"AN EXTRAORDINARY MEDITATION ON THE SELF":

ROBERT PENN WARREN'S WRITINGS ON RACE

by

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in English

Middle Tennessee State University

December 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

Robert Penn Warren made significant contributions to almost every literary genre, and at the center of a significant number of his writings is the topic of race. These works include a biography of John Brown (1929), his infamous essay "The Briar Patch" (1930), the short story "Her Own People" (1935), the poem "Pondy Woods" (1936), the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *All the King's Men* (1946), the long poem *Brother to Dragons* (1953), the novel *Band of Angels* (1955), the nonfictional works *Segregation* (1956) and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), the headnotes of African-American authors in the anthology *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (1974) and a series of "confessional" poems written during the 1970s. One of the central questions which virtually all critical discussions of Warren and race attempt to answer is whether Warren's racial politics evolved over the course of his career. While textual evidence can support the idea that Warren left behind the segregationist views he held in the 1920s and 30s, because Warren's works also contain inconsistencies in the forms of omissions, erasures, silences, and perpetuations of racist stereotypes, his transformation will likely always be a question of debate.

In *Racial Politics and Robert Penn Warren's Poetry* (2002), Anthony Sczcesiul concludes that the trajectory of Warren's career reveals a change from segregationist to integrationist. Using a framework that Toni Morrison provides in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Szczesiul examines the Africanist presences in Warren's poetry to reach his conclusion. My study expands Morrison's concern about the "feats that white American authors perform" as an exercise in literary criticism "to erase the black presences in their works" ("Unspeakable Things" 369) and challenges Szczesiul's conclusion. My examination of the Africanist presences, of whom W. E. B. Du Bois is Warren's primary foil, calls into question his alleged transformation. Through close readings of Warren's

nonfiction as well as references to his fiction and poetry, I speak the unspeakable, unmasking

Warren as a perpetuator of white supremacy. I conclude with a discussion of interest

convergence, a key aspect of critical race theory, and a call to resist memorializing Warren—or

any other writer—in such a way as to ignore or minimize the ways in which his works

perpetuates a racist worldview.

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Part One: The Southern Way of Life

For Warren apologists, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (1956) is one of the

primary texts that corroborates their claims that either Warren never held segregationist views or

over time had repudiated them. Warren makes clear in the "Author's Notes" that the contents of

the book merely reflect his "report of conversations" he had had while traveling through

Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana: Some of the reports "had been

sought and some . . . came as the result of chance encounters" (xix). He had begun the traveling

and interviewing necessary for the composition of this work early in 1956. Joseph Blotner relates

that Warren battled the flu during February and March yet managed to compose for *Life*

magazine an eight-thousand (originally twenty-thousand) word exposé of the psychic turmoil of

Southerners during a rather tumultuous period for them (304). Two months later, he produced an

expanded version, which became *Segregation.* The sixty-six-page compendium of interviews

received superb reviews and earned excellent sales.

The tumultuous period was the result of the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v.*

Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. The Justices had ruled unanimously in the landmark case

that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional. *Brown v. Board of*

Education was one of the cornerstones of the Civil Rights Movement, and as such helped

establish the precedent that "separate-but-equal" education—and other services—were not, in

fact, equal at all. The decision was a blow to the status quo in the South because it overturned the

1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that argued that racially-segregated public

facilities were legal as long as the facilities for blacks and whites were equal. The ruling

inaugurated Jim Crow laws across the South, constitutionally sanctioning laws that banned

blacks from accessing the buses, schools, water fountains, and other facilities that whites used. "Separate-but-equal" was the proverbial "law of the land" for the next six decades.

By the early 1950s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was filing lawsuits across the United States, challenging segregation laws. In the case that successfully made its way to the Supreme Court, a plaintiff named Oliver Brown filed a class-action suit against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, in 1951, because his daughter, Linda Brown, had been denied entrance to Topeka's all-white elementary schools. In fact, the Supreme Court did not rule solely on this case, having combined Brown's case and four other cases challenging school segregation across the United States. In the decision, Earl Warren, the new Chief Justice appointed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, wrote that "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place," as segregated schools are "inherently unequal." In 1955, the Court issued a second opinion in the case, which directed school boards to proceed with desegregation "with all deliberate speed."

Two years after the decision, Warren embarked on his travels of the Deep South to take the pulse of a region that once again believed the federal government guilty of overreach. The subtitle *The Inner Conflict in the South* makes obvious that Warren is exploring the psychological schism occurring in the region because of the deliberate speed with which change has been forced upon it. The schism, Warren argues, is at the core of the racial divide between blacks and whites: "Such division between man and man is important. As one editor in Tennessee said to me: 'There's a fifth column of decency here, and it will, in the end, betray the extremists, when the politicians get through.' But such a division between man and man is not as important in the long run as the division within the individual man" (53). In his analysis of the race issue, then, Warren sees racial discord as a microcosm of the very theme he has explored in

several of his works—the problem of a fractured self or the lack of self-knowledge. Still another

interpretation of Warren's conclusion is that he diagnosed the condition of the South directly

after the *Brown* decision within a framework he understood and with which he felt most

comfortable. *Segregation*, then, is a continuation of one of Warren's primary concerns in his

fiction—the inner conflict of the individual man—applied to a region.

     In Warren's oeuvre, the importance of self-knowledge is a crucial element in one's ability

to relate to humanity or to be at peace with oneself. At the conference on the Unity of

Knowledge during the bicentennial celebration of Columbia University in 1954, Warren defined

the term *knowledge*:

> To put my cart before the horse, the conclusion before the discussion, and let the
>
> cat out of the bag, I'll assert that to say man's right to knowledge is simply a way
>
> of saying man's right to exist, to be himself, to be a man. . . [We] have limited and
>
> revised the idea of the sanctity of life. Human life we mean in our world, and
>
> human life not as existence but as the individual's right to exist as himself.
>
> ("Knowledge" 182)

Warren understands that this premise is violated every day but acknowledges "it remains

fundamental to our democratic Western world" (182). Moreover, the "right to exist . . . assumes

the Right to Knowledge" (186). One can infer from Warren's definition of *knowledge* that a lack

of self-knowledge, then, is the failure by individuals to internalize the sanctity of one's own

uniqueness. This internal failure manifests itself as an absence of an individual identity:

> [Only] by knowledge does man achieve his identity. I do not mean that the mere
>
> implements of knowledge—books, libraries, laboratories, seminars—distinguish
>
> man from the brute. No, knowledge gives him his identity because it gives him

the image of himself. And the image of himself necessarily has a foreground and a background, for man is in the world not as a billiard ball placed on a table, not even as a ship on the ocean with location determinable by latitude and longitude. He is, rather, in the world with continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms, his identity. It affirms it, for out of a progressive understanding of this interpenetration, this texture of relations, man creates new perspectives, discovers new values—that is, a new self—and so the identity is a continually emerging, an unfolding, a self-affirming and, we hope, a self-corrective creation. (186-187)

The most crucial phrase from this passage is "intimate interpenetration" because what becomes clear through an examination of Warren protagonists who suffer from a lack of self-knowledge or self-identity is that they fail to grasp the role intimate relationships play in one's formation of an identity.

Percy Munn and Willie Proudfit of *Night Riders* (1939), Jack Burden of *All the King's Men* (1946)*, Jeremiah Beaumont of *World Enough and Time* (1950), and Amantha Starr of *Band of Angels* (1955)—protagonists in Warren's novels—embark on journeys for self-knowledge and identity in their efforts at psychic healing. In *Night Riders*[1] Percy Munn, a lawyer and small-time farmer, ultimately dies because of his obsessive involvement with the Association of Growers of Dark Fired Tobacco and The Free Farmers' Brotherhood of Protection and Control. Munn's inability to find meaning in his own life or in the events surrounding his life leads to his willingness to frame individuals at trial and to be involved in the unethical activities of the

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[1] The term *night riders* was coined by the Kentucky press to describe the militant tobacco farmers who resorted to physical intimidation to enforce compliance among tobacco farmers during the Black Patch Tobacco War (1904-1909) in southwest Kentucky and northern Tennessee.

Association. Before his death, he seeks refuge at Willie Proudfit's farm, where Willie narrates his own story, a tale of also having been psychically lost but eventually coming to understand the importance of community with all peoples. In *World Enough and Time*, a narrator pieces the story of Jeremiah Beaumont together through Beaumont's personal letters and legal documents, a narrative that ends with the protagonist's execution for the murder of his benefactor Colonel Cassius Fort. In *Band of Angels,* Amantha Starr, the mulatta protagonist, begins her narrative with "Who am I?" The rest of the novel relates her tale of coming to peace with being of mixed race. Her inability to come to terms with who she is, however, results in her complicity in several deaths and compromised lives. The journeys of these protagonists reveal that the fractured self can often result in the dehumanization of all humanity, not just oneself but those with whom one must interact. Without this healing of the fractured self, without the acquisition of self-knowledge—a psychic phenomenon Warren equates with understanding one's finiteness, acknowledging the validity of conflicting visions, and accepting one's place in the pattern of human history—dehumanization will always occur.

Warren would cite this lack of self-knowledge as the source of white Southerners' inabilities to come to terms with the changes occurring because of *Brown v. Board.* His best illustration of the problematic nature of a fractured self occurred a decade earlier in the journey Jack Burden embarks upon in *All the King's Men.* In chapter seven, Jack comes up with the idea of the "Great Twitch" to explain the "why" behind any action one takes: everything one does is the result of random impulses; therefore, no one is responsible for the consequences of one's actions:

> For after the dream there is no reason why you should not go back and face the
>
> fact which you have fled from . . . for any place to which you flee will now be like

the place from which you have fled, and you might as well go back, after all, to

the place where you belong, for nothing was your fault or anybody's fault, for

things are always as they are. (311)

According to Jack's Great Twitch theory, there is no causal relationship between what one does

and what happens afterward. Thus, Jack is able to absolve himself and Willie Stark of any

responsibility in the subsequent deaths of Adam Stanton, Judge Irwin, and Willie Stark himself,

as well as the ruin of Jack's relationship with Anne Stanton as a result of his thinking that things

just happen. Eventually, Jack realizes the miscalculations of this theory and replaces it with

another, the "Spider Web" theory, which argues that "[the] world is like an enormous spider web

and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter

and the drowsy spider feels the tingle. . ." (188). Ultimately, Jack accepts this principle as the

underlying motivations for Cass Mastern's actions, the subject of Jack's unfinished doctoral

dissertation, while equally acknowledging the principle as the underlying reason for the pain and

suffering that has been a constant aspect of his existence.

The "Spider Web" theory informs Warren's idea of the interconnectedness—or the

"intimate interpenetration"—of all humanity. Despite comparing man to "brute," Warren does

not qualify his theory by having a hierarchy of humanity, ranking individuals by race. Instead,

the Cass Mastern story, which is partially responsible for Jack's transformation, makes apparent

that the black communities of the South were—and are—intricately woven into the

interconnectivity of the world. Mastern is a maternal ancestor of Jack. Rescued from poverty by

his brother Gilbert, Cass becomes acquainted in his new life with Duncan and Annabelle Trice, a

banker and his wife, who, in turn, introduce Cass to the pleasures of drinking and gambling. Cass

and Annabelle begin an affair that drives Duncan to suicide when he learns of it. Another

casualty of the affair is Phebe, Annabelle's "waiting maid, a comely yellow wench" (174), who

is sold "to a man who was making up a coffle of Negroes for New Orleans" (176) because she

knows of the affair. In one of the entries of Cass's journal, Jack reads a passage that eventually

helps him understand why Cass chooses to become an abolitionist:

> It was, instead, the fact that all of these things—the death of my friend, the
>
> betrayal of Phebe, the suffering and rage and great change of the woman I had
>
> loved—all had come from my single act of sin and perfidy. . . [It] was as though
>
> the vibration set up in the whole fabric of the world by my act had spread
>
> infinitely and with ever increasing power and no man could know the end. (178)

Not lost on the reader is Cass's inclusion of Phebe's devastating circumstances of being sold into

chattel slavery. Cass, who ultimately reveals himself to be brother to all humanity, epitomizes

Jack's statement that "you are not you except in terms of relation to other people" (136). For

Warren, the Cass Mastern story is a microcosm of his paradigm of interconnectedness, which

includes members of all race communities.

Warren approaches his interviews of Southerners directly impacted by the 1954 Supreme

Court decision with this framework in mind. *Segregation* presents a South that lacks the

understanding of the interconnectedness of all humanity. Warren describes this condition as a

fractured self and identifies it as the state from which primarily white Southerners suffer—

although both black Southerners and even expatriated Southerners like Warren himself appear at

risk of the same malady. In one interview after another, white and black Southerners—but more

particularly, white Southerners—reveal their inabilities to cope with the realities of the federal

mandate to desegregate schools. One of Warren's first interviews underscores this point. A boy

who has hitchhiked to Nashville from Atlanta to see the Fort Nashborough replica on First Street

has a vituperative reaction to some of the racial unrest occurring in Atlanta:

> I ask him where he goes to school.
>
> 'Atlanta,' he says. . .
>
> 'You all have been having a little trouble down your way,' I ask, 'haven't you?'
>
> He looks sharply at me, hesitates, then says: 'Niggers—you mean niggers?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> 'I hate them bastards,' he says, with a shuddering, automatic violence. . .
>
> 'Don't you?'
>
> 'I can't say that I do,' I reply. 'I like some and I don't like some others.'
>
> He utters the sudden obscenity, and removes himself a couple of paces from me.
>
> He stops and looks back over his shoulder. 'I'm hitching on back to Atlanta,' he
>
> declares in a flat voice, 'this afternoon,' and goes on out of the fort. (10-11)

Warren describes the young man as "the cliché . . . come true: the cliché of hate" (11). Warren's

use of the word *cliché* suggests the ubiquity of odium white Southerners have for black

Americans. Indeed, the impromptu interview is a snapshot of what Warren will encounter during

the course of his travels through the deep South. It also serves as an early indication that the

Warren who narrates the encounter may be distancing himself from his Southern roots. Having

left the South for good when he departed the University of Louisiana in 1942, Warren went on to

become one of the eminent writers of Southern letters. Physical distance had not removed the

inherent connection he had with the region in which he was born. What had been lost, Warren

apologists would argue, was his segregationist ideology, and *Segregation* is proof of that change.

For Warren the young man's response at Fort Nashborough is the result of a wounded psyche, a self-inflicted injury ensuing from a belief in the "Southern way of life." In other words, the loss the South experienced in the Civil War did not perpetrate the animus—although the defeat contributed to it. Instead, it stems from equating the South with the whole country and believing Southern values were most representative of America's values. That is, the loss of the "Southern way of life" signified also the loss of a national identity, which, according to the Southern mythos, was exclusively white. In *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961), Warren describes the psyche of the South during the Civil War in a way that was still apropos almost a century later:

> In a civil war—especially in one such as this when the nation shares deep and significant convictions and is not a mere handbasket of factions huddled arbitrarily together by historical happen-so—all the self-divisions of conflicts within individuals become a series of mirrors in which the plight of the country is reflected, and the self-division of the country a great mirror in which the individual may see imaged his own deep conflicts, not only the conflicts of political loyalties, but those more profoundly personal. (83-4)

Defused within this critique of American social politics is Warren's belief that the collective psyche of the South remains broken. In his work on a different region of the United States, the American West, Henry Nash Smith defines myth as "an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image" (xi). The collective fractured psyche of the South that Warren traveled in early 1956 to collect his interviews is the result of believing in a mythos created during Reconstruction, adapted, revised, and perpetuated during subsequent generations via books and various forms of popular culture.

Created during Reconstruction, and then based on the idea that the South was a repository of national virtues, the mythos celebrated, exalted, and equated the South with (white) America—the "American ideal." F. Garvin Davenport, Jr., has described the image in the following manner: "This myth suggested that the South, because of its experience of defeat and humiliation, had developed a vision of history, a strength of character, and a sense of moral responsibility which made it alone of all the national regions strong enough to reconcile industrialism and the Negro with the Jeffersonian vision [of the white, democratic yeoman farmer]" (11). Davenport goes on to examine four concepts that "contribute to the development of the 'myth of Southern history'" (12): Union, Southern uniqueness, Southern mission, and Southern burden. For Davenport, each of these concepts has a common denominator: the white South's conceptions of the emancipated African American during the post-Reconstruction South:

> The theme of Union, dominant in the era of reconciliation, becomes qualified by the concept of a special mission to that Union. Both this mission and the conditions in the nation that make a mission seem necessary are eventually defined in terms of the Southerners' consciousness of their own past and their unique heritage. But unlike the Southern uniqueness which is associated with an "Old South" and which might be called sentimental comedy, the tendency evident in this century has been one toward ironic tragedy. The themes of righteousness and tranquility are crowded by the themes of guilt and violence. The tranquility of the plantation becomes first the burden of the subjugated Negro and eventually the "burden of Southern history." (11-12)

In other words, perpetuators of the myth argued African Americans never had a place in the original vision of the ideal American. Their presence in this country had been always as an alien

race. Thus, the appropriate response to a people and culture out of place in the original blueprint for this country was to alienate and subordinate them. When Abraham Lincoln declared the subjugating of these supposed aliens an illegal act, segregation and disenfranchisement were necessary to keep alive and perpetuate the notion of the ideal American. It became, Davenport describes, the mission of the South immediately after Reconstruction[2] to show the rest of the United States that it was possible to stay true to this idealism:

> The lesson of Reconstruction had been well learned. The missionary spirit of abolitionism was long since dead. These "inferior' races," wherever they lived, must be denied participation in the cultural life of American society. For while they were inferior, they nevertheless threatened, with their ignorance and number as well as with their color, to undermine and destroy the whole structure of the white democratic civilization which had subdued them. . . In the national imagination the South's actions could now be equated with the defense of all of the values of white America—all the values of a great White Garden. (19)

The South would do its part to assure those values never died. From 1890 to 1908, various southern states succeeded in disenfranchising their black citizenry with voting laws that made either registering to vote or simply voting virtually impossible for African Americans. President Woodrow Wilson, the first Southern-born President since 1856, reversed advances that African Americans had made in Washington, D.C., by dismissing all blacks who held civil-service jobs in the various departments of the federal government. Southern machinations under the auspices

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[2]In *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (2019), Henry Louis Gates calls the period after Reconstruction "Redemption" to underscore how "the gains of Reconstruction were systematically erased [while] the country witnessed the rise of a white supremacist ideology" (xv). It was the period when white Southerners were able to "redeem" what they had lost during Reconstruction.

of "separate but equal" created separate public facilities for African Americans that did not meet the "equal" part of the statute.

Warren identifies these machinations as the effects of "The Great Alibi" in *The Legacy of the Civil War.* The decades that followed Reconstruction testified to the various methods the South used to perpetuate the myth that separate and unequal, by any means, was necessary for the good of the republic. Warren observes that "the most painful and costly consequences of the Great Alibi are found . . . in connection with race. The race problem, according to the Great Alibi, is the doom defined by history—by New England slavers, New England and Middlewestern Abolitionists, cotton, climate, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Wall Street, the Jews. Everything flows into the picture" (55). This passage reveals elements of Warren's belief in the interconnectedness of all humanity. The impact of an action, collective or individual, has far-ranging significance. The "Great Alibi" of *The Legacy of the Civil War* becomes the myth-building of subsequent generations, but the ultimate effect is the fractured psyche to which Warren is exposed during his interviews of white Southerners.

In early 1956 Warren enters a South that, decades after the machinations of the post-Reconstruction period Gates calls Redemption, still believes the systematic stripping of the rights of its black citizenry remained the appropriate reaction to the compromise of what white supremacists argued was the American ideal. Gains made by blacks during Reconstruction had tarnished that image, and the South had shown the rest of the United States how best to restore it. The post-Reconstruction period, during which the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) was politically and judicially manipulated to reestablish white supremacy in the South, also saw a rise, as Gates notes, in the use of "lynching, mutilation, rape, beatings, and mayhem, [and] a surfeit of verbal and visual imagery to debase the popular image of the Negro"

(14) in order to restore the appearance of the American ideal to its original "brilliance." By 1954, the year the Supreme Court announced its *Brown* decision, these terrorist tactics continued to be the means to maintain an image that other regions, especially the North, were failing to promote.

Checked in its efforts to maintain the status quo, the South's white citizenry reacted with dismay, concession, anger, and passive-aggression, which at times manifested itself in further violence against its black citizenry. The interviews of white Southerners reveal the emotional undergirding of the violent reactions of some Southern whites during the Civil Rights Movement. Warren notes that the young man he met at Nashville's Fort Nashborough was the only interviewee that purposefully discontinued an interview, but several individuals elicited "a stiffening, a flicker of suspicion, an evasion or momentary refusal of the subject. . ." (11). Though some of his white interviewees admit to conflicted feelings about the matter of desegregation, the vast majority of Warren's subjects virulently react to what they believe is federal government overreach in regional politics. This distrust of any non-Southern entity confronts Warren at various stops of his travels. During one trek, Warren reminds the reader of the poor reception he received at his previous interview to set up a scene in which his interviewees again show him no proverbial Southern hospitality:

> My Tennessee license, and Tennessee accent, hadn't been good enough
>
> credentials in Clarksdale, Mississippi. But on occasion, the accent wasn't good
>
> enough even in Tennessee, and I remember sitting one evening in the tight, tiny
>
> living room (linoleum floor, gas heater, couch, one chair, small table with TV) of
>
> an organizer of a new important segregation group (one-time official of the Klan,
>
> this by court record) while he harangues me. . .

He is talking too much, tangling himself. All the while his wife . . . has been

standing in the deep shadow of the doorway to a room beyond. . .

"Excuse me," she suddenly says, but addressing me, not the husband, "excuse me,

but didn't you say you were born down here, used to live right near here?"

I say yes.

She takes a step forward, coming out of the shadow. "Yes," she says, "yes,"

leaning at me in vindictive triumph, "but you never said where you're living

now!" (13-14)

As in the encounter with the young man from Atlanta, Warren distances himself from his

subjects, this time by underscoring that his interviewees recognize him as an expatriated

Southerner. The effect is to suggest that Warren has not merely left the South physically—he no

longer espouses its thinking.

In another city in Tennessee, Warren meets both white-collar and blue-collar workers

who share such sentiments. The encounters underscore the idea that the South fails to see itself

as part of a whole, that is, part of the larger United States: "I have seen a Southern newspaper

man of high integrity and ability (an integrationist, by the way) suddenly strike down his fist and

exclaim: 'Well, by God, it's just a fact, it's not in them not to load the dice in a news story!'"

(15). Not long afterwards, Warren talks to a police officer who makes obvious his disdain for

non-regional criticism of the South: "*Life* magazine's editorial on the Till case, that sure fixed it.

If Till's father had died a hero's death fighting for liberty, as *Life* said, that would have been as

irrelevant as the actual fact that he was executed by the American army for rape-murder" (15). A

Baptist minister expresses similar sentiments: "[When] I show [the minister] an article in the

Reader's Digest, an article mentioning that the Southern Baptist Convention had voted

overwhelmingly for support of the Supreme Court decision, [he] stiffens and says to me: 'Look—look at that title!' I didn't need to look. I knew what it was: 'The Churches Repent'" (15). Subsequent interviews reinforce the reality that a large number of Southern whites believed immediately after *Brown* became law: the South was once again fighting a war against the rest of the country. It is the same "us-versus-them" posture that presaged the Civil War, and the status of Southern blacks occupied the centers of both ideological battles.

The views on black-white relationships expressed in Warren's interviews in *Segregation*, conducted in the mid-twentieth century, echo late nineteenth-century views, both eras witnessing a surge in white resentment toward perceived gains by blacks. In his survey of early-twentieth-century Southern literature, F. Garvin Davenport observes that "[the] myth of Southern history approaches full devlopment (sic) in the early novels of Thomas Dixon" (23). Davenport describes Dixon as "[colorful] and indefatigable as an individual" but "as detestable to a liberal modern reader as any of the verbiage of that particular heyday of American racism" (23). In an analysis of several of Dixon's novels, Davenport reveals Dixon's catalyst: "The purity of the race must . . . be preserved" (38). By reinforcing black stereotypes in works like *The Leopard's Spot*: *A Romance of the White Man's Burden, 1865-1900* (1902)*, The Clansman* (1905) *The Root of Evil* (1911), and *The Sins of the Father* (1912), Dixon essentially leads the vanguard of turn-of-the-century segregationists. Indeed, not only does he publish arguably the most racist material of the period, but, a dear friend of President Woodrow Wilson, he is also instrumental in the White House screening of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the screenplay adaptation of Dixon's *The Clansman.* In the novel, Dixon rails against the threat of the freed Negro, while perpetuating the image of a black man as a "Beast" whose sexual voraciousness threatens the purity not only of the South and its Southern white women but also the nation.

Forty-plus years later, Warren finds Southerners still harboring the same sentiments, claiming a heritage most do not fully understand nor are interested in challenging. Warren's travels throughout the South make obvious that many in the post-*Brown* South continued to believe the racist rhetoric perpetuated by Dixon's novels. During various visits, Warren is confronted with segregationist propaganda. Before an interview with a Tennessee official who runs an "outfit" whose primary responsibility is the propagating of segregation material, he observes some of the literature the place openly displays: "There are the handbills showing 'Harlem Negro and White Wife,' lying abed, showing 'Crooner Roy Hamilton & Teenage Fans,' who are white girls, showing a school yard in Baltimore with Negro and white children, 'the new look in education'" (24). The same handbills cite arguments against desegregation: "'Segregation is the law of God, not man. . . Continue to rob the white race in order to bribe the Asiatic and Negro and these people will overwhelm the white race and destroy all progress, religion, invention, art, and return us to the jungle. . . Negro blood destroyed the civilization of Egypt, India, Phoenicia, Carthage, Greece, and it will destroy America!'" (25). Warren's statement that "[the] stuff is not new. I have seen it before, elsewhere" (24) reveals the deep-seated sentiments that are characteristic of the South as a whole.

More importantly, this rather nonjudgmental response reveals a gap in the writer's own psyche: Warren, who had left the South in 1942 never to live in the region again, appears to be guilty of the sort of evasion of which Forrest Robinson accuses him. By presenting the images sans commentary—an approach he admits to taking in his "Author Notes"—he allows his reader to render judgments on the racist material without taking a stand himself. While distancing himself from his interviewees may result in the reader inferring that the author no longer identifies with the segregationist attitudes so prevalent throughout his travels through the deep

South, this rhetorical decision backfires. Warren's failure to condemn such racist rhetoric belies the distance Warren implies lays between him and the South. Robinson correctly identifies a common tenor of Warren's writings on race, and the same stratagem manifests itself in *Segregation* as well: "[It] appears that Warren's enduring preoccupation with questions of identity was an evasive strategy permitting him to address racial themes, as he felt compelled to, without facing directly or for long their painful moral implications" (527). Warren's silences argue for a different interpretation of his late-career meditations on race, and that interpretation is not kind to the author.

When Warren asks white Southerners "What's coming?" he receives varied responses, but the vast majority highlight the perceived loss of the white ideal as well as a collective sense of impending doom as a result of that loss. Warren asks a white grade-school superintendent if he would hire a black teacher: "I personally would, but folks wouldn't stand for it, not now, mostly those who never went much to school themselves" (45). A lawyer responds to the same question with "It's coming that we got to fight this bogus law . . . or we'll have a lot of social dis-tensions" (46). A college student replies, "I'll tell you one thing that's coming, there's not going to be any academic freedom or any other kind around here if we don't watch out" (48). A taxi driver believes the future holds "[lots] of dead niggers" (48). And a farmer believes "Race amalgamation is inevitable" (50). The responses reveal that the Southerners of the 1950s continue to live under the mythos of a white America, but now anticipating an end to self-anointed supremacy, lament the advent of a new age. Yet if, as some critics argue, *Segregation* corroborates Warren's repudiation of the racist ideology, what is the reader to make of the author's failure to comment on its ubiquity as he tours the South? Might one reasonably conclude that Warren is experiencing a sense of loss as well?

Warren also interviews African Americans during his travels through the South. With few exceptions, the support for *Brown* is overwhelming. And the primary and obvious reason is that for blacks, the South of the 1950s still bore stark resemblance to the South of the turn of the century. Michael J. Klarman, currently a constitutional law scholar at Harvard Law School, details the state of race relations at the turn of the century:

> In the years 1895-1900, an average of 101 blacks were lynched a year—mostly in the South. In 1898, a white supremacist campaign to eliminate black political influence culminated in a race riot in Wilmington, North Carolina, which killed at least a dozen blacks. In 1897, President William McKinley declared that "the north and the south no longer divide on the old [sectional] lines," as he and the Republican party turned an increasingly blind eye to violations of the civil and political rights of southern blacks. . . Segregation spread through most spheres of southern life, and blacks were almost entirely barred from voting and from serving on southern juries. Most scientists agreed that the black race was biologically inferior. (3)

Though lynchings occurred much less frequently during the 1950s, blacks who did not show deference to white Southerners put themselves in danger of retribution. Emmett Till's murder in Money, Mississippi, is perhaps the most well-known example of this sort of Southern justice. The right to vote was still another area in which life had changed little in half a century for Southern blacks. Although various regions of the South had begun to allow them to vote, "[in] the years 1950-55, Southern black voter registration rose to roughly 20 percent, up from 3 percent just a decade earlier" (Klarman 3). For the Southern black, obstacles to voting continued to exist in many regions of the South. Because Jim Crow laws were still the rule of the region,

the South of the fifties revealed that little had changed in the South since early twentieth century. This reality was especially true of a black person's access to a good education. Thus, in one interview after another with black Southerners, Warren senses a sort of suppressed optimism about what the Supreme Court's decision means for the present and the future. The interviewees consistently express hope more for the educational opportunities the higher court's decision will bring than for the prospects of voting in future elections.

With a mixed-race African American he calls "a yellow plump man" (32)—a problematic descriptor to be written by an alleged reformed segregationist—Warren discusses the potential educational advances as a result of the Supreme Court's mandates:

> "About education, now. If you got good schools, as good as anybody's, would that satisfy you?" (33)
>
> "Well," the yellow man begins, but the black, intense-faced man breaks in. "We never had them, we'd never have them!"
>
> "You might get them now," I say, "under this pressure [the Supreme Court decision in *Brown*]."
>
> "Maybe," the yellow man agrees, "maybe. And it might have satisfied once. But"—and he shakes his head—"not now. That doctrine won't grip now."
>
> "Not now," the intense-faced man says. "Not after the Supreme Court decision. We want the law."
>
> "But when?" I ask. "Right now? Tomorrow morning?"
>
> "The Supreme Court decision says—" And he stops.
>
> "It says deliberate speed," I say, "or something like that." (33)

In a subsequent interview, a Negro college administrator and a black lawyer, both belying the stereotype of being members of a race of ignorant, unintelligent subhumans, answer a question from Warren that suggests the author is attempting to universalize the Southern black experience. Warren asks, "*Is there any difference between what the Negro feels at the exclusions of segregation, and what a white man feels at the exclusions which he, any man, must always face at some point?*" (43, italics Warren). Both men answer in the affirmative: "'Yes, it's different,' the Negro college administrator says, 'when your fate is on your face. Just that. It's the unchangeableness. Now a white man, even if he knows he can't be President, even if he knows the chances for his son are one in many millions—long odds—still there's an idea there'" (43). In like manner, the lawyer responds: "'Yes, it's different. But it's not easy to name. Take how some unions come in and make some plant build nice rest rooms, one for white, one for Negroes, but same tile, same fixtures and all. But off the white ones, there's a little lounge for smoking. To make 'em feel superior to somebody. . ." (45). These snippets of interviews underscore the difference between the fractured collective psyche of Southern blacks and Southern whites: the wounds that white Southerners bear are self-inflicted; in contrast, the wounds that Southern blacks bear are exacted upon them.

Though Warren fails to make the association, what the college administrator and black lawyer manifest are the effects of the psychic injury W. E. B. Du Bois refers to as double consciousness. "[The] problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (100), Du Bois proclaims in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The phenomenon is the result of a country that is governed by differences. More importantly, this imposition of difference, the civil rights leader continues, creates psychic disharmony: "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body,

whose strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (102). Du Bois would repeat the refrain in other places, sometimes changing a word or two but essentially voicing the same idea. For the civil rights leader, the psychological scars were just as problematic as segregation, Jim Crow laws, and voter disenfranchisement of Southern blacks. Du Bois was presciently aware that the fractured psyche would be a more difficult task for African Americans to overcome.

Indeed, Warren himself understands fully the impact of living under the imposition of difference—albeit from a white man's perspective. When he remarks in the last interview of *Segregation,* "Gradualism is all you'll get" (65), the conclusion is not just a prediction of the South's recalcitrant pushback to the requirement to change. Like a line from one of his poems, it connotes more than its surface meaning of measured and deliberate adjustments. Those gradual changes will occur not just in public policy but in psychic response as well. And if gradualism is measured as the sum total of its parts, some will not change at all. Warren highlights this reality with an interview he has with the taxi driver who has taken him to the apartment where he stays during one stop in Nashville. A World War II veteran who had fought in Africa, Sicily, and Italy to assure that the types of freedoms guaranteed by a democratic republic like the United States would continue, the driver implies that a change in racist attitudes—a change that would allow him to exercise the same freedoms for which he risked his life—will never occur in some Southerners:

> *Niggers a lot better than Arabs, but they didn't hurt themselves—didn't any of*
> *'em git a hernia for Uncle Sam—race prejudice—but it ain't our hate, it's the*
> *hate hung on us by the old folks dead and gone. Not I mean to criticize the old*
> *folks, they done the best they knew, but that hate, we don't know how to shuck it.*
> *We got that God-damn hate stuck in our craw and can't puke it up. If white folks*

quit shoving the nigger down and calling him a nigger he could maybe get to be a

asset to the South and the country. But how stop shoving? (62 italics Warren's)

This comment precedes Warren's last conversation with a Southerner who, like the taxi driver,

reveals some evidence of progressive thinking yet belies an attachment to racist ideology.

In his last interview for *Segregation,* Warren interrogates himself, the strongest argument

that the book is about his *own* racial politics. The author immediately makes clear that despite

leaving the South for good in 1942, he still considers himself a Southerner. He underscores this

identification with the use of the first-person, plural possessive:

> Q. Do you think the Northern press sometimes distorts Southern news?
>
> A. Yes.
>
> Q. Assuming that they do, why do they do it?
>
> A. They like to feel good.
>
> Q. What do you think the South ought to do about that distortion?
>
> A. Nothing.
>
> Q. Nothing? What do you mean, nothing?
>
> A. The distortion—that's the Yankees' problem, not ours. (63)

Though Warren never makes clear over the course of this interview what about Southern news

the North distorts, he undoubtedly is referring to Northern rhetoric that referred to *all*

Southerners as racist. For proof, he could have offered the following passage in the *Greensboro*

Daily Mail: "There are many white people in the South who recognize the injustice of the lunch

counter system. . . It is based on circumstances which may have made sense 100 years ago; today

it has a touch of medievalism. It smacks of Indian "untouchables" or Hitlerian Germany's Master

Race Theories" (qtd. in Sitkoff 79-80). Though white supremacy reigned supreme in the South,

small pockets of support for the Civil Rights Movement existed throughout the region. Yet Warren's implicit reference to this reality notwithstanding, he fails to convince the reader that he identifies with these "new Southerners." In Warren's mind, the problems of Southerners are his own as well. The primary problem of the South, Warren argues in *Segregation,* is its fractured psyche, a failure to understand the interconnectedness of all humanity. David W. Blight acknowledges Warren's quest in the following manner: "[Warren] heard a huge variety of personal struggles and psychological divisions within the souls of individual people, as well as a catalogue of ideas about the relationships of law and morality, of time and human change" (xv).

Yet while Warren may nuance the problem with discussions about self-knowledge, the final analysis is that the primary problem in the South of *Segregation* boiled down to racial politics, a topic that the author addresses in all genres throughout his long and storied career. Warren's preoccupation with the issue has led to frequent critical discussions on the matter, the central question of which is whether the author, over the course of his career, evolved from a segregationist to an integrationist.

Those who have addressed this question wrestle with two undeniable facts of Warren's career. In 1930, he penned the essay "The Briar Patch," an unapologetic defense of the segregated South. Then in 1956, he concluded the book *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* with an interview of himself wherein he unequivocally stated he was an integrationist. In short, Warren's racial politics appeared to have transformed dramatically. Over the course of Warren's career, however, critics have debated the veracity of this transformation. When addressing the alleged change in Warren's racial politics, Warren apologists argue in one of two manners. The first group argues that despite Warren's support of the status quo in the South, the writer never supported racist ideologies. Hugh Ruppersburg is representative of this mindset:

"From the beginning of his career Warren portrayed blacks in a fairly consistent manner. For the most part he avoided racist stereotypes" (*American Imagination* 150). In *Robert Penn Warren and the American Imagination* (1990), Ruppersburg explores the subject of race as one of several themes to which Warren returned during a sixty-five year writing career. The central motif in Warren's oeuvre is the myth of America versus its reality—the loss of the ideals of its founding fathers. As a result, Ruppersburg argues, when Warren writes about the black experience, he is more interested in the applicable universality of that experience and less in the uniqueness of what it means to be black in America:

> Even when black characters do illustrate a racial theme, Warren still seems more interested in them as human beings than as symbols of oppression. . . The black figures who occasionally appear in the poetry usually serve the same themes as the white characters, especially the theme of identity. Race is an aspect of identity in these poems but rarely the central theme, though in some of the later poems it becomes a barrier which the poet must transcend in order to achieve human understanding. (151)

Ruppersburg underscores this interpretation of the black characters in Warren's works by arguing that Big Jim Todd, the runaway slave in "Pondy Woods," arguably Warren's most problematic poem because of its racist rhetoric, should be defined by the reader as "Everyman": "There is no escape for [Big Jim Todd], just as there is no escape for any human individual" (151). As difficult as that conclusion is to accept,[3] Ruppersburg is not alone in assessing Warren's racial politics as evidence of his concern for humanity.

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[3] Twenty years after the publication of *Robert Penn Warren and the American Imagination*, Ruppersburg would return to the same topic in an article he published in the *Mississippi Quarterly*. "Robert Penn Warren and the 'Burden of Our Time'*: Segregation and Who Speaks for the Negro"* (2010) rehashes much of the material that the author covered in his earlier work. Time had not moderated his position of Warren, however. While he begins by

The second group in the apologist camp acknowledges Warren's support for segregation early in his career but maintains he experienced a personal transformation from overt supporter of Southern segregation policies during the 1930s to conscientious defender of integration during the mid-century Civil Rights Movement. While William Bedford Clark sees a consistency in Warren's principles during his sixty-five-years as a writer, he does acknowledge changes in Warren's racial politics: "Warren's values and assumptions proved to be remarkably consistent over the course of his career. . . In some instances, in Warren's approach to the race question, for example, his ideas underwent a profound reevaluation, but, even when we find Warren taking what appears to be congruent stands on an issue early and late in his life, a closer look serves to reveal the subtle but real evolution that has transpired" (18). Clark's position is similar to the one Anthony Szczesuil takes in his book *Racial Politics and Robert Penn Warren's Poetry*: "Politically, Warren made the dramatic transition from a segregationist to an integrationist position" (1). Szczecuil's own examination of Warren's "continual personal struggle and conflict . . . self-evaluation and self-revision" (1-2) leads him to conclude that Warren's transformation from segregationist to integrationist was complete:

> Warren engaged racial subjects, themes, and issues in all of his genres and in
> every decade of his career, from the 1920s to the 1980s. Most notably, the young
> Warren advocated racial segregation in his 1930 essay "The Briar Patch,"
> published in the controversial Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand.* As Joseph

admitting that the material of *Who Speaks for the Negro?"* is dated—"Even the key word *Negro* is now regarded as patronizing and offensive" (115)—time had not done the same to his evaluation of Warren's writings on the black experience: "Dehumanization is the target of Warren's criticism of contemporary America and modern life: the dehumanization of the individual, the devaluation of existence. In the black man's alienation and disenfranchisement, he discovers an analogue to his own sense of modern estrangement" (128).

