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Outside Literary Studies: Black Criticism And The University

Andy Hines
Swarthmore College, ahines1@swarthmore.edu

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Introduction

In the early 1950s in New York, the faculty of instruction of the arts at the Jefferson School of Social Science organized their critical and pedagogical activities around the idea that "the arts have always been partisan." They argued that universities clipped the political capacity of literature via a "Southern clique . . . who represent the approach to literature . . . saturated with racialisms, apologetics for slavery, deliberate distortions of American history, explanations of the most bestial violence as being 'human nature.'"[1] This clique privileged literary form as a means to absorb "racialisms," and the Jefferson School faculty listed among its members the progenitors of the American New Criticism, including Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren. To challenge this critical practice with "roots in the reactionary political and economic forces of our time," the assembled Jefferson School faculty members pledged to pursue a criticism that "place[s] works of art directly in the context of the political, social, and philosophical struggles which they reflect in clear or distorted fashion."[2] Against those they opposed, the faculty refused to present their critical work as objective and separate from the world in which it emerged. They also invoked a different genealogy for their critical formation. The always partisan arts echoed with W. E. B. Du Bois's 1926 claim that "all Art is propaganda."[3] For Du Bois, the propaganda character of art makes possible "a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world."[4] With this intertext, criticism for the Jefferson School faculty offered a crucial tool in a struggle against the political economy of American liberal capitalism: a means for conditionally enacting and imagining a future "beautiful world" in the present.

From its opening in 1944 to its closure in 1956, the arts and culture faculty at the Jefferson School included many important Black writers on the left (Lorraine Hansberry, Shirley Graham, Claudia Jones, Alice Childress, Yvonne Gregory, Augusta Strong, and Lloyd Brown), artists (Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White), and political leaders (Alphaeus Hunton, Ben Davis, Claudia Jones, and W. E. B. Du Bois). They were assembled and supported by Doxey A. Wilkerson, an expert in Black education who left Howard University to join the Communist Party, and who served as the Jefferson School's director of curriculum. Black radicals on this faculty, with the support of labor activists, challenged the terms of academic literary criticism that buoyed the racialized political economy of the United States.

The faculty of the Jefferson School was not the only entity to suggest that New Critical formalism was a reflection and instrument of the political, economic, and ideological expansion of the United States in the years after World War II. Attacks on New Critical assumptions abounded in Black literary circles on the left, and were lobbed publicly and privately by writers as well known as Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, and Ann Petry, and those lesser known, like Melvin B. Tolson, Arna Bontemps, and Doxey A. Wilkerson. These writers shared affiliations—explicit or tangential—to the communist-led left in the mid-twentieth century. During the era of red-baiting, they faced the constant threat of condemnation from most public institutions for their political views, not to mention the scrutiny of the surveillance and investigatory arms of the federal government.[5] While their particular approaches varied to the New Criticism's role in the imperial expansion of US-backed capitalism abroad and continued racial oppression at home, one thing is clear from a careful archival study: they agreed that the New Criticism and the university system were part of the racialized red-baiting that suppressed Black people who challenged the inequities of US liberal capitalism.

Midcentury Black writers on the left envisioned literary-critical methods and institutions that were opposed to the solidifying interpretive practices of the university and the state. Black left practices for reading, writing, and institution making foregrounded literature as a crucial instrument in articulating the multifaceted dimensions of anti-Black racism and a vision of a future world that could sustain Black life and Black culture. For these writers, literature engages, reveals, and

imaginatively portrays the material reality of the Black past, the present struggle, and the future to build. This was not the definition of literature espoused by the era's white critics, nor was this mode of reading and writing valued in university classrooms. The dominant literary criticism of the era—the New Criticism—was defined by the objectification and isolation of the literary object from the circumstances of its creation. Many literary studies scholars still describe this critical movement as an effort to eliminate history or contemporaneous political concerns from its methodological emphasis on the text above all else. The effect of the New Criticism's enclosure of literature and its ways of reading and evaluating literature was a large-scale exclusion of Black writing—or, as the Jefferson School cultural faculty put it, an absorption of "racialisms" and an overrepresentation of white norms in their definition of human nature.[6] The New Critics saw Black writing as too invested in the particulars of the present for it to be able to enter into the timeless, universal tradition they espoused. This midcentury clash between Black criticism and the New Criticism has largely been passed over in scholarly investigations, despite the essential contributions made by Black writers regarding literature's social and political function, not to mention their political economic analysis of how the university and the state work to value whiteness at the expense of Black people. The latter, which offered a critical view of the articulation of the university and the state, would anticipate a similar realization from student movements in the mid- to late 1960s; according to Melinda Cooper, those students "perfectly understood the connections between domestic race relations and anticommunism abroad and . . . refused the cozy relationship between the public research university and American imperialism."[7]

In this book I show how midcentury Black left critical practice was—and has remained—on the outside of literary studies as it has come to be established, historicized, and practiced in the American university. This outside position results from the methodological particularities of white critical practice and how the New Critics linked US anticommunist and anti-Black principles to the institutions of criticism. Put differently, the Black writers, critics, and thinkers I discuss here—Hughes, Hansberry, Tolson, Petry, Wilkerson and others—identify that what limits an understanding of Black literature are forces coalescing to devalue, attack, and suppress Black people and Black life.

The mode of study they propose requires an analysis of how racism works through the interpretation of literature and how the interpretation of literature gains authority and support through racist institutions. From this lens, it is difficult to separate New Criticism from the political plea of its founders for a return to an agrarian South against communism; to separate universities from a federal government that upheld segregation and a liberal capitalism rooted in slavery; and to separate the federal government from its policing agencies, which employ retooled versions of academic criticism to antagonize and dismantle Black freedom movements, as well as decolonial movements across the globe. As the varying scale and degree of the entanglements of criticism, the university, and the state indicate, Black left struggles against literary interpretation are not esoteric exercises conducted primarily for an integrated middle-class audience. Instead, they can be seen as part of what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has termed the long civil rights movement that challenged racism, capitalism, and American militarism from the 1930s to the 1970s.[8] In the 1940s, Black literary critical activity foregrounded a struggle for an antiracist, anticapitalist, anticolonial world beyond literary studies along the intersecting lines of race, class, gender, ability, and even ecology. This is an often-submerged thread of Black thought that is neither nationalist nor integrationist, but deeply committed to an analysis of race and class.

