

Understanding Criticism:
An Institutional Ecology of US American Literary Criticism

By

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For Keegan

Acknowledgments

Institutions and pedagogical actions play a pivotal, but often forgotten role in the development of literary criticism and theory. In some sense, the goal of this dissertation is to account for both the effects of and development of this gap in disciplinary history and in the process of doing literary criticism. Yet, if there is any genre of academic writing that is a consistent exception to this rule, it is the acknowledgments: a place where a critic tracks her encounters with institutional life and the unforgettable, invaluable actions of mentors, colleagues, and friends. Such entries are always woefully partial. Still acknowledgments remain the thing that many compose as they walk to and from campus. To imagine the ways we can give thanks to those who made the work possible is to imagine the completion of the work. Without this act of gratitude, the work could not be.

I began this project as an undergraduate in the Department of English at the University of Pennsylvania. Herman Beavers introduced me to the Southern Agrarians and encouraged me to pursue how that group's ideas impacted their literature and the literary criticism they would come to develop. Jed Esty and Paul Saint-Amour played a large part in opening my eyes to the profession, its potentials, as well as its pitfalls. More importantly than that, as classrooms have become conference halls and quizo forays, Jed and Paul consistently remind me what kind of scholar I hope to be, both through their work and their good humor, generosity, and care.

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A shorter version of chapter three will appear under the title "Vehicles of Periodization: Melvin B. Tolson, Allen Tate, and the New Critical Police" in a forthcoming issue of *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* scheduled for publication by Wayne State University Press.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
Introduction: The Cause and the Cure	1
Against New Criticism’s Anti-Blackness	13
Always Provincialize!	17
From “Ecology of Knowledge” to an Institutional Ecology.....	23
Organization and Scale	32
I. The Beginning and the End of Criticism.....	39
The Burden of Criticism and the Ideal “New Critic”	48
The Bollingen Controversy and the Emergence of Criticism.....	57
New Criticism Now	76
New Modernist Studies.....	80
The Descriptive Turn	84
II. Parker Tyler: Toward a Minor Criticism.....	92
Prolix and Broke: The Myth of the Mid-Century Professional Intellectual	97
Professional Literary Culture as Woman: Criticism’s Gender Trouble.....	108
Criticism as Structure of Feeling	116
Minor Criticism as Method: Covering <i>Kenyon</i> and <i>View</i>	124
Evil, Camp, and the Code of Criticism	138
III. A Belated Bomb: Melvin B. Tolson, Allen Tate, and the New Critical Police	143
Modern Poetry versus Propaganda Poetry.....	150
Odes, Epitaphs, and Taxonomical Colonization.....	160
<i>Libretto for the Republic of Liberia</i> ; or, Tolson’s Quantum Philosophy of History	169
A Final Note on the Period Concept.....	182
IV. “A crying need for good literary criticism,” or, Tactical Criticism.....	189
Langston Hughes Gives a Lesson in Literary Criticism	198
The Fugitive Forms of Tactical Criticism.....	209
Criticism without an Object and without an Institution.....	222
The Beginning and the End of Tactical Criticism	234

Epilogue: Toward a Disciplinary Utopia	237
REFERENCES	245

Introduction The Cause and the Cure

“The world is in crisis and language is at once the cause and the cure.”
- James Laughlin, 1936¹

“First, ‘hegemony’ is a very particular, historically specific, and temporary “moment” in the life of a society...Such periods of ‘settlement’ are unlikely to persist forever. There is nothing automatic about them. They have to be actively constructed and positively maintained. Crises mark the beginning of their disintegration.”

- Stuart Hall, 1985²

“The crisis in academia is both real and fabricated.”

- Bennett Carpenter, Laura Goldblatt, Lenora Hanson, Anna Vitale, Karim Wissa, Andrew Yale, 2014³

There is a crisis in literary studies. University administrators have slashed budgets of Departments of English and Departments of Comparative Literature under the assumption that the methods and research yield of humanities disciplines carry little vocational and financial value inside and outside of the academy. The logic goes, if English departments cannot train students for the technological and data-driven demands of the global economy of the digital era – or, for that matter, if these departments train too many students for a shrinking market of jobs largely deemed unnecessary – then why shouldn’t their budgets be slashed and their doors shuttered? The illusion that the university is separate from the global economy and its demands for efficiency and flexibility has been shattered by the persistence of austerity-based policies for academic programs and personnel, even in times of economic windfall.⁴ The university produces

¹ qtd. in Greg Barnhisel, *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound*, *Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 63.

² Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (June 1986): 15.

³ Bennett Carpenter et al., “Feces on the Philosophy of History! A Manifesto of the MLA Subconference,” *Pedagogy* 14, no. 3 (September 2014): 382.

⁴ The peak proportion of Bachelor’s degrees in English to all other Bachelor’s degrees awarded in the United States was approximately 7.5% in 1971; in 2009, this proportion was 3.5%. See Indicator II-18a on humanitiesindicators.org, a reporting service of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences

a labor force, invests its capital in funds legitimate and shady, and tries to maximize expenditures in the form of larger class sizes and digital delivery mechanisms for “educational content.”⁵

At the same time that the discipline has faced the reduction of its material resources and the exploitation of many of its practitioners, literary studies has seemingly lost its object and its methodological purchase within academia. Never have there been so many things to read and so many ways to read them; the attention span of criticism has become, as Mark McGurl has put it,

(<http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/cmsData/pdf/indII-18a.pdf>). This particular graph, however, which has been printed in the *Wall Street Journal*, proves to be a particularly misleading measure for the decline or growth of English studies and the humanities in general. Joining Jim English and David Laurence, John Marx and Mark Garrett Cooper have pointed out that this particular statistic is odd, given that the actual number of majors in the Humanities has dramatically increased since the 1950s. Another way of putting this is that a larger proportion of the United States population has degrees in the Humanities today than they did in the 1950s. This, of course, is because of a major increase in the overall enrollment and completion of degrees in institutions of higher education; in the academic year of 1959-60 392,440 B.A.’s were awarded, compared to the 1,715,913 awarded in 2010-11. In addition, Marx and Cooper illustrate that the degree market-share numbers don’t account for the major structural change undergone by universities in the wake of the increase in enrollment. One important thing to consider is the increased differentiation of programs in the humanities, like feminist studies, ethnic studies, and professional programs in the arts. The statistics show that this change in approach had structural implications: the number of degree programs classified as arts and humanities has increased from 60 (approximately 15% of all degree programs) in 1966 to 230 (approximately 13% of all degree programs) in 2010. Marx and Cooper suggest that these misleading statistics are used to reinforce commonly held notions of the value of the Humanities on the labor and economic markets. Unpacking the meaning of these various ‘indicators’ is essential to understanding that the crisis in the humanities is about the perception of its value, less than its structural impact. For more on the sourcing of these figures and the full dimension of this argument, see: Marx and Cooper, “Humanists: Do not panic about your declining market share” June 29, 2013. <http://humanitiesafterhollywood.org/2013/06/29/humanists-do-not-panic-about-your-declining-market-share/>. On a different issue, the AAUP argues that the uptick in contingent faculty – over 50% of university educators are contingent, up from 30% in 1975 – is not a result of slashed budgets. Instead, they reflect institutional priorities to upgrade and facilities and technology, rather than spend on instruction. Also, the highest increase in contingent faculty hires has not been during times of austerity, but of abundance. See: <http://www.aaup.org/issues/contingency/background-facts>

⁵ Some, most notably James English, have disagreed with the “crisis” consciousness, especially when it comes to the number of majors. Expanding his frame to the globe, English discovers that the number of students enrolling in English studies majors and degrees is actually continuing to increase. English’s argument shows how a sense of crisis is tied closely to the statistics and expectations presented by those statistics. His study asks us to consider whether it is realistic to anticipate a steady stream of growth for English majors, or, even whether it is sound to measure the success of the discipline in terms of growth. James F. English, *The Global Future of English Studies* (John Wiley & Sons, 2012). It will become clear in the pages that follow that I, too, have some skepticism of the crisis rhetoric, in part, because of how the New Critics tied success to economic measures.

“highly variable.”⁶ On the one hand, the expansion of reading methods, devices to read on, and texts to read has made the epistemological coherence of the discipline of literary studies difficult to discern, creating a crisis about what we even do and who “we” are in the first place. On the other hand, why must the efflorescence of critical methods be understood as a crisis? Why isn’t the disaggregation of methods, media, and canons understood as a moment of great potential for the broader use of literature, criticism, and theory? Because, when the contribution of research is increasingly measured by its financial and reputational impact, an efflorescence of methodologies – each with a distinct epistemological and purposive framework – looks less like “innovation” and more like self-congratulatory fragmentation.

All the while literary critics understand the current efflorescence of methods to be a distinct break from a more unified epistemological history of the discipline.⁷ The story goes that since the 1940s, literary criticism gained institutional prominence because it fashioned a brand that supplied a public image of a discipline with a united method and purpose, which, for the most part, was easily taught and widely accepted. The name of that brand, at least before several rebrandings: the New Criticism. The New Criticism has supplied literary studies with an undistorted narrative of what the discipline was, how it operated, and who made up its professorial legion, even if that legion was understood to be predominantly, white, male, and heterosexual.

⁶ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 409.

⁷ In a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jeffrey J. Williams writes, “in the past decade, we’ve seen a new modesty. Literary critics have become more subdued, adopting methods with less grand speculation, more empirical study, and more use of statistics or other data. They aim to read, describe, and mine data rather than make “interventions” or world-historical importance. Their methods include “surface reading,” “this description,” “the new formalism,” “book history,” “distant reading,” “the new sociology.” At times it seems as if each year brings the next new thing, but those methods add up to more than that. Together they augur a change in the basic assumptions of literary studies.” Jeffrey J. Williams, “The New Modesty in Literary Criticism,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 5, 2015.

Understanding Criticism, however, argues against the narrative that New Criticism was a unifying and organizing force for literary studies. I argue that a “real” crisis in capital has led to the fabrication of a literary historical narrative that makes the current plurality of approaches to literary studies register as a crisis. Put differently, the New Criticism and its definition of the discipline makes the current methodological efflorescence appear to be anomalous from a more coherent history of the profession. As the New Criticism came to be synonymous with literary studies, a heterogeneous commons of practices and definitions of literature became increasingly obscure. In equating the rise of literary studies with the rise of the New Criticism, we have lost track of a vision of criticism that was a meeting ground for a plurality of methodologies, rather than a singular methodological object. I argue that the New Critics enclosed that common meeting ground to create the image of a unified disciplinary position and object. *Understanding Criticism* describes this process of enclosure and provides a glimpse of the knowledge commons that has been obscured as an effect of that process.

Many accounts of disciplinary history have mischaracterized the importance of the New Criticism to the modern formation of literary studies. The New Criticism didn't develop a radically new methodology for reading literature, nor was it pivotal in setting up professional and institutional infrastructure for the study of literature in the university. What the New Critics did do so spectacularly, however, was create the illusion that New Criticism developed the singular practice of close reading and that New Criticism was responsible for a massive uptick in enrollments and institutional prestige. Indeed, the New Critics created a brand that bestowed value upon literary studies by taking unearned credit for a number of accomplishments. Rather than understanding the New Criticism as a reactionary coup that moved smoothly toward institutional dominance, studying the era's periodicals and the development of material and

institutional culture shows a much more uneven transformation. Just one piece of evidence for the unevenness of the New Criticism's rise is the late adoption of New Criticism as a proper noun in 1950; before then, its capitalization was far from standardized even when printed in journals like the *Kenyon Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Southern Review*, and *Partisan Review*.

The enclosure of literary studies was not limited to the period of the New Criticism's rise from the mid-1930s to the early 1950s. The process of enclosure continues with the persistent perception that literary critical history is a dialectical progression of dominant critical methods beginning with the New Criticism. Marjorie Levinson's call for a new formalism shows this understanding of disciplinary history at its most schematic. Writing in *PMLA*, Levinson draws a portrait of the narrative of literary studies, which she takes to be reductive, but unavoidable because of its explanatory purchase: "New Criticism → structuralism → deconstruction → new historicism → poststructuralism."⁸ Levinson's diagram shows that historical accounts of the discipline largely take New Criticism to be the point of origin and that the discipline continues to operate under the assumptions of New Criticism, albeit at a distance of several decades and several epistemological overhauls.⁹ Even if the trajectory illustrated in Levinson's diagram is a false image, the fact that it has been taken as largely representative of the history of the discipline

⁸ Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (March 2007): 563.

⁹ A number of critics—for good or for ill—argue that all of the methods included in Levinson's diagram above are variations of the New Criticism. Hershel Parker writes, "The New Criticism is still dominant in the study of American literature, however disguised over the last decades as Phenomenology, as Structuralism, as Deconstruction, as the New Historicism." Edward Said, as I'll discuss in chapter 1, famously called poststructuralism the "New New Criticism." The idea that the New Criticism continued to structure critical thought also engendered a series of critical reactions in the 1980s that were set explicitly against this idea. In *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* edited with Chaviva Hošek, Patricia Parker wonders, "What *would* enable future work on the lyric, or on poetry more generally, to go "beyond" New Criticism rather than simply following "after" it?" a reference, of course, to another work anxious about the current critical scene's relationship to New Criticism, Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism*. Hershel Parker, *Melville Biography: An Inside Narrative* (Northwestern University Press, 2012), 482; Edward W. Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (September 1982): 1–26; Chaviva Hošek and Patricia A. Parker, eds., *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 16.

by many members of the profession indicates the “real” implications of the New Critical literary historical paradigm. The implications are the epistemological orientation of the profession and the institutional and material instantiations of the discipline in the present moment. A major aim of this dissertation is to describe this paradigm and the impact it has had in how the discipline has positioned itself within the university and towards the public.

In the dissertation that follows, I put pressure on the boundaries and defining characteristics of the New Criticism, showing them to be historically fluid and capricious. For example, what were the criteria for belonging to a critical movement in the mid-twentieth century? To be a New Critic did you have to call yourself a New Critic? Allen Tate, the “toughest of the New School of criticism” according to the African America poet Melvin B. Tolson, denied that he was a New Critic.¹⁰ At times, Tate barely acknowledged the existence of the New Criticism: he did “not know what the New Criticism [wa]s,” other than that it was some sort of myth.¹¹ With self-identification off the table, did you have to know other New Critics to be a New Critic? In a 1949 letter, Cleanth Brooks, the co-editor of the pedagogical-manual-cum-anthology that “revolutionized the teaching of literature in the universities,” *Understanding Poetry*, could not “even claim to know certainly who they [the New Critics] are.”¹² Personal affiliation could be one way to organize critical groups, but in the case of the New Criticism this organizational principle does not hold.

If it is not about who you know, then perhaps being a New Critic meant using a New Critical textbook in your classroom, or, just generally deploying its signature hermeneutic. In

¹⁰ Letter, Melvin B. Tolson to Horace Mann Bond, March 27, 1950, qtd. in Robert M. Farnsworth, *Melvin B. Tolson: 1898-1966, Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 146.

¹¹ Allen Tate, “A Note on Autotelism,” *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 1 (January 1949): 14.

¹² Cleanth Brooks, “List of ‘Wicked Esthetes’ Wanted,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, October 29, 1949, 24.

that case, one could count Sterling A. Brown alongside Robert Penn Warren.¹³ Maybe to be a New Critic meant publishing in one of what John N. Duvall has called “New Criticism’s Major Journals”: *The Kenyon Review*, *The Southern Review*, or *The Sewanee Review*.¹⁴ In these journals, we find the usual suspects, including Tate, Brooks, Ransom, Warren, R.P. Blackmur and others. But we also find work by a collection of critics not frequently associated with the New Criticism: Theodor Adorno, Kenneth Burke, Marshall McLuhan, Philip Rahv, Delmore Schwartz, F.O. Matthiessen, Edwin Denby, and Parker Tyler. Besides challenging the historical labels that categorize these critics, the presence of this second group’s work within New Critical periodicals tests both the methodological approaches and objects of critical inquiry understood to be practiced under the purview of New Criticism. Indeed, alongside essays about the affective fallacy, one could find reviews of dance, analyses of Trotskyism, and Adorno’s critique of radio music all between covers designed by the New Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy. The content of mid-century “New Critical” periodicals expanded beyond close readings of metaphysical and modernist poets. Even though such readings are present, they are nearly outnumbered by essays and reviews that engage other subjects. In returning to the print culture of the period, I find a diverse array of critical methodologies deployed upon a wide variety of arts and media, rather than a dominant tendency toward dogmatic close readings of literary modernism.

While the notion that criticism as practiced exceeds the confines of the broadest disciplinary categories feels familiar to us now, the mid-century institutional landscape where the New Critics developed their historical paradigm is quite different than our own present. Though the New Criticism’s major journals printed important scholarly work, they avowedly did not

¹³ Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, “J. Saunders Redding’s Disciplinary History” (presentation, Modernist Studies Association Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, November 6-9, 2014).

¹⁴ John N. Duvall, in *Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazine*, eds. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker. Vol 2. Oxford UP, 2012.

publish scholarship, but “criticism.” Many of the articles the major journals printed were vetted and fact-checked, but *Kenyon*, *Sewanee*, and *Southern* did not have any formal process for peer review, nor did their peer publications, the *Partisan Review* and the *Hudson Review*. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the “theory journal,” publications like *New Literary History* or *Critical Inquiry*, appeared on the scene, which reflected the growing need for a “research protocol” for faculty in the humanities.¹⁵ Mid-century New Critical journals provide an interchange between the little magazines of the early twentieth century and the theory journals of the latter half of the century. As such, New Critical journals shuttled literary culture into academe from smaller and dispersed literary publics. *Kenyon*, *Sewanee*, and *Southern* were all headquartered in institutions of higher education – though the *Partisan Review*, one of the era’s most influential journals, carried no institutional affiliation after separating from the John Reed Club – but actively published work by writers who were not affiliated with university departments.¹⁶ In this sense, these journals and the criticism they published present a site to explore for the now lost register of the academy’s enclosure of literary studies. Thus, *Understanding Criticism* records the shifting of the institutional ecology of literary criticism between universities, periodicals and publishers, the U.S. government, and large granting agencies, like the Rockefeller Foundation.

After a long drought of histories of literary studies and the university that attend to the work of critics outside of the circuit of mainstream periodicals, a number of scholars in the last decade have turned their focus to cross-disciplinary collaboration within the university, as well as the mechanisms for funding literary criticism. This body of work shows how literary criticism

¹⁵ Jeffrey J. Williams, “The Rise of the Theory Journal,” *New Literary History* 40, no. 4 (2009): 683–702.

¹⁶ As evidence of the transition from a public oriented criticism to a university-based one, the *Partisan Review* eventually became affiliated with Boston University in 1978 while the journal was edited by William Philips.

affects and has been affected by developments in creative writing programs and sociology departments in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, among other phenomenon.¹⁷ In addition, literary scholars have also chronicled a growing coalition of philanthropic and business interests in the academic formation of literary criticism that worked together to create a labor force and a consumer force for large culture industries, like Hollywood cinema.¹⁸ Evan Kindley has called the mid-twentieth century the era of “Big Criticism,” an analogy to the contemporaneous partnerships between universities, military contractors, and government agencies often referred to as Big Science.¹⁹ As implied by Kindley’s analogy, inquiries into mid-century literary criticism increasingly account for the influx of both funding and students as a result of U.S. military actions in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War.²⁰ Scholars working in the field of Critical University Studies, like Christopher Newfield and Jeffrey J. Williams, have been attending to the impact of these connections beyond the English Department and thus provide a more thorough understanding of the role of the university as it relates to the social, political, and economic dimensions of U.S. society. *Understanding Criticism* sees the development of literary criticism as an integral part of these dynamic interdisciplinary and interinstitutional histories. By building on these scholarly works, I further chart the complex tangle of action and influence between entities inside and

¹⁷ McGurl, *The Program Era*; Stephen Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Mark Garrett Cooper and John Marx, “Crisis, Crisis, Crisis: Big Media and the Humanities Workforce,” *differences* 24, no. 3 (February 2014): 127–59; Barnhisel, *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound*.

¹⁹ Evan Kindley, “Big Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 1 (2011): 71–95. For a rebuttal of Kindley’s declaration, see Jeffrey J. Williams, “The Little Magazine and the Theory Journal: A Response to Evan Kindley’s ‘Big Criticism,’” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (January 2013): 402–11, as well as Kindley’s response, “Response to Jeffrey J. Williams,” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (January 2013): 412–18. For more on the development of Big Science, especially as it relates to cybernetics, see: Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008).

²⁰ Andrew Rubin, *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture, and the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Eric Bennett, “How Iowa Flattened Literature,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 10, 2014, <http://chronicle.com/article/How-Iowa-Flattened-Literature/144531/>.

outside of the university that affects the epistemological and institutional formation of literary studies.

In addition to building on the insights of critical university studies and the emerging field of the media history of criticism and theory, I situate the rise of the New Criticism within historical and theoretical texts by scholars working within black studies, particularly the discourse of afro-pessimism/black optimism. By bringing critical university studies, the media history of theory, and black studies together, I show how African American institutions, scholars, and writers participate within and reshape the networks of literary criticism in the mid-century. Not only does the thorny intersection of these fields draw attention to the critical work of black writers and scholars during the period, it also intimates an argument for why such important work continues to be overlooked.²¹ Despite exponential growth in the size and prestige of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the 1940s and 1950s, African American letters in this era is often portrayed as a battle of the masculine triumvirate of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. As Lawrence Jackson has shown, however, the interregnum between the New Negro Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement carries important literary, artistic, and political developments in the interpretation of African American literature and culture, as well as the position of African Americans in U.S. institutions of higher education.²²

²¹ For example, Christopher Newfield's *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880-1980*, which chronicles entanglement of corporate interests and higher education, provides a typical example: "I ignore important developments at remarkable colleges all across the country, from Evergreen and Reed in the Northwest to Spelman, Howard, and Fisk in the South. I thus bypass the major centers of African American education during this period" Christopher Newfield, *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880-1980* (Duke University Press, 2003), 13.

²² Lawrence Patrick Jackson, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011). The encounters between black studies and predominantly white institutions have been better attended to, primarily through the controversies surrounding the development of ethnic studies departments in the late 60s and early 70s. See, especially Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). Also,

At the same time, state sanctioned anti-black racism became an unavoidable domestic and international issue for the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. The impact of literary criticism on the battle for the integration of U.S. universities and increased African American admissions in predominantly white institutions of higher education has typically been explained away. Black critics were either blocked from the literary critical system entirely, or, they were more invested in ongoing political and international struggles and therefore did not as frequently write literary criticism. Yet, these explanations pass over the important intersections and confrontations between black literary critics and New Critics. The encounters between black critics and New Critics shed light on the methods of black literary criticism during this period and on the indelible influence of black critics on the predominantly white institutions where New Criticism was said to have reigned. Further, interactions between black and white critics show the extent and history of the racist practices of the New Criticism. A better grasp of these practices can draw attention to how modes of exclusion persist in literary critical paradigms and in the ordering of the discipline's departments and professional organizations.

For Jared Sexton, anti-black racism in its structural and institutional forms generates a perpetual loop of misdirection, “that is, it [racism] appears as what it is not, as something other than it is.”²³ Sexton's formulation proves to be a compelling description of the New Criticism, both with regards to the movement's legacy of anti-blackness and to its own persistent position as the “status quo” of literary studies, the engine that generates the coherence of formal arguments and rules about intention and intelligence. In this regard, the New Criticism and the literary critical institutions founded in its name provide a locus for understanding the contours

contemporary accounts of race in the academy are robust. See, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

²³ Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 27.

and gestures of anti-black racism during the 1940s and 1950s, a period that Eric Porter calls “the first post-racial moment.”²⁴ In what follows in this introduction, I describe how the New Criticism appears as what it is not, which is the historical source of the status quo for literary studies. Taking New Criticism as historically important to the current formations of literary studies and as an essential structure for an emergent mode of anti-black racism opens up space for *Understanding Criticism*’s largest and most ambitious argument: when I analyze the relationship of New Criticism to black writers, black critics, and to blackness, I show that New Criticism, as we usually know it, crumbles between our fingers. Such an analytic, in other words, opens up the possibility for imagining the discipline anew. *Understanding Criticism* chronicles the inseparable relationship between anti-black racism and literary studies, which, subsequently, makes visible the limits of literary criticism as we knew it.²⁵

²⁴ Porter suggests that the post-race concept formed in this moment because of sociological and scientific studies that pointed to the “fictiveness of race.” Understanding race as an elaborate social fiction “presented possibilities for reconstituting the human and the political subject while calling into question the racially exclusive definitions of these categories. Yet following this path toward racelessness called into question political and social formations situated in racial experience and potentially abandoned a powerful analytic for understanding the way the world operated. Moreover, it was precisely at the moment when the falsity of race was made public that its persistence and complexity became more apparent.” Eric Porter, *The Problem of the Future World: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Race Concept at Midcentury* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3, 11. Porter references Howard Winant to make these claims. Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

²⁵ My use of “as we knew it” echoes J.K. Gibson-Graham’s volume, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Gibson-Graham argues that “capitalism can quite readily be viewed as contributing to a *crisis* in left politics. Indeed...the project of understanding the beast has itself produced a beast, or even a bestiary; and the process of producing knowledge in service to politics has estranged rather than united understanding and action.” Gibson-Graham does this by tracing the “discursive origins of a widespread understanding: that capitalism is the hegemonic, or even the only, present form of economy and that it will continue to be so in the proximate future.” J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

Against New Criticism's Anti-Blackness

Any account of literary criticism as it function in U.S. Departments of English must contend with the anti-blackness of New Critical models for disciplinary organization, close reading methods, and the dehumanization of black writers enacted by those practicing under the New Criticism. There are inescapable anti-black logics present in the discipline and, as such, these logics police how and what we read, as well as what it means to read in the first place. For afro-pessimist thinkers, anti-black logics restrict us from imagining alternative possibilities for a new political, economic, and epistemological order that are not anti-black. According to Jared Sexton, anti-blackness is a reaction to the fact that “blackness serves...as the master sign of intertwining forces of instability that together conspire to frustrate the aspirations of an esteemed neoliberalism.”²⁶ Those familiar with Sexton’s argument, which examines how white supremacy and anti-blackness are structured upon a background condition of miscegenation, may find this reference slightly out of place. Yet, the academy is by no means free of analogues to miscegenation. For example, the idea that the academic canon and the discipline of literary studies can be made “colorblind” by adding black texts to the canon and by adding black scholars to departments resembles arguments that see a solution to the “race problem” in the sexual mixing of the races. Arguments about amalgamation deflect the question of race and the function of white supremacy at different registers. As such, conversations about “blackness” are perpetually deferred until a moment when such conversations will never need to be conducted.

For example, Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?* takes the loss of a distinctive legal classification of blackness as reason for the assimilation of black culture into white and vice versa. Warren argues that the dissolution of a legal category of blackness leads black writers to take up themes and forms more in line with writers of other racial and

²⁶ Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 17.

ethnic backgrounds, thus making blackness as a literary critical category obsolete. The terminus of African American literature coincides with integration, the coming together of blacks and whites in social, public, and private space in the United States. Integration is not synonymous with miscegenation, but, even so, it often served as symbolic ground for publicly discussing anxieties surrounding interracial sex.²⁷ By relying on integration to make its pivotal temporal distinction, Warren's book shows that there is a direct connection between protecting a certain literary categorical order and the legal, social, and political orders of the world.

Of course Warren's account and the neoliberal economic context from which it emerges differs from the mid-twentieth century period of the New Criticism. Yet, the connection between a literary critical categorical order and miscegenation actively shaped the thinking of a number of important founders of the New Criticism. Allen Tate drew on this connection in 1932 when he stymied a gathering of black and white writers in Nashville, Tennessee. James Weldon Johnson had invited Langston Hughes to read his poetry at Fisk University, and Tom Mabry, a Vanderbilt faculty member, planned a party to celebrate Johnson and Hughes as guests of honor. Tate wrote an open letter to Mabry in protest of the event, which Tate circulated to other members of the Vanderbilt faculty: "Johnson and Hughes are both very interesting writers and as such I would like to meet them... This would be possible in New York, London, or Paris, but here such a meeting would be ambiguous. My theory of racial relations is this: *there should be no social intercourse between the races unless we are willing for that to lead to a marriage.*"²⁸ Tate's "theory" shows how the social segregation of blacks and whites was tied to anxiety about sex between blacks and whites. Further, Tate's invocation of segregation in this context suggests that

²⁷ For just one example of a defense of segregation based in the fear of sexual mixing between the races, see Herbert Ravenel Sass, *Mixed Race, Mixed Blood* ([Pamphlet], 1956).

²⁸ qtd in. Thomas A. Underwood, *Allen Tate: Orphan of the South* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 291, emphasis mine.

the social sphere has import in shaping literary taxonomies. Tate's position on the literary function of miscegenation becomes even more lucid in a short essay on race he wrote for *Hound and Horn* in 1933. There Tate argued that sex between a black man and a white woman created a "counter symbol... of evil and pollution," made manifest in the pregnant white woman. Private acts develop symbolic force in Tate's literary imagination.²⁹ In the Nashville example, despite the fact that Johnson and Hughes are "interesting writers," Tate cannot bear to see the meeting held in the South, especially in the place where the Fugitive poets convene. As numerous accounts of U.S. modernism have recounted, literary reputations were made and broken through connections to coteries, which often cohered because of social and emplaced bonds. In denying Hughes and Johnson access to the social space of a literary movement, Tate closes black writers out of the more abstract literary field.

Anti-blackness and white supremacy mediate the connection between the literary and social orders. Tate's screed against Hughes and Johnson proves to be one of many reasons why literary criticism should be analyzed with regards to how it constructs an institutional world based on its particular practices of racism. In fact, Sexton makes the claim that institutional worlds and their processes of authorization – their logics – are often racism instantiated: "Racism has no secure foundation because it is incoherent, unjustified and founded in affect, emotion, or conviction. Yet this underlying affective basis is systemic, structuring and governing for the entire racist complex, making it appear as intelligence, intention, and coherent formal arguments, indeed as status quo. Racism only ever appears in *this* way; that is, it appears as what it is not, as

²⁹ Tate would more explicitly state his theory in a letter to *Hound and Horn* that was requested by the magazine's editor, Lincoln Kirstein. "The psychology of sex," Tate writes, "says that a man is not altered in his being by sexual intercourse, but that the body of a woman is powerfully affected by pregnancy. A white woman pregnant with a negro child becomes a counter symbol, one of evil and pollution." *Ibid.*, 291.

something other than it is.”³⁰ Tate’s affective conviction – writing an open letter against the actions of a colleague and distributing it widely – becomes, through the institution, the language of intelligence and rational intelligence. Tate has a *theory* of race relations, not a feeling. His “theory,” arguably, is that which structures the institutional world Tate seeks to protect.

Stories about the anti-black racism of New Criticism are familiar to many. Yet, more often than not, this awareness does not prompt extensive analyses of the anti-black racism of the movement, or of literary studies in general. Instead, stories like the one about Tate’s letter often give rise to a declaration of racism and not much else.³¹ Occasionally, as has been the case with Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man, critics make herculean efforts to separate the discriminatory dimensions of a philosopher’s life from their philosophy through a series of analytic extractions. Sara Ahmed has suggested that “a good way not to hear about racism is to hear racism as accusation,” and, in literary studies, calling a literary movement racist functions as an accusation,

³⁰ Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 27.

³¹ This is not to say that there hasn’t been some excellent work on the epistemological merits of the New Criticism, as well as their impact on the organization of the discipline. Virginia Jackson’s argument about the New Criticism’s role in making a lyric of virtually all literature, when lyric, of course, is a particular genre of poetry, is especially important in this regard. Jackson, however, does not address the question of New Critical anti-blackness, which, to be fair, is not her aim in working on Emily Dickinson. Virginia Walker Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005). Jackson’s critique rests on Paul De Man’s reading of the New Criticism, in Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Also, see: Dries Vrijders, “History, Poetry, and the Footnote: Cleanth Brooks and Kenneth Burke on Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn,’” *New Literary History* 42, no. 3 (2011): 537–52. Douglas Mao, “The New Critics and the Text-Object,” *ELH* 63, no. 1 (April 1996): 227–54. In addition, it is worth noting that a number of critics have returned to the New Criticism as a way of defining Object-Oriented and digital approaches to literature, see, respectively, Graham Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (2012): 183–203; Alan Liu, “Understanding Knowledge Work,” *Criticism* 47, no. 2 (2005): 249–60. Finally, there have been a number of important accounts that deal explicitly with New Criticism, anti-blackness, and the institution, but, for reasons I explain in Chapter 1, have failed to adhere to critical memory, see: William E. Cain, “The Institutionalization of the New Criticism,” *MLN* 97, no. 5 (December 1982): 1100–1120; William E. Cain, “Notes Toward a History of Anti-Criticism,” *New Literary History* 20, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 33–48; Walter Kalaidjian, *The Edge of Modernism: American Poetry and the Traumatic Past*, 1st ed. (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

rather than an analytic invitation.³² As Ahmed implies, to hear racism as an analytic invitation makes possible structural and self-reflection; in an analytic frame, a declaration of racism can become a point of departure for understanding how and why racism manifests in the way that it does. Approaches that argue for the extraction of racist lesions, as well as those that simply dismiss the New Criticism for its racism both underestimate the thorny entanglement between methods and categories of literary analysis and the logics of anti-blackness. *Understanding Criticism* actively explores the variety of forms in which the status quo of literary studies and its anti-black racism emerge as the infrastructure for literary studies. Analyzing the entangled relation between anti-blackness and literary studies opens up a variety of avenues for future study, but also presents a demand for thinking anew the relationship between Departments of English and to the social and political worlds that they inhabit.

Always Provincialize!

An analysis of the relationship between anti-blackness and literary studies requires an alternative mode of historicizing. Histories of literary studies are too often oriented by teleological thinking dictated by a sense of the present that is only at a slight remove from the New Criticism. To return to the schematic drawn by Levinson earlier, the current mode of literary studies must be determined by the New Criticism, because the historical understanding in the present takes the New Criticism to be the origin for something like today's discipline. The present, in other words, becomes the end of a teleological mode of historicism. The same challenge arises with histories of the discipline that think through race, New Criticism, and the

³² Sara Ahmed, Twitter post, January 5, 2015, 12:47pm, <https://twitter.com/SaraNAhmed/status/552204731763163136>. Ahmed's tweet is an excellent summation of her extended work on institutional racism. For more, see Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

academy. For example, Michael Bibby, who cites the same encounter between Tate, Mabry, Hughes, and Johnson in his argument, suggests that the ties between modernism and the New Criticism make manifest a segregation of black and white writers that is “*structural* to a disciplinary field that can be understood as a racial formation of whiteness.”³³ Bibby supports his argument by counting the number of papers presented on New Negro Renaissance writers at Modernist Studies Association conferences, as well as the number of articles published on these writers in the official journal of the Modernist Studies Association, *Modernism/Modernity*.³⁴ While Bibby makes an important point about the structural racism embedded within modernist studies, whiteness still serves as his telos for the early history of modernist studies. Bibby’s inquiry affirms that modernist studies is structurally white, despite “the lost promise of modernism’s racially diverse moment.” Yet, what would happen if we followed the promise of modernism’s racially diverse moment through history? Would we necessarily end up with a definition of modernism that is structurally understood as whiteness? These questions can and should be applied to literary studies as a whole.

When applied to literary studies as a whole, pursuing an anti-teleological history requires openness about the sense of the present. Reconfiguring the definition of literary studies means

³³ Michael Bibby, “The Disinterested and Fine: New Negro Renaissance Poetry and the Racial Formation of Modernist Studies,” *Modernism/Modernity* 20, no. 3 (September 2013): 487.

³⁴ Bibby on the numbers at the Modernist Studies Association (MSA) Conference:

Each year since 1999, the MSA has held conventions...and each year’s conference has featured, on average, twenty-four presentations making any reference in their titles to race or to writers of color...The 2011 MSA conference, for example, featured 354 presentations, 5 of which were on New Negro writers, about 1.5 percent of the total. (492)

And, Bibby on the numbers in *Modernism/Modernity*:

From its inception in 1994 through the 2011 volume, *Modernism/Modernity* has published 452 feature essays, with 48 focusing on topics concerning race and/or writers of color, or about 10.6 percent of the total...The majority of articles treating race in any thematic way focus on the works of white writers, and the majority of these focus on European writers. Ironically, the inaugural issue of the journal was devoted to race—but the featured articles of this issue comprise about 10 percent of the total articles addressing race in *Modernism/Modernity*. (492-493)

For what it’s worth, Bibby’s article is published in *Modernism/Modernity* in a special issue on “New Negro Poetry.”

resisting the inevitable conclusion that New Criticism functions as a hegemonic entity within the academy where it provides the source for critical methods that develop throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Resisting this conclusion about the dominant sense of the present requires reorienting our approach to disciplinary history and to the contours of the discipline as defined in those histories. Writing about critique broadly conceived, Bruno Latour's work on the assembly of the social has yielded important insights about the uncertainty of teleological history, an insight that suggests critique, which is often based in some mode of teleology, has run out of steam.³⁵ Latour writes, "Reality is not defined by matters of fact. Matters of fact are not all that is given in experience. Matters of fact are only very partial and, I would argue, very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern and only a subset of what could be called states of affairs."³⁶ Though she refers to an older set of Latour's terms, Myra Jehlen links the various false starts that unfold in making a matter of fact achieve the status of history. She calls the history of these "uncertain and apparently redundant, and contingent" elements history before the fact.³⁷ Jehlen's history before the fact supplies a method for doing "alternative colonial history," because an attention to uncertain elements makes visible how political matters of concern dictate what become matters of fact in histories. The links between New Criticism and anti-blackness give reason to suspect that histories of the discipline that take the New Criticism as the center may be motivated by matters of concern that, in turn, make the politics that favor New Criticism matters of fact. Indeed Latour and Jehlen show that there is an often unremarked upon political

³⁵ In writing about symptomatic reading, which has been taken to be the paradigmatic mode of critique, tends to tell us what we already know, despite being structured as a surprise. That is, Sedgwick argues that paranoid reading, as she terms it, implicitly announces its conclusion whether or not any analysis takes place as that conclusion is determined by the structures of critique. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

³⁶ Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (January 2004): 232.

³⁷ Myra Jehlen, "History before the Fact; Or, Captain John Smith's Unfinished Symphony," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (July 1993): 690.

dimension to supposedly objective representations of the present and to the histories that lead up to that present. That is, disciplinary histories often develop a version of the present that is overdetermined by a naturalized, or reified, understanding of the current order.

There have been a growing number of theoretical approaches to counter the hegemony of methodologies based in a cursory acceptance of “matters of fact.” Of course, these alternative theoretical positions are themselves grounded with a different set of political concerns, many of which are, like Jehlen’s, anti-colonial, anti-heteronormative, and/or anti-racist. In taking up these positions, *Understanding Criticism* is not alone in registering the value of what Rachel Sagner Buruma and Laura Heffernan deem “reparative disciplinary history,” an approach that brings together Latour’s critique of critique with Eve Sedgwick’s reparative reading. As suggested by the allusion to Sedgwick in Buruma and Heffernan’s term, these alternative theoretical postures are designed to counter the “paranoid” qualities of the hermeneutics of suspicion. As a countermeasure to paranoid reading, Sedgwick proposes a reparative approach, an “impulse” that is “additive and accretive” instead of “reductive.”³⁸ When it comes to disciplinary history, a reparative approach means attending to practices and spaces within literary studies that are typically removed when disciplinary histories reduce the discipline to what appear to be its basic elements: theory, method, and literature. Buruma and Heffernan focus on the classroom in their study. With a similar aim, I examine the institutions of criticism, by which I mean the material and media of criticism itself: journals, conference proceedings, course catalogs, in addition to classroom materials and correspondence. As just about any graduate student, contingent faculty member, or tenure-track faculty member can attest, there is much more to the professional life of literary studies than theory, method, and literature. Much of the labor that is done in the name of

³⁸ Sedgwick refers to strong theory as “wide-ranging and reductive” (145). Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 149.

the discipline is immediately rendered invisible by the dominant mode of recounting disciplinary history, including teaching, editing, leading professional organizations, applying for grants, fellowships and jobs, reviewing applications, evaluating colleagues for tenure, conferencing, and many more. Tending to a wider range of materials and practices, which are implicitly understood by our disciplinary paradigm as insignificant, provides a methodological opening into a different history of the discipline's emergence, its imagined potential, and a different sense of the significance of our present and future labor.

While admittedly some of these imagined possibilities haven't yet realized their potential, attitudes and moods that anticipate this future are themselves historical phenomenon that the New Criticism had to construct itself against. Sedgwick figures the way that a dominant mode positions itself within and against imagined possibilities as a battle between "strong" and "weak" theories in "the ecology of knowing."³⁹ Weak theories are local, contingent, and flexible in their formation, while strong theories are those that tend to be monopolistic by gathering as much under their purview as possible. The struggle between "strong" and "weak" theories is the subject of an important narrative trajectory of this dissertation. One way to think about traditional disciplinary history is that it traces the myriad ways that a once weak theory grows up to become strong. In this regard, disciplinary historical narratives provide a teleological narrative of development, a sort of *bildungsroman* for the theory set, because disciplinary history presumes a certain professional present that must have progressed from a previous form.⁴⁰ The

³⁹ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁰ Jed Esty has shown that even within the European context not all narratives of development are even paths to the progression of nationhood or manhood. "As it turns out," writes Esty, "many canonical works of the late Victorian and modernist period feature colonial themes of backwardness, anachronism, and uneven development that provide the symbolic basis for an anti-teleological model of subject formation." That "delay and...distension" seemingly is connected to how colonization challenged inherited notions about progress, in part because of its failure on multiple orders. Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 14.

path from weak to strong is captured again in my account, albeit with a difference. Instead of suggesting that the hermeneutic method of New Criticism marked a significant break with past methods, I argue that the New Criticism gains power through a deliberate political strategy enacted by its practitioners with unanticipated assists from the state and capitalist economics. I read the history of the New Criticism as a mode of narrative representation, written by the victors of a battle for control of the territory of literary criticism. Reading disciplinary history in this way opens new modes of describing and analyzing the New Criticism and the character of the discipline.

By reading the New Critical disciplinary history narrative as tied to colonial and anti-black racist traditions, *Understanding Criticism* actively provincializes New Criticism in order to understand how its methodologies intersected with a variety of other methods for studying literature. With the term provincialize I invoke Dipesh Chakrabarty's distinction between History 1, in which capital "posits" the past "as its precondition," and History 2, in which "nothing in it is automatically aligned with the logic of capital" and as such "interrupt[s] and punctuate[s] the run of capital's own logic."⁴¹ To provincialize New Criticism is to recognize how other methodologies for literature punctuate the development narrative told by New Critics about how they came to structure the institutional and epistemological forms of literary studies.

Provincializing histories of literary criticism provoke new questions. Instead of asking why Melvin Tolson sought a New Critical endorsement for his poem *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* in the form of a preface by Allen Tate, we can ask: how does Tolson's request aim to resist the New Criticism by proposing both an alternative mode of reading poetry and, subsequently, a new plan for the institutional organization of literary knowledge and practice?

⁴¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N. J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 63–66.

The latter question takes the New Criticism as a symbolic meeting point for various epistemologies, a commons, a place for translation and mediation.⁴² Provincializing criticism shifts the meaning of criticism from a term that denotes a particular and historically based set of interpretive rules to a term that suggests a more dynamic ecology of knowing. From the perspective of provincialized criticism, New Criticism no longer describes a series of practices developed and popularized by Ransom, Tate, Brooks, Warren and the like, but, instead, provides a ground where their various practices encounter critical practices by black and queer intellectuals, encounters that I describe in chapters two, three, and four. Changing the term in this way acknowledges a more heterogeneous picture of criticism in the mid-century, a picture that has the potential to counter the anti-blackness rampant in traditional understandings of New Criticism and the critical practice that it perpetuated.

From “Ecology of Knowledge” to an Institutional Ecology

My approach to describing New Criticism as a symbolic ground for methodological encounter relies on the material culture of criticism. For this reason, I prefer the term *institutional ecology* to Sedgwick’s “ecology of knowledge” because of how the institutional implies that knowledge paradigms act primarily through their instantiation as organizations, practices, and objects. Science studies, for example, has largely made a field of study from the idea that knowledge both exists and is produced through the interactions between organizations, practices, and objects.⁴³ Ideas, of course, play a factor as well, but, when it comes to literary

⁴² Chakrabarty suggests that History 2 retools globalization to mean the creation of a place for translation and mediation. My argument is that attending to a provincialized history of criticism does similar work.

⁴³ Exemplary works of science studies include, Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2007); N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York; Cambridge, Mass.: Zone

criticism and theory, because ideas are so often sutured from their material, historical, and formal instantiation, it is worth drawing additional attention to their material forms.

This explanation of the institutional, of course, does not answer any questions about the role of ecology in “institutional ecology,” especially when ecology’s evocation of the natural world is opposed to the social and political connotations of the institutional. The separation between the natural world and the social world of humans, however, has itself been a construction of anthropocentric epistemologies. The geological thesis that humans have become a distinct force affecting the structural and material make up of the planet as a whole – an epoch deemed the Anthropocene – complicates any practical separation of the human world from the natural world.⁴⁴ Ecology in *Understanding Criticism*, though, is largely used as a metaphor. A case could be made for the connection between the political Agrarianism of Ransom, Tate, Warren, and company, an Agrarianism which implies an identity derived from a relation to the soil of the U.S. South, and the same group’s organization of the institution of criticism, but this connection is not pursued at length. That said, the impulse of these thinkers in *I’ll Take My Stand* is conservationist in that it hopes to preserve land and a way of life associated with the geography of the South as it once was. In discussing the various ways that the ecological metaphor is used, Ursula Heise associates the conservationist sense with an “altered public image of the ecological” rather than with the “interdisciplinary field [ecology] that brought together the more specialized findings of multiple individual branches of scientific inquiry.”⁴⁵ Heise goes on to suggest that the yield of interdisciplinary ecology is its success in “making visible many of the

Books ; Distributed by the MIT Press, 2007); Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” *Nature* 519, no. 7542 (March 2015): 171–80.

⁴⁵ Ursula K. Heise, “Unnatural Ecologies: The Metaphor of the Environment in Media Theory,” *Configurations* 10, no. 1 (2002): 163, 162.

less apparent and perceptible connections between natural phenomena at a regional and even global level.”⁴⁶ Ecology as a mode of description provides access to a flexible temporal and spatial frame for the interaction of a variety of systems in a way that the rigid tendrils of a network may not. Additionally, this frame is attentive to both the discovery of previously unknown actors within an ecosystem, as well as to the influence of forces that act on the system from without.

The spatial and temporal flexibility of ecology proves to be particularly apt for seeing New Criticism as an ecosystem for dynamic encounter, rather than a strict coterie to be conserved. The latter model, which corresponds to the teleological sense of history described above, often manifests as a canon of critics and their essays: Brooks’s *The Well Wrought Urn*, Ransom’s *The New Criticism*, Wimsatt and Beardsley’s affective and intentional fallacy essays, Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry*, etc. Even considering the institutional ecology of works in this narrowly defined example raises interesting questions. For one, we might ask where Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy” first appeared, since both writers are not normally associated with the social orbit of the New Critics née Agrarians. In answering, we discover that the essay was published in *The Sewanee Review* in 1946 under the editorial helm of Allen Tate. Further, we see that the essay immediately precedes an essay by Parker Tyler on “Schizophrenic Motifs in the Movies.” In violation of the intentional fallacy, Tyler’s essay argues that the motifs he traces result from the “efforts of movie actors and actresses at versatility of character.”⁴⁷ Tyler’s essay doesn’t engage Wimsatt and Beardsley’s essay or vice versa, but the proximity of the two generates interesting questions about how a reader who reads both essays in succession may have interpreted the intentional fallacy differently because of that

⁴⁶ Ibid., 162.

⁴⁷ Parker Tyler, “Schizophrenic Motifs in the Movies,” *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (July 1946): 489.

ordering.⁴⁸ These types of connections, including Tate's editorial authority over both essays, are weak: on their own they do not provide enough evidence to completely overturn our understanding of the intentional fallacy. Keeping our eye to ecology helps us to see that the entanglement within and between institutional environments cannot be reduced to one explanation or determination.⁴⁹ In aggregate these environments, which are often made of a multitude of weak connections, as well as a few strong ones, show "small and slow" processes of disciplinary activity and, hence, open up the "literary field as a whole." Scaling up our attunement to the environment of Tyler's and Wimsatt and Beardsley's essays, for example, might be one way to respond to Franco Moretti's call to "find meaning in small changes and slow processes."⁵⁰

Journals are an important locale for tracing the various crossings of critical methods in the mid-twentieth century. In this respect, *Understanding Criticism* builds on the turn to print culture studies in many fields. Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman, for example, argue that

⁴⁸ Here I invoke Sianne Ngai's elegant definition of interesting, "the deepest content of interesting is the process of its own justification." For more, see Ngai, "Merely Interesting," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no 4 (2008): 777-817.

⁴⁹ I see this work as a way of engaging recent questionings of the inherent ordering function that "context" seems to have had on literary studies since the New Historicism. In his "Introduction" to an issue of *New Literary History* on "Context?" Herbert F. Tucker argues that he and his fellow contributors are responding to the following pedagogical and scholarly maxim: "Responsible reading puts a text in its context." To put it simply, Tucker and other contributors to that issue want to put question marks behind almost every word in that sentence, though, especially "responsible," "text," "its," and "context." Context, in other words, is itself a representation and requires the same attention to a historical, cultural, and political apparatuses in its construction. See, Herbert F. Tucker, "Introduction," *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011); in the same issue, see, especially Martin Jay, "Historical Explanation and the Event: Reflections on the Limits of Contextualization," Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!" Bruce Holsinger, "Historical Context" in *Historical Context: Surface, Depth and the Making of the Text*, Derek Attridge, "Context, Idioculture, Invention," Eric Hayot, "Against Periodization; or, On Institutional Time." Also see, Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain*, *Modernist Literature & Culture* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 1.

⁵⁰ Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London ; New York: Verso, 2013), 192. The intersection with Moretti implies that an institutional ecological approach could be useful for scholarship on the literary world system. For extant, competing approaches to the literary world system, see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Harvard University Press, 2004); Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).

analyzing magazines and journals for their advertisements, the proportions of their content, and their circulation is “to enter a world...It is to follow the connections that link certain political views and certain views of art and literature.”⁵¹ The notion that journals, as well as textbooks, form a world that can be entered prompts Mark McGurl to deem these entities “virtual institutions.” In the field of criticism and theory, Jeffrey J. Williams has called for a book history in order to bring forward a “more accurate and historically thick” account of literary criticism and theory.⁵² With the Wimsatt and Beardsley example, historical thickness does not accumulate through the discovery of one strong, groundbreaking connection. Instead, the “accuracy” that Williams refers to accumulates through a large number of weak ties. The connections between certain political views and aesthetic positions found in the analysis of material culture are particularly apt in studying the New Criticism, where such connections tend to be minimized or used as fodder for complete dismissal.

The world creating force of a journal – or a constellation of journals – is not, of course, the only force that shapes the discipline. To make visible these other forces, I turn to administrative documents from departments, pedagogical manuals, books, archives from journals and publishers, newspaper accounts, and transcripts from Congressional hearings. Making an important intervention in the study of material culture, Jeremy Braddock argues for the ways that material culture may be the object of a “collecting practice.” Collecting practice, that which brought an object to a given location or prominence, mediates understandings of the object itself. Jeffrey Williams has argued that institutions can be thought of as a set of “established practices,”

⁵¹ Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman, *Modernism in the Magazines : An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Also see, Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism : Literary Elites and Public Culture*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁵² Williams, “The Little Magazine and the Theory Journal,” 407.

as much as they can be thought of as organizations.⁵³ Thinking of institutions in this way suggests that materials found in the archive are partial evidence of the ephemeral performances of established practices. For example, there is no material record in *The Sewanee Review* archive that indicates why Tate placed Parker Tyler's essay next to Wimsatt and Beardsley's. The work of the critic here becomes interpreting the logic present in these silent decisions, a logic which might be construed as an operative cultural practice for at least some New Critics. In an essay discussing the relationship of Charles Henri Ford (Parker Tyler's editorial partner) and Claude McKay, Brent Hayes Edwards has called this historical method a "queer practice of the archive: an approach to the material preservation of the past that deliberately aims to retain what is elusive, what is hard to pin down, what can't quite be explained or filed away according to the usual categories."⁵⁴ Edwards alludes to the ways that scholars in queer studies and in black studies have shown that the archive is fraught with resonances of surveillance and the criminalization of queer and black bodies. At the same time, Edwards suggests that such elusiveness extends to materials that might less obviously be formed by the logics of anti-queerness and anti-blackness. Anti-black and anti-queer logics, in other words, are operative in all archival collections. Under the light of the archival practices described here, I show that the cultural practices that form under the term criticism cast a different shadow on disciplinary strategies and categories.

For example, the institutional ecological method calls to question the narrative of the rise of the New Criticism. Many of the most robust accounts of disciplinary history suggest that the

⁵³ qtd. in McGurl, *The Program Era*, 132.

