David J. Alworth, *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 224 pp.

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It is, by now, a familiar story. For more than a decade, at least since Bruno Latour published "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" in 2004, literary scholars have been increasingly weary of historicist and contextualist modes of close reading, suspicious hermeneutics, and critique. Special issues and manifestos have proliferated calling for a new way forward. Names for alternative methods abound: reparative reading, surface reading, generous reading, and postcritique. At stake in these debates, we are told, is the survival of the humanities. In *The Limits of Critique*, for example, Rita Felski writes that her advocacy for postcritique is part of a broader effort to articulate a positive vision for humanistic research that might combat growing skepticism about the value of this research. Similar motivations drive Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* and Joseph North's *Literary Criticism: A Political History*, both of which argue that the "historicist-contextualist paradigm" has serious limits we must move beyond. For all their verve and erudition, these texts are necessarily limited by their form. As book-length manifestos, they cannot practice the new method they call for. David Alworth's bracing and beautifully written monograph, *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form*, answers the call. It practices the new mode of reading it also proposes.

Site Reading is a sociologically informed study of post-1945 US fiction and art that aspires to start an interdisciplinary conversation about how we theorize the built environment. As Alworth emphasizes, his book 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" (21). His project, as he recounts its origin, began its life as a more traditional effort at "historicizing the postwar US novel" in terms of its "spatial politics," but he found that the texts he was analyzing "began to push back against the ways I wanted to understand them" (21-22). He began to wonder whether "the historicist procedure of contextualizing literature in relation to a *specific* sociohistorical context . . . had foreclosed the more fundamental question of how literature imagines sociality as such" (22). *Site Reading* is an effort to ask those more fundamental questions. Specifically, it is an effort to show that "setting" has been an undertheorized and misunderstood category in literary analysis. Hoping to move post-1945 literary study beyond historicism, Alworth studies a range of well-known authors, including Don DeLillo, William S. Burroughs, Joan Didion, Thomas Pynchon, and Ralph Ellison, pairing them with artists such as Andy Warhol, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Robert Smithson, and Donald Judd. Alworth's pairings are organized

around major postwar "sites" that make an appearance in their art, and his analysis is heavily shaped by the sociology of Latour (and to a lesser extent of Erving Goffman).

For example, DeLillo and Warhol get paired through the site of the supermarket. But Alworth does not study this pairing in the way we might expect. Though he tells us a great deal about the history of food retail after World War II, his argument is that (much like Latour) DeLillo and Warhol theorize the full shelves of the supermarket as a "semiautonomous nonhuman sphere" (34). The human workers in the supermarket as well as the supermarket owners disappear from view in these artworks. In place of the human elements of the social assemblage we call a supermarket, we find ourselves squarely focused on "the shelves themselves" (47). After explicating his method in his supermarkets chapter, Alworth adds chapters on dumps (Burroughs and Ukeles), roads (Jack Kerouac, Didion, John Chamberlain), ruins (Pynchon and Smithson), and asylums (Ellison, Gordon Parks, Jeff Wall), with a brief conclusion on bunkers (Cormac McCarthy and Richard Ross). Alworth argues that literature and visual art do not only represent these sites; they are also implicated in the material networks of these sites. That is, sites ramify through different media. In Burroughs's hands, for instance, a novel about dumps might also aspire "to be a kind of dump itself—the literary counterpart to an actual landfill" (52). These novels also engage in sophisticated theorizings of these sites. So Alworth reads Ellison as a social theorist whose great 1952 novel promulgates the view that "Harlem was not just a ruin . . . but also a pathogenic agent" (139). Many of these interpretations are persuasive, but there is a tension throughout *Site Reading* among three ways of reading novels. Alworth sometimes reads novels in mimetic terms; a novel might *represent* the dump. At other times, Alworth reads novels by means of New Materialist categories; a novel might be regarded as in some meaningful sense *part of the actual dump*. And Alworth, finally, often suggests novels might themselves *do* sociology; the novelist theorizes the dump just as much as the sociologist or critical theorist.

