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Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature After “the Sociology of Literature”

James F. English

THE “SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE” HAS ALWAYS NAMED a polyglot and rather incoherent set of enterprises. It is scattered across so many separate domains and subdomains of scholarly research, each with its own distinct agendas of theory and method, that it scarcely even rates the designation of a “field.”¹ But for purposes of clarity and simplicity, I will focus here on the fate of sociology in the recent history of literary studies. Is literary studies actively invested at present in the project of sustaining a sociology of literature? As currently configured, and facing the particular disciplinary circumstances that we do, are literary scholars capable of producing a *new* sociology of literature? Would they be favorably disposed toward one if it came their way?

One hesitates to answer such questions in the affirmative. New or old, the sociology of literature seems to possess little traction in literary studies. Nobody appears to regret the passing of an “old” sociology of literature, invoked these days (where it is invoked at all) as a stale and outmoded approach, like reader-response or archetypal criticism, barely worth a chapter in the latest theory anthology. But nor would many literary scholars embrace the prospect—as they perceive it—of a new sociological turn, of a more “sociological” future for literary studies. If the old sociology of literature seems all too old, a superseded relic of an earlier moment in the discipline, a new sociology of literature can seem all too contemporary, in step with ominous trends that are driving humanistic inquiry toward some small, sad corner of the increasingly social-science-dominated academy to endure an “interdisciplinary” afterlife of collaborative media research.

I am speaking here of images and perceptions, of what the phrase “sociology of literature” might conjure up in the disciplinary imaginary of the Eng Lit or Comp Lit professoriate. I am not speaking about any actual program of research, about attempts to connect the core mission of sociology with that of literary studies, articulating in new, more thorough, or more provocative ways the social logic of literary texts and

practices and/or the literary forms of social texts and practices. That multifaceted enterprise is alive and well, as I believe anyone awake to the excitements of our profession should be aware, and as the essays in this special issue of *NLH* vibrantly affirm.

But there is the image problem, this resistance, at the very least, to the nomenclature, this need to place scare quotes around the phrase itself. “The sociology of literature”: something critics tried to do a long time ago, or (more worryingly) something critics are starting to do today instead of the proper tasks of literary history and criticism. When exactly did this distancing become habitual, and why? Rita Felski and I embarked on this project partly as a way to address those questions. Having entered graduate school in the early 1980s, we well remember when “the sociology of literature” was a term widely in use by literary scholars and critical theorists alike. This was especially true in Britain which, as Raymond Williams observed, remained into the 1970s a “backward—indeed an undeveloped country” with respect to sociology as an academic discipline.² With little in the way of an institutional establishment to hinder them, British scholars whose training and higher degrees were in literature could make free with the mantle of “sociologist.” In addition to Williams himself (whose visiting appointment at Stanford in 1973–74 was in the social sciences rather than the humanities), one thinks here of Richard Hoggart (labeled a sociologist in most bibliographies and encyclopedias) and Stuart Hall (who was named Professor of Sociology at the Open University in 1979), as well as younger figures like Francis Barker, Colin Mercer, and Graham Murdock, all of whom came to be at least as closely associated with sociology as with English. Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, these sociologically inclined literary critics worked productively alongside an emergent generation of cultural sociologists (Tony Bennett, John Hall, Andrew Milner, David Morley, Charlotte Brunson, Jim McGuigan, Janet Wolff, and many others), building on the traditions of Western Marxism and in particular of critical theory to forge an interdisciplinary path—a “sociology of literature” stream within “British cultural studies”—through such innovative venues as Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the Essex Sociology of Literature Project.

Australia, where Felski did her graduate work, was importantly involved in advancing this new intellectual and institutional configuration. The relatively soft disciplinary boundaries there between sociology, communications, media studies, and English allowed scholars like Bennett (a native Australian with a sociology degree from Sussex), Mercer (a native Briton with a degree in sociology of literature from Essex), and John Frow (a native Australian with a comparative literature degree from

Cornell) to engage each other as colleagues in a series of collaborative and genuinely interdisciplinary projects when they were working at Australian universities in the early and mid-1980s.

In the United States, where sociology had already staked out its separate territory within the higher educational and public-policy infrastructures, such discipline bridging was more difficult. Still, the “sociology of literature” was something an American graduate student could not help but be aware of in the early 1980s. The Birmingham scene was attracting considerable transatlantic attention. Williams’s major early works were well known, he had published a study of American television in 1974, and in the early 1980s his *Keywords* and *Writing in Society* both appeared in U.S. editions. Lucien Goldmann’s *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (1975) and *Method in the Sociology of Literature* (1981) often figured alongside works by Williams and Hall on the syllabi of literary theory courses, having eclipsed Robert Escarpit’s earlier *Sociology of Literature* as the major French contributions to the field. Alert to this curricular trend, publishers were issuing handbooks and primers like John Hall’s *Sociology of Literature* in 1979 and Williams’s *Sociology of Culture* in 1981, both geared mainly to graduate students in literature.