⁵⁴ Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Taste of the Archive," *Callaloo* 35, no. 4 (2012): 972.

modern era of literary studies begins with a swift takeover by the New Critics.⁵⁵ Many of these accounts cite a letter from John Crowe Ransom to Allen Tate written on New Year's Day 1938, immediately after the meeting of the Modern Language Association, in which Ransom writes: "The Professors are in an awful dither, trying to reform themselves, and there's a big stroke possible for a small group that knows what it wants in giving them ideas and definitions and showing them the way."⁵⁶ As the story goes, both before and after that meeting of the MLA, the New Critics cemented their rise to institutional dominance with the publication of Ransom's "Criticism Inc." in *Virginia Quarterly Review* in Autumn of 1937 and the release of the first edition of Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* in 1938. With these two "strokes" came an overhaul of the organizational structure of the discipline. In the moment where the humanities began its long, dull hum of crisis – the professors were "dithering" even then – the New Critics carved out a unique epistemological space for its inquiries by employing a technocratic method to read what they considered the holistic experience of a work of literature.

The stroke that Ransom reported to Tate, however, was much less significant than literary history would have us believe. He writes that his big success is helping to elect Mark Van Doren (later known for his mentorship of Allen Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac, and Lionel Trilling, among others at Columbia University) as secretary of the MLA's "Poetic form and General Aesthetics" committee, of which Ransom had previously been the chair.⁵⁷ While Van Doren could be classed as a New Critic – he presented in the committee's session at the previous year's conference – his

⁵⁵ Gerald Graff and Mark Jancovich both cite Ransom's "stroke" in their accounts of the New Criticism's rise. Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 145; Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism*, 80.

⁵⁶ John Crowe Ransom to Allen Tate. Letter, Jan. 1, 1938, box 36 folder 27, Allen Tate Papers. Princeton University Special Collections.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

role as secretary hardly seems a revolution, especially when Ransom's replacement as chair was Ernst Rose, a historian of German literature.⁵⁸

From a different perspective, it looks like Professors of Germanic Languages mustered a takeover at the MLA in 1937. Eduard Prokosch, a Germanic scholar best known for showing the link between Indo-European and Germanic languages, gave the Presidential Address that year, titled "Treason within the Castle." The treason referenced may appear to be that of Ransom and company, whose association with Seward Collins's *American Review* had grown controversial that year when Herbert Agar accused Allen Tate of fascist leanings. (Tate denied the accusations, but Collins didn't deny his own loyalties to fascism.) But in his address Prokosch is more concerned with protecting the humanities from the treasonous rise of standards associated with the social sciences. He wonders, "could it be that the range and direction of our teaching and research have so changed that the superficial observers are apt to get the impression that our scientific standards are not equal to those of a generation ago?"⁵⁹ Ransom's "Criticism Inc." departs from a similar question only to suggest that, "Criticism must become more scientific," rather than to suggest "linguistics" as a way forward as Prokosch did. While the disagreement between these two proposals positions Ransom and his "Inc." against the MLA's company line,

⁵⁸ Looking to what is arguably the first panel on new criticism at the meeting of the MLA in 1936 reveals these revolutionaries in disagreement about their "ideas and definitions." Besides the dissonance in the methods that Tate, Brooks and Warren, and Mark Van Doren brought to the "Modern Poetry" session, chaired by John Crowe Ransom, the attendance at the panel suggests that the stroke made here was minor at best. Eighty people attended the session, more than the thirty-seven who attended the session on "Experimental Phonetics" with papers on the "Duration of French Occlusives," but fewer than the 125 who attended a session on "Arthurian Romances" and the 139 who opted for a session on "Shakespeare" "Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America," *PMLA* 51 (January 1936): 1332-34. Even then, a New Critical hegemony was neither imminent, nor the immediate act of a hubristic few, especially since a consensus as to what a "new" criticism was seemed disparate at best. The papers from the session were reprinted in the conservative journal, *The American Review*. Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, Mark Van Doren, "Modern Poetry: Three Papers Read at the Meeting of the Modern Language Association, Richmond, December, 1936," *The American Review* 8, no. 4 (February 1937): 427-456.

⁵⁹ Eduard Prokosch, "Treason within the Castle," *PMLA* 52 (January 1937): 1322.

it appears to be merely an alternative tack to the organization's guiding question, rather than a revolutionary action. Nevertheless, Prokosch's address might have had as much of an impact on the course offerings in English departments as *Understanding Poetry*.⁶⁰

The effort made by the New Critics to make criticism autonomous from any other mode of inquiry has kept other operative models for understanding the discipline from entering the history of literary studies. For example, Philip Rahv, usually read as a stalwart of the New York Intellectuals, suggested in a letter to Allen Tate (strangely enough) that, "With the *Southern Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, and the *Partisan* all going at the same time, the critical atmosphere ought to improve in this country."⁶¹ Rahv suggests that even when journals are associated with distinct movements – *Southern* and *Kenyon* with New Criticism and *Partisan* with the New York Intellectuals – they participated in a united project: the critical atmosphere. Rahv's metaphor for this project is an ecological one ("atmosphere") that prevails ("improve") from the overlap of multiple institutions. Rahv's definition shows that defining New Criticism as a space for dynamic encounters between competing methodologies has historical grounding. Even a well-chronicled history, like that between the New Critics and the New York Intellectuals, has a certain fugitivity within our current model of disciplinary history. *Understanding Criticism* asks, how can we formulate a definition of the discipline and trace a history that accounts for literary critical approaches that, despite being categorically banned, intersected with this atmosphere?

⁶⁰ Prokosch's influence could be seen in the comparable and required Bibliography course required of all graduate students or in "The History of English Language," which still holds a course number at Vanderbilt (240) and is still offered in institutions as far flung as University of California, Berkeley (ENGL 101) and Harvard (English 101 until 2009). It shouldn't be surprising that a completely distinct and separate narrative of critical development can be found alongside New Criticism.

⁶¹ Rahv, like many of the figures here, is an important figure for recognizing the very different professional landscape required to do criticism in the mid-century. For one, Rahv never finished high school, which suggests that there were allowances for prestige over credentials. Imagining a critic with the equivalent reach of Rahv today without a high school education is nearly impossible. Letter, Philip Rahv to Allen Tate, October 24, 1938, box 34 folder 17, Allen Tate Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

How did black critics enter into the critical atmosphere and how did they change it? When we account for those encounters, how do our disciplinary categories and definitions change?

Organization and Scale

Each chapter of *Understanding Criticism* focuses on events and encounters that occur in and around 1950. In a limited sense, just as scholars of modernism have declared 1913, 1919, and 1922 pivotal years for modernist studies, I make a claim for 1950 being a banner year for the history of literary criticism in the U.S.⁶² Like other scholars that focus on a particular year, I make use of a limited temporal span to alter our sense of broader scale historical narratives. A tight focus on the years before and after 1950 gives access to important tectonic shifts in the cultural and political history of the United States. Michael Denning, the cultural historian, argues that the switchpoint between the progressive thirties and the liberal Cold War consensus is 1948, the year Henry Wallace ran for President as a member of the Progressive Party and was defeated horribly, garnering even fewer votes than Strom Thurmond, who was running on the pro-segregation Dixiecrat platform.⁶³ As Denning argues, financial support from the U.S. government turned the university system into a key node of the culture industries at this time, the goal of which were to profit from cultural production, regardless of its form. While not an integral element of Denning's account, critics and historians who track the development of an emergent shift in work and labor practices take the New Criticism to be an important beneficiary of the influx of university funding. Further, these scholars argue that New Criticism became a

⁶² See Jean-Michael Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007); Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁶³ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998), 22.

crucial paradigm for understanding culture and labor at this moment when professionalism became a screen for “voiding [moral] claims of specific content.”⁶⁴ In *Understanding Criticism*, I track the shifting institutional ecologies that made it increasingly difficult for the presence and impact of progressive and radical politics inside and outside of the academy.

The first chapter, “The Beginning and End of Criticism,” shows that many of the most prominent New Critics formed a definition of literary criticism that they almost immediately disavowed. The immediate disavowal not only naturalizes, or reifies, the definition of criticism they developed, but it also creates the sense that New Criticism is both dead and alive. I argue that the dead and alive temporality figured by the New Critics was effectively what was “new” about the New Criticism and, as such, has served as the defining characteristic of literary critical history since its inception. To show this, I examine both internal dissent about the function of criticism in the late 1940s and an external controversy that called into question New Critical definitions of literature and their theory of interpretation. The external controversy was the awarding of the Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound in 1949 by the Fellows in American Letters of the Library of Congress. Even though only a third of the Fellows could be readily identified as New Critics, they quickly became synonymous with the aggressive apoliticality of New Criticism, which had been invoked to justify giving a U.S. government-backed poetry prize to a poem with anti-Semitic passages, which was written by a poet currently being held in a psychiatric ward, because he was unfit to stand trial for treason. The resulting public discussion on what should be taken into account in reading literature, particularly poetry, paradoxically pushed discussions of

⁶⁴ Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class*, 51; See also, Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). For a critique of Liu’s position, which contextualizes arguments about knowledge work within a broader frame of cybernetic development, see: N. Katherine Hayles, “Attacking the Borg of Corporate Knowledge Work: The Achievement of Alan Liu’s *The Laws of Cool*,” *Criticism* 47, no. 2 (2005): 235–39.

literary criticism further into the academy, where presumably experts held these discussions. The Bollingen Controversy and responses to R.P. Blackmur's essay "A Burden for Critics" led to a definition of the New Criticism that could be easily used to disassociate oneself from controversy, partly for the political safety of New Critical practitioners. The vacuum these definitions created between literary criticism as practiced and literary criticism as theorized marked the end of one mode of disciplinarity and the beginning of another. In later chapters, I argue that this strong, all-encompassing definition of the New Criticism effectively erases resistance against it by the black critics the definition deliberately excludes.

The strong definition of New Criticism, and the model of literary history that accompanies it, pushes practices of literary criticism outside of history that do not resonate with the form of the New Criticism. With this established, the second chapter points to the large field of minor criticisms that is rarely discussed, but that was a prominent part of new critical journals, discussions, and practices from the mid-1930s through to the 1950s. Not only do these minor criticisms expand our sense of what was possible in critical practice in the mid-century, they also provide models for resistance against exclusionary logics that were part and parcel of the era's critical atmosphere. I make this argument by following the career of Parker Tyler. A poet and novelist in his own right, Tyler was a journeyman of the mid-century critical journal scene. He wrote on the movies and had a regular column in the *Kenyon Review* in addition to contributing to the *Sewanee Review* and *American Quarterly*. At the same time, Tyler edited *View* magazine, which acted as a mouthpiece for surrealists in exile in the U.S. during the war. Tyler was also openly gay and wrote about his sexuality in a semi-autobiographical novel, *The Young and Evil*, co-written with Charles Henri Ford. Nearly every aspect of Tyler's life and career pushes against the perceived boundaries of what it meant to be a New Critic: from the types of works he

interpreted and the way he interpreted them, to the credentials required to do the interpreting. In fact, Tyler's entanglement with the New Criticism expands the definition of New Criticism in ways that challenge mid-century associations with sexual and familial conformism. As such, my chapter builds on recent work in queer studies that considers the impact of sexual politics on academia in the mid-century.⁶⁵

In chapter three, I turn to a poet, intellectual, and critic, who lobbed an elaborate discursive bomb at the methodological and institutional facets of the New Criticism: Melvin B. Tolson. In 1950 Tolson famously asked Allen Tate to write a Preface for Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*. Despite rumors to the contrary, Tate agreed to do so. Tolson's request for a Preface from Tate seems odd to say the least, especially when the poem is an ode to Liberia written for the country's sesquicentennial by its freshly appointed Poet Laureate. Yet, when we read Tate's Preface against *Libretto* and an essay that Tolson hoped to publish in the *Sewanee Review* about his relationship with Tate, we see that Tolson attempted to coordinate a multi-faceted critique of institutionalized criticism, colonialism, and anti-blackness through the figure of Allen Tate and the institutions and methods of criticism that Tate represented. Tolson's critique, which has largely lain dormant until now, focuses on how the formal characteristics of history can be weaponized for the purposes of cultural and political subjugation in the name of colonialism. Tolson invokes the temporalities of quantum physics and black social life to undercut the colonial historiography that makes claims about the primitivism of Africans. Tolson's proposition affects current debates about periodization, especially the periodization of African American literature. Further, Tolson makes explicit how epistemological categories, their institutionalization, and colonialism are all tied together in the name of progress and capital;

⁶⁵ See Michael Trask, *Camp Sites: Sex, Politics, and Academic Style in Postwar America*, Post 45 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013); Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2004).

or, to put it differently, Tolson's belated bomb makes visible an institutional ecology of criticism that is entangled with anti-blackness.

The final chapter returns to Washington D.C. where, in 1953, Langston Hughes gives a lesson in poetic interpretation to the Subcommittee on Congressional Investigations during a closed-door hearing. Besides shedding a different light on Hughes's much maligned public testimony before Joseph McCarthy's committee, Hughes's closed-door testimony, which was unsealed in 2003, offers a perspective on why Hughes declared in a 1950 interview in the journal *Phylon* "that there is a crying need for good literary criticism" written by and about black writers.⁶⁶ Read in tandem with his "crying need," I argue that Hughes theorizes in his testimony a performative mode of literary criticism that I call tactical criticism. Building on Michel de Certeau's formulation of tactics as temporally defined actions launched by those that are "other" to dominant powers and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's definition of the "undercommons," I argue that before the committee and in his interview Hughes gestures towards the embodied and situational elements of "doing" criticism by pointing out how much fidelity is lost when defining critical practice "broadly." That is, Hughes makes a case for how activity itself can be a form of critical theory separate from the institutionally entrenched modes of authorization. With this connection, I consider tactical criticism within what Cedric Robinson has famously called the Black Radical Tradition. By situating tactical criticism in this way, I explore how tactical criticism can achieve the force necessary to reconfigure ontological definitions of literature and of the human that are essential to the definition of literary criticism and the points from which blackness has been excluded from critical discourse.

⁶⁶ Langston Hughes, "Some Practical Observations: A Colloquy," *Phylon (1940-1956)* 11, no. 4 (December 1950): 309.

I close the dissertation with a short epilogue that reflects on how the work of tactical criticism might help us to theorize a richer understanding between political activity and critical theory.

Understanding Criticism shows that common knowledge about literary interpretation has its own system of rules and regulations making it possible, as well as a history of its own. What accumulates in this dissertation are approaches to the reading and valuation of literature that sometimes explicitly, but, more frequently, implicitly resist the default options of an academic literary studies. I wouldn't want to call "common" the thinking of Parker Tyler, Melvin B. Tolson, or Langston Hughes, but, here, at the beginning of this study, it might be a place to start.⁶⁷ These thinkers lead us toward understanding a common knowledge, or, better yet, a knowledge commons. With knowledge commons, I emphasize the connotation that means the holding of a resource, usually land, but in this case knowledge in common; as Stuart Banner defines it, the commons "occupied a third category, between public and private. It was owned directly by the public, without the intermediation of any government institution or individual."⁶⁸ In this light, the story of criticism in the mid-century is about the expropriation of the commons by the New Criticism, a governing institution of sorts. As Nancy Fraser has argued of capitalism more broadly, the New Criticism creates "common knowledge" in the process of expropriating it,

⁶⁷ My use of "common" here is informed by the distinction between literary theory and common knowledge that Rita Felski challenges in her *Uses of Literature*. Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 1st ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 13; Also see, Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 13–38.

⁶⁸ Stuart Banner, "The Political Function of the Commons: Changing Conceptions of Property and Sovereignty in Missouri, 1750-1850," *The American Journal of Legal History* 41, no. 1 (January 1997): 64.

which, is to say, it generates something outside of itself (common knowledge) in its process of enclosure (the movement of literary criticism into the academy).⁶⁹

Capitalism, of course, is a suspiciously paranoid answer to a paranoid question and I don't mean to make New Criticism synonymous with it. Yet, the question of capital, even its symbolic forms, makes for at least one of many critical strands that Fraser argues forms a "weave" where "each strand is internally multiple."⁷⁰ The crisis in criticism, after all, is part of a crisis in the university, which might be attributed to the enforcement of austerity in a post-recession era of belt tightening and efficiency. Nevertheless, what this affirmative account to a paranoid query can yield is a schematic of that weave, a contingent and temporary description of a moment of an institutional ecology. This provides us with a more thorough understanding of the function of the anti-black logics of criticism by bringing to the surface how that which literary criticism defines itself against comes into being because of the very act of defining-against.

Returning the term "New Criticism" to a definition that means the meeting place of multiple methodologies prompts, however slightly, a return to the sense of literary studies as a knowledge commons. This means that what we talk about when we talk about New Criticism is no longer self-consciousness about the discipline's long discriminatory hangover. Instead, what we consider is how institutions and methodologies take hold of texts and writers and make of them what they will and, more importantly, how texts and writers resist that reification. What we talk about when we talk about New Criticism is our commons and what we have forgotten in its enclosure.

The first chapter begins with how that enclosure took place.

⁶⁹ Nancy Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode," *New Left Review*, II, no. 86 (April 2014): 55–72.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Chapter 1 The Beginning and the End of Criticism

“The King is dead. Long live the king! Reports that the New Criticism is dead, though they have been circulating for a long time, are nevertheless exaggerated.”
- David Hirsch, 1982¹

What does it mean when we say that New Criticism is dead, over, or in the past? What does it mean when we say that we are on the other side of a critical paradigm, that we are post-New Criticism, *After New Criticism*, or beyond it? How does such a shift occur? What precisely was “New” about New Criticism, anyway? Or, for that matter, what was “new” about the criticisms that came after New Criticism, like deconstruction, for example, which Edward Said called “new New Criticism”? Or, “New” Historicism? Moving past the 1980s and 90s, what about the New Modernist Studies, or the New Formalism, or any number of “new” theoretical approaches or disciplinary formations that have developed in the last two decades? In this chapter, I argue that what was “new” about New Criticism was neither its reading practice, nor its attention to literature’s autonomy, but its particular mode of making that practice and form of attention seem new.

The New Critical effort to make criticism new created a distinct mode of historicizing the disciplinary formation of literary studies. Such an effort was premised on suppressing the history of the practical labor of criticism. Before 1950, criticism was understood to be a loose collection of practices generally referred to by the lowercase referent “new criticism.” “new criticism” provided the raw material for what was smelted into what we’ve since come to know as New Criticism. New Criticism, as we’ve come to know it is “capitalized,” gained its status as a proper noun around 1950 largely through the primitive accumulation of the field of criticism by New Critical practitioners. New Critics collected common practices and reified them to create a

¹ David Hirsch, “Penelope’s Web,” *Sewanee Review* 90, no. 1 (Winter 1982): 126.

distinct object of particular value. Indeed, “capitalized” refers to criticism’s imbrication within capitalism, as much as it refers to the way the term came to be printed. The push for enclosure of the field of criticism resulted from concerns among critics about the viability of “new criticism” going forward, as well as concern from the general public about how critics represented political values in their practice.

Nearly all of the hermeneutic, philosophical, and institutional “innovations” of the New Criticism have actually been shown to be relatively old. The essential interpretive characteristics of the New Criticism – the pureness of poetry, its attention to style over genre, and the close reading such ontological and linguistic conceits require – rose in concert with the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The decreased importance of generic norms led critics of literature to interpret texts in order to speak for them “as if [the texts] were mute.”² With this paraphrase of Jacques Rancière, Frances Ferguson argues that hermeneutic criticism began with modernity, which Rancière dates to 1764. If that is the case, it seems curious that many literary histories attribute the beginning of the “modern” discipline of literary studies to the rise of the New Critics in the 1940s and 1950s. Dating the modern origin of the discipline to the 1940s reflects the broader historical sense that intellectual inquiry changed dramatically at the time. Foucault, for example, took Sartre to be “the last nineteenth-century intellectual” and the 1940s to be the moment when “the university and the academic emerge” as specific entities, rather than universal ones, an emergence that generates “politically ultrasensitive areas.”³ As James Chandler points out, Foucault may have misplaced this transition; most historians date the rise of disciplinarity in the American university to somewhere between 1870 and 1900 “when most of

² Frances Ferguson, “Philology, Literature, Style,” *ELH* 80, no. 2 (2013): 332.

³ qtd. in James Chandler, “Critical Disciplinarity,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 357.

the great research universities were either founded or transformed.”⁴ Ferguson and Chandler show that the interpretive philosophy and the major institutional structures of literary studies were largely in place by the 1940s and 1950s in order to question why we have not yet produced, in Chandler’s phrasing, a “more rigorous account of what a discipline is.”⁵

While these archaeologies of philosophical and institutional formations show that the criticism of New Criticism was, in fact, old, they leave open the question as to what could be new about the “New Criticism.” Even if Foucault’s distinction was a false one, clearly there was something about the 1940s that led him and a bevy of historians of literary studies to trace something essential about our current disciplinary formation to that moment. Particularly in literary studies, the grandiose nature of the name “New Criticism” has beckoned scholars to focus on the revolutionary potential of the movement. The answer to what was new in New Criticism *is* in the name, but not in the criticism. What was so path breaking about New Criticism was the sense of novelty it engendered: its brand, not its criticism. New Criticism gained energy and prominence by the “creative destruction” of what came before it, a hallmark of capitalism according to Joseph Schumpeter. Indeed, as Schumpeter’s theory suggests, not only

⁴ Ibid., 358.

⁵ Ibid., 359. R.S. Crane made a similar point in his Alexander Lectures, which were delivered at the University of Toronto on the “new” criticism and eventually published in 1953 as *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry*. Crane seeks to make a correction to the supposed novelty of the movement that has become the basis for modern criticism. Besides writing that “new” criticism is “thus, as far as its basic language goes, a very old thing indeed,” Crane argues that “modern criticism had its true beginnings” in the age of Aristotle. Crane points to Aristotle for the true beginnings of modern criticism, it seems, because the new criticism is understood as the source for a new language of discussing poetry. Crane’s insistence on Aristotle as the founder of modern criticism suggests that the New Critics have not generated new methods (“the criticism that has been thought by its practitioners and others to differ most completely from the criticism of the past”), but merely asserted themselves as the stewards of those methods. Yet, those critics represent themselves not as stewards, but as the founders. Thus, to extrapolate from Crane’s argument, what the New Critics have really accomplished is not a “new” criticism, but rather the New Criticism, an institutional practice crafted to form a “new” history for literary studies. R.S. Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), 95, 92.

does the process of creative destruction make something new, it “incessantly destroy[s] the old.”⁶ Further, this gesture has a distinct temporality (Schumpeter calls it a “process”), which is to say that it opens an avenue for describing and sensing history in a particular way. Further, because the New Criticism gains energy from such a process, the “new” structure of criticism is marked by the enclosure and primitive accumulation of criticism into capital.

But, a modernist may wonder, “what about Pound’s ‘make it new’? Doesn’t that phrase encapsulate the ‘new’ gesture of criticism that is being described, thus making this aspect of New Criticism old, too?” Surprisingly, the explanatory power of Pound’s phrase actually came to fruition after the New Criticism made itself new. Michael North writes of the “slogan”:

One of the most interesting things to be discovered by a serious examination of Pound’s slogan is that it was not a slogan until the late 1950s and early 1960s. The phrase that is now universally taken to summarize the ambitions of modernist artists and writers was quite obscure until the literary scholar and critic Hugh Kenner gave it some prominence in the *Hudson Review*. It became so notorious, not because it summarized the ambitions of the modernists themselves, but rather because it helped scholars to talk about a quality that was then under serious debate.⁷

“Make it new,” gained its prominence in the wake of the New Criticism, providing a term for what had otherwise been a “quality” or artistic process that was the subject of criticism. Hugh Kenner, who wrote his dissertation about James Joyce under the direction of Cleanth Brooks, popularized the phrase. The essay that revived “make it new” was published in the *Hudson Review*, which was edited by Frederick Morgan, a student of Allen Tate at Princeton. “Make it

⁶ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2003), 83.

⁷ Michael North, *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2013), 10.

new” might have gained its explanatory purchase on modernism, but its pedigree and its popularization suggests that the famous slogan is primarily a New Critical phenomenon.⁸

Previous critics have suggested that the New Critics developed a unique mode for comprehending the history of genre, form, and the canon. Fredric Jameson has argued that despite frequent claims leveled against the New Critics for their ahistoricism, they “devoted significant energies to the construction of historical paradigms.”⁹ By historical paradigms Jameson refers to the broad “traditions” cut by the New Criticism, “the dissociation of sensibility from Donne to Shelley, the reconquest of style and image from Swinburne to Yeats.”¹⁰ More recently, Virginia Jackson has argued that this historical paradigm was, in fact, an ahistoricism generated by the tendency of New Critics to ignore genre, which had previously been the engine for understanding the history of literature. The New Criticism read all literary works as if they were lyric poems, a logic that Jackson identifies as “a seamless rationale for literary studies as a separate academic discipline.”¹¹ That rationale creates a canon, marked by stylistic periods, which, as I discuss in chapter three, a number of recent critics see as the “central concept” of literary studies.¹² Jackson and Jameson identify that the New Critics crafted a unique historical

⁸ Walter Kalaidjian makes a similar observation about Hugh Kenner’s work on Pound. He argues that Kenner’s glorification of Pound at precisely the moment Pound was being condemned in the wake of the Bollingen controversy helped to refashion modernism’s “radical energies” into the “‘costumes’ of New Critical conservatism.” Yet, Lawrence Rainey, seminal volume, *Institutions of Modernism* suggests that “modernism neither resists or capitulates to commodification,” it incorporates elements of both. Rainey, in other words, might argue that “Make it New” was implicit in the development of modernism’s “ill-fated counter realm to the public sphere.” Walter Kalaidjian, *The Edge of Modernism: American Poetry and the Traumatic Past* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 130. Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form; Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), 323.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Virginia Walker Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 99.

¹² Virginia Jackson, *On Periodization: Selected Essays from the English Institute* (Cambridge, MA: English Institute in collaboration with the American Council of Learned Societies, c2010.); Ted Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies*

paradigm for understanding literary history. What lies dormant in their theory is that understandings of a tradition of form, rather than a history, are brought to the fore by a historically situated critical frame. That critical frame, one of creative destruction, is not transcendent or outside of history, but an active player within it and, as such, carries with it a particular mode of understanding history. If criticism is in history, then it requires a historical paradigm that mediates its understanding of how history is “made.” The New Critics “devoted significant energies to the construction” of that historical paradigm, the paradigm of making it new.

The majority of construction began a little before 1950, when many of the key practitioners of the New Criticism wrote that their critical practice was beginning to fall out of favor and that it should be replaced by other methods.¹³ William E. Cain has argued that “the New Critics rapidly turned ‘against’ New Criticism itself at this time. By the early 1950s, the New Critics were not only pointing (along with their foes) to the narrow canon touted by New Criticism and bemoaning its failure to invoke ‘history,’ but they were also scrutinizing a defect in the very procedures of New Critical close reading.”¹⁴ In 1948 John Crowe Ransom noted that “the stock of New Criticism is having a dip on the market.”¹⁵ Shortly thereafter Cleanth Brooks observed that New Criticism had “exhausted its energies.” By 1951 Austin Warren had come

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Eric Hayot, “Against Periodization; Or, On Institutional Time,” *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 739–56.

¹³ Vincent B. Leitch argues that “end-of-theory sentiments arose...very early in the contemporary period: when the classical Enlightenment project of theory culminated in [Northrop] Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* [1957].” Vincent B. Leitch, “Theory Ends,” *Profession*, 2005, 124. As does William Maxwell, “By the 1950s, the conventions of CIA-endorsed New Critical formalism had crept into FBI critical practice...Ahead of the CIA’s invention in 1947, however, Bureau ghostreaders had cobbled together a separate mode of spy-reading, one sympathetic to pre-New Critical academic schools and exceptionally attuned to the political mindfulness of Afro-modernist writing.” William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover’s Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 19.

¹⁴ William E. Cain, “Notes Toward a History of Anti-Criticism,” *New Literary History* 20, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 43.

¹⁵ John Crowe Ransom, “The New Criticism,” *The Kenyon Review* 10, no. 4 (October 1948): 682.

across the idea that “Anglo-American criticism has come to an end” so frequently that statements about criticism’s demise had become “commonplace.”¹⁶

Despite these endings, or, perhaps because of them, the same critics took this to be an important moment of renewal. In fact, a number of literary historians pinpoint 1950 as a germinal year for the establishment of literary criticism and theory as the guiding force in literary studies. In 1965, Martin Green asserts the New Critics “became the absolute rulers of the intellectual scene; by 1950 literature in America was a single-party system.” About fifteen years later, Grant Webster would repeat Green’s claim, “by 1950, Tory Formalism [which is Webster’s term for the New Criticism] was firmly established in the centers of academic power and influence.”¹⁷ Such claims have continued to the present. D.N. Rodowick argues that the same Austin Warren who spoke of commonplace end-of-criticism sentiments founded a “new domain of inquiry” with his and Rene Wellek’s *Theory of Literature*: “the survey of critical theory...in a synoptic perspective.”¹⁸ As New Critics were incessantly destroying the old, they were developing something new.

Establishing the end date of New Criticism, however, is not solely a retrospective phenomenon; a number of New Critics argued that the death of the movement proved to be a necessary precondition to discuss its present and its future. Indeed Austin Warren described the commonplace of criticism’s end as a “moment of consolidation and pedagogic simplification as

¹⁶ Austin Warren, “The Achievement of Some Recent Critics,” *Poetry* 77, no. 4 (January 1951): 239.

¹⁷ Grant Webster, *The Republic of Letters: A History of Postwar American Literary Opinion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 113. Webster uses the term “Tory Formalism” because he sees the New Critics as direct descendants of T.S. Eliot whose “great achievement was to propel his literary generation in the direction of Toryism.” Webster is quick to declare that Eliot’s Toryism is not that of Thatcher but follows Samuel Johnson’s definition of the political program. It defines those who adhere to “the ancient constitution of the state” and to the church of England (66).

¹⁸ D. N. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 69.

well as a moment for assessment.”¹⁹ Allen Tate argued that such metacriticism, “when insights into the meanings of a work become methodology,” was a distinctive gesture of the New Criticism.²⁰ He called this “autotelic criticism” and argued that it was what made the “myth [of New Criticism] by giving it a name.”²¹ Like the ontologically distinct poem so essential to its method, the New Criticism made criticism into an object readily analyzable, still and unmoving, posing for study. Richard Chase – best known for his work on Melville and Whitman – took autotelic criticism further by suggesting that not only was it a necessary condition to discuss past phenomenon, but that it ensured discussions of the past-object would continue into the future. The futurity relied on Chase’s figuration of the death of New Criticism not as a murder, but a suicide. “Slitting one’s own throat,” Chase writes, “can be a kind of paradoxical assertion of authority, or at least a declaration that one has ceased to underestimate oneself.”²² Chase insists that the gesture is necessary for the New Criticism, because, for reasons unexplained, its critical “vision has remained largely immobile and unadmitted.” To mobilize this vision and to ensure its “endurance and cultural self-protection,” the New Critics must slit their own metaphorical throats. By performing a rhetorical version of *hara-kiri*, the New Critics can control the mobilization of their own critical legacy, rather than allowing their detractors to define the practice. Chase suggests that suicide takes the form of a creative destruction of criticism, but, instead of imagining criticism as an object, he takes it to be an organic body, which was a frequent metaphor used to describe the ontological totality of the poem by New Critics.

¹⁹ Warren, “The Achievement of Some Recent Critics,” 239. Warren goes on to say that the criticism he describes is “what Ransom termed the “New Criticism,” a label variously distasteful to most of the critics.” Ultimately, though, Warren disagrees with the commonplace and hopes that one day soon “all professors of literature should be critics, and good ones.” (240)

²⁰ Allen Tate, “A Note on Autotelism,” *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 1 (January 1949): 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²² Richard Chase, “New vs. Ordealist,” *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 1 (January 1949): 12.

In order to control their movement's future, the New Critics came to understand their movement not as a set of practices, but rather as a body, or a naturalized object, that could be exchanged or destroyed. Georg Lukács describes the mystification of human labor, or social practices, into a seemingly natural object as the result of a process of reification. The process works through a separation of the worker from her object of labor, which, in turn, separates the worker from herself. When scaled up, these separations facilitate an epistemological shift away from material and qualitative methods and towards rationalized and quantitative ones. With this shift, the object of a science drifts from the material object itself to the methodological processes that have been used to determine the ontology of that object. Lukács continues:

The more highly developed it becomes and the more scientific, the more [the science] will become a formally closed system of partial laws. It will then find that the world lying beyond its confines and in particular the material base which it is its task to understand, *its own concrete underlying reality* lies, methodologically and in principle, *beyond its grasp*.²³

Lukács describes how reification makes it difficult for epistemological methods to register the material basis for whatever it is that a “science” attempts to describe, because science ignores the social practice and the human labor that is necessary to the process. That is, reification figures certain patterns of thought as ‘natural’, which separates the history of an epistemology’s material practice from its seemingly universal ideal. The New Critics insisted that the making of a literary work was not an act of labor, but rather of “communion,” thus mystifying activity into “natural” spirit.²⁴ Richard Chase’s metaphor about self-immolation further suggests that New Critics not

²³ Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1967): 104.

²⁴ Allen Tate writes that critics “see the work of literature as a participation in communion.” Tate, “The Man of Letters in the Modern World,” in *Essays of Four Decades* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1999), 11.

only abstracted the social practice that potentially mediates the writing of a poem – hence the removal of context and the idea that all literature is the pure expression of a lyric ‘I’ – but, on a second pass, abstracted the social practices of criticism into a ‘natural’ mode of literary criticism called New Criticism.

In the case of the literary critical science, self-immolation, or, creative destruction, produces this abstraction, what Chase called, “the spirit of Criticism...seen rising from the corpse.”²⁵ Recent scholarship of the post-1945 period suggests that the intensified separation between labor and object is part of the rise of “knowledge work,” the premise of which was a “cool” or “hip” attitude that mediated and distanced the knowledge worker from the object they studied. In fact, Stephen Schryer, Alan Liu, and Michael Szalay understand the New Critics to carry some responsibility for the development of this attitude.²⁶ Through enclosing criticism with these processes of capital, the New Critics shift the discussion of criticism away from practice and toward a discourse that takes criticism itself as its object. It is this gesture – to make it dead to make it new to make it perpetuate – that enables the enduring sense that New Critical theory has long been dead in the research of literary studies, but somehow still vital in pedagogical practices and in writing disciplinary histories.

The Burden of Criticism and the Ideal “New Critic”

The publication of R.P. Blackmur’s “A Burden for Critics” in the Summer 1948 issue of *Hudson Review* prompted a number of critics to define a set of criteria for being a New Critic.

²⁵ Chase, “New vs. Ordealist,” 12.

²⁶ Stephen Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class : Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

Blackmur's essay argued that literary criticism had become hermetic because critics increasingly failed to register that "literature is one aspect among many of the general human enterprise."²⁷ Blackmur's claim occasioned a number of responses that sussed out why literary criticism became hermetic, yet the respondents were largely those that Blackmur claimed made literary criticism insular in the first place. The writers who responded to Blackmur's essay generated a list of practices that a New Critic must follow in order to create a fundamentalist set of rules for the most orthodox New Critic, rather than to describe an existing critical community. The creation of this orthodox New Critic, who had to abide by a strict set of rules that were impossible to follow, allowed those who practiced the suspect method of criticism to disidentify from it. The New Critics fabricated an ideal for what a critic was supposed to do, while knowing full well that there wasn't a single living critic who practiced criticism in the ideal way. The ideal New Critic never set foot in a classroom or wrote an essay in a critical quarterly; the ideal New Critic only existed as text on the pages of critical quarterlies or in theoretical monographs. Creating the ideal New Critic abstracted the critic from the practice of criticism because it left the labor of criticism to a concept, not a person. With this reification, the New Critics ended the "new criticism" and formed New Criticism.

In "A Burden for Critics" Blackmur scrutinized the idea that a literary work could be separated from the world in which it was read and in which it was written. Blackmur, a professor in the Department of English at Princeton, wagered that criticism, not art, was responsible for this idea. In an impressive inventory, Blackmur insists that not only do the familiar masterpieces of modernism register worldly knowledge – poems by Eliot and Yeats, novels by Joyce and Gide, plays by Shaw and Pirandello, music by Stravinsky, paintings by Picasso, sculptures by Brancusi – but so do massive infrastructure projects across the United States: "the railway station at

²⁷ R. P. Blackmur, "A Burden for Critics," *The Hudson Review* 1, no. 2 (July 1948): 172.

Philadelphia, the Pentagon, the skyscrapers, the gasoline stations, the highway systems, the east and west side highways, apartment houses each a small city, and the interminable multiple dwellings...the Washington Bridge, the Pulaski Skyway...[and] the National Parks, with their boulevards running at mountain peak.”²⁸ For Blackmur, each one of these projects reflects a shift in the relation between audience and work of art, a shift that Blackmur suggests is determined by parallel shifts in “the institutions, the conceptions, [and] experience of culture.” The critic’s burden is to situate works within these shifts in order to “bring the art to full performance,” which resonates with Rancière’s argument that interpretation became necessary to speak for art that had come to be understood as mute. To bring a work of literature to its full performance was to interpret its meaning and to explain how that meaning is made through the reconfiguration of the material landscape. Blackmur called this “rational judgment,” a deliberately “non-systematic” reckoning with how the aesthetic qualities of a work participated in the cultural world surrounding the work. In other words, rational judgment suggests that material conditions in the world help to inflect unique instantiations of aesthetic form. The critic’s work is to evaluate that form in order to reflect upon the interaction between the world and the work.

Yet, according to Blackmur, the New Criticism did not shoulder that burden. New Criticism is, “at bottom...facile,” because of its overemphasis on the work’s technical capacity. That overemphasis comes at the expense of assessing how the work reflects and participates in culture at large. With this claim, Blackmur repudiates the methodology he had followed for the past decade of his career. Perhaps because of this long-time allegiance, he suggests that he would not have been able to make his argument about the new burden of criticism without the successful work of the New Criticism. In fact, the burden is only made visible because of New Criticism’s exegetical success. Formalist exegesis is a necessary step towards “rational

²⁸ Ibid., 178.

judgment,” a step that occurs through the payoff of “all that Mr. Ransom means by New Criticism.”²⁹ On some level, Blackmur recommends a retooling of criticism’s emphasis; criticism should overcome its masquerade to become a religion, a way of life, or a total mode of being, and recognize that it offers, instead, a skill: close reading. Though New Criticism may have been facile, its overemphasis on form had developed a skill necessary for making a rational judgment about a literary work and its reflection of culture.

Turning criticism into a stepping-stone – a mere skill – did not sit well with New Critics. “A Burden for Critics” prompted a number of responses in *The Kenyon Review* including “The Critic’s Business” forum and the “My Credo” series, which Grant Webster has called the “climax” of the *Kenyon Review*.³⁰ These symposia are where the New Critics declared themselves dead – Chase’s call for critical suicide, Ransom’s dip of the new critical stock, both appeared in response to Blackmur’s essay. As such, *Kenyon Review* and other publications provided an echo chamber for the New Critics to substantiate Blackmur’s claims and, in turn, to distance themselves from the cast of a purely formalist critic.

For many New Critics, Blackmur’s essay provided an opportunity to rebrand their critical practice, however anachronistic the term may be. Ransom, in fact, argued that the “dip” of New Critical stock on the market was not an occasion to “sell this criticism short,” but rather a moment to “go over” its “production and merchandizing.”³¹ In fact, such calls lead Jed Rasula to argue that “New Criticism was, in effect, a public relations firm that pioneered and then

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

³⁰ Webster writes, “This symposium seems historically pivotal, since Brooks’s essay sums up the Formalist position, Bush’s the opposition of the scholars to it and Chase’s the liberal/avant-garde approach of the New York Intellectuals, while Fiedler’s essay “Toward an Amateur Criticism” and Frye’s essay on myth criticism serve as points of departure for the critical movement of the fifties.” Webster, *The Republic of Letters*, 105.

³¹ Ransom, “The New Criticism,” 682.

successfully promulgated a certain brand of poetry.”³² Like the head of a good PR firm, Ransom denied Blackmur’s charges against New Criticism by stating that Blackmur mischaracterized New Critical practice. In fact, many of the “new critics” were already using the methods of the social sciences to unveil poetry’s knowledge of the world at large, including I.A. Richards, who had been a proponent of psychology, and Kenneth Burke, who virtually defined interdisciplinarity with work that touched on psychology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and grammar. From this perspective it isn’t the “product” of New Criticism that needs fixing. To shoulder Blackmur’s “burden,” what the New Criticism really needed was better packaging that more accurately reflected criticism as practiced.

The process of rebranding the New Criticism led to a new way of portraying criticism: instead of characterizing individual perspectives, those responding to Blackmur began to characterize “New Criticism” as a whole. Taking Blackmur’s lead, respondents to his essay provide a grand theory for what had otherwise been a loose set of critical practices. This theory of criticism, however, became ground for critics to disidentify with the movement. Even figures like Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks, who are almost universally understood as New Critics, claimed that neither were they New Critics, nor did they know any New Critics.³³ These claims were made possible by the fact that the theory of New Criticism did not match – nor could it – the institutional conditions in which New Criticism was practiced. As Brooks put it, “in practice, the critic’s job is rarely a purely critical one.”³⁴ Giving a course lecture, presenting a paper at MLA, or promoting a new author in the popular press forces the critic to take on methods other

³² Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 69.

³³ Brooks writes that he “cannot even claim to know certainly who they [the New Critics] are” and Tate called New Criticism a myth, suggesting that it would be difficult for this myth to have any true believers. Cleanth Brooks, “List of ‘Wicked Esthetes’ Wanted,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, October 29, 1949, 24; Tate, “A Note on Autotelism.”

³⁴ Cleanth Brooks, “The Formalist Critics,” *The Kenyon Review* 13, no. 1 (January 1951): 76.

than formalism in her or his practice. Even the “Letter to the Teacher” in the 1938 edition of Brooks and Warren’s germinal textbook, *Understanding Poetry*, begins with a caveat to the methods of formalism: “Of course, paraphrase may be necessary as a preliminary step in the reading of a poem, and a study of the biographical and historical background may do much to clarify interpretation.”³⁵ In the 1950 edition of *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren added a postscript that states that the contemporary “critical attitude” has led to a “new context.” The new context leads them to “certain shifts of emphasis” away from formalism: Brooks and Warren move from “a sharp focus on the poem itself” to “the relation of the poem to its historical background, to its place in the context of the poet’s work, and to biographical and historical study generally.”³⁶ In other words, critics must “see how history, literary and general, may be related to poetic meaning.”³⁷ To be a critic in the classroom and in the world – and not just “in theory” – is to relinquish the “pure” ideals of formalism.

Despite these gestures to methodological inclusiveness, *Understanding Poetry* and responses to Blackmur’s essay fueled the fire that the New Criticism was defined by its orthodox formalism. In both the 1938 and 1950 editions, for example, far more space in *Understanding Poetry* is devoted to formal analysis than to form and history. To further the contradiction, Brooks defined “ten articles of faith” for the formalist critic in his contribution to the “My Credo” series. In sum, New Critics were creating an image of the formalist critic, which could not exist because of how that image sought a fundamentalist purity in critical reading. The New Critics reified the ideal formalist critic into the thing that would be called New Criticism. This capitalized New Criticism was synonymous with formalism, yet entirely different from the

³⁵ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, eds., *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938), iv.

³⁶ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, eds., *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students, Revised* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1950), xxi.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii.

criticism actually practiced by Brooks, Warren, Ransom, and others. The difference between the two allowed the “new critics” to deny participating in the capitalized New Criticism.

What, then, is the orthodox theory of New Criticism? How did the critic operating under “pure” conditions approach interpreting a work of literature? What were these “pure” conditions and could they even be accomplished? Brooks’s list of ten criteria for formalist criticism summarizes the basic requirements:

That literary criticism is a description and an evaluation of its object.

That the primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity—the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole.

That the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed, those of logic.

That in a successful work, form and content cannot be separated.

That form is meaning.

That literature is ultimately metaphorical and symbolic.

That the general and universal are not seized upon by abstraction, but got at through the concrete and the particular.

That literature is not a surrogate for religion.

That, as Allen Tate says, “specific moral problems” are the subject matter of literature, but that the purpose of literature is not to point a moral.

That the principles of criticism define the area relevant to literary criticism; they do not constitute a method for carrying out the criticism.³⁸

³⁸ Brooks, “The Formalist Critics,” 72.

Brooks's "articles of faith" intimate how he can deny knowing any "pure" formalists, while still invoking the work of particular critics to define the category. Brooks refers to what "Allen Tate says," but that statement is but one article among ten. The articles of faith, in other words, are composed of a multitude of sometimes conflicting individual perspectives. Because of their combinatory construction, these articles cannot become a practice: the articles avowedly "do not constitute a method."

Though Brooks's articles of faith fall short of making a method, they do provide specific boundaries for the limits of literary critical inquiry and suggest the need for a method of some kind. How else could one surmise whether a work's form can be separated from its content? Observation, it seems, is not enough. At the same time, in suggesting that literary criticism has a distinct object, Brooks makes plain the separation between a work and its context. Context may not be the object of criticism, but it is a precondition of criticism. In order to define a pure formalism, Brooks and others had to separate the criteria for criticism from the context in which those criteria were practiced. Practical criticism became a byproduct of New Criticism, a hidden repository distinct from what had become critical discourse, *a la* the "hidden abodes" that Nancy Fraser describes as being produced by the primitive accumulation of capital. The separation of practical criticism and New Criticism is what allows Blackmur, who had shunned the New Criticism in the first place, to recommend a year after his disavowal that "the novel needs precisely the kind of [critical] attention, the same second look from the same untenable position, that in the last twenty years or so we have been giving poetry."³⁹ Despite prompting the movement's death, Blackmur and other critics managed to find additional material for New Critical inquiry.

³⁹ R. P. Blackmur, "For a Second Look," *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 1 (January 1949): 9.

These expansions contradicted the death of New Criticism and the very historical pattern that the death of New Criticism portended. As Blackmur himself intimated with his “rational judgment,” critical discourse conformed to a progressive model of development: each methodology is a step toward the realization of criticism’s *Geist*. Ransom even invoked Hegel’s dialectic to describe criticism’s progress in his response to Blackmur’s essay. For New Critics the dialectic only applied to logical or rational work, not art. Tate writes, “Shakespeare does not replace Dante in the way that Einstein’s physics seem to have ‘corrected’ Newton’s. There is no competition among poems. A good poem suggests the possibility of other poems equally good. But *criticism is perpetually obsolescent and replaceable.*”⁴⁰ Critical approaches unfold in a dialectical sequence, therefore, ‘correcting’ one another, as they step closer to rational judgment. And, as we will see in chapter three, even literary art couldn’t escape competition with itself. With constant overtures to how poetry is an “organic” object, literary works were subject to judgment on an evolutionary, or eugenic, scale. The nominal obsolescence of a particular phase of criticism served as a screen for the persistence of both literary works and critical practice that didn’t match the paradigm.

The general theory of New Criticism insulated multiple critical methods from expiring and, at the same time, made it more difficult to describe deviations from the dominant. Creating this general theory ended practical criticism by repackaging it as “New Criticism,” hence making it new. Yet, as I argue in the next section, by creating “New Criticism” the New Critics shifted the discourse of literary studies towards the theoretical. That discursive shift pushed descriptions of practical criticism beyond the limits of the discipline’s discourse. This gave the practice of criticism, especially as it unfolded in the classroom, the ghostly quality that otherwise pushed the

⁴⁰ Allen Tate, “Is Literary Criticism Possible?,” in *Essays of Four Decades* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 1999), 42–3, emphasis mine.

classroom out of disciplinary history. Making New Criticism new allows for the inescapable sense that New Criticism is thoroughly dead, but still, somehow, frustratingly alive as a spirit that haunts our classrooms and our disciplinary histories.

The Bollingen Controversy and the Emergence of Criticism

Blackmur's "burden" of criticism – and the ensuing paradigm of critical creative destruction it spawned – suggested the limits of the New Critical methodology going forward. As we've seen in the previous section, such a critique brought significant change and attention to the discourse used to discuss the New Criticism. That shift made New Criticism into an ontological entity that could be readily discussed and put aside, while allowing some of its practices to persist under new names. It was this form that made the New Criticism an object of national controversy when several prominent New Critics awarded Ezra Pound the first Bollingen Prize on behalf of the Library of Congress in 1949. The award, which recognized the best book of poetry published in the United States, was controversial because of the open anti-Semitism of Pound's poetry and the fact that Pound was being held in the St. Elizabeth's psychiatric hospital in Washington D.C. after being ruled mentally unfit to stand trial for treason. The ensuing public debate, however, moved the focus away from Pound. Instead, writers and critics wondered aloud about the political commitments implied by the interpretive principles held by the critical establishment. The fallout from the Bollingen Controversy forced the New Critics to articulate a political philosophy for their freshly dead criticism, which was something many of the New Critics had avoided since their avowedly more explicit politicking in the 1930s.⁴¹

⁴¹ Walter Kalaidjian argues that suppressing the New Critics' political position in the 1930s was the main result of the Bollingen Controversy:

The subsequent postwar policing of cultural modernism by the more restrictive literary canon of high modernism also was meant to repress the revenants of ultra-right political extremism, whose

The Bollingen Controversy pushed the New Criticism into the center of a raucous debate about the function of literary criticism in a democratic society. The most contested principle was how to justify the separation of a work of literature from its author's politics, a principle that arose out of taking the work's form and style as the primary materials for analysis. On one side of the debate, the side of the critical establishment, the separation of literature from politics came to be understood as a political act essential to upholding American democracy. Dwight Macdonald, the founding editor of the journal *politics* and a former editor at the *Partisan Review*, declared that awarding Pound the Bollingen Prize was "the brightest political act in a dark period."⁴² Of course, whether this was the brightest political act or the darkest one depended on who was measuring the light. At the head of the other side of the debate, the side defending the public's interest in criticism, was Robert Hillyer, who was on the faculty with John Crowe Ransom at Kenyon College. Writing in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Hillyer claimed that his research into the prize "lead[s] me toward one concept: totalitarianism."⁴³ His research also determined the responsible parties for this totalitarian act: "the party line of Eliot and the new aesthetes (including the self-styled 'new critics') is merely the old doctrine of art-for-art's-sake titivated with plumes of voodoo jargon to overawe the young. Their power in academic circles is beyond appraisal because it is pervasive rather than defined."⁴⁴ As the controversy continued – largely due to Hillyer's stoking the flame – Hillyer's conclusions were entered into the *Congressional Record* to justify an appropriation for an investigation into the proceedings of the

specters haunted Kenner's mentors from the 1930s—Cleanth Brooks and his collaborators in the Fugitive, Southern Agrarian, and New Critical movements: Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren, among others. This line of reactionary cultural politics flourished right through the conservative renaissance of the Reagan-Bush era, reappearing with the uncanny repetition of George W. Bush's presidency, and surviving to this day.

Kalaidjian, *The Edge of Modernism*, 131.

⁴² Dwight Macdonald, "Homage to Twelve Judges," *politics* 6, no.1 (Winter, 1949)

⁴³ Robert Hillyer, "Poetry's New Priesthood," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, June 18, 1949, 38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

Fellows in American Letters of the Library of Congress who selected Pound for the award. The investigation never took place, because the mere threat of such an investigation led the Library of Congress to suspend all of its award programs.

Hillyer's conflation of "the self-styled new critics" with the Fellows in American Letters helped to make New Criticism synonymous with the mid-century critical establishment in the U.S. The connection between "new critics" and the Fellows in American Letters is surprising in retrospect, because only one third of the thirteen fellows could be immediately identified as New Critics. Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren were among those who selected Pound, as was T.S. Eliot, whose poetry had made a great impact on Tate and Warren in their younger years. Tate and Warren drew murals of *The Waste Land* on the walls of their Vanderbilt University dorm-room when they were members of the Fugitive group in the 1920s. Several other members of the committee had close ties to the publications and institutions that would come to be associated with the New Criticism, including Robert Lowell, who lived with Tate in Nashville and studied with Ransom at Kenyon; Katherine Anne Porter, whose "Silver Horse, Pale Rider," an excerpt of her later collection *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, was published in full in *Southern Review* in Summer 1938; and Karl Shapiro, who would become editor of *Poetry*. The other seven members of the committee—W.H. Auden, Katherine Garrison Chapin, Willard Thorp, Paul Green, Louise Bogan, Conrad Aiken, and Theodore Spencer—wouldn't register as New Critics in the late 1940s, nor would they now. Despite the myriad of practices and critical temperaments represented by this group, the award was seen to be the responsibility and signature of New Criticism. In addition to Hillyer, the editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Norman Cousins, claimed that the Fellows were responsible for "the incredible and dangerous intellectual snobbery that is the dominant strain of the 'new criticism.'" The Prize prompted Robert Gorham Davis, a professor at

Columbia University, to dwell on the tenuous relationship between New Critical orthodoxy and liberal democracy in an essay titled, “The New Criticism and the Democratic Tradition” published in *The American Scholar*. From all angles, the New Criticism, its politics, and their relationship to civil society forced both structural changes to how the public funded criticism and how, in turn, criticism related to the public. These changes, too, impacted the theories and practices of literary criticism in the academy.

In outlining the controversy and the ensuing structural, theoretical, and practical changes to criticism, I argue that the Bollingen Controversy more firmly established the rumblings of an end to New Criticism described in the previous section. The public debate that erupted over the Prize challenged the authority, as well as the motives of the New Critics, just as it echoed the concurrent New Critical discussion over the new burden for criticism. In this regard, the Bollingen Controversy shows the wide and rapid circulation of the fiction of an ideal New Critic practicing “pure” formalism and provides an excellent place to examine the institutional and disciplinary effects of the large-scale purchase of that fiction.

