

## Black Lives Matter: Teaching African American Literature and the Struggle

**Jeffrey Gross**  
*Christian Brothers University*

Perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and nothing about his world is meant to be. So you must wake up every morning knowing that no promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 71

He winked. His eyes twinkled. “All right, forget what I’ve said. But for God’s sake, learn to look beneath the surface,” he said. “Come out of the fog, young man. And remember you don’t have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don’t believe in it—that much you owe yourself.”

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 153

Kenneth Warren’s 2011 *What Was African American Literature?* was a lightning rod for the field of African American literature. Warren’s book incited dozens of published responses, including the proceedings of a roundtable at the 2012 MLA Convention in a room filled to standing-room only capacity. As his title suggests, Warren poses crucial questions about African American literature as a cohesive field of study. He asserts African American literature’s *was*—its pastness—by suggesting that African American literature as a cohesive category “has been correspondingly, if sometimes perceptibly, eroded” alongside the “legal demise of Jim Crow” (2). Warren argues that we have, since the dismantling of legal segregation in the 1960s, moved to something that comes after African American literature: “African American literature as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end, and that the turn to diasporic, transatlantic, global, and

other frames indicates a dim awareness that the boundary creating this distinctiveness has eroded” (8). For Warren, African American literature’s coherence came from its response to Jim Crow racism, as writers “sought to build support for a racial project by giving their readers a glimpse of the emptiness, or at least the insufficiency, of dominant white American ideals” (22). In perhaps the most often cited passage of his book, Warren argues, “it is my contention here that to understand both past and present, we have to put the past behind us” (84).

I do not wish to prolong my response to Warren’s book, at least in relation to the way he historicizes African American Literature as a distinct field of study and literary criticism. Responses from well-known scholars filled the Winter 2011 issue of *African American Review* and, in 2013, *PMLA*.<sup>1</sup> These responses, of course, add to the range of reviews Warren’s book received—from praise for how he historicizes African American literature to complaints about the historical, categorical, and methodological limits he puts on literary productions by African American writers. Warren challenges us to think about *what was* or *what is* African American literature as a category for literary production and criticism. His book asks important questions about how we classify African American artistic production. Scholars who agree and disagree with Warren must be more precise in their definitions of African American literature, particularly about what *is* and what *is not* part of that literary tradition. Here, I aim to reframe the conversation toward an exploration of African American literature as a pedagogical area. How do the ways we frame African American literature shape the way we teach it?

In considering African American literature as a teaching subject and a focus of critical pedagogy, I aim to examine what African American literature *is* or *needs to be* in the university classroom. In locating African American literature as a teaching subject, I am particularly

interested in the undergraduate course as a site of exchange between students and professors and as a space for cultivating links between literature and the real world. To some degree, all literature courses have to deal with this link between literature and the world, but our present moment demands that we think particularly about the African American literature course as a site of social engagement with U.S. racial conflicts. How do we teach African American literature? Or, more precisely, how do we teach African American literature in the age of mass incarceration? How do we teach it in the age of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Laquan McDonald, Sandra Bland, and so many other victims of state and non-state violence? How do we teach African American literature in the era of voter ID laws and the rollback of the Voting Rights Act of 1965? How do we teach it in an era of mass incarceration and for-profit prisons? How do we teach it as our universities are privatized and remade within the model of neoliberalism? How do we teach it when conservative politicians and organizations attack anything they deem “political” in college curriculums? How do we teach it in an era when academic freedom and tenure, hallmarks of critical inquiry, are weakened by state legislatures and boards of trustees? How do we make our African American literature courses both relevant in relation to the current state of the field but also useful for introducing students both to critical race theory and the realities of systemic racism in the world into which they will graduate? How do we make sure these courses remain literature courses, in the midst of these important broader questions? Indeed, the way we frame our courses in African American literature are pressured by a number of outside factors, but we also have the opportunity to help students understand the broader racial divide in U.S. society. Of course, one paper cannot address each of these questions, but the number of important questions demands consideration.

