



INTRODUCTION

The Site of the Social

With the close of the door, the room gets quiet. The scene is familiar enough: a college English class, where the topic of the hour is narrative setting. The assigned reading might be Wendell Berry or William Faulkner, but it also could be Jane Austen or James Joyce, Geoffrey Chaucer or Cormac McCarthy. After all, what literary narrative (aside from the most experimental) omits setting? When the instructor starts to speak, the mode of sociality here, what Erving Goffman would call the “interaction order” at this site, begins to shift: the students peer up from their iPhones, turning away (hopefully for the hour) from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, to begin addressing the complex questions raised by literary form.¹ What are these questions? The answer itself is site specific, or at least context dependent. If, for instance, this course resides in the environmental humanities, then the conversation might analyze setting in order to confront the many urgent concerns of the climate crisis, from the calamity of “slow violence” in the Global South to “[t]he challenge that deterritorialization poses for the environmental imagination.”² If, alternatively, this course has taken its cues from the recent material turn in literary criticism, from the new scholarship associated with “thing theory” and “object-oriented philosophy,” then the discussion might be, as Walter Benjamin said of the surrealists, “on the track of things,” pursuing the way that literature resists the commodifying force of capitalist modernity to disclose what Martin Heidegger called “the thingness of things” or what Georg Lukács termed “the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things.”³

And yet, however influential these modes of inquiry have become, however rigorously they have examined the link between literature and what Lawrence Buell calls “the palpable world,” a traditional understanding of setting still predominates within literary studies.⁴ “Setting is practically terra incognita,” lamented Seymour Chatman in 1978, a lament that continues to resonate these days, not only because our interpretive procedures tend to privilege other aspects of narrative prose fiction (plot, character, theme) but also because setting is generally regarded as a static background for narrative action, a “framework,” as the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, for the unfolding of plot, the development of character, and the situating of theme.⁵ *Site Reading* aims to challenge this view. Against the notion that setting is a fixed container for the characters that are presumed to define the social world of a given novel, I argue that sites figure in novels as determinants of sociality—as dynamic networks of *actants* in Bruno Latour’s sense, exercising a kind of agency with and through their human and non-human constituents.⁶ To elaborate this argument, I employ an interpretive method—site reading—that lies at the intersection of environmental criticism and textual materialism. If environmental criticism has taught us that setting is so much more than the “mere backdrop for the human drama that really count[s] in a literary text,” and if textual-materialist approaches have revealed literary things (a golden bowl, mahogany furniture, a kaleidoscope) to be lively and dense with “fugitive meanings,” then site reading takes lessons from both discourses, yet seeks to explore a question that neither has formulated in quite the same way.⁷ How does literary fiction theorize social experience? One answer, the answer that I want to propose, is by transposing real sites into narrative settings and thereby rendering them operative, as figures in and of collective life.

To ask how literature theorizes sociality would seem to be a rather familiar way of doing business. Even Franco Moretti, surely among our most forward-thinking critics, has argued that “society, rhetoric, and their interaction” is, finally, “the only real issue of literary history.”⁸ Still, to perform a site reading is not to undertake a conventional “sociology of literature,” insofar as the latter designates the project of locating the deep roots and meanings of literary form in the social forces that underlie it. Such a project, as James F. English has observed, relies on the “long-dominant paradigm of critique” that has come to seem less dominant in recent years, with critics such as Moretti, Rita Felski, Heather Love, Ross Posnock, Leah Price, Stephen Best, and Sharon Marcus pioneering various alternatives to “symptomatic reading” and “the hermeneutics of suspicion.”⁹ One happy consequence of this methodological flux is that, as English speculates, we seem “to be arriving at a point of especially rich potential” for a newly productive encounter between sociology and literary studies, two disciplines that are acknowledging the limits of critique while developing “more rigorously

‘descriptive’ or ‘pragmatic’ approaches” to their objects of study.¹⁰ *Site Reading* strives to enact such an encounter primarily but not exclusively through an engagement with Latour’s recent work, his sociology in particular. Latour is a rather peculiar sociologist—one might even call him an antisociologist—because he contends that there is no such thing as society or the social, traditionally understood: no such thing as a special domain of reality (distinct from, say, the material or the natural) governed by abstract laws, structures, and functions.¹¹ Rather, for him, and for the other thinkers associated with Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), the social “just is the act and the fact of association,” as Felski puts it, “the coming together of phenomena to create multiple assemblages, affinities, and networks.”¹² In this analytical model, in other words, the social is not a preconstituted setting or container where anything can be situated, but “a process of assembling” whereby persons, things, texts, ideas, images, and other entities (all of which are considered actors or actants) form contingent and volatile networks of association.¹³

This conception of the social prompts a new mode of literary interpretation. One of Latour’s main intellectual adversaries is Émile Durkheim, the foundational sociologist whose understanding of society has been widely (if often implicitly) accepted within literary studies. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, for example, Durkheim writes:

Since the universe exists only insofar as it is thought, and since it can be thought totally only by society itself, it takes its place within society, becomes an element of its inner life, and society may thus be seen as that total genus beyond which nothing else exists. The very concept of totality is but the abstract form of the concept of society: that whole which includes all things, that supreme class under which all other classes must be subsumed.¹⁴

While this passage encapsulates precisely what Latour rejects, the notion of society as a sui generis totality that “includes all things,” it also forms part of the second epigraph to one of the most influential works of literary criticism, Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). The latter, as Best and Marcus explain, “popularized symptomatic reading among U.S. literary critics,” establishing the protocols for a certain method of historicism that remains important to this day.¹⁵ While the critical value of this method has been hotly debated in recent years, I want simply to recall how it conceptualizes the link between literature and society. For Jameson, the literary text expresses—often through gaps, elisions, repressions, all that “remain[s] unrealized in the surface of the text”—the history, politics, and ideology of the society from which it has emerged: this is finally what it means to think of narrative as a “socially symbolic

act.”¹⁶ But what if there is no such thing as society? What if, in other words, the very definition of society that Jameson imports from Durkheim, and that we all invoke spontaneously whenever we speak of “placing a text in social context,” must be modified because it has come to seem unconvincing? Surely such modification would precipitate a somewhat different practice of literary criticism, not merely an attempt to move beyond the paradigm of critique, an attempt that has already taken Latour as a kind of patron saint, but a new sociology of literature that would seek to apprehend the sociology *in* literature: the way that literary texts assemble an impression of social form.¹⁷

Pursuing this project in the following pages, I strive to demonstrate that the novel is an acute instrument of sociological thought, or, more specifically, that the “terra incognita” of setting contains vivid and valuable insights about the experience of collectivity. This does not mean overlooking the formal qualities of narrative prose fiction but looking at them in a certain way: with an eye toward how they effect something like a radically literary sociology. If the novel’s delineation of consciousness has long instructed us (however unevenly and unsystematically) about both individual personhood and the human mind, and if its treatment of physical things has prompted us more recently to pose fresh questions about matter and materiality, then perhaps its figuration of sites, vibrant assemblages of persons and things, might occasion a new inquiry into the nature of sociality. This is the premise of *Site Reading* as well as the hope.