This book supplies an account of a crucial precursor to the late 1960s demand for Black studies, and it contributes to discussions regarding the interdisciplinary praxis of Black studies scholarship. Specifically, I build on discussions about how the practice and imagination of Black social life generates a future world inside of the present, despite the fact that the present regime of white supremacy has attempted to render the existence or conception of such a world as impossible. Katherine McKittrick argues that "Black matters are spatial matters," an insight that informs the spatial metaphor of my title, *Outside Literary Studies.* McKittrick shows that Black people create space and place in spite of the fact that Black geographic activity is understood as "ungeographic and/or philosophically undeveloped."[9] Her work makes possible a comprehension of Black space on its own terms, and a recognition of how anti-Black discourse seeks to interrupt and delegitimize that understanding. Importantly, McKittrick makes clear that Black imaginings have material ramifications and instantiations. The production of

Black space is an imaginative activity, in addition to a practiced one; this is praxis, the directed creation of a Black world bringing together theory and practice. In this book, McKittrick's Black geographies draw our attention to a "terrain of struggle" unfolding through vectors of race, gender, and political economy.[10] When creating metaphorical and material space in territory deemed ungeographic, Black critical acts in this period necessarily invoke the need to dismantle institutionalized cultural spaces governed by whiteness and anticommunism. They thus challenge in their very practice and imaginings the forces that place Black criticism and Black life on the outside—such as Cleanth Brooks's insistence that "the principles of criticism define the *area* relevant to literary criticism"—and create another material, practiced world through liberatory acts in the zone of irrelevance.[11]

These limitations placed on the area of literary criticism occurred during the wider context of Jim Crow segregation and communist purges. In the 1940s and '50s, Black writers on the left were blocked from entering predominantly white colleges and universities, and their work was actively barred from classrooms and other publishing venues. Black writers with communist connections were even pushed out of institutions nominally devoted to Black people and Black culture. Gwendolyn Bennett, for instance, began her work teaching Black culture in people's schools after she had been forced out of her position as the director of the WPA-funded Harlem Community Art Center because of communist affiliations. The area or field of literary study—spatial metaphors commonly used to discuss scholarly activity—has an emplaced realization in universities, publishing, and classrooms. Put differently, literary studies must be maintained and fortified; they require labor and resources, and entail an inclusion of the few predicated on the exclusion of the many. As McKittrick has elaborated, academic practices and disciplinary thinking, including "the canon, the lists, the dictionaries, the key thinkers, the keywords," contribute to this regulation; or, simply put, "Discipline is empire."[12] In drawing attention to the spatial practice of literary study, I articulate the scholarly discipline of the university, the state, and the wider political economic order that establishes and reproduces forms of spatial segregation. This framing allows me to identify how these activities generate and support anti-Black violence both within the university and in the wider confines of the imperial nation-state.

Black critics recognized that the inside/outside structure was precisely that which the New Criticism and other liberal midcentury institutions endorsed for managing difference. This postwar template for the state's rhetorical engagement with racism while maintaining racist practice has been referred to by Jodi Melamed and others as "racial liberalism."[13] Black writers on the left argued that a path toward an antiracist future did not merely mean gaining access to the inside. It meant abolishing the terms of this division altogether by generating a different way of thinking about literature and culture. Put differently, midcentury Black left writers and critics develop another world against the one envisioned and maintained by white supremacy.

Primarily, this book offers a cultural history and analysis of the "Black matters" of midcentury Black critics, criticism, and institutions that have not been a mainline object of study in English and literature departments in American universities. This cultural history relies on extensive archival research, and ranges in scope from the imagined importance of an unpublished essay to the operations of a curriculum for the study of Black literature and culture at the Jefferson School. I also offer a multifaceted critique of the New Criticism in terms of the connections it establishes between the federal government and the university system to maintain an anti-Black and anticommunist US political economy. Because the New Criticism has often been seen as foundational for today's literary critical institutions and for the university, this has important implications for the current organization and practice of that academic discipline and higher education more widely. The criticism of Black left writers makes clear that academic critics must do more than reform definitions and methods alone to slake the discipline's historical anti-Blackness. Institutions, labor, and politics—or "the group competition over scarce resources," in Lester Spence's definition—stand as additional sites for reconfiguring the work and affiliations of literary studies.[14]

Throughout this book, I situate the work of midcentury Black left critics as part of what Cedric Robinson terms the Black radical tradition. Robinson suggests that the Black radical tradition can be characterized as "the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being."[15] These struggles are material and epistemological. They move along the di-

alectical matrix of "capitalist slavery and imperialism," a dialectic the cultural faculty at the Jefferson School engage when situating their struggle against the "reactionary political and economic forces of our time."[16] Melvin B. Tolson explored a similar critique in his invocation of the sociological work of his friend and colleague Oliver Cromwell Cox in his *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia.* Black left critics sought a literary criticism that attends to how the New Criticism and the United States upheld a racialized division of labor, and which situates Black critical struggle as part of an international effort to dismantle colonialism. Beyond the fact that Du Bois stands as one of Robinson's three exemplary Black radicals, his term is relevant here because this book chronicles the development of a Black criticism that pushes toward an "actual discourse of revolutionary masses, the impulse to make history in their own terms."[17] I show how Black left writers generate this discourse and situate it within the longer history of the Black radical tradition in the first part of this introduction. Titled "Outside," this section explores how and where Black writers were making knowledge beyond the realm of literary studies as it had been imagined.

The second part of this introduction, "Inside," follows because I understand New Critical activity as a reactionary and counterrevolutionary response to the political and cultural activities of Black writers. Here I define racial liberalism, a particular form of nominal antiracism that the New Critics work to uphold and establish in the 1940s and 1950s. Attending to the construction of racial liberal discourse requires situating the development of academic literary criticism with respect to critical histories of the postwar racial state. This section chronicles how contextualizing the disciplinary work of literary studies in political and economic terms falls in line with recent accounts of the discipline and the university by scholars including Jodi Melamed, Roderick Ferguson, Stefano Harney, and Fred Moten. While the first part of the introduction contextualizes my project's contribution to Black studies and Black histories of the left, the second part outlines what I offer to contemporary critical investigations of the university, and how the project speaks to what Laura Heffernan has termed the "new disciplinary history" in literary studies. I explain why recounting a Black critique of the New Criticism remains necessary, and urge caution to those in literary studies who may see the mere incorporation of Black left critiques as a solution for moving through existing impasses

within the discipline and the university. The introduction closes with a summary of the book's structure and a recapitulation of its interventions.

Broadly, this book suggests that the struggle over culture and the methods for interpreting it extend well beyond the university, especially in Black left movements. As I show, Black left struggle foregrounds that debates about interpretive methods in the university are partial unless they engage a political economic understanding of the university's operations, especially with regard to its management of difference, its place in imperial expansion, and its circulation and accumulation of capital. These insights decenter the university as an exclusive site of knowledge production, and expand the stakes for how scholars working within the university position and organize their work. In this book the criticism of Black left writers does not emerge without an organization of the terms and sites under which acts of interpretation unfold. This work provides a provocative reframing of present struggles in and beyond the university over method, but more presciently of the condition and structure of academic labor, the purpose of the institution, and the imaginings of what other universities and societies may be possible.

