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INTRODUCTION

The title of this collection, *An Unfamiliar America*, should be understood broadly. It refers to various phenomena that humans inhabiting the geographical area that today constitutes the United States find or have found odd, new, or challenging for their worldviews. Indeed, our topics vary from the xenophobic attitudes of eighteenth-century University of Virginia students toward their foreign professors to the lessons drawn from the Civil Rights Movement in Trumpian America.

Most characteristically, however, our use of the term "unfamiliar" refers to the need for every American Studies scholar to acknowledge the danger of clinging to conventional attitudes of decency to the extent that they overcome our genuine academic awe. Without awe there is no innovative research. Given that information turns into knowledge only by interpreting a selected set of information in some way, it should be evident that academic, research-based knowledge is first and foremost offered as valid only within the disciplinary limits of its relevance. Each methodological decision on what to interpret from one's material also closes off some other possible readings of the same. This fact calls for particular caution on the part of the researcher in order to avoid turning into an untainted idealist, who conducts research only for what seem like good and progressive goals.

Academic research must cling to the ideal of seeking the truth about the world rather than turning itself into a political campaign for, say, multiculturalism or against climate change, no matter how desirable those goals may appear to us. Ethnographers have always been aware of the delicate balance between their own interpretations of the lives of their informants and the informants' understanding of the same. For example, no Trump scholar needs to believe in anything Trump says when analyzing his astonishing consistency of being the personality he is.

There are odd blind spots in our understanding of even the most familiar cultural trends surrounding us. For example, the century-old statues of Confederate soldiers have recently been proclaimed offensive to racial minorities and therefore to be erased from the public space and memory. One may ask whether it makes sense to question the legacy of the Civil War and the Jim Crow legislation era by attacking one's own cultural landscape. Iconoclasts, after all, have no new interpretations to offer either of history or of these statues. History, of course, changes all the time, because it consists of our constant reinterpretation of the past. It is the past that does not change. Given that even Woodrow Wilson condemned the Reconstruction as "a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South" and was subsequently quoted as an authority in D. W. Griffith's blatantly racist 1915 movie, *The Birth of the Nation*, is there anything pure enough in the American past to pass the test of a genuine moralist? One might better understand the debate about these statues by maintaining the distinctions among current politics, cultural landscape, the American past, and various histories written of that past.

There are certain risks in the currently fashionable transnational, transboundary, and transdisciplinary approaches to cultural phenomena. Such a research focus may lose from sight the very core of cultural studies itself, namely consideration of what makes certain aspects of our manifold cultural ways particular as compared to others. In

sum, research solely focusing on what the crossing of cultural boundaries looks like can lose critical distance from itself and turn into something that, in Terry Eagleton's words, is "not to be reckoned up among the cultures it explores, since it is nothing but the activity of exploring them."¹ Scholars remain cultural beings themselves.

As much as identity-building appears to be the central concern for much of the current practice in American Studies and history writing, it is worth keeping in mind that truth may not always directly contribute to one's identity-building. The researcher's quest for truth is situated at the core of the modern idea of advancing science and scholarship. It does not, of course, equate to already possessing it. As the scholarly community keeps discussing the famous Gramscian concept of "the Other," it is also worth keeping in mind that, without distinguishing one thing from another, no meaning can arise either and any analysis of the outer world becomes impossible.

Following Charles Taylor's classic *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (1994), identity-building can simply be viewed as a constant dialogue that every individual performs both internally and externally, within oneself and with others. Hence, identity is not stable and should not even aim to become so. Otherwise, one's dialogue with the outer world ceases to change her/his subjective interpretations of the constantly changing world and only begins to turn into some form of alienation. Unfortunately, the current American political culture, with its apparently ceaseless culture wars, seems to have become a battlefield of everyone's separate identity-building project to an extent that was never intended by the advocates of the culture of authenticity. Authenticity, after all, was about recognition of others as different from oneself and yet deserving one's respect for being so, not about compelling anyone into a given, standardized model of authenticity itself.

It is evident that society should provide equal recognition for numerous cultural identities beyond the mere equality of individual rights. Taylor's radicalism rests precisely in the claim that traditional human rights are not sufficient for genuine multiculturalism. Cultural rights are specific rights. To be sure, Taylor provides no answers to any specific problems of multiculturalism in Western societies – for example, how to react to Muslim women's petitions for separate women's hours in public swimming halls – an obvious dilemma for the mainstream Western ideal of what gender equality means. Identity-building, however, should never be laid out as a responsibility of society instead of the individual. Otherwise we are only imposing yet another model for what being a human being is supposed to entail. The ultimate ideal must concede to genuinely different worldviews. Not counting sheer pathological personality disorders, one may well live quite comfortably in some middle ground between one's different role identities. It seems clear, for example, that our transnational world today often connects an academic with closer ties to one's international colleagues than to one's own countrymen. For a Finnish Americanist, colleagues in American academia might well be the ones with whom the dialogue on her/his professional identity is produced and maintained.

