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Werner Sollors: Comment and Interview

I am grateful to Scott Lucas for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the new website of the *Journal of American Studies*. Putting together literary histories today is both necessary and impossible, and, in the American case, the culture wars and the postmodern critiques of grand narratives have posed particular challenges that are only augmented by the availability and Googlability of so many bits of quite reliable information for which past generations still had to consult literary histories or other reference works. In a contribution to *American Scholar* (Winter 2010) I have posed eleven questions surrounding the present state and possible future of literature and literary study in the United States, questions I would be happy to see discussed more widely. The following comment is a specific response to a review that appeared in the print edition of the *Journal of American Studies* in November 2010.

Paul Giles is known for his scholarly rigor, his enviable productivity, and his limitless energy, in works from *American Catholic Arts* to *Atlantic Republic*, in fresh approaches to transactions between English and American culture, and in his contributions to strengthen such important existing institutions as Oxford University's Rothermere Centre or to create and direct such new institutions as the International Association for American Studies. (He is also, coincidentally, a colleague I have met and had friendly dialogues with on several academic occasions.) It was thus rewarding to see that he found room in his about one-thousand-word short review of *A New Literary History of America* to single out more than a dozen essays for praise and admiration in the book I coedited with Greil Marcus. He notes the book's "many distinguished contributors" and the "many fine pieces" they wrote and appreciates "the prevalence of perspectives from creative writers and artists," mentioning Bharati Mukherjee, Gish Jen, Walter Mosley, and Mary Gaitskill. It was, indeed, one of our principal intentions to review American literature and culture in expressly *literary* essays, written freshly for this occasion, and we were fortunate enough to enlist among our 201 contributors David Bradley (on Malcolm X), Norma Cantú (on the Alamo), Andrei Codrescu (on New Orleans in literature), Jonathan Lethem (on Thomas Edison and the beginnings of film), Paul Muldoon (on Carl Sandburg), Camille Paglia (on Tennessee Williams), Richard Powers (on the Shaw Memorial), Ishmael Reed (on *Huckleberry Finn*), Stephen Schiff (on *Lolita*), and John Edgar Wideman (on Charles W. Chesnutt).

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A New Literary History of America, with its 219 short essays (at 2,200 to 2,500 words each, only a little more than twice as long as Giles's review), is organized chronologically, each essay starting with a date that is not very often a date of publication, followed by a newspaper-style headline and a more dictionary-like topic statement, and Giles finds that this "focus on a specific date can sometimes pay rich dividends," as in the examples of Avita Ronell's essay on the invention of the telephone or Kathleen Moran's piece on Jack London and the San Francisco earthquake. Starting each essay with a specific date, a chronological "hook" – a method Harvard University Press humanities editor Lindsay Waters developed and perfected in *A New History of French Literature* and *A New History of German Literature* – serves as a way to draw the reader's attention to a specific moment and anchors the essay in time. Yet, as we instructed contributors, there was also the danger of "taking the hook too seriously. The author needs to understand that the hook is just a starting point." Thus Robert Polito's essay on F. O. Matthiessen (who, together with D. H. Lawrence and Leslie Fiedler, was among the book's influences inspiring the wish to produce readable criticism) has as its headline, its hook, the 1924 meeting of Matthiessen and Russell Cheney, but the bulk of the essay presents *American Renaissance* with additional comments on *From the Heart of Europe* and other works. The essay thus highlights, in short, "the significance of his critical writings in the 1940s" that Giles was looking for, while also putting in the foreground the person of the author; references to fictional Mathiessen figures in novels by May Sarton and Mark Merlis further add to the liveliness of this piece. Similarly, as Giles mentions, in Joanne van der Woude's essay on the Great Awakening, the figure of George Whitefield (*not* Jonathan Edwards) provides an occasion for a brief aside on Billy Graham, for, as Van der Woude writes, Whitefield

> was accused of exchanging theatrics for substance and, like many celebrity preachers – a persona he arguably pioneered and that remains current in the American context, as seen in the twentieth-century success of Billy Graham – he rarely influenced church attendance or brought about permanent change in religious behavior.

Such forward and backward glances invite the reader to draw connections among different essays, among various modes and genres, and, more broadly, to imagine links between past and present.

Giles's comments are most unfounded when made in overstated and sweeping terms. Thus Giles calls Ronald Reagan's appearance in *A New Literary History of America* on 27 October 1964, "the date of his famous television speech campaigning on behalf of Barry Goldwater," "absurd." But should a literary history really be "discussing more substantially the

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effects of his presidency in the 1980s" (as Giles demands) rather than examine the rhetorical power of the text of one of Reagan's most important speeches? In any event, it was our choice to include literary essays on other examples of American rhetoric, such as the Declaration of Independence, Washington's Farewell Address, and Jefferson's first and Lincoln's second inaugural addresses, as well as FDR's first fireside chat, rather than offer full assessments of their various presidencies, the subject of presidential history. When Larry McMurtry reviewed *A New Literary History of America* in the *New York Review of Books* (5 November 2009), he perceptively commented on the power of American speech that comes across in the book and links different forms of expression.

I also do not share Giles's uncharacteristically hyperbolic view of Greil Marcus's imaginative American studies essay on *Moby-Dick*. The piece opens with the *TV Guide*'s plot summary of John Huston's 1956 film version starring Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab, quotes extensively from the text of the novel, takes the reader forward to E. L. Doctorow's "The White Whale," and tackles the problem that because of the diffusion of the book and its metaphors "to read *Moby-Dick* is to reread it." Readers are easily able to form their own opinion, since this essay is one of a dozen sample entries anyone can access at www.newliteraryhistory.com, the website for the book that Emily Arkin created.

Another questionable point in Giles's review is his apparent wish for more traditional background chapters on periods like "antebellum" or "postmodernism," so as to arrive at a "coherent sense of how larger cultural forces operate." Yes, the book necessarily works through a series of parts, *partes pro toto*, that suggest larger pictures without drawing them outside individual essays. Is that not the old problem of the hermeneutic circle, that the *totum* can only be understood through parts, which in turn can be understood better with the help of more and more additional parts that suggest the *totum*? The graduate student or lecturer preparing for a session on, say, the Civil War will get a very vivid sense of that topic from such entries as the ones on the Missouri Crisis, on Lincoln, on Whitman, on Dickinson, on Grant, on *Little Women*, on Alexander Gardner's sketchbook, and on the Shaw Memorial, whereas trying to digest a dry encyclopedic entry or headnote on the entirety of that momentous conflict might be less effective. And will students really benefit more from an outline of what modernism was than from reading Lisa Gitelman's comment on the linotype's "Etaoin Shrdlu," Luc Sante's piece on the invention of the blues, Daniel Albright's essay on Gertrude Stein, or Alan Ackerman's piece on O'Neill? There may be a contradiction in Giles finding the book on the one hand a mobile,

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maverick, ramshackle affair – placing a "bizarre emphasis on individualism, contingency and the haphazard nature of events as keys to all American understanding" – while simultaneously deeming it traditional and "mechanical" – that it is "beholden implicitly to old-fashioned ideas about US cultural continuities that ruled the roost during the 'myth and symbol' phase of American studies some fifty years ago." Well, perhaps I am part of a roost that is both ramshackle and traditional. But perhaps it is also the genre of the book review that has made Giles, an ordinarily more mild-mannered author, come up with pretty wild and stodgy complaints. Only in this case the central complaints also seem to be internally contradictory.

