimension."[2] And it is no accident that the particular plotting of this television drama should prompt a new respect for the powers of plot generally. Not unlike *Bleak House*, *The Wire* expands the usual affordances of its medium by intertwining over one hundred characters in multiple intricate sequences that overlap and reshape one another. It links apparently distant or disconnected characters, showing how a homeless heroin addict in Baltimore can have an impact on Russian drug smugglers and the governor of Maryland. And like *Bleak House*, but unlike almost any other fictional text, it dramatically expands the usual number of characters while also connecting them to each other through *multiple* channels. There is no single principle of interconnection that links each to every other. The sheer complexity and intricacy of *The Wire*'s plot are therefore truly striking—and indeed different from almost all conventional storylines.

Despite Jameson's recognition of the importance of plotted form here, his analysis of the series remains formally unconvincing. He argues that small moments in *The Wire*'s plot introduce "a slight rift or crack" into its "realism," which, according to Jameson, is all about "necessity": "why it had to happen like that and why reality is both the irresistible force and the unmovable obstacle." He contends that realist plots have certain, inexorable outcomes, while the plots of utopias open out unusual or unexpected possibilities. *The Wire* converts one into the other, Jameson argues, as "the Utopian future here and there breaks through, before reality and the present again close it down" (371–72). But he gives us no way to distinguish between these two kinds of plot: that is, what is it that makes one sequence of events necessary and another implausible and fantastic if both structure experience in the same text? How could one plot "break through" the other, if both are organizing elements of the same overarching narrative? Jameson himself distinguishes between them based on convention: some plotted arcs are familiar and recognizable and therefore realist; others, more unusual and surprising, are for him utopian.

But it is the genius of *The Wire* to show that *both* kinds of plot are plausible. The series presents all manner of outcomes looming at all times, imagining multiple possible paths immanent in every formal encounter, some conventional, others more surprising. I propose, then, to flip Jameson's argument upside down. Rather than seeing realism as closing down strange and unfamiliar plots, we can understand *The Wire* as making strange, unconventional plots plausible—realist. My own reading departs from Jameson's interest in genre to come much closer to that of sociologists like Wilson, who explains that *The Wire* "shows incredible imagination and understanding about the way the world works."[3] Fiction it is, certainly—artful and stylized, without question. But in and through its plot it seeks to track the plausible unfolding of events as forms collide.

Plotting matters in particular to our capacity to think about causality. As I have said before, narrative is an ideal form for avoiding metaphysical truth-claims about causes: it presents causality in something of the same way that it actually appears to us in the world, through an experience of unfolding. And serialized television seems especially well suited for this, since, unlike many novels, no obtrusive omniscient narrator intervenes to tell us why something has happened, and since, like the novel but unlike conventional film, it has hours and hours and hours to unfold relationships. The narrative affords hundreds of social forms, tracking them as they cooperate, come into conflict, and overlap, without positing a single deep structure or original cause. And since forms can move across contexts, taking their own

range of affordances with them, the plot gives us a way to theorize the relations among forms that appear both inside and outside of fiction.

The Wire is famously bleak, and its critics—perhaps most notably Slavoj Žižek—have condemned it for its "fatalistic world view."[4] It might therefore seem politically ineffective, even counterproductive, to turn to David Simon's series for a theory of social forms. Most outcomes for the characters are tragic or ironic, and no entirely restructured alternatives take shape. Sometimes characters mourn for the old days, suggesting a break between past and present. Both the unions and the newspapers have seen better times. But the series also ironizes such nostalgic sentiments. In one case, Bodie, a drug dealer who is no older than sixteen or seventeen, looks with regret at his eighth-grade lookouts who are off to play with pigeons: "Young 'uns don't got a scrap of work ethic nowadays. If it wasn't for us pops I wouldn't even bother."[5] Similarly, Wee-Bay, who has killed many times, longs for the good old days under Avon Barksdale, before Marlo's rise to power: "[W]e did that shit right; word was your bond; man looked out for his own, knowing he in a family. . . . But today, it's all fucked up."[6] In a series that ends by suggesting that its young characters are about to replicate the lives of their predecessors—with Michael as the new Omar, and Duquon as the new Bubbles—the repetitiveness of patterns seems to triumph over attempts to generate genuine difference. Or to put this another way: although the world of Baltimore may have changed over time, *The Wire* focuses our attention on institutional rhythms of replication and substitution that stretch forward and backward in time rather than on moments of dramatic change or rupture.