This was the situation—“the sociology of literature ‘moment’” as Bennett calls it in his contribution to this volume—that for all its seeming promise scarcely figures in accounts of literary studies today. Many of these figures are still being read (indeed, are still writing), but not, by and large, under the banner of the “sociology of literature.” The Essex Project dropped “sociology” from its nomenclature in the mid-1980s and disbanded a decade later. The Birmingham Centre faded from prominence and was summarily “restructured” out of existence a decade ago. A title search for “sociology of literature” in Amazon turns up no primers published since 1990; conferences or panels on the sociology of literature are nonexistent, at least from the perspective of scholars of literature. How to account for such a rapid decline, especially when the evidence suggests that interest in theorizing relationships of literary forms to social forces has grown rather than diminished since the early 1980s?

Indeed, the increasing institutional legitimacy of this formerly dissident mode of literary study might itself suggest a partial explanation for its terminological eclipse. If the “sociology of literature” had often functioned during the period of New Critical orthodoxy rather like Gramsci’s “philosophy of praxis” during the years of his imprisonment—as a euphemism for the Marxist approach—then perhaps it was the triumph of that approach, the triumph of critical theory and the paradigm of “critique,” which permitted the term itself to wither away. “Triumph” is

of course somewhat overstating the matter and, as I discuss below, there were also other factors in play. But broad acceptance of the (Marxist) paradigm of critique within literary studies had by 1990 enabled the “symptomatic” or “suspicious” mode of close reading largely to supplant that of the New Criticism while elevating History and Power to the position of new disciplinary watchwords and consigning much of the formalist inheritance to a reject bin labeled “aesthetic ideology.”³ There was rather less need to specify a distinct school or approach called the “sociology of literature” because so many literary scholars were now, in this very basic sense of the term, sociologists of literature. Wherever they might be located on the map of named and recognized subfields—postcolonial studies, queer theory, new historicism—their shared disciplinary mission was to coordinate the literary with the social: to provide an account of literary texts and practices by reference to the social forces of their production, the social meanings of their formal particulars, and the social effects of their circulation and reception.

Of course this mission has been pursued in very different ways, some more directly indebted to and conversant with established sociological traditions than others. But a quick survey of some important tendencies since the 1980s shows just how wide a swath of the discipline has undergone some form of sociological reorientation. Among the approaches where affinities with sociology are strongest we should include book history and the new bibliography studies, which have been revitalized by the work of such scholars as Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, D. F. McKenzie, and Peter Stallybrass. As McKenzie influentially argued, historians of the book need to recognize that the true “substance” of their research is not texts but “the sociology of texts,” for “the book, in all its forms, enters history only as an evidence of human behaviour.”⁴ By recasting book history in these terms, scholars have advanced what has been one of the main goals of the sociology of literature since the early work of Williams, namely to open and extend the very concept of literary culture together with the understanding of who produces it. As Alan Liu puts it, the new book history has helped to “democratize” the “core circuit” of literary sociality, “restoring to view other vital nodes” in the productive process beyond the exclusive club of author, text, and reader, making room in literary studies for “editor, publisher, bookseller, shipper, balladmonger or peddler, annotator, and so on.”⁵ This democratizing emphasis on the hidden or forgotten producers of culture, those whom Howard Becker called the “support personnel” of art worlds,⁶ has among other things enabled literary scholars like Zachary Lesser and sociologists like Laura J. Miller, John B. Thompson, and Ted Striphas to fill in what John Sutherland rightly complained was still the “hole

at the centre of literary sociology” in the 1980s, namely the “scholarly ignorance about book trade and publishing technicalities.”⁷⁷ And scholars such as Stallybrass have recently carried the project of democratization further, into the world of things, exploring the cultural agency not only of “minor” individuals and collectivities but of the technical apparatuses and material objects of literary practice, which serve, in Bruno Latour’s terms, as “actants” in a vast network of productive interrelation with other objects as well as with humans.⁸

Liu himself has explored these super- or extrasocial networks of cultural production in his own important contributions to new media studies, a thriving area of research that knits together book history, cultural studies, communications theory, and the history and sociology of science. Literary scholars had already explored new or digital media sufficiently to support an anthology like George Landow’s and Paul Delany’s *Hypermedia and Literary Studies* in 1991; a decade later Jerome McGann’s *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* won the premier book prize in the discipline; and today the field encompasses a full range of variants in the work of senior scholars like Johanna Drucker and N. Katherine Hayles and younger ones like Lisa Nakamura and Matthew Kirschenbaum.

