

## **The Past, Present, and Future of African American Literary History**

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**Abstract:**

At a time when the project of literary history is eyed with increasing suspicion, two recent publications expand and complicate discussions of what constitutes the canon of African American literature: With their Cambridge History of African American Literature, Maryemma Graham and Jerry Ward have edited an impressive, comprehensive survey that will no doubt impact further discussions on the development of African American literature in the early 21st century. While its chapters offer a multiperspective view that defies any single narrative to explain 'AfAm Lit', Kenneth Warren, by asking the polemical question of What Was African American Literature?, tells quite a revisionary story: African American literature, Warren claims, was first and foremost a "representational and rhetorical strategy" (p. 9) in response to the social reality of the Jim Crow era, and therefore no longer exists. Particularly in conjunction with each other, these two publications might represent a crucial moment in African American literary studies, as many of the well-established theoretical and ideological frameworks are being renegotiated.

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## The Past, Present, and Future of African American Literary History

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Kenneth Warren: *What Was African American Literature?* Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2011. 180 pp. Hardcover, €18.99. ISBN: 978-0674049222

Maryemma Graham; Jerry W. Ward (eds.): *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 847 + xi pp., hardcover, €119.99. ISBN: 978-0521872171

As late as 1997, the publication of the first edition of the Norton Anthology of African American Literature (eds. Henry Louis Gates & Nellie McKay) marked a milestone in African American literary history. This anthology, in many ways a direct result of the so-called canon wars of the 1980s, was a major contribution to the formation of an African American canon during a time when the very value of literary history was put into question by many literary scholars, especially in the wake of poststructuralist theory. For African Americans (and other ethnic groups in the US), however, the theoretical implications of such discussions were only of secondary importance, because, as the editors note in the second edition of 2003, "the scholars of our literary tradition needed first to construct a canon before it could be deconstructed!" (Gates et al. 2003: xxx)

A decade and a half later, African American literary scholars are still navigating this tension between canon formation and a critical reevaluation of the theoretical underpinnings of any attempt at writing literary history (see also the special issue of *American Studies* on "African American Literary Studies: New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges", Issue 55.4, 2010). In 2011, two publications were especially important for expanding and complicating these discussions: Maryemma Graham and Jerry Ward's *Cambridge History of African American Literature* (CHAAL) provides a voluminous and complex survey of African American literature that nicely accompanies literary collections like the Norton Anthology, while Kenneth W. Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* challenges established notions and foundations of what defines this genre in the first place.

In their introduction, Graham and Ward commence with the obligatory disclaimer that in the "problematic nowness of the twenty-first century" (p. 16), that is due to the diverse epistemic ruptures of the past few decades, literary histories have become, if not an impossibility, then at least an ever-unfinished "work in progress" (p. 1). Notwithstanding these predicaments, the goal of the impressive volume is to present a "complete chronological description" (p. 2) of

African American literature from the 17th to the 21st century, including written and oral literature (or 'orature') alike. For this purpose, the editors draw on a host of prior studies that serve to provide "explanatory narratives" (p. 5) for the vast body of texts subsumed under the label 'AfAm Lit' and thus help to structure their own approach, which is to "highlight moral, political, and aesthetic concerns of texts with varying degrees of emphasis" (p. 7). And although they locate the origins of that literature on the African, and not the North American continent, the experience of American slavery remains the hinge of this narrative: "Had Africans from various ethnic groups not come into contact by virtue of their removal from Africa and relocation to the far distant lands of the Americas, it seems unlikely that our currently recognizable deep structures of black literature [...] would have ever evolved." (p. 4)

Divided into three large sections, the individual chapters provide an excellent survey of the respective periods and genres with which they deal. In eleven chapters, the first part charts the emergence and development of African American history from its origins to 1900. The second part consists of twelve chapters which cover the literature of the 20th century. In the third part, finally, five chapters "reflect upon the operations of literature in the marketplace and forms of scholarly practice" (p. 14) and thus serve "as a corrective to conventional literary histories" (ibid.).

While most of the chapters have a rather broad scope, either tracing certain historical developments across generic boundaries or focusing on one particular genre, a few chapters also highlight one or two authors that are representative of certain shifts and tendencies (see especially Leonard and Elam). The shifting emphasis on aesthetic, political, and contextual aspects creates certain historical and thematic overlappings among the individual chapters, but this has no negative effect on the volume as a whole. However, given the fact that many chapters deal with the same authors and texts, the reader would have profited from more cross-references. These are not only very sparse in the volume; sometimes, they are even strangely misleading. For example, chapter 12 refers to chapter 7 (Joycelyn Moody) regarding the concept of 'masking'; Moody, however, doesn't even mention the words 'mask' or 'masking' (let alone the theory or concept) in her essay on independent antebellum literature. Other such red herrings can be found on pages 347, 363, and 741.

Despite such editorial slips, CHAAL is a very timely contribution to the project of literary history in the 21st century and an invaluable resource for both scholars and students of African American literature. All of the individual chapters offer extremely rich and insightful discussions of many well-known and lesser-known authors and works in their social, historical, political, and aesthetic contexts.

