Toward an Equitable Agrarian Commonwealth: Race and the Agrarian Tradition in the Works of Wendell Berry, Allen Tate, and Jean Toomer

A thesis presented to

the faculty of

the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

Eric D. Earnhardt

June 2011

© Eric D. Earnhardt. All Rights Reserved.
This thesis titled
Toward an Equitable Agrarian Commonwealth: Race and the Agrarian
Tradition in the Works of Wendell Berry, Allen Tate, and Jean Toomer

by

ERIC D. EARNHARDT

has been approved for
the Department of English Language & Literature
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

______________________________
Amritjit Singh
Professor of English

______________________________
Benjamin M. Ogles
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

EARNHARDT, ERIC D., M.A., June 2011, English

Toward an Equitable Agrarian Commonwealth: Race and the Agrarian Tradition in the
Works of Wendell Berry, Allen Tate, and Jean Toomer (75 pp.)

Director of Thesis: Amritjit Singh

The concept of commonweal broadly refers both to the welfare of the public and to the equitable distribution of power and wealth. Thus, the formation of a commonwealth has been a significant part of the American dream, especially in its formulation by Thomas Jefferson and his agrarian vision of a landed, independent, educated citizenry. The inherent contradiction with this model in the United States, however, has always been the exploitation of certain members of the public. The welfare of African slaves was not taken into account and their freedom and humanity were consistently undermined. This essay explores three literary figures of the twentieth century in order to trace how an agrarian vision of democracy manifests itself today. The representations of agrarianism by Jean Toomer in Cane (1923) and by the Southern Agrarian Allen Tate in his essays, “Religion and the Old South” (1930) and “The Profession of Letters in the South” (1935), can be viewed as parallel streams running in similar directions and with contiguous goals, though never meeting or allowing mutual influence. Today, The Hidden Wound (1970) by neo-agrarian writer Wendell Berry may be viewed as a flood bringing the two streams, two conversations, together through an honest exploration of the culture of racism that kept them so utterly separate. Issuing from this confluence of parallel perspectives is a new course: an agrarianism that
proceeds from a stance of racial equality, of cooperation grounded in ecological and economic limits, and of pursuit of the realization of commonwealth.

Approved: ______________________________________________________________

Amritjit Singh
Professor of English
To Amber Leasure-Earnhardt
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my sincerest appreciation to my thesis committee for their enthusiasm, diligence, and guidance: to the director, Professor Amritjit Singh, and to the two readers, Dr. Marilyn Atlas and Dr. Albert Rouzie. To the helpful staff of the English Department at Ohio University and Alden Library, and especially for the friendship and direction of Dr. Marsha Dutton: many thanks. To those others who read all or portions of this essay or listened to me talk about it, thank you: David Armstrong, Elise Auivil, Dustin Faulstick, Dr. Gary Halcomb, Ryan Kelly, Samantha Mudd, Bridget Tetteh-Batsa, and Adam Wroblewski.

I am sincerely grateful to my parents, Lee and Michelle Earnhardt, for their generous support and prayer; and I am similarly appreciative of my second set of parents, the Leasures, for their assistance and encouragement.

Most of all, I give special thanks to my wife Amber, whose love, steadfastness and faith make everything I do possible. Thanks for somehow working full-time and watching our beautiful son Lochlann while I worked on this essay.

Finally, I would like to thank Wendell Berry for his exquisite writing, for his careful thinking, and for his respectful response to a young student’s letter in which he said exactly what I needed to hear: keep reading, and read closely.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract........................................................................................................................................3
Acknowledgments..........................................................................................................................6
Preface...........................................................................................................................................8
Chapter I: Introduction..................................................................................................................11
Chapter II: Two Streams of Modernism: Toomer, Tate, and Agrarian Discourses of Race..................19
Chapter III: Convergence: A Literature of the Wounded and Marx in the Mix.........................34
Chapter IV: A New Way: Neo-Agrarianism, Environmental Justice and Literature................58
Chapter V: Conclusion: Toward an Equitable Agrarian Commonwealth.....................................68
References......................................................................................................................................71
It is perhaps difficult to define agrarianism in the twenty-first century. As a state of being, it seems to have been, at one point or another, historically relegated to societies now popularly regarded as primitive. As an adjective, *agrarian* has simply signified a definitive relationship to agriculture, especially, perhaps, agriculture on a small scale. Agribusiness moguls and workers are less likely to call themselves agrarian because, in terms of the “agrarian versus industrial” paradigm that goes back at least to the early years of the twentieth century, modern agriculture fits more neatly into the industrial slot, with its heavy use of petro-chemicals and industrial equipment. As a political philosophy, *agrarianism*, at least since the Enlightenment and the writings of Thomas Jefferson, has posited a belief in the distribution of landed property for independent agricultural purposes, and been directed by a view for long-term use as a social ideal or standard. It is to this meaning of agrarianism that I refer throughout this essay.

Today, agrarianism is likely to evoke two opposing ideas. One is the idea of the pastoral-georgic fantasy many Americans embrace as somehow native and comforting, a vision held against that of the dirty and immoral life of the city. This is surely why pictures of small family farms appear on packaged foods that are nevertheless grown in indoor factories and/or using massive amounts of chemicals and fossil fuels subsidized by the federal government. The other idea evoked by agrarianism today, held simultaneously and in tension with the other pastoral fantasy, marks rural life and farmers as culturally and technologically backward, racist, unsophisticated, ultra-conservative, base, “hicks”—marginally civilized and marginally human. The unfortunate irony of these visions, which amount to the settled concept that for every practical purpose a serious agrarianism is
simply passé in the age of the machine, is that they belie what has in fact been a broad political and cultural engagement with agrarian ideas throughout U. S. history, including today. In the literature of the twentieth century, in fact, agrarianism finally begins to reckon with the most serious complication of the “agrarian versus industrial” paradigm: the two systems’ mutual dependence upon the labor of enslaved peoples.

Whether they are self-consciously agrarian or industrial apologists or neither, careful writers and critics of twentieth-century literature have not placed the onus of the exploitation of slave-labor solely on either the agrarian or industrial systems. Though chattel slavery is not the same as wage slavery, their effects often differ in degree, not in kind. While white men in the South enslaved African blacks in order to impose a dehumanizing feudal system in the service of a “gentleman planter” aristocracy, white men in the North attracted black laborers—as well as Asian, Chicano/a, German, Irish, and Italian laborers—with false promises of stable wages and prosperity, only to deliver a similarly inhuman system characterized by slums and unlivable wages in the service of a different aristocracy, that of the “robber barons.”

Recognizing the flimsiness of the modern-day conception of agrarian life and philosophy as somehow inherently and uniquely exploitative, this essay will trace the various visions of agrarianism in the imaginations and literary productions of three important American literary figures of the twentieth century: Jean Toomer, Allen Tate, and Wendell Berry. Broadly speaking, the representations of agrarianism by Toomer in *Cane* and his other writings, and by Tate in his essays, can be viewed as parallel streams running in similar directions and with contiguous goals, though never meeting, and never allowing mutual influence. By the same broad standard, Berry’s agrarianism in *The
*Hidden Wound* can be viewed as a flood bringing the two streams, two conversations, together. The catalyst for this convergence, of course, is an honest exploration of the issue that kept the two conversations so utterly separate: racism. Issuing from this confluence of parallel perspectives, initiated by Berry’s exploration of race as it relates to agrarian philosophy, is a new course: a channel of neo-agrarianism that proceeds from a stance of racial equality and cooperation. With a steadfast cognizance of real ecological and economic limits, and in pursuit of a robust ethic of sustainability that takes the health of the land as a standard for the health of a culture, Berry’s new agrarian standard combines Jeffersonian ideals with modern environmental and racial awareness. It is a vision in pursuit of a longstanding American dream, the realization of a commonwealth.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The rich and poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe. Some few towns excepted, we are tillers of the earth, from Nova Scotia to West Florida. We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory, communicating with each other by means of good roads and navigable rivers, united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws, without dreading their power, because they are equitable.

—J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, “What is an American” from Letters from an American Farmer (1782)

Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds.

—Thomas Jefferson, Letter to John Jay (23 August 1785)

Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result.

—Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845)

With good reason, much of American literature may be called agrarian literature. Its trajectory has been steered, more often than not, by concerns over land use, land ownership, land expansion, and land improvement, as well as toward the economic improvement of the land’s inhabitants. Whereas Iroquois oral tradition endowed that culture with a respect for the land that approached a feeling of kinship, Euro-American interests, from Christopher Columbus to Cargill, Inc., have generally operated with the assumption that they could and should own all of the land and use it purely for their own benefit. They took as an article of faith that “improvement of the land” would forever be

---

1 Cargill, Incorporated is a twenty-first century, U.S. based, multi-national agribusiness.
synonymous with the unlimited increase of the land’s capacity to produce commercial capital.

Critiques of this Euro-American mind-set of expansionism and exploitation are usually employed in defense of the subjugated peoples who have borne the many costs—economic, cultural, emotional, physical, spiritual—of the dominion of a self-serving colonizer. However, not until the development of late-twentieth-century environmental awareness and the field of ecocriticism has the subjugation and exploitation of land come under similar scrutiny. According to ecocritics, the use and abuse of land and the resulting adverse effects on people, places, and animals, both locally and globally, are linked to the same colonial penchant for power and wealth that exploits humans directly. This imperial impetus is usually justified by its perpetrators through various methods: it can be transcended through invocations of divine mandates; masked by the fraudulent promises of a powerful few to increase the health, wealth, and prosperity of all; or dismissed by nihilistic moral relativism.

Now, the placing of blame during conversations on such exploitative tendencies can be regrettable even as it appears inevitable. Too often people (scholars included) resort to either/or thinking, looking for some pure iteration of egalitarian democratic principles and ending up disappointed when revered figures come into focus as impure parts of a solution, and therefore part of the problem. Such disappointment is perhaps particularly rife in explorations of that most American of archetypes, the educated agrarian citizen. The “noble yeoman,” so the lore goes, is the guarantor of a self-regulating economy where land and wealth are equitably distributed, where the interests
of modest merchants and modest industry intertwine to ensure a materially and culturally fecund and politically stable commonwealth.

The glowing observations of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, which George Washington austerely called “too flattering,” aspire to such an idealistic agrarian vision. Crèvecoeur, a French aristocrat who fought against the English in the French and Indian Wars but who resisted the American Revolution, can be placed, in economic terms, somewhere between the ragged frontiersman and the exploitive plantation owner. He embodied, perhaps as much as anyone, the American “noble yeoman.” Moreover, during his time as an American farmer he was an outspoken critic of slavery in the Americas and elsewhere. By contrast, that quintessential gentleman farmer, Thomas Jefferson, who purportedly believed in the self-evident truth that “all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inherent and unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Jefferson 24), was a radical Enlightenment thinker who wrote against the institution of slavery even while keeping them in bondage himself at Monticello, his sprawling mountaintop plantation in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Instead of critically considering such complex and contradictory figures who, nonetheless, helped to significantly shape and define what democracy would become in the United States, some critics and educators may be tempted to dismiss them and their agrarian dreams as idealistic and blind to their own intractable dependence on exploitation. In such instances, literary and cultural critics and teachers have turned elsewhere for their heroes, outside the hegemonic power structures, outside the privileged classes, outside the imperial interests. For a Christopher Columbus, there is a Bartolomé
De Las Cases; for a John Winthrop, there is a Roger Williams; for a Thomas Jefferson, there is an Olaudah Equiano; for an Abraham Lincoln, there is a Frederick Douglass; and next to the Southern Agrarians, there is the Harlem Renaissance. Consequently, the writings of African Americans such as Phillis Wheatley, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ralph Ellison have begun their ascension to rightful places in survey courses of American literature. This new inclusiveness owes its success to the concerted efforts of critics who recognize the necessity of (re)discovering and spreading the word about those forgotten writers who can tell the missing parts of the story we call history.

Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that when Wendell Berry—a back-to-the-land white man from Kentucky with strong ideological ties to the Southern Agrarians and Jeffersonian democracy—proclaims a localist neo-agrarianism as the solution to modern cultural ills, eyebrows elevate. For black and white alike, the spectre of racism silently rears at such a suggestion and the accumulated weight of uncertainty and fear begins its dull pull. Emerging from this silence, the either/or approach seeks to place the new agrarian voice in the usual convenient slots—racist or antiracist, colonizer or colonized, liberal or conservative—as if these categories were as essentially and as necessarily entrenched, unchanging, and polarizing as the morphology of black or white has become.

By way of moderating this reactionary position and of considering Berry on the basis of his own distinct agrarian vision, this essay assumes that a discussion of agrarianism in American literature must be approached via a recognition and an acknowledgement of the often failed history of agrarian ideology in the United States—in particular, vis-à-vis various Southern distortions—without reducing, essentializing, or homogenizing agrarian philosophy into a caricature. The purpose of this essay is to argue
that a more correct way to understand Wendell Berry’s agrarianism—informed as it is by the major agrarian philosophical traditions in America as well as by an astute ecological awareness, a thoroughgoing critique of free-market capitalism, and a penetrating first-hand investigation of the psychology of racism—is as a renewed emphasis on a sustainable relationship with the land as a necessary ground-condition for human culture. In short, Berry recognizes in the term agriculture the agrarian roots of culture, and he seeks to chart a path for those in the modern world wishing to (re)connect with a way of life that is intentional and serious about affection and care for others and the environment through an exploration of agrarian economics and the meaning of good work.

Recognizing a deep personal and social responsibility in the inseparability of race from agrarian discourse, Berry’s The Hidden Wound (1970) is an attempt at bridging two conversations, two histories, of American agrarianism: one white, one black. While it would be easy to see these two histories as utterly opposed, one representing the white myth of plenitude and stability and the other the black underbelly of want and repression, Berry would have people recognize that these histories together narrate the singular story of greed as it became racialized, not the philosophy of race or agrarianism generally. In other words, racism was the result of greed and the justification, not the impetus, for slavery. For Berry, racism and the history of early agrarian America are the flipsides of a mutual wound, the wedge of prejudice driven into egalitarian democratic ideals.

In order to fully understand the character of these two histories and their intersection in Berry’s work, chapter one of this essay will take a closer look at an
important figure from each. In 1923, Jean Toomer authored his best known work, *Cane*, a self-proclaimed swansong for the “Negro of the folk-song” (“Correspondence” *Cane* 151). Toomer, who admitted that he was moved by the agrarian movement and that he longed for a farm of his own, renders in *Cane* scenes of pastoral beauty and transcendence through nature directly beside horrific and unflinchingly drawn moments of racial violence and human despair. Allen Tate, a Kentucky-born white man who contributed the essay “Religion and the Old South” to the Southern Agrarian symposium *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), delivers in this and other essays many piercing critiques of industrial capitalism and commercial culture even as he glorifies and defends an agrarian culture committed to white supremacy and black subjugation.

The second chapter will explore in detail Wendell Berry’s philosophies of agrarianism and of race in *The Hidden Wound* (1970) and how they relate to the agrarian imagery in Toomer’s *Cane* and Tate’s 1930s agrarianism. This chapter will also trace these earlier writers’ potential influence on Berry, and it will examine his departures from their stances. It will not suggest a synthesis nor will it project a felt need for apology in the case of Tate and the Southern Agrarians. Rather, Berry’s incisive pragmatic criticism cuts through to racism’s cultural and economic foundations as well as its human costs. Through personal reflection and reminiscence and through a far-ranging critical eye, Berry explores ways in which to heal the wounds racism has inflicted on both races. Throughout his book, he insists on forgiveness and on peace without forgetting the

---

2 Due to the exclusion of certain critical material and correspondence by the 2011 Norton Critical Edition of *Cane* I have opted to use the Norton Critical Edition edited by Darwin T. Turner. All citations of *Cane* refer to this 1988 edition.
difficulty of his position as a white Southern man or the righteousness of the claims of African Americans for a long-delayed justice.

As might be expected, despite his progressive views on race and his proposals for a culture of nurturing as opposed to exploitation, the fraught history of agrarianism in America has proven problematic for Berry. Some critics have viewed Berry as holding a pitchfork behind his back when he extends his agrarian olive branch into the arena of race and gender politics: Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism* (2009) critiques Berry for utopianism and holding localist leanings that set the stage for xenophobia and narrow-minded isolationism. Garrard contends that an improper emphasis on community identity can become limiting as opposed to liberating.³ Criticizing *The Hidden Wound* in particular, Debian Marty finds that Berry’s characterization of the obligations and responsibilities of the “systems” of slavery—rather than the responsibilities of humans to other humans—seeks to alleviate the guilt of his white ancestors and, by extension, alleviate his own racist guilt, by downplaying the importance of basic human obligations and exaggerating the obligations enforced by a monolithic, all-powerful slave system.

In order to appropriately assess and respond to these critiques, chapter three seeks to explore not only how the text of Wendell Berry’s *The Hidden Wound* contradicts such claims, formally and philosophically, but also to show how Berry’s work has been appreciated by a number of scholars and artists all across the political spectrum. Berry’s diverse admirers demonstrate that he has transcended the unfruitful conversations

---

³ Lawrence Buell addresses such considerations well in his book, *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001). In direct reference to Berry, Buell acknowledges the potential dangers of an extreme place-centeredness but observes that historical abuses do nothing to invalidate the benefits of place-centeredness today and that the only potential problem inherent in Berry’s “back-to-the-land, stay-at-home injunctions” (77) is, at last, one of degree.
between Toomer and Tate around agrarianism and race in the United States. Indeed, Berry’s agrarianism fluidly accommodates the polemics of the Civil Rights movement as well as observations on ethics and agrarianism from the works of Malcolm X, Tolstoy, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Mark Twain, and Homer. Berry’s admirers include the leftist feminist critic bell hooks, Marxist theorist Bill Martin, Indian feminist and environmentalist Vandana Shiva, bestselling environmental authors Michael Pollan and Bill McKibben, and a host of “Neo-Agrarians” and other unlikely and unwitting allies.

Finally, the conclusion suggests that Berry has initiated a new era in agrarian philosophy in the United States. By exhibiting an awareness and an understanding of the significance of racism and its causes, by approaching race and agrarian philosophy from a broad humanistic and interdisciplinary perspective, and by eloquently incorporating scientific knowledge into economic theory and personal experience, Berry has commanded a respect and a readership not enjoyed for decades by critics using the “agrarian” appellation. Arguing against the idea that Berry’s agrarianism unduly exhibits a nostalgic and idealistic posture, this essay seeks to explore how the urgency and liberality of his position brings important discussions of agrarianism back into contemporary cultural and economic debates.
CHAPTER II. TWO STREAMS OF MODERNISM: TOOMER, TATE AND AGRARIAN DISCOURSES OF RACE

*The higher myth of religion, the lower myth of history, even ordinary codes of conduct, cannot preserve themselves; indeed they do not exist apart from our experience. Since the most significant feature of our experience is the way we make our living, the economic basis of life is the soil out of which all the forms, good or bad, of our experience must come.*

—Allen Tate, “What is a Traditional Society,” *Essays* (1936)

“What back to nature,” even if desirable, was no longer possible, because industry had taken nature unto itself. Even if he wanted to, a city person could not become a soil person by changing his locale and living on a farm or in the woods. So then, whether we wished to or not, we had to go on...and accept the task of creating a human world that was at least as conducive to man’s well-being and growth as the world of nature was conducive to the growth of plant and animal life.


*Cane*, Jean Toomer’s modernist masterpiece, quietly entered the literary scene in 1923. Critics who noticed it regarded *Cane* as a beautiful, ache-filled montage of prose and poetry, the creative impetus of which stemmed from Toomer’s observations of a moribund black agrarian culture in rural Georgia. In 1930, seven years after *Cane*’s publication, Allen Tate contributed “Religion and the Old South” to the landmark symposium of essays titled *I’ll Take My Stand*, a work that cemented the group now identified as the “Southern,” “Nashville,” or “Vanderbilt” Agrarians. In 1937, seven years after *I’ll Take My Stand* and the same year Zora Neale Hurston published her cautionary celebration of Florida’s black folk culture, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a black man in his late fifties named Nick Watkins began work as a farm-hand in Kentucky.

---

4 Many of the book’s ideologically diverse contributors were associated with Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. I will refer to them herein as the “Southern Agrarians” after their characterization of themselves in *I’ll Take My Stand* as “Twelve Southerners” (iii).
on a farm owned by Wendell Berry’s grandfather—at the time, Wendell would have been just three years old.

Literature produced in the United States between *Cane*’s publication in 1923 and Nick Watkins’s employment in 1937 marked a new moment in agrarian philosophy as well as in racial consciousness. Sadly, the impulse on the part of Southern whites to shore up and proclaim a worthy agrarian self, “to envisage some healed image of their own identity” (Warren 55), often ran counter to the identity impulses of many burgeoning black authors of the time, whose collective work is today referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. As Nathan Irvin Huggins writes in *Harlem Renaissance* (1971), “Blacks have been essential to white identity (and whites to black)” (12). However, in reassessing Huggins’ claim, Amritjit Singh has argued that the “symbiosis” between black and white identity has often been a “one-sided and unequal relationship” (65) that functions at the expense of black members of society.

This inequality between blacks and whites in their various but separate identity projects in the United States could be easily observed during the Harlem Renaissance years, 1919-1937. In the concluding paragraph of his essay, Singh writes that “The true meeting of the minds between black and white artists is symbolized best by the meetings that never took place between Jean Toomer and Allen Tate, both from the South and both proponents of new ideas and experiments in literature” (Singh 73).  

---

5 Singh is correct in that Toomer and Tate did not, on the two planned occasions in the early 1920s at a Washington D. C. metro station—mentioned in Arna Bontemps’ introduction to *Cane*—make each other’s acquaintance. However, in a letter that Frederick L. Rusch received from Tate in 1968, Tate states that he met Toomer once in New York in 1927 and once in Paris in 1929. Rusch writes that “it was probably too late for Tate to have influenced Toomer because by 1927 Toomer was firmly committed to the mystical/philosophical ideas of Georges (sic) I. Gurdjieff” (Rusch 60). Interestingly,
despite artistic and philosophical affinities between the two figures, both of whom critiqued the shift in the United States toward an exploitative industrial economy, Toomer and Tate’s ineffectual dialogue, to the degree that a dialogue existed, represents the inherent difficulty of reconciling economic commitments that contradict or ignore racial ones. In order for a meaningful conversation to have taken place it would have been necessary for Toomer and Tate to acknowledge each other’s positions, situated as they were on opposite and unequal sides of the color line and the agrarian narrative in the United States. Such an acknowledgment alongside an analysis of this painful history and its effects is what makes Berry’s The Hidden Wound so pertinent to discussions of racial identity and agrarian political commitment. However, before explaining how Berry’s attempt at an egalitarian discussion of racial identity from an agrarian vantage-point proved impossible for Toomer and Tate, these two figures need to be considered for their unique contribution to discussions of race and agrarian culture.

Depending upon one’s perspective, Toomer’s racial identity was either radically progressive or shamelessly opportunistic: considering it in theory and in practice, it may have been both. Yet, Toomer’s personal identification with his fictional character Kabnis (“Kabnis is Me” [Toomer “Correspondence” Cane 151]), among many more direct and indirect statements about his diverse ethnicity, marks him as ambivalent toward race as a criteria to define any human being. This is especially apparent in one terse letter to his publisher, Horace Liveright, in which Toomer objects to their featuring him as a Negro

though Rusch is most likely correct in his assessment, he makes no mention of any potential influence Toomer may have been able to exhibit upon Tate.

artist: “I do not expect to be told what I should consider myself to be…. Feature negro if you wish, but do not expect me to feature it in advertisements for you. I have sufficiently featured Negro in Cane” (“Correspondence” Cane 157).

