5. Reading and Writing (at) the Site of the Social
Or, David Alworth's *Site Reading* (2015) as a Pandemic-Proof Model of Cultural Critique

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David Alworth's *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form* opens with an epigraph from Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, one of the most influential books of cultural criticism of the past century. Positing that space, in being produced from an intricate and ever-shifting web of social relations, is not static but dynamic, not a stage on which history plays out but an active participant in shaping its course, Lefebvre's book helped an entire generation of scholars to formulate concerns about space and place, turning the concept of space into a trailblazing notion for such diverse paradigms as cultural geography, environmental criticism, literary ecology, and media archeology. Impulses from these fields have profoundly shaped the practice of cultural criticism in the past decades. With its seemingly modest aim of challenging the view of the literary concept of setting as "a static backdrop for narrative action," *Site Reading* actualizes this tradition for the twenty-first century in substantial and far-reaching ways (2).[1] Before I say more about how it does so, I want to quote Alworth quoting Lefebvre in his book's epigraph to set the stage for what is indeed one of the more ambitious projects in literary criticism of recent years:

> There is a question implicit in the foregoing analyses and interpretations. It is this: what is the mode of existence of social relations? No sooner had the social sciences established themselves than they gave up any interest in the description of "substances" inherited from philosophy: "subject" and "object," society "in itself," or the individual or group considered in isolation. Instead, like the other sciences, they took *relationships* as their object of study.

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1   All parenthetical citations in the text refer to David Alworth, *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

> The question is, though, where does a relationship reside when it is not be-
> ing actualized in a highly determined situation?

Making use of literary fiction to read such "highly determined situations" as sites at and through which we can see the social take shape is the project of Alworth's book. *Site* is Alworth's spatial term of choice, for it "implies both human activity and sociality" (19). Linking the term to Lefebvre's investment in the concrete and material relations that converge at specific sites (and thus constitute them), Alworth argues 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" (2).

For Alworth, drawing on Latour, sites are *actants* (or actors, two terms that Latour uses interchangeably) in two different ways: they are "determinants of sociality that invite sustained attention from novelists," and they are "material environments that give rise to constellations of cultural artifacts" (20). In this dual capacity, "sites mediate sociality," and one of the points that Alworth drives home over the course of reading his "test sites" (11)—supermarkets, dumps, roads, ruins, asylums, bunkers—is that literary fiction theorizes social experience "by transposing real sites into narrative settings and thereby rendering them operative, as figures in and of collective life" (2). If Latour helps us to see that such mediations are active participants in collective life, Alworth zeroes in on the formative role that literature plays in giving them agency. The focus of this book is clearly on literature, but one of its great virtues is that it approaches these mediations as intermedial phenomena. Each test site links literary and visual art: the supermarket put on display by Andy Warhol at a New York gallery in the early 1960s to the supermarkets imagined by Allen Ginsberg and Don DeLillo; the dumps that give form to William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* to the dumps that inspired performance artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles; the cars featured in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Joan Didion's *Play As It Lays* to the cars turned into sculptures by concept artist John Chamberlain; the ruins explored in Thomas Pynchon's *V.* to the ruins engaged by earth artist Robert Smithson; the asylums written about by Ralph Ellison and Erving Goffman to photographic approximations by Gordon Parks and Jeff Wall of Ellison's "invisible man's" famous hibernation space (read by Alworth as an asylum); the bunker that gives shelter to the father and son in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* to the family shelters depicted by photo artist Richard Ross. This is not the place to rehearse Alworth's nuanced trans-

medial and transdisciplinary readings of these sites. Suffice it to say that the critical advantage of dealing with constellations of cultural artifacts rather than individual (or even clusters of) literary works is twofold: it indicates how the material environment of the site can serve as a synchronic and diachronic mediator in a full-fledged cultural history of social form (which *Site Reading* does not attempt to write), and it helps us, via its transmedial perspective, to gain a firmer grasp on literature's special capacities to mediate the social and theorize the experiences associated with it.