Blotner remarks in his biography of Warren, "He could not have known how 'The

Briar Patch' would haunt him, or how he would be judged a racist by people

ignorant of his later repudiation of the 'separate but equal' doctrine" (113). This

public repudiation of segregation came in the 1950s. Against the backdrop of the

growing civil rights movement, Warren became an advocate of integration and in

texts such as *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (1956) and *Who Speaks*

for the Negro? (1965) was writing to exorcize himself of his past opinions. (2-3)

While Szczesuil does acknowledge the problematic nature of some of Warren's discourse, he

concludes that Warren exhibited a sincere effort to come to terms with his past (215). The

conclusion is not unlike the one to which David A. Davis comes in an essay published at about

the same time as the release of Szczesuil's book: "Ultimately, Warren found his way out of the

briar patch" (120). This second view of Warren's transformation appears to have staying power

as Blight implies his support for the position in a more recent evaluation of Warren's lifelong

preoccupation with race: "'The Briar Patch' haunted Warren for the rest of his life; it cropped up

in some reviews of *Who Speaks*. Some commentators still cannot uncouple Warren from that

essay well after his death; it is likely the only writing he ever lived to regret, and he said so

endlessly" (xiii).

      Those critics to whom Blight refers are the non-apologists—writers who find the idea of

Warren's conversion problematic. Among them are Forrest G. Robinson and Michael Kreyling,

both of whom argue that despite Warren's declarations of support for integrationist policies, his

later writings evidence a perpetuation of the author's early racist views. In his essay "A Combat

with the Past: Robert Penn Warren on Race and Slavery," Robinson sees evasion of his past in

Warren's writings, an unwillingness to confront his early support of segregation:

"The recognition of complicity," Warren declared, "is the beginning of innocence.
/ The recognition of necessity is the beginning of freedom." . . . Warren arrived at
this paradoxical position . . . because he could neither fully deny nor fully accept
the burden of his Southern past. He made peace with that past, if peace it really
was, by continually and variously accepting and denying responsibility for it.
(528-529)

Kreyling concurs with this conclusion, further positing that one of the texts that Warren
apologists use to argue for his conversion in fact supports just the opposite interpretation: "To
anticipate the title of one of Warren's later works on racism in the US, it is clear 'who speaks for
the negro' . . . is a white man appropriating to himself all subjectivity, supremely
sure that every human person in a dark skin is satisfied with the status of being a commodity"
(281). Where Warren's defenders see transformation, Robinson and Kreyling see disingenuity.
These critics argue that the literary output of Warren's later career evidences an implicit
continued support for the status quo in relationships between America's white and black
populations.

To study Warren's works on race is to study the author's self-reflexivity; it is an analysis
of a writer in perpetual struggle with the appropriate place of black Americans in this country.
Both Warren apologists and non-apologists agree on this point. Starting with his biography of
John Brown in 1929, Warren makes race a major theme of his work. More significantly,
however, is that even after the alleged "[exorcism] . . . of his past opinions" (Szczesuil 3) by way
of personal annotations of the various interviews in *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?*,
Warren finds reason to again make the black American's experience the subject of the poetry he
creates in the 1970s. In 1974, Warren published *Or Else: Poem/Poems 1968-1974*. Two of the

poems included in the anthology underscore events unique to African Americans: "Ballad of Mister Dutcher" and "News Photo." Two years later, he would publish still another poem on the topic, "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart," in the volume *Selected Poems: 1923-1975* (1976). The inclusion of these poems point to only one possible conclusion. Szczesuil, whose interests in Warren's racial politics is in "investigating points of intersection between Warren's changing views on race and his changing poetic theories" (3), observes, "[Many] years after Warren had publicly repudiated his prosegregation position and adopted a more liberal stance on race . . . he keeps returning through his poetry to the subject of race [because] . . . he felt uncertainty, anxiety, and guilt over the implications of his earlier beliefs" (155). This critique argues for the progressive evolution of Warren's racial politics, yet one can argue, perhaps more convincingly, that the contents of those poems reinforce the conclusions to which Robinson and Kreyling come. In other words, these poems are not evidences of further exorcism of Warren's past racist views but substantiation that he continues to harbor such views.

Part Two: The "Not There" in Warren's Conscious Center

The study that follows begins with the conversion narrative of Warren's alleged transformation from segregationist to integrationist. In Chapter One, I identify key moments during Warren's lifelong grappling with American racial politics. In Chapter Two, I discuss Warren's "The Briar Patch," his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand.* The chapter dissects the essay for its white supremacist ideology, and, thus, by extension, confirms that its author was a segregationist. "The Briar Patch," however, was not his foray into contemporary racial politics. He was composing the essay in 1929 when his first published work, a biography of the abolitionist John Brown, came out in bookstores. My analysis of the biography does not occur until Chapter Three, however, because traditionally a study of Warren's racial politics begins

with "The Briar Patch." Warren's biography of Brown contextualizes the essay, offering

substantiation that Warren had entrenched himself in white supremacist ideology more deeply

than the progressive ideas in "The Briar Patch" might suggest. In Chapter Four, I tackle the

problematic aspects of the nonfiction works *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* While

these works allegedly reveal a more progressive Warren, they, in fact, belie Warren's

commitment to a hierarchal view of race. Together, my close readings of these texts, along with

close readings of a select number of Warren's fiction and poetry, reveal that Warren's

fabrications of an Africanist persona—Morrison's term for depictions of the American black

experience—are reflexive. That is, they are an extraordinary meditation on the self.

With the publication of *Segregation,* Warren, his apologists argue, takes significant steps

towards exorcising the demons that had tormented his career since the release of *I'll Take My*

Stand, the book Southern literature critics refer to as the Agrarian Manifesto. Warren's

contribution to the anthology of twelve essays addresses the "Negro question" in the South. His

position is pro-segregation and echoes Booker T. Washington's adjuration to his fellow Negroes

to "let down your bucket where you are." The essay would trouble him for the rest of his career.

Blotner observes that "[he] could not have known how "The Briar Patch" would haunt him, or

how he would be judged a racist by people ignorant of his later repudiation of the 'separate but

equal' doctrine" (113). Indeed, Blotner's choice of words to describe the impact of Warren's

early-career decisions underscores a truth about the elder Warren: transformation in his racial

politics did occur, and the evidence occurs not only in his writings but also in his personal

choices. Anthony Szczesiul sees a parallel between the growth of his poetry and those changes:

"Reading Warren's poetry within this context [as a white Southerner living through the

enormous changes that altered the landscape of racial politics in the twentieth century] reveals

that the complex transformations that occur over the course of his poetic career sprang from his own difficult negotiations with issues of self and identity, politics and aesthetics, individual will and social change, and race and cultural pluralism . . .” (2). Later in this same work, Szczesiul adds, “His early regional politics—particularly his views on race—and his emerging high modernist aesthetic were complementary endeavors which drew from the same sources: a general fear and mistrust of the social and cultural changes facing America in the early part of the century—particularly in the South—and a consequent desire for the stability, order, and authority of tradition in the face of this modern flux and uncertainty” (9). In other words, Szczesiul sees evidence of the “jangle and wrangle” Warren describes occurring within himself as he penned “The Briar Patch” also manifesting itself during Warren’s early period of poetry (1920s to 1940s).

Though “The Briar Patch” proved to be the most problematic of Warren’s writings, it was not the first time he had addressed racial politics. His first published work was a biography of John Brown, the abolitionist. In *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929), Warren disputes the idea that Brown was deserving of the hero status granted upon him by abolitionists; instead, Warren argues, the more appropriate appellation for Brown was megalomaniac. A disturbing aspect of the book is Warren’s perpetuation of the sorts of racial stereotypes that Thomas Dixon had used to undergird his own campaign for the preservation of white American purity. While Warren’s use of the stereotypes differs from Dixon’s vituperative form of racism, it does make obvious that the African American was equally challenging to the young Warren. While he may not have been an overt champion of white supremacy as Dixon was, he did not quibble with the implicit message his perpetuation of racial stereotypes sent to his readers, who Warren surely

understood to be almost exclusively white Southerners: thus, like them, the message reads, "I too am a white supremacist."

That Warren followed *John Brown* with other works that would also touch on this nation's racial politics testifies to the importance the topic had for the author. Szczesiul concurs: "[Race] is a common denominator in [Warren's] extensive canon" (3). Indeed, one cannot ignore the topic of race when reading Warren as not only does his evolving views on the topic inform his "changing poetic theories" (3), the thrust of Szczesiul's volume, but they situate him in the center of the political debates on civil rights during the early twentieth century through the Civil Rights Movement and beyond. The tenor of those later works that touch on race do indeed suggest that Warren's own racial politics had moderated over the decades. In a 1957 interview with Ralph Ellison and Eugene Walter, Ellison observes that Warren's fiction exhibits an explicit "conscious center"—that is, unlike Ernest Hemingway, and other writers of the twenties, who merely "sneaked in" matters of consciousness (Watkins and Hiers 43), matters of morality appear to be central to Warren's fiction. This "conscious center" is one argument for Warren's evolution towards a more progressive position on racial politics. That is, the argument goes, Warren had replaced the explicit support for the status quo in black-white relationships in early works with a sensitivity for the plight of the African American in not only his nonfiction but also his later fiction and poetry.

Yet Ellison's "conscious center" is not necessarily evidence of the sort of transformation that Warren apologists purport. As noted earlier, Forrest G. Robinson sees evidence of evasion in Warren's later writings. For the epigraph of his essay "A Combat with the Past," Robinson quotes one of the more intriguing lines from Morrison's lecture at the University of Michigan on October 7, 1988: "We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily 'not-there'; that

a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum. . . The spectacularly interesting question is 'What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work?" (qtd. in Robinson 511). Robinson argues specifically that the absences in *All the King's Men* speak volumes about what Warren says about race: "Warren's evasiveness, I want to argue, is closely akin to Jack Burden's failure . . . to acknowledge the existence of 'the race problem.' . . . This conspicuous omission is evidence of an underlying ambivalence, shared by Jack and his maker, on the score of race and slavery" (512). In other words, despite Warren's eventual recognition of slavery and racial inequities as moral issues, his omissions and silences, like those in *Segregation,* suggest an inconsistency that should not be present in someone who no longer was a proponent of segregationist ideology. These inconsistencies are the motivation behind the project that follows, which will examine, explore, and attempt to occupy and delineate the contours of this conscious center regarding an issue that too many critics have given Warren a pass on.

Morrison's concern about the "feats that white American authors perform" as an exercise in literary criticism "to erase the black presences in their works" ultimately led to her exploring the phenomenon. *Playing in the Dark* is the result of her exploration. Early on in the volume, Morrison argues that "there is a strong and undeniable 'African presence' which 'informs in inescapable ways the textures of American literature'" (2). Soon afterwards, Morrison notes the need for "increased critical inquiry into 'the impact of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability . . . on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered these notions" (3). Szczesiul chose to reassess Warren's poetry in response to Morrison's call because Warren's lasting place in American literature "will be determined more by his poetry than by his fiction"

(3). While Szczesiul does not devote his study exclusively to Warren's poetry, devoting a chapter on the poet's "The Briar Patch," another on the racial themes of his early fiction, and a third on *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* the foci of these chapters appear to be to highlight the *alleged* transformation of Warren's racial politics in an effort to "delineate the political and ideological implications of [Warren's] evolving aesthetic and thematic principles" (3). I italicize the word *alleged* because a study of the Africanist presence in Warren's canon suggests an altogether different conclusion about the evolution of his racist ideologies.

While textual evidence may support the idea that Warren left behind the segregationist views he held in the 1920s and 30s, there are reasons to believe that his transformation was not as complete as his supporters contend, and this presents a problem for both Warren scholars and readers of American literature. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison appears to have Warren in mind when she makes certain observations about the ubiquitous Africanist presence in American literature. Her analyses focus primarily on works by Willa Cather, Edgar Allen Poe, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and to a lesser extent on works by Herman Melville, Henry James, and William Faulkner. She excludes Warren from her study, likely for the same reason that Szczesiul chooses to focus his study on Warren's poetry: despite winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1947 for the novel *All the King's Men*, Warren's place in the American literature canon is secure primarily because of his poetry. Still, Morrison certainly is referring to the Warrens of the literary world when making the following comment: "The ways in which artists—and the society that bred them—transferred internal conflicts to a 'blank darkness,' to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies, is a major theme in American literature" (38). Warren acknowledged that his writings on race were self-reflexive; they were, as Szczesiul notes, "inextricably tied to his consciousness as a Southerner" (3). In other words, what Warren writes

about the Africanist—and does not write—offers the reader a way to interpret Warren's own racial politics.

Indeed, Warren had acknowledged that for him all writing was self-reflexive. In *Democracy and Poetry* (1975), Warren acknowledges the ability of a poem to unburden its creator of one's most revered thoughts: "What poetry most significantly celebrates is the capacity of man to face the deep, dark inwardness of his nature and his fate" (31). When Warren uses the word *poetry* in this essay, he means "in the broad sense of all the 'making' which is art" (3). Warren undoubtedly had this notion in mind when he complained that the germ of the fictional works he wrote were in poems he considered composing:

> A great deal of . . . well, poetry is different from fiction. It's much more inside:
> you're reliving your life. For me, anyway. When I quit writing short stories I felt a
> great relief, because I had been killing poems to write short stories. The small
> anecdote—the suggestion behind the anecdote—was a poem. And when you start
> telling a story, making the suggestion into a story, you start mucking the poem up.
> As the germ of a poem, it can grow. ("Interview with Eleanor Clark" 65)

Therefore, though Warren is primarily known as a poet in the classic sense, he imagined himself creating poetry when composing an essay or a piece of long or short fiction—although he did not necessarily use the terms interchangeably. It is fair to say, then, that Warren viewed the creation of a work of fiction as equally self-reflexive as the composition of a poem.

Because a common characteristic of several of Warren's protagonists in both his short and long fiction is the pursuit of a sense of self, one is reminded of Morrison's early statements in the introduction to *Playing in the Dark*: "I am interested in what prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from—and in what disables the foray, for purposes

of fiction, into corners of the consciousness held off and away from the reach of the writer's imagination" (4). The frequent presence of the Africanist in Warren's writing, regardless of the genre, should prompt us to ask what that presence says of Warren himself. For as Morrison notes several pages later, "As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" (17). Her observations are consistent with Warren's admittance that all his writings are self-reflexive. Indeed, Warren admits to the meditative nature of his writings on more than one occasion. In *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Wyatt Tee Walker, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference associate of Martin Luther King, asks him for the motivation behind his interviews of black leadership. Warren admits that the process is more about himself than about the subjects with whom he is dialoging: "I wanted to find out about things, including my own feelings" (232). During an interview conducted by Roy Newquist, Warren admits again to the same impulse: "The key motive was to find out that world as deeply as I could, to find out about myself as deeply as I could" (Watkins, *Talking* 90). By extension then, Warren's self-reflections through frequent immersing of himself in the racial politics of the South in particular, and the United States in general, ultimately reveal that his transformation from segregationist to integrationist should be seen as, at best, partial and incomplete.

One of the reasons the question of Warren's racial politics continues to be a topic of study and debate is that without a sufficient framework for examining and understanding his stance, one must simply take Warren at his word. Morrison's paradigm provides the framework to reassess what Warren's frequent writings about the American black experience reveal about his racial politics. Applying Morrison's approach to white American authors such as Poe, Cather,

and Hemingway to Warren, this project shifts the debate away from the traditional question of "was he or wasn't he" to what do his self-reflections reveal. Warren's confrontations with the Africanist presence in his works expose the powerful "fears and desires that [resided] in [his] writerly conscious." Part of that fear was the reality that like the South of the Civil Rights Movement, he too had not exorcised the demons that haunted him as a result of his segregationist past.

The South during the Redemption period of its history may best be characterized in the following manner: Having lost the battle to subjugate blacks to the status of chattel, the white South successfully found the legal support to segregate and disenfranchise African Americans. It had done what it could as a region to assure that a white America had not died. Likewise, the South that Warren visits during 1956 does indeed reveal a fractured psyche as a result of having lost the legal backing to continue "business as usual." Warren's meditations on the Africanist in works of nonfiction like "The Briar Patch," *John Brown, Segregation,* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, and fiction like the short story "Her Own People" and the novel *Band of Angels,* reveal his own psyche may have not been that different as his fellow Southerners. Such similarity has significant consequences for how we read Warren's work and assess his legacy in particular and how we read American literature in general. The likelihood is good that a similar study done on canonical writers of American literature would find that they too are haunted by the same internal fears that troubled Warren throughout his writing life.

Chapter 1

The Wrangle and Jangle of Warren's "Conscious Center"

Warren critics acknowledge the presence of racist rhetoric in his early writings and then identify subsequent compositions and personal events in his life to plot a metamorphosis from racist ideologist to race progressive. Despite the conclusion to which Forrest G. Robinson and Michael Kreyling come that Warren's writings on race display both evasion and disingenuousness, the trajectory of his views does appear to chart a course of complete reversal from segregationist to integrationist. Anthony Szczesuil is perhaps the most distinct voice to argue for this interpretation of Warren's lifelong interactions with race, having plotted the journey Warren made from segregationist to integrationist in his study *Racial Politics and Robert Penn Warren's Poetry* (2002). But Szczesuil and his fellow critics' evaluation of Warren's racial politics ultimately proves to be problematic because it ignores the implicit meanings of Warren's creative manipulations of the Africanist presence in his fiction and nonfiction.

In this chapter, I do a chronological examination of the episodes of Warren's life that have led critics to interpret his writings on race so differently. I start with how the author came to write "The Briar Patch," reserving the close reading of the essay for Chapter Two, where I examine it for both its progressive thinking and defense of segregation. I then discuss Warren's poem "Pondy Wood," a ballad that he actually had been working on for several years before it was published several years after "The Briar Patch." Its racist rhetoric underscores the early white supremacist mindset of the young Warren. The amelioration of his racism appears to begin in the 1940s when he is named Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress and is able to research slave narratives when he is not involved in official duties. Warren also publishes *All the King's*

Men (1946) during this time, the beginning of a period of prolific writing on race that spans into the fifties and sixties. One of his more significant compositions on race is the long poem *Brother to Dragons* (1953)*,* which contains in verse some of Warren's most confessional statements about his segregationist past. After examining one of these confessions, I then move into a brief discussion of the novel *Band of Angels* (1955)*,* a work that features a mulatta as its protagonist. I conclude the chapter by returning to *Segregation,* the pivotal work, according to his apologists, that most reveals a transformed Warren.

In January 1930, Warren, studying as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, received a letter from John Crowe Ransom, inviting him to write an essay for a volume that would argue that "the agrarian values of the Old South" were the "best hope not only for the South in resisting the effects of northern industrialism but also for the rest of America as well" (Blotner 105). In the same letter Ransom also outlined the plan for Warren to write the essay on "ruralism as the salvation of the negro" (qtd. in Blotner 105). About a month afterwards, Warren responded directly to Donald Davidson that he would accept the assignment, never imagining the composition would haunt him for the rest of his career. Warren did understand, however, the project was a proverbial landmine. "The negro is a delicate subject," he wrote his dear friends Allen Tate[4] and Caroline Gordon,[5] "and one which could be most easily attacked" (qtd. in

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[4] Tate's racism may not have been as virulent as Davidson's, but he, nonetheless, harbored white supremacist ideologies. In "A View of the Whole South," Tate makes clear his position on race equality: "I argue it this way: the white race seems determined to rule the Negro race in its midst; I belong to the white race; therefore I intend to support white rule. Lynching … will disappear when the white race is satisfied that its supremacy will not be questioned in social crises" (295).

[5] Unlike her husband, Caroline Gordon, who retained her maiden name after marrying Allen Tate, established her legacy as a novelist. Still, Paul V. Murphy has observed that Gordon "exhibited a southern nostalgia as strong as any member of the [Southern Agrarians], including Davidson, the most unreconstructed of the Agrarians" (9). This inherent kinship to the conservative values of Agrarianism included views on the Southern black not unlike her husband's and Donald Davidson. In her book *The Southern Mandarins* (1984) Sally Wood observes, Gordon "largely shared the southern notions about blacks that were prevalent in the first half of the [twentieth] century" (xx). In a chapter devoted to Gordon in the volume *Entitled to the Pedestal: Place, Race, and Progress in White Southern Women's Writing, 1920-1945* (2007), Nghana Tamu Lewis argues that such a conclusion ultimately leads to seeing Gordon as merely a "woman of her times." That is, Gordon merely inherited the views of her generation

Blotner 105). In fact, Davidson[6] was the one Agrarian colleague Warren knew he might offend

since Davidson had made his intransigent position on the proper place of the Southern black

quite clear to him: "It's up to you, Red, to prove that Negroes are country folks . . . 'born and

bred in a briar patch'" (qtd. in Blotner 106). As a result, he granted Davidson *carte blanche*

editing of the composition, even though Davidson's changes would have likely modified

Warren's original thesis: "[If] for any reason—such as adjusting one essay to another—you wish

to make certain changes or point up certain arguments please consider yourself as having a free

hand here" (qtd. in Blotner 106). Even before sending his manuscript, Warren understood its

contents would be controversial. The idea that Warren would grant Davidson ultimate control of

the final content of the essay, knowing well that Davidson would take him up on his offer and

that "The Briar Patch" would read quite differently after Davidson had edited it suggests he

kowtowed to the wishes of his former professor. After all, Blotner notes that Warren exhibited a

deep admiration for Davidson as a result of taking a literature course from the professor during

his sophomore year at Vanderbilt University (34-35). One must question how committed Warren

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with little negotiation with the complexities of racial politics. Lewis argues that Gordon did exercise agency in these matters:

> Gordon's instincts and motives for mythmaking derived directly from her status as an aristocratic white southern woman. The clarity and precision with which she remembered and invoked the Old Order in *Penhally, None Shall Look Back,* and *The Garden of Adonis* are largely due to the fact that she consciously lived by its ideological principles daily. And the implication of her having done so, at least throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, is that Gordon consciously exploited the depressed conditions of black and poor white southern Americans for her own benefit. (136)

In other words, while Gordon's racial politics were not unlike her husband's, to argue that she was a mere reflector of her generation does not do justice to the feminist conservatism Gordon fostered in her own right.

[6] John L. Grigsby has observed that although the views of the twelve essayists of *I'll Take My Stand* on the "Negro problem" do not exhibit a united front on the topic, Donald Davidson's brand of racism was as virulent as the most extreme white supremacists of the day:

> Upon close examination, it becomes immediately obvious that the most highly venomous snake in the Agrarian garden is Donald Davidson, evident both in his reaction to Robert Penn Warren's essay in *I'll Take My Stand* and in his own essay there. . . Davidson exhibits the pathological mind-set of the extreme racist and is the serpent that person entering the Vanderbilt Agrarians' garden needs to be most wary of. He is also the Agrarian who worked longest to build a regressive social and political program upon his racism and is thus most responsible for negative reactions to the entire Agrarian movement. (33-35)

was to the progressive racial ideas he proposed in the essay if he was ready to accede

responsibility over what he wrote to the racist Davidson.

Warren was Allan Tate's choice to write this chapter. After all, Warren had recently

completed a biography of John Brown, the "martyred" abolitionist, and because the work

perpetuated stereotypes about enslaved blacks before they were emancipated, one might easily

assume that part of Warren's motivation for composing this work was that, like Tate, Warren

viewed African Americans as unworthy of any status than what they currently had. National

attitudes towards John Brown in the early twentieth century generally fell at the extreme ends of

the spectrum between admiration and abhorrence. Those who admired John Brown for his

actions sympathized with the black's plight in the United States. In contrast, those who looked

upon John Brown with revulsion saw blacks as a problem. Thus, both Tate and Davidson, having

read Warren's *John Brown*, could easily have made still another assumption—that the young

poet would have taken a conservative position on the black's position in an agrarian South. Yet

the writing of *John Brown* apparently belied Warren's true sentiments on the black Southerner

because, as Conkin observes, Davidson was shocked when he received Warren's "The Briar

Patch" manuscript:

> His [Warren's] essay horrified Davidson, who, in alarm wrote Tate that the essay
>
> was not related to the main themes, treated the Negro problem in general terms,
>
> with "progressive" implications, and seemed infected by "latter-day sociology."
>
> In short, it did not adhere to Southern racial norms and might offend the very
>
> Southerners they wanted to enlist in the agrarian cause. In horror, he exclaimed
>
> that it did not "sound like him. What is he after?" In fact, he doubted that "Red
>
> actually wrote this essay!" He believed it inappropriate for the book, and, after

reading it, Owsley fully supported him in this judgment. In this one case,

Davidson decided to use his editorial responsibility and reject the essay in order to

protect the larger project. (Conkin 72)

That the essay was included in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) is testament to the deep admiration

Tate had for Warren. Tate liked the essay and lobbied hard for its inclusion, suggesting to

Davidson that he take Warren up and edit the essay at will. Davidson did edit the manuscript but

not enough to align Warren's beliefs with his own.

Conkin offers a glimpse into the psyche of Warren during the period he was composing

"The Briar Patch." According to the author, homesickness likely had an influence in Warren's

acceptance of the assignment (59). No doubt, Conkin is reflecting the sentiments Warren himself

makes at the 1956 Fugitive reunion:

Well, as I remember the thing as it came to me, there were several appeals in it

[Agrarianism]. It hit me at an age when I was first away from this part of the

country for any period of time, having lived in California two years, and a year in

New Haven in the Yale Graduate School, and then in Oxford. And I had broken

out of the kind of life I was accustomed to in that part of the world I knew. And

there was a sentimental appeal for me in this. (Purdy 207-08)

As Conkin puts it, Warren was attracted to Agrarianism "because he was young, away from

home, and sentimentally attached to a familiar way of life. He was willing to affirm his roots, not

as a thought-out philosophy but as an intuitive response" (59). In other words, according to

Conkin, nostalgia for home and dear friends played a significant role in Warren's writing an

essay that did not necessarily reflect his true sentiments—even if Davidson deemed it too

progressive. This failure to stay true to oneself is the "wrangle and jangle" to which Warren

refers many years later. If this version of Warren's mindset is correct, then Warren could publish *John Brown* only a year earlier without any prompting on anyone's part to prove that "Negroes" are "'born and bred in a briar patch,'" yet when asked to expand upon the proper place of the black Southerner in the Agrarian paradigm, could not do so without betraying what he really believed about African Americans. Moreover, if this version is correct, Agrarianism played a role in the formation of Warren's early beliefs about Southern blacks although Warren proved over the course of his lifetime never to have been committed to any one ideology.

The Agrarians were born from the group called the Fugitives, a group of poets and literary scholars who came together at Vanderbilt University during the 1920s. When in 1956 the members who formed the Fugitives met together for a reunion, several of them related their recollections of the genesis of the group. According to Rob Purdy, Ransom, arguably Tennessee's most acclaimed poet at the time, and Alfred Starr, a member of the literary group who attended but never graduated from Vanderbilt, argued for the apolitical tenor of the group:

> **Ransom**: I don't like to be held to any concept of magnitude or dimension. And every poet is a law to himself in those matters. But we did not make a program, nor swear any oaths, nor undertake any Herculean labors.
>
> **Starr**: Nor undertake the solution of political problems.
>
> **Ransom**: No. That never entered into our conversations.
>
> **Starr**: I'm glad to get that on the record.
>
> **Ransom**: So far as I can recall. Never. (Purdy 81)

Instead, the group's focus was the composing, reading, and critiquing of each other's poetry. As for the name Fugitives, Merrill Moore recalls, "We were all rebelling, not only against the bourbon Brahmins, or the moonlight and roses, or you might call it the 'moonlight and roses

neurosis,' or as Allen [Tate] called it, the—I remember, Allen, you telling me that we were really protesting against the 'sweetness and light' school; and you were right; we were" (Purdy 145).

If the Fugitives were not politically minded, the Agrarians most definitely were. Only four of the original Fugitives became Agrarians: Warren, Ransom, Davidson, and Tate. According to Conkin, the "eleven other Fugitives either had no interest in Agrarianism or, as in the case of [William Yandell] Elliott, openly repudiated it. At the 1956 reunion, the distinction between the Fugitives and the Agrarians remained clear: a Fugitive meeting, even in the early thirties, was a poetry seminar, not a place to plot Agrarian conspiracies" (23-24). Elliott relates that "the whole Agrarian rebellion, or revolt, in this group was surely aimed at something that they thought they could correct in the 'out-of-jointness' of the times" (qtd. in Purdy 157). At the same event Andrew Lytle defines this period of "out-of-jointness" as that "historical circumstance of the First World War, which gave this affluent kind of release into which all things seem to be extravagantly enlarged. Then suddenly, as always, you come back to the domestic scene, into the local situation; and the trial at Dayton focused it—as a concrete instance always does" (qtd. in Purdy 178).

What the Agrarians were defending against during this period of "out-of-jointness," according to Louis D. Rubin, Jr., who writes the introduction to the 1962 edition of *I'll Take My Stand,* is the "erosion of the quality of individual life by the forces of industrialization and the uncritical worship of material progress as an end in itself" (xiv). Rubin adds, "It was not their assumption that one first achieved material well-being, then used it to further 'the more spiritual side of a good, full and happy life'; on the contrary, they insisted that any attempt to divorce economics and labor from 'the more spiritual side' of one's life brutalized the labor and cheapened the humanity" (xiv-xv). In essence, then, the symposium, which becomes the text *I'll*

Take My Stand, is a manifesto against rapid industrialism, urbanism, and modernity in the United States but especially their encroachments upon the South and their effects on Southern culture and tradition. As Ransom writes in the "Introduction: A Statement of Principles": "All the articles bear in the same sense upon the book's title-subject: all tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much as agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian *versus* Industrial" (xxxvii italics Ransom).

Ransom adds a qualifier when he notes that "all as much as agree. . . [No] single author is responsible for any view outside of his own article" (xxxvii). Indeed, Ransom may have had in mind Warren when making this statement, for while an Agrarian by virtue of contributing to *I'll Take My Stand,* Warren was less committed to the defense of Agrarianism than his compatriots. As Conkin notes, "[Warren] never capitulated to any ideology or committed himself unreservedly to the Southern cause. And none of his essays, in *I'll Take My Stand* or later, spoke directly to the philosophical issues. He preferred to do literary criticism, or to describe various points of view, as a somewhat detached observer, whimsical and sympathetic" (59). Indeed, in the text considered to be the sequel to *I'll Take My Stand*, *Who Owns America?: A Declaration of Independence,* Warren again contributed an article, but his essay is unlike the others. While the majority of the authors rail against industrialism, capitalism, and Communism, Warren provides a critical review of proletariat literature.[7] Moreover, a survey of various works of his oeuvre reveals that he understood that though Agrarianism may perhaps be a better answer to America's cultural woes than capitalism or Communism, it too had its limitations. Thus, like

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[7] William Bedford Clark has observed that "Warren . . . was always sensitive to the conditions that gave rise to protest literature" (63) although "[in] response to a *Partisan Review* questionnaire mailed to various writers . . . Warren indicated . . . the literature itself left a good deal to be desired" (144).

Sherwood Anderson, who revealed the grotesque of small-town America, and Carson McCullers

and William Faulkner, who occasionally explored the theme of Southern grotesqueness, Warren

also did not hesitate to unveil the wartiness of Southern culture. Though his characters may be

less memorable than those of his literary peers, protagonists like Percy Munn, Jeremiah

Beaumont, and Bolton Lovehart— each afflicted with a lack of self-identity—illustrate that

Warren understood well the psychic effects of a culture built solely on an Agrarian mythos.

But if Warren equivocates in his allegiance to Agrarianism, he makes obvious his

position on blacks in an agrarian South is less so. "The Briar Patch," Warren's contribution to *I'll

Take My Stand,* clearly defends the South's segregation of its African-American population. The

essay has three basic tenets: that blacks deserve the same rights as whites, but within the

framework of a segregated society; that Northern industrialization of the South would only

victimize blacks further and thus worsen their relationships with whites; and that an agrarian

lifestyle best suits the Southern black (Ruppersburg 30). Warren undoubtedly understood that

most of what he wrote would please his Agrarian compatriots. They would agree with his

support of segregation, his acknowledgement that industrialization was not a panacea for any

alleged problems the South had, and that blacks should not aspire to any vocation higher than

manual labor.

But for Davidson, an Agrarian manifesto must address the black question, and Warren

had not done so appropriately. Conkin notes that early discussions on the content of *I'll Take My

Stand* included dialogue on the "placeness"[8] of the Southern black: "The progressives might

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[8] In *William Faulkner and Southern History* (1993), Joel Williamson discusses the importance in Southern culture
for every element of society to have its appropriate place:

> If I were pressed to chose (sic) one word that comes closest to capturing the essential nature of Southern
> culture, that word would be "placeness." There is a place for everything and every person, and everyone
> and everything ought to be in its place. There is also placeness in time—a time for certain words to be
> spoken, certain gestures to be made, and certain rituals to be performed. Placeness is a quality in every

capture the field, win over public opinion, and violate southern traditions by their treatment of the Negro issue, already a more critical concern to Davidson than the philosophical heresies that bothered Tate" (55-56). As a result, Davidson had not expected Warren to make any concessions to black Southerners. Davidson saw Warren's conclusion, "Let the negro sit beneath his own vine and fig tree" ("The Briar Patch" 264) as incompatible with what he believed was the appropriate place of blacks in Southern culture. Warren's concession that some of the desires Southern blacks had merited consideration would have been more blasphemous to an Agrarian's ethos, especially that of the white supremacist Davidson. A brief overview of Warren's progressive ideas in the essay reveal how "out of step" he was with the Agrarianism Davidson proposed to champion in *I'll Take My Stand.*

Warren's first "blasphemous" statement in "The Briar Patch" against Agrarianism occurs when he asserts, "There are strong theoretical arguments in favor of higher education for the negro. . ." (251). But even with Warren's qualifier that higher education benefitted the black population only in segregated populations, the idea was still too progressive for Davidson. The unofficial leader of Agrarianism, he was a virulent racist in the 1930s and would continue to be throughout his career. In a review of one of Davidson's impassioned defenses of southern agrarianism, *The Attack on Leviathan,* Mark G. Malvasi identifies his attitude towards Southern blacks as Davidson's most significant misstep:

> The most obvious flaw in Davidson's thinking lies in his view of race relations.
> Under the principles of the New Federalism, Davidson presumed that southern
> state governments had no legal obligation to obey or implement the Fourteenth
> and Fifteenth Amendments, and, after 1954, the *Brown* decision. He never

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culture, but in the South, because of the necessity of keeping blacks in their place, that quality is vastly exaggerated. (403)

repudiated his position on segregation, never modified his views on race relations, and never abandoned his racism. (57)

Warren's suggestion that Southern blacks would benefit from higher education was much too progressive for a man who had never viewed blacks on equal terms. Thus, when Warren observes that "everyone recognizes that there is a need for negroes in the professions, especially medicine and teaching. . ." (251), he offers the Southern black a place that Davidson would never in his life concede. Neither the "need" nor the "everyone" existed for him.

Warren's concession of equal justice before the law, his second "blasphemy," would have been equally problematic to Davidson:

> At present the negro frequently fails to get justice, and justice from the law is the least that he can demand for himself or others can demand for him. It will be a happy day for the South when no court discriminates in its dealings between the negro and the white man, just as it will be a happy day for the nation when no court discriminates between the rich man and the poor man; and the first may be a more practicable ideal than the second. . . [The] least that can be desired in behalf of the negro is than any regulation shall apply equitably to both him and the white man. (252)

Davidson's position on American justice for blacks was more in line with Benjamin Tillman, a South Carolina and United States Senator, who thirty years earlier had proclaimed his support for lynching as the most appropriate form of justice for Southern blacks although Davidson never supported violence against Southern blacks:[9] "We of the South have never recognized the right

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[9] Although Davidson regretted the Southern form of justice that legitimized the use of lynching—"the work of hot-heads and roustabouts" (qtd. in Murphy "Sacrament" 96), he belied the support of the practice in his book *Attack on Leviathan*: "[What] did a few lynchings count in the balance against the continual forbearance and solicitude that the

of the negro to govern white men, and we never will. We have never believed him to be the equal of the white man, and we will not submit to his gratifying his lust on our wives and daughters without lynching him" (qtd. in Herbert). Thus, Warren is out of step with both his editor and a large number of white Southerners in asserting that Southern blacks deserve a fair shake in the judicial system.

While Warren's progressive views on educational opportunities and judicial equality for blacks may have been too progressive for his fellow Agrarians, in one area he was still very much in line with their ideas. In the essay, Warren continues to support the status quo in Southern race relations by arguing that whatever equalities blacks do gain must occur within a segregated South. He quotes one of Booker T. Washington's more memorable lines from the Atlanta Exposition of 1895 speech to underscore his position: "We can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (718). Washington had essentially argued that a segregated Southern black population was the most conducive environment to social uplift. By quoting Washington, Warren makes clear that none of the concessions he makes to the Southern black population threatens the Southern tradition of separate-and-unequal. This segregationist position notwithstanding, however, Warren apologists assert the concessions are the first evidence that Warren's racial politics were in the infancy stages of transition.

Many years after writing "The Briar Patch," Warren admitted to its contents not sitting well with him even as he composed the essay. In a 1957 interview with Ralph Ellison and Eugene Ferdinand Walter, Jr., American screenwriter and well-known raconteur, Warren

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Georgian felt he exercised toward those amiable children of cannibals, whose skins by no conceivable act of Congress or educational program could be changed from black to white" (142).

confesses to the uneasiness this assignment brought him despite what Blotner describes as his *asking* for the assignment of writing the Negro chapter of *I'll Take My Stand*:

> My essay in *I'll Take My Stand* was about the Negro in the South, and it was a defense of segregation. I haven't read that piece, as far as I can remember, since 1930, and I'm not sure exactly how things are put there. But I do recall very distinctly the circumstances of writing it. I wrote it at Oxford at about the same time I began writing fiction, the two things were tied together—the look back home from a long distance. I remember the jangle and wrangle of writing the essay and some kind of discomfort in it, some sense of evasion, I guess, in writing it. . . . In the essay I reckon I was trying to prove something, trying to find out something, see something, feel something—exist. . . On the objective side of things, there wasn't a power under heaven that could have changed segregation in 1929—the South wasn't ready for it, the North was not ready for it, the Negro wasn't. The Court, if I remember correctly, had just reaffirmed segregation, too. No, I'm not talking about the objective fact, but about the subjective fact, yours truly, in relation to the objective fact. Well, it wasn't being outside the South that made me change my mind. It was coming back home. In a little while I realized I simply couldn't have written that essay again. (qtd. in Watkins 34-5)

On more than one occasion after the publication of "The Briar Patch," Warren argued that the contents of the essay contradicted the way his father had raised him. The senior Warren, according to the author, insisted on his family's seeing the humanity of African Americans. Indeed, according to Warren, his father even banned the use of the racial slur *nigger* from use in the home—although the proscription did not have an impact on the poet's use of the word

throughout his life. But Warren asserted more than that the essay controverted his upbringing; Warren added that he could never write "The Briar Patch" again because the content of the essay no longer reflected his racial politics. Yet if Warren no longer subscribed to segregationist ideology, the "wrangle and jangle" of his alleged transformation into an integrationist included numerous examples of contradictions. In other words, the "wrangle and jangle" should not be understood strictly synonymous with periodic moments of guilt for having harbored white supremacist ideology during the 1920s and 30s. The "wrangle and jangle" also connotes incongruities between his overt rejection of the racial politics of the Agrarian movement and his implicit support in his writings of the status quo in the South during the course of his career.