In theorizing how we should pedagogically approach African American literature, especially in courses for undergraduates, I argue that we have to move away from questions of what *was* or even what *is* African American literature and, instead, find ways to teach African American literature in both its historical contexts—artistic and political—and its contemporary resonances. We can embrace the ways the field and each piece of literature simultaneously *was* and *is*. Importantly, we can think about what both African American literature and the course on this literature *need to be* in ways that focus on past, present, and future. For students, African American literature can be a living voice in a broader trajectory of civil and social death, *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination, and the struggle for social justice.<sup>2</sup> Our current moment demands it, and the persistence of the Black Lives Matter movement—from its origins in the wake of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown’s deaths into the early stages of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaigns—warrants, or perhaps even necessitates, a pedagogy that positions African American literature courses as spaces on campuses where the vulnerabilities of and violent acts against black lives can be discussed. In this paper, I am particularly interested in examining both the praxis of teaching African American literature as part of a cultural and civic literacy program for our students and then in examining the larger stakes of our moment, both for racism in the United States and the role of literature courses of programs.

## **The Course, Texts, and Logistics**

At many U.S. university campuses, undergraduate African American literature courses draw a range of students, from African American students who know all too well the

pervasiveness of systemic racism from their lived experiences to some white students who, through ignorance and curricular design, whole-heartedly believe that racism is an artifact of the past. They arrive at college confident that they live in a post-racial society. Moreover, even at a campus such as mine that has a student body that is 43% minority, students have limited opportunities to learn African American literature, history, theology, and theory; these subjects remain underrepresented in the curriculum.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, any of these courses represent the limited options students have for learning to discuss race critically during their undergraduate experience. Teaching in the immediate aftermath of Michael Brown's death and during the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement during the fall 2014 semester, I felt the urgency to foster this dialogue and to foreground that as an objective in my course.

In May 2014, when I ordered books for my African American Literature course, which I subtitled "The Race Line in the African American Novel," I selected Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) as the first novel we would read during the semester.<sup>4</sup> As prescient a choice as Chesnutt's novel that fictionalized the race violence in 1898 Wilmington, North Carolina, seems, it is perhaps more a commentary of our time that a novel in which the media incites a race riot for which it blames African Americans would serve as the ideal novel through which to begin a conversation about protests against police violence in Ferguson, Missouri. In addition to Chesnutt's novel, the course included W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), and Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001). Moreover, I assigned Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* and various responses to it as well as Coates's "The Case for Reparations," the June 2014 article in *The Atlantic*

*Monthly* that outlined the moral debts that shape our current moment.<sup>5</sup> Although focused on a discussion about reparations, Coates's conclusion in that article serves as model, too, for what a course in African American literature can do. Discussing whether a dollar amount of reparations could be calculated, Coates suggests the dialogue on the topic would be most significant:

But I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as—if not more than—the specific answers that might be produced. An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future. (71)

Together, the literature covered in the course would not allow students to look away. The course description from the syllabus is below.

Significantly, the final questions in the course description ([Fig. 1](#)) I posed about the need for African American Literature in 2014 came to define the course as we watched and discussed the unfolding protests and lack of grand jury indictments against the officers involved in the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Current events became a text in the course, especially with the November 24 Grand Jury decision not to indict Darren Wilson in the death of Michael Brown and the December 3 Grand Jury decision not to indict Daniel Pantaleo in the death of Eric Garner occurring during the fall 2014 semester. While responding, in real time, to these ongoing events required an incredible amount of flexibility on my part, especially as I was increasingly saddened by events, it also allowed me to teach the sort of course I had intended, one that foregrounded the need for a thoughtful and informed dialogue about race in the United States. The course positioned literature as both part of this ongoing dialogue and as an impetus to have

this conversation. Students had to see the literature as art that is simultaneously and always both aesthetic and political and as part of a broader social discourse.

### **African American Literature - The Race Line in the African American Novel**

Our study of African American literature will explore major novels from a 100-year period, moving from Charles Chesnutt's Jim Crow-era *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) to Percival Everett's *Erasure*, a 2001 novel that questions the meaning of "African American" literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Together, the novels we will study explore the meaning and perseverance of the race line in the United States, looking at structures and effects of racism. Contextually, the novels demand that we consider major social, cultural, political, and historical contexts, including, among others, Jim Crow racism, the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement, the Civil Rights movement, the New Jim Crow. Through reading major authors such as Chesnutt, Nella Larsen, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Everett, we will explore the artistic, social, and political roles of African American literature, especially the ways it questions and challenges racialized ideologies. W.E.B. DuBois's work offers another foundation for our study; *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) outlined the major artistic and social struggles faced by African American thinkers. DuBois's work shaped critical race theory, making it foundational for how race is theorized and studied today.