OUTSIDE

Black people have long pursued modes of knowledge production in forms often unrecognizable to academic spheres. Scholars in Black studies root some of these forms in the United States to the performance and making of spiritual songs by enslaved Black people, knowledge that W. E. B. Du Bois has famously termed the sorrow songs. Clyde Woods connects this mode of knowledge making to class, gender, and region in his analysis. What Woods terms blues epistemologies challenged and provoked the counterrevolutionary political economic development of the plantation bloc within the South and eventually, as the scene of struggle expanded, within the United States. These ways of knowing forge modes of collectivity and solidarity to challenge the social and political structure of racial capitalism as they create new aesthetic, social, and political possibilities.[18] Such knowledge making

was not limited to creating, performing, listening to, and assembling around music; the multiple and myriad forms of this nearly limitless expansion is, if nothing else, the subject of an entire line of inter- and extradisciplinary inquiry.

By the mid-twentieth century, some Black writers saw the Communist Party and other left political affiliates as spaces that provided institutional and material support for Black cultural production and for Black interpretive practice. Nearly all of the Black writers I discuss in this book had some relationship to communism, whether it was through explicit membership in the Communist Party USA or general solidarity with movements to end racial capitalism and imperialism. Over the last two decades, scholars of the Black left have worked to complicate the idea that the CPUSA and the Communist International tokenized Black causes and Black art in order to grow their rolls with Black members in the United States and advance Soviet propaganda goals.[19] These accounts challenge the long-held common sense established by canonical Black writers, some of whom either were members or expressed deep sympathy with the party. Black writers disaffected with communism suggested that the white leaders of the Comintern and the CPUSA had a naive understanding of anti-Black racism. For instance, Richard Wright explains in his autobiographical *Black Boy* that "white Communists had idealized all Negroes to the extent that they did not see the same Negroes I saw. And the more I tried to explain my ideas the more they, too, began to suspect that I was somehow dreadfully wrong. . . . I began to feel an emotional isolation that I had not known in the depths of the hate-ridden South."[20] Wright's experience has been magnified, confirmed, and shared by a number of Black writers and intellectuals, including Ralph Ellison and Harold Cruse. In their view, to serve the orthodoxy of the Party line, the CPUSA minimized lived Black experience. This contradicted the intellectual liberty that was hard won while living Jim Crow. Cruse states clearly his feeling about Marxist influence on Black writing before the 1959 American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) conference of Black writers: "It is a foregone conclusion that the Marxists will make strong attempts to exert influence on this conference either through Negro writers who are Marxists or other Negro writers who are under the influence of Marxists. This is, of course, a personal question of one's own political views, but based on this member's own personal experiences with the

Marxist movement in art and theater, Marxists are too aggressive to be allowed to wield influence behind the scenes with no opposition."[21]

Cruse's and Wright's statements, however, do not represent the only ways Black people experienced the CP or communism. Black literary scholars and Black labor historians have shown that there were other ways to engage with the party, and that its grip over forms of expression and organizing may have been at times more susceptible to Black intervention than Wright or Cruse suggest. Robin D. G. Kelley has shown that Black working-class people both anticipated and shaped the organizing tactics and goals of the Communist Party in Alabama in the 1930s. Black party members were so integral that many former Klan members who had joined the CP quickly defected after learning of the party's practiced and theoretical commitment to interracial as well as class solidarity. Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe* and other works that follow from it challenge the prevailing sense that the CP merely appropriated Black labor and ideas for its own gain. Claude McKay, for instance, long thought that "his Russian work spawned a shaping influence over Communist policy toward Black Americans," particularly the adoption of the Black Belt thesis by the Comintern in 1928.[22] As adopted, the Black Belt thesis asserted that Black people constituted a nation within a nation in the United States—meaning that Black liberation was a distinctly national struggle, an important distinction in Leninism. McKay's ideas, however, also challenged the party's thinking, arguing that "the Negro question is inseparably connected with the question of woman's liberation."[23] Black party members made use of the party to advance an understanding of political struggle and culture, as much as the party sought to make use of the work of Black party members to cover over racism within entities like the CPUSA, or to cover over national difference in favor of race.[24]

Nevertheless, Black leftists found that the CP eventually accommodated and incubated analytical approaches that, like McKay's, considered interlocking forms of oppression. They developed intricate positions—some decades ahead of their time—on the intersections of race, gender, and class. Claudia Jones, the Black Trinidadian woman who headed the CPUSA's Committee on the Women Question, further elaborated Louise Thompson Patterson's idea that Black women were triply exploited: by class, by gender, and by race.[25] Jones and other Black radicals—"left of Karl Marx," as Carol Boyce Davies has so

aptly put it, because of their progressive, or ultraleft, views on race and gender—were able to establish their thinking as the official line of the CPUSA. This shows that Black analytical approaches and forms of assembly in the United States and across the diaspora had agency within the organization's orthodoxy.

Even when Black leftists were not establishing party doctrine, they could mobilize the resources of the international organization for their own purpose. For Black writers in the United States, the party was often the greatest well of resources available to them. In summarizing the extensive and important work by James Smethurst, Alan Wald, William Maxwell, and others on Black writers on the left, Mary Helen Washington determines that "these left-wing clubs, schools, committees, camps, and publications 'constituted the principal venues' for the production of African American literary culture."[26] A number of these venues were partially or sometimes even entirely Black-run and Black-funded. Lloyd Brown edited the journal *Masses and Mainstream* from 1948 to 1952; in 1950 Paul Robeson and Louis Burnham founded and edited the newspaper *Freedom*, which published reporting by Lorraine Hansberry and Yvonne Gregory. Founded through the organizing efforts of the National Negro Congress, the George Washington Carver School at 57 West 125th Street in Harlem was led by Gwendolyn Bennett and financially supported by Robeson and Hubert Delany, an African American civil rights attorney and New York City judge, and by $1,120 in donations from Harlem residents. When the Carver School faced financial trouble, the better-funded Jefferson School downtown absorbed the Harlem school's mission of serving the expressed needs of the Black working class.[27] From a certain angle, this appears as a form of incorporation, but, as I will illustrate in chapter 4, the Jefferson School altered its operations in ways much different from the diversity regimes that would later take root in the American university system. The CP was an organization Black people could work through—certainly turbulently, on occasion—in an effort to create interpretive theory and practice that could meet the demands of the different political, economic, and social forms they imagined.

Robin D. G. Kelley identifies the Communist Party as one of several sites where the "freedom dreams" of Black radical imaginations could flourish. Freedom dreams are imaginative visions of an alternative world in which oppressed peoples are emancipated from the various

forces that oppress them: race, gender, and capital, among others. For Kelley, these creative imaginings "erupt out of political engagement," and therefore "collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge."[28] A similar position is developed by a Black radical named Randy in the 1954 novel *Youngblood* by John O. Killens, a cultural leader of the Black left in the mid-1950s and a regular student at the Jefferson School in New York. Randy's Howard University roommate, Richie, displays an affinity for reading both Black and red texts, but when it comes time to protest, Richie is reluctant. To convince Richie otherwise, Randy turns not to Lenin, but to Frederick Douglass:

> "*If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.*" "That's what I'm talking about," Randy said, and handed Richard the big book. "You intellectuals don't ever want to do anything but read."[29]

Convinced by Randy and his Douglass citation, Richie goes out the next day to support the New Negro Alliance–led "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign, and after another demonstration discovers that he is not afraid of a picket line. In fact, for Richie at least, the picket line comes to be a place of sociality and a foundry for knowledge making through assembly, hallmarks of the Black radical tradition.

