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*AHR Forum*  
The Kids Are All Right:  
On the “Turning” of Cultural History

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JAMES W. COOK

To situate this introduction, it will be useful to focus briefly on just what constituted the cultural turn.

Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt

RUN A FEW WEB SEARCHES FOR the term “cultural turn,” and you will begin to grasp the scope of an increasingly viral concept. In Google Books alone, you will find more than 100,000 citations, the bibliographic traces of the concept’s extended wandering.<sup>1</sup> Switch to the search engine at OCLC WorldCat, ArticleFirst, or ECO, and the numbers become less daunting, somewhere on the order of a few hundred hits. In these more specialized databases, however, the searchable content is limited to titles and abstracts. So what you are really seeing is the initial layers of a much larger conversation: the figurative tip of the bibliographic iceberg.<sup>2</sup>

What might the iceberg tell us? Most of all, perhaps, it provides a wide-angle view of the concept’s current ubiquity. In addition to Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt’s 1999 volume *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, you will find thousands of recent books invoking “cultural turns” in a wide variety of scholarly contexts—from sociology to

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed March 9, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Other useful benchmarks can be found in JSTOR and Project Muse. On March 9, 2012, a keyword search among history journals in JSTOR for the phrase “cultural turn” generated more than 600 hits. In Project Muse, which archives a shorter span of time, the same procedure on the same day generated more than 500 hits. At first glance, my approach here may appear contradictory: the application of older social historical methods (e.g., counting) to track the very mode that is often said to have supplanted those methods (“the cultural turn”). As we shall see, however, such hard-and-fast distinctions between the “social” and the “cultural” have often relied on misleading conceptual inventories. From Robert Darnton’s *The Business of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979) and Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984) to Richard Ohmann’s *Selling Culture* (New York, 1996) and Franco Moretti’s *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (London, 2005), there have always been major currents *within* the cultural turn that traversed the conceptual zero sums. I return to these currents below.

geography, Marxist theory to translation studies.<sup>3</sup> You will also confirm the impact of this concept on our patterns of historical discourse. Since the early 2000s, it has figured prominently in hundreds of historical monographs, articles, and reviews; two AHA presidential addresses; at least three previous *AHR* Forums; and various fora in the *Hispanic American Historical Review* (1999), the *Journal of American History* (2003), *Cultural and Social History* (2004), and *Social Science History* (2008).<sup>4</sup>

Dig a bit deeper, though, and additional wrinkles begin to emerge. One involves the long list of seminal cultural histories in which the concept never appeared: from Natalie Davis's *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975), Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977), and Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1982) to Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984), Jonathan Spence's *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (1984), and Joan Wallach Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988).<sup>5</sup> Nor did the concept achieve much currency anywhere in our discipline before the end of the last century—the very moment, paradoxically, when growing numbers of commentators began announcing our transition to something else, something now figured as subsequent to or “beyond” the cultural turn.<sup>6</sup>

What is at issue here, then, is not a ground-level concept, first developed in the process of *doing* cultural history, so much as a genealogical master trope, now increasingly used to *stand in* for cultural history. Defining the turn in this way does nothing to diminish its significance. In fact, the trope's recent arrival has been entangled with at least two major trends. Above all, it has signaled a growing desire to track the shifting contours of cultural history—and survey the larger whole. It has also suggested a willingness to step back and take stock, to begin a broader conversation about what “the turn” actually accomplished. Regardless of how we answer

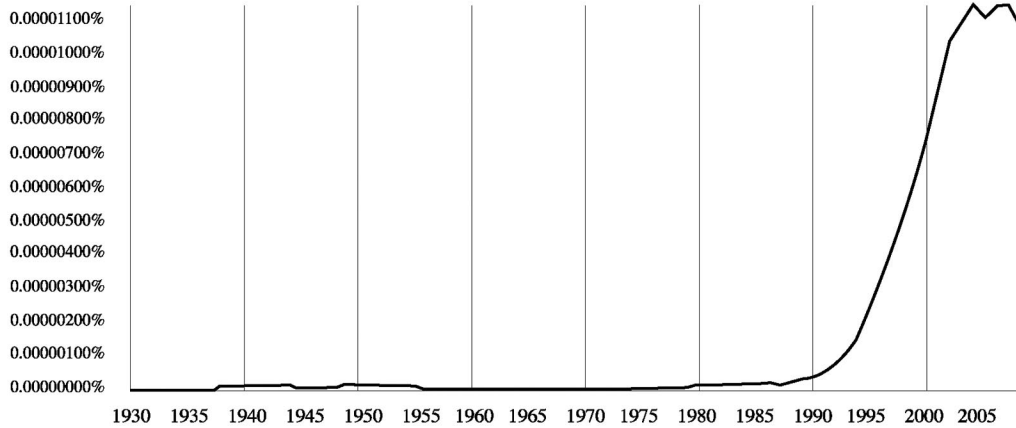
<sup>3</sup> Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Weinstein, “Developing Inequality,” AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 113, no. 1 (February 2008): 1–18; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “The Task of the Historian,” AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 114, no. 1 (February 2009): 1–15; “AHR Forum: Geoff Eley's *A Crooked Line*,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 391–437; “AHR Forum: Revisiting ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,’” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (December 2008): 1344–1430; “AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 573–661; “AHR Conversation: Historians and the Study of Material Culture,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009): 1355–1404; “AHR Forum: The State in South Asian History,” *American Historical Review* 115, no. 2 (April 2010): 405–483; *Mexico's New Cultural History: ¿Una Lucha Libre?*, Special Issue, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (May 1999); *Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (September 2003): 576–611; *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 1 (January 2004): 94–117, and 1, no. 2 (May 2004): 201–224; *Social Science History* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 535–593. I myself invoked the concept on multiple occasions in James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O'Malley, eds., *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present and Future* (Chicago, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Calif., 1975); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore, 1982); Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984); Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York, 1984); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> One good way to track this pattern is by running a JSTOR search for “cultural turn” in the *American Historical Review*. Interestingly, the very first hits are from 1999, the same year in which Bonnell and Hunt published *Beyond the Cultural Turn*. Three years later, the *AHR* editors were already using the phrase as an unexplained touchstone. See, for example, the introduction to “What's beyond the Cultural Turn?,” *American Historical Review* 107, no. 5 (December 2002): 1475.

**Google Labs Ngram for the Phrase “Cultural Turn”**  
1930-2008, Books in English



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FIGURE 1: Google Labs “Ngram” for the phrase “cultural turn,” 1930 to 2008. The larger data pool encompasses texts in English that were digitized by Google through 2011.

these questions, the very act of posing them has marked an important epistemological shift. Since the late 1930s, at least, cultural historians have positioned themselves as paradigm-busters: always challenging conventional assumptions, always pushing toward something new. The recent talk of turns, by contrast, has directed attention backward, toward more comprehensive conceptual inventories, new waves of self-critiques.<sup>7</sup>

One useful response is to track this burgeoning turn talk—its dominant narratives, assumptions, and insights. At this late date, however, it seems important to do more than simply rehearse the prevailing narratives or fill them with additional content. Indeed, what we increasingly lack is a clear and critical sense of how this trope has shaped conventional wisdom, and to what larger effects. For all the recent efforts at genealogical precision, much of the best work has assumed a metonymic equivalence between the trope itself (cultural turn) and the multi-decade phenomenon it

<sup>7</sup> In recent years, this literature has become voluminous. In addition to the citations in fn. 4, see especially Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994); Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*; Richard Biernacki, “Method and Metaphor after the New Cultural History,” *ibid.*, 62–94; Biernacki, “Language and the Shift from Signs to Practices in Cultural Inquiry,” *History and Theory* 39, no. 3 (October 2000): 289–310; Miri Rubin, “What Is Cultural History Now?,” in David Cannadine, ed., *What Is History Now?* (New York, 2002), 80–94; Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (London, 2004); Miguel A. Cabrera, *Postsocial History: An Introduction* (Lanham, Md., 2004); Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller, eds., *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* (Durham, N.C., 2005); William H. Sewell, Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Transformation* (Chicago, 2005); Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2005); Robert M. Burns, ed., *Historiography: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies*, vol. 4: *Culture* (London, 2006); Daniel Wickberg, “What Is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories, Old and New,” *American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (June 2007): 661–684; Karen Halttunen, ed., *A Companion to American Cultural History* (Malden, Mass., 2008); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011).

is now meant to reference (cultural history). Yet this assumption is shot through with potential problems. One is that it often produces a moving target: each new narrative tracks a somewhat different set of concepts. Another is the turn's propensity for semantic dodginess: sometimes standing in for entire spectrums of cultural approaches, at other moments referencing one particular approach within a larger spectrum.<sup>8</sup> A third basic problem is the tendency to compress periodization, such that "turning" becomes synonymous with a generational rite of passage—most typically, from the new social history of the 1970s to the new cultural history of the 1980s.<sup>9</sup>

In this latter vein, especially, much of the work has produced unmarked forms of synecdoche, simultaneously compressing, flattening, and occluding a much longer conceptual history. On the U.S. side alone, it compresses at least four or five distinctive modes: from Depression-era advocates of a "cultural approach" such as Caroline Ware and Merle Curti; to Cold War-era champions of myth and symbol historiography like Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, and John William Ward; to key innovators of the 1960s and 1970s, including David Brion Davis, Warren Susman, Neil Harris, Herbert Gutman, Ann Douglas, Lawrence Levine, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Nathan Huggins; to more recent waves of culturalists, for whom the new cultural history of the 1980s was already a conceptual artifact.<sup>10</sup>

Curiously, some of the most prominent recent commentators have ignored these longer trajectories, producing the rather odd and misleading impression that cultural history simply rose and fell—stopped *turning*—in the course of a single generation.<sup>11</sup> In so doing, they have also consolidated a new declension story: ambitious early

<sup>8</sup> This distinction has typically played out as a series of semantic slippages between "a turn" (that is, of a single practitioner, or within a particular subfield) and "the turn" (encompassing an entire discipline). Yet these slippages carry very different methodological assumptions. By its very formulation, "a turn" pushes in the direction of multiplicity, with each practitioner (or subfield) "turning" in a variety of ways. "The turn," by contrast, conjures a broader epistemic shift, as well as a more normative set of assumptions about what the shift encompassed. My thinking here is indebted to Michael Warner's discussion of "a" versus "the" public in *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 65–124.

