Reading American Novels and Multicultural Aesthetics
Also coedited by Lou F. Caton

READING AMERICAN NOVELS AND MULTICULTURAL AESTHETICS

ROMANCING THE POSTMODERN NOVEL

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Dedicated to my family’s youngest members, the “romantics” of our future: Jasper, Finn, Cato, Luna, Kate, and Jackson. And especially to my only real teacher, Delia.
Every metaphysics of metaphysics . . . that in any way whatever attempts to climb beyond metaphysics falls back most surely beneath metaphysics, without knowing where, precisely in so doing, it has fallen.

Martin Heidegger, from *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, “The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead” (109).
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When a University of Oregon seminar titled “Representations of Romanticism” ended for the semester in 1990, a group of graduate students exited the hall. Smoking and talking quietly outside Prince Lucern Campbell Hall in Eugene, the grads continued to discuss the class. It had been led by Forest Pyle who had encouraged everyone to see Paul de Man as a leader in restaging romanticism, critical theory, and canonicity. As I recall the moment, someone had a sudden realization that our readings of de Man and romanticism might address even wider concerns. Indeed, could not romanticism lead to theories that could also help one understand the debates around social issues such as ethnicity and multiculturalism? This idea had not arisen in the seminar, but it seemed now to make exciting sense. The “doubleness” of romanticism, its vital dualism of a “both/and” perspective, could be interpreted to mean ethnic separatism can never depart from a shared world of “togetherness.” For example, any “multicultural” event has particular ideological content that inevitably occurs on a field of communal similarity. The spirit behind this two-fold recognition of ethnic distinction and human commonality springs from elements of European romanticism that de Man helped clarify for us. Viewed within the field of literature, a romantic approach to America, I energetically thought out loud, might help define ethnic-centered novels. After all, had not a romantic interpretation once helped an earlier generation define and explain the “myth and symbol” school of critical practice? 

I am guessing now, over fifteen years later, that such notions probably did not formulate themselves in quite so stunning a manner. But I like to think they did. I do remember exclaiming a few notions about polarity and dialectic that evening during the ensuing conversations. But very soon we began to disband and another graduate student offered some parting, contrary advice: “You know, seeing our current social movements in terms of romanticism sounds intriguing. I love the romantics,
too. At the same time, who wants to take the risk? Who could claim she
knows enough about all the varieties of romantic theory to hazard a guess
at how it applies to such a hugely complex and multifaceted topic like
contemporary culture? Isn’t romantic rhetoric too soft, too mushy, too
inarticulate to be of much use? Wasn’t Arthur Lovejoy really right in
pronouncing it a more or less useless term? It tries to say everything and
ends up saying nothing. Nah, stay away from the romantics. Trying to
analyze them as an interpretative strategy is a mug’s game.” Yes. With this
book, then, I hereby enter that “mug’s game” whereby I risk turning the
intricate into the domestic. Hazard accepted. And in response to that
student’s warning, then, and because I may sweep too quickly over this
expansive landscape called “the romantic,” I need to briefly describe this
project.

My work clearly fits within a broad category of revisionary, resistive,
and restless critics who, like Satya Mohanty, Charles Altieri, John
McGowan, Charles Taylor, Hilary Putnam, P.F. Strawson, Seyla
Benhabib, and Murray Krieger, to name only a few, are all not persuaded
by the absolute tone of many poststructural declarations. All of these
“counter-anti-aesthetic” thinkers tend to offer strategies that recapture
the often romantic implications and motivations of “truth,” “beauty,”
and “idealism,” notions that they believe still carry currency, although
deeply qualified and contested, in spite of the fact that they have largely
been hijacked by the reactionary Right. With romanticism as an inter-
pretative tool and beginning under the ancient belief that art unveils
certain truths that normal discourse obscures, I hope to extend their
work by revealing critical principles that underlie the diversity of the
American canon and, in the process, a multicultural aesthetics. I interpret
the social/political implications of America’s literary canon largely
through Coleridge’s aesthetic principles and argue that romantic theory,
and in particular Coleridge’s vital trope of organicity, can coordinate and
organize much of the current debate on multiplicity and the contempo-
rary novel that arises in terms of authenticity, ethnicity, and identity.
After describing how Coleridge often approaches concepts supporting
these issues with an inclusive dialectic, I further suggest that his roman-
ticism reveals an idealistic universality within this literary diversity, one
that does not domesticate the cultural particularity of each text. My work
exemplifies these concerns in detail by way of the following novels: Leslie
Marmon Silko’s Ceremony, Chang-Rae Lee’s Native Speaker, Luis
Rodriguez’s Always Running La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A., Jamaica
Kincaid’s Annie John, and Don DeLillo’s White Noise.

The Coleridgean emphasis on organic relationships mentioned above
supports a literary multiculturalism of exchange and communication. I
sustain these claims by interpreting sections of Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, and other romantic writings through a broad *via negativa* tradition. Romantic writers, I assert, frequently proceed “negatively” by emphasizing the inability of the finite mind to completely understand cultural and metaphysical “truth.” As an example, I suggest that romantic writers use a “first cause” approach of a shared, universal acceptance of “not knowing”: that is, a romantic writer implicitly agrees that every culture’s “first cause” is an acknowledgment of the finite limitations of human knowledge. By having this dialectic occur in and through different cultures, all of which experience similarities on the limitations of “knowing,” groups theoretically share the possibilities for both an ideal commonality and a respectful recognition of another’s alterity. My pan-cultural acknowledgment of these rational limitations and speculative notions links diverse groups to each other, encourages an affirming curiosity in an individual’s “otherness,” and provides the theory for a romantic ethnic-literary multiculturalism.