Six years after the publication of *I'll Take My Stand*, Warren published his first volume of poems. Among the entries Warren included in *Thirty-Six Poems* (1936) is a ballad on lynching that he had worked on since 1927. That year he had sent the poem "Pondy Woods"[10] to Donald Davidson for his "appraisal and criticism" but added that the version was "not the latest copy" (qtd. in Watkins *Then and Now* 72). Davidson must have been pleased with some of the explicit language of the verse. Critics often cite "Pondy Woods," along with the biography *John Brown* and the essay "The Briar Patch," as proof of Warren's early racism. The ballad recounts an episode—likely his last—in the life of Big Jim Todd, who runs into swampland to elude the punishment from white pursuers for some unstated violation of black-white etiquette:

> Nigger, you went this afternoon
>
> For your Saturday spree at the Blue Goose saloon,
>
> So you've got on your Sunday clothes,

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[10] "Pondy Woods" was originally slated to be part of an earlier volume of poems that Warren had contracted with Joseph Brewer of Payson and Clarke. *Pondy Woods and Other Poems* never made it to publication, however, because Payson and Clarke went bankrupt. The typescript of this unpublished manuscript still exists among the Robert Penn Warren Papers at Yale's Beinecke Library.

On our big splay feet got patent-leather shoes.

But a buzzard can smell the thing you've done;

The posse will get you—run, nigger, run—

There's a fellow behind you with a big shot-gun.

Nigger, nigger, you'll sweat cold sweat

In your patent-leather shoes and Sunday clothes

When down the track your steeljacket goes

Mean and whimpering over the wheat. (22-32)

The disturbing scene anticipates violence that the poem never describes. But while the imagery is disquieting for depicting a reality for Southern blacks in the 1920s, equally unsettling is Warren's language, which gives a reader reason for pause when evaluating the "wrangle and jangle" Warren allegedly experienced during the composition of "The Briar Patch."

Earlier in the poem, Big Jim is described as a "slick black buck" (7), the depiction perpetuating the animalistic imagery that overt racists like Thomas Dixon used during the early twentieth century to assert that African Americans had an insatiable sexual appetite. Even more alarming is what the buzzard says to Big Jim Todd after the stanza above: "Nigger, your breed ain't metaphysical" (33). In light of Warren's self-proclaimed discomfort with composing "The Briar Patch," one wonders how he was at ease to work for several years—a period during which he was writing the essay for *I'll Take My Stand*—on a poem which, in its final form, contains such a line. A number of Warren scholars and critics have responded to the contradiction. Predictably, Hugh Ruppersburg, one of Warren's most ardent apologists, argues for an interpretation that universalizes Big Jim's predicament: "Jim's blackness is not an issue, except as it defines the social helplessness of his position, but it does allow Warren to portray him as an

extreme example of the hopelessly fated man" (151). Szczesuil, who argues for an eventual

transformation in Warren's racial politics, responds to critics that assert that Big Jim is an

"Everyman" or that the scene should be read ironically—that based on the context, the reader is

able to see the implied meaning in spite of the contradiction— Szczesuil sees evidence here of

Warren's early support for racist ideology: "Reading such a level of irony into these passages

would suggest that Warren was already questioning and deconstructing white racist discourse

even before he wrote 'The Briar Patch.' This seems highly unlikely. . . . If we consider the

particular moment of composition . . . it becomes apparent that Warren cannot be so readily

distanced from the values disclosed in his rhetoric" (17). For Szczesuil, any other reading is

problematic as it does not take into account the extent of evidence that Warren repeatedly

perpetuated racist ideology early in his career.

Sterling Brown, renowned black poet and contemporary of Warren's, may have had the

most profound response to the line. At a lecture given several decades after Warren wrote

"Pondy Woods," Brown mimicked the metrical pattern of the offensive line as a rejoinder to

Warren: "Cracker, your breed ain't exegetical" (qtd. in Wimbush 3). Through concision and

replication, Brown exposes a truth that affirms both Szczesuil's conclusion about Warren's early

racial politics and Morrison's assertions about the self-reflexive meaning of the Africanist

presence in an American white author's writings: the presence of this particular white racist

discourse affirms Warren's early-career predisposition for racist attitudes. According to Mark A.

Sanders, Warren is appropriating the buzzard's voice to perpetuate "nearly a half-millennium of

white hegemonic philosophy. . ." (393). The buzzard, Sanders adds, "does not simply assert

black inferiority but reconstructs and reaffirms the mutually exclusive mythic realms 'white' and

'black' must inhabit in order to sustain five hundred years of radical inequity" (393). By

appropriating the voice of the buzzard, Warren thus "constructs a blackness thoroughly banished to the margins of the human community, a blackness of radical absence proclaiming the final and ultimate abstraction of external sameness. Indeed, Warren . . . achieves much of his coherence through the assertion of objectified blackness, through a trope vocabulary of necessarily reductive poses impervious to change over time. . . (393). Szczesuil ultimately extrapolates the same conclusion by examining several of Warren's early poems: "[We] can discern the manner in which these assumptions [regarding blacks] formed the foundation for his representation of the hierarchical structure of the segregated South" (21). That is, through his early "imaginative uses" of the Africanist, Warren gives his implicit approval to the status quo in Southern race relations.

However, while the "wrangle and jangle" Warren admits having while writing "The Briar Patch" may have had little impact early in his career, it does begin to bear influence during the 1940s. In late 1943, Tate, who was serving as Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress, recommended to Archibald MacLeish, then serving as Librarian of Congress, that Warren succeed Tate in the position. At the time, Warren was a professor at the University of Minnesota. In early spring of 1944, the Minneapolis *Sunday Tribune* included a short blurb about "Warren's appointment as Consultant in Poetry of the Library of Congress, 'given annually to an American poet of outstanding accomplishment and reputation in his field'" (Blotner 212). The position had few responsibilities; Warren stated he could accomplish "everything I was supposed to do" in "four hours' hard work a day" (qtd. in Blotner 214). Therefore, he was able to spend a significant part of the day composing his latest work and researching topics of primary interest to him in the hallowed halls of the Library.

One of those research projects excited him tremendously. He spent time with the collected materials of the historians, teachers, librarians, and other white-collar workers who were employed by President Roosevelt's Federal Writers' Project (FWP). The venture, a part of the United States's Work Progress Administration (WPA), tasked these most recently unemployed professionals with producing a series of guidebooks that would represent America's historical and cultural past. Warren spent significant time with the collection entitled "Born in Slavery," a seventeen-volume compendium of 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves. In a letter dated November 9, 1944, Warren would remark to Katherine Anne Porter, "It is really wonderful stuff, full of all sorts of information and human quality and God knows what" (Blotner 214).

Warren used some of what he read in "Born in Slavery" as source material for the Cass Mastern story in *All the King's Men* (1946) and more significantly for *Band of Angels* (1955), the story of Amantha Starr who, raised as a white woman although her mother is a slave woman, is thrust into the world of chattel slavery upon her slave-owning father's death. The reading of those slave narratives did more than supply Warren with source material for just those two works, however, as his thematic attention to race is not limited to these two novels. Race is central to the interpretation of Warren's long poem *Brother to Dragons* (1953), a text in which, as Szczesuil notes, Warren "confronts his own early views on race in a deeply personal manner. . ." (72). The poem has as its subject matter the historical event of the brutal axe murder of a slave by Lilburn and Isham Lewis, nephews of Thomas Jefferson. Szczesuil also identifies this first publication of the poem "as a watershed moment in the transformation of Warren's poetry and of his views on race" (83).[11] Thereafter, Warren would touch on race in a number of works: the

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[11] Warren revisited the poem twice more in the future. In 1976 he reimagined the poem into a two-act play, and in 1979 he reworked the poem "to better reflect the looser, more open style of his poetry in the 1970s" (Szczesuil 83).

aforementioned *Band of Angels,* the novels *Wilderness* (1961) and *Flood* (1963), the criticisms *Segregation: The Inner Conflict of the South* (1956), *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961), *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), and various poems.

A more personal statement of Warren's transforming racial politics, *Brother to Dragons* features a character referred to as R.P.W. whose voice gives the poem a decidedly confessional tone. Indeed, one cannot easily separate the poet from his poem as Warren, the New Critic, would have adjured his university students to do in their neophyte efforts to interpret lines of verse. Friedemann K. Bartsch has correctly observed that the role R.P.W. plays in the poem is crucial to the synthesis of the whole composition:

> Nor is R. P. W. in any way insignificant. He enters fully in the moral drama,
> keeping Jefferson on his toes intellectually, badgering him into renouncing some
> pet rationalization or theory he has used to shield himself, and he, too, shares in
> the pain of increasing self-knowledge. R. P. W. thus functions as more than a
> moderator in *Brother to Dragons*; he is one of the chief actors whose spiritual
> course runs parallel to that of Jefferson and whose ultimate temporal salvation is
> as important to Jefferson's. (338)

Indeed, not only is R.P.W. a chief actor in the poem, he functions as the poet Warren's own voice. Szczesuil argues that what transpires in the poem is R.P.W.'s "interrogation of Warren and his Agrarian past" (91).

In one particularly damning passage in which Warren appears to be appraising his own past, R.P.W. allows neither Jefferson nor Warren off the proverbial hook:

> Sure, I know well—who doesn't know down home;—
>
> The intolerable eye of the sly one, and the foot

Soundless, and the sibilant confabulation below

The threshold of comprehension.

What the hell did you say?

Me, Boss? You mean me?

Who the hell you think I mean, you black bastard?

Me, Boss?

Yes, you—what the hell was that you said?

Boss, I did'n say nothing.

It is always nothing, but always there around you:

And in the deep vessel of self now the dark

Lees and dregs are disturbed, uncoil now, and rise

To murk the clear, rational ichor of innocence.

No use to say now you've dealt justly with individuals

Or held the most advanced views on the race question.

Do you think the Dark Inquisitor can be deflected

By trivialities like that? (*BD* 110)

Szczesuil sees in the passage "a remarkably honest confession" (92) of the racism of which

Warren was guilty. Szczesuil makes two additional important points. First, this confession occurs

before the "more frequently cited 'confessions' in *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?*"

(92). The admission is significant because it supports the idea that Warren's transformation from

segregationist to integrationist was a process that occurred over the course of his lifetime and,

more importantly, if, to borrow from religious dogma, confession is the predecessor to

conversion, Warren is on his way to leaving his white supremacist past behind him. Szczesuil's

second point highlights Warren's refusal to blame "history nor our environment" (92) for his

past. When Jefferson argues for the inevitability of Lilburn's murder of George, the slave, with a

"Lilburn is Lilburn," (111), RPW rejects the assertion:

> For if responsibility is not
>
> The thing given but the thing to be achieved,
>
> There is still no way out of the responsibility
>
> Of trying to achieve responsibility (*BD* 112)

Warren, Szczesuil argues, "admits the depth of his past opinions [in *Brother to Dragons*] with a

bluntness that never really infuses his prose works on race" (93). In other words, if poetry in

particular is self-reflexive for Warren, then the publication of *Brother to Dragons* may indeed be

the watershed moment Szczesuil argues it is in Warren's transformation. At a minimum, *Brother

to Dragons* reveals Warren's recognition of his segregationist past as an egregious and ugly mark

on his legacy. As James Justus observes about the poem, "The premise behind Warren's doctrine

of complicity is the central conviction that none is without guilt" (41)—not even Warren himself.

At worse, however, the long poem, inspired at least in part by "Born in Slavery," belies a reality

that becomes clearer by analyzing the Africanist presence in Warren's prose works.

One of those presences occurs in the novel *Band of Angels*, which Warren was already

working on when he published *Brother to Dragons* in August of 1953. *Band of Angels* arrived in

bookstores on August 22, 1955. Warren's fifth effort at long fiction—he would eventually write

ten novels—features a protagonist of color. Born to a slave woman, Amantha/Manty Starr, light-

skinned enough to pass for white, experiences the effects of her black heritage only after her

white plantation-owning father dies and one of Mr. Starr's creditors places a lien on Manty,

eventually selling her into slavery to pay off the debt owed him.[12] The Civil War provides the

backdrop of *Band of Angels*. Raised by her father, Aaron Pendleton Starr, with all the advantages

of a white Southern belle, one of them being a proper education in the North, Manty finds herself

ill-prepared for the psychic conflicts she now must confront. Written in first person, the novel

begins "Oh, who am I?" (1) and from there, Manty chronicles her quest to self-identity. After

being ignominiously taken away from her father's funeral, she is sold to Mr. Calloway, who

takes her to New Orleans. There, she is resold to Hamish Bond at the city's slave market. A

reformed runner of slaves from Africa, Bond treats his own slaves with kindness, offering them

what he believes is a sense of individuality. Despite his benevolence, Manty frequently

calculates her escape from him. After she admits to Bond her desire to be free, he surprises

Manty by giving her freedom papers and putting her on a ship heading to Cincinnati. Despite this

opportunity, she chooses not to leave him. Eventually, she comes to hate Bond, in spite of his

kindness, ultimately watching him hang during the aftermath of the Union's capture of New

Orleans during the Civil War.

       Over the course of the novel, several men complicate Manty's quest for self-knowledge.

Besides Manty's father and Hamish Bond, Charles de Marigny Prieur-Denis, a neighboring

plantation owner to Bond, reasserts her self-image as a white woman by appealing to her

beautiful pale features. Rau-Ru, a slave who works as Bond's attachė, acts as Manty's foil and

in this role does not allow her to forget her blackness. Seth Parton, a rather superciliously

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[12] Always intrigued with stories of the American Civil War, Warren borrowed a true war story he had heard from a Kentucky writer for the primary plot of *Band of Angels*. The actual story is of two little girls sent to Oberlin College. They are young women when their wealthy white father dies. Returning home to Lexington, Kentucky, for the funeral, they learn all of their father's assets are being seized to satisfy his outstanding debts. Light enough to pass for white, they have no knowledge that they are part black. They are sold to the highest bidder, "a gambler who [takes] them South and [sells] them to a very 'discriminating' buyer of New Orleans" (Blotner 291). The father could have set them legally free by signing papers for their emancipation but had never done so despite being, according to all testimony about his relationship to his children, a doting, affectionate father to the women when they were young girls.

righteous schoolmate from her school days at Oberlin College, reappears, reminding her of the days when white woman was her primary identification. Finally, she weds Captain Tobias Sears, who makes his mark during the Civil War by leading a troop of black soldiers.

The early reviews of the novel, according to Warren, varied from "enthusiastic" to "wishy-washy" to "a bum review" (Blotner 298). James Justus's assessment of the novel finds its problem primarily in the protagonist, who as "[the] heroine . . . is a whiner and a nagger, a spoiled, petulant woman who refines a talent for manipulating men" (237), an assessment Warren acknowledges: "The narrator is wrong," he concedes in an interview. "There's not enough richness and depth in the experience of the narrator—at least it isn't brought out. . ." (Watkins and Hiers 162). Moreover, an ending in which Manty comes to terms with the reasons her father fails to give her freedom papers and thus also comes to terms with her identity appears forced. Yet despite its faults, the work may be regarded as another step in Warren's transformation. By giving a mulatta equal treatment in his development of characters who are seeking self-knowledge—characters such as Jack Burden and Jeremiah Beaumont—Warren acknowledges that while whites and blacks experience similar psychic challenges to self-actualization, blacks—in an implicit affirmation of Du Bois's scholarship—experience an even greater challenge because of double consciousness. In his summary conclusion of the novel, James Grimshaw unwittingly pays homage to the writings of Charles Chestnutt and Nella Larsen, who make light-skinned blacks their particular focus, while describing the classic scenario of Du Bois's theory of internal conflict:

> [Manty's] lack of self-knowledge is one reason Manty has hate-love relationships
> with Seth Parton, Miss Idell, Bond, Tobias, Rau-Ru, and even herself. She does
> not know what community she belongs in. She is able to adjust to life in the black

community as well as the white community. Her dilemma is discovering which

identity is really hers. (*Understanding Warren* 64)

The novel itself might not have been a critical success, but Warren created in Amantha Starr a

literary example of Du Bois's description of "twoness." Evaluated in isolation, the novel offers

little proof of any transformation in Warren's racial politics. In fact, an analysis of the Africanist

presence in the work reveals how problematic the novel is for Warren apologists. Yet when

viewed as one step in Warren's lifelong struggle with race, it suggests on Warren's part an

acknowledgement that amidst the injustice that slaves endured was an equally incapacitating

psychic struggle, one worthy of consideration by writers and readers of American literature.

As I noted earlier, in Szczesiul's evaluation of Warren's lifelong grappling with racial

politics, the publications of *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* marked Warren's most

overt confessions of his own past segregationist views. While the Africanist presences in both

works pose a challenge to such a conclusion, Warren's "confessions" do suggest that Warren had

come, at a minimum, to acknowledge intellectually the problematic nature of his past white

supremacist views. Szczesuil points to Warren's opening paragraph as proof that though Warren

states the book is merely "a report of conversations," Warren is not a detached observer: "I was

going back to look at the landscapes and streets I had known—Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas,

Mississippi, Louisiana—to look at the faces, to hear the voices, to hear, in fact, the voices in my

own blood" (*Segregation* 3). Warren implies a continued connection with the South in this

passage by connoting the writing will be self-reflexive. That is, his own heart will either resonate

with the sentiments expressed by his interviewees or become disquieted from them. This initial

passage, however, occurs pre-interviews and is edged with a wistfulness, which Szczesuil

identifies as a "sense of guilt" (102):

It seems like a thousand years since I first drove that road [Highway 61 in

Mississippi], more than twenty-five years ago. . . Negro shacks set in the infinite

cotton fields, and it seems like a hundred years since I last drove it, last week, in

the rain. . . Last week, I noticed that more of the shacks were ruinous, apparently

abandoned. More, but not many, had an electric wire running back from the road.

But when I caught a glimpse, in the dusk, of the interior of a lighted shack, I

usually saw the coal-oil lamp. Most shacks were not lighted. (4)

Where Szczesuil sees guilt, James Justus sees merely a heightened sense of awareness—

Warren's eyes are being opened to a reality he failed to observe when he wrote "The Briar

Patch": "I would suggest that of the later books—*Band of Angels* and *Wilderness* as well as

Segregation and *Who Speaks for the Negro?*—is less an act of restitution for lamentable early

views expressed . . . than it is a conscientious exploration of a race and its problems. . . These

later works of Warren represent an awakened consciousness more than they do a ravaged

conscience" (141). Whether one or the other, what is undeniable is that Warren views the scenes

of black abject poverty with a set of eyes whose sensitivities to the race problem in this country

are more acutely aware of the issue than the ones he had as a young writer.

The rest of *Segregation* is absent of the sentimentality that infuses the opening to the

volume. Warren stays faithful to his intentions of merely reporting conversations. While the lack

of his own glossing can be disturbing when he is met with rather vituperative white supremacy

rhetoric, Warren's final interview of himself makes obvious his current position on racial

politics. First off, he does acknowledge that despite living away from the South since leaving

Louisiana State University in 1942, he still identifies strongly with the region:

Q. You re (sic) a Southerner, aren't you?

A. Yes. (63)

He also acknowledges that like many Southerners who still live in the region, he fears the federal government is again guilty of overreach in its handling of regional politics:

Q. Are you afraid of the power state?

A. Yes. (63)

Eventually, Warren reveals that his views on segregation have changed:

Q. Are you for desegregation?

A. Yes. (emphasis Warren's)

Q. When will it come?

A. Not soon.

Q. When?

A. When enough people, in a particular place, a particular county or state, cannot live with themselves any more. Or realize they don't have to.

Q. What do you mean, don't have to?

A. When they realize that desegregation is just one small episode in the long effort for justice. It seems to me that that perspective, suddenly seeing the business as little, is a liberating one. It liberates you from yourself.

Q. Then you think it is a moral problem?

A. Yes, but no moral problem gets solved abstractly. It has to be solved in a context for possible solution.

Q. Can contexts be changed?

A. Sure. We might even try to change them the right way.

Q. Aren't you concerned about possible racial amalgamation?

A. I don't even think about it. We have to deal with the problem our historical

moment proposes, the burden of our time. We all live with a thousand unsolved

problems of justice all the time. We don't even recognize a lot of them. We have

to deal only with those which the moment proposes to us. Anyway, we can't

legislate for posterity. All we can do for posterity is to try to plug along in a way

to make them think we—the old folks—did the best we could for justice, as we

could understand it. (64-65)

This portion of the self-interview is perhaps Warren's most overt statement on the racial politics

of his day. While aspects of the dialogue are problematic, such as when he states, "Gradualism is

all you'll get" (65), the responses testify to, at a minimum, an intellectual affirmation that the

status quo treatment of Southern blacks is morally wrong. Knowledge, however, as Warren notes

in *Knowledge and the Image of Man,* does not always effect appropriate responses; therefore, it

is reasonable to assert that Warren's transformation was far from complete, an observation that

will become more obvious in subsequent chapters.

One of the more intriguing aspects of the above exchange is Warren's rhetorical decision

to offer his concluding remarks with an interview of himself. Several years later, he would end

Who Speaks for the Negro? with a chapter that serves as the synthesis of his thoughts after

several chapters of interviews of black leaders and intellectuals. He names the chapter

"Conversation Piece." Instead of interviewing himself, he waxes eloquently, addressing both

white and black Americans about how best to approach the future. Interviewing himself would

obviously have been a poor decision because such an act would have implicitly indicated that he

himself was one potential voice who speaks for the Negro. Though the chapter essentially does

accomplish the same task—speaking for the Negro—the impact would have been more

disconcerting. In an interview of himself, Warren would have rhetorically inserted himself as a voice for the Negro. Concluding *Segregation* with an interview, Warren inserts himself as an equal with the several interviewees that precede him, but by addressing his black readers— "Gradualism is all you'll get"—he rhetorically identifies himself as a white Southerner. Not lost on the reader is that Warren is just as terse in his responses to himself as some of the belligerent white Southerners with whom he spoke. Though Warren is correct that change would occur slowly, the manner in which he chooses to prophecy such a message suggests he believes if change must occur, then *slowly* is the only manner it *should* occur.

Between the publication of *Segregation* and the publication of *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* Warren busied himself with few projects that touched on racial politics. A poem might include a black figure. The social commentary *The Legacy of the Civil War* certainly touches on slavery but is more about the impact the war had on subsequent generations. The novel *Wilderness* (1961) includes a black character, Mose Talbutt, who saves the life of the protagonist, Adam Rosenzweig, and whose role in this moral tale should not be devalued. But until 1964, when Warren embarks on several trips in research for *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* the eight years between *Segregation* and these trips marks a period when Warren did not make racial politics a central theme in any one work.[13]

In 1964, Warren traveled thousands of miles in Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, Georgia, and North Carolina, as well as major northern cities to conduct interviews as part of his research for *Who Speaks for the Negro?* A survey of the original transcripts, which contain dates and venues of the interviews, reveals that Warren likely traveled no fewer than 17,000 miles

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[13] Szczesuil argues that the character Mose Talbutt continues a trope that Warren used in several poems—a black character who reminds the author of his imperfections. The imperfection, of course, is Warren's past embrace of segregationist ideology. More importantly, Mose works as "an index of [Warren's] own capacity for change and growth" (132).

between the months of February and June 1964 to dialogue with various African American leaders and a few white sympathizers of the Civil Rights Movement.

With titles such as "The Big Brass," "Leadership from the Periphery," and "The Young," the chapters of *Who Speaks for the Negro?* reflect Warren's interviewees, but they indicate something more about Warren's view of his subjects. Interviewing such Civil Rights Movement icons as Martin Luther King, Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, Malcolm X, and the Reverend Ralph D. Abernathy is a logical decision to discover the answer to who, among the many and various African-American voices during the turbulent sixties, has the definitive message about the black journey towards equality. But by also interviewing students involved in sit-ins, as well as literary stalwarts, such as James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, Warren acknowledges that the answer to his book title is not as simple as deferring to one of the best known leaders of the movement. In his last chapter, he begins by underscoring this reality:

> Somewhere back in the mind of many people there is an image of *the* Negro leader—a glare-eyed robot propelled by a merciless mechanism to stalk forward over the smiling landscape, where good clean American citizens (including well-adjusted Negroes) go happily about their constructive business. Many of us who are white—in our moments of stereotype and cartoon thinking—share that vision. In those moments we do not realize that there is, in one sense, no Negro leader. There are, merely, a number of Negroes who happen to occupy positions of leadership. (405)

As Ruppersburg has observed, in Warren's "search for a Negro leader . . . which leads him to interview figure after figure in the movement, looking for a consensus about a leader and not finding one. . . he finds 'merely a number of Negroes who happen to occupy positions of

leadership' (405) and who have served their cause responsibly" ("Burden of Our Time" 127).

Warren discovers that eventual success of the Civil Rights Movement was the result of

competing strategies and agendas of individuals as diverse as the solutions they proposed. From

the nonviolent resistance approach of Martin Luther King, Jr., to the black nationalist rhetoric of

Malcolm X, Warren found that black intellectuals could not agree on what approach would result

in the realization of the movement's goals more quickly.

Who Speaks for the Negro? (1965) is often discussed in the same conversation with

Segregation (1956) as evidence of Warren's transformation. Like *Segregation,* the volume reads

like a compendium of interview transcripts. Unlike the earlier work, however, Warren does not

refrain from providing the reader a window through which one sees Warren's own observations

of the individuals he interviews. Another similarity to *Segregation* is the volume's use of the last

chapter to encapsulate Warren's own views. He calls the chapter "Conversation Piece"; it is not

an interview of himself, however. Rather, Warren attempts to achieve consensus from the diverse

opinions on integration. As Justus notes, Warren's answer to the question in the title of the book,

"The implied answer to the rhetorical question has a further ambiguity. If nobody speaks for the

Negro it is just as true that everybody speaks for the Negro" (151). At the same time, this last

chapter serves as a form of exorcism in which Warren appears to purge the demons that have

haunted his career since "The Briar Patch."

If in *Segregation* the best hope that Warren could offer his readers is gradualism—slow,

measured steps towards integration—in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* he exhibits an optimism

regarding the possibilities of a future in which blacks and whites can live together peacefully.

Justus observes, "The tonic hopefulness of *Who Speaks for the Negro?* has little to do, finally,

with blacks or whites. It stems in large part from a moral and aesthetic bias that sets great store

on the sense of community viewed in its most comprehensive way, as the seamless fabric of 'humanness,' the tearing of which threatens an always precarious individuality with alienation and spiritual death" (153). In one snippet of a conversation, Warren illustrates this measured hopefulness with the words of a white female Southerner: "I pray to God to change my feelings" (432). There is change occurring, Warren implies, and it may be the gradual change he augured in *Segregation,* but it is change for the better. In the eight years since his travels for *Segregation,* Warren, despite the struggles that are still a reality of the black experience, finds reason for optimism.

At the same time, Warren does not appear to have blinded himself with this optimism. He understands that "[in] an ideal world . . . our feelings would all be good—we would 'love' all men—and the good feelings would express themselves immediately and effortlessly in good acts" (432). The world is not idyllic, however; even the best steps towards integration may be fraught with questionable motivations. Warren warns his readers about the temptations involved in recognizing the "justice of the Negro's demands" (431). One temptation is to assume that "we must consult our feelings in order to do justice" (431). Warren argues that doing the right thing—treating the South's black citizenry as equals—is not based on "spontaneous and uncriticized feelings" but on "what is reasonable, decent, [and] socially desirable" (432):

> It is not doing the Negro population much of a favor for a white man to indulge
> himself in a nice warm bubble bath of emotion, no matter how sweet he feels
> while in the suds. When a white man, fresh from his virgin experience on the
> picket line or in jail (with his bail money usually handy), begins to tell me how he
> feels clean for the first time in his life, I wonder if he has bemused himself into

believing that the whole demonstration had been mounted exclusively for the

purpose of giving him a spiritual cathartic. (433)

What is particularly noteworthy about Warren's comments is that unlike his gradualism

statement in *Segregation*, which clearly is addressed to Southern blacks and their white

sympathizers, this remonstrance targets all of his white readers. Warren warns his white audience

against three other sentimentalities: "the notion of the 'debt' to the Negro," (434), "the notion

that the Negro . . . is intrinsically 'better'" (436), and the notion that the white man "is going to

redeem the Negro" (443). These sorts of sentimentalisms, he asserts, can lead only to

disillusionment (443). When discussing the idea that a debt may be owed to the Negro, Warren

argues, "If we assume the U.S. Government does owe the Negro citizens back pay, how do we

calculate it" (434). He strongly disagrees with Martin Luther King's "Bill of Rights for the

Disadvantaged," which finds a "moral justification" for paying restitutions to black Americans

and uses Stokely Carmichael, Bayard Rustin, and James Farmer as examples of contemporary

black Civil Rights leaders who agree with him. Carmichael, he notes, calls the "theory of a debt

to the Negro . . . 'a drip from the Black Muslims'" (435). For Warren, the idea of owing Negroes

a debt is actually "an immoral justification" (435):

> [It] sets up a false relation between the Negro and society, distinguishing him
>
> from the white citizen who needs assistance. To regard the relation as based on a
>
> debt is a line of thought that, on one hand, would unman and demean the Negro,
>
> and on the other would lead straight to the happy inspiration in some hoodlum's
>
> head that the back wages are sitting there in the form of a new TV set and all he
>
> has to do is to kick in the show window and collect his pay. (435)

Warren does not deny that the history of white America's treatment of its black citizenry is fraught with disabuse, but at the same time, he does not see why this debt should be addressed when other "debts of history" (434) are not being paid.

The second sentimentality to avoid, according to Warren, is the idea that the "Negro . . . is intrinsically 'better'" (436). Warren sees this idea as a form of condescension because it usually means the Negro is being admired for "athletic prowess, musicality, grace in the dance, heroic virtue, natural humor, tenderness with children, patience, sensitivity to nature, generosity of spirit, capacity to forgive, life awareness, and innocent sexuality" (436). However, one never hears "*the* Negro admired as a better philosopher, mathematician, nuclear physicist, banker, soldier, lawyer, or administrator" (436). For Warren, the end result of this idea is that the Negro is never recognized as a man: "It [negrophilism] recognizes him as a Negro—if sometimes as a Negro Jesus Christ. And that is the worst condescension of all" (439).

The final sentimentality Warren warns against is the idea that white Americans will redeem the Negro. "[The] age of philanthropy is over" Warren argues (443). Doing the right thing by the Negro should not be viewed as an act of charity. Rather, it should be viewed as an act that has mutual benefits for all Americans: "It is self-interest to want to live in a society operating by the love of justice and the concept of law. We have not been living in such a society. It is self-interest to want all members of society to contribute as fully as possible to the enrichment of that society. The structure of our society has prevented that" (443). Instead, Warren implies, treating Negroes as equals benefits all Americans. The arguments against these three sentimentalities may be interpreted as the maturation of Warren's racial politics. While Warren's more progressive observations indeed confess to the inerrancies of his thinking as a

young man, they also continue to attest to Warren's interpreting the black experience only through a white man's eyes.

In *Segregation,* when Warren speaks of slow, measured progress in the interview of himself, he makes a prediction with which some of his black interviewees agree. When witnessing a filmed interview of a "dark brown man" (36) by two white journalists, he overhears the interviewee admit "it is going to take some time to work things out" (37). Yet he reveals an implicit bias towards protecting his fellow white Southerners from any more wounds to their fragile psyches. Eight years later, Warren is less preoccupied by such a concern in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* In place of measured concern is an understanding that sacrifices must be made in order to realize a racially-integrated country. This more progressive attitude is most apparent in Warren's final words to his readers: "It would be sentimentality to think that our society can be changed easily and without pain. It would be worse sentimentality to think that it can be changed without some pain to our particular selves—black and white. It would be realism to think that that pain would be a reasonable price to pay for what we all, selfishly, might get out of it" (444). Pain is an inevitable reality when change occurs, Warren argues. By addressing this passage to his white readers, he reveals the sort of progressive thinking his defenders argue is present in this work. Yet by insisting that pain be shared, Warren once again fails to apprehend one of the crucial realities about the fight for civil rights: the pain during the battle has been felt unevenly, with African Americans bearing the brunt of it.

Despite Warren's more overt progressive attitudes in *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* the text is not without its problems. In spite of his implicit acknowledgement that the message of black leadership during the Civil Rights Movement was not monolithic, Warren finds the messages of certain black leaders' most radical voices dangerous. One can draw a straight line from Warren's

attitude in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* to "The Briar Patch." There, Warren labeled any African American who coveted equality with whites the "negro radical." In Warren's interview of Malcolm X for this volume, the reader comes to understand that any message from a black leader that does not align with what Warren believes is an appropriate form of protest is "illogic[al]" (257), a mindset that will be explored more fully in Chapter Four. So although the "wrangle and jangle" may have taken different forms over the course of Warren's career, it never really ended. The rather questionable images of blacks in "Ballad of Mister Dutcher," "News Photo," and "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart," poems all written in the seventies, point to the continuous struggle Warren had with race.

Chapter 2

The Africanist Presence in "The Briar Patch"

The origins of southern Agrarianism go back to 1914. The year marks the beginning of the formative period of the Fugitives—although the half dozen young men, most affiliated with Vanderbilt University, were not yet identifying themselves as such. During the early years, they gathered periodically to engage in philosophical discussions. The group, led by the poet and critic John Crowe Ransom, ultimately devoted its attention to the writing, reading, and critiquing of poetry. America's entry into World War I put the meetings on hiatus as several of the group enlisted in the military. Upon reconvening in 1920, several new members were now participating in the weekly forums. Warren was among the new poets. His reminisces of the experiences point to the importance of these opportunities in the growth of his poetic vision: "[When] we sat down together to discuss poetry, we sat as equals. It was one long seminar, and I was getting a priceless education writing boyish poems. I *was* a boy. . . [It was] an exhilarating experience to be suddenly involved in an intellectual interchange with men twice my age" (qtd. in Blotner 41).

In the years before the Great War, the group had no name. Alec B. Stevenson, one of the new members, suggested they publish a magazine, offering the title *The Fugitive*. Ransom explained the rationale for the title in the foreword to the first issue in April 1922: "*The Fugitive* flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South" (qtd. in Blotner 42). In his memoir, Allen Tate further explains what the men had in mind when selecting the title: "[A] Fugitive was quite simply a Poet: the Wanderer, or even the Wander (sic) Jew, the Outcast, the man who carries the secret wisdom around the world" (qtd. in Malvasi "Fugitives"). At some point, the group's identity became synonymous with the magazine and so they called themselves the Fugitives.

After 1930 an ideological change occurred among the ranks. But even then, Conkin makes clear the group's purpose: "A Fugitive meeting, even in the early thirties, was a poetry seminar, not a place to plot Agrarian conspiracies" (23-4). The reality was that not all of the Fugitives agreed with the unofficial principles of Agrarianism. One of those ideas was the black Southerner's place in an agrarian society. Even among the twelve who signed on to essays for *I'll Take My Stand*, there was not unanimity on the topic. Conkin notes that while Davidson and Frank Lawrence Owsley were virulent racists, Herman Clarence Nixon "was unique among the contributors in always including Negroes in his reforms, and in his later willingness, at great personal sacrifice, to join organizations that supported the full equality of blacks" (67). And though less progressive, Warren, Ransom, Tate, and John Gould Fletcher did not want to identify Agrarianism with the racial issue (Conkin 72-73). Warren's reluctance suggests that the "wrangle and jangle" which he states he experienced while writing "The Briar Patch" may, to some extent, have been a shared experience.

In this chapter, I begin with how Morrison herself analyzed coded language within the descriptions of Africanist presences in the writings of white American authors to reveal the implicit racist ideology of those authors. I use Morrison's analysis of Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) and Ernest Hermingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937) as two works in which parallels to Warren's works can be seen. I then use Morrison's framework to analyze "The Briar Patch" for its coded language, examining primarily the coded language Warren uses for Du Bois. Because Warren never identifies Du Bois by name, I devote a significant portion of the analysis on identifying Warren's "negro radical" as Du Bois. Warren's juxtaposing Booker T. Washington with the "negro radical," his references to the college educated "negro radical," and the parallels between the current demands of the "negro radical" and those of Du Bois's

protagonist in the latter's short story "On Being Crazy" all point to Du Bois's being the primary

Africanist in the "The Briar Patch."

Having accepted the assignment of writing the essay on the Southern black's place in an

agrarian society, Warren chose to echo Booker T. Washington's adjuration to his own race to

"let down your bucket where you are" (*Up From Slavery* 717) at the Atlanta Cotton States and

International Exposition on September 18, 1895. But Warren chose to go further than

Washington did. Whereas Washington argued that "[no] race can prosper till it learns that there

is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem" (717), Warren offered black

Southerners another option—the possibility of a liberal-arts education. Whereas Washington

adjured his race to "[till] your fields, [clear] your forests, [build] your railroads and cities" (717),

Warren "recognized that there is a need for negroes in the professions, especially medicine and

teaching" ("Briar Patch" 251). However, where Warren and Washington did agree is in the

"where you are" part of Washington's speech. Black Southerners, according to Warren, would

have to practice as medical doctors, teachers, and lawyers among their own people in a

segregated South. Despite Warren's concessions to the South's black citizenry regarding higher

education, he continued to perpetuate the mythology of a white America by maintaining that

blacks would best serve themselves by remaining in their own communities: "There are strong

theoretical arguments in favor of higher education for the negro, but those arguments are badly

damaged if at the same time a separate negro community or group is not built up which is

capable of absorbing and profiting from those members who have received the higher education"

(251). By attempting to be both sympathetic of black Southerners and supportive of the paradigm

his fellow Agrarians were drawing up, he failed both groups. To Davidson and Owsley, Conkin

observes, "[such] generosity, such goodwill, hinted at treason" (72). To the black community, it

was supporting the status quo. On the surface the extension of this goodwill may have caused Warren to be too progressive for the likes of Davidson and Owsley; however, the body of evidence from this essay supports what Warren believed of this essay many years later—that a white man's offer of a higher education in "The Briar Patch" does not mask the implicit messages in the essay. In truth, while Warrren's form of racism may not have been as virulent as Davidson's or Owsley's, it was still racism.

The narrative that Szczesuil and others would have their readers believe is that the mature Warren eventually rejected the racist ideology of his younger days. One incident that supports this version of the story occurred after the publication of *Legacy of the Civil War* (1961). Despite the book's positive reviews, one author from the *New Republic* excoriated it. "Furious," Blotner notes, "Warren wrote the editor that he wished the reviewer had taken the trouble to glance at explicit repudiation, some time back, of what I said in 1929" (344). Warren could only repudiate something that was there in his past, and what was there was implicit racist ideology. Warren saw that the writings of his early career contained what Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) calls "coded language" for white supremacy. Morrison argues that implicit messages of white American author's writings on the American black experience reveal how those writers related to their subjects:

> Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart so too did the literature, whose founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restrictions. Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of their

presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to

their sense of Americanness. And it shows. (6)

Warren's "The Briar Patch" contains these sorts of omissions and contradictions, with the most

obvious one already having been discussed—the support of higher education for black

Southerners but only in a segregated, separate-and-unequal society that would change only when

and if whites decided change would occur. Moreover, "The Briar Patch" reveals the young

Warren's own "sense of Americanness": one that perpetuates the Southern myth of the white

man as the American ideal and black humanity, because of their alien status, as threats to the

ideal.