Our exploration will be informed by Kenneth Warren's 2012 *What Was African American Literature?* and other scholars' responses to Warren. Does Warren's argument that African-American Literature was limited to responses to Jim Crow hold up? Ultimately, we want to think about the following questions: what, in 2014, is African-American Literature? What should it be? What artistic and political work does it need to do? In your projects, you will be invited to explore the meaning of and need for African American literature today.

[Fig. 1:](#) Course Description: ENG 361 – African American Literature

Course discussions focused on close readings of texts, historical overviews and discussions, intertextual connections between assigned works, critical and theoretical approaches, and opportunities to reflect on current news and events. Student presentations expanded on the historical contexts for each work, and some response paper prompts invited students to think carefully about relationship between the literary texts and our current moment.

Each student was required to complete one in-class presentation, at least five response papers, and a final term project. The following sections of the paper think through the lessons, both theoretical and practical, to come out of this teaching experience.

## **Lesson 1: What is Obvious to Us is Not Obvious to Our Students**

In the classroom, what would it mean to follow Warren’s directive to “put the past behind us”? (84). For students, I would argue—and I do not think Warren would necessarily disagree—that we have to start with the past and to establish the history of African American literary production and the contexts of struggle. Never knowing the past is different from putting it behind us. Pedagogically, we do need a label for these courses, and African American literature remains useful and recognizable as a category for a course that examines white supremacy and racism in the U.S. in the contexts of African American culture and literary production. However, we also have to think about what this label means in relation to today’s pedagogical demands. Responding to Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?*, Glenda Carpio argues that scholars pay too much attention to the politics of African American literature and, as a result, too little attention to the art of the literature itself. Carpio hopes that Warren’s book “will challenge scholars to rethink the conventional, empty goal of pointing to the obvious as if it were a revelation—mainly, that racism persists and that we should look to the history of racial trauma to discover why” (386). She adds that she believes too often scholars take these approaches due to their, in Warren’s words, “commitments to social justice” and she urges scholars to resist politically divisive methodologies and to focus, instead, on the fiction and “the power of fiction

in shaping the world” (386, 87). Carpio’s final caution against focusing on the political goals and political unity of African American literature may be even more important for pedagogy than it is for literary criticism.<sup>6</sup> We must be careful to avoid politicizing the classroom and to ensure that inquiry and dialogue in the course do not force a certain set of beliefs. At the same time, we must be aware that failing to expose and interrogate a political context is also a political act and a potentially divisive act. Not teaching African American literature is politically divisive as an act of omission, an erasure of voices from the plurality of the literary sphere. To deny students the opportunity to discuss context is to eliminate the significance of the literature. Chesnut’s *The Marrow of Tradition* invites discussion of mediated images of blackness. Warren, too, recognizes the significance for connecting the study of literature with social justice concerns: “To be sure, there is nothing wrong with investing in the idea that the writing of literature and literary criticism and history might in some way promote social justice” (148).

My ongoing research on legal personhood and democracy forces me to resist Carpio’s advice to avoid positioning social justice, politics, and history alongside the artistic power of literature. The African American experience is shaped by political domination, systematic oppression, and violence against the body. Coates makes this point in a direct manner to his son and, more importantly, to his implied (white) audience in *Between the World and Me*: “Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is *heritage*” (103). I suggest the implied audience is white because a black audience already understands this American tradition. Novels such as *The Marrow of Tradition* or Ellison’s *Invisible Man* represent artistic responses to these experiences of oppression. To try to avoid or

to teach around the politics of the literature requires a willful act of neglecting context and reality. Such an approach, in itself, is a political act of silencing and erasure.