A third sociological branch of literary study that has emerged since the 1980s treats the history and logic of literary values and literary canon formation. Pierre Bourdieu’s work has provided much of the impetus for this line of research as well as many of its conceptual resources. His theory of general and restricted literary fields with their reciprocal ratios of symbolic to economic capital, his focus on the ways that cultural distinctions and “consecrations” homologize, euphemize, and reinforce social hierarchies, and his particular interest in the role of the educational system in maintaining structures of domination have influenced a wide range of work on literary value and the institutions that produce it, from John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* (1994) and John Frow’s *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (1995) to Pascale Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters* (2005).⁹ But the interest in social and institutional bases of literary value extends well beyond the school of Bourdieu and has become a diversified subfield containing such varied and influential studies as Richard Ohmann’s *Politics of Letters* (1987), Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s *Contingencies of Value* (1988), Lawrence Rainey’s *Institutions of Modernism* (1998), Richard Todd’s *Consuming Fictions* (1988), Janice Radway’s *A Feeling For Books* (1999), Regenia Gagnier’s *Insatiability of Human Wants* (2000), Graham Huggan’s *Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), and the work of Martha Woodmansee, Mark Osteen, and others involved in the new economic criticism.¹⁰

Overlapping with this stream of research insofar as it shares an institutionalist emphasis on higher education, the syllabus, and the professoriate is another large body of work which has been rethinking the history of literary studies and its place and function among the disciplines and in the wider social world. This is one form of what Bourdieu called the “reflexive” sociology of literature, which positions the discipline as its own object of study, forcing a critical encounter between literary scholars and the conditions of possibility of their authority and expertise. Terry Eagleton made an influential intervention on this field with the first chapter of his bestselling primer *Literary Theory* (1983), and subsequent contributions include major studies by Gerald Graff (1987), Ian Hunter (1988), Evan Watkins (1989), Gauri Viswanathan (1989), and Bill Readings (1996), as well as Alan Liu’s *The Laws of Cool* (2004), which brings the reflexive sociology of literary studies up to date with the age of digital media and “knowledge work.”¹¹ Though focusing on different national traditions and historical moments, these studies share an interest in what Viswanathan highlights as the central task of “educational sociology,” namely that of “treating the received categories of the curriculum not as absolutes but as constructed realities realized in particular institutional contexts.” This sociological detachment from the literary *illusio* denaturalizes our disciplinary investment in, say, Shakespeare or irony, bringing into view the “power relations between educator and educated, and the relations of curricular content to social structure and modes of social organization.”¹² The project has been especially important for postcolonial studies (Viswanathan’s field), as it has uncovered the colonial agendas that lie at the roots of English (a discipline born in India and Scotland) and perhaps of modern literary study more generally.

A fifth explicitly sociological branch of literary studies, emerging in dialogue with those already mentioned, has focused on readers and reading. Book history in particular has helped to dislodge the traditional literary-critical conception of “the” reader as a generalized text processor (a conception reinforced rather than challenged by the work of Wolfgang Iser and the Konstanz school of reader-response theory). Through the efforts of Chartier and others, we have come to see the reception side of literary practice as a complex and changing social space in which the kind of reading *we* do (silent, secular, academic, unshared, et cetera) is a recent and decidedly nontypical development. The sociological work on literary value and canon formation, and that on the functions of the university, have also helped to shape the terms of a sociology of readers; one thinks in particular of Bourdieu’s bestselling work, *Distinction*, a social critique of approved canons of value

supported by a massive empirical study of people's judgments of taste in literature and the other arts.¹³ But the sociology of readers and reading practices that has emerged since the 1980s is not merely tributary to or subsidiary of these other lines of scholarship (book history and canon critique). The most influential study of readers in the United States is still Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), a book completed prior to the publication of *Distinction* in English and well before the rise of a revamped field of book history.¹⁴ Methodologically, it drew on the long sociological tradition of audience research and mass persuasion theory and on the new and more respectful attention being given, especially within British sociology, to audiences for popular culture and to communities of fans. It assisted in hastening what Wendy Griswold, Terry McDonnell, and Nathan Wright describe as the major shift in American sociology of reading, from an approach concerned mainly with issues of literacy and illiteracy to one concerned with "reading as social practice," posing questions about "who reads what, how people read, and how their reading relates to their other activities."¹⁵

The "who" in Radway's case were nonacademic middle-class women, and the particular impact of her book derived partly from its focus on these readers, whose preferences and practices had traditionally served within literary studies only as negative exemplars. *Reading the Romance* brought a specifically feminist critique to bear on the discipline, on the academic habitus, and on the dominant regime of literary value—something that neither Bourdieu's sociology of taste nor the institutionalist sociologies of the university managed to do. Radway's book initiated an enduring sociological concern with the gender of reading, evident today in such studies as Dawn H. Currie's *Girl Talk* (1999), Elizabeth Long's *Book Clubs* (2003), Iris Parush's *Reading Jewish Women* (2004), and many more.¹⁶ It has also inspired scholars to pose the questions of who reads and why to other groups of readers that were neglected or diminished in the traditional optics of literary study. The sociologist Wendy Griswold, for example, has extended the reach of such questions to Africa, describing, among others, the "hard-core group of committed readers" in Nigeria: readers so far on the periphery of Anglophone culture that they were effectively invisible to literary scholars before her interventions.¹⁷

