

## A BACKWARD GLANCE

Alan Trachtenberg

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What does the term *trajectory* mean in regard to scholarly work? What implications about oneself follow in the wake of the image? Particularly for folks at a certain stage of life, to imagine yourself as having had and still enjoying a trajectory, an upward movement, is really quite wonderful and uplifting. I'll try in this informal talk to describe the arc of my professional work, as best I can make it out, picking my own brain as I go along. I'll try principally to convey what I think makes for continuity and perhaps coherence in my work, what have been chief concerns, adding some reflections on sources of those concerns.

Trajectory, any decent dictionary tells us, refers specifically to the path that a particle takes as it moves through the air, an object that is hurled or thrown into space. Trajectory denotes a curve measurable in the language of mathematics and geometry. More important to me than measurement is the fact that trajectory implies an unbroken line. That's particularly compelling for someone like me, who seems to have jumped around a good deal, in the topics of my writings, from bridges to poems to photographs, from architecture and engineering to cities and social history, with excursions into social and political theory and aesthetics here and there. Has the connecting trajectory been an unbroken line? It's about how I discern internal connections in my work that I'll talk briefly.

I start with the books, four of them, in which my various intellectual and cultural interests appear: *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (1965), *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982), *Reading American Photographs:*

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*Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (1989), and *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1890-1930* (2004). The first book, as you can tell from the title and the cover, concerns an actual trajectory, the catenary curve that gives the traditional suspension bridge its familiar look. It's the curve that falls naturally from a chain suspended over two elevations or towers, the fundamental fact of physics that gives the classic suspension bridge its classic look. My first book takes as its subject perhaps the most famous of all suspension bridges, the Brooklyn Bridge. The book viewed the bridge as a physical fact, product of the most advanced engineering of its day, and as a cultural fact, its place in the mind or spirit or imagination of the culture, its symbolic resonance as an "American thing." It's the meanings imputed to the bridge that I'm interested in, the interaction of fact and symbol, the literal and the symbolic aspects of the structure. As scholarship the book falls properly in the category of cultural history; it has also been taken as an early example of "cultural studies," a field that developed in the 1990s, concerned with symbolic and ideological constructions that shape collective experience in everyday life.

The uncertainty about how to classify the Brooklyn Bridge book—it's been found on library shelves devoted to engineering as well to American studies—may be a small but telling example of something I feel strongly about my work. Overt subject matter—a bridge, a period of time such as the two and a half decades after the Civil War known as the Gilded Age, photographs, Indians and immigrants—such empirical subjects are hardly beside the point in these books, but neither are they the whole point. I think I treat these overt subjects with a certain obliqueness designed to some degree to undercut the merely empirical appeal of the subject as such. It's fair to say that I've been more interested in covert matters, in hidden relations, what has been previously unrecognized and undisclosed. I see my work as proceeding from a sense that appearances ought not to be taken at face value but instead as provocations to explore the shadowy edges where obvious "facts" and meanings fall into ambiguity and uncertainty. Some degree of skepticism about the very existence of the scholarly subject itself has been part of my trajectory. "Fact and symbol" in the title of my first book implies a balance between attention to what is indubitably there and what the imagination might make of what is given. Works of collective or cultural imagination in the United States have been my true subjects, but I've tried to discover and to show connections between imagination and the world, the symbolic constructs that define and reveal "world" as we know it. "Fact and symbol" pledges regard and respect for both the visible material realm and the invisible realms of meaning that come together in the making of what is collectively recognized as reality: it is, in short, a kind of bridging action between here and elsewhere.

It's relevant that I began my graduate career as a student of English literature, especially seventeenth-century poets—the "metaphysical poets" John Donne, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell, and the exemplary poet of rectitude, John Milton. This was the 1950s, during the reign of the "New Criticism," which taught that literature

consists of verbal artifacts which require “understanding” in their own terms, not as reflections of the author’s life or ideas, or the influence of social forces or ideologies or anything beyond what is intrinsic to the text itself. “Close reading” was the rule of the day, concentration on the sounds and signification of words in their given order and weight. I found this an exciting way to read and took great pleasure in it. And while I’ve since turned away from the view that “understanding,” as the New Critics used that term, need be exclusively concerned with form and structure, close reading and a kind of phenomenological formalism remain important for me even as I’ve pursued historical cultural studies. With John Dewey’s notion of “art as experience” as a catchword, during my Ph.D. work in American studies at the University of Minnesota, my interests turned away from strictly formal textual readings to study of cultural artifacts as themselves forms and modes of experience, experiential occasions steeped in social life and practical historical situations.