But it would also be a mistake to claim that *The Wire* gives us no way to think social relations outside of a too-abstract capitalism or tragic fate, which decrees that all is predetermined. To the contrary, we are repeatedly, even insistently, shown how things work, with openings to multiple alternatives at every turn. And how things work is relentlessly a matter of form. Patterns and arrangements structure experience in such complicated ways that they often derail happy endings, but at the same time they do not altogether foreclose the possibility of events turning out otherwise. Indeed, *The Wire* repeatedly imagines the ways that forms might work together for genuine social change. If those get disrupted, the source cannot always be traced back to a single structure of power—economics, politics, or race—but rather to the overlapping of multiple forms.

I will consider forms in *The Wire* in the same order that I have used to structure this book as a whole: bounded wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks. This order is arbitrary in the sense that none of these is primary

or basic: each can be nested inside the other—wholes can contain rhythms and hierarchies networks. In fact, *The Wire* helps us to see how interdependent these forms must always be. But for the sake of intelligibility, I want to build my case by focusing on one at a time, and only then exploring their interdependence. My reading will focus almost exclusively on the arc of the series' interconnected plots, since it is my contention that *The Wire*—though notable for its rich characterization, its excellent acting, its refusal of simple stereotypes, and even its soundtrack—is truly exceptional in its attention to the ways that multiple social forms unfold in relation to one another, their encounters producing serious, painful, and occasionally promising effects.

Whole

Many bounded wholes organize experience in *The Wire*. Most of these are literal spatial enclosures, from homes, offices, and city limits to shipping containers, public meeting spaces, bars, stash houses, and prison cells. Like the unified wholes we encountered earlier, all of these have boundaries that distinguish inside from outside; all afford protection or imprisonment, inclusion and exclusion. Drug dealers fight over the limits of their turf, and police identify strongly with either Eastern or Western districts. I will begin here by focusing briefly on three different examples of encounters between spatial containers, as illustrative—rather than exhaustive—of *The Wire*'s interest in the power of various contending and colliding enclosures to organize and disorganize experience.

Perhaps the most notable example of the power of bounded enclosures appears as an experiment in season 3, when Bunny Colvin creates Hamsterdam, a strictly bounded trio of urban zones where drug dealers and users can behave as they wish, safe from police interference. These enclosed spaces take the drug trade off the usual street corners, distributed throughout poor neighborhoods in the city, and allow public health groups, who now have easy, centralized access to addicts, to begin to distribute condoms and offer needle exchanges and rehabilitation programs. Hamsterdam then has consequences for other enclosures, both small and large. First of all, neighborhood boys, once hired by drug dealers to stand on the corners and act as lookouts, now have nothing to do and so drift into a different kind of contained space, Dennis "Cutty" Wise's community-run boxing ring. Second, Mayor Clarence Royce is momentarily impressed by the success of the zones, and his delay in shutting them down helps to bring about his defeat in the next election, catapulting Tommy Carcetti into leadership of the city and eventually the state. Where one might expect the leader of

the larger, official political space—the city—to define the smaller, experimental one—Hamsterdam—in fact the mere existence of the free zones shifts power relations in Baltimore and eventually Maryland as a whole, suggesting that minor forms have consequences for major ones. These three defined spaces, each a container with clear boundaries, one nested within the next—Hamsterdam, Baltimore, and Maryland—are formally similar, but that does not mean that they are coordinated to the same political or organizational ends.

In season 2, the relation of enclosures again suggests that the smallest containers can affect the largest scales of political power. At the start, police commander Stan Valchek is furious that Frank Sobotka of the dockworker's union has bested him in a small-time quarrel over who gets to install a new stained-glass window in a local church. Seeking to win a power struggle over a single parish church, Valchek calls in favors at the Baltimore police department to launch an investigation into Sobotka's finances. Sobotka turns out to be taking money from an international smuggling ring, and the police department and soon the FBI turn their attention to larger targets than the Baltimore-based union boss. Valchek has called in both Baltimore and federal law enforcement to prevail in a neighborhood fight, only to find that the city, national law enforcement, and transnational networks have their own logics, which unfold well beyond his control. The politics of a single church triggers the sequence that ensues, but as the parish overlaps with other jurisdictions—the city police, the national FBI, and global trade and terror agents—major forms end up engulfing minor ones.