Paul Giles is absolutely right, however, when he observes in Lindsay Waters's essay the avoidance of "abstract academic jargon" – which is, in fact, a characteristic feature of the whole book, for we tried to make it inviting to readers by curbing any unnecessary employment of overly technical language, faddish terms, and lazy neologisms. I believe scholars and critics can, on some occasions at least, make their points without speaking of "contested sites" or "social constructedness" – and it is the academic jargon so frequently mocked by reports on Modern Language Association Conventions that I must have meant by my oral comment that Giles cites on getting "off the MLA track." We, the editors and the twelve members of the editorial board – literary scholars, historians, a film critic, a historian of science, an art historian, a novelist-and-critic, and two graduate students – asked contributors to deliver "breezy writing that doesn't condescend," to do "a good job of describing a historical event without invoking other historians," and to give "vivid descriptions of the visual." If Theodor W. Adorno, hardly a theoretician one would accuse of writing journalism (or very accessibly, for that matter), could deliver radio lectures that an ordinary listener could readily follow, then there has to be a place for literary history and criticism today that is not only technical and academic. Departing from literary historians' customary predilection for plot summary and paraphrase, we stressed that "when an essay is about a text or about a subject's writing, it should quote from that text, and the sooner the better." This takes me to Giles's question of who the reader is – to whom is the book addressed? It is that elusive "general reader," a person who likes to read and to whose general familiarity with some aspects of American culture we wanted to appeal, but whom we also wanted to make curious about many unfamiliar yet fascinating topics. We wanted works from the past – things that have been made in or for America – come to life for contemporary readers anywhere in the world (not excluding academic specialists) who might enjoy not only fresh readings of familiar works but also surprisingly new topics that the

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book hopefully covers in readable – and at times memorable – prose. It was encouraging that an Americanist of such near-omniscience as Paul Giles found himself engaging with Gaitskill's fresh approach to Norman Mailer and with such topics as the invention of the telephone and the San Francisco earthquake. Fortunately, the reception of the book so far seems to bear out his view that "the extensive nature of the material covered in an accessible manner should make the book attractive to ambitious high school students as well as to the wider public." The Yale Americanist Matthew Jacobson, for example, reviewing *A New Literary History of America* in *American Quarterly* (June 2010), concluded that it is that the book is "a rich, dense, varied, and immensely engaging tapestry of the nation's history and ideational life – a wide-eyed journey, ah yes, through 'the matrix of American culture'" that makes it suitable to build courses around and to launch dissertations from as well as to gift to the in-laws. It is my hope that reading essays in the book will make its audience curious to find out more about the subjects at hand, as well as those of many other entries, and inspire readers to go on to read and reread the works and speeches, see the films, and examine the various creations of the past that our book presents in present-day writing.

Harvard University WERNER SOLLORS

INTERVIEW WITH GREIL MARCUS AND WERNER SOLLORS

ASBJØRN GRØNSTAD AND ØYVIND VÅGNES*

In September 2009, Harvard University Press published *A New Literary History of America*, edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors. The book is an anthology of original essays that

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kaleidoscopically comprise not only literature and fiction but many different fields from philosophy and science to political rhetoric, art and aesthetics, music, film, and popular culture. On 19 March 2010 we talked to Greil Marcus in his home in Berkeley. Werner Sollors we interviewed by email around the same time.

Grønstad and Vågnes: *In terms of readership, an important audience for this anthology, we can imagine, will be students and future students of American culture, both inside and outside the USA. To what extent would you say that the topics and perspectives found in this anthology reflect the interests and concerns of today's students?*

Werner Sollors: The topics are sufficiently varied to appeal to very broad general interests from the coining of the word "America" and the Puritan jeremiad to the election of Barack Obama. The fact that each essay is only four to five printed pages long invites students and general readers to open up to topics they may never have thought they might be interested in. The volume rationale reminded contributors that essays were

meant to be stimulating and provocative for both scholarly and expert audiences and for the public at large. An entry on, say, Faulkner or Stephen Foster does not have to rehearse the entire background story of the person in question, but should provide basic contextual information that can locate the reader in the entry. Keep the interested but general reader in mind, but do not ever feel you need to dumb down or oversimplify your arguments or your style.

Contributors were also assured that while they "should take cognizance of secondary literature on the given subject," there was "no need to get bogged down in critical controversies that will lead you and the reader away from the subject in question." We did not want writing that was predictable, but essays that would surprise even the authors of the essays themselves. Our goal was not to give readers a feeling that once they had read an essay about a subject they had acquired a definitive understanding of it. Much rather, our aim was to make nonspecialists curious to read, or look at, or listen to, works as if for the first time, intrigued by one of the essays. Hence we wanted not only academic specialists to write for us but also authors who had not previously published on a topic at hand but who cared about it and were curious about it.

How did the idea for this anthology come about, and whose initiative was it? And what brought you and your coeditor Werner Sollors together? In short, why this book at this particular moment in time?

Greil Marcus: Lindsay Waters is an editor at Harvard University Press and has been for many years, and he is the editor who published my book *Lipstick Traces*, so I've worked with him for a long time. I've done other

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books with him too. A number of years ago he published a book called *A New History of French Literature* that was edited by Denis Hollier, and then a few years after that he published *A New History of German Literature* that both Werner and I contributed to. And they were both terrific books, and he wanted to do an *American* version, *A New History of American Literature*, and he thought that Werner and I – who didn't know each other, and I'm not sure that we were even *aware* of each other – would work well together. And so he arranged for me to come out to Cambridge so we could all meet. I mean, Lindsay had also published Werner's books at Harvard University Press, and you know we got along very, very well right away.

But what we realized immediately was that there was no way that any American book that would be even remotely equivalent to their earlier ones could follow the same format or the same ruling idea. With the German and French volumes and book cases you're talking about organic societies that developed through many, many very different dialects of German or French – some of them unrecognizable today – but there has always been a High German, there has always been a court French, there has always been an official language. And that has been the ruling language of those societies, and that language – in many ways – helped create those societies, and the societies long pre-date any modern political formations. These are histories of an *organic* literature, in both cases developing from at least 800 AD to the present, without significant invasions of other languages. America – you know there's just no comparison. When we're talking about America – obviously something of much more recent date – you have *many* different languages, you have people from *all over*, you have a constant *battle* in a lot of ways, to even begin to create a national discourse. And in a lot of ways the political formation, with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, antedates the social world. The social world takes shape as a reflection of the political formation. The fundamental ideas in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution shape and in many ways determine what the society is going to be, what its values are going to be, how they are going to be understood, and what the *conflict*, the intellectual, literary, social and cultural conflict in the society is going to be, and that's going to be the history of the country.

So Werner and I, we just sort of immediately said that this is going to have to be completely different. And it cannot restrict itself to literature – it cannot be a history of American literature in any conventional sense. And we had a number of meetings where we really began to get a clearer idea of what this would be – but ultimately it was going to be the story of American speech, of American discourse, of people arguing with each other over what

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the meaning, purpose, reality of the country was and would be. And that would involve *writing*. But – in American literature, American speech – the first genre is the *sermon*, the puritan sermon. Poetry comes not too long after that with Edward Taylor and other puritan poets, but then you're moving out to political essays, satirical essays, and then you move in to the realm of rhetoric. Poetry doesn't begin to play a major role until the late eighteenth century, early nineteenth century. It's going to have to involve theater, it's going to have to involve music, inventions, creating. Werner's idea was always that this book was about *making* – it was about *making* America. And you *made* up, you *invented* America – you could do it in a poem, you could do it with the invention of a particular kind of rifle that would come to symbolize the whole American story, the American quest, its triumphant spirit, its imperialistic spirit. And all different sorts of things were going to constantly come into play – and what elements, what formations, what genres those might be – that was going to change over time as the story moved forward.