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Back in the classroom, the discussion proceeds apace. The students are raising their hands and taking notes, underlining the text and responding to questions, occasionally even engaging one another. The assigned reading for the hour turns out to be Emma Donoghue’s 2010 novel *Room*, which includes one of the more intriguing experiments with narrative setting in recent literary history. This class appears to be an ordinary social unit, composed of people and their internalized protocols of behavior, and this unit appears to be acting out *its own* protocols in this setting (the setting of the classroom) through a discussion of narrative setting. But then, much to the chagrin of a certain student, something happens. As the instructor is introducing the novel, a loud ringtone interrupts her remarks, and suddenly everybody looks away from the PowerPoint. The familiar rustling and fumbling ensues, but after a few exasperated grunts, class is back on track. This moment is not merely a reminder that the classroom constitutes an assemblage of humans and nonhumans—a social site where a whole range of nonhuman entities (books and other cultural artifacts, laptops and tablets and projection equipment, a fully operational heating and cooling unit) are central to the pedagogical enterprise—but also a rift in the interaction

order that discloses the people and things at this seminar table as actants in vast social, material, and informational networks. Now it makes no sense to distinguish the class (as a social unit) from the material environment. Now sociality seems so much more promiscuous. When class is going well, though, this promiscuity, this sharing of sociality among humans and non-humans, does not register as a distraction. On those serendipitous afternoons, when the discussion of literary art assumes a kind of urgency and tacks in a surprising and challenging direction, the social network can feel quite immediate and intimate: just the teacher and the students thinking together with the text.

These are the days when the text itself attains full potency as a nonhuman actant or as what Latour would call a “matter of concern,” something that solicits attention, care, interest, and desire from human agents and that, consequently, forms the center of a collective project, however ephemeral.¹⁸ The dice are loaded in the case of novels, of course, for novels have that incredibly powerful means of solicitation that we call the narrator. “Today I’m five,” begins Donoghue’s *Room*, her young narrator addressing us directly.¹⁹ Up to this point, Jack has spent his entire life in a cramped room, a site that is only eleven feet long by eleven feet wide, yet nevertheless constitutes his entire world. Donoghue’s novel, for this reason, compels us to study its setting in a sustained way; as a matter of concern, it solicits the kind of critical attention that I call site reading. “We have thousands of things to do every morning,” Jack tells us early on, “like give Plant a cup of water in Sink for no spilling, then put her back on her saucer on Dresser.” The gendered pronoun (“her”) and capitalized nouns (“Plant,” “Sink”) signify the status that Jack accords to the nonhuman environment, whose particular constituents—Wardrobe, Stove, Bed, Lamp, Desk, TV, Blanket—are his only companions, aside from his mother. She gave birth to him five years before the start of the narrative, after being raped by Old Nick, the villain in the novel, who holds her and Jack in captivity. Despite this appalling scenario, however, *Room* is not a horror story but a compressed and spatialized bildungsroman. The climax of the plot is a nail-biting escape scene where Jack first encounters the realm that he calls Outside Space. “Looks like a TV person,” he thinks when he sees a human being who is neither Ma nor Old Nick, “but nearer and wider and with smells, a bit like Dish Soap and mint and curry all together” (*R*, 143).

Evident here and throughout the novel, Jack’s ebullient, searching intelligence is especially striking as he starts to fathom a world beyond his site of internment. “How can TV be pictures of real things?” he wonders (*R*, 62). This question sends him into a frenzy:

I think about them all floating around in Outside Space outside the walls, the couch and the necklaces and the bread and the killers and

the airplanes and all the shes and hes, the boxers and the man with one leg and the puffy-hair woman, they're floating past Skylight. I wave to them, but there's skyscrapers as well as cows and ships and trucks, it's crammed out there, I count all the stuff that might crash into Room. I can't breathe right. I have to count my teeth instead, left to right on the top then left to right on the bottom, then backwards, twenty every time but I still think maybe I'm counting wrong. (*R*, 62)

Feeling suddenly overwhelmed—"I can't breathe right"—as he wrestles for the first time with the difference between reality and representation, Jack displays his desire for assemblage, his longing to gather "all the stuff" of reality into a mental economy that might impose some order on his tumultuous experience of coming to grips with the mystery of existence. Donoghue combines the trope of confinement with a strong narrative constraint, telling the entire story from Jack's perspective and through his distinctive voice, in order to explore the nonhuman world from a unique vantage point. To see Room through his eyes is not only to glimpse a tiny yet vibrant environment—"We have a pretty busy morning. First we undo Pirate Ship that we made last week and turn it into Tank. Balloon is the driver, she used to be as big as Ma's head and pink and fat, now she's small like my fist only red and wrinkly" (*R*, 39)—but also to register nonhuman entities, both physical things and televisual images, as *friends*: intimate others who constitute a social network.

Indeed, as Jack tries to grasp the nature of TV, his sense of sociality is thrown into crisis: "Dora is a drawing in TV but she's my real friend, that's confusing. Jeep is actually real, I can feel him with my fingers. Superman is just TV. Trees are TV but Plant is real, oh, I forgot to water her. I carry her from Dresser to Sink and do that right away" (*R*, 63). Jack has to water Plant himself on this day because "Ma is Gone," so depressed that she fails to emerge from a catatonic stupor (*R*, 60). At these times and others, he relies heavily on his nonhuman companions for succor and support, partly by interacting with them as Ma interacts with him. "When I'm having some," he says, referring to the breast milk that he still drinks, "Ma won't let me bring Jeep and Remote into Bed even though they're my friends" (*R*, 46). Moments later, just before Nick arrives, as he does most nights, Jack curls up with his buddies in Bed: "Can't you sleep, little switches," he whispers; "It's OK, have some: I put them at my nipples, they take turns. I'm sort of asleep but only nearly" (*R*, 47). In addition to "animat[ing] the novel's physical space," as Aimee Bender suggests, such rituals help Donoghue's narrator stay sane.²⁰ If, despite the circumstances, Jack's jovial narration suggests something like a healthy mental state, then this state depends on both his doting attention from Ma and his experience of nonhuman entities as *actual* friends: social beings who solicit his care and motivate his action,

rather than compensatory trinkets meant to distract him from the trauma of isolation. Donoghue amplifies this suggestion in the second half of the novel as Jack acclimates to Outside Space. Stressed by the pressures of a foreign lifeworld—"I try to rock," he rues, "but it's not Rocker. Everything's wrong" (*R*, 160)—Jack longs to be comforted by his old buddies: "Ma and me keep knocking into each other in the night. The third time I wake up I'm wanting Jeep and Remote but they're not here" (*R*, 190).