<sup>9</sup> This pattern is especially strong in the works cited above by Bonnell, Hunt, Eley, Sewell, and Spiegel—all "cultural turners" of the late 1970s and early 1980s who began their careers working in other subfields.

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller portrait of this occluded history, see James W. Cook and Lawrence B. Glickman, "Twelve Propositions for a History of U.S. Cultural History," in Cook, Glickman, and O'Malley, *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History*, 3–57. See also Caroline F. Ware, ed., *The Cultural Approach to History* (New York, 1940); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950; repr., Cambridge, Mass., 1970); Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Turpie, eds., *Studies in American Culture* (Minneapolis, 1960); David Brion Davis, "Some Recent Directions in American Cultural History," *American Historical Review* 73, no. 3 (February 1968): 696–707; Leo Marx, "American Studies: A Defense of an Unscientific Method," *New Literary History* 1, no. 1 (October 1969): 75–90; Robert F. Berkhofer, "Clio and the Culture Concept: Some Impressions of a Changing Relationship in American Historiography," in Louis Schneider and Charles Bonjean, eds., *The Idea of Culture in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 1973), 77–100; Alan Trachtenberg, "Myth and Symbol," *Massachusetts Review* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 667–673; Michael Denning, "The Special American Conditions," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): 356–380; Ellen Fitzpatrick, "Caroline F. Ware and the Cultural Approach to History," *American Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (June 1991): 173–198; Donald R. Kelley, "The Old Cultural History," *History of the Human Sciences* 9, no. 3 (1996): 101–126; Barry Shank, "The Continuing Embarrassment of Culture: From the Culture Concept to Cultural Studies," *American Studies* 38, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 95–116; and Lucy Maddox, ed., *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline* (Baltimore, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*; Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*; Sewell, *Logics of History*; Peter Mandler, "The Problem with Cultural History," *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 1 (2004): 94–117. Eley and Spiegel have adopted similar narratives of generational supersession, but with fewer declensionist overtones. See, for example, Eley, *A Crooked*

agendas later chastened by disappointments; mid-career conversion experiences subsequently tempered by disillusionment.<sup>12</sup> But what actually happened to all of those latter-day culturalists, those fourth- and fifth-wave practitioners for whom the cock-fights, carnivals, and cat massacres were part of their basic historical training?<sup>13</sup> At the very least, it seems important to write these younger scholars into the family romance. In the process, however, we may discover something crucial: namely, that the much-debated “beyond” has been steadily unfolding all around us. One turn’s “future” is another turn’s “now.”

WHEN DID WE BEGIN TO SPEAK in “turns”? Interestingly, before the 1980s, the more specific figure of a “cultural turn” appeared precisely nowhere in the vast history archives of JSTOR. And over the next decade, it appeared only twice: first in a 1982 *Daedalus* essay by Martin Marty, and then again in a 1990 essay by Adelheid von Saldern in *International Labor and Working-Class History*.<sup>14</sup> The scarcity of the phrase is intriguing: two lonely hits in roughly half a million pages, and this during the very period often described as “the turn’s” conceptual apex. Another key lesson involves the particular ways in which Marty and von Saldern formulated their turns. Neither author, that is to say, used the phrase as genealogical shorthand, to stand in for the history of cultural history. Nor did they employ it historiographically, to conjure the shifting methods of a particular group. At this point, rather, the turns in question referenced much broader shifts in twentieth-century religious practices (Marty) and mass politics (von Saldern). In both instances, the authors’ uses of the phrase seem almost accidental—as if they might just as easily have said “cultural watershed” or “cultural transformation.”

Extend the search another year or two, however, and the patterns begin to change. The very next hit from 1991 is an essay in the *Journal of American Ethnic History* by Kathleen Neils Conzen, in which she describes large numbers of “immigration historians” making the same “cultural turn” so evident “in many other areas of our discipline.”<sup>15</sup> Within JSTOR, at least, this was the first published reference with clear historiographical overtones. Yet it pointed to a longer process: a turn now figured as fully active. In a 1993 review essay for *Labour/Le Travail*, Elizabeth Blackmar similarly referenced a “cultural turn in social history” familiar enough to be

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*Line*, 200–203; and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Comment on *A Crooked Line*,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (2008): 411–413.

<sup>12</sup> Bonnell and Hunt, “Introduction,” in Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 11; Sewell, *Logics of History*, 23. See also William H. Sewell, Jr., “Crooked Lines,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 393–405, in which he laments “the shapeless bazaar” (403) of cultural histories produced in the turn’s wake.

<sup>13</sup> My use of these terms is meant to reference some of the most widely influential studies of the 1970s and early 1980s: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973); Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*; Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*.

<sup>14</sup> Martin E. Marty, “Religion in America since Mid-Century,” *Daedalus* 111, no. 1 (1982): 149–163, quotation from 154; Adelheid von Saldern, “The Hidden History of Mass Culture,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 37 (Spring 1990): 32–40, quotation from 32.

<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Neils Conzen, “Mainstreams and Side Channels: The Localization of Immigrant Cultures,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 11, no. 1 (Fall 1991): 9. This essay was a revised version of Conzen’s presidential address delivered at the April 1991 meeting of the Immigration History Society.

contrasted with previous modes of New Left scholarship, charged by its critics with evading politics, and finally defended by Blackmar herself as essential for understanding the broader dimensions of capitalist power.<sup>16</sup> One year later, the British sociologist David Chaney stretched the concept further, describing a “cultural turn” irreducible to any particular topic, subfield, or discipline. Chaney’s point, in fact, was to cast this turn as a major development in late-twentieth-century social thought, one in which scores of new “culture concepts” were said to be rising and falling, competing and commingling.<sup>17</sup>

The point of rehearsing this lineage is not to suggest some longer teleology, each new hit pushing ever closer to common currency. Rather, what the hits begin to show us is the inevitably messy etymological process by which the trope first entered historical discourse. In her 1991 essay, Conzen put the term in quotation marks and cited the introduction to Lynn Hunt’s important collection *The New Cultural History* (1989). At this stage, though, Hunt had never actually used the phrase “cultural turn,” opting instead to frame her story as a series of localized debates within British Marxism, the French *Annales* group, and certain corners of U.S. intellectual and gender history. To the extent that Hunt even spoke of “turns” or “turning” in 1989, it was always to reference innovations figured as just prior to her target: the new cultural history. Thus, the “interest in language” exhibited by growing numbers of Marxists marked them as “turning” to something else—something other than the default “materialism” of an older “Marxist agenda.” But when such “interest” grew into something larger, something closer to a core concern, the same conceptual exemplars resurfaced (transformed) as new cultural historians.<sup>18</sup>

Early on, then, Hunt conjured methodological rites of passage: new routes *into* cultural history rather than a metonym *for* cultural history. Chaney, by contrast, presented his 1994 title *The Cultural Turn* as a self-conscious play on words. This figure, he explained, referenced no preexisting master trope, no widely employed catch phrase. Its specific intent, rather, was to pun on the somewhat earlier figure of a “linguistic turn,” here expanded to include a broader range of culture concepts (i.e., no longer confined to words and texts).<sup>19</sup> When, exactly, this second turn emerged—or how it might have intersected its linguistic predecessor—remained unresolved in Chaney’s admittedly “provisional” framework. In the book’s opening pages, he simply noted that “it would not be difficult to put forward a thesis that the . . . recent focus on culture” was a further development of earlier work on “the nature and forms of language.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Betsy Blackmar, “Building the History of Working-Class America,” *Labour/Le Travail* 31 (Spring 1993): 327. The impetus for Blackmar’s review was the publication of *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation’s Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society* (New York, 1989, 1992), a landmark two-volume collection written under the auspices of the American Social History Project. Her more specific reference to a “cultural turn in social history” (my emphasis) was not entirely unprecedented. See, for example, Raphael Samuel’s use of the same phrase in “Reading the Signs, II: Fact-Grubbers and Mind-Readers,” *History Workshop Journal* 33 (Spring 1992): 220–251, quotation from 226.

<sup>17</sup> David Chaney, *The Cultural Turn: Scene-Setting Essays on Contemporary Cultural History* (London, 1994), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Lynn Hunt, “Introduction: History, Culture, and Text,” in Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989), 1–22. For the references to “turns” and “turning,” see 4, 5, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Chaney, *The Cultural Turn*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> One key reference point for Chaney was John E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review* 92,

Even at this juncture, however, there were growing indications of a more rigorous and expansive story. Key titles in this regard were Geoff Eley's "Is All the World a Text?" (1990) and Raphael Samuel's "Reading the Signs" (1991) and "Reading the Signs, II" (1992), all of which sought, quite explicitly, to push beyond the brief conceptual lineages of Hunt's volume.<sup>21</sup> The point here is not simply that Eley and Samuel expanded Hunt's story with a number of additional seedbeds (such as the work of Antonio Gramsci), or that they tracked key innovations more systematically from high-level concepts to ground-level practices (such as the shifting editorial policies at *History Workshop Journal*, *Social History*, and the *Radical History Review*).<sup>22</sup> Nor is it that their inventories of defining concepts issued from a much broader range of thinkers: Raymond Williams as well as Clifford Geertz; Philippe Ariès as well as Michel Foucault; Edward Said as well as Roger Chartier; Catherine Hall as well as Joan Scott.