Using the works of several canonical white American authors, Morrison illustrates how

their rendering of black characters belies how the self-consciousness of each author "[behaves]

in [their] encounter[s] with racial ideology" (16). Morrison chooses Willa Cather's last novel,

Sapphira and the Slave Girl—a work, she concedes, "has been virtually jettisoned from the body

of American literature by critical consensus" (18) because of its flaws—to illustrate that those

flaws are partly the result of "trying to come to terms . . . with the power and license of a white

slave mistress over her female slaves" (18). The novel tells the story of Sapphira Colbert, an

unhappy middle-aged woman, crippled by dropsy, who marries late a man that her society

considers beneath her station. Her husband Henry, a miller, chooses to reside at his mill, visiting

the house occasionally for meals in partial protest to his discomfort with Sapphira's owning

slaves. Sapphira comes to believe that Henry is having an affair with Nancy, an attractive young

mulatto girl, and exacts her revenge by mistreating Nancy. At one point Sapphira invites a

disreputable nephew to the estate who threatens to rape Nancy on several occasions. Eventually,

with the help of the Colberts' daughter and two abolitionist neighbors, Nancy rides the Underground Railroad to Canada.

Morrison points to the title of the work as the first hint of failure. Why did Cather entitle the novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and not *Sapphira and Nancy*? The answer, Morrison argues, lies in Cather's "struggle to address an almost completely buried subject: the interdependent working of power, race, and sexuality in a white woman's battle for coherence" (20). To have used the slave girl's name Nancy in the title would have obscured how dependent white identity is on the hierarchy of difference. Thus, Cather's conscious decision to identify Nancy not by her name but by her subjugated role reveals Cather's implicit affirmation of the power Sapphira not only holds but needs over Nancy.

Sapphira's decision to invite her lecherous nephew to visit her is still another example of the implicit support of the white-black hierarchy. Sapphira's machinations of the living arrangements to make possible the raping of Nancy by her nephew in order to win back her husband is merely an example of the sort of power Sapphira wields over Nancy. Were Nancy a white woman this conspiratorial activity would be criminal. Just as significant is the sort of disapprobation that Sapphira would receive from the novel's readers. As Morrison notes, "The problem is trying to come to terms critically and artistically with the novel's concerns: the power and license of a white slave mistress over her female slaves. . . How can the story of a white mistress be severed from a consideration of race and the violence entailed in the story's premise?" (18). The answer to the question is that the story and the consideration cannot be severed. The interconnectedness of the two implies Cather's implicit approval to the manner in which Sapphira exerts power over Nancy. Morrison analyzes other flaws of the novel, all of

them pointing to one conclusion that Morrison specifically makes about the ending of the novel but can be applied to the whole narrative:

> Just as Sapphira has employed these surrogate, serviceable black bodies for her own purposes of power without risk, so the author employs them in behalf of her own desire for a *safe* participation in loss, in love, in chaos, in justice. But things go awry. As often happens, characters make claims, impose demands of imaginative accountability over and above the author's will to contain them. (28)

These claims by the characters are implicit enunciations of what the meaning of blackness is to the author who created the character. In the case of Sapphira, blackness signifies a less-than status of humanity. According to Morrison, Sapphira speaks for Cather. Though the reunion episode at the end of Cather's novel may presume to make wrongs right, the author's craftsmanship suggests a different interpretation. "How does literary utterance arrange itself when it tries to imagine an Africanist other?" Morrison asks. "What are the signs, the codes, the literary strategies designed to accommodate this encounter" (16). While the literature of slavery frequently reinforces the idea of the black body as commodity, a product that signifies ownership, it is the writer's "technical expertise," Morrison continues, that creates a "'normal,' unracialized, illusory white world [as] the fictional backdrop" (16) and suggests that the hierarchical structure of slave ownership is the appropriate relationship. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather has implicitly given her approval to such a world.

Morrison's analysis of Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937) is another example of how an Africanist presence impacts the author's fiction. The novel tells the story of Harry Morgan, a fishing boat captain left destitute as a result of a wealthy customer's failing to pay him for a chartered, three-week fishing expedition. As a result, Harry chooses to run illegal

cargo between the United States and Cuba in order to support his family. He eventually meets his

death in a shoot-out with Cuban revolutionaries who have attempted to rob a bank. Several

critics suggest that the racism of the Great Depression provides part of the setting of the novel.

Morrison challenges this idea. One indicator that the Africanist presence signifies not only the

racism of the day but also the measures that a white author takes to erase blackness is

Hemingway's use of racist language. Morrison identifies Hemingway's use of the epithet *nigger*

as the strongest indicator of this erasure. For the first five chapters, the black man on Harry

Morgan's crew is unnamed. The first time he appears in the story, Hemingway writes, "Just then

this nigger we had getting bait comes down the dock" (qtd. in Morrison 70). It is not the only

time that Wesley, the name of the character, is identified in such a manner. Morrison observes a

pattern to the use of the signifier: "Harry *says* 'Wesley' when speaking to the black man in direct

dialogue; Hemingway *writes* 'nigger' when as narrator he refers to him" (71). Still another

manner in which Hemingway's development of Wesley reveals implicit messages about

Hemingway the author is through the black character's speech: "[Wesley] either does not speak

(as a 'nigger' he is silent) or speaks in very legislated and manipulated ways (as a 'Wesley' his

speech serves Harry's needs)" (71). Because of such authorial decisions, Morrison asks, "What

would have been the cost, I wonder, of humanizing, genderizing, this character at the opening of

the novel" (73). Her response is telling:

> For one thing, Harry would be positioned—set off, defined—very differently. He
>
> would have to be compared to a helpless alcoholic, a contemptible customer, and
>
> an individualized crew member with, at least by implication, an independent life.
>
> Harry would lack the juxtaposition and association with a vague presence
>
> suggesting sexual excitement, a possible threat to his virility and competence,

violence under wraps. He would, finally, lack the complementarity of a figure

who can be assumed to be in some way bound, fixed, unfree, and serviceable. (73)

In difference, then, Harry receives not just his identification but his power. Morrison recognizes

that the Africanist presence becomes a means by which Hemingway "not only . . . [displays]

authority but, in fact, constitutes its source" (80). By identifying Wesley as *nigger* and silencing

him for most of the narrative, Hemingway augments the protagonist's identity by highlighting

who Harry is not.

In *Playing in the Dark,* Morrison analyzes the Africanist presence exclusively in works of

fiction. Szczesuil responded to Morrison's call to examine representations of an Africanist

presence in American literature with a focus on Warren's poetry, choosing to discuss Warren's

fiction and nonfiction only as it highlighted the parallel changes in both Warren's poetic

aesthetic and his racial politics. As part of his assessment of Warren's career, Szczesuil

acknowledges the problematic nature of Warren's "The Briar Patch." Replete with Africanist

images, it is a propaganda piece for segregation. In the essay Warren specifically identifies three

Africanists: "[the] most prominent man in negro education of the past," (250), "the hypothetical

negro" (254), and the "negro radical" (254). Warren discusses the philosophies of the latter two

in juxtaposition to the prominent negro to imply that reasonable negroes are content with the

status quo. Though the essay at times is complimentary of African Americans, what becomes

obvious is that Warren's commentary on the "negro radical" and on blacks in general contradicts

all subsequent statements Warren made that he experienced a "wrangle and jangle" while

composing it.

Warren is quick to identify to whom he is referring when discussing "the most prominent

man in negro education." In response to the question, "For what is the negro to be educated?"

Warren responds with the "wisdom" of Booker T. Washington: "I am constantly trying to impress upon our students at Tuskegee—and on our people throughout the country, as far as I can reach them with my voice—that any man, regardless of color, will be recognized and rewarded just in proportion as he learns to do something well—learns to do it better than some one else—however humble the thing may be" (qtd. in "The Briar Patch" 250). Of course, these "wise words" would ultimately be the lead-in to Washington's adjuration that the black man learn some sort of manual labor, a point Warren does not avoid reinforcing: "The most urgent need [according to Washington] was to make the ordinary negro into a competent workman or artisan and a decent citizen" (250). Warren ultimately concedes the importance of a liberal-arts education for some black Southerners, but whether a black laborer held a blue- or white-collar position, Warren agrees with Washington that "[we] can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (254)—Washington's explicit and Warren's implicit support of segregation. This latter message becomes the touchstone by which Warren measures the message of the "negro radical."

The juxtaposition of Washington's adjuration and the phrase "negro radical" suggests that Warren has an unnamed particular individual in mind when outlining the demands of this black citizen. Soon after quoting Washington's hand metaphor, Warren imagines what Washington might say to the "negro radical": "'My friend,' Washington might well reply to such a critic, 'you may respect yourself as a man, but you do not respect yourself as a negro'" (254). The salutation is more than just recognition of Washington's renowned diplomatic demeanor. Instead, the "negro radical" is someone Washington would have considered an acquaintance whose own stance on segregation differed from his, thus, more appropriately a political enemy. In essence, the "negro radical" is the primary Africanist presence in "The Briar Patch."

In the paragraph before Warren's first use of the phrase "negro radical," he uses the phrase "hypothetical negro," which the reader eventually understands to be interchangeable with "negro radical." Using various textual clues within Warren's essay, Michael Kreyling correctly identifies Warren's "hypothetical negro" as W. E. B. Du Bois (275). The first clue that points to Du Bois as Warren's "negro radical" is that this Africanist opposes the racial uplift solutions that the Wizard of Tuskegee supports. Mark Bauerlein notes that by 1906 Washington and Du Bois were bitter enemies despite Du Bois, only a few years earlier, finding enough common ground with Washington to have congratulated him on his "phenomenal success in Atlanta" (qtd. in Bauerlein 107). "[The] men had become open enemies," notes Bauerlein, "standing for polar-opposite race policies in post-Reconstruction America. Washington advocates 'go-slow' accommodationism while Du Bois favors militant protest" (106). Du Bois would hold Washington's willingness to concede an integrated society to white Southerners against him for the rest of Washington's life.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which precedes the acrimony to which Bauerlein refers by three years, Du Bois devotes a chapter to Washington. Here, Du Bois acknowledges Washington's stature as the most influential African American during the early twentieth century: "Mr. Washington's cult has gained unquestioning followers, his work has wonderfully prospered, his friends are legion, and his enemies are confounded. Today he stands as the one recognized spokesman of his ten million fellows, and one of the most notable figures in a nation of seventy millions" (123). And though Du Bois admits hesitancy in criticizing a man of such prominent standing, the rest of the essay is, indeed, a denunciation of the black leader. A closer reading of the chapter, however, reveals Du Bois's criticism of Washington beginning earlier than this announcement to speak sincerely, for Du Bois's biographical notes of Washington's

career includes an implicit insult: "This 'Atlanta Compromise' is by all odds the most notable thing in Mr. Washington's career. The South interpreted it in different ways: the radicals received it as a complete surrender of the demand for civil and political equality; the conservatives, as a generously conceived working basis for mutual understanding" (123). This statement is rather shocking! Du Bois places the Atlanta Compromise speech above all of Washington's accomplishments—more significant than his climb from slavery to national prominence, than the writing of his autobiography, than the establishment of Tuskegee. The statement accords the speech more impact than any other act in Washington's career. Moreover, by subsuming Washington's multiple achievements under this speech, Du Bois suggests that he sees Washington as a proverbial "one-trick pony." At this point the fraying of their relationship had reached the point that Du Bois overtly suggests that Washington's career can be boiled down to one achievement—the Atlanta Compromise speech, called such because, to Du Bois and many others, it represented betrayal. Many years after Washington's death, Du Bois would enumerate the reasons for his disdain towards the man in *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940): "I was increasingly uncomfortable under the statements of Mr. Washington's position: his depreciation of the value of the vote; his evident dislike of Negro colleges; and his general attitude which seemed to place the onus of blame for the status of Negroes upon the Negroes themselves rather than upon the whites. And above all, I resented the Tuskegee Machine" (40).

Still another problem Du Bois and other leaders of the black community had with Washington was the latter's willingness to perpetuate stereotypes that reinforced the white view of blacks as Uncle Toms or Sambos. Stephen R. Fox notes that Washington "liked to warm up his audiences with darkey stories, homely tales about rural southern Negroes. . . In his writings

he would refer to the Negro's 'naturally cheerful and affectionate disposition,' and he once wrote that the black man is 'naturally a farmer, and he is at his very best when he is in close contact with the soil''' (37). Such activity is not consistent with uplift, his detractors argued; it is, as Monroe Trotter, another contemporary enemy of Washington, asserts, an example of anti-intellectualism (qtd. in Fox 35).

Two other passages in "The Briar Patch" that undoubtedly identify the "negro radical" as Du Bois refer to the latter's college education and his insistence on being considered an equal to white Americans. In a passage in which Warren discusses the educated Southern Negro's desertion of the South for the North, Warren begins his argument with the following line: "Let us take the case of a negro who has satisfactorily prepared himself for a profession" (252-253). While the description could refer to a number of Du Bois's educated peers, that Warren has used coded language to refer to Du Bois at various points in the essay suggests that he is also doing it here. Du Bois's professional preparation was a Harvard education. And because of that education, he argued for recognition of his status as an equal to the majority white race. Yet in regards to this point, Warren imagines Washington scoffing at such pursuits of equality: "To him [Washington] the critic [Du Bois] would be suffering from a failure to rationalize his position, from the lack of a sense of reality, and from a defect in self-respect, for the last implies two deficiencies. The critic's condition would be like that of the individual of any color who consumes himself in 'desiring this man's art, and that man's scope'; and his principles would be those of the doctrinaire" (254-55). Though Warren would continue to reveal an inherent admiration for Washington in subsequent writings, Warren uses the ideological debate between the late Tuskegee president, once the leading voice for social uplift for blacks, and the man who replaced him in the role of principal clarion for change in American race relations to bolster his

case for segregation. Since Warren's readers are primarily white Southerners and those Southerners view Washington's doctrines more amenably than Du Bois's, Warren exploits those biases to make his case for white American-ness.

Though Warren undoubtedly has Du Bois in mind when referring to a "hypothetical negro," one must note that Du Bois was not Washington's only philosophical enemy. Warren just as easily could have been referring to Trotter, who, like Du Bois, is still alive when Warren writes "The Briar Patch." In fact, Trotter is less diplomatic in his opposition to Washington than is Du Bois. In 1901, Trotter, along with a friend, George W. Forbes, started the weekly newspaper, the *Guardian*. Stephen R. Fox, one of Trotter's biographers, describes the publication as "a typical black newspaper":

> [Its] eight pages filled with local and national news of the Negro, mostly culled
> from other black papers and the white press. . . The editorials on page four made
> the *Guardian* notorious among the black journals of the day and prompted its
> readers to spirited and divergent opinions on the paper's usefulness. Week after
> week in his editorials Trotter mounted an extended attack on the person, prestige,
> and racial policies of Booker T. Washington. (32)

The main theme of the publication, according to Raymond Wolters, was the failure of Washington's policies. Moreover, "[the] *Guardian'*s tone was as important as its message. And the tone was personal, scurrilous, even vicious" (Wolters 62).

Fox reminds his readers of a well-known fact about Booker T. Washington—he often had little patience for the intellectualism of his Negro critics. Washington one time wrote about these naysayers: "[They] know books but they do not know men; [they] understand theories, but they do not understand things" (qtd. in Fox 35). In contrast, Trotter, according to Fox, "was

sometimes an intellectual snob, referring to Georgetown University as "a fourth-rate school" (35) and noting that a Bookerite "should be forever cursed by all college men" (35). As for his direct diatribes against Washington, they make Du Bois's attacks on Washington look rather mild: "At its most basic," states Fox, "it was simple name-calling: Pope Washington, the Black Boss, the Benedict Arnold of the Negro race, the Exploiter of all Exploiters, the Great Traitor, the Great Divider, the miserable toady, the Imperial Caeser, the heartless and snobbish purveyor of Pharisaical moral clap-trap" (39). It is Trotter who incites the incident now known as the Boston Riot, which is credited as the act that irreparably harms the Washington-Du Bois relationship. Having learned that Washington had accepted an invitation to speak at a Boston church on July 30, 1903, Trotter "packed the audience of some two thousand with as many anti-Washington people as he could rally" (Wolters 63). Trotter's baiting of Washington, along with the hissing that occurred while Washington spoke, led to the brawl that ensued. Although Trotter was arrested and spent some time in jail, Wolters notes that "the press coverage damaged Washington, for it forced whites to recognize that many well-educated African Americans did not accept him as their leader" (63).

Trotter's vituperative nature, ugly opposition of Washington, and bolder defense of black rights make him just as likely a candidate to be Warren's "hypothetical negro" as Du Bois. Indeed, Fox notes that "Trotter was the most forceful and insistent of the radicals, and to some observers he seemed to be an ever-vigilant watchdog, ready to pounce on any deviation from militant ideas" (44). Moreover, though Du Bois's attacks of Washington are almost as malicious as Trotter's, at times he attempted to intervene between Trotter and Washington, such as the immediate period after the 1903 Boston Riot when Du Bois is vacillating between Washington's doctrine of accommodation and Trotter's militant agitation for Negro civil rights. The strongest

argument against Trotter being the "radical negro," however, is that in none of his writings

during his illustrious career does Warren ever mention Trotter. While one can safely assume

Warren knows of Trotter because of his penchant for thorough research and his fascination for

African-American history, the omission of Trotter from Warren's oeuvre is likely because

Trotter, though a man of letters, never pens a classic like *Souls of Black Folk.* Conversely, Du

Bois is the subject of one of the biographical headnotes Warren writes for the anthology

American Literature: The Makers and the Making, a collaborative effort of his, Cleanth

Brooks's, and R. W. B. Lewis's. (Warren's contributions on black literature for the anthology

provides further proof of his ideological disputes with Du Bois.)

Other examples of individuals who opposed Washington were the twenty-eight African

Americans, all of whom were "Negroes radical," who gathered at the Erie Beach Hotel on July

10, 1905, and launched the Niagara Movement. Although the movement emphasized protest, it,

according to Wolters, primarily "opposed Booker T. Washington's compromising, conciliatory

style of leadership" (66). Besides Du Bois and Trotter, other enemies of Washington at the hotel

were John Hope, the first Negro president of Atlanta University, who delivered a strong rebuttal

to Washington's Atlanta Exposition speech; Fredrick L. McGhee, one of the first Negro lawyers

in the United States. who, according to Du Bois, deserved the honor of founding the Niagara

Movement; J. R. Clifford, West Virginia's first Negro lawyer; L. M. Hershaw, a key intellectual

figure among Negroes in Atlanta; and F. H. M. Murray, who, arguably, was the least known of

the attendees as a historical figure but besides being active in the Underground Railroad, has

been recognized as the first internationally-recognized Negro art historian. Women who believed

that Washington's positions injured their work towards full suffrage rights also attended the

meetings. Among them were Gertrude Wright Morgan, national secretary for women in the

Niagara Movement; Mrs. O.M. Waller; Mrs. H. F. M. Murray; Mollie Lewis Kelan, Ida D.

Bailey, Sadie Shorter, and Charlotte Hershaw. In other words, the strong case for identifying Du

Bois as Warren's "negro radical" notwithstanding, the most famous member of the Agrarians

could have been referring to any one of a number of Washington's enemies. By writing an essay

on the black's place in an agrarian society, Warren inserts himself in a debate that could have

had any one of a number of opponents because the subject of the debate was the primary battle of

the period in the South and one of the more significant disputes on the national level.

Despite this long list of black leadership who supported a "radical agenda" of racial

uplift, the strongest argument for Du Bois being identified as Warren's "negro radical" is the

similarities between Warren's hypothetical scenarios in his essay and what Du Bois waxes

eloquently about in his short story "On Being Crazy." Written in 1907, the short story begins

with a rather brief encounter between a Negro and a white at a restaurant:

> It was one o'clock and I was hungry. I walked into a restaurant, seated myself,
>
> and reached for the bill of fare. My table companion rose.
>
> "Sir," said he, "do you wish to force your company on those who do not want
>
> you?"
>
> No, said I, I wish to eat.
>
> "Are you aware, sir, that this is social equality?"
>
> Nothing of the sort, sir, it is hunger—and I ate.

The Negro decides to go to the theater to take in a concert after his meal. He encounters a woman

who is uncomfortable with his presence:

> "Do you enjoy being where you are not wanted?" she asked coldly.
>
> Oh, no, I said.

"Well, you are not wanted here."

After the theater, he heads to the hotel to which he has sent his luggage:

> After the theatre, I sought the hotel where I had sent my baggage. The clerk
>
> scowled.
>
> "What do you want?"
>
> Rest, I said.
>
> "This is a white hotel," he said. I looked around. Such a color scheme requires a
>
> great deal of cleaning, I said, but I don't know that I object.
>
> "We object," said he.
>
> Then why, I began, but he interrupted.
>
> "We don't keep niggers," he said, "we don't want social equality."
>
> Neither do I, I replied gently, I want a bed.

Without further objection, the Negro goes to the train station, planning to take a sleeper to Texas:

> "Can't sell you one."
>
> I only want to hire it, said I, for a couple of nights.
>
> "Can't sell you a sleeper in Texas," he maintained. "They consider that social
>
> equality."
>
> I call it barbarism, I said, and I think I'll walk.

The Negro leaves the train station. During his walk, a white man heading towards him on the

sidewalk on which the Negro is traversing, switches to the other side of the street, which is not

paved and thus muddy:

> I asked his reason.
>
> "Niggers are dirty," he said.

So is the mud, said I. Moreover, I am not as dirty as you—yet.

"But you're a nigger, ain't you?" he asked.

My grandfather was so called.

"Well then!" he answered triumphantly.

Do you live in the South? I persisted pleasantly.

"Sure," he growled, "and starve there."

I should think you and the Negroes should get together and vote out starvation.

The white walker eventually moves their brief conversation to women:

"I do not want my sister to marry a nigger."

I had not seen his sister, so I merely murmured, let her say no.

"By God, you shan't marry her, even if she said yes."

But—but I don't want to marry her, I answered, a little perturbed at the personal

turn.

"Why not!" he yelled, angrier than ever.

Because I am already married and I rather like my wife.

"Is she a nigger?" he asked suspiciously.

Well, I said again, her grandmother was called that.

The short story concludes with the Negro's ending the conversation:

Go on, I said, either you are crazy or I am.

"We both are," he said as he trotted along in the mud.

This short story has striking parallels to the passage from "The Briar Patch" in which

Warren questions the wisdom of the "hypothetical negro" desiring equality with whites. Warren

asks, "Does he want to spend the night in a hotel as comfortable as the one from which he is

turned away, or does he want to spend the night in that same hotel" (253-254). In like manner, Du Bois's unnamed "crazy Negro" enters a white hotel for that very purpose. When the Negro of the short story heads to a white restaurant at which he expects to sit at table with white patrons, he mirrors Warren's "hypothetical negro," who also "contemplates . . . regularly [sitting] down to the same table" with a white man (254). Warren's "hypothetical negro" also must "be content with a poor seat at a concert," the type of entertainment, one assumes, Du Bois's crazy traveler is attempting to enjoy in the theater he enters (254). Warren's penultimate sentence in the paragraph in which the above descriptions occur begins, "To such a radical the demand for less is treason to his race. . ." The juxtaposition of such a starter with the last sentence of the paragraph in which Warren refers to Du Bois's enemy clinches the argument that the poet is undoubtedly referring to Du Bois: "When Booker T. Washington at the Atlanta Exposition of 1895 lifted his hand and said, 'We can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress,' the hand he raised, in the eyes of such a radical, was the hand of treason'" (254). These parallels strongly argue for identifying Du Bois as Warren's "negro radical" and "hypothetical negro," and as such then, Du Bois is the Africanist presence that haunts Warren in the essay.

Though Warren's references to both a "hypothetical negro" and the "negro radical" point to an actual historical figure and not one of his creation, Morrison's paradigm still is an effective means of evaluating what insights Warren's creative encounters with these Africanist presences represent. Unlike Cather's Nancy or Hemingway's Wesley, Du Bois was not a fabrication of Warren's imagination. Yet for Morrison, this fact is irrelevant:

> Encoded or explicit, indirect or over, the linguistic responses to an Africanist
>
> presence complicate texts, sometimes contradicting them entirely. A writer's

response to American Africanism often provides a subtext that either sabotages

the surface text's expressed intentions or escapes them through a language that

mystifies what it cannot bring itself to articulate but still attempts to register. (66)

"The Briar Patch" is an early indication of Warren's difficulties with a black man of Du Bois's

stature. By referring to Du Bois as the "negro radical" and then juxtaposing him against

Washington, the young Warren makes obvious that not only is he a segregationist but, contrary

to his "strong theoretical arguments in favor of higher education for the negro" (251), only the

subservient black man is a good black man. Warren "sabotages" the progressive tenor of the

essay through his support for segregation. The surface text of his essay may argue for a status for

black Southerners far more liberal than any of his peers, but Warren's "expressed intentions"—

the shoring up of his sense of white identity—becomes the more lucid message of the work.

Early in the essay, Warren perpetuates this idea by claiming to understand the black

psyche after Emancipation. His description of the liberated slave as an ill-prepared recipient of

liberty reinforces the idea that the end of slavery was an ill-conceived plan:

> Always in the past he had been told when to work and what to do, and now, with
>
> the new-got freedom, he failed to understand the limitation which a simple
>
> contract of labor set on that freedom. It is not surprising that the idea of freedom
>
> meant eating the cake and keeping it, too. In the old scheme of things which had
>
> dwindled away at Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Chattanooga, he had occupied an
>
> acknowledged, if limited and humble, place. Now he had to find a place, and the
>
> attempt to find it is the story of the negro since 1865. The Reconstruction did little
>
> to remedy the negro's defects in preparation. (248)

These pictures of emancipated Africanists play a minor role in "The Briar Patch," yet their presence cannot be understated. This version of black history is not new to Warren's telling. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., points out, plantation literature, which still had a popular readership in the early nineteenth century, was used "to prove that Negroes were happy as slaves and hopelessly unequipped for freedom. . ." (95). Yet the regurgitating of it is the author's attempt to prepare his readers for the praise he heaps upon Washington for promoting manual labor in segregated communities as the best approach to self-respect. But by siding with Washington's restrictive vision of black uplift over the possibilities that an educated "negro radical" offers to the South, Warren attempts to silence Du Bois and minimize the threat to white supremacy that organizations such as the NAACP represented during the 1930s.

In one way, Warren's attempts to silence Du Bois mirrors Cather's rendering Nancy in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* voiceless. Cather is successful because Nancy is a creation of Cather's literary imagination. By placing Nancy at the mercy of a vindictive Sapphira, Cather makes the germ of a thought reality. The idea would go something like this: The world is a better place when race relations are managed within a hierarchal paradigm in which whites are situated in the power position above blacks. Warren's attempt at rendering Du Bois voiceless is in creating an avatar to stand in the civil right leader's place. In the essay, Du Bois does not get to talk for himself. Warren imagines what Du Bois, the "negro radical" and the "hypothetical negro" would say. Moreover, Warren resurrects a now-deceased Washington to counter what Warren states for Du Bois. The problem is that Warren fails at the effort to silence his Africanist, for Du Bois, who, in reality, never did respond to the Agrarian Manifesto's formula to solve what the Agrarians' termed "the Negro problem," does indeed speak through the short story that

Warren parodies: Du Bois's crazy protagonist rendered in "The Briar Patch" as a "hypothetical negro" is the only character that speaks sensibly.

Warren's attempt to find a middle position—the effect of experiencing a "wrangle and jangle" while composing the essay—that would please his Agrarian colleagues while advocating for progressive approaches to segregation fails because there can be no middling approach to racial politics. The result of Warren's waffling is that Warren ultimately reflects what he came to understand many years later about himself. The young Warren was indeed a white supremacist no matter how many concessions he made to blacks. This conclusion is not unique. Szczesiul had said as much when observing that the failure of Warren defenders is that they "tended to read 'The Briar Patch' by superimposing over the text Warren's later, more liberal ideas. In other words, they read forward in anticipation of his conversion to an integrationist position. . ." (29). While Warren may indeed have taken more liberal positions on race relations in future years, those writings on the topic suffer from the same problem that "The Briar Patch" does—Warren's choice of language betrays "the surface text's expressed intentions."

Warren's failure in "The Briar Patch" is also the result of creating a character to stand for Du Bois in the essay—a character Warren believed he could silence and control. It was not the first time Warren had attempted to render Du Bois voiceless. He had made the attempt with his biography of John Brown, the abolitionist, a historical figure Du Bois believed deserved his posthumous status as a martyr. Warren's biography thus makes obvious that the Africanist presence of the "negro radical" haunted him *before* he had received the assignment to write "The Briar Patch"—a consideration that critics generally have ignored.

Chapter 3

Du Bois's Call & Warren's Response: Two Biographies of John Brown

John Brown is the subject of Warren's first book. Allen Tate had helped procure for his friend a contract with Payson and Clarke, Ltd., a publisher who purposefully took chances with young writers. In his biography of the poet, Blotner relates the story behind Warren's writing the biography. Warren began the project while studying at Yale, before his fellowship at Oxford, and while in New Haven he had begun to experience a bout of homesickness. In fact, this period away from the South, Warren believes, gave him the affinity for the South necessary to write on a polemical figure like Brown: "As long as I was *living* [italics Warren's] in Tennessee and Kentucky and knew a great deal about various kinds of life there from the way Negro field hands talked or mountaineers talked . . . I had no romantic notion about it" (qtd. in Blotner 84). Eventually, the assignment took Warren to Harper's Ferry, Winchester, and Charlestown. He interviewed the last living witness of John Brown's raid on the U.S. armory and spent a good deal of time in the Yale library researching his subject. In other words, Warren's preparation for this book revealed early on the same dedication to exploration and inquiry the poet became known for.

In this chapter, I will establish Warren's fascination with the figure of John Brown, using one of the interviews he included in *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* examine Warren's purpose and motivation for writing a biography of the abolitionist, perform a close reading of Warren's *John Brown* using Morrison's framework to reveal the message below the surface language, and highlight episodes in Brown's life that both Warren and Du Bois use to validate their conclusions. I also perform a second close reading on Du Bois's *The Quest for the Silver Fleece* (1911) to augment the argument that for Du Bois all "art is propaganda." I will conclude that

both Warren's and Du Bois's biographies of John Brown should be read as part of the rhetorical battle over the meaning of American identity waged throughout the United States; in Warren's case, the subtext of his work makes it still another medium to deliver a message of white supremacy. I also call for more critical attention to this first work of nonfiction by Warren as a subject that remains of contemporary interest.

The biography was his first attempt at a long work of literature, and reviewers did not fail to highlight his "adolescent attempt at the fashionable, ironic, witty Strachean style" (Cullick 35). Critics have observed that in this first attempt at being more than just a poet, Warren introduced some of the major themes that he would develop in greater depth in later works: individual idealism, the problem of identity and self-knowledge, and the seductions of power. However, just as frequently mentioned is the author's biased approach to the subject, the intent "to burn John Brown in effigy" (Casper 91). Apparently, the prejudice was deep-seated, for thirty-five years later it would reveal itself at an unexpected moment.

In April 1964, Warren traveled to New York City from his home in Connecticut to interview Kenneth Bamford Clark,[14] at the time a professor and researcher at the Northside Center for Child Development in Harlem, New York. The interview was one of the many he conducted for *Who Speaks for the Negro?* After discussing "ethical judgments in historical

---

[14] Clark's contribution to the 1954 Supreme Court decision to overturn the "separate-but-equal" doctrine is a significant part of the narrative. Clark's research into the deleterious effects of school segregation was used as part of the rationale for the higher court's unanimously finding the doctrine unconstitutional. In his study, Clark, the first black to earn a doctorate from Columbia University, conducted his research in Clarendon County, South Carolina, in the early 1950s because at the time the county had three times as many black students as white, yet white students received sixty percent of the education appropriations. Clark administered his test to sixteen black children, ages six to nine years old. He showed each child individually a white doll and a black doll and asked them what they thought of each. The results were startling: "Eleven of them said that the black doll looked "bad," and nine of them thought that the white doll looked "nice." Seven of the 16 told Dr. Clark that they actually saw themselves as being closest to the white doll in appearance when asked, "Now show me the doll that's most like you" (Severo). Thurgood Marshall and NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund used Clark's findings as part of its challenge of "separate but equal."

contexts," Dr. Clark refers to John Brown, the nineteenth-century abolitionist, in a comment that

results in Warren's asking, "What do you think of John Brown, by the way? Morally and

psychologically? Or both?" (318). Clark's initial response likely pleased the poet: "Well,

psychologically, the simple designation of John Brown might be too simple—he was a fanatic, a

neurotic, a literalist, an absolutist, a man so totally committed that nothing, including reality,

stood in his way" (318). The descriptors Clark chose undoubtedly elated Warren for they were

consistent with the picture Warren himself had painted of Brown in his biography of the

abolitionist. In it, Warren had focused on an important element of the abolitionist's personality

he believed all other biographies of the subject had failed to highlight: "his elaborate

psychological mechanism for justification which appeared regularly in terms of the thing which

friends called Puritanism and enemies called fanaticism" (qtd. in Woodward xii-xiii). But Clark

did not stop with this list; he then compared the ardent abolitionist to Jesus Christ. Warren's

response, even in text, appears both measured and emotional. This portion of the interview,

though long, is worth printing in its entirety because it suggests that even after nearly forty years,

while Warren's racial politics may have become more progressive, the abolitionist remained an

irritation:

> WARREN: Do you equate Christ and John Brown?
>
> CLARK: Unquestionably.
>
> WARREN: In their values or simply in their neuroses?
>
> CLARK: In their values, in their neuroses, and of course, in their end.
>
> WARREN: Christ came as the Prince of Peace, and Brown lived in a dream of
>
> bloodshed. He loved the text: "Without the shedding of blood there is no
>
> remission of sins."

CLARK: But Christ ran the money changers out of the temple.

WARREN: Do we equate that with the Pottawatomie Massacre?

CLARK: Don't push me too far. But look, Christ was clearly a person committed to values other than those prevailing in his time.

WARREN: Or in our time, either.

CLARK: The depth and reality of his commitment was expressed by his life. All right –Christ was alienated, Christ had values he was willing to run the risk for, and he paid the ultimate price. Christ, Socrates, John Brown—these people are irritating.

WARREN: Suppose a man like John Brown, with the same burning eye, came into your office and said, "I'm tired of this fooling around, I'm going down to Mississippi, take six or seven determined men with me, and I am going to slaughter the Governor and his entire staff in the Capitol and come out and say 'Rise, follow me!'" What would you do about this man who came and asked for a hundred dollars to help finance his trip?

CLARK: First, I wouldn't give him a hundred dollars.

WARREN: Fifty?

CLARK: I wouldn't give him anything.

WARREN: Would you call the doctor?

CLARK: I would probably see what I could do to help this man, if it would not inconvenience me too much—or if it would not involve me with him too much.

WARREN: But such a man, with the wild eye and Biblical texts, did go into the offices of certain gentlemen in Boston, some hundred years ago.

CLARK: That is the difference—me and time, you see.

WARREN: You know about psychology, and more about history—and therefore wouldn't want any part of it?

CLARK: Not only that, I am frank to say to you, I am a professor—I have a vested interest in "either/or-ing," you see—in maintaining issues on a level of discussion rather than action, and certainly anybody who says anything to me about bloodshed is not going to get a sympathetic response.

WARREN: John Brown was like Christ, psychologically?

CLARK: In the totality of his commitment, his alienation, his willingness to run risks.

WARREN: Some mad men are that way, too—but we don't take men as equal in virtue, automatically because of this mere resemblance?

CLARK: No—except that it isn't always that easy. It isn't always easy to differentiate between a madman and a martyr, or the person who irritates the status quo.

WARREN: If the madman happens to tie in with a moral cause and happens to have the bad, or the good, luck to get bumped off in the process, then—

CLARK: Who else does this except madmen?

WARREN: We must trust the madmen to be our moral guardians?

CLARK: Let us back up a little. Of course you could define madness as daring to believe that something which you value is so important that it is worth risking your security, your comfort, and your stagnation—you could define madness as

any alienation that brings you into open conflict with the prevailing values and

patterns. So defined—who else but madmen defy constituted authority?

WARREN: You are defining them clinically?

CLARK: I am not defining them clinically.

WARREN: Suppose a man also clinically mad—let's just assume that—then what

do you do about his relation to an idea, or to action?

CLARK: I am more concerned with Van Gogh's painting that I am with the fact

that he was mad. I confess I will probably be more concerned with what a man

stands for and does.

WARREN: Would you judge the morality of an act by its consequences?

CLARK: I'm not always sure that I would judge only by the consequences. Even

if one sought to rationalize consequences on the grounds that they were morally

valuable, these consequences might be contaminated by the immorality of the act.

WARREN: John Brown is almost a test case for this.

CLARK: Boy, you certainly are fascinated with John Brown, and he is one of the

most—

WARREN: You brought him up—I didn't. (318-20)

Warren's responses suggests Clark had identified a sore point with the poet—a scab that had yet

to heal. More specifically, the scab is the last remnants of the wound of racial prejudice marring

Warren's reputation. But if it had not healed yet, it was because Warren had refused treatment.

By the 1960's Warren's racial politics may have appeared radically different from those

he espoused in "The Briar Patch," but those changes did not appear to have amended his views

of John Brown. In his own gloss of the interview immediately following the transcript of his

dialogue with Dr. Clark, Warren admits that he is still fascinated with Brown. More interestingly, however, he also states were he to write the book now, the 1960s, the book would be far different. The likely differences are 1) Warren would have probably rejected the paternalistic attitudes towards enslaved blacks that were popular in the 1930s, and 2) he would not have based his descriptions of Southern blacks on stereotypes that were accepted as gospel in the South. What is likely to have gone unchanged, based on the sorts of exchanges that Dr. Clark and Warren have, is Warren's thesis—that John Brown is not deserving of the appellation *martyr*.

Besides making obvious Warren's longstanding and deep-seated antipathy towards John Brown, the work also reveals in more overt language the racist ideology upon which the doctrine of segregation in "The Briar Patch" was based. Though Warren professed to wanting to set the record straight in the writing of this biography[15]—because the John Brown biographies that had already been written had failed to do so—an unsettling element of the biography is the author's derogatory depictions of blacks. This aspect of the book pits him directly against Du Bois, whose own biography of the same figure not only places the subject on the proverbial pedestal, to be admired by all subsequent generations, but also, in standard DuBoisian fashion, refutes the stereotypes attached to blacks. More significantly, Warren's grappling with the various representations of an Africanist presence—from Du Bois to the several unnamed slaves—is further proof that the young Warren embodied white supremacist ideology.

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[15] In "The Making of a Historian: Robert Penn Warren's Biography of John Brown," Jonathan Cullick observes that Warren's first book failed on a number of levels: critically, stylistically, and unprofitably. Yet despite these deficiencies, the work proved to be an apprentice work for an author whose career consistently manifested a desire "to reconcile the past with the present—to reconstruct events from the conventional historical record by exposing the plots by which those events have been historicized, so as to create . . . a more usable past" (36). Though the project of writing the biography was Allen Tate's idea, who had procured for Warren a commission from the publisher Payson & Clarke, the opportunity to correct the views his contemporaries held of John Brown fascinated him.

