

The Hidden Activism of White-Life Novels:

Frank Yerby's *The Foxes of Harrow* and the Fledgling Civil Rights Movement

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In 1890, Amelia E. Johnson published the first white-life novel, *Clarence and Corinne; or, God's Way* and unwittingly created a new literary genre. A white-life text is a piece of literature written by an African American author, but featuring an all-white, or mostly white, cast of characters. The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth saw a variety of these texts published, but not until Frank Yerby brought out his white-life novel, *The Foxes of Harrow*, in 1946 did the genre take off. Yerby's commercial success with his white-life novel - the book sold over two million copies<sup>1</sup> and he became the "best-selling black writer of all time"<sup>2</sup> - sparked a new trend in African American literature. Whereas the early 1940s had been dominated by Richard Wright and his brand of racial protest, which tended to use literature as the vehicle for illustrating the physical and psychological consequences of segregation, "the later 1940s were fairly dominated by Frank Yerby and his style of success - a Jim Crow special that removed black protagonists."<sup>3</sup> The fact that Yerby ultimately made a name for himself penning supposedly non-racial novels is ironic given that he began his career in the racial protest vein, with his first few short stories emphasizing the racial inequality omnipresent in America during the 1940s. However, by the end of World War II, Yerby realized "[p]ublishers had grown tired of sociological protest"<sup>4</sup> and recognized a shift away from racial protest literature was occurring. As a result, after a failed attempt to publish a novel about a black Ph.D. entitled *This Is My Own*, Yerby turned to the genre of southern romance and penned *Foxes*, a book that won him fame and

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey Breit, *The Writer Observed* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1956), 195.

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Brown, *The Postwar African American Novel: Protest and Discontent, 1945-1950* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 67.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence P. Jackson, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 271-72.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

renown among his readers, but also enmity from African American scholars in the later twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

The commercial success of *Foxes* spawned a new literary movement among African American authors, as the decade following the novel's publication saw many white-life texts appear on the market.<sup>6</sup> However, while some contemporary critics, such as James Baldwin, praised these texts, in the long-run, white-life works have not been viewed favorably, a trend that reflects a disturbing disregard for the postwar environment that produced this literature.<sup>7</sup> The Second World War played a prominent role in the development of the white-life genre, as the conflict saw discussions about race become prominent, and occasionally violent, in the United States. Additionally, following the war's conclusion, publishing houses perceived not only a new consumer market in prosperous African Americans, but also a racial fatigue among white readers. The combination of a desire to appeal to the black dollar, white readers' discontent with racial literature, and Yerby's success with *Foxes* among both black and white readers prompted the rise of the white-life novel. However, most scholars and readers since the beginning of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s have ignored these works, taking Mary Helen Washington's line that white-life texts are "vacuous as a soap opera"<sup>8</sup> because they do not directly engage with the issue of race. Recent scholars such as John C. Charles, Lawrence P. Jackson, Stephanie Brown, and Gene Andrew Jarrett have attempted to reframe the value of white-life novels by

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<sup>5</sup> Gene Andrew Jarrett, *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 144.

<sup>6</sup> A few of the more notable white-life works that appeared in the postwar era were Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* (1947), Ann Petry's *Country Place* (1947), Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), William Gardner Smith's *Anger at Innocence* (1950), Chester Himes' *Cast the First Stone* (1952), Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday* (1954), and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956).

<sup>7</sup> John C. Charles, *Abandoning the Black Hero: Sympathy and Privacy in the Postwar African American White-Life Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 40.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Helen Washington, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Woman Half in Shadow," in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. Alice Walker (New York: Feminist Press, 1979), 21.

examining them within a larger historical context and arguing white-life authors “could not escape the publishing climate”<sup>9</sup> of the late 1940s, but further work remains to be done.

While these scholars’ reframing is vital to white-life recovery, their work has almost exclusively put white-life texts in conversation with issues relating to the publishing industry and the general condition of African Americans after the Second World War. Such a reactionary view disregards how white-life texts may have helped shape African American history after the conflict, particularly in relation to the fledgling Civil Rights Movement. White-life texts’ origins are deeply embedded in the social moment that produced them, and as such they are worthy of study in a historical context because of “what they bring to light about an understudied and undertheorized era in black literary history - the years leading up to, during, and following the Second World War.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, these texts are valuable historical as well as literary documents, and as the text that initiated this postwar trend, *Foxes* is particularly worthy of study.

