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# **John Brown, Slavery, and the Legacies of Revolutionary Violence in Our Own Time: A Conference Commemorating the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Harpers Ferry Raid**

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*“I’ll Be John Browned”: Abolition in the Southern Imagination*

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Available online at <http://www.yale.edu/glc/john-brown/stauffer-abstract.pdf>  
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## **Abstract**

In 1864, the vast majority of Northerners and Union soldiers (save Copperheads and deserters) viewed John Brown as a hero. “John Brown’s Body” was the most popular song in the Union army, sung by soldiers as inspiration as they prepared to fight and possibly die for the cause of Union, and in 1864, emancipation. Although Brown had been extremely controversial in the North following his raid on Harpers Ferry, by 1864 he had effectively been mainstreamed by the war, considered a national hero.

However, by the 1880s and continuing up to the present, most white Americans have demonized Brown, referring to him as a murderer, madman, or terrorist.

What caused this profound shift in white attitudes toward Brown? The short answer is the influence of Southern writers. My talk focuses on three of the most influential Southern

writers, who profoundly shaped the image of Brown in the national imagination, and, appropriate for this conference, all taught at Yale: Robert Penn Warren, David Potter, and C. Vann Woodward.

Warren, Potter, and Woodward are among the most influential and important writers in the twentieth century. As writers, each of them loved irony, paradox, and the pragmatic perspective. And yet when they turned their attention to John Brown, they abandoned their irony and cast him as a melodramatic demon.

For them, Brown epitomized all that was wrong with Northern reformers: a fanatic who threatened their beloved South and had no concern for the costs of reform; an imperialist who sought to import into their region ruthless competition; industrialization; and Northern racism, which they saw as far more virulent than in the South.

Indeed, the only things Warren, Potter, and Woodward hated more than Northern reformers---from John Brown and the abolitionists to Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, and the feminists---were Communists and militant blacks. Northern radicals, militant blacks, and Communists undermined their desire---and that of liberal white Southerners more generally---to redeem their own region, and their ancestors, of crimes and guilt. Liberal white Southerners themselves wanted to lead the way in civil rights and race reform.

Like most other white Southern writers, Woodward, Warren, Potter were profoundly shaped by the power of place. They defined themselves first as Southerners, second as Americans. As Southern nationalists, they hoped their region could offer a healthy corrective to the rampant industrialization, combative individualism, and hyper-rationalism of the North.

Long before they became writers, they believed John Brown was demonic. For generations white Southerners so reviled Brown that his very name constituted an expletive: instead of saying “I’ll be God-damned” or “I’ll be hanged,” they said “I’ll be John-Browned.” The phrase “I’ll be John Brownded” (or “I’ll be John Brown”) appears in at least five different Southern folk songs and can still be heard in the South, especially among the older generation.

No wonder Southern writers have had such a hard time coming to terms with John Brown: from cradle to grave, generations have associated him as demonic.

The power of place has profoundly shaped the historiography of John Brown and the U.S. more broadly. Warren’s, Woodward’s, and Potter’s South was a communal, orderly region that downplayed or ignored lynching and other forms of racial warfare that had long existed between whites and blacks. It left no room for militant and nationalist blacks. And it was a place that needed to be redeemed for the sins of the past by Southern whites. Their South was, in other words, a sentimental, utopian vision that never existed.

It is a rich irony that Woodward, Potter, Warren, who loved irony, paradox, and pragmatism and disdained Northern utopian thought, romantic reformers, and sentimentalism, created their own utopian vision that fueled and sustained their extraordinary creative and critical energies for over half a century. They believed that history transcended politics and ideology; but they developed methods that were beholden to their Southern nationalism. Ultimately, they were less interested in objective history than in the idea of an autonomous South. I’d like to think they would have appreciated these ironies.