literature itself constitutes a representational and rhetorical strategy within the domain of a literary practice responsive to conditions that, by and large, no longer obtain" (9). Since Alexander has shown that such conditions still obtain, one has to wonder whether during the first half of the twentieth century African Americans' enlistments of literature in the service of social change—or what Warren partly means by the literature's "coherence"—were so exceptional as to justify Warren's argument about the literature's subsequent demise. My bet is that these enlistments were not. Rather, African American writers across a *longue durée* persisted, through success and failure, in making an artistic and political impact on social attitudes and practices precisely because they recognized that Jim Crow, narrowly or broadly defined, was not the only kind of racism that afflicted the world.

Note

1. Warren drew "Does African-American Literature Exist?" from *What Was African American Literature?*, so I quote only from the book.

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When African American Literature Exists

R. BAXTER MILLER

In making an important distinction in 1972 between Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, both of whom he appreciated, George E. Kent, of the University of Chicago, recognizes the artistic superiority of Ellison. Then Kent warns that the imaginative transformation of folk sources alone hardly suffices, for "the basic *attitudes* [spirit] and *forms of response to existence* are abandoned by us [African American critics] at our peril" (162; my italics; see also Miller, "Mirrored Reflection" 163). Who would have thought then that a later theorist at Chicago would envision the demise of African American literature within the next forty years? In serious reflection, I shall define African American literature as folk, or even sometimes highbrow, responses to a community's existence and as original and innovative idioms, forms, and aesthetics of particular yet "universal" import from 1773 (when Phillis Wheatley's *Poems* was published) to the present.

Yes, it may be true that, as Kenneth Warren maintains in *What Was African American Literature?*, African American literary tradition expressed a theme of racial protest

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during the Jim Crow years of 1896–1964.[1] And, yes, the March on Washington in 1963 resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But, as Charles T. Davis shows, African American literature preceded Warren's temporal brackets by at least 123 years (81).[2] Indeed, according to my interpretive and ideological reading of American history, no termination date for the tradition exists.

In fact, Warren's concept of African American literature is reductive anyway. I propose that African American literature defines itself as tropes written especially in the face of the impending reality and later occurrence of the Civil War and, a century later, the civil rights movement. Even more important, the genre points subtly to the decentralized spaces of epiphany, meaning, and interpretation between Warren's historical markers and beyond them, including the Harlem Renaissance, in the twenties, and the New Chicago Renaissance, from the thirties to the early seventies (Miller, *On the Ruins*). If the postracial theorist proposes to erase such memory, he reminds us in the process that the memory is there to be erased. In saying that African American literature *was*, the disingenuous theorist confirms that it *is*. For African American literature not only represents such historical moments but also encapsulates the memory of intense experiences.

Warren's critical world must be discredited because it seeks to reestablish a Eurocentric primacy based on the American literary canon of the late nineteenth century, especially Henry James ("Still Reading" and "Race"); because it attempts subconsciously to resituate Ellison as the foremost "Negro" novelist in the traditional American canon ("Ralph Ellison"); and, finally, because his postracial method tries to obscure that African American literature, despite his claims, endures. In closing, I offer proof of a folk continuum in *Dreams from My Father* (1995), by Barack Obama, and "I Was Here but I Disappeared" (1990), by Wesley Brown. The folk are the invisible thinkers in Warren's elite critical world.

Warren's work has expressed an obvious preference for a Eurocentric viewpoint on African American texts—indeed, has anxiously craved assimilation of them into the traditional American ideologies of liberal democracy and comparative culture—for the last nineteen years. In his consideration of racial guilt in *Black and White Strangers* (1993), about the traditional novel of American realism, Warren invents a clever way to absolve the traditional novel from the expression of any complicity with the national mores of racial discrimination. Here especially he also establishes Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) as a better work about the "Negro" plight than the "incoherent" books of Richard Wright. Yet he offers no evidence of having ever read *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1945) or "Big Black Good Man" (1957), two of Wright's refined aesthetic structures. As some may know, there has been a decided tendency since 1930 for each decade's readers to declare themselves on Wright's proletarian side or Ellison's artsy side. While the rebellious audiences of the thirties and sixties favored the former, readers of the fifties and eighties privileged the latter (Miller, "Deeper Literacy"). When Warren in his later career interviews the novelist Leon Forrest, a Northwestern University professor and exuberant disciple of Ellison, Warren confirms a stylistic continuum that extends from the Victorian prose of W. E. B. Du Bois to the elite poetry of Robert Hayden. Nevertheless, Warren's own unabated praise for the traditional novelist in "Ralph Ellison and the Problem of Cultural Authority" (2004) reveals a double standard. Insofar as he sees Ellison, along with the novelist's namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, as intellectual role models, Warren treats African American writers as literary devices, objects or tools representing democratic principles, rather than as the subjects of their own freedom. Though Warren is right in

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suggesting that Americans of all races share a culture, he circumvents any celebration of cultural distinctiveness.

