

Letters

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Imaging Diaspora: Race, Photography, and the Ernest Dyche Archive

By Tina Campt

My first trip to Birmingham, England coincided with the 2006 World Cup. As luck would have it, I arrived the day after England had been eliminated from the quarterfinals, and, quite frankly, it seemed like the entire country was in a bad mood. But not Pete. Peter James is the head of photographic collections at the Birmingham City Archives. It was Pete who had unearthed the collection of historical photography that I had come to the archive to see, when he rang the doorbell of a desolate looking building he believed to have previously housed a photography studio that had served the Black and Asian communities in Birmingham's Balsall Heath for nearly half a century.

An older woman had answered the door on that unremarkable day in 1990. When Pete explained he was researching the Dyche Photography Studio, she had insisted he come in. Moments later, she introduced him to her husband, Ernest Malcolm Dyche. Malcolm Dyche had learned photography from his father, Ernest Dyche, Sr., who had opened the first of two Dyche Studios in 1910. Once inside, Pete realized that the studio he had researched was still more or less in tact. Although the business had closed almost ten years before, the rooms that

had once served as the studio were filled with thousands of prints, film and glass plate negatives, and photography equipment dating back to the teens and twenties. Malcolm Dyche died only a short time after Pete's initial visit; he had been delighted by the interest in the studio and, shortly before his death, had agreed to donate its contents to the City Archives.

On my first day in Birmingham, and over the course of several visits back, Pete James reconstructed for me this history of the studio and the fascinating photographs it had produced. Following the success of the first studio, which initially catered primarily to entertainers and musicians in the theatre district around Bordesley Palace, Ernest Dyche, Sr. had opened a second studio in 1913 in Balsall Heath. The clientele of the studios shifted in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when waves of Caribbean migrants began taking up residence in Birmingham in response to postwar British immigration policies and employment opportunities. Alongside studios such as the Harry Jacobs Studio in Brixton, the Bellevue Studio in Bradford, or Plant's, Sam's or the Oriental Studio in Birmingham, the Dyches were part of a group of studio photographers sought out by postwar Black and Asian migrants



Tina Campt

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These photos witness black communities practicing forms of self-presentation that reveal the inextricable relationship between how black people ‘image’ and how they ‘imagine’ themselves.

who produced portraits of members of these communities that were circulated among families in Britain, the Indian sub-continent, and the Caribbean. Until its closure in the mid-1980s, the Dyche Studio served as a pivotal, albeit unintended, site of documentation for post-war British colonial migration during this critical phase in the creation of Black Britain.

Back at the archives, Pete led me downstairs into the stacks. We gathered box after box of images and brought them upstairs to the office, where I combed through countless photos with awe and admiration. In the coming days and weeks, I sorted, stared at, scanned, and ruminated over hundreds of portraits that rapidly began to blur in my mind. Face after face of men, women, boy and girl children; parents, siblings, and friends; work portraits, wedding portraits, family portraits; head shots, standing shots, seated shots; close-up, full body, standing pensively, seated demurely—portraits that seemed to form an endless, interchangeable litany.

From the moment I first laid eyes on them, I’ve been captivated by the insights these images give us into the cultural dynamics of diaspora. These photos witness black communities practicing forms of self-presentation that reveal the inextricable relationship between how black people ‘image’ and how they ‘imagine’ themselves; they draw attention to the role of photography and portraiture as forms of expres-



African Caribbean Couples, Ernest Dyche Collection, BCA

sive cultural practice. As art historians and cultural theorists have shown, visual culture is key to understanding the experiences of blacks in diaspora (Willis 1996, 2000; Mercer 1994; Hall 1992, 1997; Powell 1997; Bailey 1992, 2005). The photographic image has played a dual role in rendering the history of African diasporic communities through its ability to document and, at the same time, pathologize the history, culture, and struggles of these communities. Indeed, it is the equally powerful positive and negative impact of photography that has made it an important vehicle for articulating black people’s complex relationships to cultural identity and national belonging.

Yet when and how does an image of a Black European, or, more specifically for my own work, a Black Briton or Afro-German emerge as part of, rather than deviant from, his or her

national cultures? I would suggest that we can, in fact, locate the visual emergence of such Black European national subjects within the frames of some of the seemingly most mundane examples of historical photography—images that are frequently overlooked or taken for granted. That site of emergence is family photography: both informal snapshots and professional studio portraits. My current research engages the family photo as a dynamic and contested site of black cultural formation. It charts the emergence of a Black European subject through the medium of photography by counterposing how two different Black European communities—Black Britons and Black Germans—used photography to create positive forms of identification and community in the first half of the twentieth century in ways that challenged the racist stereotypes that Blacks in Germany

and the UK confronted in their daily lives.

Focusing on the family photography of Black Germans from the turn of the century through the 1950s and on the studio portrait photography of Afro-Caribbean Britons in the immediate postwar period, my book in progress, *Capturing the Black European Subject*, examines how photography became a vehicle through which Afro-Germans and Black Britons wrote themselves into historical narratives of nation and culture. It contrasts the British and German contexts in ways that articulate differences among the respective colonial, post-colonial, and diasporic histories of each country. In each of these contexts, photographic technology became an important site of cultural formation for Black European diasporic subjects.

At the center of my inquiry are three sets of images. Part One focuses on the family photographs (formal portraits, institutional photos, and informal snapshots) of five Black German families in the interwar years and during the Third Reich. Part Two examines two sets of photographs of Afro-Caribbean Britons: first, the 1950s photo-journalism of postwar arrival pictures taken of the Windrush generation of migrants from the Caribbean to the UK published in British newspapers (in particular *Picture Post*), and, second, an archive of images that exemplifies the portraits this community created once established in Britain—portraits produced by

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the father and son team of Ernest Dyche, Sr. and Ernest Malcolm Dyche. Each of these photographic archives marks a qualitative shift in the representation of Black Europeans, for these images compose alternative meanings of Britishness and Germanness in ways that were decidedly against the grain of dominant notions of the purity of British and German cultural identity. During my residence this year at the Robert Penn Warren Center, my work will focus primarily on the second section of the project, “Imaging Black Britain: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe,” and, in particular, on a close analysis of the Dyche Studio’s archive.