Unlike Warren, by the time Du Bois embarked on writing his own biography of John Brown, he had already established a name for himself as a prolific writer, having published his impressive sociological study *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois wrote his biography of John Brown in 1909; Warren wrote his twenty years later in 1929. As a result, Du Bois's biography, though polemical, displays the polish of an accomplished writer. In contrast, Warren's volume gives no evidence that its author would one day be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. What is evident, however, is that each author crafted a biography reflecting a perspective having everything to do with race. Warren's biography focuses on the idea that John Brown does not deserve the appellation of martyr; instead, Brown should be called a megalomaniac for whom the attack on Harper's Ferry is a final attempt at the glory he believes he should receive as a result of being called by God.

Warren's confrontations with the Africanist presences in *John Brown* provide a subtext that informs his lifelong struggle with race. The Africanist presences fall into three categories: slaves who have escaped north, Northern blacks who are collaborating with Brown, and one "negro radical." This latter Africanist, as I argued in the previous chapter, is Du Bois, who is labeled irrelevant by the simple act of Warren's ignoring him—or as Morrison puts it, "[through] significant and underscored omissions" (6). Towards the end of his biography of Brown, in the "Biographical Note," Warren writes of the error in at least two of the sources he researched in preparation for his own biography on the abolitionist. Of the author of *John Brown 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (1910)*, Oswald Garrison Villard, grandson of the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and a founding member of the NAACP, Warren writes, "Mr. Villard has prepared an important, detailed account of John Brown's business affairs, and deduces from that record of embezzlement, fraud, speculation, and self-righteousness that he was an ingenuous,

honest man who simply made a few mistakes because he owned a poor head for business" (444).

Despite the positive review of Villard's biography, Warren identifies the biographer's failing as

the same as that of Hills Peeble Wilson, whose own biography *John Brown Soldier of Fortune: A*

Critique (1918), one reviewer notes, describes the abolitionist as "a hypocrite with the Scripture

on his tongue's end, the most contemptible of men" (Fleming 320). Despite Villard and Wilson

coming to vastly different conclusions, Warren believes both fail in their portraits of Brown

because they both omit "one of the most significant keys to John Brown's career and character:

his elaborate psychological mechanism for justification which appeared regularly in terms of the

thing which friends called Puritanism and enemies called fanaticism" (446). In essence, then,

Warren perceives Brown's passion for the abolition movement as borne out of a need to feel

significant, a psychological reaction to having been a failure at everything else in life.

Villard and Wilson produced two of the nineteen biographies Warren read in preparation

for writing *John Brown.* He consulted over two hundred books, articles, federal and state

documents, tracts, and speeches about the abolitionist, abolitionism, or the Harper's Ferry

debacle. One of the biographies of Brown he cites is Du Bois's (*John Brown* 448). And then

there is no other mention of Du Bois. Ironically, it is Du Bois's "old nemesis Villard"[16] (Lewis

The Fight 529) whose biography Warren identifies as indispensable because "all other books on

the subject which had appeared before 1910, seem as mere trifling with the matter" (*John Brown*

442). Morrison's comment that "invisible things are not necessarily 'not-there'; that a void may

be empty, but is not a vacuum" (qtd. in Robinson 511) is in play here. Warren, who a year later

would erase Du Bois from the essay "The Briar Patch" by replacing him with an avatar named

both "negro radical" and "hypothetical negro," is involved in a similar act of omission. But in the

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[16] Despite Villard's status as a founding member of the NAACP, Villard always cited Du Bois as the reason for his ouster as one of its executive board members.

context of Warren's problematic relationship to Du Bois in subsequent years, this "void . . . is

not a vacuum." Warren dismisses Du Bois because Du Bois is a threat to the white-majority

status quo, and his interpretation of Brown's life only reinforces that menace. With a simple act

of dismissal, Warren attempts to make Du Bois's interpretation of Brown's life immaterial. Yet

an analysis of the contrasting interpretations of the abolitionist makes clear Du Bois cannot be

that easily erased. The differences in the biographies underscore what made Du Bois a threat.

Though mentioned only in Warren's bibliography, Du Bois maintains the role of the primary

Africanist in Warren's *John Brown*, for, like a sermon in a black church, Warren's evaluations of

Brown's life respond directly to Du Bois's call to take note of this rare white man's sacrifice.

Though Warren writes what is supposed to be an account of Brown's life that augments

and corrects all the previous biographies preceding his own, his biography of the abolitionist has

a fictionalized texture to it, primarily because of his invention of dialogue[17] in his attempt, as

Blotner relates, "to penetrate the psychological depths of this complex character" (101). But the

inventions also support the notion that Warren is less interested in developing a true picture of

Brown and more concerned with creating the megalomaniac he believes Brown to be. Indeed, as

James Justus has observed, objectivity was not Warren's priority in writing this biography:

> Warren's ambiguous attitude toward the fictionalizing of history can be seen in
>
> his first book. *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929) is important, but not

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[17] Warren's use of fictionalized dialogue is an example of a popular technique in the currently fastest-growing genre in the published literature community. In *Literary Nonfiction: The Fourth Genre* (2003), Stephen Minot argues against the creation of dialogue, suggesting its use as unethical: "The best rule here is negative: don't take liberties. Commercial writers have produced popular 'biographies' that entertain the reader with entirely fictionalized dialogue and thoughts, but most of these are mass-market works composed with a greater concern for sales than for quality. Even when written with skill, they are works of fiction masquerading as biography" (46). Warren would have his readers believe that the words he places in Brown's mouth are the sorts of ideas that Brown would have habitually said. As a result, one must ask if Warren's biography is actually a work of fiction, for as Minot observes, "With some exceptions, mixing [fictionalized dialogue into nonfiction] becomes a deceit and adulterates the assets of each [type of genre]" (47).

because it gives us an objective portrait of John Brown to replace the distorted

and mythic images of previous biographers. For the writing of this book Warren

acquainted himself with the considerable secondary literature, much of it biased—

accounts of old Brown written to buttress larger causes. Warren's procedure was

to sift through these accounts, looking for contradictory uses of the same factual

evidence and the selective process by which some facts were cited, some

authorities quoted, while others were ignored. Warren tries to make his subject

more complex than either of the opposing figures projected by the partisans and

enemies—that is, Brown is neither saint nor madman, but an ambitious failure

who makes the most of his middling talents, a charismatic leader with a paltry

knowledge of tactics, and a self-deluded idealist indifferent to the most

commonplace moral and ethical standards of his day. As a result, Warren's

account of John Brown is perhaps more interesting than any other, but it can

hardly be termed objective. (*Achievement* 209)

If Warren's goal was to write historical fiction, then creating dialogue and manipulating scenes

are certainly parts of the artist's repertoire which were at his disposal. If his goal was to "set the

record straight," however, his use of this sort of craftsmanship suggests Warren was working

with an agenda in mind, and that agenda is to assure that his blending of fiction into the narrative

of Brown's life would result in a picture of Brown consistent with his thesis.

In like manner, Du Bois composes a biography of John Brown that manifests a certain

prejudicial slant to it. For the sociologist, Brown is a God-send, a prophet whom David Levering

Lewis describes as having been "draped," by Du Bois, as an "Old Testament hero in Old

Testament prose" (*Biography of a Race* 358). To substantiate this claim, the author chooses, like

Warren, to create a persona that fits his thesis. And like Warren's, Lewis also points out, Du

Bois's "primary concern was not with facts but interpretation" (*Biography of a Race* 358). Du

Bois, who one time proclaimed "all art is propaganda and ever must be" ("Criteria of Negro Art"

328),[18] believed that one must sometimes compromise truth in order to most effectively sway the

opinions of others. Thus, for Du Bois one should come to only one conclusion regarding John

Brown's raid of the armory at Harper's Ferry:

> The deed was done. The next day the world knew and the world sat in puzzled
>
> amazement. It was ever so and ever will be. When a prophet like John Brown
>
> appears, how must we of the world receive him? Must we follow out the drear,
>
> dread logic of surrounding facts, as did the South, even if they crucify a clean and
>
> pure soul, simply because consistent allegiance to our cherished, chosen ideal
>
> demands it?" (338)

According to Du Bois, Brown's motives justified his actions. He was a martyr, Du Bois argues,

because his cause, the emancipation of slaves, was just. Warren, of course, emphatically

disagreed.

The dramatic differences in Du Bois's and Warren's evaluations of Brown allude to the

rhetorical battle that Du Bois had been fighting for thirty years by the time Warren inserted

himself into the discussion. In *John Brown: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War,*

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[18] One of the more interesting anecdotes David Levering Lewis highlights as part of his discussion of the
philosophical fight Du Bois has with certain members of the Harlem Renaissance is the author's speech at the
annual convention of the NAACP in June 1926. "[All] Art is propaganda and ever must be despite the wailing of the
purists. . . I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda," Du Bois shouts from the platform (*Fight
for Equality* 756). Du Bois would print the contents of this speech in the October 1926 issue of *The Crisis,* entitling
the essay "Criteria of Negro Art."

and Seeded Civil Rights (2005),[19] David Reynolds, one of the more recent biographers of the abolitionist, traces the mythic significance of the man since his death:

> Brown's long-term impact has been manifested in many ways, perhaps most significantly among African Americans. Viewed as a whole, Brown's career anticipated a panoply of civil rights goals, some of which America is still struggling to achieve. The right to vote; the right to participate in government; the right to be paid equally for equal work; and the right to live in an integrated society free of prejudice—John Brown had envisaged all these rights for blacks and other minority groups. (12)

By the early twentieth century, Brown had already accomplished this epic status. Thus, Warren's decision to write a biography that supposedly would correct the interpretations of previous volumes on the abolitionist cannot be viewed in isolation. Like Du Bois's biography, Warren's must be seen as propaganda for a cause that was being debated not just in the South but in the national arena as well. Warren had intentionally involved himself into the discussion as a young white supremacist whose primary concern was maintaining the status quo in the South. In contrast, for Du Bois, the cause was equality by any means necessary

An obvious result of Warren's and Du Bois's contrary purposes for writing their respective biographies of John Brown is that the two authors interpret an event of Brown's life differently. One of the more apparent differences is the two authors' opinions of John Brown's inability to complete a task successfully despite having the resolution to see a job through to its

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[19] Reynolds notes his biography differs from those volumes on Brown that preceded his in that his is a cultural biography: It "[places] Brown fully in historical context" (9). Reynolds explains the difference further:
> Most standard biographies . . . contain some information about a subject's historical milieu. Cultural biography . . . analyzes this milieu not as window dressing—not as something 'out there,' on the fringes of personal life—but rather as a dynamic entity constantly seeping into the subject's psyche and shaping his or her behavior. Character traits usually explained psychologically have social dimensions. Cultural signifiers color the most private thoughts. (9)

end. Du Bois quotes from John Brown's autobiography a letter the abolitionist has written to a young boy. Referring to himself in the third person, Brown adjures the lad towards a resolute and steady direction, wherever that direction may be: "I wish you to have some definite plan. Many seem to have none; others never stick to any that they do form. This was not the case with John. He followed up with great tenacity whatever he set about as long as it answered his general purpose; hence he rarely failed in some degree to effect the things he undertook. This was so much the case that he habitually expected to succeed in his undertakings" (qtd. in Du Bois, *John Brown* 28). Du Bois wants his audience to see this letter as evidence of Brown's rather strong resolve. Warren, however, responds with dubiety—the letter is evidence of, at a minimum, a lack of self-knowledge, and at worst, duplicity. If the former, then Brown is, in the eyes of the poet, a more despicable version of some of the characters in his novels who also fail to reveal an ability to be self-aware. Jack Burden of *All the King's Men,* Percy Munn of *Night Rider,* Jeremiah Beaumont of *World Enough and Time* and Amantha Starr of *Band of Angels* may, in their own rights, illicit various levels of disapprobation, but the primary difference between them and John Brown, Warren might argue, is that the despicableness of those four characters has as their geneses the absences of self-knowledge. In contrast, the poet might continue, John Brown's lack of self-knowledge evolves from a hubris that makes it impossible for him to view himself as the failure he is. For Warren, the letter is Brown at his worst. Warren thus responds to the primary Africanist in the biography, Du Bois, that his "hero," far from being a man of resolution, is instead a self-absorbed liar.

Du Bois's biography of Brown refers to another letter that the abolitionist writes, this one to home in 1846. The missive describes Brown's experience in Springfield, Massachusetts. That season proved to be a successful one for the abolitionist, a historical fact even Warren

acknowledges. In the letter, Brown refers to this success: "We are getting along with our business slowly, but prudently, I trust, and as well as we could reasonably expect under all the circumstances; and so far as we can discover, we are in favor with this people, and also with the many we have had to do business with" (qtd. in Du Bois *John Brown* 63). Du Bois takes Brown's observation at face value and points to the success as evidence of the abolitionist's entrepreneurial genius. In contrast, though Warren's response to Du Bois does not mention the letter, he presents the successful season as an anomaly in the arc of the abolitionist's failed life. In place of the letter, Warren includes a comment by one of his Springfield partners that besmirches Brown's accomplishments: "I had no controversy with John Brown . . ." Simon Perkins, Jr., says of the abolitionist, "for it would have done no good" (qtd. in Warren, *John Brown* 51). In other words, the inability to receive advice by those who have been successful in business before, a characteristic born of Brown's hubris, would make this success temporary, a reality that the rest of his career, according to Warren, proved to be true.

As we might expect, Du Bois and Warren interpret Brown's tenacity differently. Each biographer argues for different motivations behind the abolitionist's actions. Warren defines Brown's resoluteness as obstinacy—the result of a megalomania that blinds Brown to not only the outrageousness of his own actions in the name of abolitionism, but also to the incapacities in his own persona to make success impossible:

> And so [Brown] wrote: "He followed up *tenacity* whatever he set about so long as it answer his general purpose: & hence he rarely failed in some good degree to effect the things he undertook. This was so much the case that he *habitually expected to succeed* in his undertakings. With this feeling *should be coupled;* (sic) the consciousness that our plans are right in themselves." John Brown had always

had the consciousness that his plans were "right in themselves," but the rest

sounds a little strange after the long history of so many failures. (249, italics

Warren's)

Du Bois, on the other hand, argues that Brown's tenacity is admirable because he refuses to

allow failure to dissuade him from his goals:

John Brown, coming to full industrial manhood in the buoyant prosperity of 1825,

soon began to sense the new spirit. After ten years' work in Pennsylvania, he

again removed westward, nearer the projected transportation lines between East

and West. He began to invest his surplus in land along the new canal routes,

became a director in one of the rapidly multiplying banks and was currently rated

to be worth $20,000 in 1835. But his prosperity . . . was partly fictitious, and built

on a fast expanding credit which was far outstretching the rapid industrial

development. [United States President Andrew] Jackson's blind tinkering with

banking precipitated the crisis. The storm broke in 1837. Over six hundred banks

failed, ten thousand employees were thrown out of work, money disappeared and

prices went down to a specie (sic) level. Brown, his tanner and his land

speculations, were sucked into the maelstrom. (50)

A victim of economic naturalism, Brown should be admired for fighting it. Brown's agency,

however, though admirable in Du Bois's interpretation, is incapable of influencing change

because Brown battles forces that have not only predetermined the plight of blacks but also

debilitates the efforts of any individual who works for the freedom of slaves.

While a comparison of Warren's and Du Bois's biographies of John Brown reveals

disparate views of the abolitionist, what ultimately becomes apparent is that the young Warren

does not see slavery as a moral issue and Du Bois does. Du Bois entitles the first chapter of his biography "Africa and America." In it, he draws a rough outline of the intersection of the two countries, a juncture that ultimately results in slavery in the New World. The major theme of the chapter is how John Brown comes to be a center point of that intersection. For Du Bois, Brown is a product of his heritage, an ancestry that includes an English carpenter, a Welsh wanderer, and a Dutch tailor. The importance of that mix is that those three represent the ideals that motivate Europeans to risk a transatlantic voyage for the purpose of establishing the New World:

> So there was builded into America the thrift of the searchers of wealth, the freedom of the Renaissance and the stern morality of the Reformation. Three lands typified three things planted in the New World: England sent Puritanism, the last white flower of the Lutheran revolt; Holland sent the new vigor and thrift of the Renaissance; while Celtic lands and bits of lands like France and Ireland and Wales, sent the passionate desire for personal freedom. (Du Bois, *John Brown* 18)

John Brown's paternal great-great-great-great-grandfather was the English carpenter, and his maternal great-great-great-great-grandfather, the Welsh wanderer. The Dutch tailor, Peter Mills, is an ancestor of the Reverend Edward Mills, the preacher who instills in John's family a religious pedigree, which John himself considers important.

John Brown's religious zeal, coupled with an inherent understanding of the prominence of personal freedom and Puritanistic morality, according to Du Bois, leads to the abolitionist's seeing slavery as an immorality consistent only with the pursuit of wealth. As Lewis notes, Du Bois "endeavored passionately to convey the meaning of the life of the wrathful, violent abolitionist to the twentieth century" (*Biography of a Race,* 357-58). The meaning of John

Brown, according to John David Smith, who writes the introduction to the 1997 edition of Du

Bois's biography of the abolitionist, is that the acquisition of wealth should never usurp personal

freedom: "Du Bois nonetheless blasted modern American capitalism for its shoddy construction,

arguing that the country would be better served by 'smaller production and more equitable

distribution; better fewer miles of railway and more honor, truth, and liberty; better fewer

millionaires and more contentment. . .'" (xix). Sounding like an early-twentieth-century

Agrarian, Du Bois reiterates a point he makes throughout his life: the oppression and denial of

black humanity in the United States occurred for only one reason—the rise of capitalism—and

this flipping of early-American values is a case of avaricious immorality.

Warren responds to this interpretation by perpetuating a myth about the incapability of

the slaves themselves. For the young Warren, the most indictable aspect of John Brown's life is

that Brown views slavery through the prism of Puritanistic morality. Such a perspective,

according to Warren, fails to take into account the pragmatism of slavery and the slaves'

assessment of their alleged plight:

> [There] was another fundamental error in the plan of conquest. John Brown, along
>
> with the greater number of Abolitionists, thought of slavery in terms of abstract
>
> morality, and never in the more human terms of its practical workings. They saw
>
> a situation which violated all justice, and they firmly believed that every victim of
>
> the situation was ready to avenge himself by cutting a throat. The slave himself
>
> was at the same time more realistic and more humane; he never bothered his
>
> kinky head about the moral issue, and for him the matter simply remained one of
>
> convenience or inconvenience. Since the system did not involve that absentee
>
> ownership, which had caused the horrors of West Indian slavery, and since

immediate contact existed between master and slave, an exercise of obligation

reached downward as well as upward and the negro's condition was tolerable

enough. The system was subject to grave abuse, but economic considerations

bolstered whatever little decency the slaveholder possessed, for the slave was very

valuable property and it was only natural that the master would take care to give

his property such treatment as would not jeopardize its value. There was, by

consequence, no great reservoir of hate and rancor which at the least opportunity

would convert every slave into a soldier; when the war came the masters marched

off, leaving their families and estates in the care of those same negroes for whose

liberty, presumably, the North was fighting. (Warren *John Brown* 332)

Warren eventually rejected this position, and his time studying slave narratives at the Library of

Congress no doubt helped towards this reversal in reasoning. But the twenty-four-year-old

Warren believed equating abolition with moral duty misinterpreted the economic history of the

United States. It obfuscated the inherent value that slaves played in making this country a world

power.

Such racist rhetoric calls into question the idea that Warren experienced a discomfort

while writing "The Briar Patch," a work that follows shortly after the publication of *John Brown.*

According to Warren, one recalls, he experienced a "wrangle and jangle" during his composing

of the essay. In an attempt to create a middle position that would placate his Agrarian colleagues

while acknowledging the humanity of Southern blacks, Warren merely reaffirms the profile of a

young white supremacist he more obviously perpetuates while writing the "corrected" version of

Brown's life. After all, this alleged discomfort did not deter him from supporting late-nineteenth,

early-twentieth century racist doctrine in a book for which there were no expectations to support

Agrarian doctrine, as there were with "The Briar Patch," or please an editor such as Davidson.

Despite Warren's insistence that an argument against his critics' accusations of inherent bias

against blacks is a father who insists on his family's seeing the humanity of African Americans,

Warren makes a conscious decision to perpetuate the myth of the happy slave within the pages of

John Brown. When Warren argues in the above passage that "[it] was only natural that the

master would take care to give his property such treatment as would not jeopardize its value.

There was, by consequence, no great reservoir of hate and rancor. . ." (332), he ignores the slave

narratives of Frederick Douglass, whose own autobiography he had researched as part of his

preparation for the writing of *John Brown.* For Warren, stories like the whipping of Old Barney,

whose veterinary skills with horses exceeded everyone who lived on Colonel Lloyd's farm,

prove to be of no effect. Of the event, Douglass relates, "[Few] of the features of slavery have

impressed me with a deeper sense of the injustice and barbarity than this exciting scene" (70).

Instead, Warren places greater value in the writings of white supremacist of the day who

propagate the trope of the happy slave.

While the primary document that Warren's critics use to substantiate claims of racism is

"The Briar Patch," his biography of John Brown reinforces their claims and should receive more

critical attention.[20] Warren's legacy with regard to race cannot be fully assessed without

including this work of nonfiction. Its publication occurring barely a year before *I'll Take My

Stand* was published indicates Warren's views of African Americans were not likely to have

gone through significant transformation in the period between the works appearing in public.

Morrison's words again come to mind here: "The spectacularly interesting question is 'What

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[20] James A Grimshaw's *Robert Penn Warren: A Descriptive Bibliography, 1922-79* (1981), a work that is in need of updating, reveals that reviews of *John Brown*, written in 1929 and 1930, exceed the number of critical essays (zero) and unpublished works (1) on the book.

intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critics to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work?'" (qtd. in Robinson 511). For Warren, the feat is in accepting as gospel the message early twentieth-century white supremacists like Thomas Dixon had disseminated about blacks.

Warren's *John Brown* has several passages that reveal that the young Warren has bought into the mythology of "negroism" that is popular in the late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century. One of the myths Warren believes is that black humanity is naturally lazy; thus, he creates dialogue that is consistent with such a belief. In late 1846 when the social reformer, abolitionist, and future three-time candidate for the United States presidency Gerrit Smith allots one-hundred-twenty acres of his property in upstate New York to "deserving negroes," John Brown sees the situation as an opportunity to make good on his promise to help emancipated slaves become self-sufficient. Brown approaches Smith in 1848 about becoming a supervisor of the Negro tenants on his property and convinces the future presidential hopeful of his frontier acumen. In language Warren probably created for Brown, he argues for the position: "I am something of a pioneer. . . I will take one of your farms myself, clear it up and plant it, and show my colored neighbors how such work should be done; will give them work as I have occasion, look after them in all needful ways, and be a kind of father to them" (qtd. in Warren *John Brown* 57). Warren's description of the workers under Brown belies his affinity with early-twentieth century paternalism towards blacks: "[The] new settlers had several faults to live down. Even the naïve, perennial faith in human nature, which sustained Gerrit Smith when his purse suffered at the hands of the unworthy, had received a sort of shock when indisputable evidence forced him to admit that many of the free negroes and run-away slaves had adopted their Southern masters' habit of drinking too much" (58).

In the same passage, Warren perpetuates other stereotypes of enslaved blacks: "He [John Brown] had to admit that the negroes were lazy. . ." (59). Worse still is the assertion that Brown subscribed to the notion of Samboism: "There is evidence that Cyrus [a runaway slave who had found his way to upstate New York], at least, kept John Brown's admonition and remained good-natured; it was a failing of his race" (61). For support, Warren uses a pamphlet that John Brown had written called *Sambo's Mistakes.* The protagonist is a mature Negro who details the mistakes he has made over the years:

> He learned to read but had devoted this talent to silly novels and other miserable
> trash. Smoking and chewing tobacco had taken money which might better have
> paid for a farm, a library, or benefitted the suffering members of his own race. . .
> He had also wasted his time with Free Masons, Odd Fellows, Sons of
> Temperance, and a score of other secret societies instead of seeking the company
> of intelligent, wise, and good men. . . Sambo, furthermore, had been too proud of
> his spouting talents to ever get any business accomplished when some crisis
> called a meeting of colored people together. He had other things to regret in his
> misspent life: self-indulgence, failure to coöperate with fellow Abolitionists
> because of religious differences, prejudice against people who would help him.
> But the writer is most bitter when he comes to the climax of his paper: "Another
> trifling error of my life has been, that I have always expected to secure the favor
> of the whites by tamely submitting to every species of indignity instead of nobly
> resisting their brutal aggressions from principle. . . " (61-2)

The pamphlet suggests the notion that Brown himself may have been duped into believing the myth of the happy-go-lucky slave. Yet Du Bois views the presence of this pamphlet as proof that

Brown sympathized with the plight of the slaves: "No one knew better than John Brown how slavery had contributed to these faults: for how many slaves could read anything, or when had they been taught the use of money or the A. B. C. of organization? Not in condemnation but in faith was this excellent paper written and delicately worded as from one who has learned his own faults and will not repeat those of others" (Du Bois *John Brown* 100). The polarity in their statements is proof that Warren wrote his biography not only with a bias against Brown but also with racist assumptions about slavery. I am reminded of Morrison's words about the self-reflexive nature of American white authors' incorporating into their writings black characters: "The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self. . ." (17). Warren's erasure of Brown and his creation of emancipated Africanists that perpetuate untruths about slavery uncovers Warren's white supremacist ideology. In the same paragraph in which Morrison develops the above thought, she concludes with "It requires hard work *not* to see this" (17). Warren does not use coded language in his description of the slaves that worked with Brown; it is not "hard work *not* to see" his racist ideology. Yet the lack of critical attention to Warren's biography of Brown suggests that Warren apologists have overlooked the obvious. Warren scholars have engaged in the "hard work" to which Morrison refers in *not* seeing Warren's use of racist tropes about slavery.

Indeed, the most uncomfortable aspect of Warren's *John Brown* is its perpetuation of stereotypes about blacks. When Warren again declares the black slave indolent, the reader begins to believe Warren has another agenda in writing Brown's biography than just offering his audience a "corrected" view of John Brown. In response to Brown's assertion in the preamble of the Constitution, drawn up by the Provisional Convention of Kansas, that "slavery [was] a 'most

barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war,'" (281), Warren cannot help himself in revealing

what he considers to be the fallacy in Brown's declaration:

> The negroes, as the experience of emancipation was to show, could not work for
>
> themselves. They had been accustomed to explicit directions as to when, where,
>
> and how they should employ themselves, and John Brown must have realized this
>
> fact. The abolition of private property would accomplish two expedient ends: it
>
> would throw the wealth of white, non-slaveholding citizens into the common
>
> treasury, and it would permit the irresponsible negro labor to be kept under direct
>
> control. (283)

The simplest interpretation of this passage is to assert Warren had bought into the stereotypes

that were perpetuated about slaves during the early twentieth century. But the choice of Warren's

words indicate more than implicit bias. Warren's use of the word *irresponsible* to describe black

labor that would find its way to Kansas suggests the poet also has a secondary reason in writing

the biography of the Brown—to underscore that slavery was a logical solution to the plight faced

by black humanity since blacks, as the narrative asserts, do not have the innate characteristics to

make a productive labor force. The argument Warren pursues is that the South could continue

sustaining economic viability only with slavery. In turn, Warren also implies a support of the Jim

Crow laws under which Southern blacks lived during the early twentieth century, decades after

the Emancipation Proclamation.

Warren's biography of John Brown reveals another racist tendency: the author's penchant

for using racial epithets in his early years. In fact, Warren never fully quit using such ugly

language, as will be more fully discussed in Chapter Four. Speaking of Frank B. Sanborn (1831-

1917), an American journalist who writes early biographies of many of Transcendentalism's key

figures, Warren refers to the young man as "[possessing] that tight especial brand of New England romanticism which manifested itself in stealing Guinea niggers. . ." (*John Brown* 226). While the use of the epithet may be chalked up to youthful immaturity, its use runs contrary to the thought that Warren has at this time an unease about writing "The Briar Patch" because the ideas espoused in that essay clash with his upbringing. Indeed, youthful immaturity may be Warren's best excuse for such language as he undoubtedly has chosen to reject at an early age the direction of Robert Franklin Warren, his true father, and instead adopt the language of his false fathers—the Agrarians. But immaturity does not give Warren a complete pass as the racist language reveals merely one aspect of his racist tendencies.

In addition to the passages that perpetuate black stereotypes, Warren's negative descriptions of Frederick Douglass suggest that at a young age, Warren fails to see beyond the color of one's skin to acknowledge the significance of another's contribution to American history. When discussing John Brown's visit with Douglass, Warren calls the former slave, whom he refers to much later in the biography as "the fugitive slave" (225), "a prominent agitator" (52). To pronounce Douglass an agitator fails to evaluate properly Douglass's role in history. If he, indeed, is an agitator, then the appellation has positive connotations Warren does not necessarily mean when using the term. In like manner, the African Americans who demonstrate peaceably by involving themselves in sit-ins at the counters of white diners during the Civil Rights Movement are also agitators. Both Douglass and those individuals involved in the sit-in demonstrations were attempting to upset the status quo. Moreover, to describe him as a fugitive rather than as emancipated harks back to Morrison's discussion of Cather's choice of title for *Sapphira and the Slave Girl.* By choosing, consciously or unconsciously not to name Nancy in the title, Cather subsumes her humanity in her assigned role. In like manner, Warren

uses *fugitive* to describe Douglass to make clear that Douglass's emancipation results from his

breaking laws governing Southern blacks.

Ironically, thirty-one years after publishing *John Brown,* a more mature Warren would

respond to sit-in demonstrations in a manner that suggests he no longer held to the same

sentiments expressed in either *John Brown* or "The Briar Patch." Warren writes an essay as a

result of a pictorial he viewed in the March 14, 1960, issue of *U.S. News and World Report*: "I

have just seen in a magazine three photographs—three stages of an action. In the first a young

white man is taking his seat at a lunch counter where Negro students are staging a sit-down

protest. In the second the young white man is being jerked off the stool to the floor. In the third

he is being held down and, it is reported, kicked" ("Episode" 654). The essay, published

posthumously in 1994, reveals a side of Warren seen only in private—a man who indeed is

disturbed by the lack of racial tolerance in this country nearly a century after emancipation.

Warren admits that he is unsure if he would have had the fortitude to sit on the stool:

> I do not mean to say that under the same circumstances as the young man in the
>
> photograph I would have sat down on that stool. I might have been out of
>
> sympathy with the protest of the Negro students. I might have felt their method
>
> wrong or ill-timed. I might have been too much of a coward. Any one of a number
>
> of things might, theoretically, have restrained me from sitting on the stool. But
>
> whether I might or might not have sat there is irrelevant to the right I had thought
>
> I had in Nashville, Tennessee, but which, apparently, I no longer possess. (654)

Despite the admittance that he may not have acted in like manner as the young white man who

gets punished for his bravery, Warren's racial politics appear to have mollified somewhat over

the years—he no longer aligns himself with those Southern sentimentalities that would deny

anyone the right to sit in a desegregated room:

> For here is the paradox. As soon as we deny a right to another person we have
>
> taken the first step toward denying all rights to ourselves. We change the nature of
>
> our society from a society of right to a society of force. For the only way to deny
>
> a right to people who know they have that right is by force—and always such
>
> force is administered at the whim of the hoodlum behind the stool. Society
>
> without the undergirding of right—with all the important distinctions between
>
> private and public rights—is hoodlumism. (654)

Warren speaks of losing his citizenship to the South as a result of no longer identifying with a

region in which such "hoodlumism" is supported (654). The essay suggests a sense of loss and is

evidence that Warren did experience some sort of change in his racial politics—even if the

change was merely an intellectual one predicated on the danger racism posed to white bodies,

such as the one in the *Life* photos. The young Warren, however, is not afraid to make obvious the

less progressive nature of his racial views.

Warren's assessment of Frederick Douglass as "agitator" substantiates such a conclusion,

even if one must grant that the term *agitator* is not necessarily a derogatory expression. One of

the possible first uses of the term to describe Douglass is found in the chapter the English author

David W. Bartlett devotes to the former slave in his 1855 book *Modern Agitators: or Pen*

Portraits of Living Reformers. Including Douglass among his portraits, Bartlett is

complementary towards his subject: "Few living orators surpass Frederick Douglass in

declamatory eloquence. . . Mr. Douglass is a powerful writer, but we confess that we think he

erred in attempting to maintain a weekly journal. . . Nature intended Douglass for an orator" (qtd.

in Inge, Duke, and Bryer 66). The mostly complimentary discussion in the chapter suggests

Bartlett is using the word *agitator* in a rather positive sense. While Warren may have been

merely using the noun in this manner—one who upsets the status quo—the tone of *John Brown*

suggests otherwise. Indeed, as in the example in which Warren calls Negro labor "irresponsible,"

the choice of words suggests an agenda besides correcting his readers' view of John Brown, *e.g.*

why is Douglass described as a "fugitive slave" and not a former slave? The reason, the text

supports, is that the young Warren has a white-supremacist attitude towards eighteenth-century

slave labor.

The ideology of extreme racism that engulfs the South after 1890 undoubtedly had an

effect on the young writer. This line of thought argues that blacks, a subhuman species of

humanity, would eventually come to a Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest extermination. Until

black extinction occurs, however, something must be done with the current problem—or as

George Fredrickson points out in his book *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on*

Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914 (1971),

> For Southern Negrophobes the prospect of black extinction was at most a
>
> comforting thought; it did not remove the pressing problem of how to prevent the
>
> contamination of the white community while the doomed race reverted to
>
> savagery and declined morally, physically, and economically. Central to the new
>
> anti-Negro propaganda was the 'degenerate' state of the Negro, rather than the
>
> racial "thanatopsis" at the end of the evolutionary process. (258)

Fredrickson's conclusion is deduced from the research of writers like Ray Stannard Baker, the

first prominent American journalist to write about America's racial divide, who despite asserting

impartiality in delving into the subject, comes to the conclusion in his book *Following the Color*

Line (1908) that blacks are "far inferior in education, intelligence, and efficiency to the white people as a class." As a result, they "must find their activities mostly in physical and more or less menial labour . . . before they can expect larger opportunities" (qtd. in Schäfer 113). Though not a disciple of the "Southern prophets of black extinction," Fredrickson's term for these extremists, Warren appears to have rejected his father's instruction on matters of racial equality and bought into the propaganda about blacks from these oracles of doom.

Du Bois fights against these stereotypes in his interpretation of Brown. To call the abolitionist a martyr is appropriate, Du Bois argues, because he fought for the humanity of a dehumanized population. More importantly, Du Bois made a significant part of his own lifework the refutation of what Warren's rhetoric represented. In *The Souls of Black Folk,* for example, while acknowledging the lazy disposition of a number of blacks in his day—the majority of the black population of Dougherty County are described as "poor and ignorant, fairly honest and well meaning, plodding, and to a degree shiftless, with some but not great sexual looseness" (174)—he, nonetheless, places the blame on environmental factors, rejecting emphatically the idea that blacks are naturally so. Soon after contextualizing the behavior of the black residents of Dougherty County, he rejects his early characterization:

> These black thousands are not in reality lazy; they are improvident and careless; they insist on breaking the monotony of toil with a glimpse at the great town-world on Saturday; they have their loafers and their rascals; but the great mass of them work continuously and faithfully for a return, and under circumstances that would call forth equal voluntary effort from few if any other modern laboring class. (175)

An earlier chapter of *Souls* rejects the same representation. In "Of the Meaning of Progress," Du Bois addresses the reason for this alleged laziness: "The mass of those whom slavery was a dim recollection of childhood found the world a puzzling thing: it asked little of them, and they answered with little, and yet it ridiculed their offering. Such a paradox they could not understand, and therefore sank into listless indifference, or shiftlessness, or reckless bravado" (136). The trained sociologist sheds further light upon the subject in other writings. In "The Training of Negroes for Social Power," published the same year as *Souls,* he observes, "If the Southern Negro is shiftless, it is primarily because over large areas a shiftless Negro can get on in the world about as an industrious black man" (358-359). In an editorial entitled "Reconstruction and Africa" for *The Crisis* in February 1919, he identifies another source of the Negroes' alleged shiftlessness: "Is a civilization naturally backward because it is different? . . . Drunkenness, terrible diseases, immorality, all these things have been the gifts of European civilization" (638-39). Without naming the likes of Robert Penn Warren, then, Du Bois rejects the characterizations of the slave that were so prominent during the early twentieth century. Du Bois recognizes the problem of "black shiftlessness" not as a character flaw of Southern Negroes but as a symptom of a much greater issue—institutionalized racism. Undoubtedly, by making sociology the foundation of his arguments, Du Bois not only created enemies among his white critics but also heightened the angst Warren had for him, for as Paul V, Murphy observes in *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (2001), the Agrarians "refused to conceive society in sociological terms" (29).[21]

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[21] John Crowe Ransom had made the Agrarian distrust of the field of sociology clear in the Introduction to *I'll Take My Stand*: "Men are prepared to sacrifice their private dignity and happiness to an abstract social ideal, and without asking whether the social ideal produces the welfare of any individual man whatsoever. But this is absurd. The responsibility of men is for their own welfare and that of their neighbors; not for the hypothetical welfare of some fabulous creature called society" (xlvi).

Du Bois uses his biography of John Brown to reject the idea that emancipated slaves were a lot of "shiftless" workers that needed the direction of white overseers to make them productive. According to the sociologist, Brown should be admired for taking a martyr's stance against slavery, but ultimately, the biography is a defense of enslaved black humanity. Warren, on the other hand, uses his story of John Brown not only to counter the prevailing—and in his opinion, aberrant—views of the abolitionist but also—and more importantly—to affirm the conservative, Agrarian position of his colleagues at Vanderbilt University towards slavery specifically and segregated, subordinated southern blacks generally. The overt racism in Warren's *John Brown* lays the foundation for Warren's objections to Du Bois's radicalism in "The Briar Patch." In contrast, Du Bois affirmed the humanity of a population that Warren believed deserved no affirmation.

Du Bois would also use his rare incursions into fiction to reject categorically such characterizations. In the introduction to *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Oxford Reader* (1996), Eric J. Sundquist notes that "[in] writing his own life . . . Du Bois was at all times writing the story of his own people—all those people belonging to the 'race' or 'nation' he grouped under the amorphous category of 'Negro'" (5). Sundquist undoubtedly is referring to Du Bois's own words in *Dusk of Dawn* about the trajectory of his life and its parallels with the history of racism in America: "My discussion of the concept of race, and of the white and colored worlds, are to be regarded as digressions from the history of my life; rather my autobiography is a digressive illustration and exemplification of what race has meant in the world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (111). This observation can just as appropriately be made about Du Bois's first novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* as Du Bois speaks through the work's characters as agitator, sociologist, philosopher, and historian.

