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THE WORK WE MAKE SCRIPTURES DO FOR US:
AN ARGUMENT FOR SIGNIFYING (ON) SCRIPTURES
AS INTELLECTUAL PROJECT

Vincent L. Wimbush

I propose to argue in this essay for the agenda and practices of a research institute that a new agenda and set of practices put forward by a particular research institute offers a compelling future for biblical studies. In order to make such an argument about a direction for the future, I think it important for me to provide my own unavoidably tendentious current perspective on the personal and intellectual experiences and challenges of the past that have led me to this point.

I have begun to understand my career of twenty-five years as teacher/scholar of religion with its focus on the Bible (not the other way around) in terms of an ongoing quest on the part of a member of an over-determined demographic group—one of the communities of the late “modern” “black” Atlantic “diaspora”—to try to understand the history of uses of and to position myself to “speak back to” an overexeguted/overdetermined social-cultural artifact and “classic” “white” “scriptures.” Precisely because the two categories are complex and fraught and loaded and contested in characterization and signification, their imbrication in my career mark and characterize periods of my academic-intellectual work and preoccupation, orientation, and political-critical consciousness. These periods inform my interest in addressing the matter of the future of biblical studies.

The first period from the beginning of my career in the early nineteen eighties to the mid-nineties—had to do with my attempt at representation and reinscription of the fairly traditional orientation, sensibilities, skills and practices of western Enlightenment-inflected academic biblical scholarship. Teaching at a well-regarded graduate theological school in a small town of elite colleges in Southern California, I cultivated the skills of the historian (of late ancient Near Eastern religion and culture) and the philologist (of ancient Greek and Latin texts especially ancient Jewish and Christian texts

called “scriptures”). And I accepted as the primary agenda, established by that slice of mainstream academic culture in which biblical studies participated, to occupy myself in a disciplined way with one set of texts among the “classics.” So I dutifully pursued the historical “facts” or “truth(s)” in and behind the classic texts that were the Christian Bible.

Within this system in this period I even found my niche and established a reputation by working as a biblical scholar/historian of religion invested in the critical exegesis of texts having to do with the origins, historical development, and theorizing of early Christian asceticism and forms of world renunciation. I even assumed positions of leadership among colleagues interested in such study. I convened several conferences and colloquia and conceptualized and organized collaborative publication projects. For my orientation and work associated with this period, I received the usual academic “rewards”: promotion and tenure; recognition by the academic guilds (in appointments to important posts); and several fellowships and foundation grants.

The interest in *askesis* is itself worth pondering. I think I thought at the time that focus on renunciatory practices as ideologies and regimes of resistance might somehow help me get back to a place of my initial but difficult to articulate interests. I had keen interest in finding out what was behind different views of and orientations to the world, in the logics and politics behind different interpretations and uses of traditions. From the very beginning of graduate studies, I was clearly channeling these questions and issues through the experiences I knew from the world I knew, but given the antiquarianist, theory-allergic, and anti-self-reflexive orientation of the program I was undergoing, I had little or no opportunity certainly, no encouragement, to pursue the questions and issues in relationship to that world. I was on my own to figure things out, to be in touch with my self and hear my own voice, to figure out my own interests and how to negotiate them and relate them to the field of studies I had entered.

The second period from roughly the mid-1990s to roughly the year 2002 had to do with the beginning of my departure (with attendant fears and anxieties) from the traditions and orientation of my “classical” training and an attempt to model an alternate intellectual orientation and set of interpretive practices that would lead toward a more unitary self. The intellectual departure coincided roughly with my move in 1991 to New York City to assume the position of full professor at Union Seminary (and adjunct affiliate at Columbia University). Although I had all along at least from the graduate school years experienced doubts and ancestors’ hauntings about what I was doing as a professional, I was with the move to the mouth of Harlem and with the challenges and expectations and needs of that location, including those of students of many different backgrounds, forced to begin a (re)turn. With the

change in location and my own social and intellectual and political maturation, I came to realize that I could hardly continue to be the unqualified classic texts standard-bearer in my teaching and research. I simply could no longer find my-self and its history, could not “hear” clearly enough the ancestors within the intellectual guild system and its practices that I had trained for and with my “card” had been charged and expected to represent. And I was deafened and frustrated even more by attempting to carry out such a charge as part of the mission and agenda of the traditional western protestant theological paradigm—notwithstanding Union’s incessant cries about its “liberal-progressive” modeling of it. Both the theological house in which I lived (figuratively and literally) and the intellectual guild discourse in which I worked were traditional and conservative; their expectations of me were complex, wanting the new “other” that I in personal-physical terms represented, on the one hand, but not really in terms of translating that other in terms of independent professional-intellectual orientation or full-throated articulations and arguments.