African American cultural theorist Fred Moten articulates an approach to images that emphasizes an attentiveness to “the whole sensual ensemble of what is looked at,” for, as he writes, “the meaning of a photograph is cut and augmented by a sound or noise that surrounds or pierces its frame” (2003 210, 205). Engaging the broader “sensual ensembles” of these particular images helps us account for some of the most important, yet ever elusive, dimensions of the image-making practices of black families in diaspora by focusing on how photography operates in excess of vision and sight. Put another way, what if we set our sights beyond ‘what we see’ as the sole register for understanding the impact of the photo? What if we consider the work these

images do (or were intended to do) as more than visual documents? What interests me about these portraits, in fact, are the very things that mark their simplicity and lack of sophistication as visual artifacts—



African Caribbean Portraits, Ernest Dyche Collection, BCA

specifically, a seriality and familiarity that makes them register profoundly.

Here, my reference to ‘register’ refers not only to how these images evoke affective connections visually, but also, and equally importantly, to how they resonate and enunciate diasporically in ways that often

exceed the sensory range of the visual. In the vocabulary of musicology, “register” is a measurement of the highness or lowness of the pitch of a sound; register is always relative to an instrument’s or voice’s specific capacity to produce a limited range of pitches. For example, one might speak of a soprano’s use of the high, middle, or low registers of her voice, or remark that the low registers of a bassoon rattled the table. Adapting this concept to the field of visual culture, we might similarly think of the photograph as an instrument with a distinct set of cultural, affective, and semiotic registers, which map a range of sensibilities within a given community or culture and that index and evoke the investments and attachments of

individual subjects as well. Like the vocabulary of music more generally, the concept of register offers an alternative, extended way of understanding the cultural work of the photographic image.

These photographs cite familiar tropes of individuals attempting to project and por-

tray success, respectability, and prosperity. As an archive of anonymous images that lack biographical information, dates, or other identifying material, these photos register not so much as narratives of individual accounts, but, instead, through the ways they evoke and correspond with things we’ve seen before. What registers first and foremost is their genre: the photographic portrait, which reproduces portraiture techniques and conventions utilized since the late nineteenth century. As part of this larger historical trajectory, they closely resemble similar portraits taken by photographers in former colonial territories in Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Pacific Rim—photographs used at the time to validate so-called ‘scientific’ theories of racial and cultural difference. Such images circulated widely throughout Europe (and beyond) as objects trafficked between lay collectors and trained scholars who traded and commissioned them as visual proof of racial distinctions and taxonomies, and they trace their origins to the earliest uses of portrait photography as evidence for hierarchical social and racial differences (Green 1986; Pinney/Peterson 2003; Poole 1997; Edwards 1992, 2001).ⁱ These different but related sets of portraits share striking compositional continuities that display photographic techniques common to a generation of photographers—techniques that structured the Western

Journalists' documentation of this population's arrival, settlement, and 'home-making' via images of Afro-Caribbean migrants have made the Windrush migration one of the most iconic representations of Britain's multicultural history, and it inscribed these individuals in particular ways in the visual history of postwar Britain.

photographic gaze in portraiture of this period.

In contrast to these earlier instances of the transnational circulation of black photographic portraits, postwar portrait photography of African Caribbeans in Britain was circulated not by photographers, scholars, or collectors, but by and among West Indians themselves as a way of connecting them to families and friends separated by oceanic geographic spans. These photographs display a more agential practice of portraiture that resignifies the historical uses of this genre that sought to objectify and silence their non-white, subaltern subjects. The portraits made and circulated within this community display their subjects appropriating photography in ways that witness their attempts to represent themselves as particular kinds of modern agents.

Elaborating on Moten's concept of "the musics of the image," these photos are 'pitched' to register histories and experiences that activate and anticipate our assumptions and associations. In this way, they map a "structure of feeling"ⁱⁱ that makes these images make sense according to multiple, but quite particular, cultural and historical contexts. That structure of feeling, and one of their most powerful registers, is aspiration: an aspiration to be someone, to be proud and good-looking, respectable and upstanding—an aspiration to middle-class prosperity. Their aspirations preceded these individuals' migrations but were

enabled in new ways through the forms of autonomy transatlantic resettlement produced. These portraits' register exceeds what they show, as they evoked moments of recognition and affective responses within the circuits of exchange in which they circulated.

If genre is one significant range of these photographs' register, then what coordinates as a lower range counterpart is the historical register of *generation* and the use of portraiture as an expressive diasporic practice by West Indian migrants. This archive of portraits features members of the much-celebrated Windrush migration—an event that the arrival of the HMS Windrush, the first of a series of ships that brought countless Caribbean migrants to Britain, inaugurated in 1948, initiating one of the largest and most visible waves of collective migration of West Indians to the UK and ultimately reshaping the iconography of Black Britain in fundamental ways. For, beyond its demographic impact, this migration is distinguished by its extensive documentation as a visual event heralded at an unparalleled popular level.ⁱⁱⁱ From the late 1940s onward, numerous published photographs featured African Caribbean migrants poised to take up the promises of employment and economic prosperity many felt they had earned through their support of Britain in two World Wars. Photojournalism played a critical role in defining how this new population was seen and portrayed.

Photographs of Windrush arrivals were published widely in mainstream UK newspapers and magazines—most famously in *Picture Post*, whose significance in shaping British public perception has been examined in depth most notably by Stuart

made the Windrush migration one of the most iconic representations of Britain's multicultural history in a manner that inscribed these individuals in particular ways in the visual history of postwar Britain.

Picture Post's visualizations



"Is There a British Colour Bar?" *Picture Post*, July 1949.

