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.

Imaging Diaspora: Race, Photography, and the Ernest Dyche Archive
By Tina Campt
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.

What if we set our sights beyond ‘what we see’ 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?

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 their photographic voice’s specific meanings of Britishness and Germanness in ways that were decisively 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 archives.

Erasmus editions of portraits produced by the son and daughter of Ernest Dyche, Sr. and Ernest Malcolm Dyche. Each of these photographic archives marks a qualitative shift in the representation of Black Europeans, for their photographic voice’s specific meanings of Britishness and Germanness in ways that were decisively 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 archives.

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”, as, for him, “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 ensemble” of these particular images helps us account for some of the most intriguing aspects of it: the 1950s photographic 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 created once established in Black Britain—portraits produced by the son and daughter of Ernest Dyche, Sr. and Ernest Malcolm Dyche. Each of these photographic archives marks a qualitative shift in the representation of Black Europeans, for their photographic voice’s specific meanings of Britishness and Germanness in ways that were decisively 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 archives.

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”, as, for him, “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 ensemble” of these particular images helps us account for some of the most intriguing aspects of it: the 1950s photographic 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 created once established in Black Britain—portraits produced by the son and daughter of Ernest Dyche, Sr. and Ernest Malcolm Dyche. Each of these photographic archives marks a qualitative shift in the representation of Black Europeans, for their photographic voice’s specific meanings of Britishness and Germanness in ways that were decisively 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 archives.

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”, as, for him, “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 ensemble” of these particular images helps us account for some of the most intriguing aspects of it: the 1950s photographic 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 created once established in Black Britain—portraits produced by the son and daughter of Ernest Dyche, Sr. and Ernest Malcolm Dyche. Each of these photographic archives marks a qualitative shift in the representation of Black Europeans, for their photographic voice’s specific meanings of Britishness and Germanness in ways that were decisively 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 archives.

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”, as, for him, “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 ensemble” of these particular images helps us account for some of the most intriguing aspects of it: the 1950s photographic 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 created once established in Black Britain—portraits produced by the son and daughter of Ernest Dyche, Sr. and Ernest Malcolm Dyche. Each of these photographic archives marks a qualitative shift in the representation of Black Europeans, for their photographic voice’s specific meanings of Britishness and Germanness in ways that were decisively 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 archives.

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”, as, for him, “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 ensemble” of these particular images helps us account for some of the most intriguing aspects of it: the 1950s photographic 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 created once established in Black Britain—portraits produced by the son and daughter of Ernest Dyche, Sr. and Ernest Malcolm Dyche. Each of these photographic archives marks a qualitative shift in the representation of Black Europeans, for their photographic voice’s specific meanings of Britishness and Germanness in ways that were decisively 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 archives.

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”, as, for him, “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 ensemble” of these particular images helps us account for some of the most intriguing aspects of it: the 1950s photographic 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 created once established in Black Britain—portraits produced by the son and daughter of Ernest Dyche, Sr. and Ernest Malcolm Dyche. Each of these photographic archives marks a qualitative shift in the representation of Black Europeans, for their photographic voice’s specific meanings of Britishness and Germanness in ways that were decisively 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 archives.
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 circu-

ated not by photographers, scholars, or collectors, but by and among West Indians them-

selves as a way of connecting to families and friends separated by oceanic geographic

spans. These photographs dis-

play a more agential practice of portraiture that refigures the historical uses of this genre that sought to objectify and silence their non-white, subaltern sub-

jects. The portraits made and
circulated within this commu-

city display their subjects appropriating photography in ways that witness their attempts to represent themselves as par-

ticular kinds of modern agents. Elaborating on Moten’s con-

cept of ‘the musics of the subaltern’, these images ‘pitched’ to register histories and experiences that activate and anticpate our assumptions and associations. In this way, they map a ‘structure of feeling’ that makes these images make sense according to multiple, but quite particular, cultural and historical contexts. That struc-