In my third example, we see how bounded shapes can collide to trigger a far-reaching sequence of events. When the Barksdale solider, Wee-Bay Brice, willingly accepts a life sentence for the sake of the organization, he is enclosed for life in a prison. In exchange, the Barksdales support and protect Wee-Bay's girlfriend De'Londa and their son Namond in an expensively furnished home. But the Barksdale drug crew is soon driven off their territory by Marlo's ruthless new team of dealers. Having lost their turf, the Barksdales say that they can no longer pay for Wee-Bay's home. De'Londa responds by sending Namond into the streets to sell drugs, where he is driven off his own corner territory by rivals, fails in the business, and as punishment is thrown out of his mother's home. Thanks to an academic experiment happening in Namond's school, where children who are especially troublesome are enclosed in a separate classroom, the boy comes to the attention of former police officer Bunny Colvin, forced into retirement because of his own experiments with bounded wholes. Bunny offers Namond temporary sanctuary and eventually a new home. Here, then, each bounded

space has an impact on the next. An enclosed prison cell is exchanged for a protected home, which is endangered when drug-turf boundaries are breached, which causes Namond to be ejected from his home. But Namond is also one of the few characters who has a happy ending in the series, and he succeeds because the school's reorganization of space happens to propel him into two new protected enclosures, Bunny's classroom and his adoptive home: without those, his fate would be like that of his homeless peers, Randy and Duquon. No single form dominates or causes this sequence of events: not the home, not the school, not the drug territory, not the prison cell. But all of these enclosures play a part in the organization of Namond's story, which is literally unthinkable without them.

Rhythm

The Wire is as interested in the collision of social rhythms and tempos as it is in the overlap of bounded spaces, offering up an impossibly complex assemblage of temporalities. The plot layers routine police assessments of crime statistics on top of biennial political campaigns on top of annual school testing on top of the daily deadlines of newspapers. Narratively speaking, it is often impossible to determine whether the events represented are sequential or simultaneous: *fabula* can be hard to deduce from *sjuzhet*. To be sure, as it constantly cuts back and forth between plots and between institutions—moving rapidly from the newsroom to the classroom to the mayor's office to the home to the street-corner—each particular episode does imply a temporal unfolding. We tend to see shots that take place in the morning, followed by those during the day, evening, and then night. But are the morning scenes taking place at the same time, or consecutively? Similarly, seasons change, but we rarely have a sense of precise dates, or of the spans of time that pass between episodes. The series seems to resist temporal exactness, preferring to capture a feeling of simultaneous recurrence, patterns of repetition all going on at once, rather than events following each other in any precise order.

As the plot unfolds, we see how each institution has its own temporal rhythms, and often multiple rhythms, overlaid one on the other. Mrs. Sampson, a teacher at Tilghman Middle School, describes one school tempo: "You can tell the days by [the kids'] faces. The best day is Wednesday. That's the farthest they get from home, from whatever's going on in the streets. You see smiles, then. Monday is angry. Tuesdays they're caught between Monday and Wednesday, so it could go either way. Thursdays, they're feeling that weekend coming. Friday is bad again."[7] The school is also organized

temporally by grade level. One of the most painful moments in *The Wire* is Duquon's graduation from middle school. Part of a beleaguered school system's attempt to show that its students are advancing academically, Duquon is suddenly expected to move forward to the ninth grade at mid-year. This interrupts the widespread practice of routine social promotion—which moves children forward with their peers by age, rather than academic level—and it will prove catastrophic for Duquon. He is not ready for the socially mature world of high school and so drops out altogether, only to learn that there are no good alternatives. He is not yet old enough to find paid work in a legitimate business, and so, cast out of the bounds of home, his middle-school cohort, and the workplace, both too old and too young, he faces a bleak future of drug addiction and homelessness. This is the formal power of temporal organization both at its most mundane—Duquon's promotion is, after all, just a routine bureaucratic action—and at its most tragic.

The Wire often represents characters caught between social tempos, surprised by the effects of multiple rhythms colliding. In one example, Lester Freamon and Kima Greggs, having tracked drug dealers' donations to high-ranking political officials, decide to take advantage of the primary election to hand out subpoenas, reasoning that the election cycle will make people pay attention to them. And pay attention they do. Kima is kicked out of Major Crimes, and finds herself on the bottom rung of the ladder, a novice, in Homicide. When the mayor fears that a scandal will erupt around the murder of a state's witness, he puts pressure on Police Commissioner Burrell to slow down the investigation, so Burrell puts Kima—the inexperienced rookie—on the case. The press gets hold of the story, interviewing candidate Tony Gray who takes advantage of the situation to humiliate Kima, showing her up as a naive know-nothing. "What the fuck I ever do to him?" she asks.[8] But to see this as an interpersonal drama is a mistake; it is actually a case of colliding temporal forms. Kima has been caught at the junction of contending tempos that include the pace of two different police investigations, the timing of a mayoral primary, her own newness at the job, and the daily news cycle.

