A Reply to My Critics

KENNETH W. WARREN

I do not expect to disarm criticism, an impossible ideal under any circumstances and one particularly out of place in a book that apprehends itself to be saying something new. Rather, I hope to remove grounds for misunderstanding, so that those who are driven to complain about what I have done will at least have an unobstructed view of their target.

—Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*

I wrote *What Was African American Literature?* with the hope of clarifying what the term *African American literature* could mean. What prompted the attempt was my sense that scholars have produced a range of often incompatible ways of defining our "object of study," as demonstrated by the welter of terms on display in these responses, which variously declare African American literature a genre, a canon, a set of tropes, a tradition, a shared affinity, and so on. This is not to say that scholarship on African American literature is particularly imprecise. Delimiting literatures is a difficult task, and scholars in most fields often play a little fast and loose with the terms they use to designate the body of texts they work on. Nonetheless, I've never subscribed to the idea that because imprecision prevails elsewhere in literary study, scholars of African American literature should let themselves off the hook in this regard. Of course, with greater precision comes the possibility of strong disagreement, which, if principled, is all to the good of the field.

No one disputes that over the first two-thirds of the twentieth century literary writing by African Americans and the pronouncements of black creative writers figured prominently in the political and social discussions of racial inequality. Nor would many dispute that black writing considered collectively has made its claim on our attention at least in part because the connection between literary production and the problem of black political subordination has seemed so obvious. As I note in the first chapter of my book, James Weldon Johnson opines "that there is not a single Negro writer who is not, at least secondarily, impelled by the desire to make his work have some effect on the white world for the good of his race" (qtd. in Warren 10). The sticking point for many of my readers, however, is my argument that absent the exclusion of the black population en masse from politics in the South beginning in the 1890s, also known as Jim Crow, and the resulting politics of racial appeal in which strategically positioned blacks (and whites) sought to represent and speak on behalf of the disfranchised black population, there would have been no imperative to consider black writing as a separate or distinct literature. To be sure, as I make clear in my book, had the Jim Crow regime been throttled in its fetid cradle, African American writers would nonetheless have produced compelling novels, plays, short stories, and other works, but the imperative to regard their work as a literature apart would likely not have emerged. African American literature was the historical relation of literary production by black writers (along with the reception of and commentary on these texts) to the social and political fact of black inequality that was codified by the legal regime of Jim Crow. That relation underwrote the presumption—and gave coherence to the claim—that despite the vast differences among black writers, in terms of what they wrote about, the forms they chose, the stylistic decisions they made, and so on, their work collectively constituted a literature. It was by virtue of this relation that events in the domain of literature—say, the selection of *Native Son* for the Book-of-the-Month Club, or the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize to Gwendolyn

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Brooks in 1950, or the decision of a major black writer to write about white rather than black characters—were, so to speak, automatically considered events in the struggle against constitutionally sanctioned Jim Crow.

Once you take in the notion that African American literature denotes a historical relation—that is, a literary period—you can see the irrelevance of objections that the argument of *What Was African American Literature?* is incomplete because it fails to devote sufficient attention to certain genres, forms, or groups of writers in that period. The writings of black poets and playwrights composed during the years of Jim Crow *all* count as African American literature. Indeed, *pace* Glenda R. Carpio, Zora Neale Hurston presents no problem for my argument because Hurston's complaints about the "sobbing school of Negrohood" and the like exemplify my point that even for authors who insisted on writing "without reference to the political or social status of the black race, . . . the mere insistence was an acknowledgment of the pressure" to write in behalf of their race (13). I chose texts that enabled me to illustrate my points efficiently; however, the argument would not have changed had I selected a different group of writers or texts because what make these texts African American literature are not textual properties they share but rather a politico-historical relation among them. For that reason *What Was African Literature?* neither prescribes nor proscribes the aspects of a text on which a critic ought to focus. Scholars are free to comment on a poem's joy or exuberance or the lack thereof. But my argument makes clear that it would be a mistake to declare that exuberance, joy, the blues, or some other property makes a text a work of African American literature.