Identifying ethnic and multicultural exceptionalism by way of an equally significant romantic vocabulary, I invoke Coleridge’s definitional contentions for such terms as the imagination, symbol, polarity, consciousness, and so on. I propose dialectical theories for the popular “both/and” social concern over ethnic particularity and human commonality. For instance, Coleridge’s symbol “enunciates the whole” while abiding as a “part” in any perceptive act. Similarly, his secondary and primary imaginations move as related forces between the physical and metaphysical worlds of materiality and spiritual myth. More universally perhaps, Coleridge writes of polarity as a doctrine which claims that every enunciation of particularity in one context is, at the same time, a declaration of wholeness within another, related context. These comprehensive and motivated definitions, although troublesome and contested, continue to suggest that a belief in dialectics, relationship, and organicity moves us beyond the perceived atomistic limits of culture; they help map out analogies between varied ethnic literary works without negating their radically dissimilar historical conditions. Acknowledging both heterogeneity and homogeneity, these organic theories provide an ethno-critical frame from which to arbitrate the profound variation inherent in the American canon. They suggest transhistorical parallels within a historical field of diversity. The house I build uses a critical foundation for this form of canonicity by initially reconstructing how medieval-quest metaphors have influenced English romanticism. This relation, first famously articulated by Harold Bloom in his article “The Internalization of Quest-Romance,” helps move romance from its genre designation to a fictional interpretative strategy for America’s canon. My first four chapters
compose the “first floor” of this edifice and configure this movement in the following contexts: Dialectical, Historical, Postcolonial, and Poststructural.

My discussion of the novels often reveals this polar balance. I suggest that Tayo’s bicultural experiences in *Ceremony* lead to a healing process that accents both Western and Native American principles. “Thought Woman,” the spider–teller–of–tales of the novel, weaves individual narrative strands until the “web” of her story is a holistic vision for Tayo. This interdependence of strands within the unity of a web closely resembles Coleridge’s polarity theory: every articulation of particularity leads to an eventual declaration of wholeness. Read together, these two tropes, Indian webs and European polarities, operate as “vital” (i.e., multifaceted yet incomplete) dualities that show how some clashing traditions, even those as quarrelsome as Western and Native American, can and do intersect. For *Native Speaker*, a particular partnership of self and world forms a phenomenon I call romantic negative tolerance. Because a full grasp of what experience means continually eludes Henry Park, he gains health by accepting several renditions of “truth,” all of which compose the phenomenon called knowledge. This romantic interpretation arises as a radical principle of doubt to liberate Henry toward a full reception of his actions in a seemingly uncaring world. Such tolerance grows into a bridge toward others as it reminds Henry of how difference and unknowing can combine to create an introductory, opening acceptance of experience. Rodriguez’s autobiographical-novel *Always Running* pulls from the romanticism of Kant to disclose an idealistic, modernist text. Because discursive or logical reasoning depends on determinate concepts, those that are already a part of our understanding and social reality, this text uses the sensuality and physicality of aesthetic “reasoning” to describe the harsh and violent street realities of east Los Angeles. The protagonist judges and thinks in an aesthetic fashion, amounting to the closest thing possible to an immediate, sensuous response to the world. Such a response produces a satisfaction related to indeterminacy rather than the determined representational or conceptual force of “conscious” ideas. In a different, but still romantic, way, Kincaid presents Annie John as a daughter in quest of an identity that both engulfs and rejects her mother; this contest keenly resembles the paradoxical energy of the symbolic quest. That is, Coleridge’s assertion that the symbol carries “the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal” describes the paradoxical pull/push relation within the mother–daughter bond. Finally, DeLillo presents *White Noise* as a similar organic struggle of parts to wholes. Contrary to the claim that DeLillo is a postmodern who writes primarily of the
crisis surrounding representation, mediation, and commodification, I look instead at passages that highlight the organic desire of his characters’ perceptions. For example, Jack Gladney so desires social intimacy that he interprets his son’s radical skepticism as an assault on the mythopoeia bond of father and son.

Using a discourse of romanticism to order this radically dissimilar collection illustrates how a novel’s ideological and cultural identity occurs upon a global field of similarity. Such organization, although problematic, compels an examination of the struggle within idealistic terms such as “equality,” “authenticity,” and “community,” key terms in many multicultural debates. Coleridge’s dynamic theories arbitrate these contestations and offer a useful framework for the broader discussion on identity, ethnicity, and the canon. As is probably apparent to most at this point, such isolation of an aesthetic, romantic reading from any historical and social realities helped foster the New Critics. Unsurprisingly, I do not wish to relive those days. However, some equally strong claims of the undecidability of texts should also be viewed skeptically. The postmodern observation that knowledge can never release itself from the knots of an infinitely deferred sign system has limited use. Ultimately, I hope to show that it fails to foreclose on organic claims; the organicism of commonality necessarily exists within recognition of this error called language, within this fallibility of knowledge. Indeed, declaring an ontological belief in the motivating force of an organic theory of multiculturalism “essentially” occurs in the midst of this awareness of the fallen state of language. Coleridge’s faithful ontology and our current skeptical epistemologies must be read together; it is within such a romantic dialectic that the possibility of an authentic multicultural aesthetics may emerge. In a single sentence: this book claims that the unreachable translucent ideal of a perfect aesthetic “wholeness” always motivates the social, political, and disputed sign of community.

Finally, a word about words. Throughout this book, I will often use various cognates, but two particular words stand out in their cognate difficulty: “romantic” and “form.” At one point I felt that a judicious use of capitalization might help determine meaning among all the variety; however, I now feel it best simply to have the context of usage function in that regard. With that in mind, I have decided to retain, as much as possible, lower-case designation for these two cognates throughout the book. Even though too much consistency may be the hobgoblin of small minds (Emerson?), just enough might help you find your way home.
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