The white-life vogue in the United States is not an unexplainable anomaly, but instead the product of powerful social factors, such as the changes the Second World War brought to America’s shores and a desire to appeal to both black and racially-fatigued white readers. These social pressures manifested in Yerby’s *Foxes*, a text that interacts with, as well as promotes, early aims of the Civil Rights Movement, particularly the focus on breaking down the walls of whiteness and subtly promoting racial equality, in order to contribute to, as well as reflect, the movement’s sentiments.

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<sup>9</sup> Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, 272.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

### **Racial Protest to White-Life: The Transformation of Black Literature in the 1940s**

The war that highlighted the racial problems which contributed to white readers' supposed postwar racial fatigue and the rise of the white-life novel has, ironically, often been seen as a "good war," a "necessary war of self-defense that ended in the defeat of international bullies . . . ended the depression, ushered in an era of unprecedented prosperity, and brought the nation's citizens together."<sup>11</sup> While historians in the twenty-first century have largely eroded this perception by pointing to conflict on the home front during the war in the form of race riots and protests as well as postwar conservative backlashes against women and blacks, an understudied part of this history is the war's effects on African American literature. Between 1940 and 1950, the style and subject matter of blacks' novels changed dramatically, going from racial protest literature to what is often "read as the 'assimilationist' product of a disillusioned black writer,"<sup>12</sup> or the white-life text, by 1950. The Second World War is not exclusively responsible for this change, but the racial tensions the conflict brought to the surface in America emphasized the United States' hypocritical stance on freedom. While the war may have revealed America's hypocrisy, the conflict also brought prosperity for many African Americans and with their rise in economic standing, publishing houses sought to court the black dollar as well as satisfy what they perceived to be racially fatigued white readers, creating a publishing environment that encouraged black writers to move away from penning racial protest works.

Before the postwar decline in popularity of race literature in the U.S. though, novels and stories that dealt directly with the issue of race were extremely popular, with the most successful of these racial works being the protest novels published between 1940 and 1946. This vogue in

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, "Introduction," in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *The Postwar African American Novel*, 74.

racial protest literature began in 1940 with the publication of Wright's *Native Son*, a novel about a young black man in Chicago named Bigger Thomas who accidentally smothers the daughter of his white employers, is caught, charged with murder and (falsely) rape, convicted, and sent to the electric chair. Read by both blacks and whites alike thanks to the influence of the Book-of-the-Month Club, which placed the text in thousands of white homes across America and gave a black writer unprecedented publicity, *Native Son* "constituted a watershed moment in black American writing."<sup>13</sup> The novel was one of the first to explicitly show the devastating economic and psychological effects of segregation and racism, but more than this fact, the text was a bestseller, selling 250,000 copies in its first two months on the market.<sup>14</sup> African Americans had been writing fiction for centuries, but "*Native Son* made Wright the first black American to actually make a living from creative writing."<sup>15</sup> The consequence was "an enormous growth in consciousness in American audiences and publishers"<sup>16</sup> as not only Wright, but a slew of other black writers, including William Attaway, Charles Ruthaven Offord, Chester Himes, and Ann Petry, published racial protest novels in the early 1940s.<sup>17</sup> The popularity of this genre was a boon to African Americans who had been writing about race for years without seeing any significant change in the conversation or profit on their part, but the entrance into mainstream American culture, while beneficial, came at a cost.

Black authors have never been immune to the influences of the primarily white publishing industry, but the relationship between white publisher and black writer became more complex after *Native Son* proved racial protest literature could be worth something to white

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<sup>13</sup> Charles, *Abandoning the Black Hero*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Charles, *Abandoning the Black Hero*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, 125.

<sup>17</sup> The novels alluded to here are Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941), Offord's *The White Face* (1943), Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), and Petry's *The Street* (1946). All of these novels were well-received, but none matched the popularity of Wright's work.

publishing houses. As even Wright discovered, the price of having white readers consume a racial protest text was often letting a white editor sanitize the piece in order to let the work dissent, but not disrupt, America's racial order. In Wright's case, he had to "ton[e] down the interracial romance between Bigger Thomas and Mary Dalton [his employer's daughter] as well as remov[e] a masturbation scene early on in the text."<sup>18</sup> While these changes were controversial, Wright had to make them because getting the white Book-of-the-Month Club's endorsement was "premised on revisions that reinforce[d] standard social definitions of racial identity in 1940,"<sup>19</sup> even if the text as a whole remained contentious. The need for Wright to revise his work in order to preserve the illusion of white superiority reflects black authors' general struggle during the 1940s. An African American writer could "take as his subject only the writing of black life, a topic whose central thrust is always predetermined by its emphasis on 'protest,'"<sup>20</sup> but while race was the only subject black authors were expected to write about, they could not protest to the extent that they undermined white readers' feelings of superiority. As a result, while *Native Son* opened up new opportunities for African Americans, it also pigeonholed them and forced their literature to protest racial injustice, but not call out white supremacy, if they wished to achieve commercial success.

