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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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PMLA 128.2 (2013), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900122540 Published online by Cambridge University Press

history. Warren declares that African American literature "gained its coherence as an undertaking" during the fifty-eight years when blacks and whites could occupy only so-called separate-but-equal public spaces and facilities (1). And "with the legal demise of Jim Crow," he goes on to say, "the coherence of African American literature has been correspondingly, if sometimes imperceptibly, eroded as well" (2). Yet we should resist the constriction of Jim Crow to the first half of the twentieth century. Such a narrow periodization overstates the role that constitutional or juridical events have played in race relations, while restricting the political awareness and activities of African American writers to discourses of de jure racial segregation.

Encapsulating a spectrum of racial conflict and domination that stretches from well before 1896 to after 1954, Jim Crow demands paradigms of literary study attuned to an expansive historiography. Scholarly approaches to segregation's history, according to John David Smith, should focus on "differentiating between segregation by custom, habit, or practice (de facto segregation) and segregation by specific law (de jure segregation). Historians have frequently erred by focusing too narrowly—on de jure segregation only—thereby missing long-standing patterns of informal racial separation that have stained the fabric of interracial contact throughout American history" (7). Though *Jim Crow* was a term first used in 1841 to classify racially segregated railroad facilities in Massachusetts, it also "existed informally throughout much of the country's antebellum history" (10).

Literary studies of Jim Crow should strive for the flexible definition and periodization found in the scholarly work of Saidiya Hartman and Ivy G. Wilson on slavery and antebellum American literary and cultural production. Reconfiguring the antebellum political sphere, Hartman has shown that, while President Abraham Lincoln's executive order of 1 January 1863 may have formally emancipated slaves, a longer and more nuanced view of history would see that "emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection" (6). Writing literature qua literature, furthermore, did not necessarily depreciate or misguide African Americans' political ability to focus on and redress the vestiges of servitude and subjection—and, not unrelated, segregation—regardless of official emancipation. "If formal politics signal certain institutional practices such as electoral processes and policy making," Wilson claims, regarding the aesthetics of politics in antebellum America, "then a turn to culture as a particular arena where African Americans had varying levels of agency is all the more necessary in the years before they were ostensibly granted access to these structures with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment" (7). Such informed historiographies of slavery and freedom help put in perspective Warren's claim, ironically both an assertion and a potential concession "in the face of textual evidence," that African American literature of the antebellum period "was changed significantly by the necessity of confronting the constraints of the segregation era" (7). Smith, Hartman, and Wilson have suggested that the period between 1896 and 1954 likely was not so unique in this regard.

By the same token, Jim Crow or racial segregation emerges after this period by other names to signify circumstances of social constraint. "Since the nation's founding," as Michelle Alexander puts it in her study of the social control of mass incarceration, "African Americans have repeatedly been controlled through institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow, which appear to die, but are then reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the time" (21). Here again we have the information to critique Warren's secondary claim that "African American

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900122540 Published online by Cambridge University Press

literature itself constitutes a representational and rhetorical strategy within the domain of a literary practice responsive to conditions that, by and large, no longer obtain" (9). Since Alexander has shown that such conditions still obtain, one has to wonder whether during the first half of the twentieth century African Americans' enlistments of literature in the service of social change—or what Warren partly means by the literature's "coherence"—were so exceptional as to justify Warren's argument about the literature's subsequent demise. My bet is that these enlistments were not. Rather, African American writers across a *longue durée* persisted, through success and failure, in making an artistic and political impact on social attitudes and practices precisely because they recognized that Jim Crow, narrowly or broadly defined, was not the only kind of racism that afflicted the world.

Note

1. Warren drew "Does African-American Literature Exist?" from *What Was African American Literature?*, so I quote only from the book.

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When African American Literature Exists

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In making an important distinction in 1972 between Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, both of whom he appreciated, George E. Kent, of the University of Chicago, recognizes the artistic superiority of Ellison. Then Kent warns that the imaginative transformation of folk sources alone hardly suffices, for "the basic *attitudes* [spirit] and *forms of response to existence* are abandoned by us [African American critics] at our peril" (162; my italics; see also Miller, "Mirrored Reflection" 163). Who would have thought then that a later theorist at Chicago would envision the demise of African American literature within the next forty years? In serious reflection, I shall define African American literature as folk, or even sometimes highbrow, responses to a community's existence and as original and innovative idioms, forms, and aesthetics of particular yet "universal" import from 1773 (when Phillis Wheatley's *Poems* was published) to the present.

Yes, it may be true that, as Kenneth Warren maintains in *What Was African American Literature?*, African American literary tradition expressed a theme of racial protest

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PMLA 128.2 (2013), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900122540 Published online by Cambridge University Press