

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

## Romance and Commitment

ANDREW COLE

Q: What do you desire?

A: It is to hear the romance of romance.

Q: What is desire?

A: An exciting catastrophe.

—Aimé Césaire et al.

## The False Opposites

People reading Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* forty years on might think about how we may continue to write books like this and what it takes to do so in our present circumstances. The problem of how we can write in this capacious mode compels us to ask the pressing questions posed by the traditions from which such a text emerged as a significant advance, which is to say Marxism and the analysis of class and culture, the critique of ideology, the rationalization and reification of our work and play, and our utopian wish to have everything be otherwise. This book responded to its moment as a meditation on processes in capitalism that are both deep—ensuring a fundamental alienation in our selves—and wide in damaging everyone and every ecosystem on the globe. And it responds to our moment now during the intensification of all these destructive tendencies in capitalism. Writing more books like this means not only practicing and supporting committed criticism within and without academic institutions, but also sustaining a method where the conditions of that very labor, both local and global, figure centrally in acts of interpretation, which is what properly dialectical criticism has always involved.

*The Political Unconscious* never was nor will ever be the true opposite number to literary formalism. But today various formalisms,

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as it's fair to name them, attempt to position themselves accordingly, grounding their approach in this opposition to Jameson or Marxism—especially the recent critical methods decorated with an adjective that recommend “reading” at whatever distance, speed, or prescribed “post” criticality. This, all in the effort to practice literary criticism anew with a greater appreciation for form. The hitch here, though, is that formalism itself is only ever new in one respect, and it's not in its stance toward Marxism, history, or politics. No, the newness comes from changing the formalist idiom about what's being read or indeed counted as “form.”

Remember, forms were once fossils in Hippolyte Taine, then organisms sprung to life in Russian formalism, and now networked agents in the Latourian lit crit of the last ten years. Paleontology, biology, media studies, digital humanities, environmental sciences, and architecture are all metaphoric funds from which a new formalist description is drawn in the writing of novel “readings.” While the formalism is said to be new, this mode of reinvention is old and familiar—poking around in the stashes of other disciplines for metaphors that might juice up the literary critical language and balloon the capacity of the word *form* to describe any- and everything. This isn't history in the sense meant by Jameson's “political unconscious,” nor is it the interdisciplinarity practiced by Jameson in his magnificent *Postmodernism*, now enjoying its thirtieth anniversary. In fact, this method, in which all manner of media and modes are rendered identical *as form*, is like the postmodern “textualization” of everything Jameson describes in that latter book (77, 94, 158, 397). Formalism, which loves this discursive procedure (it may not be for everyone), remains most useful, however, in the analysis of genre, and key here, as I show in my discussion of Northrop Frye, is that “genre,” rather than “form,” picks out the semi-autonomy of “the literary”—in other words, its identity in difference to history.

To wit, most of these new “reading” programs, which again are best called formalism, do assume a real opposition to Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*—namely, the decision in advance that history, politics, capitalism, and the critique

of ideology are, when not outright dismissed as distractions, an addendum to acts of interpretation. The now oft-repeated complaints about symptoms and symptomatic criticism read as refusals of the fact that collective history is intrinsic to literature; accordingly, at no level—surface, depth, midpoint—can this history figure. So this real opposition leads me to believe that if there's anything hermeneutically suspicious about certain literary criticism, it's not Jameson's book but rather a formalism that eschews the political unconscious and reduces the work of art, in all of its fullness, to a form. Would that everything were as easy as the problem of form. After all, there's more to life than form, which is why *The Political Unconscious* gives us form—or rather genre—but also more than form in understanding that a work's sheer existence presupposes a world of circumstances that only a materialist method, with its collective ambitions at all scales, can begin to grasp.

*The Political Unconscious*, finally, has been critiqued since its publication for not *reading* as a manifesto or policy paper, which opinion really means to say that Jameson *wrote the book the wrong way* and how dare he do a work of literary criticism—to boot, an ambitious one. The demand for this book to stay in its lane and become a manifesto is redolent of neoliberal consensus to neutralize *The Political Unconscious*, to instrumentalize it as a species of vulgar Marxism, which it isn't, but that's an easier thing to know in advance than the “positive hermeneutic” (285, 286) Jameson proposes that asks you to learn about virtually every aspect of art and life since the Middle Ages, and the humanities more particularly—all that's eventually touched by capital and modernization. This is why the familiar imperative of “Always historicize!” can't tell us much methodologically about *The Political Unconscious*, except for what its false opposite—“never historicize!”—has brought us. To be sure, all the focus on “Always historicize!” is itself reductive, because it gives the misimpression that we're simply to read any ol' history book before writing a piece of literary criticism, which is what the imperative apparently means to those who wouldn't even do that.