The problem with the prominence of racial protest literature in the early 1940s beyond the fact that African American writers essentially had to publish about race or perish, was that this genre's popularity and success heavily depended upon white patronage. The Second World War partially changed this trend, as African Americans' postwar prosperity made white

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<sup>18</sup> John K. Young, "'Quite as Human as it is Negro': Subpersons and Textual Property in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*," in *Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race Since 1850*, ed. George Hutchinson and John K. Young (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 72.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *The Postwar African American Novel*, 29-30.

companies eager to win the black dollar as well as the white one.<sup>21</sup> As Robert E. Weems, Jr., asserts, “[t]he massive mid-twentieth-century migration of African Americans to cities across the country resulted not only in a change of address for the migrants, but also in a distinct improvement in their occupational status . . . contribut[ing] mightily toward increasing the perceived importance of the black consumer market.”<sup>22</sup> Until the Second World War, many white companies, including publishing houses, did not tap the black market, but with the postwar rise in black prosperity, African Americans began to play a more prominent role in advertising strategies. However, the rise of the black consumer market did not negate the importance of the white one, meaning that advertisers needed to appeal to both market segments, even if that meant taking out additional ads “tailored to attract African-American consumers.”<sup>23</sup> For publishers though, creating a product, much less advertising, that appealed to both blacks and whites became difficult after the Second World War because while racial protest was in vogue in the early 1940s, after the conflict ended, publishers perceived a racial fatigue in their white readers. This shift in publishing house desires created the perfect storm for a resurgence in white-life texts, as the tokenism of the black author could, theoretically, draw in the black dollar while the apparent racelessness of works such as *Foxes* made the works palatable to white readers. The vogue in racial protest literature thus proved temporary, as by the end of the Second World War, the mainstream market for novels directly addressing the race problem had all but disappeared.

Much of the initial change in publishers’ attitudes toward race literature came about as a result of the attention given to racial issues during the Second World War, with protests unflatteringly calling attention to blacks’ plight at a time when America was presenting itself as a

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<sup>21</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 323.

<sup>22</sup> Robert E. Weems, Jr., “African American Consumers since World War II,” in *African American Urban History since World War II*, ed. Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe W. Trotter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 360.

<sup>23</sup> Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, 324.



bastion of democracy and equality.<sup>24</sup> The era of Jim Crow was far from over when the United States entered the Second World War in December 1941, and many African Americans resented the disconnect between President Franklin D. Roosevelt's assertion that America was fighting for democracy and the fact that blacks remained second-class citizens. In an effort to inspire change as well as bring attention to their cause, many African Americans engaged in promoting the Double V campaign, a movement that sought to achieve "victory against fascism abroad and Jim Crow at home."<sup>25</sup> While concessions made during the war, including the implementation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) in 1941, allowed many African Americans to advance economically within the United States, wartime legislation failed to manifest in the racial equality many desired. As a result, "[a]s the war progressed in tandem with continued organized black pressure for change, a growing voice of militancy could be heard,"<sup>26</sup> escalating racial tensions in America even further as the war went on.

This growing unrest exploded in 1943 when race riots erupted in cities such as Los Angeles, Detroit, and West Harlem, but in spite of blacks' obvious calls for social change, previously "Othered" whites, not African Americans, became members of mainstream society after 1945, leaving many blacks feeling bitter about their wartime experiences. In the First World War, many African Americans fought on the United States' behalf and during this conflict's sequel in the 1940s they did the same, hoping that their sacrifices and accomplishments would result in an improvement of race relations on the home front. However, this hope was not realized for many years on a grand scale for blacks because while the Second World War is often seen as a unifying conflict for Americans, this unification was largely confined to white

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Sugrue, "Hillburn, Hattiesburg, and Hitler: Wartime Activists Think Globally and Act Locally," in *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 88.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>26</sup> Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience during World War II* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 42.

