

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

# Reading *The Political Unconscious* at the End of 2020; or, Interpretation in an Era of Capitalized Mediation

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When I first agreed to reread *The Political Unconscious*, I wondered how it would fare in a present quite different from its own. How might we think about the “political unconscious,” say, in an era when representation and critique are just so much content to maintain channels of flow for social networks and capitalist platforms; when mediation or transcoding is the means or device of popular cultural politics and financial ventures alike (when the Greimas semantic square seems to have been repurposed as a popular meme<sup>1</sup>); when affect and expression operate as intensifiers and asignifying acts of communicative production; when a global structural totality is widely accepted as a social fact and hermeneutic necessity, and the end of global capitalism is eminently conceivable? If, as Fredric Jameson writes, “our readings of the past are vitally dependent on our experience of the present” (11), these are at least some observations about our present that reading *The Political Unconscious* today calls up for consideration.<sup>2</sup>

My inclination here is to read for what compels in a particularly urgent present, which has been weighing on my own thought in the last few years, and for what might be important for radical decolonizing critiques to revitalize (a practice Jameson himself demonstrates in his magisterial repurposing of a wide array of literary methods of analysis for a Marxist interpretive practice). I have been thinking in particular of the contemporary phenomenon of murderous policing in Rodrigo Duterte’s “war on drugs” in the Philippines, murders carried out as socially symbolic acts. Here police and mercenaries would carry out extra-judicial killings as a form of “writing,” using the

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murdered bodies of accused drug users as surfaces on which to write messages and various hashtags, and drawing smiley faces on the fully taped heads of the killed, prompting one journalist to describe the style of killings as “murder as meme” (Evangelista).<sup>3</sup> The killings also became the instruments of lucrative, derivative enterprises, with each execution garnering financial compensation and serving as an occasion for the proliferation of monetary and other kinds of gain: extortion of suspects before arrest, ransom of kidnapped suspects and their relatives, commissions for authorized funeral parlors, ransom of dead bodies, career promotions, and so on—a situation another journalist calls “murder as enterprise” (Coronel).

I mention this specific phenomenon of our present in part because the mode of killings can certainly be read as a cultural form along the lines Jameson proposes—that is, as offering a “solution” to the specific social contradictions of Philippine life, though not only on a symbolic-aesthetic or ideological level, as *The Political Unconscious* argues for the first of three concentric frameworks of interpretation of a cultural “text,” but also directly on the level of “material” social life, directly yielding practical, bodily, social, and monetary effects. They are symbolic acts that also serve as political and economic actions. As in the context of anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-immigrant policing and punishment in the United States, humans are mere media for socio-symbolically staged “events” through which contracted and securitized values are realized, for individuals and for nations—in the Philippine context, monetary values for individuals and the increased value of Filipino life promised by Duterte to the nation, values redeemable through increased financial investment in the Philippine platform hosting the securitized movements of global capital.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere, I write about this cultural form in terms of a logic of derivatives to highlight a structural relation between these forms of racialized disposability and platform capitalism, which here I can only suggest has to do with the rise of the concept and practice of mediation as a central site and object of financial speculation and cultural production (Tadiar, *Remaindered Life*). We see this phenomenon in the practice and means of connection and

movement (circulation) taking precedence over the production of goods in the rise of mega-platforms, such as *Google*, *Facebook*, and *Amazon*, as well as in the rise of financial derivative and cryptocurrency markets. Indeed, the practice of transcoding between seemingly disparate levels of reality proposed as an interpretive method (“the invention of a set of terms, the strategic choice of a particular code or language, such that the same terminology can be used to analyze and articulate two quite distinct types of objects or ‘texts,’ or two very different structural levels of reality” [Jameson 40]) has become the basis of all sorts of economic and cultural production—everything from the complicated pricing and contract schemes of finance, symbolic instruments that disassemble and reassemble attributes of things into other kinds of entities to speculate on, to the kinaesthetic sex-gender and race bodily performances on *Tik-Tok*, where transcoding reigns as a device of pleasure and sociality-making performances.<sup>5</sup> These examples of mediation could well be understood as fractal instantiations of a broader logic of derivatives, which we see developing out of and possibly superseding (at a higher level of abstraction) that process of reification, or systemic breaking up of older unities and autonomization of the resulting fragments, which Jameson sees as a historical dynamic of capitalist life and a key interpretive code. To see these derivative processes and performances as a further development of the logic of reification suggests an important way of thinking about the continuity and difference between the moment in which *The Political Unconscious* makes its intervention (evidently crafted against a theoretical and ideological climate of poststructuralist thinking hostile to hermeneutic and interpretive activity) and the present moment, while also providing a way of clarifying this period that is our own moment.<sup>6</sup>