We also found – pretty quickly – that the story gains momentum and it becomes bigger and it becomes louder and more interesting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because it's in those centuries that the story of America becomes in a certain way the story of all different kinds of people who were previously excluded from the master narrative of the country. They begin to push in and take over that story themselves, so that – in the nineteenth century – you know, obviously, one of the towering literary figures of the whole era is Abraham Lincoln, as a literary figure. But also Frederick Douglass, just as much. And there are two entries on Lincoln, and there are two entries on Frederick Douglass. And of course, Poe and Melville and two fabulous essays on two different Emerson addresses. But it's then that other voices begin to come in, and this becomes a stream within a stream that widens within the greater river.

So both Werner and I, and I think Lindsay – once we agreed we would do this – just couldn't wait. We were just filled with a sense of mission. At Lindsay's suggestion we put together an editorial board of ten people. And these would be people who would have expertise in different fields – might be science, might be poetry, might be film – but who would also be the sort of people who had broad knowledge and broad interests, and could be involved in decisions having to do with *any* aspect of the book. It wasn't like the film person only was responsible for – or had to keep his mouth shut when we weren't talking about – film. So we convened this group, and we had a meeting in Cambridge to see if it would work, if this was going to be a good working group. And there were mostly younger academics – people in their thirties, maybe early forties. But also David Thomson, the great film

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historian, who's a bit older than I am; Gerald Early, who is a great Americanist from Washington University in Saint Louis, who's in his fifties. And we did get along, we did have an intellectual sympathy, except for one person, who just did not understand what we were doing.

So we ended up with a good group of people. And then, Werner and I asked each member of the editorial board to come up with suggestions for twenty or thirty incidents – events – happenstances that we should be covering in this book. Because the format was going to be as it was with the French and German volumes – turning points, moments when something happened that had not happened before – incidents where something that had seemed impossible the day before now seemed inevitable. Not necessarily for the whole society, maybe just for the individual involved, or a very small group of people who were aware of what might have happened. That could be the publication of a book, the starting of a newspaper, the delivery of a sermon, or a political event like an assassination or an election. It could be when two or more people met, and a certain kind of intellectual symbiosis took place that no one would have ever anticipated. It was all these sorts of events, and we were asking people: OK, find dates, find events, describe them and come to a meeting where we will decide what's going to be in this book, because we have room for about two hundred entries. We're going to tell the *whole* story from the beginning of literate America, which means of course the European discovery. We're going to tell the whole story from then to the present, and we only have room for two hundred essays. They're all going to be about 2,500 words.

I guess we had a total of about five hundred nominations – and most people nominated within their particular fields of interest, but not necessarily. Anybody could put forward *anything*. So Werner and I got this pile of suggestions. Some of them were just dates and names and some of them were lengthy descriptions of why we had to include this. And ultimately it meant that someone was going to have to play the grand inquisitor. And I took on that role, and that meant that I went through the whole list – we put together a master list – and before our meeting, where everyone was going to be present, I just checked yes and checked no, in the most fascist manner imaginable. Not discussing anything, not making any arguments, but saying, 1492 – no, 1612 – yes. Like that. People were encouraged to interrupt me at any time, like when I did something anyone disagreed with. We would argue about it. So it was a very intimidating procedure – because I just started: yes, no, yes, no, and nobody was saying anything. So I went back to the beginning and started over, and then, you know: no. – No? What do you mean, no? How can you say no? Do you even know what you're

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talking about? And of course, sometimes I didn't know what I was talking about.

We then really began to struggle and argue over this list, and the meeting began to generate its own new, and in some ways better, ideas, and we began to come up with all kinds of double entries, composite entries, where you're talking about two things at once – two things that maybe happened in the same year, that on the surface don't seem related at all, but in fact speak to each other, that are about similar things. They might not be in the same year, but they could be a *thematic* that encompasses certain things. For example, there is an entry on *The House of Mirth* and *Sister Carrie*. One published in 1900, the other in 1905. They are both novels about class anxiety, rise and fall – Carrie rises, Lily Bart in *House of Mirth* falls. And it just seemed like a natural. And it's a way of dealing with both writers and dealing with this greater theme that obsesses them both. So a lot of composite entries began to develop. And by the end of the day, or the second day, we had gone through this whole list, dispensed with many, discovered many in the course of the discussion. But we were down to somewhere around 240 entries. And we figured we could make that, we would find room for that, we would lose some along the way. We were there.

Then we had another meeting – again with the entire group. And the entire group included Werner and myself, Lindsay Waters, and a couple of other Harvard University Press people as well as the editorial board members. OK: who is going to write what? And what that came down to, what we wanted to do was to stay away from getting the main expert in this field or in this question, who would then recapitulate what he or she had already written about this subject. That was not what we wanted. We wanted people who would confront these questions as if they had never been asked – as if you bring your intellectual apparatus to bear on this question, but it's not a question you have really examined before. So we wanted that kind of freshness, and we wanted writers who were going to surprise their readers, and they were going to surprise us. But we also wanted people who would surprise themselves, who would be able to bring a sense of discovery into their own work. So in many cases we would take someone who was a great scholar of literature and ask her to write about Junius Brutus Booth, who brought Romantic acting from Britain to the United States in the nineteenth century. And often it would be someone who was familiar with that period, and who certainly knew who Booth was, but hadn't really grappled with him before. That was how we tried to make this work.

Some of it was catch-as-catch-can. I happened to read an essay in the journal *Raritan* – about Lincoln before the presidency – after he had been

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elected but before he took office. Things that were going on, things that he was trying to put in place. And the writing was so alive, and the thinking was so full of daring. I just said: this is the guy we want to write about the Lincoln–Douglas debates. You know, has he ever studied them? Probably, but not necessarily. But this guy could write, we have got to get him. Over and over again it became a question not of who would do the best job, or who knows the most but of: what does this person think of such and such? That is how Ishmael Reed got the assignment to write about *Huckleberry Finn*. Because we said: I wonder what Ishmael Reed thinks of Huckleberry Finn – nobody had a clue. Well, let's ask him!

In some cases it was very easy to find the person we wanted. Sometimes we had to knock on several doors before we could get anyone to say yes. One of our composite entries was on *Gone with the Wind* and *Absalom, Absalom!* by Faulkner, because they are both southern novels and they were both published in 1936. Do they really have any affinity? Well, let's find a writer who could tell us if there is or if there isn't.

I remember I called Lee Smith, who is a southern novelist I know and whose work I love. And I asked her if she would do this – and she said: "well, of course I've read *Absalom, Absalom!* but I've never read *Gone with the Wind*." I'm thinking: "You're a southern middle-aged woman and you've never read *Gone with the Wind*? Come on." But I wasn't about to say: And now will you please sit down and read this nine-hundred-page book? So I called Bobby Ann Mason, another southern novelist who I know, and she said the same thing, you know: "Oh, I've seen the movie." You know, big deal …

Finally I realized I should have called my friend Carolyn Porter, who's an English professor at Berkeley, from Texas. And a down-home person, with no pretensions, and also a Faulkner scholar; she had just published a book on Faulkner. So I said, "Carolyn, I've talked to other people who claim they haven't read *Gone with the Wind*, have you read it"? She said: "Have I read it? I've memorized it!" And she had, I mean, she knew chapter and verse. Not only could she quote dialogue, she knew exactly where in the book it was. And *Absalom, Absalom!* was just as familiar.