Kima is not the only worker on *The Wire* to turn over—to be replaced and to replace others. Some of the most powerful temporal forms in the series are patterns of surrogation. As soon as characters die, get fired, or go to jail, others replace them—in the police bureaucracy, the drug trade, and even the family. The police in *The Wire* complain that death and jail can never put an end to the drug trade, because the dealers are endlessly replaced; this means that their own jobs will never be done; so they too are

endlessly replaceable. *The Wire* also makes it clear that these surrogations are not limited to official organizations. In season 3, we see McNulty at a baseball game: his ex-wife Elana has taken up with a new man, a wealthy downtown lawyer, whose seats are far better than his own, much to his sons' disappointment when they switch from maternal to paternal custody. This scene suggests that the realm of private, intimate relationships is hardly safe from institutionalized patterns of turnover. Indeed, we might think of the many foster and adoptive parents in the series, including the four substitute fathers in season 4—Colvin, Carver, Prez, and Bubbles—each of whom considers taking on a kind of parental role in relation to one of the boys—Namond, Randy, Duquon, and Sherrod. The family clearly involves its own processes of surrogation.

The series thus shows how all of the major institutions it represents endure across time. There are no dramatic historical breaks on *The Wire* precisely because the many institutions that impose order on experience—family, school, government, business—operate by way of iterable patterns of surrogation and replacement. This is not the same as fatalism or stasis: institutions can introduce a new pattern of student promotion, decline over time through lost business, or shift workers to new positions. We can see the repercussions of these changes as new forms encounter other forms both inside and outside of a particular institution, but it is a crucial aspect of social rhythm that institutions replicate themselves across time through repetition and substitution.

Hierarchy

One of the most powerful institutional forms that endure through patterns of replaceability in *The Wire* is the vertical form of the hierarchy, which crops up everywhere, from racism to the bureaucratic hierarchies of the police force, political campaign, and, most startlingly, drug organizations. Part of what makes *The Wire* so brilliant is its revelation that the bureaucratic forms of modern institutions are so pervasive that they have come to organize not only official institutions but underworld activity as well.[9] The business of drugs turns out to produce the same kinds of pecking orders, promotions and demotions, incentives for good work, quality assessments, and business mergers as the routines of official institutions. Stringer Bell's borrowing of *Robert's Rules of Order* for his cross-Baltimore drug consortium is perhaps the most elegant instance of the pervasive spread of bureaucratic forms. And what this means is that the most powerful institutions portrayed on *The Wire*—not only the police force and the drug trade, but

city politics, the school system, and the newspaper—are, without exception, structured according to remarkably similar hierarchical forms. The choices made by *The Wire*'s characters—from police lieutenants to mid-level drug dealers, from city council members to kids in the boxing ring—are, in most cases, strategic attempts to retain their positions or to reach up the ladder to occupy a higher rank. Just about everyone can report to a superior, snitch on a peer, or be demoted. *The Wire* draws our attention, over and over, to the hierarchical structuring of experience.

Season 3, for example, opens with police detectives planning to arrest a mid-level dealer. They expect him to be replaced with a garrulous underling whose chatter, they hope, will give the whole game away. "What makes you think they'll promote the wrong man?" asks the police commissioner. "*We* do it all the time," Daniels responds. Burrell laughs, but it is worth noting that he also uses this point to turn the conversation to the question of Daniels's own promotion, telling him that his wife's run for office—to replace the mayor's ally—is prompting the mayor to hold up Daniels's career move.[10] Each of the persons in question—Drac, Marla Daniels, Cedric Daniels—has the potential to take the position of another in a hierarchy, just as Burrell and the mayor are trying to hold on to their own high-ranking spots. All are vulnerable, and no place in any of these pecking orders will remain empty for long.

