Commentary

For our Commentary segment, JAC invites one of our readers to discuss a significant book or to explore an important topic in our field. In this issue, Patricia Bizzell discusses the “usefulness of Fredric Jameson’s work to the field of composition studies.”

Fredric Jameson and Composition Studies

PATRICIA BIZZELL

The purpose of this essay is to present my perspective on the usefulness of Fredric Jameson’s work to the field of composition studies. Therefore, I make no pretension to “cover” or report on the entirety of Jameson’s accomplishment, still less to take part in the current controversies over his thought. Furthermore, I am sure that my perspective does not exhaust the possibilities for use of Jameson’s work in composition studies. This is, then, in many senses of the word, a partial account of his work.

As Edward Said has noted, “ideas and theories travel” (226). To find my essay valuable, you have to accept this idea that theory can travel, that the field of composition studies can be allowed to use Jameson even in ways he might deplore. Said goes on to argue:

Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. (226)

While permitting such “traveling,” though, Said is concerned specifically about the uses to which European Marxist theory has been put as it migrates through the work of Georg Lukacs, Lucien Goldmann, Raymond Williams, and Michel Foucault. Said is concerned that through these migrations, what were once the “adversarial,” “oppositional,” “insurgent” qualities of this theory have become depleted or tame, without anyone noticing because the theory is still riding on the credit of its earlier reputation for possessing such qualities (247). I mention Said’s analysis here at the outset because I wish to acknowledge that my own treatment of Jameson may be subject to the same criticism. I don’t want to appear to claim credit for his entire degree of “insurgency” in this treatment of his ideas.
What I propose to do in this essay is, first, to provide a brief overview of Jameson's career and his work up to and including the major book *The Political Unconscious* (1981). I will then discuss his work on postmodernism, now collected in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Finally I will explore in more detail the "pedagogical" functions of art that Jameson hints at in his postmodernism work. I will attempt as I go to make the links between his ideas and the work of composition studies.

**Jameson's Earlier Work**

Fredric Jameson was born in Cleveland in 1934. He was educated at Haverford College and Yale University, where he received his Ph.D. in French in 1960. Among his many academic honors are a Fulbright Fellowship to study in Germany and two Guggenheim Fellowships. He is a co-founder of the Marxist Literary Group and frequently lectures at its summer institutes. In 1986 he was appointed William A. Lane Professor of Comparative Literature at Duke University. Jameson's biographer Martin Donougho calls him "without dispute the leading Marxist critic and literary theorist of his generation in North America" (177).

Jameson's first book, developed from his Ph.D. dissertation, was *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* (1961). In brief, Jameson argues here that Sartre's disorienting style represents in literary form the alienation his philosophy describes and the very failure of art itself to make order in a fragmented world. The book's title suggests the mix typical of all Jameson's work: an interest in philosophy and philosophical questions, combined with rigorous literary analysis. Jameson's style is notoriously difficult: convoluted and dense, as he attempts to embed many nuances of discussion and responses to potential criticism within sentences; and studded with a dazzling array of allusions to world high art and popular culture.

Jameson has said that in working on Sartre, he discovered Marxism—not so much from reading Sartre's overtly Marxist works, but from encountering frequent references in Sartre to Marxist terminology and points of view, which Sartre took for granted that his readers would understand, but that seemed quite exotic to an American reader in the late 1950s (see Donougho 179-180). Jameson's second book, *Marxism and Form* (1972), is a collection of essays largely devoted to introducing the American academic audience to the major European Marxist thinkers—e.g., Adorno, Benjamin, Lukacs. *The Prison-House of Language* (1972) is also introductory, in a sense, being one of the first American books to employ structuralism in literary criticism, but at the same time Jameson attacks structuralism for its failure to situate itself historically, and calls for a truly dialectical criticism that will account for both synchronic and diachronic aspects of texts.

*The Political Unconscious*

*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) is the book in which Jameson tries to develop this dialectical criticism. (In what follows, I will draw heavily on my discussion of this book in "Marxist Ideas in
Composition Studies,” 56-57; see also Dowling). Jameson wants to develop a Marxist theory of interpretation that encompasses all other theories, that becomes their intellectual horizon, because it effectively describes all of human life. The notion of “all of human life” is explored via Lukacs’s concept of “totality,” that is, the sum of all the relations among people, culture, and the material world of a given time and place. Economic activity and cultural activities such as religion and the arts are related within the totality, although not in the mechanistic “base-superstructure” way found in older Marxist views. The totality must be understood as constantly changing (see Jameson Political 50-56).