I grew restive with the restrictive formalism of the New Criticism and became interested in bringing other questions and broader currents of experience into my writing about poems and novels. In my early years of graduate work I continued to think of myself as primarily a student of literature concerned with *texts* as distinct from, let’s say, *behavior*, whether political or economic or social behavior. I eventually came to feel that the distinction between text and behavior as fields and objects of study was arbitrary and confining. As a graduate student in the 1950s I learned of a new field of study that had been founded at Harvard in the late 1930s and later at Yale about fifteen years before I arrived here in the late sixties. Known as American studies, the new field dared to claim that there are no texts without contexts, no textuality that is not also behavior, and that a text itself, as the literary critic and theorist Kenneth Burke was demonstrating in his writings since the 1930s, is a social and indeed a political act. This enlarged vision of the “text” captivated me and changed my vision of myself as a scholar in fundamental ways.

Like a bridge, a trajectory that joins this to that, one shore to another, and raises itself above and crosses over a gap or opening, so the interdisciplinary field of American studies offered a different, more inclusive way of reading, along with an expanded idea of texts relevant to the study of cultural history: bridges, for example, buildings, constructions of all sorts, photographs and film. It was not a rejection of close reading of verbal artifacts, but an attempt to perform such readings with other kinds of texts also in mind, visual and behavioral texts from the whole range of cultural experience.

The term *culture* gets to the heart of the change in direction I underwent during my graduate work. Like the term *bridge*, culture too can be thought of as a trajectory, that dimension or multidimension of common experience that overlaps and overflows the boundaries of any particular disciplinary field. Connections may be invisible and intangible, but the student of culture assumes they are there and can be made visible, brought into consciousness, by critical historical scholarship. The poem, the photograph, cuisine and costume, language and religion are related phenomena, if

only we can find the key to the connections, the bridge that joins this to that and raises hidden connections into new degrees of visibility and clarity.

What did the Brooklyn Bridge, so obviously a prominent cultural point of reference in its day, mean to Americans and others during the first fifty years of its existence, from 1883 to 1933? How to describe it as a fact in the course of attempting to understand it as symbol: this was the challenge I gave myself in my dissertation and subsequently my first book. Hence there is a good deal about civil engineering in the study, about the material physical facts of the bridge as well as about the social and political life that formed the setting of its origins, its construction, and its reception in the 1880s and later. The bridge was a product of and hence represents a specific era in American history, the post-Civil War decades whose lavish styles of conspicuous wealth and flamboyant corruption earned it the name of the Gilded Age. In the course of its construction the bridge itself fell under suspicion; Boss Tweed had his hand in the bridge company and there was word that corrupt or defective wire had found its way into the cables. In a chapter called "History and Hidden History," I dealt with the underside of political shenanigans and outright bribery that played a role in the building of the bridge, which took from 1869 to 1883, and contributed to its emergence as a vibrant symbol of the nation itself, its new technological power along with its idealism, its sense of leaping into the future with the same vigor with which it was still pushing its western frontier to the edge of the continent.

In *The Incorporation of America*, I undertook to examine the entire era, the Gilded Age, from interrelated perspectives of literature, sociology, art, political science, and science and technology. I sought to tell a seamless story of the three decades between the end of the Civil War and the commemoration in Chicago in 1892 of the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's "discovery," a seamless story in which all parts relate to and in some ways reflect each other. *The Incorporation of America* alludes to a kind of corporeal being, the reunited nation after the Civil War as a body extended in space and time across the continent. The 1890 census revealed that the expansion had reached an end; the frontier was declared "closed." By related processes of incorporation the nation now appeared unmistakably as an urban "society" such as Jefferson had feared and hoped the new nation might keep at bay with its escape hatch of an open frontier and apparently inexhaustible free land. Incorporation marked the end of a certain American innocence about the destiny of the nation. By the 1890s it seemed clear that *systems* had taken over—the railroad system with its imposed spatial-temporal system of time zones; market and banking and merchandising systems all serving to help corporealize the country, so to speak, into a national society. The process included the rise of the large corporation, with major consequences for the daily life of the nation.