*

Funded by a grant from the Bollingen Foundation, an organization endowed by Paul Mellon, son of Andrew W. Mellon, the annual Bollingen Prize was placed under the purview of the Library of Congress in 1948. A jury of Fellows in American Literature was to award the one thousand dollar prize to a book of poetry that “represents the highest achievement of American poetry in the year for which the award is made.” On November 18 and 19 of that year, the Fellows met in Washington to deliberate on their selection for the first award. Four works had been nominated for consideration: Pound’s *The Pisan Cantos*, William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson, Vol. 2*, Randall Jarrell’s *Losses*, and Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Green Wave*. *The Pisan*

Cantos emerged as an immediate favorite, which led the Fellows to discuss the potential implications of giving the award to the institutionalized Pound. Eliot expressed particular concern for his *il miglior fabbro*; he thought that the award would only harm Pound's already damaged reputation.⁴⁵ The Fellows needed to think it over and adjourned without taking an official vote. By early February 1949, all of the Fellows had mailed their ballots to the Library of Congress. *The Pisan Cantos* was ranked first by ten of the fellows. Paul Green abstained, and Karl Shapiro and Katherine Garrison Chapin ranked Pound's poem second out of four.

On the same day that the Library of Congress announced Pound as the recipient of the award, the media firestorm began. The page one *New York Times* headline on February 20, 1949 read, "Pound, in Mental Clinic, Wins Prize For Poetry Penned in Treason Cell."⁴⁶ Within the week, Karl Shapiro wrote to the *Baltimore Sun* to explain his dissenting vote. He reported that "to break the hypnotic spell of detachment which the new critics have cast over poetry is one of the most serious issues of our time." As the debate continued, Shapiro walked back his position on this, the most serious issue of his time. He offered the services of *Poetry*, which he edited, and worked closely with Allen Tate to defend the Fellows. Over the next several months, editorials were written and forums were held in many of the major literary publications. In the *Partisan Review*, William Barrett, Robert Gorham Davis, Irving Howe, Shapiro, Tate, and George Orwell weighed in on the issue. No publication, though, fanned the flames as much as the *Saturday Review of Literature*. In June 1949, Robert Hillyer wrote two polemical pieces claiming that the

⁴⁵ Karen Leick, "Ezra Pound v. 'The Saturday Review of Literature,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 25, no. 2 (Winter 2001-2002): 21. For an exemplary account of the Bollingen Prize on Pound's career, see Greg Barnhisel, *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound*, Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), chap. 3.

⁴⁶ The Associated Press, "Pound, in Mental Clinic, Wins Prize For Poetry Penned in Treason Cell: PRIZE VOTED POUND FOR PRISON POETRY," *New York Times*, February 20, 1949, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/105759373/abstract/C A027816A18444CBPQ/1?accountid=14816>.

Fellows were advocating totalitarianism with ties to Nazi Germany through their literary criticism. Hillyer's claim was outrageous, though he defended it vociferously by invoking the conspiratorial fact that the Bollingen Foundation was named after the Swiss lakeside home of Carl Jung, a known Nazi sympathizer. Even with this faulty reasoning, Hillyer called on a higher power to act on what he saw to be a treasonous group: he brought the matter to the attention of Congress. "Is it proper or legal for such a group to exist," Hillyer wondered, "appointed privately, even secretly, yet speaking openly under the authority of the American Congress?"⁴⁷

And, with the prompting of Norman Cousins, Congress listened. Congressmen Jacob Javits and James Patterson brought Hillyer's protest to the floor of Congress on July 14, 1949. In addition to entering Hillyer's articles into the *Congressional Record*, Patterson called for an investigation of the "circumstances surrounding" the award, despite conceding that he did "not profess to be a poetry critic."⁴⁸ Later, Javits and Patterson admitted that they hadn't read the *Pisan Cantos* in full, only enough to get the work's "ideological climate."⁴⁹ With a Congressional investigation into the Library of Congress looming, Luther Evans, the library's head, announced that the library would no longer award prizes of any kind, including annual prizes that had been established before the Bollingen Prize. Reporting on Evans's announcement and indicating glee that the influence of the Fellows was coming to an end, *Time* magazine announced, "That's All, Fellows," mimicking Porky the Pig at the end of a Looney Tunes cartoon. Even though Evans' cancellation brought some closure to the situation – Congress

⁴⁷ Robert Hillyer, "Treason's Strange Fruit: The Case of Ezra Pound and the Bollingen Award," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, June 11, 1949, 28.

⁴⁸ James T. Patterson, "Treason's Strange Fruit--A Premium upon Disloyalty," *Appendix to the Congressional Record*, July 14, 1949, A4617.

⁴⁹ Mary McGrory, "Dr. Evans Would Thrash Out Premises of Bollingen Award Controversy," *Washington Sunday Star*, July 31, 1949.

cancelled their investigation in response – the greater temblor to literary criticism was yet to be felt.

The larger quake moved literary evaluation from a public, or semi-public, activity to the private university where, presumably, trained professionals practiced. Less than six months after the Library of Congress severed its ties to the Bollingen Prize, Allen Tate helped to secure the Prize's future at Yale University. (The Bollingen Prize remains housed at Yale to this day – Nathaniel Mackey won in 2015.) Yale's President Charles Seymour was pleased to host the award at Yale and only asked that the Bollingen Foundation provide \$1,250 in annual funding (\$1000 for the prize itself and \$250 for annual expenses). After Seymour invited Tate to join the prize committee at Yale, Tate wrote, "The action of Yale University and the Bollingen Foundation is heartening evidence that intelligence and public decency are still powerful factors in the cultural life of the United States."⁵⁰ Tate missed the irony that the protector of intelligence and public decency was not a public, government-supported entity, but rather an elite, private institution. In moving the prize to Yale, the Bollingen Foundation acknowledged that the evaluation of literary achievement would no longer be subject to public accountability and would henceforth reside solely in the hands of experts. On a similar note, Robert Hillyer, who made an exaggerated argument for the public check on criticism, was forced to resign his position at Kenyon in February 1950; it didn't help that Ransom, then a prominent faculty member at Kenyon, was leading the anti-Hillyer campaign on campus. Hillyer's academic reputation was seriously tarnished. Philip Blair Rice, another Kenyon faculty member and editor at Ransom's *Kenyon Review*, told Tate that Hillyer is "cooked with the Literature depts., of all the chief

⁵⁰ Letter, Allen Tate to Charles Seymour, January 27, 1950, box 12 folder 16, Allen Tate Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

American Universities.”⁵¹ (Hillyer was eventually hired at the University of Delaware.) There isn’t much to defend in Hillyer’s essays from the point of view of scholarly integrity, especially when it came to light that his essays were crafted to create controversy rather than critical thought.⁵² Yet Hillyer and his backers at the *Saturday Review* attempted to represent a large segment of the American public. Hillyer’s polemic largely matched the tone of the popular press, and his firing, at the very least, suggests how connecting with the public in this way came to be treated in the academy.

A public check on scholarly work can be deeply problematic – we may think about ongoing debates regarding the “validity” of climate change or evolution – but it also, in theory, can curb private interests. For instance, the editorial personnel changes at *Poetry* magazine that occurred during the Bollingen Controversy were likely connected to the journal’s ongoing quest to find a sustainable source of funding. Allen Tate, in particular, feared that Hayden Carruth had been fired from his post as editor because of Carruth’s support of the Fellows during the controversy. Carruth’s replacement was Karl Shapiro, the most vocal dissenter to Pound’s selection among the Fellows. Tate was especially upset at Carruth’s ouster. Alongside Carruth, Tate had been working closely with the Bollingen Foundation to obtain a \$15,000 grant for *Poetry* to support its dwindling operating budget. Carruth’s proposal for the grant indicated that he hoped to add a more robust criticism section “à la *The Kenyon Review*” to the journal. The

⁵¹ Letter, Philip Blair Rice to Allen Tate, November 15, 1949, box 36 folder 26, Allen Tate Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

⁵² Karen Leick attributes this fact to Malcolm Cowley’s correspondence with Tate in which he reports that Hal Smith openly admitted to printing the articles for controversy’s sake:

Hal Smith saw me and advanced beaming. "I was going to congratulate you," he said, "on the article about Hillyer. I think you had the right dope. Of course we just printed the Hillyer articles and the editorial to start a controversy. It was a great success. We thought it would give us three exciting issues but it went on for six." William Randolph Hearst actually believes the stuff he writes.

Quoted in Leick, “Ezra Pound v. ‘The Saturday Review of Literature,’” 32.

grant, in other words, would permanently fund another prominent venue for criticism for the critical establishment in a periodical with an already strong reputation. In its inchoate stages, Carruth's criticism section gave space to a lengthy defense of the Fellows, "The Case Against the Saturday Review of Literature: The Attack of the Saturday Review on Modern Poets and Critics" and to William Elton's extensive, three-part, "Glossary of the New Criticism." In fact, these two works, both closely connected to Tate and his critical brethren, provided the major successes of what Carruth called the "Critical Supplement." Carruth confided in a letter to Tate that the Critical Supplement "ha[d] received the support of the Bollingen Foundation."⁵³ The Foundation's support for *Poetry*, however, ceased with Carruth's departure. Shortly after assuming the editorship, Shapiro wrote to Tate telling him that the magazine had yet to acquire funding. When Tate asked if there was anything he could do, Shapiro declined Tate's funding expertise, saying that the most helpful thing would be for him to send a poem or an article for publication. Thanks to the prompting of Melvin B. Tolson, that article would be Tate's preface to Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, which will be examined in greater detail in the third chapter.

Carruth's departure shows that conflicting views between a private board, a funding source, academic critics, and journal editors could change the direction of a periodical, or influence that periodical's content. Financial support for certain types of editorial content, as the *Poetry* case shows, could easily be pulled if that content ceased. Whether or not Carruth was actually fired for using *Poetry* to support the Fellows – Carruth had only been appointed as interim editor – his connections with Tate and the Bollingen Foundation suggest how a private

⁵³ Letter, Hayden Carruth to Allen Tate, October 24, 1949, box 34 folder 62, Allen Tate Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

source of funding could alter the personnel and format of a prominent literary periodical, as well as incubate articles sympathetic to its interests.

While there's no evidence of totalitarianism – and *Poetry* successfully weathered the financial storm – it is precisely these types of dealings that prompted Hillyer's conspiracy theories about the New Criticism's role in the Library of Congress. In other words, the concern here is less that the government had a major impact on literary critical culture, but that literary criticism had a direct effect on the functions of the federal government. William Maxwell has shown, in fact, that FBI agents tasked with reading novels and poems and viewing plays written by African-American writers in the 1950s and 1960s frequently deployed the interpretive practices of the New Criticism.⁵⁴ To make his case, Maxwell draws on the work of William H. Epstein, who has shown how a number of faculty and students from the Department of English at Yale were recruited to work for the agency that would become the Office of Strategic Services, particularly the Research and Analysis (R&A) and counter-intelligence (X-2) units. The R&A office had a role in the development in Area Studies programs during the war and was led by a Yale English alumna. Similarly, James Angleton, a Yale graduate, led CIA counter-intelligence programs during the Cold War, with an approach he called “the practical criticism of ambiguity,” an approach clearly derived from the work of I.A. Richards and William Empson.⁵⁵ In other words, criticism, government, and private funding formed a feedback loop, sharing interests and influence throughout the mid-century.

Some critics of the Bollingen Controversy, Hillyer included, suggested that this feedback loop was reflected in a shift in the practice and rhetoric of criticism. In “The New Criticism and

⁵⁴ Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes*.

⁵⁵ William H. Epstein, “Counter-Intelligence: Cold-War Criticism and Eighteenth-Century Studies,” *ELH* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 84.

the Democratic Tradition,” Robert Gorham Davis observes that the terminology of literary criticism has separated from the language of liberal democracy:

Over the last two decades in the journals of the New Criticism *authority, hierarchy, catholicism, aristocracy, tradition, absolutes, dogma, truths* became related terms of honor, and *liberalism, naturalism, scientism, individualism, equalitarianism, progress, protestantism, pragmatism, and personality* became related terms of rejection and contempt.⁵⁶

These new “terms of honor” signal that the New Criticism did not seek a critical program, but rather a religiously inflected critical orthodoxy, which, for Davis, was on par with the orthodoxy sought by the Counter-Enlightenment movement in France following the French Revolution. Davis draws a connection between the New Critics and Joseph de Maistre, a prominent leader in the movement that sought to return a monarch to France. In a more alarmist way, Robert Hillyer made a similar claim about the new critical lexicon. Hillyer argued that Elton’s “Glossary of the New Criticism” represents “their [New Critics’s] current critical preoccupation... a new vocabulary that has no purpose but its own creation.”⁵⁷ Even though the vocabulary had no greater purpose, it functioned as a discursive currency for the elite. It mediated “polite disagreements” and became the reason for “their subsidized quarterlies”; such disagreements and quarterlies were designed to “shut the doors of poetry in the face of the public.”⁵⁸ What led Hillyer to his claims of conspiracy, elitism, and, ultimately, totalitarianism was a critical vocabulary. Developing a jargon, one that honored, in Davis’s and Hillyer’s opinions, anti-

⁵⁶ Robert Gorham Davis, “The New Criticism and the Democratic Tradition,” *The American Scholar* 19, no. 1 (December 1949): 10.

⁵⁷ Hillyer, “Poetry’s New Priesthood,” 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

democratic values, seemed to be evidence enough of “a group which has a genuine power complex.”⁵⁹

William Barrett, the editor of the *Partisan Review*, echoed Hillyer’s and Davis’s concerns about the New Criticism’s vocabulary, though he avoided the conclusion that jargon was evidence of anti-democratic aims. Because the Fellows “were making a public award and were therefore directly involved in public responsibilities,” Barrett wondered why the Fellows couldn’t put aside their “obsess[ion] with formal and technical questions,” questions that virtually ignored a work’s content.⁶⁰ This obsession was so pervasive in critical judgments that Barrett called it the “attitude” of American literary criticism, or the “climate” of criticism as Barrett referred to it in the next issue of *Partisan*. In that later piece, he suggests that the political dimensions of the current critical climate are in need of defining. “It would be hard to define just what the reigning climate of opinion has become in literary America since the collapse of the ‘thirties,’” writes Barrett, referring to a moment when the political evaluation of literature carried weight, “but perhaps it is high time we sought to establish a new climate, beginning with a re-examination of some of these ‘non-aesthetic’ bases of literary judgment.”⁶¹ Aesthetic bases, according to Karl Shapiro in the same forum, required reexamination because they had formed “in the literary struggle to dissociate art from social injunction.”⁶² Indeed, because of New Criticism’s exclusive turn to aesthetics in a period of great political turmoil – during and after the Second World War – the New Criticism’s apolitical mode of evaluation drew critique.

Of course, in a move we saw with some frequency in the previous section, this totalizing description of New Criticism’s anti-democracy position provided an imaginary phenomenon

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁰ William Barrett, “A Prize for Ezra Pound,” *Partisan Review* 16, no. 4 (April 1949): 345, 347.

⁶¹ William Barrett, “Further Comment,” *Partisan Review* 16, no. 5 (May 1949): 521.

⁶² Karl Shapiro, “[Untitled],” *Partisan Review* 16, no. 5 (May 1949): 519.

from which critics could disidentify. Cleanth Brooks, for one, wrote to the *Saturday Review* asking that Hillyer explicitly name the critics he railed against because, “his responsibility to the public demands it: in order to protect itself, the public needs to know definitely who these men are.”⁶³ Brooks’s letter indicates that he took the ambiguity of Hillyer’s claims as a sign that Hillyer, like Joseph McCarthy and his claims of rampant Communism in the United States Army, had little evidence to substantiate them. It didn’t help Hillyer’s case that the *Saturday Review*, despite printing 106 letters about the controversy, refused to print some letters rebutting the magazine’s case against the Fellows.⁶⁴ Among those whose letters were rejected were John Berryman and Yvor Winters, the second of whom had a particularly fiery reaction: “Your letter [in which you declined to publish my letter that responded to your decision not to publish Berryman’s letter] is so much bullshit and you know it... Your group is the lowest group of cheap punks I have ever seen in action; to save my soul, I cannot imagine your motives. I suppose it is in the nature of cheap punks, however, that their motives are unimaginable. To hell with all of you, Yvor Winters.”⁶⁵ Simply put, the *Saturday Review* and their cries of totalitarianism were immediately turned back on them by a group of well-established critics, whose reputations were mostly untarnished even with the controversy. At the same time, unlike Winters, the Fellows in *American Letters* were able to imagine the motives of those who would criticize their decision based on aesthetic principles.

The Fellows understood that the “apolitical” position from which they awarded Pound the Bollingen prize was becoming increasingly difficult to portray as such. Anticipating the backlash,

⁶³ Brooks, “List of ‘Wicked Esthetes’ Wanted,” 24.

⁶⁴ The count of letters comes from Robert A. Corrigan, “Ezra Pound and the Bollingen Prize Controversy,” *American Studies* 8, no. 2 (Fall 1967): 48. Appended to Corrigan’s essay is an excellent bibliography of nearly all of the contemporaneous writing about the controversy.

⁶⁵ Letter from Winters enclosed in Letter, Harrison Smith to Allen Tate, December 19, 1949, box 7 folder 3, Allen Tate Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

the Fellows and the New Critics began to represent their “apolitical,” or “objective” position as one that privileged rationality and empiricism. On some level they created a politics that from afar, at least, resembled the form of a political position and was devoid of much content. Stating the content of their “objective” stance, the New Critics argued, would be against democratic principles.

This particular mode of political subjectivity was formulated in the press release that announced Pound as the Bollingen Prize winner:

The fellows are aware that objections may be made to awarding a prize to a man situated as is Mr. Pound. In their view, however, the possibility of such objection did not alter the responsibility assumed by the Jury of Selection. This was to make a choice for the award among the eligible books, provided any one merited such recognition, according to the terms of the Bollingen Prize. To permit other considerations than that of poetic achievement to sway the decision would destroy the significance of the award and would in principle deny the validity of that objective perception of value on which any civilized society must rest.⁶⁶

In their preemptive defense, the Fellows acknowledge two points of disagreement with their decision: Pound’s background and the background of the poet’s speaker. The fascism of Pound, “the man,” as they put it, puts pressure on the intentional fallacy, which was essential to critical evaluation; Pound’s extremist politics make it more difficult for critics to separate the poem from its context and author. The second disagreement centers on the anti-Semitic claims of the speaker in *The Pisan Cantos*. The point of contention is whether or not the politics of the poem’s speaker should factor into the judgment of the work’s value as poetry. The Fellows argue that neither the poet’s background, nor the political position of a narrator within a poem matter to evaluating

⁶⁶ Qtd in. Barnhisel, *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound*, 120.

poetry. Both would disallow an “objective” judgment as to the poem’s merit. This brackets identity politics in the evaluation of literature, which is less about an egalitarian leveling of the playing field as it is a push for the conservative “color blindness” that began to take hold in the period.⁶⁷ In his definition of reification, Lukács argues that objectivity plays a similar role in suppressing the social relations implicit in an exchange of concepts. He defines this as “phantom objectivity,’ an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of...the relation between people.” Phantom objectivity is the “essence of the commodity-structure.”⁶⁸ As such, objectivity becomes the logic by which a reified object, the commodity, is separated from the social activities and the people that make it. This bracketing of the social from the literary object is the signature of “objective” criticism and embeds implicit hierarchies within critical categories, a phenomenon I discuss more fully with relationship to black literature in the third chapter. Indeed, this press release, or brief political statement has a major impact on the political positioning and methodologies of literary studies in the years that follow 1950.

To the point about the so-called democratic function of this gesture, the Fellows argued that “objectivity” proves to be the essential principle for evaluations of art and achievement. By making this claim, the Fellows equate the criteria of the evaluation of poetry with those of social governance. In concert with Lukács’s theorization of phantom objectivity, this collapse suggests that for the Fellows governance is not an act between people – it isn’t social – but, instead a formal object. The Fellows answer that their aggressively impartial approach to literature can

⁶⁷ Eric Porter calls the 1940s and the early 1950s “the first post-racial moment.” Eric Porter, *The Problem of the Future World: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Race Concept at Midcentury* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

⁶⁸ Lukács, 83.

become a social politics, a means for approaching the relations between people in civil society. This is how objectivity becomes a political logic.

Several critics have observed the irony in the Fellows's argument about how objectivity is the principle upon which civil society must rest, because Pound made a similar argument himself.⁶⁹ Pound more explicitly equated politics and aesthetics, whereas the New Critical invocation of objectivity implicitly achieved the same result. In "The Serious Artist," an essay composed some forty years before the Bollingen award, Pound argues that the need for objectivity in art hinges on the fact that poetry "gives us a great percentage of the lasting and unassailable data regarding the nature of man."⁷⁰ These data, as well as the methods behind poetry making, should be investigated in the same way that a physician's research would be; claims about poetry, as well as poetry itself, must be reproducible and are made without corruption or incompetence. "Bad art is inaccurate art," Pound writes, "It is art that makes false reports."⁷¹ Such false reports have consequences. The negligent, bad artist carries responsibility for "future oppressions" that his art may engender. Put differently, Pound suggests that art has political consequences – future oppressions – because it occasionally does not tend to the complete dimensions of the social. By not attending to a complete portrait of society, artists can reinforce and create inequity.

⁶⁹ Wai Chee Dimock, "Aesthetics at the Limits of the Nation: Kant, Pound, and the Saturday Review," *American Literature* 76, no. 3 (September 2004): 539; Andrew S. Gross, "Liberalism and Lyricism, or Karl Shapiro's Elegy for Identity," *Journal of Modern Literature* 34, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 4; and "According to Barnhisel, getting Pound read required separating his politics from his art, and this was ironic since Pound's politics, ranging from Confucian pragmatism to Fascist anti-Semitism, are so deeply woven into his art, especially *The Cantos*."

Mark Jarman, "Your Anonymous Correspondent: Ezra Pound and 'The Hudson Review,'" *The Hudson Review* 59, no. 3 (October 1, 2006): 362.

⁷⁰ Ezra Pound, "The Serious Artist" in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 42.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

Pound understood it to be the duty of the artist to attend to as many “states of society,” or socio-economic classes, as possible. Again, Pound makes an analogy to science to explain his reasoning. An artist only evaluating the ways of being in the world with relation to one “state of society” is equivalent to a physicist refusing “to consider a force designed to affect one mass, in its relation...to another mass wholly differing, or in some notable way differing, from the first mass.”⁷² In short, it is a fundamental error. Pound’s invocation of science as poetry’s analog suggests that both poetry and its evaluation are to be considered with the same deference to objectivity. Yet, while science produces data used to further hone man’s mastery of nature, poetry provides data for the effective governance of society. In other words, poetry provides data for man’s mastery of man through what Foucault called *savoir*, or “power-knowledge.”

“The Serious Artist” shows that, for Pound, aesthetics has a direct tie to developments in subjecting humans to forms of governmentality. Wai Chee Dimock has argued that Pound’s later commentary on Mussolini further establishes the connection between poetry and the power-knowledge of government. In *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, Pound calls the Italian dictator’s plan for the redistribution of wealth “poesy.” Poesy, after all, was what Pound defended in “The Serious Artist,” an update of Sir Philip Sidney’s canonical “Defence of Poesy.” Karl Shapiro was well aware of Pound’s implosion of politics and aesthetics. Shapiro would write some years after the Bollingen controversy, “Pound’s lifelong problem has been to establish an equation between poetry and society, between the esthetic and politick.”⁷³ For Pound, the objective rules governing inquiries in science became a requirement for poetry. More importantly, Pound saw objectivity as a requirement for fascism, which sought social purity and unity. Can objectivity be both a requirement for fascism and a “principle...on which any civilized society must rest”?

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ qtd in. Gross, “Liberalism and Lyricism, or Karl Shapiro’s Elegy for Identity,” 4.

The Fellows' defense of their decision revealed a much larger problem with their theorization of critical practice. Of the controversy, Robert Gorham Davis wrote, "the judges were judging themselves along with Pound, their master."⁷⁴ Of course, that judgment was largely favorable – they did give Pound the award. But, the extent of the controversy that surrounded the award provided a portrait of the public perception of the institutions of literary criticism, and, albeit at a reactionary pitch, leveled a damning critique of the "apolitical" politics of the New Criticism, which compressed all aspects of social life into poetry. From the first part of the chapter, we recall that one way to end a critical movement is to recognize that movement as a distinct object, therefore mobilizing an otherwise immobile vision. The Bollingen Controversy became the social force that both catalyzed and facilitated this mobilization. At the outset, Robert Hillyer noted the formlessness of new critical power: "Their power in academic circles is beyond appraisal because it is pervasive rather than defined."⁷⁵ Yet, later in the year, Robert Gorham Davis argued that the controversy showed that the New Criticism "has completed its corrective purpose."⁷⁶ A formless entity at the controversy's outset, by its middle and its end the New Criticism emerged as "completed" and thus fully formed. For Hillyer, the "new criticism" was something to be put in quotes, something unfamiliar, or so-called, but for Davis, the New Criticism was a proper-noun, finally established as a reified thing unto itself.

The Bollingen Controversy defined in public the reach and the form of the New Critics' power. It highlighted their affiliations with a large funding organization, its closeness with the subsidized periodical market, and its ties to the Library of Congress and the Federal government. In many respects, the controversy made the extent of this ecology visible to the American public and to the New Critics themselves. At the same time, the Bollingen Controversy forced the New

⁷⁴ Robert Gorham Davis, "[Untitled]," *Partisan Review* 16, no. 5 (May 1949): 513.

⁷⁵ Hillyer, "Poetry's New Priesthood," 7.

⁷⁶ Davis, "The New Criticism and the Democratic Tradition," 19.

Critics to dramatically shift that ecology away from institutions focused on the public and towards private institutions and academe. In doing so, the New Critics tried to cleanse the critical vocabulary from its association with an anti-democratic politics. They attempted to do so by insisting that inquiries into aesthetics were essential to the health of civil society. That, too, came under scrutiny and led even more critics to take up the new “burden” of criticism, one that demanded some accountability toward the contexts outside of a poem. Yet, these were largely nominal and rhetorical changes made possible only by the closure of “new criticism” into a reified object. As such, the social practice of criticism became separated from discourse about criticism – as with the commodity, it became possible to discuss the relation of things without discussing the labor and social relations that went in to producing such things.

Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* describes a method for discerning the emergence of a discipline. A new field of study, Foucault argues, requires a new object of study. For Foucault, objects are not just present in the world waiting to be discovered and classified; objects must be formed through discourse. This is to say, that in order for a new object to form, a dispersed set of entities, institutions, economic and social processes, etc. create a complex relation that forms an object. Or, as Foucault puts it, “a discursive formation is defined (as far as its objects are concerned, at least) if one can establish such a group; if one can show how any particular object of discourse finds in it its place and law of emergence; if one can show that it may give birth simultaneously or successively to mutually exclusive objects, without having to modify itself.”⁷⁷ This group of relations is what “enables [the object] to appear, to juxtapose itself with other objects, to situate itself in relation to them, to define its difference, its

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge ; And, The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 44.

irreducibility, and even perhaps its heterogeneity, in short to be placed in a field of exteriority.”⁷⁸

The coming together of internal discussions amongst critics and the varied institutional entities embroiled in the Bollingen Controversy together “give birth” to criticism as an object. The emergence of this object is the beginning of literary criticism and theory, as we’ve come to know it. As I have argued, what emerges is a discourse that can no longer grasp literary criticism as practiced, because what the enabling conditions of that discourse call to attention are the readings and interpretations made possible by the theoretical boundaries of literary critical objects. I will show in later chapters that this ontological uncertainty becomes the play in the system that shapes the anti-black “objectivity” of literary criticism. As part of the same process of emergence, literary critical practice dies, while literary theoretical bases for criticism are born. The emergence of New Criticism forces a space between literary critical practice and literary theory, and, in doing so, pushes theory into time (it is born) and practice out of time (it dies). But given that this object is not a reflection of the real, but a production of the entanglement of multiple discourses, the practices do not actually die; they merely lose prominence as a point of discussion and thus can persist through a temporality of the lost and ignored. This emergence and the subsequent suppression are the beginning and the end of criticism. In the final section of the chapter, I sketch how this disciplinary formation largely remains today, despite the “death” of most other aspects of the New Criticism.

New Criticism Now

Through the capitalization of the New Criticism, criticism about criticism, or theory, came to be the frame through which scholars of literary studies came to understand the discipline’s limits and possibilities. As I have argued, this shift in discourse, where discourse is

⁷⁸ Ibid., 45.

that which makes possible the limits of what can or cannot be said, resulted from a rebranding of critical practice out of creative destruction that was designed to ensure the New Criticism's future legacy. The rebranding occurred because of public and internal pressure on the extant institutions of criticism. In order for several critics to maintain their positions as emerging leaders of literary studies, these leaders abstracted the labor of doing criticism through the reification of criticism. Indeed, this abstraction and the general theory of criticism that resulted from it subsumed any emphasis on practical criticism, especially with regard to the practice of the criticism in the classroom, or even within the set up of a critical essay. The history of making criticism a bounded object – criticism's enclosure – shows that what was foundational about New Criticism was not its methodology, but its efforts to make new and to incessantly destroy what preceded the new. In this section, I argue that the New Critical enclosure of criticism has been its contribution to our disciplinary history, as well as to ongoing formations of a number of "New" fields and studies. New Criticism remains alive in our definition and history of the discipline, despite its methodological dethroning.

To show how New Criticism continues to shape field formations and disciplinary history, I examine the defining documents of two "New" fields formed in the last twenty years. I choose to focus on the construction of new fields, rather than disciplinary histories, because the instantiation of new fields better reflect a widely held, though mostly implicit history of the discipline. As a handful of literary critics – Frances Ferguson and James Chandler among them – and historians of the university have shown, both the methods and the institutional forms of the disciplinarity of literary studies were well established by the time would-be new critics arrived on the scene in the 1930s. These histories appropriately minimize the importance of the New

Criticism towards establishing new methodologies and perspectives upon the discipline.⁷⁹ While historical accounts of the profession that deemphasize the New Criticism as the founding entity of literary studies exist, the insights are not yet widely held.⁸⁰ In turning to the generation of new fields, my goal is to capture a commonly discussed and taught history of the discipline, even if this history differs from more thoroughly researched accounts.

Evidence of a “vulgar” sense of the discipline’s history appears most often in public discussions about the utility of literary studies. Despite a recent destabilization of this notion, literary studies is largely defined by New Criticism and its practice of close reading, even if that close reading has been modified by subsequent theoretical perspectives. Most recently, the controversial and far-reaching Common Core Standards have highlighted “closely reading” as a requirement of the English and Language Arts curriculum for the duration of a student’s “career” in elementary, middle, and high schools. The Common Core Standards are nominally designed to provide K-12 students in U.S. public schools with benchmarks that are set to ensure success in college. Putting aside the success or failure of the law, Common Core intimates that the study of language and literature can be equated with close reading skills at the college level. Though “closely reading” is an incredibly capacious practice, the phrase carries within it the historical

⁷⁹ Ferguson frames the essay as a deepening of the call for a return to philology within literary studies, while Chandler’s short piece in *Critical Inquiry* outlines framework for a richer account of disciplinarity in the humanities more broadly. Also see, Jerome McGann, “Philology in a New Key,” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (January 2013): 327–46, :10.1086/668528.

⁸⁰ Though this evidence is anecdotal, when discussing this dissertation project with a number of scholars in the field, one would be surprised how many scholars respond by sharing what they take to be a little known secret: that the New Criticism had a connection to the Southern Agrarians and the Fugitive poets. The structure of this formulation as a secret says to me not that the knowledge is widely held – as I point out this is a pretty typical reaction to saying one works on “the New Criticism” in the twenty-first century – but that numerous scholars were not taught this connection in their graduate training and then discovered it in a text on their own. This aporia, I argue, is not accidental. It is a direct result of the capitalization of New Criticism discussed here. The absence of any type of historical existence for the New Criticism, beyond a vague sense that it served as an origin myth, renders its conservative political capacity endlessly surprising. To be frank, it is precisely this reaction that makes it clear that the discipline is need of a major literary historical corrective.

trajectory that Marjorie Levinson describes as a reductive and didactic history of formalism:

“New Criticism → structuralism → deconstruction → new historicism → poststructuralism.”⁸¹

Levinson’s diagram – and her essay that surveys another “New” critical method – is synonymous with the historical paradigm of the enclosed, and therefore, capitalized New Criticism, as well as it is a catalyst for the enclosure’s continuation.⁸²

The “New” fields I examine – the New Modernist Studies and the descriptive turn – invoke and repeat the New Critical historical paradigm in different ways.⁸³ On the one hand, the definitive category of the New Modernist Studies – modernism – largely came to prominence in the university through the work of the New Critics and their students. As Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz put it in defining the New Modernist Studies, the notion that modernism was a “persistent orthodoxy” came to be established through “demonstrations from T.S. Eliot, the New Critics, and their heirs—of how modernism was not at war against but rather continuous with tradition.”⁸⁴ On the other hand, the descriptive turn – and the distant, surface, and reparative reading practices it engenders – comes at an additional remove from New Critical practice. The works that theorize descriptive practice are largely set in opposition to Jameson’s mode of

⁸¹ Marjorie Levinson, “What Is New Formalism?,” *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (March 2007): 563.

⁸² “New Formalists characterize the task of the critic as restoring the artwork to its “original, compositional complexity,” a position that corresponds by and large to the aims of the old New Criticism and distances itself from what it perceives as attacks on literary form by New Historicism.” Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (November 2009): 14.

⁸³ It wouldn’t be difficult to conduct this analysis on different fields in the present and in the recent past. Hortense Spillers, for example, argues in the intellectual synthesis of 1994 is the “*commercialization* of black studies/African American studies.” She defines commercialization as “the ‘selling’ of an ‘object’, however we identify it, for purposes of self-aggrandizement and gain, even though it is not always clearly the case and even though the *outcome* could well benefit many others, and that is the subtlety of African American studies *as a business*, or an enterprise, today.” Spillers argues that black studies is capitalized, rebranded, in order to continue its position in the university. Such commercialization, as she calls it, recapitulates the New Critical enclosure of criticism that I argue occurs in each definition of a field in literary studies since 1950. Hortense J. Spillers, “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date,” *Boundary 2* 21, no. 3 (October 1, 1994): 110.

⁸⁴ Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New,” in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.

symptomatic reading. Symptomatic reading took “close reading” and gave it steroids: Jameson argues that form and style of literary texts are superstructural reflections of the economic world-system. This assertion made reading literature about locating the structuring economic, ideological, or political condition of a text’s form or style. Eve Sedgwick calls this paranoid reading, or “strong theory.” In response, Sedgwick argues for a reparative reading that counteracts the negative affects of the symptomatic, a set of practices that provides a vocabulary for “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture.”⁸⁵ Yet Sedgwick traces some of these practices to the “devalued and near obsolescent New Critical skill of imaginative close reading.”⁸⁶ In short, these two fields with significantly different theoretical investments both tie themselves to New Criticism. Beyond a mere citation, the critics who define these fields deploy the New Criticism as a way of establishing and structuring the bounds of their respective fields. By showing the impact of New Criticism’s enclosure within these varied fields, I establish that the New Critical effort to “make new” remains a necessary measure in defining disciplinary history and methodological paradigms in literary studies.

New Modernist Studies

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the New Modernist Studies (NMS) came to fruition through institutional and methodological shifts in the study of modernism. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz described the emergence of this field first in the introduction to their co-edited collection *Bad Modernisms* in 2006 and again in 2008 in a *PMLA* essay titled “The New Modernist Studies.” They state that the field emerged around 1999 through the creation of

⁸⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 150–1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

the Modernist Studies Association, the journal *Modernism/Modernity*, and an uptick in scholarship on modernism that offered “new methodological directions.”⁸⁷ More specifically, they argue that the methodological expansions occur on temporal, spatial, and vertical axes that represent new periodizations, an emphasis on transnational connections, and increased attention to the intersection of popular, or mass culture and high modernism. These axes expand because a number of scholars have once again been able to see the transgressive, or “bad” aspects of modernist literature. As Mao and Walkowitz outline in their introduction to *Bad Modernisms* an attention to “bad” modernism is indicative of a new approach to modernism. Work on modernism in the late 1970s and 80s showed how modernism was synonymous with the institutional standards of the culture industries in the mid-century, thus making modernism ‘good’. Yet, according to Mao and Walkowitz, expanded scholarship on modernism revitalizes its supposedly counter-institutional origins and shows that modernism’s relationship to universities and art institutions may again be in jeopardy. Put differently, Mao and Walkowitz define NMS by the shift in modernism’s perceived value vis-à-vis the institution. By becoming “bad” again, the field of modernism can expand to its full potential as imagined by the major writers of high modernism, since those writers again carry a contrarian posture to the establishment.

A number of critics have argued that the definition of NMS rebrands previous iterations of modernist studies, rather than marks a significant qualitative shift in modernist scholarship.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 737.

⁸⁸ The most extensive critique is Max Brzezinski’s “The New Modernist Studies: What’s Left of Political Formalism?” Brzezinski aligns the NMS and its founding documents with the manifesto culture of modernism. Yet, rather than making a manifesto for an alternative political, formal, or intellectual order, Brzezinski insists that the NMS merely reproduces the tendencies of neoliberalism in the NMS’s push for globalization and its reliance upon the precarity of the university for success. At one point Brzezinski wonders, “Is the *Neo* in neoliberalism the *New* in New Modernist Studies?” Brzezinski also cites Daniel

Writing before Mao and Walkowitz had published *Bad Modernisms*, Jennifer Wicke uses the language of branding to discuss the emergent trends in modernist studies. In particular, Wicke argues that brands allow for the revival of otherwise dead movements. That is, Wicke suggests that early discussions of the New Modernist Studies attempted to make new something that was otherwise falling out of favor, a move that I have described as the signature gesture of a New Critical disciplinary history. Wicke writes:

Efforts such as the Modernist Studies Association, the “New Modernisms” conference, and even a provocative journal devoted to modernism/modernity share credit for reawakening a slumbering critical and scholarly and aesthetic spirit—modernism’s brand. Each has something to do with resurrecting and refurbishing a brand in advanced moribundity—at least in some parts of the world. And as with so many commercial brands, the modernist brand can only be resurrected by ironizing or implicitly denying its original cultural status.⁸⁹

Wicke’s explanation of the rebranding of modernism recalls Richard Chase’s description of self-immolation as a necessary step in mobilizing the critical spirit. Mao and Walkowitz do not deny Wicke’s claim; in fact, they confirm and adopt it by citing her essay without caveat as a guiding

Worden’s review of *Bad Modernisms*, in which Worden writes that the positioning of modernism as “bad” ultimately mimics the most traditional notions about modernism: that modernist art strives to be confrontational and to provide a site for inexhaustible interpretation.” Mao and Walkowitz did not respond to Brzezinski’s essay, though Martin Puchner, one of the contributors to *Bad Modernism*, did. In his response, Puchner argues that what made NMS a movement was not Mao and Walkowitz’s writings, nor his own, but Brzezinski’s essay, which constituted NMS as an object of critique. As one piece of evidence, Puchner cites an email from Walkowitz that drew his attention to the Brzezinski essay. Walkowitz wrote, “Apparently, we are a ‘movement.’” This back-and-forth also resembles the constitution of the New Criticism; it is through its critique and the New Critics’s sarcastic persistence to disidentify with the object being critiqued – Walkowitz’s response with its quotation marks and its “apparently” implies a disidentification with the claim that NMS is a movement – helps to further instantiate its existence. Max Brzezinski, “The New Modernist Studies: What’s Left of Political Formalism?,” *Minnesota Review* 76 (2011): 109–25; Martin Puchner, “The New Modernist Studies: A Response,” *The Minnesota Review* 2012, no. 79 (January 2012): 91–96.

⁸⁹ Jennifer Wicke, “Appreciation, Depreciation: Modernism’s Speculative Bubble,” *Modernism/modernity* 8, no. 3 (2001): 394–5.

attitude for “all the contributors” to their volume.⁹⁰ By fiat, at least, NMS seems comfortable with the New Critical gesture. Indeed, Douglas Mao made note of the New Criticism’s tendency to be both “dead and alive” in the first sentence of a 1996 essay: “It is presently a commonplace among scholars and teachers of literature that New Criticism is, and has been for decades now, both dead and alive.”⁹¹

The rebranding of New Modernist Studies can be found in the main text of Mao and Walkowitz’s essays, as well. One quality of the reification of New Criticism is the devaluation of practical criticism, which manifested most often as a separation of the theory of criticism from criticism as practiced in theoretical discourse. Mao and Walkowitz invoke an expansion of methodologies and practices, but their discussion largely surveys the broad results of this expansion. In other words, NMS takes the emphasis off how critics arrived at their conclusions, as long as those conclusions expanded one of the three axes of the field. In addition, the definition of this field lacks any discussion of how the field – or works within in it – should be taught given the dramatic changes in scholarship. Over the course of the introduction to *Bad Modernisms* and the *PMLA* essay, the word “teaching” is only used once and when it is used it is linked to research.⁹² More telling, perhaps, are the ways that NMS benefits from the increasingly precarious position of the university in society. Just as New Criticism formed due to a reaction against the perception of established academia during the Bollingen controversy, so does NMS in

⁹⁰ “For one thing, all the contributors take on what we have already seen to be modernism’s most notorious way of going bad: its alleged surrender of resistance and transgression (aptly described by Jennifer Wicke as “our critical *bêtes blanches* these days”) to sanctification and success.” Mao and Walkowitz, “Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New,” 14.

⁹¹ Douglas Mao, “The New Critics and the Text-Object,” *ELH* 63, no. 1 (April 1996): 227.

⁹² “Scholarship such as Edwards’s, Santos’s, Puchner’s, Schoenbach’s, and Lewis’s should change the way we talk about Anglo-American modernism. It asks us to consider how early-twentieth-century texts circulated in the world and how this dissemination affected modernist production; it suggests that even those of us who think of ourselves as scholars of British or United States modernism can no longer exclude nonanglophone works from our teaching and research.” Mao and Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” 742.

the era of the privatizing university. Mao and Walkowitz close their essay in *Bad Modernism* by asking: “Could it be...that the new-old appeal of modernism lies partly in a consolation of this sort [that modernism is valuable because it is difficult], emerging from its very negatives? If so, we will not be surprised to find modernism holding special allure in times when the future of thinking seems uncertain, when anti-intellectualism seems ascendant, when resistance to all but the simplest positions and solutions has arrogated itself to the mantle of the good.”⁹³ The emphasis on the “new-old” appeal of modernism suggests a revolution in the sense of return, rather than that of radical change. That return, of course, means that modernism circles back to those who “helped solidify modernism as an object of analysis—Clement Greenberg, Theodor W. Adorno, the New Critics, and others.”⁹⁴ Despite the claims of novelty, *New Modernist Studies* takes its “New” from the capitalized New Criticism, aligning its critical production and its generation to the reification and creative destruction of criticisms.

The Descriptive Turn

While the *New Modernist Studies* directly invoked and cited the New Critical gesture to develop a waxing disciplinary field out of the repackaging of a waning iteration of that field, the impact of the New Criticism on the descriptive turn proves to be more elusive. In her 2010 essay “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” Heather Love applies the phrase “the descriptive turn” to a set of methods in literary studies that “departs from a depth hermeneutics and is primarily descriptive in its orientation.”⁹⁵ Love’s “descriptive turn” then characterizes a number of attempts to reformulate the practice of reading in literary studies,

⁹³ Mao and Walkowitz, “Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New,” 16. Their *PMLA* ends similarly, this time invoking Fox News as the group that attacks intellectualism and makes “good” of the simple.

⁹⁴ Mao and Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” 744.

⁹⁵ Heather Love, “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 382.

including Franco Moretti's "distant reading," Eve Sedgwick's "reparative reading," and Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's "surface reading." For Love, these methods emerge from an intersection of sociology and literary studies defined by book history approaches to literature and by approaches concerned with cultural capital as produced by universities and the literary world system. As I stated in the introduction, I situate my dissertation at this intersection and, despite my occasional invocation of structuring conditions, I understand my articulation of the New Criticism's capitalization as a *description* of, to cite Love quoting Bruno Latour, "what the world is really like."⁹⁶ For example, the fact that critics have missed the "New" aspect of New Criticism shows quite literally how the surface has been ignored in understandings of literary theory. Attending to the surface of the descriptive turn shows that methods of the descriptive turn bend toward the New Criticism as a predecessor, despite the New Criticism's devaluation. At the same time as they register the New Criticism's devaluation, however, many formulations of the descriptive turn register the ways that New Criticism is absolutely foundational to all the methodologies that followed it. If a movement is foundational, can it really be devalued? The entanglement of these competing strands presents the locus for how the capitalization of New Criticism occurs yet again within the descriptive turn: these works, mine included, perhaps, cannot escape the disjunctive historical paradigm wrought by the New Critics. In its valorization of practice and description, the descriptive turn confirms and maintains the evacuation of literary critical practice from literary theoretical discourse.

Love's "Close but not Deep" essay shows these competing strands in action. Love begins her essay by formulating the contradiction between the simultaneous valuation in literary studies of the "warmth and depth" of human experience and the post- or antihumanist approaches that borrow from Marxism, psychoanalysis, and post-New Critical iterations of formalism. Love is

⁹⁶ Heather Love, "Close Reading and Thin Description," *Public Culture* 25, no. 3 (October 2013): 430.

most interested in the persistence of the humanist values in literary studies after sustained attacks from cultural studies fields against the “founding exclusions” of humanism. Importantly, Love identifies that there is something strange in this antagonism given the fact that a number of scholars argue, as Catherine Gallagher does, that “English departments were theoretically open and eclectic in the sixties and seventies, not despite the New Criticism but because of it. Its flexibility and its ability as an analytic technique, to mix well with various theories provided the sense of a common enterprise.”⁹⁷ Put simply, New Criticism played a pivotal role in the development of cultural studies, because of the capaciousness of close reading and the separation of reading from the literary object, which, as Hortense Spillers argues, allows a “transfer [of methods]...to the world of text and discursivity.”⁹⁸ The notion that New Critical “close reading” inflects nearly all efforts of literary studies prompts a turn to methods outside of the discipline. Most work in the descriptive vein adopts sociological methods for studying literature, many of which invoke empiricism as a solution to the discipline’s ills. Moretti’s “distant reading,” which relies upon data gleaned from computing to make claims about the history of literature, serves as a primary example. As her intervention, Love suggests that these types of quantitative approaches are not the only answer; in fact, as the remainder of her essay goes to show, a number of sociologists, including Erving Goffmann and Bruno Latour, have found text-based description to be an important analytical tool, distinct from hermeneutics. Love sees this as a solution because the hermeneutic aspect of “close reading” was what led to New Criticism’s methodological openness, as well as its “metaphysical and humanist concerns.”⁹⁹ Ultimately, such an analysis shows that the “depth” in depth hermeneutics is not just “hidden structures,” but

⁹⁷ Catherine Gallagher, “The History of Literary Criticism,” *Daedalus* 126, no. 1 (January 1997): 142; See also, Spillers, “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,” 90.

⁹⁸ Spillers, “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,” 90.

⁹⁹ Love, “Close but Not Deep,” 375.

the attribution of “life, richness, warmth, and voice to texts,” which is the work of the troubled humanist project.¹⁰⁰

From Love’s essay, it is clear that the descriptive turn struggles with the problematic separation of New Critical theory from New Critical practice. If the ideal formulation of New Critical formalism has waned, one of its essential aspects remains in the separation of close reading practice from New Criticism. In Love’s case, the thing that close reading contains within it is a humanist impulse, an impulse made problematic by the revelations of symptomatic reading. This distinction trumps the capitalization of New Criticism, as it suggests that the disavowed grand theory makes an impression upon the practice separated from it; the proverbial baby remains with the bathwater. Yet, by making this distinction, Love separates her project from other realizations of the descriptive turn. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, for example, suggest that New Critical reading falls comfortably within the rubric of surface reading. They write, the “valorization of surface reading as willed, sustained proximity to the text recalls the aims of New Criticism, which insisted that the key to understanding a text’s meaning lay within the text itself, particularly in its formal properties.”¹⁰¹ In a note, Best and Marcus elaborate that this sense of the New Criticism “paraphrases” Catherine Gallagher’s work about New Criticism’s importance to the development of subsequent methodologies in literary studies. Best and Marcus affirm that New Criticism provides the condition of literary critical possibility through its separation of critical practice from the text-object, the same structure that Love identifies as allowing for the persistence of a dead and alive temporality. By identifying “close reading” as a persistent aspect of the discipline, Best and Marcus confirm that New Criticism has always been alive, which is a reversal and therefore negative repetition of making it new. At the same time, however, there is

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 388.

¹⁰¹ Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading,” 10.

Eve Sedgwick, who insists that New Criticism has long been dead, nearly obsolescent: “What could better represent ‘weak theory, little better than a description of the phenomena which it purports to explain,’ than the devalued and near obsolescent New Critical skill of imaginative close reading?”¹⁰² Sedgwick’s weak theory revives an obsolescent practice, allowing that practice to persist, again mobilizing the critical spirit. Ultimately – and Love’s essay helps us to see this – the various nodes of the descriptive turn, when read as an entire entity, repeat the outline of the self-immolation of New Criticism. That is, the descriptive turn identifies with a nearly dead practice (Sedgwick) to mobilize its spirit and continue its future success (Best and Marcus).

Identifying this resonance between New Criticism’s formation of a new object that reorganized disciplinary studies with the descriptive turn confirms two recent phenomenon in literary studies. First, the descriptive turn has the potential to completely overhaul the discipline by unseating the primary theoretical and practical method that has defined the disciplinarity of literary studies for the last fifty years. It suggests that the rising prominence of media and book history methodologies in a number of fields (including NMS), digital methods, and other sociological based approaches are representative of a major disciplinary shift in value. Calls for reforms in the structures of English Departments – periodization, nation-based methods, collaboration, etc. – are tied to this emerging form of a *new* discipline that may be called literary studies, but is not qualitatively the same literary studies of the past. Second, as a number of critics have commented on, the descriptive turn brings literary studies closer to the machinations of capital by updating the methodologies of literary criticism to hardware compatible with late capital. It is not a coincidence that the new descriptive turn appears to value flexible, efficient, and contingent modes of criticism, just as neoliberal economics thrives from flexible, efficient,

¹⁰² Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 145.

and contingent modes of labor.¹⁰³ Put differently, as Eric Hayot has wondered, does weak theory simply confirm the weakness of faculty – contingent or not – and graduate and undergraduate students in humanities disciplines?¹⁰⁴ When the descriptive turn repeats the capitalizing maneuver of New Criticism, it appears that the unfortunate answer to this question is yes.

In the 1980s, Edward Said bemoaned the New Criticism because, despite its apparent effort to reach “a wide community of responsive readers out of a very large, potentially unlimited, constituency of students and teachers of literature,” the result has been a “private-clique consciousness embodied in a kind of critical writing that has virtually abandoned any attempt at reaching a large, if not a mass audience.”¹⁰⁵ Said’s comment, though thirty-five plus years removed, allows us to see that the capitalization of New Criticism insulated criticism from the mass in order to preserve some sort of humanism within a voracious capitalism. Yet, that very gesture separated the people and their labor from the work and objects of criticism. Putting Said’s observation in conversation with the new descriptive turn and my discussion of the enclosure of criticism shows, at some level, that the New Critical solution has only exacerbated the problem.

In repeating the enclosure of New Criticism, the descriptive turn has updated the forms and approaches of literary studies to be in even greater lockstep with late capitalism. If an attention to humanism – however problematic it is – is what insulated literary studies from the market and gave space to literary studies to potentially critique that market, then, the insulation wrought by this new turn to description is virtually absent. In fact, the field of digital humanities

¹⁰³ Alan Liu argues in *The Laws of Cool* that flexibility and efficiency are the beacons for the postindustrial and the knowledge-work it incubates. Liu, *The Laws of Cool*.

¹⁰⁴ Eric Hayot, “[Weak Theory Roundtable Presentation]” (presentation, Modernist Studies Association Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, November 6-9, 2014).

¹⁰⁵ Edward W. Said, “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community,” *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (September 1982): 5, 6.

– included within the descriptive turn by Love because of its empirical methodology – increasingly understands its role as a mediating valve between private business and the university. The way forward for digital humanities, according to a Stanford Literary Lab pamphlet, is to operationalize the concepts of literary theory, where operationalization is the “process whereby concepts are transformed into a series of operations.”¹⁰⁶ Alan Liu argues that digital humanities can perform “cultural criticism” through the operationalization of criticism’s categories.¹⁰⁷ Software designers, app makers, and others would then take up these operations for profit, which would bring the work of the humanities to the public after being adopted by private software developers. The possibility for cultural critique, then, lies not in large-scale overhaul of neoliberal policies and procedures, but in the adoption and occasional adjustments of those policies. Put simply, Liu shows us that his call for cultural critique in the Digital Humanities embeds DH into neoliberal economies. There is something pragmatic about this push. Aligning humanities interests with enterprise software producers like Google or Microsoft brings funding from the government, from corporate entities, and from the university, which explains the growing number of Digital Humanities Centers on campuses. Digital Humanities produces work that registers within the systems of the contemporary global economy, and, as such, its products are understood to enrich public and social life. Liu’s attempt to bake cultural critique into this formulation by looking to the subfield of sociology that studies organizational institutions is laudable. Yet, at the same time, Liu’s positioning removes the illusion of any boundary between

¹⁰⁶ Franco Moretti, “Operationalizing”: Or, the Function of Measurement in Modern Literary Theory, Pamphlets of the Stanford Literary Lab 6 (Stanford: Stanford Literary Lab, 2013), 1, <http://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet6.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ Liu famously asked “Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?” in 2012. He answers his own question in his latest book, *Against the Cultural Singularity: Drafts for a Critical Digital Humanities*. The book has yet to be released. My summation of his argument comes from a talk Liu gave of the same title at University of California, Berkeley on March 5, 2015. Alan Liu, “Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

the university and the postindustrial economy. That boundary may not be there in the first place, but, the illusion of it arguably creates the possibility for thinking of the university and literary theory otherwise. Is it really the case that the only way to reach the public is to abscond to the prevailing sense of what is good, or can we register that there are ways of making a case for the humanities and its insights between the valuations of capital?

