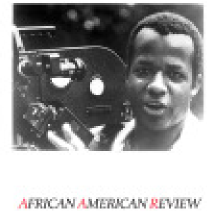
# *Activism and the American Novel: Religion and Resistance in Fiction by Women of Color* by Channette Romero (review)

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(Review)

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an elderly black man. And indeed Paulin bookends her study with Obama-as-text, from the first epigraph to her Introduction, in which he writes that a 1960s-era image of his interracial parents would have then been considered "lurid and perverse" (ix) to the Conclusion, where Paulin treats now-President Obama's story as a "mosaic" via another series of images—his memoir's "overlapping" (239) photos of his Kenyan paternal grandparents, his Anglo-American maternal grandparents, and one of himself.

And though she does not do so intentionally, Paulin again alludes to "A More Perfect Union" when she analyzes W. E. B. Du Bois's short story "The Comet," a post-apocalyptic romance between a black man and a white woman (two strangers who are the only survivors of a comet that crashed into the city) who walk as a couple from New York City's Midtown to Harlem and back again. In his speech, reflecting on his own mixed-race parentage and quest for the Democratic nomination, Obama noted that "in no other country on Earth is my story even possible." Assessing Du Bois's story, Paulin writes, "His views are out of this world" (237). Yet Paulin frames her book with real-world possibility—the promise of both the Constitution and a hopeful Presidential candidate—illustrating how the simplistic vision of a black-white dyad fails to articulate the complex interracial relationships that undergird the nation and have done so, often invisibly, for hundreds of years.

**Channette Romero.** ***Activism and the American Novel: Religion and Resistance in Fiction by Women of Color*****. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2012. 232 pp. $55.00.**

**Reviewed by Peter Kerry Powers, Messiah College**

Among the many "posts-" that characterize our present age, "postsecular" is one of the most interesting and contentious. If the motivating idea of secularism is that religion be relegated to the private sphere, and if its foundational faith is in the transformative power of reason beyond the boundaries of belief, secularism is a god that has failed. As Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen point out in their work, *The American University in a Postsecular Age*, the return of religion is primarily a renewal of academic attention. Religion never went away. Not even in the 1960s, when *Time* magazine proclaimed the Death of God, or in the decades following when students ceased praying in public schools. Instead, we recognize that religions remain vital forces to the vast majority of human beings and the cultures they create, however diverse their manifestation for good and for ill.

While we have yet to find a critical language adequate to this realization, the stubborn fact of religion has proved difficult to wish away. Indeed, interest in the role of religions in literary and other cultural work has surged, asking new questions about various cultural movements and literary artifacts. In what ways do novels draw upon religious traditions, or use spiritual themes as motive forces within their creative work? How do religious traditions shape and inhabit literary and other cultural forms? How might literary works and their readings be themselves religious or spiritual acts? Channette Romero participates in this renewed attention to religions in her new book, *Activism and the American Novel: Religion and Resistance in Fiction by Women of Color*. Romero gives particular attention to the work of women of color since the 1980s, believing that the literature manifests several new emphases. It is political in intention, it moves beyond identity politics into crosscultural collaboration, and it seeks to do both of these by deploying the religious traditions of people of color in new and vital ways.


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> The project, expressed in a variety of ways, is to deprivatize reading, to use it to inspire social critique. This politicized fiction offers itself as a means to re-create the public sphere, a space of public debate and dialogue that is critical of state power. The novel form's historic connection to the public sphere is appropriated in an effort to engender a fuller democracy than that envisioned by the concept of nationalism. The religions and spiritualties of people of color are also deployed, as they contain rich histories and models of engagement. Fiction by women of color since the 1980s enlists the political potential latent in novels and the belief traditions of people of color seeking to inspire readers with visions of resistance to injustice. (2)

Although others have addressed all of these issues, Romero highlights and underscores them in some new ways. She especially draws new attention to the question of cultural collaboration and how the novel might provide a venue for enacting a political and religious activism that crosses the bounds of established communities. For Romero, this spiritual activism is possible because the religious traditions of women of color are inherently inclusive. This is a disputable claim, but she is right that many women writers of color have drawn on or created religious practices that seek a broad inclusiveness in order to pursue social justice and political change.

Romero brings these issues to light best in some good close readings of various texts. A discussion of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* and Louise Erdrich's *Plague of Doves* illuminates the different ways that Native American writers have wrestled with international, multiracial and multicultural alliances, especially where one's relationship to the land is fundamentally spiritual and oriented toward an indigenous community. Romero's reading of Toni Morrison's *Paradise* is the best chapter in the book. She suggests that Morrison uses a particular reading of African American Christianity to question American exceptionalism, but also to question a simplistic notion of racial identity. By Romero's reading, spiritual impulses emanating from the African American church provide a ground for imagining a broader and more inclusive politics, even while those same spiritual discourses can be used to reinforce an African American exceptionalism that should be critiqued. Throughout the book, Romero effectively demonstrates that writers as different as Morrison, Erdrich, Silko, and Ana Castillo are all working to make their fiction an act of spiritual activism, one that creates new forms of connection in pursuit of social justice across divides of cultural and historical difference.

Romero's book is less successful in its larger theorizing, and in some degree the good close readings of texts are diminished because of it. Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere is repeatedly invoked, but feels somewhat grafted on, as if we had to find an important theorist to reference in order to believe what's being said. Romero invokes the early Habermas who is, however, one of the important late theorizers and proponents of the secularization thesis. His shifting focus and concern in later work seem to recognize the enduring significance of religion for culture and politics, but consequently suggests the limitations of his earlier views. Romero doesn't provide an account of this dissonance, which reinforces the sense that Habermas isn't really essential to what's going on in the book.

While getting Habermas right is not terribly important for Romero's ultimate purposes, a larger question goes begging: what kind of public sphere are we to imagine and what language should it use while respecting the multitude of different cultural languages different religions could bring to the public stage? This is *the* problem of religion in the public square, and Romero doesn't address it. Even if the religions of women of color are uniquely inclusive, it is unclear how such a discourse engages other religions or no religion in the public square, especially when such religious or nonreligious frameworks may be more or less exclusive in their own ideals and impulses. There may be good answers to these questions, but Romero's book doesn't gesture toward this problem.

Similarly, Romero gives too little attention to the question of cultural change, or to whether literary constructions of religions are in tension with the multiple and complex ways in which religion and resistance to religion is manifested in the day-to-day life of various communities of color. Romero elides this question almost entirely under the premise that religions of women of color are inherently inclusive, even while her close readings suggest that writers like Silko and Morrison struggle mightily to know how to be inclusive, not least because religious communities necessarily have exclusive elements. It is, of course, very true that different religious communities can create spiritual alliances with one another, but in doing so they enact a process of change and accommodation, one that affects self-definition and even the nature of the community as such. This is truly one potential consequence of alliance's making and encountering difference: that my home community will be changed irrevocably, perhaps into a shape that I no longer recognize comfortably as home.

This does not mean that all religions are collapsing into one form of enlightened religion. Romero erroneously suggests that I argue this in my own book on these matters. It does mean, however, that we haven't yet fully figured out the relationship between identity, religions, and change; that is, how religions, cultures, and persons necessarily change and transform in unanticipated ways as they encounter others in the public marketplace of religious ideas and practices, whether that encounter is through novels, politics, education, or other forms that we call religious. Romero's book has provided a useful demonstration of this thicket, but hasn't yet helped us find our way through it.

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