My book, then, is not a demonstration of what makes African American texts literary. I assume the literariness of these texts and that any account of a text's literariness will in some way or another exceed the conditions that make it a work of African American literature. Literariness, after all, is not unique to African American literary texts. Rather, I seek to bring to the surface the historical relation that constitutes these literary texts collectively as African American literature. But this argument is not indifferent to aesthetic concerns, because it also reveals the aesthetic drama generated by the way that African American writers, in the face of a Jim Crow America, sought to rewrite political contingency into the necessity of tradition and culture, transform the imposed into the willed, assert the primacy of form over content, and whistle blithely past social restrictions and expectations. Of course, one can truly appreciate this drama only if one recognizes the distinct political and social pressures of the Jim Crow era.

The significance that I attach to the Jim Crow era has, however, generated a second set of complaints. Rafia Zafar, whose fine study *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature* largely confirms that before the late nineteenth century black writers considered themselves not writers of African American literature but contributors to American literature, nonetheless objects to the idea that literary production by black writers after Jim Crow does not count as African American literature and even to the idea that Jim Crow has ended. In the opinion of practically all the respondents here, Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* demonstrates that Jim Crow hasn't ended because so many black men have been victimized by mass incarceration and have lost their right to participate in politics as a result. Gene Andrew Jarrett also contends that recent historical scholarship, which has focused on practices of segregation in the antebellum North, renders dubious any claim that Jim Crow is a late-nineteenth-century phenomenon.

It's no surprise given the popularity of Alexander's thesis that her work is mentioned

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in relation to any argument about Jim Crow. What is surprising is how readily my critics have embraced her book as demonstrating that current carceral practices and policies constitute a new Jim Crow, when Alexander's own words are much less definitive (and sometimes contradictory). For example, she claims that her "book argues that mass incarceration is, *metaphorically*, the New Jim Crow" (emphasis mine) and that mass incarceration "functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow," "is analogous to Jim Crow," and frequently is "like Jim Crow." But she also cautions, "Those who claim that mass incarceration is 'just like' Jim Crow make a serious mistake" (11, 4, 60, 17, 197).

It is indeed a serious mistake. Put simply, Jim Crow was a caste system that emerged from the successful effort of southern white elites to reestablish class dominance in the South in the wake of the cross-racial insurgency that was Populism. This system certainly placed whites over blacks, but it also placed white landowners and capitalists over white labor. State-enforced and state-mandated, Jim Crow established the presumption of white domination and superiority as the norm governing all interracial social interactions in the South. It was partly for this reason that evidence of black achievement and excellence could appear destabilizing to the justifications of the regime as a whole. The challenge for those who use Alexander to fault my book for stipulating that the major court rulings, legislative acts, and policy changes from the 1950s through the end of the 1960s constitute the end of Jim Crow is to demonstrate how mass incarceration, which Alexander deems only to be very much like Jim Crow, sustains the same set of social and cultural relations that determined the role of literature under Jim Crow. It seems almost silly to point out that while the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Toni Morrison in 1993 was a literary event, it was not taken as an event in the legal struggle against mass incarceration, notwithstanding that one of the characters in *Beloved* is a victim of the convict-lease system. Merely claiming that literary writing by black Americans constitutes a literature does not align it with struggles against mass incarceration.

Another charge about the archive of my book misses the point as well. Sonnet Retman believes that had my discussion of recent works included "black women writers and queer writers of color" and "black feminist literary criticism and queer-of-color critique," I might have registered the "possibility of more-radical traditions and conceptions of African American literature that query past and present conditions of racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy." Nothing in my argument denies that some African American literary writings challenged patriarchy and capitalism or that current writers have mined these works for strategies and tropes to inform their own critiques. But to find in African American literature resources for contemporary political challenges is not to identify African American literature with those challenges.