This listing of sociological strains in literary studies could be extended, to include for example the burgeoning field of law and literature, which has among other things been mapping relationships between the laws governing intellectual property, the popular conceptions and concrete practices of authorship, the modes of literary distribution and consumption, and the history of literary forms. There is the sociology of literature and race, as explored in the work of Roderick Ferguson, Avery

Gordon, and Cynthia Tolentino.¹⁸ There is the sociology of globalization and “world literature,” pioneered by Casanova but separately and no less influentially developed by Franco Moretti. At the intersection of literature and film, there is what R. Barton Palmer has described as “the sociological turn of Adaptation Studies,” evident, for example, in the work of Dudley Andrew, Robert Stam, and Simone Murray.¹⁹ And so on. But the point should by now be amply clear that, whatever its reputational and nomenclatural fates may have been since the late 1970s and early 1980s, the sociology of literature has not actually receded. Instead, it has become partner to a great many significant and innovative projects that are no less sociological for bearing other labels than “the sociology of literature.” It has stealthily advanced on many fronts and seems now, as much of the work in this issue suggests, to be arriving at a point of especially rich potential as both sociology and literary studies turn toward new, more rigorously “descriptive” or “pragmatic” approaches, rejecting the long-dominant paradigm of critique that has governed and limited the previous history of their encounters.

And yet it seems unlikely that the “sociology of literature” banner will soon be raised again. Exciting new work will indeed be emerging (is already emerging) in this disciplinary contact zone, but when it comes to labeling, the era of silent partnership is likely to continue. And the reasons for this are not, I think, hard to discern. The period I have been surveying—the period “after” the sociology of literature—has, to be sure, witnessed the rise of interdisciplinary research. Putting aside the question of its intellectual payoffs, this development has offered some clear institutional advantages to literary studies, which has been able to install itself as a major contributor and even, at many U.S. universities, as the veritable hub of interdisciplinary programs: Africana studies, Asian American studies, cinema and media studies, cultural studies, digital humanities, early American studies, queer studies, women’s studies, and many others. But the discipline’s accommodation of the interdisciplinary paradigm has only gone so far. Academic disciplines (and even interdisciplines or hybrids) are relational entities; they must define themselves by what they are not. And what literary studies is not is a “counting” discipline. This negative relation to numbers is traditional—foundational, even—and it has not been seriously challenged by the rise of interdisciplinarity.

In fact, while disciplinary binarisms may have softened within the humanities (as also within the sciences), those between humanistic and nonhumanistic disciplines have tended to harden. For this same period of rising interdisciplinarity has also, of course, (and not unrelatedly) been the period of higher education’s remodeling after the image of the

private corporation. The institutions in which we are lodged (colleges, universities, state and national educational systems, regional accords, global higher-educational brands, world rankings) have become ever more committed to numerical data, imposing on us ever more stringent quantificational regimes of value and assessment—regimes which have tended predictably to shift resources away from the humanities and toward the very disciplines that have created them (such as the business school disciplines of finance, marketing, and strategic management).²⁰ As the largest discipline in the humanities, and the center of its interdisciplinary formations, literary studies has shouldered much of the burden of critique and resistance to this encroachment, defending qualitative models and strategies against the naïve or cynical quantitative paradigm that has become the doxa of higher-educational management.²¹ Under these institutional circumstances, antagonism toward counting has begun to feel like an urgent struggle for survival.

Let me hasten to say that sociology departments are far from monolithic bastions of number crunching. Even in the United States, where quantitative approaches have held a dominant position and where nearly every doctoral program requires training in statistical methods, sociology is among the most heterogeneous and methodologically capacious of disciplines—far more so in fact than literary studies. It encompasses a vibrant wing of “new cultural sociology” (spearheaded by scholars like Paul DiMaggio, Craig Calhoun, Michèle Lamont, Ann Swidler, Jeffrey Alexander, and Philip Smith) which, though developing its own distinct assumptions and methods, bears more in common with the traditions of British cultural studies and European critical theory (traditions represented today by such figures as John B. Thompson and Mike Featherstone from the United Kingdom, and Jürgen Habermas, Zygmunt Bauman, and Ulrich Beck from Germany) than with the kind of Parsonian positivism that literary scholars tend to imagine as sociology’s sole agenda.²² Critical sociology has contributed far more than literary studies to the tool kit for critique of current social hierarchies and neoliberal ideologies; and the sociology of education has produced more powerful and comprehensive challenges to the corporate university.²³ Still, perceptions guide practice, and literary studies, at least in the United States, has often let itself be guided by a view of sociology, as of the social sciences in general, as allied with the hegemony of numbers, and as a discipline decisively favored, over and against the humanities, by the despised new managers of higher education.

