Theories and Methodologies

Negative Totalization

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When Fredric Jameson, one of the speakers at the 1983 conference Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, passed away in the fall of 2024, eulogies poured in from many corners, both academic and mainstream, testifying to his status as a towering intellectual, dedicated mentor and teacher, and prolific critic of a vast array of aesthetic and cultural objects. In reading many of these reflections on his life and work, I wondered what Jameson himself might say about them. Attending closely to genre as the sedimentation of the past into the present, and especially to the role of genre in Marxist theory, his work is a reminder that any attempt to look back at things—one person's oeuvre, or the recent history of Western Marxist thought and its legacies, as is the case in this feature—must confront the very generic modes through which those attempts are made. This forum's collective reflection on Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture thus raises the immediate question—which Jameson's work, especially his emphasis on periodization, inspires—of how those reflections occur and what they might say about our own historical moment.

I revisit here Jameson's talk from 1983, "Cognitive Mapping." An early iteration of what would become the oft-cited conclusion to *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1989), it remains an evocative account of one of Jameson's most well-known motifs. At the time (including at the conference itself), Jameson was engaged in what might be called the wider spatial turn in theory, periodizing the various stages of capital according to formal, spatial metrics, like the grid. While the spatial turn has certainly passed, "cognitive mapping" remains. But it is often mobilized in academic literary and cultural criticism to rather narrow methodological ends, at the expense of the riskier, more imaginative, indefinite quality of its

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original deployment. Here I take up a term central to both Jameson's talk and his wider work: *totality*. I think about totality's relationship to a concept of failure, especially the failed history of revolution and left social transformation. I conclude with a discussion of the work of the contemporary artist Zarina Hashmi (known professionally as Zarina). While Jameson has noted that cognitive mapping should shed the figure of an actual map, I suggest that diasporic artists often make use of the map as a genre that holds open the social contradictions of history instead of resolving them. Zarina's art is one example of a profound engagement with totality on the visual sphere that takes Jameson's thinking in a new direction.

I see Jameson's talk itself as an exercise in the reflective component of cognitive mapping, a whirlwind tour of Western Marxist concepts, Anglo-American cultural life after the 1960s, and the practicalities of socialist politics, all of which were largely unfashionable in the early 1980s. Jameson had mentioned cognitive mapping in earlier works, such as *The Political Unconscious*, published in 1981. There, in a brief parenthesis, Jameson associates cognitive mapping with the aesthetics of the realist novel, which attempts to situate lived experience within an increasingly unmappable structural totality (104). His talk two years later expands on the phrase; but in this later iteration, Jameson insists that cognitive mapping will be a feature of *any* aesthetic form that attempts to grasp—but not to hold—the "structural coordinates" of capitalist existence ("Cognitive Mapping" 349). Beginning with the familiar Marxist example of Bertolt Brecht, Jameson argues that such aesthetics—hitherto unknown—will be formally imaginative and reflective, where "the cognitive becomes in and of itself the immediate source of profound aesthetic delight" (348).

Jameson's particular dialectical method of theorizing typically forges connections among seemingly disparate levels of social and cultural life. Yet "Cognitive Mapping" goes further, offering an extended series of mediations with the kinds of thinking Western Marxism has often been read as sidelining: feminism, Black radicalism, Kantian aesthetics, psychoanalysis, and the postcolonial. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson had argued that these forms of thinking are "more specialized interpretive codes whose insights are strategically limited" because of their suspicion concerning the term *totality* (21). Yet, like his fellow conference speaker Stuart Hall, Jameson's particular blend of Marxist interpretative methods seeks a rapprochement with those other forms of interpretation. Perhaps the best example of this mediating engagement is with feminism, which, in the culture wars of the early 1980s, was an inevitable interlocutor. In "Cognitive Mapping," Jameson makes the surprising claim that

> all forms of hierarchy have always been based ultimately on gender hierarchy and on the building block of the family unit, which makes it clear that this is the true juncture between a feminist problematic and a Marxist one—not an antagonistic juncture, but the moment at which the feminist project and the Marxist and socialist project meet and face the same dilemma: how to imagine Utopia. (355)

