

15. Thick Redescription

Narrating Sociocultural Forms with Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* (2016)

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I first read *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* while on fellowship at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. The year was 2017, and, I seem to recall, I started reading Matthew Desmond's bestseller right around the time Donald Trump was inaugurated over the course of a few bleak winter weeks. I'm not a sociologist, neither do I work on urban poverty in the United States. Aside from the many books and essays that form my daily pile of professional reading in literary and cultural studies (somehow always growing, never shrinking), I like to have a handful of non-American novels and general interest books around my place that I can pick up at odd hours to let my thoughts run elsewhere. Desmond's book was in that latter category, having little to nothing in common with my ongoing research at the time. I was also grateful, I remember, to escape from the daily television coverage and online news feeds chronicling the first fits and starts of a disastrous presidency into a coherent and forceful narrative that tackled and made sense of profound social problems in America.

I always like to think of books, even academic works, as material objects in the world. With the book at my side as I write these lines, I am struck by the way my paperback copy of *Evicted* literally comes wrapped in cultural capital: the covers of the book proclaim it a "book of the year" as selected by the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker* and the *Washington Post*, as well as the winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, a Carnegie Medal, and the PEN / John Kenneth Galbraith Award for Nonfiction.¹ An endorsement by

1 I admit that the inclusion of *Evicted* on the NYT "10 Best Books of 2016" list was probably what prompted me to pick up a copy at the campus bookstore.

Barbara Ehrenreich establishes the book's academic credentials on the front cover, while short blurbs on the back by authors Ann Patchett and Jesmyn Ward lend a certain literary cachet to this ethnographic work. In his study, Desmond follows eight families in post-Great Recession Milwaukee who try to escape the vicious cycle of poverty, eviction, and homelessness, while also portraying the strategies that landlords, city courts, the police, and other actors employ to manage and often exploit lower-class renters. Desmond contends that the bottom portion of the private housing market is not distinct from the capitalist excesses in prestige real estate development; if anything, the immense potentials for profit and the structural exploitation in this market segment lend themselves to even more predatory behavior.

The book's enormous success, both popular and academic, speaks to the fact that it qualifies in the eyes of many current experts and readers as an ideal type of epistemic artifact. *Evicted's* massive impact on the cultural conversation in the United States certainly stirs the type of "sociology envy" that Rita Felski recently diagnosed in herself and in the wider discipline of literary and cultural studies.² Traditionally, literary criticism and media studies have turned to sociology for framing theories and concepts that locate aesthetic objects within larger social domains (think Bourdieu's "literary field," Luhmann's "social systems," or Williams's "structures of feeling"). But the attempt to analytically connect micro-phenomena (e.g., a literary text) to macro-phenomena (e.g., capitalist Western society) needs to draw upon various registers of critical practice, with theory being only one of them. It also requires forms of narrative redescription that follow connections between domains, relations between people, institutions, and artifacts. Taking the reflexive stance of *Culture*² as my cue, I inquire less into the content of Desmond's book (i.e., less into *what* it tells us about American culture) and more into its form: *how* does *Evicted* become such a supremely effective account of urban, race-inflected poverty? A great part of its appeal lies in the public-facing nature of its written prose, which is not only more empirically grounded and more directly political than today's literary and cultural criticism—as one should expect from good sociology—but also more assertively literary in style. I read *Evicted* as a late outcropping of a submerged strand of American sociology associated with the pioneering, but often professionally sidelined work of early activist sociologists such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Jane Addams. With Desmond's study as my

2 Rita Felski, "My Sociology Envy," *Theory, Culture & Society* (blog), July 25, 2019, <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/rita-felski-my-sociology-envy/>.

companion text, I aim to make a case for sociological *narrative*, rather than sociological *theory*, as a useful interdisciplinary resource for cultural studies. Furthermore, this short essay sketches how Desmond's intervention in *Evicted* rests on a foundation made up of a network of co-texts that firmly anchor it in a midway position between the scholarly publication sphere and the wider domains of mass media discourse.