Apart from muting the term “sociology” within literary studies, one consequence of this misperception is a tendency to draw on the most innovative sociological work by literary critics for its conclusions rather

than its methods. Consider the response to two major interventions that effectively bookend the period we've been considering. At one end lies Radway's *Reading the Romance*, which, as already noted, has exerted a powerful and enduring effect in literary studies, inspiring much work on popular genres, forms of interpretive community, the gendered hierarchies of cultural value, and more. But few if any literary scholars have modeled their actual programs of research after Radway's. *Reading the Romance* was, we should recall, an empirical, questionnaire-based study. Its questionnaires were not distributed in the manner of a rigorously designed scientific survey; there were no sample groups or regression analyses, and no charts or diagrams. Data gleaned from the questionnaires were supplemented by interviews and other qualitative ethnographic research, which largely shaped the analysis. Still, it was a book that proposed a clear line of departure from the normative protocols of literary study, charting a new methodological path in the direction of the social sciences. It has been a path not taken.

At the other end of this time span, we find another seminal and widely discussed intervention in Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000), and *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005). In Moretti's work, the departure from normative methods and the turn to social science are cast in far more polemical terms than in Radway's. Moretti denounces close reading and the devotion to a small canon of texts as "theological" practices, and calls explicitly for a more "scientific" approach to literary history, a project of "distant reading" that combines large-scale data sets, abstract models drawn from mathematics and biology, and heavy reliance on the visual display of quantitative information. At times, Moretti's embrace of the "scientific spirit" and disparagement of unrigorous humanisms are so bluntly expressed that one wonders if he even really expects his call to be heeded.²⁴ Moretti's work has had a wide influence on the field of the history of the novel and has helped to reanimate the field of comparative world literature. And certainly it has prompted much debate and discussion *about* the uses of data and mathematical models in literary study. What it hasn't done is to inspire other literary scholars to adopt his quantitative methods as part of a new model of practice. On the contrary, Moretti's provocations, however scintillating, have tended to reinforce the false but pervasive perception of a great divide between literature and sociology, with the former all irrational devotion and interpretative finesse and the latter all scientific rigor and verifiable "results."

Sociology itself has long favored mixed-methods research and has gone a good way toward dissolving, in practice as well as theory, this hoary binarism of quantitative versus qualitative. But literary scholars

seem less able than ever to map themselves on the higher-educational landscape without reference to that presumed fault line. Even those who see themselves as doing cultural studies tend not to venture across the disciplinary divide to read, say, DiMaggio on art and audience, Thompson or Featherstone on popular media, Timothy Dowd, Marco Santoro, or Johan Fornäs on popular music, or any of the work that appears in major journals of mixed-methods research like *Poetics* and the *American Sociological Review*. Sociology is thus likely to remain in a vexed position within (North American) literary studies, perceived as an institutional threat even as it serves as an indispensable partner on many terrains of historical and theoretical inquiry.

John Frow provides an expert account of the current problems and potentialities of this interdisciplinary partnership in his essay "On Midlevel Concepts." He begins with the various theoretical errors that have plagued nearly all work in the sociology of literature. The most fundamental of these errors is to conceive the analytical task in terms of a unidirectional itinerary which brings the methods and categories of social science to bear on the material of literature, reducing the latter to an object of the former. Literary scholars are right, according to Frow, to reject this assignment of absolute priority to the social and of subordinate status to literature, and therefore also justified in mistrusting the claims made for explicitly quantitative methodologies such as Moretti's. The process of counting and tabulating requires one to specify the units of analysis (in Moretti's case, "devices, themes, tropes," "clues," and so on) but these are, Frow argues, "neither given in advance nor arbitrarily constructed by an analytic choice, but are, rather, necessarily implicated in and derived from a process of reading and interpretation." The "sociological" method, that is, itself depends on literary practices.

While this means that "distant reading" is more intimately entwined with close reading than its adherents have recognized, and that counting does not offer a way out of the treacheries of form and the impasses of interpretation, Frow's critique is not ultimately intended to impede empirical inquiry and statistical analysis but on the contrary to suggest how "it might yet be possible to cross the boundary between literary studies and the social sciences"—a crossing that he, in common with other contributors to this volume, still regards as "a prerequisite for any viable account of the literary field."

Tony Bennett likewise distinguishes an emergent mode of the sociology of literature, defined against a now-exhausted program of critique

and its attendant dualistic logic whereby the critic invokes the social to explain the “real” meaning of the literary. In common with several other contributors here, Bennett sees the development of the (otherwise quite different) Luhmannian and Deleuzian sociologies of assemblages and of Latour’s actor-network-theory, with their commitment to “flat” rather than dualistic ontologies, as instrumental in discrediting this old dependency on the explanatory power of “the social” and as providing the basis for rethinking literary form. Whereas the old sociology of literature “focused on how to fathom the connections between two different realms” (the social and the literary), the task for sociology of literature today, says Bennett, is to focus on “the ways literary phenomena operate in and across different kinds of publicly instituted sociomaterial assemblages.” From the vantage point of this paradigm, he offers a new sociological conceptualization of aesthetic agency, borrowing from the critiques of Kant advanced by Foucault, Rancière, and Ian Hunter, but moving beyond them to consider how aesthetic expertise is produced through “particular discursive and sociomaterial orderings of the relations between persons, spaces, texts, and things.”