Students on our campuses exist in these spaces of erasure. On my university's campus, it was not unusual to see "Black Lives Matters" signs disseminated by the campus chapter of the NAACP torn down or defaced to read, "~~Black~~ **ALL** Lives Matter." These acts and the micro-aggressions, or more explicit aggressions, against the Black Lives Matter movement suggest that the significance that racism persists goes beyond the fact that it is obvious. The African American literature course offers an academic opportunity to explore the core tenets of the Black Lives Matter movement within artistic, political, cultural, and historical contexts: "Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise" and the need to affirm "Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression" (*Black Lives Matter*). The African American literature course provides the opportunity to bridge the literature and the students' world through a critical pedagogy. The affirmation of literary contributions made possible through such courses fight the threat of social erasure.

When our students can look at the lives valued less in the U.S. and recognize the contributions of black writers and thinkers, we prepare them to engage in the important discussions need about race in this country. Carpio is right that the persistence of racism is obvious—*painfully* so for those of us who study and teach critical race theory and African American literature and even *more painfully* so for those who live and experience it; however, for undergraduate students, the political and social mechanisms that perpetuate racism and white supremacy are not obvious. The veiled rhetoric that disguises racism often obscures the

obvious, especially when we want students to understand deep structural racism. Rather, a convergence of ideological, political, and rhetorical devices allow for the continuance of racism. As Michelle Alexander articulates, the movement from one system of oppression to the next is a matter of design, not chance. Alexander begins *The New Jim Crow* by arguing,

In each generation, new tactics have been used for achieving the same goals—goals shared by the Founding Fathers. Denying African Americans citizenship was deemed essential to the formation of the original union . . . The arguments and rationalizations that have been trotted out in support of racial exclusion and discrimination in its various forms have changed and evolved, but the outcome has remained largely the same. (1)

To understand those tactics and rationalizations, students need courses that pull back the veil on racism. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates, too, arrives at a similar conclusion about the position of African American persons in U.S. society: “You and I, my son, are that ‘below.’ That was true in 1776. It is true today. There is no them without you, and with the right to break you they must necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the dream” (105). Coates’s historiography understands the way that the United States has always kept African Americans as the “below” of the nation, that part of the nation subordinated by terror and mastery. For Coates, the power of the state to change its tactics can be seen in the “retrofitting” of U.S. Civil War battlefields and histories:

It is truly horrible to understand yourself as the essential below of your country. It breaks too much of what we would like to think about ourselves, our lives, the world we move through and the people who surround us. The struggle to understand is our only advantage over this madness. By the time I visited those [U.S. Civil War] battlefields, I

knew that they had been retrofitted as the staging ground for a great deception, and this was my only security, because they could no longer insult me by lying to me. (*Between the World and Me*, 106).

In a course such as the one I taught, students can start to see the mutation of discrimination and how racism manifests in the decades from the turn of the twentieth century into the second decade of the twenty-first. As teachers engaged in a critical pedagogy, we all share the challenge of exposing the deception and aiding students in the “struggle to understand.”

When we help students see the deception, then we also provide them with a deeper insight into how politics and ideology operate. Alexander’s belief that systems of discrimination evolve but survive illustrates the idea of Jacques Rancière’s that political systems rely on a miscount, the exclusion of some group from the full rights of personhood (10). For Rancière, politics—that is the action—occur when the part with no part, those excluded from the system, disrupt the political order (11, 17). Systems of power work to prevent and halt such disruptions. In reading works such as *The Marrow of Tradition*, *Invisible Man*, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, and Percival Everett’s *Erasure*, students can recognize the perpetuation of discrimination and see how literature disrupts the political order. Thanks to GIS technologies, I can show my students a map of the areas where slaves were owned in the highest numbers in the 1800s overlaid with a map of the areas in the US today where socioeconomic mobility is the lowest. Again, it is from the past and understanding how literature disrupts a narrative about the present that students find ways to make sense of injustice in 2015. Rather than compete with the literature or take away from the study of literature as an artistic form, these added components help students understand the need to study literature more broadly, thus

producing something they can take away from the course and apply to their lived experiences in the world.