The “featuring” in Cane of which Toomer wrote resulted from a trip to rural Georgia during which he worked as an instructor at a small black agricultural school. Toomer saw something of vital worth in the culture that he called “the Negro of the folk-song” for which Cane was “a swansong” (“Correspondence” Cane 151). Although black agrarians in the South were disappearing by the hundreds of thousands during the 1920s and moving almost exclusively to the “Celestial Cities” of the north (Davis 7, 10), Toomer wrote to his friend, the white novelist Waldo Frank, that the remnants of black agrarian culture were essential to American identity. In response to the migration of rural blacks and the cultural shifts it precipitated, Toomer sought to preserve the Negro peasant in the only way he thought they could live on, through art:

A hundred years from now these Negroes, if they exist at all will live in art. And I believe that a vague sense of this fact is the driving force behind the art movements directed towards them today. (Likewise the Indian.) America needs these elements. They are passing. Let us grab and hold them while there is still time. (emphasis added) (“Correspondence” Cane 151)

In the same letter, Toomer stresses the need for the spirit of the agrarian Negro to continue by contrasting it with the destructive power of industrial culture:

The supreme fact of mechanical civilization is that you become part of it or you get sloughed off (under). Negroes have no culture to resist it with (and if they had,
their position would be identical to the Indians), hence industrialism the more readily transforms them. ("Correspondence" *Cane* 151)

While a position such as Toomer’s, which may seem to unduly valorize the agrarian culture of African Americans, could appear to contradict portraits of rural poverty implicit in Booker T. Washington’s “Atlanta Exposition” address (1895) and those described in detail by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), they do nothing of the sort. Toomer’s social vision was not one of revival for agrarian culture in the South. Though Toomer himself had entered the University of Wisconsin for agricultural studies as a young man and later recalled that at the time, “the agrarian movement moved me” (*Wayward* 94), he quickly concluded that a new modern world was dawning, one that could contain aspects of, but certainly not continue unchanged, the old agrarian way of life.

According to Kimberly K. Smith, Toomer’s initial attraction to agrarianism should not come as a surprise. She writes in *African American Environmental Thought* (2007), that “much of what [African American writers] say about racial oppression makes sense only against a background of claims about humans’ proper relationship to the natural world” (Smith *African* ix-x). Smith reminds readers that “The antislavery movement was, after all, an agricultural reform movement: it aimed at disassembling the plantation system of controlling nature and labor and promoting a different system of agriculture—the system celebrated by Thomas Jefferson and other American democratic agrarians” (Smith *African* 39). It should be remembered that Sherman’s “Special Field Orders, No. 15” (1865), in which the promise of “forty acres and a mule” first famously emerged, established the possibility of free and modest agricultural production as the
most sensible option for and the most ardent wish of freed slaves in the post-bellum South. Toomer’s dedication to preserving the agrarian Negro in art, therefore, may have stemmed from a recognition of a failed opportunity for black participation in the Jeffersonian dream, a wound for which the five words of Sherman are now synonymous and which, the opportunity being passed, only art could heal.

Another possibility, however, is that Toomer romanticized the black agrarians he witnessed in order to best market his book, and that “the driving force behind the art movements directed towards” (“Correspondence” *Cane* 151) African Americans was not a sense of their practical cultural worth but of their fashionable primitivism. Robert Bone writes that, in the Jazz Age, blackness could be readily exploited in art, for “[the Negro] represented the unspoiled child of nature, the noble savage—carefree, spontaneous and sexually uninhibited” (Bone 59). Susan Donaldson, in her introduction to *I’ll Take My Stand*, cites Donald Davidson, unquestionably the most racist of the Southern Agrarians, as stating that publishers prefer the “trivial” verses of the likes of Langston Hughes because “niggers are a metropolitan fashion” (Donaldson xxvii).

At least personally if not artistically, Toomer is not immune to this critique. Alice Walker, an African American writer whose book of literary essays, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), exhibits its own agrarian bent, takes time to praise Toomer’s treatment of women in *Cane*; nonetheless, she accuses Toomer personally of racial opportunism. Walker writes that “Toomer apparently used his ‘connection’ to black people only once, when it was to his advantage to do so” (64) as he was trying to publish excerpts from *Cane* in the *Liberator*, of which Claude McKay was one of the black editors. Walker explains how Toomer’s effusiveness in letters to his editors, in which he
describes himself feeling pulled “deeper and deeper into the Negro group” (64), is quickly abandoned when he is asked to “‘feature’ himself as a Negro for Cane’s publicity” (64).

However, even with the beauty of Cane’s pastoral imagery—“She was as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower” (Cane 3)—and Toomer’s apparently opportunistic racial identity, the cloying tang of the primitive and romantic remains exactly the element that critics find so refreshingly absent in Cane. From its inaugural sketch of “Karintha” who burns her child on a heap of sawmill waste, to the sexual violence and lynching in “Blood-Burning Moon,” to the paranoia of “Kabnis,” Cane is brutally honest about white racism and about the harshness of black life under severe economic constraints, constraints with important spiritual consequences. Toomer defied conventional ideas of middle-class morality, representing sexual desire in naturalistic terms and relationships characterized more by exploitation, fetishism, and violence than by virtue and order, thereby throwing into sharp relief the terrible conditions that make such terrible relationships possible and, even more terrifyingly, desirable. For these qualities, W. E. B. Du Bois stated that Toomer wrote with “a certain splendid, careless truth” (162). Even while criticizing Toomer’s unstable race consciousness, Alice Walker praises his artistry and sincerity while remarking that Cane was a double swansong:

He meant to memorialize a culture that he thought was dying, whose folk spirit he considered beautiful, but he was also saying good-bye to the “Negro” he felt dying in himself. Cane then is a parting gift, and no less precious because of that. I think Jean Toomer would want us to keep its beauty, but let him go. (Walker 65)
The extent of Walker’s appreciation for Toomer’s realism becomes apparent when she uses his portrayals of women in *Cane* as source texts for the titular essay of her book. “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” is a personal, memoir-like essay that narrates the journey of Walker’s own mother, who found beauty in life in spite of enormous pain through the cultivation of her flower garden.

Perhaps, then, in spite of the complexity and contrariness of Toomer’s racial consciousness—or perhaps because of it—toomer managed portraits of rural black life, of the pain of racial violence, and of stunning pastoral beauty that rang true to critics in the 1920s and which continue to inspire today. It is not surprising, then, that Allen Tate would also compliment Toomer’s portrayal of the agrarian South. In a letter to Toomer in 1923, Tate wrote: “I believe it’s the genuine thing—your new technique applied to the material for the first time, and then none of the caricatured pathos of Harris and the others of the southern school of sentimental humors” (“Correspondence” *Cane* 161). While Arna Bontemps suggests in his 1968 introduction to *Cane* that “Tate appears to have been reaching toward Toomer tentatively and vaguely, on behalf of the Fugitive enclave” (xvi)—and then perhaps only doing so at the suggestion or insistence of Toomer and Tate’s mutual friend, Hart Crane— it is also clear that Tate chose to address *Cane*’s true-to-life pathos, its sharp portraits, and its round characters. *Cane* was antithetical, in form and function, to the prevailing stereotypes found in the stories of Uncle Remus. One might say that Tate saw Toomer as distilling the fantastical and sentimentalized *tale* out of the *folktale* to leave only the raw of the dying *folk*.

Though over a decade away from its publication, perhaps Tate was already thinking about his own novel, *The Fathers* (1938), and taking notes from *Cane*. 
According to Rafael Cancel, such a thought is not outside the realm of possibility; Cancel too sees a connection between Toomer and the Southern Agrarians:

I think that Toomer, along with other Negro and white writers of his age, notably Allen Tate and the Agrarians, shows through his search for primitive roots, through his emphasis on proximity to the soil, and through his search for the past, redemption from the materialism of his age. For him, as for the Agrarians, the only possible way to forestall the disintegration of character and the dissociation of personality is through attachment to the soil and to one’s culture. Love of the land, a return to the past, a loyalty to one’s instincts as they are transmitted from one generation to the other by means of blood are themes common to Allen Tate’s *The Fathers*, Stark Young’s *So Red the Rose*, Toomer’s *Cane*, and other works of the Agrarians. (Cancel 419)

Cancel may go too far in this comparison by stating that Toomer shows redemption through primitive roots. Redemption is often frustrated in *Cane* and the primitive, while beautiful and useful, never survives unscathed. Cancel certainly goes too far if by referring to “other works of the Agrarians” he considers Toomer a solid member of any such group. Yet, Cancel’s attention to the broad similarities in the novels’ treatments of agrarian themes is astute, if omitting their most vital difference: their treatment of race.

Ironically, Tate’s thinking, like Toomer’s, was mired in strong if often latent racial allegiances; however, Tate’s thinking could in no way be construed as ambivalent or progressive, as is sometimes the case with Toomer. One of many damning racist statements appears in a short 1934 article in the *America Review* in which Tate writes: “I
belong to the white race, therefore I intend to support white rule...lynching will disappear when the white race is satisfied that its supremacy will not be questioned in social crises. To tempt the Negro to question this supremacy without first giving him an economic basis is sentimental and irresponsible” (“A View of the Whole South” 418-19). Even in 1934 such words would have been considered by many as incendiary and indicative of a tyrannical paternalism—after all, it was after the publication by William Faulkner of such works as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Light in August* (1932). The great difficulty in reading Tate, on the other hand, is that racist impulses like the one just quoted are neither usually apparent nor necessarily implicit in many of his arguments. Tate’s winding prose forces attention to that which, he argues, makes for a good human culture: a community that can determine and define its own culture and religion based on shared human values and a respect for the land, each other, and mystery. Issues of race, as opposed to above where they are couched in the rhetoric of patronizing obligation, are simply absent or ancillary to this seemingly greater concern, a phenomenon which is, of course, also profoundly problematic, a characteristic assumption of white privilege.

However, Tate’s 1935 essay “The Profession of Letters in the South” has the peculiar distinction of arguing for the freedom of peasants while insulting African slaves, coming close to blaming them for their own bondage. Tate begins the pertinent section by

---

7 In the biography *Allen Tate: Orphan of the South*, Thomas Underwood alludes to conflicting theories about Tate’s possible guilt over his racism (Underwood 398 n.149) and how such feelings may have stifled his poetry and his sense of honor. However, Tate never retracted statements such as his 1933 assertion that “The negro race is an inferior race” (Underwood 291).

8 Cf. the epigraph to this chapter on p.18 of this essay from “What is a Traditional Society”
rightly critiquing those southern romantics who would in hindsight see the abolition of
“the black magic talisman” of slavery as the fall of the last obstacle to their perfection,
artistic, cultural, or otherwise. Such a revisionist perspective, Tate argues, would release
its proponents from the obligation of critical self-reflection. Tate then notes by way of
digression that it was nevertheless true that “African chattel slavery was the worst
groundwork conceivable for the growth of a great culture of European pattern” (Essays
524-5). He explains that the blackness of the African marked him as essentially different
from his master, as opposed to other feudal societies of Europe in which there was less
“distance” between serf and lord. Tate states that “The peasant is the soil. The Negro
slave was a barrier between the ruling class and the soil” and that “The Negro… has had
much the same thinning influence upon the class above him as the anonymous city
proletariat has had upon the culture of industrial capitalism” (Essays 525). While it is
difficult to decipher what Tate means by “thinning influence” the context suggests that by
“thinning” he means to suggest a movement of the mind toward a recognition of a
common humanity, a blurring or weakening of purely economic definitions of people. In
other words, while the peasant in feudal Europe could be admired by the lord as of a
lower class but human and at one with the same soil and culture that nourished him,
Negro slaves in America held “economic status only” (525) and offered no “thinning
influence” upon the ruling class, just as the proletariat offers no segue toward human
affection and affinity. For Tate, this essential incommensurability signified the type of
shallow anti-humanistic thinking that he linked to the mind-set of industrial culture.