## 1981

We'd be remiss not to look back on the year 1981 as a banner year, occasioning the publication of significant committed criticism and literary practice alongside *The Political Unconscious*, such as Angela Y. Davis's *Women, Race, and Class*, Samuel R. Delany's *Distant Stars*, bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman*, Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, Edward W. Said's *Covering Islam*, Wole Soyinka's *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Writers in Politics*, and all the work collected in the groundbreaking anthology edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*. These titles represent fields that are necessarily searching, innovative, and responsive to their moment—areas of thought and praxis in Black art and Black studies, critical race theory, women of color feminism and queer critique, postcolonial and decolonial critique, and Marxism. Their modes of committed criticism have persisted to this day while other subdisciplines, diversions, theory trends, narrow boring formalisms that have tut-tutted such work, have come and gone. Let's acknowledge these books on their fortieth anniversary, too, as they are all works that have stayed with us these four decades and have shaken off the accusations of essentialism—which is strange to say about poeses that are praxes, about writing that is living, surviving.

To say that *The Political Unconscious* is a book of its moment, alongside these and other foundational texts from 1981, is really to say something general about these broad areas of thinking, writing, and praxis. It is to find something that draws together different fields of committed criticism. There are many areas of overlap, but I've come to realize that the genre of romance is one of them. Not quite the novel but also usefully distinct from the enclosed and monologic genres of epic and tragedy, romance is intriguing for the way it motivates authors to break history down into its constituent parts, to line up the contradictions of human expression and effort, and then to imagine and build something new out of the pieces, constructing different worlds and fostering revolutionary insights

on all the contingencies that make today such an overbearing necessity. Romance marks the occasion of “exciting catastrophe,” per my epigraph. In what remains in this essay I first discuss Jameson's vision of the genre of romance as an index of historical contradiction and change, paying attention to how romance is a figure for the dialectic in Jameson, especially in his handling of the ideas of Frye. I claim that romance is a revolutionary genre because it is a dialectical one. Then I close with recent examples of committed critique today where romance is important—namely, in Black studies.

## Dialectical Genre

I can't think of any other book about which it's *not* an insult to say that the book makes you put it down and read other people, because each page is a portal to some thinker, author, or idea you should know more about. That's the result, again, of a “positive hermeneutic” that includes vast amounts of knowledge. For my part, Jameson's *Political Unconscious* got me reading Frye years ago. In chapters 2 and 5, Jameson engages Frye on the interpretation of the genre of romance.

Taking Frye's idea that romance at *all times* involves a host of ethical binaries, Jameson proposes that the binaries in romance arise at *some times* in history—the twelfth century, the nineteenth century, the twentieth century—and can thus be read as imaginary resolutions to sharpened historical contradictions felt in the transition in modes of production, cultural styles, or “everyday social life” (*Political Unconscious* 225; see also 113, 148, 212). Thus is Jameson's “dialectical use” of Frye's genre criticism, whereby the formal is, yes, generic as well as historical (*Political Unconscious* 109). To understand how we go from genre to history is to discern the interpretive movement from genre to history to dialectics, for it is in dialectics that the relation between literature and history is one of continuing contradiction—in other words, of identity and difference.

Look at Frye. I don't think it's ever been pointed out that in the *Anatomy of Criticism* and *Secular*

*Scripture*, Frye axiomatically pairs dialectics with romance, and that he thinks of the aforementioned ethical “binary” as “dialectical”: “The central form of romance is dialectical: everything is focused on a conflict between the hero and the enemy” (*Anatomy* 187). Now, it does seem that Frye’s definition of “dialectical” is more along the lines of “Manichean.” But Frye often seeks to render his notion of “dialectical” to be properly “dialectical” when, in *Secular Scripture*, he speaks of the *interdependence* of oppositions in suggesting that for the romance writer “[b]oth his idyllic and his demonic worlds are a mixture of the two” (*Secular Scripture* 38; 42; see also 56). There are also moments when Frye stages the pop Hegelianism of procession and return (39), as well as elsewhere indulging in pseudo-Hegelian clichés about thesis and antithesis (*Anatomy* 213). Frye had Hegel on the brain (Denham).