## **Lesson 2: The Future Possibilities of Education and Democracy are at Stake**

The African American literature course is also an opportunity to fight for the meaning of higher education. For a number of reasons, the academy today risks being, or in too many cases already is, covered in Optic White paint, to borrow a guiding metaphor from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. As Ellison's Kimbro explains, the Optic White paint "will cover just about anything" (202). For Ellison's narrator, the significance of "Keep America Pure with Optic White Paints," the company's slogan, holds true when Federal buildings and monuments are covered in the paint (196). The narrator makes the link between the paint and the campus buildings on his former college's campus:

I wondered if the same Liberty paint was used on the campus, or this "Optic White" was something made exclusively for the government. Perhaps it was of a better quality, a special mix. And in my mind I could see the brightly trimmed and freshly decorated campus buildings as they appeared on spring mornings—after the fall painting and the light winter snows, with a cloud riding over and a darting bird above—framed by the trees and encircling vines. The buildings had always seemed more impressive because they were the only buildings to receive regular paintings. (201)

Ellison's symbolism and the narrator's previous expulsion demonstrate the power of white supremacy. Even as a student at a black college, the narrator must learn to adhere to the power of whiteness. When he does not, he is expelled. When the narrator describes his desire to please Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe responds, "Please him? And here you are a junior in college! Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education are you getting around here? Who really told you to take him out there?" The pressure of maintaining the status quo stands out to Ta-Nehisi Coates, who describes his experience of educating in a similar manner: "I was a curious boy, but the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance" (*Between the World and Me*, 26). In *Invisible Man*, the narrator's inability to recognize the importance of compliance causes his expulsion. What are the ways we can work to make sure education, in our classrooms, is not about compliance?

Our states, education systems, and universities continue to spread an optic white ideology. As *The New Yorker* demonstrated in March 2015, universities such as the University of North Carolina face "political crackdowns" or, perhaps more accurately, conservative hijacking of their curriculums (Purdy). In the words of then North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory, the university must "reform and adapt the U.N.C. brand to the ever-changing competitive environment of the twenty-first century" and "[hone] in on skill and subjects employers need" (qtd. in Purdy). Such efforts at UNC and elsewhere target the critical studies of gender, class, and race. The transparent political goals of these battles in higher education are clear when the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy, a conservative think tank and lobbying group for education, calls on UNC "to revive the Great Books model of humanities education: literature

and philosophy as a source of eternal truths, dating back to Plato, passing through John Locke, and perfected by Ayn Rand and the libertarian economist Friedrich Hayek” (qtd. in Purdy). The simultaneous efforts to reformulate education around economic and employer-based needs and to paint the curriculum optic white with “great books” culminating with Rand and Hayek serve to move education away from the goals of creating an informed citizenry capable of democratic government and toward preparing students for their roles within neoliberal and capitalist society. The Great Books approach centers on the cultural dominance of whiteness, harkening back to an earlier canonical era where the canon had little space for women and almost no space for nonwhite writers and thinkers.<sup>7</sup>

Within the larger framework of neoliberalism, these curricular “reforms,” like mass incarceration, are by design. They guarantee the conditions of compliance. In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown explores the ramifications of neoliberal education reform for democracy. She argues, “Citizens cannot rule themselves, even if that means only thoughtfully choosing representatives or voting on referenda, let alone engaging in more direct practice of shared rule, without understanding the powers and problems they are engaging” (175). The trend in education—primary, secondary, university, public, and private—moves toward an emphasis on, in Brown’s words “human capital development, where human capital is what the individual, the business world, and the state seek to enhance in order to maximize competitiveness” (176). For students investing tens of thousands of dollars, if not hundreds of thousands, in a college education, competitiveness and employability are and should be significant concerns. However, the coding of such language works to discourage students from majoring in or even taking courses in subjects that do not fit neatly within a capitalism-

focused trajectory. If fully realized, this vision will leave us with curriculums where students have few opportunities to question structures of power. Following scholars like Brown, bell hooks, and Colin Dayan, Dylan Rodriguez reads such politically-driven reforms through the lenses of civil and social death:

This is why Indian reservations, the U.S. prison and criminalization regime, and even Arizona's ban on ethnic studies need to be critically addressed through a genocide analytic as well as through focused critiques of neoliberalism's cultural and economic structures: the logics of social neutralization (civil death, land expropriation, white supremacist curricular enforcement) always demonstrate the *capacity* (if not actually existing political will and institutional inclination) to effectively exterminate people from social spaces and wipe them out of the social text (810).

In Rodriguez's formulation, neoliberalism is the optic white paint of our moment. It allows a push for an education that wipes certain peoples and struggles from the social text. Moreover, the emphasis on competition and capital move students away from the very sort of critique Rodriguez offers.