How to make sense of Jack's mode of sociality? It is easy enough to say that this utterly traumatized subject looks to objects, the only objects he has ever known, for stability amid stress and chaos, but there is more to Donoghue's project. While the imperatives of psychological realism—representing the consciousness of a child narrator, this *particular* child narrator, in a manner that simultaneously recalls and revamps key precedents set by Mark Twain, Henry James, and William Faulkner—have Donoghue depicting playthings as pals, *Room* is also an exercise in defamiliarizing the palpable world: "Houses are like lots of Rooms stuck together, TV persons stay in them mostly but sometimes they go in their outsides and weather happens to them" (*R*, 41). This exercise works by exploiting the complex relation between character and setting. "I'm not in Room," Jack speculates during his frenzied escape, "Am I still me?" (*R*, 138). Yes and no. Jack's first five years have been marked by an extreme form of environmental determinism, so extreme that his conscious self is all but entirely shaped by the small architectural enclosure that constitutes his phenomenal and social realm. With the massive expansion of that realm, a kind of Big Bang at the climax of the plot, Jack begins a difficult journey through contemporary America—through the institutions of mass media, the health care system, his own suburban family—yet the site of his birth nonetheless retains a certain power over him. Moments after his escape, snuggling with Ma in a police cruiser, he longs to return to Room: "I've seen the world and I'm tired now," he says, and upon being rebuffed, begins "crying so much [he] can't stop" (*R*, 155).

Jack's tears register his sensory overload as he tries to process the deluge of new perceptual data. Yet it is not simply that his point of view (the point of view through which the entire narration is focalized) has been formed by the severely confined setting of his birth and early childhood, but that his mind becomes a zone of conflict between two social sites, Room and Outside Space, as he struggles to acclimate to a world like ours. Indeed, the degree to which he is successful in that struggle, the degree to which he becomes a well-adjusted social actor, can be measured precisely by the degree to which the novel achieves the *effect* of what Gérard Genette calls "variable focalization" without ever varying the focal character.²¹ By the end of the novel, it is clear that Jack sees the world differently than he did when he first emerged, that nothing less than an encounter with the world itself

has changed his point of view. “I look back one more time,” he says in the final scene that brings him and Ma back to Room. “It’s like a crater, a hole where something happened” (R, 321). The trajectory of this bildungsroman is anything but smooth, however, and the turbulence of Jack’s journey results from the profound mismatch between him and his new lifeworld. Through this mismatch, Jack’s alterity in *Outside Space*, Donoghue generates much of the novel’s humor and satirical bite. “I’m learning lots more manners,” he tells us after some time in an inpatient ward. “When something tastes yucky we say it’s interesting, like wild rice that bites like it hasn’t been cooked” (R, 204). He has to acquire manners and other social graces, to be sure, including the habits through which people inhabit social space: “We have our breakfast in the dining room that’s for eating just, persons in the world like to go in different rooms for each thing” (R, 192). As Jack familiarizes himself with *Outside Space*, then, he defamiliarizes our world for us, spotlighting its conventionality and artificiality through participant observation and wide-eyed social commentary. “The woman with the puffy hair puts on a special voice”—he says of the crass talk-show host who interviews Ma a mere six days after their escape—“she has her hands together for praying” (R, 231).

If Jack transforms from a strange social being (a kid with no friends other than nonhumans) to a keen social analyst (a student of contemporary America) over the course of the novel, then this transformation depends on a friction at what Chatman calls the “critical boundary” between character and setting.²² Jack’s relative happiness in Room is no less startling than his alienation in *Outside Space*, because Room is a site of massive trauma, and “we expect,” as Goffman asserts with a nod to Kenneth Burke, “some coherence among setting, appearance, and manner.”²³ Yet Donoghue consistently violates this expectation in order to run a two-part sociological experiment: first, to imagine a site where it would be scandalous *not* to extend sociality to nonhumans; and second, to satirize the social conventions of contemporary America by viewing them through the eyes of a brilliant young misfit. The eponymous site, Room, facilitates this experiment in a novel that finally registers less as a true-crime story and less as a revision of a classic child-narrator tale (*What Maisie Knew* or *Huckleberry Finn*) than as a reworking of *Robinson Crusoe*. “They’re a lost tribe of two,” Donoghue said of Jack and Ma soon after the novel had been published. “They’ve got things in their heads like Kylie Minogue songs, which Ma has brought from the old civilization, but what they’ve come up with is a strange kind of island culture, island religion, and a pidgin form of English.”²⁴ In fact, Donoghue’s “main concern,” as she explained to the *Economist*, “was to avoid the True Crime genre,” partly by modeling *Room* on Defoe’s canonical story and other “wonderful 18th-century novels with wide-eyed traveller narrators.”²⁵ Her allusion to *Crusoe* is obviously imperfect—a room is not an island; our

narrator is never alone; our narrator is five—but the intertextual affiliation nonetheless underscores how the novel, as both a form and a genre, so often imbricates the figuration of sites with an exploration of sociality.

Recall the moment when Crusoe lands on the shore of his island, the key site in the novel. Soon after “making a thousand gestures and motions” to celebrate his survival, he realizes that all his shipmates have perished in the wreck, leaving him “entirely destitute of all comfort and company.”²⁶ His solitary condition—what he deems, at his lowest moments, a “dreadful deliverance” into “a scene of silent life” (*RC*, 39, 52)—precipitates what will become a familiar lament: “Why were not they sav’d and you lost? Why were you singled out?” (*RC*, 51). These questions, which he poses both to himself and to God, preoccupy him as he undertakes the day-to-day labor of trying to survive on the island—salvaging tools and materials from the ship; fabricating shelters and fortifications; learning to hunt and gather, bake bread, make pots, baskets, furniture, and clothes; to plant crops; to domesticate animals—all told, to master his new habitation and finally to become “like a King” (*RC*, 118). By the end of the novel, long after he has discovered the cannibals and enslaved Friday, Crusoe certainly envisions himself as an emperor surrounded by subjects and treasures, a fantasy that Susan Stewart calls “the most inimically social of all illusions,” yet his arduous journey to that point occasions one of literary history’s most searching meditations on social ontology.²⁷ Defoe uses Crusoe’s site-specific predicament—his being “banish’d from human society” on a remote island (*RC*, 124)—to ask the question of who or what society includes, to wonder whether a talking parrot, for instance, counts as a “sociable creature” or whether the beings that Crusoe finds most abhorrent, the “savage wretches” who enjoy “inhuman feasting upon the bodies of their fellow-creatures,” might form a legitimate society that he has no right to decimate (*RC*, 114, 131). This is really just to recall a key claim of Ian Watt’s, from *The Rise of the Novel*, that Defoe “annihilated the relationships of the traditional social order” in his ambitious effort to construct “a network of personal relationships on a new and conscious pattern,” casting his protagonist in a setting where interactions with human others, nonhuman animals, and even material things would stretch the definition of society.²⁸