Jameson has been repeatedly attacked for trying to devise a totalizing theory of interpretation. It is said that he contradicts himself with this project, for he has also argued that all systems of interpretation, relying as they must upon a code or key by which they translate experience, are themselves products of experience (the source of the key) and not transcendent as they may claim to be. Jameson counters, however, by emphatically denying that his theory makes any transcendent claims. It is openly ideological. It bases its claim to superiority over all other theories on its comprehensiveness, that is, its ability to account for more aspects of experience than any other theory can do.

At the same time, this comprehensiveness is what saves Jameson’s theory from appearing transcendent. As I noted in “Marxist Ideas,” “the interpretive study of totality, given the comprehensiveness of Lukacs’s definition of the term, seems hopelessly enormous—or accessible only to a person who possesses a talent for symbol-reading equivalent to that of a person who can play fifty chess games simultaneously” (56). And since the task is impossible, the human interpreter eventually runs up against the resistance of the material being interpreted—the interpreter simply can’t cope with it all, and thus realizes that it is out there, independent of his or her theory and in some part inaccessible to it. Thus the theory being used to generate the interpretation must not be transcendent—the resistance encountered indicates this.

While we cannot complete the symbol-reading task imposed on us by the concept of totality, neither are we allowed to desist from it if we want to try to establish some human purchase on contemporary experience. Hence Jameson proposes in Political Unconscious a three-part system of interpretation. The first part, the “study of forms,” argues that works of literature (or any other symbolic configuration) grow out of changing social pressures as an attempt to solve the contradictions enacted in social relations. Jameson would say that artists are not always aware of the ways their works attempt to imagine solutions to real social problems. The eruption of these problems into the process of creating symbolic constructions would be, for Jameson, a sort of return of a collective repressed—our repressed awareness of the crimes we commit against one another via social injustice—and this is the “political unconscious” that literature, and all other symbolic forms, express.

The second part of Jameson’s scheme, the “study of ideologies,” views any particular text (or other symbolic construction) as an utterance in the discourse
of a particular social class, which is seen in certain fixed relations to other social classes. Hence the social problems to which symbolic work responds are seen as conditioned by the producer's social class position—they are not just a matter of individual experience. The third part of the analysis emerges as we come to realize that the discourse of one social class exerts ideological control or "hegemony" over other discourses through a process of struggle. Works of art, then, take part in this struggle.

While Jameson clearly locates symbolic constructions within their social class origins here, and more, sees them as instruments in class struggle, he avoids earlier Marxist views of texts and other symbolic constructions as totally determined by class. Principally, he modifies earlier versions of the concept of hegemony. In some Marxist analyses, dominant classes exercise their ideological control so thoroughly that the very people they are oppressing assent to the oppression. The marginalized agree that they deserve to be marginalized and, instead of hating their exploiters, wish only to become like them. Jameson suggests that while this hegemonic process does indeed operate, its control is never effortless or total. Some people always resist it, with varying degrees of success, and the hegemonic situation is never static. The dominant class maintains control only through constant struggle. It is this struggle that keeps the totality in flux, so that, as I say, "one complex of social relations fades away, along with its hegemonic networks, while another comes into being" (57).

Jameson suggests that we understand this struggle as a struggle over who controls the production of meaning. Meaning is produced through forms, or, as Jameson says, "the production of aesthetic narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act" (Political79). Hence, to study history, or the sequence of modes of production of meaning, is to study changes in the ideology of form. In my "Marxist Ideas" essay, I attempt to use a simplified version of this three-part system of analysis to interpret the concept of "community" as it has been used in composition studies. I think the method could also be useful to analyze student texts, especially as they show signs of resistance to the hegemonic culture.

**Jameson and Postmodernism**

Jameson is engaged now in the description and critique of postmodern culture, which he has played a large part in defining for the academy in a series of essays now collected in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

Given my own predelictions, I want to introduce Jameson's work on postmodernism through what he says in *The Political Unconscious* about utopian thinking. Marxism, he says,
Jameson's call here for a utopian moment in analysis may simply express a desire to make his analysis as comprehensive as possible. As Dominic LaCapra notes, one of Jameson's dominant critiques against Marxism is that it "has been 'undialectically' one-sided in attempting to demystify ideologies without seeing their necessity and their well-nigh gravitational force of attraction." (239)

I think there is more to it than that, however. I think Jameson hints here about the Marxist critic being motivated by a commitment to fostering social justice, having "dreams as well as nightmares about history" ("Marxist Ideas," 55). LaCapra agrees, although deploring what he calls the shift in Jameson "from a critique of ideology and utopia to an apology for ideology and utopia in a manner reminiscent of Durkehim at his most exalte" (239)

The commitment to social justice need not derive from transcendent sources; that is, it may be ethical, not moral, and unabashedly ideological (indeed, if "everything is ideological," there is no shame in admitting oneself to be in the grip of an ideology that promotes social justice). As Hayden White has put it, commenting on Jameson's work:

If Marxism looks, sounds, and feels like a traditional religion, it is because it shares the desire for redemption that motivates the latter, even if it translates this desire into social terms and locates it in the domain of history as its proper field of possible cathexes. (155)

Moreover, I think we see Jameson's "dream" of redemption in his commitment to what he calls (in "Cognitive Mapping" (1988)) "a society without hierarchy, a society of free people, a society that has at once repudiated the economic mechanisms of the market" (355). Jameson claims that Marxist ideology is unable to imagine what such a utopian society would actually be like, and hence also unable to imagine how to achieve such a society. Given that he wants this kind of society to come into existence, he sees these failures as "a crisis in Marxist ideology" (355). He sees Marxist ideology as needing to generate "a vision of the future that grips the masses," an image of "Utopia" (355).

Furthermore, Jameson says that the needed utopian ideology must be not only "economic" but also, indeed "supremely," "social and cultural" (355). I think what he means here is that the utopian ideology needs not only plans for the egalitarian reorganization of economic production, such that people's material needs are met, but also plans for new forms of affective and aesthetic life, such that people's emotional and spiritual needs are met. He puts the problem another way when he notes that "with one signal exception (capitalism itself, which is organized around an economic mechanism), there has never existed a cohesive form of human society that was not based on some form of transcendence or religion" (355). Since "religious belief or transcendent values" are in his view "absolutely incompatible" with the society he wants to come into existence (and indeed, as I noted above, he does not need them to underwrite his commitment), the requisite Marxist utopian ideology must contain social and cultural elements that take their place, that provide the incentive for people "to
live cooperatively and to renounce the omnivorous desires of the id" (355). In Jameson’s view, no existing socialist society has solved this problem, although he raises the possibility that it is being addressed successfully in Cuba and Yugoslavia (an estimate that now, of course, at least in the latter case, he would have to revise).

As a preliminary, then, to imagining the society for which he wishes, Jameson sets himself the task of imagining what the ideology that could image this society would have to be like. One feature of the utopian ideology, he insists, must be a totalizing vision of current national and international social life. This totalizing vision is needed because, he argues, if you do not have such a vision, then neither can you imagine comprehensive social change. The totalizing concept that Jameson finds to be the most useful tool to think with is the concept of “capital” (354 passim). He wishes to understand current national and international life in terms of the historical development of capitalism.

Jameson acknowledges that contemporary philosophy tends to condemn all totalizing concepts. He suggests, however, that this condemnation may arise not so much from actual arguments that disprove or discredit totalizing concepts, as from the increasing complexities of modern life that make the application of totalizing concepts increasingly difficult (as I noted above with the image of playing fifty chess games). As he puts it, perhaps “our dissatisfaction with the concept of totality is not a thought in its own right but rather a significant symptom, a function of the increasing difficulties in thinking of such a set of interrelationships in a complicated society” (356). To re-apply terminology that Jameson uses in a slightly different context elsewhere in “Cognitive Mapping,” I might say that he suggests that the condemnation of concepts of totality is a symptom of contemporary alienation.

If Jameson is to imagine the needed utopian ideology, then, he must imagine a way around the alienation that rejects the totalizing kind of concept he sees as required by this ideology. In other words, he must imagine a way to deal theoretically with the increasing complexities of modern life. His idea for a practice that will do this is “cognitive mapping” (353 passim). Jameson takes this term from the work of Kevin Lynch. In Lynch’s book The Image of the City, “cognitive mapping” is used to describe a literal kind of mapping of a city’s layout. Lynch asks people to draw on paper the “mental map” they have of their urban surroundings. Lynch contends that the more easily people can do this, the less alienated they are by living in the city they map, or, as Jameson summarizes his results: “Lynch suggests that urban alienation is directly proportional to the mental unmapability of local cityscapes” (353). People need to be able to imagine their own location relative to the rest of the city in order to feel comfortable.

Jameson suggests that just as people need to be able to imagine their spatial location, so too do they need to be able to imagine their historical and social location. He wants to expand the definition of “cognitive mapping” to include this more abstract kind of orientation. To be able to do this kind of mapping would be to deal theoretically with the complexities of modern life, to say with
Commentary 477

respect both to contemporary constructions of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and
nationality and to the histories of these constructions, "I am here." Jameson
summarizes:

The conception of cognitive mapping proposed here therefore involves an extrapo-
lation of Lynch's spatial analysis to the realm of social structure, that is to say, in our
historical moment, to the totality of class relations on a global (or should I say
multinational) scale. The secondary premise is also maintained, namely, that the
incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous
incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience. It follows that an aesthetic of
cognitive mapping in this sense is an integral part of any socialist political project (353).

