DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

The Site of the Novel: Objects in American Realism, 1930–1940

Moacir P. de Sá Pereira
University of Chicago

During the 1930s, many novels featured an internal potential for radical political change, often through the presence of the Communist Party in the plot. At the end of James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, for example, Pat Lonigan leaves his dying son Studs at home and goes for a drunken drive through Chicago, leaving behind the Irish-American community, parish, and neighborhood that have all failed his son. Lonigan explicitly links the start of the Great Depression with his son's collapse from illness, and the parallel blows of the frailty of the economy and of his son send him to flee to his own childhood neighborhood of Bridgeport, back to the past, where he stumbles upon a communist rally, in which he sees only smiling faces belonging to people eager to stay and change the world around them. The novel, then, provides a testing ground for other existing worlds that can serve as a guide, model, or simply inspiration toward changing the worlds of the reader.

The Site of the Novel claims that this transformative potential is a generic feature of every realist novel, but one only discoverable by building up a method of literary inquiry that does something other than address questions of psychology and historicism that tend to preoccupy scholars of literary realism. Taking its cue from contemporary debates surrounding object-oriented ontology in metaphysics as well as the flat ontologies that describe an object called the site in human geography, I aim to ground the realist novel in philosophical realism, arguing that its political potential grows as critics (and readers) expand their view of what is important in the novel. In place of historicism, the novel must be considered within chronotopic spatiotemporality. In place of a focus on psychological human subjects, a larger focus emerges that includes objects without either subjectivity or identities based on those subjectivities, but objects that still have emergent properties and self-organization. Most importantly, instead of ascribing a critical or political ideology to the novel from the top down. I argue that the novel, approached as a site, exposes the answers it already has at hand within the heteroglottic worlds that constitute it. This reframing allows the fundamental trope of realism—the metonymic network of relations between objects—to assist the critic or reader to find, in J. K. Gibson-Graham's words, the "creativity to generate actual possibilities where none formerly existed." Every novel is a box of revolutionary building blocks.

The Site of the Novel takes up four works (two novels, two trilogies) of the 1930s that feature characters or discussions devoted to overthrowing capitalism. Because these works come from the traditions of American realism and naturalism, meaning that it is possible to map what occurs in the worlds within each work onto the worlds outside the work. This mapping, both spatial and temporal, exposes a gap between the worlds in the work and the worlds outside, and it is from this gap that the questions guiding the readings emerge. The four readings expand on the introduction's description of both object-oriented and flat ontologies and show how they serve to reconfigure the political commitments within each work. More specifically, I argue that political change demands a new political ontology. Instead of revealing a system of domination, this new ontology makes use of the geographical concept of a site, an emergent entity given definition by its inhabitants, both human and non-

human. The relationships among these inhabitants both reinforce the site's contours even as they create fissures that reconfigure the site. By heteroglottically generating multiple new worlds, realist novels stand as exemplary collections of sites that help expose the multiple dynamic structures outside the novel. In this way, the aesthetic encounter reinforces the possibility of a realist, egalitarian view toward politics.

In my first chapter, "*Studs Lonigan*'s Failing Bodies and Other Objects Subject to Change," I track object relations in the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy to show how Studs's reliance on subject-based politics, specifically liberal capitalism, assumes an ontology of transcendence that keeps Studs at its center while failing to give him the life he desires. In contrast, the novel's brief moments of affect, where the transcendent subject is left behind, are also the moments where Studs is most at peace and his thoughts are most optimistic, suggesting that the salvation in the trilogy lies in a practice dictated by an object-oriented ontology. The second chapter, "Siting *U.S.A.*: Uniforms, States, and Anarchism in Dos Passos," moves to the object of the site. First, I show that uniforms in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* reinforce how the characters are bounded and defined within the political and economic sites of the U.S.A. Uniforms also help define the state in the work, but a top-down theory of the state would ignore the explosion of relations Dos Passos provides, because, as I reveal, the text is a site built from the bottom up, from the relations between its constituent objects, further suggesting a communist-anarchism opposite the individualist-anarchism typically associated with Dos Passos.

The third chapter, "'Think about Montana. *I Can't.* Think about Madrid. *I Can't.* Think about a Cool Drink of Water. *All Right.*': The Realism of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*," returns to the liberal subject in Ernest Hemingway's novel. Here I delineate three heteroglottic sites: the site of the narrative action itself, the site of the discussions among the partisans, and the site of Robert Jordan's interior monologues. The monologues act as the crucible in which Jordan mixes together his ascriptive, identity-driven, proto-neoliberal politics into a merged Spain and U.S.A., where only those born republican are worth saving. Yet as Jordan faces death, the radically non-humanist site of the narrative action claims him and replaces his individualist liberalism with a metonymic connection with the real around him. The fourth chapter, "'America Needs Our Propaganda More Every Day,'" considers in greater detail the way heteroglossia creates multiple worlds as objects within the novel, worlds that often, but not necessarily, intersect. I test these worlds against theories of counterfactuality such as that promised in a novel like Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, which, unlike the other works in the project, tells a story that had not yet happened. Here, again, the responsiveness of the site to iterative experimentation shows the limits of all of the political ideologies in the novel. Still, paradoxically, it is the anti-dogmatic "yankee liberalism" of Doremus Jessup that remains most in line with the play of the site. Adaptability and openness are what occasion change.

By being such an inexhaustible object filled with worlds and as yet unfound object relationships, the novel is not as much a guidebook for revolution as it is a reminder in practice of the limits of axiomatic, symptomatic approaches to political change. Taking inspiration from social scientific accounts of post-capitalist worlds or of worlds that happen in the in betweens capitalism leaves in its wake, *The Site of the Novel* takes seriously the capability of objects–that is, human and non-human ontological entities—to disrupt the stratification of their containing object sites, be they considered the state, the neighborhood, or whatever. This disruption is the true political and revolutionary moment, a point in space and time where an object challenges its role in the site that has until now contained it and directed it.