There are other features of Frye’s thinking on romance that would appeal to Jameson and those of us writing within the Marxist tradition. Frye, for example, claims that both a “revolutionary quality” and “an element of social protest” are “inherent in romance” (*Secular Scripture* 52). He goes farther to speak of the “curiously proletarian status” of romance (19)—as “popular” literature and laments the “‘kidnapping’ [of] romance, the absorbing of it into the ideology of an ascendant class” (41). (Did you catch the word “ideology”?) For him, quite simply, “[r]evolutionary attitudes are dialectical and polarizing attitudes” (92; see also 94), and so romance, as a dialectical genre, has a special purchase on history that other genres do not.

With that historical understanding, Frye has thought himself into a corner where he must speak of transformations in literary practice as transitions in history itself, using patently eventful historicist tropes to talk of purely ahistorical literary invention as itself a revolution:

Writers improve and refine on their predecessors until it seems that no further improvement is possible. Then the conventions wear out, and literature enters a transitional phase where some of the *burden of the past is thrown off* and popular literature, with romance at its centre, comes again into the

foreground. *This happened* with Greek literature after New Comedy, when Greek romance *emerged; it happened at the end of the eighteenth century* in Britain, when the Gothic romances *emerged*, and it is *happening now after the decline* of realistic fiction. (23; my emphasis)

Always historicize, because you may have no choice if you speak of genres emerging over time. What we have here is an example of how you can’t do genre—or myth criticism with its own peculiar generic obsessions and schematics—without the language of eventfulness and the idioms of social transformation. This passage, in other words, isn’t literary history. It’s history. Or rather, it’s the language of history—not only historiography but the ubiquitous idiom of history as experienced, on the ground at the time, when people rejoice throwing off the “burden of the past.”

This should be enough from Frye to demonstrate what in his work on romance might have interested Jameson in the writing of *The Political Unconscious*—noting here that Jameson himself identifies none of these particular dialectical features in Frye, but clearly he takes them on. Let there be one more turn of the screw on this point of history, though, which has to be seen as a transpersonal imaginary raised into the thought of collectivity. Raised by what? In Frye, the proposition that “secular stories” offer “a single integrated vision of the world” for archetypal criticism (*Secular Scripture* 11) becomes in Jameson the “unity of a single great collective story” for Marxism (*Political Unconscious* 19). The shift from Frye to Jameson, then, isn’t only from genre to history, myth criticism to Marxism, but rather from history to history, precisely because genre—in its cut into sub-kinds like romance—bears its identity to history in its “emergence” from, or out of, history into a medium capable of expressing and modifying the human sensorium in a manner that’s differently eventful from history.

Frye’s thinking on romance is already amenable to *The Political Unconscious* for all these reasons, true, but for the following reason above all: Frye’s formulations on romance make evident the insights and dialectics of Hegel and Marx. After all, as his

notebooks for the drafting of *Anatomy of Criticism* show, Frye read Hegel and Marx, loved and hated them. Frye himself admitted that “[i]f Hegel had written his *Phenomenology* in *mythos*-language instead of in *logos*-language a lot of my work would be done for me” (*Northrop Frye’s Late Notebooks* 192). That’s an amazing claim. Frye, then, is a case in point in how a pure history of genre, how literary history itself, can never look the same after Hegel and Marx, and so any attempt to perform all those new formalist “readings” without them, without dialectics, seems forced yet futile.

The problem goes in the other direction, too. I would wager that we will never be able to look past contemporary theory to see the genre of romance “as it really was” back in time, to know it without dialectics. But I do find it invigorating that the best expositors of romance in the subfield in which I began my career, medieval studies, are themselves innovators of theoretical readings within the discipline, and that their definitions of romance jibe with Jameson’s and Frye’s, and vice versa. Susan Crane, for instance, offers this definition in her foundational book on insular romance:

Romances do not claim to be coextensive with the contemporary world, as do chronicles, but to reshape and meditate on the world. Like epics, they tell the stories of whole careers; but unlike epics, they do not envision their heroes primarily in service to society’s collective need. Instead, romances contemplate the place of private identity in society at large. Their thematizations of stress and harmony between hero and world make this genre an eminently social one which nonetheless proposes that private identity exists somehow above and apart from collective life. (11)

Sarah Kay, in her equally illuminating study of the origins of romance, shows that the genre itself was conterminous with, and infused by, the emergent rhetorics of contradictoriness and scholastic philosophies of opposition, in which negation, irony, and other modes figure centrally. No wonder the genre is dialectical down to the socks—and yet from its inception is uniquely subjective but intransigently

social in that it resonates with the alternating discords and harmonies between self and society, sounding out the possibilities for social transformation.