*

The next chapter takes up the question of how the good is related to the popular by looking to the years before the establishment of the discipline of literary studies, as we know it. In the next chapter and the remainder of the dissertation, I consider how the New Criticism's alignment with branding, repackaging, and capital has left an impact on a number of categories and questions that may carry over into the next disciplinary formation of literary studies. As Love points out, these impressions are related to the long history of humanism and the Enlightenment. Importantly the New Criticism's ties to the goals of the Enlightenment reconstitute formations of anti-blackness that were essential to the quantified abstraction of beings and their labor. As my argument continues it will become clear that any solution – an overhaul of the politics of literary criticism – to the problem of literary criticism's collapsed relationship with capital and a reconfiguration of its relationship to blackness must come through a rethinking of the human, the social sciences, and their joint histories.

Chapter 2 Parker Tyler: Toward a Minor Criticism

“Why not give Parker Tyler a roving commission to write about anything and everything, from twigs to nebular gases?”
- Henry Miller, Letter to *View*, May 1942

Parker Tyler had an accomplished and prolific career. Between the late 1920s and early 1970s, he published more than 500 essays, 400 art and literature reviews, eight books of film criticism, including the first book on queer film (*Screening the Sexes*, 1972), six volumes of poetry, reviewed favorably by the likes of William Carlos Williams, and a novel, *The Young and Evil*, written with Charles Henri Ford, which was burned and banned in the United States and England for its frank depictions of gay sex in Greenwich Village.¹ With Ford, Tyler also started two important magazines. In 1929, they founded *Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms* where they published William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, and, for the first time, Paul Bowles and Erskine Caldwell. Again in 1940 with an office in New York City next to the Museum of Modern Art at Fifth Avenue and West Fifty-Third, Ford and Tyler teamed up to begin *View*, a magazine that became an important vehicle for surrealists in exile in the U.S. Tyler designed *View*'s unusual, but innovative page layouts – imagine George Herbert's shape poetry crossed with Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* – that led to the magazine becoming, as the *New York Times* later put it, “the natural counterweight to the Abstract Expressionists being championed by Clement Greenberg and *The Partisan Review* and *The Nation*.”² Before his death in 1974, Parker Tyler's work became the object of obsession for Myra Breckinridge, the eponymous character of

¹ These numbers have been compiled by Steven Watson, “Introduction,” in *The Young and Evil*, by Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler (London: GMP Publishers, 1989).

² Roberta Smith, “Charles Henri Ford, 94, Prolific Poet, Artist and Editor,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2002, sec. Arts, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/30/arts/charles-henri-ford-94-prolific-poet-artist-and-editor.html>.

Gore Vidal's campy novel, which spawned the somehow even campier 1970 film starring Mae West, John Huston, Raquel Welch, and Farrah Fawcett.

Parker Tyler is also, perhaps, the most important forgotten "new critic." From any angle, this is a controversial claim and is the subject of this chapter. In the 1940s, Tyler published essays with some frequency in the most important New Critical journals, including *The Sewanee Review* when Allen Tate was its editor. He penned a biannual film letter in Ransom's *Kenyon Review* and joined Clement Greenberg in *The Nation*. His writing about film in these venues complicates the typical understanding of New Criticism's primary interest in the lyric poem and his open and unapologetic homosexuality – he was known throughout his life as "The Beautiful Poet Parker Tyler" – challenges the heteronormativity of mid-century critics. In the previous chapter, I suggested that before the New Criticism reified in 1950, making it a proper noun and an established institution, the new critical field could best be defined as an entanglement of various methodologies competing for space in a shrinking print landscape. It is this definition of "new criticism," a thick tangle of intertwined approaches to interpreting culture, that I marshal when calling Tyler a "new critic."

By following Tyler's career from the 1930s until 1951, when Ransom dissolved Tyler's "Film Letter" in *Kenyon*, I map the ways that a smaller set of foundation-funded journals published an increasingly diverse catalog of cultural criticism, instead of a more homogenous one. Our literary historical retrodeterminations of New Criticism have paved over this diverse critical field and Tyler's role in it. The logic goes that with fewer journals, a result of increased costs on paper and distribution due to World War II and the Depression, the various niche audiences of literary magazines were consolidated. Yet, I show that critics like Tyler understood these larger audiences as an opportunity to speak to the general public and smaller

counterpublics at the same time. Opposed to figures like Ransom, Tate, Brooks, Warren, and even their political opposite Theodor Adorno, Tyler saw discourse about the threat of a feminizing mass culture as evidence of the “emotionalism” of “professional literary politics.” Because Ransom and company hailed a subset of the public that took lowbrow culture to be a threat to all culture through a seemingly objective discourse, Tyler recognized that he could use a similar turn to objectivity as an opportunity to mobilize a mass audience for political and aesthetic change. To put it most simply, Tyler saw that the affectively sensitive consumer of mass culture, usually figured as a “girl,” was just as affectively sensitive as the objective critics decrying sensation. This was a major departure from the approach to interpreting culture prescribed by those Tyler shared pages with in critical quarterlies. Instead of blaming the audience for their ineptitude, Tyler blamed the critics and in doing so argued that criticism carried an essential social and political function, rather than an aesthetic one.

Tyler’s critical practice does the work of minor criticism. Minor criticism is an allusion to Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation of minor literature, by way of Branden Joseph’s adaptation of the “minor” to history. Branden Joseph defines “minor history” in his critical monograph on the artist Tony Conrad. Conrad’s peripatetic relationship to any one medium results in his creative work being elided by most art historians, musicologists, or literary historians, all of whom primarily tend to interpret and historicize their respective medium. Even so, Conrad is not entirely unknown, rather his career “represents a different sort of development, which impacts or passes by each categorical point, each acknowledged grouping.”³ Joseph continues:

Appearing at the fringes of major movements or styles, their relation to them is one of deterritorialization, opening these categories up to heterological connections and

³ Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage : (a “Minor” History)* (New York: Zone, 2011), 51.

interactions. These fringes or margins, however, are sometimes found at the very center of major categories or movements; a “minor” figure may—perhaps fleetingly, perhaps not—become essential to the development of a major category or movement without, however, being fully contained.⁴

When it comes to minor history, Parker Tyler is to Tony Conrad as the institution of mid-century literary criticism is to the underground art world of which Conrad was integral part.⁵ This is to say that tracing Tyler’s different “sort of development” ends up “open[ing] [critical] categories to their outside, onto a field of historical contingencies and events that is never homogenous and that is always political.” Tyler opens the poem – the art object – up to the outside, by giving it to the audience and the critic, which contradicts the attempt at apoliticality engendered by the language of “objective criticism,” Wimsatt and Beardsley’s preferred term for New Criticism outlined in their affective fallacy essay.⁶

By opening criticism to the outside, Tyler suggests that the critical posture of disinterestedness is, in fact, a sensibility (much to the chagrin of T.S. Eliot and his lifelong

⁴ Ibid., 51–52.

⁵ As far as I can tell, Tyler never wrote about Tony Conrad, though he very likely had some familiarity with his work and vice versa. Steven Watson discusses Parker Tyler’s role in influencing the selections for the Fifth New York Film Festival in 1967, which featured three works of the emerging New American Cinema, including Tony Conrad’s *Flicker*. Tyler saw the New American Cinema as a potential savior from the psychedelic-inflected Underground cinema; “A thing may well be groovy and yet far from great.” Steven Watson, *Factory Made: Warhol and the Sixties* (Pantheon Books, 2003), 305; Parker Tyler, *Underground Film: A Critical History* (Da Capo Press, 1995), 131. Branden W. Joseph has also written about Tyler as an important interlocutor in the study of Andy Warhol’s films. In fact, Tyler is far from a minor figure when it comes to experimental cinema in the U.S. As of 2012, Tyler’s *Underground Film* is one of five required works in the “Experimental, Avant-Garde, and Underground Film” category of Harvard’s Film and Visual Studies General Exam List (<http://www.ves.fas.harvard.edu/forms/F%20VS%20History%20Reading%20List%202012.pdf>). Branden W. Joseph, “The Play of Repetition: Andy Warhol’s ‘Sleep,’” *Grey Room*, no. 19 (April 2005): 22–53.

⁶ The first sentence of “The Affective Fallacy” reads: “As the title of this essay invites comparison with that of an earlier and parallel essay of ours, “The Intentional Fallacy”, it may be relevant to assert at this point that we believe ourselves to be exploring two roads which have seemed to offer convenient detours around the acknowledged and usually feared obstacles to objective criticism, both of which, however, have actually led away from criticism and from poetry.” W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, “The Affective Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review* 57, no. 1 (January 1949): 31.

attempts to dissociate from sensation). In doing so, Tyler shows the campy aspects of professional literary politics. With this, I echo Michael Trask's recent assertion that mid-century formalist criticism became a "camp site," a place where the performance of academic voice collides with camp performance to such a degree that they are potentially indistinguishable. For Trask, camp plays the "evil twin of the pragmatist stance that saturated academic life in the mid-twentieth century, for camp takes pragmatism's slogan, 'whatever works', and turns it inside-out."⁷ Later in his life, Tyler wrote that, "camp is a perfectly valid instrument of criticism, particularly in terms of an art offering the public so many crass charades as the movies did and still do," which reflects the fact that in 1971 when he is writing, camp has been made distinct from criticism and is, at the same time, a valid instrument to do criticism. To riff on a famous line from Susan Sontag on the subject, camp is not criticism, but "criticism."⁸ The deterritorializing aspect of camp, the turning inside-out, suggests the possibility of an inside-out representation of the New Criticism that operates simultaneously, but, is ultimately a counterweight to it. This is a slight adaptation of Roberta Smith's observation in Ford's *Times* obituary; *View* is as much of an inside-out form of the *Kenyon Review* as it is a counterweight to the Abstract Expressionism that grew to prominence in the museum next door to *View*'s offices and to some of the same publications that generated a critical consensus in the 1950s. I will return to what it means for one journal to be the inside-out form of another in this chapter's penultimate section.

To open a critical category to its outside means confronting the category's function as a political force. When Tyler camps as a critic, it is not solely as a metaphor. His camp

⁷ Michael Trask, *Camp Sites: Sex, Politics, and Academic Style in Postwar America*, Post 45 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 7.

⁸ Sontag writes, "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." ... [Camp] is the farthest extension, in sensibility of the metaphor of life as theater." Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (Fall 1964): 519.

performance – if it is a performance at all – challenges the (homo)sexual panic within the institutions of New Criticism. In the introduction, I argued that anxiety about miscegenation is woven within New Critical defenses of the literary field, in part by how affective reactions to sex between black men and white women became a theory, an objectively defined epistemology. Jared Sexton has argued that this movement from the subjective emotion to the objective formal argument is, in part, a structuring condition of anti-blackness. Further, mid-twentieth-century sociology had a large part in aligning the corporeal difference of blackness with any deviance from male heterosexuality, as Roderick Ferguson has shown in his definition of a “queer of color critique.”⁹ In a practical sense, Ferguson’s study suggests that much can be learned about anti-blackness and anti-queerness by observing the intersection of these identities. This also means that arguments about queerness can shed light on the governing logics of anti-blackness and vice versa, even if these logics and identities are not synonymous. From this position, Tyler’s camp and the eventual condemnation of Tyler’s and Robert Duncan’s sexuality by John Crowe Ransom presents an analytical wedge for tracking the connections between sexuality, anti-blackness, and the New Criticism. In other words, Tyler’s camp criticism not only shows the entanglement of racialized, sexual politics and professional literary politics, but also how that tangle appears to be smooth, a smoothness that takes the “roughness” of blackness and queerness as being against reason.

Prolix and Broke: The Myth of the Mid-Century Professional Intellectual

In November 1949, after *View* had folded, Parker Tyler was broke. Without his steady and humble Associate Editor’s salary of eighteen dollars per week, he needed to find a more

⁹ Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

reliable source of income. He decided to apply for a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters to support him while he started a new book project. Tyler approached Allen Tate for a letter of recommendation. The two had previously worked together on pieces for the *Sewanee Review* and, when Tate was an editor at Henry Holt he expressed enthusiasm about a book Tyler wrote on Rodin, which Holt never ended up publishing. In his request for a recommendation, Tyler expressed his befuddlement with why he couldn't pull in a steady income, despite writing regularly for *Kenyon*, *Sewanee*, and *Partisan*, as well as for "slick" magazines.¹⁰ Tate agreed to recommend Tyler for the grant, but seemed equally befuddled by Tyler's befuddlement at his financial troubles. Tate wrote, "Have you thought of teaching? Good writing can never make one a living."¹¹ The question was sincere. A few months later, Tate insisted that Tyler schedule a meeting with the Dean of the Division of General Education at New York University, who was a friend of Tate's.¹²

Tate's generous offer to find Tyler a teaching job only made the situation more confusing. Why? Tate was among the most prominent advocates for a robust periodical publishing market that paid writers a living wage. In fact, in the third issue of *Southern Review* in 1936, Tate argued that the health of a literary culture had a direct tie to how well journals, and by fiat their writers, were financially supported. A decade later, even after the bastion *Southern Review* shuttered its doors for lack of funds, Tate repeated a similar thesis in *The American Scholar*. On some level, Tate's 1936 thesis in "The Function of the Critical Quarterly" served as the impetus for an entire

¹⁰ Parker Tyler to Allen Tate, November 2, 1949, Allen Tate Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

¹¹ Allen Tate to Parker Tyler, November 5, 1949, Parker Tyler Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

¹² Allen Tate to Parker Tyler, May 29, 1950, Parker Tyler Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

movement of critics, including R.P. Blackmur and Charles Allen, who devoted their energies to acquiring secure, market-insulated funding for periodical publishing.

Because journals were understood to be a public good, they were to be protected from the precarity of the market. In a 1943 article, Charles Allen argued that little magazines and critical quarterlies were as essential to the development of literary culture as they were susceptible to bankruptcy. Allen argued that out of “100 of our most prominent critics, poets, novelists, and story writers of the last forty years,” eighty were first published in little magazines, which included larger-scale publications like *Kenyon*, *Southern*, and *Sewanee*.¹³ Yet, to achieve this work, these magazines were fiscally and morally irresponsible, “willing to do almost anything—steal, beg, or undress in public—rather, than sacrifice their right to print the best.”¹⁴ As a mode of public welfare, these periodicals required public subsidies. Their aim was to produce “the best” for all, rather than money for a few.

To protect these periodicals from the grind of capitalism, editors and advocates sought patrons in the form of large foundations, some of which had public and secret ties to government agencies, mainly the CIA, during and after the war.¹⁵ In fact, many of these editors and advocates worried that if these periodicals were driven by profit, then they would “preserve only the

¹³ Charles Allen, “The Advance Guard,” *The Sewanee Review* 51, no. 3 (July 1943): 425.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹⁵ See, Andrew Rubin, *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture, and the Cold War*, Translation/transnation (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Eric Bennett, “How Iowa Flattened Literature,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 10, 2014, <http://chronicle.com/article/How-Iowa-Flattened-Literature/144531/>; Greg Barnhisel, “Perspectives USA and the Cultural Cold War: Modernism in Service of the State,” *Modernism/modernity* 14, no. 4 (2007): 729–54; Lawrence H Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner’s Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1988); Claire F. Fox, *Making Art Panamerican: Cultural Policy and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10315837/>; Kate A Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10236547/>; Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, The, 2001), chap. 15.

cheapest values.”¹⁶ R.P. Blackmur, who was commissioned to write a report on periodical culture for the Rockefeller Foundation’s Humanities Division, argued that foundation funding would excise those cheap values by allowing journals to escape “the open market,” which incubated cheap tastes.¹⁷ More importantly, he understood there to be a direct correlation between the amount of cultural value in an essay and the amount of money paid to the writer. A higher rate of remuneration per page, which was the typical measure for payment, “educates” contributors to produce at the highest possible level.¹⁸ Blackmur’s plan relied on the vulgar logic of capitalism – more money yields a better product – as much as it tried to escape it. It remains an open question as to the degree to which government and foundation funding had an influence on the actual content of journals in this period.¹⁹ Indeed, the intensity of determinism in private and public funding for cultural institutions must be measured on a case-by-case basis. It is safe to say, however, that most funding, even of significant amounts, cannot fully insulate a journal or institution from the need to make a profit, or, to make enough money to continue operations.²⁰

¹⁶ R. P. Blackmur, “The Economy of the American Writer: Preliminary Notes,” *The Sewanee Review* 53, no. 2 (April 1945): 181.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* John Marshall, associate director of the Rockefeller Foundation’s Humanities Division and close friend of Blackmur, enlisted Blackmur, who then enlisted Malcolm Cowley and Lionel Trilling, to write a report on the need for funding for literary periodicals. Blackmur and his team submitted the report in the winter of 1946 after they had conducted a survey of a number of journal editors about their financial needs in order to provide funding to those most in need and to those with the largest potential cultural impact. As Evan Kindley has shown, a number of writers and critics saw Foundation funding as a road to avoid the turn of literary magazines toward colleges and universities for support; William Carlos Williams wrote to Blackmur, “Certainly the colleges can’t be trusted. They have too much in restrictive educational commitments at stake. They just can’t foster REVOLUTION!” (181). See Evan Kindley’s “Big Criticism” for an extensive account of the content of Blackmur’s survey and the responses to it.

¹⁸ “Proposal for the *Princeton Quarterly*,” R.P. Blackmur Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

¹⁹ Despite the ways that spy stories or government money for the humanities capture our contemporary imaginations, Greg Barnhisel has shown that CIA funding often arrived with little to no oversight by the Agency as to what a journal did with that money. See, Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015).

²⁰ As Christopher Newfield has shown, the university, often understood to be insulated from the market, has had deep ties to corporate and government investment going as far back as the late nineteenth century.

In any case, the most relevant result of this foundation funding to Tyler was the increase in already high rates of pay per page for journal contributors. Blackmur's 1946 Rockefeller Report recommended that writers should be paid \$7.50 per three hundred words of prose and \$10 for a comparable page of verse. (For reference, in 1946 the U.S. average median income was \$2,750 and a postage-stamp cost three cents.²¹) These rates were significant both in relation to the price of a journal – *Kenyon Review* cost seventy-five cents on the newsstand in 1946 – and to the historic rate paid to writers per page of text. Allen Tate speculated that the *Southern Review*'s peak rate of \$6.50/page was the “highest since British Quarterlies in the early-Romantic period,” an important moment in the expansion of print culture.²² Of course, not every journal paid rates this high: Tate's *Sewanee Review* only paid \$3/page. Even so, the higher rates not only educated contributors to “produce at the highest possible level,” but also, paired with a latent disdain for the university's educating impulse, fostered a myth that one could be a professional freelance writer.

With Parker Tyler, however, we see the financial realities of someone who pursued the myth of becoming “professional author,” which was a U.S. census category in 1940. To make the equivalent of Tate's salary of \$4,100 as editor of the *Sewanee Review*, Tyler would have had

See, Christopher Newfield, *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880–1980* (Duke University Press, 2003).

²¹ Income figure comes from D. Gale Johnson, “Some Effects of Region, Community Size, Color, and Occupation on Family and Individual Income” in *Studies in Income and Wealth, Volume 15*, ed. Conference on Research in Income and Wealth (National Bureau of Economic Research, 1952): 56, table 6. Postage stamp figure from “Rates for Domestic Letters Since 1863,” <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/domestic-letter-rates-since-1863.pdf>.

²² Tate's assertion about the *Southern Review*'s rate of pay is the highest since the early-Romantic period has some merit, though, at the same time, its accuracy may have been more coincidental than anything. In part, this is because it was – and still is – difficult to estimate the relative value between early 19th Century British guineas and U.S. dollars. Even so, *The Edinburgh Review* paid 10 guineas a sheet, a rate that begins a “period of perceived high pay.” By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, many rates were individually negotiated. I'm indebted to Mark Schoenfield for this information on Romantic print culture. Mark Schoenfield, e-mail message to the author, June 28, 2013.

to publish somewhere between fifty and eighty articles or 820 published pages per year.²³ Even to make the equivalent of his more modest annual salary at *View*, \$936, Tyler would still have had to publish 187 pages or twelve to sixteen articles. Tyler wrote books, too, but the royalties didn't help much. In 1947, Tyler only made \$56.74 from *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, in 1948, \$10.15. In short, even for the prolific Parker Tyler this yearly pace of production was too much. More prominent writers, Langston Hughes among them, also had incredible difficulty living solely off their writing.²⁴ Significant faculty and editorial salaries, like those of Tate, Brooks, Warren, Ransom, and the like, led to stratification between those with teaching positions and those without them. In Tyler's co-authored novel, *The Young & Evil*, a character, who constantly publishes paid articles in "organs of literary expression rated official as A," captures the attitude of a freelancer like Tyler: he says, "I have you see certain ambitions."²⁵ Tyler's massive written output – he had to take on multiple pen names at *View* to make it appear as if he didn't write the

²³ Articles typically ranged from 10-15 pages. I'm calculating this figure at the \$5/page rate. At the time, Tate was corresponding with Tyler, he was making \$4,100 per year as editor of the *Sewanee Review*, the salary of a full professor at Sewanee, University of the South. Brooks and Warren were making \$2,500 per year when they were lecturers at Louisiana State University. When Brooks was promoted to Assistant Professor his pay increased to \$2,700, then in 1936, when promoted to associate, his salary increased to \$3,600. When Warren left for the University of Minnesota in 1942 because of an offer of a \$4,000 salary and an appointment as Director of Creative Writing. Brooks wouldn't make \$4,000 per year until 1944. In 1945, Yale offered Brooks a full professorship with a salary of \$7,000. Ransom famously left Vanderbilt for Kenyon College in 1937; Kenyon offered Ransom a \$4,500 plus the cost of lodging, which was an improvement over his \$3,820 salary and \$45 per month house rental allowance at Vanderbilt. See Mark Royden Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism, 1996), 110, 196, 214; Marian Janssen, *The Kenyon Review, 1939-1970: A Critical History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 15.

²⁴ As I'll describe in chapter 4, in the 1950s Langston Hughes had difficulty supplementing his income, as his book tours were largely being cancelled due to concerns by college administrators about his politics. Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2:205–238. Bernard Lahire argues that the lack of authors independent from other modes of labor and work suggests a change in the way scholars and theorists understand the literary field and its autonomy. I describe this in more detail later in the chapter. Bernard Lahire, "The Double Life of Writers," trans. Gwendolyn Wells, *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 443–65.

²⁵ Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, *The Young & Evil* (London: GMP Publishers, 1989), 58, 191.

entire review section – indicates that it was possible to imagine living solely off of one’s contribution to the mid-century periodical circuit, though nearly impossible to actually succeed.²⁶

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Tyler’s persistence, futile as it may have been, led to the publication of his essays in unexpected venues. He published on a wide-range of subjects, including *The Maltese Falcon*, Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood*, and experimental cinema, in periodicals as far flung as *The Nation*, *Magazine of Art*, and the incipient *American Quarterly*. Reflecting on Tyler’s contributions to *American Quarterly* – “Hollywood as a Universal Church” (Summer 1950) and “Documentary Technique in Film Fiction” (Summer 1949) – Jonathan Auerbach has wondered “what possessed Tyler to publish in *A[merican] Q[uarternly]* or conversely what possessed the journal to invite him.”²⁷ Tyler was part of *American Quarterly* in its early, less academic phase, an *American Quarterly* that covered “mass culture subjects” like film, television, sports, and “hot-rod culture.”²⁸ The journal changed significantly in 1951 when it was placed under the purview of the newly founded American Studies Association. Even so, the early years of *American Quarterly* reflect the ways that periodicals were turned toward both the public and the academy. That position attracted articles and reviews on a large variety of subjects that deployed a number of analytical methods.

By 1950, journals began to retreat to the academy and grew to be more homogenous. In fact, in March 1951 Ransom wrote to Tyler, “We have come to the conclusion that the ever-increasing demand for space – due I think to the fact that there are simply now far more

²⁶ Those pen names included Hilary Arm and Everett McManus.

²⁷ Jonathan Auerbach, “American Studies and Film, Blindness and Insight,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (March 2006): 44.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42. Interestingly enough, Carl Bode, the first ASA president and among the founding members, suppresses the early history of *American Quarterly* from his history of the association. See, Carl Bode, “The Start of the ASA,” *American Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (January 1979): 345–54.

accomplished critical pens than there used to be – forces us to discontinue the Movie Letter as a regular item.”²⁹ The “ever-increasing demand for space” led to a new rubric for accomplishment that hewed closer to the now familiar credentials of academia. But, Tyler and the early years of *American Quarterly* and *Kenyon* reflect a larger trend of the years before, where critics may have been willing to set aside interpretive and ideological battles with a journal’s mission or masthead – and editors willing to loosen their visions to have a full issue -- in order to secure publication and the cash that came with it.

On some level, this meant thinking differently about the audience for criticism. Not only did writers and critics see an audience of the educated public to be larger than an academic one, they also understood an academic audience to be made up of scholars who had a wide-ranging interest in culture. In a review of *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography* by Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich, Eric Bentley, a Rockefeller Fellow at the *Kenyon Review*, pointed out that “the dutiful readers of *P.M.L.A.* are also eager readers of *The New Yorker*.”³⁰ Bentley’s acknowledgement that scholars read scholarly publications *and* middlebrow ones is part of his larger argument that scholarship requires an acute knowledge of what “‘the present’ is.” By attending to the present, one that can be understood only through magazines like *The New Yorker* and journals like *Kenyon*, critics can cleanse the word ‘Academic’ of “its pejorative overtones.”³¹ Bentley was reacting to the recent accusation by the members of the English *Scrutiny* group that *Kenyon* was merely “running a highbrow review.”³²

²⁹ John Crowe Ransom to Parker Tyler, March 1, 1951, Parker Tyler Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

³⁰ Eric Bentley, “Editors in Person: Little Magazines,” *The Kenyon Review* 9, no. 2 (April 1947): 284.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

³² In a postscript to his article, Bentley writes that these comments from *Scrutiny* require some scrutiny of their own: “When the above was in galley proof a new issue of *Scrutiny* arrived. It contains an interesting editorial note on KR, of which the key sentence, I think, is this: “Our criticism of the *Kenyon*, as of the old *Southern*, and the *Sewanee*, is that we have been able to discern nothing more positive behind

Bentley's retort to *Kenyon's* association with the pejorative connotations of the academic and the highbrow suggests that not only did journals have an interest in speaking to a broader public, but they also sought to reconfigure the attention of the academy to the cultural present. There is certainly ambiguity in what it means to attend to the present and how a publication should go about it, but this effort was a major aim of criticism in the era.

The desire to interpret the present coincides with the typical story of the New Criticism. In "Criticism Inc.," Ransom writes, "Here is contemporary literature, waiting for its criticism; where are the professors of literature? They are watering their own gardens, elucidating the literary histories of their respective periods."³³ Tired of the historical methods of their philological predecessors, Ransom and the New Critics took up new methods to give voice to the modernist literature they discussed for hours on end as the Fugitive group in Nashville. This, though, is where Bentley's argument helps us to see how these typical accounts have erred. It isn't just that these institutional arms of an emergent new criticism were interested in contemporary literature: they were interested in contemporary culture most broadly, mapping all of its tendrils, films, radio music, or Broadway productions. The inclusion of Tyler's writings on Hollywood and the work of a number of other critics writing on popular culture subjects in New Critical journals provides evidence of this larger goal for New Criticism. The pursuit of the present led to a capaciousness in the works of culture featured in New Critical periodicals.

The Kenyon Review provides a snapshot of the far-flung collection of content in mid-century journals. *Kenyon*, of course, published important symposia, including "Present State of Poetry," "The Critics Business," and "My Credoes" that brought together names we still take to be important voices on the subject: Robert Penn Warren, I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, R.P.

them... than the idea of running a highbrow review." There is matter here for another discussion and a long one. Perhaps one of my senior colleagues will take it up" (286).

³³ John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism Inc.," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 13, no. 4 (Fall 1937): 586–602.

Blackmur, Rene Wellek, and others. In addition, the journal published early essays from the next generation of influential critics, including Northrop Frye, Hugh Kenner, Richard Ellmann and Marshall McLuhan. At the same time, you could find an essay on Einstein's philosophy of science by Ernest Nagel or by Bertrand Russell. Or, you could read Edwin Denby's latest installment on "Dance Criticism," Siegfried Kracauer's review of Sergei Eisenstein's *The Film Sense*, and George Beiswanger on the latest on Broadway. There was Lionel Trilling on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Hannah Arendt on the poetry of Bertolt Brecht, and Theodoro Adorno giving a "Social Critique of Radio Music." Even leaving out the essays on Mexican mural-art, Le Corbusier's architecture, and André Gide, it is clear that *The Kenyon Review* sought to capture a wide-swath of culture in nearly all areas. It was not alone in this endeavor; similar spans of content can be found in *The Partisan Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *The Southern Review*.³⁴ While it is certainly true that not every work of popular or mass culture received high praise from its reviewer, the sheer quantity of their presence suggests a heartier role for these works in defining the contours of literary criticism.

In fact, one of Parker Tyler's columns on film for *Kenyon* appeared in *The Kenyon Critics*, an anthology of collected essays that appeared in the journal by such esteemed contributors as Philip Rahv, Austin Warren, and William Empson. Tyler's piece was on the adaptation of Robert Penn Warren's novel *All the King's Men* into a Hollywood film directed by Robert Rossen. The publication was important to Tyler and for writing on film in general: "It is

³⁴ *Sewanee Review* published a number of reviews and translated poems of the French surrealists, in addition to articles on U.S. Southern politics. Hannah Arendt also appeared in its pages, "Expansion of the Philosophy of Power," as did Marshall McLuhan with a number of early essays. *Southern Review* largely continued the far-right political line of *American Review* by publishing the English Distributists, including Herbert Agar and Hilaire Belloc. At the same time, however, *Southern* held robust forums on Marxism, particularly Trotskyism. Most striking, however, is that *Southern* more than any periodicals saw higher education as an important battleground for literary capital. It published a number of articles on the state of higher education in the U.S., including Aldous Huxley's essay "Literature and Examinations," as well as a forum on Literature and the Professors that joined forces with *Kenyon*.

the first time anywhere, I believe, that film criticism has been formally and signally recognized as of literary value.”³⁵ Even so, there were certainly limits. Tyler proposed a lecture series that built on his work on film adaptations of novels for the Kenyon School of English. Founded by Ransom, the Kenyon School of English was a six-week summer program primarily for university faculty and graduate students to intensely explore topics in criticism. (The Kenyon School of English served as a model for Murray Krieger’s more enduring School of Criticism and Theory, which continues to this day.) Tyler asked Allen Tate, “Do you imagine Mr. Ransom or the others would welcome an innovation in the shape of a series of lectures on well-known films adapted from novels? These could be rented from the Museum of Modern Art and the talk would precede the showing.”³⁶ Tate, not wanting to answer himself, recommended that Tyler write Ransom. Ransom said no. He cited a number of reasons why, including the imminent move of the School to Indiana University, the loss of Rockefeller Foundation funding, and a full faculty already confirmed for 1952. Not to mention the fact that Ransom was trying to break ties with Tyler, having just dissolved Tyler’s column in *Kenyon Review*. (I’ll discuss the reasons for this in this chapter’s conclusion.) Yet, Ransom may also have wanted to avoid the “saloon-style conflicts” – and the films that prompted them – that occurred during film screenings at MoMA that ultimately, according to Haidee Wasson, challenged and reoriented the pitch of high art institutions.³⁷

Wasson is just one among many scholars who have begun to argue that this period is marked by an interest in making a variety of cultural works available for the public to study. As Mark Garrett Cooper and John Marx acknowledge in describing a slightly earlier phase,

³⁵ Qtd in. Janssen, *The Kenyon Review, 1939-1970*, 254.

³⁶ Parker Tyler to Allen Tate, May 22, 1950, Allen Tate Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

³⁷ Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.08118>.

“Questions about how to regulate, how to teach, and how to critique “the movies” shaped a host of arguments about how populations should and should not, could and could not, be managed through mass media.”³⁸ Importantly, Cooper and Marx argue, the coalitions formed across universities, film studios, government agencies, and large cultural institutions explain, in part, Horkheimer and Adorno’s insistence that professors, too, played an important role in the administration of culture.³⁹ The next section dramatizes precisely the ways that accounts of New Criticism have come up short in evaluating the role of mass culture – particularly the deliberate feminization of the consumer of mass culture – in the literary critical field. Yet, to even understand that role, as Cooper and Marx, Wasson, Peter Decherney and others have, it must be acknowledged that the professional literary culture of the 1940s was a mission to capture the present.⁴⁰ Though this mission to capture the present carried a number of deliberate exclusions, its inclusiveness to works of mass culture indicates an audience for criticism that was perceived to be both public and academic. As long as this was the imagined audience for criticism, the consolidation of literary journals due to financial constraints created a heterogeneous field of culture and of methods to interpret the present.

Professional Literary Culture as Woman: Criticism’s Gender Trouble

Though mass cultural objects were often collected in the pages of *Kenyon Review* and of its peer journals, they were not always endorsed whole-heartedly. Often when a reviewer would degrade a work of mass culture, they would also denigrate the audience of that work. Tyler

³⁸ Mark Garrett Cooper and John Marx, “Crisis, Crisis, Crisis: Big Media and the Humanities Workforce,” *differences* 24, no. 3 (February 2014): 137.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴⁰ Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005). Also see, Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds. *Inventing Film Studies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

critiqued this particular aspect of mid-century critical practice. His critique, I argue, sheds light on the peculiar creation of a reactionary professionalism that portrays itself as without affect. At some level, this is the perennial question about the role of the public in determining the shape of the present, about the relation of the popular to the good. Should the public be trusted with determining its own taste, with determining what culture should be? Or, should the understanding of the present be determined by an oligarchy of critics and writers, cultural taste-makers who tell the public what they want and how to understand the contours of the present?

In response to these questions, the New Critics often turned to the figure of the feminized spectator. The feminized spectator helped clarify distinctions about whether a work of art was highbrow or lowbrow and, just as importantly, the figure separated those who took pleasure and consumed mass culture from those who reflected upon and appreciated high art. In an appendix to *The Well Wrought Urn*, Cleanth Brooks states that the mass cultural palate can be traced to the “young lady who confesses to raptures over her confessions magazine.”⁴¹ This “young lady,” overly receptive to the affective pleasure of gossip, had appeared in the writings of Brooks’s colleagues before. All the way back in 1930, in *I’ll Take My Stand*, Vanderbilt professor Donald Davidson invoked the “shop-girl,” who had a passion for gossip magazines herself, as a foil for the tastes of high art.⁴² In *Cultural Capital*, John Guillory has argued that the feminized spectator preserves the priestly orthodoxy of a recusant, secularized literary culture where the affective fallacy is intensively enforced. Of course, just as women have long been kept from being part of the clergy, this type of distinction is premised on beliefs about sexual difference between men

⁴¹ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1947), 233.

⁴² She “does not recite Shakespeare before breakfast...instead, the shop-girl reads the comic strip with her bowl of patent cereal and puts on a jazz record while she rouges her lips. She reads the confession magazines and goes to the movies.” Donald Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” in *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 35.

and women. John Crowe Ransom argued that women poets were “less pliant, safer...[and] indifferent to intellectuality,” or, conversely, “Man,” in Ransom’s estimation, “is an intellectualized woman.”⁴³

There is a long and varied history of associating women with mass culture and men with the pursuit of high art, particularly from the nineteenth century onward.⁴⁴ The idea that women are unable to manage their affect, which ultimately is what makes them susceptible to the pleasure-driven objects of the masses, has an even longer history.⁴⁵ As Andreas Huyssen puts it, in a chapter of *After the Great Divide* titled “Mass Culture as Woman,” “Time and again documents from the late 19th century ascribe pejorative feminine characteristics to mass culture—and by mass culture here I mean serialized feuilleton novels, popular and family magazines, the stuff of lending libraries, fictional bestsellers and the like.”⁴⁶ The positions of Ransom, Brooks, and Davidson clearly stem from these nineteenth century roots and they were

⁴³ John Crowe Ransom, “The Poet as Woman,” *Southern Review* 2 (1937): 783–806.

⁴⁴ For just a sampling of work on the issue, see: Nancy Armstrong, “Modernism’s Iconophobia and What It Did to Gender,” *Modernism/modernity* 5, no. 2 (1998): 47–75.; Philip Gould, “Revisiting the ‘Feminization’ of American Culture. Introduction.,” *differences* 11, no. 3 (1999): i – xii; Dana D. Nelson, “‘No Cold or Empty Heart’: Polygenesis, Scientific Professionalization, and the Unfinished Business of Male Sentimentalism,” *differences* 11, no. 3 (1999): 29–56.

⁴⁵ In *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, Amy Hollywood chronicles how the embodied and affective interpretive practices of thirteenth and fourteenth century women mystics have led to the prominence of these mystics as privileged figures for a particular strain of twentieth century philosophy. In some respects, this is the opposite of the feminization of mass culture, for it suggests that the affective and embodied reading of mystics provides a privileged access to knowledge otherwise unattainable through objective modes. At the same time, such a distinction still confirms and reinforces the notion that women have an innate relation to sensation unavailable to men, who have largely lost this ability through acculturation. In other words, this figures women as closer to a “state of nature” and further away from civilization. Similar reasoning propelled modernist artists to seek “primitive” art of black Africans and African-Americans. Fred Moten has argued that ‘blackness’ has become a signifier for this lack-of-constraint in relation to civil codes. This goes to say that distinctions about groups who are more prone to reaction are feeling are ordering mechanisms of a race, gender, and sexuality hierarchy. See, Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago UP, 2012), Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2009): 177–218.

⁴⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide : Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 49.

by no means alone. Many famous thinkers, including Freud, Mallarmé, and Nietzsche, imbued feminine qualities upon the masses and their art, a displacement that reacts to the threat of feminist and working class self-activity on the professional, masculine sphere. The working class “shop-girl” and the rapturous “young lady” mentioned by these critics challenge the masculine hold on the professional sphere of artistic culture, a sphere already feared to be effete by many avant-garde artists, who tended to overcompensate with extra doses of masculinity in their many manifestoes. Parker Tyler was familiar with this mode of mockery. In Tyler’s *roman-a-clef* co-authored with Ford, a self-declared communist poet “wanted to know what Karel [the character that most closely resembles Tyler] was doing that night besides composing effeminate poetry.”⁴⁷ The invocation of rapture, and the perceived lack of discernment and control for women suggest that women became symbols for the opposite of all of the characteristics that the critic was to have: objectivity, rationality, and, ultimately – as Ransom’s definition of a “man” makes abundantly clear – intellect. These qualities, all designed to shore up the body against affect, came to be understood as the ideal of professional literary politics.

Yet, early in his career, Tyler and his editorial partner Charles Henri Ford saw professional literary politics as an affectively driven response to culture itself. Rather than pursue a better objectivity, Tyler and Ford simply wanted critics to be forthright about the “emotionalism” of their own politics. Tyler and Ford indicted condescending dismissals of women and the culture that took on the characteristics of a gendered body as “chauvinistic, hypochondriac, even nostalgic fulminations of the intellectually decadent.”⁴⁸ They made this claim in 1931 after an editorial spat between their newly founded journal (*Blues*), *The New York Times*, and T.S. Eliot’s *Criterion*. Tyler and Ford outline how relations between periodicals and

⁴⁷ Ford and Tyler, *The Young & Evil*, 112.

⁴⁸ Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, “Blues: What Happens to a Radical Literary Magazine,” *The Sewanee Review* 39, no. 1 (January 1931): 65.

literary professionals often take on the cast of relations between raced, gendered, and sexualized bodies. In other words, the “objective” sphere of professional literary politics reinforces and generates anew fictions about the inferiority of bodies that are not white, not male, and not heterosexual all while seemingly discussing professional matters.

Tyler and Ford hoped to explain why *The Criterion* and *The New York Times* devoted “nearly a foot of editorial space” to criticizing *Blues*, their Columbus, Mississippi-based magazine with a much smaller readership and reputation. The *Times* commented that the contributors to the fifth issue of *Blues*, “bear no worthy ships, no daring swimmers, not even a jam of logs to give promise some day of carved and polished wood.”⁴⁹ (The *Times* was wrong. H.D. was among writers featured in the issue.) This type of critique, Tyler and Ford argued, was *de rigueur* for what they called “professional literary politics.” This describes a situation in which well-established venues deploy their institutional power to level “personal or impersonal” critiques at other publications with little justification. For example, the anonymous author of the *New York Times* review provides no evidence – textual or even descriptive – for the lack of seaworthy literature in *Blues*. These comments stand as unsubstantiated, though professionally endorsed, commentary. Because of this, there is a slippage between the “personal” taste of a given critic and the “impersonal” judgment of criticism. Ultimately, Ford and Tyler declare that this slippage only tends to move in one direction: from the personal taste of the critic to the impersonal assessment of the professional entity.

Ford and Tyler draw attention to what they see as subjective judgments by comparing critics to the consumers of mass culture, the affectively enraptured women critics so feared. They write, “Not one [of these reviews of *Blues*] has been free of an emotionalism which may be

⁴⁹ “Rhythmic Blues.,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1929, sec. Editorial.

described justly only as some species of intellectual hysteria.”⁵⁰ While “hysteria” hadn’t yet become, as Elaine Showalter put it in the early 90s, “the waste-basket term of literary criticism...taken as a synonym for women’s writing and the woman’s novel,” the term did carry the implied hierarchy between the male analyst who could speak for and hence determine the hysterical narrative of the female patient, who had been “crippled” by her emotional excess.⁵¹ (Freud’s *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* was published in 1905.) It is possible to read Ford and Tyler’s comment as a diagnosis of its own repetition of misogyny that calls critics “hysterics” because the critics perceive most women as “hysterics.” In addition, the use of “chauvinist” diagnoses not misogyny, but a leaning towards nationalism against the proposed internationalism of Communism. Yet, there may be a critical edge to Ford and Tyler’s claim of “emotionalism” and “intellectual hysteria.” In many ways the construction of a hysteria narrative mirrors the unequal claims to authority and knowledge that occur in criticism. The anonymous analyst in *The New York Times*, in this respect, constructs a seemingly impersonal account of *Blues*’s content that is incredibly personal. What really unfolds in the assessment of *Blues* is that institutional and cultural authority is used to create knowledge about the journal rather than some form of interpretive engagement. At the same time, the small journal cannot create knowledge itself because of its inferior position; the minor criticism of the oppressed is framed against the prevailing values of literary and cultural knowledge by fiat.

By suggesting that the dominant cultural authority itself is hysterical – the idea of man as intellectual woman taken to its extreme – Tyler and Ford argue that criticism is a game of force, power, and cultural capital that is ultimately a game of emotions cloaked with the discourse of

⁵⁰ Ford and Tyler, “Blues,” 62.

⁵¹ Elaine Showalter, “On Hysterical Narrative,” *Narrative* 1, no. 1 (January 1993): 24. For critiques of Freud, see Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), esp. 3-40. and Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), esp. 45-6 and 136-9.

professional intellectual inquiry. In doing so, they equate professional literary politics with mass culture and its various culture industries. This levels the playing field between the two: the shop-girl does the same type of interpretive work as the professional critic and, because she does, she questions the very logic that separates mass culture from culture in general. More broadly, the audiences of art, literature, and culture have as much authority as the critic to interpret and define the meaning and value of an object of culture. This anticipates arguments in the late 70s by Fredric Jameson and Stuart Hall about popular culture, who, in Michael Denning's summation, argue "that popular culture is neither simply a form of social control nor a form of class expression, but a contested terrain."⁵²

To return to the question of the public role in evaluating present taste, Tyler suggests that the public has just as much authority as the critic to define the value of art. In turn, the popular can, but doesn't always, determine the good. The inclusion of reviews of movies, radio programs, and Broadway shows in critical journals provided an opportunity for readers to expand their interpretive reach. Critics have often read the presence of these objects as a place to stage the evaluation and separation of high cultural objects from mass cultural objects. Yet, when we pair Tyler and Ford's critique with Bentley's imperative to map the present, it becomes clear that even this staging opened criticism to new objects for a readership that was both public and academic, rather than one or the other. Criticism is not professional or emotional, but, rather, is both emotional *and* professional. In turn, art objects can be both objects of high art and objects of mass culture. Even with destabilized authority, Tyler shows that the critic had great potential to speak to multiple publics at the same time as she addressed a professional public. More

⁵² Michael Denning, "The End of Mass Culture," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 37 (Spring 1990): 4.

importantly, by speaking to a professional public, the critic could make a work of art both “good” and “popular.”

Tyler saw that this mode of multitudinous engagement had the political potential to alter the hierarchies fostered by patriarchal professionalism, an alteration that Tyler believed could be affected through making modes of high art popular. Tyler didn’t fear the feminization of culture – he embraced it.⁵³ With this embrace, Tyler suggests that criticism, like Judith Butler’s concept

⁵³ Tyler’s embrace of the feminization of the audience is a complicated gesture especially when discerning whether or not it is a ‘feminist’ act. On the one hand, Tyler makes visible a much more rampant scopophilic pleasure – or repulse – between the viewer and the viewed. In this sense, we could see Tyler’s embrace as one that attempts to outline the objectification of women’s bodies on the cinema screen, so famously described by Laura Mulvey. Tyler, more or less, queers the feminization act by making it multidirectional and suggesting that no one can escape the necessary rapture of pleasure, even if that pleasure is intensified by holding that pleasure at bay: critics as masochists. On a crude level, this dimension of Tyler’s embrace anticipates the arguments of Rei Terada about the bracketing of emotion in poststructuralist thought. Terada writes, “if emotional effects are so terribly pervasive in poststructuralist theory – “always ... smuggle[d] in” – it is time to consider the possibility that poststructuralism is *directly* concerned with emotion. [I add that this move of understanding the push away from emotion as a direct invocation of critical concern is the same move Tyler and Ford effect towards professional literary politics] In order for this to be so, emotion would have to be nonsubjective” (3).

On the other hand, even in this act, Tyler maintains the distinction between subject and object that is often deployed as an exercise of power over women and their bodies. This subject-object distinction has been critiqued by feminists of various stripes with regard to different operations. Donna Haraway has argued how “objectivity” discourse in science, which disallows the body of the observer and, often, the subjectivity of the observed, continues to reinforce the primacy of the observers opinion. When it comes to epistemology and ontology more abstractly, Mieke Bal has argued that feminism has been unable to articulate the bond between “existence and knowledge” in part, because of the ensuing divide in subject and object. She has proposed Deleuze’s concept of the *fold*, because of its “potential to overcome individualism” fostered by how the fold “helps us think, not the position of the subject caught in the abyss between victimhood and pleasure, or that of the object as, for example, in some sentimentalizing forms of ecofeminism, but the relationship between the two” (213).

Ultimately, Tyler, may see emotion as Terada would see it. This is to say, that the circulation of emotion complicates our notions of how the aesthetic work is constructed, because it separates emotion from the subject. Tyler insists, on some level, that the film-image is always in a state of becoming, wrested between the agencies of the multitudinous production crew and its audiences. Yet, and contradicting himself, Tyler insists on the stability of that object through myth. I describe this at length in the following section. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18; Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory Emotion after the “Death of the Subject”* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–99; Mieke Bal, “Enfolding Feminism,” in *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 209–35.

of gender, is performed through the “stylization” of the critical body.⁵⁴ Indeed, the “intellect,” the so-called objectivity that Ransom sees as literally making the man, is shown to be a garment, a style, a pattern of gestures. With this masculine stylization, professional literary politics—and the categories they create—are, in a sense, always in drag. After all, an intellectual, by Ransom’s definition, was a woman wearing men’s clothing.⁵⁵

Criticism as Structure of Feeling

Tyler’s frustration with professional literary politics continued into the 1940s, despite the fact that his essays and reviews appeared under its purview. What pushed Tyler to participate in this institutional system despite his frustrations? Money was certainly a reason, but, as we saw earlier, the financial goal of sustaining himself solely on writing within this publishing market was nearly impossible to achieve. More importantly, Tyler saw criticism to have an essential social role in making visible the emotional management that large cultural producers and promoters – both Hollywood studios and critical journals – effected in their promotion and creation of cultural objects. A different mode of criticism could educate the audience otherwise by teaching them that being affectively absorbed by culture played an important interpretive function and was not, in fact, fallacious. Tyler’s practice ultimately suggests that this different mode of criticism, a mode of affective encouragement, necessarily had to operate within the

⁵⁴ Butler argues that gender is performed through the “stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 191.

⁵⁵ Esther Newton, as quoted by Butler, “At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says “appearance is an illusion.” Drag says “my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.” At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; “my appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ [myself] is feminine.” Ibid. 186, brackets are Butler’s.

loose boundaries of the “new criticism” in order to be articulated with the necessary institutional authority, the same authority that this mode sought to undo.⁵⁶

Tyler described the conditions that engendered this practice in the April 1943 editorial column of *View* magazine, aptly titled “The Point of *View*.” He argues that beginning in the 1940s, artists and writers draw from a new well of inspiration. Instead of gaining their energy from the masses or their unconscious, artists must “regulate their conduct according to methods that help perpetually to renew our deepest emotional contact with the world.” In order to achieve this renewal, the artist must “decide by their own volition what shall affect them.”⁵⁷ In other words, Tyler argues that artists in the 1940s throttle their own affect in order to remind us all of “our” receptiveness to the world and our presence within it. The problem, however, is that these types of works, often because of their emotional regulation, do not find an audience because they lack a criticism. In a 1949 Movie Letter in *Kenyon Review*, Tyler describes this conundrum with respect to the experimental cinema of Maya Deren and Sergei Eisenstein: “It is wrong for Experimental Film to adopt a posture of hermetic pride and detachment; in the latter centuries no art worthy of the name has failed to develop its corollary forms of verbalization automatically relating themselves, as “criticism,” to culture as a whole.”⁵⁸ The role of the critic, therefore, is to

⁵⁶ The late Sam See has argued that Tyler and Ford address a particular counterpublic through seemingly more universal modes of address. See discusses the ways that in *The Young and Evil*, Ford and Tyler “engage myth to universalize queer experience and to propose that modernist myth can and must account for kinds of experience too readily overshadowed by heteronormative modernist mythopoeia” (1087). We can see this most readily in the various taglines considered for *Blues* by Ford and Tyler “a magazine of modernism” and a “bi-sexual bi-monthly.” Ultimately, See argues that there is something folkloric in Ford and Tyler’s turn to the mythic. I bring up See’s argument because Tyler’s work in the 1940s takes on a similar structure. Tyler speaks from the literal position of a member in the critical establishment, but, does so in order to “universalize queer experience.” In other words, Tyler makes “new criticism” ‘queer’, a move he is only able to conduct through an attempt to make all criticism of the moment queer. See, Sam See, “Making Modernism New: Queer Mythology in *The Young and Evil*,” *ELH* 76, no. 4 (2009): 1073–1105.

⁵⁷ Parker Tyler, “The Point of View,” *View* 3, no. 1 (April 1943): 5.

⁵⁸ Parker Tyler, “Movie Letter: Experimental Film: A New Growth,” *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 1 (Winter 1949): 144.

verbalize the posture of a work in order to create a mode of attachment where there previously was none. Tyler argues that Hollywood cinema can do this without a critic, because the film industry works to embed an interpretation of the film within the film itself; Tyler calls this embedded interpretation, “internal interpretation.” Experimental Film, though, and other works of high culture, require verbal-critical interpretation to do the same work, which explains their so-called inaccessibility. Either way, interpretation of some kind is necessary to allow the renewal of emotional contact with the world.

The system of interpretations, what Tyler calls “criticism,” provides a necessary precondition for art. Without it, an art would not be “worthy of the name.” This implies that in order for art to enact its social function of renewing emotional contact with the world, art requires the critic. And, since emotional contact seems to be the ultimate goal, the critic must depart the realm of her own hermeticism. Hermeticism is the professional “critical distance” between the critic’s sensing body and the work of art, a distance that also separates the critic from the public and its affective relation to art. In other words, criticism must escape the professionalism that enforces, to use Raymond Williams’ term, a structure of feeling that promotes not feeling. Jonathan Flatley sees structure of feeling as “the term to describe the mediating structure—one just as socially produced as ideology—that facilitates and shapes our affective attachment to different objects in the social order.”⁵⁹ Tyler takes interpretation – and all of the apparatuses that support it, be they journals, universities, or museums – to be this mediating structure, the very set of social and institutional relations that can create an emotional cast around a work of art or literature.