So sometimes it was difficult to find the right person – sometimes easy – but it was a tremendous adventure. And there were very few situations – maybe one or two – where the person couldn't come through and didn't write anything. And maybe half a dozen or a few more where people turned in their essays and for one reason or another they were just unworkable. In most cases people understood the assignment, they were able to get some sense of the whole picture, even though nobody had a sense of the whole picture then. And in the cases where we got essays that were dull,

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or they were kind of programmatic, but that had passion and knowledge, we'd say, you know: "Could you instead of going one, two, three, four five – could you start with three, and then maybe go to five and then take us to one later? Just make this story a little less familiar, to yourself and to us."

Each member of the editorial board was responsible for between twelve and maybe eighteen entries. "You're the editor of these people, you've got to get them to turn their work in on time, it's gotta be good," and all of that. And Werner and I were each handling twenty–twenty-five apiece, and calling people up to say: "How many have you got?" and "When are you going to have everything ready?" Just that kind of housekeeping. That's a very long answer to your first question.

WS: Harvard University Press had published two earlier one-volume literary histories that provided models for an American volume. Denis Hollier's *A New History of French Literature* (1989) had introduced a kind of mock-chronological arrangement of single essays using an often arbitrarily chosen date and a tagline as hooks (e.g. "1922, November 18 Death of Marcel Proust, Death and Literary Authority"), and David Wellbery's and Judith Ryan's *A New History of German Literature* (2004) had expanded the notion of texts and works that could be included as literature (with essays on Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Edgar Reitz's film *Heimat*, and the falling of the Berlin wall); both volumes settled on fresh but provocatively short essays. Lindsay Waters and I had had regular e-mail contact since the 1990s, averaging perhaps a dozen messages a year. This changed radically in the second half of 2005 when I received over a hundred e-mails from him – most of them about imagining editing a new one-volume literary history of the United States and about who might be a good coeditor. After contemplating some other possibilities, in August 2005 Lindsay reported the exciting news that the famous music and cultural critic Greil Marcus sounded "interested" in becoming a coeditor, and we were soon all writing each other back and forth about the project, and at the end of September 2005 we had a long two-day brainstorming session in Boston at which a real book project began to take shape. Lindsay had known both me and Greil for decades, but Greil and I had never met. We liked the model of the two earlier volumes (all three of us had written essays for *A New History of German Literature*), but we thought that an American volume needed a different emphasis, and we settled on *poiesis*, "making" in the broadest cultural sense, as its overarching idea: works and things that have been made and that may also lead to the creation of other works and things. American literature would be the core, but it would be embedded in cultural history, not set off from it. We thought this a timely

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project for all sorts of reasons, including the postmodern anxiety about narrative, the availability of background facts on the Web, and the fact that while many works and objects created in America have had a resonance in other countries, today the whole globe consumes and debates, admires and loathes American culture. We wanted to produce "not an encyclopedia but a provocation" that would present American literature to nonspecialists, in a lively manner, following such classic examples as D. H. Lawrence and Leslie Fiedler. That would make it essential to get contributions not only by critics but also by writers and artists.

How you describe the gestation of the book and the plan behind it ties in quite well with the impression that you have as a reader of a certain freshness and excitement. The unusual constellations.

GM: I'm thrilled to hear that. But you know, when the essays were all in, and Werner and I began to edit the whole book, we realized that – either by luck or just because we really had chosen well in terms of entries, in terms of correspondences and affinities – there would be themes taking shape within a constellation of maybe three or four, or maybe six or seven, entries over a stretch of say twenty or thirty entries. There would be subthemes developing within that area, from one to the other that we had nothing to do with. It just had to do with the way the themes drew out certain subthemes from different writers, who were not aware of what the other person was doing. And so we didn't have to draw linkages. We didn't have to edit – and we wouldn't have in any case – to make the book look more whole than it really is. It took on its own shape.

How long was it in the making?

GM: I cannot believe we did this in three years, but we did.

We are interested in this question of expertise versus writers exploring issues they would not necessarily be experts on.

GM: I don't mean that we wanted people who were ignorant, just the contrary, but we wanted people whose whole world was film, but who had never maybe written about or even seriously thought about *Some Like It Hot* by Billy Wilder. But who had the *ability* to then confront that movie and enter its world and create a larger world for it.

With the Linda Lovelace entry, which is one that came up during our original long list meeting, Gerald Early asked us near the end of the day: "Has anybody read Linda Lovelace's autobiography?" Nobody had. Then he starts telling us about *Ordeal*, her autobiography (written with somebody

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else, of course), about how she was turned into a sex slave in the pornography industry and all of this, and he said that the most dominant literary genre of the last forty years in America is the memoir. More particularly, the memoir of abuse, of survival of hideous circumstances. It's titillating; it's sensationalistic – and this is one of the first examples of it. Early claimed it was a completely gripping book, but most people had not heard of it. But he convinced us, although at first we all thought it was a joke.

So then the question is: who is going to want to write about this? Ann Marlow – who did write about it – is someone who had written her own memoir – which is essentially about sex and drugs. And I thought, she can write about this. She can write about drugs, she can write about sex, she can write about domination, she can write about escape. Those themes are real to her. But like the women who had said they had never read *Gone with the Wind*, she said, "Well, I've never seen *Deep Throat*." But she took the project on and she ended up knowing far more about it than anybody who assigned it. Then it turned out there isn't just one Linda Lovelace autobiography, there are four. So there is this sense of invention, of discovery going on from place to place in the book.

There is this energy that comes from that, like in the Jonathan Lethem piece.

GM: I don't remember who suggested that he write about Edison and the birth of the movies. Jonathan is someone I have known for many years, but I didn't know he had any interest in that, or knowledge of it. It was someone else's idea. And it just turned out to be perfect. And he just immediately went for it. And it's funny – that is a controversial entry. A lot of people love it, some people find it completely dull and dry. But people talk about it.

The New Literary History *is rich with original and striking constellations, not least between writers and topics/thematics. It would be very interesting to hear a little about the process involved. Did you approach writers with specific things in mind, or were your invitations more open-ended? Was there stuff that you had hoped you would get in, but that for various reasons did not make it in this first edition?*

WS: We were fortunate to receive funding to invite ten critics to a Radcliffe Institute Exploratory Seminar on 27 and 28 January 2006. Lindsay, Greil and I had selected them in unanimity, and several of them we had already mentioned to each other at our initial meeting: literary scholars from departments of English and comparative literature, but also historians, interdisciplinary Americanists and African-Americanists, an art historian, a historian of science and technology, a film critic, a novelist–critic, and two graduate students. At this meeting we were ready to see the whole project

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radically questioned, perhaps terminated altogether, by the arguments of others. The first focussed brainstorming session, based on some precirculated readings and presentations by Lindsay, Greil, me, and some of those who were present, moved from the question whether such a book should exist at all to the specific shape it should take, and we began to explore the topic of making and the question how far we could reach in describing things American. For a second session we asked each of the participants to come up with a larger list of questions that could help generate a history of making in America. The assembled scholars enjoyed the chance to think about an American project more generally, far beyond their own backgrounds and areas of expertise. Most of the seminar participants (nine of the ten scholars and both graduate students) were excited enough by the discussions in this exploratory seminar to agree to form the truly interdisciplinary editorial board of *A New Literary History of America*, and another Americanist joined us a little later. The collective wisdom, imagination, and energy of these twelve immediately propelled the project onward. Each member took on the task to come up with a list of the twenty-five to forty most important American topics (by Ash Wednesday 2006) that each believed would simply *have* to be included (with a brief rationale, outline, or listing of possible subtopics), regardless of individual specialties and disciplines, "trying to imagine the book as a whole, without territory to protect or turf to defend." And all lived up to that challenge. A board meeting in the Harvard University Press offices brought all of us together a second time on 12 to 13 May 2006, armed with an elaborate composite listing of several hundred submitted topics that all of us now had to whittle down rigorously to about two hundred, while some new subjects also emerged at that meeting. Throughout, we were looking for points in time and imagination where something changed: "when a new idea or a new form came into being, when new questions were raised, when what before seemed impossible came to seem necessary, or inevitable." We asked board members before the meeting to trim their own lists somewhat and combine some of the more minute topics into clusters of related subjects. We asked, "which twenty do you *really* want to see discussed?" – a question which led to spirited debate and quite a painful process of elimination, as all editors had to watch topics they had proposed, and with good arguments, disappear from the project. Among the many subjects cut were "1492 Columbus believes he finds honey and nightingales in New World; imports word *canoa*, the first American word to reach most European languages," "1640 Bay Psalm Book," "1774 Speech of Logan, Mingo Chief," "18– A fry cook at a remote lumber camp in Wisconsin overcooks some potatoes. These are the first potato chips," "1842 Dickens *American Notes*: Possibly a