Donoghue alludes most forcefully to Defoe, then, when she imagines a protagonist that copes with being “banish’d from human society” by turning to the nonhuman, for just as Crusoe mitigates the misery of his solitude by fabricating “things” (tools, weapons, the famous earthenware pot) that will “supply [his] wants” (*RC*, 54), so too Jack inhabits a society of nonhuman “friends” (Bed, Desk, Melted Spoon) that provide for his developmental needs, however inadequately. Regardless of the way he experiences it, though, Jack’s Room constitutes a social dystopia that nonetheless registers as a structuralist utopia—a narrative setting that includes none of the “su-

perfluous” details or notations that Roland Barthes, in his well-known essay on the reality effect, considers “scandalous (from the point of view of structure).”²⁹ For Barthes, of course, many details of setting in realist narrative, such as the barometer in Gustave Flaubert’s “A Simple Heart,” are included only to signify the “category of ‘the real’” and not “its contingent contents,” or as Elaine Freedgood puts it, “to signify a generic real rather than to suggest something particular about it.”³⁰ But there is nothing superfluous in Jack’s Room, nothing that could be understood as a mere device to produce the reality effect, for everything in that site plays a particular (and particularly meaningful) role in his social milieu: “I jump on Bed and teach Jeep and Remote to shake their booties. It’s Rihanna and T.I. and Lady Gaga and Kanye West” (*R*, 45). The really difficult ethical question that Donoghue raises—the question that preoccupies the mass public of Outside Space, as well as many in the novel’s actual reading public—of whether Jack would be better off banished from human society in Room, arises only because Jack has such rich and nuanced relationships with the things that make up his material setting there, things that, as Lukács said of “the tools rescued from the shipwreck in *Robinson Crusoe*,” produce a “profound poetic effect” as our protagonist interacts with them.³¹

To draw the line from Defoe to Donoghue in this way is to see a literary tradition that extends from the emergence of novelistic realism in the eighteenth century to the vicissitudes of the contemporary period as a tradition in which the question of setting (how to represent the palpable world) is imbricated with the question of social form (how to represent society and its constituents). And it is, more specifically, to apprehend Defoe’s effort to ask what counts as a social being (a parrot, a cannibal, a slave, a material thing) and his effort to portray what Watt calls the “solidity of setting” as two parts of a single project, a project that Donoghue inherits and cleverly reorients.³² There may be a good historical explanation for this unity, at least in Defoe’s case, since he was imagining a setting populated by animals and cannibals at the exact moment when the term “social” was undergoing a major etymological shift, coming to designate a key attribute of “human nature,” but it also could be that the novel form is especially suited to rendering sociality in situ.³³ Lukács makes this point, a point echoed by Allen Tate, in his influential reading of Flaubert: “the minute description of setting”—the agricultural fair where Rodolphe woos Emma in *Madame Bovary*—“is absolutely essential to Flaubert’s purpose, that is, to the comprehensive exposition of the social milieu.”³⁴ Indeed, what Lukács considers Flaubert’s sociological objective, to convey “the public and private banality of the petty bourgeoisie,” relies on both ironic juxtaposition (Rodolphe confesses his desire for Emma at the precise instant when the prize is awarded “For manures!”) and what I think of as *site specification*, the process whereby imaginative literature defines and delimits a locale, which in this

case means rendering a “display of pomp” at a public venue that ironically expresses what Rodolphe calls the “provincial mediocrity” of Yonville.³⁵ If, in other words, Flaubert can be read as a quasi-sociologist, which is how Pierre Bourdieu tended to read him, or as a novelist who “undoubtedly regarded his work as a finer kind of social science,” which is how Wolf Lepenies defines him, then some of his best insights about society and social relations are, as Lukács suggests, built into his specification of sites.³⁶

Can we generalize Lukács’s suggestion? Might the ground for a new sociology of literature, one that would seek to discover the sociology in literature, be found in the way that literature itself grounds social experience, the way that it imagines sociality in situ? One method of answering these questions, the method that I adopt here, begins by revisiting the tradition of the novel in English and selecting a cluster of case studies from the American canon—test sites—with the topic of social form in mind.³⁷ My framing of this topic, as I discuss in detail below, is animated by Latour’s broad provocations, yet narrative theory (Barthes, Burke, Lukács, Genette, Chatman) also provides inspiration, not least because Latour’s sociology employs narratology and semiotics. If I do end up providing an account of narrative setting that manages to unlock its sociological force, then this account should be understood partly as an elaboration of something we already know—a certain sense of how setting works that is both intuitive and implicit in many of our reigning theories. What is a “chronotope,” after all, if not a spatiotemporal figure in novelistic discourse that mediates the “multiplicity of social voices,” which Mikhail Bakhtin called “heteroglossia”?³⁸ And what do we recall whenever we encounter, say, Dickens’s London or Faulkner’s Mississippi if not how imaginatively novelists have worked to disclose Henri Lefebvre’s basic lesson that “[s]ocial relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space”?³⁹ If Bakhtin and Lefebvre have taught us, in different ways, that sites mediate sociality, then Latour helps us to recognize such mediation as *active participation*. “Mediators,” Latour writes, “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry.”⁴⁰

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Now suppose, returning to the classroom, that this is not a course on contemporary fiction but a standard introduction to theories and practices of literary interpretation, for which *Room* provides a case study. The instructor has led the students through various formalisms and historicisms, introduced them to major works in French, Russian, German, English, and American intellectual history, and helped them navigate the trade winds of the current critical climate. What happened during the week devoted to the sociology of literature? Does the syllabus even include such a week? In previous years, at the height of what Tony Bennett calls “the sociology of liter-

ature ‘moment’;⁴¹ the readings likely would have come from Raymond Williams, Lucien Goldmann, and Bourdieu, among others, but these days, as English has argued, there is less need to flag the “sociology of literature” as a specific critical subfield “because so many literary scholars [are] now, in this very basic sense of the term, sociologists of literature,” which is to say, variously committed to “the shared disciplinary mission of coordinat[ing] the literary with the social.” By covering queer theory or new historicism or postcolonial studies, for instance, it is possible to indicate “just how wide a swath of the discipline has undergone some form of sociological reorientation” since the 1980s.⁴²

So where does Latour fit into this swath? He has already spurred some literary critics to rethink critique while inducing others to address the paradox of nonhuman agency in newly productive ways. Two other aspects of Latour’s thought, however, are more directly related to the emergence of a new sociology of literature. The first is his claim, evident in his rejection of Durkheim in favor of Gabriel Tarde as his sociological forefather, that society cannot be presupposed.⁴³ “It is no longer clear,” he writes at the outset of *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, “whether there exists [*sic*] relations that are specific enough to be called ‘social’ and that could be grouped together in making up a special domain that could function as a society. The social seems to be diluted everywhere and yet nowhere in particular.”⁴⁴ This claim challenges both common sense, the notion that society is a big container that holds us all, and specialized knowledge, the notion that society is what Mary Poovey calls an “objectified abstraction,” an autonomous, *sui generis*, and exclusively human domain whose laws and forces have “become thinkable as part of the long history of reification that we call modernity.”⁴⁵ What Latour attacks, in other words, is the definition of society that Williams provides in his keyword entry for the term: “the body of institutions and relationships within which a relatively large group of people live,” as well as “the condition in which such institutions and relationships are formed.”⁴⁶ As its title implies, therefore, the main objective of *Reassembling the Social* is to articulate an “alternative social theory,” one that concentrates on associative processes: the coming together of actors (variously defined) into networks that must be traced in order to be understood.⁴⁷ Society is not presupposed as a cause, then, but understood as the effect of how actors assemble, disassemble, and reassemble anew.