America. As Thomas Bruscino acknowledge, America saw new ethnicities, such as the Irish and Italians, included under the heading of “white” for the first time after the Second World War, with blacks paying the price for this unity.<sup>27</sup> European immigrants frequently believed “becoming American meant becoming white,”<sup>28</sup> a view that “intensified their prejudice against blacks”<sup>29</sup> and resulted in a more collective white America at the expense of African Americans. This “us versus them” mentality persisted in postwar America as veterans and American citizens “became reactionary on issues of race in their fear of blacks challenging them both economically and socially.”<sup>30</sup> This resentment was not one African American authors feared confronting. As Zora Neale Hurston wrote in “Crazy for This Democracy” (1945), “[a]ll I want to do is to get hold of a sample of the thing [democracy], and I declare, I sure will try it. I don’t know for myself, but I have been told that it is really wonderful.”<sup>31</sup> While America claimed to be the arsenal of democracy, Hurston preferred “Ass-and-All of Democracy,”<sup>32</sup> an expression that reflected blacks’ widespread frustration about their continued second-class citizen status.

This postwar focus on white America, not blacks’ continuing struggles, had a significant impact on the black literature of the postwar period. Following the end of the Second World War, white America “attained a single, clean vision of the nation, but only by cropping out anything that could blur the picture,”<sup>33</sup> and blacks’ protests against white supremacy was one “blur” white America resented. While ascertaining the full extent of whites’ unwillingness to

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Bruscino, *A Nation Forged in War: How World War II Taught Americans to Get Along* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Gary Gerstle, “The Working Class Goes to War,” in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 118.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>30</sup> Bruscino, *A Nation Forged in War*, 211.

<sup>31</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “Crazy for This Democracy,” in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. Alice Walker (New York: Feminist Press, 1979), 165.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>33</sup> Bruce Lenthall, “Outside the Panel - Race in America’s Popular Imagination: Comic Strips before and after World War II,” *Journal of American Studies* 32, no. 1 (1998): 39.

engage in discussions about race after the war is nearly impossible, what is clear is that publishers bought into the idea of a single America because “the dilemma of racial antagonism as a theme of interest to the commercial press dried up considerably after 1945 . . . no publisher wanted the label of house to activist Negro writers.”<sup>34</sup> As a result, African American authors encountered a new problem in the publishing industry, in that while editors and readers still expected blacks to write about race, they also “urged black writers to chuck [the] bitterness, environmental horror, and ambiguity”<sup>35</sup> that had been a hallmark of their work only a few years before. African American authors were, therefore, put in a difficult position, because while white publishers wanted black writers to pen novels about race, they did not want them to protest or void the informal publishing moratorium on blacks undermining the traditional racial order in their works. Ultimately, while blacks gained buying power after World War II, the white market was still where the majority of money was, and because publishers sold books to make a profit, satisfying white readers remained imperative.

Limiting the ways African American authors could criticize America’s racial hierarchy effectively cut off opportunities for black writers to pen progressive race novels. Outside of exposing the dregs of African American society, black writers had few viable options for subject matter because after World War II publishers frowned both upon protest literature and the exploration of upper-class black life, as the latter challenged America’s racial order. The racial protest literature of the early 1940s had effectively helped initiate discussions about race in the United States, but the genre was “understood to be an unsophisticated (and thus more real) version of the novel form itself,”<sup>36</sup> meaning that while this literature was provocative, it remained safe. The black characters in racial protest novels may have exposed the injustice of the

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<sup>34</sup> Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, 234.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>36</sup> Brown, *The Postwar African American Novel*, 30.

Jim Crow system, but most of these figures, like Bigger, were poor and spoke in dialect, meaning that while they challenged segregation, they did not directly confront white supremacy.

However, the manuscripts that authors such as Hurston and Yerby submitted in the wake of the backlash against racial protest literature did threaten to undermine whiteness. Both authors wanted to publish novels about upper-class African Americans, but encountered strong resistance. As Hurston confessed to her friend, Carl Van Vechten, in 1945, her publisher, Lippincott, had rejected a manuscript “on the upper strata of Negro life”<sup>37</sup> because the company “decided that the American public was not ready for it yet.”<sup>38</sup> Even Harper & Brothers, the company that published *Native Son*, deemed Yerby’s novel about a black Ph.D. too radical for publication.<sup>39</sup> These types of novels followed the stories of “uppity” blacks whose status, whether social, educational, or a combination thereof, challenged the traditional racial hierarchy in the U.S. by suggesting blacks had the potential to advance themselves. Such a radical message made these manuscripts “unpublishable” because they supposedly pushed the discussion of race too far, and a book that made its white readership feel uncomfortable was unlikely to become a bestseller, forcing black writers to get creative with their writing techniques in the conservative postwar era.

### **Frank Yerby, *Foxes*, and the Civil Rights Agenda**

An answer to the question of what blacks could publish and still make a living off of appeared in 1946 with Yerby’s *Foxes*, a southern romance that both publishers and readers eagerly consumed. In his inaugural novel, Yerby “seemed to have produced a major and

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<sup>37</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Carl Van Vechten, 12 September 1945, in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: Anchor, 2002), 529.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 529.