If mediation as a device of the analyst becomes precisely the means by which this fragmentation and separation of various spheres of social life is momentarily and locally overcome (the lost unity of social life thereby methodologically restored), as Jameson argues, then we might also see in these contemporary transcoding practices, which are at once cultural and economic (capitalized as they are through social media and other platforms), not just

reflexes of a financial capitalist logic but also compensatory or reparative acts that can yield transformative effects—new pleasures and new forms with utopian energies (as Jameson argues with respect to the semi-autonomization of sense perceptual capacities in Joseph Conrad's stylistic practice and in modernism more generally as “a Utopian compensation for everything reification brings with it” [Jameson 236]).

So while it would seem that these examples of contemporary sociocultural “texts” militate against the interpretive method proposed, in fact *The Political Unconscious* provides us with the very tools for understanding them. Through the method of enlarging horizons of interpretation, we can grant local validity to the proposition that particular social and cultural forms act as ideological resolutions to specific social contradictions within a given social formation (Duterte's “war on drugs” undoubtedly performing an ideological program for the Philippine nation), while also being made aware of other planes of action. We are able to see these particular cultural forms as reality-making “moves” in “an essentially polemic and strategic”—but no longer only ideological—“confrontation between the classes” (85): that is, reality making in an infrastructural sense, in the way that seemingly immaterial practices of mediation (or content provision) build platforms with enormous material power. While the terrains and forms of antagonistic relation between classes might have changed—and within a context of continuing colonialism and imperialism, one would need to consider kinds of group cohesion and solidarity that are part of class struggle but not delimited to that defined by labor and capital (this latter relation being also importantly determined by social relations of colonialism, racism, and heterosexism as extant relations of primitive accumulation that have also become semiautonomous)<sup>7</sup>—the sense that antagonism drives and shapes cultural forms, their intelligibility, and their practical effectivity, even or especially as they operate in an altered terrain, seems to me to be absolutely essential. This sense of antagonism compels us to pry apart what would appear to be a unifying hegemony of practice into oppositional tendencies.

One could, for example, read the utopic dimensions of the divisibility of things and even the

instrumentalization of humans, their conversion into media of economic, communicative processes (against their bourgeois humanist idealization as ends in themselves or independent beings), as entailed by the logic of derivatives. This is certainly the reading pursued by critical scholars of cultures of finance, such as Randy Martin, who argues that the social logic of derivatives' significant erosion of the integrity of the concepts and units of being comprising the political ontology of everyday life—everything from the commodity as a bounded, self-enclosed thing-in-itself to individual and collective identities modeled on it, to the notion of the economy as a closed, equilibrium system—might be viewed, following on Jameson's own analysis of postmodernism, as having been ushered in by a broader process of decolonization (Martin, “Money”).<sup>8</sup> Many contemporary left critiques do in fact draw out the utopian strains of the latest digitally mediated social and cultural forms of our own financial, computational platform capitalist moment.

But I would venture that we need to move to the last interpretive horizon to understand yet another dimension of these same contemporary cultural forms and their reality-making moves. This brings me to what I have always found singularly compelling in *The Political Unconscious*—the concept of cultural revolution. For only if we register precisely “that permanent struggle between the various coexisting modes of production” (97) can we grasp the otherwise unrecognizable or illegible “meaning” and implications of the same practices that appear to be only the effect of capitalist processes. When so much criticism has sealed off the present as well as the future in a mystifying characterization of global capitalism as historically complete, or as thoroughly dominated by its most advanced tendencies, this idea of cultural revolution allows us to probe the very insides of the latest mode of capitalism for those outsides that are other sociocultural modes of survival within it. It urges us to consider the ways that these very critical analyses of capitalism and capitalist cultures might also serve as strategies of repression and containment of other political energies seeking form and force.