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In *The Racial Order*, their ambitious work on social theory and an important companion text for *Evicted*, Matthew Desmond and his co-author (and erst-while doctoral adviser) Mustafa Emirbayer link their sociological outlook to a peculiar American genealogy of the field. In the closing paragraphs of the book, they refer to a “primordial diremption” in the early years of professionalized American sociology, which split apart a “reformist, public-minded” type of inquiry from what would become the “discipline-building, professionalizing” mainstream.³ This rift between positivist and normativist schools of thought, they argue, needs to be overcome: “The way forward requires affirming, as Addams and Du Bois sought to do from the outset ... that reflections on the kind of society and racial order one wants to have—and considerations as to how it might be brought about—do not have to be relegated to the realm of arbitrary speculation. These moral practical inquiries also can be reasoned, systematic, and open to empirical testing in much the same way as substantive knowledge about the racial world.”⁴

Indeed, Du Bois's early work, which emerged from his research activities as an enterprising social scientist trying to break into the white-dominated academy, struck this balance between empiricism and didacticism with care—and sometimes with flair. As such, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1898), Du Bois's first professional study after his doctoral dissertation, carries as its first footnote the following pronouncement regarding the word “Negro”: “I shall, moreover, capitalize the word, because I believe that eight million Americans are entitled to a capital letter.”⁵ This is quite a prescient opening salvo, considering how publishers and newsrooms in America are only now opting for

3 Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond, *The Racial Order* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 358.

4 Emirbayer and Desmond, *The Racial Order*, 359.

5 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1899] 2014), 2.

a capital B in “Black” after the groundswell of Black Lives Matter activism in 2020. Bracketing the many pages of measured prose and innumerable statistical items, the final chapter of the book ends with urgent rhetoric within two sections of moral-practical advice titled “The Duty of the Negroes” and “The Duty of the Whites.” Having staked out a claim to identity and citizenship in its first footnote, the book ends with an earnest, poetic admonishment of Philadelphia’s white citizenry. Du Bois calls for a “polite and sympathetic attitude” and a “desire to reward honest success” on behalf of the whites, and ends with the exhortation that “all this, added to the proper striving on their part, will go far, even in our day toward making all men, white and Black, realize what the great founder of the city meant, when he named it the City of Brotherly Love.”⁶ Coming on the heels of the publication of his doctoral thesis as the first monograph in the Harvard Historical Series, *The Philadelphia Negro* constituted Du Bois’s full-fledged attempt to establish himself in the professional field of sociology. In a larger context, this turn-of-the-century sociological publication partakes of the foundational identity crisis of this very field, which wavered between, as Wolf Lepenies has written, “a scientific orientation which has led it to ape the natural sciences and a hermeneutic attitude which has shifted the discipline toward the realm of literature.”⁷ Within Du Bois’s early oeuvre around 1900, *The Philadelphia Negro* gravitates toward the domain of science, while *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) marks the author’s entry into *belles lettres*.

As recent scholarship has examined, this mixture of hard science, activist interpretation, and literary style—pioneered by Du Bois but also by Jane Addams and her associates at Chicago’s Hull House—was relegated to the sidelines throughout twentieth-century professional sociology, with race- and gender-based discriminatory structures engulfing and curtailing its impact.⁸ With explicit references to this shadow history of American sociology included in *The Racial Order*, Desmond’s widely read work in *Eviction* also be-

6 Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 275.

7 Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1.

8 With regard to these two underappreciated founding figures of American sociology, see Aldon D. Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); Mary Jo Deegan, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892–1918* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988).

comes implicitly aligned with the trajectory of a more narratively engaged and interventionist approach of social inquiry.⁹

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In her essay on her “sociology envy,” Felski contends that sociology has a bad rep among literary and cultural studies scholars because it is often caricatured in one of two ways: either “as being synonymous with quantitative and statistical methods” or “as associated with broad synoptic theories of modern or postmodern society.” She reflects on the value of sociological writing for her own career as an academic: “Looking back over my own writing, for example, I’m struck by how often I’ve been helped out of intellectual jams and dead-ends by sociological thought.”¹⁰ She goes on to list Georg Simmel, C. Wright Mills, George Herbert Mead, Max Weber, and Luc Boltanski as important sociological interlocutors to her thought. Reflecting on this small canon, Felski holds,

None of this work drew on quantitative methods; nor did it turn to sociology to bolster broad claims about the nature of modern or postmodern society. What I found instructive in sociology, rather, was its sharply honed attentiveness to the many kinds of phenomena that make up social existence. While sociologists continue to assume a concept of society—a concept that Bruno Latour, for example, would question—they cannot help being conscious that this society is highly variegated and differentiated: made up of many kinds of institutions, communities, norms, and behaviors.¹¹

If I were to reflect on the genesis of my own conceptual thinking on the interrelation between “culture” and society, I would likewise highlight the influence of theoretical sociology by writers such as Niklas Luhmann or—more recently and going along with many in the field—Bruno Latour. At the end of the day, however, one returns to the writing on the page, the practical medium that

9 Consider Morris on the way Du Bois innovatively combined research methods in his early work as a freshly minted Harvard PhD: “Du Bois emerged from *The Philadelphia Negro* as the first number-crunching, surveying, interviewing, participant-observing and field-working sociologist in America, a pioneer in the multimethods approach” (Morris, *Scholar Denied*, 47). While the relative proportions are different, Desmond’s account in *Evicted* is based on all these methods as well.