This project demands the new methodology—*site reading*—which the book develops by conducting "an experiment in literary criticism whose hypothesis is that writing a novel is a way of knowing about collective life" (21). This experiment has two closely related goals: it aims to trace *what* novels know about collective life as a way of showing *how* they know about it. And this means that the book engages in a genuinely reflexive form of knowledge production, one that is firmly committed to second-order observation of all human and nonhuman actors gathered at and through a specific site. The form of this experiment—its critical *style*—bears striking resemblances with novelistic writing, most notably through its firm commitment to careful (implying truthful) observation of all social actors assembled in a given setting, which brings to mind the "show, don't tell" formula of a Henry Jamesian kind of realist fiction.[2] Rather than being a mere pleasantry, this style is indeed a driving force behind the critical agenda of Alworth's book. Consider, for instance, the narrative drive of these opening lines:

> 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)

The narrative drive animating this passage is essential to setting up the literary experiment that Alworth is after. Note how "the room" takes the place of

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2   See Walter Besant and Henry James, *The Art of Fiction* (Boston: Algonquin Press, 1900).

the subject in the first sentence, and how the beginning of class is described as an instance of reassembling the human and nonhuman actors gathered in it. True to the book's central claim that setting is a dynamic network of actors with the capacity of "exercising a kind of agency with and through [its] human and nonhuman constituents" (2), the classroom is imagined as "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 or cooling unit) are central to the pedagogical enterprise" (4). Note further how the passage transforms the site of the classroom into a literary setting in ways that lend force to the projected method by way of poetic enactment. This commitment to novelistic narration is hardly unique to Alworth's book. And if Mark McGurl has made the case that "show, don't tell" and "write what you know" are among the mantras of the creative writing programs that have vastly transformed the modes of literary production in the United States in the postwar years, passages like the above make me wonder about the extent to which they have disseminated into literary criticism with the effect of *novelizing* it in a Bakhtinian sense.[3] While this is not the place to explore this question further, there can be no doubt that *Site Reading*'s novelistic borrowings sustain its methodological ambitions.

These ambitions are anchored in the claim that unearthing what novels know about collective life not only demands a new way of reading but also a new literary sociology, one that breaks with the conventional wisdom of "locating the deep roots and meanings of literary form in the social forces that underlie it" to clear the stage for "a newly productive encounter between sociology and literary studies" (2). Latour is such a useful guide for thinking anew about literature's relationship with the social because, for him, "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" (3). And if we are willing to follow Latour's proposal that the "social is just the act and fact

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3   See Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 21–28. It is fair to say that McGurl's book, in successfully marrying the pleasures of reading with the bliss of scholarly insight (in ways that Kathryn Roberts, in her contribution to this volume, reads as middlebrow), paved the way for this novelistic mode of criticism. For Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of novelization as a driving force of literary production and creativity, see his essay "The Novel and the Epic," in *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2010), 361–78.

of association, the coming together of phenomena to create multiple assemblages, affinities, and networks," literary form can no longer be seen as a surface effect—a symptom—of social forces.[4] It comes into view as the result of a process—or *practice*—of assembling and networking that intersects and interacts with other social practices. While the notion of practice is not central to Alworth's new methodology, I think that it could be, and perhaps even should have been, because it is an extremely helpful tool to make sense of the distributed form of agency that this method is invested in. Practices are forms of action that are collective rather than individual, and a claim recently made about them is that they are the very stuff out of which the social world is made.[5] Thinking about literature in terms of a collective action distributed among shifting constellations of human and nonhuman actors opens up possibilities to further refine Alworth's goal of dynamizing received views of literary properties, including those of setting as a stable container for narrative action, character as an entity that is clearly distinguishable from the setting in which it emerges and acts, form as a solidification of social forces—and, one might add, a stable and singular text as the site in which such solidification occurs.[6]

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4   Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!," *New Literary History* 42, no. 2 (2011): 578; qtd. in Alworth, *Site Reading*, 3. Felski was among the first literary scholars to turn to Latour in order to rethink literature's relation to the social. See also Rita Felski, "Latour and Literary Studies," *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015): 737–742; *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), discussed in this volume by Ramírez; and, most recently, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2020).

5   For an introduction to what is often referred to as the "practice turn" in critical theory, see Theodore R. Schatzki, "Introduction: Practice Theory," in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike von Savigny (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 1–14. Not all practice theories include nonhuman actors. For two that do, see Karin Knorr Cetina, "Objectual Practice" in *The Practice Turn*, ed. Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, von Savigny, 175–88; Andrew Pickering, "Practice and Posthumanism: Social Theory and a History of Agency," in *The Practice Turn*, ed. Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and von Savigny, 163–74. On literature as social practice, see Laura Bieger, "Jean-Paul Sartre, Richard Wright, and the Relational Aesthetics of Literary Engagement," in *The Return of the Aesthetic in American Studies*, ed. Johannes Voelz, Rieke Jordan, Stefan Kuhl, *REAL Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 35 (2020): 169–88. For more scholarship on the praxeological dimension of literature, see the body of work produced by the Cluster of Excellence 2020 "Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective" at Freie Universität Berlin.