Importantly, however, even the bureaucratic hierarchy does not emerge in *The Wire* as a single source of clear power. Bureaucratic institutions turn out to be neither monolithic panoptic nor simply hierarchical structures—as we might expect—but rather complex and uneven overlappings of norms and practices that work against each other as often as they work together. A crucial part of the plotted tension of season 1, for instance, revolves around the question of whether Lieutenant Daniels will seek his own promotion, pleasing his bosses at the expense of the drug case, or whether he will choose to value his detectives' work, pursuing the investigation and risking his career. The outcome feels genuinely uncertain. And crucially, we come to learn that it is not just Daniels's choice that is involved here: Carver, his underling, is secretly reporting all of his lieutenant's choices to the Deputy of Operations, thereby securing his own promotion while undermining both the success of the case and the choices of his own immediate superior. Meanwhile, McNulty is constantly challenging Daniels's authority by investigating the case in his own way, typically dragging his partner Bunk Moreland into the process by invoking the value of the peer partnership over the chain of command. None of these characters chooses

to work outside of the bureaucracy altogether: rather, each favors one aspect of bureaucratic organization over others. In the process, they come into conflict in ways that are enabled by precisely the bureaucratic forms that also frustrate them. Thus the text refuses the narrative logic of personal intentions as well as the logic of monolithic institutional power, opting instead for the intricate interweaving of competing bureaucratic forms—multiple hierarchies and alliances—as they organize, constrain, and overwhelm individual ends.

Unpredictable consequences ensue when multiple vertical forms meet in *The Wire*. Marla and Cedric Daniels separate when he refuses to pursue an ambitious rise up the career ladder, and she pursues her own political ambitions instead, running for city council. Daniels agrees to support her, only to find his own career further damaged by his wife's decision to run against one of the mayor's close political allies. But when the mayor, under pressure from the Hamsterdam debacle, is forced to switch allegiances, he lends his support to Marla Daniels and gives Cedric a career boost. This eventually changes the career trajectory of Bill Rawls, whose sole and ruthless aim is to rise in the bureaucracy of the police department. Rawls is horrified to discover that Cedric Daniels may be promoted over his head because the white mayor, Tommy Carcetti, needs an African-American police commissioner to solidify support for his administration. The majority black Baltimore population, he is told, will not stand for a white commissioner working for a white mayor. "It's funny how it works out," Daniels says. "All those years I'm trying to climb the ladder, kissing ass, covering ass, doing what I'm told. I finally let some of it out, say what I really think, and I'm going from lieutenant to colonel in little more than a year."[11] This unpredictability has been the effect of a formal collision: the hierarchies of gender, race, and bureaucracy. The gendered hierarchy of the Daniels marriage—where the wife serves the husband's career—runs into trouble when the husband's place in the police bureaucracy stagnates. The wife takes her husband's failure as a reason to pursue her own rise, only to find herself, thanks to political matters beyond her knowledge and control, propelling her former husband far beyond anything either of them had ever expected. Meanwhile, Rawls, who has been single-mindedly dedicated to climbing the career ladder, finds that the hierarchy of race—here inverted from the norm in majority black Baltimore—allows him to be outstripped by the much less ambitious Daniels. In the final montage, we see the conventional hierarchies of race and career ambition restored, as Daniels's refusal to manipulate crime statistics thrusts him out of the police force altogether, and Rawls is rewarded for

loyalty to Carcetti by being named state commissioner. But we do not see the links in the chain that produce this conventional ending. Instead, *The Wire* has shown, closely and carefully, how effectively hierarchies can throw one another into disarray.[12]

Network

We have seen how bounded wholes, rhythms, and hierarchies produce tangled and unexpected effects in *The Wire*'s Baltimore. But what is it that connects all the pieces, joins all the participants, creates the larger plot structure? This brings us to our last form: the network. Several critics have argued that the real protagonist of the show is the city of Baltimore, which is portrayed as an overlapping set of networks, each operating according to its own principles of interconnection. Others have said that the real agent is capitalism. "Follow the money," says Lester Freamon, tracking economic links from nodes in the Barksdale drug business to downtown real estate and electoral politics. Information, too, has power, and it too moves along network paths: phone calls among drug dealers prompt the detectives' desire for wiretapping technology to reveal the structure of the drug business, and gossip and informants provide crucial hinges between police and drug dealers when the wiretap fails. There are other networks that exert power here: official, institutional networks, such as the legal system, which brings together police officers, judges, lawyers, prison guards, witnesses, convicts, and informants; and illegal networks, including the consortium of drug dealers organized by Stringer Bell, which links up East and West Baltimore, and has connections to unions, politicians, corner kids, Russian prostitutes, and global smugglers. This final example points to the impossibility of thoroughly disconnecting different networks: the drug trade must overlap with other economic transactions and run up against the legal system, while taking place on city streets and drawing on ties of kinship. And yet, while there is no question that these networks overlap and link together, they also follow discrete principles of interconnection: kinship is not the same as the city streets and will never be, but both provide crucial connections. The multiple networks that tie the city together—trade, the legal system, and the circulation of information, among others—often reach beyond its boundaries, so that the shape of the city fails to contain its many networks.