I articulate these points in response to cautions against "political"—and my quotation marks here are important—approaches to African American literature. Students' educational experiences are increasingly shaped by political objectives. Everything is political. The affordability and meaning of our students' university educations are shaped by political ideologies that promote the privatization of the commons and the whitewashing of curricula. Student loan interest rates, scholarship conditions, and even high school preparation all result from political contexts. When we teach African American literature, we have an opportunity to

help students discover literary texts as artistic and political responses to discrimination—to understand art’s role as a disruption of domination. If we get that right, then we can teach students to read a myriad of complicated social texts.

As a scholar and teacher in interdisciplinary American Studies, I negotiate the need to discuss political contexts in the classroom all the time. Most of the works we teach in African American literature are political, whether they’re responding to chattel slavery, Jim Crow racism, housing discrimination, mass incarceration, or other examples of systemic racism. Our students need to understand these works in their artistic and historical contexts. Moreover, in terms of our pedagogy, we have to allow students to make connections. Sadly, sometimes the connections nearly make themselves. When the narrator of *Invisible Man* describes Tod Clifton’s death, saying, “His name was Clifton and he was black and they shot him,” he also contextualizes Clifton’s death in a pattern of violence: “It’s an old story and there’s been too much blood to excite you. Besides, it’s only important when it fills the veins of a living man. Aren’t you tired of such stories? Aren’t you sick of the blood?” (456). It is too old of a story, but for many of our students, it is a story they do not know, especially when so many police killings are covered as isolated events by mainstream media outlets. However, what they do know is that police killings are an all too common occurrence.

How do we ensure that our students gain some sort of cultural literacy, or perhaps civic literacy, from our courses? How do we make sure students gain experience in reading literature, understanding history, and applying critical theory?

## Critical Praxis

The components of my African American literature course followed patterns I typically use for my upper-level American literature and American studies courses: a series of short response papers, student presentations, a final term project assignment, and a final exam. For the final term project, I elicited arguments about the significance of African American literature today ([Fig. 2](#)). The assignment followed the lead of the questions I posed on the syllabus and drew on Warren's argument. More importantly, it put students—African American, Latino, white, men, and women—in the position of critic and literary historian, making them responsible for thinking about the usefulness of African American literature as a category.

The course assignments aimed to help students develop their critical literacies. For Maryemma Graham, twenty-first century technological shifts in the way literature gets produced and disseminated demand new pedagogies to adapt to emerging literacies: “These shifts, in turn, point us to larger questions of literacy, or more precisely critical literacy, the conscious and unconscious framing one employs to read and interpret texts, and its corollary, critical pedagogy, which focuses more specifically on teaching and learning practices.” Assignments that weave theory, history, and the present together call on students to develop a critical literacy, and in the final term project for the semester, the students had to think through the framing they used to read, interpret, and categorize the texts from the novel.

**African American Literature – Final Term Project Assignment**

**Prompt:** For this project, you are to create an argument about the importance of African American Literature (or African American Studies) as a field or a subfield. You can consider a wide variety of questions, including the following: Is African American Literature important in 2014? Why is African American Literature important in 2014? What counts as African American Literature? How does African American Literature produce a counter-history to mainstream US history? What does African American Literature teach us about historiography? How does African American Literature help us make sense of the past? The present? Does the separation of African American Literature into a separate category of American Literature increase its importance? Reduce its importance? Tokenize it? Do you agree with Kenneth Warren that African American Literature is a project that is over now? If African American Literature, for Warren, was to respond to Jim Crow, then to what should African American Literature respond today? How should African American Literature be taught? Obviously, if you answer all of these questions, your project will be a disaster. Choose questions or create questions on which you can focus to craft an argument about what African American Literature means in the twenty-first century. Don't just review African American Literature or state the obvious about it; instead, craft an argument in which you articulate something specific about it. Make a claim. Defend it. Warren and his respondents offer good models for this sort of writing. Bring in necessary contexts to make your point, either from the past (slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, etc.) or from the present (mass incarceration, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, etc.).