These three modes of reading need not be regarded as conflicting, but they raise questions about the methodological hypothesis that drives *Site Reading*. After all, Alworth's hypothesis isn't merely that literature conceptualizes collective life using a variety of techniques. Older historicist-contextualist reading modes—such as Fredric Jameson's theorizing of narrative as a "socially symbolic act"—always conceptualized the novel as being about collective life. Critics working in that older mode might presumably have much to say about the political economy that made, for example, large-scale food retail a going concern in the postwar period. What is distinct here is that Alworth promotes a specifically Latourian way of knowing collective life, simultaneously theorizing the social and dissolving it as an object of knowledge. In place of the category of "the social," one

discovers affiliations, associations, networks, and relations. The authors and artists Alworth analyzes all make a version of the same discovery: that nonhuman elements of our environment exercise agency and that the social is "a network comprising both humans and nonhumans as fully agential actors or actants" (29). There are many questions raised by the passing phrase "fully agential." Does any person or thing in a Latourian view ever have anything other than "full" agency? If so, what person or thing might have the power to restrict agency? If agency can be restricted, do we not find ourselves back in the realm of unequally distributed agencies? And might not the human creators of the supermarket then be rightly said to be worthier of critical attention than are its shelves? However we answer these questions, my point is that Alworth sets up *a contest* between two different sociologies of literature. One (the bad sort) is alleged to treat literature as epiphenomenon. The other (the good kind) sees literature as engaging in a "fully agential" knowledge-making project.

Whether you regard this argument as sufficient justification to stop doing historicism-contextualism will partly depend on whether you see the two methods as being at odds in the first place. Does studying sociohistorical context foreclose more fundamental ways of studying the literary imagination (or construction) of the social? My view is that the two projects are not at odds, and my assessment of *Site Reading* is that Alworth has, perhaps inadvertently, written the very book he thought he had abandoned. That is, *Site Reading* makes an original and welcome historicist contribution to our understanding of the postwar world. It illuminates how canonical writers, artists, and social theorists collectively fought to understand the emergence of the overlit object world of postwar consumer capitalism. Alworth's study suggests that recent literary scholars have been right to abandon "postmodernism" as a privileged category by which we conceptualize the post-45 period. In its place, many have started using the category of "neoliberalism."

Though he only uses that term once in his introduction, his analysis is compatible with, and might be regarded as a sort of prequel to, recent literary studies of neoliberalism. What Alworth is really studying, I would suggest, is the high art of high Keynesianism. With a few exceptions, Alworth's examples are largely drawn from the midcentury. At a post-Depression moment when the management of consumer demand was a primary objective of government policy, the consumer economy was not only a fact of life but a core site of political conflict. If the midcentury novel produced a rich sociology of consumerism—with its myriad roads, supermarkets, dumps, and can-filled nuclear bunkers—it did so in part because the postwar period was increasingly reflexive in its discussions of social life. This is not to say that novelists were somehow trapped as if in amber within their period, but that it matters a great deal to know that supermarkets were

not just a site with agency but also a site that was *made to act* upon shoppers along certain lines. Our historicist-contextualist understanding of this sociological situation is not an enemy of the recognition of full agency, but the precondition to its exercise.

I will end by suggesting that if *Site Reading* does not overcome historicism or contextualism as the horizon of literary study, this is no flaw at all. Our models of literary historicism are, though by no means perfect, nonetheless great inventions of our profession. A book as lively and accomplished as *Site Reading* would not have been possible without that prior groundwork. We would do well to proudly defend that inheritance even as we recognize that there are many other exciting sites of literary study that we might develop along different lines. To my mind the most compelling proposal Alworth makes isn't his advocacy for Latour's Actor-Network-Theory but the seemingly simpler observation that literature produces a sociology of its own. The way I would put it, in sympathy with his claim, is to say that there is *always* a conceptual dimension to aesthetic representation. The question then becomes what role the contemporary literary critic has in relation to this conceptual element of art. In my view, the answer is that we should treat literary modes of knowledge production in the same spirit we treat knowledge produced within more formal arenas of intellectual life. That is, literary ideas should be analyzed, historicized, critiqued, and finally incorporated into our own repertoire of concepts and disciplinary genealogies.