Both systems, academic biblical studies and a representation of the Protestant theological school, came to strike me as more and more irrelevant to, if not problematic and somewhat unhealthy for, who and what I thought I was. No matter how I seemed to comport myself, I became more silent and withdrawn and thought myself quite peripheral to both domains as they appeared more and more to me to represent mostly unconfessed if not unknowing protectors of (discourses about) “white-ness.” Here I mean that both systems or domains had as their default orientation the structure of whiteness and its correlate racialism and racism that of course, defines and pollutes the West and all of its traditional dominant institutions.

The ever-clearer recognition of the situation left me somewhat discouraged. I made myself aware of some of the assessments and types of responses black intellectuals and social critics and activists had given to the situation. I determined that that response on the part of some to reconstruct and advance myths and other discourses of afrocentrism, ethiopianism, contributionism and vindicationism¹ as part of a long tradition in the search to empower a displaced and humiliated people, was understandable but not effective or compelling. And the particularly poignant and long history of effort on the part of some to find a few “black” figures in the “white” scriptures seemed to me to be a desperate but ultimately unwise and self-defeating game.²

1. See Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16 (and passim). Also, see his *Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

2. Wilson, *Afrotopia*, 44–96 (and passim).

In my teaching of and research into the past that was the “ancient world” that was the matrix for the Bible I could not see or hear my-self. The experience had come to a point of being intolerable and unacceptable. So slowly, or so it seems now, and thoughtfully, or so it seemed then I began to change my teaching focus and intellectual research agenda. It changed from the reconstruction of the (still mainly unproblematic) ancient Greco-Roman world context and the pursuit of the correct content-meaning of the ancient texts which was really, frighteningly, obfuscating discourse about whiteness or a construal of a part of European studies to the meaning of seeking meaning in relationship to ancient iconic texts called “scriptures.” I committed myself to the raising of what I came to consider the most basic question that should be raised prior to the question regarding the content-meaning of the iconic texts: I began to ask not so much what is the meaning (liberal or conservative or whatever) of this or that text but what is the *work* we make (texts turned into) scriptures do for us. This was not a question that the western theological school system (including its liberal-progressive protestant wing), an historical religious-ideological reflection and extension of dominant territorial cultures of the book, wanted someone like me to pursue. Such agenda involves fathoming of some hard questions and issues, questions and issues not about a past on which anything in defense of the dominant arrangements can be inscribed without clearly defined attribution and interest, but about what we all continue to do with the texts we call scriptures and with what effects.

I arrogated to myself the right to take a step back and begin elsewhere. I decided not (as so many white and black expected and assumed, as even one administrator who had known me for years had assumed) to focus on the “black” interpretation of this or that text, but instead to make African Americans’ historical and ongoing experiences and expressions and practices *be* the experiences and expressions and practices I use “to think with” about the phenomenon of scriptures. I became convinced that the default socio-religious-cultural and academic thinking would continue (even if the explicit claim is not always made) to presume the scriptures to be “white,” that is, the representations and projections of the dominant history and culture. So I then began to conceptualize and develop a multi-disciplinary and collaborative research project on African Americans and the Bible that somewhat modeled the different academic-intellectual orientation for which I had sighed. Over a period of two years, beginning in 1997, I set up what was the first ever of a series of structured but enormously creative and rewarding extensive colloquia among historians, literary critics, sociologists, anthropologists, visual art historians, musicologists, and religion scholars around the topic African Americans and the Bible. These experiences led to my convening with grant

support from foundations a major international conference on the topic in New York City in 1999.³

The third period, from 2003 to the present, represents my willingness to depart even further from the antiquarianist-theological play with “classics” and take on more academic-intellectual and programmatic risk: I accepted the ongoing challenge to attempt a complex nuance or intellectual calibration, a balance of focus upon my own world and its history, its traditions and forms of expressions, with comparative work, with the traditions and expressions of many different peoples. This challenge reflects my assumption that the experiences of African Americans may be different in some respects from others but not altogether exceptional or unique, and that such experiences are to be studied not as exotica but as analytical windows onto broadly shared if not universal practices, expressions and experiences. So what I began doing in this period represents not abandonment of but intellectual-programmatic building upon and expansion of the focus on African Americans and the Bible. I began to make use of continuing research on African Americans and the Bible as wedge for theorizing about and building a critical studies research program around “scriptures” as historical-comparative phenomenon in society and culture.