10 Felski, “My Sociology Envy.”

11 Ibid.

has to lay out a narrative path connecting various levels of analysis—from a literary character or a specific metaphor, say, via genres and institutions, all the way to “American culture” or “neoliberal ideology.”

So how does *Evicted* do this?

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While you shouldn't judge a book by its epigraph, the paratextual addendum of a signifying quote often establishes a meaningful framing, with snippets from literary source texts frequently used to open accounts of a non-fictional nature. Desmond chose Langston Hughes's poem “Little Lyric (Of Great Importance)” for this purpose. The framing achieved via Hughes's poetic hope for a “heaven-sent” solution to poverty among urban renters highlights, first, the durability of the housing problem in the United States and, second, its peculiar relevance to non-white communities.

After this opening move, the prologue of the book starts in medias res, with the simple sentence “Jori and his cousin were cutting up, tossing snowballs at passing cars” (1).¹² The reader will get to meet the adolescent Black boy Jori, his mother Arleen Belle, and his little brother Jafaris in more detail in the chapters to follow; but first we see Jori's snowball spinning through the air on a cold January day in 2008, landing on or close to a passing car; the car stops, the driver gets out and runs in pursuit of the two boys; he doesn't stop at the front door the boys had thrown shut behind them but kicks the wooden barrier down; this small incident triggers a chain of events resulting in the landlord's decision to evict Jori and his family. What does this opening establish? A very common narrative strategy, such a beginning *in medias res* grips the reader's attention right at the get-go before leading over to a more thorough introduction to the storyworld: drama before exposition. A reviewer for a sociological journal would likely write this off as mere decorative prose distracting from the scholarly core of the argument. But is this paragraph not also something more? We could say, with Latour, that Desmond here manages to enlarge the sphere of actors by showing the interactions of humans, structures (car, street), and objects (snowball, door) as they bring about a surprising result that needed the active agency of each to come about. We could also say, against Latour, that the affordances of snowballs and doors really do not matter much in such a scenario but that this passage merely illustrates a

12 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016).

principle in which certain human behavior (youthful shenanigans) results in specific social outcomes (repercussions for parents).

In the larger scope of *Evicted's* narrative, the opening scene manages to provide an apt metaphor—the snowball—to illustrate how little it takes in the precarious situation of poor Americans for their home to be lost and their daily lives to be upended by eviction. As the reader begins to follow the characters, the opening image of the snowball remains in the background. Which small action, which inconsequential transgression, which damaged or lost item will precipitate the next tragic eviction?

In multiple cases, Desmond injects a positive tone into scenes of despair. For example, here is the invisible narrator-sociologist observing Arleen and Jori on the day of yet another eviction:

At sunrise on Thursday, the sky was the color of flat beer. By midmorning, it was the color of a robin's egg. The still and leafless tree branches looked like cracks in the sky's shell. Cars rolled slowly through the streets, caked with salt and winter's grime. Milwaukee Public Schools canceled classes because of the cold advisory. Arleen's boys weren't going anyway. She needed them to help her move. Jori loaded a U-Haul truck that a family friend had rented for them. The cold gripped him. His fingers and ears began to sting. Icy air filled his mouth, and it felt like his gums were hardening into one of those plastic molds of teeth in the school nurse's office. His breath was a thick gauze circling his face. He smiled through it, happy to be useful. (211)

If I understand Rita Felski's description of her sociology envy correctly, what she has in mind is a more direct form of accessing literary and cultural fields as sites of social action as well as a specific kind of thinking on interrelations between social spheres and institutions. Now, would not a literary scholar also envy the way that Matthew Desmond gets to write the above paragraph—a beautifully thick redescription of what he observed in the field? (The beauty of it deriving from the way that the prose style coordinates social setting and aesthetic expression, as when he associates the morning sky over one of the poorest parts of Milwaukee with "the color of flat beer.")