Consequently, in this same essay, Tate links the distance between master and
slave, and therefore between master and land, as the malady of Southern art: the
estrangement from image. “The white man got nothing from the Negro, no profound image of himself in terms of the soil. … But the Negro, who has long been described as a responsibility, got everything from the white man” (Essays 525). Tate writes provocatively thus, perhaps, in order to contrast his own view with that of the critic William Peterfield Trent, who claimed that Southern art suffered because of the moral stain of slavery. Tate writes that Trent was right in his claim, but for the wrong reason. Tate argues that southern culture’s roots, while closer to the land “in spite of the Negro” than those of the industrial North, they were not deep enough in the soil to produce great literature. However, Tate argues that “It was not that slavery was corrupt ‘morally.’ Societies can bear an amazing amount of corruption and still produce high cultures. Black slavery could not nurture the white man in his own image” (525). That is, the moral corruption of slavery did not curse white art in the South; instead, the white identity ideal simply did not extend to the superior domain of the black man, the de facto “authentic” domain of the land that the slaves worked. While Tate’s statement achieves a recognition of the interdependence of white and black identity in the United States, what Singh terms “symbiosis,” for Tate the nurture of the white image is consummately important. Perhaps he has its nurturing in mind when he praises the Old South—for all of its faults—for “its comparative stability, its realistic limitation of the acquisitive impulse,” and “its preference for human relations compared to relations economic” (526).

Tate’s assessment of the state of Southern letters is nigh unassailable if one makes a few reasonable allowances: (1) that the imagism of most so-called good art is born from an intimate and critical attention and relationship to one’s human and physical environment, (2) that literature by whites in the ante-bellum South was in many cases and
by many standards poor, and (3) that slavery was an obstacle in the development of these conditions for white art. The problem with Tate’s view lies not so much with his aesthetic assessment of white ante-bellum art but with his clear bias for and commitment to white art’s ascendance over non-white art. Tate excludes in his considerations those human and socio-economic factors, some might say moral factors, that limited the degree to which the virtues of the slaveholding South could be compellingly sung in a country with ostensibly egalitarian values. Although Tate nods to the corruption of slavery, his words are consistently couched in quick and vaguely qualified rhetoric that flips the aggressor/victim binary: the white man got nothing from the Negro / The Negro got everything from the white man; the Negro could not be the soil / The Negro was a barrier for white art; the immorality of slavery was not important to art / the impossibility of the Negro nurturing an authentic white identity was important to American (read: white) art. Only once does Tate grant any type of racial equality in his essay, and only, ironically, within an act of blame: he calls the industrial capitalist system the “the worse system of slavery that afflicts both races today” (525).

Unfortunately, the quality and value of Negro art, pre- or post-Civil War, receives no mention by Tate. Although he consistently brims with contempt over slavery as a poor cultural practice, he does so from a distinctively white-supremacist perspective with exclusively white interests in mind. Tate’s telling lack of explanation concerning any participation by blacks in the culture and art of the South going forward begs a number of questions that might bring to mind Toomer’s effort to preserve the “Negro of the folk-song” in art: (1) When Tate praised Cane for its lack of caricatured pathos or sentimentality, did he know of Toomer’s seemingly confused and fragile racial
allegiances, and would they have mattered to him? (2) Did Tate break with his usual racist form and actually recognize in *Cane* a vision of a new “human world” that transcended race through the power of art, perhaps along the order of humanism he claimed for the Old South? (3) Did Tate know that Toomer had intellectually worked “through” agrarianism and was then reaching for what the Southern Agrarians would deride as “Marxian superstition” (*Essays* 527)? (4) Despite his avowed liberality about an “American race,” how would Toomer have continued to shrug off the claims of society upon his racial identity when confronting Tate, his admirer, and Tate’s steadfast dedication to American identity as always already white?

With the exception of the last question—Toomer assuredly would have spurned Tate’s racial theories as the default position of many whites of the time—the answers to such questions largely remain the domain of ongoing critical speculation. However, by looking for writers who have been influenced by the traditions that inflect Toomer and Tate, critics can look for ways in which the tensions of their positions have or have not been resolved. Toomer passionately preserved African American folk beauty and envisioned a “human world that was at least as conducive to man’s well-being and growth as the world of nature was conducive to the growth of plant and animal life” (*Wayward* 129). Tate called for art that touched the land, and critiqued cultures and economies governed by commercial interests that he thought stifled human connection. However, as Singh argues, the ways in which Toomer and Tate’s affinities for one another remained unrealized reveals the difficulty of white and black artists of the 1920s and 1930s to engage with each other explicitly and personally.
Shortly over a decade after *Cane*’s publication, however, after Toomer gave up entirely on explorations of agrarian thought during his eclectic religious pilgrimages, and as Tate and others among the Twelve Southerners came to realize their manifesto’s failure to spawn a movement, a relationship began that would tell a different story about race and agrarian life. The story of the black farm-hand Nick Watkins and the white farm-boy and later student and author Wendell Berry would mark one practical and literary turn in racial aspects of American agrarian life and thought. In spite of but mindful of the weighty traditions that inform it, Berry’s *The Hidden Wound* sets forth a humanistic vision that reorients agrarianism and American race studies. It embraces something like Toomer’s vision of the fecundity of nature as a standard for human culture and eschews Toomer’s personal avoidance of socio-racial realities. Berry’s work uses Tate’s critique of industrial capitalism and his vision of Jeffersonian democracy while condemning white supremacy and romantic nostalgia. Finally, *The Hidden Wound* adds to the “agrarian versus industrial” paradigm the benefit of modern environmental awareness, finding perhaps for the first time in the discourse of agrarian thought a very real and alarmingly permanent ecological limit to the industrial penchant for expansion.
CHAPTER II. CONVERGENCE: A LITERATURE OF THE WOUNDED AND MARX IN THE MIX

*Humanism, properly speaking, is not an abstract system, but a culture, the whole way in which we live, act, think, and feel. It is a kind of imaginatively balanced life lived out in a definite social tradition. ... We cannot recover our native humanism by adopting some standard of taste that is critical enough to question the contemporary arts but not critical enough to question the social and economic life which is their ground.*

—“Introduction: A Statement of Principles” *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930)

*What is a Negro slave? A man of the black race. The one explanation is as good as the other. A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations. A cotton spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes capital only in certain relations. Torn from these relationships it is no more capital than gold in itself is money or sugar is the price of sugar.*

—Karl Marx *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (1857-8)

As a novelist, poet, essayist and farmer, Wendell Berry might make a number of his anti-industrial, anti-consumerist, pro-sustainability, pro-local contentions under a number of available monikers: conservationist, ecologist, economist, environmentalist, etc. He is all of these. Despite its occasional ambiguity and negative connotation in cosmopolitan circles, however, Berry has chosen the term *agrarian*. Berry traces what he sees as a distinctly agrarian economic and ecological ethic going back to the works of Theocritus and to Virgil’s *Eclogues* but that was expressed in the American strain, controversially, by Thomas Jefferson. Berry also pulls concepts from the essays of the equally controversial Allen Tate, and from the Southern Agrarians’ “Statement of Principles,” written by John Crowe Ransom. In order to understand how Berry posits a racially equitable agrarianism, any potential relationships to members of the Southern Agrarians and their notorious prejudices must be explained.
In his article, “Moral Husbandry: The Nashville Agrarians, Wendell Berry, and the Hidden Wound of Race” (1997), D. A. Hamlin perceptively locates Berry’s primary departure from his Southern Agrarian forebears in their very different handling of race. Hamlin remarks that Robert Penn Warren’s “The Briar Patch” is the only essay in *I’ll Take My Stand* to directly address the issue of race (implicitly endorsing segregation) and that the containment of race by the twelve southerners “perhaps reveals their assessment that race was an unassailable social constraint in 1930. Yet it also suggests that the traditions surrounding race in the South constituted something the Agrarians considered worth preserving” (56). Hamlin is undoubtedly being extremely generous to the Agrarians in this assessment, but he rightly notes that Berry, by contrast, writes an entire book on race in the United States. However, the differences between Berry and the Agrarians with regard to race go far beyond their mere attention to the issue. Their differences are centered in their fundamental conception of race. While tied to the same critique of industrial capitalism, their conceptions are as different as feudalism and democracy.

Still, Hamlin is puzzlingly enthusiastic about Berry as a new Southern Agrarian, stating that “a thirteenth southerner has emerged” (Hamlin 56). Hamlin argues convincingly that the “‘Agrarian versus Industrial’ struggle prophesied by the ‘Twelve Southerners’ from Vanderbilt forms the spiritual center of Wendell Berry’s political jeremiad” (56). And in perhaps his best moment of comparative apologizing for the Southern Agrarians and Berry, Hamlin responds to the common critique that the premise of *I’ll Take My Stand*, which is grounded in an elaborate metaphor that mixes various rhetorical and scientific ingredients in the service of an over-generalized ideal, could not
be easily communicated and is too vague to be useful. Hamlin’s response is a question: “can one man speak with conviction about a way he has lived, a way he believes has value for others, without being impractical or naïve simply because the entire society around him cannot easily adopt it? This is the dissent Wendell Berry has offered, with his life and his words” (63).

Hamlin’s mention of the dissent of Berry’s life, in addition to his words, undoubtedly refers to the fact that Berry lives and works on a farm near the one his father owned and that he uses many traditional farming methods, including draft animals. He types his books, essays, letters, and poetry on a typewriter, or writes them out by hand for transcription. He uses as little fossil fuel as possible. It may come as no surprise, then, that Berry writes passionately about the need to moderate consumption and reorient public and private economies, values, and so-called standards of living. Yet, Berry does not believe that everyone could or should be a country person, nor that sustainable living involves the wholesale jettisoning of collective human achievement beyond the invention of the light bulb (as if such an option were either possible or desirable). Rather, Berry advocates greater intention and affection based on a greater awareness, and born of a greater connectedness, to place and to people and their ecological and economic limits.

Thus, notwithstanding his thorough analysis of the many similarities between Berry and the Agrarians, Hamlin overlooks important distinctions between them, both in their rhetoric and their politics. Regarding the latter, Berry holds a primarily progressive

---

9 In “The Whole Horse,” Berry writes that “any thinkable human economy would have to grant to manufacturing an appropriate and honorable place. Agrarians would insist only that any manufacturing enterprise should be formed and scaled to fit the local landscape, the local ecosystem, and the local community, and that it should be locally owned and employ local people” (Art 244).
conservationist perspective that spurns ideas of any lost chivalric South of medieval organization; he does not speak from any distinctive notion of a South-land. Instead, he works against romanticizing past incarnations of agrarianism that are linked to economic exploitation, issuing a critical vision for a sustainable agrarian culture moving forward.