New knowledge grows from the complex and often contradictory experiences of organizing—talking with friends, standing on the picket line, marching in protest—and from intellectual labors. This scene from *Youngblood* indexes how Black writers on the left employed the combination of writing and organizing as a way to express and engender a Black critical practice that manifested freedom dreams. This combination of study and assembly can be located in a catalog of Lorraine Hansberry's self-reported New York activities: "See only foreign movies, no plays hardly, attend meetings almost every night, sing in a chorus, eat all the foreign foods in N.Y., go for long walks in Harlem and talk to my people about everything in the streets, usher at rallies, make street corner speeches in Harlem and sometimes make it up to the country on Sunday."[30] Further, as Killens's novel highlights, these activities might not be determined by an entity like the CPUSA, even if they were adjacent to it. Black cultural workers could develop their

own terms, epistemologies, and institutions for a struggle against racial capitalism while intersecting with CP activities.[31]

The mutually constitutive roles of assembly and intellectual study to knowledge making animate the work of Black criticism I describe in this book. Black writers challenging New Critical fundamentals targeted the exclusionary tendencies of the institutions in which the New Criticism was situated. Most universities in the 1940s and 1950s, even elite ones, enrolled few Black students, if any at all. Policies of spatial segregation delegitimized the knowledge-making capacity of work associated with social and political organizing. In addition, uneven levels of federal and state support for Black colleges and universities created labor conditions for scholars that were not conducive to writing and research.[32] Black writers excluded from the academy, doing work in other types of spaces and incorporating different forms of reference, evidence, and experience were rendered as outside authorized flows of knowledge. Yet, as Kelley, Killens, Hansberry, and other historians and practitioners of the Black radical tradition suggest, these sites outside the mainstream circuits of knowledge proved to be a powerful force for the production of radical ideas.

Killens, Hansberry, and the other Black writers who are the central protagonists of this book's later chapters—Melvin B. Tolson in chapter 2; Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Ann Petry, and Hansberry in chapter 3; and Gwendolyn Bennett, W. E. B. Du Bois, Elizabeth Catlett, Killens, and Doxey Wilkerson in chapter 4—participate in this tradition. Their visions of literary and cultural interpretation were necessarily entangled with social and political aims and modes of assembly. Nearly all of the Black cultural workers I discuss would likely consider themselves writers or artists above being organizers, but nevertheless, they all participated in some form of political work or organizing. Petry helped to found Negro Women Incorporated, a consumer rights organization, in addition to working for the Laundry Workers Joint Board and the Play School Association Project in Harlem; Tolson organized tenant farmers and later served three terms as the mayor of Langston, Oklahoma; and others, including Hughes, Bennett, and Wilkerson, offered their literary talents to forward Black and left causes in poetry, fiction, and newspaper write-ups.

Leftist political affiliations were dangerous for any American during the McCarthy years, though they were especially so for Black people. There was a prevailing sense within the intelligence divisions of the US government and among the public that to be Black was to be subversive and therefore in close proximity to communists. For Black writers on the left, fighting anti-Black racism, the class inequities of capitalism, and gender oppression could not be separated from their approach to literary interpretation. Their political organizing activities made clear that the borders formed around literary interpretation served a particular purpose. Buoyed by the growth of the American university system more broadly and by the New Critical institutionalization of literary studies more locally, these borders ensured the reproduction of an exploitable labor force and signaled a hierarchization of America's empire of capitalist influence. In short, it was clear to Black writers on the left that the New Criticism was an integral part of the expansion and retooling of political, economic, and social forms of material oppression. This critique was particularly urgent as the United States. adopted an antiracist facade to further disseminate, install, and support regimes friendly to US liberal capitalism while the Soviet Union attempted to exploit American racism for its own geopolitical gain.

Because the Black writers I discuss faced a simultaneously intellectual, institutional, and spatial repression, they developed their attacks against the New Criticism and the racial state it supported in venues understood by white audiences to be beyond the proper spheres of thought. Tolson attempted an elaborate exposure campaign of the unspoken racial codes of the New Criticism by asking Allen Tate to write the preface to his *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia.* The exposure would come with an essay composed by Tolson for publication in the *Sewanee Review*, one of the major New Critical organs. Langston Hughes offered a description of the complex network of associations between literary criticism, the state, and their mutual aversion to Blackness in a closed-door testimony before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. Lorraine Hansberry launched a project of a utopian "New Romanticism" set against the ills of the nuclear age, drug and alcohol addiction, racism, sexism, and ableism. All of these efforts have a textual component, which I draw out of the archive, but they also have a component rooted in action and protest. They make knowledge and critique of midcentury critical practice by doing, seeing, and cre-

ating. By contrast, they reveal that the New Criticism itself isn't merely an intellectual project, but a political project for excluding Blackness and Black people and for expanding a tenuous coalition between reactionary and liberal forms of anticommunism.

Given that the New Criticism frequently marks the starting point for the discipline of literary studies, many of these accounts of Black radical critique have been at most suppressed and at least on the margins of the disciplinary history of literary studies. Tolson's *Sewanee Review* essay was never published. The pressure of continued public ostracization—cancellation of his public talks, declining sales of his books, leaving the famous writer for broke—led Langston Hughes to soften his critical position in his public testimony. Meanwhile, his subversive testimony would remain under government seal for fifty years. Hansberry's remarks were excised from the widely-distributed publication of the AMSAC conference proceedings on the recommendation of Harold Cruse, not to mention the fact that AMSAC served as a CIA front at this time.[33] Like other cultural and political histories about organized or everyday forms of Black radicalism, much of what I describe here are ideas and actions that were seemingly impossible to imagine within mainstream institutions, and their realization was often thwarted accordingly. From a methodological standpoint, this also means that the records of these critical activities are partial, or refracted through the lens of intelligence agencies scrutinizing Black lives.[34] Tolson's drafts of his essay on Allen Tate are various and unfinished; the Jefferson School destroyed its student rolls and refused to accept information from students to protect them from government surveillance; and FBI surveillance documents inform a number of my arguments.