In contrast with these essays, Timothy Brennan’s “Running and Dodging: The Rhetoric of Doubleness in Contemporary Theory” offers a warning against too hasty and fulsome an embrace of “flat” or descriptive ontologies. While Bennett sees the work of Rancière, and in particular his theory of an “aesthetic regime of art,” as a valuable resource for a new sociology of literature, Brennan includes Rancière among the “new formalists” who have lately emerged to defend the sacred ground of poetics against any incursion of the sociological. But unlike the new formalism of poetry studies, says Brennan, Rancière’s is a formalism in the camouflage of political combat; his work, like other recent work in literary theory, aims at “reasserting literary autonomy under the sign of the ‘political.’”

The most common and influential form of this duplicity, Brennan argues, so widespread that it has become part of “an academic common sense,” is “politicized Derrideanism,” a “theoretical style that declares itself as *immediately* political,” that is, as capable of advancing the radical aims of a new politics through the very act of doing or performing “theory.” To disrupt this orthodoxy, Brennan undertakes a sociological stylistics of literary theory which seeks to clarify the social situation of literary studies by focusing on the formal properties of its language. Chief among those properties is a kind of “doubleness,” a simultaneous showing and veiling, or speaking and not speaking, which Brennan regards as the classic gesture of literary modernism. Indeed, the double rhetoric of theory is effectively identical with the “double-movements” of

Flaubertian style that Bourdieu maps onto the social space of nineteenth-century Europe in his famous reading of *Sentimental Education*. Just as that doubleness enabled modernist literature paradoxically to claim advantaged social ground for itself in the name of aesthetic autonomy, so, Brennan argues, a certain style of literary theory today lodges itself comfortably in the fabric of neoliberal society through the very rhetorical maneuvers of its expressed political dissidence.

David Alworth and Mark McGurl attempt to coordinate literary form with sociological theory in a rather different way, proposing not a sociology of literature (or of literary theory), but rather, in Alworth's phrase, a "reciprocally illuminat[ing] juxtaposition of sociology and literature." Their essays aim to achieve the difficult "crossing" Frow envisions, but without evading what McGurl calls the "friction" or "productive irritation" between the two disciplines. Alworth organizes his analysis around sociology's and literature's "dissimilar, yet comparable, approaches to the same site," namely the supermarket—which has served on the one hand as a central metaphor in Latour's accounts of actor-network-theory, and on the other hand as a location, a theme, and an object of representation for both literary and sociological texts. What makes the approaches to this site by recent works in sociology and literature "comparable" is that both reject conventional accounts of the supermarket as locus of alienated modernity, conceiving of it instead as a node or relay between human and nonhuman agency. The literary work—in this case, Don DeLillo's *White Noise*—cannot offer a "fully formed sociology" of the postmodern supermarket, nor can ANT offer the "imagistic density of a novelistic diegesis." But brought together into site-specific contact, they "suggest a new model of humanistic and social-scientific collaboration directed toward emergent problems in and of the social."

McGurl's essay, "Ordinary Doom: Literary Studies in the Waste Land of the Present," organizes its "reciprocal illumination" of the two disciplines around their different orientations to temporality and especially to the concept of modernity. Taking sociology not as a comfortable academic companion for literary studies but rather as its "privileged intellectual antagonist," McGurl explores the dissonance between sociology's dominant orientation toward the present (its projects typically centered on the question of modernity) and literary study's commitment to the past (its projects typically centered on a historical sequence of authors, works, genres, and periods). Neither discipline, he argues, is fully equipped to grasp the material and experiential threats imposed by an increasingly unpredictable and terrifying future. But by drawing on the sociologist Ulrich Beck's concept of "reflexive modernity" and on the complex management of interpenetrating pasts, presents,

and futures in key twentieth-century literary works (from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* to Gregory Benford's science-fiction classic *Timescape*), McGurl proposes a way for literary studies to recalibrate its temporal framework. This reorientation will also make possible a new, more sociological appreciation of the institutions that constitute literature as a field of study—institutions that today face a near-term future of potentially massive erosion or even annihilation. Through an admittedly difficult articulation of literary practice with sociological thinking we can, says McGurl, use the penetration of our present by “speculative fictions” of the future to draw us “away from a position of automatic critique to a position as interested in the conservation and value of institutions as in their limitations.”

For the sociologists Shai Dromi and Eva Illouz and for the literary critic Heather K. Love, the payoff for a new articulation of sociology with literary studies lies in the area of ethics. Dromi and Illouz begin their essay “Recovering Morality: Pragmatic Sociology and Literary Studies” by sketching the theoretical framework developed by Luc Boltanski and his collaborators in the new French pragmatic sociology. In this school of thought, actors are presumed to possess a “universal capacity to argue about just and unjust arrangements, a capacity to criticize and to move between different ways of arguing about these arrangements, and a capacity to defend their position using evidence or ‘tests.’” The new pragmatic sociology does not try to sort everyday moral controversies by bringing the force of critique to bear on the actors’ various “ideological” statements and “faulty” rationales. It accepts that, as Latour has put it, “the task of ordering and defining the social should be left to the actors themselves, not taken up by the analyst.”