The second aspect of Latour’s thinking that informs the sociology of literature is his contention that literary texts, from the poetry of Francis Ponge to the novels of Richard Powers, are crucial “resources,” both for apprehending social reality and for producing social theory.⁴⁸ As part of their storytelling mandate, Latour intimates, novelists in particular assemble an impression of the social (however realistic or fantastic) that can be instructive for analysts of the real social world, not because novels transmit the

ideology of a given social context but because “the worlds of fiction invented on paper” pose questions and invite speculation. This is why “some continuous familiarity with literature” has been important to Latour for many years, and why he holds the conviction that “sociologists have a lot to learn from artists.”⁴⁹ Such a conviction aligns him with other unconventional sociologists, perhaps Goffman above all, who have looked to literature as a conceptual resource.⁵⁰ While Goffman and Latour engage the literary in different ways—Goffman tends to cite literary texts as illustrations of social phenomena, whereas Latour tends to see them as thought experiments that can stimulate fresh inquiry—both thinkers consider literary authors to be fellow travelers on the journey to discover and explain the intricacies of sociality. Could we receive their work, across the disciplinary divide, as both a gift and a challenge? To do so would be to glimpse, in their rather undisciplined approaches to literature, a salutary reorientation of our discipline, an invitation to treat literary authors as allies in the immensely difficult task of comprehending something as perplexing as *society*. “Like all sciences,” Latour declaims, “sociology begins in wonder,” in a “passionate attempt” to fathom “the paradoxical presence of something at once invisible yet tangible, taken for granted yet surprising, mundane but of baffling subtlety.”⁵¹ No less passionately than sociologists, though, novelists seek “to tame the wild beast of the social” when they spend hours upon hours dreaming up the scenarios of social interaction that we call plot and dialogue and situating them in the framework that we call setting.⁵² This is a way of reaffirming the conviction, first voiced by eminent sociologist C. Wright Mills and more recently echoed by Avery Gordon, that “literary work” constitutes a major contribution of the “sociological imagination.”⁵³

While there are many ways to explore this imagination in literature, I follow Latour (and, to some extent, Goffman as well) in pursuing an analysis of sites, for his radical sociology first appeared as a site-specific project. When he asserts at the beginning of his introduction to ANT that “the study of scientific practice has provided the main impetus for this alternative definition of the social,” he is referring to his earlier scholarship in the field of science studies, specifically *Laboratory Life*, his still-controversial collaboration with Steve Woolgar.⁵⁴ A *bête noire* in what would come to be known as the culture wars of the 1980s, *Laboratory Life* provides an ethnographic account of Roger Guillemin’s laboratory at the Jonas Salk Institute in La Jolla, California.⁵⁵ Striving to make “a detailed study of the daily activities of scientists in their natural habitat,” Latour conducted nearly two years of fieldwork (beginning in 1975), observing “the routinely occurring minutiae of scientific activity.”⁵⁶ In the end, he and Woolgar concluded that the scientific laboratory is best understood as “a system of literary inscription, an outcome of which is the occasional conviction of others that something is a fact,” but this conclusion is finally less significant than the way

Laboratory Life begins to depict social action and interaction.⁵⁷ By scrutinizing the humdrum business of laboratory research, “focus[ing] on the work done by a scientist located firmly at his laboratory bench,” Latour and Woolgar started to recognize the importance of the physical setting to the scientific endeavor. “Without the material environment of the laboratory,” they argue, none of the scientifically observed phenomena “could be said to exist,” for so much of the “apparatus” at this site—the gamma counter, the X-ray machine, even the workbench—had been “invented specifically to assist in the construction of laboratory objects.”⁵⁸ Thus, as Latour and Woolgar develop a certain epistemological claim, that knowledge is produced rather than simply discovered by laboratory science, they also project a sociological vision, revealing this site as a vibrant assemblage of human and nonhuman actors that forms a complex social unit.

Reassembling the Social refines this image of sociality by attending to a different site, the supermarket, and by adapting the narratological conceptions of actor and actant for sociological inquiry. It is for this reason that, even though Latour has not said much about any given literary work, I want to propose that his understanding of sites (whether science labs or supermarkets) might prove useful for the analysis of narrative prose fiction, including fiction that seems more concerned with psychological than with social phenomena. Suppose that *Room*, for instance, has been dislodged from a course on literary interpretation and repositioned in one on narrative setting. Consider the syllabus for a moment. Such a course might reasonably start with Defoe and end with Donoghue, perhaps analyzing works by Radcliffe, Scott, Austen, Dickens, Melville, and Faulkner before pausing for a while to consider how setting—or what Eudora Welty called the “low-lier angel” of “place in fiction”—was reworked by the modernist novel, with James, Woolf, Proust, or Joyce providing exemplary cases.⁵⁹ *Ulysses*, in particular, would seem to reward close reading in this context, for even as Joyce was eager “to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain,” as Woolf famously wrote, he was equally captivated by what he himself called “Dublin street furniture.”⁶⁰ Much of the novel’s audacity lies in the way that it shuttles (smoothly or jarringly) between these two poles, between the workings of what Woolf called “an ordinary mind” and the flux of phenomena that is Dublin on “an ordinary day.”⁶¹ As Joyce depicts it, such flux can be opaque and elusive, to be sure, yet also stunningly precise: “By Brady’s cottages a boy for the skins lolled, his bucket of offal linked, smoking a chewed fagbutt. A smaller girl with scars of eczema on her forehead eyed him, listlessly holding her battered caskhoop.”⁶² Indeed, it was Joyce’s august procedure of site specification, his exacting treatment of the Irish capital, that led Hugh Kenner to see the novel as a bid for cartographic posterity, whose “pages, indicating which street intersects with which, might afford the clues to an excavator’s map.”⁶³

But while Joyce maps Dublin through what Kenner called Bloom's "circuitous wandering," he also uses the site in a subtle exploration of sociality.⁶⁴ Take the "Lotus Eaters" episode, for example, when Leopold Bloom "walk[s] soberly" around the city in the hour before Paddy Dignam's funeral (*U*, 58). In this episode, which provides the first extended treatment of Bloom's mental life, our protagonist emerges as both a social actor and a sort of sociologist, an inquisitive (if also crude) guide to modern Dublin. As he makes his way from the post office, having just retrieved a letter from his would-be mistress, Martha Clifford, he recognizes someone: "M'Coy. Get rid of him quickly," he thinks (*U*, 60). The ensuing social interaction would be rather dull were it not for Bloom's antisocial behavior. While the two characters chat, mostly about Dignam's funeral, our protagonist's eyes start to wander—"Clearly I can see today"—ultimately fixing their covetous gaze on an "outsider" across the road. "Careless stand of her with her hands in those patch pockets," he thinks, "[l]ike that haughty creature at the polo match. Women all for caste until you touch the spot" (*ibid.*). His lust builds as the outsider reveals her silk stockings, so he "move[s] a little to the side of M'Coy's talking head," but at the exact moment when he is about to catch a glance of something really thrilling—"Watch! Watch! Silk flash rich stockings white. Watch!"—a "heavy tramcar slew[s] between" him and his object of desire. "Lost it. Curse your noisy pugnose," he thinks, just before responding blandly to M'Coy: "Yes, yes, Mr Bloom said after a dull sigh" (*U*, 61). He is pretty pleased with himself as the two characters part ways: "Didn't catch me napping that wheeze" (*U*, 62).

