Theories and Methodologies

The End of English

JESSE ALEMÁN

For Doug, whose wit and sly smile stay with me.

W. E. B. Du Bois launched his opinion column in the January 1921 issue of *The Crisis*, the NAACP's official organ, with the following epigraph: "It's better to be Right than White." His commentary touted the plans for the second Pan African conference and answered a letter about economic thrift, explaining that "the capital which is today ruling the world is not the capital of the rich—it is the capital of the middle class and poor. The *control* of it is in the hands of the rich and that is the reason they *are* rich" ("Opinion" [1921] 101). He exposed the structural racism embedded in a survey launched by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, the questions of which implicitly blamed Blacks for recent race riots in St. Louis; Washington, DC; and Chicago. And in response to the 1920 presidential election of Warren Harding, Du Bois noted the power of the Black vote to rile southerners and turn the social tide by way of political appointments. "We must realize," Du Bois writes at the end of his column, "that this country is not a democracy; that it is an oligarchy ruled by the Rich and Powerful, and that the right to vote is the beginning and not the end of the dream of transferring to the masses of men the power now held by the few" (104).

Steered mainly by Du Bois's editorship, *The Crisis* formed the periodical bedrock of Black modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, providing social commentary and analysis of race-related events for a Black middle class in a multigenre venue that mixed image and text.[1] Not always in tow with the NAACP's national message, *The Crisis* often juxtaposed accounts of racial violence with stories of racial uplift, making it a vexed middle-elite publication attuned to widespread systemic racism and sensitive to African American successes,

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mainly by men. It "was animated by contradictions," Rachel Farebrother explains, and "contributors veered from radicalism to conservatism with regard to such matters as gender roles, aesthetics, and social reform" (124). In the wake of a flu pandemic, a presidential election, and the lingering tension of the 1919 race riots that swept the country, the January 1921 issue also proves to be an especially prescient piece of print culture for understanding the long-haul crises over race, governance, violence, and resistance in the United States.

In "Election Day in Florida," for example, Walter F. White reports on racial violence by the Ku Klux Klan and strategic disenfranchisement at the ballot box. "An unknown number of dead, men of property and standing forced to leave their homes and families under threat of death, thousands of qualified voters debarred from casting their ballots—these constitute a portion of the results of the elections of 1920 in the state of Florida" (106). Meanwhile, James Weldon Johnson, in his official dispatch as the NAACP's national secretary, describes the way legal structures buttress personal racial violence in the extradition of Thomas Ray Case, who left Georgia for Detroit after killing a white man in self-defense. Sheriffs raided Case's brother-in-law's house, arrested Case, and "sent in a riot call and surrounded the house with police and detectives" (116). Knowing that Case faced certain lynching in Georgia, the Detroit NAACP moved to stay extradition, only to be kicked around a kangaroo court backed by a racist governor whose rulings the NAACP had, at the time of the issue's printing, appealed to the Michigan Supreme Court.

For anyone who might have taken the time to read, teach, or study *The Crisis* in an English department or American literature classroom, the magazine shows that the past remains our present when it comes to race relations, a "rememory," as it were, made apparent in the issue's inclusion of Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman's "Margaret Garner: A True Romance." Printed between Du Bois's opinion piece and the NAACP report, the story—a revision of a version Wyman told and published in the late nineteenth century—recounts the trauma of a fugitive slave mother, Margaret Garner, who after capture cuts her daughter's throat rather than see them both returned to slavery. "As I think of the crouching figure she does not seem 'like a wild animal' but like an image of sublime motherhood," the narrator concludes, over sixty years before Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reshaped Garner's story into Sethe's horror (111).[2]

Indicative of the early volumes, especially during the 1920s, when Jessie Redmon Fauset served as the literary editor, the January 1921 issue demonstrates that literary production cannot be separated from social crises, that literature matters because of its social context. I would even venture to say that reading any issue of *The Crisis* published during its mid-twentieth-century run would teach students more about the problems of the color line than the smattering of anthologized selections of the same era students would encounter in an introductory literature class. However, for too long, *The Crisis*—and scores of similar forms of print production by, for, and about people of color—have remained on the outskirts of our discipline. Their marginalization is one of the main reasons why 2020 should bring English studies as we generally know and practice it to an end.