<sup>39</sup> Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, 233.

controversial anomaly for the 1940s - a novel by a black writer apparently not only deliberately unengaged with social realism and race but also entirely disinclined to court critical approval of any kind.”<sup>40</sup> An immediate bestseller, *Foxes*, like *Native Son*, started a new trend in African American literature, as for the next decade, with the exception of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), white-life texts dominated the African American literary scene. Traditionally, Yerby’s southern romance novels have often been dismissed as “pulp or escapist fiction”<sup>41</sup> devoid of any aesthetic or racial value. Now though, certain scholars, such as Brown, argue “Yerby’s shift from the protest genre to the southern historical romance needs to be understood not only as commercially canny but also as a shrewd attempt to exploit the form to further an embedded political agenda.”<sup>42</sup> As Brown suggests, *Foxes* was, in reality, a unique response to the publishing difficulties black writers faced in postwar America and revealed a methodology for subtly engaging with the ongoing racial discussions of the 1940s. The lack of suffering black characters in white-life texts satisfied white publishers’ demand that African American authors cater to both black and white readers. However, the prominence of whiteness in the novels also allowed writers such as Yerby to criticize America’s racial hierarchy, an essential part of the fledgling Civil Rights Movement.<sup>43</sup> In “shifting the sympathetic gaze of their largely white readership away from suffering black ‘others’ and toward troubled and troubling white subjects,”<sup>44</sup> Yerby, and ultimately other white-life novelists, were able to criticize whiteness because any negative commentary concerning the racial order was coming from white, not black, characters. Thus, the critiques appeared harmlessly intraracial as opposed to threateningly

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<sup>40</sup> Brown, *The Postwar African American Novel*, 68.

<sup>41</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Valerie Smith, “Realism, Naturalism, Modernism 1940-1960,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, vol. 2, *Realism, Naturalism, Modernism to the Present*, 3rd ed., ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie Smith (New York and London: Norton, 2014), 94.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, *The Postwar African American Novel*, 71.

<sup>43</sup> Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 14-15.

<sup>44</sup> Charles, *Abandoning the Black Hero*, 8.

interracial. As a result, Yerby's work subtly furthers several aims of the early Civil Rights Movement of the 1940s, specifically undermining whiteness' perfection and advocating for desegregation, while simultaneously making this rhetoric palatable to white readers.

Superficially, Yerby appears to concede to white pressures to write a raceless novel in *Foxes*, but his portrayals of whiteness in his first book are far from ideal and instead of reinforcing the conception of whites as naturally superior to blacks, the novel subtly exposes the cracks in the white facade. While readers are undoubtedly supposed to admire the protagonist, Stephen Fox, and his determination to build a legacy from nothing in Louisiana, Stephen and his white compatriots are hardly heroes. Instead, Yerby "portray[s] white southerners as ruthless, as scoundrels, as immoral - certainly the opposite of the white southern representation of the white south."<sup>45</sup> In fact, some of the "whitest" characters in the novel, including a German plantation owner named Hugo Waguespack, are the cruelest, while Stephen, a non-white Irishman<sup>46</sup> and a "black-hearted scoundrel,"<sup>47</sup> is one of the kinder individuals and comes to symbolize the triumph of American diversity. Stephen is not quite white in antebellum Louisiana, yet he manages to overpower and kill the cruel Waguespack in a duel. In killing the supposedly pure "white" German and subsequently getting more work out of his slaves with kindness than Waguespack ever could with violence, Stephen reveals that the purest white is the "swine as will ultimately root up the whole world,"<sup>48</sup> not the darkest black as Waguespack asserted. While Stephen may not be white by the standards of his day, after the Second World War changed the definition of "white," he became white enough that his killing of the German did not upset the racial status

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<sup>45</sup> Bruce A. Glasrud and Laurie Champion, "'The Fishes and the Poet's Hands': Frank Yerby, A Black Author in White America," *Journal of American Culture* 23, no. 4 (2000): 17.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen does not have any African or black heritage as far as readers know, but most U.S. citizens did not consider the Irish fully "white" until the Second World War had helped unify America's various European ethnicities. As *Foxes* takes place between 1825 and 1865, during his life Stephen would still have been considered a non-white in much of the United States.

