

# Assessing *What Was African American Literature?*; or, The State of the Field in the New Millennium

## Introduction

Melissa Asher Daniels and Gregory Laski

African American literature has ended. Or so claims Kenneth W. Warren, whose recent book *What Was African American Literature?* (2011) was the topic of conversation at a special session roundtable at the 2012 Modern Language Association convention in Seattle, Washington. Arguing that “the collective enterprise we now know as African American literature is of rather recent vintage” (1), Warren seeks to historicize, and in so doing, redefine what *was* for many a fine wine that kept getting better with time. In his account, African American literature emerged within and against the epoch of state-sanctioned racial segregation, bookended by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896 on the one end and the civil and voting rights acts of the 1960s on the other. Understanding the literary output of black Americans during this period as an “imaginative response” to both the “social and legal reality of segregation,” Warren contends that a paradox lay at the heart of this project: its very success necessitated its “obsolescence” (42, 18). Indeed, given that the formal structures of Jim Crow have been dismantled, Warren argues, African American literature can no longer be written.

With such an ambitious thesis at its center, *What Was African American Literature?* claims a place in the genealogy of critical works that aim to give coherent shape to the literary and cultural production of black Americans, from such foundational studies as Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988) and Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987) to more recent reassessments of the canon, such as John Ernest’s *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History* (2009) and Gene Andrew Jarrett’s *Representing the Race: A New Political History of African American Literature* (2011). But if Warren’s book shares with these studies an attention to what we might consider the constituent components of this critical genre—an interest in crafting a particular literary/historical narrative and accounting for the relationship between aesthetics and politics, for instance—it distinguishes itself not simply in the way it articulates a position on these themes, but in the very valence it assigns to the notion of an African American literary *tradition* in the process. Indeed Warren, in urging us to understand African American literature as a post-emancipation phenomenon that effectively ended with the legal demise of Jim Crow, issues no lament. To the contrary, he insists that because this literature was generated by a social and legal order that demanded cultural production by elites aimed at disproving notions of “black inferiority,” it is the product of a past that is best put “behind us” (18, 84).

*What Was African American Literature?* thus forces us to rethink some of our most deeply held assumptions about this tradition. Can Phillis Wheatley and Toni Morrison accurately be classified as African American writers? What conception of history, historical process, and temporality—linear, recursive, or generally chaotic—do we

bring to our readings of texts by and about black Americans? What value do the legacies of the Middle Passage, slavery, and Jim Crow have for the struggle to realize greater racial equality in the present? For that matter, how might the way we narrate literary history inflect discussions about race and politics in the public sphere?

The session treated Warren's book less as a postmortem on the field than as a symptom that African American literary studies has arrived at an impasse. Though at one time considered marginal, the discipline has achieved a prominent position in the academy, as indicated by the now-standard presence of black authors on college syllabi and reading lists, and the ubiquity of scholarly work on African American texts. And yet, other signs point to a less-promising future. The recent budget and enrollment crises confronting some black studies programs, the neoliberal investment in colorblindness, and the allure of the "post-racial" make the field's ostensibly secure position appear now to be tenuous.

With these factors in mind, we assembled a diverse group of scholars working in African American literary studies, broadly construed, to analyze this critical juncture. In short position papers, each speaker explored a particular aspect of Warren's thesis and its implications from a different interpretive or methodological perspective. Warren then offered a response. Though all of the presenters, as well as Warren, have revised their statements in preparation for this print forum, the essays featured here do not differ radically in length, tone, or content from the pieces delivered in January 2012. In this regard, we think, they capture the spirit of that exchange.

The first three papers examine how questions of history and time influence both the critic's and artist's relationship to craft. Adam Bradley warns against conceptualizing the African American literary tradition in a way that emphasizes historical, social, and political contexts at the expense of considerations of form, technique, and artistry—the "aesthetic freedom" that black writers have always possessed, even during Jim Crow. If Bradley encourages us to recognize the "unity and diversity" that characterized the cultural production of black Americans in the past as it does in the present, John Ernest seeks to understand the best way for critics to describe this phenomenon. Ernest suggests that the most important question that Warren poses to scholars may not come in the form of his contention about the "outdated ideological baggage" associated with the designation "African American literature," but in the largely linear and chronological vision of historical process that informs the book's treatment of "collective identity." Even as he favors a more chaotic historical model that can account for the ways in which it still makes sense to invoke the notion of an "African American church" or an "African American community," Ernest notes that he shares with Warren a commitment to "getting literary history right," a commitment that he sees as central to the project of African American literature more generally. Bringing the tools of performance studies as well as a more contemporary archive to the conversation, Soyica Diggs Colbert uses the work of a group of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century writers to complicate Warren's idea that African American literature of the Jim Crow era was "prospective," whereas post-civil rights authors take a more "retrospective" stance, turning to the past for inspiration. In the writings of Toni Morrison, August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, and others, Colbert does not find a straightforward backward-looking posture but a "multi-temporal focus," or what she terms a practice of "[m]obilizing . . . setting the lessons of the past in motion through future-oriented action."

Russ Castronovo and Sharon P. Holland move the discussion beyond the domain of African American literary studies, as narrowly construed. In his reflection, Castronovo uses the metaphor of travel to explore how Warren's book might influence conversations about race and ethnicity both within and beyond the academy. Noting the attention that *What Was African American Literature?* has already garnered in several public forums, Castronovo wonders how a declaration about the end of this literary tradition might be received "in places, not where ethnic studies has succeeded,

but where it is still fighting for a toehold.” Asking whether it would be possible to make a similar observation about Asian American literature, he underscores the difficulty in determining the impact that always-shifting forms of state and legal power have on the racialized subject, not to mention the many “motivations that inspire literary undertakings.” In her comment, Holland similarly inquires into the subject that African American literature purports to represent, arguing that this “literature cares not for the black female body as much as it cares deeply for the preservation of its iconographic wholeness—a unity completed in the embodied presence of a signifying maleness through which the call-and-response to black community can be absorbed and understood by a wider body politic.” If we are to leave the “was” about which Warren writes behind, Holland asks, might we also use this occasion to imagine a more expansive sense of our humanity, one that exceeds the terms of race?