It is also, more fundamentally, that Eley and Samuel engaged the concepts themselves with greater depth and comprehensiveness. On the central question of "discourse," for instance, Eley did not simply gesture toward Foucault. More ambitiously, he tracked the transatlantic reception of Foucault's work, explicated the "dispersed and decentered conception of power" that made the "discursive move" possible, and then argued for its broader utility as an "extraordinarily fruitful" way of "theorizing both the internal rules and regularities of particular fields of knowledge (their 'regimes of truth') and the more general structures of ideas and assumptions that delimit what can and cannot be thought and said." A few pages later, he returned to the concept, but this time to consider its broader effects on historiography. After Foucault, Eley cautioned, bedrock categories such as "class," "citizenship," and "society" could no longer be "assumed" or posited "objectively"—in "some unproblematic social-science sense." The more pressing issue, rather, was how each of these categories had emerged as "an object of theory-knowledge" or "a target of policy." What, in other words, were "the historically located methods, tech-

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no. 4 (October 1987): 879–907. For a much fuller treatment of the concept's origins and shifting currency, see Judith Surkis's essay in this forum.

<sup>21</sup> Geoff Eley, "Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later" (CSST Working Paper #55, October 1990); Raphael Samuel, "Reading the Signs," *History Workshop Journal* 32 (Autumn 1991): 88–109; Samuel, "Reading the Signs, II." The original context for Eley's essay was the Working Paper Series sponsored by the Program in Comparative Study of Social Transformations (CSST) at the University of Michigan. The essay was then reprinted with minor revisions in a subsequent conference volume: Terrence J. McDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1996), 193–243. Samuel's essays first took shape as an editorial for *History Workshop Journal* 31 (1991). This seems to have provoked substantial disagreements among the editors, however, which led Samuel to revise and expand the essay into the much longer, two-part series. According to the notes for "Reading the Signs, II," Samuel intended two additional essays in future issues. By 1992, though, the larger plan seems to have shifted. As he explained in "Reading the Signs, II": "In order not to trespass further on readers' patience, or *History Workshop Journal* space, the third of these articles, which is about history and post-modernism, will be placed elsewhere" (246). As far as I am aware, the third and fourth parts never appeared, although some of these ideas can be tracked to Samuel's subsequent two-volume *Theatres of Memory* (London, 1994, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Despite the prominent position of turn-prone Marxists in Hunt's 1989 narrative, Gramsci was surprisingly absent. Nor did she cite many of the central figures in twentieth-century Marxist theory who were widely discussed on the British side, such as Georg Lukacs or Valentin Voloshinov. I note these patterns not to argue for or against any particular cast of characters, but to point out some of the surprising gaps that were built into the turn talk from the very beginning.

niques, and practices that allowed such . . . categor[ies] to be constructed in the first place"?<sup>23</sup>

Samuel, too, had quite a bit to say about "discourse." But in his telling, the genealogical branches extended even further: first backward to the structural linguist Emile Benveniste, who had developed the concept of "discourse" during the 1930s; then forward a bit, to Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic* (1963), which "vastly expanded" Benveniste's concept by applying it "to all those classificatory and naming devices by which science and authority produce order out of chaos"; then laterally, to extended comparisons with morphology, deconstruction, semiotics, and hermeneutics (each of which, Samuel insisted, came with its own distinctive theories about how signs actually work); and then laterally once again, to a second round of comparisons with Marx, Gramsci, and Althusser (Foucault's "discursive formations" now functioning as "base and superstructure, theory and practice rolled into one"). Even here, however, Samuel was just warming up. With remarkable erudition (and over more than sixty printed pages), he quickly performed similar maneuvers on Ferdinand Saussure and semiotics; on Roland Barthes and mythology; on Jacques Derrida and deconstruction; on Clifford Geertz and symbolic anthropology; on E. P. Thompson and class; on Pierre Nora and sites of memory; on Carlo Ginzburg and microhistory—and on many, many others.<sup>24</sup>

In retrospect, though, much of the fascination of these essays stems not simply from their breadth, depth, and clarity, but also from their lingering open-endedness. In both cases, to be sure, Eley and Samuel referenced a dizzying assortment of turns: some of them linguistic, some of them historic, some of them deconstructive or antireductionist, some of them situated more narrowly within intellectual, social, or gender history. "Important things," Eley noted, "were clearly at stake."<sup>25</sup> At the end of the day, however, both Eley and Samuel chose to represent these "things" with the capacious metaphors of "readings" and "signs," "worlds" and "texts." And in this sense, at least, their targets were always much larger than cultural history itself—new, old, or otherwise. More than origin stories for any particular field, these were conceptual inventories that spoke of turns (not turn), disciplines (not discipline), modes (not mode), unresolved possibilities (rather than consolidating agendas). Although clearly committed to the work of critical genealogy, both authors embraced multitudes and confessed the provisional status of their still-unfolding stories. Neither author, significantly, gave the slightest indication that the stories themselves might be coming to an end.

HOW, THEN, CAN WE EXPLAIN the very different sort of story first ventured in *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, a story now thick with overtones of obsolescence, specters of supersession? Why, in other words, this dramatic refashioning of the story itself: from the live and bracing debates of Eley and Samuel to the fixed and finished turn of

<sup>23</sup> Eley, "Is All the World a Text?," in McDonald, *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, 203–204, 217–222.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel, "Reading the Signs" and "Reading the Signs, II." Quotations from "Reading the Signs," 101, 106.

<sup>25</sup> Eley, "Is All the World a Text?," in McDonald, *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, 198.



Bonnell and Hunt? One obvious complication here is the frequent narrative overlaps. In an opening footnote, Bonnell and Hunt pointed to Eley as their principal touchstone.<sup>26</sup> They also made it clear that they were plowing much the same basic terrain. Back once again were Hayden White's *Metahistory*, Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*, and Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*; French post-structuralism and British cultural studies; those turn-prone Marxists and the fourth-generation Annalists.<sup>27</sup>

Much the same can be said about the narrative trajectories. Following Eley and Samuel, Bonnell and Hunt built their story around the "declining power" of "social explanation," more specifically the "tried-and-true materialist metaphors" central to much postwar historiography. Like Eley and Samuel, too, Bonnell and Hunt presented the 1980s as a critical tipping point, the watershed moment in which "growing numbers" of historians came to reject the very notion of culture as "reflective" or "epiphenomenal." Fundamental categories (such as class or political affiliation) now came to be understood "not as preceding consciousness or culture or language, but as depending upon them." The most basic forms of social life, they noted, "only came into being through their expressions or representations."<sup>28</sup>

But whereas Eley and Samuel had presented these ideas as part of a rapidly unfolding story—still alive with "possibilities"—Bonnell and Hunt now recast them as a form of prior practice, a singular turn of "the last decades."<sup>29</sup> In the process, they also consolidated the larger narrative: first, by squeezing its complex history into roughly half a dozen pages; second, by distilling a heterodox range of cultural approaches into a core proposition (namely, that language and culture "shape" the social, that there is no social being "outside" of culture and language); third, by organizing the story around a rising and falling episteme ("the cultural turn"); and finally, by articulating "disappointment" with the more "radical" manifestations of this turn.<sup>30</sup> In one bold stroke, that is to say, Bonnell and Hunt simultaneously traced the turn's origins and regretted some of its impacts, assembled the family romance and declared the romance over.

There is more to be said about this narrative template: a fast-forming declension story in which the "cultural turn" arrives just in time to deliver its own eulogy.<sup>31</sup> First,

<sup>26</sup> Bonnell and Hunt, "Introduction," 27 n. 4. This despite the fact that Eley did not actually use the phrase "cultural turn" in his 1990 essay.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–32, 27 n. 4; Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973); Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. The contrast here with Hunt's earlier formulations was particularly striking. Consider, for example, the closing lines of her 1989 introduction to *The New Cultural History*: "For the moment, as this volume shows, the accent in cultural history is on close examination—of texts, of pictures, and of actions—and on open-mindedness to what those examinations will reveal, rather than on elaboration of new master narratives or social theories to replace the materialist reductionism of Marxism and the Annales school . . . Historians working in the cultural mode should not be discouraged by theoretical diversity, for we are just entering a remarkable new phase when the other human sciences (including especially literary studies but also anthropology and sociology) are discovering us anew . . . Someday soon, presumably, another E. H. Carr will announce that the more cultural historical studies become and the more historical cultural studies become, the better for both" (22).

<sup>31</sup> Hunt's first published reference to "the cultural turn" came in her co-authored book with Joyce Appleby and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 221. The specific context was a passage

though, it is worth noting the expanding turn talk. Consider JSTOR once again. In the years immediately following Eley's and Samuel's essays, public invocations of the cultural turn remained quite rare. In 1993, there was a grand total of one explicit reference. And over the next half-decade, the aggregate curve remained relatively flat, ranging from no hits in 1994 to seven in 1998. In the years following Bonnell and Hunt, by contrast, the numbers began to spike quite notably, climbing from twenty-four references in 2000 to fifty-eight in 2003.<sup>32</sup> These references, moreover, began to appear in a much broader range of journals, from *Renaissance Quarterly*, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, the *William and Mary Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Modern History* to the *Journal of African History*, the *Catholic Historical Review*, the *Journal of Military History*, and *Historia Mexicana*.

It was at this point, too, that scores of historians began to poach Bonnell and Hunt's title figure, invoking cultural turns in political history and diplomatic history, urban history and environmental history, Cold War studies and histories of consumerism.<sup>33</sup> To some extent, of course, such appropriations served to popularize the concept, transforming a previously marginal catch phrase into a ubiquitous touchstone. With each passing reference, however, the concept took on additional semantic baggage. Much of the new turn talk, in fact, pushed in very different directions: sometimes emphasizing the "vast dispersion" of cultural history said to be reshaping the larger discipline; sometimes complaining about the "contemporary

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devoted to conceptual retrenchments, with E. P. Thompson once again serving as bellwether. In this case, though, the focus was not on Thompson's having "turned away" from socioeconomic "reductionism" during the early 1960s, but rather on the fact that he later "drew back from the more extreme post-modernist positions associated with the cultural turn" (here exemplified by his 1978 polemic, *The Poverty of Theory*). In five short years (1989–1994), that is to say, Hunt's broader framework for talking about cultural history had shifted quite dramatically: from public calls for theoretical "diversity" to a growing emphasis on theoretical zero sums; from a forward-looking process of conceptual "discovery" to backward-looking critiques of methodological "extremism."