<sup>47</sup> Frank Yerby, *The Foxes of Harrow* (New York: Dial, 1946), 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

quo, but still rattled it, a methodology that echoes that of early Civil Rights activists. World War II “had weakened European colonial empires and eroded the credibility of doctrines of white superiority”<sup>49</sup> and African American activists fought to capitalize on this dissolution. In working toward the goal of equality, African Americans further broke down assumptions about whiteness through desegregation legislation at the local, state, national, and even international levels. While Yerby does not explicitly call for overturning the white supremacist order, Stephen and his actions encourage readers to engage with this larger debate about whiteness, especially because Stephen is not the only character whose actions call into question the validity of white supremacy.

The behavior of Mike Farrel, one of Stephen’s friends, also gives the impression that the association between white skin and purity is undeserved, particularly because Yerby describes Mike’s violent actions in animalistic terms. Mike, like Stephen, is an Irishman, but as an individual with lighter skin, he possesses what Ta-Nehisi Coates calls a “strange birthright - the right to beat, rape, rob, and pillage the black body,”<sup>50</sup> and Mike exercises this “privilege” in full. In spite of Mike’s light skin and his attempts to justify his rape and sexual assault by asserting that the sex would have been “just a wee bit of sport”<sup>51</sup> and that forced intercourse with him “‘twould do her [Suzette, a house slave] good in fact,”<sup>52</sup> Yerby classifies Mike as an animal. For example, when Mike attempts to rape Suzette, the narrator describes him as a man with the “power of a grizzly striking”<sup>53</sup> with hairy “paw[s].”<sup>54</sup> Such descriptions of Mike indicate that as much privilege as his white skin offers in society, he is no better than a beast in his behavior.

This specific association of Mike with animals is particularly noteworthy given that his

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<sup>49</sup> Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 14-15.

<sup>50</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 102.

<sup>51</sup> Yerby, *The Foxes of Harrow*, 155.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

attempted rape of Suzette is followed shortly by Achille's, Stephen's black overseer, successful rape of an African slave called La Belle Sauvage. Stephen intends Belle to be Achille's wife, but when the proud woman continually refuses the overseer's advances, Achille decides "[s]he had no right to make him feel like a dog or a horse or any owned thing"<sup>55</sup> and that he must have her. While Achille's rape of Belle is no less problematic than Mike's attempted assault on Suzette in the twenty-first century, the fact that in 1946 the white, rather than the black, man is associated with animals as a result of his lust reverses the commonly held stereotype that black men are salacious beasts bent on rape. Achille sexually assaults Belle, but Yerby does not label him as an animal. Instead, he attacks the institution of whiteness and subtly calls out white men's systematic sexual abuse of black women, once more fragmenting the facade of white perfection.

While Mike is the only white male in the novel equated with an animal, he is not the sole unsympathetic white in *Foxes*, as Stephen's son, Etienne, is almost inherently unlikeable due to his extreme racism. From a young age, Etienne is marked as different from his more tolerant father, with Andre Le Blanc, Stephen's closest friend, noting the young Etienne "has a sickness of the mind . . . Like that La Laurie<sup>56</sup> [sic] woman who tortured her slaves,"<sup>57</sup> and, indeed, as an adult Etienne is a vicious and racist master. Though his personal slave, Inch, is intelligent and serves him well, Etienne treats him poorly, and the unfairness of this situation becomes prominent when Etienne's views come into conflict with those of a liberal French artist, Paul Dumaine. Paul, who has traveled from Paris to Louisiana with Etienne, finds "Inch a capital fellow"<sup>58</sup> and does not believe "[s]uch a minor irrelevance as a little pigmentation"<sup>59</sup> should

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>56</sup> Madame Marie Delphine Lalaurie was a Creole socialite in New Orleans during the early nineteenth century who is best known for torturing her slaves in her attic, a cruelty only exposed when her mansion in the French Quarter caught fire in 1834.

<sup>57</sup> Yerby, *The Foxes of Harrow*, 229.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 347.



prevent intelligent blacks from bettering themselves. In contrast, Etienne preaches racial essentialism and maintains Inch is nothing more than a “black ape”<sup>60</sup> who needs constant reminders about his low status in society to prevent insurrection and revolt. While many slaveholders and Southerners held such a view in the nineteenth century, Etienne’s perspective comes across as harsh and unfair given Inch’s loyalty as well as the protagonist’s changing temperament.