⁵⁹ Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 26, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10318451>.

Enabling this emotional contact with the world was important to maximizing the social force of cultural work. In the same article where he describes that criticism's function is to relate a work to culture as whole, Tyler describes the potential for Cinema 16, an experimental film society based in Manhattan, to give form to an audience of experimental film. Cinema 16 provided an educating function that competed with the "internal interpretation" embedded into Hollywood cinema by providing the otherwise implicit interpretation that would expand the "experimental cult" through the activities of the society. This was one of the explicit goals of the organization, as outlined in its "Statement of Purpose": "CINEMA 16 will thereby advance the appreciation of the motion picture not merely as an art, but as a powerful social force."⁶⁰ Building on the popularity of weekly film screenings at MoMA, Cinema 16 promoted this goal by arranging frequent screenings and discussions of a wide range of visual and film media – including, "painting on glass and on negative film, synthetic sound, new color-devices, and stroboscopic photography" – in various venues throughout New York City.⁶¹ Cinema 16 assisted its members in seeing the poetic and social content of these experimental techniques to combat the Hollywood appropriation of these techniques for use in its own films, an appropriation that restricted the expression of these forms by the sheer strength of the narrative of Hollywood film. In other words, Cinema 16 provided an interpretive lens with which to understand cinematic techniques and forms that, when appropriated in Hollywood cinema, lost their efficacy due to the strength of the "internal interpretation" of Hollywood cinema. In a different context, Tyler saw this as the "flattening" of a complex poetic plot into a single generic dimension, a slightly askew version of the heresy of paraphrase that "talk[ed] down to the public." At the same time, Tyler reserved concern that Cinema 16 may foster holier-than-thou audiences of experimental cinema

⁶⁰ qtd. in Scott MacDonald, *Cinema 16: Documents toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 6.

⁶¹ Tyler, "Movie Letter: Experimental Film: A New Growth," 143.

who failed to see the ways cinema arts were responding to and were an important part of the social body. Cinema was not solely a formal engagement but a social and political one as well. Tyler saw that the institutions of criticism and criticism itself should be integral threads in the social and political fabric, a much different perspective than John Crowe Ransom and his Criticism Inc.

Because Tyler took criticism's function to be an affective medium between an audience and a work of art, he grew particularly exhausted with the emotional dissociation required to perform objective modes of criticism. From his perspective, criticism is a necessary conduit for the circulation of emotion. Even if criticism and the interpretations it performs are a mediating structure, criticism is still very much in contact with everything that surrounds it. In her work on the American tropics and ecological personhood, Monique Allewaert has described mediation in terms of ecology and argues that "everything including that which is conventionally understood as a medium...is bound up in processes of touching and proximity."⁶² Allewaert's definition illuminates this context, because, though Tyler sees criticism as a mediating structure – a means for artwork that doesn't otherwise have a verbal-critic interpretation "to renew our emotional contact with the world" – he argues that this structure should not be isolated from that world.

Tyler's thought on the film medium supports this idea. He argues that the medium itself is altered by the proximity and tactile engagements of those that work towards its making. This was especially the case for Hollywood film, where the resulting film-image would be a "three-ring circus, a contest for attention between the make-up man, the dialogue writer, and the star's personality."⁶³ Further, in Juan A. Suárez's gloss of Tyler, this fragmentation is intensified during viewing because of "the spectator's fetishistic fixation on specific visual motifs, including

⁶² Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 8.

⁶³ Parker Tyler, *The Hollywood Hallucination* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1944), 15.

parts of the actors' bodies."⁶⁴ The polymorphous desires of the film's production staff, its cast, and a given audience alter the image projected from celluloid film. This results from fetishistic fixation and fragmentation. Freud suggested that a "fetish comes to life, so to speak, [when] some process has been suddenly interrupted."⁶⁵ For Tyler at the level of the film, the interrupted process is one of emotional renewal, and it is being interrupted not necessarily by the "shock" of castration, which is Freud's explanation, but by the various thresholds that enforce rationality.⁶⁶ Yet, Tyler argued that these potentially conflicting desires and fetishistic fragmentations could be made whole by locating a myth that unites the multitudinous affects of the film.⁶⁷ Like the surrealists he often published in *View*, Tyler saw that objective knowledge was possible only through an embrace of what the otherwise rational world has marked as irrational, a giving of oneself completely to the "automatic" emotional and affective processes of culture.⁶⁸ If there was

⁶⁴ Juan Antonio Suárez, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* (University of Illinois Press, 2007), 204.

⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism (1927)" in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 207.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* To continue down this road would be to connect with Tyler's surrealism. In 1945, upon encountering similar ideas of Tyler, Eric Bentley wrote in a review that he couldn't even grapple with Tyler's "besetting temptation...to substitute surrealistic oratory for reasoning."

⁶⁷ Juan A. Suárez points out that later in Tyler's career, while working closely with the Gryphon group of experimental filmmakers, he would define myth as "a visionary plan, a central unifying idea, an underlying level of referentiality." Juan A. Suárez, "Myth, Matter, Queerness: The Cinema of Willard Maas, Marie Menken, and the Gryphon Group, 1943-1969," *Grey Room* 36 (Summer 2009): 73.

⁶⁸ At this statement, Adorno throws up a red flag. Adorno argued that Anti-Semitic and Fascist propaganda aimed at "winning people over by *playing upon their unconscious mechanisms* rather than by presenting ideas and arguments" (219). Adorno defines these unconscious mechanisms as irrational and, hence, ties totalitarianism with the privileging of irrationality. He is not alone in making this claim. Richard Wright argued that the world of Bigger Thomas "existed on a plane of animal sensation alone" because of the world-historical, proletarian, and national blackness tugging at his and his class's being (18). Wright argues, in Cedric Robinson's gloss, that "the Nazi movement succeeded because it offered in the stead of an existential terror, a new, unambiguous social order" (298). Despite their glorification of irrationalism, however, surrealists, including André Breton, spoke out against fascism during the Spanish Civil War. Tyler does not seek to replace rationality with irrationality, but rather, aims to point out the inevitable intermingling of the two. Theodor W. Adorno, "Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda," in *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. Stephen Crook (London: Routledge, 2002), 218–32; Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," *The Saturday Review of Literature* 22, no. 6 (June 1940): 3–4, 17–20; Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

any hope for interpretation, the critic must be in the thick of the circulation of desires and affects, not outside of it. By these lights, criticism is what structures and mediates that circulation.

Thus, Tyler's definition of criticism is undoubtedly minor. In "What Is a Minor Literature?" Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari outline three characteristics of what they call minor literature:

1. The language of minor literature is a construction that actively deterritorializes the major language from which it is formed. Deterritorialization, in this case, means that the minor language, often through its impossibility of expression, makes strange, and hence, visible the limitations of expression in the major language.
2. Everything in minor literature is political.
3. Everything in minor literature takes on "a collective value," often in the form of an assemblage, which is able to speak of broad social forces.

With regard to the first characteristic, Tyler argues that professional literary politics are marked by their "emotionalism." By making this observation, Tyler calls into question the practice in which these critics "feminize" the audience of mass culture. This, of course, reveals a limitation of the detached and objective criticism proposed by those critiquing the feminized audience for succumbing to an affective overload. The supposed intellect of the masculine critic is merely a cover for the otherwise emotional and reactionary distinctions the masculinist critic levels.

Indeed, Tyler deterritorializes the jargon of critical interpretation, which has become a means for distancing the reader of poetry from the poem. As to the second characteristic, Tyler suggests that criticism must repair and renew the "emotional contact with the world" between the spectator and the film, or the reader and the poem. An essential part of this renewal is that criticism, in this form, is understood to be a social force. By the same token, in challenging the

value and institutional distinctions fostered by the major language of criticism, the minor criticism of Tyler shows how the field of criticism is a political field, one that is actively contested because of its structural role in mediating affective attachments to art objects. Finally for the third criteria, criticism must be an essential part of the social and its requisite circulation of affects, which suggests that criticism should not be an enunciation from an elite and professional class. Rather, this criticism, surrounded on all sides by the desire and affects of its audiences, should become a statement of social forces more broadly. This makes criticism and its role in the social, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, “*the people’s concern*.”⁶⁹

Of the three characteristics of minor literature, Deleuze and Guattari “say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.”⁷⁰ In the particular case of criticism, the revolutionary conditions that arise are a new set of criteria with which to consider established criticism. In some sense, minor criticism shows us the banal fact that the field of criticism is contested, because of its political importance. More importantly, because of this banal fact, it becomes clear that the enclosure of criticism – denying audiences of their “feeling” – privileges the sense of criticism as a professional authority for taste (and Tyler might add, for unfeeling) over a constantly shifting ecology of affective and intellectual responses to a wide range of works, which is very much tied to the historical, social, and political conditions of a given moment. Criticism is not the mere articulation of the myth that unites the multitudinous desires of a work, instead it is the struggle to define that myth between a multitude of reading methods.

Ultimately, the pursuit of “myth” might be another way of looking at the “objective” new criticism in drag. The term and its supernatural connotation combats the otherwise scientific

⁶⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, *Theory and History of Literature*, v. 30 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

positioning of criticism. Tyler shows how major criticism camps again by intimating that the efforts of critics to judge poetic communication in a matter of fact way, is, itself a seemingly sacred enterprise, a supernatural effort in controlling the conditions of reading and interpreting. This camp performance of objectivity becomes visible through the deterritorialization afforded by Tyler's insistence that criticism performs a mediating function between the audience and its emotional attachment to the work of art. Looking back at Tyler's work through the retrospective lens of a New Critically-based genealogy for literary criticism, we might suggest that Tyler wrote "criticism," but not criticism. He is the camp performer, attempting to articulate his critique from the inside. Yet, when looked at through the lens of minor criticism, which insists upon a shifting ecology of institutions, affects, and audiences, we see that it was the New Critics who performed the gestures and stylizations of "criticism," not Tyler. Objective criticism, itself, comes to be seen as the opposite pole of Tyler's camp performance, and is, in effect, a camp performance itself.

Minor Criticism as Method: Covering *Kenyon* and *View*

Does minor criticism, which I've defined as a struggle for the mediating structure between the affective response of readers or spectators and the art they view, provide a way to view the relationship between mid-century journals, public and academic audiences, and, ultimately, the possibility of a less-dominant New Criticism? Answering yes opens up previously unavailable connections between far-flung periodicals and critical approaches. Further, it suggests that with minor criticism comes a method, a way of doing work on criticism and theory that leaves open the possibility that literary theory might have a role in doing "the people's work." In other words, literary theory can have a role in the social sphere, of which the academy is one

small part among many others. Such a goal may seem strange, especially given theory's traditional hermeticism, but, as I hope to have shown through Tyler's work, criticism, ultimately, serves as a structure of feeling for works of art and literature broadly construed.

Tyler's minor criticism pushes against the perceived stability of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the structure of the field" by questioning the integrity of its infrastructure.⁷¹ The pressure applied by this push has a methodological result. As Eric Hayot argues, the media specificity and form of an exemplary object plays an important role in theorizing. He writes, "the evidentiary material that sustains any general or theoretical conclusion (be it anecdote or description, novel or poem, photograph, medical case study, or union pamphlet) must exert formal and thematic pressures on the theory that it comes to sustain, so that ideas about anecdotes will express, however strongly or mildly, something of that anecdotal origin in their form, ideas about newspaper articles will owe something to the fact that they are about that particular form of mass production" and so on.⁷² Hayot concludes that the generic form of a methodology ultimately puts pressure on the theory of that methodology in a feedback loop that yields an eventual homeostatic return to the form of the evidentiary material. Importantly in Hayot's estimation theory contains a trace of its material origin. This means that if the project of criticism before

⁷¹ Pierre Bourdieu, among the most important theorists in conceptualizing the function of critical fields and institutions in the reception of art, argues that "the most personal judgements it is possible to make of a work...are always collective judgements in the sense of position-takings referring to other position-takings through the intermediary of the objective relations between the positions of their authors within the field. Through the public meaning of the work, through the objective sanctions imposed by the symbolic market upon the producers' 'aspirations' and 'ambitions' and, in particular, through the degree of recognition and consecration it accords them, the entire structure of the field interposes itself between producers and their work." Minor criticism suggests that the "structure of the field" that intervenes between producers, as well as audiences, of a work is based itself on a system of collective judgements, rather than a set of objective criteria. The revelation that objectivity may itself merely be an authorized judgment, suggesting its precarity, destabilizes the notion that criticism itself is a stable structure. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 135–6.

⁷² Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain*, *Modernist Literature & Culture* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 59.

1950 is about taking stock of the present, and, the sense of that present was developed through a mediating structure largely outlined in periodicals and books, then those materials should impact the broader theory that emerges from them. But, the “evidentiary material” used to map this present expanded well beyond text, to visual art, dance, music, and even historical and political treatises. Therefore, to determine the shape-shifting mediating structure known as criticism, we should trace the connections between the various journals and the ways that they perceive their audiences to stake a claim on criticism, as well as the evidentiary material of the journals themselves. Simply put, this means that additional dimensions of these journals become contested ground for determining the shape of criticism, including advertisements, cover design, and other features that are otherwise made invisible in most efforts to describe methods of literary criticism and theory. Mapping these elements of a given present suggests new historical understandings of the social and political aims of critical thought, but also provide novel insight for how criticism can be theorized and practiced.

Case in point: the relationship between *View*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Partisan Review*. Take the following open letter to John Crowe Ransom, written by Parker Tyler, published in *View*, that actively brings together the various readerships of ideologically distinct publications and suggests that, what’s published in one, has ramifications for the political and social orders promoted by them all:

A movement which was mobilized in a much more organic sense than Surrealism, and which received all Mr. Rahv’s literary credit, was Stalinist-Leninist Marxism. Booming in 1934 with Mr. Rahv and colleagues at its head, it reached immobility about two years later on interference from Moscow. Rahv and Co. demobilized it till they could remobilize it in 1937 under the banner of (I quote their own editorial statement) “literary

editorship a once exacting and adventurous *which characterized the magazine of esthetic revolt.*" (My italics.) Apparently even this slogan has become Dwight Macdonald's old hat. Evidently Rahv and Co. had developed a complex about literary mobilizations and longevity of their credit – or maybe it was that they never had anything permanent to put on paper. Mr. Rahv has no community with the spokesmen for other movements, nor any history as their critic when it would have been "timely" to criticize them. He has no means of showing the immobilization of Surrealism nor whether or not it may have been dialectically transformed while he was getting review copies from *The Nation*. He has abandoned every Marxist critical belief he swore to in such a vibrant voice. If the class-conscious literature he proclaimed in 1934 is still alive, he is hiding its light under camouflage communiqués. Now he is a literary camp-follower, a creator of catch-words for college boys, a hat-doffer to current intellectual fashions such as Kafka. Indeed, he himself has been so thoroughly immobilized in relation to the "social" literature he still professes vaguely to admire that we are forced to include him among the victims of that curious 20th century disease, literary sclerosis of the Stalin gland, with ganGreenberg complications.⁷³

⁷³ As I'll suggest in a moment, Tyler's anger may have been sparked by Rahv's interpretation of the surrealists, but, is clearly fueled by a much larger concern with literary culture. While certainly critical of the surrealist poets included in the 1941 *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*, Rahv's review doesn't appear as damaging as Tyler's letter might intimate. Writing about Andre Breton's "Fata Morgana," Rahv argued that Breton failed to meet the standards of good surrealist art enunciated in any number of Surrealist manifestoes: "it neither probes the hidden mind nor unfolds the element of the 'marvelous'; and its shock value—that famous prescription of M. Breton's—is nil." Ultimately, Rahv decides that "surrealism has virtually exhausted its literary credit." Parker Tyler, "Open Letter to J.C. Ransom," *View* 2, no. 2 (May 1942). Philip Rahv, "Souvenirs and Experiments," *The Kenyon Review* 4, no. 2 (April 1942): 238–40.

Other letters in this edition of "*View* Listens," the magazine's letter to the editor page, reinforce the expanse of *View*'s address. Other correspondents include William Carlos Williams, Henry Miller, Dwight Macdonald, and Andre Masson.

Tyler's letter hails a wide range of periodicals of the 1940s literary scene in the span of a paragraph: published in *View* and addressed to the *Kenyon Review*, which published the review in question, Tyler also speaks to the first editorial of Philip Rahv and Dwight Macdonald's *Partisan Review* after the publication broke ties with the John Reed Club. He invokes *The Nation* and one of its famed contributors Clement Greenberg, who, of course, also published in the *Partisan Review*, and comes to the defense of James Laughlin's *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* of 1941, which is the work under review by Rahv that prompted this letter. In addition to his interpellation of periodical publics, Tyler also captures the strife of the critical establishment -- caught amidst a Leftist political crisis with influences from Stalinism, Leninism, the Communist International, liberalism, and even the right (Ransom) -- to define the political function, if any, of literature. Further, he captures concerns about the college-bound direction of literary critical culture; calling Rahv a "camp-follower" of and "hat-doffer" to "intellectual fashions" and the "catch-words," which are an integral part of those fashions, comes across as a major grievance in the conflict over criticism's enclosure in the academy.

Ultimately, Tyler rails against the separation of the elite group of critics, who must speak to one another in "camouflage communiqués," from the class-conscious workers so celebrated by Marxism (in theory, at least).⁷⁴ Yet, Tyler's letter also shows that announcing criticism as a concern of the people could be addressed to -- and was expected to be heard by -- the audiences

⁷⁴ In outlining the historical development of the black radical tradition, Cedric J. Robinson has argued that, "Marxism, the dominant form that the critique of capitalism has assumed in Western thought, incorporated theoretical and ideological weaknesses that stemmed from the same social forces that provided the bases of capitalist formation" (10). This is to say Marxian thought -- including the thought of the famously-not-a-Marxist Karl Marx -- carries within it a particular dominant class distinction; a group of intellectuals "articulate," but really dictate, the revolutionary desires of the working and peasant classes. In making this claim, Robinson asks if the Western Marxist tradition really is so radical. See, Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

of this group of periodicals and political affiliations.⁷⁵ Tyler's open letter, vitriolic though it is, shows that the critical field in the 1940s could be imagined as one nominally connected to political concerns of "the people." His intense reaction, in part, reveals his anxiety that the literary and art world was beginning to demobilize, falling to the "slogans," "fashions," and "catch-words" of the interests of capital. Fueling this concern was a particular assertion in Rahv's review. Rahv writes, "surrealism has virtually exhausted its literary credit," suggesting that, of course, the movement could no longer accrue and was even in debt to literary capital. By the end of the decade, many New Critics, including John Crowe Ransom, feared the exhaustion of capital and credit for criticism in general, which, as I argued in the previous chapter, was essential for rebranding criticism through its literal and figural capitalization as "New Criticism."

Tyler's encompassing address wasn't the only thing that brought together these mid-century journals that had competing political and aesthetic aims. In fact, *View* – a magazine known now primarily for its promotion of surrealism and experimental artists, like Marcel Duchamp – shared many contributors with *Kenyon Review*, a journal much more associated with the traditional development of criticism. Contributors that published in both venues included Paul Goodman, Marshall McLuhan, H.R. Hays, W.H. Auden, Wyndham Lewis, Lionel Abel, Randall Jarrell, and Kenneth Burke. Also, Stark Young – one of the "Twelve Southerners" of the

⁷⁵ Kenneth Burke proposed that the term "the people" should be used over "the worker" in his 1935 speech before the first American Writer's Congress: "In suggesting that "the people," rather than "the worker," rate highest in our hierarchy of symbols, I suppose I am suggesting fundamentally that one cannot extend the doctrine of revolutionary thought among the lower middle class without using middle-class values—just as the Church invariably converted pagans by making the local deities into saints. I should also point out that we are very close to this symbol of the people" in our term "the masses," which is embodied in the title of the leading radical magazine. But I think that the term "the people" is closer to our folkways." John Logie supplies an excellent account of Burke's speech, the various reactions to it, and Burke's surprise at the virulence of those reactions in "WE WRITE FOR THE WORKERS": Authorship and Communism in Kenneth Burke and Richard Wright," *KB Journal* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2005): <http://kbjournal.org/logie>. Also see, Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Verso, 1998), 55–56.

Southern Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*—served as an advisory editor for *View* during the majority of its print run. Another member of *View*'s advisory board, James Johnson Sweeney, who was the director of the department of painting and sculpture at MoMA and later directed the Guggenheim Museum, published reviews of surrealist public art, Mexican art, and of Gertrude Stein's *Picasso* alongside *The Art of Cezanne* by Albert Barnes of Barnes Foundation fame.

Yet, this overlap expanded beyond contributors. In fact, writers often had a tendency to repeat themselves in both venues. In 1942 Paul Goodman published "Frank Lloyd Wright on Architecture" (co-written with his architect brother, Percival) in *Kenyon* and three years later published on Wright again in a piece for *View*, titled "Designs for Living." Marshall McLuhan panned middlebrow magazines in both publications within a few years time and Kenneth Burke published an extended excerpt of his forthcoming *Grammar of Motives* in *View* and in *Kenyon*. The litany of repetitions continues: letters from appreciative U.S. soldiers in Europe, reviews of Afro-Cuban poets, and poetry by Paul Valéry, some of which was translated and featured in the *Southern Review* and *Sewanee Review*, as well.

The similarities between *View* and *Kenyon* went beyond shared contributors and subject matter. The poetry and fiction writing featured in *View* often became the subject of reviews in *Kenyon* and vice versa. Lloyd Mallan reviewed the poetry of Nicolás Guillén, which was the first review of any black poetry in *Kenyon*, under the guise of H.R. Hays' *Spanish American Poets* collection. Two years before, *View* published the Afro-Cuban poet's "Ballad of the Guije" and "Street Cry," which were both translated by Hays. Paul Bowles, who made his debut in Tyler and Ford's *Blues*, published travelogues of Morocco in *View* and Richard Chase reviewed Bowles's novel about Tangier, *Let It Come Down*, alongside Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in *Kenyon*. (I discuss this review at some length in the following chapter.) Also, despite writing a

negative review of Tyler's *Hollywood Hallucination* – the review was dedicated to collecting “slightly screwy” and “characteristic Tylerisms” – Eric Bentley found himself writing about New York theater in the very same issue of *View* where Alan S. Downer reviewed Bentley's most recent monograph, *The Playwright as Thinker*. When thinking of *Kenyon* and *View* as working together, we see that they had an important role in importing intellectual trends from outside the United States. For example, *View* and *Kenyon* helped to bring French existentialist literature and philosophy to the United States. In 1946, *View* published the first English-language excerpt of Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*, as well as a translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's “The Nationalization of Literature.” *Kenyon* followed suit after *View* folded in 1947 by publishing three essays by Marjorie Greene on existential philosophers, among them Sartre, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, and Gabriel Marcel. Philip Blair Rice also contributed essays to *Kenyon* on the subject.⁷⁶

Perhaps because all of this shared content drew a wanting audience, journal editors from other literary critical journals saw *View* as an appropriate venue to advertise their latest issues. The May 1945 issue of *View* featured advertisements for *The Sewanee Review* (the ad mentions that circulation has tripled since October 1944, the beginning of Tate's tenure as editor), an issue of *Partisan Review*, which had a line up of *Kenyon* and *View* contributors (Eric Bentley, Delmore Schwartz, James Johnson Sweeney, and Dwight Macdonald), and *Hemispheres*, a journal of French-American poetry publishing new work by Aimé Césaire and Nicolás Guillén. At the same time, *View* displays more concretely than *Kenyon Review* the idea that midcentury literary critics were likely to read both *P.M.L.A.* and *The New Yorker*. In addition to

⁷⁶ Marjorie Grene, “The Philosophy,” *The Kenyon Review* 9, no. 1 (January 1947): 48–69; Marjorie Grene, “L'Homme Est Une Passion Inutile: Sartre and Heidegger,” *The Kenyon Review* 9, no. 2 (April 1947): 167–85; Marjorie Grene, “Two More Existentialists: Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel,” *The Kenyon Review* 9, no. 3 (July 1947): 382–99; Marjorie Grene, “Philosopher's Circus,” *The Kenyon Review* 10, no. 4 (October 1948): 688–91; Philip Blair Rice, “An Existentialist Allegory,” *The Kenyon Review* 10, no. 4 (October 1948): 691–99; Philip Blair Rice, “Existentialism and the Self,” *The Kenyon Review* 12, no. 2 (April 1950): 304–30.

advertisements for critical journals, there were announcements for New York art galleries, Blue Note Records, Shocking de Schiaparelli perfume, and SKOL tanning lotion.

The SKOL advertisement is particularly striking given Tyler and Ford's critique of the feminization of "professional literary politics." The ad was featured on the back of the May 1945 issue of *View* on "Tropical Americana" and, as such, would be proudly displayed while a critic reads the magazine in public. A woman's face stares up, seemingly to the sun, a halo of white surrounding her face and body. Her slightly open mouth and squinting eyes suggest that using SKOL not only yields a flattering tan, but a true sense of pleasure. The ad's placement implies that the critic reading *View* is embodied and ecstatic, and, perhaps most importantly for SKOL's profit margin, even reading about the Caribbean and South America requires protection from the sun. To put it plainly, advertising sun-tan lotion in a critical magazine confirms that, in fact, critics have bodies of their own that are, at the very least, vulnerable to a "painful sunburn," if not receptive to a wider range of sensation and affects. The ad is a wry reminder that the critic's body is also a feminized body.

Advertisements for SKOL, however, do not appear in the *Kenyon Review*, nor do advertisements for much anything else besides literary journals and recent book releases. On some level, it goes without saying that *View* and *Kenyon* have different interests and, perhaps, grossly different audience. That Kenneth Burke, for example, offered an excerpt of *Grammar of Motives* to each publication could have been a strategy to reach a wider audience than had he just published in one. (He also published early portions of the book in *Accent*, *Chimera*, and *The Sewanee Review*). At the same time, it seems equally plausible for a reader who had taken interest in Burke's thought would look to another venue to seek out Burke's work again. Tyler's open letter supports this second explanation for why Burke published excerpts of *Grammar of*

Motives in multiple venues. Tyler's open letter writes to readers who are well-versed in the era's critical print culture: they should understand that Rahv and Macdonald edited *Partisan Review*, that Ransom edited *Kenyon Review*, and the politics of *The Nation*, let alone the positions of those magazines on "social" literature. In addition, Tyler anticipates his readers to not only be readers of *View* but also to be readers of *Partisan*, *Kenyon*, and even *The Nation* and vice versa. In addition, Tyler expects that those who write for all of these magazines will likely encounter his letter while flipping through *View*'s sizable pages.

Even though these periodicals share publics, it is important to recognize how these publications are different and what that difference says about the wider (print) culture of criticism in the mid-century. Arguably, the conversation between the journals – the overarching mediating structure between readers and publications – shows that the objects and modes of criticism in the midcentury were not dictated by a group of authoritarian critics at *Partisan Review* or *Kenyon Review*. Rather, criticism itself could be dramatically altered by contributions from "minor" publications, like *View*. At the same time Tyler addresses John Crowe Ransom, he addresses *View*'s niche public, who could be members of a much larger critical public. As Bernard Lahire has argued, participants in a literary field can participate in multiple ways, as professionals, as fanatics, or as occasional players. Beyond that, participants in this "game" can have interests totally outside of it; William Carlos Williams, for example, had a practice as a physician). Writers could have a "double life."⁷⁷ The New Criticism, understood as "professional literary politics," does not account for this type of exchange. Yet once the double life of writers is recognized, it opens new angles for critical inquiries into the material dimensions of criticism,

⁷⁷ "Can they [writers] "invest" with equal intensity in different social worlds, whether or not these are organized as fields of struggle? And when they participate in different "fields" (literary, medical, journalistic, academic, diplomatic, et cetera), can they simultaneously invest in both fields and integrate the *illusio* (e.g. beliefs and values of both)? Is it possible to belong to two different fields and have incorporate the specific *illusio* of each?" Lahire, "The Double Life of Writers," 446.

starting with the cover of the journal. The material dimensions of criticism, as I've shown throughout this chapter and in the example that follows, are absolutely essential towards seeing criticism not as an abstracted field, but, rather as a dynamic form of mediation, an interplay between varying audiences, feelings, cultural works, and institutions. In addition, this emphasis on the material shows how normally paratextual phenomenon, like the cover of a journal, may have affected a reader's understanding of a set of critical practices. Analyzing the cover of a journal, among other ephemera and paratextual apparatus, can provide an alternative mode for understanding not only the historical understanding of a particular type of literary theory, but such materials can also provide us now with alternative sites for doing and critiquing theory.

László Maholy-Nagy's cover design for the *Kenyon Review*, for example, suggests a particular method of interpretation that closely aligns with Ransom's sense that a poem, or a work of literature, must be taken as an ontologically distinct object in order to be interpreted. Influenced by Bauhaus, Maholy-Nagy founded the Chicago-based School of Design (later known as Institute of Design) with the help of Charles W. Morris, an occasional contributor to the *Kenyon Review*. In Chicago, Maholy-Nagy laid out the principles of the New Bauhaus. Beyond "form following function," as the architect Louis Sullivan famously stated, Maholy-Nagy asserted that "form also follows—or at least it should follow—existing scientific, technical, artistic developments, including sociology and economy." Even with his attention to form – like Ransom's colleague Cleanth Brooks, Maholy-Nagy took form to be "organic" – Maholy-Nagy seemed a curious choice to design the cover of Ransom's *Kenyon Review*. In a review of Maholy-Nagy's photography in *Kenyon* in 1938, Ransom spoke out against Maholy-Nagy's appreciation of industrial functionalism, which, inspired by Russian constructivists, aimed to move viewers to revolutionary action by bold colors, geometric shapes, and clean lines.

Nevertheless, with the convincing of Malcolm Cowley in 1942, Ransom green-lighted Maholy-Nagy's design for *Kenyon*.

Maholy-Nagy's *Kenyon Review* cover has two solid rectangular blocks in contrasting color with the text, "The Kenyon Review," set left-aligned in Bodoni Ultra in the top block and the season and year in the lowerblock set in the same typeface, all in lowercase. Despite the lack of depth in the design, the split-page and alternating colors suggest the distinction between text and context promoted by New Criticism, the same distinction that Tyler saw as premised by an implicit management of affect. The text on the cover is easy to read because of its contrast from the background in which it is set. The foregrounding of text reminds *Kenyon*'s readers of literature's status as a unique form of communication, an organic text-object that requires its own system of knowledge. At the same time, the stark contrast between text and background acknowledges the importance of context to the legibility of text. For example, if the text were light blue and the background a darker blue, the journal's title would be much more difficult to read. If both were the same color, the text would be entirely indistinguishable. Indeed, Maholy-Nagy's *Kenyon* cover design represents the flux of new critical practice at this moment. It privileges the appearance of text, but the legibility of that text doesn't rely upon the text itself: its legibility relies upon the context in which it is situated. Maholy-Nagy's cover figures reading and criticism as one with a minimum of collateral sensory distraction, a bold two-dimensional visual representation of the clarity that criticism provides its object.

One cover of *View* takes this clarity and complicates it by revealing the third-dimension beyond *Kenyon*'s two-dimensional curtain. In doing so, *View* performs the same type of deterritorialization as Tyler's minor criticism; it suggests that professional literary politics are, in fact, an infrastructure to preserve the integrity of the phallus. The fall 1946 cover of *View*,

designed by the Japanese-American artist, Isamu Noguchi, depicts the solid rectangles that make up *Kenyon*'s cover floating around the edges of a scaffolding made up of metal rods loosely held together with hand ties.⁷⁸ The flimsy infrastructure protects a signature Noguchi statue floating in its center. The statue is an oblong cylinder with a deep circular indentation in its top and clearly recalls a phallus. The journal's name is scattered across the page with 'V' and 'W' in large type in the upper-left and bottom-right hand corners respectively. The 'i' stays close to the 'V' and the 'E' is found below this configuration, on the bottom-left of the page. Noguchi's cover shows that the contrast between text and context, which was so prominent in Maholy-Nagy's design for *Kenyon*, serves as a mask for the otherwise flimsy infrastructure protecting the memorial to masculinity at its center. Instead, text recedes into context; it becomes one object among fine art (Noguchi's sculpture), architecture (the scaffolding), and the movies (the glowing yellow planes of the cinema screen), to be scrutinized. This cover of *View* shows the stage directions for the performance of patriarchal privilege enacted by the cover of *Kenyon*.

The dialogue between the covers of these journals confirms Tyler's insight about criticism in the 1930s and 1940s: criticism could only be defined by its assemblage, not by its stasis. Stasis, in some form, appears to be the disease that criticism can fall prey to, in Tyler's phrase, "the literary sclerosis of the Stalin gland, with ganGreenberg complications." Sclerosis, "the morbid hardening of any tissue or structure," points to a critical body that has hardened against feeling. That it is of the Stalin gland intimates, perhaps, Stalin's tendency toward

⁷⁸ Prior to this design Noguchi had supported Tyler's critical work in a letter to Allen Tate. Noguchi wrote to endorse Tyler's study of Rodin that Tate ultimately rejected because Henry Holt's Sales Department didn't think it could sell at \$5/copy. Noguchi wrote that Tyler's work "carries us to an evaluation [sic] and an understanding of our immediate past, through it better to understand our present plight – to perhaps point to an approach of a new faith beyond science and doom." Noguchi seems to agree with Tyler's assertion that culture must be situated in its social context to be understood. Isamu Noguchi to Allen Tate, March 20, 1947, Parker Tyler Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

centralization and the strengthening of the state. The portmanteau *gangrene* Greenberg refers to more dead tissue (*gangrene*) and Clement Greenberg, who, in his writing on kitsch, reaffirms the sensory overload that attracts the un-cultivated spectator; kitsch “provides experience for the insensitive with far greater immediacy than serious fiction can hope to do.”⁷⁹

All of that withering tissue, all of that loss of sensation, all of that isolation forged by way of false distinctions. In 1968, while his authority to offer criticism was called into question by the student uprising, *Kenyon Review* veteran, Theodor Adorno writes that

the unspoken abrogation of the right to critique for those who have no position makes the privilege of education, especially the career insulated by official examinations, into the authority defining who may criticize, whereas the truth content of critique alone should be that authority. All this is unspoken and not institutionally anchored but so deeply present in the preconscious of innumerable people that it exercises a social control.⁸⁰

Tyler’s minor criticism shows that “unspoken” and “deeply present” notions of the authority of literary criticism in the 1930s and 1940s were, in fact, open for critique. These notions could be refigured because Tyler, and other critics like him, who were both inside and outside the system of professional literary politics, took the professional mediating structure as an affect itself. Importantly – and unlike the Adorno of the *Culture Industries* essay – Tyler saw the audience as not a blank slate to be influenced, but as a living, breathing multitude to be addressed, to be affected through and with criticism.

⁷⁹ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (Fall 1939): 44.

⁸⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Critique,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 285.

Evil, Camp, and the Code of Criticism

In 1943, John Crowe Ransom pulled Robert Duncan's "African Elegy" from production for the Fall 1944 issue of *Kenyon Review*. Duncan's poem had been accepted several months before and was even typeset. After reading Duncan's essay, "The Homosexual in Society," in Dwight Macdonald's *politics*, Ransom decided not to publish Duncan's poem: "It seems to me to have obvious homosexual advertisement, and for that reason not to be eligible for publication."⁸¹ In reaction, Duncan resisted and threatened a lawsuit for a violation of the First Amendment, Ransom replied, "I cannot agree with your position that homosexuality is not abnormal. It is biologically abnormal in the most obvious sense, I am not sure whether or not state and federal laws regard it so, but I think they do."⁸² In "The Homosexual in Society" Duncan equated the struggle of "homosexuals" to other groups perceived to be "abnormal:" "Negroes" and Jews. But Duncan expressed particular frustration with the queer community for its "cult of homosexual superiority to the human race: the cultivation of a secret language, the *camp*, a tone and a vocabulary that is loaded with a contempt for the human."⁸³ Duncan's point here was to degrade camp, to speak out against its "secret language," or code, because, according to Duncan, this code resisted universal human equality more than the counter-discourse of other marginalized groups, and placed queer life at the top of the human hierarchy. Duncan spoke out against camp in other writings. In fact, he wrote that *View* was a primary offender in cultivating the superiority associated with camp code. Despite Duncan's arguments against camp, Ransom, according to Jeff Hamilton, "thought "An African Elegy" was full of code," the same code that

⁸¹ qtd. in Jeff Hamilton, "Wrath Moves in the Music: Robert Duncan, Laura Riding, Craft and Force in Cold War Poetics," *Jacket* 26 (October 2004), <http://jacketmagazine.com/26/dunc-hami.html>.

⁸² qtd. in *ibid*.

⁸³ Robert Duncan, "The Homosexual in Society," *politics* 1, no. 7 (August 1944): 210.

Duncan railed against.⁸⁴ Duncan saw camp as reason to fight against the “inhumanity of his own group,” and, apparently, so did Ransom after registering camp in Duncan’s poetry. In other words, camp performance, as Trask puts it, may be able to take whatever works and turn it “inside-out,” but, at the same time, the recognition of camp performance as such may jeopardize the performative stakes. While camp is often rife with ambiguity, once that ambiguity falls away, what is left is a ‘code’, the language of a resistant counter-insurgency, which for some provides a reason for a removal of camp from public discourse.

Later in his life, Parker Tyler suggested that “the world calls ‘evil’ and has always called so, whoever rejects labels and methods and systems, even nominal rights and privileges, in order to uncompromisingly create its own individual good.”⁸⁵ Tyler’s definition of ‘evil’ provides a good summary of Duncan on “camp” and Ransom on “homosexuality.” But, as usual, Tyler’s definition has a critical edge. He defines not ‘evil’, but what *the world calls* ‘evil’. This world can be the professional literary politics that can be found in both Duncan and Ransom’s formulation. Discourse that is counter to the dominant position on what can or cannot be said in public can be figured as dangerous both to that dominant and to the sense of security ensured by the stability of the status quo. This sense of security, of course, is not universal and is only extended to certain people. In our own moment, we may recognize this call for universalism and unabridged free speech in the invocation of “civility” by a number of university chancellors and presidents, after the University of Illinois withdrew Steven Salaita’s job offer because of his violation of the unwritten codes of such policies. This type of declaration of “evil,” which is announced from the established position, comes with its own set of codes, its own “camp” that

⁸⁴ Hamilton, “Wrath Moves in the Music: Robert Duncan, Laura Riding, Craft and Force in Cold War Poetics.”

⁸⁵ Qtd. in Watson, “Introduction.”

comes to define who is in and who is out of that group. This code is unspoken and like camp, as defined by Sontag, is both “universal” and universal.

Tyler’s final regular Movie Letter, in which he expressed regret over his constant haranguing of film audiences, crosses the line of what Ransom deemed acceptable to print in the journal. This Movie Letter draws attention to the limits of the current critical discourse in relation to the perceived function of critical discourse:

In my ripened stage as a mythographer of the Hollywood product, I am suddenly oppressed by the consciousness of what I have written. It brings the faintly overwhelming thought that perhaps too much sadism is involved in my part amidst the great public. Furthermore, facing my seventh year of intensive and unflattering analysis, I have come to feel that particular game is no longer worth the candle of critical prose—at least, without danger of repetition.⁸⁶

Tyler has grown exhausted with practicing a criticism that must necessarily harangue the “great public” with pain for its blinding experience of pleasure. This type of criticism, Tyler’s attempt at making change within the New Criticism by speaking its feminizing codes, has run out of steam. His pain wrought by the language of objective criticism is palpable and on the surface. Importantly, such pain comes at the behest that the present cannot be mapped with “this critical prose,” which is to say that critical prose cannot maintain its enforced distance from its critical object without publicly falling prey to the affective fallacy. This letter appears in 1951, after the New Criticism had become, itself, artificially exhausted, but, Tyler expresses concern about the repetition of the earlier politics of New Criticism that dare not be spoken.

Though Ransom published the essay, he wrote to Tyler shortly after to discontinue Tyler’s column. Ransom’s dismissal comes in the rhetoric of professional literary politics and

⁸⁶ Parker Tyler, “Movie Letter: Three Myths,” *The Kenyon Review* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1951): 542.

states plainly that the professionals have decided that criticism's turn to the public has ended. His dismissal may be polite, but Ransom's reasoning for firing Tyler, which turns on the question of the sensation of film, suggests that Ransom instead passes a personal judgment. Further, to support that judgment, he invokes a broader set of "accomplished critical pens" that, one surmises, allows Ransom to better enforce the stable "structure of the field" that is to rest between the work and its audience. Ransom, in the 'code' of professional literary politics, writes:

We have come to the conclusion that the ever-increasing demand for space – due I think to the fact that there are simply now far more accomplished critical pens than there used to be – forces us to discontinue the Movie Letter as a regular item. There is need for our having all sorts of Letters or up-to-date reports, ever so often; on music, theatre, painting, dancing, etc. I note the melancholy conclusion of your own present Letter dealing with the bad state of the American film and it is precisely that *sense of it* [emphasis mine] which leads us to think this art doesn't merit quite so much attention comparatively speaking as we have been giving it.

You have written for us with distinction, and it isn't any defect of the writing which makes us come to this conclusion. I hope we may have you at least occasionally still.

With very best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

John Crowe Ransom⁸⁷

It isn't Tyler's writing that gets him fired. It is his subject matter and how the sense of that subject matter has affected him. That affective impact "styles" Tyler's writing in ways that, to Ransom, at least, Tyler seemingly cannot control. As it was with Robert Duncan, Tyler's work is removed from *Kenyon's* pages for reasons that extend beyond the text at hand. In Tyler's case,

⁸⁷ Ransom to Tyler, March 1, 1951.

professional literary politics and its throttling of emotion creates an affective response that Ransom associates with the feminized viewers of mass culture. Of course, this move reinforces Ransom's own reactionary distaste to an affective interpretive mode of interpreting culture as "professional," "objective," and, ultimately, as decidedly anti-emotional.

In the next chapter, I argue that Ransom's judgment about Tyler's writing, which does not judge the text itself, but rather the writer's life outside of the text, extends beyond decisions about critical essays. The New Criticism, and its literary politics, encodes evaluations of the life-world outside of the literary text in its interpretations of the text *itself*. Put differently, in addition to the text, what comes under scrutiny in New Critical interpretations is the ontology of the author.

Chapter 3

A Belated Bomb: Melvin B. Tolson, Allen Tate, and the New Critical Police

Melvin B. Tolson frequently came into direct contact with the New Criticism, especially with Allen Tate. Such contact was atypical for most African American poets, though not for Tolson and a handful of others. In February 1949, Tolson wrote to Tate, whom he considered to be “the toughest of the New School of criticism,” to ask Tate to write a preface for *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, Tolson’s epic-poem commissioned by Liberian President William Tubman. Tolson’s request has been a source of confusion – and controversy – for decades. Why would an African-American poet, writing a nationalist poem for an African country no less, ask a known anti-black critic to endorse his poem? Did his appeal for critical approval from the white establishment indicate an assimilationist aim, an integrationist one, or, perhaps a more radical one?

Contrary to current understandings of the Tolson-Tate encounter, I argue in this chapter that Tolson’s goal was to create with his poem and Tate’s preface “an atom bomb dropped on two worlds,” Tolson’s metaphor for reenvisioning the possibilities of critical practice in the mid-century and overhauling the organization of literary studies for black and white critics alike. Tolson’s method was to show how recent scientific developments theorizing space and time – mainly the usurping of Newtonian physics by Albert Einstein’s Theory of Relativity – undercut traditional modes of Western historiography. When paired with the developments of quantum physics, the suppressed African history covered over by these modes of historicism presented a utopian vision of Africa, which itself functions as an extensive critique of colonialism and globalization. Importantly, Tolson channeled his revision of historical time through an extensive attack on the selectively historical mode of doing literary criticism promoted by the New Criticism. Tolson understood the institutional form of the English Department wrought by the

New Criticism to reproduce the logics of colonialism and, as such, decided upon the New Criticism as the drop-site for his atom bomb.

Literary critical models of periodization have largely been the culprit for Tolson's poor initial reception and the subsequent neglect of his work. Born in 1898, four years before Langston Hughes, Tolson didn't publish his first major work of poetry, *Rendezvous with America*, until 1944, well after the spark of the New Negro Renaissance. Until recently, the period between the New Negro Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement has been notoriously undertheorized.¹ Several critics have argued that this gap between periods has directly affected the reception of Tolson's work. Michael Bérubé argues that Tolson's poetics present "something of a periodization problem: . . . he emerged in the interstitial period between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts movement."² Even with an uptick in studies on Tolson, not to mention increased discussion about the periodization of African American letters, in 2011 Matthew Hart reiterated Bérubé's claim in passing, "Tolson belongs fully to no literary movement."³ Hart and Bérubé's observations merely compound Tate's observation, made in *Libretto's* preface, that Tolson's arrival to modernist poetics, the first of its kind for a "Negro poet," was late. Catherine Gunther Kodat, however, argues that "the case of Melvin B. Tolson . . . suggests that future work for the New lies not only in re-reading established authors or

¹ Lawrence Jackson has authoritatively filled this gap with his 600-page volume, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

² Michael Bérubé, *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon, and the Politics of the Canon* (Cornell Univ Pr, 1992), 181.

³ Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing* (New York: Oxford UP 2010), 144. Other recent work has participated in thinking Tolson as untimely. John Taylor writes that 1898 "was actually a good year for a modernist poet to be born but the wrong time for a Black American modernist poet who began publishing relatively late in his career" John Taylor, "Melvin Tolson," *The Antioch Review*, Fall 2011, 717. Also, contributing to Hart's argument about Tolson's relevance to contemporary black poetry through Harryette Mullen, Diana Cruz considers Tolson as a foil for discourse surrounding Rita Dove's poetry and its alleged "'transcendence' of race as the ultimate sign of her excellence," Diana V. Cruz, "Refuting Exile: Rita Dove Reading Melvin B. Tolson," *Callaloo* 31, no. 3 (2008): 789.

reclaiming lost works, but also in revisiting long-held assumptions about the politics of literary form.”⁴ Tolson shows us that even sixty plus years after *Libretto*’s publication, periodization of African American literature is most often tied to a mid-century politics of literary form that hinges on the progression and development of style.

Indeed, the associations between literary style, race, and the “progress” of poetics circulated at the center of Tolson’s criticism and poetry projects. In that regard his poetry challenged typical modes of periodization that compressed a number of judgments into an assertion that a work’s style was either “of its time,” and therefore literary, or “out of time,” which paradoxically removed a work from literary history and into the history of social and political life. Under this regime, Tolson’s ties to modernism especially impacted his early reception. The stylistic experimentation associated with modernist aesthetics was closely associated with anti-blackness, in spite of its appropriation of African aesthetics. From a version of the story told by Tolson, in 1966 Dudley Randall described Tolson, initially rejected by Tate, “studying modern poetic techniques and rewriting the poem [*Libretto*] so that it said the same things in a different way,” to gain Tate’s approval. Tolson developed this myth to show his talent at playing the trickster, but the myth backfired when many critics, including J. Saunders Redding, read it as an act of assimilation. This narrative, in which Tolson intentionally takes up modernist poetics to appease Tate, was told as true until 1984 when Tolson’s biographer, Robert Farnsworth, determined with archival evidence that Tate never refused to write a preface for the poem. The fact that this myth was told as true for so long before being disproven displays just how deep the ties to anti-blackness, modernism, and stylistic untimeliness have been driven into understandings of black poetry. Tolson hoped his interaction with Tate would shed light on

⁴ Catherine Gunther Kodat, “Afterword: New Studies,” *Philological Quarterly* 90, no. 2/3 (Spring 2011): 346.

precisely this nexus of anti-blackness in literary criticism and the historical primitivism of black poetics and black people it implied. In this regard, not only was periodization practice the phenomenon that led to Tolson's obscurity, it also was the fount of his critique.

Periodization in Tolson's time and in our own is weighted by a New Critical legacy that both dates a work and judges that work's quality as literature primarily on its style, what René Wellek deemed a "system of norms." Those works that did not engage the epoch's privileged literary style became propaganda, sociology, history, or documents instead. Tolson approached Tate to illuminate the hypocrisy of the New Critical practice of classifying works as either literature or sociological documents. The difference between literary works and social documents was nominally "style," but, as an ambiguous category, "style" provided cover for judgments based on the author's race, the work's politics, or any number of other factors. Tolson's correspondence and his unpublished essay about his relationship with Tate, as well as his poetry, provide a trenchant account of how periodization practice affected politically and stylistically complex works like *Libretto*. Reading Tolson's encounter with Tate as a challenge to New Critical practice, rather than an adoption of New Critical values, shows how period concepts, style, and criticism itself came to be part of the material reality of literary production, wherein literary works were classified a priori by the race of their authors. Or, conversely, these works show how the literary critical classification of a literary work became a way to acknowledge a writer's work while also ignoring the personhood of that work's author. Tolson's resistance shows us yet again that New Critical practices in the 1950s were available for critique, even as they were gaining institutional supremacy in colleges and universities in the United States.

Histories of the discipline have shown that the epistemological logic of the period concept has had a lasting effect on the institutional and material configurations of literary studies.

Recent conversations about the material instantiations of the period concept date back at least to the 1990s when John Guillory and Gerald Graff chronicled the relationship of English departments to the rise of the university and to definitions of cultural value writ large. As Guillory points out in *Cultural Capital*, the crisis point of the canon wars was not the canon, but the syllabus. Texts can be added to the canon without fail because it is a transcendent category, while the syllabus, the anthology, and other material instantiations of that canon, initiate scarcity. Cultural production, Guillory argues, is a crisis over the scarcity of time and space on a syllabus and a classroom, or in an anthology. According to Graff, though, the larger problem is that conversations about this crisis do not make their way into the classroom. By leaving debates on the methods of scholarly discourse on the cutting room floor, instructors present the illusion of stability in the values of the discipline and the university. This, Graff suggests, is one of the effects of the New Criticism and the field-coverage model it concretized in its incorporated organization of the profession.

Growing out of its philological and historical predecessors, New Criticism creates a “larger technology of control” that prefers a static presentation of hermeneutic practices, periods, and geographies in the types of courses offered and the faculty teaching those courses.⁵ Thus, the form of a New Critical department makes it especially challenging to teach the dynamic professional controversies about disciplinary topics and methods. A department that takes a field-coverage approach endorses time periods that can be seen as autonomous from one another, since the survey course for each period is taught by the specialist in that period and often only by that specialist. There is seldom support for overlapping coverage, which means that often one person or a small group of people control the knowledge of a certain period of time and the

⁵ Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 241.

method with which literature in that time is approached. Further, this allows a department with given political leanings to hire in areas that threaten it—for example, the appointment of Robert Hillyer to the Department of English at Kenyon College while John Crowe Ransom taught there – without affecting the approach of others within the department. Similarly, this field-coverage model might register Parker Tyler’s participation in New Critical journals described in the previous chapter as an isolated inclusion to cover more material, thus leaving New Critical methodology largely unaffected. In other words, a wholehearted endorsement of the field-coverage model suggests that fields, particularly those that take a critique of the status quo as their subject (cultural studies, black studies, queer studies, etc.), can be included but largely isolated in their impact on the dominant order.

More recently, Ted Underwood has argued that periodization won out as the primary template for literary studies because it supplied literary studies with a unique object of inquiry. Challenges to the period concept, however, rarely make their way to the surface of disciplinary histories because of “widespread amnesia about the whole history of the discipline before New Criticism.”⁶ In the last ten years, this has changed dramatically; in addition to Underwood’s historical account, the period-concept has faced heavy fire from all sides. Caroline Levine has called literary periods “leaky containers” in a collection of essays distilling a 2008 English Institute conference on the subject and Joshua Kates has critiqued the idea of “contemporary holism” – that simultaneous events in the present necessarily hold something in common – on which periodization is based.⁷ Importantly, this work has confirmed New Criticism’s role in

⁶ Ted Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 134.

⁷ Caroline Levine, “Infrastructuralism, or the Tempo of Institutions,” in *On Periodization: Selected Essays from the English Institute*, ed. Virginia Jackson (Cambridge, MA: English Institute in collaboration with the American Council of Learned Societies, 2010), 53–96; Joshua Kates, “Against the Period,” *differences* 23, no. 2 (January 2012): 136–64.

shaping periodization practice in literary studies. Kates argues that the New Criticism “shaped a disciplinary theoretical kernel” that had an impact on the periodization of literary studies.

Underwood suggests that this occurred through New Criticism’s disciplinary incorporation that became the basis for the organization of English departments. Underwood’s historical account and Kates’s theoretical one provide a backdrop for Eric Hayot’s suggestion that despite the growth of “transconcepts” (transnational studies and interdisciplinarity) “our entire system of literary education...reifies the period as its central historical concept.”⁸

Tolson’s intervention in the debate has largely been lost. In the chapter that follows, I describe his suggestion that “contemporary holism” is not only false, but also politically motivated. Tolson anticipates that Tate will see Tolson’s poetic accomplishment in *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* as belated, a claim that suggests unevenness in development not only between the core and the periphery, but also between the races. Tolson saw this belatedness as tied to the long history of the devaluation of black culture more broadly; “critical” categories, in other words, operated under the strict logic of Hegel’s conclusion that Africa is “no historical part of the world” and that an African person “exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state.”⁹ Tolson wagers that when New Critics make general judgments on style as it relates to the prevailing winds of ‘modernity’, they actually bring this sense of world-historical and racial development to bear on the text at hand. Simply put, criticism came to be about reinforcing an inherited map of global history, not about culture.