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way to start an entry on foreign travelers writing about the US," "1862 Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'Chiefly About War Matters by a Peaceable Man,'" "1873 Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis put rivets in denim pants, creating blue jeans," "1874 'Catch-phrase': the date of its first use in John C. Calhoun's *Works*," "1901 First refrigerated ship enables banana to reign supreme as favorite US breakfast food," "1908 Ernest Fenollosa's widow meets Ezra Pound," "1930 *I'll Take My Stand*: The South and the Agrarian Tradition," and "1978 Publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*." It is easy to imagine another book consisting only of subjects that did not make it into ours. We also offered each member of the editorial board the opportunity to propose ideal contributors for each topic that remained active. They included the sadly unfulfilled hopes that Bob Dylan would write on Walt Whitman or F. Scott Fitzgerald, Toni Morrison on Lincoln's Second Inaugural or on Faulkner, Art Spiegelman on comics and graphic novels, Stanley Crouch on Edgar Rice Burroughs, Philip Roth on Hawthorne and Faulkner, Thomas Pynchon on Orson Welles, Don DeLillo on Miles Davis, Supreme Court Justice David Souter on Madison's *Notes of Debates of the Federal Convention*, and a Senator from Illinois on the Lincoln–Douglas debates. Even though such suggestions remained unrealized (the senator from Illinois, for example, was too busy because he was planning a campaign as presidential candidate), this only fired up the imagination of the editors who identified many other major authors and creators who did accept our invitation to write,[1] and did come through with essays that help to deepen the understanding of making, of creating, of suggesting amazement at things that have been made in America: empty pages filled with memorable words, canvases on which unforgettable visuals took shape, or notes that turned into patriotic songs, popular tunes, and jazz.

[1] Writers among the contributors include Elizabeth Alexander (on Jean Toomer), Clark Blaise (on Hawthorne and Melville), David Bradley (on Malcolm X), Sarah Shun-lien Bynum (on Edmund White), Norma Cantú (on the siege of the Alamo), Robert Clark (on Edgar Allan Poe), Joshua Clover (on Bob Dylan), Andrei Codrescu (on New Orleans), Steve Erickson (on Stephen Foster), Mark Ford (on Frank O'Hara), Mary Gaitskill (on Norman Mailer), Gish Jen (on *The Catcher in the Rye*), Jonathan Lethem (on Thomas Edison), Beverly Lowry (on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), Douglas McGrath (on Preston Sturges), Maureen McLane (on Adrienne Rich), Walter Mosley (on hard-boiled detective fiction), Bharati Mukherjee (on *The Scarlet Letter*), Paul Muldoon (on Carl Sandburg), Richard Powers (on the Shaw Memorial), Ishmael Reed (on *Huckleberry Finn*), Peter Sacks (on Robert Lowell), Luc Sante (on W. C. Handy), Stephen Schiff (on *Lolita*), Susan Stewart (on Emily Dickinson), Michael Tolkin (on Alcoholics Anonymous), Lan Tran (on *The Great Gatsby*), David Treuer (on Schoolcraft), John Edgar Wideman (on Charles W. Chesnutt), Rob Wilson (on Queen Lili'uokalani), Christian Wiman (on Robert Frost), and Elizabeth Winthrop (on John Winthrop).

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The title of the anthology seems very apt; this really is not just a new history in the literal sense but, perhaps even more importantly, a new method or template for composing a literary history in the first place. Wes Davis in the Wall Street Journal *enthuses that in* A New Literary History of America *"it's clear that nothing remains of the boundaries that traditionally separated literature, history and popular culture."*[2] *It might be interesting to know whether this dismantling of the boundaries was in fact a deliberate and carefully designed objective to begin with, or if it was something that just happened.*

WS: We wanted to keep literature at the center but select works in all genres: not just prose fiction (which has become the preferred genre of contemporary American studies), but also drama, poetry, essay, autobiography, nonfiction, with some examples of writing in languages other than English. More than that, the notion of "made in America" opened up the possibility to examine examples of a much broader array of subjects than earlier American literary histories, and not merely as backdrop for literature in the high-cultural sense but as central topics in the shaping of American culture: religious tracts and sermons, children's books, public speeches and private letters, political polemics, addresses and debates, Supreme Court decisions, maps, histories, travel diaries, philosophical writing, literary histories and criticism, folk songs, magazines, dramatic performances, the blues, paintings and monuments, prints, jazz, war memorials, museums, the built environment, book clubs, photographs, country music, films, radio, rock and roll, cartoons, technological inventions and innovations, pornography, cultural rituals, sports, and hip-hop. The hope was that the essays would illuminate each other – which would be a different mode of providing contexts than the more traditional literary histories' background writing on such topics as "the colonial era" or "the Civil War."

GM: I don't think it was a structural attempt to dismantle boundaries. It wasn't like, "here's our chance to insert into the discussion of American culture all these things that are so often excluded, so let's shove all this in." It was more a sense, I think, on Werner's part and mine, that we didn't recognize, accept, countenance, respect, these boundaries. And we wanted to find people to contribute to the book who didn't either. Not who would set about breaking down boundaries, but who didn't *see* them and so they *ignored* them. That's what we were interested in.

[2] Wes Davis, "A Melting Pot Full of Words," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 Sept. 2009, available at http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204488304574427212465532566.html.

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You know the title, there was a lot of discussion over what to call the book. We realized it could not be called *A New History of American Literature*, because it wasn't going to be that. And the question of America, rather than the United States … The United States is this weird country, it's like the People's Republic of China, the Federal Republic of Germany – it's a bureaucratic name, it doesn't exactly have heart to it. And that's one of the reasons why the question whether America exists or not – which is a fundamental question in our literature and our culture from the beginning to the present – is because the United States of America sounds more like a trade association than a country. It sounds like something that was just made up, which it was! That's the point. In terms of boundaries, in terms of how we were going to construct the thing, we went with America because it had more resonance than the United States. It seemed to be about something. Obviously the United States of America exists as a bureaucratic entity. But does America exist? And we know what we mean by America. Forget all this stuff about South America and Canada.

And then a literary history – not a history of the literary – a history that will have a literary engine behind it or within it. There will be a literary backdrop or a literary beating heart, in a subject that isn't itself necessarily literary. You know, Chuck Berry and Bob Dylan have entries, and obviously they're there primarily because of what they did as musicians, but a lot of what they did as musicians had to do with songwriting. But even more than that, we're talking about two people, Chuck Berry and Bob Dylan, who wrote absolutely singular, unique, revelatory autobiographies. There are no parallels to the books that they wrote. Both of them have left behind "documents not of edification but of paradox," as Hugo Ball once put it. So there is going to be a literary reflection, a literary echo – if not a fully formed literary body – in almost every entry in the book.

