THE CRITICAL PULSE

THIRTY-SIX CREDOS
BY CONTEMPORARY CRITICS

Mark Bauerlein | Lauren Berlant
Michael Bérubé | Marc Bouquet
Morris Dickstein | Rita Felski | Diana Fuss
Judith Jack Halberstam | Amitava Kumar
Lisa Lowe | Mark McGurl
Toril Moi | Cary Nelson | Andrew Ross
Ken Warren and twenty-one other critics

EDITED BY JEFFREY J. WILLIAMS & HEATHER STEFFEN
My critical credo—or what would become my critical credo—was formed in the crucible of 1968 and 1969. Tens of millions were in motion to transform the conditions in which life is lived. It was imaginable that exploitation and its accompanying oppressions might be abolished, that people might create a social order in which it was possible to be human. The capitalist world order seemed anything but eternal: it had come into being in history and could go out of being in history. The understanding that communism is necessary, desirable, and possible became lodged in me as I came of age. While the world has changed in significant ways over the past several decades, my Marxist view of historical necessity has not. Indeed, in many respects—given the vast and spiraling inequalities to which the drive to capital accumulation gives rise, as well as the threat it poses to the future of the planet—my conviction that humanity must free itself from the yoke of class society is if anything more urgent than ever.

Although I harbor no illusions that literary criticism constitutes any kind of front line in the global class war, my commitment to the revolutionary transformation of society has over the years definitively shaped my scholarship, pedagogy, and citizen participation. At first the gap between my leftist activism and literary interests was close to schizophrenic: my graduate training at the University of Chicago in the early 1970s turned me into a neo-Aristotelian of sorts even as my political engagement drew me into both the antiwar movement and the struggles of black working-class people on Chicago's South Side. An enduring benefit of my exposure to the Chicago
neo-Aristotelians, however, was my appreciation of both the propositional and the rhetorical power of works of literature. In my first book, Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction (Cornell University Press, 1986), I attempted to situate the novel's changing ways of rendering cognition within a Marxist analysis of changing modes of production.

I have placed increasing importance upon recovering and critically analyzing traditions of literary radicalism that have been unfairly derogated and dismissed because of the enduring influence of anticomunism, whether in its Cold War, postmodernist, or ethnic studies guises. My 1993 book, Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941 (Duke University Press), constituted an effort to understand and evaluate the scores of leftist novels produced in the Depression-era United States. In subsequent projects I have investigated the dynamics of African American literary radicalism. Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro (University of Illinois Press, 2003) explored the radical origins of the movement that would later be known as the Harlem Renaissance. My recent book on Ralph Ellison, Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (2010), examines Ellison's early journalism and short fiction, both published and unpublished, as well as the thousands of pages of drafts and notes that were abandoned, augmented, or rewritten as Ellison struggled to create his now-classic 1952 novel. My current project, provisionally titled Jean Toomer and the Political Unconscious: Race, Revolution, and Repression in Cane, builds upon Spectres of 1919 by situating Toomer's 1923 masterpiece in the aftermath of the postwar revolutionary upsurge and studying the text's rhetorical maneuvers as symbolic acts suturing irreconcilable historical contradictions.

While these book projects indicate that my interests and emphases have shifted somewhat over the years, a fairly consistent critical credo forms a figure in the carpet. To begin with, as a committed leftist I have believed that it is crucial to try to get it right about the left, as it were. In writing Radical Representations, I found it necessary to do a good deal of ground-clearing about the early-twentieth-century communist movement, both in the United States and international, before I could even begin to encounter proletarian literature on its own terms. Original archival work was essential—I had to get past a host of continually recirculated untruths about writers and the left—but so, too, was a dialectical assessment of the historically specific strengths and limitations of the Depression-era left. My feeling that the 1930s literary radicals were, in a sense, my own ancestors helped me to formulate an often stringent critique of their shortcomings—and of the political consequences of "Stalinism" or "class...
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cal consequences of these shortcomings—without resorting to such labels as 
“Stalinism” or “class reductionism,” which obscure far more than they explain.