<sup>32</sup> One major source of this groundswell can be traced to the large numbers of reviews of Bonnell and Hunt. In 2002, for example, the editors of this journal commissioned not one, but three review essays, by Ronald Suny, Patrick Brantlinger, and Richard Handler, for a special feature titled "What's beyond the Cultural Turn?," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 5 (December 2002): 1475–1520. It is important to be clear, though, that Bonnell and Hunt were not solely responsible for expanding the trope's currency. In 1999, the trope also surfaced in at least four different articles: Craig Clunas, "Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 5 (December 1999): 1497–1511; Claudio Lomnitz, "Barbarians at the Gate? A Few Remarks on the Politics of the 'New Cultural History of Mexico,'" *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (May 1999): 367–385; Christopher Sellers, "Thoreau's Body: Towards an Embodied Environmental History," *Environmental History* 4, no. 4 (October 1999): 486–514; and Shirley Wilton, "Class Struggles: Teaching History in the Post-modern Age," *History Teacher* 33, no. 1 (November 1999): 25–32. Other prominent invocations can be found in David F. Crew, "Who's Afraid of Cultural Studies? Taking a 'Cultural Turn' in German History," in Scott Denham, Irene Kacandes, and Jonathan Petropoulos, eds., *A User's Guide to German Cultural Studies* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1997), 45–61; Thomas Bender, "Politics, Intellect, and the American University, 1945–1995," *Daedalus* 126, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 1–38; and George Steinmetz, ed., *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Ronald P. Formisano, "The Concept of Political Culture," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31, no. 3 (Winter 2001): 393–426; Karina Urbach, "Diplomatic History since the Cultural Turn," *Historical Journal* 46, no. 4 (December 2003): 991–997; James Connolly, "Bringing the City Back In: Space and Place in the Urban History of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1, no. 3 (July 2002): 258–278; Richard White, "Afterword: Environmental History: Watching a Historical Field Mature," *Pacific Historical Review* 70, no. 1 (February 2001): 103–111; Robert Griffith, "The Cultural Turn in Cold War Studies," *Reviews in American History* 29, no. 1 (March 2001): 150–157; and Frank Mort, review of Matthew Hilton, *Smoking in British Popular Culture, 1800–2000: Perfect Pleasures*, *American Historical Review* 108, no. 1 (February 2003): 262–263.

dominion of cultural history” over this or that subfield; sometimes concluding, by extension, that cultural history constituted a methodological “imperialism.”<sup>34</sup> As Drew Gilpin Faust argued in one of the more eloquent variations on this latter theme, “What I have found so compelling about cultural history during my three decades in the profession is its emphasis on how historical actors construe their experience—how they see, define, and respond to their world. Thus for me the lens of culture or meaning filters every other dimension of experience, and cultural history takes on a kind of natural historical imperialism: Whatever else might be happening—politics, economics, technological change—happens to people who use their cultural assumptions and predispositions to interpret it.”<sup>35</sup>

Ultimately, though, the most dramatic effect of Bonnell and Hunt’s volume was to spark new and competing master narratives from some of the discipline’s leading turners.<sup>36</sup> These narratives deserve more careful consideration. In virtually every case, they have generated broad and prominent review attention. In most cases, too, they have been fortified by the weight of personal experience. William Sewell’s *Logics of History* (2005), for example, is equal parts critical genealogy and intellectual autobiography, an often brilliant explication of the same methods that Sewell was centrally involved in developing.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Gabrielle Spiegel’s eloquent 2008 AHA presidential address provides an unusually rich synthesis of the multiple currents of poststructuralism in historical practice—a synthesis bolstered by the fact that Spiegel was among the very first historians to deploy these challenging ideas as they migrated across the Atlantic.<sup>38</sup>

Instructive, too, are the varying points of emphasis that have sometimes set these stories apart. Whereas some authors have run their turns through literary criticism, British cultural studies, or anthropology, others have focused on key developments in gender theory or subaltern studies. Whereas some have marked their debts to Geertz, Foucault, Williams, or Derrida, others have emphasized the epistemological overlaps that produced common modes of questioning. Whereas some have described their turns as sparked by a growing crisis (e.g., within the quantitative social history of the 1960s and 1970s), others have insisted that the crises themselves need to be understood in relation to much larger “macrosocial forces” (e.g., the global rise

<sup>34</sup> I am referring here to broader patterns of historiographical usage. For specific examples and quotations, see the remarks by David Hollinger and Drew Gilpin Faust in “Interchange: The Practice of History,” *Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (September 2003): 589–590, 587, respectively; and Formisano, “The Concept of Political Culture,” 394.

<sup>35</sup> Faust, in “Interchange: The Practice of History,” 587.

<sup>36</sup> Important contributions here include Mandler, “The Problem with Cultural History”; Sewell, *Logics of History*; Eley, *A Crooked Line*; and Spiegel, “The Task of the Historian.” The larger cycle extends, as well, to a number of published reviews and commentaries commissioned in response to Bonnell and Hunt, Mandler, Eley, and Sewell. See, for example, the review essays by Suny, Brantlinger, and Handler in “What’s beyond the Cultural Turn?”; the responses to Mandler’s essay by Carla Hesse, Colin Jones, and Carol Watts in *Cultural and Social History* (April 2004); the reviews of *A Crooked Line* by Sewell, Spiegel, and Manu Goswami in the *American Historical Review* (April 2008); and the reviews of *Logics of History* by George Steinmetz, Dylan Riley, and David Pedersen in *Social Science History* (December 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Sewell, *Logics of History*, 22–80. See also Sewell, “Crooked Lines.” It is worth noting that Sewell’s generative role in this process was not limited to his own published writings. As some of the recent genealogies note, he was also a key participant in landmark theoretical seminars at Princeton (with Clifford Geertz), Paris (with Joan Scott), and Ann Arbor (with Geoff Eley).

<sup>38</sup> Spiegel, “The Task of the Historian.” See also Spiegel, “Comment on *A Crooked Line*.”

of neoliberalism).<sup>39</sup> And whereas some have inflected their turns as tales of retrospective disappointment, others have emphasized collective accomplishments, future possibilities.<sup>40</sup>

No two turns, then, have pushed in precisely the same directions. Step back from the larger cycle, however, and certain echoes become apparent. Most striking, perhaps, are the recurring deployments of timeframe (1960s to the 1990s), setting (one or another corner of the European field), narrative arc (rise and fall), and authorial voice (the generational “we”). Striking, too, is the considerable extent to which the narratives have pivoted around mid-career “conversion experiences”—initially pursued with great “profit,” but ultimately passed through en route to something else. The point of noting these patterns is not to dispute their collective resonance. For those who “made the turn” in this way, it was clearly a profound and powerful process. The sheer volume of narrative redundancy, moreover, suggests the outlines of collective memories: a genealogical template in which large numbers of former turners have recognized (at least some of) their own trajectories.

We might wonder here, though, about the shaping power of standpoint. If we were to shift the disciplinary context, would it be possible to alter the plot lines and tell a very different sort of story (e.g., one unallied with a single generation)? How, in other words, has this retrospective template—this growing tendency to speak in an idiom of conversions, turns, and beyonds—shaped our broader sense of cultural history: of when it started, who it included, where it happened, and what it ultimately became? Are there other important turns lurking behind the generational “we”?

CONSIDER WHAT HAPPENS WHEN we shift the narrative frame to the field of U.S. history. At first glance, the broader patterns here are not easily disentangled from their European counterparts.<sup>41</sup> We could point, for example, to the roughly contemporaneous interests in subaltern thought and ritual that informed both Natalie Davis’s *Society and Culture in Modern France* (1975) and Lawrence Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977). Or the parallel efforts to unpack dominant categories of collective identity in Joan Scott’s *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988) and David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991). Or the shared sensitivity to shifting modes of urban perception that guided Judith Walkowitz’s *City of Dreadful Delight* (1992) and John Kasson’s *Rudeness and Civility* (1990). Or the growing emphasis on transnational circulation that began to crystallize in Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and George Lipsitz’s *Dangerous Crossroads* (1994).<sup>42</sup>

The specific innovations driving these projects, moreover, were never confined

<sup>39</sup> The term “macrosocial forces” comes from Sewell, *Logics of History*, 22–80.

<sup>40</sup> On the whole, Bonnell, Hunt, Sewell, and Mandler have fallen more squarely into the disappointment camp. Eley and Spiegel, by contrast, have emphasized greater accomplishments and possibilities in recent scholarship.

<sup>41</sup> Cook and Glickman, “Twelve Propositions for a History of U.S. Cultural History.” The next few paragraphs build upon portions of that essay.

<sup>42</sup> Davis, *Society and Culture in Modern France*; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*; Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991); Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992); John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York, 1990); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and*

to a single quadrant. A case in point is Geertz's landmark essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (1973), which appeared in dozens of subsequent studies by Europeanists and Americanists alike: from Sewell's *Work and Revolution in France* (1980), Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984), and Hunt's *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (1984) to Rhys Isaac's *The Transformation of Virginia* (1982), Roy Rosenzweig's *Eight Hours for What We Will* (1983), and Susan Davis's *Parades and Power* (1986).<sup>43</sup> But Geertz was hardly exceptional in this regard. Indeed, one could easily track similar patterns of cross-talk via Foucault on discourse, Gramsci on hegemony, Said on Orientalism, Theodor Adorno on the culture industry, Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival, Walter Benjamin on the *flâneur*, Benedict Anderson on imagined communities, and Judith Butler on gender-as-performance—all key concepts that regularly traversed the U.S. and European fields.<sup>44</sup>

This does not mean, however, that the turns in question simply mirrored one another. On the European side, for instance, there was a much earlier set of engagements with the cultural dimensions of "empire," a pattern deriving at least in part from the pathbreaking scholarship of postcolonial intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon, Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, C. L. R. James, and Stuart Hall.<sup>45</sup> On the U.S. side, by contrast, we can trace a much wider range of research around "market

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*Double Consciousness* (New York, 1993); George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980); Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*; Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Calif., 1984); Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (Cambridge, 1983); Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986). As early as 1980, Ronald G. Walters noted this trend in "Signs of the Times: Clifford Geertz and Historians," *Theory and Social History* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 1980): 537–556. Four years later, Daniel Joseph Singal jokingly described Geertz as cited "so often . . . it has become something of a professional embarrassment"; "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," *American Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (October 1984): 998. This does not mean, however, that cultural historians absorbed Geertz in precisely the same ways. See, for example, Roger Chartier's and Robert Darnton's heated debates from the same period: Chartier, "Texts, Symbols, and Frenchness," *Journal of Modern History* 57, no. 4 (December 1985): 682–695; Darnton, "The Symbolic Element in History," *Journal of Modern History* 58, no. 1 (March 1986): 218–234.