Even though the Black radical ideas I discuss are not widely known, there exists ample evidence that they circulated to other Black thinkers. As Dayo Gore and Erik McDuffie point out, many Black radical women from the 1950s—including those affiliated with the progressive people's schools, such as Alice Childress, Shirley Graham, Augusta Strong, Beulah Richardson, and Louise Thompson Patterson—played a crucial role in the organization of late-1960s struggles, including perhaps most prominently the formation of the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis.[35] In addition, their ideas about the triple exploitation of women, purveyed by Claudia Jones and groups like the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, would reappear in the work of 1970s

feminist groups including the Combahee River Collective. Late-1960s Black nationalism could be read as the reemergence of notions of Black self-determination that stemmed from the CP's Black Belt thesis. Student movements calling for Black and ethnic studies would bring to the academy a retooled version of the 1940s and '50s critique of academia leveled by the Jefferson and Carver Schools. Like those in midcentury people's schools, students in the 1960s and '70s believed that academia should serve and be party to knowledges produced by people of color, women, and working-class people.[36] Even so, as I highlight in chapter 4, the institutional difference between people's schools and the late-1960s university system leads to notable distinctions in how the former approached the study and making of Black culture, particularly in terms of its practice and theorization of the impact of gender and class on race. The curriculum of people's schools anticipates that of the Freedom Schools formed by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi. According to Robin D. G. Kelley, their "curriculum included traditional subjects that publicly funded black schools did not offer. . . . Students examined power along the axes of race and class."[37]

Another mark of the continued circulation of Black midcentury challenges to the New Critical hegemon is the legacy of Black critics targeting the New Criticism as reactionary and retrograde. In *The Black Situation* (1970), Addison Gayle suggests that the New Critics are but one instance of a line of Southern writers seeking to continue the plantation tradition in the United States. He does not mince words when he insists that the Agrarian manifesto, written by some of the most prominent New Critics in 1930, "is a racist, fascist document, equaled in the twentieth century only by Hitler's *Mein Kampf.*"[38] To support his polemic, Gayle highlights the New Criticism's ontological definition of literature that was supported by "the southern myth and gave authenticity to a society constructed along class lines."[39] For Gayle, what makes this particularly concerning is the ease with which the American university system and the state so quickly embraced the group's critical program.

Ishmael Reed, too, picks up on the connection of New Critical approaches and the development of official antiracisms some twenty years later. Reed's Professor Puttbutt, the Black protagonist of *Japanese by Spring* (1993), is an avid New Critic who hopes to earn tenure by reproducing the racist ideas stemming from color blindness, the official

antiracism of the era.[40] Due to a shifting economy that has made stars of critical theorists, Puttbutt recognizes the profit possible for "even a New Critic like himself."[41] Though Puttbutt knows that his New Critical affinities are out of step with other literature and humanities faculty at the fictional Jack London College, he sees holding conservative credentials as the only path to tenure for a Black man. Reed's satirical novel affirms the sense that the seemingly depoliticized New Criticism is an appropriate shield for a person whose race makes him subversive by default. The wide-ranging canon of Black writers disparaging the New Criticism continues to this day.[42] This suggests that the literary, political, and economic conjuncture that midcentury Black critiques of the New Criticism addressed is alive in some form within current academic literary study and within the university. It also suggests that many of the midcentury critiques I describe in this book manage to circulate despite institutional and state suppression.

This circulation occurred in ways that remain difficult to track archivally or otherwise: in conversations, private letters, and rumors. Occasional traces of these networks make their way to the surface. For instance, the *Amsterdam News* reported some information on Langston Hughes's antagonistic closed-door testimony. As David Chinitz has suggested, the article printed there about his appearance before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations includes details from the private hearing in addition to those from the public hearing, suggesting that Hughes leaked his less subservient performance to the press.[43] Beyond these whispered traces, the modes of pedagogy and literary interpretation promoted by Black writers challenging the New Criticism were modeled within midcentury Black literary texts. Black literature of this period frequently stages scenes of interpretation where the stakes are higher than in formal squabbles. These scenes suggest that interpreting Black literature, Black culture, and Black life can both challenge white supremacist ideas and activate white supremacist violence. They make plain the threat that a socially and politically situated interpretive practice can pose to a political, economic, and social order designed to protect whiteness. The fictionalized scenes of interpretation tend not to unfold in university spaces but in a public pageant, in an interrogation room, or around a dinner table. These sites spotlight that this mode of Black criticism is part of the grain of social and political life. Black criticism joins the struggle to reconfigure the

racist regime supported by the US state, its global expansion of capital, and the New Criticism.

Many of the writers featured in this book pursue a definition of Black literature and of literary criticism that sees interracial unity as an opportunity, not a threat. These writers pursued this idea because they recognized how anti-Black racism was situated as a key piece in the oppression of not only Black people but other people of color and white people as well. Racism was one means of oppression that combined, intensified, and further developed with and through other modes of oppression, including those of class, gender, and sexuality. Despite the fact that positions on integration, segregation, and nationalism would rapidly shift on all sides of the political spectrum in the mid-twentieth century, Black writers on the left made calls for interracial unity precisely because solidarity across race, gender, and class posed the biggest potential threat to the extant order, which relied on the separation of and antagonism between these groups. By presenting an approach for interpretation attentive to those boundaries, Black left writers position the production of culture and its interpretation as central to social, political, and economic struggles of various stripes. For instance, Kate Baldwin argues that when Langston Hughes suggests in poetry of the 1930s that "Black and white can all be red," he takes "seriously the plausibility of new people under a rubric of 'red.'"[44] Baldwin shows that for Hughes the rise of the Soviet Union presented an opportunity to create, in Hughes's phrasing, a "new people." The "red" genre of humanity Hughes proposes is a new one altogether, something only made possible by political economic upheaval. Admittedly, these ideas of interracial unity often floundered, largely because of the failure of white leftists to commit to their radical demands. The lack of white commitment would further encourage exclusive Black radical organizing and ideas of Black self-determination in the closing years of the 1960s.

INSIDE

While the previous section focused on midcentury Black left modes of knowledge production based around literary and cultural interpretation, this section of the chapter contextualizes and emphasizes the counterrevolutionary forces that sought to contain and exclude those

ideas in intellectual, institutional, and state forms. The antiracism that the midcentury liberal state established carried a different connotation than the calls for interracial unity within the CP. Rather than build a new people, the liberal state offered an assimilative model. A Black college student of the era attending a predominantly white university describes the model in stark terms: "We were being let into the university on the condition that we become white men with dark skins."[45] This state attitude toward race and gender has been referred to frequently as racial liberalism and, as this student intimates, universities, the state, and dominant methods for interpreting culture contributed to its establishment and circulation.