Desmond unsettles the expectations that many readers (among them reform-minded, liberal urbanites who buy books recommended by the NYT) will bring to this narrative. He humanizes his subjects in a way that, on the one hand, illustrates how they are entangled with systems of oppression and exploitation but, on the other hand, also lends them a narrative space to feel, think, and act outside of the stereotypical social positionality they are in. The

brief glimpse into Jori's head in the quote above—surely not backed up by much empirical data—gestures at the reference frame of a child thinking about the school nurse's office while also showing the pride of agency that can emerge within the oppressive and depressing scenario of being evicted.¹³

Desmond's characters stand in for the statistical norm but also include several outliers. As a Black single mother trying to provide a home and a livelihood for her family, Arleen Belle serves as a representative for an important social group in the lowest segment of Milwaukee's housing market. Her landlord Sherrena Tarver is an outlier, one of the very few Black female landlords in the city, who expertly navigates the market and accumulates enough property and capital to afford extended vacations and prestige professional events. While Sherrena's success story shows the complexity of the race-biased economy, Arleen's multiple evictions speak to the supreme precarity of Black female tenants in the American city. Spending time in the Milwaukee County eviction court right before Christmas, Desmond briefly zooms out of his chronicle of various characters, who try to prevent eviction, and presents a macro view of the structural racism hardwired into these institutions: "If incarceration had come to define the lives of men from impoverished Black neighborhoods, eviction was shaping the lives of women. Poor Black men were locked up. Poor Black women were locked out" (98). This is a stark pronouncement, but also an eminently quotable phrase that begs to be shared far beyond the networks of scholarly communication. Not surprisingly, Barbara Ehrenreich latched onto this statement in her *New York Times* review, calling it an "epiphany."¹⁴ *It reads* like an epiphany, that much is true. But the passage

13 The most instructive instance of this comes in a longer passage about how the poor white woman Lorraine spends her entire monthly food stamp allowance on a lobster and shrimp meal after toying with the thought of buying a large TV set (217–220). Desmond pairs this up with a series of longer footnotes which include a transcribed conversation between him and Arleen. Desmond asks her: "When I write about this, it's going to be a little hard for people to understand," (377), referencing the potential reaction even of well-meaning readers to such careless frivolity. Lorraine replies: "Well, they don't have to understand it. I don't understand a lot of things other people do, but they do it" (377). After a literature review on US mainstream reactions to perceived luxury items in US households, Desmond affirms his stance: "There are two ways to dehumanize: the first is to strip people of all virtue; the second is to cleanse them of all sin" (378).

14 Barbara Ehrenreich, "Matthew Desmond's 'Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City,'" *The New York Times*, February 26, 2016. www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/books/review/matthew-desmonds-evicted-poverty-and-profit-in-the-american-city.html

is of course *carefully constructed* to appear as such. In a pair of accompanying footnotes that stretch across several pages of fine print, Desmond performs the epistemic heavy lifting: first, he outlines the results of his own statistical number-crunching based on close to 100,000 eviction records of the county of Milwaukee; then, he adds statistical and critical literature on Black incarceration.

In a way, what holds for Desmond's work as a whole—more on that below—also holds for the internal structure of *Evicted* as a monograph: it resembles a lean edifice (the main text) erected on top of a broad and multi-voiced foundation (paratexts such as afterword and footnotes). Why multi-voiced? On the one hand, we find in the footnotes the typically restrained voice of the academic, documenting research activity and surveying the critical literature in the field. Even in this professional voice, the book has its convention-breaking moments, as when Desmond recommends Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* as "accounts of human behavior under extreme conditions" (376)—both of which are formally experimental accounts of trauma and war. (Note also that he simply writes "accounts" and not "literary accounts.") On the other hand, the footnotes also feature a more reflective, if not exactly personal voice that bubbles up occasionally. In one of the final footnotes, Desmond writes: "There's this idea that ethnography is a 'method.' ... I tend to think of ethnography as a *sensibility*, a 'way of seeing' as the anthropologist Harry Wolcott once put it. This means that ethnography isn't something we go and do. It's a fundamental way of being in the world" (403-04). This is a bold declaration, hidden in a very out-of-the-way place. Many casual readers will never notice this passage. And yet, it exerts influence and lends stability to the entire structure, in its supportive role as part of the reflexive foundation of *Evicted*.