Networks on *The Wire* link other social forms, including enclosures (connecting the school to the prison cell, for instance) and hierarchies (as when drug dealing kingpins contribute to the campaign war chests of ambitious politicians). They also link temporal patterns: as the detectives investigate

links between drugs and politics during the election season, both police officers and politicians know that they can leak stories to a press always hungry for something juicy for the evening news cycle. Networks can have rhythms of their own (gossip can move fast; court cases can be slowed down by missing witnesses); and they can be organized hierarchically (as in the legal system or the drug trade). Networks thus not only connect but overlap with other forms.

Like bounded shapes, rhythms, and hierarchies, networks also collide with one another on *The Wire*. In one example, Bubbles, a former police informant, runs into Prez, a former police officer, at Tilghman Middle School. Crossing paths in the same enclosed space, Bubbles assumes that Prez is working as an undercover cop, but in fact the paths that link them this time are less obvious. Bubbles is there to try to educate his young business associate, Sherrod, who refuses to be contained by the school walls, while Prez has left the police force to teach eighth grade after mistakenly shooting a black cop and being publicly accused of racism. Cutty, too, crosses their paths at the school, having been hired as a seasonal truant enforcer through the recommendation of the Deacon, whose exceptionally expansive network reaches across politicians, school administrators, police officers, and the poor people of the west side. ("A good church man is always up in everybody's shit," as the Deacon himself puts it.[13]) The space of the school is thus crisscrossed by networks that gather together people who have been joined before by the network of law enforcement.

Consider, for another example, the fate of D'Angelo Barksdale, who is caught, at the end of season 1, between his position in the family and his potential to act as a hinge between the network of drug dealers and the courts. The family is a powerful structuring principle for Dee: the fact that he is Avon Barksdale's nephew means that he has often bypassed the usual business hierarchies and reaped special privileges. But Avon also requires that D'Angelo accept a twenty-year jail term for the sake of the family. After Dee has made up his mind to refuse the family, informing on the Barksdale crew to the police, and promising a huge career-clinching victory for those trying to prosecute Avon, his mother visits him in jail: "How the fuck you gonna start over without your peoples?" she asks.[14] The outcome, at this moment, is very much in question. D'Angelo could plausibly go either way. Following a pause of powerful suspense, Dee yields to his mother, choosing the power of kinship networks over the safeguards of police protection.

The Wire favors those characters who understand the power of network forms. The police who do street rips, gathering up small-time dealers, never

get anywhere: it is only a knowledge of drug dealing hubs that will allow police work to progress. The most successful and sympathetic detectives, like Freamon, use the networking technology of the wiretap to uncover knowledge of the drug dealers' networks, as the drug kingpins themselves try to conceal the nodes that claim the most network centrality, and to expose only the least networked nodes. Stringer Bell grasps the value and power of linking East and West Baltimore drug rings, while Avon remains tied to habits of family and neighborhood loyalty. Omar's remarkable freedom and power comes not least from his knowledge of the major drug dealers' networks, which he gains by constant observation. Good journalists, we learn in season 5, always have robust networks that cross institutions, including the mayor's office and the police force. Even Bubbles, poor and marginal, is one of *The Wire*'s most beloved characters, one whose importance to the plot rests on his willingness to act as a hinge between networks of law enforcement and drug dealers.

Why is a knowledge of networks so crucial in *The Wire*? Since networks can always make one vulnerable—a schoolboy witness, willing to make the link between streets and police force, could take down a whole criminal operation—a knowledge of network links is absolutely crucial to maintaining or unsettling a fragile hold on power. But *The Wire* also suggests that knowledge of network links is essential to understanding the ways that the social world works. What makes things happen in Baltimore, *The Wire* suggests, is no single social group or form—not money or politics or race or the family or the social elite—but the many webs of small and subtle interconnections that can link a low-level cop to the mayor, via police bureaucracy, daily news cycles, and the classroom. To understand how Avon Barksdale is brought down or Carcetti propelled to power requires a careful tracing of the connecting links between forms both major and minor.