In the note that precedes chapter one, Du Bois remarks, "In no fact or picture have I consciously set down aught the counterpart of which I have not seen or known . . ." (xxi). Using an ensemble cast of protagonists, Du Bois fills the pages of the novel with educated Negroes, Southern gentlemen, Northern capitalists, poor Southern whites, and benevolent Northerners, undoubtedly composite images of people he has met in his lifetime. Of the many characters that play major roles in the story, Bles Alwyn and Zora are the most crucial. The story opens with their meeting in the swampland of Alabama. Bles, who has been forced to leave his Georgia home, meets Zora, whose initial characterization as an elf-girl, is reinforced by subsequent pictures of Elspeth, the girl's witch-like mother. The chance encounter results in the knowledge Bles needs to get enrolled in the local Negro school, where he becomes a star pupil. The two fall in love but go their separate ways because Bles learns Zora is not "pure," having been raped by Harry Cresswell, who embodies the worst of Southern gentlemen. Both Bles and Zora end up in Washington, D. C., neither knowing the other is there. Each becomes a pawn of the racial politics of late nineteenth-century America. Bles's oratorical skills are put to use to get Republicans elected into office while Zora works as a servant for one of the more important Northerners in the story, Mrs. Vanderpool. Eventually, Bles and Zora return to the South, helping the Negro school from which they both received their initial education. The last chapter ends with the two back in the swamp and Zora's asking Bles to marry her.

In between the initial and last meeting of Bles and Zora, Du Bois uses both romantic and naturalistic constructs to cast his story in terms of social uplift. The swamp in *The Silver Fleece* reminds the reader of Nathaniel Hawthorne's forest imagery. It is a place where not only witches and devils reside but also where Zora, reminiscent of Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter,* can impart wisdom and knowledge:

> [In] sudden new friendship she had his hand and led him through the swamp,
>
> showing him all the beauty of her swamp-world—great shadowy oaks and limpid
>
> pools, lone, naked trees and sweet flowers; the whispering and flitting of wild
>
> things, and the winging of furtive birds. She had dropped the impish mischief of
>
> her way, and up from beneath it rose a wistful, visionary tenderness; a mighty
>
> half-confessed, striving for unknown things. (28)

The Romantic tendency for symbolism is rampant throughout the novel, the most obvious being the title of the work, *The Quest for the Silver Fleece.* The literal meaning of the silver fleece is cotton; but, as Gregory U. Rigsby correctly notes in the introduction to the 1969 edition of the novel, "The real 'silver fleece' is not in the cotton fields, but in the souls of black folks" (vi). This idea is reinforced by the frequent references to dreaming—the first chapter of the novel is entitled "Dreams"; Zora and Bles dream of a world in which blacks are the social equals of whites; political wrangling in Washington indirectly squelches the dreams of all blacks; and Southern white mobs violently attempt to smother those visions.

As a naturalistic work, *The Silver Fleece* reflects Du Bois's arguments that institutionalized racism creates the "listless indifference . . . shiftlessness, or reckless bravado" he had witnessed of blacks living in rural Georgia. Like Frank Norris's novels *McTeague* (1899) and *The Octopus* (1901),[22] *The Silver Fleece* draws a straight line from the economic

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[22] In *The Octopus*, wheat becomes a great force for which the farmers of the San Joachin Valley and the railroads fight. In *The Silver Fleece,* cotton is at the center of all the major conflicts: the machinations of Northern capitalists John Taylor and Mr. Easterley and Southern gentlemen Colonel and Harry Cresswell; between the clashes of cotton mills and southern plantations; and, of course, behind the dreams of economic wealth of both whites and blacks. One of the more interesting parallels between *The Silver Fleece* and a Norris novel manifests itself in Zora's love for the cotton, reminiscent of the lust for money that Norris's female protagonist Trina manifests in his other naturalistic classic *McTeague.* In one rather dramatic scene in Norris's novel Trina spills all the gold coins she has been hoarding onto her bed. Naked, she then climbs onto the same bed and appears to have a rather orgasmic experience with the coins. Similarly, Zora sleeps among the cotton bales which have been stolen from her by the Cresswells; she wraps the cloth that has been woven from those bales around her in another scene, and eventually she hoards the cloth in a trunk. Although the rather Victorian-inclined Du Bois refrains from depicting his female protagonist as

machinations of those who work in financial marketplace during the late nineteenth century to the plight of black Americans. Consistent with naturalistic determinism, those entities in the novel who are looking to make a lot of money from the growing and manufacturing of cotton dictate the fates of Bles, Zora and the black community. The narrative is consistent with one of Du Bois's favorite topics—the relationship between economics and race. In his autobiography *Dusk of Dawn,* the author reiterates this connection: "[The] economic foundation of the modern world was based on the recognition and preservation of so-called racial distinctions. In accordance with this, not only Negro slavery could be justified, but the Asiatic coolie profitably used and the labor classes in white countries kept in their places by [a] low wage" (qtd. in Sundquist 80). Like Norris, Du Bois suggests that the fates of Bles and Zora, and their Southern black contemporaries, are determined by both economic and social forces beyond their controls. And any attempt to take control, such as in the pair's growing from seeds given them by Elspeth a wonderful field of the commodity in the swampland's forest, leads only to futility because the Craswell's lay claim to the cotton through immoral, yet legal, means.

For Du Bois, writing a novel like *The Silver Fleece* provided another platform on which he could proclaim both his message of social uplift and his rejection of black stereotypes like the ones Warren perpetuates. In the chapter entitled "The Planting" of *The Quest for the Silver Fleece,* Zora and Bles work their secret patch of land in preparation for the planting of cotton seed. The narrative opens almost dreamlike as Du Bois creates a rather romantic picture of back-breaking work that eventually leads to wonderful results: "Zora looked down upon Bles, where he stood to his knees in mud. The toil was beyond exhilaration—it was sickening weariness and panting despair. The great roots, twined in one unbroken snarl, clung frantically to the black soil.

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being aroused by cotton, Zora's obsession with the cotton may be described as no less deep than Trina's is of money.

The vines and bushes fought back with thorn and bramble. Zora stood wiping the blood from her hands and staring at Bles" (64). The next morning, after an evening during which Zora has without permission borrowed a mule to work the earth alone, Bles arrives to a scene he cannot believe: "Bles, hurrying down in the morning with new tolls and new determination, stopped and stared in blank amazement. Zora was perched and beneath a fat black mule was finishing his breakfast" (66). With the help of the witch-like hag, Elspeth, who is the owner of the special cotton seed Bles and Zora wish to plant on this island patch in the swamp, they sow the seed and wait for the harvest. Two chapters later, Bles and Zora earn the fruits of their labor:

> The golden green of the first leaves darkened, and the plants sprang forward steadily. Never before was such a magnificent beginning, a full month ahead of other cotton. The rain swept down in laughing, bubbling showers, and laved their thirsty souls, and Zora held her beating breast day by day lest it rain too long or too heavily. The sun burned fiercely upon the young cotton plants as the spring hastened, and they lifted their heads in darker, wilder luxuriance; for the time of hoeing was at hand. (92)

The reaping of the cotton results in an impressive crop, which also effects an effusive response from the two young farmers:

> So it was that the Fleece rose and spread and grew to its wonderful flowering; and so these two children grew with it into theirs. Zora never forgot how they found the first white flower in that green and billowing sea, nor her low cry of pleasure and his gay shout of joy. Slowly, wonderfully the flowers spread—white, blue, and purple bells, hiding timidly, blazing luxuriantly amid the velvet leaves; until one day—it was after a southern rain and the sunlight was twinkling through the

morning—all the Fleece was in flower—a mighty swaying sea, darkling rich and

waving, and upon it flecks and stars of white and purple foam. The joy of the two

so madly craved expression that they burst into singing; not the wild light song of

dancing feet, but a low, sweet melody of her fathers' fathers, whereunto Alwyn's

own deep voice fell fitly in minor cadence. (94)

This romantic inter-relationship between the working of the fields and the happiness of the two

protagonists underscores an agrarian truth—that there is a direct correlation between manual,

agrarian labor and the ultimate contentment of humanity. The scene, one would think, would

have been endorsed by Booker T. Washington. Instead, it is Du Bois who insinuates in this

scene, and others, that he understands the value of manual labor. Of course, he would add that,

this value notwithstanding, like the white workforce, there was a place for white-collar laborers

among his black peers as well.

Despite the alleged relationship between contentment and agrarian labor, however, this

picture of apparent fulfillment belies a truth that is not lost on Du Bois: the Southern black

agrarian laborer lived in squalor during the four decades after emancipation. Du Bois does not

fail to address this reality in *Souls of Black Folk.* In "The Quest for the Golden Fleece" Du Bois

outlines the various effects that the Cotton Kingdom has had on the Southern black:

We seldom study the condition of the Negro to-day honestly and carefully. It is so

much easier to assume that we know it all. Or perhaps, having already reached

conclusions in our own minds, we are loth to have them disturbed by facts. And

yet how little we really know of these millions,—of their daily lives and longings,

of their homely joys and sorrows, of their real shortcomings and the meaning of

their crimes! All this we can only learn by intimate contact with the masses, and

not by wholesale arguments covering millions separate in time and space, and

differing widely in training and culture. (171)

The real picture, according to Du Bois, is a "direct heritage of the South from the wasteful

economies of the slave regime" (171). Homes not much different from those lived in by slaves

more than a half century earlier are "nearly always old and bare, built of rough boards, and

neither plastered nor ceiled . . . [light] and ventilation . . . supplied by the single door and by the

square hole in the wall with its wooden shutter" and "no glass, porch, or ornamentation without"

(172). Ninety percent of the black population is uneducated, relates Du Bois, with nearly two

thirds of them unable to read or write. Child labor is rampant, and just as baleful, unlike in some

areas of the United States, blacks in the South have no leisure class. Finally, "[the] toil, like all

farm toil, is monotonous, and here there are little machinery and few tools to relieve its

burdensome drudgery" (175).

Yet notwithstanding these actual despairing pictures, the Negro does not fail to toil unendingly

"in the pure open air, and this is something in a day when fresh air is scarce" (175). Moreover,

despite what appears to be a "shiftless" people, working the land has resulted in their

> "[loafing] before your face and [working] behind your back with good-natured
>
> honesty. They'll steal a watermelon, and hand you back your lost purse intact.
>
> Their great defect as laborers lies in their lack of incentive beyond the mere
>
> pleasure of physical exertion. They are careless because they have not found that
>
> it pays to be careful; they are improvident because the improvident ones of their
>
> acquaintance get on about as well as the provident. (180)

In other words, Du Bois describes what Nicholas K. Bromell calls the "self-affirmative value" of

slave labor (208). That is, Du Bois paints this squalid picture to assert that these ugly realities

during the period Gates calls Redemption are the effects of white ownership of the Cotton

Kingdom—both the means of production and those forced into sharecropping—while equally

affirming the value of manual labor. Through similar genres—the biography, the essay, and the

novel—and dissimilar ones—the sociological study and the poem—both men engage in a

rhetorical battle waged not just in the South but throughout the United States over who is an

American.

　　　Warren purportedly eventually repents of his racist positions—although never dismissing

his views of John Brown. In like manner, despite Warren's repudiation of the positions he takes

in "The Briar Patch," he could never fully reconcile with what Du Bois represented to him. Three

decades later, the interviews of *Who Speaks for the Negro?* underscore Warren's failure to

appreciate the immense contributions Du Bois had made to the progress the United States had

made in the area of race relations. Because the two never met, it was not simply a distaste for the

obstinate persona of Du Bois, whose irascible personality could infuriate even his closest allies.

That difficulty suggests that Warren's public repudiations of his racist past belie a profound,

internal dissonance on the subject of race. The "wrangle and jangle," if you will, continued its

presence in Warren's psyche even as his racial politics changed. Both *Segregation* and *Who

Speaks for the Negro?* contain what Szczesuil identifies as Warren's most confessional material

regarding his white supremacist history. As a result, these two works come closest to exorcising

the ghosts that haunted his career. An examination of the Africanist presences in those works,

however, reveals that Warren had not experienced a *complete* exorcism—and a partial exorcism

means the ghosts were still present.

Chapter 4

Sins of Commission and Omission in *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?*

Though the publications of *Segregation* (1956) and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965) are separated by nine years, they are often discussed together as evidence of the alleged transformation Warren made from segregationist to integrationist. If *John Brown* and "The Briar Patch," Warren's earliest nonfiction on race, provide irrefutable evidence of his support for white supremacist ideology, these works of nonfiction, the first written to gauge Southerners' reactions to the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the second to ascertain who among African-American leaders at the height of the Civil Right Movement could be identified as their primary spokesperson, reveal Warren's most confessional passages about the regret he had for his past defense of segregation. An analysis of the Africanist presence in these two later works, however, suggest Warren's transformation was not nearly as complete as his apologists assert. Instead, under close scrutiny Warren's interactions with the Africanists in both *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* reveal that Warren continued to think like a white supremacist. While it is true that, intellectually, he could no longer support state and federal government policies that subordinated black Americans, his championing of a "go slow" strategy towards civil rights equality and his penchant to describe African Americans in language reminiscent of early-twentieth-century racist rhetoric point towards Warren still harboring racist ideology.

In this chapter, I will return to *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* examining them through the Morrison-inspired lens I have used for "The Briar Patch" and *John Brown*— what the Africanist presences in these works continue to denote about Warren's racial politics. I

will explore Warren's novel *Band of Angels* for further clues regarding his antipathy towards radicalism and examine the headnotes of black authors in the anthology *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (1974) for similar clues that the radicalism of Du Bois made him a natural enemy of Warren's. I will show these two works as complementary pieces to Warren's reaffirmation as a white supremacist. I will conclude that *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* reveal similar contradictions of the surface meaning of the texts as do the works that have already been explored—that Warren's encounters with the Africanist presences in these late-career works continue to support white-supremacist ideology.

Warren composed *Segregation* from the interview material he did not use for the article "Divided South Searches for Its Soul," which appeared in the July 9, 1956, issue of *Life.* Blotner notes, "The sixty-six page book was the place for material too inflammatory for *Life*: the epithets and expletives, the sheer hatred and the vitriolic anti-NAACP and anti-Negro fulminations" (304). Furthermore, Blotner adds, even though Albert Erskine, Warren's editor, tended to avoid superlatives, he described the reviews as "'really fabulous'" (304). In truth, as Christopher Metress observes, the reviews, "though mostly positive,"(167) were a mixed bag of opinions. But a book that took the pulse of the South just two years after the Supreme Court had announced its decision in *Brown* was destined to generate a substantial amount of interest.

Segregation, according to its author, reveals both the collective and individual fractured psyches of Southerners. It gives testimony to a region of the country that lived in the spirit of its mythic past, and now, faced with change, must come to terms with what that particular change will mean. In his review of the book, Ralph McGill enumerates some of the contradictions of the South that underscore the irrational nature of its decisions prior to *Brown*:

A white clerk will sit at the feet of a Negro customer and fit shoes on colored feet, but the same clerk would define sitting beside the same customer on a bus as social equality. Taxis in one suburb will accept Negro passengers, while across town others won't. White and colored fishermen will sit along the bank of a commercially operated lake in complete amity, but Negroes may not fish in the public lakes of the state parks. (1)

These conscious decisions, Warren would argue, are the manifestations of white Southerners who are unaware of the interconnectedness of themselves with their black neighbors. That is, as noted in the Introduction, white Southerners suffered from a lack of self-knowledge—that awareness that they are "in the world with continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms, [their identities]" (Warren "Knowledge" 186-187). The visceral emotions evident in Warren's collection of interviews are the result of what Southerners believed was federal government overreach in telling them how to live their lives. It was also the result of not knowing what the future held. Yet Warren was hopeful: "If the South is really able to face up to itself and its situation, it may achieve identity, moral identity. Then in a country where moral identity is hard to come by the South, because it has had to deal concretely with a moral problem, may offer some leadership" (66).

Others were hopeful as well. In his review of the book, McGill, then editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, reflects the sort of tempered confidence many in the South had: "The last paragraph [of *Segregation*]is, I believe, prophetic of the South, which, one of these days, will rise out of the ashes of the divisive forces which burn within our hearts and souls" (13). Those words, written over fifty years, augur the optimism of Christopher Metress, who in 1996 wrote a commemorative piece on the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *Segregation* for *The*

Saturday Evening Review: "In the forty years since Warren wrote *Segregation,* the South, though it has often stumbled, has made progress, and in many ways it has offered the nation some of the moral leadership it has so desperately needed" (170). But at the same time Metress also saw then what has become reality today—the propagating of racist ideology in full force, not the sincere and difficult grappling with a moral problem but a virtual return to the sort of rhetoric that dominated racial politics during the turn of the century: "But the national rhythm of complacency and panic that Warren decried so many years ago seems to be coming back" (170-171).

Others who reviewed *Segregation*, however, had little reason to be optimistic as they saw in its writer the very problem about which he was writing. How does one remain optimistic about the future when the writer being prophetic about it manifests the very qualities that the South must overcome? Robert Lovell, Jr., asks this question in the conclusion of his review of the book for *The Journal of Negro Education* in 1957. Enumerating a series of disqualifications from which the book suffers, Lovell argues that the author himself is a problem: "Second is the fact that Mr. Warren is not an emancipated Southerner, although he tries hard to be. He cannot help thinking of Negroes as something separate and peculiar all the way down. Throughout his book one is embarrassed by his unconscious shudders at the nearness of integration" (157-158). Other critics also argue that the problem of the book is its author. Paul Goodman, writing for the magazine *Dissert,* calls the book "disingenuous and not disinterest. Ed (sic), and it is a conceited little book. . ." The reason, he argues, is that

> Warren's disingenuousness is this: he sees, he cannot help but see, that the Negro
> problem in the south is a psychiatric one, a matter of irrational emotions and split
> identity; all the usual reasons are largely rationalizations; and indeed he subtitles
> his book "inner conflict," a term picked up from psychoanalysis. Yet the author

persists in striking the postures and sounding the rhetoric of being in an agonizing

moral dilemma, as if a problem of medicine were a problem of ethics.

Goodman's assessment is not unique. Metress notes that Lawrence Dunbar Reddick, the first

biographer of Martin Luther King, Jr., "heard in *Segregation* the 'loud echoes' of the Nashville

Agrarians" (qtd. in Metress 168). That is, despite its confessional elements, the book fails to

acknowledge the equality with white America that black Americans inherently have.

These negative reviews argue that *Segregation* fails, despite contributing valuable

ethnographic material to race studies, primarily because its author lacks sincerity. What the

above critics observe is the sort of acts to which Morrison refers in "Unspeakable Things

Unspoken": "What are the strategies of escape from knowledge? Of willful oblivion?" (378).

Warren may speak integrationist rhetoric in *Segregation*, but the subtext of his language argues

for a different interpretation. As a formalist critic, Warren would have understood this principle,

having co-written *An Approach to Literature* with Cleanth Brooks and John Thibaut Purser in

1938. The primer on formalist criticism argues for letting a text speak for itself. In an essay for

the *Kenyon Review,* Brooks simplifies the principles into two assumptions:

> The formalist critic, because he wants to criticize the work itself, makes two
>
> assumptions; (1) he assumes that the relevant part of the author's intention *as*
>
> *realized* is the "intention" that counts, not necessarily what he was conscious of
>
> trying to do, or what he now remembers he was then trying to do. And (2) the
>
> formalist critic assumes an ideal reader: that is, instead of focusing on the varying
>
> spectrum of possible readings, he attempts to find a central point of reference
>
> from which he can focus upon the structure of the poem or novel. (75)

In other words, a poem, novel—even a piece of nonfiction—takes on a life of its own that may affirm the author's original intentions, contradict them, or suggest alternative readings altogether.

Though in the late 1970s, the popularity of formalism had substantially waned among literary critics, displaced by approaches that do not wholly separate a literary work from its origins or use, elements of the approach still existed, especially its focus on textual analysis and language. For Morrison this idea of letting the text speak for itself means that one could "identify those moments when American literature was complicit in the fabrication of racism, but equally important . . . when literature exploded and undermined it" (*Playing* 16). Yet Morrison gives significant weight to the idea to which Brooks expounds upon in the above quotation: "the author's intention *as realized* is the 'intention' that counts"—that a work of literature cannot and should not be separated from its source, the author—the notion that it is self-reflexive of the creator's own "fears and desires" regarding race (*Playing* 17). Treating a text in any other manner limits the reader's understanding of it.

The analyses of Warren's "The Briar Patch" and *John Brown* has already revealed that the two works affirm their writer's white supremacist tendencies. Whereas Warren attempts to ameliorate his support of segregation in "The Briar Patch" with some progressive concessions in the areas of black access to higher education and equal justice in the courtroom, even he eventually admits he could not support the views he propagated in the essay—an implicit admittance that the work was composed during a period when he supported white supremacy. This support is more obvious in the earlier work *John Brown,* where Warren's perpetuation of racist stereotypes is so overt that it undermines his intent to "set the record straight" on the abolitionist.

By 1956, however, Warren was allegedly, according to his apologists, a reformed segregationist and fully supportive of integrationist ideology. Yet what Lovell, Goodman, and Reddick read in the glosses of the conversations Warren had with white Southerners is that they betray Warren's stated intentions of merely "reporting conversations" (xix). They, in fact, reveal Warren as not having fully rejected his past beliefs. One of Warren's failures is in his descriptions of the black Southerners he interviews. Mostly, Warren uses the term considered proper in the fifties; he refers to black Americans as *Negroes*. Unlike his use of the term in *John Brown* and "The Briar Patch," he even capitalizes the word. When he attempts to "paint the scene" to describe his interviewee in a manner in which his readers can see the person, however, the text of *Segregation* becomes self-reflexive.

In one passage, Warren describes the light-skinned black who will answer his question on [*what*] *are the white man's reasons for segregation?* (17): "The man I am talking to is a yellow man. . ." (17). "Yellow" is Warren's descriptor for light-skinned blacks, and he uses it frequently. In fact, in this particular episode, Warren uses the expression to refer to the same man two more times before the man answers the original question:

> "Mongrelization," he says, "that's what a white man will say. You ask him and
> he'll say that. He wants to head it off, he says. But—" He grins, the skin crinkles
> around his eyes, the grin shows the gold tooth. "But," he says, "look at my face. It
> wasn't any black man hung it on me."
> The other man doesn't seem to think this is funny. "Yes," he says, "yes, they
> claim they don't want mongrelization. But who has done it? They claim Negroes
> are dirty, diseases, that that's why want segregation." (19)

Warren's fascination with the psychic phenomena of individuals born of a white man and a black woman notwithstanding—his only black protagonists of his many writings are the mulattas Viola in "Her Own People" and Amantha in *Band of Angels*—Warren's juxtaposition of his identifying an interviewee as "yellow" and then having that person talk of miscegenation in terms that imply the crossbreeding of animals may have been, in his words, "reporting conversations," but the report obscures an undeniable and disturbing reality. Warren's honest reporting disguises what Morrison calls "the sycophancy of white identity" (19); that is, Warren's conversations implicitly reveal his reliance on color to assert white superiority.

The color marker identifies the interviewee as different, but because the man is "yellow," not brown or black, Warren is placing the interviewee in still another category of racial differential. Mita Banerjee describes the racial underpinnings of using color to identify individuals as the act of placing humanity not in groupings but on a spectrum:

> [In] a racist setting, yellowness is only another variation within an overall continuum of blackness as non-whiteness. As David Palumbo-Liu has argued, the problem is not the raced body itself but the meaning the white gaze insists on projecting onto it. It is through this projection, also, that the black body becomes a spectacle for the white observer to ponder precisely in its enigmatic quality. To the white eye, only the fact that the black body must carry meaning is a given. . . (416)

What is the meaning that Warren's white gaze projects on the "yellow" Africanists with whom he meets? That is what Morrison would ask as Warren's use of the color signifier occurs during his descriptions of other encounters as well. In the office where he is confronted with the racist literature, he remembers the "pridefulness the yellow man [of the above encounter] had talked

about" (25) to finally answer in seriousness the question why whites want segregation. And then

to the question *What does the Negro want?*, a "plump yellow man" responds with "Opportunity"

(32-33). Ironically, except in one instance when Warren describes "the yellow girl wearing the

salmon sweater and slacks" (42), mixed-race women are described as "a mulatto woman,

middle-aged, with a handsome aquiline face" (20) or as "the wife of our host, a plump, fortyish

mulatto, an agreeable-looking woman" (35). All of these uses of the color *yellow* to describe

Warren's mixed-race interviewees argue for a much darker interpretation of his intent. Instead,

Warren's intention of "report[ing] the conversations" without commentary provides his

"intentions as realized"—a hierarchy of race that informs the writer's interactions with nonwhite

Americans even when integration of the races occurs. Yellow-skinned people may be less black,

but they are still on the spectrum of black. As Karen Ross notes in her 1996 book *Black and

White Media,* "[The] gaze has traditionally been white, where whiteness is taken as the

profoundly unproblematic norm against which all 'others' are measured. . . [Whiteness] as a

discrete ethnic category has never been the subject of serious scrutiny, since the powerful have

no need to explain or justify themselves to the powerless" (3-4). Warren's use of the word *yellow*

connotes difference, which in turn connotes inferiority—in essence, then, confirming white

superiority.

It is not just Warren's descriptors that speak to his own sense of racial superiority,

however. In the book's concluding interview when Warren dialogues with himself, he promises

only slow progress towards integration. "Are you a gradualist on the matter of segregation?" he

asks himself. Warren understands the implications of his response:

> If by gradualist you mean a person who would create delay for the sake of delay,
>
> then no. If by gradualist you mean a person who thinks it will take time, not time

as such, but time for an educational process, preferably a calculated one, then yes.

. . It's a silly question, anyway, to ask if somebody is a gradualist. Gradualism is

all you get. History, like nature, knows no jumps. (65)

Warren's statement that "It's a silly question" underscores his sense of superiority. After all, he

obviously intends the audience of this last interview to be Southern blacks and progressive

whites. The silliness of asking himself a silly question notwithstanding, Warren's attempt to

answer the question from his knowledge of the historical realities of change reads only as

support for the status quo.

One would think he would have learned from his friend William Faulkner, whose support

for gradualism during the same year of the publication of *Segregation* led to doubts about his

commitment to the black community. Those misgivings were the result of a "Letter to the North"

published in the March 5, 1956, issue of *Life* magazine. The missive advocates a "Go Slow"

policy towards racial segregation. Faulkner first reminds his readers of his commitment to

integration and then asserts an equal commitment to state's rights: "Now I must go on record as

opposing the forces outside the South which would use legal or police compulsion to eradicate

that evil overnight. I was against compulsory segregation. I am just as strongly against

compulsory integration. Firstly of course from principle. Secondly because I don't believe

compulsion will work" (51). Rapid change in race relations, he believes, will result in open

violence. He references Miss Autherine Lucy, whose enrollment into the University of Alabama

had been suspended out of fear for her life. He refers to a letter he had received from a Negro

woman who asserts Emmett Till had gotten what he deserved. He reminds his readers of a lesson

learned from the Civil War:

The Northerner is not even aware yet of what that war really proved. He assumes

that it merely proved to the Southerner that he was wrong. It didn't do that

because the Southerner already knew he was wrong. . . What that war should have

done, but failed to do, was to prove to the North that the South will go to any

length, even that fatal and already doomed one, before it will accept alteration of

its racial condition by mere force of law or economic threat. (52)

Then he concludes by urging his northern readers to cease and desist: "Stop now for a moment.

You have shown the Southerner what you can do and what you will do if necessary; give him a

space in which to get his breath and assimilate that knowledge" (52).

Faulkner's letter generated swift rebuke. James Baldwin published a denunciatory

response in the fall 1956 issue of *Partisan Review*. A Presbyterian minister, Dr. Carl R. Pritchett,

who at the time was still a relative unknown, condemned the contents of the letter at the March

22 National Civil Liberties Union Clearing House. The NAACP and the Southern Regional

Council also denounced the article and its author. Du Bois challenged Faulkner to a debate on

the topic of integration, which Faulkner declined on the grounds that Du Bois's and his opinions

on the topic were the same. Instead, Faulkner responded to the criticism by writing another letter

to *Life*. In this one, he explains that his primary motivation for writing the first letter was a fear

for Miss Lucy's life. But Faulkner failed to convince his readers, partly because of the interview

he granted to Russell Warren Howe in February of the same year. *The Reporter* published the

interview two weeks after Faulkner's first letter to *Life*. In an effort to underscore his position on

state's rights versus federal rights, he makes his most inflammatory statement on integration:

"But if it came to fighting I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant

going out into the street and shooting Negroes. After all, I'm not going out to shoot

Mississippians" (qtd. in Peavy 70). Faulkner's declaration of loyalty to states' rights implies

there are no black Mississippians; therefore, Faulkner denied ever making such a statement, even

writing several letters to *The Reporter* professing his innocence—that the interview and the first

Life letter contradicted Faulkner's protests to their readers.

Warren, who had never fully convinced the majority of the black community of his

conversion, fails to learn from Faulkner's image-altering mistake. From the perspective of the

black community, a proponent of gradualism is a segregationist. The editors of the *Negro History*

Bulletin explain it succinctly four years earlier:

> It is obvious that any period of transition to better conditions for Negroes is
>
> related to increasing educational, economic, political and social opportunities.
>
> Since segregation limits these opportunities, and since segregation is based upon
>
> the idea of the inferiority of Negroes, it is equally obvious that one might expect a
>
> period of gradualism to stretch out into an eternity. . . ("Segregation" 152)

Disguised as a history lesson and packaged as philosophical wisdom, Warren's gradualism is, as

Morrison would call it, code language for more segregation—protection of the white psyche

from any further fracturing (Warren's primary concern) and a full defense of the racist status

quo. To read Warren's interview of himself in any other way is to deliberately turn a deaf ear to

the ways the text speaks for itself—to ignore Warren's "intention as realized."

In *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Warren appears to have learned this lesson. His closing

words in this book reveal that he now understands that the white community must experience

pain if true change in race relationships in this country is to occur. Yet as promising as Warren's

final words are, his encounters with a few Africanists reveal there are still blind spots in his

racial politics. These exchanges also make clear that the primary Africanist still haunting his career is Du Bois.

Du Bois informs several of the interviews. Indeed, the sociologist appears as an obsession for Warren.. Besides Dr. Felton Clark, whose interview has already been discussed, Warren brings the sociologist up in his interviews of Dr. Aaron Henry, president of the Clarksdale, Mississippi, chapter of the NAACP; Robert Parris Moses, field secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); James L. Farmer, founder and national director of the Committee of Racial Equality (CORE); Adam Clayton Powell, who is dismissive of Du Bois's philosophy; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Bayard Rustin, executive secretary of the War Resister's League; Malcolm X; James Baldwin; and Ralph Ellison. In each of these interviews, Warren brings up Du Bois first, a contrast to the interview of Dr. William Stuart Nelson, at the time, vice president of Howard University, who refers to Du Bois first. But it is not just in interviews that Du Bois plays a role. In the glosses of various interviews, Warren invokes the philosophy of Du Bois on various topics: double consciousness, Samboism, world Jewry, the NAACP, Negro history, the talented tenth, judicial injustices towards African Americans, the "back-to-Africa" movement, and Southern populist uneasiness about official Southern Negro policy. Finally, Warren virtually gives Du Bois the last word in the book. In the penultimate paragraph, the author quotes from *The Souls of Black Folk*: "[This] happy-go-lucky nation which goes blundering along with its Reconstruction tragedies, its Spanish War interludes and Philippine matinees, just as though God were really dead" (qtd. in Warren *Who Speaks* 444). The ubiquity of the now-deceased Du Bois as a topic of discussion during several interviews affirms that Du Bois continues to serve as the "negro radical" for Warren, a foil for all of Warren's

anxieties about the specter of racial equality and about a country, the South included, where "liberty and justice for all" actually means no exceptions.

At a minimum, these frequent explicit and implicit references to Du Bois lead the reader to believe that Du Bois's legacy is a minor theme of *Who Speaks for the Negro.* In his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to W. E. B. Du Bois* (2008)*,* Richard H. King notes the significance of Du Bois to the work: "One surprising exception to the general white neglect [of Du Bois] is Robert Penn Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1964). In that collection of interviews and commentary, Warren returns repeatedly to the question about 'splits in identity' and a 'psychic split' among African Americans, thus demonstrating, by implication, the great pertinence Du Bois's ideas had in the emerging civil rights movement and black consciousness" (135). King correctly assesses that especially pertinent to a proper reading of the book is Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, for in every conversation in which he brings up Du Bois first, he asks what are the interviewee's thoughts on the idea of psychic divisions within the individual African American. Warren's life-long exploration of the theme of self-knowledge in an individual's quest for psychic healing certainly informs his questions. No doubt, Warren appreciates the African American's struggle to realize wholeness because of the "impulse to Negro-ness, the *mystique noire,* and the impulse to be absorbed into the white West European-American culture. . ." (*Who Speaks* 97). For Warren, in implicit deference to Du Bois's original scholarship, this pull in two different directions goes to the heart of the Civil Rights Movement—a desire to be American while equally insisting on being black.

Yet Warren finds that the various black leaders who are asked to address double consciousness do not agree on its significance to the fight for civil rights occurring in the 1950s. Dr. Felton Clark argues for its inconsequence: "I don't think that [double consciousness] is as

valid a point of view now as it might have been in the earlier days. And I think that all human beings want first, last, and always, to be human beings" (19). Dr. Aaron Henry acknowledges its continued import to contemporary blacks but in uninterestedness responds to Warren, "The desire of the Negro to retain Negro-ness and the assimilation into American culture? My position is, I don't care which develops. I would like to be considered on par with any other man in America. . ." But to Martin Luther King, Jr., "It's [still] a real issue, and it has made for a good deal of frustration in the Negro community. . ." (216). The reason for Warren's asking various interviewees their position on double consciousness may be simple as their answers support the conclusion he ultimately makes about African-American leadership during the 1960s: there is no one individual who speaks for the Negro. Yet Warren could have arrived at that conclusion without invoking the name of Du Bois. The ubiquity of Du Bois in Warren's questions points to how significantly the sociologist continued to haunt Warren's psyche. The relevance of Du Bois as a prominent voice of dissent for better than half a century would continue to impact current and future Negro leadership long after his death.[23] Warren fails to grasp this reality.

While Warren never discusses the slow muting of Du Bois's voice during the late fifties and early sixties,[24] the several voices that downplay Du Bois's significance to the contemporary

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[23] Part of the reason Du Bois failed to maintain a significant voice during the 1950s is that he had become somewhat of a pariah in the black community. Because of Du Bois's dalliances with Communism, he became a target of the FBI, which opened a file on him in 1942. The most belligerent attacks on Du Bois by the United States government occurred in the next decade when Du Bois became chairman of the Peace Information Center (PIC), a move that directly related to the sociologist's opposition to nuclear weapons. The U.S. believed PIC a working agent for a foreign entity. Therefore, it required PIC and its leaders to register with the government. When Du Bois refused, he was indicted for un-American activities. Friends distanced themselves from him, and the NAACP failed to issue a statement of support for him.

[24] In her contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to W. E. B. Du Bois* (2008), "Du Bois, Black Leadership, and Civil Rights," Kimberly Springer observes Du Bois "never regained his prominent position as a civil rights leader after leaving the NAACP [in 1934]" (83). Yet despite Du Bois's loss of status, new black leadership, Springer notes, did not fail to acknowledge his immense contributions to the Civil Rights Movement. One example of this recognition occurred at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. During his speech, Roy Wilkins, Du Bois's successor on *Crisis*, paid homage to the civil rights icon:

fight for civil rights underscore the view that Warren appears to have always had of the Africanist he dubbed the "negro radical." Radicalism, Warren implicitly argues, is not the answer to the black's plight in this country. In fact, during Warren's interviews with the Civil Rights Movement's most radical leaders of the fifties, Warren's impression of their messages mirrors his reactions to Du Bois's in "The Briar Patch." In the essay, Warren makes clear that "the millennium which he contemplates would come to pass" before the demands the "negro radical" makes are met (254). By juxtaposing the demands to stay at the same hotels in which whites stay, to eat at the same restaurants that whites patronize, and to watch the same entertainment that whites watch with Booker T. Washington's metaphor of the hand at the Atlanta Exposition of 1895, Warren underscores his affinity to Washington's message of accommodation. Had Du Bois chosen to respond to the essay, he would have repelled the idea that professional negroes need also be segregated just as vehemently as he resisted Washington's promotion of a vocational education for blacks. Warren acknowledges what he imagines would be Du Bois's resistance in "The Briar Patch": "To the radical the demand for less is treason to his race; to simply look forward to a negro society which can take care of all the activities and needs of its members is a feeble compromise" (254). Instead, Warren offers a segregated society of both manual laborers and white-collar professionals. But Du Bois is likely to have corrected the specious reasoning of a young Warren, only twenty-five years old when he composed the essay, by redirecting him to a statement Du Bois had made in 1900: "Error that ends in progress is none the less error—none the less dangerously liable to end in disaster ("The Present Outlook" 51). It

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Remember that this has been a long fight. We were reminded of it by the news of the death yesterday in Africa of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois. No, regardless of the fact that in his later years Dr. Du Bois chose another path, it is incontrovertible that at the dawn of the twentieth century his was the voice that was calling to you to gather here today in this cause. If you want to read something that applies to 1963 go back and get a volume of *The Souls of Black Folk* by Du Bois published in 1903 (qtd. in Springer 84).

is a rejoinder that Du Bois restates or paraphrases many times thereafter. In one particular editorial in a 1933 issue of *The Crisis*, he makes his position clear that a United States the likes of what Warren proposes is unacceptable: "[We] must oppose all segregation and all racial patriotism; we must salute the American flag and sing "Our Country 'Tis of Thee" with devotion and fervor, and we must fight for our rights with [a] long and carefully planned campaign" ("On Being Ashamed" 72). Though Du Bois is specifically addressing in this statement the "melting pot" ideology, in which unique races are subsumed under the umbrella of *American*—an example of his rejection of racial eliminativism[25]—his statement may be read as a rejection of the creation of geographical boundaries that blacks are not to cross and the segregated South that Warren proposes has such boundaries. For Du Bois the South that Warren argues for benefits whites greatly and blacks not at all. For Warren, such an attitude is an insult to the white majority, especially one like himself, who is willing to concede to the black Southerner educational gains—gains Warren probably understood, like Faulkner, would never occur.

When the Supreme Court ushered in a generation of change with *Brown v. Board of Education*, Du Bois experienced a short-lived moment of elation: "I have seen the impossible happen. It did happen on May 14, 1954"; however, by 1955, when the high court handed down *Brown v Board of Education 2,* he was arguing "'all deliberate speed' [is] an oxymoron" (qtd. in Lewis *Fight for Equality* 557). He was undoubtedly responding to voices that mirror and incidences that reinforce Warren's pronouncement to blacks in *Segregation* to expect nothing but

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[25] Racial eliminativism is the concept that society ought to eliminate race from our ontologies, discourses, and philosophical and scientific inquiries. In "Can Race Be Eradicated? The Post-racial Problematic," Brett St. Louis highlights the sort of thinking that encapsulates the idea:

> Adherents of this perspective usually insist that we strike—that is, eliminate—race from our ontological vocabularies. So, the elimination of race here is not simply a process of atrophy, perhaps owing to its internal contradictions, but is instead an active process that is the result of purposive determinations. The contention that race *is* an erroneous and 'pernicious' category renders it indefensible, and that it therefore, *ought to be* eradicated demonstrates racial eliminativism as praxis. (116)

gradualism. For Warren, Du Bois continues to serve as the "negro radical" because he is unable to acknowledge that despite "the Eisenhower administration [encouraging] by silence and indifference the white South's most intransigent and violent elements, thereby delaying the dismantling of legal segregation by a decade" (Lewis *Fight for Equality* 557), blacks had made, in Warren's mind, "gradual" gains.