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After these stray comments on narrative style and structure, I want to look at one last formal aspect of Desmond's *Evicted*: narrative voice. In the afterword "About this Project," the reader receives a thorough making-of, as Desmond chronicles his days in the field, in this case split between a few months spent in a trailer park home and a longer stretch of time during which he trailed several of his sources while based in a rented apartment on Milwaukee's North Side. In the main narrative, however, there is no "I." The person Matthew Desmond does not seem to exist as a character in his own narra-

tive. This stands in marked contrast to other recent public-facing sociology books. To give just one example, Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016)—one of the bestselling books during that year's post-election search for meaning—makes extensive use of the first person, as Hochschild combines the story of her rural white subjects with a chronicle of her own ethical and ideological positioning in the field.¹⁵ Desmond remains mum on this and only introduces such questions in the paratextual foundation of his text. Why?

In the afterword, Desmond rationalizes his formal decision in the following way:

Ethnography has come to be written almost exclusively in the first person. It is a straightforward way of writing and an effective one. If ethnographers want people to take what they say seriously, the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz once observed, they have to convince readers that they have “been there.” “And that,” Geertz said, “persuading us that this offstage miracle has occurred, is where the writing comes in.” The first person has become the chosen mule for this task. *I was there. I saw it happen. And because I saw it happen, you can believe it happened.* Ethnographers shrink themselves in the field but enlarge themselves on the page because first-person accounts convey experience—and experience, authority. (334)

Seen from the vantage point of the large-scale reckoning with issues of race and anti-Black racism in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd, it seems plausible that this stylistic and formal decision on the part of Desmond, the white author, also transports a political message in a narrative centered on predominantly Black actors. Desmond attests to his unease with the public embrace of the white expert by the larger public:

[A]fter almost every academic talk I have given on the material in this book, I have been asked questions like: “How did you feel when you saw that?” “How did you gain this sort of access?” ... I am interested in a different, more urgent conversation. “I” don't matter. I hope that when you talk about this book, you talk first about Sherrena and Tobin, Arleen and Jori, Lorraine and Scott and Pam, Crystal and Vanetta—and the fact that somewhere in your

15 See the essay on Hochschild by Johannes Voelz in this volume. On the use of first-person narrative in feminist theory and cultural studies, also see the essay by Maria Sulimma on Clare Hemmings.

city, a family has just been evicted from their home, their things piled high on the sidewalk. (335)

Lots of elements are at play in this scenario. Especially in an academic setting, such talks generally draw very privileged crowds, if not solely in terms of economic capital, then definitely in terms of symbolic capital. There will be a certain amount of voyeurism when such audiences are presented with the unsavory details of lower-class lives on the brink in the inner city, as reported by one of their own social set. Given this situation, people in the audience will likely empathize more with the researcher than with the researched—out of sheer professional proximity, but also because this is the much safer position. Yet, as Desmond well knows, his professional position allows him to actively consecrate the life experiences of people like Arleen and Sherrena, transfer them into “knowledge,” and thereby build his symbolic capital in the academy.¹⁶ In a crass sense, then, the exploitation critiqued in the book would be reenacted in and through its circulation.

There is no ethically pure way out of this situation. It is to Desmond’s credit, I believe, that he realizes that narrative itself has agency in this communicative process (co-incidentally a base assumption informing the fields of American Studies and cultural studies at large). To distribute agency in a scholarly text—to really, fundamentally ask “who is doing what here?”—and then to compose sentences accordingly: this is a strategy that I take to be the essence of actor-network *practice* in the social sciences and humanities.

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Moving on from the narrative structure(s) of *Evicted*, I wish to make a brief point about its positioning within Matthew Desmond’s oeuvre. His publications in multiple venues also take on something like a larger structure—a structure that certainly contributed to the strong effect of *Evicted* on American public discourse and on policymaking in the housing market. *Culture*² focuses on singular works, on standalone monographs that shape our thinking. As I have tried to show with regard to Jane Addams and W.E.B. Du Bois, as well as in a different register with regard to Rita Felski, Desmond’s book needs to be contextualized within larger intellectual conversations spanning more than a century.

16 In Desmond and Emirbayer’s *The Racial Order*, the field theory and the notion of symbolic capital by Pierre Bourdieu hold a central position.

Nevertheless, the description I used for this book—the lean edifice erected on top of a broad and multi-voiced foundation—also applies to the relationship between *Evicted* and Desmond's other writings. As I already mentioned, Desmond co-wrote the magisterial tome *The Racial Order* (2015), which proposes a comprehensive frame theory for race studies. This book came paired with the textbook *Race in America* (2016), also co-written with Mustafa Emirbayer.¹⁷ Add to this several essays and journal articles. Like any academic, Desmond publishes study results in increments across a variety of academic journals. Among his essays, I would single out two that do more than regular papers. These two position pieces stake out Desmond's disciplinary position, one in a more methodical fashion, one in an almost philosophical manner.¹⁸ They establish “relational” and “reflexive” as key terms for his style of academic inquiry; remarkably, however, these terms and their attendant scholarly posture hardly ever appear in the register of *Evicted's* narrative. Instead, *Evicted* is relational and reflexive without rubbing your nose in it.

