

Henry Koerner Center for Emeritus Faculty

Intellectual Trajectories

VOL. 5

Richard H. Brodhead, Editor



INTRODUCTION

Yale: The Inside Story

Richard H. Brodhead

I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me.

— Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

American life expectancy has increased by twenty years since 1940, making retirement not a brief post-career respite but a substantial life-chapter of its own. For all that, few universities have made much provision for the life of retired faculty, and none has created anything like Yale's Koerner Center. Since its opening in 2003, the Koerner Center has supplied a place for emeritus faculty from every school to gather, connect with each other, and gain access to arts and culture on a scale few enjoyed in our working years. As befits an institution of higher learning, it is also a place for continuing education.

Intellectual Trajectories has been one of the Koerner Center's most vibrant education programs. When the center's creators were first envisioning what could go on there, David Apter had the idea that, once a month, some emeritus professor should share the story of his or her professional life with colleagues in the center's cozy library. First conceived as talks to a live audience, these works have been collected in a series of print volumes (and are available online). With this, the fifth collection, one hundred and fifteen have been published to date.

For their audience, the trajectories have formed a stunning and unexpected education. For people who have spent most of our adult lives at Yale, the volumes yield the shock of recognizing how small a part of the university we actually know: how little we know of the contemporaries who have shared faculty roles, and of fields distant from our own. These pieces have yielded new understanding not just for hearers and readers, but for their authors as well.

All emeritus professors have spent lives as noted communicators. Authoring lectures, publications, papers for scholarly conferences? That's what we do! But for the great majority, composing an Intellectual Trajectory is something new. Suddenly the task is not explaining your subject but *yourself*. These essays struggle to answer such questions as: Of all the things that could tempt a smart person in the world of your time, how did you find your way to an academic life? Within that small subset of humanity, how did it happen that your subject, not some other, became the object of

special attraction? Once you had found your intellectual love, how did it evolve over time? How did those roads lead to Yale, and what did it mean to make your life here?

One hundred and fifteen answers to these questions by brilliant, articulate people across every discipline form a treasure-trove of historical material. The five volumes of Koerner Center trajectories are no mere collection of personal reminiscence. Taken together they form an inside history of a great American university in the last three decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first—a history more revealing for being personal and particular, not a mass of institutional generalities, and for capturing the lifeblood of great universities: the play of curiosity that drives the life of the mind.

If we ask where a great university's faculty came from in this period, for instance, the answer we find here is, virtually anywhere. A professor in this cohort might as naturally come from Sicily (Francesco Iachello) or Budapest (Charles Baltay) or Beijing, then Taipei (Kang-i Sun Chang) or Berlin (Brigitte Peucker) as from California or Pennsylvania. Iachello gives us a glimpse of Old World gentility still almost miraculously intact in his early childhood, with libraries of rare books and private concerts in the home—but the postwar expropriation of great landowner estates is just about to happen. History breaks in even more harshly in the other tales of foreign-born childhood, which entail flights from new Communist regimes.

In addition, many US-born colleagues in the volume came from families only recently arrived from abroad, driven by their own logic of displacement. The flight from European anti-Semitism, this volume reminds us, brought a huge windfall to American universities. Victor Bers's Latvian ancestors traveled by foot over the Pyrenees and on to Lisbon with help from the celebrated Emergency Rescue Committee. Harvey Goldblatt's ancestors had fled the current Lithuania and Belarus to Hamilton, Ontario, where his father's army-surplus store sold cheap clothes to other immigrants. Steven Fraade grew up in the immigrant Jewish neighborhood of Manhattan's Washington Heights, where neighbors included the Kissingers and Doctor Ruth.

The flight from Nazism and communism helped produce the new diversity that came to characterize American universities from the mid-twentieth century on. But it does not follow that the native-born all shared similar backgrounds or had easy rides. Kids from academic families would seem to have had the smoothest road to academic careers, but this thought gets a surprising correction from the talks collected here. Of these twenty-four scholars, the two who would fit this description most neatly are, with profound unobviousness, two Black colleagues: Robert Stepto, whose relatives had earned bushels of degrees and whose great-aunt was a dean at Howard University; and Frank Snowden, whose father was professor of classics at Howard. Both Robert and Frank also attended elite secondary schools, but advantage and disadvantage can be combined in complex ways in American experience. The first Black student to attend a private school in Washington, DC, Snowden had that door opened by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision overturning racially segregated education. St. Albans would not have admitted him had he come along a few years earlier.