With my acceptance of an appointment at the Claremont Graduate University in 2003 and the convening in February 2004 of another international conference (“Theorizing Scriptures”), the Institute for Signifying Scriptures (ISS) was established as a small center to facilitate the sort of multilayered, transdisciplinary research on “scriptures” that I had for many years sought to encourage and model.⁴ This rather unique research institute (ISS) has as its agenda the forcing of certain simple and basic but disturbing questions and issues about the complex phenomenon of “scriptures”—what they are or what the English term signifies as phenomenon/a; how they are variously represented; how they are invented; the work we make them do for us; and the ramifications in power dynamics and relations they create and foster and delimit. Because I was convinced that as with medical research we can learn much (more and differently) from shifting the focus of research of a particular syndrome and this particular phenomenon from dominants or presumed “traditional” or “normal” subjects, I have made the commitment to place privileged but not exclusive focus upon historically dominated peoples.

3. This event led to the publication of Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

4. This event led to the publication of Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon* (Signifying [on] Scriptures Book Series; New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

It is this focus around which I have come to find my-self, including myself as teacher-scholar. I find it compelling because it is an opportunity for me to communicate with passion my ideas and arguments and because it is the motor for my continuing journey toward the modeling of *integrity*, in the original and most profound sense of this term, of the different investments, challenges, orientations, interests, politics and passions of a career and personal life journey.

Given this historical sketch of my personal and intellectual transformation, I think it important to reflect more deeply on what are some of the critical issues and challenges that lie behind it and some of the implications and ramifications that grow out of it.

What in ISS is proposed is a challenge regarding the need, rationale, impulse for change in the study of scriptures and in fact, insofar as it still for the most still turns around the study of texts—the study of religion, in general. It is a challenge regarding the orientation of such study, including its starting point or underlying presuppositions.

I am concerned in this essay about a future but that future very much and necessarily in terms of a particular orientation, actually reorientation, to the past. The “past” represents the fulcrum around which or matrix within which the modern European-American field of biblical studies (and of course the study of religion/theology in general) was begun. Of course, this past is also that which shapes us and the larger circles and structures tribes; worlds to which we belong.

Of course, the major point here is that this “past” is a culture-specific invention and protectorate. The “antiquity” and the ancient “texts” in play reflect the prejudices and interests of dominance. These prejudices and interests have to do with the dynamics that come out of the first contacts between the West and the rest, the world of the Other. Among the many dynamics and consequences of the first contact is the construction of the modern fields of comparative studies of peoples and religions. And one need not dig too deeply before one can find the construction of the modern field of biblical studies and its originary and ongoing participation in the western European-American ideological maintenance of exploitative arguments, power dynamics and arrangements, including the modern era invention and classification/hierarchialization of “races” and “religions.” The legacy of modern biblical studies’ participation in, major support for and sometimes otherwise deadly silence in the debates about the “chain of being” that provided ideological support for modern trafficking in black slavery is well established.

Various disciplines, historical/philological, ethnographic/ethnological, philosophical, and psychological, were developed and employed for the sake of “race-ing” the Other as a tool for containment and dominance. Historian and

theorist of religion Charles Long has been most eloquent in pointing out how the West signified the Other through proto-academic-disciplinary discourses in collusion with other interests with powerful and perduring consequences:

through conquest, trade, and colonialism, [the West] made contact with every part of the globe.... religion and cultures and peoples throughout the world were created anew through academic disciplinary orientations—they were signified.... names [were] given to realities and peoples...; this naming is at the same time an objectification through categories and concepts of those realities which appear as novel and “other” to the cultures of conquest. There is of course the element of power in this process of naming and objectification.... the power is obscured and the political, economic, and military situation that forms the context of the confrontation is masked by the intellectual desire for knowledge of the other. The actual situation of cultural contact is never brought to the fore within the context of intellectual formulations.⁵