It's Better to Be Right Than White

The University of Chicago's English faculty has already rung the bell for English studies, not so much for their decision to focus their graduate admissions in the 2020–21 cycle on Black studies but for what the gesture painfully revealed to the public: literary studies in English departments is white studies. We've known and felt this fact for years, especially during the so-called culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, when pundits framed the rise of multiculturalism as an attack on the sweetness and light of Western civilization and its classics. This sustained advocacy for so-called Western values should, by now, sound its truth: it's always been khaki code for white supremacy. "English as a discipline has a long history of providing aesthetic rationalizations for colonization, exploitation, extraction, and anti-Blackness," the Chicago English faculty declared, and "our discipline is responsible for

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developing hierarchies of cultural production that have contributed directly to social and systemic determinations of whose lives matter and why" ("Department of English"). While the backlash was swift, including the requisite anxiety about Shakespeare's relevance to it all, the statement itself is not untrue—in fact, it's more of an adage than an intervention to many minority, postcolonial, and critical thinkers in the field who have long held that Anglocentric English studies should give up the ghost.[3]

We should all come to the position that our long-standing investments in the literary and cultural values of the standard English curriculum must go the same way as the Confederate and conquistador statues that are falling across the south and southwest. Stubborn with change, English departments are already living relics in curriculum, graduate preparation, and deep-rooted methods of New Critical textual analysis, but the last few years of racial upheaval, political plague, and a fast-moving health crisis that revealed the fissures of unequal economic power, limited health care, and tenuous access to the technology we all take for granted have urgently pressured English studies to show its social worth. And to my mind, as an academic field conveyed in the classroom to future teachers, lawyers, and professors, English in the United States is irrelevant if it's not confronting the questions of race, transformative justice, structural inequality, and the long legacies of coloniality that shape and define national cultures, traditions, and histories of literary production.

While many departments and universities posted solidarity or protest statements calling for social change, we must also be ready and willing to jettison the academic and intellectual structures that socialize students and scholars to disconnect literary study from the struggle for social equity and racial justice. This isn't exactly the same thing as understanding literature as propaganda, a familiar charge Du Bois faced in his 1926 call for a proactive "Negro art." Rather, as Du Bois explains it in the April 1920 issue of *The Crisis*, race is at the center of literature's "strong matter": "the material about us in the strange, heart-rending race tangle is rich beyond dream and only we can tell the tale and sing the song from the heart" ("Opinion: Negro Writers" 299). Put simply, literature's emergence from and engagement with social struggle is manifested in its creative use of language, experiments in form, and complicated plotlines that map the "race tangle" of a given text's historical moment. "Du Bois constituted distinct norms of African American culture and expression," Eric King Watts explains. He "argued that black culture makes available alternative epistemologies to American social knowledge. He also linked them to the potential for an American polity to genuinely deliberate on social justice" (187). As long as these "alternative epistemologies" remain on the periphery of our field, however, English literary studies will continue to reproduce an approach to literature that separates it from the matter of its formative social structures.

The problem isn't that our scholarship ignores race. After all, *The Crisis* has been the subject of sustained study (including in the pages of the *PMLA*). Rather, the everyday practices of English studies—its coverage curriculum, standard periodizations, milestones meant to affirm mastery of established field areas, and the insistence in our classes on the value of literature over other forms of cultural expression—keep intact a structural situation that curtails literature's social engagement and relevance for radical change when it's put in the hands of our students. For all its limitations regarding gender and class, *The Crisis* remains "A Record of the Darker Races" (as its early issues were subtitled) that archives Black critique and continues to make legible the everyday and systemic racial violence in the United States. It's the kind of reading that rarely makes its way into the literature classroom and is less often on the radar of anyone who doesn't study modernism, print culture, the Harlem Renaissance, or Black movements. Yet the complicated legacies of race, slavery, coloniality, and displacement demand from us that our discipline be more responsive and relevant to the conditions under which we live and teach, if not for us then for the students who continue to believe literature can make a difference.

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I say this with three degrees in English and more than twenty years in an English department. I loved literature. Some of my best friends were books. But the foundations of our discipline remain built on the ruins of cultural values that emerged from societies whose unequal social relations remain the scaffolding of our field. Even if we've added women and minority writers over the years, departments and their faculties remain ensconced in curricular literary categories or forms of literary learning that tend to limit our scopes of scholarship and teaching to the authors, aesthetics, or genres of the dominant culture we were trained to value.