ture of feeling, and one of their most powerful registers, is aspira-

tion: an aspiration to be some-

one, to be proud and good-looking, respectable and upstanding—an aspiration to middle-class prosperity. Their aspirations preceded these indi-

viduals’ migrations but were enabled in new ways through the forms of autonomy trans-

nationally settler-colonialism 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’ reg-

ister, 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 mem-

bers of the much-cele-

brated Windrush migration—

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 rehap-

ping the image of Black Britain in fundamental ways. For, beyond its demographic impact, this migration is distin-

guished by its extensive docu-

mentation as a visual event heralded at an unparalleled popu-

lar level.2 From the late 1940s onward, numerous published photographs featured African Caribbean migrants poised to take up the promises of employ-

ment and economic prosperity that many felt they had earned through their support of Britain in two World Wars. Photogra-

phy played a critical role in de-

fining how this new popula-

tion 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 per-

ception has been examined in depth most notably by Stuart Hall (1972, 1992). The images of Afro-Caribbean migrants produced by journalistic jour-

nalists in their documentation of this population’s arrival, settle-

ment, and ‘homemaking’ 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.

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. There was no such thing as our boys because they looked so sharp. It was not just about race.” We see ‘Sunday best’ all over these images; it is, perhaps, the embodiment of this generation of Caribbean migrants’ aspira-

tions to middle-class respectability. Sunday best were literally church clothes, but they were also dresses clothes with a differ-

ence. They were clothes meant for worship in a community with a deeply religious sensibil-

ity. Sunday best was attire that stood apart from both the workweek and from leisure time. Sunday best was dressing up, but not showing off; it was clothing intended to be reverence 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 notion 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’ rela-

tives and friends in a visual con-

text of people ‘keeping faith’ oceans away. These portraits projected an upright folk who, in what was seen as the highly sec-

2. “Sunday best” is a phrase that describes black attire that indicated a man’s wealth and social status. It was commonly worn on special occasions such as Sundays.

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.

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.’

[1] There are photographic practices that date back to the pioneering, yet pernicious, work of criminologist Alphonse Bertillon and osteologist Francis Galton and their development of the criminal mug shot and composite photos, respectively. Each used photography as evidence to classify, document, and distinguish ‘inferior’ human differences defined as deviant or racially inferior. See Alan Sekula’s seminal essay, “The Body and the Archive,” October 39 (Winter 1986-87), 64.

[2] A Dyche photograph shows a nurse in a starched and immaculate uniform; she proudly carries a pail and a syringe. Was she suggesting she was 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, and 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 [that] a token of immense pride and a symbol of a nurse’s successful fight against institutional racism. (Courtman 140).

[3] 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.

[4] 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 transcending 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 provides a black familial language that diaspora mirror these invocations and its discontents. In this way, they enact the parallel tensions of diasporic aspiration and its discontents.

[5] 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 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 agents of their own terms.

[6] 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 ressignified 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, Tootex, Leamhist, and Brixton. As images intended to present a visual account of their subjects’ successful establish-ment in Britain, they are multi-faceted historical texts that depict the image of life ‘over there’ that these individuals wanted their communities ‘back home’ to see.

These portraits offer an alternative 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 Caribbean forged diasporic identities in Britain.
The Robert Penn Warren Center: A Place for the Humanities
By Nicholas S. Zeppos, Interim Chancellor, Vanderbilt University

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.

The Robert Penn Warren Center

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 in 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, projects, 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 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 daunting 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 form—a writer we see 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 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 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 whole-heartedly 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 totransinstitutional ‘startups’ through ou r 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 at 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 Warren 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 grew together in such a way that the former is simply inextricable from the latter.

As well as providing a rich context for the humanities departments and centers, the Warren Center has been a place for the humanities to be—its name, its traditions, its events, its ideas, its atmosphere, its reach, its range, its place. The interface between the Robert Penn Warren Center and Vanderbilt’s other humanities departments and centers is so porous, so vernalized, that it is impossible to tell where one program ends and another begins.

To sum up two decades of an individual career full of many different movements, that will address civil rights issues in our own daunting century.