Hall (Hall 1972, 1992). The images of Afro-Caribbean migrants produced by journalists in their documentation of this population's arrival, settlement, and 'homemaking' have

of this generation of West Indian migrants oscillate between the depiction of individuals and groups, shifting restlessly between huddled masses and lone travelers. Both group

Against the backdrop of numerous images produced by photojournalists in the postwar period, West Indian migrants attempted to tell their own stories of their experiences in Britain through the images they commissioned from private studio photographers.

and individual figurations have deeper gendered articulations. The figure of the lone Black man depicted in these urban (land)scapes is a man alone in the world, yet a man making his own way. Despite the accompanying captions and headlines of concern that ventriloquize the anxieties of a white British public, the gender of his isolation situates him as the agent of his own destiny. These images offer a compelling visual accompaniment to Mary Chamberlain's acclaimed 1997 oral history of intergenerational Barbadian migration to the UK and of the highly gendered narrative structures revealed in their accounts. Chamberlain highlights the fact that many of her male informants emphasized the spontaneity of their decisions to migrate, which they narrated as tales of heroic adventure or of masculine camaraderie against all odds. Their vivid accounts of agential autonomy retrospectively justified the travails they encountered on arrival in Britain with a happy end of accomplishment through cleverness and self-reliance.

These images extend this theme through the atmospherics of shadow and light (which mimic the jazz bar and its illicit significations) and amplify the risks and loneliness of diaspora that such accounts often attempt to filter out. This image confirms a similar script where the lone male diasporic signifies autonomy, albeit without the economic opportunities that fueled his migration. On the one hand, in the British

popular imagination, such an image situates the black male diasporic as perpetually at risk and illustrates the potential dangers of diasporic failure. Those black migrants who did not attain the employment they sought became objects of concern and distrust, as idleness threatened an availability to white femininity in other sites of urban sociality—a threat that reinvoked older discourses of moral panic about the dangers posed by black populations in the metropole and in the colonies (Carby 1992). These journalistic images of the Windrush generation provided another vehicle for the circulation of such moral panics. At the same time, they materialized an older script of Caribbean masculinity in diaspora in which the black male finds affirmation through reputation and the male crew. Here, a sense of self bound up in autonomy and activity links the lone male, as a daring and adventurous sexual agent, to the anonymity of the city and to the culture of the street as a site of asserting difference and autonomy.

Unlike photojournalism's portrayal of arriving Caribbean migrants, or earlier anthropological photographic depictions of Blacks as social problems or racial pathologies, the images of African Caribbeans taken by studio photographers in this period witness their black subjects engaging and adapting this visual technology as a medium for rendering a positive account of their history. Against the

backdrop of numerous images produced by photojournalists in the postwar period, West Indian migrants attempted to tell their own stories of their experiences in Britain through the images they commissioned from private studio photographers. As one of my informants commented:

"When we arrived here in England it was horrible. It was cold and miserable. But we always looked good. Even if you only had one suit or one nice outfit, it was clean. We taught the English how to dress. They used to wear the same clothes everywhere. You don't wear the same thing everywhere! We had work clothes, and going out clothes, and **Sunday Best**. Those teddy-boys used to beat up our boys because they looked so sharp. It was not just about race. It was about style!"

We see 'Sunday best' all over these images; it is, perhaps, the embodiment of this generation of Caribbean migrants' aspirations to middle class respectability. Sunday best were literally church clothes, but they were

also dress clothes with a difference. They were clothes meant for worship in a community with a deeply religious sensibility. Sunday best was attire that stood apart from both the work-week and from leisure time. Sunday best was dressing up, but not showing off; it was clothing intended to be reverent and to show respect for the place and practice of worship, as well as gratitude and humility in the presence of God. Sunday best was a demonstration of faith that signified the fact that, for West Indians in this period, respectability was not just a question of class but also had an equally important spiritual dimension. The version of Sunday best in these images was intended to harmonize back home as a familiar register for the loved ones left behind who received them; it 'placed' relatives and friends in a visual context of people 'keeping faith' oceans away. These portraits projected upright folk who, in what was seen as the highly sec-



African Caribbean Portraits, Ernest Dyer Collection, BCA

Sunday best was a demonstration of faith that signified the fact that, for West Indians in this period, respectability was not just a question of class but also had an equally important spiritual dimension.

ular world far away from their families and community, gave the appearance of maintaining similar values. These images aspire to 'the good life,' yet they also perform encoded variations on the tropes of respectability they compose and project. As such they represent aspiration as anything but simple or straightforward. These photographs enunciate stylistic variations in a kind of freestyling that disrupts a desire to hear them playing solely in a gender-neutral register of respectability. In these portraits we see elegant fedoras—yet fedoras often cocked carefully to one side. We see cigarettes and zoot suits that straddle the line between Sunday best and 'Friday night finest.' We see pens, watches, and other adornments, yet these accessories were frequently not the property of their sitters. Often borrowed or supplied as props by the studios sitters patronized, they were utilized as individual stylizations and coded performances that suggest the bad boys and not-always-so-good girls beneath Sunday best: men and women making their own way on the other side of the Atlantic. We often see rhinestones and other forms of jewelry that appear a bit flashier or at odds with Sunday best. We notice the absence of a usually ubiquitous accessory in this community: crosses. Sometimes we see hems that show a bit more leg than would ordinarily be displayed in and around the pews. In these images, Sunday best often reflects the secularity

and autonomy that migration achieved. As much as they image reverent and respectable Caribbean men and women, they also show covertly fly girls and boys winking at the camera and flaunting their autonomy through style.

Unlike in the journalistic portrayals, many of these migrants arrived with the confidence of their accomplishments in the Caribbean, responding to Britain's calls to employment because they felt they had something to offer as British subjects. The negative reception they encountered was both a surprise and a disappointment. It is the tensions of thwarted diasporic aspiration that these images also reflect. Sandra Courtman points out in her reading of these photos that such images articulate the tensions of diasporic aspiration, as many West Indians failed to find employment at the level they were promised or at equivalent levels to those of white British workers. She cites nursing, one of the primary occupations of migrant labor, as one notorious example of such discrimination:

A Dyche photograph shows a nurse in a starched and immaculate uniform; she proudly carries a pile of textbooks to suggest she is on the way up, advancing her knowledge and training. But it is unclear whether her uniform might be that of a State Registered or State Enrolled nurse [...] To read this image culturally would be to acknowledge contradictory evidence about a profession that was to become a prime example of

bitterness and disillusionment. Having fought hard in the Caribbean to become properly trained and qualified, women were recruited to nursing, tested in advance of joining and assured of proper career structure. On arrival in England, however, many nurses found themselves relegated to lower status jobs as auxiliaries or cleaners [...] A photograph taken in a nursing uniform is [thus] a token of immense pride and a symbol of its wearer's successful fight against institutional racism. (Courtman 140).