6   For a philosophical reflection on the praxeological understanding of art, see Georg W. Bertram, *Art as Human Practice: An Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

So yes, a praxeological understanding of art in general and of literature in particular helps to gain a firmer grasp of the role that cultural artifacts play in generating and distributing agency at and through concrete and ever-shifting constellations of actors. A main reason for this is that the relations between these actors do not merely exist; they are forged and maintained through practices, with literature being one of these practices. From this point of view, literature's form-giving capacity (and thus its capacity to mediate sociality and theorize social experience) is both shaped by and gives shape to the practices with which it intersects and interacts. One of the practices with which literature has had a long tradition of intersecting and interacting is sociology. When literature interacts with the sociological practice that does not treat the social "as a preconstituted domain" (as generations of sociologists drawing on Émile Durkheim have done) but as something that is "literally figured out" in the sense of being "given a kind of figuration in the sociological monograph, not unlike that which is proffered by narrative prose fiction" (28) (as assumed by Latour and actor-network theory), *the existence of the social comes into view as the result of a quintessentially descriptive, narrative effort*—an effort in which "the sociologist and the novelist [are potential] collaborators" (35).[7] So, here is my attempt to redescribe the methodological project of Alworth's book in praxeological terms: based on the hypothesis that literature has a truly versatile relation to the social (as well as the sociological), the ambition of *Site Reading* is to develop a model that does justice to scholarly reading as a social practice that actively participates (to a significant degree through its critical style) in the continuous act of fabricating the social by tracing (and thus making comprehensible via reflexive, second-order observation) the ways in which "literary texts assemble an impression of social form" (4).

Moreover, and crucially, in practicing such a reading, the form-giving act of assembling that constitutes a literary text comes into view as an especially powerful mediator of sociality—because it exposes how the act of fictional world-making involves raising such pertinent questions as the following: what counts as a social being? What are the limits of the social, that is, where does the social begin and where does it end? How is a self conditioned by the site it inhabits by way of the relations that it maintains to the human

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7   For a lucid discussion of Latour's literariness, see Sianne Ngai, "Network Aesthetics: Juliana Spahr's *The Transformations* and Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social*," in *American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions*, ed. Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 369–92.

and nonhuman actors gathered at this site? Even though Alworth's model does not reflect on the role of the reader, it does seem compatible with the idea that literary texts are sites that, in engaging readers with these kinds of questions in the act of reading them, assemble constellations of human and nonhuman actors across the boundary that both separates and connects the world of the text and the world of the reader at and through the site of the text. In a riff that blends Alworth and Wolfgang Iser, one could even say that, in crisscrossing this boundary, the act of reading can perform such magic tricks as turning "a strange social being"—be it a fictional character, a narrator, or a reader—into "a keen social analyst" (8).[8]

As I am writing this text, the new coronavirus has altered my web of relationships in ways that have turned *me* into a strange social being—one that avoids touching her face, religiously washes her hands, uses her elbows to open doors and push elevator buttons, wears a mask over her mouth and nose when entering public spaces, has recently celebrated a hug-free birthday, and finds solace when reading that someone else "just realized that [she has] not touched another living being, nor … been touched, for more than 4 weeks," and that this peculiar state makes her wonder "whether we will later on have split humanity into those who were touched and those who were not."[9] While this split is not exactly a positive outlook, the strange social being I have become finds solace in it because strangeness is eased by social analysis (in this case even one that, despite its bleakness, offers a sense of belonging). In any case, I have no doubt that this yearning for a vision of the shape that sociality will take once the crisis is over has turned the strange social being that I have become into a tireless analyst of how the new protocols are affecting my interactions with myself, with friends and neighbors, with the clerks at the grocery store and with the groceries (and everything else) brought home from an outside world ravaged by an invisible enemy. If I was uncertain how far I was willing to follow Latour's claim that the social does not exist outside of the continuous act of assembling it, the coronavirus pandemic seems to

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8   For the idea of reading as a performative act of crossing the boundary between the world of the text and the world of the reader, see Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

9   The lines stem from a Facebook post by art curator Ruth Noack, quoted by Masha Gessen in her op-ed "The Political Consequences of Loneliness and Isolation During the Pandemic," *The New Yorker*, May 5, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-col umnists/the-political-consequences-of-loneliness-and-isolation-during-the-pandemic.

prove it right. Society and the social have never felt so ephemeral to me. The world as we know it has disappeared almost overnight as a result of a tear in the fabric of our collective lives that prompted a perfectly haphazard instance of reassembling social actors, some of them human, many of them not.