As this précis suggests, the panelists covered significant intellectual ground, posing searching questions about the influence of state and juridical power on subjectivity, the nature of historical process, and the relation between race and representation, even if the panel’s time constraints did not allow the fuller development of their positions. Equally evocative, but more difficult to reproduce here, was the open discussion that followed Warren’s response to the panelists. From the audience of roughly two hundred—a standing-room-only crowd—a number of stimulating queries and comments emerged, both about the book’s thesis and its implications for the field and the profession more broadly.

For instance, one participant wondered about the emphasis the book places on the law, asking whether a consideration of “material conditions on the ground” should also inform our thinking about the complicated interplay between aesthetics and politics. While Warren agreed that we should understand Jim Crow both as a form of legal power and as a set of practices, Castronovo took a slightly different approach to the notion of “material conditions.” For him, it is important to consider not simply the sociopolitical circumstances that produced African American literature, but also those that generated *What Was African American Literature?*. That the book appears in a moment in which Barack Obama occupies the White House, and that it originates from a particular type of institution—a four-year private university in an urban setting—are not insignificant material contexts. Another audience member worried that for all the attention that Warren’s study devotes to the political instrumentality of African American literature, it overlooks other, no less crucial ends of black cultural production. The ways in which African American writing serves as a mode of “self-affirmation,” or even simply as the record of “lived experience,” must also be considered as central to this literary tradition.

Other questions took up the professional and pedagogical dimensions of Warren’s thesis. For example, one attendee suggested that we think about the implications of *What Was African American Literature?* for academic training. If the book signals a kind of paradigm shift that in a sense functions to differentiate a generation of more senior scholars from a younger cohort, then how do critics and teachers trained on the older model go about “authorizing” and “nurturing” this “new body of work”? In this regard, Holland pointed out that Warren’s book provides us with an occasion to reflect on the history of the field and in so doing to consider anew our collective work as scholars and teachers—that is, to meditate on just what we mean when we say, “this is what it is” and “this is what it ought to do.”

The session concluded with an incisive comment that functioned at once as a sort of summa of the conversation and an illuminating guide for how we might continue the discussion going forward. Acknowledging the anxiety surrounding the title of Warren’s book, this participant perceptively noted the general tendency to emphasize the “was” when we pronounce *What Was African American Literature?* But what if we modified our inflection, both literally and metacritically, accenting not the verb’s past tense, but other parts of the title—or none at all—and simply ask: “What was African

American literature?” Such a shift in emphasis might ultimately enable us to see Warren’s book not as an attempt to “erase” the tradition, but rather to “elasticize” it.

Approached thus, *What Was African American Literature?*—and the conversation it has ignited—might afford us as scholars, teachers, and readers of this tradition the vital opportunity to reflect on the state of African American literary studies in this new millennium, a moment in which we would do well to ask: just where are we, and where do we go from here? It was this question that drove us to organize the roundtable. We hope very much that our attempt to translate it into print here will serve to provoke both additional reflection and further dialogue.

## Our Mayan Prophecy

*Adam Bradley*

I don’t know if you’ve heard the news, but the world is going to end later on this year.

For decades now, mystics and New Age-types have been telling us that the Mayan calendar prophesizes human extinction on December 21, 2012. I point this out not just to underscore the futility of holding a literature conference at the edge of the apocalypse, but also because I sense a similar—though admittedly more isolated—atmosphere of cataclysm surrounding Ken’s book.

*What Was African American Literature?* That simple question and its verb tense would seem to spell the extinction of our very field. All of those years in graduate school, all of those survey courses taught, all of those refereed articles submitted, all of those MLA conferences attended, all in the name of something that no longer exists. It’s not too much to say that Ken’s book is our Mayan prophecy, letting us know that our time might just be up.

But like the Mayan calendar, Ken’s book has often been misread. If you consult experts in Mayan script or if you happen to watch a documentary on the History Channel one Sunday afternoon, you’ll learn that the Mayans were not predicting our extinction but rather our transformation, perhaps even our elevation of consciousness.

So too with Ken’s book. Its provocative title incites a frenzied response that the substance of his argument does not merit. This is its problem, but also its power. Had Ken chosen another title—say, *What Was Negro Literature?*, as he had once considered—I doubt the book would have caused such a stir. I also doubt it would have the potential to affect the field in the way that I believe it does. I like to imagine Ken, maybe along with some ancient Mayan friends, having a good chuckle at our histrionics, knowing it’s all part of the plan.

No, *What Was African American Literature?* is no extinction narrative. Instead, I read Ken’s book as a kind of ritual cleansing of our literary past, a rebirth, and an opportunity to conceive of new ways of reading and teaching African American literature today. In that sense, the book—in keeping with the black folk tradition—is a call in need of a response. This is my response.

Reading Ken’s book has convinced me of many things, but it has *not* convinced me to stop using the term “African American literature” to describe the writings of black Americans, both past and present. I revel in studying a body of literature that spans the distance between Phillis Wheatley and Elizabeth Alexander—or better yet, from Phillis Wheatley through Elizabeth Alexander to Lauryn Hill. These artists are united by race and nation, yes, but also by form and subject matter. Equally defining are their obvious divergences. African American literature relies upon both this unity and this diversity to find its shape.