By 1965, the year *Who Speaks for the Negro?* is published, Du Bois is dead two years. Yet the "negro radical" continues to live in the personas of black leaders like Malcolm X. Indeed, Kreyling argues that Warren's reaction to the leader of the Black Muslim movement is proof that Warren had not renounced his white supremacist views. For Kreyling, Warren's interviews of Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Ellison, and Malcolm X confirm that "[if] rhetorical maneuvering is an indication of the deep psychological unrest felt by the author, then Warren wrestles with every African American (DuBois [sic], Douglass, Malcolm X) who knows enough about the white man's moves to slip or reverse them" (288). In other words, a black leader who does not align himself with Warren's interpretation of the Civil Right Movement is a "negro radical," which is to say, a threat. The text of these interviews reveals that Warren's "wrangle and jangle" reflects less a struggle with the ethical and moral inconsistencies of his upbringing and his actions and more a rhetorical battle with his interviewees to have them concede his point of view on the turmoil of the 60s.

Warren interviews King on March 18, 1964, in Atlanta, Georgia. The two discuss Du Bois's double consciousness, which Warren refers to as the "danger of the psychic split . . . the pull, on one hand, toward Negro tradition, or culture, or blood and the pull on the other hand toward the white cultural heritage with, perhaps, an eventual absorption of the Negro blood" (216). King acknowledges the psychical phenomenon is still "a real issue" to the Negro

community, ultimately asserting that it does not have to be a problem because "[the] Negro is an American. We know nothing of Africa. He's got to face the fact that he is an American" (216). The significance of Warren's interest in this particular DuBoisian concept has been touched on already. However, what is of particular interest here is Warren's "maneuvering"—to borrow Kreyling's term—King to agree that "the American Negro is more like the old American—the old New Englander or old Southerner—than is any other kind of American" (216). In other words, America's white ancestors would also have experienced a form of double consciousness—the struggle between British ancestry and colonial Americans. Indeed, the interview finds both men in agreement on a number of Civil Rights issues, such that Michael Kreyling summarizes the interview in this manner: "Ultimately, Warren can 'control' Martin Luther King, Jr." (287).[26] While Kreyling's conclusion is equally uncomplimentary of King—after all, it suggests King can be "controlled" as opposed to being "in control" while in the presence of a racist interviewer—his choice of words to describe this conciliatory exchange underscores an important aspect of Warren's racial politics: "American identity—when it is not racialized as white—is a detour from the ultimate realization of shared identity among black and white. Those activists and theorists who put race above national identity—in Warren's thinking DuBois (sic) is the fountainhead of this kind of thinking, as Booker T. Washington is the antithesis—do not speak for the Negro" (287). In other words, Warren's questions to King suggest he finds the double allegiance implicit in the concept of double consciousness problematic. Instead, Warren advocates black identity should be found in one's Americanism.

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[26] Blight likely has evaluated this interview correctly, seeing reservation where Kreyling sees control: "The man [King] had learned how to be circumspect with the press (the FBI might be anywhere and in any tape recorder) and even with sympathetic writers" (xxiv).

This idea of subsummation is more obvious in Warren's interview of Ralph Ellison. When Warren asks Ellison about the concept of "the split in the Negro psyche" (327), Ellison's answer reveals that his agreement with the ideas of double consciousness has its limits:

> The idea that the Negro psyche is split is not as viable as it seems—although it might have been true of Dr. Du Bois personally. My problem is not whether I will accept or reject American values. It is, rather, how can I get into a position where I can have the maximum influence upon those values. . . However, there's another aspect of reality which applies: The American Negro has a dual identity, just as most Americans have, and it seems to me ironic that the discipline out of which this present action is being exerted comes from no simple agony—nor simple despair—but out of long years of learning how to live under pressure of learning to deal with provocation and with violence. It issues out of the Negro's necessity of establishing his own value system and his own conception of Negro experience and Negro personality, conceptions which seldom get into the sociology and psychology textbooks. (327-29)

Warren glosses over this portion of the interview before continuing. He recognizes in this black artist a kinship, "the impulse [to] re-inspect, to break through, some of the standard formulations of the Revolution, which are in constant danger of becoming mere stereotypes" (330). This comment is the sort that leads Kreyling to comment: "Warren seems to find ideas and a temperament less disruptive to his assumptions than those he found in activist political leaders. Ellison does not want a separate game; he wants a place at the big table and he will play the cards Warren deals" (291). The next exchange in the interview reinforces this idea:

> ELLISON: "I've won my individuality in relation to those friends [who have no
>
> sense of the experience behind me] at the cost of that great part of me which is
>
> really representative of a group experience. I'm sometimes viewed as 'different'
>
> or a 'special instance'—when in fact I'm special only to the extent that I'm a
>
> fairly conscious example, and in some ways a lucky instance, of the general run of
>
> American Negroes.
>
> WARREN: I encounter the same thing, I suppose, in a way. I've been
>
> congratulated by well-meaning friends who say, 'It's so nice to met (sic) a
>
> reconstructed Southerner.' I don't feel reconstructed, you see. And I don't feel
>
> liberal. I feel logical, and I resent the word—I resent the word *reconstructed.*
>
> (336-37)

This exchange is evidence of the camaraderie these two men have developed over the years. Yet

while one might deduce from the relationship that Warren has indeed moved beyond the

segregationist attitudes of his younger years, Kreyling argues for a sycophantic association

between the two artists. Rather than protesting that Warren's efforts to find parallels between

black and white American experiences minimize what double consciousness—essentially what

Ellison is describing he is encountering—means to the black psyche, Ellison concedes Warren's

point. Just as problematic, Warren's use of the word *reconstructed,* no doubt a pun by the poet,

suggests a different reading: "I hate *Reconstruction.*" Or paraphrased, "My thoughts on

segregation have never been 'reconstructed'; they are the same as they were in the 30s." While

Warren's apologists might argue this playing with the word for the period when emancipated

slaves made momentous progress towards equality signifies continued "wrangling and jangling,"

the more appropriate interpretation has Warren admitting—unconsciously?—little change in his racial politics.

In contrast, Malcolm X makes no concessions. Warren's conversation with the Black Muslims' leader underscores the non-conciliatory personality by which he has come to be known:

> WARREN: Can a person of white blood—even one—be guiltless?
>
> MALCOLM X: Guiltless?
>
> WARREN: Yes.
>
> MALCOLM X: You can answer it this way, by turning it around. Can any Negro who is the victim of the system escape the collective stigma that is placed upon all Negroes in this country? And the answer is "No." Well, the white race in America is the same way. As individuals it is impossible to escape the collective crime.
>
> WARREN: Let's take an extreme case—your reaction to it. A white child of three or four—an age below decisions or responsibility—is facing death before an oncoming truck.
>
> MALCOLM X: The white child, although he has not committed any of the deeds that have produced the plight the Negro finds himself in, is he guiltless? The only way you can determine that it is to take a Negro child who is only four years old—can he escape, though he's only four years old, can he escape the stigma of segregation ? He's only four years old.
>
> WARREN: Let's put the Negro child in front of the truck, and put a white man there who leaps—risks his own life—to save the child. What is your attitude toward him?

MALCOLM X: It wouldn't alter the fact that after the white man saved the little

black child he couldn't take that little black child into many restaurants right

along with him. That same white man would have to toss that child back into

discrimination, segregation. (256)

Warren's interview of Malcolm X continues for several pages after this interchange, and what

best characterizes the discussion is the black leader's refusal to concede any ground on the topic

of white guilt. Malcolm X sees through Warren's façade of a progressive thinker regarding race.

To Warren's attempts to get him to acknowledge that good, white men have been at the center of

what progress in race relations have occurred, Malcolm X counters with "I'm not interested in

[good, white men's] moral nature. Until the problem is solved, we're not interested in anybody's

moral nature" (256-257). In turn, Malcolm X refuses to acknowledge the contributions of

Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Eleanor Roosevelt: "[Lincoln]

probably did more to trick Negroes than any other man in history. . . Kennedy I relate right along

with Lincoln. . . [Roosevelt] The same thing. . . [Eleanor Roosevelt] The same thing" (262). A

year after their conversation, upon reading that Malcolm X has made the statement in an article

in the *Saturday Evening Post,* "Once I was racist—yes. But now I have turned my direction away

from anything that's racist" (qtd. in *Who Speaks* 263), Warren acknowledges Malcolm X "is in a

position to enter into any centralized grouping of the various elements in the [Civil Rights]

Movement that may be managed. He will, in fact, be in a position to be the center of such a

centralized grouping" (263). The acknowledgement notwithstanding, Warren's concession to

Malcolm X occurs only because this minister of the Black Muslim movement, the most famous

and successful, has expressed a less radical view of race relations. Still, Malcolm X's refusal to

grant any ground to Warren is important because it unmasks the poet, confirming that Warren continues to manifest the markings of a white supremacist.

Kreyling argues for such a conclusion because of Warren's refusal to accept this particular "negro radical" as a legitimate representative of the current black experience. Interestingly, Kreyling parallels Warren's difficulties with Malcolm X with the poet's difficulties with Du Bois: "Like DuBois (sic), Malcolm X presents Warren with an African-American subjectivity, a kernel of self-consciousness around and through which a world circulates—a world tangential at best to Warren's fierce and insistent attempts to appropriate it" (289). Du Bois was a threat to Warren's version of progressive racial politics: a South—and, by extension, a country—in which blacks could earn a liberal-arts degree from only black universities and serve only black communities, a world in which black and white Southerners—and, again, by extension, a country—never would commingle. In like manner, Malcolm X, the 60s version of the "negro radical," threatens Warren's white world because Malcolm X's message not only calls for change now but for white accountability. Warren's interview of this "negro radical" makes obvious that Warren will concede white America's mistakes in the past but not in the present. In truth, Warren makes another concession to Malcolm X, yet he qualifies even this one: Malcolm X can become the leader of any black leadership group in the United States only if he abandons his radicalness.

Warren's idea of black leadership found its prototype in Booker T. Washington, of whom posthumous evaluations of his legacy have been unkind. For Warren, however, Washington's accommodationism made possible the perpetuation of the status quo. In contrast, Du Bois's form of radicalism—the Talented Tenth, access to the ballot box, integration, and economic equality—threatened upheaval not only to the Southern way of life but also to all of America. In

like manner, Malcolm X preached a message appropriate to the plight of blacks of the 1950s and

60s and appealed to their pent-up frustrations, thus making him an equally foreboding figure to

Warren:

> Even as late as December 20, 1964, at a Harlem rally, Malcolm X could say:
> "We need a Mau Mau to win freedom!" With this emotional appeal, which even
> the coolest-headed and most high-minded Negro, in some deep corner of his
> being, is apt to admit to responding to, Malcolm X stands prepared to undercut
> and overreach the leaders of those very organizations which he, with one hand,
> beckons to a "united front." Beneath all the illogicalities, there is the clear logic of
> feeling: the black powerful current beneath the crazed and brittle ice. (265)

But if Du Bois's radicalism was anathema to Warren because it appeared always to be several

steps further than where Warren's "progressive" racial politics were—on an intellectual level, he

would eventually embrace those positions Du Bois championed early in the century—Malcolm

X's radicalism endangered the status quo because it was equal parts logic, emotion, and black

pride: "Malcolm X must be aware that the basic appeal he has had is not merely his

incorruptibility or his origin in the lower depths; it inheres in his racism, his celebration of

blackness, his promise of vengeance" (264). Warren's reaction to the radicalism represented by

both Du Bois and Malcolm X reflect a different form of "wrangle and jangle" that Warren

experienced throughout his career—an inability to reconcile the logic of the messages of these

two men with the "illogicalities" of being further along in their racial positions than he—or white

America—would ever concede.

For Warren radicalism never worked because it was out of step with those who controlled

all facets of society—white men. This reality is the logic behind his remark "Gradualism is all

you'll get" in *Segregation*. In both Warren's fiction and nonfiction there is no place for the Africanist who fails to move politically at the rate Warren believes is safe for the white majority. To underscore this point, Warren fabricates a radical Africanist presence in *Band of Angels* (1955)*,* the novel that best illustrates Warren's attempts to illustrate the psychic effects of double consciousness. Though the novel features a mixed-race protagonist, because the setting of the story is the Civil War, Amantha Starr meets up with a number of both blacks and whites that complicate her struggle for self-identity. One of the more significant foils is Rau-Ru, the *k'la*— attaché, so to speak of Hamish Bond, the sympathetic white slave owner who ultimately purchases Amantha in New Orleans. Bond teaches this slave hand to read and entrusts him with the oversight of *Pointe du Loup,* the smaller of Bond's two upriver holdings. When Charles de Marigny Prieur-Denis, a neighboring plantation owner, attempts to rape Amantha during one of Bond's absences from *Pointe du Loup*, her screams bring Rau-Ru to the cabin. He strikes Charles hard enough to kill him—though Charles survives—and then flees the property. A sheriff's posse catches him, but in custody, he does kill someone and escapes for good. These events occur before the start of the Civil War. In the ensuring years, a gang of runaway slaves from the swamps surrounding New Orleans harasses the city with thieving and burglarizing. The rumor is that the leader is Rau-Ru.

The Civil War begins. Tobias Sears, Amantha's eventual husband, leads a Union army battalion, whose bravest soldier is Lieutenant Oliver Cromwell Jones, who the reader eventually learns is Rau-Ru. Once the war ends, Jones aligns himself with the political party known as the Radicals. In a telling statement to Sears regarding the Fourteenth Amendment, Lieutenant Jones remarks, "I'm a Radical for only one reason, and that reason is that I can't be anything else. Not with this face" (274). Eventually, Lieutenant Jones dies as a result of being too radical of a

leader. As a story within a story related to Amantha's quest, Warren's scripting of Jones's death

suggests his moralizing the effects of taking a position regarding racial equality and integration

that challenges the gradualism Warren championed in *Segregation,* a work that arrived in

bookstores less than one year after *Band of Angels* did.

But it would be in the pages of *Who Speaks for the Negro?* that Warren would underscore

the futility of such radicalism, and he uses the assassination of Malcolm X to make the point.

Warren's editor had sent the book to press on February 20, 1965, the day of the murder. The

incident allowed Warren to halt the publication to insert a "Note on the Assassination of

Malcolm X." In its original form, the section on Malcolm X concludes with Warren's musings

on the symbolism of Malcolm X's persona. Warren recounts a story in which a young, idealistic

white girl at a seminar on race and religion asks Malcolm X if there is anything that she could do

"to be acceptable to him" (265). Malcolm X responds, "Not anything" (265). The girl bursts into

tears but receives no pity from the Black Muslim leader. For Warren, the story symbolizes the

"absoluteness of the situation" (266)—there is nothing an individual white person could do that

would change the reality of systemic racism; therefore, there is nothing that an individual white

person could do to effect "merciless" resolution. Malcolm X also symbolizes the hate with which

every black American must come to terms:

> It is reported that Martin Luther King, a few years ago, remarked to a friend: "I
>
> just saw Malcolm X on television. I can't deny it. When he starts talking about all
>
> that's been done to us, I get a twinge of hate, of identification with him." This
>
> despite the fact that, during Birmingham, Malcolm X had called Martin Luther
>
> King "a chump, not a champ," despite the fact that the Muslims called his
>
> doctrine "a slave philosophy," despite the fact that the rotten eggs thrown at him

in Harlem had, for all intents, come from the hand of Malcolm X. For principles

or no, Malcolm X can evoke, in the Negro, even in Martin Luther King, that self

with which he, too, must deal, in shock and fright, or in manic elation. (266)

Finally, Warren argues for Malcolm X's representing a more ominous symbolic function: "He is

the unspecified conclusion in the syllogism that all of the 'responsible' Negro leaders present to

the white world: 'If you do not take me, then . . .' Then you will have to take Malcolm X, and all

he means" (266). The implicit message in Warren's syllogism is "*Do* ignore him. He fights for

an America I refuse to support."

In the note Warren adds after Malcolm X's assassination, he reiterates his belief in the

futility of radicalism: "Malcolm X had something of the scale of personality and force of will

that we associate with the tragic hero. And he finally found himself caught on the horns of the

classic dilemma of tragedy" (267). Thus, as in the death of Rau Ru, the Africanist of Warren's

own creation, the tragic hero's tragic flaw, resolute devotion to one cause, ends in that hero's

demise. This assessment of Malcolm X starkly contrasts with the one Dennis Wainstock makes

in his biography of the black leader: "Extremism in the defence (sic) of liberty is no vice" (135).

The valuation could just as appropriately be used to describe Du Bois's career-long battle

for race equality, yet Warren's one-sided feud with Du Bois proves how problematic Du Bois's

radicalism was an issue for the poet. Several years after the death of the black intellectual,

Warren continued his attack on Du Bois in the 1973 anthology *American Literature: The Makers*

and the Making, a collaborative project with Cleanth Brooks and R. W. B. Lewis. According to

Lewis, Warren's contributions were part of a larger effort to show "the importance of the

historical environment for charting the course of racial conflict and progress in America, at its

several stages, and of the rise of black writing ("Warren's Long Visit" 575). Indeed, Lewis notes,

Warren does not fail to emphasize the significance of race in his introductory remarks on

Thomas Jefferson and the subsequent introduction to "Political Writing" up to the Civil War. Yet

despite Lewis's observation that Warren's contributions are an attempt to reveal a wholeness in

American literature—"a mode of rich cultural history sharpening into more purely literary

history and on through biography to the most precise literary criticism" ("Warren's Long Visit"

573)—it takes enormous effort not to see Warren's biases *for* Washington and *against* Du Bois.

Warren's headnote on Washington reads more like an apology than a biography. First

declaring Washington hungry for power, Warren then contextualizes Washington's desire in a

way that makes this hunger not only reasonable but necessary. It was a world, Warren observes,

in which

> [an] abolitionist like James Russell Lowell had come to hold the blacks as
>
> "incapable of civilization from their own resources," and after his experience with
>
> four black freedwomen as housemaids . . . [had] uttered the generalization that at
>
> least the first generation of ex-slaves was "dirty, lazy, and lying. . ." [Moreover,
>
> Lowell] thought, in fact, that the blacks were only fit to become the peasantry of
>
> the southern—*not* of the northern—states. ("Washington" 1729)

This northern attitude is not unique to Lowell, Warren correctly implies. It is an attitude that

George M. Fredrickson has historicized in works with titles like *The Black Image in the White

Mind* (1971), *White Supremacy* (1981), and *Racism: A Short History* (2002). According to

Fredrickson, the Christian saw as his duty as a member of the superior white race to take care of

black labor during Reconstruction as though the latter were children: "In some respects the new

paternalism was akin to the nineteenth-century concept of charity which [allows] the upper levels

of bourgeois society in the North and Great Britain to express benevolent intentions toward the

poor of their own race without doing anything that interfered with the impersonal workings of a competitive, capitalistic society" (*The Black Image* 211-12). But the reason Fredrickson identifies the attitude as the *new* paternalism is that a similar attitude existed during the years of slavery. Even among abolitionists, Fredrickson notes, slavery may have been an abhorrent institution, but it was not necessarily because they considered Negroes equals. Fredrickson describes Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe as the epitome of "advanced and liberal . . . Northern white opinion" on the issue of Negro liberation: "an enemy of slavery and a proponent of legal equality for blacks . . . he . . . like so many other whites who stood with him against slavery . . . was unable to visualize a permanent future for Negroes in America. His ideal America was all white. . ." (*The Black Image* 164).

More importantly, this paternalistic attitude continues long after the Emancipation Proclamation and eventually leads to the legalization of segregation and the disenfranchising of the Negro population. Warren argues that faced with this situation, "Washington, knowing the grim world of poverty, ignorance, and hopelessness from which he had come, held that the most effective way was to eschew political action and to cultivate habits of work, self-discipline, cleanliness, and thrift in order to establish a firm economic base" ("Washington" 1729). Warren then defends Washington's approach as consistent with the "spirit of the age": "It was the age of laissez-faire economics, of Horatio Alger, and of the American dream of success. . ." ("Washington" 1729).

Warren doubles down on his defense of Washington by asserting that Washington's philosophy was likely more popular among blacks than Du Bois and other radicals were suggesting: "[It] is probable, as August Meiers puts it in *Negro Thought in American 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington,* that 'Washington's critics consisted of

only a minority of the intellectual and professional men'" (1731). Even if Meiers's observation is correct, in the context of the apology, such a statement suggests Warren believes the criticism that Washington received by the likes of Du Bois, Trotter, and other Negro intellectuals unwarranted. Finally, Warren makes two observations about what leads to the "full resistance" that Washington feels from Du Bois and others. The first is that Washington's "greatest success . . . [was] being offset by losses" (1731) and the second is that despite these losses, more blacks were earning degrees in higher education. These educated blacks "were impatient of the policy of dependence on economic advance and moral improvement as long-range preparation for their rights" (1731). Warren implies that the circumstances in which all blacks find themselves in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries make reasonable the accommodating approach that Washington advocated. In essence, rather than limit himself to just the facts of Washington's life and career, he advocates for a more positive evaluation of the black leader.

Warren's biographical headnote on Du Bois also suggests an anti-Du Bois bias, which at this point should surprise no one. Four-and-a-half pages long, the sketch highlights that time has not changed Warren's mind about Du Bois's "radicalness": "[Du Bois] did have something to say, but the story of his life is not the very process of saying it; it is the long struggle to find out what he most deeply wanted to say" (1752). And like his headnote on Washington, Warren composes a sketch that is more personal observation than objective survey. The opening paragraph illustrates such lack of objectivity:

> The hopes, aspirations, and attitudes expressed in religion often reappear in
> secular forms. For instance, the philosopher Bertrand Russell has pointed out that
> Christian theology finds a peculiar parallel in Marxism. It is no wonder, then, that
> a Nat Turner, organizing his famous slave insurrection in 1831, should have been

inspired by a messianic role, or that the black world of America, both before and

after the Civil War, with its deep-seated religious sense, should have nourished

the hope of a secular messiah. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois . . ., born in

1868, growing up in the age when the religious temper of life was still dominant,

seems to have felt that his great talents fitted him for that role for his people.

(1751)

From the outset, then, Warren accuses Du Bois of having a messianic complex. The accusation is

not unique to Warren. Joel Williamson notes Du Bois's own messianic rhetoric to describe his

role in early twentieth-century race politics:

> [If] one remarks Du Bois's "Messiah complex," one understands his loneliness,
>
> his aloofness, and final alienation. The role prescribed such isolation, and Du Bois
>
> seemed determined, often perversely, to achieve it. The role also prescribed
>
> suffering, and he sought that too. In a smooth mixture of Christian and Hegelian
>
> metaphors, he painted himself in *Dusk of Dawn* as being "crucified on the vast
>
> wheel of time," while "he flew round and round with the zeitgeist." (410)

The sentiments also mirror Eric Sundquist's remarks in the introduction to his *Oxford W. E. B.

Du Bois Reader* (1996):

> At times a literal Christ and at times more a prophet of the coming millennium,
>
> the iconic figure of the messiah in Du Bois's work has always a strong
>
> autobiographical component. . . Du Bois's Black Christ was an inspiring symbol
>
> in the fight against segregation and colonialism. Lynching, poverty, and
>
> discrimination were his crucifixion, and resistance, not docility, was the message
>
> of his new parables. (25-6)

Indeed, on more than one occasion early in his life, Du Bois admits to the feeling of having a

greater purpose. During his first year of graduate study at Harvard in 1890, a young Du Bois

writes a theme for Barrett Wendell's English 12 entitled "Something About Me." Dated October

3, 1890, in it he admits to rather grand opinions of himself: "I wanted to go to college because

others did. I came and graduated and am now in search of a PhD. and bread. I believe, foolishly

perhaps but sincerely, that I have something to say to the world. . . (qtd. in Lewis, *Biography of a*

Race 115). Three years later he again professes similar sentiments during his studies at the

University of Berlin. On the evening of February 22, 1893, after a day he describes in his diary

as "one of the happiest days of my life" (qtd. in Lewis, *Biography* 134), he soliloquizes about his

own future:

> I rejoice as a strong man to run [win?] a race, and I am strong—is it egotism—is it
>
> assurance—or is it the silent call of the world spirit that makes me feel that I am
>
> royal and that beneath my scepter a world of kings shall bow. The hot dark blood
>
> of that [a] black forefather—born king of men—is beating at my heart, and I
>
> know that I am either a genius or a fool. O I wonder what I am—I wonder what
>
> the world is—I wonder if life is worth the striving. . . I do know: be the truth
>
> what it may, I will seek it on the pure assumption that it is worth seeking—and
>
> Heaven or Hell, God nor Devil shall turn me from my purpose till I die. . . (qtd.
>
> in Lewis, *Biography* 134)

As to what "my purpose" is throughout the course of his writing career, Du Bois would

frequently define it as reaching racial equality in America and forcing the nation to live up its

stated ideals in its Constitution.

While Warren's assessment mirrors what other critics and even Du Bois himself have recognized about his steely purpose, the biographical sketch, like Washington's, has a different feel to it than do those of the other African-American writers in the "Black Literature" section of the anthology. If texts "speak for themselves," as the Formalist Warren would assert, a careful listener will hear in Warren's headnotes the white supremacist rhetoric he had championed earlier in his career. According to R. W. B. Lewis, Warren requested the responsibility of writing the biographical notes for this section. The three other writers found in the section are Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, and James Weldon Johnson.[27] None of these writers' headnotes exhibits the same quality of apology that Warren's biographical notes on Washington do.

Warren begins his notes on Dunbar by recognizing the latter as "a perfect example of the transitional figure in black literature in America . . .," meaning "he knew slavery only by hearsay, and only by hearsay the period of new hope that had ended with the Compromise of 1877" (1741). Moreover, Dunbar "grew up in the period when discrimination and segregation were already hardening" (1741). With these words, Warren introduces a one-and-a-half page, didactic, biographical headnote. It includes Dunbar's literary exploits as a high school student and his break coming as the result of several influential men, including James Whitcomb Riley[28]

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[27] Most interesting is the absence in the anthology of Ralph Ellison, whose friendship with the poet is considered by both parties as genuine, a relationship that some might argue contradicts assertions that Warren continued his racist tendencies even after asserting his embarrassment for writing "The Briar Patch." In a letter to a friend, Ellison relates how he was often a guest at Warren parties: "Fanny and I were often among their week-end guests. Marked by good food, fine drinks, and live music for dancing, these were pleasurable occasions of a truly rare order. We were introduced to an array of people—writers, artists, curators, publishers, academics—whom otherwise we might not have encountered, [and] as far as we were aware no other writers gave parties that encompassed such a diversity of backgrounds" (qtd. in 302-303).

[28] James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916) was an American writer and poet nicknamed both "the Hoosier poet" and "the children's poet" because of his dialect poetry. The majority of his over one thousand poems, humorous and/or sentimental in style, are written in dialect.

and William Dean Howells, recognizing and promoting his talent. Warren only alludes to Dunbar's frustration at being acknowledged primarily as a dialect poet: "[Was] dialect, as Howells suggested, the answer? It was certainly not the answer for Dunbar, who was to declare that black 'poetry will not be exotic or differ much from that of the whites'" (1742). Warren concludes by acknowledging Dunbar's place in American literature:[29]

> He was *the* [italics Warren's] "Negro Writer," just as Washington was *the* [italics Warren's] Negro Leader. He died in 1906, only thirty-four years old, before the rise of the new "radicalism," but in spite of his official role, he had, as in "We Wear the Mask" and in "The Haunted Oak," a poem about lynching, treated some of the themes of black protest; and in the poem "An Ante-Bellum Sermon" he touched on the world of the spirituals and of James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones.* (1742)

One interesting note in this closing paragraph is Warren's use of the expression "new 'radicalism.'" Having recognized Dunbar as a contemporary of Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, he emphasizes Dunbar's transitional position in black literature because of the leading roles those other two writers play after Dunbar's dying at a young age, they having "lived on into the next phase of black history" (1741). That Warren would define the "next phase of black history" as "new 'radicalism'"—a term that typically engenders fear—when by the 1970s this period of black history is more commonly referred to as the beginning of a new chapter in the fight for civil rights, suggests Warren continues to see Du Bois's role in the movement less favorably than the compromising Washington.

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[29] Warren may acknowledge Dunbar's place in American literature but not without undermining the black author's talent: "The sad fact is that Dunbar's dialect poetry, except for bits of local color, was much nearer to James Whitcomb Riley than to black life" (1742).

Warren's next subject is Charles Waddell Chesnutt. Unfortunately, despite a wealth of biographical material available to him, the poet laureate devotes a mere three paragraphs to this black author. Positioning Chesnutt as a contemporary of Washington, Dunbar, and Du Bois, Warren observes the author "belongs . . . to a much later generation" because "[his] work is concerned not with some generalized and simplistic relation to the white world, but with tensions within the black experience" (1745). This statement alone warrants the sort of exposition Warren has already done with both Washington and Du Bois, yet he chooses to focuses on biographical material only, acknowledging at the end of the headnote that "Chesnutt is, in fact, the first successful black writer of fiction. His themes, it may be added, are still fresh today" (1745). Despite such a grand pronouncement of Chestnutt's place in literary history, Warren chooses to be rather brief, suggesting that Chesnutt's stature, though significant, does not reach the magnitude of the other black writers the editors of the anthology chose to highlight.

Warren concludes the anthology's section on black literature with James Weldon Johnson, the author he sees fit to quote in the introduction to the unit. Like his pieces on Dunbar and Chesnutt, Warren devotes this headnote primarily to biographical information, adding colorful information that underscores Johnson's move from an accommodationist stance to the goal of full equality and full integration for blacks: "[As] a friend of Booker T. Washington, Johnson had been more or less under that influence. For instance, some of his 'coon songs' had, perhaps unconsciously, accepted stereotypes of the black man that were implicit in Washington's accommodationism. . ." (1767). Unlike Chesnutt's brief headnote, Warren's biographical notes on Johnson highlight the latter's significance to both black history and literature. Warren underscores the historical significance of Johnson's move to the NAACP, which clearly indicates "that he had left the orbit of Booker T. Washington's influence" (1768) while also [resisting]

both Du Bois' effort to move the headquarters of the NAACP to Harlem and Marcus Garvey's

more radical program of surrendering the goal of equality and integration to the "nationalistic

'back-to-Africa' solution [because] his hope lay in the cooperation between blacks and the white

liberals" (1768). As for Johnson's notability in black literature, Warren observes Johnson's

importance to linguistics: "Dialect . . . is the 'exact instrument for voicing certain traditional

phases of Negro life,' but he [Johnson] goes on to assert that the instrument has only two

'complete stops'—pathos and humor—and that this is the result of the white man's view that the

black must be either a 'happy-go-lucky or a forlorn figure'" (1769). Furthermore, "Johnson is

perfectly aware that more is at stake here than mere language, that language springs from an

inner situation; but at the level of language what would be called for, by his theory, would be

something roughly analogous to the style that Mark Twain developed for Huck. . ." (1769). This

willingness to expound upon the significance of Johnson's contributions to the genre of black

literature gives this headnote a fullness not found in those on Dunbar and Chesnutt. If length and

development are indicators of importance, then Warren ranks Johnson's literary star brighter

than his peers. What particularly stands out, however, is Warren's need to position Johnson in

the struggle between Washington and Du Bois. Warren does not fail to underscore Johnson's

resistance to radical positions in the racial politics of the day. Johnson may have no longer

agreed with Washington's accommodationist rhetoric, but he, Warren suggests, understood the

futility of aligning himself with Du Bois.[30]

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[30] Johnson published his objections with Du Bois's radical agenda in the book *Negro Americans, What Now?* (1934). In the book, Johnson posed five options before the black community: exodus, physical force, revolution, isolation, or integration. As Eugene Levy notes in *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice* (1973), Johnson rejected the first two options as impractical. As part of his discussion on revolution, he dissected the possibilities of Communism, seeing merit in the socio-economic system but ultimately concluding, "it was hard enough being black, without being red as well" (Levy 161). By 1934, Du Bois had seen enough of Communism to be enamored of the system but believed its American version produced a message of racial uplift incompatible with his own. Where Johnson and Du Bois ultimately differed was in Du Bois's revised views on segregation. Du Bois had virtually done a complete about-face regarding integration. Instead of "[brooking] no compromise of the

Still, this more critical assessment does not have the same feel as Booker T. Washington's headnote does. Not satisfied with merely indicating why Washington's literary contribution merits inclusion in this short survey of black literature, Warren defends the Washingtonian doctrine of accommodationist uplift during the late nineteenth century rather than limiting his focus on the person Washington. As a result, Warren feels a need to quote Gunnar Myrdal, author of *The American Dilemma,* the celebrated 1944 work on race, to support his contention that Washington's conflict with the "radicals" had multiple layers of conflict: "Negroes seem to be held in a state of internal preparedness for a great number of contradictory opinions—ready to accept one type or another depending on how they are driven by pressures or where they see an opportunity" (qtd. in Warren "Washington" 1732). Warren moves from this quotation to assert a position that is central to *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, the focus of this chapter: "A monolithic attitude does not exist among blacks any more than does one among whites" (1732). Warren's conclusion is that "[the] grounds of the conflict between Washington and his black adversaries were not merely theoretical. Washington loved power and was expert in the manipulation of power" (1732). Despite Warren's agreement with C. Vann Woodward that "Washington's success was due primarily to the 'remarkable congeniality between his doctrines and the dominant forces of his age and society, forces that found an eloquent voice in the brown orator'" (qtd. in Warren "Washington" 1732), it is clear that the headnote is a defense of Washington.

By placing Washington on the proverbial pedestal forty-three years after the publication of "The Briar Patch" and minimizing Du Bois's significant and undeniable accomplishments, Warren once more fabricates an Africanist presence that, as Morrison states in her conclusion,

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principles of absolute racial equality" (Lewis, *Fight for Equality* 46), Du Bois would rather concede that segregation might be the best solution to effecting his goals.

casts a critical gaze "from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (90). And what the critical gaze at Du Bois connotes is that for Warren, Du Bois's racial politics were too progressive for his own white supremacist ideologies. Over the decades since the publication of *I'll Take My Stand,* Warren may have published statements that asserted he had moved from his segregationist ways, but his writings on Du Bois indicate that even as an integrationist, he still considered white America the superior race. In *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (2019)*,* Gates makes a statement about individuals who, pre-Civil War, argued for the emancipation of Southern slaves:

> Reconstruction revealed a fact that had been true but not always acknowledged
> even before the Civil War: that it was entirely possible for many in the country,
> even some abolitionists, to detest slavery to the extent that they would be willing
> to die for its abolition, yet at the same time to detest the enslaved and the formerly
> enslaved with equal passion. As Frederick Douglass said, "Opposing slavery and
> hating its victims has become a very common form of abolitionism." (11)

In Warren, a similar contradiction between morality and praxis also exists. Warren, who had declared to Ellison that he was not "reconstructed," proves how accurate that self-assessment was. Morally, he believed segregation, Jim Crow laws, and other Southern white supremacist machinations were wrong. But change to black-white relationships must occur in a manner that best served the white majority, and the racial politics of which Du Bois was both a proponent and a representation did not, in his mind, meet this qualification.

The anthology headnote would be the last time Warren confronts the Africanist presence represented by Du Bois.[31] But it would not be the last time his Africanist creations would

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[31] *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back* (1980) is Warren's last work of nonfiction that touches on the Civil War and thus somewhat obliquely on race. The book is more of a biographical sketch of the Confederacy president

contradict the conversion his racial politics had allegedly experienced. During the seventies

Warren continued to explore racial themes in his poetry, and those poems that contain an

Africanist presence are as problematic as the fictional and nonfictional works that precede them.

In effect, *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* do not exorcise Warren's demons; rather,

they reveal Warren's continued embrace of the diabolical part of his past. As complementary

pieces, *Band of Angels* and Warren's headnotes on black Americans, serve as bookends to

Warren's reaffirmation as a white supremacist. While *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the*

Negro? contain episodes that may be interpreted as confessional, Warren's confrontations with

the numerous Africanists who populate each work subvert the surface interpretations of those

passages. One of the last interviews in *Segregation* before Warren interviews himself contains

one of those "confessional" moments. His interviewee is a white Southerner—not an

Africanist—but his attempt to empathize with the man's emotional quandary undermines

Warren's insinuated meaning. The interviewee, a small businessperson "in a poor county" (60) is

the last of several white Southerners whom Warren describes as segregationalists. Each one

admits to some level of guilt. "I think it's a moral question [desegregation], and I suffer. . ." (59),

confesses one woman. The businessperson is more verbose:

> "But what nobody understands is how a man can get cut up inside. You try to live
>
> like a Christian with your fellow man, and suddenly you find out it is all mixed
>
> up. You put in twenty-five years trying to build up a nice little business and raise
>
> up a family and it looks like it will all be ruined. You get word somebody will

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with Warren's reminisces of the Davis he learned about from his grandfather, a former Confederate captain, and
details of the man's life that underscored his obstinate allegiance to the idea of secession. One of the more
compelling stories Warren shares is of Davis's daughter, Varina Anne, who as a young adult fell in love with a
young lawyer from Syracuse, New York. Davis refused to give his blessing to the marriage, and she bowed to his
wishes. Varina never married and died nine years later at the age of thirty-four.

dynamite your house and you in it. You go to lawyers and they say they

sympathize, but nobody'll take your case. But the worst is, things just go round

and round in your head. . . You might say, it's the psychology of it you can't

stand. Getting all split up. Then, all of a sudden, somebody stops you on the street

and calls you something, a so-and-so nigger-lover. And you know, I got so mad

not a thing mattered any more. I just felt like I was all put back together again.

(60-61)

In typical fashion, Warren chooses to respond little: "He said he wished he could write it down,

how awful it is for a man to be split up" (61). Warren's confession rings hollow, for not long

after, the interview of himself occurs—the dialog in which he promotes a go-slow policy. The

juxtaposition suggests a greater concern for the psychology of being "split up," which he and

these segregationists experience, than for black Southerners who have lived the ill-effects of

segregation.

In "The Briar Patch" Warren confines all African Americans—not just "negroes

radical"—to that place where they were "born and bred." While the Warren who wrote

Segregation and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* no longer may have supported such a statement,

Warren's confrontations with Africanists in both his fiction and nonfiction confirm that little in

his racial politics had changed since Donald Davidson had commissioned him with solving "the

Negro question." Warren's original "wrangle and jangle" supposedly was the result of his

discomfort with Davidson's charge. By the Civil Rights Movement, when African Americans

were answering the "Negro question" in greater numbers and with stronger voices, the "wrangle

and jangle" now exemplified Warren's discomfort with the sort of future their progress augured.

Conclusion

Warren and Interest Convergence

In 2014, Yale University, the repository for the original audiotapes and other research materials related to Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?* reprinted the book, a rather interesting decision, considering that holding off the reissuing for a year would have been a more logical choice—2015 would have marked the fifty-year anniversary of the first publication of the book. David W. Blight wrote the introduction for the new edition. Part of his concluding remarks is as fitting for the book as it is about its author: "This book more than deserves a reprinting—as a window into the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1960s, as well as into our own souls as Americans still struggling with a history that both defeats and revives racism" (xxviii). *Who Speaks for the Negro?* indeed is a window into the soul of its author, revealing not only his tempered optimism for what sorts of change to race relations black leadership of the period might accomplish but also the contradictory subtext of white supremacy that his writings continued to expose. In "Conversation Piece," Warren's final chapter of the book, he mentions those leaders through whom appropriate change can occur: "Now many Negroes, the sung and the unsung, people like Martin Luther King and Ruth Turner, and some nameless ones whom I could name, have exhibited great compassion. And I am confident that the effect of the Negro Revolution may be redemptive for our society—in the sense that Bayard Rustin suggests when he refers to the Negro Movement as a 'catalytic'" (440). Despite the explicit support this passage purports for what plans these individuals had, the message below the surface of various interviews in the book subverts Warren's support for integration—or as Blight puts it, "revives racism."

