

EN 4990/6990
The End of African American Literature?
Summer Session II, M-F 1:00-2:50

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(Michael Morgenstern)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will examine the recent debate sparked by my former dissertation adviser Kenneth Warren that African American literature no longer exists, having only existed in the first place because of a bygone period in American history marked by racial segregation. According to Warren, the overwhelming impetus behind African American literature and its authors was to make the case for Black humanity (as an earlier generation of black authors had previously done) and to argue for a more racially inclusive society (the latter distinguishing the critical project of an antebellum group of black authors). However, while many African American authors were engaged in such a racial and political project, it is equally true that African American culture informed, shaped and ultimately maintained a tradition of “black arts” that continues in various forms today. We will explore the productive critical tension between Warren’s view of black literature as tendentious writing and a more expansive view that argues for the formal complexity (and universality) of African American aesthetics. In addition to Warren's book *What Was African American Literature* we will read canonical works in the tradition that fall within Warren's definition of African American literature, as well as more recent works by several contemporary authors that presumably do not "count as" African American literature.

Required Texts

Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature*; Charles W. Chesnutt. *The Marrow of Tradition*; Jean Toomer. *Cane*; Richard Wright, *Black Boy*; Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*; [Course Packet] Consisting of readings from the works of William Dean Howells; Irving Howe; Frances E.W. Harper; Zora Neal Hurston; Norman Mailer; James Baldwin; Ralph Ellison and others