The much-praised, characteristically interdisciplinary touch of American Studies promises to keep our eyes open to the constantly changing world around us. Yet, as for the danger of blind reliance on even any cross-disciplinary doctrines, let us keep in mind the 1970 warning of David Hackett Fischer against only combining "the worst of both worlds – the stupidity of historians and ignorance of sociologists."² Research results are always dictated by the research question one is asking. Hence, a study of Thomas Jefferson's moral thought, while perhaps offering ample knowledge of the impact of the Aristotelian virtue ethic and eighteenth-century moral sense school on Jefferson's intellectual outlook, tells us little of the actual immorality of his slaveholding or of the reality of chattel slavery in the antebellum United States.

After all, as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, the real problem for a researcher in understanding the social order of any particular community from its members' point of view is that in most cases those members grasp its very structure quite differently.³ Truth is rarely monolithic. It is just as important to provide knowledge of the motivations of Ku Klux Klan members in the 1960s as it is of the career of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Principles may still matter. Some of them are ethical, some methodological, and some purely political. A Texas politician, Bill Kugle (1925-1992), has this inscription on his tombstone: "He never voted for Republicans and had little to do with them."

Under the pressure of the now fashionable memory studies, the advocates of which may proclaim that "anachronism is no longer a taboo that the historian must fear but a tool that he can employ for his own benefit," our emphasis lies in bringing historical thinking back to the center of American Studies as a part of the international field of Cultural Studies.⁴ Modern historical thought once evolved from the Hegelian-inspired notion of an embedded rationality (be it the absolute mind or divinity itself) of the world manifesting itself over time and only thus revealing its true meaning. Even after leaving aside most of its earlier metaphysics, history today speaks to the centrality of change in all that still goes under the time-honored notion of "human development." This is why history has nothing to do with a particularly traditional way of looking at things. Instead, history provides knowledge of the past for our present.

While academic history focuses solely on this mode of knowledge, historical thinking may certainly help us in understanding why things are as they now appear. This does not exclude the goal to also change them for the better in the future. Even so, it is one thing to realize why, say, current academic thinking appears to draw on an exclusively Western notion of rationality (due to its very roots in the European Enlightenment), and a totally another thing to argue about the possible need to develop it in some other direction.

This book is divided into three thematic parts. The first one, titled "Facing and Adapting to an Unfamiliar America" offers fresh approaches to American history in terms of gender and ethnicity from the early nineteenth century to the present, the topics varying from hoboes and other marginal groups in Tom Waits's lyrics to construction of masculinity during the latest Apache wars in the 1880s. The second, the most extensive part of the collection, "Conservatives and Liberals in the Unfamiliar Trumpian America," studies this most topical of topics from a variety of angles. True to the theme of historical developments, it deals with the Trump phenomenon from the rise of the Christian Right in the Cold War era up to the current political divide between rural and urban America, and to the very concept of liberalism in American literary history. The article "History Matters" introduces us to Part III and its topic of African-American experience, resulting in the present racial problems of mass incarceration and police brutality. A historical perspective is further elaborated by the case of Emmett Till as a media event in its own time as well as by considering the rhetoric of Ku Klux Klan, and eventually by examining what is there to learn from such a historical phenomenon as the Civil Rights Movement for today's politics.

As for individual articles, Jeffrey Meikle has the honor of opening the volume with his genuinely intriguing big-picture of America and its unfamiliar oddities as provided by the famous musician Tom Waits. The name of Tom Waits evokes a gravelly-voiced singer channeling a drunken cocktail lounge piano player, a screeching blues vocalist, a manic circus organist, or a junkyard percussionist with lyrics conjuring up people on the margins – hoboes and tramps, gamblers and thieves, traveling salesmen and con artists, waitresses and burlesque dancers, circus

performers and carnival freaks, sailors on shore leave, tenant farmers and village idiots, the homeless and the crazed, all pursuing raggedy "American" dreams.

Alan Taylor offers us an interesting glimpse at early nineteenth-century Virginia xenophobia. To be sure, this xenophobia apparently included northern Yankees as well as foreigners invited to professorships at the University of Virginia in the early days of that famous institution. The title of Taylor's article is, tellingly, "Damn the European Professors': Higher Education and Xenophobia in Jefferson's Virginia."