<sup>44</sup> In 1989, for example, Hunt described the resonance of Foucault's work among her fellow Europeanists as "undeniably tremendous"; *The New Cultural History*, 9. Yet the pattern was hardly restricted to Hunt's own field. Indeed, for much of the next decade, Foucault was a regular presence in scores of U.S. histories, including Michael O'Malley's *Keeping Watch: A History of American Time* (New York, 1990); Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993); Elizabeth Lunbeck's *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton, N.J., 1994); Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, 1995); George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, 1994); Michael Meranze's *Laboratories of Virtue: Punishment, Revolution, and Authority in Philadelphia, 1760–1835* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); and Kathleen M. Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996).

<sup>45</sup> For general introductions to this long-running body of work, see Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997), especially 1–56; and Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005), especially 33–55. Also helpful is Bill Schwarz's interview with Stuart Hall, "Breaking Bread with History: C. L. R. James and *The Black Jacobins*," *History Workshop Journal* 46 (1998): 17–32. For much fuller treatments of the recent work on empire, see the contributions to this forum by Durba Ghosh and Gary Wilder.

cultures” and “cultures of consumption”—a genealogy that goes back at least as far as the pioneering scholarship of Warren Susman, Neil Harris, John Kasson, Jackson Lears, Karen Halttunen, Richard Fox, Roland Marchand, Daniel Horowitz, Kathy Peiss, Jean-Christophe Agnew, Michael Denning, and Ann Fabian.<sup>46</sup> Over time, of course, these field-specific strengths have tended to collapse and cross-pollinate. But in so doing, they have also reflected their local contexts. Thus, much of the foundational work on U.S. empire has positioned itself as an explicit rejoinder to “American exceptionalism.”<sup>47</sup> And much of the best work on European consumerism has tended to cluster around studies of “Americanization” or the Eastern Bloc—topics that simply are not thinkable in the same ways on the U.S. side.<sup>48</sup>

The most striking contrasts, however, can be found in the respective roles played by “class” and “race” in each context. In the European turn narratives, class has long operated as the central category of analysis. In most cases, Europeanist accounts single out the Marxist historiography of Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, Christopher Hill, and Raymond Williams as foundational. They draw intellectual lineages from the political revolts of the late 1960s to the renewed interest in “history from below” during the 1970s. Above all, they trace the origins of a new cultural history to the pivotal moment when many social and labor historians began to doubt the deterministic power of structures and conditions.

On the U.S. side, by contrast, it is simply impossible to tell this story apart from race.<sup>49</sup> Here again, Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* is instructive.

<sup>46</sup> Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984); Neil Harris, *Humbly: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston, 1973); John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1978); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York, 1981); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, Conn., 1982); Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980* (New York, 1983); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985); Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875–1940* (Baltimore, 1985); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986); Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, 1986); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London, 1987); Ann Fabian, *Card Sharps, Dream Books, and Bucket Shops: Gambling in 19th-Century America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990).

<sup>47</sup> Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, N.C., 1993); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997); Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001); Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006).

<sup>48</sup> Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997); Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000); Heide Fehrenbach and Uta G. Poiger, eds., *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan* (New York, 2000); David F. Crew, ed., *Consuming Germany in the Cold War* (New York, 2003); Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Jonathan R. Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism: Money and Political Culture in East Germany* (New York, 2007); Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, eds., *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2008).

<sup>49</sup> The major exception here is Eley, who devotes more than ten pages of *A Crooked Line* to the early work on race and empire by Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Ranajit Guha, and Gayatri Spivak (138–148). In part, this is because Eley’s is the only Europeanist genealogy to reckon with the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the Subaltern Studies Group. For more recent studies of race

Initiated during the mid-1960s, as Levine himself was actively involved in the U.S. civil rights movement, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* espoused many of the same basic assumptions as the work of the British Marxists. Much like Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, Levine's epic study of "Afro-American folk thought" was a "history from below" that sought new ways of conceptualizing "resistance." Like Thompson as well, Levine figured culture as a repertoire of "resources"—rituals, traditions, and customs through which an oppositional politics persevered. For Levine, however, these innovations emerged from a somewhat different set of commitments. As Walter Johnson has noted, the strong rhetorical emphasis on "self-determination" in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* had obvious affinities with the civil rights politics of the late 1960s.<sup>50</sup> And the "determinisms" against which Levine framed his arguments generally came in the form of psychoanalytic theories of victimization (e.g., Stanley Elkins's somewhat earlier description of the antebellum slave plantation as a "total institution").<sup>51</sup>

We can extend this line of comparison to the more discursive modes of analysis that began to flourish during the 1980s. On the European side, one of the earliest efforts in this regard was Gareth Stedman Jones's *Languages of Class* (1983), an important but controversial study that generated enormous discussion among the British New Left.<sup>52</sup> Although Jones's work was cited widely by U.S. labor historians, it would be difficult to argue for a strict parallelism—in part because the often contentious debates around class and culture never achieved the same centrality in U.S. circles.<sup>53</sup> If we shift the focus to race, however, the patterns look very different. Only three years after the publication of *Languages of Class*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant's landmark study *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986) performed a similar deconstructive maneuver by describing race (a category that had long been understood as self-evidently tied to physiology) as an ideological construct traceable across shifting patterns of discourse. Over the next decade, this new way of thinking

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and empire by Europeanists, see Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago, 2002); Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939–1945* (New York, 2004); Heide Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America* (Princeton, N.J., 2005); Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago, 2005); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2006); Rita Chin, *The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany* (New York, 2007); Rita Chin, Heide Fehrenbach, Geoff Eley, and Atina Grossman, *After the Nazi Racial State: Difference and Democracy in Germany and Europe* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 113–124.

<sup>51</sup> Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959). For helpful context on these questions, see Lawrence W. Levine's autobiographical preface to the 30th Anniversary Edition of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 2007). It is important to be clear here, as well, that Levine's work was part of a much broader wave of landmark African American cultural histories that included studies by John Blassingame, Nathan Huggins, Sterling Stuckey, Albert Raboteau, Deborah Gray White, Charles Joyner, and Nell Irvin Painter (among many others). This rich body of work, much of it by African American scholars, is yet another important subfield occluded by the recent turn talk.

<sup>52</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983); Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 9.

<sup>53</sup> For examples of Americanist reactions to Jones's work, see Michael H. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds., *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society* (Urbana, Ill., 1983).

about race quickly became a sign of the times, extending from Alexander Saxton's *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (1990), Tomás Almaguer's *Racial Fault Lines* (1994), and Kathleen Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (1996) to Neil Foley's *The White Scourge* (1997), Philip Deloria's *Playing Indian* (1997), and Robert Lee's *Orientalists* (1999).<sup>54</sup>

These examples illustrate some of the dangers of our turn talk, the vast expanses of major scholarship behind the generational "we." But the dangers are hardly unique to the U.S. field. Shifting the frame to Latin American history, for instance, reveals a very different conception of "the social" (here grounded in "dependency theory"), politics (focused more explicitly on U.S. imperialism), and key works in cultural history (almost none of which appear in the footnotes of the leading European and U.S. creation stories).<sup>55</sup> Shift the frame again to the fields of late ancient and medieval history, and the debates look different still: this time, pivoting around the ritual-centered analyses of innovators such as Peter Brown, Caroline Walker Bynum, and Miri Rubin.<sup>56</sup> Even here, though, we are still seeing only part of the larger picture.

LET US SHIFT THE FRAME one last time, but now to the somewhat later waves of culturalists that arrived after the 1980s.<sup>57</sup> These cohorts have occupied a rather odd genealogical position. Again and again, the specific moment of their training has been described as the historiographical apex of the turn.<sup>58</sup> In many cases, too, they

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London, 1990); Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994); Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*; Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, Conn., 1997); Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, the debates that run from William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French, eds., *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington, Del., 1994); to Florencia E. Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1491–1515, and Stephen H. Haber, "The Worst of Both Worlds: The New Cultural History of Mexico," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 363–383; to Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore, eds., *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.–Latin American Relations* (Durham, N.C., 1998); to the essays by Susan Deans-Smith, Gilbert M. Joseph, Eric Van Young, William E. French, Mary Kay Vaughn, Susan Migden Socolow, Claudio Lomnitz, and Stephen H. Haber in *Mexico's New Cultural History: ¿Una Lucha Libre?*, Special Issue, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Martin and Miller, *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies*; Rubin, "What Is Cultural History Now?" Key texts here include Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, Calif., 1987); and Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>57</sup> This would include my own cohorts, first during my years as an undergraduate major in European cultural history at Princeton University from 1984 to 1988, and then as a UC-Berkeley Ph.D. student in U.S. cultural history from 1990 to 1996.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, which cites publication statistics as evidence of the cultural turn's expansion (219). In "The New Empiricism," *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 2 (May 2004): 201–207, Carla Hesse makes a similar point, arguing that cultural history was transformed during the 1980s and 1990s from "a minor (albeit highly prized) sideshow into the main event in the big tent of the historical profession" (204). In Hesse's version of events, however, this claim is not attached to a declensionist narrative.



have found themselves depicted as a kind of motor: the graduate-student groundswell driving the turn's expansion. Sewell, for example, describes the late 1980s as the watershed moment when cultural history became the discipline's "major growth area," attracting "the best students in the major centers of graduate training." Along with other key indicators (such as Hunt's 1989 volume), these swelling ranks of culturalists mark a kind of apotheosis in Sewell's narrative, the pivotal moment when cultural history "usurped definitively the hegemonic position achieved by social history only a decade earlier."<sup>59</sup>