The book has a playful edge, enjoying the puns compacted into the term *incorporation* and teasing from it an array of interpretative tropes. From a bridge as fact and symbol to incorporation as a semantic mine with multiple veins of ore for interpreta-

tion: there's a trajectory that extends into my later and more recent work, my studies of photography as a version of historical consciousness, and my study of nationality from the joined perspectives of natives and immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. To clarify how these later works, *Reading American Photographs* and *Shades of Hiawatha*, figure in this trajectory, another few words should be said about the initial venture, the Brooklyn Bridge book.

The book actually began, in its dissertation stage, as an effort to make sense of an extraordinary poem by Hart Crane, a book-length poem called simply *The Bridge*. Intended by Crane as an epic poem, the work differs from Virgilian epic in a number of ways, not least of which is the absence of a narrative with a central hero, such as Aeneas. In lieu of a heroic person the poem gives us a bridge, Brooklyn Bridge, which the poet tries hard to see, literally to envision, as an embodiment of the nation in granite and steel. Even as he imagined the bridge as a sign of America's epic greatness, Crane suffered grave doubts. Suppose it's not true, he came to ask himself; suppose it's just a traffic bridge after all, a mechanical rod in a system of transportation. The poem concludes with a walk across Brooklyn Bridge in the section called "Atlantis," the title referring to the legendary island which, once a powerful and wealthy city, in a day and a night sank forever into the sea. As the walker in "Atlantis" approaches the other side, he asks in an echo of Columbus: "Is it Cathay?" The answer is indecisive: "Whispers antiphonal in azure swing." The poet confesses he doesn't know, cannot say whether America realizes its early promise or whether it has already failed, and like Atlantis is about to be swallowed by the sea. "Whispers antiphonal" means yes and no at once, both greatness and failure, both a bridge and a myth. "Of Thy curve-ship," the poet had prayed early in the poem, "lend a myth to God." That would be to confirm the nation as "Cathay" in the mythic terms of the poem, the "passage to India" of Columbus's dream as an accomplished fact. But antiphonal whispers insinuate and acknowledge doubt, uncertainty, even fear in the face of national collapse. The poem indeed appeared in the ominous year of 1930, on the eve of the Great Depression, a falling echo of the high romantic optimism of the 1920s.

What gave Hart Crane warrant even to imagine that this bridge connecting Manhattan to Brooklyn, an island to the mainland, could possibly represent the transcendent promise of the nation, its destiny as an exception among the nations? Did the actual history of the bridge both as fact and as symbol give grounds to the poet's original vision? I began by seeking out particulars and found evidence enough of a pattern of similar belief and desire addressed to this bridge, from the original conception of the bridge by its builder, the great John Augustus Roebling, to ceremonies that opened the structure in 1883 and responses to the structure in Crane's own era of the 1920s. When Crane began his poem, Brooklyn Bridge was already steeped in myth, as if it were something more or other than a mere part of a larger mechanical system of transportation. It was the contradiction that made the subject interesting and exciting to me. All this besides the intrinsic appeal of bridges, suspension bridges

especially, with their rising and falling motion, their airy network of wires and cables, their arching roadway. Perhaps bridges match a certain desire to move up and out in confidence of landing somewhere – or perhaps a counter-wish to risk not landing, to run the danger of tilting high above a chasm. It may be that bridges speak to a fundamental human wish to connect at all risk. Thoreau writes, “We crave only reality,” and the bridge can be thought of as a symbol for that craving to touch down somewhere solid and sound.

In a review of the book Alfred Kazin made an observation that clarified for me another aspect of this trajectory. He asked, “Why is it that the field of American Studies is populated by so many second-generation American Jews?” “What is their investment in the study of America if not a way of connecting with America?” Contemptuous of mere nationalist celebration, Kazin approved of work by several Jewish American scholars of American studies; he noted the passion as well as the critical edge they brought to the study of America, their evident love of their subject even as they probed critically into its contradictions and failures. Their aim was not to celebrate; their aim was to connect through criticism, to affirm through dissent – an especially American paradox, he observed, that derives from commitments both to individual liberty and to social reform. Kazin’s review did my first book the honor of placing it within a tradition that sees dissent as a mode of affiliation, critique as a form of connection, and the second-generation immigrant experience as a breeding ground for the desire both to sustain and to overcome difference by acts of bridging.