Regarding Berry’s rhetorical method, though Hamlin sees a similar element of personal testimony in Berry’s and the Agrarians’ work, of personal conviction in cultural dissent through one’s life and words, Berry’s stance in *The Hidden Wound* largely avoids the type of generality found in the discursive prose of the Southern Agrarians. Berry grounds the narrative in personal experience and supplements theory with examples from literature: the work consists of stories of Berry’s life as a child on a farm and his experiences with the black farm-hand Nick Watkins and Nick’s partner Aunt Georgie. It is also an exploration of race and agrarianism through texts, ranging from a public shaming of Mosgrove’s *Kentucky Cavaliers in Dixie* to the suspicions of agrarian connection in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Berry’s tone is decidedly less declarative and more confessional than that of the Southern Agrarians. He writes that “if the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he has received the mirror image of that wound into himself” and that “the more painful it has grown the more deeply he has hidden it in himself. But the wound is there, and it is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as it is in his society” (4). From the beginning of the book, it is clear that Berry sees *The Hidden Wound* as his first attempt at knowing and communicating the wound of racism in himself with the distinct purpose of finding a cure in mind. Commenting on this goal, Berry concedes:
Perhaps this is only wishful thinking; perhaps such a thing is not to be done by one man, or in one generation. Surely a man would have to be almost dangerously proud to think himself capable of it. And so I am really only saying that I feel an obligation to make an attempt, and that I know if I fail to make at least the attempt I forfeit any right to hope that the world will become better than it is now. (THW 4)

Berry’s exorcism of the inherited wound of racism takes the shape of an examination both of the personal stories of his Southern family and of the literature that informs his agrarian philosophy and his sense of race in America.

The first story he examines is one often recounted by relatives about a slave buyer, Bart Jenkins, to whom John Johnson Berry, Wendell’s great-grandfather, sold a defiant slave. Berry relates how he was struck years later at how casually such stories were told to him as a child, “without comment beyond the facts of the narrative” (THW 5). He clearly finds it both probable and unaccountable that his great-grandfather, who was “thought too kind to his slaves…. did not understand, in any way that he would have acknowledged to himself beforehand, that in selling the slave he was abandoning him to violence” (8). Berry’s knowledge of Bart Jenkins, despite the picture painted by Mosgrove’s Kentucky Cavaliers in Dixie that Berry cites frequently, is not the romanticized chivalric Confederate Captain who dauntlessly led his men into battle, but a calculating, marauding ex-soldier known to throw salt on the wounds of dying blue-coats and to treat slaves with vicious brutality (9-10). Taking for granted the relative tranquility of a small farm with only a few slaves under the comparatively kind hand of his grandfather, Berry writes:
It seems quite possible that Bart Jenkins appeared to the white household that night [that he came to retrieve the slave], to their astonishment, as the agent of a horror and an outrage that they had inherited and lived with all their lives, and had never openly faced. (8)

Berry makes it clear that “any kindness in slavery… was dependant on the docility of the slaves” and that “any slave who was unwilling to be a slave broke through the myth of paternalism and benevolence, and brought down on himself the violence inherent in the system” (6). However, Berry’s characterization of his grandfather’s and his grandfather’s family’s naïveté and silent shock at the human consequences of their everyday actions, and the actions of their families going back generations, is still a potent image of violence upon slaveholding order, even if it exposed the frailty and injustice of that order. That they chose to continue in their slaveholding, and that the story has been passed down casually through the family, Berry interprets as indicative of the complexly hidden psychological wound of white racism:

I feel in the story as it has been told to me a peculiar muteness… it is the silence with which white men in this country have surrounded the anguish implicit in their racism. The story has passed from generation to generation in flight from its horror. It has been told and retold, surely, because in the depths of our souls we all have recognized in it an evil that is native to us and that we cannot escape. Probably it has also been told as a confession, in the unspoken, even the unthought, hope that we will finally tell it to someone who can forgive us. (8-9)

This silent anguish of the wound of racism, which Berry renders here in religious terms of confession and forgiveness significant to his personal faith, is perhaps soothed
by his childhood relationship with Nick Watkins, a black farmhand who came to work for his family when Wendell Berry was still a toddler. Berry recollects his relationship with Watkins during the eight years Watkins lived and worked on the farm as a way of learning about his family’s racism and about the humanity and economic reality of black Americans. This reflective approach that grants the spiritual, economic, and political life of blacks to be of absolutely equal importance to that of whites, is an approach that would have been unthinkable for the Southern Agrarians. Berry describes how by himself or with his brother he followed Nick everywhere, and how Nick bore their self-involved childishness gracefully, while always maintaining a dutiful attentiveness to his work. Berry relates that Nick also bore the headstrong meddlesomeness of Berry’s ailing grandfather who did not wish to give up the day to day management of the farm. According to Berry, within the bounds of the racial situation of the time and place, Nick earned his grandfather’s and his father’s respect as a skilled and hard worker and a man of dignity.

Berry’s stories about sitting and listening to Nick and his grandfather talking in the barn on rainy days or after a sassafras cutting are touching, and all the more precious for their fleetingness and exceptionality. Berry writes of his childhood admiration for Nick: how he and his brother often talked of running away with him to the mountains on camping trips, how they accompanied him to listen to his partner Aunt Georgie spout personal religious musings, and how they smiled when Nick secularly winked at them.

10 Donald Davidson, the most belligerently racist of the Southern Agrarians, was horrified by Robert Penn Warren’s modest and, no doubt, universally recognized point in “The Briar Patch” that “If the Southern white man feels that the agrarian life has a certain irreplaceable value in his society, and if he hopes to maintain its integrity in the face of industrialism or its dignity in the face of agricultural depression, he must find a place for the negro in his scheme” (I’ll Take My Stand Donaldson “Introduction” xxx).
over her unorthodox bouts of pious talk. Berry writes of his fierce defense of Nick against the taunts of family members and how he and his brother, like Robin Hood, stole coal from his grandfather’s pile and hauled it in sled-loads to Nick and Georgie’s place. Yet, Berry would experience the intrusion of systematic racism in his relationship with Nick, just as his forefathers experienced it with Bart Jenkins.

Berry recalls how, when a young child was acting unruly at Nick’s feet, Nick rattled his leather leggings at the child and warned in a formidable tone: “John’s going to get you” (THW 51). When Berry finally realized that the “John” of whom Nick spoke was his father, Berry writes that he was sadly astonished and that this realization had a formative effect on his mind: “It gave me the strongest sort of hint of the existence of something I had been born into, and lived in—something I have been trying to get out of ever since” (51). Berry interprets Nick’s statement in terms of the system of race relations as opposed to any enforcement of such a system by John Berry. Of his father, Berry writes that “he had entered the position of ‘boss man’: whoever he was, whatever he did, he had the power and austerity of that role; the society assigned it to him, as it assigned to Nick the role of ‘Nigger’” (51). For Berry as a child, such roles, justified or no, seemed as indelibly fixed as they seemed unaccountably cruel.

Regarding “the role of ‘Nigger’” and the social and psychological import of the role and the word, Berry writes: “I remember the shock and confusion I felt one night when, saying good-bye to Nick, I impulsively kissed his hand” (50). When Berry came inside through the door he heard “Lord, child, how can you kiss that old nigger’s hand” (50).11 Berry admits to having used the N-word himself and that, to white children of his

11 Berry does not reveal the speaker of this statement in The Hidden Wound.
place and time, in the abstract, “it seemed as innocuous and as casual to me as any other word” (50). On this occasion, however, “when it was used with particular reference to a person one cared for, as a child cares, it took on a tremendous force; its power reached ominously over one’s sense of things” (50). The forcible designation of Berry’s knowledge of Nick—of his affection, admiration, and understanding of Nick’s humanity—as relating to a “nigger” and all that meant, altered Berry’s concept of his own identity.

Thus, well before Nick died of a stroke in 1945, racial difference and hierarchy had become entrenched in Berry’s consciousness, so that despite his affection for and knowledge of Nick Watkins, the image Berry retains of Nick is one surrounded in the silence of death, racialized. Berry writes that a silence had followed Nick all of his life, a silence that Nick had fallen into and that was in the speech of white men: “the wound of their history, formed three hundred years before my birth to stand between him and me, so that when I think of him now, as important as his memory is to me, it must be partly to wonder if I knew him” (56). Berry defines the wound of racism, therefore, as an absence, a loss of the possibility for human connection and relation on a personal and a social level.

Extending his personal experience to the social level, Berry writes of the wound’s effects on cultural production: “A work of art that grows out of a diseased culture has not only the limits of art but the limits of the disease…. The art of a man divided within himself and against his neighbors, no matter how sophisticated its techniques or how beautiful its forms and textures, will never have the communal power of the simplest
tribal song” (49). In other words, a culture that cordon off members as “niggers” will never speak with the power of a clear conscience, or with the power of the entire culture.

Thus, after Berry describes the white wound of racism and his personal relationship with Nick Watkins, he moves on to the socio-political problem of racism, which he relates to economics and to the idea of “good work.” It may be helpful at this point to examine Berry’s explanation of race and racism as laid out in the Afterword to The Hidden Wound:

The root of our racial problem in America is not racism. The root is in our inordinate desire to be superior—not to some inferior or subject people, though this desire leads to the subjection of people—but to our condition. We wish to rise above the sweat and bother of taking care of anything—of ourselves, of each other, or of our country. We did not enslave African blacks because they were black, but because their labor promised to free us of the obligations of stewardship, and because they were unable to prevent us from enslaving them. They were economically valuable and militarily weak.

It seems likely, then, that what we now call racism came about as a justification of slavery after the fact, not as its cause. (THW 112)

To be sure, Berry is not denying the race problem in the United States or the existence of racism. Rather, by identifying and concentrating upon the economic system and colonizing tendencies that birthed racism he seems to take for granted, in ways Tate does not, the essential equality and shared humanity of blacks and whites. In other words, he acknowledges the morphological differences humans classify as white and black without ever locating an essential difference—i.e., any practically important chemical,
physical, or evolutionary one. Instead, he locates the essential historical difference between white and black in America in that legacy which continues to inform race relations today, that difference between the economically and militarily powerful and the economically valuable and militarily weak, between the demands of proud and greedy sloths and the unsuspecting overwhelmed. Indeed, Berry’s views on race bear comparison to those of the cultural critic Stuart Hall, who views race as a “floating signifier” (Hall Race) that can mean different things at different times for different people. Race, as it is practically used, functions as a language; it is largely socially constructed and enforced (through pseudo-science, generational ignorance, propaganda, etc.) for specific economic and political purposes, “a justification after the fact” (THW 112).

Such a perspective is evident in most of Berry’s large oeuvre. In the book that made his name as an environmentalist, The Unsettling of America (1977), Berry sketches a brief history of white imperialism on the continent. The first sentence of the book reads: “One of the peculiarities of the white race’s presence in America is how little intention has been applied to it” (Unsettling 3). By intention, Berry means practical attention, affection, and cultivation with a view toward the long-term. Only on a basis of a proper relationship to the land, Berry argues, can a sustainable human culture be built. Without this, he warns, purely economic interests will prevail.

Therefore, wishing to draw his essential divide in The Unsettling of America along lines of economic thinking, not along lines of race, Berry enumerates the differences between “two opposite kinds of mind” (7), one geared toward exploitation and the other toward nurturing. He is sure to note that this is “a division not only between
persons but also within persons” and that “We are all to some extent the products of an exploitative society, and it would be foolish and self-defeating to pretend that we do not bear its stamp” (7). Similarly, in *The Hidden Wound*, Berry insists that the radical economic legacy that Nick and Aunt Georgie profoundly stamped upon him was one of pleasure in good work. He writes that “the great benefit” of his near-familial relationship with Nick and Aunt Georgie was that they were “friends and teachers, ancestors you could say, the forebears of certain essential strains in my thinking” (*Unsettling* 64). In thinking of the necessity of Nick and Aunt Georgie to Berry, one may be reminded of Toomer’s comment on agrarian blacks: “America needs these elements. They are passing. Let us grab and hold them while there is still time” (“Correspondence” *Cane* 151).