Jameson speaks here of an "aesthetic" of cognitive mapping because he focuses
in the essay I'm quoting on the possibility that art may be a good medium in which
to develop the practice of cognitive mapping. He suggests that the utopian
ideology should incorporate a concept of art as able "to teach"—not to propa-
gandize, but rather to help people develop the capacity to cognitive-map the
social structure, both synchronically and diachronically(347).

Jameson says that this kind of cognitive mapping does not yet exist (see 347).
He is in a tricky situation, since the logic of his argument would seem to require
that he go ahead and describe what this cognitive mapping would look like; and
yet he is reluctant to step out of the seemingly purely descriptive stance of the
social scientist, which would mean that he could not prescribe the practices of
social-structure cognitive mapping in advance, as it were, of their social
emergence. It might be more accurate to say that he sees himself as sketching
a kind of practice that he predicts will begin to emerge under the pressure of
people's desires not to abandon the socialist project, or simply not to give in to
contemporary alienation.

Nevertheless, if he cannot simply sit down and describe this cognitive mapping
in detail, he can work toward a description, or perhaps work toward hastening the
emergence of its practices, in various ways. One way is to describe what this
cognitive mapping will have to map, that is, to characterize the complex modern
society under its scrutiny. Another way is to look at artistic and intellectual
practices that are already emerging in this society, to see if they look like the requisite
cognitive mapping. Jameson has undertaken both of these efforts, for example in
"Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984).

Jameson periodizes the development of capitalism in three phases. The
first, market capitalism, coincides with realism in art; the second, monopoly or
imperial capitalism, coincides with modernism; and now, in late, international,
or "post-" capitalism, we have postmodernism as the cultural dominant.
Postmodernism is not one style among many, says Jameson, but is the prevailing
mode of experiencing contemporary life. His characterization of postmodernism
emerges in this opening summary from "Postmodernism":

The exposition will take up in turn the following constitutive features of the postmodern: a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary “theory” and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum; a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality, whose “schizophrenic” structure (following Lacan) will determine new types of syntax or syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts; a whole new type of emotional ground tone—what I will call “intensities”—which can best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime; the deep constitutive relationships of all this to a whole new technology, which is itself a figure for a whole new economic world system; ... [and] some reflections on the mission of political art in the bewildering new world space of late multinational capital. (58)

The “depthlessness” in the “culture of the image or the simulacrum” describes the effect of what I call “culture in a blender,” that is, the jumbling together of material from different regions, time periods, etc., where the experiencer’s or consumer’s goal is not to understand the images’ inter-relationships or to identify the provenance of each, but rather merely to react to the barrage of the array. The “depth” of an image’s history or contemporary location is lost. The effect is to become unresponsive to such effects as incongruity or anachronism, and to cease to ask such questions as, “What is the difference between Bosnia and Bosnia on television?”

Such a culture leads to a “weakening of historicity” since any sense of time line or tradition is lost in the jumble. And without historicity, it is hard to locate one’s self in any meaningful way, that is, we lose a sense both of our personal histories (hence a “schizophrenic” “private temporality”) and of the histories of our communities (a weakened “relationship to public History”). Lacan’s schizophrenic loses a sense of any connection between succeeding events, becoming isolated in the experience of the present moment. Not surprisingly, then, the postmodern self is decentered; individualism is impossible where no continuous individual identity can be named; and emotional life becomes simplified to a kind of digital off/on (“intensities”) of vague anxiety or euphoria.

Postmodern people thus seem to be floating collections of fragments, whose everyday life is organized by consumerism, or the instant gratification of an increasing array of desires. I would add that consumerism can be seen as fitting into the “depthless” culture of the simulacrum in that consumerism offers substitutes for the real thing (soft drink ads notwithstanding), substitutes that do not satisfy desire but rather create an unending itch for more: such as, drugs as a substitute for food, casual multiple sex as a substitute for love, and so on. Jameson has suggested that “the yuppies” are representative postmodern people: “their cultural practices and values, their local ideologies, have articulated a useful dominant ideological and cultural paradigm for this stage of capital” (“Afterword,” 1989, 381).

As for responses to postmodern culture, attempts to conceptualize or represent it, Jameson describes a variety, some of which may seem to be tending toward the kind of cognitive mapping he calls for, while some do not. The
"schizophrenic" structure of the "more temporal arts" would seem to provide more postmodern experience, rather than to map it. "Temporal arts," I take it, are arts the experience of which unfolds in time, such as listening to music, watching a film, or walking through a building, and the "schizophrenic" here refers not merely to fragmentation but to a kind of active denial of perspective, a refusal to allow the experiencer to orient himself or herself vis-a-vis the art work. Jameson characterizes this denial in "Postmodernism" by describing his attempts to find his way through the Bonaventura Hotel in Los Angeles. This denial is fostered by the use in postmodern arts of technological media (from the "whole new technology" that both enables and symbolizes the late-capital world order), such as computers and television, which require esoteric expertise for their operation, generate images at the extremes of human perceptual abilities to process them, and in other ways tax the experiencer.