The volume is most intriguing, however, when it questions established trajectories of the history of what we have come to call 'African American literature' and sets out to redefine this vast and problematic label (especially, of course, in the chapters of the third part, but also, for instance, in Moody, Broeck, and Dubey/Goldberg). Probably rather involuntarily, the collection as a whole also brings into sharp focus the generic centers (autobiography, novels, poetry) and margins (e.g. drama, short story) of current African American literary scholarship. Moreover, it is representative of the transnational/transatlantic turn in (African) American studies

that questions the national(ist) narrative that has dominated in African American literary history for many decades (see especially the chapters by Carretta, Wheelock, Werner/Shannon, Cumber Dance, and Warren).

As mentioned above, the project of African American literary history is still a work in progress, or even, as the editors of CHAAL note, "a post-future project" (p. 16). It is certainly no coincidence, therefore, that Kenneth Warren's chapter on "African American literatures [note the plural!] and New World cultures" concludes the volume. Warren takes Georges Schuyler's acerbic 1926 essay *The Negro-Art Hokum* as his starting point and asks: Is African American literature a distinct (or particular) body of literature? And if so, what is the common ground of that literature? In his chapter, Warren outlines the "literary and scholarly projects that have arisen out of the debate about black cultural and linguistic distinctiveness" (p. 732), focusing particularly on Pan-Africanist notions and vernacular theories. For Warren, the discussion of an alleged particularity has been central to the project of African American literature and literary criticism, yet this particularity seems to erode at the historical moment when the social circumstances of literary production for African Americans change: "if racial inequality constitutes the basis of black difference, then the end of inequality, which is presumably something we would all welcome, would also portend the end of any significant cultural work for African American literature, as a collective enterprise, to perform." (p. 743)

In a much more pronounced way, this is also the central argument of Warren's controversial monograph *What Was African American Literature?*, a book that is based on his 2007 Du Bois Lectures at Harvard. Its title being an allusion to Leslie Fiedler's polemic *What Was Literature?* (1982), Warren's rich and densely argued book radically challenges existing definitions and historical parameters of African American literature. Refuting those definitions that center on the "prolonged engagement with the problem of slavery" (p. 2) as the common denominator, he claims that 'AfAm Lit' is inextricably interlinked with the social reality of the Jim Crow era and thus a phenomenon of the past, and "not a transhistorical entity" (p. 9): "The key fact is that black literature's collective social and political relevance was a function of Jim Crow and the fight against it." (p. 110)

From this vantage point, African American literature has rather clear historical coordinates, beginning with the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896). For Warren, it is therefore a "postemancipation phenomenon" (p. 1) that ended with the "legal demise of Jim Crow" (p. 2). With the social-historical coordinates so radically altered, literary works produced by African Americans before and after legal segregation also call for a different framework and nominator, Warren argues. He identifies especially the "turn to diasporic, transatlantic, global and other frames" (p. 8) as evidence that the distinctiveness of African American literature has eroded.

The book's argument comes in three portions. In chapter 1 ("Historicizing African American Literature"), Warren draws upon such writers as Du Bois, Richard Wright, and, most importantly, George Schuyler and his satire *Black No More* to substantiate his claim that African American literature was a direct response to Jim Crow segregation. More precisely, he argues

that black writers regarded literature either as a political instrument in the struggle against racial segregation and inequity, or as an index of "racial progress, integrity, or ability" (p. 10). Chapter 2 ("Particularity and the Problem of Interpretation") dwells on an idea that is very prominent in African American literary history, namely that literature produced by blacks is, or should be, particular in some sense or another and thus constitutes a self-contained category. Warren argues that the history of African American literature in the 20th century is marked by a tendency for criticizing and disparaging earlier achievements, "all in service of a progressive narrative of a literature moving toward maturity" (p. 68).

Chapter 3 ("The Future of the Past") tackles "the question of our responsibility to the past" (p. 82). Discussing several recent academic publications like Ian Baucom's study *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (2005) and Nikhil Singh's *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (2004) as well as court decisions (especially the 'Michigan cases' of 2003) and literary works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*, Warren asks whether the current constitutional 'color blindness' may not turn out to be "a kind of blindness to the presentness of the past, a refusal to see that people can still be victimized by the past, and that the past can be victimized by the present" (p. 86). Emphasizing contemporary novels' preoccupation with history and memory as constitutive of collective identity, Warren suggests that "literature of identity, rather than African American literature, names the writing of the present moment" (p. 107). In this chapter, Warren also addresses the question of whether popular, mass-market black fiction should be dismissed as smut (as a recent essay in the *New York Times* by Nick Chiles suggests) or lauded as a sign for a really independent, market-driven black literature which no longer pines for white acknowledgment. In the conclusion, Warren then explores the developments of the so-called New Black Aesthetic, i.e. writing by authors like Trey Ellis, Paul Beatty or Michael Thomas, and their relationship to earlier paradigms in African American literary history.

Particularly in combination with, and contrast to, a state-of-the-art literary history like Graham and Ward's *CHAAL*, Kenneth Warren's monograph poses a tough challenge for a field that still has to navigate and renegotiate its key coordinates. In more than one respect, *What Was African American Literature?* is not an easy book: As Warren interlaces historical, aesthetic, economic, and political discussions with questions of collective identity and group solidarity, his complex narrative demands a lot from its readers. It remains to be seen whether or not its redefinition of the socio-historical framework of African American literature will reach a consensus among literary historians. Yet, the book surely succeeds in producing "greater clarity around an area of cultural activity with the hope of helping us understand better where we are and how we got here" (p. 148).

And as both publications discussed in this review demonstrate, the 'problematic nowness' in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the 21st century creates an interesting past and future for the project of African American literary history.