theories and methodologies

What Was African American Literature?

What Does Fiction Have to Do with It?

GLENDA R. CARPIO

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Kenneth W. Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* offers a much needed challenge to ahistorical, purportedly "progressive racial scholarship and racial literature" that uses "the history of racial trauma" (i.e., the Middle Passage and slavery) to convince mainly "white and black conservatives" that "racism still matters and still explains ongoing inequalities" (86). As Hua Hsu notes, the book "expands [Warren's] long-standing skepticism toward academic work's politically galvanizing effects" (132).[1]

This is for me the most incisive aspect of Warren's book. I hope it will challenge scholars to rethink the conventional, empty goal of pointing to the obvious as if it were a revelation—mainly, that racism persists and that we should look to the history of racial trauma to discover why. All too often the subjects of this kind of scholarship (and by implication the scholars themselves) stand, heroically, as radicals whose "commitments to social justice . . . can serve as repositories or inspirational examples of how we might in the present confront the emergency represented by the ongoing inequalities of our own time" (86). At its best this is a sentimental relation to the past; at its worst it is self-serving and obfuscating. By contrast, Warren boldly argues that to "understand both the past and the present, we have to put the past behind us" (84). His boldness is refreshing, though it poses some problems. As Hsu notes, "Warren's analysis underestimates the broader, more nebulous blast radius of slavery—the effects that are not as legible or confirmed by statute, the ills that are perpetuated through ideology rather than code" (135) and that may just make putting the "past behind us" more challenging than Warren might warrant.

Warren's intense focus on history and politics also offers a limited vision of African American literature as art. In his efforts to properly historicize African American literature Warren has precious little to say about literary form. He makes a persuasive ar-

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gument for how the function of African American literature was tied to the racial politics of Jim Crow (although, as Eric Sundquist has noted, echoing others, Warren doesn't "specify when the Jim Crow era ended—surely not in 1954, or even 1964, but when?" [551]). And what about the formal richness and variety of African American literature? Has form also been tethered to politics? Warren would argue that, yes, black literary art was indeed either "indexically" (as measure of achievement in art) or "instrumentally" (as social and moral instrument) tied to Jim Crow whether writers consciously understood their work as such or not. Perhaps, but the inescapability of this scenario strikes me as totalizing. Early in his book, Warren warns that he is not interested in "attending to the historical processes, institutional effects and social pressures as these broader forces are reflected in and refracted through authorial style," that his focus is on how African American literature "constitutes a representational and rhetorical strategy within the domain of a literary practice [that is] *responsive to conditions* that, by and large, no longer obtain" (8–9; my emphasis). Warren is too subtle a thinker to argue that art is responsive solely to its contexts, yet he often comes close to doing so while offering discussions of novels as varied and aesthetically rich as George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931), Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003), and Michael Thomas's *Man Gone Down* (2007) only by way of content analysis.

I wonder too what he makes of a writer as slippery as Zora Neale Hurston, whose works do not fit easily into the indexical or instrumental categories that Warren uses. Hurston's complicated political views might suggest otherwise. In 1954 she opposed the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* because she did not see it as a productive way of combating Jim Crow. Yet her joyous sense of humor and willingness to experiment with form (at the risk of producing uneven results) reveal a writer who did not always fix on Jim Crow, though this exposed her to the scorn of writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. She focused on American black life, but she also lived abroad (in the Bahamas, Haiti, Jamaica, Honduras), exploring black culture more broadly. Hurston rejected what she called the "sobbing school of Negrohood," famously declaring that she did not feel "tragically colored" (827). While such statements were often forms of posturing, Hurston was on to something missing in Warren's account of African American literature: a sense of freedom and joy. In the context of Warren's arguments it seems impossible to think that African American writers could and did write for pleasure and that African American readers could and did read for beauty, because everything seems to have been funneled through the all-consuming power of Jim Crow.

Warren's historicizing of African American literature and his contention that contemporary black American fiction is the work of memory and identity are stimulating. His arguments advance the soul-searching that African American studies has undergone in the last few decades. But reading Warren's book I have to remind myself that I am reading about literature and not strictly about political science or history, with fiction in the passive role of cultural evidence. What would it mean to take the power of fiction in shaping the world as seriously as Warren takes history and politics?

Note

1. See, e.g., Warren, "End(s)."

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What Is Jim Crow?

GENE ANDREW JARRETT

The titles of Kenneth W. Warren's essay "Does African-American Literature Exist?" and book *What Was African American Literature?* instantly provoked me.[1] Admittedly skeptical of these questions, I could not help turning to my mental Rolodex of published authors and texts attesting to African American literature's historicity or currency. As I read the essay and the book, I gradually realized that they raised more questions than answers—which, I suppose, could have been the point all along. Warren's work pulled the rug out from under long-standing fields of academic inquiry and devoted readers outside the academy. In doing so, it elicited an initial public reaction in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that was marvelous for its diversity and intensity. Subsequently, in the spate of responses online and in print, at conferences and in classrooms, his work has breathed fresh air into scholarship on African American literary history.

In the year that has passed since I first read Warren's writings, my disagreement with his main argument remains, yet the thrust of my critique has changed. Previously I accepted, as many did, the historiographical premise of Jim Crow in *What Was African American Literature?* For Warren, Jim Crow means the "system of Jim Crow segregation" that once defined a "social world": "This social order, created by local and statewide laws, statutes, and policies, received constitutional sanction in 1896 with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*," and "it was finally dismantled, at least judicially and legally, in the 1950s and 1960s," specifically with the 1954 ruling by this court in *Brown v. Board of Education*, overturning *Plessy* (1–2). (A quick glance at the *MLA International Bibliography* shows that Warren's characterization of Jim Crow largely resembles what one finds in the latest literary scholarship.) Based on this standard definition in literary studies, I maintained that the genuine intellectualism of African American writers, even the notorious elitism of some of them, did not rob their literature of effectiveness in the formal (or state-sanctioned, electoral, and legal) realms of political action ("African American Literature"). A flexible cultural notion of political action shows not only that African American literature has long existed but also that it is a legitimate thing of the present and the foreseeable future, as long as its writers see themselves and act as agents of social change.

Now, I believe that the historiography of Jim Crow that Warren uses to launch *What Was African American Literature?* should have been as controversial as his resultant periodization of African American literary

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