Jameson's use of the word *utopia*, mentioned throughout the talk, evokes Northrop Frye's definition of romance, the realism of Georg Lukács, and the heterodoxy of Ernst Bloch. The reference to utopia might have seemed out of sync with the intellectual climate of the 1980s, dominated as it was by a poststructuralist approach to aesthetics as well as sociopolitical life. But the 1930s of Lukács and Bloch, the 1980s of sharply rising neoliberalism, and the current moment pose similar questions about how to think collectivity and forge a shared vision of freedom, without flattening difference and singularity. For Jameson, it remains impossible to aim for freedom without a strong sense of the totality of capitalist relations. Having grounded much of my work in the "narrow interpretative codes" of feminism and other perspectives on the world, I always find myself bristling against the term *totality* when I encounter it throughout "Cognitive Mapping" and other works. It remains devastatingly easy to mistake Western Marxism's eye to structural totality with what Cornel West identifies in his response to

Jameson as a "regulative ideal" that flattens the work of difference (Jameson et al. 360). Yet Jameson took pains to show that mediation—and the broader tool of dialectical thinking—preserves difference "as a relational concept, rather than as the mere inert inventory of unrelated diversity" (*Political Unconscious* 41).

Nearly forty years on, it is hard not to spy the ideological co-opting of difference everywhere as just that inert inventory, in which real negativity is declawed and repurposed as neoliberal commodity. This narrow and facile understanding of identity politics shows itself in the Global North in the moribund form of electoral politics, which offers nothing in the face of the alarming rise of fascism. And while mass movements—such as Black Lives Matter and the global movement in solidarity with the Palestinian liberation struggle—may appear narrow to some at first glance, they hold to the Combahee River Collective's powerful statement about Black feminist freedom as the grounds for wider liberation and to Jameson's rejoinder that "these things always take place at two levels: as an embattled struggle of a group, but also as a figure for *an entire systematic transformation*" (360).[1]

It remains necessary, then, rather than peripheral, to engage these "narrow interpretive codes" and to consider the nuances of what Jameson means by "totality" and "totalizing thought" (354): not a perceptible totality, but the capacity for an entire systematic transformation. Drawing on Kevin Lynch's urban planning concept of "cognitive mapping" in his book *The Image of the City* (1960), Jameson allegorizes Lynch's sense of "urban alienation" in American cities as a broader representation of "the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated" (353). Drawing on Louis Althusser, Jameson mentions that such a gap can be "positively" bridged only by ideology, which "attempts to span or coordinate, to map, by means of conscious and unconscious representations" (353). But the map as a figure is only a beginning. Jameson has said that mapping needs to be understood purely at the speculative level: it is "something we cannot imagine" (347). Later, in *Postmodernism*, Jameson notes that "cognitive mapping cannot . . . involve anything so easy as a map; indeed, once you knew what 'cognitive mapping' was driving at, you were to dismiss all figures of maps and mapping from your mind and try to imagine something else" (409–10).

Indeed, the metaphor of mapping recalls the tools of colonial violence as the basis of capitalist totality in the first place, which Jameson emphasizes in both historical and spatial terms. This totality emerges early in Western modernity as an ungraspable and disorienting reality, an "absent global colonial system" in which "the truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India, or Jamaica or Hong Kong: it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life" (Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping" 349). Capitalism and colonialism are fundamentally imbricated here. Yet any attempt to render this complex system as a coherent one risks paranoia. One of Jameson's most prescient early insights about the contemporary in "Cognitive Mapping" is his point about conspiracy as "the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital" and "a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system" (356). The conspiratorial—coastal elites, hidden agendas, and covert government plots—dominates the discourse of current reactionary politics. It remains the one way to cognitively map what is constitutionally unavailable for representation.

That structural totality in the Marxist sense is "ultimately unrepresentable" and "something like an absent cause, one that can never emerge into the presence of perception," then, is crucial to its definition (Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 411). In this way, Jameson's totality, like the Althusserian Real to which it refers, is like Jacques Lacan's *not-all*: it is a totality that cannot be grasped except indirectly and through representational means that cannot necessarily be gleaned in advance. Conspiracy theories, as Alenka Zupančič has recently observed, often resemble Sigmund Freud's dream-work (233). They are a kind of unconscious cognitive mapping, and a complex representational schema: they "touch" the real, and they grasp something of its absent totality.

But in attempting to fill out that totality—to find the man behind the curtain, so to speak—they positivize what is inaccessible to direct representation.