⁸ Eric Hayot, “Against Periodization; Or, On Institutional Time,” *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 741.

⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, Trans. John Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 99 and 93.

Modern Poetry versus Propaganda Poetry

In a letter to Tate in February 1949, Tolson writes, “it seems the belatedly I have initiated the modern movement among Negro poets.”¹⁰ Tolson’s statement suggests a particular temporal argument: the initiation of an altered future (“modern movement”) is possible only by bringing the reader’s present attention to something previously unaccounted for, even if that something is tardy. Tate famously picked up on this notion in his preface for Tolson’s poem. In 1950 Tate’s “Preface” was first published as an “Opinion” that appeared after an excerpt of one of *Libretto*’s eight sections in *Poetry*. (This “opinion” could be read as Tate’s gesture of support to *Poetry* described in chapter one, which Shapiro asked Tate for after the magazine lost its Bollingen Foundation funding.) There, three years before the full release of Tolson’s epic, Tate wrote: “For the first time, it seems to me a Negro poet has assimilated completely the full poetic language of his time and, by implication, the language of the Anglo-American poetic tradition.”¹¹ What comes from Tolson as a remark about the emancipation of black writers from the throes of Anglo-American critical categories shifts in Tate’s voice to a narrative of African assimilation to its colonizers.

Instead of becoming the progenitor of a new literary history, under Tate’s scrutiny, Tolson’s poem becomes the late arrival to a history that had already happened. According to Tate’s logic, if the golden rule of modernism and New Criticism is, in fact, to “make it new,” then tardiness is the equivalent of obsolescence and Tolson’s poem is a version of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* nearly thirty years too late. Yet, reading Tolson’s poem as modern, even in a belated sense, had another effect. By reading *Libretto* – or any other formally complex black poetry in

¹⁰ Letter, Melvin B. Tolson to Allen Tate, February 19, 1949, box 42 folder 21, Allen Tate Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

¹¹ Allen Tate, “Preface,” in *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, by Melvin Tolson (Twayne Press, 1953), viii. Also, Allen Tate, “Preface to *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*,” *Poetry* 76, no. 4 (July 1950): 217.

the mid-century – as a modernist work, the poem became indistinguishable from all other types of poetry in the eyes of the institution, and therefore had no place at all. Critics, like Tate, read a work’s modernist style as an invitation to classify a work as literature *qua* literature. Modernist style did not read as an intervention in political and social context where the poet may have sought to counter the notion of a universalized subject, behind which lingered multiple and hierarchized identities.

By inviting Allen Tate to write a preface for *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, Tolson challenged the efficacy and hegemony of New Critical hermeneutics and professional incorporation designed to maintain a unilateral sense of modernism. To keep this sense of modernism, critics set boundaries for the category of literature that placed any sense of political and social struggle outside of that category. In asking Tate to comment on a poem nominally about Liberia, Tolson puts Tate in yet another conundrum about how to handle politics in poetry. If Tate comments on the content of Tolson’s poem, he acknowledges some degree of complicity with philosophies that restrict Africa to the realm outside of history. If he ignores Tolson’s politics, Tate folds the embedded call for an economic and cultural revolution into the color blind, liberalism of mid-century modernism. Tate opts for the second option: he takes the political and social claims of *Libretto* and makes them literature, which, in a sense makes those claims apolitical and at the same time universal.

Tolson hoped that Tate would read the poem as literature in the apolitical and universal sense, even if the modernist style associated with it did not ‘unite’ with the poem’s content. Though he wrote in the style of T.S. Eliot, because it was the “technique of his time,” Tolson still saw his ideas as “far apart [from Eliot’s] as hell and heaven.” Eliot would have agreed,

particularly when Tolson stated that he was “the only Marxist poet Here and Now.”¹² Tolson wrote in another letter to Tate:

Of course this world of the poem, in harmony with the dictates of the theme and occasion, had to be far-flung and various in space and time, techniques and ideas, persons and symbols. I can only hope that the diatonic structure supports the conception. I may say that each word, foreign or archaic, was selected for its particular effect in the unity underlying the diversity of the scheme.¹³

Despite the poem’s intrinsic diversity, Tolson produces just the kind of poetic “world” that a New Critical reader would come to privilege in a poem by drawing attention to the poem’s “harmony” and “unity.” Following Tolson’s description of his poetics, Tate declares that the result of pursuing poetry ends up with Tolson being “more intensely *Negro* in his apprehension of the world.”¹⁴ Yet, for Tate, to be more intensely Negro is actually the key to the subordination of a Negro identity and, consequently, to establishing the poem’s universal appeal. The poem about Liberia, in Tate’s estimation, becomes a poem “that is about the world of all men.”¹⁵ To avoid criticism that considers a poet’s racial background, Tate molds Tolson’s identity into the assumed identity of the poet: a white man writing on behalf of humanity. In other words, Tate argues that Tolson’s modern poetics distance him from the dominant modes of black poetry at the time: folk poetry and dialect poetry. As such, Tate separates Tolson from blackness in order to state that Tolson’s poetics, like that of the Anglo-American tradition, are universal. In this, Tate and his critical brethren reinforce the presence of a universal marketplace for assessing

¹² Qtd. in Robert M. Farnsworth, *Melvin B. Tolson: 1898-1966, Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy*, 1st ed. (University of Missouri Press, 1984), 225.

¹³ Letter, Melvin B. Tolson to Allen Tate, June 1, 1949, box 42 folder 21, Allen Tate Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

¹⁴ Tate, “Preface,” ix.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

poetic value. But, at the same time, they assert that to enter into that marketplace black poets must take up ‘modern’ forms; black poets must enter into history to be recognized, which, in the logic of Western modernity, is to eschew the African tradition.¹⁶

Written before and after the preface, Tolson’s correspondence with Tate further addresses such false-universalist tendencies of New Critical practice. In those letters Tolson draws attention to the ways that racial difference is arbitrarily acknowledged in assessments of poetry. Specifically, Tolson shows that race becomes most apparent in assessments of “propaganda” and completely submerged in assessments of “poetry.” According to Tolson’s argument, this aspect of New Critical discourse is tautological, because the categories of “propaganda” and “poetry” are already racialized. These categories are not dispensed on the basis of the work but rather on the basis of the race of the works’ author.

This racialized distinction between propaganda, or protest writing, and literature was apparent throughout much of the work of a nascent New Criticism. For example, in a 1940 essay on writing as a profession, R.P. Blackmur asks why John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* is frequently compared to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a literary work on the threshold of “serious writing,” and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* is “widely accepted as a document.”¹⁷ The three works Blackmur describes all inhabit the category of non-serious writing, but at different positions. To explain the difference, Blackmur cites “Mr. Wright’s extra-literary predilections which are

¹⁶ André Breton draws a similar conclusion about the universality of Aimé Césaire’s “negritude” in “A Great Black Poet” now printed as the preface to modern editions of Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*: “What I find invaluable in [Césaire’s poetry] is that it constantly transcends the anguish a black associates with the fate of black people in modern society, and that becoming one with the anguish of all poets, artists, and bona fide thinkers, but adding to it the bonus of verbal genius, it encompasses the condition allotted to *man* by that society even to its unbearable, but also infinitely amendable, dimension” (trans. and eds. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2011, xvii).

¹⁷ R. P. Blackmur, “A Feather-Bed for Critics: Notes on the Profession of Writing,” in *The Expense of Greatness* (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1940), 281.

conspicuous.”¹⁸ Blackmur elaborates that the writing in *Native Son* seems to be much less important than its subject matter; it “is one of those books in which everything is undertaken with seriousness except the writing.”¹⁹ Though oblique, by “the writing” Blackmur refers to Wright’s style, and “everything” to the novel’s subject: the oppressive conditions that lead Bigger Thomas to murder Mary Dalton, a result of what Wright had called Bigger’s “revolt.” Parker Tyler, writing under the pseudonym Everett McManus, made a similar claim about Wright’s novel *Black Boy*: Wright “is an individual and a writer dealing with social facts and personal and race history. As a sociological document, this book has much value, although the general category of facts it brings forward is by no means unknown; as a work of literature it has serious shortcomings.”²⁰ At some level, the “conditions” that Wright must “deal with” are the same that Tate registers as the challenge of the Negro writer in his Preface to *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*. For Tate, these conditions result in a similarly narrow focus on “everything” except for the writing: “the distinguishing Negro quality is not in the language but in the subject-matter, which is usually the plight of the Negro segregated in a White culture. The plight is real and often tragic...[The “folk” and “new” attitudes used by Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and other black poets to approach this plight] have limited the Negro poet to a provincial mediocrity in which one’s feelings about one’s difficulties become more important than poetry itself.”²¹ In other words, drawing attention to the social conditions of Negro life usurps the achievement of poetry. Black writing, then, can only ever be a social or historical “document,” a work of political propaganda designed to draw attention to and change those conditions. This

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 295.

²⁰ Everett McManus (Parker Tyler), “Black-and-White Culture,” *View* 5, no. 6 (January 1946): 19–20.

²¹ Tate, “Preface,” viii–ix.

distinction by itself is not a denigration, but Tate's emphasis on the "provincial mediocrity" reminds the reader of the devaluation bestowed upon the "documents" of black writing.

John Crowe Ransom defined this phenomenon in a strict ontological sense, which largely confirmed Tate's and Blackmur's devaluation of "documentary" literature and the category's strong association with black writing. In an editorial entitled "Ubiquitous Moralists" in the Winter 1941 issue of *The Kenyon Review*, Ransom echoed his concern from his 1937 essay "Criticism Inc." by suggesting that Humanist critics and Marxist critics have very little "relevance to literature" because their respective critical philosophies don't properly acknowledge aesthetic experience.²² Instead of being interested in the aesthetics of literature, Ransom sees the object of Humanist and Marxist criticism as impure, for they privilege works in which the work's prose core subsumes its distinctive stylistic tissue. One of Ransom's test cases is Blackmur's diagnosis of Wright's "extra-literary predilections." In fact, in the *Kenyon Review* in the 1940s, nearly all mentions of black poets are accompanied by descriptions of their political aims. Reviewing H.R. Hays' *12 Spanish American Poets* anthology in 1944, Lloyd Mallan writes that Afro-Latin and Indian schools of verse "have now developed overtones of social protest."²³

Though never reviewed in *The Kenyon Review*, the Pulitzer Prize winning Gwendolyn Brooks proved an exception to this rule. To emphasize the fact that her work was, in fact, poetry, her reviewers always made a point to emphasize its universality. As Stanley Kunitz writes in his review of *Annie Allen*, "Though the materials of her art largely derived from the conditions of life in a Negro urban milieu, she uses these incendiary materials naturally, for their intrinsic value, without straining for shock or for depth, without pretending to speak for a people."²⁴ *The*

²² John Crowe Ransom, "Ubiquitous Moralists," *The Kenyon Review* 3, no. 1 (January 1941): 97.

²³ Lloyd Mallan, "Bird's Eye View," *The Kenyon Review* 6, no. 1 (January 1944): 143.

²⁴ Stanley Kunitz, "Bronze by Gold," *Poetry*, April 1950, 52. William Jay Smith made a similar statement about Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry in a review essay in *The Sewanee Review*: "Much of her [Brooks'] other

Kenyon Review's review of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* defines more explicitly what it might mean for a writer to pretend not "to speak for a people." In "A Novel is a Novel," Richard Chase highlights how Ellison breaks from attending to the social fact of blackness. He writes that the symbols in the novel are "derived from [Ellison's] idea that the white man cannot or does not see the Negro as an individual and that by extension *this invisibility is in our time the fate of all individuals.*"²⁵ Indeed, what makes Ellison's novel a novel – which is really to say what makes Ellison's novel *literature* and by extension what makes Brooks' poetry *poetry* – is that a universalized and metaphysical subject eclipses the work's political content. Declaring *Invisible Man* a novel recalls the "desperate ontological or metaphysical manoeuvre" that Ransom declares as a prerequisite for a poem to be a poem.²⁶ Of course, Chase and Ransom both read this maneuver as related to the being of the literary form, not, in fact, to the ontological and metaphysical struggles enacted by the fractional personhood fostered by the US American legal system and by American social life, with which Ellison, Brooks, and Tolson must compete. Lawrence Jackson has written that the convoluted relationship of black writers to modernism indicated a larger challenge to situate black thought in the 1940s and 1950s in terms of an assimilationist liberalism. Overall, the relationship presented "the queer problem of applying political standards to the arts."²⁷ Modernist style – the apex of the New Critical category of

work is marred by a use of jagged rhythms and an excessive striving for modernity. The reader feels at time also the burden of the author's attempt to come to terms with, and yet avoid, racial bias. But still, within their own conventions, which is convention of serious light verse, the poems make a just claim to our attention." Here the poems only make a "just claim to our attention" because Brooks steers clear of "racial bias." William Jay Smith, "Performers and Poets," *The Sewanee Review* 58, no. 3 (July 1950): 534.

²⁵ Richard Chase, "A Novel Is a Novel," *The Kenyon Review* 14, no. 4 (October 1952): 682, emphasis mine.

²⁶ John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism Inc.," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 13, no. 4 (Fall 1937): 586–602.

²⁷ Jackson 305.

literature – carried a mostly unstated, though direct, endorsement of a white subject, otherwise coded as a subject representative of “all men.”²⁸

Philosophers outside of the New Criticism further developed the idea that the establishment of modernist style was encoded as a universal ideal. Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1948 introduction to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, “Orphée Noir” (“Black Orpheus”), explains how négritude poetry outlines the “most authentic revolutionary plan” against the forces of a colonially driven, capitalist modernity.²⁹ While revolution is a much different conclusion than that offered by the New Critics, Sartre’s argument draws on the same maneuvers as the New Critical universalization of black poetry through its resemblance to modernist style. In the course of his argument, Sartre places Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor on the front lines, or *avant garde*, of art made out of and designed to fight oppression. Yet, for Sartre, négritude poetry carries a timeless, essentialized primitivism, a hyper-sexualized and potent force that can break the “spiritual destruction” of capitalism.³⁰ Anticipating Tate’s remarks about Tolson’s “Negro” intensity that leads to his poem’s universalism, Sartre shows “that this poetry [négritude poetry]—which seems racial at first—is actually a hymn by everyone for everyone. Like the white worker, the negro is a victim of the capitalist structure of our society.”³¹ In this movement from racial poetry to universal poetry, “the Black present explodes” and inserts itself within “Universal History,” bringing about a revolutionary conceptualization of

²⁸ For more on modernism’s relationship to the appropriation of black culture and the challenge this posed to African American writers in the early twentieth century, see, Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1998). Also see, Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, New Edition (London: Verso, 2007).

²⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Black Orpheus,” trans. John MacCombie, *The Massachusetts Review* 6, no. 1 (October 1964): 52.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

Humanity with a radically new future. At the same time he states that *négritude* is defined “as being against Europe and colonization,” Sartre acknowledges that Africa has been, until this poetic explosion, outside of Universal History.³² In addition, he enlists black poets with the responsibility to single-handedly bring about a new future for all, to stand in as the faceless proletariat in a Marxian dialectic that seeks a transcendent world beyond capitalism. Black poets are assimilated into a universal struggle by being “like the white worker,” but unlike the white worker, these poets are expected to take pointed poetic action.

From these assimilative gestures of stylistically experimental black poetry, it becomes clear that the critical rubric for classifying literature as such appears to be one unit of digital code, a binary switch that could be flipped either to literature or to propaganda on the basis of style. Yet, as is apparent through Tate’s and his fellow critics’ position on the “provincial mediocrity” of Negro writers, each side of the switch is not only a description, but also a temporal position (modern or provincial) and a value judgment (serious or mediocre). Even so, the so-called description of a work’s style often was not the only criteria under scrutiny. For many New Critics, the distinction between literature and document had a relation to the conditions outside of the work and to the identity position of the author. In other words, the distinction between literature and document functions as a binary, but carries beneath it a much more complex system of criteria (liberal/radical, white/black, masculine/feminine, etc.) that factor into assessing the supposedly autonomous text object. This set of criteria resonates loudly behind assessments of an author’s “style.” In recognizing this more complex system, we can see how certain anti-literature denotations of the New Critics have a latent anti-blackness, because of a category error between the ontology of poetic form and the ontology of blackness in social and political life.

³² Ibid., 33.

The latent anti-blackness in the mid-century classification of literature can be interrupted by untangling the categorical conflation of the ontology of poetic form and the ontology of blackness in social and political life. Similarly, Fred Moten has argued that the definition of blackness results from condensing – and obscuring – an array of taxonomical processes. Blackness, for Moten, “has been associated with a certain sense of decay,” a delayed and, in some regards, transcendent, repository for all that is against the Enlightenment project.³³ Because Enlightenment disorder, regardless of its persuasion, is presented as “a dream-world created by an unregulated imagination,” blackness is also a source for vitality otherwise erased in the Enlightenment project’s pursuit of order.³⁴ Indeed, for Moten, “what is inadequate to blackness is already given ontologies. The lived experience of blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder.”³⁵ In other words, because blackness has been defined as all phenomenon, beings, and things that are repressed in an Enlightenment frame, its vitality and sheer existence in the lifeworld are always an active mode of resisting the rational order of things. Tolson, in effect, makes an observation that is directly related to the symbolic off-load of Enlightenment thought on to blackness that Moten describes. Tolson’s argument, though, focuses on how off-loading “a certain sense of decay” on to blackness operates out of categorical distinctions between “literature” and “propaganda.” Tolson maps the faulty logic of anti-blackness in these categories by reversing, and, therefore, interrupting them: he argues that Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead” is a propaganda poem *par excellence* rather than a modernist poem.

³³ Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2009): 177.

³⁴ Jonathan Lamb, “Imagination, Conjecture, and Disorder,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45, no. 1 (2011): 53.

³⁵ Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 187.

Odes, Epitaphs, and Taxonomical Colonization

Melvin Tolson planned to publicize the anti-black logic within New Critical taxonomies by publishing an essay about his correspondence with Allen Tate in *The Sewanee Review*. In the final months of 1950, after part of the *Libretto* appeared in *Poetry* with Tate's "Preface," Tolson began working on drafts of the essay. The essay summarized Tolson's lengthy debate with Tate about both the history of the Ode form, Tate's comments about methods of literary critical reading, and the institutional instantiations of the taxonomical categories of literary criticism. Even though drafts of the essay were highly critical of Tate, Tate didn't object to Tolson publishing parts of their correspondence as part of the work. In late November 1950, Tolson even asked Tate for advice on how to incorporate one dimension of the argument. "Excerpts from a Letter to Allen Tate" was never published, but Tolson produced nearly eighty pages of draft material for the essay, which are now held in the Library of Congress.

Tolson's argument in "Excerpts from a Letter to Allen Tate" departs from a discussion of Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead." Tate's poem depicts a speaker reflecting on the loss of Confederate soldiers in a graveyard in Tennessee. Though the poem's title makes it seem as if the poem focuses on the graves of dead Confederate soldiers, the poem hews much more closely to the "solipsism" of the narrator, as Tate writes in his own reading of the poem. After Tate had completed his Preface for Tolson's poem, Tolson told Tate about the time he saw an "Uncle Remus" reading Tate's "Ode" in the Detroit Public Library. In response to this anecdote, Tate responded that the Detroit Uncle Remus should be "informed [by a 'solemn sociologist'] that the heroes honored in the poem were anxious to keep his people in slavery."³⁶ Tate, in other words, presumes that the "Uncle Remus" figure cannot read the poem as if it were a work of literature.

³⁶ Letter, Melvin B. Tolson to Allen Tate, November 15, 1950, box 10, Melvin Beaunorus Tolson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

According to Tate, the black reader in the library should focus on the sociological reading of the poem (that is about Confederate nostalgia) rather than the literary reading (that the poem is about solipsism). That Uncle Remus must focus on one and not the other intimates the latent anti-blackness in the application of New Critical literary critical categories. The tension between the figures – Uncle Remus and the sociologist – becomes the locus for Tolson’s reading of Tate’s poem, and, eventually his critique of the New Criticism.

Tolson’s reading of Tate shows how critical categories and interpretive practices were available for appropriation just as poetics were. As the Uncle Remus reference suggests, appropriation is often entangled in stereotype, but can just as easily generate a site of contestation. Aldon Nielsen has argued that “What Tolson came to attempt,” in suggesting that African aesthetics came before Anglo-American modernist ones, “was a decolonizing of American letters.”³⁷ This decolonization was not limited to aesthetic practices, but to institutional practice, as well: in the same essay on Tate, Tolson uses satire to stage the operative motives of specialization on the broader institutional ecology of financial and political interests that determine the shape of English departments and the scope of curricula.

Tolson accuses Tate of relying on a stereotype for Tate’s assumption that the “tighter wrinkles in [Uncle Remus’s] face” are lines of confusion, rather than an indication of the knowing concentration of a “disinherited post-bellum scholar from the South, marooned...by one of the ‘artistries of Circumstance.’”³⁸ Tolson wagers that the “artistries of Circumstance,” which Tate suggests are the reason this Uncle Remus lost his position, are more deliberate and less circumstantial than Tate lets on. To comment on Uncle Remus means at some level Tate must admit the deliberate artistries of *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination across the United States,

³⁷ Aldon L. Nielsen, “Melvin B. Tolson and the Deterritorialization of Modernism,” *African American Review* 26, no. 2 (July 1992): 245.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

particularly the increase of “lynch law” after Reconstruction that would have disinherited the scholar Tolson references.³⁹ In other words, Tolson’s choice to name the character in this anecdote “Uncle Remus” supplies a shibboleth for Tate’s current thinking on race matters. By the time Tolson and Tate exchanged these letters, Uncle Remus had become a representative example of demeaning portraits of African Americans in film, notably because of the centrality of the Uncle Remus character to Disney’s *Song of the South* (1946). Sterling Brown, too, in *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937), drew attention to the ways the Uncle Remus character fostered and reinforced a degrading stereotype of African Americans.⁴⁰ Tate reveals his racist-bias by not challenging the Uncle Remus stereotype and, as such, implies that a black reader would only interpret his “Ode to the Confederate Dead” with a sociological reading that would highlight the enslavement of “his [Remus’s] people.”

As to the sociologist, Tolson unfolds how the interpretive practice of the sociologist who confronts Remus actually resembles the interpretive practice of Tate’s New Criticism. Tolson suggests that Tate’s sociologist “enacts the role of a magician” by producing a “tension which is not the tension inherent in the Ode.”⁴¹ He argues that Tate’s sociologist’s claim, which is that the man at the gate in Tate’s poem sees the dead Confederate soldiers as heroes, is spurious – tautological, to be specific. The sociologist assumes that this man at the gate empathizes with the cause of the dead soldiers in the Tennessee graveyard. According to Tolson, based on the syntax of the poem, the only recoverable motive of these soldiers is that they were ordered to charge. The fact that they were ordered to charge, rather than charging forth on their own volition, leaves the motives of the individual soldiers inscrutable. The sociologist’s motivational imposition

³⁹ See, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “Lynch Law in America,” *The Arena* 23, no. 1 (January 1900):15-24.

⁴⁰ Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 122.

⁴¹ Typescript, “Excerpts from a Letter to Allen Tate,” box 10, Melvin Beaunorus Tolson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. n.p.

becomes the site of Tolson's critique of New Criticism: Tolson asserts that the sociologist reads as Tate does.

By showing how Tate's sociologist imposes a reading on the "Ode," Tolson deploys New Critical methodologies to make what is not typically a New Critical argument: the poem's aesthetic content gives way to the affective experience of its wrenching politics. Tolson suggests that the soldiers in the Confederate Army didn't necessarily support slavery by default; instead, they could be compared to the "Negro soldiers in George Washington's army...the historic Senegalese in World War I...in French West Africa...[or] the Negro heroes of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry in Korea," all groups who likely did not support the broader cause of the side for which they were fighting.⁴² Tolson foregrounds these soldiers who fought against politics they might have otherwise supported because he sees the poem's narrator standing Janus-faced "by the sagging gate" as an example of the multi-directional character of history.⁴³ From the gate, the narrator of "Ode to the Confederate Dead" watches "the arrogant circumstance/Of those who fall/Rank upon rank, hurried beyond decision--."⁴⁴ By using this gate imagery, Tolson claims that Tate draws upon an African proverb cited by the Griots in his *Libretto* that states "an open door/sees both inside and out."⁴⁵ Tolson undermines the claim that Tate's poem has on modernist poetry by pointing to Tate's indebtedness to the African tradition. Further, deploying African poetics in a poem about Confederate loss sets up a tension between an irrecoverable past and an irreconcilable Southern future proposed by the poet. With the poem's final command, "Leave now/The shut gate and the decomposing wall," the past is shuttered from the poet locked in the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Tolson quotes from the poem in his typescript. Line numbers for "Ode to the Confederate Dead" are taken from its re-publication in *Sewanee Review* 60, no 3 (1952): 41.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 38-40

⁴⁵ Melvin Tolson, "Libretto for the Republic of Liberia," in *"Harlem Gallery" and Other Poems of Melvin B. Tolson*, ed. Raymond Nelson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 197-98.

cemetery with a crumbling stonewall.⁴⁶ With this command, according to Tolson, the poet is now free “through the recognition of necessity.”⁴⁷

The “recognition of necessity” of the narrator in “Ode to the Confederate Dead” is not far from J. Saunders Redding’s 1939 characterization of “Negro literature” as a literature of necessity. Redding uses this term because Negro literature “appeals as much to the cognitive as to the conative and affective side of man’s being.”⁴⁸ At times, the literature of necessity sacrifices the aesthetic aims of art to announce the purposive urgency of political and ethical concerns. These characteristics of the literature of necessity are present in “Ode to the Confederate Dead” and provide sufficient evidence for Tolson to not only declare Tate’s ode a propaganda poem, but a black poem as well. Tolson even couches his interpretation in the rhetoric of McCarthy’s investigations of communists. In a letter to Tate announcing he’d like to publish his comments on the “Ode,” Tolson writes, “If I were the Chairman of the un-Southern Activities Committee, I would most certainly prosecute you for a Fifth Columnist. The Ode is a flagrant deviation from the ante-bellum Party Line!”⁴⁹ If for Tate the distinguishing subject matter for African American poetry is “the plight of the Negro segregated in a White culture,” then Tolson claims that Tate breaks with that white Southern tradition because his style is rooted in African and Asian cultures. Tolson’s assertion is an inversion of Tate’s claim about the “provincial mediocrity” of the “Negro poet.”⁵⁰ Just as Tolson breaks with the “provincial mediocrity” of Negro poetry, in which “one’s feelings about one’s difficulties become more

⁴⁶ Tate, “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” 87-8.

⁴⁷ Tolson, “Excerpts from a Letter to Allen Tate”

⁴⁸ J. Saunders Redding, *To Make a Poet Black* (College Park, Maryland: McGrath Publishing Company, 1968), vii.

⁴⁹ Letter, Melvin B. Tolson to Allen Tate, November 18, 1950, box 10, Melvin Beaunorus Tolson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

⁵⁰ Tate, “Preface,” viii.

important than poetry itself,” Tate breaks with the provincialism of Southern whites.⁵¹ The “Ode” is Tate’s effort to enter into modernity: For the first time, it seems to Tolson, a Southern and modernist poet has assimilated completely the full poetic language of his time and, by implication, the language of the African and Asian traditions. And, in so doing, Tate turns pure poetry into political poetry.

Tolson points out that the categorical distinctions between literature and propaganda impact the institutional arrangements of literary study and the university system. Tolson links a long history of the Ode-form to the development of increasingly specialized university departments. He reads the conflict over Ben Jonson’s tombstone – whether it was meant to be carved “*Orare* [pray for] Ben Jonson” or “O rare Ben Jonson”—as a potentially rallying cry for “the new Departments of Literary Epitaphs, with courses in Post-Mortem Periods of Poets.”⁵² These departments would require a budget fattened with funds solicited by college presidents from “Rotary Clubs, Chambers of Commerce, and Chrysanthemum Culture Societies.” Thus, Jonson’s stonecutter provides a “unique service...[for] the New Criticism,” because it reapportioned university territory for the expanding business of New Criticism by using disciplinary controversy to fund and to create stable courses and departments in the same cast as departments of English. In a nod to the field-coverage model Guillory describes, the Jonson controversy doesn’t change the methods of the English department; it allows for an expansion of the department’s methodological reach to new departments within the university. In connecting the history of a poetic form to the reconfigurations of the organization of the university, Tolson brings together various mediating forces, the medium of poetry and the mediating function of criticism, which I described as a structure of feeling in the previous chapter.

⁵¹ Ibid., ix.

⁵² Tolson, “Excerpts from a Letter to Allen Tate”

Rey Chow defines staging as that “which materializes as an intermedial event, in ways that far exceed the genre of drama [for Bertolt Brecht, Chow’s case].”⁵³ In Tolson’s case, we can see this “conscious form of staging,” or reflexivity as Chow has it, in Tolson’s treatment of the ode genre. Importantly, such staging enables a political critique of stable forms of knowledge. Chow continues:

Precisely on account of its status as phenomenon rather than as actuality, therefore, staging remains an abstract operation. And it is such abstractness, which is also a quality of incompleteness and openness, that lends staging its political potential. At the same time that it signifies the mediatization of reflexivity, staging shows theoretical practice to be *in process*.⁵⁴

Tolson creates an intermedial event with his correspondence and Tate’s preface. This event gestures towards an “entangled” history of the Ode genre and the organization of the English Department, which together creates ground for political contestation, a locus for interruption and disorder. At the same time, Tolson generates an interpretive mode – a mediating structure – that is capable of depicting this struggle between genre and institution as an ongoing process rather than a controversy that is captured and frozen. It is in this abstract intermedial entanglement of criticism, poetry, and institutional form that Tolson opens up space for decolonization. Importantly, this entanglement results from Tolson implying that Tate’s critical maneuvers are part and parcel of blackness. Tate’s sense of time in “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” Tolson reads, has African roots. Indeed, following Moten’s insight about the phenomenological function

⁵³ Chow argues that “staging” is a modernist form of critique that has been outmoded because of its emphasis on laying bare its object. While Chow’s analysis of Brecht in this regard is prescient, I’m not convinced Tolson is trying to expose the “primitive” sense of literary criticism. In other words, Tolson again pushes against the traditional modernist model. Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 18.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

of blackness to Enlightenment though, Tate's poetry and his critical classification of Tolson's work appear as acts of disorderly conduct and political transgression that require an appearance before a kangaroo court. By putting Tate in blackface Tolson shows that New Criticism enacts its politics through its stable capture of privileged writing into the category of literature.

Staging also emerges in Tolson's discussion of Tate's sociologist. Actively competing with literary studies for epistemological capital, the social sciences were depicted by the MLA as a treasonous threat to the discipline's coherence in 1937. Indeed Tolson's intermedial event suggests a political struggle waged over the accrual of capital – be it financial, cultural, or intellectual – of the university and misinterpreted figures like Uncle Remus, who stand in for the sphere of Negro letters devalued by default. In pitting Tate's sociologist against Remus and himself against Tate, Tolson seeks to interrupt the cycle of “disciplinary self-perpetuation” that Stephen Schryer sees as one of the primary aims of sociology and literary studies in the 1940s and 1950s. Though sociologists and literary critics took to different theoretical approaches, Schryer argues they shared fantasies of a “new class” of labor, which would bring together “techne and morality” through atomization and result in a more cohesive society.⁵⁵ Instead of cohesion, however, these departments created a university that established insular disciplines entirely autonomous from each other. This mode of disciplinarity led to a cycle of disciplinary self-perpetuation. At the same time, both English and Sociology in their studies of black life and “literature” developed a new “science” for enforcing racial difference to replace the waning biological (read: eugenicist) explanations of a racial hierarchy.⁵⁶ Tolson's satirical interruption

⁵⁵ Stephen Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁵⁶ Moten, again in “The Case of Blackness”:

From the origins of the critical philosophy in the assertion of its extra-rational foundations in teleological principle; to the advent and solidification of empiricist human biology that moves out of the convergence of phrenology, criminology, and eugenics; to the maturation of (American)

makes visible the claims on capital – and the connection of those claims to colonization – made by academic disciplines in his vision of new departments of Literary Epitaphs, or other specialized subjects.

Afforded by the entanglement of genre and institutional history, the link between disciplinary organization and colonial logics allows Tolson to suggest that the New Critical English departments perpetuate a white-supremacist (and anti-black) hierarchy of racial difference in their distribution of value. These departments generate capital by deeming works “literature,” but the assessment of a text as literature results from the way a given critic “salts the mine” in her or his interpretive practice.⁵⁷ Tolson’s mining analogy is telling; the phrase comes from entrepreneurs in the Western United States who would sprinkle gold dust in an otherwise barren mine to sell the now “salted” mine for more money to novice prospectors. Mining, of course, and its primitive accumulation of resources have deep ties to colonization and the manifest destiny of the United States in the nineteenth century. For Tolson, the critic plays the role of the entrepreneur, sprinkling the valuable dust of pure, lyric poetry – the gold standard of New Criticism – on poems he hopes to fool readers into thinking are more valuable than they really are, which of course, is a way to expand the movement’s territory. “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” a propaganda poem in Tolson’s estimation, or, a barren mine, is given the

sociology in the oscillation between good-and bad-faith attendance to "the negro problem"; to the analysis of and discourse on psychopathology and the deployment of these in both colonial oppression and anticolonial resistance; to the regulatory metaphysics that undergirds interlocking notions of sound and color in aesthetic theory: blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay, even when that decay is invoked in the name of a certain (fetishization of) vitality. (177)

Several other critics have tracked the handoff between eugenics, psychology and sociology in the mid-century. See, Jay Garcia, *Psychology Comes to Harlem: Rethinking the Race Question in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class*, chap. 2; Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2004); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁵⁷ In “Excerpts from a Letter to Allen Tate” Tolson writes that “Yes, your sociologist, as a victim of circulus in probando, salts the mine, stacks the cards, loads the dice!”

status of pure poetry for the sheer expansion of criticism. The classification of the Ode was a “desperate ontological maneuver” in a much different sense than John Crowe Ransom intended.

Libretto for the Republic of Liberia; or, Tolson’s Quantum Philosophy of History

Tolson’s correspondence with Tate and his essay on the matter to be published in *Sewanee Review* were but one dimension of a larger transmedial event tied to the release of the *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*. After considering Tate’s preface “carefully,” Tolson wrote that combined with his poem, “it is an atom bomb dropped on two worlds.” William Carlos Williams came to a similar conclusion, even though he hadn’t read Tolson’s atom bomb statement. Taking on the style of the “Ti” section of the *Libretto*, which was published in *Poetry*, Williams Carlos Williams wrote of the Tolson and Tate encounter in Book IV of *Paterson* before *Libretto* was published in full:

-- and to Tolson and his ode
and to Liberia and to Allen Tate
(Give him credit)
and to the South generally
Selah!

-- and to 100 years of it – splits
off the radium, the Gamma rays
will eat their bastard bones out who
are opposed
*Selah!*⁵⁸

In the stanzas that precede and follow the above, Williams draws an elliptical relation to financial credit, fragmentation, the atom bomb, and colonization.⁵⁹ Williams, as Tolson did, saw

⁵⁸ William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New Directions, 1963), 83.

⁵⁹ Kathy Lou Schultz supplies an excellent reading of the Tolson/Tate stanza in *Paterson* in relationship to *Libretto*’s status as a “modernist epic.” See, Kathy Lou Schultz, *The Afro-Modernist Epic and Literary History: Tolson, Hughes, Baraka* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 62–3.

Tolson's poem and Tate's preface as containing the destructive and world-shaping, anti-colonial potential of an atomic bomb.⁶⁰

Peter Middleton argues that in the 1940s and 1950s poetry often turned to quantum and nuclear physics to shore up epistemological legitimacy for culture in an age where claims to knowledge were increasingly made through research. Middleton writes, "If poets were to claim some territory on Vannevar Bush's endless frontier of knowledge alongside [George A.] Lundberg, [Kurt] Lewin, [Norman] Wiener and other new scientists of the human, as well as the natural world, they would need methodological credit."⁶¹ This was a particular challenge for poets – and black poets, especially – because they were "outside the institutional networks" that were responsible for "the legitimation of disciplinary knowledge," especially in any areas under the purview of the natural and social sciences. As we discovered in the previous section, Tolson invited Tate to write a preface for his *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* in order to trouble the disciplinary knowledge that was becoming increasingly legitimate in literary studies. Tolson turns to the metaphorical register of physics to do "epistemic work" against the epistemology of literary criticism that is tied, by yet another metaphor, to the colonial logics of Europe and the

⁶⁰ Sartre, too, figured the becoming of Universal History as a result of an explosion of black poetics. Yet, Tolson (and perhaps Williams) sees this bomb not as a kick to an existing Universalism, but, rather as a complete overhaul in the possibility of universalism; put differently, Tolson blows up the category to completely reconstruct it. Tolson would likely have seen Sartre's explosion as a repetition of the category error between the ontology of form and the ontology of the human that marked the New Critical understanding of universalism. The "human," in other words, must be redrafted based upon an alternative epistemology and sense of history.

⁶¹ Peter Middleton, "Poetry, Physics, and the Scientific Attitude at Mid-Century," *Modernism/modernity* 21, no. 1 (January 2014): 163. Cleanth Brooks made a similar argument about poetry: "the course of science has come full circle from the age of Hobbes to the age of Einstein...By removing the curse of *fiction* from poetry, [modern science] allows the poet to develop *his* kind of *fiction* in accord with its own principles, unconfused by those of another." Brooks suggests that with the transformation of scientists from imposing dogmatists into genial relativists, poetry need no longer suffer from an epistemology inferiority complex. qtd in Mark Royden Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism, 1996), 170. Also, Michelle M. Wright writes about the potential of New Physics in towards developing a "wholly inclusive definition" of Blackness. See, Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2015).

U.S. For Tolson, the primary source of this colonial logic is Europe's skewed sense of world history that largely ignores the world dominance of African and Islamic civilizations during the so-called "Dark Ages" that spanned from the fifth to the fifteenth century. It is this sense of history that allows Tate to call Tolson's poetry "provincial" even while Tate himself draws upon African cultural forms and stories to become modern. Tolson undoes this through his poems – and his dialogue with Tate – where he depicts the entanglement and competition between various histories, forms, and disciplinary practices.

Tolson's epistemic work against colonial and literary critical logics perhaps takes place most prominently in the twenty-five pages of references, explanations and digressions found in endnotes published with his poem. Kathy Lou Schultz has argued that Tolson's notes take on the cast of an ever-growing syllabus "that may continue days, months, or years, for this is not a text to be mastered."⁶² Similarly, the notes to *Libretto* can just as easily be recognized as notes toward a critical reading of the poem informed by Western philosophy, accounts of Liberia's history, and a long history of Anglophone poetry. Like Tolson's correspondence with Tate that linked a history of the Ode form to the organization of university departments, the notes to Tolson's poem suggest how poetry is always yoked closely to an interpretive apparatus that has both a specific and an elliptical epistemological method. In the body of the poem, Tolson comments on the colonizing effect of similar, "universal" epistemologies in math, science, and music:

worldmusic's sol-fa syllables (*o do de do de do de*)
worldmathematics' arabic and roman figures
worldscience's greek and latin symbols
the letter killeth five hundred global tongues

⁶² Kathy Lou Schultz, "To Save and Destroy: Melvin B. Tolson, Langston Hughes, and Theories of the Archive," *Contemporary Literature* 52, no. 1 (2011): 127.

before esperanto garrotes voläpuk *vanitas vanitatum*⁶³

Tolson suggests that the same science and math that he takes to be important metaphorical repositories also have a morbid impact on the diversity of human cultures, the death of “five hundred global tongues” by the force of the “letter.” This radical erasure of culture in the pursuit of universalism is already in process, well before an International language (Esperanto) will strangle another (Voläpuk). Meanwhile, Tolson registers *Libretto*’s own relationship to this universalizing practice. Besides the fact that the poem is named as if it were the text of an opera, Tolson’s 880-line poem is divided into eight sections, each marked with a corresponding scale degree of the major diatonic scale noted in solfeggio (“sol-fa”) syllables (Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La Ti, Do). By invoking the Western major scale in this way, Tolson notes the false universalism of music and of his poem. The major scale is not only standardized by the tonal frequencies of given pitches, but it also only allows for certain intervals of ascent or descent between pitches.⁶⁴ For example, the quarter-tone bends of jazz and the blues, as well as the microtonal melodies of South Asian and Middle Eastern musics all fall between the possible notes in the twelve-tone system. In using and undercutting the foundations of Western music, Tolson reveals an implicit colonization present in international movements, especially ones that give lip-service to universal tendencies.

Tolson stages his poetry as actively entangled with movements of “universal” aims. Indeed, *Libretto* becomes both a pursuit of Liberia’s greatness and a pursuit of a transcendent poetic style. Matthew Hart argues that this results from Tolson writing toward an “interpretive

⁶³ Tolson, “Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,” l. 520–24.

⁶⁴ For example, in the United Kingdom and the United States the ‘A’ above middle C is agreed to sound at 440 Hz. This standard didn’t come to be, however, until efforts toward pitch standardization lobbied by European, British, and US American broadcasters came about in 1939. See: Lynn Cavanagh, “A Brief History of the Establishment of International Standard Pitch, A = 440 hertz” *WAM: Webzin o audiju i muzici*.

community adequate to the Africa-to-come,” a community that Tolson refers to as “the vertical audience.” Hart goes on to say that in writing for this audience, “Tolson imagines a time in which the catholicity of modernist form, far from embodying a critique of instrumental rationality or bourgeois culture, has become commensurate with the social project of postcolonial modernization.”⁶⁵ Paired with the busting of the epistemology of the fields of worldscience and worldmathematics (and perhaps even world literature), Tolson’s musical frame looks to a time when universalism can become a decolonial logic, rather than a colonial one.

This decolonial conceit is appropriate for the subject of Liberia, an African nation with its own twisted relation to colonialism. It also draws attention to the fact that the American Tolson was neither from Liberia, nor had set foot in the country prior to being named the country’s poet laureate and to writing the poem. Liberia was founded as a project of the American Colonization Society (ACS), also known as The Society for Colonization of Free People of Color of America. In 1820, ACS proposed founding a colony in Africa to be populated by free slaves from the United States, maroons, and Africans rescued from the then illegal transatlantic slave trade. The Society’s members funded the project, most of whom were white aristocrats and evangelists. Tolson mentions some of ACS’s most prominent members in *Libretto*: Francis Scott Key and Supreme Court Justice and nephew of George Washington, Bushrod Washington. Charles Morrow Wilson, whose history of Liberia is cited in the notes to *Libretto* as “the source for many of these references” on Liberian history, notes that “for good or bad it [Liberia] was conceived by white theorists who pondered and dreamed of black peoples’ future.”⁶⁶ The future for black peoples extends to both the free people of color, who became de facto colonists when they arrived at Sherbo Island in 1820, and to the indigenous Africans who were coerced to sign over

⁶⁵ Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry*, 174.

⁶⁶ Charles Morrow Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 3.

their land rights on contracts they could not read with what Tolson calls a “haply black man’s X.”⁶⁷ After 1820, Liberia would continue to be at the expense of global market manipulations by economic power players: accusations of slavery by the League of Nations in the 1920s put Liberia in such dire financial straits that President Charles D.B. King was forced to lease one million acres of Liberian land for rubber production by the Firestone Plantation Company in 1926.⁶⁸ In all of its working parts, *Libretto* reflects the shape of Liberia’s colonization: Tate acts as the American Colonization Society, the poet’s protagonist as the pressed colonizers, and the indigenous Africans are present as they were in the colonial record, as only an ‘X’.

*

Despite the number of frames – historical, formal, medial, critical – around *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, the poem resists any distinct resolution. For example, the final stanza of the poem’s first section triumphantly declaims, “You [Liberia] are/ The iron nerve of lame and halt and blind,/ Liberia and not Liberia.”⁶⁹ Even Liberia cannot be pushed toward a unity: it is both “Liberia and not Liberia.” This resistance to resolution resonates with Rey Chow’s sense of staging, which describes how the entanglement of varying frames unfolds the becoming of theory, just as Tolson’s unpublished essay of his correspondence with Allen Tate does. Chow argues that the processes of thought are made visible through staging: “rather than drawing

⁶⁷ Tolson, “Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,” l. 18.

⁶⁸ From this act of international eminent domain, Liberia became an important strategic interest for the Allies on the North African front in World War II. The poet’s protagonist recaps these in the closing stanzas of ‘Mi’:

*The rubber from Liberia shall arm
Free peoples and her airport hinterlands
Let loose the winging grapes of wrath upon
The Desert Fox’s cocaine nietzscheans
A goosetstep from the Gateway of the East! (120-4).*

⁶⁹ Tolson, “Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,” l. 53–55.

things into itself [thought] by unifying them, [thought] splits them up, moves them apart, and gives them independence, in a series of sensuous explications (out-foldings).”⁷⁰ Just as he moves various epistemologies apart, Tolson registers that the poem changes depending on the frame that comes first to a given reader. In this regard, his poem appears as fragmented because of the number of competing epistemologies proposed by the poem. Tate called such competing strands irony or ambiguity, but only privileged them if they resolve into a total experience, the ontic poem. This makes the poem a well-defined and knowable object. Tolson’s point, and Chow’s too, is that these strands can each be traced with independent and “sensuous explications.” In pursuing this poetics, Tolson not only resists the essentializing ontology of New Criticism, he also resists the taxonomical impulse of Enlightenment thought. The taxonomical impulse undergirded the European colonial project and became a primary means to define the human, or the white European, as that which was not black.

The critique of the taxonomical and colonial project of the West comes with *Libretto*’s figuration of temporality. Many philosophers accounted for the uneven development of cultures, but even then, the measurement for “development” often took a particular cast. Tolson cited Eugene Guernier’s declaration about Africa’s historical positioning as an example of this type of thought: “‘*Seule de tous les continents, ’* the parrots/ chatter, ‘*l’Afrique n’a pas d’histoire.*”⁷¹ Guernier, himself, parrots Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, which dwells on the Unhistorical character of Africa, poised “on the threshold of the World’s History.”⁷² This positioning of

⁷⁰ Chow, *Entanglements*, 18–9.

⁷¹ Tolson, “Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,” l. 170–71. “*Of all the continents,*” the parrots/chatter, “*Africa alone does not have a history.*” Thanks to Keegan Cook Finberg for assistance with this translation.

⁷² G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, Trans. John Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 99. That Africa was seen to be without history and without content to Western eyes was a bugbear for Tolson, particularly when voiced by Gertrude Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (Random House, 1960): “Gertrude Stein concluded that negroes were not suffering from persecution, they were suffering

Africa outside of history confirms the taxonomical issues with Enlightenment thought, since it simultaneously suggests that African people are not “civilized” (and therefore less than human), but are instead “natural man in his wild and untamed state.” Tolson, however, reads assessments of an Africa as outside of history as a failure of Europe’s present, rather than of Africa’s past. European historians failed to acknowledge the role of African civilizations, like the Songhai Empire, that had some influence on European culture. In recuperating this African past, Tolson writes *Libretto* for a future-to-come, only because of the historiographical failings of the present. Frantz Fanon also discussed how contact with colonialism skewed history and the sense of the present. Fanon argued that storytellers could invoke a new rhythm of life, as well as remembrance of past “muscular tensions.” Fanon developed this argument from the stories told by storytellers who were jailed in Algeria in the mid 1950s by the colonial French: “contact” with colonialism, “brings an urgent breath of excitement, arouses forgotten muscular tensions and develops the imagination.”⁷³ Like the stories told by Algerian storytellers, Tolson’s poem constantly reminds its reader that the new developments that define Enlightenment thought are the sublated potential of those exploited and marginalized by modernity.

Tolson’s epic form, like that of Fanon’s storyteller, shows that the “present is no longer turned inward but channeled in every direction.”⁷⁴ In Tolson’s poem, the omnidirectional signaling of the present takes the form of connecting contemporary texts and events to their submerged histories. For example, Tolson aligns the voyage of the *Elizabeth*, which brought the first African Americans to Liberia, with Gunnar Myrdal’s sociological chronicle of the

from nothingness. She always contends that the african is not primitive, he has a very ancient but a very narrow culture and there it remains. Consequently nothing does or can happen” (238). Though not directly invoked in *Libretto*, Tolson frequently brought up Stein’s statement including in his poetry and in his tribute to his mother in his unpublished autobiography, see Farnsworth 8.

⁷³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 174.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

“American Negro problem,” *American Dilemma*, and the Middle Passage. The poet chants, “This is the horned American/Dilemma” and “This is the Middle Passage.”⁷⁵ Retreading the Middle Passage in reverse, but this time to forage for economic resources, recalls Eric Williams’ argument that the imperial expansion of capitalism leads to a submerged link between the accumulation of capital and the subordination of those bodies who produce that capital. Ian Baucom has described how the insurance ledgers of the slave ship *Zong* made a metaphor, or exchange valuation, of black bodies forcibly transported in the tight spaces of the ship’s hold. This metaphor begins an “Atlantic cycle of accumulation...[that] enthrone[s] speculative epistemologies and value forms at either end of its long durée.”⁷⁶ Baucom confirms the proximity of a distant past to present forms of Western rationalism that of course make their “speculations” on future value.

In an apparent contradiction of his critique of worldscience, Tolson pursues this omnidirectional present by understanding temporality through the lens of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. Tolson’s poem concludes by a description of the transportation technologies of a future Africa. These vehicles – the Futurafrique, an automobile from Liberian motors; the United Nations Limited, a bullet train; the Bula Matadi, a diesel-powered quadruple-decker ship; and *Le Premier des Noir*, the flagship of Pan-African Airways – register the expansive topography of Africa completely connected—in all directions—in the present. Despite the simultaneity of this African present, temporality remains uneven, and, ultimately relative. Tolson writes about this temporality in a footnote that glosses the Japanese phrase “Shikata-gai-nai” (仕方が無い):

⁷⁵ Tolson, “Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,” l. 143–4, 149, 152. In *Black Is a Country*, Nikhil Pai Singh reads Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* as a codification of “almost a decade of liberal reformist thought around racial division” that reaffirmed the rationality that US American national culture was understood to be white American culture. Myrdal’s work, too, siphoned grant money away from African American researchers who proposed to write a similar report. Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 142–155.

⁷⁶ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Duke University Press Books, 2005), 31.

“It cannot be helped.” This is the stoicism with which Japanese villagers meet the earth convulsions of Fujiyama. In other lands it is fate, kismet, predestination, artistry of Circumstance [a phrase Tate quotes in his letters to Tolson], economic determinism, necessitarianism... Sometimes it takes the form of the sophistry, *human nature does not change*. As a hidden premise it blocks the kinetic; it confuses the feral with the societal and leads to *petition principii*. History, then, remains a Heraclitean continuum of a world flaring up and dying down as “it always was, is, and shall be.” Some moderns have turned this ancient seesaw figure of a crude dialectics into a locomotive of history.

Tolson observes that the use of the dialectic to describe historical processes is of the same ilk as determinism or gradualism. Not only does this “crude dialectics” take the form of a symbol of unceasing progress (a locomotive), it also affirms the unchanging nature of a universally conceived humanity. Tolson goes on to state how his poem works to counteract this type of historicism:

In the poem, however, the flux of men and things is set forth in symbols whose motions are vertical-circular, horizontal-circular, and rectilinear. In spite of the diversity of phenomena, the underlying unity of the past is represented by the ferris wheel; the present by the merry-go-round; and the future by the automobile, the train, the ship, and the aeroplane. I placed the ship image in the middle of the images of swifter vehicles to indicate the contradiction in the essence of things, the struggle of opposites, which mankind will face even in *Khopirû* and *Höhere*. By the Law of Relativity, history will always have its silver age as well as its golden, and each age will contain some of the other’s metal. Because of these upward onward lags and leaps, it is not an accident that

Liberia reaches her destination. the Parliament of African Peoples, after the aerial symbol.⁷⁷

In short, Tolson invokes Einstein's Law of Relativity to insist that history is neither a straight line, nor homogenous, "each age will contain some of the other's metal." Ian Hodder has described that Einstein's revelations on mass and energy show that atoms are constantly moving and, as such, "that matter 'becomes' rather than 'is'."⁷⁸ Hodder's insight sheds light on Tolson's intervention because Tolson suggests that the dialectic thinking of Hegel and of the Enlightenment engenders a historical stasis that, in turn, makes history appear unified and smooth. Against Enlightenment thinking, Tolson argues for a constant historical becoming, an attention to historical process. Tolson crafts this mode of historicism by attending to the varying vehicles, or mediating devices, that travel through the space of the present. Importantly, an experience of traversing the continent in one vehicle, is not the same experience one has when traveling in a different vehicle. Travelers experience Africa's space and time differently, even when traveling at the same time. When history is only traversed by locomotive, the type of movement associated with a progressive, universal history, the locomotive's passengers understand space and time to be uniform. Homogeneity creates the possibility for "anomalous" experiences – i.e. the "American Negro problem" – of modernity, rather than acknowledging difference as an inevitable production of the entanglement of cultural and scientific frames. Ultimately, Tolson ties his project to the Laws of Relativity of the New Physics, because it

⁷⁷ Tolson, "Libretto for the Republic of Liberia," n. 619.