The entry on Leslie Fiedler quotes him as saying (in 1979) that the function of English departments, and of freshmen composition in particular, is the "instant bourgeois WASPification of all new Americans."[3] *What would be your thoughts about this quote some three decades later? Does* The New Literary History *cater to a new kind of English department entirely?*

[3] Carrie Tirado Bramen, "An Insolent Style: Leslie Fiedler Becomes an Assistant Professor of English at Montana State Univeristy," in Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, eds., *A New Literary History of America* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 752.

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WS: At least one reviewer proposed that *A New Literary History of America* be given to new citizens as an introduction to America. The book is multi-voiced and does not offer one single storyline. Hence its goal is neither to WASPify nor deWASPify but to make its audience *think*. The reader will find Jefferson the political theorist and the Jefferson of the slavery issue; Emerson as "a self-defrocked minister turned freelance man of letters" and as the philosopher about whom Nietzsche said, "he simply does not know yet how old he is and how young he will yet be;" Truman employing the atom bomb, and Truman integrating the military; Elia Kazan turning Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* into an unforgettable film and Kazan testifying on communists in Hollywood. Even though there is no party line in this book, and different, at times truly contradictory, perspectives emerge, reading more and more essays will generate a new and fresh sense of America. Together these essays illuminate the religious and heretical impulses in the culture; its Gothic and paranoid scenarios; its democratic promise; its slave narrative and persistent, though ever-changing, issue of race; its Indian, Western and captivity narratives; its children's literature; the power of its sentimentalism; its love for the success story and its faith in self-improvement; its hard-boiled speech and sophisticated witty dialogs; its immigrant autobiography; its science fiction; its investigative reporting; its anthems, blues, and country music; and its tension between bursts of freewheeling creativity and repression, between experimentation and orthodoxy, between censorship and the broad laughter at any restraint. Gun culture and reform movements, hopes for regeneration and doomsday fears, loud exaggeration and quiet inwardness have been equally at home in America. What we hoped was to offer specialists and nonspecialists in the United States and abroad – including faculty and students in English departments anywhere – a strong and memorable reading experience. I can only hope that readers, whether they go through it from cover to cover or browse in it more randomly, will find this literary history in snapshots as thrilling as it has been for us to put it together.

Let us throw a couple of quotes at you. In 1968, Hennig Cohen suggested in his preface to The American Culture *that, although its origins "as a recognizable academic movement" can be traced to the 1930s, "for all practical purposes American Studies came into being shortly after World War II." He mentions among key events that the* American Quarterly *began publication in 1949, and that the American Studies Association was founded two years later. "Among Americanists a provocative assumption gained credence," Cohen wrote: "every aspect of the culture and all of its artifacts might be used to derive information about the culture … Disciplines were no longer secure behind impregnable*

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walls; ideas, institutions and physical objects became 'documents,' the equivalent of inscriptions on vellum or bound files of newspapers, to be 'read' for clues to the state of the culture." And in the entry on Leslie Fiedler, Carrie Tirado Bramen quotes Fiedler as saying, "I spent the first half of my career trying to break down the barriers between academic disciplines and the second half trying to tear down the walls between elite and popular culture." Although Fiedler presents these two concerns as distinct career stages, Bramen suggests in the entry, "they are in fact inextricably linked, bound together for his desire for opening up categories of any kind."

Is your new anthology a testament to a persistent vision in the field(s) of American studies that hardly is provocative anymore, or does it represent something entirely new in its multidisciplinary breadth? Did the work with the book offer new opportunities to consider the "inextricably linked" barriers described by Bramen?

WS: I already mentioned the high esteem in which all of us hold Leslie Fiedler, and we were also inspired by the models of D. H. Lawrence and John Kouwenhoven. What we liked about their approaches to American literature was precisely their readiness to look at literature and culture, broadly defined, and to write in a way that would speak not only to academic specialists and graduate students but to a very broad general audience both inside and outside the United States. Hence – whether highbrow canonical or lowbrow popular – our topics had to be interesting and had to be presented in readily accessible prose, as free of academic jargon as possible.

GM: I don't know if I have a ready answer to that. I think that the mandarism in the academic world, the sense of knowledge that flows from those who have it to those who don't, from those who deserve to possess it to those who perhaps don't, a sense of *droit de seigneur*, a sense of condescension, a sense of territory to protect … I think that has never gone away. I don't believe it ever will. And I don't buy people who say the walls have come down, there's no longer any differentiation between one form of culture and another, one form of speech and another. I think that certainly the most empowered sectors of our society – whether that's government, whether that's culture defined in any way, whether it's the academy, whether it's industry – have a tremendous interest in division, in separation, in hierarchy of values, of goods, of knowledge. I think there is a continual horror that goes back to Andrew Jackson opening the White House to the rabble. Or maybe even to the way seating was handled at dinners at the White House when Jefferson was President.

But there is a horror of the invasion of those who don't belong, in every field in our life. And I think if you look at the reception by official Washington – which is to say of the people who ran the newspapers, who

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ran the news programs, the hostesses, people who ran the think tanks, embassies – if you look at the reception of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama when they assumed the presidency, it was all, "You're an outsider, you don't belong, you don't know the rules, you have to show you can play by them, you have to show you can learn them. And if you *can* learn them and you *still* won't play by them – believe me – you'll never belong in this town." I think that pervades all of our culture and always has. I think that there is a fear of democracy that is just as strong in the discourse that creates America – that is just as strong as the lust for it, and there's a sense of entitlement – that "I'm better than you" – just as there is a sense of entitlement in the American character of "no one's better than I am," you know, "whoever I happen to be."

So I don't believe that the walls have come down, that there are no meaningful or enforceable or enforced distinctions. On the other hand, I think that the first statement you read me from 1968 is absurdly parochial and narrow-minded, to say that American studies begins with the founding of this journal and the formation of this society. As a thinking person's discipline, American studies begins in the teens and the twenties, begins with Van Wyck Brooks and Constance Rourke and Edmund Wilson. People who are saying: there *is* such a thing as America, it actually exists. There is an American character, there's an American nation, there is an American literature. These were all controversial things. You have Constance Rourke publishing *American Humor: A Study of a National Character* in 1931. You have Edmund Wilson going back and rereading everybody all through the 1920s and 30s and 40s. Of course you have Mathiessen with *American Renaissance* which is the first *magisterial* academic work that is meant to be read by a broader audience, but that says, "This is inescapable, this is where it all begins. We're all part of this." But you can go back much further, and you can go to Melville's essay on Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*, his manifesto. We have to study America, we have to *forget* about Europe, we have to claim that our writers are better than Shakespeare whether they are or *not*, because that's the only way we're going to convince ourselves that what *we do* is more important, because we're democrats, we believe in the liberation of all peoples. That therefore – as we have the greatest political idea and mission and obligation and burden – we have to have the greatest literature too. So we start by saying we already do and then we go out and *make* it.

You can site the beginnings, or really the emergence of American studies there, and other people might place it earlier. In the 1960s, if you wanted to study American studies at the University of California, there was a

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sophomore honors seminar you could take if you could get into it. That was it – that was the single American class that carried the term "American studies." There was no major, there was no complex of courses you could put together, you know, maybe drawing on history and English and art and music and economics and whatever. There is *now*, but there's still no such department. There are very, very few universities that have American studies departments – with their own faculty – today. It has to draw from all these different fields, which are protected, which are occupied. People don't want some generalist coming in, who just knows a little about a lot of things and not much about anything. That's the attitude. So essentially I don't agree with any of that.