That there’s an ethnic dimension in the bridging act that my trajectory so obviously displays seems unmistakable, and my later book, *Shades of Hiawatha*, addresses this, as the subtitle suggests: “Staging Indians, Making Americans.” (The original subtitle was “Indians, Immigrants and National Identity in the United States.”) At the time of the great immigration from eastern and southern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, how did Indians figure in representations of national identity? “Making Americans” echoes the famous title of Jacob Riis’s memoir *The Making of an American*. The notion that American is a *made* rather than primarily a *given* identity, given at birth, looms as a crux of major controversy in the turn-of-the-century era. “Americanization” programs popular at the time reinforce the idea that this national identity, unlike others, can be taught, instilled, reproduced through training. National identity is by definition a broad concern in American studies as a whole, and in this book I narrowed my focus to the role popularly assigned to natives or Indians in understandings of national character or identity. The perennially popular poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Song of Hiawatha,” published two generations earlier in 1855, gave me a key text – the original poem itself and its reproduction in countless performances and illustrations, including, I discovered, a translation in 1910 in New York into Yiddish. Also an important body of photographs on an epic scale by Edward Shariff Curtis, who famously recreated Indians as “vanishing Americans.” Then there was the John Wanamaker department store of Philadelphia

and New York, which sent out what they declared to be “expeditions to the Indians” starting in 1908; this astonishing charade produced piles of photographs, a film of a staging of the Longfellow poem, and performance of native dances and oratory at the stores.

The Wanamaker material reconnected me in an unexpected and odd way with my own past as a child of immigrant parents in Philadelphia, as did the Yiddish *Hiawatha*. The Yiddish translation of the Longfellow poem, by an immigrant poet known as Yehoash (Solomon Blumgarten), included a long introductory essay by a distinguished Yiddish critic, Chaim Zhitlovsky, who argued that Yiddish was the national tongue of Jews. The language, he argued, rather than Judaism, constituted Jews as a people. Yiddish grounded the national identity of Jews as Jews, a notion I heard often in my growing-up years in my own family. There is a trajectory of rediscovery and reconnection that became a strong presence for me in writing this book.

The *Hiawatha* book concludes with a chapter called “The Great Bridge,” another unexpected and curious return to where my trajectory began, with Brooklyn Bridge. The connecting link proved to be Luther Standing Bear, Lakota Sioux, a member of the first class of the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, which was set up after the Civil War as part of a program to “Americanize” Indians. The idea of *making* Americans, applied to new immigrants starting in the 1890s, had begun as a policy aimed at “converting” natives or “savage Indians” into “Americans.” Son of a Sioux chief, while a student at the Carlisle School in the 1880s Luther Standing Bear spent time as an apprentice at the Wanamaker store in Philadelphia, learning skills of merchandising; at the school he also learned to play the cornet in the Carlisle Marching Band. The band gave performances at schools and churches on fundraising tours. One morning while touring Brooklyn in May 1883, the Carlisle Marching Band found itself leading a parade over a new bridge as part of the opening-day ceremonies. Leading the band, Luther Standing Bear, as he recalled, was the first person to cross that bridge. “Thus a real American band was the first to cross Brooklyn Bridge.” And he underlined *real* American band, playing pointedly on the double meaning of band. For Indians it’s the name of a unit of Indian society, essentially an extended family unit.

Later in life Standing Bear wrote four books telling of his experiences growing up on the reservation, attending the Carlisle School, working for Wanamaker, traveling in Europe with the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, then pursuing a career in Hollywood as a performer in Westerns. In one of his books he expands the Indian notion of band as an extended family and contrasts its solidarity with the alienation, disregard for others, and unhappiness he found in mainstream American life. His account of crossing Brooklyn Bridge at the head of a “real American band” makes for a crossover point in the trajectory of crossings I’ve tried to trace in this talk. It’s through such coincidences, earlier work finding itself echoed in later work, scholarly pursuits illuminating life experiences, that trajectories reveal themselves.