Against closure—and readings of the dialectic, say, of Hegel's absolute, that would prioritize the closed form of its synthesis—"Cognitive Mapping" locates failure as the germinating point where aesthetics and politics meet: a negative totalization, as Theodor Adorno might have it. By *failure*, I also mean a scission in the form of the dialectic, in which history does not unfold as a telos determined by the economics of the Global North. Jameson was a lifelong left internationalist and sustained intellectual and personal relationships with revolutionary struggles across the Third World. The predominance of European and Anglo-American objects of study in his work belie this fact, but these objects too are intertwined with the wider world through cognitive mapping, an ultimately promiscuous method of linking that prioritizes connections across space *and* time. In his talk, Jameson takes up the example of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, which formed and was active across the auto and other industries in Detroit in the late 1960s. Paradigmatic of the crossing of Black Liberation with Marxist-Leninist struggle in the 1960s, the league represents, for Jameson, the quintessential problem of "how to develop a *national* political movement on the basis of *city* strategy and politics" ("Cognitive Mapping" 352). As the league's ideas spread into Europe, its initial coherence eventually fractured (as detailed in the 1975 book cited by Jameson, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution*, by Dan Georgakis and Marvin Surkin). What is ultimately more intriguing to Jameson is the documentary made about the league, *Finally Got the News* (1970). Rerouting the problem of local versus international struggles to the entanglement of space, scale, and ultimately, representation, Jameson reflects that "most ironic . . . is the very success of their failure: the representation—the model of this complex spatial dialectic—triumphantly survives in the form of a film and a book" though "the referent seems to have disappeared" (352). The "success" of this alleged failure allows for a further reflection: "successful spatial representation today need not be some uplifting drama of revolutionary triumph but may be equally inscribed in a narrative of defeat, which . . . causes the whole architectonic of global space to rise up in ghostly profile behind itself, as some invisible dialectic barrier or invisible limit" (352–53).

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers and its representative legacies become paradigmatic for Jameson of cognitive mapping, raising a whole set of questions not only about his method but also about the complex dialectics of Black revolutionary struggles on a global scale and their lingering connections to the notion of a Third World. In contrast to the somewhat demure use of the concept of cognitive mapping to analyze, say, the nineteenth-century European realist novel, Jameson's method of dialectical reading might be better used to revisit these revolutionary struggles and perhaps revive the strong concept of Third World solidarities as well as non-Western aesthetic engagements with capitalist totality. On the heels of Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, Jameson published "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986). The essay became a touchstone of controversy over its seeming claims of the "unmodern" status of a Third World literature that always projects a "national allegory" unfamiliar to the gaze of First World readers (66, 69). While widely criticized by postcolonial scholars in the years following its publication (see, e.g., Ahmad; Chow), recent scholarship has reframed some of these critiques of Jameson as indicative of the state of postcolonial studies as a field and its relationship to Western Marxism at the time (see, e.g., Tally). Yogita Goyal, for instance, has reexamined Jameson's essay as an incisive account of genre under global capital and, specifically, of allegory itself as an experimental and anticolonial genre rather than a simple derivative of metropolitan literary forms. Goyal also attends to the generic possibilities of romance as holding Marxist thought open to imaginative risk and utopian longing (526)—what Jameson, I think, ultimately wants to highlight in "Cognitive Mapping" when he concludes that there is "something positive in the attempt to keep alive the possibility of imagining such a thing" (355).

Against the map as pure colonial abstraction, later aesthetic experiments keep faith with the idea of

utopia as the shared horizon of socialist politics. Such is the case with a 2003 series of wood-block prints by the Aligarh-born, New York–based artist Zarina, *These Cities Blotted into the Wilderness (Adrienne Rich after Ghalib)*. These prints, on handmade paper in minimal, black-and-white lines, illustrate cities from above, with their names carefully inscribed in Urdu: Beirut, Jenin, Srebrenica, New York. What do these cities have in common? At first glance, perhaps nothing. But with some historical reflection, they can be understood as sites of intertwined crisis and violence: points on a map of current global catastrophe. The prints take their title from a ghazal by Adrienne Rich, written after the nineteenth-century Indian poet Mirza Ghalib, in the aftermath of May 1968. Shot through with an entire genealogy of political, historical, and literary significance, Zarina's cityscapes open out into a world of colonial capture, globalized networks, and fragile collectivities and "flirt with the indeterminate zone between representation and abstraction" (Mufti, "Zarina Hashmi" 176).