Dromi and Illouz consider the implications of this new sociology for literary criticism, taking as an example the contentious reception of American sentimental fiction and in particular of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The novel's characters, its author and her early readers, its previous generations of critics and other academic commentators, and the ordinary readers who continue to enjoy the novel today articulate competing moral claims that need to be taken equally seriously. Defining their position against the hidden normativity of politically minded literary criticism, with its predetermined frameworks of oppressive and oppressed characters, racist and antiracist readers, Illouz and Dromi argue for a sociology of literature that respects the critical capacities of all participants—and thus remains open to unexpected findings.

Heather Love's “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn” likewise focuses on a canonical novel about American slavery—Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—as a way of exploring the ethical stakes of the

pragmatic turn from critique to description in recent sociological and humanistic work. While she regards much of the new sociological work in literary studies as disavowing the tradition of close reading, Love proposes a sociological mode of reading that remains committed to closely grained accounts of textual complexity, but which locates that complexity less at the level of “experience, consciousness, and motivation” than at that of “surfaces, operations, and interactions.” Joining Latour’s ANT with Erving Goffman’s microsociological method of “thin description,” her alternate model of reading rejects even the vestigial forms of humanism in contemporary literary study and denies the critic any claim upon “ethical exemplarity.” This model is then tested in a startlingly original reading of *Beloved*. This novel, so widely embraced as a masterpiece of “humanist ethics,” appears in Love’s scrupulously “flat” reading as a text that turns at crucial moments away from humanism toward “the possibility of an alternative ethics, one grounded in documentation and description rather than empathy and witness.”

In two otherwise very different essays, Elaine Freedgood and Ato Quayson bring postcolonial perspectives to bear on sociology’s long-standing interest in literary genre. Freedgood’s “Fictional Settlements: Footnotes, Metalepsis, and the Colonial Effect,” reads Catherine Parr Traill’s *Canadian Crusoes*, a popular robinsonade of 1850, as a work whose inept management of the interplay between real and fictional spaces can serve to highlight a specifically colonial version of the effect Bourdieu attributes to all realist fiction, namely that of hiding through the conventions of the novel precisely the elements of reality which, for the sake of its power and persuasiveness as fiction, it cannot avoid revealing. The essay focuses in particular on Parr Traill’s failure to integrate the kinds of factual material about place on which realist fiction depends for its verisimilitude. Where a novelist such as George Eliot accomplishes such integration in a manner so seamless as to be almost imperceptible, Parr Traill strands whole chunks of information about the Canadian frontier, its geography and weather and flora and fauna and so forth, in footnotes that stand awkwardly apart from and at odds with her fictional adventure story. This awkwardness is, however, a gift to the postcolonial critic, since, like the clumsy sleight-of-hand of an amateur magician, it breaks the spell of illusion. The novel’s jarring moments of metalepsis betray its “colonial effect.” Freedgood is thus able to draw forth from this “innocent” story of young-adult adventure the grim realities of colonial conquest and settlement which, in more canonical novels, would be veiled through the very process of their canonization in a fictive world.

Quayson’s “*Kòbòlò* Poetics: Urban Transcripts and their Reading Publics in Africa” makes a very different approach to postcolonial studies,

proposing an interdisciplinary framework of analysis geared not to the educated African readers of the schoolroom, but rather to those of the street, arguing for “a new literary sociology [able] to account for popular forms of reading and writing in urban Africa.” The specific form of writing Quayson analyzes is a kind of urban script prevalent throughout the sub-Saharan: “Wry observations, slogans, and mottoes inscribed on different surfaces across the cityscape in a variety of languages.” To connect these texts with relevant practices of reading, Quayson develops an original sociological category, the *kòbòlòì*, which names the jobless “area boys” or savvy young men of the urban streets. He then unfolds a subtle logic of relation between texts and readers based in part on his own ethnographic research, showing that in the mobility, transitionality, and “structural intermediacy” of their social positions, as well as in their roles as “observers, interpreters, and users of urban details,” the *kòbòlòì* “become salient as co-constitutive reading public to the mobile and mobilizing *vehicular* logic of the urban scripts.” Dazzling in its interdisciplinary range, Quayson’s essay reminds us that a new sociology of literature may involve more than a simple “crossing” between its two core disciplines, drawing important conceptual resources from such other fields as anthropology, philosophy, history, and economics.

As Bernard Lahire’s “The Double Life of Writers” is ably introduced with a headnote from Michèle Richman, I will simply say that we are pleased to be presenting the first English-language extract from an important book by one of France’s leading sociologists of literature. Though not yet well known in the United States, Lahire is a visible and controversial figure in France, where he stands as both heir to the Bourdieuan tradition and as that tradition’s most prolific and vehement dissenter—a suitably mediating figure with whom to conclude this special issue, linking as he does an older sociology of literature to new ones still in the process of emerging.