These images express both the hopeful aspirations of diaspora as well as the disappointments that inevitably accompanied them. At the same time, the practice of creating and circulating visual accounts of improvised configurations of self and identity demonstrate a tenacious pride in and retention of those aspirations nevertheless. These portraits' dissonances thus offer coded indications of the fact that many were not doing quite as well as they'd hoped or appeared. Nevertheless, they wanted to capture and proclaim the often ambivalent accomplishments they did achieve.

The relationship between diasporic musical cultures and image-making practices, and the necessary linkage between the sonic and the visual, offers a particularly illuminating aperture for thinking through diaspora. Similar to Paul Gilroy's conception of music as a cathartic vehicle of transcendence,

these photographs' aspirational qualities demonstrate a redemptive practice, albeit one where transcendence and redemption are neither escapist nor naïve, but, instead, are pragmatically utopian. The subjects constituted in/through these images aspired to transcend the presence of racism and discrimination—not as an erasure of those realities, but as the foundation for building a better future for others. For what motivated the migration of both this generation and so many others was an explicit and unyielding investment in futurity—a future that would create more possibilities for their children and their communities, as well as for themselves.

The version of diasporic self-making that these images compose parallels the call and response lyrics and rhythms of gospel in the black church. Gospel music hails its congregations as both subjects of faith and as subjects of a racialized cultural formation that directly and indirectly references the Middle Passage, enslavement, and racial domination. Gospel articulates a tenacious faith in the face of overlapping histories of hope and despair—histories in which music was a cultural practice of communication and connection, mourning and affirmation. As scholars and practitioners of black music have noted, music, and the cadences of gospel in particular, provided a site of lament and resistance whose rhythms invoked a relationality of struggle and

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redemption. Those invocations do not merely reference the experience of families and communities separated and dispersed through the Atlantic slave trade, but they produce affective connections between and among them. The imaging practices of black families in diaspora mirror these invocations and these connections. In this way, they enact the parallel tensions of diasporic aspiration and its discontents.

Moreover, if these portraits register the tensions within diasporic aspirations, then the photography studio itself functioned as a space that refracted these dynamics in interesting ways. While the sitters often experienced thwarted aspirations in their daily lives, the Dyche Studio served as a momentary space of exception that pampered and put them in charge. The photographers' wives received Caribbean

migrants at the studio; the Mrs. Dyches, Jr. and Sr., sat with them and solicited their visions of how they wanted to appear. They were offered dressing facilities and accessories to help them achieve their desired look, then were ushered into the studio, where their wishes were communicated to the photographer as part of a collaborative image-making practice. The photographers catered to and crafted their visions of themselves both during the shoot and afterward, when they received proofs that were retouched according to their wishes. These sitters were not only paying customers; they were also empowered consumers and agential subjects.

The studio and these diasporic imaging practices were thus not outside the politics of race and class, but, instead, were a space where race, class, and nation were creative and

collaborative enactments that resignified diaspora in both its aspirations and its discontents. As the groundwork for a future generation of Black Britons and the social transformation they would struggle for decades later in the streets of Handsworth, Toxteth, Lewisham, and Brixton. As images intended to present a visual account of their subjects' successful establishment in Britain, they are multifaceted historical texts that depict the image of life 'over there' that these individuals wanted their communities 'back home' to see.

These portraits offer an alternate historical account to that of the photojournalism of

this period—a story of how, despite the challenges they faced, a proud Black British community emerged that changed the face of postwar England. Photography served a distinctly diasporic function as a bridge that allowed this community to maintain its affiliations to its origins, while also recording its transition from 'migrants' to 'Britons.' In this way, the Dyche Collection constitutes an invaluable visual archive that demonstrates how and why photography became one of the chosen media through which African Caribbeans forged diasporic identities in Britain.

These are photographic practices that date back to the pioneering, yet pernicious, work of criminologist Alphonse Bertillon and eugenicist Francis Galton and their development of the criminal mug shot and composite photo, respectively. Each used photography as evidence to classify, document, and distinguish 'innate' human differences defined as deviant or racially inferior. See Alan Sekula's seminal essay, "The Body and the Archive," October 39 (Winter 1986), 3-64.

ⁱⁱ"[A] felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time ... a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living ... a common element we cannot easily place." Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Pelican: London, 1975, 63-64. See also: Mary Chamberlain's explication of Williams in the context of Caribbean migration to Britain in *Narratives of Exile and Return*, Macmillan: London, 1997, 32-33.

ⁱⁱⁱThe 1948 Nationality Act gave all members of the Commonwealth the right of British citizenship and made the prospect of traveling to the UK a more attractive option for residents of the British Caribbean. Nevertheless, the U.S. continued to be the preferred migrant destination until the implementation of the McCarren-Walter Act in 1952, which restricted entry to the U.S. and led to an increase in immigration to Britain. Prior to the 1952 Act, annual immigration to the UK from the Caribbean numbered in the high hundreds. These figures doubled the following year to 2,200, leaping to 10,000 in 1954, to 27,550 in 1955, and peaking eventually at 66,300 in 1961.



Dyche Studio Exterior, Ernest Dyche Collection, Birmingham City Archives (BCA)

The Robert Penn Warren Center: A Place for the Humanities

By Nicholas S. Zeppos, Interim Chancellor, Vanderbilt University

As someone who recently celebrated his own twentieth anniversary as a member of Vanderbilt's faculty, and who, this past year, was appointed to serve as Vanderbilt's Interim Chancellor, I am acutely aware that composing a retrospective can be difficult. To sum up two decades of an individual career full of many different phases is daunting enough—to characterize and pay tribute to two decades of a Center for the Humanities that has intersected and interwoven with multiple aspects of Vanderbilt's life is a true feat, but an important one if one wants to understand the significance of the humanities and its faculty to Vanderbilt University.

Vanderbilt's own faculty officially proposed a Center for the Humanities in 1987 with the purpose of fomenting and encouraging research and accomplishment in humanistic study on Vanderbilt's campus. From the very moment of its inception, in its very conception, the Warren Center has been interdisciplinary and collaborative: the initiative which created it was the product of the minds of Enrique Pupo-Walker from Spanish and Portuguese, George Graham from political science, Paul Conkin from history, and Alisdair MacIntyre from philosophy. Jacque Voegeli, Dean of the College of Arts and Science, was instrumental in seeing the program brought to manifestation. The Center began its programming in 1988 with Charles Scott from the Department of Philosophy as the first faculty director.