Take *Jenin* (fig. 1): a thick black line surrounds a space resembling torn mesh wire. Is Zarina depicting the refugee camp, where thousands of Palestinians live in cramped, substandard living conditions, or the wider occupied city? The thick surrounding line suggests both, mapping at least two layered forms of unfreedom. And what to make of the tiny black squares within, crisscrossed by haphazard white lines? Are these buildings cloistered together, roughly erased in patches? Or is it a flickering power grid? Are the squares people, lives, children, memories? And going back to the wire, could it be a piece of a border fence, roughly textured like fabric, or a carefully drawn map? Or is it a bird's-eye view of Jenin, one supplied by an aerial bomber?

Zarina never answers these questions, preferring to trade the straightforward contours of figurative art for the material and formal density of abstract lines on a page. These lines strongly recall the colonial and contemporary mappings of occupied places, without dissolving history into a lost past or an eternal present. *Jenin* asks to be understood within the historic specificities of the dispossession of Palestine, which stretches backward to British colonialism and forward into the present. Given that the name of the city is written in Urdu—Zarina's mother tongue but also a disappearing language of the subcontinent—it narratively links the Palestinian Nakba to the Partition of India and Pakistan, two foundational catastrophes of the twentieth century (occurring back-to-back, in 1948 and 1947, respectively). Understood laterally in the series of cities depicted in the larger portfolio (others include Grozny and Baghdad), the images accrete a picture of imperialism, militarism, and ongoing dispossession that structures the globe. These cities are connected by modern imperial devastation, networked by the disorienting pulse of resource extraction. Yet in the layered thickness of lines, shapes, and simple patterns in her prints, Zarina also leaves space for what Gilles Deleuze has called "a line of flight" (Deleuze and Parnet 36), where the map might be rearranged. Her cityscapes participate in a wider formalism critics have described as minimal and "quiet" (Mufti, "Zarina's Language Question" 155), but which makes use of the line as an aesthetic of possibility, as a "vector of movement" (De Bruyn 26) that divides and differentiates but that could also extend out of the frame in unforeseen directions. *These Cities* showcases Zarina's aesthetic of defamiliarization, one that poses the ongoing question of art's relationship to sociopolitical forms.[2]

I was drawn to Zarina's woodcuts and prints as striking articulations of modernity's condition of exile and rootlessness with an emphasis on the historical forces that have produced such conditions and on aesthetic form as a means to grasp these connections. Zarina's visual lexicon exists in a diasporic context that does not settle into one place: she was associated with Third World feminist art circles in New York, working, for instance, with the socialist feminist magazine *Heresies* and cocurating the exhibit *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists in the United States* (1980) with the artists Ana Mendieta and Kazuko Miyamoto. Many of her prints contain spare but pointed textual elements, such as references to anticolonial and revolutionary poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Mahmoud Darwish. This is Zarina's cognitive map: a series of aesthetic attempts to locate particular, individual experience within an increasingly unrepresentable social totality. But they are also more than simply