Your project should reference and analyze extensively at least 2 of the works of fiction we have read this semester; moreover, you should include at least 3 outside scholarly sources (see details and guidelines below). Kenneth Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* and the critical responses to it are acceptable options for outside sources. Bring in Du Bois if you see him as helpful to your argument.

[Fig. 2:](#) African American Literature - Final Term Project

**Conclusion: The Stakes of the Struggle**

The media-framing of racial violence in Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, the police murder of Tod Clifton in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and the deconstruction of urban poverty and incarceration in in Everett's *Erasure* provide opportunities to teach students critical race theory and to equip them to understand African American literature in its contexts and systemic racism in ours. Moreover, in teaching students to read their world critically and to understand structures

of power, we prepare them to take part in democracy. Society desperately needs students who can understand broader patterns and the disruptive potential of art. At stake in how we teach courses such as African American literature is whether our graduates will be a generation of pawns in a neoliberal world that seeks for them to be trained as workers or the generation who helps halt the rollback of voting rights, the perpetuation of mass incarceration, and other discriminatory laws veiled in the optic white paint of religious freedom and personal liberties. Surely, such challenges might put too much pressure on them, but we have to acknowledge the landscape into which they will graduate. We also have to wonder if our graduates will be any better prepared than we are to discuss the perseverance of racism and white supremacy as dominant ideologies in the American experience. Our students will not reach that level of discourse on their own, so we have to be intentional about how understand our own roles as professors and the broader roles of our departments and institutions in creating educational opportunities and fostering critical literacies for the twenty-first century.

As I worked on this manuscript, two contrasting visions of English departments emerged. In September 2015, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) released “NCTE Statement Affirming #BlackLivesMatter,” in which they highlighted the moral necessity of responding to crises in our world: “the dilemmas of race and racism in the United States have become so copious that to ignore them would be to render NCTE voiceless and bequeath it to those great chasms of silence through which racial injustices endure.”<sup>8</sup> The NCTE statement directly counters some of the conservative threads in higher education and literature discourse, those that blame the “politicization” of the field for its decline. In the final paragraph, the organization sets a standard that any teacher of literature should consider:

Recognition of the structures of racial hatred sits at the center of our conviction as an organization. This statement seeks to affirm what should be obvious: Black lives matter.

As an educational organization committed to equity and educational justice, promoting literacy and human life, we take seriously our obligation to ensure racial justice.

Therefore we remain resolute in our mission to use and produce knowledge that is essential to eliminating racism in the US and beyond.

The NCTE understands the political role of our teaching to be a moral issue. It also articulates purposes for the knowledge produced and applied in our classrooms: eliminating racism and ensuring social justice. The authors call on us to use the action as a space that can “transform our world and raise awareness.” To answer this call, we must dismantle the wall between literature and our students’ lived world.

Just under two weeks before the release of the “NCTE Statement Affirming #BlackLivesMatter,” the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy issued its own report, “The Decline of the English Department.” The report’s author, Jay Schalin, is the Pope Center’s Director of Policy Analysis, and he holds degrees in computer science and economics. Schalin writes, “The modern English department has also lost its sense of purpose. Superficial and trendy topics have replaced great works from the Western literary canon. Traditional scholarship has given way to postmodern critiques, in which great literature is viewed as a source of oppression and social control instead of revealing truth and exploring universal ideals” (2). Looking at institutions within the UNC system, Schalin counts the number of “required canon courses” and documents whether each school requires a course in Shakespeare (9). Schalin also charts the political affiliations of faculty (14). He combs the LinkedIn and profile pages of

faculty, and criticizes those who teach or publish on oppression, activism, and race. He highlights one professor who seeks for students to “think critically about intersecting structures of oppression including racism, homophobia, sexism, and classism” and another who teaches “courses on hip-hop, gender, popular culture, and African American culture. His research interests include cultural and music criticism, cultural history, popular culture, and African American masculinity” (24). Schalin’s report, funded by an anonymous donor, is a hit piece on academics who seek to challenge structures of power and to engage students in critical thinking. The report really says little about the “decline” of the English Department, though it clearly intends to aid in that decline through alarmism and ad hominem attacks on scholars. Nonetheless, his piece is certainly fodder for politicians and pundits who seek to remove civic literary and democracy as both the foundation and goal of higher education.