The post of Faculty Director has subsequently been fulfilled by Paul Freedman from the Department of History, Paul Elledge from the Department of English, and Helmut Smith from history. Mona Frederick, the Center's Executive Director, arrived at Vanderbilt with experience from the National Humanities Center, and she has proven essential to the figuration of the Center's programs and its identity as a whole; her ongoing influence and leadership have ensured the Center's programmatic continuity and integrity.

The original intention of the faculty members who created the Center was to create and cultivate a place, an actual physical space, in which scholars could discuss their work in an interdisciplinary environment—in which scholars would learn, with curiosity and respect, the tools of one another's methodologies in order to be able to apply those methodologies to their own work when appropriate. The original ideas for the program were so fundamental and so necessary that they are still present and functioning within the Center's core twenty years later: the Center would have a Fellows program; it would support ongoing faculty study groups; it would offer and sponsor opportunities for special programs within the University.

Since spring of 1988, the Center has been home to dozens upon dozens of programs, pro-

jects, and reading groups. Books have arisen out of the collaborative work of the Warren Center, and original art has been commissioned and debuted. The sheer volume and disciplinary array of programs in the Center's history gives any observer an idea



The Robert Penn Warren Center

of the Center's reach and range, and it is demonstrated easily by the scope of the projects that will celebrate its twentieth year: a lecture by the Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities; a working conversation with Franz Rosenzweig; a collaboration with the Center for Latin and Iberian Studies; a co-sponsorship with the Blair Appalachian Concert Series that will debut in performance music from the novels of Laura Ingalls Wilder; and, most spectacularly and significantly, a series of events considering Robert Penn Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, a collection of the poet's interviews with individuals

involved in the Civil Rights movement, that will address civil rights issues in our own dawning century.

Following Robert Penn Warren's death in 1989, the Center was named in his honor. Robert Penn Warren, as much as any

person, could be an emblem of Vanderbilt University's tradition of humanistic study. He was a collector of voices and a chronicler of cultural moments, but throughout his whole life as a writer we see his own mind and his own ideas continue to take shape. He wrote an accurate and considered response to the pivot of time he inhabited within his own century. He was of his moment but also had a poet's consciousness of himself as an inhabitant of a much longer, broader history. As well as collecting voices and creating cultural documents, he added his own voice; as well as serving as a mediator and as a narrator, he

As we move toward even larger efforts in interdisciplinary humanities study at Vanderbilt, we continue to look to the Warren Center as a model; since its inception, and just like its namesake, the Robert Penn Warren Center has never ceased in its own evolution.

was also a participant in his culture to the end of his life. He represents an engaged, multivalent capacity that fits and inspires the Center's work and that aligns with Vanderbilt's own development as an institution.

Since the Center is not dominated or owned by any one disciplinary strain, and since it is wholeheartedly supportive of the research of its participants, every faculty member who walks through the heavy wooden door of the Vaughn Home can feel that she is entering her own place. When, in 2000, a central fund—the Academic Venture Capital Fund, which furnished resources to transinstitutional 'startups' throughout our university's colleges and schools—was created out of Vanderbilt's endowment, the Warren Center served as a model and a benchmark for successful interdisciplinary collaboration. Because the Center had been so successful, we were able to know what to look for to gauge progress and achievement in our new transinstitutional centers. As we move toward even larger efforts in interdisciplinary humanities study at Vanderbilt, we continue to look to the Warren Center as a model; since its inception, and just like its namesake, the Robert Penn Warren Center has never ceased in its own evolution.

I barely had a chance to know Vanderbilt before the birth of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities. But since I have been here, and the Center has been here, I have never witnessed anything less than the fullest and

highest achievement that Vanderbilt has to offer; much of that immense achievement has been empowered by the Warren Center. To imagine humanities at Vanderbilt without it is not really impossible, but it is depressing, because the Warren Center and Vanderbilt have grown together in such a way that the former is simply inextricable from the latter.

The interface between the Robert Penn Warren Center and Vanderbilt's other humanities departments and centers is so porous, so vascularized, that it is impossible to tell where one program ends and another begins. That is as it should be. Over the twenty years of its existence, the Warren Center has made itself indispensable to the practice of the study of the humanities here. The expectations it has established continue to inform and inspire our faculty's style of interaction with each other as colleagues and collaborators in making connections and raising considerations that expand the possibilities of the human mind and of human culture.

If you looked at an aerial map of the campus, you would see the Robert Penn Warren Center right at the campus's cartographic heart. The Center is also within this university's subtle heart. Humanities has become part of who we are, part of how we are recognizable to ourselves as Vanderbilt. Over its two decades on our campus, the Robert Penn Warren Center has helped make all of Vanderbilt University a place for the humanities.



A Place for the Humanities: 20th Anniversary Events for the Warren Center

The spring of 2008 will mark the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt University. To celebrate this achievement, the Center has planned a series of diverse activities throughout the semester. The series, entitled "A Place for the Humanities," features five events that demonstrate the centrality of the humanities on our campus.

1 First, on Thursday, February 7, the Warren Center will co-sponsor a presentation by the human rights activist and 1992 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Rigoberta Menchu. Menchu is widely known as a leading advocate of human rights and ethnocultural reconciliation, not only in her native Guatemala but around the world. Menchu comes to Vanderbilt thanks to the efforts of the Center for Latin American and Iberian Studies, with whom the Warren Center is sponsoring her talk.

2 On Tuesday, February 26, the Warren Center, in conjunction with the Chancellor's Office, will present a public lecture by Bruce Cole, eighth chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Cole, a scholar of Renaissance history and literature, has served as chairman since 2001, during his tenure at the NEH, he has launched several significant initiatives, including We the People, a program to encourage the teaching, study, and understanding of American history and culture. A

reception for Chairman Cole is at 5:00 p.m., and his lecture will begin at 6:00 p.m. Both events will take place in Ingram Hall at the Blair School of Music.