Indeed, while remaining fully aware of the precariousness of his position as a white man, Berry seeks to define Nick and Aunt Georgie’s political significance in terms of what they meant and continue to mean for him as examples that “The essential cultural discrimination is not between having and not having or have-and-have-nots, but between the superfluous and the indispensible” (*THW* 76). In other words, as an agrarian, and only secondarily as a black agrarian in an age of traditional agrarian culture’s decline, Nick represented a significant example of the value of a life lived by what William Carlos Williams called “the customs of necessity” (qtd. in *THW* 74). Berry admired and emulated Nick’s attentive work and, even more, the joy with which he appeared to perform it: “against the anxiety and the greed and the haste and the self-doubt of the white man scrambling for the top, let us place the great serenity and pleasantness of Nick’s mind” (74).
Importantly, while wishing to communicate the debt he feels for Nick’s truly agrarian counter-example, Berry does not rhapsodize or apologize about Nick’s blackness. Similarly, acknowledging his own conscience and the voices he anticipates telling him that he has little right to speak of the pleasures of Nick Watkins, given that he possesses things that Nick never had and is culturally able to act in ways unavailable to Nick, Berry concedes only a conditional epistemological ignorance. He admits that he is well “aware of the dangers and difficulties of a white man’s attempt to write so intimately of the life of a black man out of a child’s memories a quarter of a century old” (THW 75).

Yet, Berry’s wish to dignify in modern imaginations the cultural bounty Nick wrought in the skill in which he handled his mule teams and the good work in which he delighted does not have to do with race. Berry stakes a small but powerful economic claim that stresses the long-term stability and pleasure of folk life and culture over consumerist values: “This much is clear to me, insofar as I am capable of feeling such pleasures as I believe Nick felt, I am strong; insofar as I am dependent on the pleasures made available by my salary and the things that I own, I am weak” (75). 12

The value of necessary work, done well, in which one can take pleasure and pride was Nick’s gift to Berry. Moreover, Nick’s blackness revealed racism as an unstable

12 Another interesting appreciation by Berry of a black farmer is his 1975 review for Nation of All God’s Creatures: The Life of Nate Shaw, a book by Theodore Rosengarten. Berry acknowledges Rosengarten’s work in publishing the book but is troubled by his appearing as the author and not as the editor and by the subtitle “The Life of Nate Shaw” as opposed to “The Autobiography of Nate Shaw,” given that the book was transcribed from recorded tapes of Shaw’s telling. Berry critiques what he sees as a condescending, misapplied praise of Nate Shaw as a “black Faulkner”—as if blacks needed a Faulkner to be equal—while affirming in glowing terms the unique qualities of the real teller. He writes, “I do not see how anybody could consider the depth and range of the intelligence, the power, sensitivity, and precision of the speech, and doubt the superiority of this man” (“Nate Shaw: The Burden of his Book” 247).
economic tool: insofar as blacks performed the necessary care of the land they alone ensured that culture’s stability and future. As Berry writes in the Afterword:13 “When a nation determines that the work of providing and caretaking is ‘nigger work’ or work for ‘hillbillies’ or ‘rednecks’—that is, fundamental, necessary, inescapable, and inferior—then it has implanted in its own soul the infection of its ruin” (THW 113). In order to get a better sense of what Berry means by “providing and caretaking,” it may be instructive to look at Berry’s categorization of agrarian and industrial minds. In The Unsettling of America, Berry uses a common example to illustrate the nurturing mind-set (agrarian) and the exploitative mind-set (industrial):

I conceive a strip-miner to be a model exploiter, and as a model nurturer I take the old fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer. The exploiter is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter’s goal is money, profit; the nurturer’s goal is health—his land’s health, his own, his family’s, his community’s, his country’s. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks the question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity?... . The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work as well as possible. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order—a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery. The exploiter typically serves an institution or

13 The Afterword to The Hidden Wound, slightly altered for independent publication, has appeared as an essay under the title “Racism and the Economy.”
organization; the nurturer serves land, household, community, place. The exploiter thinks in terms of numbers, quantities, “hard facts”; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind. (Unsettling 7-8).

By means of his commitment to doing good work for the simple pleasures of life in the midst of a consumer-driven, exploitative, inhuman economy, Nick Watkins, for Berry, falls into the providing and caretaking camp. And clearly, and ironically, this critique of Berry’s, excepting the racial element, is profoundly informed by the Southern Agrarians.

While D. A. Hamlin is technically correct in his contention that “Berry’s reflective endeavor never mentions the Nashville Agrarians” (Hamlin 57), Berry explicitly refers to one of the group’s members, Allen Tate, in The Hidden Wound. In reference to Tate’s statement in “The Profession of Letters in the South” that “African chattel slavery was the worst groundwork conceivable for the growth of a great culture of European pattern” (Essays 525), Berry concedes to Tate’s larger point but disputes one of his unstated assumptions: “I do not share Mr. Tate’s assumption that ‘a great culture of European pattern’ was either desirable or possible in America” (THW 79). Reforming and reformulating Tate’s critique, Berry writes that “The Negro, both as slave and as servant, has been a barrier between white people of all classes and the soil … because of the inferior and menial role which the Negro was assigned” (THW 79). At first blush, such a reformulation may seem a meaningless distinction, but Berry’s point becomes clearer as he continues.

Whereas Tate and the Agrarians linked the essential otherness of the slave to his blackness, Berry links the essential otherness of the slave to the work they were forced to
do, and perceives the work, not the person, as the real barrier. He defines the imperative of whites in America as twofold: ownership and profit. He defines the division of labor by whites in America thus: whites own, and blacks labor to turn the land into profit. The psychology of this division of labor, Berry writes, is still apparent:

The black man, even now, rarely crosses over into the white man’s side of this division. And the white man, though he has unavoidably had to cross over into the black man’s side, has never forgotten when he has been there that he was doing nigger work… . What we should have learned willingly ourselves we forced the blacks to learn, and so prevented ourselves from learning it. (THW 80)

What whites should have learned, according to Berry, is that “The history of [the white man’s] effort to build here what Allen Tate calls ‘a great culture of European pattern’ is a farce” (THW 105) and that “The notion that one is too good to do what it is necessary for somebody to do is always weakening” (THW 106). Berry understands the economic farce of an agrarianism that pines for medieval romance as typified by the mythos of the Old South, just as he understands the farce of race determining anything other than skin-surface morphology. Berry’s alternative vision, while informed by the Southern Agrarians economic critiques, more closely recalls Jean Toomer’s vision of a “human world that was at least as conducive to man’s well-being and growth as the world of nature was conducive to the growth of plant and animal life” (Wayward 129). However, Berry draws his vision from a more contemporary figure, Martin Luther King.

Foreseeing the economic and cultural destiny of a country with an ethos that avoids necessary work at all costs and that has been enabled by technology to exploit and destroy at ever increasing rates, Berry calls for a “spiritual wholeness of which the white
and black races have so far had only the divided halves” (THW 107). While some might argue that it is easy for Berry to talk about “halves” when he is a member of the half that has been the more powerful and suffered least, it should be clear by now that Berry would agree with this assessment. Nonetheless, through appealing to Martin Luther King, he further establishes his commitments:

It is, then, not simply a question of black power or white power, but how meaningfully to reenfranchise human power. This, as I think Martin Luther King understood, is the real point, the real gift to America, of the struggle of the black people. In accepting the humanity of the black race, the white race will not be giving accommodation to an alien people; it will be receiving into itself half of its own experience, vital and indispensable to it, which it has so far denied at great cost. (THW 107)

Perhaps this gift of the struggle of the black race, of black agrarians in particular, which is so powerfully narrated in the story of Nick Watkins, is also the real testament of Cane. When the unnamed man in “Avey” envisions a “promise-song” while humming a folk-tune (Cane 48); when Paul of “Bona and Paul,” inspired by purple gardens, envisions racial transcendence (80); when Kabnis ascends from the basement and “The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town” (117), Toomer is alluding to a gift that may come. Even if it is not realized by the characters in Cane, and even if Toomer did not see agrarian life as a practical way of life for the majority of people to live in the modern world, Cane points to those agrarian elements that Toomer believes these United States need. Despite its melancholy and ambivalence, the more hopeful
moments of *Cane* represent the achievement of what whites on this continent, according to Berry, have lacked, “an elemental knowledge on the one hand and a decent social vision on the other” (*THW* 81). Berry might very well be speaking of artists like Toomer and the characters of *Cane* when he writes:

> Living and responding in terms of present necessities and hardships and pleasures and joys, the blacks have produced an authentic culture in this country, based upon elemental experience; their music has been continuous, responsive to circumstance, and sustaining, from the first work songs and spirituals to the jazz artists in the cities of our own time. Whereas the whites, as a group, have produced here only a pernicious *value system*, based on greed and egotism and the lust for status and comfort. (*THW* 81)

The polarity of Berry’s rhetoric in this quote is enough to give one pause. There seems to be an element of compensation in the statement that whites have produced only a pernicious value system in the United States. This blanket condemnation of white culture is certainly not evident in the white protagonists in Berry’s best-known novels, *Jayber Crow* or *Hannah Coulter*. Perhaps Berry seeks to distance himself from the racism of the Southern Agrarians and in his admiration for black culture, against white history, he overstates his case. Perhaps he fails to specify those whites whose system he finds so pernicious. Nonetheless, in searching for a responsive life and art born out of the kinds of communal experiences a well-lived agrarian life might offer, Berry’s source is not the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South, but the rough-hewn figures of black agrarian life, like the ones painted so hauntingly in *Cane*. 
However, it would be a mistake, given Berry’s affinities with Toomer, his progressive view on race, and his important departures from the Southern Agrarians over racial issues, to underestimate how informed by the economic vision of *I’ll Take My Stand*, and of Tate in particular, Berry’s agrarianism really is. Indeed, Berry addresses just these factors in the essay that best defines agrarianism for Berry and that most explicitly deals with the Southern Agrarians: “The Whole Horse” (2002). The title of this essay comes from a concept in Allen Tate’s essay “Remarks on the Southern Religion” in *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), and Berry quotes Tate in his epigraph, writing about how “the modern mind sees only half of the horse—that half which may become a dynamo, or an automobile, or any other horsepowered machine… . The religious mind, on the other hand…it wants the whole horse, and it will be satisfied with nothing less” (*Essays* 559-60). Berry writes, in this very economic essay, deeply concerned with the commodity-fetishism of industrial economics, that

The agrarian mind is, at bottom, a religious mind. It subscribes to Allen Tate’s doctrine of ‘the whole horse.’ It prefers the Creation itself to the powers and quantities to which it can be reduced. And this is a mind completely different from that which sees creatures as machines, minds as computers, soil fertility as chemistry, or agrarianism as an idea. (“The Whole Horse” *Art* 240)

In other words, Berry sees agrarianism as a form of religious humanism, perhaps similar to the kind that Jefferson invoked as he called upon the laws of nature and nature’s God to grant all men’s equality and the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. There is no doubt that there is a strong spiritual element in Berry’s agrarian project, despite his thorough critique of the complicity of many Christians in the
destruction of nature and his involvement in the interfaith philosophical group, the Temenos Academy. Berry attends a protestant church in his hometown and is a confessing Christian. While a thorough reading of Berry’s religion is impossible given the scope of this essay, it may be enough to say that Berry believes in a standard in nature that is moral, fixed, and intentional. His frequent self-reflective use of scripture in some of his essays critiquing many Christians’ complicity in the advent of industrial consumer culture\(^{14}\) can be compared to Father John’s condemnation at the end of Toomer’s “Kabnis” of the sin of white Southerner’s use of scripture to rationalize and justify slavery: “they made th (sic) Bible lie” (Cane 117).

Berry writes in “The Whole Horse” that “Anybody who has studied with care the issues of conservation knows that our acts are being measured by a real and unyielding standard that was invented by no human… The Standard exists. But having no opposing economic idea, conservationists have had great difficulty in applying the standard” (238). The search, then, is one for an adequate economic idea, an ordering of human accounting in harmony with the order of creation; that is, ecological limits.