### Romance and Radical Thought

We can contemplate the place of romance in the history of radical thought and practice, while also pondering its absence in certain other traditions in modernity, be it Cartesianism, Kantianism, or Soviet realism à la Maksim Gorky. We might study romance as a utopian genre, too, in tension with realism and perhaps science fiction (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 57–71). Whatever its relation to other genres and disciplines, romance seems central to social engagement at the level of the political unconscious but also—why not?—the political pre-conscious and the political conscious.

The Black radical tradition has a long history of engagement with romance from at least W. E. B. Du Bois’s use of the genre in his 1928 novel, *The Dark Princess* (as well as his incomplete draft of a 1905 work entitled *Scorn: A Romance* and his recently published short story “Princess Steel”). From there, romance appears from the 1930s to the present in traditions of “Afrosurrealism,” in which we find authors adopting romance motifs in the mode of critique—a practice that Amiri Baraka described, in one instance, as “dialectical” (165). Yogita Goyal’s book *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* illuminates Du Bois’s romances by taking up Jameson’s insights on the genre (8, 87; see also Gilroy 140–45).

But I turn to Saidiya Hartman’s “critical fabulation” as a pertinent scholarly mode with generic significance. “I wanted to write a romance,” Hartman says of her scholarly commitments—a “romance of resistance” (9) to “raise important questions regarding what it means to think historically about matters still contested in the present and about life eradicated by the protocols of intellectual disciplines” (9–10). Placing Hartman’s “to think historically” alongside Jameson’s “thinking historically” (*Political Unconscious* 229), I juxtapose these aforementioned projects and histories of practice not to say that they are identical so much as to open up

conversations about ways of thinking historically through a genre like romance. It's also to speculate that the genre of romance is uniquely generative for committed art and criticism.

No history of such criticism is homogenous, however. It's fair to raise here that a study like Madhu Dubey's *Signs and Cities*—in which authors like hooks, Morrison, Delaney, Cornel West, and indeed Jameson come under serious criticism for their “romance of the residual”—is, all told, a reminder that care must be given to thinking romance as genre and romance as ideology of “redemption” involving the romanticization of oppressions (8; see also 22, 158–70). Likewise, David Scott, in *Conscripts of Modernity*, identifies the limits of the genre when narrating the end of colonialism as a romance of salvation and redemption (7–8, 47, 50, 58–97). Yet still there's no denying that the “role occupied by romance . . . is key to our understanding of the emergence of a novelistic tradition in Africa,” as Simon Gikandi insists (313; see also 319–20, 326): “romance would attract post-colonial writers because it would imagine new subjects in old communal histories and outside the normative logic of colonial modernity” (321; cf. 327–28). Nor were the generic and public demands of romance and realism always so distinct in the traditions of African American literature (Jarrett 33, 34, 37, 38, 43–46, 62–64, 145, 153, 158). Whatever we think or don't think of romance, it's there “to split open the dreary world to expose an enchanted one,” to cite Morrison in her foreword to *Tar Baby* (xii)—a novel that she characterizes as a “romance of community” (“Home” 9) and that has been shown to exhibit the elements and oppositional structures of medieval romance in particular (Magness). Romance did what it needed to do. And it continues to do so.

This is why it's crucial that, when focusing on the histories of revolutionary thought, we understand romance to be a mode as much as a genre—a mode that's activated in our critical, archival, and artistic praxes. For the critic, as for authors, romance is differently responsive to history. In opposition to realism, romance doesn't reflect history or consciousness but refracts history, breaks

history open to create a co-temporal space where the past, present, and future persist, and where consciousness is substituted for the messier category of desire. Romance is perhaps the first genre centered on desire, too, but in its vivid construction of worlds, it has the capacity to open up space for utopian desire in particular, the place of possibility for things not as they are but as they can be, because the road to today was paved by contingences we just passively accept as necessities (they are not). Romance imagines the paths ahead, other ways of being, other possibilities for living in the present by figuring the past. It helps you think outside yourself while its contradictions keep you from escapism. This is how romance, too, differs from tragedy, in that it doesn't present a world that is a sealed totality, a world that is absolute in which there's no room for maneuver, resistance, or counterpractice.

To assert that romance is the genre of contradiction par excellence isn't to subsume it entirely into Marxism. It is only to say that Marxism makes these features of romance uniquely visible in the way the genre pushes back against the intention of any one author, creating those contradictions beheld by the many. Romance always gives you more than you bargained for, and that makes it fundamentally dialectical, yielding a surplus of possibilities that can surprise you and motivate you to act.

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