His elite aesthetic cannot account for the writing by the former slave Frederick Douglass, who from 1845 to 1883 helped distinguish a literary tradition that according to Warren simply didn't exist then. A generation later than 1845, the year his first autobiography, *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, was published, Douglass explains in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* the consequences of the Supreme Court's overturning of the 1875 Civil Rights Act. Perceiving the symbolic recurrences in American history, Douglass represents a heroic emblem that Hughes inscribes as a poetic figure. It is not coincidental that Warren, the historicist-literalist, privileges Hayden's high-modernist representation over Hughes's folk praise song (Warren, Afterword 436).

African American literature precedes the arbitrary date of 1896 and extends past the equally capricious endpoint of 1964. In a story about growing up in Hawaii and later Indonesia, the autobiographer Barack Obama deliberates in *Dreams from My Father* about the way that the case resolutions in law books can prove unsatisfying (391–96). He attended Occidental College and Columbia University back in the American homeland during the late seventies and early eighties, and for nearly every altruistic case such as *Brown v. Board of Education* he now discovers countless others that reveal the more prevailing compulsions of expedience and greed. Residing in Chicago's South Side, Obama has no clue that a poet who once inspired him in Hawaii years ago was Frank Marshall Davis, who had been a proletarian figure in the New Chicago Renaissance. In fact, it was the departure of Davis to Hawaii that helped end the movement (83–133).

Similarly, a well-constructed, entirely fictional story exposes the utopian flaw of a post-racial America at the turn to the twenty-first century. Indeed, the imaginary recounting proves that the rumored demise of African American literature is greatly exaggerated. In a literal and figurative flight from the commitments imposed by a girlfriend, Faye, in New York, Tyrone, the protagonist in "I Was Here but I Disappeared," flees to San Francisco to visit his black friend Rudi and Rudi's white girlfriend, Alex. Both are new age minimalists—in other words, idealistic theorists who repress the historical memory that would complicate their existences. On the beach sand, a local artist has drawn a featureless Jesus, based on a colorless sketch of Rudi done when he first arrived in California. By the end of the last, splendid turn, the protagonist, now returned to New York, saves his mirrored image from modernist and postmodernist fragmentation. Just before the image vanishes at a dance, he reasserts his redemptive discomfort: "I was not about to exempt myself from the terrors of being alive" (101). Therefore, the cultured responses to existence, those that are forgotten only at our peril, are rooted in spiritual testimony (Miller, *Artistry*). Even if the demise of Jim Crow segregation were true (a scholarly imaginary), the lasting impact on the nation's aesthetics would remain. While Marxist dynamics are in play, ideas are far less confined by time. African American literature is and will be.

Notes

1. It would provoke an interesting exchange to deliberate on whether such an idealistic goal *has* ever been achieved.

2. Davis, a professor of English, founded the Department of African American Studies at Yale University.

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What Was African American Literature?

SONNET RETMAN

Kenneth Warren's tightly woven treatise *What Was African American Literature?* asks his readers to reflect on the epistemological assumptions that define African American literature as a practice and a field of inquiry. In original close readings of novels such as George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) and Michael Thomas's *Man Gone Down* (2007), alongside analyses of literary criticism from W. E. B. Du Bois's "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926) to Trey Ellis's "The New Black Aesthetic" (1989), Warren suggests that the conception of African American literature as a changing form of group expression across centuries is ahistorical and incorrect. Warren argues instead that Jim Crow made it possible for African American literature to emerge as a national ethnic literature. More provocatively, he argues that with the end of Jim Crow and its insistence on racial difference between whites and blacks and on racial cohesion among blacks, a distinct and collective African American literature is no longer viable. Indeed, its nostalgic continuation primarily benefits black elites under the guise of racial progress for all African Americans, sustaining ever-more-inequitable class relations. For this reason he advocates leaving the paradigm of African American literature behind. At stake here are nothing less than the terms of emergence and engagement through which we imagine African American literature.

Situating African American literature as a bounded historical phenomenon, a "symptom" rather than a "cure," Warren raises important questions about literature by black

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