Stephen, while initially an individual who could not see himself relating to blacks in the slightest and believing in the necessity of slavery, has come to view it as a questionably moral institution by the time Paul chastises Etienne for his views. In fact, Stephen openly toys with the idea of “[f]ree[ing] the Negroes by gradual emancipation - and retain[ing] them upon the land under small wages and our patronage.”<sup>61</sup> The increasingly liberal perspective readers encounter in sympathetic characters such as Stephen and Paul isolates Etienne from the reader and makes his racism and, more generally, the concept of white supremacy, unpalatable to Yerby’s readers. While early Civil Rights activists were more direct in their methods of challenging white supremacy, both their and Yerby’s methods achieve the same end: a breakdown of white purity. The difference was that Civil Rights activists could be more open about their goals and aims while Yerby had to navigate the complex publishing house politics that wanted both black writers and non-racial stories. Yet in writing texts such as *Foxes*, Yerby was still building on, and contributing to, these Civil Rights discussions. By getting this novel, and subsequent similar ones, into the hands of millions of black and white Americans, Yerby exposed them to the larger racial questions and issues plaguing the U.S. and the world in the postwar era and encouraged them to question white superiority and, subsequently, segregation.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 339.

While the Civil Rights Movement was not always dedicated to the universal desegregation of America, in the postwar era, black activists were attempting to break down barriers for African Americans in the army, schools, and the job market. This push for desegregation is one *Foxes* subtly supports through the gradual transformation of Stephen's views on slavery and Inch's intelligence. As Lawrence P. Jackson acknowledges, "Yerby used the pulp narrative to present without special pleading the commonsense arguments in favor of ending racial segregation,"<sup>62</sup> and Stephen's views as well as Inch's brains play a key role in the conveyance of this point.

When Stephen first arrives in Louisiana, he confesses to Andre that he sees "nothing on earth so repulsive as a black"<sup>63</sup> and cannot imagine taking a black mistress or respecting the views of African Americans. Yet, by the novel's conclusion, Stephen has done both, as he has a brief affair with a light-skinned black woman named Desiree and respects the opinions of his head house slave, Tante Caleen, and Achille. He even goes so far as to identify explicitly with Achille, who dies of heartbreak shortly after Belle drowns herself rather than see her and Achille's son, Inch, become a slave. After Stephen's first wife, Odalie, dies in childbirth, he rides past Achille's grave and acknowledges that he now "understood why"<sup>64</sup> Achille died and admits he feels as Achille must have when his wife perished. Gradually, Stephen comes to view blacks as human to the point where he advocates for the end of slavery and shows Inch respect at the end of the novel, as the conclusion of the Civil War sees the former slave become Cyrus R. Inchcliff, the Commissioner of Police in New Orleans. While Stephen undoubtedly retains a general prejudice about blacks at the conclusion of the novel, he is not vehemently opposed to integration as his unsympathetic son is, as Etienne declares blacks' rise in the postbellum world

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<sup>62</sup> Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, 237.

<sup>63</sup> Yerby, *The Foxes of Harrow*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

to be unnatural.<sup>65</sup> In directing readers' sympathies toward Stephen, Yerby encourages them to follow his views and transform their own to be in line with his. Stephen is by no means an abolitionist, but his willingness to compromise and adapt his originally stereotyped view of African Americans suggests that blacks and whites can live together peacefully if both sides are willing to compromise. In subtly transforming his protagonist from a blatant racist to one willing to work with African Americans as well as respect their new postbellum positions of authority, Yerby reveals to readers that the proposals of Civil Rights activists are far from unreasonable and that integration and acceptance is possible if both parties keep their minds open.

The model for integration Yerby puts forth in *Foxes* is a peaceful one, as the amiable discussion that takes place between Stephen and Inch at the novel's conclusion suggests, but integration is also quiet because of what kind of blacks become part of Southern white society in Yerby's novel: a stereotype that has direct links to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s. Inch is the sole black that readers see fully integrated into society in *Foxes*, and the ex-slave functions as a symbol of how peacefully integration can and should occur. However, Inch is also an African American who might be considered, under different circumstances, part of W. E. B. Du Bois' Talented Tenth. Though born into slavery, Inch has an impressive teacher and education. His grandmother, Tante Caleen, teaches a young Inch how to subvert white power through respectability and being "just a little too polite,"<sup>66</sup> and Inch becomes increasingly professional as he ages. Not only does he use the forbidden knowledge of law he acquired at the Ecole de la Jurisprudence de Paris during and after the Civil War, but he dresses respectably as the Commissioner of Police, wearing, upon Stephen and Etienne's arrival at his office, a "dressing

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 526.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 239.

gown of finest silk.”<sup>67</sup> Inch is not a black ruffian who seeks to morally corrupt white society, but is instead a black who wishes to assimilate into it. Neither a rapist nor a scoundrel, Inch is entirely upright. Even Stephen confesses that the South needs to “find men with minds like Inch’s among them”<sup>68</sup> because he knows slavery cannot last forever. In using the unthreatening Inch as a vanguard and model for black integration, Yerby plays to the racial hierarchy of the 1940s. Like the iconic images of the Civil Rights Movement that appeared a decade later, *Foxes* uses a respectable African American to allay whites’ fears of a violent black horde and make integration palatable and, theoretically, possible.<sup>69</sup>