3 On March 13 and 14, several influential scholars from Europe and the United States will convene for the Warren Center's symposium "Thinking with Franz Rosenzweig." This international gathering will focus on Franz Rosenzweig, one of the most trenchant intellectuals, religious or secular, Jewish or non-Jewish, of the twentieth century. The symposium is presented in association with the Vanderbilt University Library, the Program in Jewish Studies, the Max Kade Center for European and German Studies, and the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture. Although much of the symposium will take the form of a working discussion for scholars, some key events will be open to the public. Further information will soon be available.

4 Friday, April 4, will mark the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Warren Center will commemorate this occasion with a two-day civil rights conference on April 4-5. The conference takes as its starting point Robert Penn Warren's 1965 volume *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, in which Warren records interviews he conducted with dozens of major Civil Rights leaders, including King. At the conference, the Warren Center will

bring together many of the figures whom Warren interviewed, as well as other activists, scholars, and community leaders working on civil rights issues today. The two-day conference has both a public dimension as well as a working dimension, and it will examine the history of the Civil Rights movement as well as the future work that must be done to begin healing the legacy of racism in the 21st century. The events and lectures on April 4 will be open to the public, and details will be released in the spring.

5 Finally, on April 12 we close our 20th anniversary celebrations with a rousing concert at the Blair School of Music. Dale Cockrell, professor of musicology, has worked for many years to produce faithful recordings of the music documented in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on*

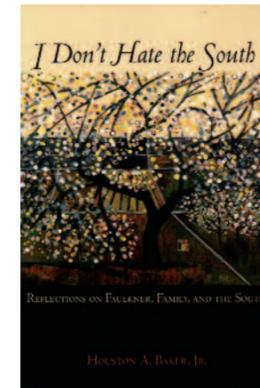
the Prairie books. His efforts resulted in two albums, *Happy Land: Musical Tributes to Laura Ingalls Wilder* and *The Arkansas Traveler: Music from Little House on the Prairie*. On April 12, the Warren Center and the Blair School of Music will bring together talented musicians and special guests to give a public concert of these historic Appalachian songs. The event is free and open to the public, but guests should reserve tickets in advance.

Information about these events, including times, locations, and registration, will be posted on our website as soon as it becomes available. Please visit www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center throughout the spring to check for updates.



What books are our colleagues in the College of Arts and Science writing and editing? *LETTERS* has asked Vanderbilt University's humanities and social sciences departments to share their faculty members' 2007 publications. Their answers give us a glimpse into an active and diverse scholarly community.

Houston Baker. *I Don't Hate the South: Reflections on Faulkner, Family, and the South.* Oxford University Press.



Robert Barsky. *The Chomsky Effect: A Radical Works Beyond the Ivory Tower.* MIT Press.

Katherine Crawford. *European Sexualities, 1400-1800.* Cambridge University Press.

Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller. *Envisager Dieu avec Edmond Jabès.* Les Editions du Cerf.

Marshall C. Eakin. *The History of Latin America: Collision of Cultures.* Palgrave MacMillan.

Florence Faucher-King and Patrick Le Galès. *Tony Blair 1997-2007: Bilan des réformes.* Presses de Sciences Po.

Lenn E. Goodman. *Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself.* Oxford University Press.

Lenn E. Goodman and Robert B. Talisse, editors. *Aristotle's Politics Today.* State University of New York Press.

John W. Janusek. *Ancient Tiwanaku.* Cambridge University Press.

Mark Jarman. *Epistles.* Sarabande Books.

Jane G. Landers, Douglas R. Egerton, Alison Games, Kris Lane, and Donald R. Wright. *The Atlantic World: A History, 1400-1888.* Harlan Davidson.

Elizabeth Lunbeck, Angela N. H. Creager, and M. Norton Wise, editors. *Science without Laws: Model Systems, Cases, Exemplary Narratives.* Duke University Press.

Tracy Miller. *The Divine Nature of Power: Chinese Ritual Architecture at the Sacred Site of Jinci.* Harvard University Asia Center.

Kelly Oliver. *Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex, and the Media.* Columbia University Press.

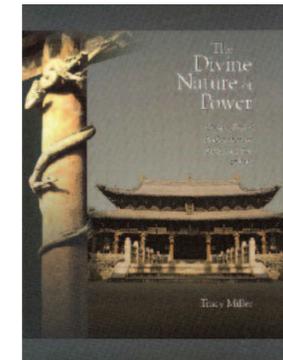
Kelly Oliver, Alice A. Jardine, and Shannon Lundeen, editors. *Living Attention: On Teresa Brennan.* State University of New York Press.

Lynn Ramey and Tison Pugh, editors. *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema.* Palgrave MacMillan.

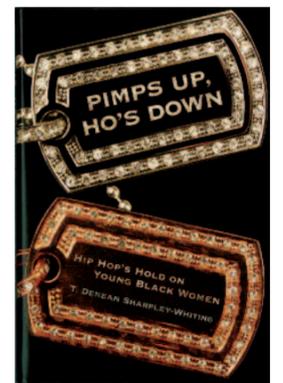
Charles E. Scott. *Living with Indifference.* Indiana University Press.

Dieter Sevin, editor. *Georg Büchner: Neue Perspektiven zur internationalen Rezeption.* Erich Schmidt Verlag.

Dieter Sevin, and Richard E. Schade, editors. *Practicing Progress: The Promise and Limitations of Enlightenment.* Rodopi.



Tracy Sharpley-Whiting. *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women.* NYU Press.



Robert B. Talisse. *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy.* Routledge.

Robert B. Talisse and D. Micah Hester, editors. *John Dewey's Essays in Experimental Logic.* Southern Illinois University Press.

Jeffrey Tlumak. *Classical Modern Philosophy.* Routledge.

David Wood. *Time After Time.* Indiana University Press.

External Grants and Fellowships

We extend congratulations to our colleagues in the College of Arts and Science for receiving the following external grants and fellowships as a result of applications submitted in the 2006 calendar year. We rely on departments to provide us with this information.