In these two competing visions of the English department, I know which side I take. I also understand that it does not have to be an all or none enterprise. The teaching of critical race theory and African American literature, among other methodologies and sub areas of our field, does not negate the teaching of those works considered “great.” It allows students to understand important works of literature by African American writers. In allowing our students to understand the canon as a social construction and the politics behind our curricula, we expose them to larger questions about how cultural values are formed.

The final part of my title for this article is taken from Coates, whose *Between the World and Me* adds to a rich canon of African American writing and captures the current moment of struggle. Coates’s emphasis on “the struggle” captures the challenges and opportunities for teaching African American literature in this particular moment. As the first epigraph for this

paper shows, Coates uses “the struggle” to refer to the cohesiveness of the African American condition. In our courses, attention to historical moments of struggle can help our students understand the nuance and complexity with which literature approaches social contexts.

Moreover, we can equip students to understand the struggle in their own lifetimes and the ways art intervenes in racism. For us, too, we face a struggle to demonstrate the value of what we do.

Yet, by engaging in the struggle, we affirm the importance of our courses and of our students’ voices, and therein lies the meaning, value, and potential of education.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Winter 2011 issue of *African American Review* included the roundtable responses to *What Was African American Literature?* from the MLA participants: Adam Bradley, John Ernest, Soyica Diggs Colbert, Russ Castronovo, Sharon P. Holland, and Warren. Melissa Asher Daniels and Gregory Laski organized the roundtable. The March 2013 issue of *PMLA* included responses to *What Was African American Literature?* by Glenda Carpio, Gene Andrew Jarrett, R. Baxter Miller, Sonnet Retman, Marlon B. Ross, Xiomara Santamarina, Rafia Zafar, and Warren. The range and stature of the scholars involved in these sections on Warren's book demonstrate the extent to which *What Was African American Literature?* resonated within the field. Notably, the participants in these discussions on the book focused on research and scholarship but little on its implications for pedagogy and curricula.

<sup>2</sup> In their collection *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*, editors Lovalerie King and Shirley Moody-Turner position contemporary literature within the broader tradition and work of African American literature. They also think critically about the intellectual demands created by our current moment, which they suggest "must call for new strategies, paradigms, and critical approaches to understanding and appreciating how contemporary African American literature facilitates a dynamic relationship of continuity and change in a centuries-old literary tradition." In furthering they claim, I think about the ways in which the literature from this tradition fits into this trajectory and our current moment.

<sup>3</sup> According to our university website ([www.cbu.edu](http://www.cbu.edu)), nearly 40% of our students are African American, but the university website demographic information breaks it down into the following categories: men, women, minority, and international.

<sup>4</sup> “African American Literature” is the specific title given in our course catalog to what is, at the present date, the only cataloged course to focus specifically on black writers from the United States or elsewhere.

<sup>5</sup> Since teaching my fall 2014 course, I would now add Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* to this particular course’s reading list. Coates’s book adds to the canon of African American literature through his use of the epistolary form, but he also adds to discussions of critical race theory and historiography. Coates’s defiance of easy categorization fits with my argument in this paper that African American literature, as a teaching subject, has to adapt to contextual concerns. *Between the World and Me*—epistolary, history, poetry, autobiography, and theory—brings together the worlds of theory, art, and literature and follows them until they converge in the black body.

<sup>6</sup> Carpio uses Zora Neale Hurston to expose the limits of Warren’s argument. Because Hurston’s politics existed outside much of the Civil Rights Movement, Carpio argues—point to Hurston’s opposition to *Brown v. Board of Education* as evidence that Warren’s definitions are too limiting to capture African American writing (387).

<sup>7</sup> At the moment of my final edits on this manuscript, students at Yale University have started a petition to revise the English curriculum to “decolonize” its course offerings and curriculum. The petition asks “that the pre-1800/1900 requirements be refocused to deliberately include

literatures relating to gender, race, sexuality, ableism, and ethnicity.” The responses to this demonstrate the larger struggle over the critical meaning of education.

<sup>8</sup> The statement was invited by the NCTE Presidential Team and Authored by the NCTE/CCCC Black Caucus.

<sup>9</sup> This article is developed from a paper presented at the 2015 CEA Conference in Indianapolis, and I am appreciative of the feedback received from audience members, which encouraged me to develop the project further.

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