This scene is fairly typical of *Ulysses*, not only in its toggling between thought and action but also in its rendering of Dublin as an assemblage of human and nonhuman actors. Bloom is the central player in a site-specific social drama that includes his interlocutor, as well as an unsuspecting stranger and a nonhuman entity. In fact, as the scene unfolds, that interlocutor recedes into the background, for Bloom's primary object of address is the anthropomorphized tramcar, whose "pugnose" he "curses" inaudibly but decisively, just as his primary object of attention is the woman in white stockings. Our protagonist, in this sense, appears enmeshed in what Latour would call a "thick imbroglio" of action and interaction, only a portion of which is visible from M'Coy's perspective, but all of which appears to us through Joyce's storytelling technique.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, in the midst of his dialogue with M'Coy, Bloom performs another social role, or participates in another social charade, the one that casts him as "Henry Flower," the pseudonym that he uses to begin the correspondence with Martha that sends him to the post office at the outset of the chapter. Epistolarity, of course, establishes an old-fashioned social network between two characters and two sites, between Martha's scene of writing and Bloom's reception of her letter, which, incidentally, gets interrupted by the appearance of M'Coy.

There are thus two overlapping social networks here: one composed of Bloom, M'Coy, the tramcar, and various other constituents, both human and nonhuman, of Dublin at midmorning on June 16, 1904; the other composed of Bloom, Martha, and the letter that facilitates their interaction. If the first is synchronic and site specific, contained in a discrete time and place, then the second is diachronic and multisited, extending from one time and place to another through the infrastructure of the postal system.

And yet, *Ulysses* upsets any neat division between synchronic and diachronic sociality as Bloom continues his stroll, "wishing he hadn't met that M'Coy fellow," a thought that registers the ongoing psychological aftereffects of a completed social exchange (*U*, 63). By this point in "The Lotus Eaters," it has become clear that our protagonist is not just a social actor but also a social thinker whose perambulations spark reflection on the experience of collective life. "He passed the cabman's shelter. Curious the life of drifting cabbies. All weathers, all places, time or setdown, no will of their own. *Voglio e non*. Like to give them an odd cigarette. Sociable. Shout a few flying syllables as they pass" (*ibid.*). What begins as a casual effort to ponder a social formation (a group of laborers and their labor conditions) becomes a desire to commiserate by enlisting an object, an odd cigarette, to facilitate an intersubjective bond. A similar desire takes hold moments later, as the Jewish Bloom sits for the Catholic mass at All Hallows. When "[t]he cold smell of sacred stone call[s] him," he enters the "swingdoor" of the church to discover "[s]omething going on: some sodality" (*U*, 66). Both the physical site and its collective rituals are captivating. "Something like those maz-zoth," he thinks, watching the transubstantiation; "it's that sort of bread: unleavened shrewbread" (*ibid.*). Soon enough, such observations precipitate speculation on the great mystery of this scene, which ultimately is not the transubstantiation itself but the question of why these people are here at all: "Now I bet it makes them feel happy. Lollipop. It does. Yes, bread of angels it's called. There's a big idea behind it, kind of a kingdom of God is within you feel. First communicants. Hokypoky penny a lump. They feel all like one family party, same in the theatre, all in the same swim" (*ibid.*). For a moment, then, Bloom identifies something like the social function of religion, playfully acknowledging the intimate link between Holy Communion and community, or what Bloom calls "confraternity" (*ibid.*).

Eventually he exits the church (in a ploy to avoid the collection basket) and ends his stroll around Dublin, but not before this period of flânerie discloses the significance of the city to Joyce's sociological imagination. By the time we have finished following Bloom around—as he curses the "honking" tramcar, admires the "multicolored hoardings" at the shops, listens to the "[f]lat Dublin voices," passes the "ruins and tenements," as well as the "hopsotch court with its forgotten pickystone," smells "the dank air" in the streets, and finally makes his way from the church to the chemist to

the gate of Trinity College (*U*, 61–71)—it is easy to agree with Joseph Frank’s classic argument that “Joyce’s most obvious intention in *Ulysses* is to give the reader a picture of Dublin seen as a whole,” but one that consists of many moving parts, a varied and volatile composite of humans and nonhumans. As Frank elaborates, in a remark that echoes Lukács, Joyce sought “to re-create the sights and sounds, the people and places, of a typical Dublin day, much as Flaubert had re-created his provincial country fair.”⁶⁶ That recreation is so complex, alternately baffling and fascinating to so many readers, precisely because of how Joyce constructs setting as a *relation* between the metropolis and mental life, between the commotion of midmorning Dublin and Bloom’s processes of cogitation, as in the moment when the “train clank[ing] heavily above” him transforms a mental image of porter into “barrels bump[ing] in his head” (*U*, 65). The setting of “The Lotus Eaters,” as in other episodes of *Ulysses*, is not a fixed framework for narrative action but a dynamic interplay between mind and matter, which is why the novel’s figuration of sociality (as in Bloom’s interaction with M’Coy) often emerges through a vertiginous oscillation between thought and action.

Another way to put this point would be to say that the figure of the social in “The Lotus Eaters” depends on how Joyce exploits the unstable boundary between character and setting. Chatman has explained just how difficult it can be to define that boundary; it is inadequate, he suggests, to say that “setting ‘sets the character off’ in the usual figurative sense of the expression,” that it constitutes “the place and collection of objects ‘against which’ his actions and passions appropriately emerge.”⁶⁷ Such a definition runs into trouble not only because nonhuman objects can assume the role of characters (as in *Room*) and because setting can span both human interiority and the external object world (as in *Ulysses*) but also because human figures (walk-ons, extras, crowds, masses) can be elements of setting—too minor, relative to the plot and its protagonist, even to warrant the designation *minor character*.⁶⁸ So how do we distinguish character from setting? Chatman offers one compelling answer, arguing that “a human being who is named, present and important is *more likely* to be a character” than any other figure in the story world, but Edgar Allan Poe offers a different and equally compelling answer in “The Man of the Crowd,” his classic tale from 1840.⁶⁹ As Poe’s unnamed narrator sits in a London coffeehouse, he peers through the window at a “throng” that moves along “one of the principal thoroughfares of the city.”⁷⁰ While “scrutinizing the mob,” producing a capacious taxonomy of social types, he is suddenly transfixed by “a countenance which at once arrest[s] and absorb[s] [his] whole attention” (*PT*, 392). At this instant, the narrator’s casual attempt to label all the different figures in the crowd transforms into an obsessive quest “to know more” about one particular man—to glimpse something of his interior life (his “vast mental power,” perhaps, or his “blood-thirstiness”) and to uncover his “wild his-

tory”—by following him through London, studying his appearance, noting his actions, and speculating about his motives (*ibid.*). The pursuit leads all over the city and ends, grimly enough, with the narrator deciding that this man is “the type and the genius of deep crime,” yet nevertheless still inscrutable. “It will be in vain to follow,” he concludes. “I shall learn no more of him” (*PT*, 396).