Jameson also suggests that traditional methods of orienting oneself before the work of art are no longer available in postmodernism. Affective fallacies notwithstanding, it is no longer possible to get a conceptual handle on a work of art by thinking of it as the production of a particular artist because the selves of artists are just as decentered as everyone else's; that is, there is no secure authorial identity to be named as the point of origin and reference for a work of art (consider how diametrically opposed this is to the still-common practice in literary studies of specializing in a particular writer, becoming a "Shakespearean" or a "Melville man," for example).

Also, according to Jameson's analysis of postmodernism, it is no longer possible to get a handle on the symbolic work by associating it with a particular historical period or cultural tradition; this follows from the loss of historicity described above, added to which Jameson notes the collapse of distinctions between "high" and "popular" art that once allowed experiencers to see themselves as part of a particular kind of audience. When "high" and "popular" are collapsed, then there is no way to be part of an elite audience, one that is privy to knowledge inaccessible to the mass of experiencers. As Jameson says, "complexity and ambiguity of language, irony, the concrete universal, and the construction of elaborate symbol systems," all of which appeal to an elite audience "in the know," all are absent in postmodern literary art ("Regarding Postmodernism," 1987/1989, 44). It follows, too, that art loses its power to be oppositional, to express social protest, since there is no privileged audience to perceive the violations of convention that signal the protest—and, indeed, no sense of conventions to be violated. If postmodern art shocks, the shock, it seems, must be purely visceral, the kind of shock you get when someone pulls a punch at you a few inches from your eyes.

Not all postmodern art presents the depthlessness of fragmentation, however. Jameson notes that another feature of this cultural dominant is "the return of storytelling after the sort of poetic novels that modernism used to produce" (53). Of course, this "returned" storytelling cannot be simple or natural, even for so-called Third World artists who come to it within inherited storytelling
traditions, because in the postmodern artistic climate such a strategy must always seem chosen. Nevertheless, Jameson sees this development as "relatively positive" (53), quoting with approval contemporary Chinese writer Deng You-mei's challenge to modernism: "We are bored by novels that don't tell stories" (67).

This point makes me think of the importance of stories in the work of many American artists of color, whom we often teach in our writing classes. For example, in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, stories "are all we have, you see, / all we have to fight off / illness and death. / You don't have anything / if you don't have the stories" (2). It's characteristic of Jameson's style that he does not cite these writers, preferring to go to China for his artist condemning the absence of stories in modernist novels. Perhaps Jameson feels that the American examples are too sentimental.

Evidently Jameson sees storytelling as positive because it assumes, and offers, a third alternative to the "bourgeois ego" or "schizophrenic" postmodern subject, namely a "collective subject" in which your self is derived from participation in the community that understands, transmits, and transforms the story. Both storyteller and audience participate in this notion of collective self. To illustrate this collective identity, I think of the remark of the young girl narrator in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*: "I did not feel it alone, but truly" (165). Trinh Minh-Ha's characterization in "Grandma's Story" is similar:

Let me tell you a story. For all I have is a story. Story passed on from generation to generation, named Joy. Told for the joy it gives the storyteller and the listener... The story depends on every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep on coming into being. (119)

Trinh goes on to contrast the history created and conveyed by stories with academic history. She suggests that precisely because it pretends to objectivity, academic or naively empirical history cannot inspire its hearers with a sense of their personal location in and relation to their community's past. Her essay is an excellent compendium of the thought of American writers of color on the social and political functions of the story—something very like what Jameson desires in cognitive mapping.

Jameson also sees a "new depthlessness" in postmodern philosophy, perhaps characterized by the fact that "our theoretical categories tend to become spatial: structural analyses with graphs of synchronic multiplicities of spatially related things (as opposed to, say, the dialectic and its temporal moments), and languages like Foucault's with its empty rhetoric of cutting, sorting and modifying" (47, Jameson's emphasis). This is theory of which it can be said, as also of much postmodern art, that it provides more postmodern experience rather than cognitive-mapping this experience or restoring to it an orienting human perspective. For understanding, it substitutes playing with the fragments—in effect, a simulacrum of intellectual work.
Jameson does not wish to oppose this “spatial” or “depthless” philosophy with anything projected from a critical distance on society. No such critical distance is possible, in his view, and indeed, for his own preferred practice of cognitive mapping he chooses a spatial, “flat” metaphor. Nevertheless, he does want to contend that it is possible that cognitive mapping can restore a human perspective on the postmodern situation. Another way to put this would be to say that Jameson is not willing to give up on the possibility that the postmodern situation can be studied. Clearly, he thinks that saving the human perspective will foster the emancipatory social project of Marxism, but not through any simple condemnation of postmodernism. Postmodernism is just what we have to study and cope with. Jameson says:

Certain aspects of postmodernism can be seen as relatively positive, such as the return to storytelling after the sort of poetic novels that modernism used to produce. Other features are obviously negative (the loss of a sense of history, for example). All in all, these developments have to be confronted as a historical situation rather than as something one morally deplores or simply celebrates. (“Regarding Postmodernism,” 53)

As noted earlier in connection with his reluctance to move out of the social scientist position and specify some practices of cognitive mapping, we see that here, too, Jameson is reluctant to elaborate on his own ethical or ideological agenda. One must simply begin from his commitment to the emancipatory project, as I have done in this summary of his ideas on postmodernism. It is as if Jameson is asking himself the classic Kantian questions, what can we know, what must we do, what may we hope? He addresses “what can we know” in his defense of concepts of totality; he addresses “what must we do” in his notes on cognitive mapping; and as for “what may we hope,” it seems that we may hope that if cognitive mapping does indeed emerge successfully, the restored human perspective will foster the efforts of those already existing “oppositional or enclaves of resistance, all kinds of things not integrated into the global model but necessarily defined against it” (52).

Art Teaching Historical Consciousness
From the hints we see Jameson dropping in various places above, it seems that an effort to restore the sense of history must be an important practice in cognitive mapping. Note that Jameson’s praise for story-telling can be attributed to story-telling’s function of restoring a sense of history to its participants through the collective self, which re-links people with a meaningful sense of collective and personal history (the two are inseparable here).

To look further into Jameson’s ideas of how a sense of history might be restored, I want to consider his discussion of the work of E. L. Doctorow. Let me begin by quoting Jameson on Doctorow at some length:

E. L. Doctorow is the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past, of the suppression of older traditions and moments of the American radical tradition... [but] he has had to convey this great theme formally (since the waning of the content
is very precisely his subject), and, more than that, has had to elaborate his work by way of that very cultural logic of the postmodern which is itself the mark and symptom of his dilemma. . . . This historical novel [Ragtime] can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes "pop history"). Cultural production is thereby driven back inside a mental space which is no longer that of the old monadic subject, but rather that of some degraded collective "objective spirit": it can no longer gaze directly on some putative real world, at some reconstruction of a past history which was once itself a present; rather, as in Plato's cave, it must trace our mental images of that past upon its confining walls. If there is any realism left here, therefore, it is a "realism" which is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement, and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach. ("Postmodernism," 70-71)

Jameson sees Doctorow, like himself, as wishing to restore a sense of history, and here Jameson even more specifically refers to the history of the "American radical past," a history that might be presumed to model acts of struggle for contemporary resistance, as Henry Giroux has suggested with his concept of teachers as bearers of "dangerous memory" (see Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life, 1988, 99 passim). In his praise of Doctorow, then, Jameson reveals more about his hopes for the outcome of successful cognitive mapping as it relates to restoration of an historical sense.

But Jameson sees Doctorow, like himself, as rejecting any traditional methods of addressing this need for history. The very "waning" of history, which is the problem addressed, makes it impossible for Doctorow to pursue his project by writing, say, a straightforward historical narrative in which Emma Goldman is restored to us as a romantic heroine of political struggle. Similarly, I presume, Jameson would not envision a pedagogy of the historical sense working effectively by giving students time lines, for example, or having them read biographies of "important" people. In other words, both historical pedagogy and the "historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past" as if that past were simply available for description—a "putative real world"—and analysis by some unitary, comprehending intelligence or "monadic subject."

Rather, what Doctorow does, according to Jameson, is to put forward "our ideas and stereotypes about that past," to show us that what we think we know about the past has been constructed for us by whatever popular images have survived from, or in spite of, public schooling and mass media representations. This is our participation in a "degraded collective "objective spirit": "degraded" because incomplete, fragmentary, stereotyped; "collective" because acquired and used in widely shared circumstances, or "pop"-ular; and "objective" only in quotation marks, because Jameson's analysis suggests that what we know of history is not objective, although our teachers may have claimed that it was, but rather is informed by the needs of late capitalism to create denatured forms of historical knowledge that will allow it to prosper.
Insofar as representing our ideas of history to us can generate resistance, however, it is clear that Jameson does not intend to oppose the degraded histories with something that actually is objective or realistic. He does not imagine that we are going to get the true story from Doctorow or anyone else. Rather, he holds out the possibility of our “grasping that confinement” to a “Plato’s cave” of historical images, “and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation” that is our own. A key feature of this situation is that we are “condemned” to attempt to recover a sense of history only by sifting through the fragments that are available to us, “our own pop images and simulacra of that history.”