For the most part, though, these narratives have had little or nothing to say about what the "students" actually produced. To the extent that they cite any recent scholarship (that is, beyond the early 1990s), it has typically come in a single bundled footnote.<sup>60</sup> And comparatively, at least, the retrospective narratives have imagined the immediate past as strangely uneventful: a long and placid epilogue to the "bracing debates" of the 1980s. This sequence, however, elicits a number of lingering questions. One involves the longer history of the "students." Did their own trajectories simply replicate those of their teachers? And if not, what difference did it make to enter the mix sometime *after* the new cultural history—in its epistemic and professional wakes? If one cohort's turns found their expression in mid-career conversion experiences, what about those for whom many of the very same ideas, texts, and debates were methodological starting points, the more mundane stuff of first-year graduate syllabi?<sup>61</sup>

These questions require more than a mere extension of chronology. As Eley has observed in one of the few acknowledgments of generational diversity, those trained in the years following the "overheated polemics" of the 1980s have been "markedly less excited" about rehashing the older "battles." And with distance, he suggests, there have been new "possibilities" for creative thinking. Whereas the first waves of turners may have felt the need to maintain "the programmatic advocacy of one authorizing form of theory against another," the more recent cohorts have been some-

<sup>59</sup> Sewell, *Logics of History*, 48.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 32 n. 31, where they thank Sara Maza for drawing their attention to the importance of recent work on material culture by Leora Auslander, Ken Alder, and Jennifer Jones. For exceptions to this pattern, see Eley's frequent references to "younger historians" and "younger people" in *A Crooked Line*, 158, 201, 202. For other genealogies that similarly track the shifting boundaries of cultural history beyond the mid-1990s, see Peter Burke, "Afterword: Cultural History in the Twenty-First Century," in Burke, *What Is Cultural History?*, 130–143; and Jean-Christophe Agnew, "Capitalism, Culture, and Catastrophe," in Cook, Glickman, and O'Malley, *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History*, 383–416.

<sup>61</sup> We might wonder as well about the "macrosocial forces" that have sometimes driven the super-session narratives. In Sewell's story, especially, it is precisely the inability of cultural turners to respond intellectually, methodologically, or politically to the shifting tides of "world capitalism" that has sealed the field's obsolescence. In his telling, the turn emerges as a story of expiring paradigms, its practitioners fated to think in national, Fordist, and discursive terms at a moment when the larger forces of world history were pushing toward "flexible accumulation," "global circulation," and the need for "a more robust sense of the social" (80). This sequence makes sense, however, only if we accept two basic premises: first, that the turn itself was a bounded generational experience that began in the 1960s; and second, that those who followed in its wake were somehow numb to the social, economic, political, and cultural changes unfolding all around them. Indeed, by this logic, the "students" of Sewell's story function as a kind of lost generation: simultaneously raised on anti-apartheid movements, global proxy wars, NAFTA, IMF protests, Google, and YouTube, yet strangely unable to develop a mode of historical questioning resonant with their "macrosocial" environment. As I try to demonstrate below, much of this argument is belied by major trends *within* cultural history over the past two decades.

what freer to combine and revise, to create their own sorts of “hybrids” across the older methodological “antinomies.”<sup>62</sup>

We can note these distinctions without dodging the accompanying critiques. In our current political conjuncture, especially, it is hard to argue with Eley’s suggestion that “even the most fervent” culturalists would do well to pay more attention to the “widening extremes of social inequality.”<sup>63</sup> Nor would most current practitioners disagree with Sewell’s central contention: that the expanding “juggernaut of world capitalism” requires something more than a “purely” discursive mode of questioning.<sup>64</sup> Methodologically, moreover, who would argue with Peter Mandler’s recent call for closer attention to the macro-level “throw” of the texts and discourses we cite as “dominant”?<sup>65</sup> Or Spiegel’s wise suggestion that we recast the cultural itself as a more fluid field of “semantics,” each new “repertoire” of signs regularly remade and “put to work” by ground-level actors?<sup>66</sup>

So far, so good. But what of the related efforts to yoke these critical impulses to tales of supersession, the collective quest for something “beyond”? We might wonder again: beyond what, exactly? Beyond the early struggles to establish language, imagery, and perception as the very stuff of historical analysis? Absolutely. Beyond the older “antinomies” that pitted cultural against social, micro against macro, subjectivity against structure? One can only hope. Beyond a “radically” or “purely” discursive mode of questioning now said to dominate “current practice”? Well, maybe not so fast.

This putatively “radical” form of culturalism has been accused of many crimes. It threatens to “obliterate the social.” It “displace[s] our gaze from the poor and powerless.” It fosters tedious conversations about “how little we know and how little we can say.” Sometimes it even shares a “secret affinity with an emergent logic of capitalist development.”<sup>67</sup> It is a specter, moreover, that is said to have appeared in many guises. On some occasions, it has conjured methodological excess: a turn pursued too far.<sup>68</sup> But it has also referenced absence: an undertheorized “cultural stud-

<sup>62</sup> Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 201. Spiegel, too, has made an effort to demonstrate the shifting theoretical positions on the question of semiotic determinism. See, for example, her comments on Pierre Bourdieu and Andreas Reckwitz in “Comment on *A Crooked Line*,” 411–412.

<sup>63</sup> Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 198.

<sup>64</sup> Sewell, *Logics of History*, 52, 62, 80.

<sup>65</sup> Mandler, “The Problem with Cultural History,” 96–97.

<sup>66</sup> Spiegel, “Comment on *A Crooked Line*,” 412.

<sup>67</sup> Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 11; Sewell, *Logics of History*, 52; Mandler, “The Problem with Cultural History,” 94; Sewell, *Logics of History*, 62. In a 2003 roundtable in the *Journal of American History*, David Roediger noted (and argued against) a similar set of declensionist rhetorics on the U.S. side: “At the least, the perception of a wholesale move toward cultural history, or even cultural studies, has mattered greatly in conditioning how U.S. historians see their field and its problems. The field’s ‘turn’ is actually variously described, usually by detractors—toward the literary, toward the postmodern, toward the ‘mantra’ of race, gender, and class, toward the linguistic, toward the subjective, as well as toward the cultural. Often a lament is registered also for what has been lost: the political, the economic, the solid. I have my doubts as to the empirical validity of such claims . . . To the extent that political economy survives . . . at all, it often does so in works that are fully alert to cultural history and theory.” “Interchange: The Practice of History,” 586.

<sup>68</sup> This metaphor of excess is often set in opposition to one of methodological emaciation: a figurative “thinning of the social.” For examples, see William H. Sewell, Jr., “Whatever Happened to the ‘Social’ in Social History?,” in Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates, eds., *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretive Social Science* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), 209–226. Here again, though, the “thinning” metaphor works only if the story ends in the mid-1990s.

ies”; an empirically thin “postmodernism.” Follow the citations backward, and the picture becomes still murkier. In many cases, these claims arrive without footnotes. In others, the claimants cite each other.<sup>69</sup> In still others, we find grab bags of titles, with landmark discursive studies such as Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization* (1995) and Ann Stoler’s *Race and the Education of Desire* (1995) lumped together with hybrid sociocultural histories such as George Chauncey’s *Gay New York* (1994)—more than half of which explores the social, political, and commercial institutions that shaped the very terms of sexual discourse.<sup>70</sup> Even these sorts of arguments, however, are belied by the longer cycle.

If we go back to the earliest genealogies by Hunt, Eley, and Samuel, we find a more measured series of portraits. In each case, that is to say, the authors were quick to emphasize that “most” of the early turners (themselves included) had stopped well short of an unalloyed “sign reading.”<sup>71</sup> Pull the story forward, and we discover a similar set of caveats. Spiegel, for example, has regularly emphasized the limited currency of “semiotic determinism”—both in prior practice and in current trends.<sup>72</sup> Much the same can be said about Carla Hesse, who has argued for at least three basic trajectories of cultural history: one composed of “neo-idealists” (such as Keith Baker), who contend “that there is nothing—or nothing knowable—about human experience outside of language”; a second, “poststructuralist” camp (exemplified by Joan Scott), which has challenged “the assumption that discursive formations are the product of self-conscious, rational individuals”; and a third, considerably larger group (including Hesse herself) who continue to believe that “the social and cultural [are] mutually constitutive,” that “text and context need to be understood on an equal footing and not as background and foreground.”<sup>73</sup>

Refreshing in this schema are its glimmers of reciprocal benefits. Rather than insisting on conceptual zero sums, Hesse describes tough but “productive” debate, an increasingly “sophisticated” methodological discourse. Refreshing, too, is her acknowledgment of dissonance—the simple fact that turners could disagree. At first glance, this may seem entirely obvious, especially in a lore cycle so often characterized by combat. For the most part, though, this combat has been figured as fights between turners and their others, insiders and outsiders, true believers and the unconverted. And in this respect, they have often fostered succeeding monoliths: a

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Bonnell and Hunt, “Introduction,” 31 n. 30, which cites Sewell; or Sewell, *Logics of History*, 79, where he cites Bonnell and Hunt.

<sup>70</sup> Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*; Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s “History of Sexuality” and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, N.C., 1995); Sewell, *Logics of History*, 48 n. 28. I am thinking here of parts II and III of Chauncey’s brilliant study, where he spends more than two hundred pages embedding the discursive figures from part I (“fairy,” “trade,” “wolves,” etc.) in a series of densely detailed social, commercial, and political contexts; *Gay New York*, 131–354.

<sup>71</sup> See Samuel’s decidedly ambiguous conclusion to “Reading the Signs, II,” in which he describes semiotics as “a wonderful tool, and a splendid provocation to historical reflection and research,” but then goes on to insist that “the historical record cannot be read only as a system of signs, however useful that might be” (245). In similar fashion, Eley described his own position in 1990 as resolutely “intermediate”: at once “accepting” of “the basic usefulness and interest of poststructuralist theory,” but also aware of its “real costs”; “Is All the World a Text?,” in McDonald, *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, 214.