When the editors of this volume invited us to write about books that may "help us articulate and navigate crucial concerns that are still beyond the horizon," they certainly did not have this situation in mind, just as I did not imagine anything like it when proposing to write about Alworth's book. But the guidance it happens to offer for dealing with some of the most pressing questions raised by the current pandemic gives me an even clearer sense of the pertinence of its vision. How long can we stand social distancing, and how long should we tolerate limitations to our fundamental rights? How do we measure the value of work, of culture, of one life over another? How shall we live, and how can we live together? How do we reassess the place of the human species in a world in which the modern phantasy of progress has come to a halt? And while neither the editors nor I have envisioned a situation in which questions like these would be ubiquitous, some novelists have. In *The End of October*, a novel inspired by Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Lawrence Wright imagines a virus that, in the language of the jacket copy, "brings the world to its knees."[10] Part detective fiction, part crash course in virology, part social critique, the novel, which had been written before anyone knew about COVID-19, and published as country after country was shutting down from it, is so poised with the promise of knowing about collective life under the conditions of a global pandemic that critics and readers have hailed it like an oracle. In *Station Eleven*, a New York Times bestseller first published in 2014 and about to be released as a mini-series by the streaming service HBO Max, Emily St. John Mandel imagines an even deadlier virus that kills most of the world's population to explore the sociality reassembled in the lifespan of the generation coming of age in the ruins of late modern civilization.[11]

Two of Alworth's test sites—roads and ruins—are featured prominently in this novel, and in its post-apocalyptic world they blend into each other in intriguing ways. Just as in Alworth's readings of roads in Kerouac and Didion, the site of the road is emblematic of a vision of human progress distilled in automobility, prompting us to reimagine sociality based on "a redemptive relay between human and nonhuman" (90). But in *Station Eleven* redemption

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10   Lawrence Wright, *The End of October* (New York: Knopf, 2020).
11   Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

takes the desolate shape of a caravan of cars pulled by humans and stripped of everything that would add unnecessary weight to their efforts of hauling them across roads gradually turning into ruins. The novel's most prominent ruin, an airport, is imagined as the shattered emblem of a vision of human progress distilled in aeromobility. Yet even in its dilapidating state the airport gives shelter to so many people that it brings to mind Alworth's point that the ruins protecting Malta's tormented population against Nazi air raids in Pynchon's *V.* exemplify "how sites sustain sociality, shoring up an entire society against its ruins" (120). So yes, in *Station Eleven*, both the site of the road and the site of the ruin are inscribed with failed visions of mobility and progress. Yet failure is not the only thing that welds them together. The novel imagines these two sites as conjointly assembling artistic practices and artifacts in ways that suggest a resilience and a recovery of a cultural dimension of social life that had nearly collapsed in the face of the threat of extinction. The members of the human species pulling the caravan of dismembered automobiles across the ravaged landscape in the Great Lakes area belong to a theater company that moves from settlement to settlement in this frontier-like setting to perform Shakespeare plays. One of them, a woman in her thirties, whom we first meet as a little girl at a *King Lear* performance at the Elgin Theatre in Toronto on the eve of the deadly pandemic (and whose character thus indicates that the social continues across the divide), is interviewed by a reporter for a newspaper published at the settlement that flourishes in the ruins of the airport. If the theater performances are animated by an air of timelessness that stems from the universality with which Shakespeare's plays deal with human fallibility, the launching of a newspaper is marked by a sense of a new beginning, a rebooting of modern sociality replete with civic media and a reading public that bears the potential of political agency.