Looking to the Southern Agrarians, Berry shows that one finds a counter to the globalizing, homogenizing impulse of government-corporate collusion which taxes only the working people and maintains ultra-large, ultra-powerful militaries. Ironically, looking at the character of the ills such a counter-philosophy opposes, one may rightly recognize many of the Marxian touch-words that have undergirded the discussion of Berry’s agrarianism thus far—the division of labor, the privileged and working classes,

commodification, consumerism, industrial-capitalism—Berry makes (perhaps) a startling claim about those who would carry out his agrarian vision:

[Agrarianism] is composed of many small efforts to preserve or improve, or establish local economies. These efforts on the part of nonindustrial or agrarian conservatives, local patriots, are taking place in countries both affluent and poor all over the world. (emphasis added) (243)

For those scratching their heads over what permutation of conservativism Berry could be appealing to, one must consider the term within the context of the Southern Agrarians and their aversion to the centralization of power. Berry mentions and praises the agrarian critique of Marxism in “The Whole Horse,” quoting from their Agrarian “Statement of Principles” that “the true Sovietists or Communists…are the industrialists themselves. They would have the government set up an economic super-organization, which in turn would become the government” (I’ll Take My Stand). In other words, the argument against Marxism is not the neo-conservative advocacy of laissez-faire global capitalism. It is a traditionally conservative argument, such as Theodore Roosevelt might make, that the evils of overproduction, unemployment, and growing inequality in the distribution of wealth may in the short-term be righted by government intervention and the militancy of labor, but must also and in the long-run be solved by the liberated, hard-working citizen that spurns the yolk of big money and big government in pursuit of a measure of self-sufficiency and community independence.

Paradoxically, such an independence, as some modern Marxian critics have pointed out, is not contrary to Marxian, or at least neo-Marxian philosophy. In Country and the City, Raymond Williams writes of the class struggles of early modern England,
of the vicissitudes of a new monied class upsetting the traditional landowner order. As a well-known Marxist critic, Williams comes to the conclusion that, both the established aristocracy and the “new men” parvenus merely established “new forms of predation” as a response to a burgeoning capitalism and that, “If we have any humanity to spare, it is better directed to the unregarded men who were making and working the land, in any event, under the old owners and the new” (Williams 50). In other words, the humanity and the dignity within the class schema rested with the working farmer.

That a critical localism could be an important tenet of Marxian thought has been specifically appreciated in relationship to Berry. In *Ethical Marxism*, Bill Martin states that Marx, like Berry, called for particularity, rightly criticizing the sham of invoking universal solutions to diverse and particular problems that, if examined, would too soon reveal complicity by the “shammers” (Martin 294). However, Martin outlines that whereas a typical Marxist answer has been that “we cannot at this time afford the luxury of these particulars,” that is, that the refusal of large-scale solutions would ultimately “yield a politics of disengagement” (Martin 294), Berry’s entire corpus assumes that Americans and humans generally have reached the tipping point in this balance. Berry counters, in essence, that on ecological grounds we cannot at this time afford the luxury of generalities.

Martin seems to agree. He states that Berry’s defense of private property in the stewardship model has “nothing in common with ownership relations in modern capitalist, imperialist societies”15 (289). Rather, Berry’s model is focused on the

15 Cf. Berry’s critique of corporations as “persons” in “Rugged Individualism” (*TWOI* 9-10) and his essay “Private Property and the Common Wealth” in *Another Turn of the Crank*. 
“intertwining of the notions of good farming, care for the earth, and appreciation of place” (289). Martin does not see communal ownership as a necessity but recognizes a sort of baseline dialectic of stewardship involved in notions of sustainability. This dialectical process of care must be negotiated through what Berry’s longtime friend and colleague Wes Jackson calls a correct “eyes-to-acres” ratio. In a Berry-like moment, Bill Martin writes:

[W]e have to recognize that there is a sense in which ecology trumps everything, at least in the sense that humanity has to exist in places and these places have to have long-range sustainability. Perhaps there is not only one way for this to happen, and certainly all of the interconnections that are involved in sustainability are susceptible to being treated in a merely utilitarian, instrumentalist, or calculative manner. However, there are limits; there are breaking points in local ecologies and in the global ecology, and humanity has come up against many of these in the case of the former, and it is now coming up against at least one (but more likely several) of these in the case of the global ecology. Happily…the inseparable notions of good farming and care for place can also ground or be understood as closely connected to other notions such as good work and therefore to some extent even justice. (291)

Martin seems willing to grant Berry a good deal of space to determine what constitutes “good farming” and “good work,” and Berry is more than happy to fill that space. Martin

---

16 Horticulturist and founder of The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas and author of Becoming Native to this Place, Wes Jackson is a long-time friend and collaborator of Berry’s and rightly treated by Martin as supporting much of Berry’s agrarian politics.
quotes Berry thus: “[W]e do not have enough farmers; we have enough farmers to use the land but not enough to use it and protect it at the same time”\textsuperscript{17} (289).

Marx’s statement concerning the institutionalizing of African slavery in the Americas as an entirely economic motivation, quoted at the beginning of Chapter II, and the point that Bill Martin makes about good work being related to issues of social justice, leads into the third chapter of this essay. Berry has shown himself to be appreciative of the gifts of black culture and the struggles of black agrarianism in America in \textit{The Hidden Wound}, thus enabling a joint consideration of the heretofore separate voices of Allen Tate and Jean Toomer. However, although Berry has shown an ability to bring liberals and conservatives under a banner of agrarianism in the twenty-first century, the extent to which African American’s have embraced agrarian life and philosophy in modern America remains to be examined. And while the results are neither always or even often attributable to Berry’s work on race, his poignancy should be recognized and his work read so that blacks and whites searching for simpler, more secure, more accountable, and more equitable economies to live by, might find a sensitive and sagacious advocate.

\textsuperscript{17} From “A Defense of the Family Farm” in Berry’s \textit{Home Economics}—163.
CHAPTER III. A NEW WAY: NEO-AGRARIANISM, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND LITERATURE

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman... when I first went to live with her... Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me.
—Frederick Douglass from The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave (1845)

But I want to tell you something. This pattern, this “system” that the white man created, of teaching Negroes to hide the truth from him behind a façade of grinning, “yessir-bossing,” foot-shuffling and head-scratching—that system has done the American white man more harm than an invading army would do to him.

When we love the earth, we are able to see ourselves more fully. I believe this. The ancestors taught me it was so. As a child I loved playing in the dirt, in that rich Kentucky soil, that was a source of life. Before I understood anything about the pain and exploitation of the southern system of sharecropping, I understood that grown-up black folks loved the land.
—bell hooks “Touching the Earth” (1993)

Despite the stigma of feeblemindedness associated with anyone who questions the holy trinity of globalization, free-trade, and industrialization, there can be little doubt that an agrarian ethos is again on the rise. The ubiquity and cultural cachet of the language of green movements, of slow food, of local living, and of sustainability, has led a new generation of agrarians to state with confidence in their introduction to one 2001 symposium, that “people are reinvigorating their ties to the land, both in their practical ways of living and in the ways they think about themselves, their communities, and the good life” (The New Agrarianism xiii). The neo-agrarian group that authored this and another similar collection is made up of a number of well-known writers, public intellectuals, activists, and scientists including Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, David Orr, Scott Russell Sanders, Barbara Kingsolver, and Vandana Shiva, to name a few. They
broadly define agrarianism as “a temperament and a moral orientation as well as a suite of economic practices, all arising out of the insistent truth that people everywhere are part of a land community, just as dependant as other life on the land’s fertility and just as shaped by its mysteries and possibilities” (xiii). However, while heralding an “agrarian renaissance” of sorts, the lists of names on the cover of *The New Agrarianism* (2001) and *The Essential Agrarian Reader* (2003) remain dominated by white males (between the two volumes there are four contributors who are white women and one Indian woman contributor, Shiva). However, the absence of black writers in future incarnations of these now decade-old volumes may soon be corrected, and Berry’s robust critique of his own tradition has begun to play an important part in building in-roads between the Neo-Agrarians and what has become known as the environmental justice movement.

According to Giovanna Di Chiro’s examination of its emergence, the environmental justice movement demands that “public policy be based on mutual respect and justice, for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias” (307) and it “challenges dominant meanings of environmentalism and produces new forms of environmental theory and action” (300). Di Chiro states that the environmental justice movement is largely made up of low-income women of color and is a response to the disenfranchisement of colored populations in environmental discourses, a phenomenon characterized as “environmental racism” by Reverend Benjamin Chavis of the NAACP (304). In 1987, Chavis served as the director of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice (UCC-CRJ) which published a study in the same year examining the “disproportionate risk” posed to the health of African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans and which exposed the deliberate targeting of minority
populations in the geographic distribution of toxic or poisonous materials and pollutants and the exclusion of people of color from leadership positions in environmental groups (304). Chavis had made plain what had been well known among minority groups: socio-economic disparities in the industrial world were unconscionably detrimental to distinct populations.

Spurred by this and other studies, in October of 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit established a solidarity between people of color wishing to expose and indict the complicity of “primarily white, mainstream organizations” in the racial environmental crisis (Di Chiro 305). Four years after this landmark summit, John W. Boyd, Jr. founded the National Black Farmers Association (NBFA), which has consistently argued for justice for black farmers having suffered discrimination at the hands of the United States Department of Agriculture. In 2010, the efforts of the NBFA won a significant legislative victory, signed by President Obama, that granted $1.15 billion in reparations for outstanding cases of black farmers who were denied loans, disaster assistance, grants, and other forms of aid from the USDA.

This recent political success by disenfranchised people of color in environmental political-action movements has been paralleled by work in African American literature. Among the most agrarian of positions taken by black environmentalists is that of the well-known feminist critic, bell hooks. Like Wendell Berry, bell hooks (also known as Gloria Jeans Watkins) is a Kentucky native. In her essay, “Touching the Earth,” she seems to resonate with Allen Tate’s and Wendell Berry’s belief that, at bottom, the agrarian mind is a religious mind, and she adds that, for African Americans, it also should be a native mind:
Living in modern society, without a sense of history, it has been easy for folks to forget that black people were first and foremost a people of the land, farmers. It is easy for folks to forget that at the first part of the 20th century, the vast majority of black folks in the United States lived in the agrarian south.

Living close to nature, black folks were able to cultivate a spirit of wonder and reverence for life. Growing food to sustain life and flowers to please the soul, they were able to make a connection with the earth that was ongoing and life-affirming. They were witnesses to beauty. (hooks 105)

“Touching the Earth,” which connects blacks to Native Americans in ways similar to Berry, makes no reference to The Hidden Wound; but hooks twice includes long citations from The Unsettling of America and calls Berry’s discussion of the connection between agriculture and human spiritual well-being important. The essay concludes after one of these excerpts from Berry when hooks states that “The collective black self-recovery takes place when we begin to renew our relationship to the earth, when we remember the way of our ancestors. When the earth is sacred to us, our bodies can also be sacred to us” (108).

In the course of hooks’ essay, she returns numerous times to contemplations of the act of gardening that, as a city person, she admits was initially difficult for her but that she found at last she could do. She speaks of finding time to hear birds and contemplate trees from her New York city apartment, and she draws attention to other black writers whose longing for natural imagery and whose narratives of gardening corroborate her feeling that, after the great migration, “Without the space to grow food, to commune with nature, or to mediate the starkness of poverty with the splendor of nature,
black people experienced profound depression” (hooks 106). Lest such an example of contemplation of the natural while in the city should seem contradictory when layered with the context of Berry’s agrarianism, Berry’s position on the urban should also be noted. He writes in “The Whole Horse” that “though agrarianism poses that everybody has agrarian responsibilities, it does not propose that everybody should be a farmer or that we do not need cities” (Art 244). Rather, agrarianism poses that people should try, against the transience of modernity, to stay put, to grow something, to put down literal and figurative roots, to be local: “[Agrarians] would insist … that the shop or factory owner should not be an outsider, but rather a sharer in the fate of the place and its community. The deciders should live with the results of their decisions” (244).