A central concern in this effort to “get it right about the left” has been the 
recovery and renarration of the relationship of African American writers to 
communism, a relationship that (despite the vitally important work of a new 
generation of “black red” scholars) to this day remains one of the best-kept 
literary-historical secrets of the past century. My abiding conviction that the 
United States—no matter what the hue of its president—remains a deeply 
racist country and that far-reaching social transformation will be impossible 
without a forthright struggle against racism in all its forms has strongly 
influenced my decision to devote scholarly attention to both movements and 
individuals embodying the dialectical interplay of race and class. It is only 
when class analysis is caricatured as economic determinism that it is possible 
to dismiss anticapitalist critique as irrelevant, or only marginally relevant, to 
the situation of people of color. The history of the Marxist-inflected New 
Black Movement, which shaped the consciousness of Jean Toomer, and of the 
U.S. Communist Party, which defined the outlook of the young Ralph 
Ellison, reveals that leftist ideas and programs have exercised a significant 
fluence upon these and many other African American writers. I have found 
that intersectionality theory—currently popular among scholars interested in 
reasing out the connections between and among gender, race, class, nation, 
sexuality, and other identities—has limited utility in accounting for the 
phenomenon of black redness. Indeed, this theory guts the anticapitalist analysis 
of racism by promulgating the liberal pluralist notion that all oppressions can 
be mapped as crisscrossing lines on the plane of social life, with each possessing 
its distinct causality and none exerting primacy over another. Recovering 
the history of African American radicalism, literary and otherwise, enables 
us to move beyond the notion of identity as subject position and to grasp the 
relationship between oppression and exploitation within the structured totality 
of capitalist social relations.

My close examination of the process by which Toomer’s *Cane* and, espe-
cially, Ellison’s *Invisible Man* came into being has sharpened my awareness of 
an important theoretical dimension to the project of biographically in-
formed literary criticism, namely, the usefulness of reading forward to a text’s 
published version, rather than backward from a standpoint that views the 
published text as a well-wrought urn. While this challenge to New Critical 
formalism might sound like a deconstructive maneuver—and, indeed, shares 
deconstruction’s radical skepticism about the notion of textual fixity—it dif-
fers in that it locates the text’s slippages and ambiguities not within a crisis in
signification endemic to all language but within a historically specific dialectic. Texts like *Invisible Man* and *Cane* are, upon close examination, radically un-well-wrought because of their structured silences, inconsistent characterizations, and overdetermined symbols. If, as is the case with *Invisible Man*, the archive reveals that the text's narrative elements were repeatedly inserted, withdrawn, rearranged, and thematically reinflected, the text loses its aura of inevitability. It emerges as a series of historical acts that are themselves inseparable from the historical world in which the author was living as he wrote and rewrote. The published text of *Invisible Man* interpellates the reader as a coherent and self-aware anticommunist subject, and many a literary critic has answered its red-baiting call. But an examination of the novel's coming-into-being shows that Ellison himself had to struggle hard to subdue recalcitrant political elements threatening to disrupt the rhetorical patterning for which the novel has become famous. To read forward through *Invisible Man*—and, I believe, through many a text whose creative process can be traced—is to follow the author's travel along a series of taken and undertaken roads that are simultaneously aesthetic, political, and historical.

Where my work on Ellison has stressed the archival dimension of reading forward, my work on Toomer—who left letters detailing the inspiration and composition of *Cane* but no drafts—has emphasized the author's struggle to represent a historical reality for which he possessed inadequate explanatory paradigms. *Cane*'s overwrought tropes and indeterminate narratorial interventions reveal its author's repression of historical contradictions that defy containment within the nationalist and aestheticist categories in which, in the wake of the failure of the revolutionary upsurge of 1919, he took refuge. As the proposed title to my book suggests, in this project I revisit Fredric Jameson's abidingly valuable notion of the political unconscious. What I hope to demonstrate, however, is that the status and function of the "ideologeme"—which for Jameson functions as the hazily defined structure of feeling mediating between the Real, the "history that hurts," and the text's symbolic acts, which continually struggle to surmise the irreconcilable contradictions produced by the Real—vary widely with the historical experience and political positioning of a given author. Writers who, like Toomer, have been influenced to one degree or another by left-aligned political movements are likely to be more fully cognizant of, or at least sensitive to, the ideological freight borne by their own guiding conceptions than are the more "bourgeois" writers (Balzac, Gissing, and Conrad) whom Jameson treats in *The Political Unconscious*. The "ideologeme," in other words, is more explicitly ideological. What I explore in my current project on Toomer, then, is the grounding of textual silence, ambiguity, and overdetermination in the specific pressures—b
Historically specific dialectic examination, radically inconsistent characters, case with Invisible Man, s were repeatedly inserted, text loses its aura of that are themselves inseparable living as he wrote steppates the reader as a d many a literary critic has novel's coming-into-ward to subdue recalcitrant rhetorical pattern for which rough Invisible Man—and, success can be traced—is to and untaken roads that are chivalric dimension of readers detailing the inspirations emphasized the author's he possessed inadequate and indeterminate nation of historical contradiction and aesthetic categories reactionary upsurge of 1979, he suggests, in this project I reframe the political unconscious.

status and function of the he hazily defined structure that hurts, and the text's the irreconcilable contradiction the historical experience is who, like Toomer, have ligned political movements cast sensitive to, the ideations than are the more I whom Jameson treats in her words, is more explicitly on Toomer, then, is the determination in the specific pressures—both potentialities and limitations—operative in a given conjuncture. The unconscious is political, I argue, in historically specific ways.