Anthropologist Michael Taussig reminds us that the consequences of first contact are certainly powerful and poignant but like Kafka’s ape “tickling at the heels” of those at the top of the great chain of being, they are complex, multi-directional and multi-leveled, and can be for dominants and dominated reverberating and disturbingly and hauntingly self-revealing:

[in the transition] from First Contact time ... to Reverse Contact now-time ... the Western study of the Third and Fourth World Other gives way to the unsettling confrontation of the West with itself as portrayed in the eyes and handiwork of its Others. Such an encounter disorients the earlier occidental sympathies which kept the magical economy of mimesis and alterity in some sort of imperial balance.⁶

What I have in mind here, and what I think Long and Taussig suggest, is the importance of beginning critical historical analysis in our time with the (expansive) point of first contact between the West and the Rest in order to understand not only what the dominant West has wrought but how the dominated may “speak back to” the situation, or resist and even make for themselves a world. It may also be helpful to try to understand what is at stake here by thinking of the words typically placed on the side view mirror of

5. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

6. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xv.

automobiles—"Objects in mirror are closer than they appear." The (human-made) "objects" in our modern world social-cultural mirror generally colored peoples are always, as Homi Bhabha reminds us, forced to lag behind.⁷ Such "objects" are frighteningly closer than we think. Our thinking with/about them may get us closer to what and who we all are, closer to an understanding of how and why we do what we do.

Even as I privilege in criticism those people who are generally positioned behind and are reflected in the analytical mirror, I reject the notion that the focus of the analysis is *only* about them! The look in the mirror, back at those who are behind is, or should be, disturbing to the point of helping us see things differently—including the reality that cultural historical interpretive practices, including the discourse and practice we call biblical studies, are not and never really were ever about the ancient world, the ancient "classic," the canonical texts per se, but about something else that remains unnamed and unclaimed.

So beginning critical interpretation with the framework or structure of power arrangements that come out of first contact between the West and the Other is imperative in order not simply to learn even more about dominants, including their interests and strategies, even though this is a likely and appropriate and needed result. Of course, we are always conditioned and oriented to learn about dominants. That is partly what it means to be dominant! We may also learn something about the dominated—on their own terms, and this is for so many rather obvious reasons a very much needed result.

Most important in my view is the likely result that by genuinely (re-) focusing on non-dominants we shall likely learn some new things about, and gain some different perspectives on, some widely shared if not universal phenomena—phenomena that have to do with the structures and frameworks, the inventions and artifice-ality of society and culture that fundamentally condition and determine us but have for the sake of maintaining the status quo remained veiled to us. What is needed in order to unveil what one of Zora Neale Hurston's folk characters referred to as things with a "hidden meanin'"⁸ is a "reflexive awareness"—a recognition of and appreciation for the mimetics and ludic practices that facilitate the engagement of societies and cultures as they are made up, especially the connection with the uses of center-symbols.⁹

ISS has as its agenda what I think of as compelling work having to do with one of those center-symbols—scriptures. Most pointedly, it aims to facilitate research, teaching, conversations and community programming about the "work we [human beings] make scriptures do for us." Its scope is global and trans-cultural; its methods and approaches are comparative and multi-disciplinary; and its orientation is activist and political as it seeks to help throw light on and address some significant psycho-social-cultural-political interests and challenges, especially as they pertain to religion and the experiences of the historically and persistent ex-centric and poor.

In connection with the ISS, "scriptures" is an elastic, tensive concept, a fraught abbreviation that points not to a particular object or text but to a complex social-cultural phenomenon and set of dynamics—that of finding "hidden meanings" and establishing (and dis-establishing) centers and maintaining (and dis-rupting) center-ing politics and effects. At the same time, the term calls attention to, and invites earnest and intellectually and politically honest wrestling with, the problematics and politics of scriptures in the narrower more literal sense having to do with writing and reading and textuality and with the material object that is the text. With its explicit commitment to take seriously the range of experiences and signifying practices of historically ex-centric, disenfranchised and poor peoples as special focus, and given the religiously-inflected nature of conflicts and crises around the world, the ISS situates itself as a center focused on compelling public-health interests and issues. Fathoming the signifying practices of historically marginalized peoples as a way of facilitating the recognition and reclamation of (a people's own as well as others') voice and agency of meaning-making practices is a most compelling public-health issue.