<sup>72</sup> Spiegel, “Comment on *A Crooked Line*,” 409. See also Spiegel, “The Task of the Historian,” 2–3, 3 fn. 5; and her editorial comments on Joan Scott’s “Evidence of Experience” in Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York, 2005), 200.

<sup>73</sup> Hesse, “The New Empiricism,” 205, 206.

one-dimensional social giving way to an equally flattened cultural, a new cultural history supplanted by a vaguely defined beyond. What Hesse helps us to see, by contrast, is more of the ground-level diversity that has often made “the cultural” such a stimulating disciplinary location—a turn, in short, never reducible to a single methodological trick.

What, then, has this dissonance produced? On the U.S. side, much of the best recent work has tended to cluster in precisely those areas described as “absent,” “impoverished,” or “neglected” by the turn talk. Think, for example, of the growing attention to circulatory patterns (or, if you like, Mandler’s “throw”) developed by George Lipsitz on global hip-hop, Nan Enstad on working women’s consumption, Kirsten Silva Gruesz on Latino/a writing, Martha Sandweiss on western photographs, Brent Edwards on black internationalism, Meredith McGill on serial fiction, Penny Von Eschen on state-sponsored jazz tours, David Henkin on the postal system, Scott Casper on the commercial book trade, and Konstantin Dierks on Atlantic letter exchanges.<sup>74</sup> Or the long-running debates around appropriation, ideology, and counterpublics (in a nutshell, Spiegel’s “semantics”) pushed forward by Miriam Hansen on silent film, Robin Kelley on African American youth cultures, John Kuo Wei Tchen on Asian American performers, Michael Warner on early modern periodicals, John Stauffer on radical abolitionism, Philip Deloria on Native American film directors, and Joanna Brooks on black authorship.<sup>75</sup> Or, perhaps most strikingly, the recent waves of turn-savvy studies of slavery, labor, mass production, consumerism, and global capital developed by Kathy Peiss, Amy Dru Stanley, Walter Johnson, Lendol Calder, Sven Beckert, Janet Davis, Michael Zakim, Lizabeth Cohen, Barry

<sup>74</sup> Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*; Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1999); Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton, N.J., 2002); Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven, Conn., 2002); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Meredith L. McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (Philadelphia, 2003); Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, 2007); Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship, eds., *The Industrial Book, 1840–1880* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2007); and Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2009). My brief inventories here are far from complete. At best, they represent fleeting snapshots of subfields in motion. I would also emphasize that they do not encompass a full range of current concerns in U.S. cultural history. Because I am responding to specific critiques within the turn narratives, I have necessarily left out major areas of scholarship that have figured less prominently in those narratives—e.g., the larger body of excellent work on space/place, empire, and borderlands (all of which similarly complicates the social/cultural divide). See, for example, Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, “On Borderlands,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (September 2011): 338–361. Finally, it is worth noting that many of the titles in this paragraph could be slotted into more than one of the conceptual categories. Lipsitz’s *Dangerous Crossroads*, for example, exemplifies all three. For parallel attention to patterns of circulation in recent European cultural histories, see, for example, Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago, 1998); and Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

<sup>75</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994); John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (Baltimore, 1999); Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge, 2002); John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence, Kans., 2004); and Joanna Brooks, “The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (January 2005): 67–92.

Shank, Walter Friedman, Scott Sandage, Charles McGovern, Sarah Igo, Jane Kamensky, Sarah Stein, Seth Rockman, Bethany Moreton, Stephen Mihm, David Suisman, Alexis McCrossen, Lawrence Glickman, Samuel Zipp, Brian Luskey, and Andrew Zimmerman (among many, many others).<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps the most familiar of these examples is Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul* (1999), a widely influential history of antebellum slavery published the very same year as Bonnell and Hunt. At first glance, Johnson's core subject (the domestic U.S. slave trade), narrative arc (the transposition of human beings into chattel), and repertoire of sources (including probate inventories and tax records) suggest little that can be described as strictly or obviously cultural. The slaves in his story do not spin tales, tell jokes, or sing more than a few short verses. The only institution that receives much attention is the slave market itself.

Look a bit closer, though, and the boundaries begin to blur. A case in point is the list of "double-entry" slave sales that opens his second chapter. For much of the twentieth century, historians might have analyzed these long columns of names, dates, and prices through a strictly quantitative lens—or by some criterion of economic necessity. Historiographical debate might have turned on the bottom-line question of the slave trade's profitability—which in turn might have been used to construct much larger arguments for or against the "inevitability" of the Civil War. In Johnson's hands, by contrast, the quantitative data reveal more subtle personal

<sup>76</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York, 1998); Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York, 1998); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton, N.J., 1999); Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (New York, 2001); Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002); Michael Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760–1860* (Chicago, 2003); Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003); Barry Shank, *A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture* (New York, 2004); Walter A. Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890–1945* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006); Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Jane Kamensky, *The Exchange Artist: A Tale of High-Flying Speculation and America's First Banking Collapse* (New York, 2008); Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (New Haven, Conn., 2008); Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore, 2009); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009); Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009); David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009); Alexis McCrossen, ed., *Land of Necessity: Consumer Culture in the United States–Mexico Borderlands* (Durham, N.C., 2009); Lawrence B. Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago, 2009); Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (New York, 2010); Brian P. Luskey, *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 2010); and Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, N.J., 2010). This long list necessarily flattens a wide range of issues: production and consumption; slavery, industrial labor, class formation, and entrepreneurship; contract theory, commodification, market research, and urban planning; currency speculation and the culture industries. It seems to me, however, that much of this recent work is bound together by a common impulse: to think across the conceptual zero sums, to think commerce and culture, markets and meanings, together. My own efforts in this regard include *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001) and "The Return of the Culture Industry," in Cook, Glickman, and O'Malley, *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History*, 291–317.

motives. In recording their day-to-day transactions, slaveholders simultaneously “make themselves” and make their “social worlds.” In writing to relatives about “making a start” in the slave market, they “translate” the “productive and reproductive labor of their . . . slaves into images of their own upward progress.” And in computing the “necessity” of individual purchases, they do more than simply respond to the structural pressures of an increasingly far-flung trade. More accurately, Johnson argues, slaveholders “objectified” these “desires into necessities,” thereby “giving cultural meaning to the economy in people upon which their lives (or at least their livelihoods) depended.”<sup>77</sup>

Johnson makes good here on one of the central promises of the 1980s: namely, to push beyond “topics,” to reimagine the cultural itself as a more capacious field of “meaning-making.”<sup>78</sup> But he also does quite a bit more than this. Consider his central figure, “the chattel principle.” First invoked by J. W. C. Pennington (a former Maryland slave who became a prominent northern abolitionist), this “principle” operates on many different levels in *Soul by Soul*. On the one hand, it is very much a discursive formation that crystallized some of slavery’s most troubling and essential questions. How was it possible to transpose human beings into fungible commodities? What did it mean to create an entire category of personhood that could “be disrupted as easily as a price could be set”? The fact that Johnson begins with Pennington’s words signals our entry into a world of ideas, values, and perceptions—a world in which much of the historical drama will occur precisely “between” the lists of prices.<sup>79</sup>

But not *just* ideas, values, and perceptions. Indeed, at many other moments, Johnson demonstrates with devastating clarity that Pennington’s “principle” was perhaps the ultimate material condition, a vast system of structural constraint. Driving his larger story are far-flung chains of commodification: from non-elite drivers to wealthy buyers and sellers; from the modest coffles of the Upper South to the large urban clearinghouses farther “down the river”; from the thousands of daily sales that devastated black lives to the further transposition of those lives in white wills, gifts, and estate sales; from the property’s initial form as a “person with a price” to its subsequent fungibility as collateral or start-up capital.<sup>80</sup>

This hybrid mode of questioning points to a related form of capaciousness: namely, the multiple meanings of “market” that permeate *Soul by Soul*. In many instances, Johnson uses this term to describe a macro-level system, historically visible through its aggregate numbers, crop cycles, legal conventions, and distribution networks. At other times, though, he employs the same term to conjure a more nebulous set of pressures, at once constitutive of, and shaped by, the values, goals, and assumptions of those who built the larger system. In so doing, he draws our attention to a series of historical structures that were always inextricably doubled: institutional as well as ideological; material as well as semiotic; economic as well as discursive;

<sup>77</sup> Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 83–86.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Hunt’s 1989 “warnings” about the need to move beyond a “cultural history defined topically” that might “degenerate into an endless search for new cultural practices to describe, whether carnivals, cat massacres, or impotence trials”; *The New Cultural History*, 9.

<sup>79</sup> “Between the Prices” is the title of Johnson’s second chapter.