This situation is negative (something to which we are “condemned”) not only because we are likely to experience the recognition of our “confinement” as a “shock,” but also because like Tantalus, we must engage in a pursuit, of historical knowledge, that because of postmodern conditions of fragmentation “remains forever out of reach.” We cannot hope to replace our fragmented images of history with the real things; but Jameson implies that the sense of history we will gain from engaging in this fruitless search is superior to what we feel when we simply rest complacent with the fragments. We may never be able to say with any security, “I am here,” with respect to our social and historical location, but by trying to find out where we are, we will have at least a bit more of a human perspective on our situation than we would if we simply bowed under the barrage of disorienting images. At least our problems will be defined in our own terms.

**Postscript: Composition Teaching Historical Consciousness**

Because I am a teacher, I experience the postmodern condition and its attendant loss of a sense of history particularly in the university, and as a teacher I also hope that some ways to cope with the postmodern condition, specifically in terms of a renewed sense of history, can be fostered in the university. Another way to put this would be to say that I am increasingly seeing all students as being like those that Mike Rose talks about in *Lives on the Boundary* (1989). One meaning of being “on the boundary” for him, I think, is in reference to students who are so underprepared for college that they are severely disoriented there, and likely to drop out. And when they do, they drop back into the disenfranchised social circumstances responsible for their lack of preparation in the first place, circumstances where physical survival itself is far from secure. I think Rose’s boundary students are the canaries in coal mines (to borrow an image Henry Louis Gates has applied specifically to African Americans), presaging conditions that more and more people will be experiencing as late capitalism increases the rich-poor gap and enlarges the latter group.

Also I think I’m seeing all students like this because Rose’s description of how the university looks to boundary students strikes me as eminently postmodern, that is, as how the university increasingly looks to everyone. Rose’s descriptions are so vivid that I’d like to quote one at some length:
It hits you most forcefully at lunchtime: the affluence of the place, the attention to
dress and carriage, but the size, too—vast and impersonal, a labyrinth of corridors and
classrooms and libraries; you’re also struck by the wild intersection of cultures,
spectacular diversity, compressed by a thousand social forces. I’m sitting under a
canopy of purple jacarandas with Bobby, for Bobby is in a jam. Students are rushing
to food lines or dormitories or sororities, running for elevators or taking stairs two at
a time. Others “blow it off” and relax, mingling in twos and threes. Fifties fasion is
everywhere: baggy pants, thin ties, crew cuts, retro ponytails—but so are incipient
Yuppiedom and cautious punk, and this month’s incarnation of the nuevo wavo. Palm
trees sway on the backs of countless cotton shirts. A fellow who looks Pakistani zooms
by on a skateboard. A Korean boy whose accent is still very strong introduces himself
as Skip. Two Middle Eastern girls walk by in miniskirts and heels. Sometimes I think
I’m teaching in a film by Ridley Scott. (3)

A science fiction film: exactly. I bet I even know which one he means: Blade
Runner. But this film is dystopic—the only kind of vision of the future that seems
to be able to be built from postmodern fragments. I want the energy and freedom
of the campus Rose describes—no sense in wringing our hands—but I want a
utopian vision, too.

Now I will turn to questions of a pedagogy that could do for the teaching of
writing what Jameson says Doctorow does for the writing of a literature of
history. If art can or should be pedagogic, in Jameson’s formulation, then perhaps
pedagogy can function as art. I would like to examine the possibility that
pedagogy, like art, can assist at the formation of cognitive mapping, and precisely
by attempting to restore a sense of history. I then ask, what would a pedagogy
that restores history be like? In pursuing this question, it is important to bear in
mind the question that Patti Lather says is always posed to emancipatory
pedagogy by postmodernism, namely, “How do our very efforts to liberate
perpetuate the relations of dominance?” (16)

In composition, there already are what could be called postmodern pedagogies,
for instance: the diversification of course contents to add a wider variety of genres,
including many not previously designated as “literature” or even as “serious” or
intellectual (e.g., letters, journals, song lyrics); diversification of contents to add a
wider variety of provenance, a.k.a. multiculturalism, including writings by people
who are not white, not male, not heterosexual, not upper class, etc.; diversification
of pedagogical approaches, especially collaborative learning, process writing, and
so on, that “decenter” the classroom, deconstruct the teacher’s authority, and credit
students with more power and responsibility.