I am drawing out these contours of a site reading of *Station Eleven* to show how astutely Alworth's method directs us toward what novels know about collective life when we turn our attention to how their settings "assemble an impression of social form" (4), and how keenly attuned this method is to articulating and navigating concerns with the limits of the social, which the coronavirus pandemic has indefinitely set on the agenda of cultural criticism. Yet I also have reservations about this method, especially regarding its claim to site specificity. How much sense does the term make to redescribe the importance and agency of the literary concept of setting in which the critical practice of site reading is anchored? As a term, "site specificity" was coined in the visual arts to lend force to the avant-garde spirit of "challeng[ing] the modernist or-

thodoxy of the art object as autonomous, autotelic, and thus indifferent to its site of display" (22). It is important to bear in mind that this challenge unfolded along a distinctive spatial trajectory, driven by an anti-institutionalism that was at first acted out by artistic movements such as minimalism and concept art within the confines of galleries and museums, then taken outside of these institutional spaces by movements such as earth art and performance art. Yes, works from all of these movements are typically made of materials such as cardboard, strip lights, chalk lines, pieces of junk, rocks, soil, human bodies and excrement that challenge received ideas about the objecthood of art in ways that highlight the web of actors and relations assembled through them. But only earth artists made artworks out of the very materials found at and bound to a given site.[12]

Alworth is keenly aware of this, and he brings in Miwon Kwon's extended model of site specificity to sustain the claim that his "investigation of social form" depends on concrete sites at which these practices are performed in ways that make it site specific, describing this investigation (with Kwon) as "an attempt not merely 'to integrate more directly into the realm of the social' but to theorize sociality itself through artistic practice" (22). Social relations are always situated, for sure. But are the artistic practices under scrutiny here defined by being *in situ* or *in socius*? [13] Is the investigation conducted through reading the artifacts assembled by Alworth around the idea of the site more invested in understanding the situatedness or the relationality of the social? Alworth explains that using site rather than terms such as place, space, or environment with a wider currency in literary studies serves "to underscore the sociological ambition of [his] book" (19). But does this choice not obscure rather than clarify the specific materiality of setting, which is distinctly different from the materiality of any site that is not a text? Sites have locations—places, if you will. Following Doreen Massey's understanding of place as "formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location," all places are sites in Alworth's sense of "impl[ying] both

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12   I have given extended thought to the site specificity of earth (or land) art and its trans- and intermedial dimensions in my essay "Putting Machines into Gardens: Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and the Pastoral Imagination," in *Rereading the Machine in the Garden*, ed. Eric Erbacher, Nicole Maruo-Schröder, Florian Sedlmeier (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2014), 121–47.

13   I borrow this distinction from Nicolas Bourriaud, who coined the term relational art to describe a turn from the site to the social in some of the art of the 1990s. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon : Les presses de réel, 2002).

human activity and sociality" (19).[14] And yet, the reverse is also true: all sites are places in Massey's sense of being "formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location (nowhere else does this precise mixture occur) and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those social relations at that location (their partly happenstance juxtaposition) will in turn produce new social effects."[15]

Setting bears a distinctive relation to sites understood in this way, for sure—one that deserves a profound and systematic rethinking along the lines that Alworth proposes. Even so, any question about the materiality of a site transformed into a literary setting is also and irrevocably a question about the *media-specific materiality* at work in this transformation. Setting is a genuinely discursive phenomenon, which also means that to understand fully the relation between site and setting, we need to ask: what is the materiality of the medium in and through which discursive site specificity does its mediating work? *Site Reading* comes closest to engaging these questions when talking about "site *specification*, the process by which imaginative literature defines and delimits locale" (10–11, emphasis mine). To me, this is a decidedly more compelling term, for it directs us toward the media-specific activities through which literary texts theorize sociality. Yet while Alworth gives substantial thought to how the novel, in being a narrative medium with a long-standing tradition of self-reflection and social analysis, has the capacity to put forth complex sociological imaginaries, the materiality of the novel as the medium that lends agency to the discursive site specificity of setting, and the book as the place where this agency resides are conceptual blind spots in *Site Reading*'s proposed methodology. Indeed, it seems to me that conflating the materiality of the site with that of the setting is responsible for this. I should add, however, that Alworth's work following this book has begun to fill this gap by focusing on book jackets and covers as specific and utterly neglected sites in understanding literature's relation to the social world, and on cover art as a transmedial form of "giving a reading."[16]

If my doubts about the adequacy or usefulness of the term site specificity to redescribe the concept of setting as a way of rethinking literature's rela-

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14   Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 1994), 168.