The subtlety in Yerby’s first novel in relation to the undermining of white purity and advocating in favor of racial integration has often gone unnoticed, an overlooking of racial content that diminishes our understanding of the influence *Foxes* and Yerby wielded in the mid-twentieth century, particularly in relation to the fledgling Civil Rights Movement. As a result of *Foxes*’ impressive sales and the fame the text brought Yerby, white-life novels became prominent in America after World War II. While the authors who followed in Yerby’s footsteps may have continued largely excising black characters from their works, they also continued Yerby’s tradition of furthering portions of the early Civil Rights agenda. Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* and Petry’s *Country Place*, for example, further break down the conception of whiteness as perfection by making either Othered white characters (*Seraph*) or minority figures (*Country Place*) sympathetic and the whites in the novels particularly cruel.<sup>70</sup> Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, which appeared a decade after the publication of *Foxes*, even takes Yerby’s dismantlement of white superiority further by working to undermine stereotypes about foreigners

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 524.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>69</sup> Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>70</sup> Veronica T. Watson, *The Souls of White Folk: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 60.

and Americans alike to put them on more even footing. Yerby's novel was not the sole one to lend literary support to the early Civil Rights agenda, and while the white-life authors of the 1940s were not part of an organized group, their literature consistently supported the agendas of early Civil Rights activists. This connection has, unfortunately, been missed in modern evaluations of white-life novels that appeared in the 1940s and 1950s, and has led to a devaluing of white-life texts through their removal from postwar history.

### **The Case for Literature: White-Life Novels as Historical Documents**

In ignoring white-life texts and their historical context, not only does the African American literary canon become problematic, but historians' view of the postwar era suffers as well. The current historical dialogue surrounding the Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement acknowledges the link between these two events, but has not heavily scrutinized the decade between the former's end and the latter's beginning, particularly the literary aspect. Scholarship has traditionally focused on the movements, both grassroots and national, that have directly contributed to the fight for racial equality. However, while the publishing industry and the literature it produced between 1946 and 1956 may not appear to directly relate to the Civil Rights struggle, the shifts in consumerism and the ways racial dissent in literature changed after the Second World War serves an important historical purpose by shedding light on the beginnings of the Civil Rights struggle and its far-reaching scope.

Though the Civil Rights Movement as we know it today was not yet in existence in 1946, its shadow was, and examining the postwar publishing industry and the literature black authors produced reveals parts, if not all, of this important forerunner. Blacks' economic power increased immensely following the Second World War, and the publishing industry's desire to court the black dollar foreshadows "[t]he strategic use of black spending power [that] represented the

cornerstone of the celebrated civil rights movement.”<sup>71</sup> Publishers were not the only ones who sought to appeal to the new black market though, and the pervasion of this dual-race marketing technique indicates just how powerful black consumers became after the war, and in the decade between the conflict and the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans learned how to use this power. While blacks’ postwar prosperity has not been ignored in scholarship, in relation to the publishing industry and literature, the effects of this economic advancement have often been overlooked because the tendency is to focus on mainstream activism as opposed to subtler techniques for undermining the racial order in the U.S.

However, in ignoring the role of literature and the publishing industry in the Civil Rights Movement, we lose an important link to this era because novels as popular as *Foxes* did much to disseminate Civil Rights-era ideas throughout the United States. The novels’ actual effects are impossible to measure, but these books’ connection to the Civil Rights era through their undermining of whiteness and the promotion of desegregation reveals how prevalent the push for equality was in the black community after the Second World War. Grassroots movements were appearing all over the United States to fight for equality, and while literature is not inherently activism, the postwar rise in the number of white-life novels arguably constitutes an aspect of this grassroots push for desegregation given the similar techniques employed in these works to undermine white supremacy. Literature does not develop in a vacuum, but is instead a product of various historical moments, and looking at the grassroots dissent of Yerby’s *Foxes* and other postwar white-life novels has the potential to reveal previously unexplored aspects of the early Civil Rights Movement. Activism and protest is more than marches, and the time has come to leave behind assumptions about white-life novels’ racelessness in order to more fully examine

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<sup>71</sup> Weems, “African American Consumers since World War II,” 359.

them as not only pieces of literature, but also historical documents that speak to an unseen side of blacks' struggle for emancipation in the mid-twentieth century.

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