Robert F. Barsky, French & Italian, English:
Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC
Canadian Studies Program Enhancement Grant

William P. Caferro, history:
Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton
Research Fellowship
War, Economy, and Culture in Italy, 1350-1450

Katherine B. Crawford, history:
Folger Shakespeare Library
Research Fellowship
The Sexual Culture of the French Renaissance

Edward H. Friedman, Spanish & Portuguese,
comparative literature:
Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the
University of Texas at Austin
Research Fellowship
The Narrative Fictions of Gerald Brenan

Gregg M. Horowitz, philosophy:
American Academy in Berlin
Berthold Leibinger Berlin Prize
Old Media

Mark B. Hosford, art:
Frans Masereel Centrum
Artist's Residency

John A. McCarthy, comparative literature, Germanic & Slavic
Languages, and Director of the Max Kade Center for
European and German Studies:
Council for International Exchange of Scholars
Fulbright German Studies Summer Seminar Grant
Germany and the European Union

Moses E. Ochonu, history:
American Council of Learned Societies
International and Area Studies Fellowship
Colonial Meltdown: Northern Nigeria in the Great Depression

David E. Petrain, classical studies:
National Endowment for the Humanities
Summer Stipend
*The Tabulae Iliacae and the Development of Visual Storytelling
in the Early Roman Empire*

Thomas A. Schwartz, history:
Nobel Institute
Research Fellowship
Henry Kissinger and the Dilemmas of American Power

Hortense J. Spillers, English:
Council for International Exchange of Scholars
Fulbright American Studies Summer Seminar Grant
American Religion

John J. Stuhr, philosophy:
Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy
Research Grant
American Philosophy in National and International Perspectives

Arleen M. Tuchman, history and Center for Medicine,
Health, and Society:
American Council of Learned Societies
Research Fellowship
Diabetes: A Cultural History

Steven A. Wernke, anthropology:
National Science Foundation
Research Grant
*Conversion or Synthesis? Investigating Early Colonial Negotiations of
New Religious and Social Forms at Malata, an Inka Provincial
Village and Mission Settlement in Highland Peru*

Robert Penn Warren and the University in its Time

Helmut Walser Smith

We are in the year 2008, and we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Robert Penn Warren Center among the forerunners of humanities centers throughout the country and, indeed, throughout the English-speaking world. The celebration of the Warren Center necessarily evokes the name of Robert Penn Warren himself. An undergraduate at Vanderbilt, he also taught briefly in the English Department before moving on to posts at LSU, Minnesota, and Yale. To a significant degree, Warren derives his connection with Vanderbilt from a group of poets and intellectuals known as the Fugitives, and, in a different constellation, from the Southern Agrarians. The manifesto of the Southern Agrarians, "I'll Take my Stand," counts as one of the most complex and interesting documents of southern literature. It is also a defense of racial segregation—"let the Negro sit beneath his own vine and fig tree," as Warren put it in "The Briar Patch," his contribution to the manifesto.

Every university has its moment, and this was, for good or ill, a significant moment for the humanities at Vanderbilt. "I'll Take my Stand" was a public pronouncement by southern intellectuals, almost all of whom had been either students or professors at Vanderbilt. The most prominent figures, in addition to Warren (who was at Oxford at the time) and the poet Allen

Tate, hailed from the Department of English; they included John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and John Donald Wade. Herman Clarence Nixon had taught in the Department of Political Science, and Lyle Hicks Lanier in the Department of Psychology, then a discipline closer to the humanities. History also had representatives. Frank Lawrence Owsley came from the Department of History, and the book was dedicated to Walter L. Fleming, then the history department chair. Not all faculty members at Vanderbilt supported the manifesto, and some, like English Department Chairman Edward Mims, publicly opposed the views of the Agrarians. Nor did the administration officially support it. Still, "I'll Take my Stand" was a document that had become associated with Vanderbilt University. When I arrived in 1991, I remember reading recommendation letters that referred to it—positively.

But Vanderbilt was not the only university which, when called upon, called it wrong.

There is the far more famous case of the University of Salamanca, whose professors deliberated in 1491 on a proposal offered by Christopher Columbus. If we believe Washington Irving, and we should not, the scholars quoted scripture and conjured a flat earth, while Columbus cited science and courageously planned to sail the convex of the earth all the way to the Indies. "You cannot do it,"

the scholars harrumphed. The scholars, of course, were dead right. Columbus's calculations were based on the second-century coordinates of Ptolemy, who imagined the earth as smaller in circumference than it actually

collective obstinacy of the faculty of the University of Salamanca, and we chalk it up to the timidity of their erudition.

Erudition is not besides the point, however, for it speaks to a kind of intellectual patience prized by the Southern Agrarians, whose stinging critiques were also directed against the frenetic pace of modern industrial society. The Southern Agrarians did more than prize erudition: they powerfully developed an approach to literature that focused on the text itself, an approach whose name derives from John Crowe Ransom's "The New Criticism," published in 1941. New Criticism, though also developed by I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot, constitutes one of the remarkable contributions of Vanderbilt's



Helmut Walser Smith

humanities to scholarship; here, Robert Penn Warren was of central importance, in particular, through two works—penned at LSU but partly conceived at Oxford—entitled *Understanding Poetry* (1938, coauthored with Cleanth Brooks), and *Understanding Fiction* (1943). Against a prevalent tendency to emphasize the biography of authors, the social context of writing, and literary history, Warren and the New Critics focused on the formal aspects of poetry and writ-

Universities in their time rarely stand alone.

ing, and they underscored the aesthetic unity of literary works. This approach powerfully influenced subsequent criticism, and it came to represent a mainstream position in English departments for the next quarter century. At once elitist and serious, New Criticism was also a potent science of erudition. A Vanderbilt contribution, it was also a contribution that, like most scholarly contributions, bears the mark of a far wider republic of letters, including Oxford University, Louisiana State University, the University of Minnesota, and Yale. Universities in their time rarely stand alone.