Racial liberalism became what Jodi Melamed deems the first official antiracism of the United States after the "racial break" of World War II. Official antiracisms are discourses by which the state can address claims of inequality, inferiority, and discrimination with rhetorical solutions rather than material ones. The US state developed an official antiracism after World War II because the nation sought to project ideals of freedom and democracy abroad after defeating the Nazis, despite ongoing white mob violence against Black people sanctioned by local police. In the geopolitical sphere, the mythic claims of American liberty were increasingly vulnerable to Soviet propaganda that targeted the racist limits on American freedom. At the same time, decolonial movements began abroad and Black Americans found new forums in which they could raise objections to Jim Crow.[46] Appeals to the newly established United Nations regarding US anti-Black racism were made in 1946, 1947, and perhaps most famously in 1951 with the Civil Rights Congress's submission of "We Charge Genocide."[47] In an attempt to address these wider ripostes to the US argument about freedom, democracy, and capitalism, the federal government, philanthropic foundations, and colleges and universities supported social science research on "the Negro problem." Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) stands as the exemplar of this tendency. In it, amid the 242 "racial battles" in forty-seven cities that occurred in 1943, the Swedish-born researcher, who began work on the book in September 1938, positions the "American Negro problem in the heart of the American."[48] By drawing US racism as a moral problem, Myrdal left the large-scale structures of racism untouched even while they continued to shape all aspects of American life, including how research was conducted. Du Bois competed for funding from the same foun-

dation as Myrdal to work on his "Encyclopedia of the Negro" project. The Carnegie Foundation selected Myrdal for their support because a European was deemed to be "wholly objective and dispassionate," something the academic community thought Du Bois could not be as a Black man.[49] The era's emphasis on objectivity would inevitably shape and frustrate Black writers and scholars. As Nick Mitchell has shown, the path toward funding and institutionalization necessitated making "Negro history" and later Black studies an object of study appealing to foundations and their embrace of academic and intellectual norms. This developed a separation between Black intellectuals and the "Black community" they would come to study.[50]

Midcentury studies of "the Negro problem" led to a liberal consensus that Black Americans could gain access to the privileges of citizenship by becoming "finally integrated into modern democracy."[51] The limitation of this view was that state entities put the onus on Black Americans to conform to white universalist understandings of democracy, rather than calling for a reconfiguration of a racist order. Myrdal figures this as "America's incomparably great opportunity for the future," meaning that there is capital to be gained by incorporating Black people into the US order rather than shifting that order itself.[52] Accordingly, racial liberalism hesitantly accepted some Black people into previously white spaces, but refused to significantly reconfigure those spaces and institutions that allowed racist practice, especially toward working-class Black people, to continue and to intensify. This intensification of racist practice occurred because entering into the American compact came to be figured as something Black people could choose to accept. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes, "The premise of racial liberalism, and postwar liberalism in general, was that the systems of the institutions of the country were strong enough to bestow the political, economic, and social riches of American society onto all who were willing to work hard and commit themselves to a better future."[53] Even when this commitment was made, Black Americans still contended with systemic issues, including redlining, racist policing, and the continued underinvestment of federal, state, and local funds to Black communities.

Colleges and universities were crucial sites for the dissemination, development, and maintenance of racial liberalism. In addition to their limited matriculation of Black students, universities in this moment were part of a larger effort to develop a national culture that could in-

corporate large numbers of ethnically diverse working-class students into (white) Americans. As Michael Denning argues, "perhaps the most important federal intervention in culture was the building of the postwar university system, supported by government research and development funds and by the GI Bill of 1944, which financed higher education for 8 million veterans."[54] The GI Bill favored white Americans and predominantly white institutions for funding in its effort to shift the domain of universities from elite enclaves to sites of mass education.[55] Universities were enlisted in manufacturing consensus around liberal capitalism and American democracy, white ideals increasingly coded in the race-neutral language of objectivity and universality. Meanwhile, it was clear that objectivity and universality came to be measures that could be deployed to exclude Black people from the full privilege of citizenship—or, in a different context, to exclude Du Bois from foundation funding. Higher education became a means to assure domestic buy-in for the US-led expansion of liberal capitalism to the rest of the globe. This offered significant material benefits for white students, largely at the expense of Black working-class people, though to a lesser degree it also incorporated a small cohort of Black people.

Jane Bond, a Black student at Sarah Lawrence College, composed a letter to her friend Lorraine Hansberry in 1951 that shows this academic attempt to build consensus as a further means of exploiting Black people. It also shows how she perceived her inclusion to be a great opportunity for the college, not for her:

> I have also learned that most so called liberal colleges do not have Negro students because they are trying to fight for Negro rights or because they believe in Negro equality, but because they want one or two of us around as trophies, to prove how liberal they are. Once we are there, they don't care what happens to us and make no effort to deal with the special problems which Negroes are faced in a predominantly white institution. I will be very glad to get out of that rarified atmosphere and into a situation which is more down to earth.[56]

Bond's observations suggest that within institutions promoting racial liberalism, racism took the form of deliberate neglect. Those who fell outside the norms around race, gender, and sexuality that composed the universal or rejected the political terms of the US citizen-subject were vulnerable to additional violence, extraction, and exclusion.[57]

One finds resonance in Bond's remarks with contemporary critiques of academic diversity regimes by Sara Ahmed; accounts of how universities "work identity" by Devon Carbado and Mitu Gulati; and Roderick Ferguson's description of the strategic use of minority difference in higher education in the wake of Black, ethnic, and feminist studies movements.[58]

Recently scholars studying higher education from an abolitionist or critical ethnic studies perspective see the university as integral to—not distinct from—the machinations of racial capital and the state's interest, defense, and reproduction of the "possessive investment in whiteness."[59] George Lipsitz defines that investment as literal and figurative; whiteness has a material tendency to accumulate capital reliant upon the social and cultural reproduction of its supremacy. These scholars recognize the university as both a material and a symbolic node in this process of accumulation. Rather than redistributing material and symbolic resources, this process marshals significant amounts of capital for the university and the state to use. This understanding relies on a historical contextualization of the university system as part of the violence of US slavery and settler colonialism. As Craig Wilder argues, because its operations were financed with capital accumulated from the slave trade and because it developed racial science to justify servitude, "the academy never stood apart from American slavery—in fact, it stood beside church and state as the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage."[60] The adoption of a discourse of mass redistribution at midcentury suggests that the university changes its mode of racialization, but not its accumulative function. This discursive shift marks the incorporation of some into the accumulated American wealth, but largely sustains the same exploitative and extractive processes under revised racial terms. Abigail Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein advise that a "more fulsome accounting [of the midcentury university] would necessarily include: absorption of surplus populations via institutional expansion, absorption of surpluses of land generated by taking land out of agricultural production and into suburbanization . . . and the consolidation of military-university financial and population flows."[61] In this analysis, higher education disseminated and designed the discourse of official antiracism while further developing new means to accumulate value for whiteness.

The New Criticism played a crucial role in supporting these ac-

tivities of midcentury universities.[62] One of the most pivotal works of disciplinary history in literary studies—John Guillory's *Cultural Capital*—suggests that the New Criticism helped to establish, temporarily, a political and economic function for literary study in the years after World War II. To put this in his terms, the New Critics are responsible for "redefining the cultural capital produced by literary study in the university."[63] On the one hand, that new definition allowed for expanded access to that capital for new audiences. On the other hand, that expansion produced new terms by which to limit the same access for already devalued groups, particularly Black people, queer people, and women.

