Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the *PMLA* authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and does not consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to *PMLA* Forum, Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004–1789.

American Studies and Critical Identity

To the Editor:

Apparently, I am guilty of the sin of "the logic of . . . totalized autolepsis," at least according to Djelal Kadir, in "America and Its Studies," his introduction to the special topic America: The Idea, the Literature (118 [2003]: 9–24).

Specifically, Kadir on page 19 cites, as confirming the sin, my essay "On Becoming Oneself in Frank Lentricchia" from its first published version in *New Americanists 2: National Identities and Post-national Narratives* (*Boundary 2* 19.1 [1992]). This essay also appears, in an expanded form, as the last chapter of my book *Radical Parody: American Culture and Critical Agency after Foucault* (1992).

In both places I think my critical project at the time was made clear. My aim was to demonstrate the truth of the Nietzschean perspective on identity, that one becomes what one is, and its truly prophetic Blakean critique, that one becomes what one beholds. Or, to use explicitly here the Foucauldian discourse I used there, any *rapport à soi* is necessarily a highly mediated, hybridic, potentially conflicted, and improvisational phenomenon, ever open to further critique and revision.

In sum, whatever else critical identity may be, the logic of totalized autolepsis it ain't!

Daniel T. O'Hara
Temple University

Reply:

I thank Daniel T. O'Hara for his response to "America and Its Studies," my introduction to the January 2003 special topic. It would be difficult to find a better demonstration of the logic and practice of autolepsis, or self-seizure, than his self-referring "*rapport à soi*," as he terms it. What is less clear in this

© 2003 by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081290016729X Published online by Cambridge University Press

demonstration is whether it is meant ironically as radical parody or whether O'Hara means for us to take his critical practice as perpetual, rather than as "totalized," autolepsis instead. Either way, the relentlessness of the autoethnography, whether as critical or as symptomatic identity, leaves no room for the issues of American studies and of America as part of the world.

As I argued in my essay, this is lamentable, especially at a time when America may be the most compelling subject of study in the world, whether the world would wish to be so compelled or not. At the recent world congress of the International American Studies Association (22–24 May 2003, Leiden, Neth.), another American Americanist, as genuinely self-searching as O'Hara, asked her international colleagues from nearly forty countries when they would finally differentiate between American Americanists as American figures and as critic-scholars engaged in the production of knowledge about America. She then proceeded, unwittingly, in the vein of O'Hara's performance here, not only to rehearse the current American obsession with demonstrating "the Nietzschean perspective on identity, that one becomes what one is," as O'Hara notes. She also, much like O'Hara in pursuit of self-differentiation and self-justifying autoscopy, confirmed, simultaneously, the "truly prophetic Blakean critique, that one becomes what one beholds."

I have been trying to make the case for an international, exogenous American studies when America is not wont to see or hear anything or anyone but itself. O'Hara's response demonstrates the urgency with which such a project must be pursued—if, that is, America and the rest of the world are to continue to exist with any modicum of civility and mutual comprehension. Conversation, perhaps the most significant sign of humane civilization, is more than soliloquy, just as insight must amount to more than self-contemplation. Failing this, autoethnography becomes, at best, a self-contradiction and, at worst, a self-erasure that also rubs out the rest of the world. At a moment when we are compelled to oscillate between these two possibilities, we need greater intellectual responsibility and a greater commitment than self-pursuit, whether as critical identity or as cultural and national symptom.

Djelal Kadir
Penn State University, University Park

The Crisis in Scholarly Publishing

To the Editor:

I read the exchange between Lindsay Waters ("A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Books of the Members of the MLA from Being a Burden to Their Authors, Publishers, or Audiences" [115 (2000): 315–17]) and Philip Lewis ("Is Monographic Tyranny the Problem?" [117 (2002): 1222–24]) on "monographic tyranny" with great pleasure but also with real concern. I feel it merits an extension.

Lewis laments that, because "graduate students in literature . . . have faced increasing pressure to choose their special area and dissertation project on the basis of what they and their mentors know about the constricted job market," which is that even candidates for beginning assistant professorships now often need a book or the clear prospect of one, and because the most esteemed venues for publication, university presses, currently "favor books . . . on broad topics," "forces in the academic book market aggravate the shaping of the disciplines to the advantage of larger fields and cross-disciplinary trends and at the expense of . . . long-term programs of scholarly inquiry." Graduate students are not the only scholars affected by this situation: university presses' current focus on "books . . . on broad topics" "inclines many authors," not just graduate students, "to bypass the rigors of large-scale inquiry and sustained argument, [putting] our profession at odds with essential values of scholarly inquiry we purport to uphold" (1223).

Lewis's words came back to me during the last several weeks as, for various reasons, beginning assistant professors sent me forthcoming book chapters and journal articles, all growing out of recent dissertations, in my bailiwick of literary scholarship, Pierre Loti. I was dismayed to see how many mistakes almost all these pieces contained, most introduced because the authors, while they speak of Loti and "his work," have read only one or two texts in isolation and as many works of Loti criticism.

I am sure that the authors of these pieces have the intelligence to produce sound scholarship. What they do not seem to have, at least yet, is the understanding that such scholarship results from "long-term programs of scholarly inquiry . . . and sustained argument." There was a time when dissertations were designed to teach that; they were monographs

https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081290016729X Published online by Cambridge University Press