Thank you, that's a very fascinating answer. We could maybe stay a little bit on that subject and talk some more about American studies. The famous line from Springsteen's "No Surrender" comes to mind; "We learned more from a three minute record than we ever learned in school." There is a vast terrain of texts, objects and events in your anthology – the Stamp of God's Image, the Sacred Harp, the Winchester rifle, Preston Sturges, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art," and Linda Lovelace, to name a few – that are undeniably an important part of American culture but which nevertheless have rarely featured in American studies classes, at least not in your typical European English department. Rich as our education in American studies might have been, one can sense, retrospectively, how significant and nourishing that noninstitutional part (like listening intently and obsessively to Dylan and the Band records or watching Hollywood movies) has been in accumulating knowledge about, as well as generating insight into, the field. There seems to be something inherently eclectic and synoptic about American history that militates against expressive homogeneity. We wonder if you can follow up on that also in relation to the previous comments about American studies and the disciplinary problems and challenges … It's a huge question, we know.

GM: It is a huge question and in some ways I've written a lot of books either trying to address or transform or maybe just tiptoe around that question. You know, I remember when I first heard "We learned more from a three minute record than we ever did in school" and I thought, you know – what a dumb comment. And I thought it was kind of a cheesy pandering comment, because in fact Bruce is a great reader. He may not have been a great reader when he was in high school, or grade school, but he is now. We get fundamental knowledge of life really early. I think it depends on what kind of reader you are. You can learn all you need to know if you are a person who reads with depth. Any line in a book can then suggest whole worlds of curiosity and interest. You can learn everything there is to know about America by reading *Moby-Dick*. Not by reading it once, probably, but

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by returning to it, and using it as your fulcrum – as your power spot that will allow you to move out in any direction. You know – we learned more from *Moby Dick* than we did from a three minute record, it just doesn't have the same ring, does it?

But on the other hand, there's no question that Bruce and I and countless other people learned things about America from listening to a single Little Richard record that we would never have imagined, could never have glimpsed, that were shocking and thrilling and mysterious and strange and threatening. There's a whole other country out there – that no one told you about! And you weren't going to learn all about that country from listening to "Ready Teddy," but you're going to learn it's *there*. And you're going to have to go out and find it for yourself. So there's different kinds of quests involved. One of the great things about school – grade school, high school, college – is that they make you read books that you would not have read otherwise. You know, they are going to instill in you – they're going to make you read the classics, or anyway they used to make you read the classics. And if that didn't happen, then you wouldn't have read them. You would have heard about them. But you would have seen the movie and you never would have read the book. And I think that is of tremendous importance with regard to binding a society together, giving people a common frame of reference, giving people a common language. So I've always been a great defender of traditional education.

Just because we learned more from a three-minute record than we ever did in school doesn't mean that we ought to teach three-minute records *in* school instead of the other stuff we didn't learn anything from. Because people are going to discover that themselves. So I tend to be very hide-bound about this.

The point that we were trying to make was mostly that there seems to be a discrepancy between the way in which knowledge of America is institutionalized in academic disciplines on the one hand and all the stuff that is not covered by disciplines on the other.

GM: The way American studies is taught at Berkeley today is not like that. It studies architecture, traffic, food – just countless different things are put forward.

It's hard not to notice a persistent engagement throughout your work with the notion of secrecy, with underground histories and unmapped spaces, with the wonders of the invisible world and "the palavers with a community of ghosts,"[4] *which is how you once described*

[4] Greil Marcus, *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Picador, 1997), 86.

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The Basement Tapes. *Several of your book titles are revelatory in this respect. There is of course* Mystery Train, *the subtitle of* Lipstick Traces *(A Secret History of the Twentieth Century),* The Dustbin of History*,* Invisible Republic*/*The Old, Weird America*, and* The Shape of Things to Come. *To what extent would you say this trope, if that's what it is, of concealment or opacity has informed your work as an editor of* A New Literary History of America*?*

GM: Well I hope *not.* I'm perfectly aware that there is this theme running through all of my work, and I know what its sources are. I mean I know what its personal neurotic sources are, and I've even written about that recently. I took me a long time. I didn't think that it was anyone's business or that anyone would care. But then there was an occasion to do it, so I did it. But for me to bring my own personality to bear on this enormous shared story of an infinite number of pieces … Any two people would have come up with a very different book, even if they had been given the same charge by Lindsay Waters. It would be perverse to inflict your own personality, your own biases, on a story that is so much bigger than you are. All I tried to do – and I think the same is true with Werner and the members of the editorial board – all we tried to do was to help the writers who had accepted assignments, to most effectively bring out what *they* wanted to say, what *their* understanding and *their* argument of a given situation was. So I hope – not at all. You know, I totally know what you're talking about in terms of my own work, but all I brought to this project was some knowledge, a *lot* of ignorance and some abilities as an editor.

Several of the essays in the book establish resonant connections between the topic of any given entry and more contemporary concerns, thus situating the present in the past and past in the present. The essay "Limits to Violence" is a case in point. There is the impression that this work is more dialogical and contextual in a way than this particular genre has previously allowed for. So was this an intended objective when you set out to compile the anthology? To have the essays speak to the present?

GM: Yes, that certainly was something we talked about a lot. And I think it was more of a concern of Werner's than of mine. I think it was something that Werner thought – this is important, this is central, we should encourage this, you know – more than I did, and that's all to his credit and the book benefits from that. On the other hand, the essay "Limits to Violence" was not one where we ever discussed with the writer: "Now, you know, there are these parallels with the present and you know, we'd really like to see you bring this out." I was just completely surprised when that entry came in. We wanted him to write about Grant, about the memoirs. We need an essay on Grant's memoirs. We didn't know what it was going to be. We didn't know

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what he was going to take up, and, you know, the notion that he would end up focussing on brutality and torture, and draw these stark analogies with the Bush administration. The Bush administration was such a radical anti-democratic, autocratic little *bunker* in the whole scope of American history, that it either overturned, denied, negated or literally set itself against so many precedents, so many senses of limits in all areas of American governance, character, discourse. But this was a case where we can only really appreciate Grant and the depth of his character and his sense of what war is by comparing it to what we're going through now. That was just inescapable. If you take that away you don't have anything. But that's a tremendous essay, "Limits to Violence."

His description in the beginning of the essay of his final days is just astonishing.
GM: It is one of those signal moments in American history, like Poe's death, his lonely, miserable, forgotten death. And Grant saying, "I'm going to finish this fucking thing, I don't care if I die the next day."

There are several entries in the anthology that reflect that a new literary history would have to approach what Leslie Fiedler called a "post-Gutenberg" culture of the visual.[5] *In a recent issue of* The Believer *you describe what you call the "waiting images" of Haneke's* The White Ribbon*, suggesting that they change the way you look at Walker Evans's 1936 photos of tenant family shacks in Hale County, Alabama. This way in which images can have the capacity to transform how you look at other images seems to interest you (i.e. in your chapter about David Lynch in* The Shape of Things to Come*). Were you ever tempted to include a stronger pictorial element in your literary history, in order to address how such processes infuse cultural and mental histories?*
GM: I think there are gaps or weaknesses in the book. We had to make choices. The book is somewhat longer than we anticipated it would be; counting the index and everything it's 1,100 pages. There are 225 entries in the book instead of the two hundred we were ultimately aiming for. There should have been an entry on *Mad* magazine, which would have opened up into Lenny Bruce, or there could have been an entry on Lenny Bruce which would have opened up into *Mad* magazine. But that kind of humor, that strain of American speech should have been in the book and isn't. And I think had there been an entry on – let's just say Walker Evans – that again could have gone in so many different directions and brought in so many other people. And that's something that isn't there.