⁷⁸ Ian Hodder, "The Entanglements of Humans and Things: A Long-Term View," *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (2014): 22.

insists upon a plurality of modes of space and time operating together simultaneously, which affirms that the travel of one vehicle is different from any other.⁷⁹

Importantly, C. Namwali Serpell argues that affinity with the New Physics – the plurality and uncertainty of relativity of Einstein, Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg and others – provides a criterion to distinguish certain critics from the New Critical mainstream. William Empson serves as Serpell’s example, because of his appreciation for the New Physics and the subsequent “resistance to abstract, fixed ideas, [which] reflects a keen eye for the temporal dimension of the literary experience.”⁸⁰ In line with Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, Empson declared that the “idea that the theorist is not part of the world he examines is one of the deepest sources of error.”⁸¹ Serpell differentiates this temporal mode of literary experience from the “ahistorical vivisections” of the New Criticism.⁸² It is the “ahistorical vivisections” that allows the New Criticism to impose a universal world-historical narrative onto all texts, even those texts that draw their energy from the history that surrounds them.

Tolson counteracts universal “ahistoricism” by deploying the New Physics to develop a new mode of historicism that has complex ties to the present, as well as the past and the future. Further, he suggests that critics who are embedded in the universal frame – the progressive

⁷⁹ Jimena Canales, who argues that Einstein increased the cachet of physics over philosophy by winning a 1922 debate with Henri Bergson about relativity, is quick to point out that what allows Einstein’s relativity is the fact that “time and simultaneity were ‘independent of individuals.’” Canales’s book supplies an excellent history of the new philosophical and scientific problems raised by the increase of scientific precision in the early twentieth century. I’m not entirely sure if this anti-humanist dimension of time is what attracted Tolson to Einstein. At the same time, however, as critics like Alexander Weheliye have pointed out, much of the black critical tradition has been to challenge definitions of the human, in part because those definitions were drawn around black people, and, thus, can be read as anti- or post-humanist. I thank Stephen Pasqualina for the Canales reference: Jimena Canales, *A Tenth of a Second: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 183. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁸⁰ C. Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 35. Auritro Majumder directed me to this work with great enthusiasm.

⁸¹ qtd. in *ibid.*, 32.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 35.

locomotive – tend to ignore whether or not the literary work being observed can be read much differently from any number of alternative frames. This tunnel vision – a misreading of the relative movement of the object being observed – not only privileges the so-called critical frame from which the object is seen, but also affects the critical object through the measurements of the critical frame. In other words, the critic dramatically alters the object it critiques through her critique. The literary work, then, is in a state of becoming as it is impacted with each critical reading. With this postulate, Tolson suggests that the phenomenology of a unitary terrain (Africa, the literary text) in any given moment is relative to the known history of that place, which eventually shapes supposedly empirical understandings of this terrain. This is Tolson's Law of Relativity and his atom bomb. It insists that competing histories – not just the world-system of politics and economics – move differently through a space that they are simultaneously creating. The result is the destruction of two worlds – the center and the periphery, white and black – that mutates the matter of the present and registers multiple outlets for the escape of excessive past and future world-shaping energies, which is to say, it allows for an emancipation of blackness from epistemological oppression.

Tolson shows how the explosion of the Western Enlightenment can radiate outwards, making visible multiple new vehicles of criticism. These vehicles are ways of knowing the world, becoming in the world, and means for recording those epistemologies and ontologies over time. In the process Tolson shows how colonial and anti-black understandings of history not only misinterpret the past, but also have a great effect on the present and the imagined potential of the future. When read with Tate's Preface and Tolson's unpublished essay that takes Tate's preface to task, we see that Tolson links the persistence of an anti-black logic to the New Critical approach to black literary works and to ordering histories of different stripes to independent

fields and categories. For example, works by Negro authors are deemed sociological documents and, as such, carry their own distinct “provincial” temporality. Further, by privileging the resolution and unity of both poetry and history in their practice, Tate and the New Critics restrict what Chow would call the “outfoldings” of particular fields. In other words, fields are understood by New Critics to share space in homogenous empty time, to make streamlined and smooth the abstractions for manipulating history.⁸³ Instead, Tolson thinks of literary fields – and the periods associated with them – as knotty entanglements, drawn together by their intersections of media, history, form, and method that ultimately make new “sensuous descriptions” of black literature possible.

A Final Note on the Period Concept

If we take Eric Hayot’s thesis that “our entire system of literary education...reifies the period as its central historical concept” and accept Joshua Kates’s aside that the period concept has its “disciplinary theoretical kernel” in the New Criticism, then, it is quite clear that we, scholars of literature, have a problem. In the beginning of the chapter, I gestured toward a number of recent critiques of periodization, but in this chapter’s conclusion, I consider what we can learn about periodization today from the delayed detonation of Tolson’s atom bomb. Up to

⁸³ Chow argues that smoothness troubles the entanglements of staging in the following passage:

In the days of proliferating, hypermediatized screens and frames, is staging, which belongs to an older, modernist way of objectifying reflexivity, still meaningful? And even if it is, has not staging lost its once utopic function now that it seems to have been thoroughly assimilated into facets of what Guy Debord has famously named the society of the spectacle, from museum art exhibits to television talent shows, to real estate marketing strategies? In terms of the sense what has reflexivity, once staged and mediatized in the form of estranged thought and roughened perception become in the new regime of the abstract touch--the pinch, the click, the tap, the slide, and the finger swipe, all characteristic of digital technologies? Has not the speed and smoothness, the so-called flow, of the microcomputer, so ostentatiously always already reflexive in its basic modes of operation, paradoxically reintroduced a sense of illusionism and automatism, exactly the kind of sensation that the earlier generations of media theorists such as Brecht and Benjamin were keen on dispelling?

Chow, *Entanglements*, 25.

this point, I have argued that Tolson stages the colonial and anti-black logics present in periodization theory and practice in literary studies. From Hayot and Kates, we can intimate that the theory and practice that Tolson encountered as part of literary studies in predominantly white institutions is still very much our own. With this, I echo Alexander Weheliye, who “underscore[s] just how comprehensively the coloniality of Man suffuses the disciplinary and conceptual formations of knowledge we labor under, and how far we have yet to go in decolonizing these structures.”⁸⁴ I wager Tolson can guide us in this decolonization struggle.

What defines the period concept? René Wellek argues that literary periods define the “systems of norms” that shaped literary practice in a given duration of time. Ted Underwood argues that Wellek took this autonomous historical concept as the only concept that “can preserve the properly cultural character of literary study. Without periodization, literature will inevitably be reduced to a province of some other discipline and culture will be reduced to mere

⁸⁴ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, 7. Weheliye cites Sylvia Wynter’s work on this matter. Wynter argues that the embedded coloniality in current forms of disciplinarity has roots in the deracination of biopolitical discourse (which ultimately becomes the subject of Weheliye’s book). Disciplines, Wynter argues, must still function, as all human orders of knowledge have done from our origin on the continent of Africa until today, as a language capacitated form of life, to ensure that we continue to know our present order of social reality, and rigorously so, in the adaptive ‘truth-for’ terms needed to conserve our present descriptive statement. That is, the one that defines us biocentrically on the model of a natural organism, with this a priori definition serving to orient and motivate the individual and collective behaviors by means of which our contemporary Western world-system or civilization together with its nation-state sub-units, are stably produced and reproduced. This at the same time ensures that we, as Western and westernized intellectual, continue to articulate, in however radically oppositional a manner, the rules of the social order and its sanctioned theories. Biopolitics may seem beside this discussion of literary form, but the categorical displacements on “bare life” that it describes through contradictions in sovereignty resonates with the conflation I’ve described on the part of New Critics between the sense of ontological struggle in a literary form and the ontological struggle imposed on black life by legal systems in the United States and otherwise. This conflation of being of form and the human associates culture with the same sort of biological order of Man, and thus, creates a distinct periodization of those groups. Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Over-Representation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.

historical explanation.”⁸⁵ The period, in other words, preserves literature from extra-disciplinary intervention. Tate, Blackmur, Ransom, and even Parker Tyler deployed periodization in this way. They argued that because black literature, in general, didn’t reflect the “style” of contemporaneous literatures, it could not be literature. Instead, black literature had to be within the realm of another discipline, since it produced both “historical” and “sociological” documents. Despite its ability to give literary studies a distinct object of study, Wellek understood that these bound and separate periods left little room for the persistence of norms from previous periods, as well as historical development in general. Frederic Jameson has called the bounded mode of historicization that Wellek theorizes the synchronic projection of history, which Jameson deems typical of formalism and structuralism. In its punctuation of time, a synchronic projection of history yields “a view of the very forms through which the mind sees change and events in time.”⁸⁶ In other words, the synchronic project provides an easy to glean model of how the “systems of norms” for literary form change over time. Yet, as evidenced by Wellek’s anxiety about his period concept, the change that registers is passive.

To put it simply, Wellek’s description of a period as a “system of norms,” which I’m taking to be more or less synonymous with the New Critical model, suggests that periods have a distinct and sudden conclusion. In the first chapter, I described how the New Critics turned this paradigm on the history of literary theory itself, which created literary theory as such, even while they acknowledged that their practices persisted after declaring the New Criticism dead. Again, this resonates with one of Ted Underwood’s central paradoxes in *Why Literary Periods Mattered*: despite knowing the limits of period surveys and field-coverage approaches, professional organization, course catalogs, and hiring practices carry forward what could be a

⁸⁵ Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered*, 131.

⁸⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), x–xi.

relic of the past into our present. This happens even after many scholars working in postcolonial studies, queer studies, feminist studies, critical race and ethnic studies, or, “minority discourses,” have “provincialized” the very Western models of universal history that Tolson ‘provincialized’ in 1953.⁸⁷ So, why do scholars, accomplished ones of minority discourse at that, continue to ask, “What Was [a period of] Literature?”⁸⁸

The “was” in this question relegates a type of literature to the past, regardless of whether it is the literature of a racial or ethnic group, or even a critical approach. When literary critics use “was” to describe a field and period of literature, the period becomes bounded, a distinct past-object. This past-object is steady, which implies that with enough labor and time a period can be “mastered.” Yet, as *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* and its extensive paratextual apparatus makes plain, certain – and, perhaps, all – literary works resist mastery by the sheer plurality of forces (material, individual, historical, phenomenological, etc.) that leads to their generation. To see a poem or a period as a bounded object is to deny either entity of the potentials of their becoming. Further, Tolson shows us that making certain literatures “of the past” reinforces the conditions of the ontological struggle of black life within an Enlightenment epistemology based on the restriction and policing of all that is symbolically loaded onto blackness. Indeed, African

⁸⁷ I use the term “minority discourse” from Weheliye.

⁸⁸ The most prominent recent example of this question being Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?* (Harvard UP: 2011). In this book, Warren argues that instead of a genre, aesthetic, or identity designation, “African American literature” denotes a historical literary period, whose beginning and end are tied to segregation in the U.S. Warren loosely attributes his title to Leslie Fiedler’s *What Was Literature? Culture and Mass Society* (Simon and Schuster, 1982) (64). Prior to Fiedler’s book, however, was Gerald Graff, “What Was New Criticism? Literary Interpretation and Scientific Objectivity,” *Salmagundi*, no. 27 (Summer-Fall 1974): 72–93. Following Warren several critics have taken up his question to their respective fields, including: Leigh Anne Duck, “What Was the New Southern Studies?,” *Society for the Study of Southern Literature Newsletter* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2013): n.p.; and Kirsten Silva Gruesz, “What Was Latino Literature?,” *PMLA* 127, no. 2 (March 2012): 335–41. And, though, they do not ask the fated question, Rebecca Walkowitz and Doug Mao’s “The New Modernist Studies” takes the “New Critical” move of adding, “New” to the title. Mao and Walkowitz identify modernist studies with other “period-centered areas of literary scholarship.” Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 737–48.

American literature as a concept doesn't exist as something that can be easily relegated to the past. Instead, it persists as omnidirectional movement within the present, which overwrites and erases epistemologies of the past, as well as the future. These designations are not defined by any one critic, nor by any one institution: the academy defines African American literature, sure, but so do writers, readers, publishing houses, book stores, museums, and even the algorithms that traverse the Internet to return results for a given search term. Such omnidirectional movements of histories require Tolson's Law of Relativity, a historical model that recognizes the locomotive of universal history in addition to all of the other modes of travel through time, however uneven they may be.

In this way, Tolson anticipates and expands Jacques Rancière's insight that various regimes for apprehending the distribution of the sensible can operate concurrently. Politics, "[t]he lodg[ing] of one world into another," may make certain ways of seeing more visible than others, but that does not preclude or accept the end of any other regime or the histories to which a regime subscribes.⁸⁹ Tolson, like Rancière, acknowledges that attempts to describe history relate closely to what it is possible "to do" in space by pointing his reader to vehicles that can greatly affect the reader's perspectives of the past, present, and future. By "refiguring the space, of what there is to do there, what is to be seen or named therein" Tolson enacts what Rancière defines as the function of politics.⁹⁰ Tolson shows us that the struggle for this sense of politics is a struggle over institutional formations that presume the temporal arrest or delay of people or nations that fall outside of "modern" time. A dominant sense of the present is what enforces aesthetic and political norms – a sense of the present as post-racial, for example, can intimate that all invocations of race are merely of the past. Rancière calls the enforcers of a smooth

⁸⁹ Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," trans. Rachel Bowlby and Davide Panagia, *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (2001): para. 21.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 22.

present “the police.” For Rancière the police breaks up demonstrations by suggesting that passersby move past, saying to them, “there is nothing to see here.”⁹¹ In this chapter, I have shown how Allen Tate and the New Criticism police the writing of black men and women from the category of literature by mistaking the ontology of the human for the ontology of poetic form. This mistake carries within it historical assumptions about the temporal development of culture. Tate, for example, dutifully noted that Tolson’s success had been accomplished before, an accomplishment that Tate took as having everything to do with Tolson’s identity, not his poetics; so did Chase with Ellison, Sartre with Césaire, and Kunitz with Brooks. These New Critics directed readers to note the achievement of these black writers, but ultimately shoo readers along, intoning “there is nothing to see here,” by calling these works “universal.” ‘Universal’ may have appeared as praise, but, instead the emphasis put upon it functioned as a confirmation of how the given writer was otherwise an exception to the cultural stage of the writer’s race.

Tolson’s model of periodization and of world history, however, calls for an undoing of periodization’s colonial logic. Tolson suggests that accounting for movement and becoming supplies a better way toward understanding the knotty entanglement that is the present, past, and future. Tolson’s model may be abstract and unwieldy, but it most certainly interrupts the periodization-centered disciplinary organization that is still dominant in most institutions of higher education. Accounting for the movements that make up history may at its base mean thinking twice about period-based field coverage in hiring, curriculum development, and staffing survey courses. If surveys are to be kept, perhaps, they should be more collaborative. What are the historical trajectories of eighteenth century philosophies within the century (taught by an “eighteenth-centuryist”), in the nineteenth century (by a scholar of postcolonialism and one of Victorian literature), and beyond? Collaboration in some form challenges the sense of individual

⁹¹ Ibid.

mastery, not in its substitution for group mastery, but for its acknowledgment that varying backgrounds make visible new tangles within the historical and cultural knot. This model isn't the dispersal of expertise to the awaiting mass of amateurs, but instead, it is the recognition that knowledge grows in a common social sphere. As such, culture and cultural knowledge when enclosed and held for mastery lose their potential as a commons. Though the way out may not be entirely clear, Tolson suggests that a different epistemology is possible and with it a different sense of the human, which has long been erased by its conflation with aesthetic form.

Chapter 4 “A crying need for good literary criticism,” or, Tactical Criticism

In 1950, the editors of *Phylon* asked Langston Hughes where “the Negro writer” had yet to make a significant contribution. Hughes responded with a definitive answer:

Well, let me put it this way: it seems to me that there is a crying need for good literary criticism. I can’t give the reasons for it, but our great deficiency is this dearth of really good critics. We have almost no books of literary criticism – certainly not recent, competently-done books.

And it’s not just literary essays and books of criticism which are lacking. There is a need for good journalistic articles and for non-fiction works in many fields. In history and in sociology the record is better than elsewhere. Frazier, John Hope Franklin, Cayton, Drake, and others, have done fine work here.¹

The interview was part of a larger special issue devoted to “The Negro in Literature: The Current Scene,” which featured contributions from many important critics of African American literature, including Sterling A. Brown, J. Saunders Redding, Arna Bontemps, and Alain Locke. Even with the prominent line up of literary critics, Hughes was not the only contributor to bemoan the “deficiency...of really good critics.” Blyden Jackson admits in his essay, “For Negroes just have not gotten around to real criticism of their own literature. We have done some good things. But all our accomplishments can be quickly demonstrated to be mere prolegomena for the hard,

¹ It will become clear later in the chapter how important it was that Hughes’s remarks come from an interview not from an essay. Mozell Hill, the editor of *Phylon*, asked Hughes for an essay for the special issue of about 2,000 to 3,000 words on the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes turned down the invitation. About four months later, Mozell Hill sent a telegram to Hughes asking him for an interview; Hughes replied the next day and received the questions ahead of the interview by airmail. Langston Hughes, “Some Practical Observations: A Colloquy,” *Phylon (1940-1956)* 11, no. 4 (December 1950): 309. Letters and Telegram, Mozell Hill to Langston Hughes and Hughes to Hill, June 27, 1950, July 24, 1950, November 5, 1950, November 6, 1950 (Telegram and Letter), box 129 folder 2414, Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

serious, tedious labor of giving literature that sort of scholarly and critical framework which adds the needed marginal dimensions to the established European literature.”² Jackson’s assessment does not spare prominent works by black critics, such as Redding’s *To Make a Poet Black* or Hugh Gloster’s *Negro Voices in American Fiction*; he calls them “reference works,” reviewer-speak for the necessary, but degraded books that must precede the glorified labor of criticism.

Despite their dismissals, Hughes and Jackson formulate the contours of black criticism by authoritatively defining what black criticism is not. They suggest that black critics were not integral participants in the recent expropriation of criticism, which, as I have argued, changed the institutional ecology that authorized literary critical discourse. Black writers are doing criticism, but they are not doing “good” or “real” criticism, nor are they providing the “critical framework” for “established European literature.” The modifiers ‘good’, ‘real’, and ‘established’ all point to the epistemological and ontological frameworks that are able to bestow value and existence to literary texts within the cultural landscape. By referring to good or real literary criticism, Hughes and Jackson point to the disciplinary formation of literary criticism made manifest in predominantly white institutions. Hughes’s reference to E. Franklin Frazier, John Hope Franklin, and Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake only reinforces the idea that Hughes refers to the disciplinarity of literary criticism. Frazier, Franklin, and Cayton and Drake’s research greatly impacted the definitions and points of inquiry in the disciplines of history and sociology at large. Hughes and Jackson observe that black intellectuals have made little impact on a specific, albeit increasingly dominant, discursive formation of literary criticism: the New Criticism.

As I argued in the previous chapter, the New Criticism’s anti-blackness manifested as a conflation between the ontological status of poetic form and the ontological status of the human. Because philosophical, historical, and sociological approaches associated black life with either

² Blyden Jackson, “An Essay in Criticism,” *Phylon* 11, no. 4 (1950): 338.

delayed human development, or, the impossibility of development, New Critics believed that the ontological status of black literature was similarly delayed. In his correspondence with Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes voiced similar skepticism about the critical methodology derived by the Agrarian New Critics. In reply, Bontemps described to Hughes his lectures given at Peabody College in Nashville that revealed the submerged preconditions of the New Criticism, mainly that race played a factor in whether or not a poem could be considered a poem in the first place.³ In his *Phylon* interview Hughes emphasizes the role of form in his determination of the “deficiency” of black literary criticism. Hughes identifies the forms that black literary criticism lacks: “literary essays and books of criticism.” By isolating the forms – essays and books – where black criticism cannot be found, Hughes tacitly identifies that criticism, as established by

³ Hughes and Bontemps challenge the New Criticism because it safeguards the category of literature – as well as that of art in general – from dissent about the boundaries of the literary. Bemoaning the influence of the New Critics on the editorial direction of James Laughlin’s *Perspectives USA*, Bontemps reminds Hughes that the New Critical group “traces its genealogy to the Fugitives of Nashville, the group which produced I’LL TAKE MY STAND, a very anti-Negro book. Not all have been reconstructed. Naturally they have their own reasons for opposing protest in fiction writing. They are ready enough to protest the things they don’t like. They simply object to protesting the disabilities of the Negro in America. By not “protesting the disabilities of the Negro in America,” Bontemps points out that the New Critics refused to acknowledge the material difference in how African Americans were treated and how that discrimination may impact African American literature. . In addition, Bontemps suggests that the objective criteria for New Critical evaluation are guided by racist bias. Objecting to protest literature is based on the likes and dislikes of a New Critic and their background (“reconstructed” or not) rather than strong and objective evaluative criteria. In a different letter, Bontemps described his lecture against the New Criticism at Peabody College, a teaching college across the street from (and now part of) Vanderbilt University. He reported that he would “draw a bead on the New Criticism which holds that neither folk materials nor sociological questions are proper for serious arts.” Even while arguing against the New Criticism, Bontemps adopts the New Critical terminology in his lecture by deeming Hughes’s poetry and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as “folk materials” or as “sociological.” In this regard, Bontemps cedes the ground of the category of literature and instead argues for an expanded definition of “serious art,” which more readily includes the work of African American writers and artists. Despite his belief in the New Critical capriciousness against black writers, Hughes would still donate John Crowe Ransom’s *Selected Poems* to the Fisk University Library in 1961. Letter, Arna Bontemps to Langston Hughes, March 11, 1953, box 19, Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Letter, Arna Bontemps to Langston Hughes, July 15, 1954, box 19, Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Letter, Fisk University Library to Langston Hughes, April 18, 1961, box 62 folder 1193, Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

the New Critics, can only appear as “essays” or “books.” That is, looking back to the first chapter, Hughes registers that the defining quality of literary criticism is not criticism as practiced, but its natural appearance as a formal theory of the text-object. With Blyden Jackson, who sees criticism as that which can bring ‘marginalized’ literature within “established European literature,” Hughes registers the deficiency of the New Criticism’s epistemology of history and the New Criticism’s understanding that criticism must take shape in certain rigid forms. What is deficient is not black criticism, but the apparatus that the New Criticism creates to define criticism.

Under these conditions, where and in what form was black criticism to be found? In this chapter, I posit that the answer was (and remains) in performance. I come to performance through Langston Hughes’s efforts to define literary criticism in an Executive Session before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in 1953 and through a significant amount of critical work on black performance in the field of black studies.⁴ In this closed door hearing,

⁴ If studies of black literature have W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* at their center, then the overlap of textuality and performance that Du Bois figures between the snippets of “Sorrow Songs” and his analysis of black life and letters becomes a sort of catalyst for black studies. In other words, black studies, especially in its instantiations since the 1980s, has always attended to the complex relation between performance, texts, performativity, and praxis. Recall that even in the poststructuralist hey-day of Afro-American studies, Houston A. Baker Jr. argued that presence was at the center of definitions of form. Baker writes, “When I use the word “form,” I do not want to invoke a distinction between form and content and spring the metaphysical trap privileging a primary order of form as an abiding and stabilizing *presence*.” Since the 1980s, many critics of black literature have been working to determine whether that presence is one important to a theoretical tradition, or, to a materialist tradition, such as studies in African American print culture. In 2010, Leon Jackson characterizes the divide between the two as quite stark: “Neither [scholars of African American literature, such as Gates himself and those who study books as economic or material artifacts] has listened to, or understood, the other.” Jackson’s characterization has some merit, but, at the turn of the twenty-first century a number of important books, including Brent Edwards’s *Practice of Diaspora*, Weheliye’s *Phonographies*, and Heather Russell’s *Legba’s Crossing*, in the field of black studies, or African Diaspora Studies, brought together book historical concerns with theorizations of texts. In a note below, I note the emerging field of black performance studies that thinks of theories of performativity in relation to black cultural production. Such studies push the boundaries of literary study writ large and suggest that presence is metaphysical, practiced, and experienced. W. E. B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Stilwell, KS.: Digireads.com Publishing, 1903); Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 16; Leon Jackson, “The

Hughes argues that the meaning of his poetry – how and what it performs – depends upon the scenario in which it is read. Indeed, Hughes cannot provide the committee with a stable account of any of his poems, because the meaning of the poem is made again with each reading. While this may sound like the reader-response criticism of the 1970s, the fact that Hughes formulates this mode of reading as a resistant action to the paranoid questioning of the McCarthy Commission distinguishes it from later formulations. In other words, Hughes shows how a mode of literary criticism can perform as an act of resistance to otherwise established modes of knowing that provide the basis for state disciplinary action and surveillance.⁵

Many scholars of black studies have argued that performance and performativity compose a vital resource for black people against anti-black racism.⁶ These methods manifested

Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian: African American Cultures of Print—The State of the Discipline,” *Book History* 13, no. 1 (2010): 251; Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Harvard University Press, 2003); Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Heather Russell, *Legba’s Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

⁵ William Maxwell called the F.B.I. surveillance operations of black writers as an effort to achieve “total literary awareness.” Maxwell argues that because of this goal, the Bureau long served as African American literature’s most comprehensive critic. The critical methods used by G-men largely reflected the contours of New Critical practice. See, William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover’s Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁶ Daphne Brooks, for example, shows how African American performance in the second half of the nineteenth century “rehearsed methods to transform the notion of ontological dislocation into resistant performance so as to become agents of their own liberation.” Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Duke University Press, 2006), 3. Harvey Young has detailed the emergence and maturation of the field of black performance studies in the past ten years. Harvey Young, “Black Performance Studies in the New Millennium,” *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 2 (2013): 289–94. Also see, Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers Of Color And The Performance Of Politics* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1999); Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Michelle Ann Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2014); Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2012); Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: NYU Press, 2011); Koritha Mitchell, *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere*

in a variety of forms including stage performances, re-enactments, dance, and in fiction. Alongside “everyday acts of resistance” by working-class blacks and the history of marronage, these cultural performances make up part of what Cedric Robinson has more broadly termed the Black Radical Tradition. The Black Radical Tradition serves as a source for revolutionary and resistant action and helps to organize collectivities of resistance through those actions. Robinson insists that for much of colonial modernity black radicalism has persevered without reference to “sacred texts to be preserved from the ravages of history.”⁷ The lack of sacred texts provides a protective function in that the absence of such a record assisted what Robin D.G. Kelley calls infrapolitics, or “the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups [which] is, like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum.”⁸ Through Robinson’s description of three paradigmatic figures – W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright – Robinson suggests that the Black Radical Tradition has increasingly been formulated through text. Yet, understanding that the Black Radical Tradition can be based in text *or* action – and oftentimes both – allows for scholars to register resistant actions as not only doing theoretical work, but as formulating a theory of revolution, resistance, and alternative modes of community.

Importantly, these theories derive their “authority” through contingent formations, rather than established institutional networks. In other words, the Black Radical Tradition does not derive its authority from established institutional systems, but achieves its work in fugitive spaces within these institutions. In their formulation of the undercommons, Stefano Harney and

Smith (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011); Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2012); Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

⁷ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 316.

⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (June 1993): 110.

Fred Moten point to the “nonplaces” of the Black Radical Tradition to locate space for the subversive intellectual. “She disappears into the underground,” they write, “the downlow low-down maroon community of the university, into the *undercommons of enlightenment*, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted where the revolution is still black, still strong.”⁹ Elsewhere, Moten argues that these nonplaces are created out of a Kantian impulse to “clip” the imagination, a clipping that positions blackness as permanently fugitive and dispossessed. Yet, it is precisely this dispossession that Moten sees as an operational center made manifest by black social life, “an irreducible property of life, persisting in and against every disciplinary technique while constituting and instantiating not just the thought but that actuality of the outside that is what/where blackness is—as space or spacing of the imagination, as condition of possibility and constant troubling of critique.”¹⁰ Following the insights of afro-pessimism, Moten suggests that blackness is always already positioned “outside” of critical thought, but – and here is where Moten turns afro-pessimism to black optimism, or “Black Op” – such an “outside” position exists as the only remaining nonplace where a revolutionary criticism, a place where the world can be thought of otherwise, can occur.¹¹

⁹ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

¹⁰ Fred Moten, “Black Optimism/Black Operation” (presentation, Anxiety, Urgency Outrage Hope... A Conference on Political Feeling, The Franke Institute for the Humanities, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, October 19, 2007). A Manuscript of Moten’s talk can be found online at <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/politicalfeeling/files/2007/12/moten-black-optimism.doc>. In the manuscript, the cited quotation can be found on pg. 3. Also see, Fred Moten, “Black Op,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): 1743–47.

¹¹ Frank B. Wilderson III defines afro-pessimism by its penchant to explore “the meaning of Blackness not – in the first instance – as a variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor, but as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions; this meaning is noncommunicable because, again, as a position, Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation.” Wilderson identifies a number of scholars who actively use this analytic as part of their work, including Hortense Spillers, Ronald Judy, David Marriott, Saidiya Hartman, Achille Mbembe, Frantz Fanon, Kara Keeling, Jared Sexton, Joy James, Lewis Gordon, George Yancey, and Orland Patterson. Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 58. Later in the chapter I discuss both

In this chapter, I consider Hughes's and Jackson's laments about the lack of "real" or "good" black criticism as an invitation to imagine the repertoire of literary criticism as otherwise.¹² Hughes's congressional testimony shows us that literary criticism can be deployed as a resistant, political act, what Michel de Certeau defines as a "tactic," that which "play[s] on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power."¹³ De Certeau argues that tactics are set in opposition to the strategies of dominant institutions, which include science, politics, and the military. Strategies "transform the uncertainties of history into readable spaces."¹⁴ They are tools of legibility, making the inscrutable more visible through their power. Therefore, according to de Certeau, "a certain power is the precondition of this knowledge and not merely its effect or its attribute."¹⁵ In turn, tactics must act from "the absence of a proper locus," which is to say tactics must function through a space unmade by power, or, a non-space.

Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton's arguments about the differences between afro-pessimism and black optimism. Moten attributes the difference to be in the emphasis of afro-pessimism on "death and pessimism" and black optimism on "life and optimism," while expressing some degree of hesitance about the term black optimism. As will become apparent, this chapter sees the performative potential of a black optimist frame by arguing that activity – particularly activities of resistance – can be analytic. Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (October 2013): 737–80.

¹² Diana Taylor defines the repertoire in the following way:

The repertoire...enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. Repertoire, etymologically "a treasury, an inventory," also allows for individual agency, referring also to "the finder, discoverer," and meaning "to find out." The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there," being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stale objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.

Taylor's theorization of the repertoire provides an alternative to writing reparative, or "recovered," histories, rather than writing through the archive. I use it a number of times throughout the chapter as a way to refer to the set of embodied, but unwritten, practices drawn upon in tactical criticism. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Second Printing edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 20.

¹³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 2nd ed. (University of California Press, 2002), 37. The use of de Certeau in describing the tactics of the Black Radical Tradition is not without precedent. Robin D.G. Kelley applies de Certeau's concept of "wiggling" to how black workers use part of the work day "for their own purpose." Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem," 91.

¹⁴ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

In this regard, if strategy relies on the making and unmaking of space, tactics rely upon the opportunities afforded by time. “The space of a tactic,” writes de Certeau, “is the space of the other.”¹⁶ In relation to Hughes and the Black Radical Tradition, the temporary tear in space afforded by tactics is the undercommons that Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe. Importantly, the undercommons formulation reorients de Certeau’s sense that the difference between strategies and tactics falls along the separation of space and time. Harney and Moten show that tactical acts repossess space, if only temporarily.

For ease of reference, I call Hughes’s criticism, and the criticism of the Black Radical Tradition of which it is a part, “tactical criticism.” In what follows, I argue that tactical criticism reformulates a number of the static ontological definitions that carry anti-blackness within existing instantiations of literary criticism. Not only does tactical criticism reorient our understanding of Hughes’s politics in the mid-century, it also opens up space for a history of literary criticism that decouples critical practices from anti-black institutions. While this history does not resolve the long tension between black studies and its function or efficacy in predominantly white institutions, it does provide leverage towards thinking about how literary critical practice borne out of the insights of black studies can resist the intensifying privatization and enclosure of the university. Tactical criticism may be a way to think about the public action of literary studies when it is being devalued and policed by cuts in funding and drops in enrollment. This is not a conflation of literary criticism with blackness, but, rather, an account of what literary criticism might look like if it were not anti-black in its history and its ontological definition.

¹⁶ Ibid., 39.

Langston Hughes Gives a Lesson in Literary Criticism

Three years after his interview with Mozell Hill in *Phylon*, Langston Hughes was served a subpoena that mandated his appearance before Senator Joseph McCarthy's committee on March 23, 1953. The blank on the subpoena that indicated the reason for Hughes's appearance was left unfilled. Hughes immediately wrote to McCarthy asking that his appearance be postponed because Hughes had neither "been informed why or what you wish to question me about" nor had he been given sufficient "time to be present."¹⁷ The committee reluctantly delayed the testimony one day, to Tuesday, March 24. In the interim, Hughes found a lawyer, Frank D. Reeves, and managed to buy a ticket to fly to Washington; he was basically broke at the time, since many of his speaking appearances had been cancelled due to public rumblings of Hughes's affiliations with Communism.¹⁸

Over the course of three days and private and public sessions with the Executive Committee, Hughes learned that he had been accused of writing pro-Communist poetry in books that had been purchased by the U.S. government. The purchased books were held in foreign libraries managed by the International Information Administration (IIA). (The IIA would later become part of the United States Information Agency.) As Senator Everett Dirksen put it in a hearing, the IIA purchased these books, "which allegedly delineate American objectives and American culture," in order to "propagandiz[e] our way of life and our system."¹⁹ Vera Kutzinski, who provides an extensive interpretation of the testimony in *The Worlds of Langston Hughes*,

¹⁷ Letter, Langston Hughes to Joseph McCarthy, March 22, 1953, box 109 folder 2030, Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

¹⁸ For background on the lead up to Hughes's testimony, see: Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 2: 1914-1967: I Dream a World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 189–222.

¹⁹ Donald A. Ritchie, ed., "Testimony of Langston Hughes (Accompanied by His Counsel, Frank D. Reeves), March 24, 1953," in *Executive Sessions of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, 83rd Congress, First Session, 1953*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953), 975.

argues that the accusations of the Subcommittee oriented the hearing towards the question of “intent.” The accusation against Hughes rested upon an uneasy relationship between the competing structures of literary and legal intent, and, unsurprisingly, became the primary source of conflict between the accuser and the accused. For Kutzinski, the difference between the rules of intent in legal and literary contexts means that a “translation” must occur between them.²⁰ Given that Hughes defines black criticism in the negative – a dearth and a lack of essays, books, and good criticism in general – the relationship between the clearly defined positions of legal intent and Hughes’s literary-based defense against those strictures can help to triangulate a definition of literary criticism.

Hughes’s literary criticism is neither synonymous with the New Criticism, nor with literary criticism, which is typically understood as a historical extension of the New Criticism. By the same logic, the Subcommittee is not a stand-in for literary criticism either. The fact that the committee called Hughes to speak for the meaning of his poetry is a flagrant violation of the intentional fallacy, as is the fact that Hughes is called to speak for the purchase of his poems by the U.S. government, a purchase that he had nothing to do with. Despite the already tensile idea of intent in the hearings, the modernist literary critic David Chinitz faults Hughes for violating the intentional fallacy on a number of occasions during the Executive Session. This leads Chinitz to the following conclusion: “The real weakness of Hughes’s testimony, then, is not that he was dissembling when he renounced his earlier radical politics, not that he was excessively polite, and not that he capitulated from start to finish. Rather, it is that he never challenged even gently, even indirectly, either the effort at censorship or the program of political intimidation that McCarthy was practicing upon him and others. One searches his testimony in vain for a moment

²⁰ Vera M. Kutzinski, *The Worlds of Langston Hughes: Modernism and Translation in the Americas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 203.

of meta-commentary, whether open or disguised, that might lead the public to question the senator's goals and methods."²¹ Chinitz recycles the frequently held derision of Hughes's public testimony – testimony that Arnold Rampersad characterizes as “largely passive, perhaps supine” – and applies it to the closed-door session. But in doing so, Chinitz passes over the possibility that Hughes's violation of New Critical reading methods is a deliberate act of resistance against both the New Criticism and the Subcommittee. Hughes's reading practice may be the very disguised meta-commentary Chinitz wishes to find. As much as the subpoena of Hughes by the Subcommittee suggests a violation of the intentional fallacy, it also implies that Hughes is called as an expert witness capable of taking an objective stance towards the meaning of his own poetry. Though the committee understands Hughes to carry legal responsibility for his poetry, the fact that they ask him to interpret these poems for their “objective” only reinforces the ontological distinction between the poem and the poet that is at the heart of New Criticism. When considering Hughes as an interpretive expert witness, his violation of the intentional fallacy can be read as an act of political resistance against the ontological distinction between poet and poem and against the paranoid logic that the committee deploys to mobilize such distinctions into legal accusations.

The committee hoped Hughes would provide an authoritative statement on the “objective,” or function of his poetry. Hughes laid out his argument about the contingent function of poetry in the closed door hearing on March 22, 1953, where he was questioned by Roy Cohn, McCarthy's chief counsel, David Schine, the chief consultant to the Subcommittee, and Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois. His basic argument was that poetry has a different function depending upon the scenario in which it is read. In the opening remarks of the hearing, Dirksen tells Hughes, “I

²¹ David E. Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear? Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 138.

would be less than frank with you, sir, if I did not say that there is a question in the minds of the committee, and in the minds of a good many people concerning the general objective of some of those poems, whether they strike a Communist, rather than an anti-Communist note.”²² Initially, the committee’s means to determine the “general objective” of Hughes’s poetry is to identify the political objective of Hughes the man. The first question lobbed at Hughes is the predictable, “Have you ever been a Communist?” Hughes answers by immediately troubling the apparent simplicity of the question, and, in the process begins his course in the perils of interpretation. To answer the question, Hughes must determine the rules that guide his actions in the session; he asks to know the committee’s definition of communism, and, for that matter, the definition of “all isms.” With this, Hughes implores the committee to agree on a critical language that Hughes, too, hopes to contribute meaning to. Cohn implores Hughes to “Interpret it [the definition of Communism] as broadly as you want,” an imperative that fails because, for Hughes, interpretation is not a “broad” act defined by an abstracted institution, but rather a contingent act defined between the parties in the scene. Hughes refuses to accept a concept as a stable object. Hughes insists that the definitions of concepts emerge through an exchange of ideas between present parties. For Hughes, concepts are always redrawn and always in need of a definition.

In challenging the definition of Communism in this way, Hughes also challenges the institutional structure that allows speech acts to perform their duties. As Diana Taylor emphasizes in her summation of J.L. Austin, doing things with words, or, the performative, relies upon existing structures of discursive and institutional authorization. For example, without the backing of the state or religious entities, the pronouncement of a couple as married at the close of a wedding ceremony would have no lasting meaning in legal or religious contexts. Taylor argues,

²² Ritchie, “Testimony of Langston Hughes (Accompanied by His Counsel, Frank D. Reeves), March 24, 1953,” 975.

however, that performatic acts – performatic being Taylor’s term to distinguish her concept from Austin’s – can function outside of these institutional contexts and draw energy from different epistemological systems, many of which have complex relationships to writing. The performatic can authorize and preserve “communal identity and memory” by creating temporary assemblages of authorization.²³ Hughes’s emphasis on the situational definition of concepts – and the subsequent contextual definition of all concepts invoked by his gesture to all “isms” – gestures toward the embodied and situational elements of “doing,” or performing criticism.

Increasingly aware that he will not receive an answer to his political inquiries, Roy Cohn approaches the objectives of individual poems instead. Hughes immediately thwarts the idea that a particular poem can have a consistent objective by stating “I don't think you can get a yes or no answer entirely to any literary question.” In fact, an answer can only be reached through discussion since a poem could “mean many things to different people.”²⁴ This unstable definition of literature is different than that held by the committee and by the prevailing definition in literary studies formulated by the New Critics. As described in *Understanding Poetry*, the task of the critic was to reconstruct the “attitude and feeling” uniquely attached to a piece of pure information. Though there is movement between attitude and information, that movement is otherwise contained within the stable borders of the poem. Critical interpretation becomes an effort to objectively account for the character of that movement. Hughes argues, however, that a poem can have multiple meanings and those meanings are made by different readers, which means those borders around the poem are largely present in name only. For example, Hughes can recall his interpretation of his “Ballad of Lenin” only by re-reading the poem. Hughes argues that a poem’s readers constantly redraw the poem’s stable borders while reading. Each interpretive

²³ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 18.

²⁴ Ritchie, “Testimony of Langston Hughes (Accompanied by His Counsel, Frank D. Reeves), March 24, 1953,” 978.

act suggests a distinctive performatic scenario dependent upon the embodiment of reader and audience.

The process Hughes describes for a performatic sense of interpretation is contingent upon the experience of the reader, the context of the reading, and the reader's background, among other factors. From his testimony, it is apparent that sometimes a thorough description of a poem's context may serve as an interpretation of that poem. Hughes formulates this context-based method of interpretation in his response to Roy Cohn's question about a specific sentence Hughes wrote for his column in the *Chicago Defender*.²⁵ Hughes states that "one can not take anything out of context."²⁶ After Cohn threatens Hughes by reminding him that he is testifying under oath, Hughes offers a slightly more thorough response: "If that statement is from a column of mine, as I presume it probably is, I would say that I believed the entire context of the article in which it is included."²⁷ Hughes suggests that any statement in his article must be measured against a number of factors both within the article and in the article's *context*. The context includes ongoing political and social events, other written responses to those events, and the writer's position in relation to that sense of the present. Indeed, Hughes suggests that a reading of a literary work must account for multiple dimensions of readerly and writerly experience in determining a temporary meaning of a poem.

Hughes eventually gets the opportunity to give what he calls "a full interpretation" of his poem "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." Before starting, Hughes asks if he will be given ample time to do so. After Cohn agrees, Hughes begins:

²⁵ Perhaps as evidence of the committee's tendency towards paranoia, Cohn incorrectly claims that the article was published in the *Daily Worker*. *Ibid.*, 984.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 985.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

All right, sir. To give a full interpretation of any piece of literary work one has to consider not only when and how it was written, but what brought it into being. I, sir, was born in Joplin, Missouri. I was born a Negro. From my very earliest childhood memories, I have encountered very serious and very hurtful problems. One of my earliest childhood memories was going to the movies in Lawrence, Kansas, where we lived and there was one motion picture theater, and I went every afternoon. It was a nickelodeon, and I had a nickel to go. One afternoon I put my nickel down and the woman pushed it back and she pointed to a sign. I was about seven years old.

At this point, Cohn interrupts:

I do not want to interrupt you. I do want to say this. I want to save time here. I want to concede very fully that you encounter oppression and denial of civil rights. Let us assume that, because I assume that will be the substance of what you are about to say. To save us time, what we are interested in determining for our purpose is this: Was the solution to which you turned that of the Soviet Form of government?

After this question, Hughes spars with Cohn about the committee's broken promise to allow him unlimited time to give a full interpretation. Hughes continues to narrate his background for two and a half transcript pages before being interrupted again. At that point, Hughes had only reached the 1920s in his full interpretation, about fifteen years before Hughes published the poem in question.

As evidenced by Hughes's frustration at being interrupted, saving time or paraphrasing this background is not sufficient for a full interpretation. Indeed, the particular details of Hughes's narrative prove to be essential components of the poem's meaning. While Hughes does not say that his interpretation is synonymous with the poem, his extensive chronicle of his

background suggests that both interpretation and poem strive to achieve a similar meaning, albeit in different form. Hughes's "full interpretation" does not conduct a formal analysis of any aspect of his poem, but it does acknowledge his body ("I was born a Negro") and the restrictions placed upon that body because of the pigmentation of its flesh (a ticket-seller gesturing to a sign that says "Colored not admitted"). His interpretation provides a rigorous portrait of where certain facts, opinions, and emotions emerge from and why those elements may be represented with a certain tone. To make this full interpretation, on the one hand, a critic must bring this contextualizing narrative to the forefront. On the other hand, Hughes gives no indication that this particular contextualizing narrative is *the* cornerstone for what he calls the poem's "ultimate meaning." His partial full interpretation – there is no telling the interpretive direction his "full interpretation" would have taken had Hughes been allowed the time he deemed necessary – constructs that which Hughes understands to have "brought [the poem] into being." Hughes provides a meaning, but minimizes the authority of his interpretation by outlining a performatic understanding of the interpretive act.

Unsurprisingly, the committee was dissatisfied with Hughes's full interpretation and his insistence upon contextualization. Cohn and Dirksen repeatedly ask Hughes whether he knows the severity of lying under oath and ridicule Hughes about misunderstanding their questions when Hughes asks them for clarifications. Though she's primarily discussing literary critical reading practices, Eve Sedgwick's definition of paranoid reading provides an apt description for the committee's efforts here. Paranoid reading, despite its efforts to the contrary, "exposes" that which is already known and, thus, rather than critiquing the present sense of order, it preserves order. What comes with the "exposure" of what is already known is a total lack of surprise in paranoid interpretation. Hughes, however, in his resistance to the simple questions of the

committee, refuses to say what he is “supposed to.” Hughes refuses to give the committee their moment of exposure. He pitches his testimony against their paranoid posture and, as such, attempts to add a legitimate element of surprise back to the hearing. Instead of admitting ties to the Communist party, Hughes releases yet another autobiography in his testimony, an autobiography that “exposes” more about Hughes’s past than his previously released biographies.²⁸ His resistance to the committee’s paranoia produces unexpected knowledge, knowledge that generates its own distinctive questions and interpretations.

Hughes’s testimony shows the potential of the project of black criticism, or, tactical criticism, just as it draws attention to the critical methodology against which black criticism must form its retort. Under the committee’s logic, and, as I showed in the previous chapter, the logic of the New Criticism, black *literature* is inherently suspicious. Black literature is suspicious in the sense that it is perceived to threaten the category of literature, which is defined by an anti-black historical tradition, just as Communism and, for that matter, blackness threatens the broader nation. Black critics – and black criticism – must find a way to make knowledge in a climate where black literature is waiting to be exposed as non-literary, in part because the literary is defined by the exclusion of writing by those who exist in a different (read: inferior) register of history. Hughes’s testimony shows how a tactical criticism can evade the encompassing strategic inquiries of the dominant order and simultaneously reveal the infrastructural logic that holds that order together.

The challenge for black literary criticism is to disrupt what is supposedly already known about black literature and to produce knowledge about that literature under a different paradigm. To do this, Hughes negates the answers expected of him, which, in the committee’s logic, are the only answers available to him. For example, in the following exchange, Hughes denies the

²⁸ Kutzinski, *The Worlds of Langston Hughes*.

options insinuated by Cohn and Dirksen's questions and then denies that his alleged answer to a question is even an answer in the first place:

MR. COHN. Did you desire to make the United States Soviet, put one more "S" in the USA to make it Soviet. "The USA, when we take control, will be the USSA."

MR. HUGHES. When I left Columbia [University], I had no money. I had \$13.

MR. COHN. Did you mean those words when you spoke them? We know the background. I want to know now, did you mean the words when you spoke them? I am not saying you should not have meant them. I am asking you---

MR. HUGHES. Yes, sir, and you gave me the permission to give the background.

SENATOR DIRKSEN. That answers the question.

MR. HUGHES. I did not say "Yes" to your question. I said you gave me the chance to give you the background to the point.

Instead of answering "yes" or "no" to Cohn's initial question about whether Hughes wanted Communism in the U.S., Hughes continues to work towards his full interpretation. Unlike Bartleby's content-less preference for not answering, in the place of an answer to Cohn's yes or no question Hughes responds with another set of interpretive possibilities in addition to announcing his preference for not answering. Hughes confirms this method when he tells the committee that they do not, in fact, have a "Yes" answer when they feel that they do. Shoshana Felman has called this type of response, of neither yes nor no, radical negativity, a negative beyond the alternative. By its radical negativity, Hughes's full interpretation supplies what Felman calls "the *analytic*...dimension of a thought," that, in turn, makes visible the predetermined logic of the committee's questions.²⁹ Hughes outlines a spectrum for black

²⁹ Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 105. For a reading of Felman that is in

criticism by eschewing and denying the present authorized mode of criticism in the hearing. Hughes' spectrum presents a model for criticism, just as it analyzes and denies the present structures of criticism.

Hughes argues that negative modes of critique can provide positive descriptions of knowledge in certain situations. These situations are those where the operative mode of critique is organized around negation, particularly the negation of blackness. The committee negates Hughes's blackness; though they understood he faced discrimination, such discrimination was deemed as irrelevant to the hearing's purpose. In these situations, Hughes's approach generates readings, rather than merely exposing readings already known. But, at the same time, his extraction of substance uncovers discriminatory structures of interpretation. His full interpretation provides a reading of "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." and it develops an analysis of the critical paradigm of his questioners. As such, Hughes's criticism becomes a dynamic and shifting political tactic with a reflexive relation to its opposition. His testimony, then, supports the generative impulse of his negation of African American criticism in *Phylon*. There, Hughes creates an undercommons by pushing against received notions of "good criticism," an undercommons that holds the potential for critical and political practice that is not limited to "literary essays and books of criticism." His framing of interpretive acts is far different than that of the academic New Critics because Hughes posits that performatic criticism, which is criticism that takes interpretive action based on the rules of a marginalized episteme, can redraw the political and aesthetic status quo by temporarily redrafting the networked flows of authority. In place of critical theory, Hughes proposes a 'tactical criticism'.

conversation with Paolo Virno, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

The Fugitive Forms of Tactical Criticism

Langston Hughes resists the Subcommittee's accusations about the function of his poetry by drawing on different methods for interpreting poetry and by attempting to derail, or, at the very least, delay the hearing through those tactical methods. Hughes disrupts the smooth procedures of the hearing and unsettles the norms of "good" and "established" criticism in his performance of interpretive acts. Hughes's "tactic," in other words, is the development of a literary critical paradigm. When read as a critical act, Hughes's tactic resonates with the daily acts of resistance by the black working class. As Robin D.G. Kelley describes, "the submerged social and cultural worlds of oppressed people frequently surface in everyday forms of resistance – theft, footdragging, the destruction of property – or, more rarely, in open attacks on individuals, institutions, or symbols of domination."³⁰ Kelley argues that an attention to these acts, which are not often read as intentional political acts, can enable the "recovery" of the practices of those previously presumed to be silent throughout the historical struggle against anti-black racism. Hughes's present stature as a canonical figure of African American literature may obscure the fact that when called by McCarthy, Hughes was nearly broke and his reputation was largely tarnished due to fears about his past affiliations with Communism. More importantly, however, as Hughes points out in his testimony, that he was "born a Negro" severely limited his opportunities for performing political actions through established channels. Put differently, though Kelley's point is to establish a much needed accounting for the effective political actions of the black working class, Langston Hughes and other prominent African American intellectuals also drew upon a similar repertoire of tactics in their actions. From these shared acts of

³⁰ Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem," 77.

infrapolitics, Hughes's formulation and use of tactical criticism in the closed-door hearing can be contextualized as part of a larger Black Radical Tradition.

As Kelley's emphasis on the spectral invisibility of infrapolitics indicates, attending to the Black Radical Tradition in labor history and political history necessitates a shift in the forms of action that are understood to be politically meaningful. For example, in the frame of infrapolitics, looting looks more like reclamation of dispossessed property, than an outburst of irrational and apolitical anger. A focus on activity makes visible the politics of actions normally deemed apolitical by the dominant episteme. By situating Hughes's testimony – and tactical criticism – within the Black Radical Tradition, I argue that literary criticism must shift its attention to different forms of meaningful critical action beyond the scholarly essay and the monograph. Essays and books have the potential to be performative and tactical, but, so can Congressional testimony, classroom practices, or, even acts of political resistance prompted by interpretations of text. The expansion of the forms of theoretical discourse has been an important aspect of scholarly work on the Black Radical Tradition since Cedric Robinson's formulation of its history in *Black Marxism*. Robinson argues that Wright's theoretical interventions into Marxism have often been ignored because they emerge in the novel, rather than in typical forms of theoretical discourse. Yet, as Robinson points out, Wright's novels “constitute studies of Marxism as a theory of history and social revolution, of the social and psychological development of the American working class and of the historical and ideological development of American Blacks.”³¹ Further, Robinson's arguments in *Black Marxism* can read as a case for including varying historical acts of black political resistance as on par with critical and theoretical discourse that intervenes in formulations of Marxist theory. In a similar vein, a number of scholars have shown how various practices of black resistance have impacted legal

³¹ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 292.

statutes and publishing practices, mainly in that legal statutes and publication strategies have been enacted to ensure the punishment of such resistant practices.³² When situated in this way, Hughes's tactical criticism intervenes in formulations of literary theory and literary critical practice. Put simply, tactical criticism calls into question the totality of the generic and formal constraints of literary theory and criticism.

In this section, I describe the appearance of tactical criticism within works that are outside of the genre of literary theory proper. The works I describe may be typically classed as novels, a bulletin board, or even semi-fictional accounts of social action. This is not an exhaustive list of the modes in which tactical criticism can appear but is a loose collection of examples to show how tactical criticism can appear beyond its usual generic confines. At the same time, I do not mean to say that *all* novels or *all* bulletin boards are examples of tactical criticism. As Hughes's testimony and the following examples show, the formation of tactical criticism is conditional; it responds to a set of conditions and invites additional interpretation through temporary theoretical and material arrangements. The arrangements formed by tactical criticism shed light on the operative logics of the conditions that the critic responds to and create new forms of knowledge to counter those conditions through their radical negation. As evidenced by its temporariness, tactical criticism does not hope to achieve complete, or, total characterizations. The conditional and deliberately incomplete nature results from the temporary basis of the actions; tactical acts emerge from the undercommons, a conditional nonspace formed against the spacemaking strategies of the dominant order.