In this light, we can perhaps think of Desmond's bestseller as a distributed work. The book is assertively a work, a standalone artifact that has made an enormous impact in the form of a self-contained analysis. It is also and at the same time a distributed object; it rests on a broad foundation of texts in different registers and formal tonalities. The book would be a different artifact without these foundations. It can afford to be lean, precise, and narratively immersive because the gaps that it leaves have been filled elsewhere. In turn, the prestige garnered from *Evicted* gave Matthew Desmond authority and reach when he contributed a widely discussed and also fiercely criticized piece on the historical crosscurrents between capitalism and American slavery to Nikole Hannah-Jones's 1619 Project, published in 2019 by the *New York Times*.¹⁹

17 Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer, *Race in America* (New York: Norton, 2016).

18 Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond, “Race and Reflexivity,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 4 (2012): 574–99; Matthew Desmond, “Relational Ethnography,” *Theory and Society* 43, no. 5 (2014): 547–79.

19 Matthew Desmond, “American Capitalism Is Brutal. You Can Trace That to the Plantation,” *The New York Times Magazine*, “The 1619 Project,” August 14, 2019, 30–40. For an opinionated discussion of Desmond's essay and in the context of research in “the new history of capitalism,” see John Clegg, “How Slavery Shaped American Capitalism,” *Jacobin*, August 28, 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/08/how-slavery-shaped-american-capitalism>.

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So what is a humanist to learn from Desmond? As I tried to show in the beginning, the standard mode of practicing “sociologically enhanced” literary and cultural studies looks almost exclusively to sociological theory that can in some way or another be applied within readings of cultural artifacts. This is a tried-and-true technique that has resulted in robust interdisciplinary conversations and in multiple historical and cultural reframings and rereadings. Conversely, the recent tendency to treat Bruno Latour as another master theorist, whose works need to be quoted in every ambitious piece of research and will thus enter an inevitable boom/bust cycle, leads me to think that this overall procedure is somewhat exhausted.²⁰

I will not enter the extensive debate on postcritique in my last few lines here—several other chapters take up this conversation. However, I will note that one of the pre-eminent critics currently assembled under this moniker had very kind words to say about Matthew Desmond. In her reply to a recent forum piece in *American Literary History* by Winfried Fluck, Caroline Levine defended the central claim of her recent scholarship, namely that literature, and especially realist literature, already does a better job than much cultural and social theory in accounting for “how the structuring of the social world works.” Yet it’s not just literature in the Dickensian tradition that achieves this effect. “It seems to me,” she continues, “that many ethnographic sociologies, from Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851–1861) to Matthew Desmond’s *Evicted: Poverty and Property* [sic] in the American City (2016), also offer convincing accounts of the complex interaction of multiple social forms. These too, like *Bleak House*, are multiplot narratives with many characters interacting with overlapping institutions, including homeless shelters, schools, and the legal system.”²¹ In the best of scenarios, the intersection of postcritique and Latourian thinking injects a healthy dose of humility into the field of cultural studies. To extrapolate from Levine, we can try to align our scholarly interests with finely plotted narratives in the hope of saying something new and noteworthy and perhaps emancipatory about social structures.

In the current moment, in which basic tenets regarding the “right” register of speaking about aesthetic artifacts and the basic units of narrative—think

20 See Jesse Ramírez’s chapter in this volume for a critique of Latourism in the humanities.

21 Caroline Levine, “Not Against Structure, but in Search of Better Structures: A Response to Winfried Fluck,” *American Literary History* 31, no. 2 (2019): 255–259, here 259.

of David Alworth's reconceptualization of literary setting or Rita Felski, Toril Moi, and Amanda Anderson's recent ground clearing regarding literary characters²²—converge with an unprecedented urgency of social problems that Americanists are called to address, it would be a mistake to only stray into sociological territory to look for “theories.” Desmond's *Evicted* presents a thick formal lesson in how to tie social domains together, how to responsibly treat human beings as characters, and how to chip away at capitalist exploitation while still telling a good story.

22 David Alworth, *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Amanda Anderson, Toril Moi, and Rita Felski, *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). See also Laura Bieger's essay on Alworth's *Site Reading* in this volume.