[5] Bramen, 752.

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The role of Walker Evans, particularly in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is really fascinating, and it tells you so much about what iconography is and how it effects a whole culture, and the way people understand who they are. You know, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* opens cold with this portfolio of photographs. There's no title page, there's no nothing. You open the cover, and there you have these pictures. And you look and you think: come on, when does the book start? And you finally get to the title page, and it starts, and you read James Agee's introduction, where he says, "The portfolio of photographs that opens this book constitutes a separate but equal statement." And you think: "boy what a really bullshit modest thing to say." "Here's my friend's pictures and here's my five hundred pages of text." But who are you kidding? Obviously, the text vastly outweighs this little portfolio of photographs in terms of depth, reach, and intellectual claims to its importance.

The fact is – and I don't know if this was Agee engaging in a very complex joke with the future, or whether he actually believed what he was saying – that none of what he said there is true. As you read his book, you are constantly going back and looking at these pictures. You're trying to figure out who's who. And then you're just trying to see if what Agee is describing is captured in the photographs. You're trying to see whether he can *match* the impact of the photographs, or – depending on who you are – if the photographs can match the descriptions in his writing. So there's this tension set up, and it's just overwhelming, and it *drives* the whole book, the two parts.

Then he says that they are separate but equal, and we all know that's nonsense, because the text is so much greater. It's like saying the maps in the beginning of *Moby-Dick* present a separate but equal statement to the rest of the book. In many ways *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, as a piece of writing, is a landlocked *Moby-Dick*. But which has entered American consciousness? Which has had a determinant effect on our understanding of what the possibilities and limits, and depths and hellholes, of life in America are? Who has affected our senses of who we actually are? Agee or Evans? Obviously Evans. Obviously those images have travelled, have penetrated, in a way that the writing never has. There's a tremendous paradox there. Those are indelible images and they aren't documentary images either. They are constructed, they are selected, they are found. And yet they're also what they are.

You've quoted Fiedler's expression "imaginary Americans" a number of places, which you use with reference to the Beatles and not least in addressing the notion of America as an

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idea or a set of ideas. To what extent do you think that imaginary Americans have shaped and continue to shape this idea of America? We are certainly two imaginary Americans, and I think this would probably be interesting to American studies.

GM: It's a completely fecund notion. When I first came across Fiedler referring to the Beatles as imaginary Americans, obviously I said: yeah, right. But I also thought that that was so limited – to refer to people who aren't Americans as imaginary Americans. Because all Americans of any interest are imaginary Americans – they are imagining themselves as Americans. You get a sense of the alienation or the strangeness of the notion of America, of a made-up country that essentially has no meaning except a few values, a few lines from the Declaration of Independence, a few principles you can derive from the Constitution. It's not just Ishmael who's an imaginary American, or an imagined American. Everybody who confronts this question, whether it's Chuck Berry who does so explicitly, whether it's Melville, and he does so explicitly, whether it's Jefferson, Lincoln – all these people do this explicitly, and many people do it implicitly. They're all saying, "what would it mean to be an American?" not "what *does* it mean?" It presumes that America has yet to actually take shape, come into focus, it's not completely real, it may never be. But you're going to have to act that out yourself, in whatever way it would be.

If you look at Coleman Silk in Philip Roth's novel the *Human Stain* – this is someone from an African American family in New Jersey, who's very light-skinned, who passes as white his entire life to absolutely everybody, including his wife, and all of his colleagues. This is someone who is asking this question in the most stark and in some ways perverse manner imaginable. What would it mean to be an American? One answer, the answer Coleman Silk is giving us, is that being an American means to be white. Philip Roth takes great pains to show us the real genealogical background of Coleman Silk's family, which includes African Americans, former slaves, Swedes, Jews. Essentially, Coleman Silk is the son of Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson, he's that completely American. Or you can look at it the way Coleman Silk himself sees it, which is that he is fulfilling the American destiny more completely than anybody else ever could, because he has completely invented himself. Out of whole cloth, he has become someone he was not, and not only has he done so, he has inhabited that role so fully that his former identity has completely ceased to exist, just like a caterpillar sloughing off its skin.

So the question of the imaginary American is central, but as I said, Fiedler uses it much too narrowly. If you settle for what you are given, he claims, then you're not fully American. Now that is a parochial statement in its own

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right. Because most people who are born into poverty in America don't escape it. So you want to turn to them and say; you don't really belong here, you're not really an American because you couldn't invent yourself, because you couldn't imagine a completely different destiny and then go on and live it out? That's stupid. I come from an educated middle-class background. I'm an educated person who lives a middle-class life. Have I escaped anything? Have I imagined a different destiny? Not really.

With respect to the realm of literature and art – aesthetics – would you say that this process of continuous cultural reinvention is something that distinguishes the whole tradition of American literature from, say, the German, French or European equivalents?
GM: Yes, of course it does, it's our great obsession. Look at the Russian novel, which is about the inability of people to imagine themselves outside the worlds in which they were born and the horrible conflicts this creates. The one signal character in Russian literature who does escape is the killer in *Crime and Punishment*. He commits this horrible, senseless crime in order to completely destroy the fabric of society, his own identity, and the destiny that it's presumed he will live out. And he fails! Right? Because he still essentially gets a pass. All literatures have their own ruling themes, and that is certainly ours.

As a distinguished scholar of multiculturalism over the years, how did you decide to go into the word's early history in your entry?
WS: The format of each entry – a date, a newspaper-like headline, and a more dictionary-like title followed by a 2,250–2,500-word-long essay that would present a surprising creation, a turning point, a cultural momentum – intrigued me and inspired me to write on the little-known novel that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, gave rise to the word "multicultural" – a word that had an astonishingly popular career half a century later. I drafted the essay in the manner of an entry and sent it to Lindsay and Greil – and they decided that it should become part of the book.

"That was New Orleans," you write in your entry on Katrina, "but imagine now that it was any place, any great city, any small town, on which, for a moment, the attention of the nation was fixed. The place then becomes a mirror, the face of the nation itself. In the national imagination the place becomes the nation, or its negation – the face the nation faces, or the face from which the nation turns away." Moving from Faulkner to Neale Hurston and then to Thomas Paine and Melville – via Randy Newman – the entry seems a perfect example of how one can approach or address the present through prisms of the past, as well as past events through prisms of the present moment – and end up with a piece

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of text that addresses much, much more than a singular event or series of events. There are several such entries in the book – is this the result of an editorial strategy?

WS: Thank you for your kind words on this essay. From the very inception of the project we envisioned essays that would roam back- and forward from a moment that provides its occasion to be included. Greil and I both thought of examples for the sort of pattern we had in mind. Greil: "An entry on Lenny Bruce, say, could move to Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and to *Lolita* – and back to earlier gauntlets of twentieth-century legal censorship, as opposed to the social and self-censorship of the nineteenth century and before, as with *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and Henry Miller – though in fact such an entry could begin with any of these specific items, moving forward in time, backwards, or sideways." Me: "e.e. cummings let typewriter keys serve as inspiration for a new kind of lower-case poetry; one could look at the stages of the invention of the typewriter that took on a new quality with the American patent in 1873 and the Remington mass production that followed it. Henry James typed many of his works and letters and used the phrase 'my Remington' with a certain fondness; there is a brass sculpture of Hemingway attached to his typewriter in the JFK Library; and the beats are unthinkable without such keys as the ampersand &." Though neither of these samples became actual entries, they guided our process of imagining a good number of topics that did make it into *A New Literary History of America*.

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