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 as just like its namesake, the Robert Penn Warren Center has never ceased in its own evolution. You would have a Fellows program; it would support ongoing faculty study groups; it would offer and sponsor opportunities for special programs within the University.

As well as being a place for the humanities, the Warren Center is also a place for the human mind and of human culture.
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.

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 ethnic-cultural 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.

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, and President of Hamilton College. Cole has been recognized as one of the most trenchant intellectuals, religious or secular, Jewish or non-Jewish, of the twentieth century. The evening will conclude with a reception for Chairman Cole at 6:00 p.m., and his lecture will begin at 5:00 p.m. Both events will take place in Ingram Hall at the Blair School of Music.

On March 13 and 14, several influential scholars from the United States and the United Kingdom will convene at the Warren Center to participate in the 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 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 place 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.

The spring of 2008 will mark the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt University. To celebrate this anniversary, 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. As the conference concludes, 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.

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/prc_center throughout the spring to check for updates.

Finally, on April 12 we close our 20th anniversary celebrations with a reunion 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.

On Friday, April 4, will mark the 50th 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. As the conference concludes, 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.

What We Are Writing

W

hat books are our col-

leagues 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. There answers give us a glimpse into an active and diverse scholar-

H

one Baker, I Don’t Hate the South: Reflections on Faulkner, Family, and the South. Oxford University Press.


Katherine Crawford, European Sexualities, 1400-1800. Cambridge 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

Katherine B. Crawford, history:

- Folger Shakespeare Library
- Research Fellowship

Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the American Academy in Berlin

- Fulbright German Studies Summer Seminar Grant
- Council for International Exchange of Scholars
- Germany and the European Union
- International and Area Studies Fellowship

Moses E. Ochonu, history:

- American Council of Learned Societies
- International and Area Studies Fellowship
- Colonial Metadawn: Northern Nigeria in the Great Depression

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 fore-runners 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 modern 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 Yale 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 recommendations letter 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 1493 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 the navigational, geographic, and cartographic capabilities to sail the convex of the earth all the way to the Indies. “You cannot do it.”

Columbus, 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 was. Columbus, the scholars rightly maintained, would have sailed his ships and crew into a vast nothingness, where—ill-provisioned—they would have disappeared without trace. The scholars did not believe that the earth was flat—almost no one did; rather, they knew its expanse. But a group of unknown islands and two continent-sized land masses saved Columbus and his crew from the fate the scholars grimly foresaw. Now, however, we remember the collective obituary 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 praise 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. The New Criticism, though also developed by I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot, constitutes one of the remarkable contributions of Vanderbilt’s 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 Cleanthes Brooke), and Understanding Fiction (1940). 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 writing.
The Robert Penn 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 transformative scholarship that conceptualizes 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 is committed to principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action. Published by University Design and Publishing, Center Services. Photos by Daniel Dubois and Steve Green.

Letters • Spring 2008 • 15

The Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities

Warren Center Staff
Helman Walter Smith, Director
Monica C. Fredericks, Executive Director
Galen Glick Martin, Assistant Director
Sarah Harper Nickel, Administrative Assistant
Amanda Ganes Nieder
LETTERS is the semiannual newsletter of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt University. It serves to announce upcoming programs, events, and student work and to provide readers with news of the Center’s activities and achievements.

Statement of Purpose
Established under the sponsorship of the Humanities at Vanderbilt University, the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities was inaugurated in 1987 and renamed the Helen V. and Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in 1995 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.

Letters • Spring 2008 • 14

Universities in their time rarely stand alone, absorbing and interpreting cultural and intellectual movements that vitalize and enrich the academic enterprise. And it is not surprising that a university that has been at the center of scholarship for four centuries would attract the attention of 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?
2007-2008 Robert Penn Warren Center Faculty Fellows

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

2007-2008 Robert Penn Warren Center Graduate Student Fellows

From left: David Solodkov, Megan Moran, George Sanders, Nicole Seymour, Josh Epstein, Heather Talley, Michael Callaghan