To rewrite these contemporary cultural practices with respect to other modes of production is,

I believe, the task of decolonizing, anticapitalist, Black, Indigenous, Global South feminist critique. It is a task that requires the provincializing of the interpretive codes of the Western European tradition, and the honing of literacies in the cultural codes (or sign systems) of other forms of living, which creatively persist in interfaces with the most advanced modes of capitalist life, not simply as archaic leftovers of the past but also as the consequence of and resistance to the imperialism, racism, and heterosexism that is internal to capitalism itself, through which the persistent survival of other social formations is forcibly converted into enabling “milieus” (as Rosa Luxemburg wrote) for more proper capital-labor relations. In this way, one can discern, for example, within the same cultural form of murder as meme and enterprise an amalgamation of the financial logic of derivatives and the social logic of dividuality and gift or “help” economies operating in kin-based social-survival networks, vital platforms of sociality that are both preyed on by and interfaced with (subsumed within) capitalized political and social platforms.

As intrinsic parts of modes of production paradoxically destroyed and preserved by continuing processes of imperial dispossession, such subaltern cultural codes of life making may lie just beyond the purview of the languages and philosophical systems of the bourgeois Western European world to which we have all been habituated by lived everyday culture as well as higher education, even while for many still part and partaking of marginal cultures of survival, those cultural codes are immanently familiar in living practice. I believe the imperative to decolonize these very interpretive codes has been the task set down for and largely taken up by those now working in those fields of interdisciplinary studies (Black studies, gender and sexuality studies, Indigenous studies, critical ethnic studies) that have struggled to carve out spaces within an academic institution that continues to be dominated by the disciplines (themselves serving as strategies of containment).<sup>9</sup>

In fact, it is precisely the concept of cultural revolution that Jameson argued could project “a whole new framework for the humanities, in which the

study of culture in the widest sense could be placed on a materialist basis” (96).<sup>10</sup> Within this final interpretive horizon, the individual cultural object is “restructured as a field of force in which the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended” (98). Today we might see the distribution of a “text” across varied media platforms, not only across genres of creative and critical work but also across multiple areas of social practice, in a “real” dissolution of the autonomy of the individual cultural artifact (the object defining disciplinary study). In this way, we might also understand this proposed restructuring of the text as “a field of force” through which a conjuncture of coexisting modes of production might be apprehended as requiring not only an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary method as Jameson suggests (across those very “separate specialized disciplines” [109] into which the wedge of the liberated concept of text was already being driven by the textual revolution, as he writes)<sup>11</sup> but also a practice of transcoding in a revised global sense, whereby the specific sign systems or codes of residual and emergent modes of living among the descendants of the colonized are viewed as also coexisting in struggle with the dominant codes of the capitalist mode of production.

In a moment of global disaster and overt barbarism when the collapse of capitalism is immanently imaginable and all kinds of dystopic totalities from global capitalism to the Anthropocene are readily affirmed, risking becoming whole positive realities of their own, the reminder of the “negative and methodological status of the concept of ‘totality’” is especially important to bear in mind (53). In this moment, when the political unconscious itself (as a historical form)<sup>12</sup> might be seen as in a process of devolution, and a more than five-hundred-year-old hurt of history seems to constantly surface, disgorged and regurgitated in one crisis and scandal, horror and atrocity, depravation and catastrophe after another, appearing as permanent war, relentless immiseration, and steady ecological collapse, we need more than ever a sensibility of the differences that such a methodological abstraction allows us to perceive. More, the interpretation of those differences seems to warrant a transcoding practice, not just

between levels of reality (the reified distinctions between which appear to have been collapsed by the logic of derivatives), or between symbolic and material aspects of an indissolubly reunified social life, but rather also between kinds of reality happening simultaneously within the same present. That heterogeneity of realities, or political ontologies, is not simply a matter of persistence of what Marx called the “partly still unconquered remnants” (105) of vanished social formations, but rather is also the very consequence of an imperial relation integral to capitalism itself.

This kind of interpretation is certainly consistent with the expanded theoretico-political framework envisioned by Jameson, “for which,” he writes, “the transformation of our dominant mode of production must be accompanied and completed by an equally radical restructuring of all the more archaic modes of production with which it structurally coexists” (100).<sup>13</sup> I would only underscore that to transcode between the realities and sign systems of this dominant mode of production, capitalism, including the mode of imperialism internal to it (the mode that paradoxically makes extrinsic what it subsumes), and those of older, residual modes of production, requires both an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach to artifacts, practices, movements, and other “social texts,” and an intercultural and transcultural literacy in other, subaltern codes and languages of life. (Clearly this is not a requirement asked of individual scholars but rather an ideal of collective practice within an expanded frame of critical scholarship and new fields of study.)