Yet, given that, as Retman and Marlon B. Ross observe, myriad forms of affiliation, including those formed around the reading and writing of literature, exist among African Americans, why not simply allow that contemporary writing by black Americans is African American literature but in a new register? To see the problem in doing so, one needs to see that the term *African American* does not merely point to what we by habit or custom already "know" as African American but also seeks to perform a relation between the doings or expressions of some black Americans and the situation of black Americans in general (and sometimes even across time). Jim Crow established the conditions in which literature produced by black Americans could performatively be African American literature by making the production of literature matter in relation to the status and condition of black Americans as a

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whole. Today, however, the term performs in one direction only—invoking the idea of general race interest to lend prestige and gravitas to the doings and expressions of some black Americans in their various spheres of operation without producing reciprocal benefits for the larger constituency being invoked.

In this light, one can see the problem with Xiomara Santamarina's suggestion about how my book might address more fully "the question of how literature—any literature or any form of cultural production—could promote equality." After describing compellingly the anxieties provoked by my argument, Santamarina goes on to fault me for not responding to the "pressing need to adapt antiracism to present-day conditions." But antiracism already *is* the politics of the present. As Adolph Reed recently wrote in "The Limits of Anti-racism," we live "under a regime now that is capable simultaneously of including black people and Latinos, even celebrating that inclusion as a fulfillment of democracy, while excluding poor people without a whimper of opposition."

Retman strives to make this point in her response but doesn't register that the very idea of African American literature at present asserts the priority of fighting racial discrimination over other forms of inequality. As I point out in the conclusion of *What Was African American Literature?*, Michael Thomas's novel *Man Gone Down* (2007) wrestles with the problem of reconciling the knowledge that in terms of inequality "the only relevant divide was those who could afford to pay and those who could not" (122) with the knowledge that as a black man shopping in trendy Manhattan stores the novel's unnamed protagonist still gets "eyeballed like he doesn't belong" by whites who "lack the imagination to understand that [he likes] olive oil" as much as they do (101). The point is not that Thomas's protagonist can't lament at the same time that some people can't afford to buy olive oil at trendy Manhattan stores and that some of those who can afford to pay are discriminated against when they attempt to do so. We do have to see, however, that from the standpoint of antiracism, not being able to afford olive oil can be a problem only if your economic privation can be described as a form of racial discrimination. *Man Gone Down* shows that a novel that gets us to care about whether its protagonist can keep his mixed-race kids in their expensive private school and guarantee that they are treated well by their teachers and classmates can't easily align our sympathies simultaneously with the fact that we would strike a more fundamental blow for educational justice (one that would enormously benefit black and brown children) by abolishing private K–12 schooling altogether. The novel demonstrates brilliantly what Walter Benn Michaels has said in a discussion of a photograph by Jeff Wall: that while it's not a "logical requirement" that we choose "between fighting racism and fighting economic inequality," it is "a historical fact" that we have done so (183).

Thomas's novel is, among other things, a political critique. But it's difficult to see that its critique hangs on defining it as African American literature, as Santamarina would maintain. The question of whether *Man Gone Down* counts as African American literature is a matter for course syllabi, publishing-house marketers, and perhaps English departments that must choose between "contemporary American literature" and "contemporary African American literature" when advertising a job opening. The only constituency inconvenienced by a conclusion that Thomas's novel isn't African American literature is the cadre of writers, scholars, critics, and readers who want to insist that it is, which is another way of saying that their politics is merely an elite politics. To be sure, the politics of African American literature (like all literary politics) was elite-driven, but the politics of Jim Crow worked to secure literary activity to the political interests of nonelite

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blacks. This is not to say that African American literature was some sort of historical error or that African American writers should have made this literature differently. They made it in the only way that they could, by seeking to put literature in some relation to the interests of blacks generally. My contemporaries' mistake is their failure to realize that when they invoke terms like *folk* and *vernacular*, they are employing notions that as Adolph Reed and I have argued elsewhere "emerged within the patterns of elite discourse that evolved between the second half of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth" (viii).

While there are many creditable ways of teaching the texts that constitute African American literature (i.e., the literature published by black Americans from the late nineteenth century through the early 1970s), it would be a curricular deficiency if an English department offered no courses on this period that treated these works as African American literature because one cannot tell or even understand the history of American literature without telling the history of African American literature. By contrast, while it would likewise be a curricular deficiency if no courses in a department's contemporary literature offerings included works by African American writers, it is merely a matter of instructor discretion whether or not a department includes courses focusing solely on contemporary African American writers.