One of hooks’ primary examples of the importance of communion with nature for African Americans comes from Toni Morrison, whose first novel, _The Bluest Eye_, documents the move from south to north in the character of Miss Pauline. Despite Pauline’s estrangement from the natural world in the industrial North, hooks observes that “when she falls in love for the first time she can name that experience only by evoking images from nature, from an agrarian world and near wilderness and natural splendor” (hooks 106). Such imagery and language is equally apparent in Morrison’s _Tar Baby_ in the cosmopolitan Jadine’s attraction to the primitive outcast called “Son.”

Like hooks, Alice Walker, author of _In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens_, writes of the history of agrarianism as a vital strain in African American literature. Using an epigraph\(^{18}\) pulled from “Avey” in Jean Toomer’s _Cane_, a passage which portrays the pain

---

\(^{18}\) “I described her own nature and temperament. Told how they needed a larger life for their expression….pointed out that in lieu of proper channels, her emotions had overflowed the paths that dissipated them. I talked, beautifully I thought, about an art that
of the hidden artistry and spirituality of southern women in northern cities, Walker tells
a personal tale of the power of agrarian activity to, in hooks’ words, “reclaim a spiritual
legacy where we connect our well-being to the well-being of the earth” (107). Walker
writes that her own mother’s ambitious gardens are magically full of color and art, and
she attests that:

it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to
the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in
work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal
conception of Beauty. (Walker 241)

Taking Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and bell hooks as literary examples of the
women of color whom De Chiro locates as composing much of the environmental justice
movement, Berry, for his circumspect view on race in American politics, has shown little
engagement in his works with either black literature of the twentieth century or with
black women in particular. In fact, accusations of patriarchal thinking have dogged Berry
at least as long as the publication of his essay “Why I Don’t Own a Computer” in which
his reference to his wife’s service to him in preparing his manuscripts on a typewriter led
readers to suggest in letters (included in the text of What Are People For?) that Berry had
found a “handy alternative” to the computer: “Wife—a low-tech energy saving device”
(WAPF? 172).

In response, Berry regrets that some have disdained to imagine and denied “the
validity of two decent and probably necessary possibilities: marriage as a state of mutual

would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her. I asked her to
hope, and build up an inner life against the coming of that day….I sang, with a strange
quiver in my voice, a promise song” (Cane 48).
help, and the household as economy” (WAPF? 180). Berry critiques the views he sees as implicit in his critics’ arguments that women who are not career women are invariably lesser than those who do something, meaning a job outside the home. Berry links his critics’ essentialist views to the culturally entrenched and so-called higher aims of technological progress, money and ease and he indicts them as valuing greed and “an obscure, cultish faith in ‘the future’” (WAPF? 188) over love, care, esteem, and respect for family, community and land. While some would see this response as a red herring, others see a connection.

Kimberly K. Smith, for one, writes that “Although not uncritical of the political movement [of feminism, Berry’s] embrace of certain feminist perspectives suggests surprisingly rich possibilities for a feminist agrarianism” (“Wendell Berry’s Feminist Agrarianism” 623). One of the eco-feminist perspectives Berry anticipates, according to Smith, is the critique of traditional constructions of the masculine ideal via rugged individualism. While she states that Berry’s fiction in particular may fall short of “capturing the subjective reality of rural women”, nonetheless, “His stories underscore the extent to which violence and domination are integral to manhood in rural American society” (“WBFA” 630).

Indeed, examples of this attitude extend beyond Berry’s fiction to include such works as the very short essay, “Rugged Individualism” (published originally, perhaps ironically, in Playboy), in which Berry highlights three kinds of rugged individualism: (1) the ennobling sort as embodied by Thoreau and civil disobedience, (2) the tragic sort based on presumptive “rights” that authorize absolutist behavior unencumbered by communal responsibility, and (3) the comic sort known as “Conservative individualism
[that] strongly supports ‘family values’” but that nonetheless translate into easy profit for personal indulgence (*The Way Of Ignorance* 10). In seeking a new appraisal of the measure of manhood or husbandry, Berry is unequivocal: “‘Every man for himself’” he states, “is a doctrine for a feeding frenzy or for a panic in a burning nightclub, appropriate for sharks or hogs or perhaps a cascade of lemmings. A society wishing to endure must speak the language of caretaking, faith-keeping, kindness, neighborliness, and peace” (*TWOI* 11). To the extent that this statement is paternal, in that a man wrote it, it can only be thought so in the most benign sense. To the extent that it is applicable to males only, one need only make an easy exception; that is, one might grant that Berry might just as well have said that every woman for herself is an equally inimical doctrine and that the virtues of caretaking, faith-keeping, kindness, neighborliness, and peace (virtues classically constructed as feminine, to be sure) provide the same amount of benefit and obligation to both sexes.

By way of critiquing the masculine ideal in America that has operated at the expense of women, and by way of linking this critique to an agrarian spirit in African American literature, Berry does cite one perhaps unlikely source in *The Hidden Wound*, a little-remarked passage of Malcolm X’s autobiography that describes his joy in tending a portion of land lent to him from his mother’s garden:

One thing in particular that I remember made me feel grateful toward my mother was that one day I asked her for my own garden, and she did let me have my own little plot. I loved it and took care of it well. I loved especially to grow peas. I was proud when we had them on our table. I would pull out the grass in my garden by hand when the first little blades came up. I would patrol the rows on my hands
and knees for any worms and bugs, and I would kill and bury them. And sometimes when I had everything straight and clean for my things to grow, I would lie down on my back between two rows, and I would gaze up into the blue sky at the clouds moving and think all kinds of things. (*Malcolm X* 8)

The appreciation with which Berry glosses this quotation represents Berry’s eager absorption (not appropriation) of African American tradition into his own agrarian philosophy. His interpretation of Malcolm X’s childhood experience in his mother’s garden inspires these thoughts:

Malcolm X, it seems to me, was a heroic figure not so much because of what he did, but because of the thorough intelligence in all that he did. He had preeminently, as his book shows, the power to assimilate new evidence and new experience, and to change accordingly. He was not, as we were so eager to believe, simply a man of fury; he was a man of *intelligent* fury. He was not simply a creature of his condition or of political struggle, but a man of vision and of hope; the pace he kept, I imagine, would itself soon have destroyed a man shallowly motivated… . I keep going back to those few sentences about his garden, not as an explanation but as a clue. Part of the strength of that passage is that it is probably the only really serene and happy moment in the whole book. He doesn’t say what were the ‘all kinds of things’ he thought, but it is hard for me to avoid the suspicion of that experience—lying there as low as he could get, against the earth, his mind free—filled him with a rich sense of the possibilities of life in this world that never left him, and served him as a measure of the destructiveness and sterility of racism. (*THW* 85)
Appreciating the constantly synthesizing mind and deep motivation of Malcolm X, Berry looks for the fount of imagination and finds not only nurture, but nature, not only the fury of “a creature of his condition or of political struggle” but of serene freedom born of contact with natural order and in work that provides for one and makes one proud. Environmental justice, in this context, becomes justice for all, Berry ends his remarks on Malcolm X by stating that the passage recalls to his mind “the myth of Antaeus, the giant of Libya, the son of earth” (*THW* 85). Perhaps it was this myth which bell hooks had in mind when she titled her essay “Touching the Earth.” It is the story of a great man who could not be conquered so long as he touched the ground.
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN EQUITABLE AGRARIAN COMMONWEALTH

Though I have chosen to title this essay “Toward an Equitable Agrarian Commonwealth,” the phrase is redundant. *Commonweal*, which the New Oxford American Dictionary defines as “the welfare of the public,” refers to the entire public, without distinction; true commonwealths are always already equitable. This simple definition cuts to the heart of the economic and spiritual problem that Berry’s work has been describing thus far, that up to now the United States has not been a commonwealth. While fairness in an unfair world is impossible, the nation cannot be excused for not having the entire public’s welfare at heart. When this apathetic status quo changes, when Americans realize that ecological limits, responsible economic practice, and non-discriminatory community accountability and understanding are inseparable threads in the fabric of any healthy culture, then perhaps the United States will be worthy of the title of a commonwealth: to be sure, much progress has been made.

However, the very mention of the term *commonwealth* is likely to seem naïve. In his foreword to Wendell Berry’s 2010 book, *What Matters? Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth*, Herman Daly anticipates questions from his economics students when he assigns the book: “Why should I read a book on ‘economics for a renewed commonwealth’? There likely won’t be a single equation in the book, and use of the archaic word ‘commonwealth’ betrays a probable lack of understanding of the individualistic basis of neoclassical economic theory” (*What Matters?* v-vi). To this objection, Daly makes a distinction between short-term efficiency economics and long-term sustainability economics, basically stating that twenty-first-century Americans, and
a good portion of modern humanity generally, is stuck using short-term economic thinking. This is thinking that disregards “the science or art of efficiently producing, distributing, and maintaining concrete use values for the household and community over the long run” (What Matters? vii). Daly praises Berry and his agrarian vision for offering a correction that dates back to classical Greece. “However,” he writes glibly, “if we are too proud to accept correction from a poet and agrarian, we can claim to have rediscovered Aristotle’s forgotten definitions all by ourselves” (What Matters? x). The economic distinctions Berry makes in 2010 are some of the same that the Southern Agrarians try to make in I’ll Take My Stand, and some of the same that Kimberly Smith alludes to in African American Environmental Thought: basically, that blind devotion to material accumulation without regard for the long term consequences produces suffering, whether the dominant accumulator is the white race to the exclusion of the black, or the industrial capitalists to the exclusion of those groups performing the necessary work.

If Wendell Berry did not specifically have the ideal of commonwealth in mind when he wrote The Hidden Wound, he certainly did when he wrote its Afterword, in which he argues that:

A true and appropriate answer to our race problem, as to many others, would be a restoration of our communities—it being understood that a community, properly speaking, cannot exclude or mistreat any of its members. This is what we forgot during slavery and the industrialization that followed, and have never

---

19 The distinction to which Daly refers is Aristotle’s between oikonomia and chrematistics, between values of household and community sustainability and the short-term maximization of efficiency and accumulation. Daly makes the point that, though the term “economics” derives from oikonomia, it is closer to chrematistics; moreover, Daly argues, modern “economics” has largely rejected values of oikonomia (vii).
remembered. A proper community, we should remember also, is a commonwealth: a place, a resource, and an economy. It answers the needs, practical as well as social and spiritual, of its members—among them the need to need one another. The answer to the present alignment of political power with wealth is the restoration of community and economy. (THW 135)

As long as a lack of community between white and black persists, the cynical cycle of “othering” and of civil rights negotiations that lack the overarching and primary imperative of a “mutual recognition of a common humanity” (THW 110), as long as this cycle persists, the United States will remain divided, racially and economically. If, however, Americans recognize the nation’s original sin of slavery, and if Americans recognize humanity’s original sin of pride, then perhaps “the self-love of self-righteous anger and the self-love of self-righteous guilt” (THW 110) can cease to define race relations in this country, and a way toward forgiveness, reconciliation, and love will emerge. Judging by the narrative of the authors examined in detail in this essay, there is at least one trajectory in American letters that suggests this vision as a possibility. And while it is undoubtedly true that such words as forgiveness, reconciliation, love, and commonwealth denote practices more than they denote final destinations, they must nevertheless be thought of as ends. They are idealistic, of course, but only insofar as they serve as practical ideals, visions for which one strives with critical vigilance and a value for justice—and grace. Such practice as commonwealth requires is never easy, and it requires a depth of knowledge that is intimate, shared, and accountable. The wound that Berry describes is deep; the only way to heal is to ensure that today’s roots reach deeper. The ground upon which to grow is the ground beneath our feet.
REFERENCES


Donaldson, Susan. “Introduction.” *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian


Jefferson, Thomas. The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson. Ed. and Intro. by