Midcentury observers both in the university and in the state recognized how New Critical aesthetic and interpretive practices could play an important role in melding the mixture of cultures bubbling within the United States into a unified entity. As Hershel Parker put it in commenting on the New Criticism's tendency toward unity, the New Critics "define their role as bringing order out of a chaos which they insist is only apparent, not real. The order *must* be there, awaiting the sufficiently attentive and unbiased reading which the present critic is always the first to supply."[64] Because of this ordering tendency, the New Critics came to be seen by the US state and by American universities as the appropriate means by which literature and its rhetorical tropes could be produced and parsed. For Guillory, this redefinition tasked literary studies with reproducing the distinction between mass and high culture. When read in terms of the long history of the accumulating university, however, this distinction mobilizes the further marginalization of Black people, especially, for the benefit of US capital expansion. Jane Bond, for instance, states that any benefits she accrued from being admitted to Sarah Lawrence paled in comparison to those that the college gained by trumpeting its acceptance of her. I show throughout this book how the New Criticism works to support the marginalization of Black people for the gain of predominantly white institutions.

The New Critics were particularly poised to update the discursive positioning toward race in the American university while maintaining the university's political economic function embedded in racial capitalism. A number of the most prominent New Critics, before they were known as such—including Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate—published a manifesto in 1930 that called for the re-

turn of an agrarian economy to the US South. Initially titled "Tracts against Communism," *I'll Take My Stand* "produced the South in the same way . . . social elites produce ideological realities: out of strategies for seizing and retaining power (cultural, political, sexual, economic, and so on) that are then reproduced as 'natural.'"[65] As Michael Kreyling suggests, the Agrarian manifesto sought to accumulate capital and power of various kinds for white Southerners by denying how slavery and racism was crucial to the region's—and nation's—political economy. Only one essay in *I'll Take My Stand* considers the role of Black people in the South at any length. In it, Robert Penn Warren endorses Booker T. Washington's program for vocational education as a means for "crime, genial irresponsibility, ignorance, and oppression [to be] replaced by an informed and productive negro community."[66] Warren coerces Black people to accept the terms white people have set out for them in an Agrarian society with the threat of criminalization, marginalization, and further racist violence if Black people refuse those terms.

Connecting the New Critics to their Agrarian past supplies a genealogy that links the racial liberalism the New Critics would eventually espouse to the foundational national defense of Black inferiority exercised through literary criticism. In his 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson establishes a connection between the US racial state and literary critical imaginations. Amid offering treatises on law, the subjects of commerce, and Black criminality, Jefferson deems Phillis Wheatley and her poetry to be "below the dignity of criticism."[67] Jefferson supports this claim by suggesting that Black people could not take raw emotion, whether misery or love, and submit it to the ordering faculties of poetry. For the Founding Father, this assessment was evidence enough that Black "inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life."[68] New Critical methodology perfected Jefferson's reasoned racism by capably obscuring racialized dimensions of literary interpretation. Importantly, this methodological development allowed for value to continue to accumulate to whiteness in the mid-twentieth century, in the "terms of an African American inclusion by exclusion, an African American *present absence*," in Lindon Barrett's phrasing.[69] To put this concretely, Warren's argument in *I'll Take My Stand* accepts a white vision of Blacks—I don't use "people" here, because Warren does not see Black people as such—as a means to exclude Black people and Black social life from their wider vision of society. This inclusion by exclusion

becomes the objective logic by which cultural as well as political and economic judgments are made. It is, in effect, the very logic of racial liberalism.

The Agrarian imprint would remain in future forms of official antiracism in the United States, especially in how those forms impacted higher education. The Agrarian New Critics have been seen as playing an atmospheric role in the counterrevolutionary political economic developments of the 1970s that would shift the financing of public higher education from states to individuals in the form of increasingly predatory student loans. The neoliberal Virginia School economist James Buchanan would argue in the 1970s that the free mass access to higher education led directly to Black student uprisings in California. To address the "terror" he saw unfolding on public campuses—he had been working at UCLA when a bomb was planted in the office of the Department of Economics, and when Black Panther students Bunchy Carter and John Huggins were shot and killed in Campbell Hall—Buchanan effectively prescribed a privatization regime that would increase tuition and decrease state funding in an effort to deflate the system for the record number of students of color and poor students entering public universities.[70] I mention Buchanan and his alliance with Reagan's attack on public education in California in the late 1960s and early '70s, and later across the nation, because according to Nancy MacLean, as a young man in the 1930s Buchanan had taken inspiration from the Nashville Agrarians, particularly the Vanderbilt English professor Donald Davidson.[71] The case of Buchanan highlights how the Agrarian New Critics provided key intertexts and institutional strategies to preserve the accumulative capacities of higher education both in the midcentury and beyond. Though I focus here almost entirely on the 1940s and 1950s, the political economic ramifications of a New Critical university and state defense apparatus extend well into the present, and suggest a line of inquiry for future scholarly investigation.

I elaborate this history of racial liberalism, the university, and the New Criticism as part of my argument for two reasons. Primarily, midcentury Black left writers, including Hansberry's friend Jane Bond, understood the American university and the New Criticism within this political economic context. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will show that the

Black radical visions of literary interpretation directly engage this articulation of the university, the state, and critical practice. This surfaces a Black political economic critique of the system of higher education in the 1940s and 1950s, decades before the bulk of Black studies movement activity in the late '60s and early '70s. Without this history of the state-university development and reproduction of racial liberalism, an account of the ongoing development of Black interpretive practice would be only partial.

Second, this political economic understanding of the New Criticism is distinct from the one typically circulated within disciplinary histories of literary studies. With a few notable exceptions, disciplinary histories have largely focused on the development of interpretive method and theory.[72] The New Criticism is frequently understood as that which sets the terms for those investigations. For example, Virginia Jackson argues that the New Critical "lyricization of poetry extended to a lyricization of literature tout court."[73] The New Critical interest in the ahistorical lyric genre came to cast an air of isolated ahistoricism on the methodology itself. The result is a general sense that the discipline's history can be summarized as merely a development of methodological approaches, like this diagram offered by Marjorie Levinson: "New Criticism → structuralism → deconstruction → new historicism → postructuralism."[74] While Levinson only produces this chart to make an example of its limitations, its presumed legibility indexes how methodological developments of the discipline are kept separate from shifts in US political economy, changes in the structure of the university, and other factors impacting the labor and thinking of scholars and critics of literature. The persistence of this methodological emphasis in disciplinary history stands as one of several indices of the continuation of New Critical practice within literary studies, despite the widespread sense that the method is a practice of the past.[75] Nevertheless, there are several recent studies of the development of literary criticism that discuss forces perceived to be external to the discipline, including works by Evan Kindley, Merve Emre, Joseph North, Chris Findeisen, and Laura Heffernan and Rachel Sagner Buurma.[76] This work in what Heffernan deems the "new disciplinary history" expands for investigation the scope of institutions and the types and contexts of the practice of criticism.[77] Other scholars working primarily at the intersection of literary studies and Black and ethnic studies, like Dorothy Wang,

Sonya Posmentier, and the late Lindon Barrett, have explicitly defined the racism that New Criticism has thoroughly embedded in the discipline of literary studies and the university.[78] Meanwhile, Sarah Brouillette, Juliana Spahr, Andrew Rubin, and William Maxwell have investigated how literature and literary criticism have been embedded within various state functions including law enforcement and cultural diplomacy within the United States and the United Nations.[79] By adopting a political-economic understanding informed by critical race and ethnic studies approaches, this book develops an expansion of modes of disciplinary history by taking seriously literary-critical work that has long been made extradisciplinary or has figured as being outside the authorized spaces for making knowledge.