Every plot sequence in *The Wire* follows a networked logic, inviting us to track the surprisingly byzantine paths between social forms as they coordinate, transform, or block one another. Or to put this another way: one cannot understand "the social" outside of the many intricate and open-ended plots depicted by *The Wire*. Any attempt to isolate the power of education or poverty or drugs will be doomed to failure, since the crucial fact is that none of these work in isolation. *The Wire* imagines that the process of capturing social experience will not lie in stories that follow a sequence of separate institutional forms—one narrative about a hospital, another about lawyers, a third about a school—but through attention to the many points where forms collide.

Knowing Forms

The Wire's plot appears so complex that it often seems to thwart both knowledge and action. The characters themselves, though often highly mindful of hierarchies, are largely unaware of other formal overlaps and collisions. This ignorance can lead to tragedy, as for example when Assistant Principal Marcia Donnelley tries to separate the bounded spaces of home and school definitively, warning Prez away from seeing Duquon as his own child:

> You and your wife, you don't have children, do you? . . . Well, have some. For better or for worse, they're yours for life. The kids in this school aren't yours. You do your piece with them, and you let them go. Because there'll be plenty more coming up behind Duquon, and they're gonna need your help too.[15]

For Donnelly, the teacher's children belong in the middle-class home, whereas the children in the school are endlessly replaceable, interchangeable units in a perpetual process of institutional turnover. But Donnelly turns out to be wrong: it is soon after this scene that Bunny Colvin will successfully cross the divide between home and school, working out a deal with Wee-Bay to take Namond into his own family. He substitutes himself as father in the kinship network, while he moves Namond between the enclosures of school and home. It is intriguing, too, that he manages to convince Wee-Bay to be replaced by pointing to him out that Namond will now be able to slot himself into a place in the social hierarchy that would never have been open to him if Wee-Bay had remained his father. Namond now can climb the social ladder thanks to his new home, while Duquon, thanks to Mrs. Donnelly's logic of strict separation of shapes, remains one of many interchangeable units of black poverty and neglect.

Another tragic example of what can happen when no one is conscious of the collision of forms, is the story of Randy Wagstaff, who has been acting as a lookout for a sexual encounter in the middle school. Caught, he is terrified that his foster mother will throw him out of her house and he will end up in a group home, so he confesses to the assistant principal that he knows about a murder. Three forms help to govern Randy's fate—the boys' bathroom, his foster home, and the group home—all of which are bounded spaces that have the capacity to exclude as well as include, to imprison as well as protect. His fear of being shifted from one enclosure to another to

another prompts him to divulge crucial knowledge of a crime, and so involves the police department. There, Ellis Carver, who has offered to act as the boy's foster father but is stymied by social services, passes Randy on to Herc, who is eager to get himself out of trouble with his superiors, hoping that information from Randy will allow him to climb the career ladder by delivering up drug kingpin Marlo Stanfield. Herc decides that Randy cannot help him rise, and casually leaks the information that Randy is a snitch to one of Marlo's people, who immediately reports this fact to his superiors. Randy emerges as a threatening hinge with the potential to link the police to the drug dealer's network. Marlo destroys the boy's home and foster mother, and Randy finds himself in precisely the group home he has most desperately wanted to avoid. Caught among at least three bounded wholes and three hierarchies—the school administration, the police bureaucracy, and the drug trade—Randy ends up trapped and brutalized in a home that is all too much like a prison.

Both characters and critics bewail the power of what they call "the system" portrayed on *The Wire*, but it is crucial to note that "the system" is less an organized or integrated single structure than it is precisely this heaped assortment of wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks.[16] The police administration fails because it depends on a simple model of individual responsibility—guilt and innocence that can be known through the arrest and prosecution of small-time drug deals on street corners but does not begin to grasp the crisscrossing forms that produce social experience. On the other hand, large-scale, abstract theories of capitalism fail too. Patrick Jagoda argues that *The Wire* insists on a particular kind of "distributed thought" suitable to networks rather than "a grand theory of capitalism":

> Theories of a seamless social totality too easily produce stability out of dynamic processes. *The Wire*, however, teems with contradictions and instabilities. The series carefully attends to the controversies, contradictions, and messy complexities of American social life. The connections that make up social networks, after all, are rarely smooth and continuous. Every political ecology—every socially embedded system of accumulation—is a precarious, tottering structure.[17]

Jagoda's invocation of a complex "political ecology" here is powerful, and I think he is right to see *The Wire* as demanding a specific kind of "distributed thought." But it is important to recall, too, that the series also reaches well beyond the network form alone as a way of understanding the social.