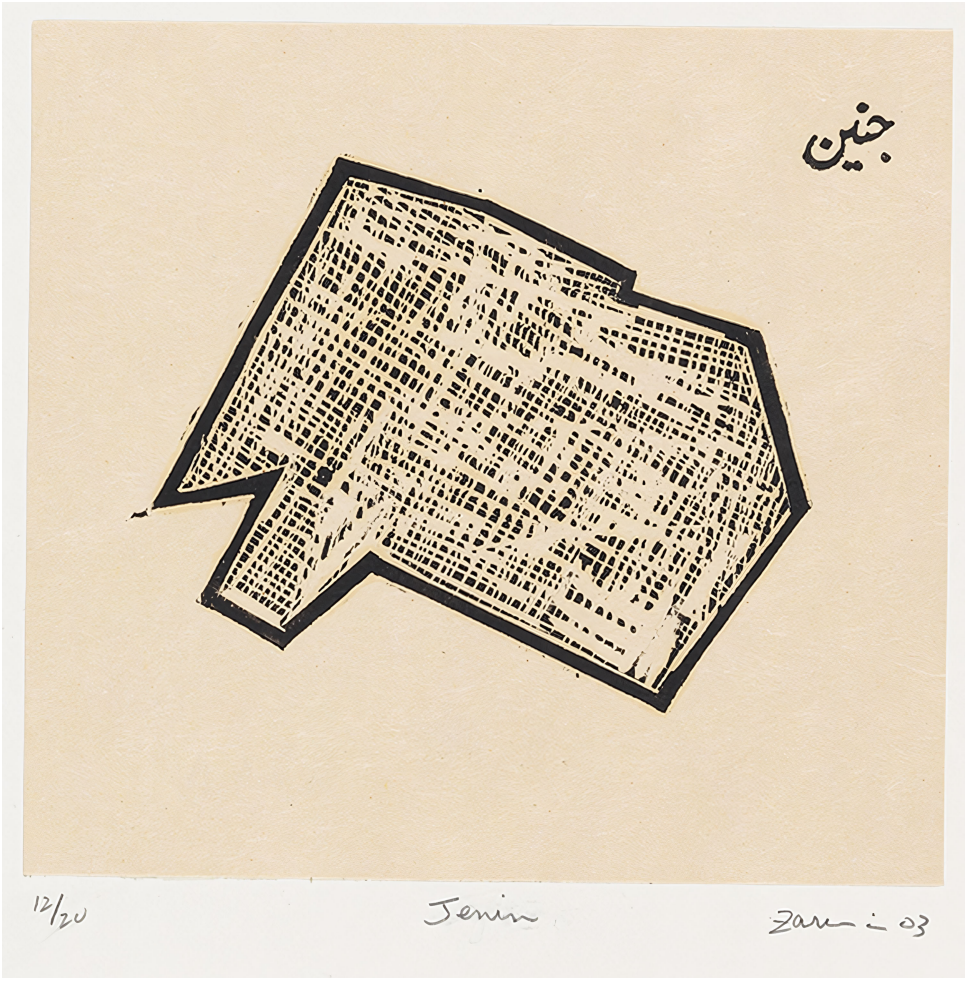

Fig. 1. Zarina. *Jenin, These Cities Blotted into the Wilderness (Adrienne Rich after Ghalib)*, 2003, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Purchased with the Stella Kramrisch Fund for Indian and Himalayan Art, the Contemporary Art Revolving Fund, and with funds contributed by James and Susan Meyer, 2019-84-2(5) © Zarina.

maps, distilling what Eric De Bruyn calls a "political geometry": "actual lines and figures . . . as well as . . . the spatial formations of sociopolitical forces as they emerge and transform themselves within history" (25). Instead, her upbringing amid the upheaval of Partition becomes the grounds for exploring connections across time and space, and the toggling between representation and abstraction continuously questions the means through which postcolonial and Third World subjects "become figurable" (Jameson, *Signatures* 51).

Zarina's *Jenin* is one way to invert the bird's-eye-view aspect of totality. In showing such a totalizing view as multiple, it shows it to be impossible as a unitary concept. By stripping totality to its very outlines, Jameson's treasured concept is resuscitated in aesthetic form, a form that does not leave the map behind but radically recontextualizes it. And yet one returns here to the question of failure, an important, even necessary term for Jameson's dialectical approach to history: Does *Jenin*, as an aesthetic object, intervene in the complex totality of global capital—its astonishing capacity for ever-increasing violence and destruction? This sort of question haunts all of Jameson's work, and the strand of Western Marxist theory for which he is best known. While "Cognitive Mapping" is a fundamentally utopian proposal, its wishfulness—especially about the aesthetic—is

tempered by Jameson's urge to make sense of history's failed revolutions and organizing efforts on the ground. Jameson and Zarina here share a surprising sense of longing. Jameson would probably periodize that feeling, too.[3] Yet there is also something to be said for sitting with a ghost, keeping dialectical criticism open to Utopia as an unforeseen prospect, and being alive to its possibility.

Notes

1. The Combahee River Collective's statement proclaims, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (3).

2. Mufti, one of the few literary scholars to have written about Zarina's practice, calls it "an art of dispossession" in which Partition (and its aftermath) is "shaken loose from its identitarian moorings" ("Zarina Hashmi" 176).

3. See the chapter "Nostalgia for the Present" in Jameson's *Postmodernism*.

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