The vigilant awareness of the limits of imagination, our own as well as others, implied in the notion of ideological repression, and the profoundly generative idea of history itself as “the untranscendable limit of our understanding in general” are to my mind what make for the continuing radical power of the idea of the political unconscious (100). That power is to be gleaned in Jameson’s concluding remarks on the need to exercise a Marxist positive hermeneutic simultaneously with a negative ideological analysis, a reminder I must say I found strangely moving to read just as the terrible year of 2020 was coming to a close. Jameson’s argument that we need “a *collective-associational* or *communal*

reading of culture” (296) and an anticipatory method can be read today as urging an anticipatory collective interpretation of our present global situation. It is only however through an expanded interpretive framework, comprised of cultural or politico-ontological codes that are made extrinsic to capitalism proper even as they are contemporaneous with it, that our own anticipatory, sociality-realizing readings might strive toward the emergence of some as yet unrealized planetary collectivity and consciousness out of this global catastrophe, without losing sight of that will to domination that Jameson reminds us perseveres intact, not only in the arena of art and culture but in every practical solution for our global crisis now proffered.

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## NOTES

1. The recasting of the Greimas’s semantic square as a popular meme is suggested by Luna Beller-Tadiar’s semiotic analysis of memes in *Visual Poetics of a Changing World*.

2. “Always historicize!” are the first words of *The Political Unconscious* (9), its slogan and moral, as Jameson acknowledges up front. While I do not undertake a historicization of this work, we might note the important details of the time of Jameson’s writing (e.g., the intensity of social fragmentation of the countercultural movement, an ideological climate of American “pluralism” and the denial of history, a critical climate hostile to interpretation and totalizing thought), which he offers in the work as touchstones of a historical moment he is well aware of as the time of his own interpretive act.

3. Before the public outcry that came with greater international coverage and condemnation, the murders and the graphic commentary on the bodies were photographed by the police themselves, uploaded as shared content on social media, part of the arsenal of so-called weaponized words and images deployed by legions of Duterte supporters, who launched a virulent social media campaign of verbal, textual, and image harassment, abuse, and attack directed at critics, a campaign that they dubbed the cyber equivalent and extension of the policing operations.

4. For a fuller analysis, see my *Remaindered Life*.

5. I owe this reading of *Tik-Tok* to Luna Beller-Tadiar.

6. One could, for example, seek to understand the contemporary ideological hijacking of poststructuralism and deconstruction by antiliberal or illiberal right-wing political factions (e.g., Imelda Marcos: “Perception is real, truth is not”) as a conservative response to radical Marxist decolonizing movements with their political interpretive models (the depth hermeneutic), a reactionary rewriting of the liberatory tendencies of what Randy Martin

calls derivative mobilizations, practices of decolonization undoing the ontology of capital rule (“After Economy”).

7. The understanding of primitive accumulation as a structural necessity of capital, rather than a past stage or prehistory of capitalism, is argued and developed by many. See Luxemburg; Mies et al.; Barker; Coulthard; Singh.

8. It is of course the case that against the presumption of bourgeois cultural hegemony, in which local-society distinctions (between public and private, political and economic, personal and political) once reigned and now appear to have largely broken down, Black, Indigenous, and third world / postcolonial communities experienced a quite different local situation in which these divisions could barely take hold or were at pains to establish themselves (those pains a product and experience of the very violence of their “differentiation” from universal ideals—most centrally, of abstract, equivalent, free human being).

9. Jameson himself proposes this view and, in his own reading practice and metacommentary here as well as his later work, demonstrates both a wide-ranging interdisciplinarity as the condition of interpretation and a historical reflexivity or dialectical thinking that has to be brought to bear on the methods or theoretical approaches developed within the disciplines.

10. This new framework is clearly what his own subsequent work on postmodernism demonstrates.

11. While Jameson’s methodological proposition recognizes literary and textual criticism as the strong form of the model, he sees it as suggesting analogous approaches in other fields. See Jameson 296–97.

12. Jameson suggests that the “political unconscious” can be glimpsed in Conrad, before becoming “a genuine Unconscious” in high modernism, when the political is fully and “relentlessly driven underground by accumulated reification” (280).

13. Jameson argues that “the affirmation of radical feminism . . . that to annul the patriarchal is the most *radical* political act” finds perfect consistency with this expanded Marxian framework (100).

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