All of these developments may be regarded as relatively positive, but it is
not clear the extent to which they can be seen as contributing to cognitive
mapping, and especially to the element of cognitive mapping concerned with a
sense of history. These postmodern pedagogical developments would not only
have to deal in our images and stereotypes of the past in order to qualify as
cognitive mapping, but they would also have to work to foreground a sense of
“confinement” to these images, a discontent with confinement and an urge to
“seek History” even if only via the necessarily futile process of trying to replace
these “pop images and simulacra” with something more authentic.
Postmodern pedagogy might be said to fulfill the first of these conditions simply in the plethora of new material it has introduced into the writing classroom. Such a pedagogy invites students to see that their images of the literary past are constructed. But it is not clear that students are invited to ask how these constructions came about, especially if the new material is presented simply as a new area to master using the same old conceptual tools. A striking number of multicultural anthologies for use in writing classes are organized according to the traditional modes of discourse or according to categories of human experience that are supposed to be universal—e.g., childhood or schooling. Such pedagogical structures do not problematize the accounts of communities past and present that the readings describe.

If we have here, then, one component of historically sensitive cognitive mapping in that the new material represents the world views of previously silenced and marginalized peoples, it still seems that we do not have another component, namely the shock of becoming aware that these images, too, do not necessarily represent any knowable reality; of feeling the confinement of relying on these fragments; and of moving to seek another history, however incomplete and fragmentary it may still have to be. I want to ask what would have to happen for us and our students to want to struggle with our confinement and actively seek historical knowledge.

I think that provisional answers to this question will involve both pedagogical techniques and course content, if I may for a moment preserve a tendentious distinction. The problem is not exactly to get people interested in history, but to show them that they already are “interested,” in the sense that it matters to their well being what stories about American history get told—or suppressed—and who gets to decide this. In other words, restoring a sense of history in pedagogy does not mean “giving” it to students but inspiring them to actively seek it for themselves.

In general, I suspect that the pedagogy we need will have to cross boundaries between individual courses and separate disciplines; the project of restoring a sense of history will have to be widely shared, not to be accomplished by historians—or rhetoricians—alone and not to be accomplished in a single semester. This project might indeed be thought of as constituting a new postmodern function for the humanities, on behalf of restoring a human perspective on the postmodern world. Also, I suspect this pedagogy will have to transgress traditional boundaries barring students from the teachers’ power, encouraging students to collaborative work while at the same time, allowing teachers to help set agendas and find materials. And of course, this pedagogy will involve increasingly self-reflexive and copious practices of language use.

But beyond these very general characteristics, I can only suggest what I am after by providing some partial, specific examples, not meant as “answers” but as stimuli to further research. One example might be the syllabus designed for first-year composition by Linda Brodkey and colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin, in which the Toulmin model of analyzing arguments was
applied to court cases involving racial and sexual discrimination (see Bizzell and Trimbur). Another example might be Geoffrey Chase's working-class history project (1988), in which a student matched her experiences with those of Meridel LeSueur. One more example might be Negotiating Difference, an American literature and rhetoric anthology that Bruce Herzberg and I have just published. This book might be seen as a sort of multicultural archive for American rhetoricians, to begin to learn something about our diverse cultural communities, and more, to learn how much it is we don't know.

Incomplete as they might be, however, I hope that these and other pedagogical incarnations have some success restoring a sense of history; if the coordinates of our social and historical locations cannot be specified, at least we will gain the benefits of looking for them. This search for history, motivated by desire generated from a renewed sense of history, is the kind of effort that Jameson envisions hastening the emergence of cognitive mapping, which in its presently emergent state I cannot describe securely or make any promises about. As cognitive mapping becomes possible, according to Jameson's analysis, aid is given to the development of the utopian ideology Jameson seeks. And that ideology increases the momentum for change toward a more egalitarian society. Hence I work back from my postmodern pedagogical site of confusion to a vision of hope for the future of us all.

Incomplete as they might be, however, I hope that these and other pedagogical incarnations have some success restoring a sense of history; if the coordinates of our social and historical locations cannot be specified, at least we will gain the benefits of looking for them. This search for history, motivated by desire generated from a renewed sense of history, is the kind of effort that Jameson envisions hastening the emergence of cognitive mapping, which in its presently emergent state I cannot describe securely or make any promises about. As cognitive mapping becomes possible, according to Jameson's analysis, aid is given to the development of the utopian ideology Jameson seeks. And that ideology increases the momentum for change toward a more egalitarian society. Hence I work back from my postmodern pedagogical site of confusion to a vision of hope for the future of us all.

College of the Holy Cross
Worcester, Massachusetts

Works Cited


Commentary 487


—. "Regarding Postmodernism—A Conversation with Fredric Jameson." Anders Stephanson, interviewer. 1987; rpt. in Kellner. 43-74.