Anyone reading my book will see the falsity of Ross's charge that its argument "relies on the nineteenth-century Germanic notion of a 'distinct people'" and "reduce[s]" literature to "belles lettres," so no further comment on this is required. Ross is, however, right in saying that African American literature needs no defense from me. Asking what African American literature was does not attack it any more than asking what Victorian literature was attacks that literature. Nor does concluding that some works don't count as African American literature deprecate those works. To think so would be to view an argument that author X is not a Victorian but a Romantic writer as an insult to author X. Too many scholars treat African American literature as an honorific rather than as an analytic category, and instead of assuming the validity of the literature they study, they see their primary task as attesting to its prestige.

R. Baxter Miller's response does me the courtesy of mentioning several of my other works, although from his critique it's not clear that he understands them. My work as a whole has interrogated two of the major projects associated with African American literary scholarship. One is determining how best to account for the field's object of study. That, of course, is the goal of *What Was African American Literature?* The other is assessing how black-white racial difference has affected the production and the study of literature more broadly. This is what my first book, *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism*, took up. What appears to have gotten Miller's knickers in a knot is my first book's contention—which seems to me irrefutable—that pursuing this project thoroughly requires interrogating non–African Americanist literature, perhaps even, God help us, the works of Henry James. (One has to wonder how Miller feels about Toni Morrison's discussion of Ernest Hemingway and Willa Cather in *Playing in the Dark*.) If Miller and Ross are threatened by the questions I have asked, they must also be threatened by many of the writers they study for whom questioning the coherence, permanence, and efficacy of what they were doing as writers was not anathema but part of the challenge and thrill of being a writer of African American literature.

Note

My thanks go to Mark Seltzer for alerting me to the performative dimensions of my argument.

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Contributors

GLENDA R. CARPIO is professor of English and African and African American Studies at Harvard University. The author of *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (Oxford UP, 2008), she is writing a book on immigration, exile, and expatriation in contemporary American literature. She edited, with Werner Sollors, *African American Literary Studies: New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011).

GENE ANDREW JARRETT, chair of the Department of English at Boston University, is the author of *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (U of Pennsylvania P, 2007) and *Representing the Race: A New Political History of African American Literature* (New York UP, 2011) and the editor of several books of African American literature and literary criticism, including the two-volume *Wiley-Blackwell Anthology of African American Literature* (Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming 2014).

R. BAXTER MILLER, professor of English and African American studies at the University of Georgia, founded the MLA's Division on Black American Literature and Culture, which is indebted to Darwin T. Turner, who established the original discussion group. Of Miller's ten books, the most recent is *On the Ruins of Modernity: New Chicago Renaissance from Wright to Fair* (Common Ground, 2012).

SONNET RETMAN, associate professor of American ethnic studies at the University of Washington, Seattle, is the author of *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression* (Duke UP, 2011). She is working on a book about literary ethnographies of the color line in the 1940s.

MARLON B. ROSS, professor of English and African American studies at the University of Virginia, is the author of *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (New York UP, 2004).

XIOMARA SANTAMARINA teaches African American and United States literatures at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The author of *Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood* (U of North Carolina P, 2005) and editor of Eliza Potter's autobiography, *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life* (1859; U of North Carolina P, 2009), she is working on a book project entitled "Redefining African American Modernity."

KENNETH W. WARREN, Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of English at the University of Chicago, is the author of three monographs: *What Was African American Literature?* (Harvard UP, 2011), *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (U of Chicago P, 2003), and *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (U of Chicago P, 1993). With Adolph Reed, Jr., he edited *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought* (Paradigm, 2009) and, with Tess Chakkalakal, a forthcoming volume of essays, *Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs* (U of Georgia P).

RAFIA ZAFAR is professor of English, African and African American studies, and American culture studies at Washington University in St. Louis. Her publications include *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760–1870* (Columbia UP, 1997) and *Harlem Renaissance*, a two-volume anthology of novels from the 1920s and 1930s (Lib. of Amer., 2011). She also writes about the role of cooking and eating in American texts.

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