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³² Kelley mentions that Herbert Aptheker makes this argument in the opening chapters of his famous *American Negro Slave Revolts*. Also see, Stephen Michael Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). For publishing, see Lawrence Jackson, "'Saying Things on Paper That Should Never Be Written': Publishing Chester Himes at Doubleday," *American Literary History* 23, no. 2 (June 2011): 283–310.

Link Williams, the protagonist of Ann Petry's novel, *The Narrows* (1953), performs tactical criticism when captors demand him to confess to a crime he did not commit. Link had been accused of raping Camilo Sheffield, the wife and daughter of the same wealthy New Yorkers who had kidnapped Link. Camilo's husband and mother believe that Link's encounters with Camilo were rape, because Link is a black man and Camilo is a wealthy white woman; there is no possibility that their relationship could be consensual. Yet, as depicted in the novel, Link and Camilo have a sustained and consensual love and sex relationship, even if that relationship is occasionally vexed by both parties' anxieties about the race of her/his partner. When Camilo's husband and her servants discover the affair, Camilo states that she had been raped. Despite the accusation, Link chalked up his capture to different set of reasons: a photograph taken of Camilo after she hit a working class black child with her car while driving drunk, a frequently circulated photograph in the periodical press of a black man referred to only as "The Convict," and "the other three quarters [of the explanation] reaches back to the Dutch man of warre that landed in Jamestown in 1619."³³ In short, Link reasons that his capture is made possible by the long history of African slavery in the United States and the abstraction of white women and black men into stereotyped categories.

The images Link mentions circulated prominently in the local and regional press and Petry portrays that the circulation of the images in the first place largely had to do with the media's anti-black bias. That bias did not result from explicit biological or social hatred, but rather from the corrupting influence of financial backing. The Sheffields, Camilo's family, tried to suppress news of an auto accident in which a drunk Camilo hit a black child with her car in a black working class neighborhood. The Sheffields pay the editor of the local paper, *The Monmouth Chronicle*, to not print photographs or news of the story. Of course, this bribe

³³ Ann Petry, *The Narrows*, Black Women Writers Series (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 399.

demonstrates how the severe injury of a black child matters less than the protection of a more valuable white life. The exchange, in other words, shows the institutional function that reproduces the “structural antagonism” against black life.³⁴ The Sheffields continue to use their financial influence after the photograph of Camilo’s accident is printed by a New York City newspaper. To counteract the ensuing scandal and its effect on the family’s reputation, the Sheffields demand that the *Monmouth Chronicle* increase its crime reporting in the Narrows to exaggerate the danger of the primarily black population of the neighborhood. Indeed, the novel shows how a wealthy white family uses the fact of blackness as a method for making the Dartmouth-educated Link Williams appear as one amongst the general type of the Convict, the criminal black.

Link gives more weight to the historical aspect of his capture, because he recognizes that the abstraction of his body into a general type has its origins in the abstraction of black human life into mere “flesh,” as Hortense Spillers terms it, which was a necessary condition and result of slavery.³⁵ Link’s thinking on the issue develops from his historical study of black slavery in the United States, a book-length extension of the thesis he completed as a history student at Dartmouth. Link works on the book between shifts as a bartender. Frank B. Wilderson III argues that blackness is a structural position defined by a subjection to gratuitous violence.³⁶ That is, violence against those deemed black can most often only be explained by the fact that one is black: “Why was he shot by the police?” “Because he is black.” For Wilderson and his afro-pessimist analytic, this positionality is constitutive of western modernity and coexists with the

³⁴ Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black*.

³⁵ Spillers argues that “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.” Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (July 1987): 67.

³⁶ Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black*, 1–94.

persistence of slavery, even in alternative carceral forms. Link Williams in *The Narrows* makes a similar connection in that he understands his capture to be a result of his blackness and the anti-blackness of the press and society at large. Why has Link Williams been kidnapped? He suspects that there is no good reason besides the fact that he is black.

Just as Hughes laid bare the committee's baseline assumptions with his full interpretation, Link confirms in his forced confession that the anti-black infrastructure of the United States has made it so his life is only marked by nominal, but uncommitted criminal acts. Link's "confession" takes a similar form to Hughes's full interpretation:

"I stole a lollipop when I was five, stole it in a candy store named Mintz. I ran away from home when I was eight. I went a long ways, too, just across the street." He [Link] stopped again, thinking, well I might as well at some point name the complication, the inflammatory complication that the choreographer range in on the old rigadon of adultery and cuckoldry, because The Race with his deathshad face unmasked walked right in here with us, with me. "But the distance that I went was farther away from where I had been living than if it had been the coast of Africa where your rapacious Christian ancestors went to kidnap the Guinea niggers who were my ancestors."³⁷

In this passage, Link at first hesitates to name the "inflammatory complication" that he understands to be the real reason for his capture and for his previous "criminal acts." The inflammatory complication is the history of black slavery and the social death that occurs in its wake. Link avers from the possible answers of the demand of "we want you to sign a confession" by providing an indictment of the historical abductions that Links sees as making his abduction possible, rather than tacitly endorsing his abduction with a more legible response to the demand.

³⁷ Petry, *The Narrows*, 402.

After Link's first response, his captors press Link to confess again. Link responds with another answer that he knows his captors will see as impossible. After pausing, "casually, conversationally," Link makes his confession: "We were in love."³⁸ Link brings to the fore the limits of the logic of anti-black racism by challenging his captors to see him not as a criminal, but as a human. Though it is a minimal act, Camilo's love for Link presses against the idea that Link and his body can only be viewed as an abstract category, as a criminal, as a slave, as "flesh." Link's confession is irredeemable in the minds of his captors: Camilo's husband fires a fatal shot to Link's chest. When Link's mother reads about his death in the paper, she, too, knows the reason: "To them, all of them, he's the Negro."³⁹ In death, Link passes on his interpretation of the conditions that led to his own murder. When Link's mother thinks, "To them, all of them, he's the Negro," she accepts an invitation to interpret the conditions that culminated in the execution of Link.

Tactical criticism need not be an act of martyrdom as it is in the case of Ann Petry's *The Narrows*, but its performance is designed to prompt a reflexive act of interpretation. To continue with this example, Link dares his captors to respond to his analysis of the contemporary and historical forms of anti-black racism when he confesses his and Camilo's love. Link knows that his interpretation will enkindle an actionable response in his listeners. For his captors, Link's invitation to interpret must be policed; it catalyzes violent action, because the possibility of Link being loved by a wealthy white woman is literally unthinkable within his captor's way of knowing the world. At the same time, his mother's interpretation shows the potential for a generative action that itself produces interpretation and potentially new knowledge. Link thinks of the potential for this new knowledge in the moments before his death. After being shot, Link

³⁸ Ibid., 406.

³⁹ Ibid., 425.

hopes that his statement of truth – that he and Camilo were in love – will leave a lasting “Legacy.”⁴⁰ Link’s “Legacy” generates self-awareness of the conditions that led not only to his capture, but also to the historical capture of Guineans pressed into slavery and to the future capture of those deemed “The Convict.”

With his final interpretive act, Link opens the possibility for readings of the same conditions that he read, though with a difference. These future readings are not necessarily directed at the same object of interpretation, but rather, attempt to approach a similar subject matter, in this case, the phenomenon of anti-black racism. In other words, Link’s tactical criticism does not necessarily invite an analysis of visual culture or an investigation of the funding structure for local papers. Instead, it prompts an inquiry into the phenomena produced by the objects under scrutiny. Link’s mother comes to a similar conclusion about the abstraction of a black person into flesh by analyzing written representations. The invitation of tactical criticism seeks to account for that which things, people, and ideas do in the world, and how the resulting phenomenon gains its energy, is constructed, and how it changes the conditions of social and political life. At the same time, the violent reaction from Link’s captors shows how the lifeworld figured by such an invitation prompts a policing of that world of black social life.

An invitation to interpret can also encourage those who receive the invitation to encounter anew the same object under scrutiny. In John Oliver Killens’s novel *Youngblood* (1954), Richard Myles interprets “the spirituals” – what W.E.B. Du Bois calls “the sorrow songs” – to convince the black population of Crossroads, Georgia that performing these songs is empowering, rather than minstrelsy. Richard, a new teacher in the black school in Crossroads, discovers that the white residents have expropriated the town’s annual Jubilee pageant. Instead of celebrating emancipation, the event perpetuates the extra-legal humiliation and subjugation of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 407.

the black community. Richard attempts to convince the Youngblood family of the power of these songs by asking them to interpret the songs for themselves, rather than supplying them with his expert interpretation. Before singing “Going to Shout All Over Heaven,” Richard encourages the Youngbloods to “Listen, Listen to the words.”⁴¹ After singing, Richard shares the yield of his own listening in order to urge his fellow listeners to share their own responses:

“You know where home was...It wasn’t only in Heaven. It was up north to freedom.”

[...]

“Great day in the morning,” Joe [Youngblood] said. “Many times as I done sung that song, it ain’t never sounded that good before.”

“It hasn’t felt that good either,” Laurie Lee [Youngblood] said, thinking about Big Mama.⁴²

Richard’s interpretation directly addresses its listeners and their knowledge (“You know where”) as it meanders over a vaguely symbolic meaning (“It was up north to freedom”) for the Spirituals. His address provides an affective point of entry for Joe and Laurie Lee that was previously unavailable to them. For Joe, “Going to Shout All Over Heaven” “sounded” differently than it had before because of Richard’s incitement to listen. The precise aural difference is left inscrutable, but Joe’s reaction of “Great day in the morning,” suggests that this particular hearing is significantly different than that framed by the typical Jubilee day festivities in Crossroads. For Laurie Lee, the song now triggers a memory of her mother, since deceased. Richard’s minimal, but tactical interpretation, creates a collectivity around the songs, a collective made up of multiple singular readings. Link’s invitation brings listeners to their own new and personal understandings of these songs, an understanding that can be shared by others.

⁴¹ John Oliver Killens, *Youngblood* (New York: Trident Press, 1966), 268.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Tactical criticism's invitation to interpret destabilizes the positions of critic, reader of criticism, subject, object, and the requisite hierarchies implied with these positions. The tactical critic shrugs off authority by asking her readers to take on the role of the critic. At the same time, by suggesting that these positions occur conditionally, these interpretive acts indicate an equally reflexive position for the material under scrutiny. In *The Narrows*, Link Williams asks his captors to be attentive to a similar set of issues than those that arose from the set of images and text he observes. If Link sources the thingification of blackness to pictures of black men in the newspapers and the history of slavery, then his mother – his “reader” – takes that identification and uses it to motivate her own inquiry into that phenomenon through a different object. Link's act of criticism brings to the fore a phenomenon to be taken into account in his mother's criticism. What are often read as stable, albeit transferrable positions – critic, reader, subject, object – become malleable through tactical criticism's insistent dialogism fostered by interpretive enticements.

The conditional roles and categories appear to rely on tactical criticism's dialogism; all of the examples so far emerge from verbal back-and-forths. Yet, given that a dialogue partner can be implied and dialogues can be non-verbal, additional forms of tacit dialogue are possible. A regular feature in the short-lived journal *Harlem Quarterly* shows one tacit approach to tactical criticism. Each of the three issues of *Harlem Quarterly* published over its year long run in 1950 includes a section called the “*Harlem Quarterly* Scope” or, “H.Q. Scope.” The Scope provided a digest of literary and intellectual happenings in the black community, broadly conceived. The feature delivered a list of texts and community accomplishments that were up for discussion and interpretation. For example, “Dr. Arthur P. Davis, one of the editors of *The Negro Caravan* (1941), is the author of a biography of Isaac Watts. Issued here in America as a doctoral

dissertation by Columbia University Press in 1942, the book was brought out in 1948 by a British publisher as the most definitive biography of Watts.”⁴³ At first glance, this announcement is on par with the brief announcements that appear in the closing pages of University alumni magazines. Those announcements share (or boast about) accomplishments that illustrate the greatness imbued on all fellow community members. Yet, “The Scope” provides this insider information – news that Shirley Graham’s essay in response to Walter White’s “article on Melanin” had been refused by *Look* magazine, for example – and invites readers to engage with these works to prompt additional critical efforts. The same entry on Graham’s essay elliptically states that “White’s article in LOOK has kicked up a lot of discussion in the Negro press throughout the nation...”⁴⁴ The entry prompts a reader to locate this discussion and enter into it herself. That “The Scope” is an invitation for further reading and engagement for *Harlem Quarterly* readers is evidenced by the dissolution of the “Suggested Reading” section, which appeared only in the journal’s first issue. “Suggested Reading” was meant to “bring to [*Harlem Quarterly*’s] readers recommended reading selected from magazines throughout the world. The suggested reading deals primarily with Negro, African, and interracial themes.”⁴⁵ In the second issue, “The Scope” takes over the functions of the Suggested Reading section when it moves to the place that “Suggested Reading” had previously occupied: the end of the magazine, immediately before the subscription card and contributor bios. The Scope’s compilation invites its readers to do criticism just as it brings forward more potential works for critical inquiries. By doing so, the journal prompts an active dialogue with its reader and asks that they, too, take on its tactics.

⁴³ Ernest Kaiser, “Harlem Quarterly Scope (Some Notes on the Negro Literati and Other Matters),” *Harlem Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Winter -50 1949): 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁵ “Suggested Reading,” *Harlem Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1949-50).

Tacit or not, the forms of critical engagement I have described challenge the generic stability of literary criticism. The destabilization of those forms reveals that the interpretation of text occurs in many forms and in many spheres often with rigorous methodological rules not defined by the academy. In other words, art and literature can level critique and develop interpretive methodologies with as much gusto as the academic critic. At the same time, the formal capaciousness of tactical criticism shifts the emphasis of criticism from the work itself to the phenomenon in which the work produces or is an integral part. In that sense, it is difficult to limit tactical criticism to text alone; performative acts can occur in a number of media. Mark Osteen has described how black bebop musicians in the 1950s used copyright laws about melodic adaptations to their financial and institutional advantage. Osteen argues that contrafacts, different melodies played over an established set of chord changes, “were a way of “writing back” to whites who had allegedly appropriated jazz from African Americans: by evading copyright contrafacts withheld royalties from white tunesmiths.”⁴⁶ Aesthetic development results from and enacts a criticism of existing phenomenon that restrict the development of black industry and the financial possibilities of black music. In this sense, tactical criticism relies upon Fred Moten’s sense that “what this irrepressibly inscriptive, reproductive, and resistant material objecthood does for and might still do to the exclusionary brotherhoods of criticism and black radicalism as experimental black performance...[This thesis and Moten’s *In the Break*] is an attempt to describe the material reproductivity of black performance and to claim for this reproductivity the status of an ontological condition.”⁴⁷ That possibility for an ontological condition results from a rupture of “the familial and the hermeneutic” circles and the result of that break is “an ongoing

⁴⁶ Mark Osteen, “Rhythm Changes: Contrafacts, Copyright, and Jazz Modernism,” in *Modernism & Copyright*, ed. Paul K. Saint-Amour (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 112.

⁴⁷ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 18.

shiftiness, a living labor of engendering to be organized in its relation to a politico-aesthetics.⁴⁸ Ultimately, this shiftiness requires a “new analytic.” The analytic unfolded in the examples I’ve described above shows that literary critical practice can shift from a stable form to a resistant pattern of call and response. Hughes’s assertion that no good literary criticism could be found in books or in essays suggests that, in most cases, such forms assume or foreclose a response in their instantiation.

In the next section, I suggest that that foreclosure, which seeks to deny the possibility and potential of tactical acts, is not a result of the forms themselves, but of how such forms are defined and made stable institutionally. The next section takes on how the institution ecology of literary criticism makes those forms appear natural and thus permanent. As Melvin Tolson showed us in the previous chapter, professional literary criticism operates through an anti-black conflation of the ontological status of the literary text and the ontological status of its author that makes and is made by the institutional instantiations of literary studies. Performative acts of tactical criticism that draw on the Black Radical Tradition develop new modes of authorization that help to establish a fugitive ontological condition for black studies. The fugitive ontological condition of critical forms shows how the institutional ecology of criticism at large results from a fugitive arrangement of institutional and discursive rules made to appear natural. I explore how tactical criticism can make interpretive acts without the endorsement of a stable object of criticism and a stable set of institutions. Put differently, what would it take to destabilize the illusion of stability and authority of the formal properties that define criticism and theory as such?

⁴⁸ Ibid., 24.

Criticism without an Object and without an Institution

Unlike the nominative formalism of New Criticism, acts of tactical criticism do not call for a rigid relationship between the object-at-hand and the interpretation. Under the New Criticism, the rigid relation between text and interpretation is formed by a philosophical assertion about the text-object and enforced by a stable institutional arrangement, or, the profession. For Foucault, a disciplinary arrangement forms in tandem with the emergence of a defined object. In the first chapter, I argued – with the help of Foucault’s *Archeology of Knowledge* -- that the reification of criticism by the New Critics around 1950 established the current mode of disciplinarity for literary studies. Tactical criticism, however, complicates the Foucauldian paradigm, because it establishes a mode of critical inquiry that operates without a distinctive object and without the illusion of a stable institutional arrangement. Indeed, tactical criticism raises an important question about the development of authority outside the bounds of endorsed institutional spaces for knowledge production. How can tactical criticism, which lacks a stable object of inquiry, draw upon any sense of institutional authority? Or, to put this differently, given that tactical criticism is launched from the “undercommons,” what authorizes epistemologies of the undercommons to those within the undercommons and those outside of it? How, too, do so-called nonspaces create space through temporally defined acts like tactics?

These questions are part of a larger debate about the efficacy of black studies in changing the anti-black institutions and paradigms of knowledge in which the field tends to be institutionally situated. In this regard, questions about authorizing knowledge outside of received disciplinary arrangements speak to whether black studies makes a greater impact on social, political, and epistemological phenomenon when situated within predominantly white

institutions or when situated in black institutions.⁴⁹ In *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) Harold Cruse put this question at the center of black cultural production by asserting that the status quo could not be challenged by the content of art works alone, but must do so in tandem with “a definitive critique of the entire cultural apparatus of America.”⁵⁰ Put differently, until the work of black intellectuals and black cultural workers changes the make up of the American institutional apparatus, their work is done to no avail. Cruse’s book restates at a different register an argument frequently made by a number of black artists earlier in the century. Hughes, Hurston, and the editors of *The Negro Caravan*, among many others, acknowledged that the key to the production of a particular type of “Negro literature” was contingent upon the nation’s publishing infrastructure. Despite the desire for a system of print and intellectual production autonomous from the strictures of white industry, African American criticism and literature relied upon the infrastructure that enforced those strictures.⁵¹ These conditions persisted well beyond the 1960s.

⁴⁹ C.L.R. James writes about the isolation of black studies within predominantly white institutions. James argued that such an isolation was indicative of the failure to understand the major critical function of the field: “Now to talk to me about black studies as if it’s something that concerned black people is an utter denial. This is the history of Western Civilization. I can’t see it otherwise. This is the history that black people and white people and all serious students of modern history and the history of the world have to know. To say it’s some kind of ethnic problem is a lot of nonsense.” Or, as he writes later in the same essay, “I only know the struggle of people against tyranny and oppression in a certain social and political setting, and, particularly, during the last two hundred years, it’s impossible to me to separate black studies from white studies in any theoretical point of view. Nevertheless, there are certain things about black studies that need to be studied today.” C.L.R. James, “Black Studies and the Contemporary Student,” in *The C.L.R. James Reader*, ed. Anna Grimshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 397, 404.

⁵⁰ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), 466.

⁵¹ In *The Negro Caravan*, for example, Sterling Brown, Arthur Davis, and Ulysses Lee argued that “the market for Negro writers...is definitely limited as long as we write about ourselves...Those novels about Negroes that sell best, by Negroes or whites, those novels that make the best-seller lists and receive the leading prizes, are almost always books that touch very lightly upon the facts of Negro life, books that make our black ghettos in the big cities seem very happy places indeed, and our plantations in the deep South idyllic in their pastoral loveliness.” In 1939, Hughes made virtually the same observation about how the most commercially and critically successful black novels are those that “touch very lightly upon the facts of Negro life.” Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee, eds., *The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1941), 7; Langston Hughes, “Democracy and Me [speech Made at the Public Session of the Third American Writers’ Congress, Carnegie Hall,

On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Cruse's volume, Hortense Spillers argues that the most institutionally successful work in black studies is that which is well situated within "the constitutive disciplines," mainly English, history, sociology, etc. She attributes the uneven success between black studies based in "the constitutive disciplines" and stand-alone black studies to the fact that, as a discipline, black studies has "either not yet defined its *disciplinary object*, apart from the itineraries of the traditional disciplines that converge – revised and corrected – on it, or has had a very difficult time clarifying such an object."⁵² Black studies had to define an object of study within existing anti-black paradigms, a challenge, to say the least, because those paradigms are constructed so as to police the generation of such an object.

The difficulty to define the object of black studies can also be seen clearly within historical and ongoing efforts to define African American literature. For the capitalized New Criticism, the category of literature was defined by a particular ontological struggle of the literary object as it related to a transcendent and ahistorical tradition. Because New Critics understood black people to be part of an ontological struggle within history, black literary works could not enter the universal position necessary to be classified as literature. For this reason, the term black literature was an oxymoron. A number of prominent black intellectuals grappled with this construction in their attempts to define "Negro literature" in the mid-century. In 1947 John S. Lash, the chair of Southern University's Department of English, argued in *College English* that

New York City, June 1939," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher De Santis, vol. 9 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 204; Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 1313–17; Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 1159–62. Also see, Clark Foreman et al., "Symposium: Should Negro Colleges Be Perpetuated or Should There Be Integration in Education?," *Harlem Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1950): 3–12.

⁵² Hortense J. Spillers, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date," *boundary 2* 21, no. 3 (October 1994): 108.

“Negro authors do not measure up” to the *belles-lettres* of literature. Lash reasoned that this failure to achieve the literary was based on “literary theory rather than on literary fact,” which is to say that the failure of black writers to “measure up” was due to conceptual classifications rather than to the work itself.⁵³ Lash raises the question of whether or not a sociological emphasis in Negro literature was any greater than the sociological emphasis on American literature writ large. In fact, in a separate article published two years later in *Social Forces*, Lash argues that “employing Negro themes has been one of the major techniques of productive creation” in American literature and produces a list of fifteen writers who have benefited from the employment of what Toni Morrison would later call “American Africanism,” including William Faulkner, Lillian Smith, and Gertrude Stein.⁵⁴ Indeed, the question of whether or not “Negro literature” meant literature written by black authors, or, literature written about black people remained an open question for much of the mid-century. By 1954, J. Saunders Redding told an audience in India that he “did not agree with the designation American Negro Literature...because it no longer defined anything.”⁵⁵ While Redding was not representative of all positions on the matter, the debate regarding whether or not “Negro literature” was a part of or distinct from “American literature” continued with a great deal of intensity into the 1960s and beyond. One of the most prominent versions of this debate occurred at the Fisk Writers Conference in 1966 between Robert Hayden, Melvin Tolson, and John O. Killens. During that event, Robert Hayden asked “Am I a poet, or am I a black poet?” and much to the dismay of Tolson and Killens, Hayden’s answer landed on the former. Hayden said, “Let’s quit saying

⁵³ John S. Lash, “What Is ‘Negro Literature’?,” *College English* 9, no. 1 (October 1947): 42.

⁵⁴ John S. Lash, “The Race Consciousness of the American Negro Author: Toward a Reexamination of an Orthodox Critical Concept,” *Social Forces* 28, no. 1 (October 1949): 28. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 6.

⁵⁵ J. Saunders Redding, *An American in India: A Personal Report on the Indian Dilemma and the Nature of Her Conflicts* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1954), 190.

we're black writers writing to black folks—it has been given importance it should not have.”⁵⁶ Even critics like Richard Gibson, who Lawrence Jackson describes as a “young black recruit to the New Criticism,” discussed the nearly impossible position for black writers.⁵⁷ In *The Kenyon Review* in 1951, Gibson identified the irony behind “Write what you know” – one of the three “prescriptive slogans” that for Mark McGurl frames the “implicit poetics” of creative writing instruction – for African American writers.⁵⁸ The irony of experience-based writing is that the “Professional Liberal will not fail to remind [the Negro writer] that he cannot possibly know anything else but Jim Crow, sharecropping, slum—ghettoes, Georgia crackers, and the sting of his humiliation, his unending ordeal, his blackness—that is what the young Negro who wants to write is supposed to know and all his enemies are eager for him to believe the grand lie that no training possible, no education in this world, can add to that bitter knowledge.”⁵⁹ Ultimately, Gibson argues that, “the young Negro writer...is nearly trapped by the Problem.”⁶⁰ The Problem, may be the problem of the color line, as Du Bois so famously put it, but as it manifests for black intellectuals defining African American literature that problem manifests as the grammar of anti-blackness in institutionally endorsed definitions of literature.

The fledgling and uneven network of black institutions only compounded the challenge of black studies to define a distinctive object of study.⁶¹ In *The Journal of Negro Education*,

⁵⁶ The proceedings of the event circulated beyond Fisk in David Llorens, “Writers Converge at Fisk University,” *Negro Digest* 15, no. 8 (June 1966): 54-81. Also, for a more recent account, see: Keith Gilyard, *John Oliver Killens: A Life of Black Literary Activism* (University of Georgia Press, 2011), chap. 17.

⁵⁷ Lawrence Patrick Jackson, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 350.

⁵⁸ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 34.

⁵⁹ Richard Gibson, “A No to Nothing,” *The Kenyon Review* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1951): 255.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁶¹ In his reading of *Invisible Man*, Stephen Schryer suggests that “Black colleges in the Jim Crow era could therefore be called “lumpen professional institutions”; they lacked the relative autonomy from the marketplace that supposedly characterizes higher education and bolsters its claims to embody enlightened

George Redd found that by the 1947-1948 academic year only seven historically black institutions of higher education had been accredited by the Association of American Universities: Fisk, Howard, Talladega, North Carolina College, Atlanta, Morehouse, and Spelman. This was a slim percentage of the 106 “Negro Colleges” counted by the U.S. Office of Education. Those 106 colleges were themselves a fraction of the 1,685 institutions of higher education in the United States at the time. It is also worth noting that, though nearly all of the accredited black colleges were located in the South, not a single Southern institution “offer[ed] work leading to the PhD degree or its equivalent.”⁶² In the fall of 1947, there were 970 students enrolled in “Negro graduate schools” of all kinds; the Census Bureau estimated that there were approximately fifteen million “Nonwhite” people in the United States in 1947. Despite the small numbers, commentators like Redd saw these statistics as evidence of the “rapid progress” of the system, despite the “glaring inequalities.”⁶³ All told established methods for legitimizing epistemologies through institutional backing were largely unavailable to black critics.

To approach the problem of legitimization, black critics created authority from dynamic and fugitive arrangements of institutions, persons, and events. Because of the “impossibility” of the category of black literature, criticism of black literature does not merely produce interpretations, but also must reconfigure the scenarios in which criticism can be deployed. Reconfiguring institutions, persons, and events can produce different interpretations, but also can create novel arrangements for authorizing concepts, categories, and methodologies. Had Hughes been pressed for a “full interpretation” of his “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” in Arna Bontemps’s

value systems such as the American creed.” His conclusion results from the double bind of the development of professionals in a black college that relies upon white economic capital. Stephen Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class : Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 75.

⁶² George N. Redd, “Present Status of Negro Higher and Professional Education: A Critical Summary,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 17, no. 3 (1948): 404.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 400.

classroom at Fisk, Hughes may have provided a much different response than he did at Roy Cohn's behest. In addition to "reacting" to these respective situations, Hughes's criticism also alters the arrangement in which the interpretation occurs. That is, his criticism becomes an *action*, tactically deployed.

Traditional understandings of performativity, however, would not define Hughes's interpretation as an action. As defined by J.L. Austin and taken up by many others, performative utterances can act only through established series of rules; a promise is only a promise if recognized as such. Throughout this chapter I have used Diana Taylor's term *performativo* (from the Spanish *performático*) to distinguish my argument from this aspect of speech act theory. Following Taylor, I see that the distinction "is vital to signal the performative, digital, and visual fields as separate from though always embroiled with, the discursive ones so privileged by Western logocentricism. The fact that we don't have a word to signal the performative space is a product of that same logocentricism rather than a confirmation that there's no there there."⁶⁴ The "performativo" registers that performativity fails to account for scenarios in which non-discursive rules apply to a situation. The *performativo* opens up a space normally closed by the force of discourse-based epistemologies and thus serves epistemologies of embodied memory and epistemologies defined by an alternative set of discursive rules. The *performativo* space, a space akin to the undercommons, suggests that if a performative utterance "misfires" it only does so within the dominant discursive framework. That is, a performative utterance that "misfires" may fire with its full force within a concurrent, though obscured, epistemological realm. Ultimately, the entanglement of performative and *performativo* space makes it possible for tactical critical acts from the undercommons to affect the "real" space defined by the dominant discourse-based epistemology.

⁶⁴ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 6.

This theoretical assertion may become more concrete by returning to examples of tactical criticism. Through a performative lens, the bulk of Hughes's testimony before the Subcommittee is a "misfire," a failure to impact the social situation in which his utterance was made. Scholarly accounts that take Hughes's closed-door testimony as setting the stage for his "passive, perhaps supine" public testimony reinforce the notion that any efforts Hughes took to resist the committee's accusations were futile. Simply put, these accounts register no significant change to "real" space or the social order due to Hughes's actions. Because the performative frame, which is seemingly held by the committee, denies the social force of black social life, it affirms the arguments of afro-pessimism that see the position of blackness and the force of black social life as determined by the social death due to slavery. In an afro-pessimist analysis, due to the social death of black social life enacted by the carceral continuum, the social life of blackness, or black life, is an impossible condition within any conceptual framework of Western modernity. A performatic account, however, attributes the "misfire" reading to an overemphasis on the stability of discourse-based definitions of disciplinarity and institutional arrangements.⁶⁵ Hughes's closed-door testimony clearly upsets the affective tenor of the hearing. Cohn and Dirksen's interruptions of Hughes's full interpretation suggest impatience and frustration with Hughes's insistence on adopting a different epistemological mode. Through his tactics, Hughes wins an opportunity, eventually stunted, to give a full interpretation, to include on the record the legally supported acts of discrimination that have altered his life. In other words, as Fred Moten argues, the persistence of black life, despite the structural antagonisms against it, challenges the limits of the dominant order and presents the possibility of an alternative order. Because that order threatens the dominant, Hughes's full interpretation must be policed.

⁶⁵ For more on the "failure" of misfirings see, Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 154.

News of that seized opportunity did travel outside of the sealed doors of Congress and, as such, Hughes's testimony does impact "real" space and the social order. Word of Hughes's closed-door testimony was passed along to *The Amsterdam News* –likely by Hughes himself – which reported, according to David Chinitz, that Hughes's resistance "reinforce[d] his image as an independent thinker who did not, in fact, approve of McCarthy's activities."⁶⁶ Chinitz, of course, reads this as a minor point in a larger argument about Hughes's "devil's bargain" with McCarthy. Yet, the newspaper report intimates that Hughes's closed-door testimony registered a shift beyond the chambers of Congress in Washington. Tactical critical acts affected change in a similar way in the fictional depictions described in Ann Petry's *The Narrows* and John O. Killens' *Young Blood*. Link Williams's confession and Richard Myles' "performance" of the Spirituals change material and psychic arrangements that eventually prompt social change. Though that change may be of a smaller scale than that affected within the performative order, Hughes's testimony circuits through a performatic set of rules to impact the dominant order. The very existence of a social life of blackness insists on the possibility of escape for what is often theorized as an inescapable paradigm. As Stuart Hall puts it, "Hegemonizing is hard work." Hall's statement registers the constant struggle to police the possibility of a different social order, which, for Moten, is black life. Black life is a performatic act with the potential, however much policed, to reenvision the order of things.

The performatic act and its potential to affect "real" space presents a way to change the structural antagonism against blackness. Jared Sexton, a prominent theorist of afro-pessimism, argues that what distinguishes Moten's *Black Op* from afro-pessimism is that for Moten, performativity has the capacity to reconfigure ontological understandings. Sexton's larger point is that afro-pessimism and black optimism are one in the same, albeit with different conceptions

⁶⁶ Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?*, 139.

of how to proceed from their theoretical intervention: for black optimism, it is performance, for afro-pessimism it is “paradigmatic analysis.”⁶⁷ Sexton explains the reason for this “set theoretic difference” – and for his own afro-pessimist position – by putting Moten’s emphasis on performance into conversation with Frank Wilderson’s argument about performance and black social life. Wilderson writes:

the prohibition against attaining differentiation or self-knowledge rests, in the first ontological instance, with a structural violence that removes black “people” from the world. The cry to be known and appreciated as an artist and not as an “African” or “black” artist operates on several levels, but the most profound recognizes (if only intuitively or unconsciously) the damage of being marked as such, not in the sense of a compromised artistic status, but a compromised existential status. The cry is not the effect of a neurotic complex that refuses to live in a deconstructive relation to the ego; it is a narrative strategy hoping to slip the noose of a life shaped and compromised by slavery. No other gathering of artists and critics is overdetermined by this dilemma. No slavery, no diaspora. No diaspora, no conference. Such gatherings are always haunted by a shared sense that violence and captivity are the grammar and ghosts of our every gesture. This is where performance meets ontology.⁶⁸

Besides providing an ontological account for earlier referenced debates about what defines “black literature,” or a “black artist,” Wilderson argues that all gatherings of black people are marked by the structural antagonism against black life, which is to say that even the performative acts of black social life are violently confined and held in captivity. Sexton suggests that

⁶⁷ Moten agrees, “Afro-pessimism and black optimism are not but nothing other than just one another.” Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” 742.

⁶⁸ Frank B. Wilderson III, “Grammar & Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom,” *Theatre Survey* 50, no. Special Issue 01 (May 2009): 122–23.

Wilderson's point here is not that performatic acts are impossible, but, that "performativity does not, in fact, have disruptive power at the level or in the way that it has been theorized to date. More radically still, he is suggesting that this theorization remains to be elaborated."⁶⁹

The distinction between the performatic (or, the misfired performative utterance) and paradigmatic analysis brings a theoretical problem to the fore: can performance alter the ontological definition of the human in a way not currently imagined by paradigmatic analysis, which is to say, can performatic acts function with the force of theory? I argue that tactical criticism shows how performatic acts – not performative ones – can disrupt, impact, or change, the ontological conceptions of the dominant order. As I've defined it, tactical criticism proposes a mode of literary critical disciplinarity that works to change the New Critical conflation of the ontological status of the text with the ontological status of the author of that text through performatic acts. These performatic acts emerge from the undercommons where knowledge can accumulate outside of the discursive bounds of that ontological conflation. Importantly, however, Wilderson claims that performativity does not have disruptive power against the grammar that determines the rules of performativity. Yet, in describing the entanglement of performatic and performative spaces made visible in Hughes's testimony, tactical criticism shows that acts in the performatic realm necessarily impact acts in the performative realm. In tying his literary critical project to the New Physics, Melvin Tolson suggested that different modes of time and space operate together simultaneously and that the entanglement of those modes make up time and space itself. There is nothing outside of time and space; or, an outside of time and space is only possible through a false representation. Karen Barad builds on the spirit of Tolson's claim in her philosophy of "agential realism" that is based on Niels Bohr's physics. She argues that quantum

⁶⁹ Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions*, no. 5 (Fall/Winter 2011): 29, <http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/jaredsextion.php>.

physics insists that observational apparatuses *affect* the material arrangements of the matter they observe. Observational apparatuses cannot exist independently from other frames of observation. Thus, observational apparatuses – here the competing epistemologies of performative and performatic space – make and are made by the phenomenon around them. Barad argues that what makes matter matter, or, what changes the material order, is – and can only be – performativity. For Barad, performativity is not defined by the rules of discourse but by any type of “iterative intra-activity.”⁷⁰ Like Barad’s posthumanist notion of performativity, tactical criticism critiques the stability of the ontology of the poem and of its author. Further, it critiques the ontological stability of *criticism*, the observational apparatus that gives shape to those ontological categories. As such, tactical criticism’s acts from the undercommons must impact, through its entanglement with “real” space, the grammatical arrangement of that “real” space. Tactical acts do not solely emerge from temporal opportunity, as de Certeau had it: they emerge from and create space, as well.

Hughes’s closed-door testimony before Congress, *Harlem Quarterly*’s bulletin board, novels, and other tactical critical acts of the black radical tradition not fully discussed here – like jazz playing “in the break” – suggest that the ontological mode of observation proposed by the New Criticism is, in fact, a performance itself. Because it is entangled with dominant modes of criticism, tactical criticism can enact the same type of rearrangements of matter as those dominant modes. This does not mean that tactical criticism makes up for, or creates a zone free of the restrictions of the structural inequality of anti-black racism within literary critical epistemologies; it is not emancipatory in that sense. What tactical criticism does provide, however, is the reclamation of territory and time. Tactical criticism doesn’t yield a new mode of

⁷⁰ Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 828.

disciplinarity, but rather, it registers the constant flux of disciplinarity by showing the discipline to be entangled in an ongoing struggle. That struggle is over concepts, which, in Barad's definition are "actual physical arrangements" of matter. In turn, tactical criticism shows that "the profession" and "the discipline" cohere only by the repeated viewing of a particular phenomenon from the same observational apparatus. Stability in disciplinarity only forms when one loses sight of the observational apparatus and the force of competing institutional ecologies on one another.

The Beginning and the End of Tactical Criticism

When Langston Hughes states – in dialogue – that there is "this dearth of really good critics" for black literature, he is largely correct. This is because the "criticism" that Hughes refers to in this statement is criticism found in "literary essays and scholarly books." Hughes bases his comment on observations of the institutional infrastructure of criticism as it has been expropriated by the American academy. When we look to criticism that is entangled within this infrastructure, but is not necessarily of that infrastructure – what I call tactical criticism – then a whole new repertoire of scholarly and intellectual engagement begins to emerge. This repertoire consists of both written texts and embodied practice. It invites additional interpretation. Importantly, it attempts to rearrange paranoid structures of knowledge and, by resisting those structures via rearrangement, tactical criticism produces new, temporary structures of knowledge distinct from those that dominate it. Just because a full physical record cannot be produced does not mean that acts of criticism do not count. Tactical criticism is physical, it is action. But to recognize that record, we must understand the assumptions made by existing definitions of criticism and how they make abstract and push "outside" that which is singularly present.

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that tactical criticism might provide a theoretical lens to look at a different history of literary criticism that severs historical ties to anti-blackness and its affirmation of the ontological stability of text. Further, at the beginning of this dissertation, I argued that the result of my account of the New Criticism would be a new definition for criticism, in which criticism means the meeting place of multiple methodologies. Now I can say that the meeting place is less of a place than it is tangle of matter, an institutional ecology constantly being rearranged, that makes and remakes the spatial and temporal boundaries of critical discourse. New Criticism and the disciplinary methods that followed from it enclosed a part of this tangle, captured and expropriated it. Those various processes created an outside, an historical precedent for their own tradition and an ahistorical absence for those banned from criticism's borders. In this regard, the enclosure of criticism created the knowledge commons prior to it, but, at the same time, it also embedded underneath its illusion of stability the same commons underneath it: the undercommons.

This calls for a shift in how we conduct the history of literary studies and literary critical practice. Rather than emphasizing the ontological stability of the critical object, we should attend to the process that allows us to perceive dispersed arrangements of matter as objects. Additionally, we can attend to how that process results from a tangle of epistemologies that have spatial, temporal, and material effects. More importantly, however, the perspective afforded by this shift makes clear that the material arrangement of the discipline as we know it has been constituted by its anti-black racism. At the same time, the undercommons that pushes against the discipline has similarly been constituted by anti-black racism. Despite this, what I hope to have shown is that out of the undercommons something is being built that is, yes, constituted by anti-black racism, but is also made to be something otherwise, a dynamic arrangement of practices,

matter, and institutions to be shared in common. To make the details of this arrangement clearer, there is more to study, more operations to perform, and more history to remember.

Epilogue Toward a Disciplinary Utopia

In early December 2014, I attended a lecture given by Étienne Balibar at the University of California, Berkeley. Besides the prominence of those involved – Judith Butler introduced and responded to Balibar’s talk – the lecture was a routine part of academic life. The room was hot, but the windows were open to a cool breeze that often rolls in with the evening fog in Northern California. I was sitting by the windows in the back of the room and the man next to me, a faculty member reading the day’s newspaper, said to no one in particular that we might have to close the windows soon, especially “if they start drumming out there.” The “they” he referred to were an anticipated group of protestors marching against anti-black police violence and systemic anti-black racism in the wake of the failure to indict the Ferguson, Missouri police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager. It was to be the fourth consecutive night of protests in Berkeley, though, in Oakland, Berkeley’s southern neighbor, there had been protests every night since the grand jury decision two weeks prior. The protests were at first celebrated, but then decried as some demonstrators began breaking windows and looting stores along the way; with the heightened pressure to protect property, just a few nights before the talk, police shot tear gas canisters and rubber bullets at a group of peaceful protestors on Telegraph Avenue at the foot of UC Berkeley’s campus. There was no audible drumming in Dwinelle Hall, but there was the now familiar sound of police helicopters circling overhead. The man reading his newspaper and a few others closed the windows.

Judith Butler mentioned the protest activities in her introduction, stating that given the recent events in Berkeley and in Ferguson, it was especially important to recognize Balibar’s activist credentials. But other than that acknowledgment and the sustained din of the helicopters above, the talk was the standard academic fare: through a reading of Hegel, Balibar sought to

synthesize the unyielding gap between Foucault and Marx. There was no sign of what Bruce Robbins has called Balibar's "much-praised analysis of modern racism," nor was there any sustained discussion of the events unfolding outside.¹

After the lecture, I walked out of Dwinelle Hall, through Sather Gate and into Sproul Plaza, the memorialized epicenter of Free Speech Movement protests at Berkeley in the mid-1960s. As I approached the intersection of Telegraph and Bancroft, so did a group of protestors. The crowd was marching west down Bancroft and was relatively small, about 75 people holding placards. They chanted what had become a well-known rallying cry, "Hands up! Don't shoot!" Then the marchers implored the growing number of people watching on the sidewalk, including myself, to join them in the streets. "Join us! Join us!"

*

While I have been writing this dissertation, I have thought a lot about the disconnect between the lecture hall and the streets on that December night. My personal dilemma, I think, is a particular instantiation of a widely held conversation about how what happens in the lecture hall impacts what happens in the streets and about how what happens in the streets impacts the lecture hall. On the December night in Berkeley, besides the simultaneity of the events, there wasn't much of a connection between the academic lecture and the protest.

The question about the social and political force of critical theory appears with some frequency, particularly in times of great civil unrest. Theodor Adorno, for example, who to much controversy didn't fully support the student protests of 1968, argued that an actionist, Adorno's term for activist, only "clings to action for the sake of the impossibility of action."² The person

¹ Bruce Robbins, "Balibarism!," *n+1*, Spring 2013, <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-16/reviews/balibarism/>.

² Theodor W. Adorno, "Resignation," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 290.

who does not give in to such a belief is not the actionist, but the thinker. “Thinking,” writes Adorno in an essay called “Resignation,” “has a secure hold on possibility.”³ For Adorno, theory, in and of itself, presents the true potential for action, since “the repressive intolerance to the thought that is not immediately accompanied by instructions for action is founded on anxiety.”⁴ Activity that emerges from this type of thinking, Adorno reasons, is pseudo-activity because it draws attention not to the issue at hand, but to “publicity” for the action itself. If activity is the pursuit of publicity for activity, then it is part and parcel of the culture industries that are intimately tied to the Enlightenment’s strategy of mass deception.

Adorno’s ideas against “actionism” came to mind in the moments before Balibar’s lecture at Berkeley. Presumably the man reading the newspaper needed the windows closed so the activity of critical theory could distance itself from the world. In Adorno’s paradigm, such distance creates the possibility for critique and, eventually, activity. At the same time, however, closing the windows to the unrealized “drumming” marks those making noise as holding a different capacity for thought than those sitting in the room listening to the lecture. Though it is a point made frequently in a different register, closing the windows of the lecture hall created a strict border between those doing the theory and those doing the activity.⁵ Balibar’s lecture could endure the helicopter noise – the sound of the state that could be heard in the room even with closed windows – because, despite some anti-capitalist rhetoric being tossed around, those of us

³ Ibid., 292.

⁴ Ibid., 290.

⁵ Sometimes those doing the acting make a great impact on those doing the theorizing, but, often, those doing the acting are minimized in that history. This elliptical sentence references the more concrete impact of George Jackson’s prison letters on Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and others. See, Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 56–63; Michelle Koerner, “Line of Escape: Gilles Deleuze’s Encounter with George Jackson,” *Genre* 44, no. 2 (June 2011): 157–80.

in the room knew that what was being spoken was not being policed. Those performing the actions on the street were the ones subject to policing.

As I have shown in the preceding pages, the distinction between theory and activity results from widely held epistemologies that accept certain modes of speech, thought, and action as capable of doing something when other modes – tactical criticism – are understood to be incapable of doing anything. I have argued, however, that despite efforts to ensure that tactical criticism has little or no effect on the “real” world, tactical criticism impacts “real” space in ways large and small. To make that impact, tactical criticism troubles the conflation of ontological definitions of critical categories with ontological definitions of the human. In turn, tactical criticism disturbs the illusion of comprehensiveness and universality figured by dominant critical modes. In this regard, tactical criticism, tied as it is to the Black Radical Tradition and black social life, exceeds the boundaries of the “dominant” modes of speech, thought, and action and provides the possibility to imagine the world otherwise. Blackness, as Fred Moten argues, is the imagination that Kant feels the need to clip from his definition of pure reason.⁶ Closing the windows of the lecture hall to the chanting outside is no different than repeating this sacrifice of imagination for the purpose of understanding. New Criticism and its capitalizing paradigm of

⁶ Moten references the following passage from Kant:

Abundance and originality of Ideas are less necessary to beauty than the accordance of the Imagination in its freedom with the conformity to law of the Understanding. For all the abundance of the former produces in lawless freedom nothing but nonsense; on the other hand, the Judgement is the faculty by which it is adjusted to the Understanding.

Taste, like the Judgement in general, is the discipline (or training) of Genius; it clips its wings closely, and makes it cultured and polished; but, at the same time, it gives guidance as to where and how far it may extend itself, if it is to remain purposive. And while it brings clearness and order into the multitude of the thoughts, it makes the Ideas susceptible of being permanently and, at the same time, universally assented to, and capable of being followed by others, and of an ever-progressive culture. If, then, in the conflict of these two properties in a product something must be sacrificed, it should be rather on the side of genius; and the Judgement, which in the things of beautiful art gives its decision from its own proper principles, will rather sacrifice the freedom and wealth of the Imagination than permit anything prejudicial to the Understanding. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1914), 205-206.

history close the window in the lecture hall and, as such, foreclose the potential of critical activity and political activity. This likely doesn't come as all that much of a surprise, given the fact that the New Critics believed deeply in the principles of Enlightenment and joined forces with the rationalist principles of capitalism. It is precisely the overlap between critical thinking and Enlightenment thinking that makes Adorno's dismissal of activity that much more frustrating. If the overlap of critical thinking and rationalist thinking produces activity that exists only to promote itself as activity, then who is to say that there isn't thought that exists only to promote itself as thought? To read thought's eventual potential for political activity in Adorno means that there must be room within the tear of the universal Enlightenment fabric to see that activity, like thought, carries the potential to perform real actions, rather than mere pseudo-actions.

The study of literature is an important site to overhaul modes of thinking that pretend to have total knowledge of the world, a manner of thinking that has had catastrophic consequences. Such an overhaul requires redefining or tossing aside the definition of the human, redesigning how authority circulates and is made, and attending as fully as possible to how matter and phenomena interact to make objects and environments appear to be stable, despite their constant change. There are a number of fields of study that are taking up these tasks, many of which I draw upon in the preceding pages: science studies, ecology, post- or anti-humanism, animal studies, critical race and ethnic studies, feminist studies, queer studies, postcolonial studies, and a number of others. In my estimation, these fields take activity and its supposed dissonance from theory to be their subject. *Understanding Criticism* participates in this in one simple way; it has asked you, its reader, to imagine the history of literary studies as different from a progression of dominant dialectical variations of the New Criticism. It has asked you to see how activity – classroom practice, tactical criticism, etc. – hints at the potential for not only a different historical

form of the discipline than that held at present, but the potential for a different formation for its future that greatly interrupts the form of literary studies as we've previously imagined it.

Indeed, in this regard, this dissertation is less of a solution, than it is a push for a disciplinary utopia. In her examination of work and anti-work, Kathi Weeks has defined two utopian functions that resonate with my account of the New Criticism and literary studies: "One function is to generate distance from the present; the other is to provoke desire for, imagination of, and movement toward a different future."⁷ Weeks arrives at these functions through an exploration of Ernst Bloch and his three-volume *The Principle of Hope*, a thinker and a work that have been taken up by José Muñoz and others to think and feel differently about the potential of scholarship. Bloch argues that "the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present" and, as such, relies upon an alternative past for the present that, in turn, alters the horizon for the future of that present.⁸ While there can be abstract utopias, Bloch prefers concrete ones because, as Muñoz points out, they "are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is

⁷ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 208.

⁸ Adorno, of course, also sees the potential for thought to imagine and perhaps enact utopia. This way of thinking is what justifies Adorno's privilege of thought over action. As he writes in "Resignation":

The utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less it –this too a form of relapse—objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages realization. Open thinking points beyond itself. For its part a comportment, a form of praxis, it is more akin to transformative praxis than a comportment that is compliant for the sake of praxis. Prior to all particular content, thinking is actually the force of resistance, from which it has been alienated only with great effort. Such an emphatic concept of thinking admittedly is not secured, not by the existing conditions, nor by ends yet to be achieved, nor by any kind of battalions.

Besides being one of his more optimistic moments, Adorno's argument overlooks the potential for activity to be thought. For much of his life, Adorno was persecuted for what he thought and had to take significant action to continue thinking. Even so, despite his forced migration, as a philosopher he was provided with the conditions necessary for reflective thought. Thought, at some level, can most easily be achieved by the privilege. For many, thought is expressed, ruminated, and considered outside of the forms of thought-discourse, which is to say beyond the essay and book. His slight hopefulness and its grounding in utopia seemingly has a strong resonance with Bloch. Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno, and Horst Krüger, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, by Ernst Bloch, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 12. Adorno, "Resignation," 292–93.

actualized or potential...Concrete utopias are the realm of educated hope.”⁹ Melvin Tolson, for example, sought a concrete utopia. His *Libretto of the Republic of Liberia* made manifest the complex cultural and political history of Liberia in order to imagine the potential for a much different pan-African future. Parker Tyler did this, too. He understood there to be a history of overly affected readings of literature and film in professional literary politics that he took to be the source for a criticism differently imagined. And, Langston Hughes’s denial of the state practice of criticism yielded not only a new dimension of his history, but, also left a kernel of what could be “good” or “real” criticism that is, in Muñoz’s gloss of Bloch’s temporality, “not yet here.” The potential within the thought of Tyler, Tolson, Hughes, and others can only be realized when we understand how the New Critical past acts on our present. To do so, means picturing literary criticism not as a total system, but an entangled institutional ecology with areas that are and will be left undiscovered that nevertheless impact the larger and always partial picture. Thinking towards a disciplinary utopia does not mean starting from scratch and erasing a history. In fact, it means quite the opposite; it means better accounting for how our sense of the past affects the present and, perhaps most importantly, how we can imagine our future.

As defined by Bloch, Weeks, and Muñoz, utopia provides a frame through which to understand theory and criticism as a form of action. It potentially changes the epistemological and phenomenological perspective of the world, which, on some level, changes what is understood to be possible in the world. Yet, theorizing as such is only one action among many acts of reimagining the world.¹⁰ The marchers on the streets in Berkeley and the many collectives

⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 3.

¹⁰ This is the point that Fred Moten makes in his arguments about the potential of black social life, and it is the point that José Muñoz makes about queer performativity. Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2009): 177–218; Fred Moten, “Black Op,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): 1743–47; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

that have emerged to take action against anti-black racism in recent months are in the process of theorizing understandings of the present and possibilities for the future through their activity. To close the window on one or the other is to bracket aspects of the present. That is, determining that certain aspects of the present are either not “real,” not “thought,” not “activity” or not “criticism,” creates non-spaces in the past and shuts off future possibilities.

Like the tactical criticism I have described, *Understanding Criticism* is an invitation for further interpretation. That invitation asks that we register the various forms of activity and practice that occur “outside” of literary theory as happening within it. That is, to think of a future discipline, one whose crisis of value may be distinct from the crises of neoliberalism, we must study how activity of all kinds molds the institutional ecology to which we tend. What that looks like and how that is done remains, and should remain, an open question. Literary studies is not ontologically distinct, but a series of entangled process that appear as a total object within a particular epistemological frame. In this sense, the “understanding” in *Understanding Criticism* is not as an epistemological imperative as it was for the New Critics, but instead, “understanding” is a utopian demand: Can we describe the way literary studies is made and unmade by all types of critical activity? Can we create a series of apparatuses that allow us to register in all the ways that those activities truly matter?

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