<sup>80</sup> See especially chaps. 2, 3, 4, and 6 of *Soul by Soul*: “Between the Prices,” “Making a World out of Slaves,” “Turning People into Products,” and “Acts of Sale.”

macro as well as micro. The book's most riveting dramas, however, play out in still another sort of market: the notorious New Orleans clearinghouses that served as the final entrepôt. Yet even here, among the chains, pens, and auction blocks, Johnson pushes for greater historical complexity, multiple ways of seeing. Consider, for example, one of the book's most important conceptual passages:

The slave trade did not begin or end in the same place for traders, buyers, and slaves. For slaves, the slave trade was often much more than a financial exchange bounded in space and time. A slave trader's short-term speculation might have been a slave's lifelong fear; a one-time economic miscalculation or a fit of pique on the part of an owner might lead to a life-changing sale for a slave . . . Comparing the sources produced by those on different sides of the bargain makes it clear that "a slave sale" was not a single thing which one could view from three different sides and sum into a whole . . . Rather, like a web of unforeseen connections, the morphology of a sale depended upon the point of departure. Time ran differently depending upon where you started the clock.<sup>81</sup>

Following Bonnell and Hunt, it might be tempting to describe this as "beyond": the decisive methodological juncture at which commerce and culture, structure and meaning, finally collapse. There are, however, a number of basic problems with such a reading. One is that Johnson developed this mode of questioning during the early 1990s, at the very moment (or so we have been told) when the new cultural history was falling into its "radically discursive" rut. Another is that Johnson was never making this up from scratch. Indeed, if we go back to the 1995 dissertation on which *Soul by Soul* was based, his citations point to a more interesting set of mergers: key theoretical texts on "the social life of things" intermixed with legal history articles; landmark works on antebellum slavery by Eugene Genovese, John Blassingame, James Oakes, and Barbara Fields side by side with seminal studies of market cultures by Karen Halttunen, Jackson Lears, Jean-Christophe Agnew, and John Kasson.<sup>82</sup> In retrospect, at least, it is easier to track the cross-currents. Agnew, for example, was among the first U.S. historians to feature the work of Karl Polanyi (whose seminal writings on "embeddedness" reverberate through much of *Soul by Soul*). Much the same might be said about Halttunen's uses of Norbert Elias, Georg Simmel, and Erving Goffman—all important early theorists for opening up the "performative" dimensions of class.<sup>83</sup>

The other key point is that Johnson was never working in a vacuum. Push beyond slavery, in fact, and many of his central moves begin to look like broader ground-

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>82</sup> Walter Livezey Johnson, "Masters and Slaves in the Market: Slavery and the New Orleans Trade, 1804–1864" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1995), 1–12. The theoretical work on the "social life of things" came from anthropologists Mary Douglas, Arjun Appadurai, and Igor Kopytoff. See Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York, 1986).

<sup>83</sup> There were, of course, additional precedents for these moves—some explicitly footnoted, others merely echoed. We might think, for example, of Joan Scott's 1988 essay "A Statistical Representation of Work: La Statistique de l'industrie à Paris, 1847–1848," much of which anticipates Johnson's against-the-grain readings of double-entry slave sales. Or Elizabeth Cohen's *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York, 1990); James Livingston's *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850–1940* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994); and Ohmann's *Selling Culture*, all of which share Johnson's concern for tracking new forms of "subjectivity" within the structures of capitalism. Or Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization* and Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, both of whose non-linear narrative structures (and close attention to competing subject positions) parallel Johnson's "thrice-told tale" of the antebellum slave market.

swells, part of an always unfinished cultural that has continued to migrate and stretch, adapt and provoke. This still-unfolding process can be seen in the work of Stanley, Calder, Sandage, Kamensky, Rockman, Glickman, and Mihm—all recent historians of capitalism for whom signs and structures are deeply interwoven, never the stuff of conceptual zero sums. Or the growing interest in circulatory systems that cuts across Lipsitz's records, Sandweiss's photographs, Edwards's novels, Von Eschen's jazz tours, and Dierks's letters. Or the explicitly hybrid approaches to commodity chains that run through Enstad, Zakim, Shank, Stein, Moreton, and Zimmerman. Or the increasingly materialist studies of representation that connect McGill's newspapers, Casper's books, Igo's opinion polls, Zipp's blueprints, and my own work on black celebrity and the politics of global positioning.<sup>84</sup>

Should we read these recent developments as cultural history's swan song? Its reinvigoration? The latest phase of its imperialist plotting? Such rhetorics of supersession ultimately reinforce the very same synecdoches I have sought to disrupt throughout this essay. So let us conclude here not with competing futurology (new "beyonds" for the same tired turns), but rather, with a series of broader suggestions for rethinking the debate itself.

First, we should keep in mind the long-running plasticity of cultural history, a notoriously capacious category that has *always* entailed a mobile, unfinished project. Before the new cultural history of the 1980s, there were dozens of older culturalists that pushed in a variety of competing directions. In a major review essay from 1968, self-identified practitioner David Brion Davis sought to familiarize his *AHR* readers with "recent directions in American cultural history." But at *that* point, Davis was summing up the myth and symbol scholarship that had first emerged with the American studies movement. Push back another decade or two, and one finds Caroline Ware's *Cultural Approach to History* (1940), a landmark edited collection (sponsored by the AHA) that included some of the era's most innovative historians. In Ware's hands, however, this "approach" was something different yet again: an explicitly "bottom up" mode of historicizing built upon the anthropology of Franz Boas.<sup>85</sup> Moving forward, then, we would do well to stop thinking in terms of superseding fashion cycles: a singular turn that simply rose and fell, supplanted and faded.

This leads to a related suggestion about parameters: the need to think more carefully—and capaciously—about what cultural history *now is*. The importance of this project hit home for me in a recent query from a colleague. "How," this colleague wanted to know, "is *Soul by Soul* cultural history? I just don't get it." We might respond here that Johnson spent much of the past two decades jointly appointed in an American studies program; or that many leading historians of slavery and capitalism have explicitly praised *Soul by Soul* for its strategic mixtures of commerce and culture, structural constraints and competing subjectivities; or that this sense of Johnson's accomplishment was shared by the American Studies Association, which awarded *Soul by Soul* its annual book prize in 2000. Johnson's citations, moreover, have often included scores of leading culturalists: Stuart Hall, Joan Scott, Michel de

<sup>84</sup> My current book project explores the first waves of African American artists, intellectuals, and political activists to strategize their circulation in relation to global markets, 1770–1930.

<sup>85</sup> Davis, "Some Recent Directions in American Cultural History"; Ware, *The Cultural Approach to History*; Cook and Glickman, "Twelve Propositions for a History of U.S. Cultural History," 5–29.



Certeau, Judith Butler, James C. Scott, David Roediger, Robin Kelley, Werner Sollors, Kathleen Brown, Joseph Roach.<sup>86</sup> At the end of the day, though, these point-by-point responses miss the larger problem. Wouldn't we *expect* cultural history to change over time? Why, then, cast it retrospectively as a singular bag of tricks: a fixed and finished turn somehow frozen in the Reagan era?

Finally, we would do well to reconsider the semantics of our turn talk: our tendency to speak of *the* turn *to* culture. Key innovations, it is often said, began locally but traveled widely. Meanings were made. Signs proliferated. Categories were deconstructed. In the process, whole blocks of major subfields—slavery, labor, capitalism, empire, borderlands, diplomacy—recalibrated, transformed. In many respects, it is an appealing family portrait (an entire discipline said to have sharpened its epistemic foundations), but one also prone to certain distortions. Most obviously, it misses those who were already practicing cultural history well before the 1980s.<sup>87</sup> But it also misses the *reciprocal* dimensions of turning to culture: the inevitable exchanges with other fields, the manifold pushbacks from other quadrants.

We have heard relatively little, in other words, about the multidirectional process by which cultural history itself—in the very act of turning—became more pluralistic in its methods; more omnivorous in its sources; more precise about causality; more attentive to competing theories of power; more open to numbers and networks; more sensitive to limits on agency, resistance, and self-fashioning; more focused on the interplay between meanings and markets, representational practices and policymaking; more ambitious in tracking global systems of capital. Some of the most sophisticated work in these areas has come from latter-day culturalists trained sometime *after* the new cultural history.<sup>88</sup> But it is hard to see this conceptual traffic if we

<sup>86</sup> Much the same could be said about virtually any of the titles referenced in the final pages of this essay. Consider Rockman's award-winning labor history of early Baltimore, *Scraping By*. Much like *Soul by Soul*, Rockman's work is wonderfully alive to both the structural and discursive dimensions of his subject. Above all, he shows us antebellum capitalism's "systemic dependence on . . . multiple, simultaneous, and overlapping forms of inequality" (10). Indeed, his larger point is to develop a conception of "class" based less on shared "cultural" traditions (in the Thompsonian mode) than on constrained "choices" and shared forms of "subjugation." This does not mean, however, that Rockman is antagonistic to the methods and concerns of cultural history itself. Rather, he returns again and again to the "rhetorical tools" deployed in public debates about the city's political economy, the ventriloquized "voices" used by newspaper editors to promote commercial development, the "implicit racial or ethnic coding" running through the jobs ads, the multiple "perspectives" and "perceptions" of different categories of workers. For Johnson's citation patterns, see Walter Johnson, "Inconsistency, Contradiction, and Complete Confusion: The Everyday Life of the Law of Slavery," *Law and Social Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 405–433; and Johnson, "The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 1 (June 2000): 13–38. For characterizations of Johnson's work, see Agnew, "Capitalism, Culture, and Catastrophe," 401–405; Rockman, *Scraping By*, 7, 273 n. 15.

<sup>87</sup> This oft-neglected group encompassed some of the most sophisticated historians of the twentieth century. A short list on the U.S. side would include Caroline Ware, Constance Rourke, Merle Curti, Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, John William Ward, David Brion Davis, Alan Trachtenberg, John Cawelti, William R. Taylor, Warren Susman, Neil Harris, Robert Toll, Daniel Rodgers, Ann Douglas, John Kasson, Nathan Huggins, Lawrence Levine, Paul Boyer, John Blassingame, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg—all *turners* to culture before the 1980s. The other missing group here, of course, is *non-turners*: the large numbers of skeptics who have never had much to do with cultural history.

<sup>88</sup> For telling recent examples in the U.S. field, see Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*; Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*; McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*; Sandage, *Born Losers*; Igo, *The Averaged American*; Stein, *Plumes*; Jessica M. Lepler, "1837: Anatomy of a Panic" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 2008); Eric Slauter, *The State as Work of Art* (Chicago, 2009); Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*; Zipp, *Manhattan Projects*; Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa*; Scott Reynolds Nelson, *A Nation*

continue to speak of one-way streets: a turn that never learned, converted but never changed.

It may be too late now to hope for a history of cultural history that is entirely free of turn talk. But perhaps we can think our way forward by recasting the larger enterprise: as *turns*, not turn; as *turning*, not turned. A turn, in short, figured with much the same basic dynamism we routinely ascribe to our larger discipline. A more compelling cultural turn: beyond the generational we.

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*of Deadbeats: An Uncommon History of America's Financial Disasters* (New York, forthcoming). See also Johnson, "On Agency," and Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic," as well as the "agenda" essays by James Cook, Nan Enstad, and Phillip Deloria in Cook, Glickman, and O'Malley, *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History*, 291–382.

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