By shifting its focus from the power of individuals or elite groups to the intricate "political ecology" of a whole world of contending forms, *The Wire* allows us to see networks as linking other forms, but also derailing them and being derailed by them.

Along the way, the series, like *Bleak House*, offers an unconventional account of agency. Individual characters do have some power to make choices—D'Angelo can choose to snitch on the Barksdales, Stringer Bell can opt for the warrior ethic or the business model he has adopted from corporate practice, and Tommy Carcetti can choose between the schools' budget shortfall and the collapse of police morale—but these examples all suggest that individual decisions matter only within environments of colliding forms where no individual or elite group controls either procedures or outcomes. It is not just that small players like Dee cannot dictate their own fates: no one—including the mayor and the police commissioner—can predict what will happen or exert a clear control over outcomes. Indeed, as new characters replace old ones in positions of power and authority, they typically find themselves becoming like their predecessors, against their best intentions. This is true of Carcetti when he replaces Royce, but it is also true of McNulty in season 5, when he has a brief stint as a supervisor and finds himself acting strangely like the supervisors he has so loved to resist in the past. While it is certainly the case that some characters have positions of high status or belong to powerful elites, then, it does not follow that their intentions wholly determine events. And if characters have limited agency, what limits them are precisely preexisting social forms: bureaucratic hierarchies that are themselves shaped by electorates organized by race; bounded spaces that include drug territories, prison cells, city limits, and group homes; and social tempos that constantly overlap, from budget cycles and school calendars to election campaigns and court cases. Far from an ideologically coherent society with power lodged in the hands of a few, *The Wire* gives us a social world constantly unsettled by the bewildering and unexpected effects of clashes among wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks.

The few characters who recognize the power and significance of multiple forms—Lester Freamon, Bunny Colvin, and Omar Little—all make strategic decisions which, temporarily at least, permit outcomes that frustrate or elude the conventional distribution of power. Freamon manages to link politicians to drug smugglers by following the tracks of economic and information networks, briefly exposing a corrupt elite. Colvin reshapes the city and the world of the corner boys into new bounded wholes until he is brought down by the mayor, and he succeeds in offering one of those

boys a safe home and promising future. Omar remains comparatively free, the consummate outsider, refusing to join hierarchies and always escaping from enclosing shapes. But he works the network all the same, showing us that he understands well how both hierarchies and networks operate. All of these are sympathetic, even heroic. They are the show's epistemological and ethical exemplars, and they perform a reading of the social that is nothing other than a canny formalism.

NOTES

Preface

1   Michel Foucault, "The Politics of Contemporary Life," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 168.

1 Introduction: The Affordances of Form

1   Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 54–55, 98.
2   Janis McLarren Caldwell, for example, argues that Cowan Bridge School, "the institution that inspired Lowood," shaped Charlotte Brontë's repeated novelistic focus on maturation. *Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 97. David Amigoni claims that Lowood is "emblematic of Foucault's case for the disciplinary turn which characterized nineteenth-century institutions." *The English Novel and Prose Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 64.
3   Angela Leighton's *On Form* tracks many of these contradictory meanings (Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–29.
4   Here I am both building on Rancière, who helpfully turns our attention to distribution as the enforcement of categories and inequalities, and also departing from his terms. He does not use the term *form*, and he distinguishes the work of distribution, which he calls *police*, from *politics*, which only erupts in moments of unsettling redistribution. I choose to call both of these *politics*, following convention in literary and cultural studies, where politics encompasses both enforcement and resistance.
5   John Milton, "The Verse," preface to *Paradise Lost* (1674), in *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 355.
6   Richard Aldington, *Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), vi–vii.
7   Terry Eagleton argues that the Brontës created mythical resolutions to real social conflicts through narrative closure in *Myths of Power* (1975) (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Stephen Greenblatt's famous New Historicist essay, "Invisible Bullets," ends with the claim that "the form itself" of Shakespeare's drama "contains the radical doubts it continually provokes," in *Political Shakespeare*, eds. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 45. Most recently, Marxist-formalist Alex Woloch brilliantly rethinks the problem of character in the novel by arguing that nineteenth-century novels are organized around enclosed character-systems. *The One v. the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). An attention to forms as constraints emerges in other schools of thought as well. Feminist poststructuralist Luce Irigaray decries Western thought for its long history of insisting on the constraints of form. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 26.