In this chapter, I return briefly to "The Briar Patch" to reveal how "progressive" Warren's answer to the "Negro question" was compared to the other contributors to *I'll Take My Stand.* I then do a close reading of Warren's short story, "Her Own People" (1935), a rare episode in Warren's early support of racist ideology when he reveals an understanding that the economic uncertainties of many black Southerners were directly the results of white Southerner's unethical, immoral, and illegal machinations. This reading is followed by close readings of two Warren poems written after the alleged "confessions" of *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* "Internal Injuries" (1968) and "Old-Nigger on One-Mule Cart" (1975) add to the evidence against a Warren conversion. After examining these poems, I offer a possible explanation for the contradictions between Warren's surface statements on racial politics throughout his career and their subtexts, highlighting one contribution of Critical Race Theory to contemporary race dialogues—its scholarship on implicit bias and interest convergence. I conclude with a call to resist memorializing Warren—or any other writer—in such a way as to ignore his implicit support for white supremacy. When we refuse to take complete account for the contradictions in Warren's writings on race, we become complicit in the sort of insidious white supremacist propaganda of which Warren was guilty.

Although Warren had his many defenders—critics who argued that his transformation from segregationist to integrationist was a complete act—he never lived down the reputation of being a racist, a reputation he had earned as a result of penning not only "The Briar Patch," in which he supported the segregation of blacks, but also racist-tinged works like his biography of John Brown and the poem "Pondy Woods." Warren himself challenged those who accused him of not having changed to look at his public renunciations of his segregationist rhetoric. His defenders argue that several episodes in his life point to change occurring. Starting with the

period during which he composed "The Briar Patch," these critics argue the essay is the
contradiction of incompatible values: the maintenance of the status quo in the South and a
defense of the black American's humanity. While advocating for the segregated South, Warren
challenges his Agrarian companions to find a place for Southern blacks, a position so untenable
with Donald Davidson that the latter expresses to Allen Tate his doubts that Warren even wrote
the essay. Warren's essay is problematic, John Tyree Fain and and Thomas Daniel Young
observe, because it discusses "the negro problem in general" and emphasizes the importance of
strong black community life and equal treatment before the law (251). Even though Davidson
eventually acquiesces and includes Warren's essay as one of the twelve in *I'll Take My Stand,*
Warren's particular brand of racial equality remained irreconcilable with his own vision of a
South in which all aspects of the region were governed by white Southerners.

The "Negro question" was Warren's to address in *I'll Take My Stand*. And though the
Agrarians were not like-minded on the answer to the question, Warren's position did not come
close to agreeing with any other of the contributors to the book. Those writers touch on the race
issue but only incidentally and then often only to perpetuate stereotypes. While Frank Owsley's
essay, "The Irrepressible Conflict," focuses attention on slavery, the contemporary race issue is
tangential to his theme:

> [Slavery] was a moral, an economic, a religious, a social, a philosophical, and
> above all a political question. It was no essential part of the agrarian civilization
> of the South—though the Southerners under attack assumed that it was. Without
> slavery the economic and social life of the South would have not been radically
> different. Perhaps the plantation life would not have been as pronounced without
> it, yet the South would long have remained agricultural. . ." (76)

But as Steven D. Ealy points out, the conflict of the title refers to the industrial-agrarian binary, not to slavery ("A Place for the Negro"), and race plays a crucial role in Owsley's discussion only because the North of the mid-1800's was incapable of understanding why the South made slavery an important topic in the debate. The North would continue to be incapable of understanding the South's point of view "until the negro race covers the North as thickly as it does the lower South" (68). Later in his argument, Owsley perpetuates the stereotype of the negro as barbarian: "[Southerners] race prejudice and fears were the stronger because they . . . regarded him as a vicious and dangerous animal whose freedom meant war to the knife and knife to the death" (83). Owsley says little else about blacks, but the little he says makes obvious what role the black has in his model of an Agrarian South. Owsley is an unapologetic racist and would have been the more appropriate author of "The Briar Patch."

The image of black man as barbarian appears again in Andrew Lytle's contribution to the volume, "The Hind Tit." In this essay, Lytle refers to "the menace of the free negro" (215). In their essays on education and agriculture, respectively, John Gould Fletcher and Herman Clarence Nixon refer to the negro as well but only tangentially. Both argue for an education for blacks but do not elaborate on the difference between their negro education and what blacks currently receive.

No other contributor to the symposium identifies a place for blacks. Indeed, even the most casual reader would agree with Louis D. Rubins, Jr's observation that "[generally] the black man in *I'll Take My Stand* is viewed as a kind of peasant, an element in southern society fitted to be the hewer of wood and drawer of water, and one that can be accommodated within an Agrarian dispensation without too much adjustment" (*The Wary Fugitives* 232). Yet equally obvious by even the scant references to blacks is that Warren's essay fails one of the litmus tests

of Agrarianism: a staunch position against granting black Americans any place in society that might bring them closer to equal footing with white Southerners. Despite Warren's support for granting blacks justice in the courtrooms and access to a liberal-arts education, his overt championing of segregation, coupled with his attempt to erase Du Bois's impact on contemporary race relations, makes null and void the progressive thinking the young Warren promotes by making these caveats to Southern blacks. Several of his works of fiction and nonfiction demonstrate this contradiction.

Yet in one work Warren accomplishes a rarity for him: he acknowledges white complicity in the plight of the central Africanist in the work. "Her Own People" (1935) reveals how Warren explores some of the economic concerns of the Agrarian movement but with a black protagonist. One of the short stories in Warren's *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories* (1947), the story details the liminal space in which mulattas lived during the early twentieth century. While it also serves, as noted in this study's introduction, as Warren's examination of double consciousness, Szczesiul is correct that Warren appears to be interested in exploring "the real power race and economics can hold over individual identity. In the story he explores some of the complex, intertwined economic and psychological forces at work in the segregated South—and the nation at large, for that matter" (59). The story begins the morning after the Allens have thrown a party. Slow to rise from bed, they awake to the evidences of the previous evening's festivities: "Dishes on the table held remnants of anchovy sandwiches. . . All sorts of glasses cluttered the sideboard, the mantelpiece, and the uneven stone hearth before the dead fireplace" (177). What exacerbates the situation for the young wife is that her black female help, Viola, quits not too long before the party, leaving the clean up of this mess to the couple. Her exchanges with her husband, laments about the situation in which they currently find themselves,

are revelations into a mulatta's psychic struggle because she fails to fit completely in the "white world" or the "black world"—a classic example of the tragic mulatta trope.

Viola is originally from Alabama but works for the Allens in Tennessee because, Mrs. Allen observes, Viola was the "cleanest nigger I ever saw" (178), so Mrs. Allen brought her north. One particular exchange reveals the sort of problematic thinking that contributes to Viola's plight:

"The trouble is," he finally said, "that Viola is a white-folks' nigger."

"She's ashamed of her nigger blood, all right."

She hasn't got too much nigger blood in her to be ashamed of. I bet she's cousin to a long line of drunken Alabama statesmen."

"She says niggers are dirty." (178)

This racial uncertainty, as articulated by the Allens, however, underlies the economic predicament of Viola's own making. While the Allens clean their party mess, Jake, Viola's landlord, pays them a visit. Jake wishes to correct the impressions the Allens have of him and his wife as a result of an alleged lie that Viola has told her former employers. According to Jake, Viola has falsely claimed that her landlords charged her nine dollars for room and board during a week when the Allens were away. The alleged outrageous charge leads Mrs. Allen to give Viola an extra three dollars to cover the extra expenses Viola will incur during her employers' absence. But Viola does not use the extra money for rent, according to Jake; she purchases a gray coat that is lined with a fur collar.

Upon Jake's departure, Mr. Allen, who thus far in the story has been equal parts aloof and sarcastic, reveals himself an oracle of truth:

"Niggers" he remarked with some unction, and stood straddle-legged in the space

by the sideboard. "Niggers"—he paused to give the pipe a precautionary suck—

"know how to live. Just like the good book says, 'Man does not live by bread

alone.' Now Viola works all winter and you teach her to save money and when

she gets it saved, she knows what to do with it. . . She got herself a new coat. Now

that nigger's got a sense of values.'" (182)

Besides highlighting his virulent racism, Mr. Allen's sardonicism underscores the economic

realities of the Southern black in the early twentieth century, a reality about which Du Bois often

wrote. In the editorial "Economic Disfranchisement," he relates the relationship of negroes and

public services, specifically focusing attention on the telephone utility: "The Telephone

Company in the North, almost without exception, employs no colored help whatsoever; no

laborers, no telephone girls, no clerks, no officials. The whole service is absolutely closed to

Negroes. In the South, a few colored men are employed as laborers and linemen, but not many"

(281). In another editorial Du Bois argues that the reason for this discrimination is that there is

"the conviction that unemployment primarily and at bottom is the fault of the man who is

without work," a characterization that "is especially untrue of colored workers" ("Employment"

128). Thus, blacks who are discriminated against in this manner rarely find meaningful

unemployment opportunities, and when they do, the work reinforces the stereotype that blacks

are best suited for menial labor.

Additionally, the environments in which a large number of Southern blacks live, one of

squalor and filth or second-hand clothing and furniture, become the only appropriate milieus for

them. And Southern whites meet any attempt to improve one's standing with contempt. This

economic reality is what Warren explores in the character Viola of "Her Own People." Thus,

when the Allens confront the protagonist about her alleged lies and "inappropriate" purchase of a new coat, they do so with airs of condescension and derision:

> "She came up the steps. 'Good morning, Miz Allen,' she said, and her fingers absently brushed the gray fur on the open coat collar.
>
> 'You've got a new coat, Viola.'
>
> 'Yassum,' the Negro said, letting her hands drop with a delayed empty gesture.
>
> 'It's a pretty coat, Viola.'
>
> 'I fancied hit,' the Negro woman said. 'I seed a girl one time outer my winder and she had on a gray dress and gray shoes and a gray coat and hat . . . all gray. . .' She lifted her pale copperish face, and gazed at the woman from out yellowish eyes which, though depthless like an animal's, expressed a certain solicitude, a resignation. The woman met the gaze, put her cigarette to her lips, then puffed the smoke straight out into the air, with no pleasure." (183)

The scene is successful because it creates towards the protagonist mixed feelings in the reader. On the one hand, Viola is an unsympathetic character because, on the surface, she is both profligate and dishonest. On the other hand, she evokes a sympathetic reaction because she attempts an element of agency to effect some sort of economic uplift in her life. Always exploring the psychological aspect of his characters, Warren implicitly asserts with this scene that not only are white Southerners guilty of dehumanizing their black neighbors but economic forces play a role as well. That the dehumanized character is a black woman universalizes the psychic phenomenon, thus placing Viola on equal footing with the "white trash" of Warren's short story "Blackberry Winter," considered by far Warren's best work of short fiction.

The above scene ends with Mrs. Allen telling Viola never to come around again. Yet soon afterwards, both Allens are being called to Jake's home. Viola refuses to leave her rented room. Despite the urgings of the Allens, she does not budge. Stuck in that liminal space created by her mixed-race status and now both unemployed and homeless, she attempts to exercise some agency by refusing to vacate her room. The success of that attempt remains unresolved at tale's end, with the reader left with this pitiable scene of helplessness caused by the economic limitations with which Viola faces. One reaction to her situation is to place the blame of her current situation directly on her. She did not have to leave "her own people"; neither did she have to make her current situation worse by desiring that which she could not afford without duplicity. Another reaction, the one Warren appears to support implicitly, is that Viola is an example of the economically disenfranchised pawn to which Du Bois refers in the editorial mentioned above. The inhumanities she faces are the result of an economic system that forces her to choose between two dire scenarios—remain satisfied with her status or exercise the only sort of agency, deceit, that brings her an element of self-worth.

Warren's recognition that Viola's skin color only exacerbates her situation reveals an element of self-knowledge—to borrow from the writer himself—not present in *John Brown,* "The Briar Patch" or the poem "Pondy Woods." Whereas the first and last works, taken together, portray Warren as a white supremacist whose virulence may not be as extreme as his contemporary Thomas Dixon's but is still dangerous, "The Briar Patch," on the surface, purports to show a more progressive Warren. In reality, however, Warren's concessions to Southern blacks are illusory; he knows his Agrarian colleagues would never agree to his "compromises," nor can he make them happen himself. The offers of higher education for the black and equal justice in the court of law sound disingenuous, for Warren offers them only in a segregated

society. "Her Own People" also has its problems: Warren describes Viola's eyes as "yellowish"

and "depthless like an animal," characterizations that echo the depiction of Big Jim Todd in

"Pondy Woods" as a "slick buck." Moreover, Viola plays the same role Nancy does in *Sapphira*

and Slave Girl; for the Allens she functions as a cipher who contributes to the superiority the

couple exert over her. The relationship serves as another example of Warren's "[transference of]

internal conflicts to a 'blank darkness'" (Morrison 38). These problems underscore Warren's

early-career reliance on the stereotypical black tropes to reinforce white supremacist ideology.

Warren does, however, display in this short story a recognition of white complicity in Viola's

plight specifically—and by extension black Southerners'. Whether Viola lied or not, the greater

concern is why she lied in the first place. That she purchases a faux-fur-lined coat for reasons of

vanity makes her look profligate, but the Allens do not come away looking innocent in the

narrative. Warren, by extension, implicitly acknowledges the complicity of the white Southerners

in creating a society that intentionally disadvantages their black neighbors economically.

Written early in Warren's career, "Her Own People" may display incremental growth in

Warren's racial politics yet does not negate that even when conceding his own people's

culpability in the sorts of encounters that his art mirrors, he continues to perpetuate racist

stereotypes—a tendency that proves to be true even after his alleged conversion was reaching

full maturity during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, even after publishing

Segregation and *Who Speaks for the Negro?,* works that some have argued prove Warren's

complete renunciation of his past racist ideology, he published at least two poems whose

treatments of the Africanist presence in them again complicate any conclusion about Warren that

does not state he still held white supremacist ideologies in his later years. In "Internal Injuries," a

poem-within-a-poem sequence which Marylouise Samaha describes as being simply about "the

loss of self within the modern city" (iii), Warren opens with a series of racial epithets that are

disturbing for an individual whose racial politics have allegedly gone through a transformation:

> *Nigger:* as if it were not
>
> Enough to be old, and a woman, to be
>
> Poor, having a sizeable hole (as
>
> I can plainly see, you being flat on the ground) in
>
> The sole of a shoe (the right one), enough to be
>
> Alone (your daughter off in
>
> Detroit, in three years no letter, your son
>
> Upriver, at least now you know
>
> Where he is, and no friends), enough to be
>
> Fired (as you have just today
>
> Been, and unfair to boot, for
>
> That durn Jew-lady—there wasn't no way
>
> To know it was you that opened that there durn
>
> Purse, just picking on you on account of
>
> Your complexion) (*Collected Poems* 242)

"Internal Injuries" describes a woman who has been hit "by a 1957 yellow Cadillac" (*Collected*

Poems 245) and while lying in the street as a result of her injuries, is being looked at by "three

construction workers" who are unable to appreciate her humanity, seeing her as a "technical

problem" (245). Hugh Ruppersburg has argued that the stanzas cast this woman as "the ultimate

social outcast, the prime urban *miserable*" (108), as though the color of her skin is irrelevant. For

Ruppersburg she is an "everywoman." His analysis, however, does not do justice to one of the more distressing features of the poem.

The disconcerting aspect of the poem is Warren's rather easy use of the word *nigger.* In *Who Speaks for the Negro?* he describes how "if one of the children in our house had used the word *nigger,* the roof would have fallen" (10-11), yet as Aldon Lynn Nielsen has detailed, his father's discipline had little impact on the poet as he uses the epithet frequently in his poetry (115-116). Nielsen's observations on the use of the word *nigger* are noteworthy and equally apply to Warren's use of the epithet earlier in his career, such as in "Her Own People":

> One signifier, the word "nigger," can produce profoundly opposed effects within the community. When put into play . . . it reaffirms white power and sunders interpersonal cohesion. . . "Nigger," though now less frequently spoken in polite conversation . . . continues to exist as a linguistic nexus of white thought. . . Racist terms, summarized by the epithet "nigger," survive as frozen metaphors within American speech; thus whites who have never had any contact with blacks in their lives may still exhibit an essentially racist mode of thought, one which privileges them while demoting an invisible other to a secondary status. (3)

As a poet Warren understands the power of the epithet. Szczesuil argues "Warren italicizes the word "Nigger" in order to draw the reader's attention to the immense, alienating power of this signifier" and then follows the epithet with a series of significations, "that, almost like a natural chemical reaction, crystallizes in the narrator's mind: the woman is black; therefore she *must* be a thief, *must* come from a dysfunctional family, *must* have a son in the state penitentiary. All of these assumptions emerge from and cling to the one signifier *"Nigger"* (157-158). But there is more here than simply the power of a poet's choice of words.

The epithet not only suggests a series of racist stereotypes, carrying the weight of a history of oppression and violence and confirming the ubiquity of racism in those who gawk at the injured woman; it also points back to the creator of the Africanist persona in the poem. Like Willa Cather, who affirms the hierarchy of race by entitling her novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* instead of *Sapphira and Nancy*, Warren's use of the epithet equally draws attention to his own need of the black woman's body to affirm white supremacy. Perhaps any other signifier would have had less impact than *nigger,* but because of Warren's frequent use of the word, it calls into question his commitment to race equality.

Warren uses the epithet again in a poem composed after "Internal Injuries": "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart Encountered Late at Night When Driving Home from Party in the Back Country." Szczesuil calls the poem a "penitential conversion narrative" (156). He argues that Warren "directly confronts [his] past, reinterpreting it with narrative meaning and projecting himself into a vision of the future" (156). First published in the November 30, 1975, issue of *The New Yorker,* it relates the impact on the narrator of nearly crashing into a cart pulled by a mule and ridden by an old black man:

> I must try to tell you what, in July, in Louisiana,
>
> Night is. No moon, but starts whitely outrageous in
>
> Blackness of velvet, the long lane ahead
>
> Whiter than snow, wheels soundless in deep dust, dust
>
> Pluming whitely behind, and ahead all
>
> The laneside hedges and weed-growth
>
> Long since powdered whiter than star-dust, or frost, but air
>
> Hot /

At the sharp right turn,

Hedge-blind, which you take too fast,

There it is: death-trap.

On the fool-nigger, ass-hole wrong side of

The road, naturally: And the mule-head

Thrusts at us, and ablaze in our headlights,

Outstaring from primal bone-blankness and the arrogant

Stupidity of skull snatched there

From darkness and the saurian stew of pre-history.

For an instant—the eyes. The eyes,

They blaze from the incandescent magma

Of mule-brain. Thus mule-eyes Then

Man-eyes, not blazing, white-bulging

In black-face, in black night, and man-mouth

Wide open, the shape of an *O,* for the scream

That does not come. (18-25, 30-45)

The rest of this stanza details the quick reaction of the narrator to avoid the man and his "cargo of junk" (47) by "[snatching] the wheel left in a dust-skid / Smack into the ditch" (52-53). The poem then relates the narrator's reflections on and symbolic significance of this nearly-fatal encounter. The immediate impact occurs when the narrator arrives home:

And go on: to the one last drink, sweat-grapple in darkness, then

Sleep. But only until

The hour when small, though disturbing, gastric shifts

Are experienced /

When joy-sweat, or night-sweat, has dried to a microscopic

Crust on the skin, and some

Recollection of childhood brings tears

To dark-wide eyes. . . (61-70)

The narrator uses these early hours of the evening to bring the experience and the childhood recollections together into a poem. He fails, but both the memory and the attempts to craft them into verse do not end there:

Moved on through the years. Am here. Another

Land, another love, and in such latitude, having risen

In darkness, feet bare to cold boards, stare,

Through ice-glitter of glass and air purer

Than absolute zero. . . (82-86)

The confession occurs in the last stanza after the narrator imagines what the mule-cart driver did upon arriving home:

—and I see,

By a bare field that yearns pale in starlight, the askew

Shack, He arrives there. Unhitches the mule.

Stakes it out. Between cart and shack,

Pauses to make water, and while

The soft, plopping sound in deep dust continues, his face

Is lifted into starlight, calm as prayer /

And so I say:

> Brother, Rebuker, my Philosopher past all
>
> Casuistry, will you be with me when
>
> I arrive and leave my own cart of junk. . . (108-114, 119-122)

The mature narrator no longer identifies the mule-cart driver with an epithet; he is both "Brother and Rebuker." The epithet early on in the poem signifies the ideology of a younger narrator, a belief system allegedly no longer a part of the poet several decades later.

The use of the epithet, the Warren critic might argue, is an effective signifier of Warren's past. But what they fail to see (choose?), Morrison would argue, is the implicit arrogance that the use of the word implies. Because he is a poet, Warren intends for the weight of the word's derivative history to symbolize who he allegedly used to be—a white supremacist. Would the poem have been less effective without the epithet? Warren obviously thought so, but taken together these two poems, along with his history of white supremacy, suggest his continued reliance on the signified black body to assert a racial hierarchy. A "reformed" supremacist does not get to use the epithet simply because he no longer believes in what it signified.

A close look at Warren's literary use of "blackness" from *John Brown* to *Who Speaks for the Negro?* contradicts his protestations that he was a changed man—that while he may not have been able to write "The Briar Patch" again, he could reimagine the subjugated Africanist in other ways. Those "other ways" do not support the conversion narrative Warren apologists use to describe the arc of Warren's lifelong contention with race. The Warren of the 1970s may no longer have been a supporter of segregationist ideology; however, his imaginings of the black body had changed little to none since 1929 when he made his first statements on race public.

This conclusion has implications for the way in which literary critics should read the works of other white American writers. As Morrison has observed in "Unspeakable Things

Unspoken," "[Certain] absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them" (378). There is intentionality, in other words, in Warren's description of Big Jim Todd as a "slick buck" and purpose in his use of the epithet *nigger*. Neither Warren's motives—and thus, by extension, those of other white American authors—should be ignored when those of his writings in which an Africanist presences occur are informed by those motives.

In both *Playing in the Dark* and "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," Morrison has explored how an unspoken Africanist presence haunts American literature. She has argued that "[for] the most part, the literature of the United States has taken as its concern the architecture of a *new white man*" (*Playing in the Dark* 14-15). The results of Morrison's interrogations of American literature's foundations has led Richard L. Schur to insist that "other disciplinary tools, methods, and concerns may be useful in uncovering the effects of literature" (278). One "new tool" that not only assists in exposing the effects but also the motives is Critical Race Theory (CRT). The hypothetical framework examines society and culture as they relate to categorizations of race, law, and power. CRT grounds its interpretations on the supposition that the pervasive presence of racism in American society is the result of power structures that have always been in place in the United States; thus, racism has been, and always will be, a characteristic of this country because these systems and institutions will perpetuate it. Little used in literary criticism, CRT nonetheless can be an appropriate tool in understanding the motives behind Warren's writings on race. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic describe CRT as

> a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the
> relationship among race, racism, and power. . . [It] considers many of the same

issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but

places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting,

group, and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious. Unlike traditional

civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress,

critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including

equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles

of constitutional law. (*An Introduction* 3)

The theory coalesced in the 1970s "as a number of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars across

the country realized, more or less simultaneously, that the heady advances of the civil rights era

of the 1960s had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back" (Delgado and Stefancic,

An Introduction 4), but the first formal conference on it did not occur until 1989. Nearly three

decades later, CRT is no "abstract set of ideas or rules," notes Edward Taylor (122). Founders of

the theory include such legal scholars as Derrick Bell, Charles Lawrence, Lani Guinier, Richard

Delgado, Mari Matsuda, Patricia Williams, and Kimberle Crenshaw. From their contributions,

one is able to encapsulate the movement into a list of themes: a critique of liberalism, revisionist

interpretations of American civil rights law and progress, the application of insights from social

science writing on race and racism to legal problems, intersectionality, essentialism philosophy,

cultural nationalism, structural determinism, white nationalism, microaggression, empathetic

fallacy, and storytelling and counter storytelling (Delgado and Stefancic "Annotated

Bibliography" 462-463, Delgado and Stefancic *An Introduction* 1-2, 27-29, 78-80, and Taylor

122). Along with the concept of white privilege, CRT scholars often discuss the phenomenon of

interest convergence, the idea that white people support racial justice only when they understand

and see that there is something in it for them.

The father of interest convergence, Derrick Bell wrote extensively on the alleged civil rights advances in this country, asserting that advances occurred only when the white majority benefitted from the change. The "advances" he asserted were less about whites changing their beliefs about minority groups and more about actions that ultimately serve the majority best. In regards to *Brown v. Board of Education,* Bell contended that the Supreme Court decision was less about the Court's finally believing in the equality of all races and more about what the decision said to the world about the United States. In an effort to present to the world a United States that supported civil and human rights, in light of the realities of the Holocaust and subsequent revelations of human rights abuses in the Soviet Union, the Supreme Court voted 9-0 in declaring "separate but equal" unconstitutional despite the higher court seating three Southerners. Mary L. Dudziak relates the story of Justice William O. Douglas's traveling to India in 1950 in support of this idea. The first question Douglas was asked, according to the justice, was "Why does America tolerate the lynching of Negroes?" Douglas later wrote that he had learned from his travels that "the attitude of the United States toward its colored minorities is a powerful factor in our relations with India" ("Global Impact").

In defense of his assertion that interest convergence played a role in the *Brown,* Bell conducted a literature survey of legal reactions to the decision. Bell paid particular attention to the reactions of Professor Herbert Wechsler, who at the time of this review was the Harlan Fiske Stone Professor of Constitutional Law Emeritus at the Columbia University Law School. The late Wechsler, despite being a frequent advocate for civil rights causes, still finds reasons to criticize the Supreme Court decision in *Brown.* As Bell notes, "Wechsler reviewed and rejected the possibility that *Brown* was based on a declaration that the fourteenth amendment barred all racial lines in legislation" (*Brown* 521). Instead, Wechsler asserts, "the legal issue in state

imposed segregation cases was not one of discrimination at all, but rather of associational rights: 'the denial by the state of freedom to associate, a denial that impinges in the same way on any groups or races that may be involved"—that is, "if the freedom of association is denied by segregation, integration forces an association upon those for whom it is unpleasant or repugnant" (qtd. in Bell *Brown* 521). In other words, desegregation laws imposed upon white Southerners the requirement to associate with black Southerners, denying whites the right to associate with whomever they chose to commingle.

As part of his review of Wechsler's critique of the *Brown* decision, Bell also notes the response of the late Charles Black to Wechsler. Another Constitution expert who also advocated for various civil rights causes, Black accepts Wechsler's challenge to the Supreme Court decision and then adds his interpretation of the premise to Wechsler's argument: "[w]hen the directive of equality cannot be followed without displeasing the white[s], then something that can be called a 'freedom' of the white[s] must be impaired" (qtd. in Bell *Brown* 522). Here, Bell himself interposes his own view of Black's conclusion:

> Whites may agree in the abstract that blacks are citizens and are entitled to
> constitutional protection against racial discrimination, but few are willing to
> recognize that racial segregation is much more than a series of quaint customs that
> can be remedied effectively without altering the status of whites. The extent of
> this unwillingness is illustrated by the controversy over affirmative action
> programs, particularly those where identifiable whites must step aside for blacks
> they deem less qualified or less deserving. Whites simply cannot envision the
> personal responsibility and the potential sacrifice inherent in Professor Black's

conclusion that true equality for blacks will require the surrender of racism-

granted privileges for whites. (522-23)

In summary, then, advances in civil rights, Bell asserts, occur only when the white majority is

convinced it will suffer no consequences or will not be required to sacrifice any privileges their

whiteness grants them.

The conclusions of Wechsler, Black, and Bell are at the crux of Faulkner's "go slow"

letter. When Faulkner urges the readers of *Life* to take a slower approach to integrating the

South, he makes clear that the motivation for his adjuration is that he wants to see an end to

violence to blacks. However, his defense of Mississippi state rights, on the surface, contradicts

the assertion: "But if it came to fighting I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if

it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes. After all, I'm not going out to shoot

Mississippians" (qtd. in Peavy 70). Indeed, states' right advocates had always asserted the

primacy of the state over the federal government in civil rights matters in arguments for

segregation and black voter disenfranchisement. In the end, Faulkner appears to be no more than

another Southern racist who has "outed" himself with his own words. Derrick Bell would argue

Faulkner's "go slow" letter exemplifies interest convergence. As soon as integration appears to

threaten the comfort of the white Southerners' way of life, Faulkner argues that there is a need to

slow the proverbial car of progress by tapping on the brakes. In other words, the black

Southerner must continue to live under segregated and unequal conditions—even if those

conditions are better than they were a generation earlier—because the alternative would

discomfort the white Southerner. Implicit in such an argument—or as Morrison would argue:

"that invisible [thing] . . . not necessarily 'not-there'" ("Unspeakable 378)—is that the white

Southerner's psyche constitutes greater importance in any policy making, especially as one as ground-moving as desegregation.

In like manner, Warren's interview of himself in the last chapter of *Segregation* belies a similar narrative of interest convergence: "Are you a gradualist on the matter of segregation?" Warren asks himself (65). His response, on the surface, reveals both reason and prescience: "If by gradualist you mean a person who thinks it will take time . . . time for an educational process, preferably a calculated one, then yes. I mean a process of mutual education for whites and blacks. And part of this education should be in the actual beginning of the process of desegregation" (65).Written only three years after Faulkner's letter to the editor in *Life* magazine, Warren certainly appears to avoid the sort of rhetoric that results in the backlash Faulkner receives. Yet as David A. Davis notes in his analysis of the evolution of Warren's race politics, "Segregation allows for no middle ground of moderate safety. . ." (109). Davis adds to his analysis the historical realities that would lead Warren—and Faulkner—to promote a go slow policy:

> The South held the division of the races as one of its axiomatic principles, and antebellum thinkers defended slavery, racially motivated slavery, passionately on social, economic, and religious grounds. Following Reconstruction and the landmark decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896, segregation became slavery's emotional and practical equivalent. The southern identity for both blacks and whites does not stem, nor has it ever stemmed, solely from race separation, but it is a part of the equation. (114)

But these realities do not make Warren's pronouncement for blacks any easier to accept, for the implicit message is that they must wait for change to occur.

One might argue that Warren mitigates his call for patience with his conclusion in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, the other nonfiction work that Warren scholars use to assert the poet's racial politics had undergone significant change from the early years of his career. There, the poet discusses the realities of change: "It would be sentimentality to think that our society can be changed easily and without pain. It would be worse sentimentality to think that it can be changed without some pain to our particular selves—black and white. It would be realism to think that that pain would be a reasonable price to pay for what we all, selfishly, might get out of it" (444). In other words, Warren appears to advocate implicitly for equality while acknowledging that, with the changes that must occur to reach such a utopia, pain is inevitable. Yet Warren's critics read a subtext in the poet's optimism. Speaking of Warren's concluding remarks in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Michael Kreyling sees interest convergence—a term he does not use but I argue is entirely applicable—as the implicit motivating factor in Warren's remarks. Kreyling quotes a paragraph that occurs two pages earlier from the one above:

> But if he [the Negro] is to redeem America, he will do so as a creative inheritor of the Judeo-Christian and American tradition—that is, by applying the standards of that tradition—the standards of Western civilization developed and elaborated here. He will point out—as he is now pointing out with anger and irony, with intelligence, devotion, and distinguished courage—that the white man is to be indicted by his own self-possessed, and self-created, standards. For the Negro is the Negro American, and is "more American than the Americans." He is, shall we say, the "existentialist" American. He is a fundamentalist of Western culture. His role is to dramatize the most inward revelation of that culture. (*Who Speaks?* 442)

Kreyling sees in this passage the machinations of interest convergence. By privileging white culture, whether explicitly or implicitly, Warren is guilty of this phenomenon. Intellectually, Warren welcomes the changes that integration will introduce to a racially divided South specifically and country generally. Pragmatically, however, he is reticent to move at any pace that may bring any pain to the white majority. In fact, when in his interview of himself in *Segregation,* he calls for a "mutual education for whites and blacks" and then again in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* asserts change will be painful for both blacks and whites, he argues for sharing in the pain, ignoring the truth that pain and terror have been the primary effects of three-hundred-plus years of inequality. Finally, Warren's inability to legitimize the radical voice of a Malcolm X or a Du Bois—the focus of Kreyling's criticism—further underscores that Warren's primary concern is the protection of white Americans.

Interest convergence may explain the motivation behind Warren's reticence to embrace fully the changes that integration would introduce to the South while clarifying why *Segregation, Who Speaks for the Negrón?,* and some of his poetry contain confessional material. Those pensive moments may be betrayed by his creative treatments of Africanists in his works, but one cannot dismiss their presence. Either those moments are the result of Warren's authenticity towards the black citizenry of this country or further evidence of disingenousness. This latter possibility, however, does not satisfactorily explain why in the "The Briar Patch," Warren chose to concede a higher education to Southern blacks and admit to their deserving equal justice in Southern courts. Donald Davidson's goal in compiling twelve essays on the various concerns of Agrarianism was to establish the foundation upon which Agrarians could argue against "federal overreach" and for the legitimacy of regional politics. Warren did not have to concede anything to Southern blacks for his essay to have been deemed worthy of entry in the anthology. Yet he

chose to. The implicit attack on Du Bois and his defense of segregation notwithstanding, Warren does offer black Southerners an olive branch of sorts by conceding that these demands by the black community are reasonable.

In her analysis of Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Morrison ultimately commends Cather for her self-reflective composition. Despite Morrison recognizing in the novel an implicit approval of the subordination of blacks, the author acknowledges that Cather's attempts at perhaps a cathartic experience may come up short but are still worthy of praise:

> Yet even, or especially, here where the novel ends Cather feels obliged to gesture compassionately toward slavery. Through Till's agency the elevating benevolence of the institution is invoked. Serviceable to the last, this Africanist presence is permitted speech only to reinforce the slaveholders' ideology, in spite of the fact that it subverts the entire premise of the novel. Till's voluntary genuflection is as ecstatic as it is suspicious. In returning to her childhood, at the end of her writing career, Cather returns to a very personal, indeed private experience. In her last novel she works out and toward the meaning of female betrayal as it faces the void of racism. She may not have arrived safely, like Nancy, but to her credit she did undertake the dangerous journey. (28)

Morrison's final assessment of Cather suggests a way to understand Warren's lifelong struggle with race/racism.

Warren did not wait until his last composition to attempt to erase the stain that "The Briar Patch" left on his career. Indeed, his lifelong grappling with race was less about correcting a wrong image he believed his readers had of him—although he at times did attempt to do so—and

more about an honest attempt at coming to terms with his own support of white supremacy.[32]

Szczesuil sees this honest assessment of his racial politics as partial reason to believe Warren's

transformation from segregationist to integrationist did occur: "To his credit, Warren refused to

simply evade the past through silence . . . instead, like the Ancient Mariner who must relive the

guilt of his crime whenever he repeats his tale, Warren felt compelled to confront the specter of

his early views on race over and over again" (156). In his analysis of the rather damning poem

"Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart," Szczesuil observes that the poem reveals "Warren confronting

a veritable conundrum of self-representation as he foregrounds the inherent, necessary tension

between the facts of the past and the desire to create meaningful, narrative interpretations of the

self" (156). While Warren deserves to be applauded for his lifelong self-reflections on race in the

same manner Morrison credits Cather for the same act, those candid moments should not be

termed transformative. When looking in the mirror, Warren may not have liked who stared back

at him, but his writings on Africanists continued to belie his support for white supremacist

ideology. He should be commended for his willingness to confront his racist past, but the textual

evidence from works that are supposed to reveal a changed man instead expose the author as

little more than what he was in 1929—a white supremacist.

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[32] In a 1978 interview with the host on the *Dick Cavett Show,* Warren addressed this issue directly when Cavett brings up "The Briar Patch":

        CAVETT: So people could take a quote from your—that earlier thing you wrote ["The Briar Patch"], and misrepresent you quite badly today.
        WARREN: They have indeed. I could have done [an answer to] a *New Republic* [article] if I had that stronghold of truth.
        CAVETT: Do I notice a grace note of contempt in your voice there?
        WARREN: Of that article, yes.
        CAVETT: Oh, okay.
        WARREN: I wrote a letter about it. I think this man's [L. D. Reddick] supposed to be a scholar; he doesn't take the trouble to look up anything about what he's writing about.
        CAVETT: A man's old words come back to haunt him. (Watkins *Talking* 285)

One of the ironies of Warren's frequent writings on race is that his explicit and implicit contradictions on the topic place him in the same company as his primary Africanist nemesis Du Bois. The civil rights leader was often guilty of contradicting himself. And like Warren, Du Bois often bared his soul in his writings. Contradiction was probably an inevitable result of his lifelong devotion to race equality. Kwame Anthony Appiah describes Du Bois's evolving views on race as Du Bois's "not always [having] one answer at any particular time"—yet staying consistent in his vehement rejection of Negro stereotypes and limitations." The evolution of his views resulted in occasional inconsistencies in his message. Over the course of his career, Warren confronted his own complicity in creating the America against which Du Bois fights. Intellectually, he acknowledged that civil rights equality for American Africans was right; subconsciously, he continued to grapple with what equality meant to his white majority.

When in "Unspeakable Things" Morrison wonders about the various strategies that white American authors have used to "erase [her]," she may as well identify Warren by name. But Morrison instead addresses a "nine-hundred-year-old academy . . . struggling to 'maintain standards'" as keepers of the literary canon (369). In *Playing in the Dark,* Morrison does name names: Cather, Hemingway, Poe, Melville, among others. Her premise: these authors are guilty of "allaying internal fears . . . [by fabricating a] brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American" (38). When responding to Ralph Waldo Emerson's "call for that new man in 'The American Scholar,'" Morrison argues, "the writers who responded to this call . . . did not look solely to Europe to establish a reference for difference. . . Writers were able to celebrate or deplore an identity already existing or rapidly taking a form that was elaborated through racial difference" (39). The black body provides the contrast for the creation of this "new man"; he was *not* that, and the writers pointed their fingers, both explicitly and implicitly,

at the Africanists on their pages. Warren's fictional and nonfictional encounters with Africanists underscore the sorts of strategies white American authors have used to assert their specious claims of racial superiority. Yet despite this ubiquity, Morrison asserts, "I . . . do not plan to live without Aeschylus or William Shakespeare, or James or Twain or Hawthorne, or Melville, etc., etc., etc. There must be some way to enhance canon readings without enshrining them" ("Unspeakable Things" 371-72).

Does the perpetuation of white supremacy dull the brightness of Warren's star? Can his artistry be separated from the racist undertones in several works in which Warren creates an Africanist persona? Do concepts like interest convergence help literary critics to enhance readings of Warren's writings on race without enshrining him? I contend it does and not just because I do not plan on living without Warren? Refusing to make excuses for Warren's racism should not detract from his art. Morrison continues to read the novels of white American authors despite their implicit support for a hierarchical view of race. Warren, a critically acclaimed, prolific, white-American author, should also be given the same due. Ellison identified a conscious center in Warren's novels. While Warren may have frequently betrayed that center with a white-supremacist subtext, he, nevertheless, deserves his position in the American literary canon.

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