The danger of placing the Black radical critiques I discuss in terms of disciplinary history is that they can be read as offering a solution to the various methodological and disciplinary impasses that have preoccupied literary scholars during the era of the method wars. My aim in this book is not to offer a solution but, as la paperson has suggested in their analysis of the accumulative university, to make space for Black thought, as well as for Indigenous and queer visions of the world to come.[80] What midcentury Black left critics identified is the entanglement of interpretive practice with academic and state forces that together upheld the persistent though shifting forms of anti-Black racism. The incorporation of Black radical demands within academic spaces has allowed for those demands to be redrafted to serve new modes of official antiracisms. As Sylvia Wynter argues, Black studies "was inseparable from the parallel emergence of the Black Aesthetic and Black Arts Movements," but this academic connection to popular movements was later disarticulated once it had been firmly established within the academy.[81] The institutionalization of these popular movements has led to their professionalization and incorporation, and has paradoxically further yoked universities to anti-Black activities, including policing.[82] This is why Stefano Harney and Fred Moten end their pivotal essay "The University and the Undercommons" by clarifying that abolition is "not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society."[83] Their argument "for the red and black abolition" states explicitly that the reform of professional disciplines or the university is not enough in the wider context of racial capitalism and conquest. In their perspective, that is, abolishing the

university requires abolishing the entire society of which it is a part. It is with this aim in the present that the undercommons offers assembly for the development and practice of visions for a future world.

With their development and creation of spaces necessarily outside the confines of professionalized academic investigation, midcentury Black radicals identified universities as a particularly inhospitable place for Black thought. In recounting their history here, I offer an account of the development of Black undercommons thinking—always inter- and extradisciplinary—that necessarily frames professional academic study as contributing to and standing as an inextricable part of the broader social, political, and economic order. The undercommons and its emphasis on sociality is effectively outside of space—Harney and Moten call it a "non-space"—in that it is figured as illicit, despite the fact that it is often understood as being "in but not of" the institutions between which it coalesces. My book traces Black radicals who experiment with building institutions for a Black future under the pressure of an anti-Black world. These institutions were not at all "in" the institutions that Black critics sought to counter. The subtle difference amplifies and offers a clarifying argument to something often obscured in discussions of Harney and Moten's work. The university is not the horizon of the revolution, nor is it the only site for the development of Black imaginings. My book emphasizes that a history of thought, of politics, and assembly necessarily circuits outside and through academe. As a result, to understand the division of labor within the discipline, its methods, and its political economic functions requires a broader investigation of the university's connection to the state and its capacities to coerce and encourage consensus around forms of antiracism acceptable to capital, the state, and white people.

ORGANIZATION

The material I discuss in this book unfolds in the years before and after 1950. This was a critical period for the development of racial liberalism, changes in the American university system, and for the imminence and repression of Black and/or communist freedom dreams. It was a time when the terms of the US state were especially in flux, albeit briefly and unevenly. By the late 1950s, the US state had concretized its ap-

proach to racism in the domestic and international spheres, the New Criticism had gained its capital letters as the premiere mode of literary study, and Black activists, thinkers, and artists widely sought new sources of support for developing their vision beyond the CPUSA. Because the terms and strategies developed at midcentury remain foundational to the function of anti-Black racism in the twenty-first century, the sometimes-forgotten postwar struggle against the racial liberal hegemony and racial capitalism remains illuminating.

This book's first chapter describes the connection between the New Criticism, the US state, and racial capitalism. I show how this connection figures Black literature, Black people, and blackness as outside the confines of literature, criticism, and professionalized spaces. The New Critics generate this figuration by their insistence on the fetishization of poetry, of literature, and of criticism itself. This operates as an enclosure and renders the outside illegible and irrelevant to an analysis of culture. Despite a widespread exhaustion around investigations of the New Criticism, my political economic contextualization of academic literary studies remains necessary. Without understanding the multidimensional scope of academic literary studies and its connections to anti-Black racism, it is difficult to register the simultaneously literary-critical, political, and social visions Black radicals unfurl when they target New Criticism. To illustrate the wide scope of Black radical literary-critical activity, I highlight an episode that the Jefferson School faculty and Langston Hughes identify as crucial for making plain the anti-Black logic operating in the connection between literary criticism and the state: the awarding of the Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound in 1949 by the Fellows of the Library of Congress.

After establishing the means by which literary studies privileged whiteness at the expense of Black people in the midcentury, I turn to how Black left writers challenged the domestic and international conquest of US liberal capitalism by developing new modes of literary interpretation. Instead of moving chronologically, I organize these chapters in terms of the increasing scale and stakes of the critical imaginings Black writers developed against the New Criticism. The chapters also build with regard to the degree of CP intervention and affiliation with the otherwise Black-led attempts to form an antiracist literary criticism. This organization supports the book's argument by accumulating endeavors of increased size, scope, and material enactment to build a Black, communist world beyond the bounds of the liberal-capitalist US state.

This organization of the book also makes clear that Black visions for the future are not only imaginary. They are implemented and put into practice even if the state and academic apparatuses of the white world destroy these visions or seek to make their realization appear improbable. Despite the persistent violence of white supremacy, these visions are built, formed, and placed as much as they are imagined. Black matters, as McKittrick puts it, are both "real and discursive."[84] Black writers on the left animate their real, discursive, and critical as well as political institutional practices by figuring them in terms of space and what space might make possible. In chapter 2, I describe how Melvin Tolson imagines a unified Africa connected by multiform transportation technologies to create a context for his revolutionary criticism. In chapter 3, I show that Langston Hughes figures the New Criticism and his McCarthy Commission testimony in terms of a manure-filled lily pond to draw attention to the shared work academic criticism and state entities conduct in establishing anti-Black racism in criticism and in surveillance. These radical, spatial imaginings provide the terms for the material impact of these writers' discursive practice. In chapter 4, however, I show that the creation of an alternative material space (the progressive people's school) fosters the creation of a new epistemology to support literary critical practice. That space includes the Black-led classrooms and curricula at the progressive people's schools in New York and California. For W. E. B. Du Bois, these "were the only two schools who tried to teach the people about the Negro position in their relation to the nation and the world."[85]

The goal of my work is to further illuminate the long history of Black people generating new terms for investigating, imagining, abolishing, and liberating themselves and the world from white supremacy. Black writers in the mid-twentieth century approached the project of literary interpretation with a recognition that any critical practice must also require material circumstances that allow for Black thought and criticism. These writers teach that literature and literary critical practice impact and shape the world in which we live. Literature and its interpretation, as academic criticism has done and continues to do, can limit and police Black life.[86] But literature and criticism can also open up places of assembly, sociality, and liberation. This book is an investigation of this insight at a moment when this insight was, as it continues to be now, pushed outside.