Poe’s tale was important to Walter Benjamin, who called it “an X-ray of the detective story” that “does away with all the drapery that a crime represents” so that “only the armature remains: the pursuer, the crowd, and an unknown man.”⁷¹ But surely Poe provides a more comprehensive scan of narrative structure than this—not only a detective story in skeletal form but also a metanarrative about how character gets distinguished from setting through the sustained attention of a narrator. From “a tumultuous sea of human heads,” Poe’s narrator selects only one, lifting him from the substratum of setting to the perch of character by tracking his movements and wondering about the hidden contours of his subjectivity (*PT*, 389). This process produces an antagonist (the man) for our protagonist (the narrator) and distinguishes them both from the urban mass, which forms a portion of the setting as the chase unfolds through bazaars and shops and various London neighborhoods. Poe’s tale in this sense reveals a familiar and potent force of narrative prose fiction: how a narrator simultaneously directs our attention and affection toward character while instructing us to consider setting significant only insofar as it influences what Lukács calls “the mesh of human destinies” in the story.⁷² And yet, there is also a counterforce at work in narrative—readily discernible in *Room*, *Ulysses*, and even *Robinson Crusoe*—that blurs the line between character and setting to disclose the Lukácsian mesh as an assemblage of humans and nonhumans. The critical gambit of *Site Reading* is to take this assemblage as a primary unit of analysis and to examine how it manifests in and through a site that is especially important to a given story.

Examining literary sites, as in the case of Joyce’s Dublin or of Donoghue’s *Room*, becomes a kind of sociological project, because sites (both imagined and real) mediate sociality. This is why ethnographers such as Latour and Woolgar undertake site-specific fieldwork: an analytical procedure that not only designates a given locale for immersive analysis but also renders social relations, which are what Lefebvre calls “concrete abstractions,” graspable as empirical objects. The English term *site* comes from the Latin *situs*, which is the perfect passive participle of *sino*, a multipurpose verb that means to place, to situate, to grant, or to allow. *Situs* is almost always used in Latin literature for somewhere that is inhabited, and the most common usage is to describe a physical location where it is good to build a city.⁷³ We retain these meanings in contemporary English, since we use *site* to designate “a piece of ground or an area which has been appropriated

for some purpose” and to identify “the scene of a specified activity” (as in phrases such as *test site*, *work site*, or *launch site*). For archaeologists, moreover, the premise of any excavation is that a given site preserves “the remains of former human habitation,” the material evidence for apprehending a lost civilization.⁷⁴ Whether in ordinary language or in more technical idioms, therefore, *site* implies both human activity and sociality. For this reason, I privilege it over other terms, such as *place*, *space*, and *environment*, that enjoy wider currency in literary studies. Although I do not entirely avoid the latter, my emphasis on *site* is meant to underscore the sociological ambition of this book, while acknowledging that many important and related topics, from the space/place dialectic to the global environmental crisis, reside beyond its purview.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, *Site Reading* shares with critical works on these topics the conviction that analyzing literary form entails asking questions about society and collective life.

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So how do these questions emerge? By what method of literary interpretation does the analysis of narrative prose fiction become an effort to fathom sociality? It begins by abandoning the notion of setting as a static framework for narrative action and by accepting the porous and dynamic boundary between setting and character. Then it seeks to identify the sites (much as a textual materialist might identify the *things*) that appear crucial to whatever a given literary text is trying to express. To analyze these sites—to perform a site reading—is to scrutinize an assemblage of humans and nonhumans in the story world with an eye on how the interaction of such figures simultaneously models and theorizes social experience. At times, perhaps owing to the force that Poe dramatizes in “The Man of the Crowd,” the boundary between human and nonhuman can seem firm and sharp; yet at other times, owing to the counterforce that we can see clearly in certain segments of *Room* or of *Ulysses*, that boundary is more difficult to discern. Latour would call these two forces, respectively, “purification” and “translation.” While purification establishes two distinct “ontological zones,” situating humans in one and nonhumans in the other, translation creates mixtures, hybrids, and assemblages of human and nonhuman. The interplay of these two forces, he argues, is constitutive of Western modernity. When he asserts that “we have never been modern,” he does not mean to deny the fact of modernization but to suggest that it relies on the mutual reinforcement of purification and translation: one force that establishes and shores up boundaries, another that transgresses them.⁷⁶ If this account of modernity also seems like an apt description of how narrative fiction manages the relation between human and nonhuman, then this should come as no surprise given Latour’s long-standing engagement with narratology and semiotics.

I track that engagement in “Supermarket Sociology,” the first chapter of this book, which provides a kind of vestibular access to *Site Reading* as a whole. By examining the figuration of the supermarket in two very different works—Latour’s *Reassembling the Social* and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*—I try to establish the methodological and conceptual stakes of this project, to show how a certain method of interpretation might form the basis for a new sociology of literature. “Supermarket Sociology” seeks in this sense to refine the claims of this introduction through the analysis of a more fully developed case, but it also means to do something more: to assemble a network of cultural artifacts, both literary and visual, that provides a fresh look at postwar and postmodernist culture. To visualize this network is to see the site, the supermarket, as a central node or vertex that not only links Latour and DeLillo but also establishes connections among Andy Warhol, Fredric Jameson, Robert Venturi, Allen Ginsberg, John Updike, and other prominent figures. Thus, even as Latour’s sociology enlivens the questions about sociality that I explore throughout this book, it also suggests a particular way of apprehending culture and cultural production. Instead of beginning with a literary text and then situating it in a given cultural context, I always begin with a site and then trace a cultural network that emanates from it, which is really to say that I understand sites as actants in two senses: as determinants of sociality that invite sustained attention from novelists and as material environments that give rise to constellations of cultural artifacts.

This two-part conception of sites animates all the case studies in this book. After “Supermarket Sociology” makes a case for defining the social as a network of humans and nonhumans, the section entitled *Test Sites* considers how that definition ramifies in the writings of several postwar American novelists whose treatments of sites—dumps, roads, ruins, and asylums—amount to meticulous delineations of social form. Concentrating on the work and life of William S. Burroughs, in chapter 2 I propose that *Naked Lunch* constructs something like a nightmare image of Latourian sociality: a collective of human subjects and nonhuman objects governed by the logic of putrefaction, or “translation” run amok. Jack Kerouac and Joan Didion are the key players in chapter 3, where I argue that the postwar American road narrative produces a sophisticated account of the nonhuman social actor through its treatment of the automobile, an entity that is, of course, both a material thing and a social site. The next two chapters both explore the question of limits: If the social is a vast network, they ask, when and where does it end? How do we establish the boundaries that make the social coherent as an object of analysis, representation, or both? In chapter 4, I suggest that Thomas Pynchon addressed such questions when he looked to the ruins and ruination of Malta, to a site where a society was

being methodically destroyed, in order to imagine how social relations might withstand destruction and persist through millennia. Turning from temporal to spatial limits, finally, in chapter 5, I propose that Ralph Ellison's career-long interest in asylums—sites where “individuals” are, as Goffman writes, “cut off from the wider society”—suggests a new way of defining his relationship to the discipline of sociology.⁷⁷