A few of these biographies evoke the classic postwar middle-class American family, but variants are more common than any norm. Rolena Adorno (nee Klahn), a farmer's daughter from Dalton, Iowa, had her primary education in a one-room schoolhouse where a single teacher taught every grade. Fred Strebeigh's father died while his mother was pregnant with him; with no means of support, she moved to the hinterlands of New Bedford, Massachusetts to teach a small rural private school that allowed her to bring her child first for daycare, later as pupil and teacher's helper. Dudley Andrew was raised in the sprouting suburbs of Southern California but in a home so economically straitened that he never ate in a restaurant. Margaret (Peggy) Bia's father was an insurance salesman in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn but died in a subway accident in her early teens. Her mother then supported her own seven children by taking in foster babies from a local orphanage.

11

For all their wildly varied particulars, each origin contained the stuff to awaken an active, hungry mind in some smart boy or girl. But from that start to an intellectual vocation there is also no single path.

Some speakers seem to have been born knowing what they wanted to do. Margaret Grey, emeritus dean of the School of Nursing, knew at age six that she wanted to be a nurse. Rod McIntosh, the archaeologist who helped uncover the early civilizations of sub-Saharan Africa, had already found the joys of archaeology in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in his early teens. Others showed glimmers of a future vocation long before they consciously recognized one. Although Harvey Goldblatt was raised in an unlettered home, with earnings from a job in a steel mill he bought what sound like the furnishings of a future faculty office: a desk, a chair, and a wooden bookcase with glass doors. Future Nobel Laureate in Economics Robert Shiller still thought he might be interested in journalism when he went to college. But the fact that, in his first year of high school, he had devoured the copy of Samuelson's *Economics* an older brother brought home from college gave early hints of his future course.

But for every such story of early dedication, many more tell of wandering among plural possibilities until chance experience provoked a sharper focus. When Dana Angluin was admitted to Berkeley at age sixteen she already had enough self-knowledge to declare that she wanted to major in "metamathematics." But it was through the chance of her father finding a course for her at a local community college that she learned computer programming, and further luck brought her onto a project-team experimenting with computer system-sharing. By his early twenties Dudley Andrew already knew his lifelong focus would be at the juncture of French culture, philosophy, and film. But by his telling, it had taken a chance job collecting tickets at a Notre Dame film festival to fuse his love of philosophy with a new love of cinema. When Rolena Adorno graduated from Iowa, she was headed for a career teaching junior high school until a professor who remembered her proposed another plan. On arriving in the United States, Kang-i Sun Chang began a library degree at Rutgers and followed her engineer husband to a library job in Brookings, South Dakota. Only many convoluted chapters later did she arrive at the graduate program in Chinese literature at Princeton.

On the medical side, Barbara Kinder made her way through medical school but had no clear idea what subspecialty to pursue. She saved her surgical rotation for last thinking she would like it least – and then learned this was the work she was born to do. By contrast, Lorraine Siggins liked surgery as a medical student in Australia. Only later did she find psychiatry the more compelling field.

Even once colleagues found a sense of direction, further chapters of accidents could be needed to put them on the exact right path. Richard Levin studied history before discovering a taste for economics. Admitted to Yale's graduate economics program in spite of his slight preparation, a telegram then informed him that his admission letter had been sent in error. (Perhaps it had not occurred to them that Rick would someday be president of Yale. Don't worry about it, just come, the DGS wisely counselled.) The same department that was surprisingly lax with one applicant was surprisingly strict with another. Having thought better of his plan to go to Harvard Law School, James Scott was admitted to the Yale PhD program in economics. But when he insisted on a chance to explore more of the non-Western world instead of finishing his remaining math prerequisites, the economics department would not allow it. So they sent his application to Political Science, which admitted him instead.

Nor is the story necessarily over once people found their correct future department. Brigitte Peucker was successfully establishing herself as a scholar of German literature when chance exposed her to the newly imported wave of new German cinema, deflecting her into the nascent field of film studies. Frank Snowden was already a historian of modern Italy before he found his real career studying epidemics.

Having co-chaired the tenure appointments committees in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences between 1993 and 2004, I can testify that when Yale makes a long-term commitment to a faculty member, it is hiring a professional self for a place in an established map of fields. The materials required to be submitted – professional publications, lists of professional activities, evaluations by experts in the targeted subfield – make this perfectly clear. In a familiar consequence, within the university, we as individuals are virtually synonymous with our academic specializations: Francesco Iachello *is* professor of physics with a specialty in nuclear and molecular physics; Kang-i Sun Chang *is* professor of East Asian languages and literature with a specialty in Chinese; Steven Fraade *is* professor of religious studies with a specialty in Judaic studies. Susan Rose-Ackerman is correct to say: "I am internationally known both as an expert on corruption and its control and as a student of comparative administrative law and executive policymaking in democracies." But no one ever emerged to a professional identity except through a prior, complexly personal history of self-discovery and self-creation. How Yale faculty *lived* their way into what they became *known as* is the story the Trajectories allow us to understand.