Just over fifty years after its deliberations on Columbus, the University of Salamanca faced another question. The faculty of theology was asked to comment upon a Latin-language dialogue written by Ginés de Sepúlveda and intended to justify the Spanish decimation of the Indians. Sepúlveda argued that the Indians were subhuman “Homunculi” with “hardly a vestige of humanity.” Cannibals, dirty and uncouth, the brutish Indians, Sepúlveda averred, were “like pigs with their eyes always fixed on the ground.” Closer to animals than to men, they were natural slaves—so Sepúlveda argued. The faculty found the argument unsound and voted to censor the book, which, in fact, did not appear until the nineteenth century. But Sepúlveda was a court historian with significant influence, and he managed to com-

mute the censorship into a debate, which was then held in Valladolid from 1550 to 1551. His opponent was Bartolomé de Las Casas, who had eloquently argued that the Indians were among God’s children, and that the Spanish devastation of the native populations was a crime. Las Casas, it is true, provided justification for the colonization of the new world in the name of the Church, and he had not the slightest doubt that eternal damnation awaited natives who did not see the light. He also offered an early justification for paternal colonization of “backwards” peoples, and argued, long before Rudyard Kipling, that colonization imposed a moral duty on the colonizers. We may now look back on Las Casas’s arguments critically; but, within the terms of the debate, his was the more humane position. The debate, alas, was a draw, but the theologians of the University of Salamanca sided with Las Casas, and, two hundred years later, Samuel Johnson could still say, “I love the University of Salamanca, for when the Spaniards were in doubt as to the lawfulness of their conquering America, the University of Salamanca gave it as their opinion that it was not lawful.”

This is the university in its time. There are other examples: when the University of Padua became the center of humanistic learning in the 1450s, or when, in the 1580s, the University of Leiden developed neo-stoicism—

formidable moral and political doctrines for a Europe torn by war and plague; other possibilities include 1699, when Cambridge elected Sir Isaac Newton as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics, even though he was not active in the Anglican church, or when, in the mid-eighteenth century, the Universities of Glasgow and of Edinburgh became the centers of an Enlightenment whose luminaries include, among others, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith. Such a list could be easily extended—to include the University of Berlin at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when it developed seminar education and a new understanding of scholarship and science; the University of Basel in mid-century, with which we associate the names of Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche; and Johns Hopkins University at the end of the century, which adopted European models of graduate education and, in this way, influenced the dynamic world of higher education in the United States. The twentieth century, too, is replete with instances of universities in their time: Peking University, from which the bulk of students of the anti-imperialist May fourth Movement of 1919 came; Brooklyn College, which, finding itself in the epicenter of European immigration in the 1930s, became a hothouse of new ideas; the New School of Social Research, set up in the 1940s and 1950s as the haven for critical

theorists once associated with the University of Frankfurt; the University of Paris X, Nanterre, a revolutionary hot spot in 1968, but also the university of Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean Baudrillard, and Paul Ricouer; Yale University in the 1970s and 1980s, when French-influenced deconstruction turned the university’s genteel learned literary debates into productive acrimony; and Peking University, again, from whose halls came many of the students who formed the largest single instance of student protest in world history—on Tiananmen Square in 1989.

It seems to me that the career of Robert Penn Warren tells us something about Vanderbilt in its time. By the 1950s, Warren recanted his earlier political views (but not New Criticism), and, as a public intellectual, he embraced not only desegregation but the Civil Rights movement. In 1965, he published a highly influential book, entitled *Who Speaks for the Negro?* The book interlaces commentary with a series of printed interviews with leading civil rights leaders (the audio transcripts of these interviews can soon be heard at the Vanderbilt University Library). In crucial ways, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* contributed to the opening of a dialogue between white and black intellectuals. Warren also wrote a series of essays reflecting on the divergent paths of north and south after the Civil War. In these capacities, he represented simultaneously the most empa-

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thetic and withering critic of the white south.

The Robert Penn Warren Center was founded twenty years after 1968, a turning point for civil rights and for political culture in this country more generally. At the time of the Center’s founding, in 1988, Vanderbilt still confronted the political legacies of agrarianism, which was still largely regional in focus, and the university counted few minorities in its student body. It also remained a hierarchically organized university in which assistant professors could not speak to deans (to say nothing of provosts and chancellors) without the accompaniment of department chairs. It had a small number of brilliant professors

and a small number of outstanding students. Much of this has since changed, and the Warren Center has helped by creating an atmosphere of open criticism and interdisciplinary thinking. It has, in other words, been an important part of a remarkable transformation which, in the last twenty years, has seen the creation of top-flight faculties in the humanities—a number of which, whatever the official rankings say—are genuinely in the top twenty in the country, and some of which are in the top ten. More importantly, the faculty in the humanities has become more diverse, and the density of cutting-edge scholarship in the humanities more impressive. Better students have followed.

Is it possible that Vanderbilt will again have its time—a second moment like that of the University of Salamanca? Perhaps it will, as a part of a wider republic of letters—the way that universities almost always make their marks. Perhaps it will by building on elements of its tradition—on the remarkable attention to textually immanent interpretation that defined New Criticism, which might now be reinterpreted as a trans-disciplinary philology. Or perhaps distinction will arise from the immensely productive domain of medicine and society, or of religion and culture, or of ethics and the environment, or for our remarkable focus on the Americas. Perhaps it will come from

scholars who conceptualize the category of race anew. Or, perhaps it will come from a scholar working alone.

It is October 12; the old Columbus Day. The BBC reports that Al Gore and the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize “for their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change.” It is the second year in a row, following Muhammad Yunus, that someone with ties to Vanderbilt has won the Peace Prize. Is this the University in its Time?

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

THE ROBERT PENN WARREN CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES

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Statement of Purpose

Established under the sponsorship of the College of Arts and Science in 1987 and renamed the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in 1989 in honor of Robert Penn Warren, Vanderbilt alumnus class of 1925, the Center promotes interdisciplinary research and study in the humanities, social sciences, and, when appropriate, natural sciences. Members of the

Vanderbilt community representing a wide variety of specializations take part in the Warren Center’s programs, which are designed to intensify and increase interdisciplinary discussion of academic, social, and cultural issues.

Vanderbilt University is committed to principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action.

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Photos by Daniel Dubois and Steve Green.

2007-2008 Robert Penn Warren Center Faculty Fellows



*From left: Devin Fergus,
Hortense Spillers, Lucius T. Outlaw, Jr.,
Tiffany Patterson, Tina Campt,
Tracy Sharpley-Whiting,
Catherine Molineux, Kathryn Gines*

2007-2008 Robert Penn Warren Center Graduate Student Fellows



*From left: David Solodkow,
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