15   Ibid.

16   See David Alworth, "Paratextual Art," in *ELH* 85, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 1123–48, here 1130; and David Alworth and Peter Mendelsund, *The Look of the Book: Jackets, Covers, and Art at the Edges of Literature* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020).

tion to the social may seem meticulous, my other, related contention could not be more general. What is the price for subsuming the cultural under the social in the ways it has been done here? For Alworth, drawing on Latour, culture means the "cultural network that emanates from [a site]," and consequently, studying culture means tracing this network (20). From this point of view, reading becomes an almost mechanical act of assembling. The sensory, aesthetic dimension—be it grounded in the interpretative and imaginative work of filling gaps between letters on a page or actors in a network, or in the tactile engagement with the materiality of the site and/or the medium at and through which this work occurs—is bracketed. Conceiving reading in terms of assembling aligns Alworth's book—at least in theory (its reading practice being pleasantly steeped in interpretation)—with current efforts to replace hermeneutics (which is always and inherently aesthetic) with description (which, even though it is a narrative technique that involves literary principles such as selection and combination, resonates with empirical facticity). If these efforts have caused a tectonic shift in literary criticism in the past decades that comes in tow with a style that, like Latourian sociology, courts a literary aesthetics to reinvigorate a critical practice, one of the ironies of this development is that the aesthetic dimension of literature receives no critical attention whatsoever.

I am not addressing this issue to dismiss the centrality that Alworth assigns to the social with Latour's help. In fact, I believe that the pathways opened up by his proposal for a "sociology *of* literature [that] seeks to discover the sociology *in* literature" (27) are crucial for the task of the cultural critic to reclaim the value of literature (and literary studies) for dealing with "the immensely difficult task of comprehending something as complex as *society*" (13)—a task that is especially taxing in times like ours, when not only the social but also the cultural artifact/social actor of the literary text, the constellation of actors and artifacts within which this text competes for attention, and the modes of engaging with it (on screen or on paper, in audio or audiovisual form) are in rapid flux. I am addressing this issue because I think it leads to an impoverished understanding of culture. And I find this problematic because I believe that we cannot fully grasp literature's special capacities to mediate the social and theorize the experiences associated with it—the very thing that Alworth is interested in and that makes his book so relevant today—without factoring in the aesthetic dimension of literature as a vector of critical engagement.

I further believe that the notion of practice offers a promising way of doing this. In his praxeological aesthetics, Georg Bertram defines art as an inter-active, intersubjective practice that revolves around making collective judg-ments about its own meaning and value. Understood in this way, art is "not simply a specific kind of practice, but rather a specific kind of *reflective* prac-tice, a specific formation of practices by means of which we take a stance to-wards ourselves in the midst of practicing our culture."[17] And while there are many different reflective practices (talking about speech, religion, therapeutic conversations, or philosophy), art is the practice we use to reflect upon what it means to be human—which means in a most general sense that "we have to define what we are always anew."[18] (I should also add that, for Bertram, what it means to be human is not a matter of defining the ontological sta-tus or essence of humankind but of defining the relations with and within the world that give shape and expression to human subjectivity.) In this con-stantly evolving process of *becoming rather than being human*, art (as a collective, reflective practice) gives occasion to take a stance on ourselves and grasp our "taking a stance" as "a practical occurrence."[19]

I am concluding on this note because I think that we are experiencing a moment in which we do have to define anew what it means to be human. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it painfully clear that social inequality—in splitting humanity into those who are more or less vulnerable to the pandemic because of inhabiting a position (or place) of relative social privilege—has be-come a vital threat to our survival as a species. In this situation, becoming human hinges, perhaps more than ever, on a commitment of those privileged enough to afford it to suture that split, both locally and globally. As cultural critics, it is our privilege and responsibility to articulate and acknowledge the indispensable role that culture can play in this collective endeavor.[20] One promising way of doing this is to connect Bertram's praxeological aesthetics with Alworth's view of literary art as an especially potent mediator and the-orizer of sociality. The critical practice of site reading would thus become a

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17   Bertram, *Art as Human Practice*, 3.
18   Bertram, 3.
19   Bertram, 3.
20   Together with my co-editors Joshua Shannon and Jason Weems, I am presently explor-ing the changing figurations of human being that undergird the practice and history of American Art in the volume *Humans* of the series Terra Foundation Essays (forthcoming with the University of Chicago Press in the fall of 2021).

driving force in confronting the question of the social with the question of the human: by way of reconfiguring human beings as quintessentially networked, collective, and dependent on nonhuman agents. And if climate change were not enough to expose the degree to which the limits of the social are determined by the corrosive effects of social inequality on the one hand and the possibilities of a peaceful coexistence of human and nonhuman actors on the other, perhaps the present pandemic could be. In any case, *Site Reading* offers a powerful vision of how the intersecting and interacting practices of literary art and cultural criticism can do their share in figuring out a just and sustainable form of sociality for times to come.