Janne Lahti begins his story in the Skeleton Canyon of Arizona in 1886 where both the Chiricahua Apache chief, Geronimo, and the U.S. general, Nelson A. Miles, had to save face in front of their own troops as honorable soldiers – and as men. Lahti, hence, brings a number of unfamiliar notions of masculinity into his analysis of the thoroughly familiar histories of the Indian wars in the American West. Mark A. Brandon offers us a somewhat stunning story of a representative of the so-called racial sciences, Aleš Hrdlička, the Curator of Physical Anthropology at the National Museum in the early twentieth century, and of his "scientific" determinations of whiteness.

The second thematic part, "Conservatives and Liberals in the Unfamiliar Trumpian America," is opened by Lauren Turek's article, "Defending the Unreached and Unknown: American Evangelical Advocacy for International Religious Freedom." Turek offers a stimulating introduction to the rise of the Christian Right in American politics during the late Cold War era. Next, we will shift our focus to the most surprising phenomenon in recent American politics, the rise of President Trump. James Henson, in his "Conservative Ideology in the U.S. at the Intersection of the Tea Party and Donald Trump," wrestles with the Tea Party's impact on the Republicans' general tactics on the national level with a somewhat bleak conclusion about a "sense of denial and eventually submission among Republican party elites still unable to come to terms with the unfamiliar now among them." Markku Ruotsila's "Trump and the Christian Right: The Political Theology behind the Mutual Attraction," is an intriguing treatise of political theology that apparently combines Trump's conspicuously practical political goals with the ideologically unbending views of the traditional Christian Right.

One may inquire what liberal America should ask of itself, given the entirely new and unfamiliar political situation of the country. Jerry Pubantz analyzes the rural/urban divide in contemporary U.S. elections where "rural America" still "sees itself under siege by the unfamiliar and alien force of urban America." His article discusses the Democratic Party's weakness in appealing to rural America and to the traditional "blue collar" worker alongside the mainly urban "identity voters" and "culture voters" and hence introduces us to both the potential weaknesses and strengths of traditional liberals currently fighting for the America familiar to them. Bo Petterson's important article on the very basics of our current liberal beliefs begins with the odd familiarity of the protagonist of Sinclair Lewis's novel, *It Can't Happen Here*. As for those "familiarities," Lewis's protagonist, Buzz Windrip, a new tyrannical president is "vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected," who wants "people to obey him," and is critical "of the media, the legal system, and the Congress," and, of course, wishes "to make America a rich, proud land again."

William H. Chafe's article "History Matters" introduces us to Part III and its topic of African-American experience, resulting in the present racial problems of mass incarceration and police brutality. It is followed by a rather grim account by Niko Heikkilä on how the opposing side viewed the revolutionary changes brought by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. From Heikkilä's "Ideology and Race in the Cultural Politics of the Civil Rights-Era Klan" one can learn, for example, that even as the Klan's official, segregationist creed to "[l]et the white man remain white,

the black man black, the yellow man yellow, the brown man brown, and the red man red" did not prevent its open advocacy of nothing less than total white supremacy throughout the United States.

Emmett Till's horrible death in 1955 was not exceptional in the thoroughly racist Mississippi of the Jim Crow era as Elliott Gorn is careful to note. It was the huge media coverage of the brutal murder and mutilation of the 14-year old Chicago schoolboy in the Delta that gradually turned the case into "shorthand for white supremacist barbarism" and later made "history's strangeness, its unfamiliarity, fully emerge."

If professor Chafe at the beginning of Part III pointed out that history matters, Cheryl Greenberg's "The Lessons of the Civil Rights Movement for Activists in Xenophobic Times" eventually suggests what to do with that history, namely how to turn one's knowledge of history into active policy for a better future. Greenberg's thirteen (and a half) points on how to initiate a successful political movement provides a good handbook for anyone wishing to improve our still oddly unfamiliar America.

Finally, we would like to express our heartfelt thanks for the patience of our authors regarding the long journey of this collection to its eventual publication. We also thank Kenny Marotta and the editorial staff at Routledge for their help in successfully finishing the project.

In April 2020 at the University of Helsinki
The Editors

¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 46.

² David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Collins, 1970), 37.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*. Ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens. (London: Continuum, 2006,) 76-77.

⁴ See Marek Tamm, "Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies," *History Compass* Vol. 11 (6, 2013): 458-473, quotation, 466.