What I have been describing to this point is the work I do when cloistered with my computer on nonteaching days. Resituated in the classroom, especially the undergraduate classroom, this critical credo undergoes some reemphasis and mutation. As frequently and in as many contexts as I can, I include on my syllabi works of proletarian literature and African American literature that, in various ways, introduce students to the red line of history or at least invite them to destabilize the apparent fixity of the capitalist social relations in which we all are compelled to live our lives. Favorites (in a very long list) include Jack London's The Iron Heel, Richard Wright's Uncle Tom's Children and Native Son, Arna Bontemps's Black Thunder, William Attaway's Blood on the Forge, Anne Petry's The Street, the radical poetry of Langston Hughes, Tillie Olsen's Yonondio, Myra Page's Moscow Yankee, Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun, Mike Gold's Jesus Without Money, John Sanford's The People from Heaven, and John Dos Passos's U.S.A. Recent works that continue in this tradition include Steve Yarbrough's The Oxygen Man and Toni Morrison's A Mercy.

Even as such texts display the power of literature to defamiliarize the status quo and grasp the necessity for far-reaching social transformation, I stress equally in my teaching the power of literature to occlude, fetishize, and legitimate capitalist social relations. Here is where my training in the rhetoric of fiction decades ago at the University of Chicago—compound by Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation, Pierre Macherey's theorization of structured silences, and Kenneth Burke's work on ideology and symbolic action—has come in handy. Examining texts that I consider to one degree or another affirmations of dominant ideology (ranging from T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land to William Faulkner's Light in August to Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man to Cormac McCarthy's The Road to Barack Obama's Dreams from My Father) I ask my students to consider how these texts position their readers to embrace without interrogation hegemonic assumptions about art, race, gender, family, nation—indeed, the meaning of life. Literature, I hope to show, has the capacity both to afford radical glimpses of an unalienated future world and, conversely, to affirm idealist propositions that—whether in liberal or reactionary form—serve to naturalize existing structures of inequality and exploitation. Literary texts fight out the class struggle in the realm of ideology; through the juxtaposition of texts possessing different political valences I try to bring the class struggle—if in somewhat etiolated form—into the classroom.

Finally, my commitment to an unreconstructed sixties radicalism has led me to put my shoulder to the wheel of political activism. In recent years
this has meant marching in the streets alongside students, colleagues, and members of NOW-N] to protest the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan; the horrific government response to Hurricane Katrina; and (more locally relevant) the refusal of the Rutgers administration to condemn "shock jock" Don Imus for his sexist and racist verbal assault on the Rutgers women's basketball team. It has also meant working within the Radical Caucus of the Modern Language Association to support the struggles of graduate students and non-tenure-track faculty against their super-exploitation and to pass resolutions contesting the false division between our professional activities as scholars and teachers and the larger political and historical context in which these activities occur. While one could readily engage in any or all of these forms of political practice without being a Marxist, I have endeavored to bring to my involvement, here as in the classroom, an analysis of the ways in which capitalism is the root cause of most of the problems that humanity faces, as well as a vision that another world (here I do not hesitate to use the c-word) is possible.

My critical credo, as both a thinker and a doer, was formed in the crucible of history. It is my hope that, in however modest a way, my scholarship, teaching, and activism have contributed to sharpening the contradictions of our time and hastening the day when humanity may exit from the kingdom of necessity and enter the realm of freedom.

Sixteen years ago, in the Public Access, I described my keenly aware of living in the leftward border of the thinkable pragmatic politics of the most duce or imagine. "The end of the world in some quarters, but it's the beginning of the middle-innings pitcher is t badly awry. He's not the closer, not the setup man, who takes the lead ball closer can face the absorber throw beat the next day. He's the one who has a chance to turn the game around after hairballs and his hapless relief is to stop the bleeding a

At the time I wrote those words, world-historical media extols the hardened culture warriors fuddled and muttering legions of second-year assistant professors. Kimball, D'Souza, et al., out of town colleagues for not taking the right but having no clue how to respi