Taken together, the eleven essays gathered here confirm the heterogeneity of these emergent approaches and call our attention to the chafing points that must arise between them as well as between the two major disciplines they articulate. But they might also suggest that we have now passed beyond the whole question of accepting or rejecting the sociology of literature. There are so many intersections and openings, so many parallel projects of research, so many forms of literary study that rely on sociological thought, and so many forms of sociology that confront the literariness of their own objects and procedures, that the real question today is not whether or even why, but how. How can sociology and literature best take advantage—institutionally as well as intellectually—of their polymorphic and often underacknowledged but nonetheless durable

partnership? I can think of no better starting point for an engagement with that question than the work in this special issue.

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NOTES

1 In this respect, nothing much has changed since the late 1980s, when Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, Philippe Desan, and Wendy Griswold, surveying the ground for a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, observed a “cluster of intellectual ventures . . . congregat[ing] under an outsized umbrella only to differ greatly in their sense of what they do and what the sociology of literature does.” Ferguson, Desan, and Griswold, “Editor’s Introduction: Mirrors, Frames, and Demons: Reflections on the Sociology of Literature,” *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Spring 1988): 421.

2 Raymond Williams, “Literature and Sociology: In Memory of Lucien Goldmann,” *New Left Review* 67 (May–June 1971).

3 Minus their emphasis on psychoanalysis, this is roughly the discipline’s post-1970s itinerary as described by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in a recent account of the rise of “surface reading.” See Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 1–21.

4 D. F. McKenzie, “The Sociology of a Text: Orality, Literacy and Print in Early New Zealand,” in *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 126.

5 Alan Liu, “From Reading to Social Computing,” in manuscript; quoted by permission of the author.

6 Howard Saul Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1982).

7 John Sutherland, “Publishing History: A Hole at the Centre of Literary Sociology,” *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Spring 1988): 574; Zachary Lesser, *Renaissance Drama and the Politics of Publication: Readings in the English Book Trade* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004); Laura J. Miller, *Reluctant Capitalists* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005); John B. Thompson, *Books in the Digital Age: The Transformation of Academic and Higher Education Publishing in Britain and the United States* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005); Ted Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2009).

8 Bruno Latour, “On Actor Network Theory, A Few Clarifications,” *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 367–81.

9 John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press); John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995); Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005).

10 Richard M. Ohmann, *The Politics of Letters* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1987); Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Critical Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988); Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-Of-The-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1999); Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants; Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000); Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001); Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, eds., *The New Economic Criticism: Essays at the Interface of Literature and Economics* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

- 11 Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987); Ian Hunter, *Culture and Governance: The Emergence of Literary Education* (London: Macmillan, 1988); Evan Watkins, *Work Time: English Departments and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1989); Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and English Rule in India* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1989); Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997); Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004).
- 12 Viswanathan, 18.
- 13 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984).
- 14 Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984).
- 15 Wendy Griswold, Terry McDonnell, and Nathan Wright, "Reading and the Reading Class in the Twenty-First Century," *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005): 127.
- 16 Dawn H. Currie, *Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and their Readers* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1999); Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003); Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in 19th-Century Eastern European Jewish Society* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis Univ. Press, 2004).
- 17 These kinds of readers were by no means invisible to sociologists of African literature. Griswold's work (in *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000]) extends a line of sociological inquiry that dates back to the 1960s and 1970s by Africanists such as Nancy J. Schmidt, Bernth Lindfors, and Emmanuel Obiechina. But Griswold's much closer familiarity with and involvement in literary studies gave her work special impact among scholars of literature, very few of whom had paused to consider how, for example, a nonacademic West African pleasure reader might fit into prevailing theories of reading.
- 18 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Horror and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997); Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2004); Cynthia H. Tolentino, *America's Experts: Race and the Fictions of Sociology* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2009).
- 19 R. Barton Palmer, "The Sociological Turn in Adaptation Studies: The Example of Film Noir," in *A Companion to Literature and Film*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 258–78. An example would be the work of Simone Murray, whose "Materializing Adaptation Theory: The Adaptation Industry," in *Literature/Film Quarterly* 36 (Jan 2008): 4–20, is part of a forthcoming book on the adaptation industry (Routledge 2011).
- 20 For the American context, see Derek Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003). For comparative analyses across the global collegium, see Philip G. Altbach, ed., *International Higher Education: Reflections on Policy and Practice* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College Center for International Higher Education, 2006).
- 21 Recent examples include Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2008), and Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham, 2008).
- 22 Useful anthologies include Philip Smith, ed., *The New American Cultural Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), and Craig Calhoun and Richard Sennett, eds., *Practicing Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2007), which presents the work of a younger

generation. See also the Yale School manifesto by Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith, "The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology," in *The Meanings of Social Life*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (New York: Oxford, 2004).

23 In the United Kingdom and Europe, where until the 1980s the state-funded higher educational systems had no truck with the business model, sociology has focused on these issues only recently. In the United States, one may trace a robust tradition all the way back to Thorstein Veblen's *Higher Education in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1918).

24 Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary Theory* (New York: Verso, 2005), 4.