Ethnic scholars, postcolonial thinkers, minority theorists, and radical labor historians in the United States have long pointed to the everyday practice of "race" (here underscored as a social construction) in literary and cultural artifacts. But the massive mobilization of people in response to police killings, systemic racism, and the onslaught of race-baiting and dog-whistle politics, to recall Ian Haney López's critique, demands that the humanities respond critically and dismantle their own investments in white cultural power. To be sure, part of the change occurs in our classrooms, with teaching and research methodologies that rewrite the literary norms of our field from the vantage points of people of color and other minoritized subjects, but we can only get to this point by rewriting our training in the field, by looking for the expressive cultures of people of color, and by facing the troubling possibility that our investments in our chosen fields of study might buttress the discipline's systemic racism. As Geraldine Heng describes the situation in medieval studies, "Critical race scholarship on premodernity analyzes the sources, institutions, infrastructures, practices, technologies, and dynamics of race and racialization, in order *critically* to assess their ethical, political, and epistemological consequences and impacts." Unfortunately, what should appear to many by now as Heng's critical common sense has instead ignited a veritable race war in one of the most venerated fields of our discipline. The end of English begins with us—we need to be less white to make the humanities right.

The Long Haul of History

COVID's long-term effects will not be understood for years, but its reverberations are already apparent in our remote classrooms, shrinking institutional budgets, and the now understandable choice of students to opt out of graduate education for caregiving or full-time work, or to protect their mental health from the trauma of it all. These aftereffects will be felt most by our vulnerable and minoritized students, who, even if they do scratch their way to campus, might rightly wonder about the usefulness of a curriculum that presumes the value of traditions that by and large don't value the lives and writings of people of color. "We are living in an age in which the humanities are devalued," Dolan Hubbard says in a piece that also draws on Du Bois to assess the state of the field, "one that places a damper on students selecting a major in the humanities in general and in English studies in particular. Pedagogically, we need to swim upstream and be more proactive in designing curricula in which minority students can see themselves" (41). So, ours has become a time for critically engaged methodologies and pedagogies that use literary studies specifically for antiracist ends. This goes beyond "the freedom to choose *one's own* scholarship," as Heng says about the choice of studying race. It's our responsibility to make literary studies critically responsive to the structures of power in our discipline and also to resituate the subject positions of students in our classrooms to face, challenge, and transform those structures of power.

The record of racial history in the early issues of *The Crisis* presages our present crises in a way that speaks to the speculative nature of literary production. We might even consider *The Crisis* as a dystopic form of Afrofuturism were it not for its insistence on social realism. In February 2020, for instance, the House passed the Emmitt Till Antilynching Act (H.R. 35) and sent it to the Senate with a margin of 410 to 4. In June, however, the Kentucky senator Rand Paul effectively stalled the passage of the act into law for characteristically vapid reasons, claiming that the bill took lynching too lightly. The act

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remains in limbo despite the sustained, overwhelming mobilizations of people in protest of the George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery killings, to name only a few of the victims of targeted racial violence. Paul added insult to injury by blocking the bill on the same day as a George Floyd memorial service (Smith). While the Senate's inaction on the act is frustrating in the light of our political climate, the antilynching bill has in fact been stalled for more than a century. Johnson notes in his January 1921 NAACP dispatch the importance of securing the votes to pass the 1918 antilynching law, which was stalled on the Senate floor by southern senators. In its "Crime" section, *The Crisis* recorded five lynchings in October and November 1920, and writing only six months before the Tulsa race massacre, Johnson predicts, "As long as no one is ever punished by the state for lynching, which has been the case for over thirty years of lynching in the South, so long lynching will continue. Today any white man of the South can kill any Negro with the perfect assurance that the state will never mete out punishment to him" (119).

If the study of English cannot lead us to realize the reality of this fact and guide students and scholars to change it, then the discipline has reached its end. After all, what good are movements and periodizations in the light of the long-haul systemic racial violence that persists relatively unchanged, and why are we so wedded to categories of literary history and value that often elide the expressive forms, genres, and archives of peoples of color? How do the institutions of anthologies, despite their best efforts, reinforce such structures of value through selections that affirm literary merit by removing pieces from their social context? And at what point do we let a traditional field go off the books rather than keep it on life support out of habit? These are the structural categories that fall largely within our reach to topple or change if we're brave or willing to do the work, because as *The Crisis* teaches us, the toxic history of race does not repeat, it remains.

Notes

1. I owe my access to *The Crisis* to the Modernist Journals Project, which has digitized the first twelve years of *The Crisis*: modjourn.org/journal/crisis/.

2. Wyman published a longer account of Margaret Garner's plight called "Black and White" in *New England Magazine* in 1892. For more on Wyman, see Rose.

3. For an account of the backlash, see Zahneis.

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