While *Site Reading* concentrates on novels and novelists, its point of engagement with sociology shifts from Latour to Goffman as the book unfolds. Goffman has enjoyed something of a resurgence in recent years, partly as a result of what Mark Seltzer calls “the incrementalist turn across a range of recent literary and cultural studies,” the new focus on “scaled-down” objects of analysis, such as “minor characters,” “little resistances,” and “infantile subjects.”⁷⁸ As I understand him, Goffman set an important precedent for Latour, an influence that Latour himself acknowledges (fleetingly) in *Reassembling the Social* when he cites Goffman as an authority on the “thick imbroglio” of social interaction.⁷⁹ Although the two thinkers are incompletely compatible, their respective sociologies share at least three features: a commitment to ethnography and site-specific fieldwork, a sustained interest in nonhuman entities (which Goffman often calls “props”), and a robust relationship to literature and literary theory. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, for example, redeploys the dramaturgical rhetoric of Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives*, a study that itself builds on “the philosophy of drama embodied in Henry James's prefaces.”⁸⁰ Moreover, Goffman's scholarship often uses literary examples to facilitate the production of sociological concepts, as in the case of *Asylums*, his 1961 analysis of psychiatric care, which draws on Melville and other literary authors to develop its claims.⁸¹ The groundwork for *Asylums* was built by a year of fieldwork at St. Elizabeths Psychiatric Hospital, the notorious state institution that housed Ezra Pound from 1945 to 1958, and that by the 1960s had become synonymous with the coldly bureaucratic and even prisonlike impression of asylums that appears in so much cultural production from the period. While I analyze some of that production, mainly to locate both Goffman and Ellison within a wider cultural network, my emphasis falls on how sites of psychiatric treatment came to mediate sociality for (and thus to spark sociological inquiry from) both the sociologist and the novelist.

This is because *Site Reading* is not a cultural history but an experiment in literary criticism whose hypothesis is that writing a novel is a way of knowing about collective life. When I began working on this book, I thought that I was historicizing the postwar US novel, seeking to demonstrate how its treatment of the built environment not only registers major historical events (the rise of suburbia, the construction of the interstates, the uneven development of cities) but also encodes spatial politics—how it manifests a

vexed relation to the intertwined ideologies of progress, modernization, neoliberalism, and American exceptionalism that underwrite what Lefebvre calls “the production of space.” The more fictions I read, the more sites I found: the home (Marilynne Robinson), the office (Richard Yates, Ed Park, David Foster Wallace), the Indian reservation (Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie), and even cyberspace (William Gibson) all warranted some attention, as did site-specific visual art. While I worked to amass an archive of primary sources, both literary and visual, I consulted the rich historicist scholarship on this period, learning how to think about my material by considering how previous scholars had analyzed sites like the suburb, the city, and the border.⁸² The literary texts that I had assembled as cases, however, soon began to push back against the ways I wanted to understand them. Their treatments of sites caused me to wonder whether the historicist procedure of contextualizing literature in relation to a *specific* sociohistorical context (postwar America or postmodernity) had foreclosed the more fundamental question of how literature imagines sociality as such. Pynchon’s depiction of a ruined Malta, for instance, is not what Jameson describes as “adoptive tourism” meant to satisfy “idle curiosity,” which is to say not merely a cultural symptom of the postmodern era but a sophisticated attempt to rethink the temporality of social interaction.⁸³

Still, this era is particularly fertile for site reading. Although it can illuminate texts across the full spectrum of literary history, site reading seems like a necessary way of accounting for a broad range of literary and artistic phenomena in the United States after World War II, not least because *site* became a key term in the visual and performing arts at this moment. Three months after Michel Foucault asserted, in the famous “heterotopias” lecture of 1967, that “[o]ur epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites,” Robert Smithson argued, in the pages of *Artforum*, that “[t]he unknown areas of sites can best be explored by artists.”⁸⁴ Such exploration was widespread and often highly intelligent, beginning in the late 1960s with the pioneering work of artists such as Smithson, Daniel Buren, Richard Serra, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and extending to the more recent projects of Andrea Fraser, Renée Green, Mark Dion, Suzanne Lacy, and a host of others. From what Hal Foster calls “the crux of minimalism,” site-specificity emerged to challenge the modernist orthodoxy of the aesthetic object as autonomous, autotelic, and thus indifferent to its site of display.⁸⁵ While art historians have developed detailed genealogies and taxonomies of this phenomenon—showing how its different phases have defined sites differently—I understand site-specificity primarily as an investigation of social form, an attempt not merely “to integrate art more directly into the realm of the social” but to theorize sociality itself through artistic practice.⁸⁶ Even as Smithson, for instance, aimed to “use the actual land as

medium” in earthworks like *Spiral Jetty*, he also sought to analyze “social structures which confine art” and to resist “[t]he function of the warden-curator” whose aim is “to separate art from the rest of society.”⁸⁷ This is why his work, like that of his fellow practitioners, can be understood as paving the way for the “social turn” of so much contemporary art, especially the recent projects of Maurizio Cattelan, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Carsten Höller, which take “as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context.”⁸⁸

When I turn to the visual arts at various moments in this book, then, I mean to affirm Latour’s conviction that “sociologists have a lot to learn from artists.” Although the questions about sociality that I examine throughout *Site Reading* are precipitated by narrative prose fiction, my extended accounts of artworks by Warhol, Ukeles, John Chamberlain, Smithson, Gordon Parks, and Jeff Wall are designed to show how visual media reformulate such questions and provide their own answers. Analyzing the paradox of nonhuman agency as DeLillo imagines it, for example, leads to a reading of Warhol’s famous *Brillo Boxes* as objects whose formal structure depends on a precise distinction between agency and its figuration. The conversation between literature and visual art in this book, however, is not organized as a conventional history or genealogy. Rather, each chapter traces a network of literary and cultural objects that emanates from a certain generic site, such as the supermarket, whose force as a cultural actant manifests in the array of specific and specifying responses that it has engendered from authors, artists, intellectuals, and other figures. The goal is not to dispute the value of a more traditional historiography but to suggest that site reading might offer a fresh way of seeing the cultural past, something like a new method of data visualization for literary and cultural historians. If how we visualize the past constitutes a way of knowing it, a lesson that is continually reinforced by scholarship in the digital present, then site reading asks what happens when we look closely at sites, when we see them as both social and cultural actants.⁸⁹

To pose this question from the vantage of literary studies is to join the vibrant conversation about critical methodology that currently animates the discipline. These days, a novel like *Room* is just as likely to occasion debate over reading (close versus distant, depth versus surface, critical versus postcritical) as it is to provoke formal and historical interpretation. Such debate should be a reminder that literary critics are pretty good at reflecting on methods of knowledge production, a capability that we bring to our encounters with other disciplines and to our work in the classroom, which, even in the era of massive open online courses (MOOCs), still constitutes the key social site of our discipline. If this era demands that we justify the existence of the brick-and-mortar classroom, while striving to explain the

value of literary studies within the political economy of higher education, then part of our message ought to be that literature itself is not only a primary source but also a conceptual resource. As such, *Site Reading* proposes, it capacitates us to think the social, to appreciate the mystery and complexity of collective life.