In the process, they also help explain what these individuals have actually done at Yale. We speak of colleagues as "in" a field, but the faculties of great universities are not passive occupants of confined spaces. Great professors bring fields of knowledge

to life for their students and colleagues, and as they animate them they also transform their fields, making them over in the image of their interests, discoveries, intuitions, and concerns. Harry (universally known as Skip) Stout entered the field of American religious history and at once transformed it, revising the then-authoritative story of the Puritan legacy by looking in unexamined archives to retrieve less-elite social experience. When Rolena Adorno entered Spanish literary study she reoriented it around New World authors and colonialist outsiders, a space of multiple, even contradictory cultural loyalties. Barbara Kinder explains how her fascination with the body's regulation of calcium led her to understand the role of the parathyroid gland and then to perfect the surgical treatment of thyroid problems. Having led a long, successful career as a particle physicist, Charlie Baltay tells how he reinvented himself as student of the origin of the cosmos, pursuing experimental validation of the unknown or "dark" matter causing the universe's expansion to accelerate.

Finally, as the Intellectual Trajectories tell us how colleagues remade the contents of their fields, they also explain how they reshaped Yale itself. It's easy to forget that every institutional feature or structure we know in daily life was created by actual human makers at the start. This book lets us watch key post-1960s differences in the process of being made.

The arrival of faculty gender diversity, a whole generation after diversification by national origin, is the principal case. The first volume of Koerner talks (given from 2003 to 2009) included one by a woman. The second volume (through 2013) contained three; the third (through 2018), two. These small numbers mark the long interval between when women began to be appointed at Yale and when they began to retire. In Volume Five as in Volume Four, eight, or 33 percent, of contributors are women. This represents a great step forward, but many of this book's writers remember being the only woman in their entering cohort—Peggy Bia remained the only woman in the nephrology section of the Department of Medicine for more than fifteen years. While women colleagues speak with satisfaction about their Yale careers, several mention indignities they suffered that seem quite cringe-worthy now. Part of this cohort's accomplishment was to make the holding of high-status positions by women at Yale a normal, respected thing.

These biographies also witness fields emerging that have proved essential to the modern university. Robert Stepto arrived in 1974, just as African American studies was being designated an important area of study. Dana Angluin's piece recapitulates the whole evolution of computer science from punchcards to the far reaches of machine learning and AI. We can watch film studies being born and built through the careers of Brigitte Peucker and Dudley Andrew. Margaret Grey documents the re-creation of nursing from caregiver training to a field with a research dimension, a fact now embodied in the PhD program in her school.

Other authors in this volume were early architects of programs that have become noted Yale strengths. Peter Brooks tells how, after serving on the Yale faculty for a

number of years, French *maîtres à penser* taught him new and different questions literary study could address. He and other colleagues institutionalized this discovery in creating the literature major, long a magnet for brilliant undergraduates. (Later, Peter helped build the Whitney Humanities Center.) Until fairly recently, Yale College students were assumed already to know how to write, and nonliterary prose was thought an unfit subject for university instruction. Fred Strebeigh explains virtually brick-by-brick how Yale built a distinguished program in the study and practice of nonfiction. To cite a final example from the social sciences, Jim Scott's cross-national, multidisciplinary work on peasants—as he calls them, “the largest class in world history”—has made Yale a global center for agrarian studies, a field critical to history, anthropology, economics, and the environment.

In short, with this volume and its predecessors the Koerner Center invites the Yale community to understand the university we take for granted in quite new ways. Without a whiff of nostalgia, these backward looks remind us where Yale came from and how great universities are created, sustained, and transformed. It has been an honor to serve as convener of the Trajectories series, and I am profoundly grateful to participants for taking this task so seriously. They have taught me a great deal.

At the Koerner Center, I have benefited from the generosity of Director Gary Haller. Thomas C. Duffy, my predecessor in this role, commissioned the first year of essays gathered in this volume. When illness made it impossible for him to continue, he was most gracious in counselling his successor. We all mourn his loss. Kelly Yamaguchi-Scanlon, events coordinator, was helpful in arranging the logistics of Trajectory gatherings. At a later stage, Steve Aitken and Sid Hirschman gave excellent assistance in editing and designing this book for publication. Sincere thanks to all.

Finally, Jenna-Claire Kemper, executive director of the Koerner Center, has been a partner every step of the way in arranging these talks and shepherding them into print. But for her skillful, cheerful help this volume would not exist.