Insofar as the agenda of the ISS is focused on the "work" human beings make "scriptures" do for them, the major research and programmatic activities of the ISS revolve around critical more self-reflexive operations of social-cultural histories, ethnographies and ethnologies. This involves comparative research into how peoples—again, especially but not exclusively, poor and ex-centric peoples around the world in their different local contexts and situations and through their different practices and gestures construct and communicate their stories or otherwise engage in meaning-making. This means fathoming how peoples read/interpret, construct and communicate meanings about themselves and the world. As incredible as it seems, it has been only rather recently that many ethnographers, ethnologists, historians, social policy analysts, organizations, and policy-makers have come to recognize in serious terms that in spite of the fact that they are not seen and heard in relationship to the center stage of power the poor and marginal peoples do indeed create and communicate meaning and worlds. And their practices and

7. Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 191–92, 237, 246–56.

8. Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990 [1935]), 125.

9. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 254–55.

gestures and worlds should be understood on their own terms so that we learn from them and about them. Such learning should lead to our addressing their stressful situations and identifying our historical involvements in such situations.

Taken from the traditions of signifying as part of the politics of vernacularization among African and African diaspora and other peoples, the use of the concept of signifying practices as an analytical wedge in connection with ISS is intended to open windows onto the rich and layered textures of life and the social and political sensibilities and orientations on the part of peoples who historically have generally been positioned off-center-stage. Rather than make assumptions about what domains and concerns (e.g., "religion," "politics") are or should be of compelling interest to them, and how they should represent and communicate their interests (e.g., texts and textualization), and what outcomes or results they should pursue (e.g., resistance, revolution), the creative self-reflexive ethnographic and ethnological research focus of ISS seeks to identify and excavate through their gestures, forms of representations, practices and sounds their wide-ranging significations.

That some if not most of the significations of peoples may pertain to or be associated with "scriptures," as such has come to be (conventionally) understood, is to be expected for two reasons: the term is really a place-holder for the practices and gestures and ideas and associations and affiliations that have to do with finding ultimate orientation in the world. This quest can be at times so complex and textured that it is communicated obliquely, indirectly, in other words. So ISS research must be oriented to un-veiling the indirectness and hidden-ness of signifying practices.¹⁰

Signifying practices are not to be collapsed into or equated with texts (understood in the narrowest and belated sense of the term). These practices may encompass and involve engagements of texts; but they are really reflections of the textures (understood in one of the broadest meanings of the term) of culture. Engaging such practices represents a turn from the interests and preoccupations and politics of historical criticism (including, in biblical studies, any of its ever dizzying and razzle-dazzle discursive offshoots) into critical history. This sort of history, which aims to get at a people's practices and worldview, should put focus on what Pierre Nora termed a people's *lieux de memoire* ("sites of memory"). The latter represent "a ... kind of reawakening ... a history that ... rests upon what it mobilizes: an impalpable, barely expressible, self-imposed bond; what remains of our ineradicable, carnal

10. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), especially chs. 6 and 7.

attachment to ... faded symbols."¹¹ The sites are engaged by peoples for the sake of living creatively and meaningfully and with the hope of continuously re-covering and re-membering what is thought to have been lost or what is thought to have been dimmed, veiled, masked in terms of knowledge or immediate or direct experience.

In an essay entitled "Site of Memory," Toni Morrison sums up what may be considered the argument/agenda for biblical studies insofar as such studies is understood to revolve around unearthing the complex texture of lives that are woven around memories. Begin, she argues, with images that facilitate the flow of memory. With focus on peoples of the African diaspora in North America, whose memories have been, to put it mildly, greatly damaged, this means beginning with images of ancestors or something in association with them:

[They] are my access to me; they are my entrance into my own interior life. Which is why the images that float around them—the remains, so to speak, at the archaeological site—surface first ... the act of imagination is bound up with memory ... You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Flooding" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers [= readers/interpreters] are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "flooding" ... like water, I remember where I was before I was "straightened out."¹²

What might it mean for us to begin to think of scriptures as a type of site—not merely a text or collection of such, but a complex phenomenon in relationship to which peoples attempt to access or recover their most fundamental and poignant memories? What might it mean for biblical studies to think of its agenda in terms not of capturing, boxing, wrestling with the site, but engaging people engaging such a site? And what might it mean for such interested and critical engagement of people to get close enough to see that

11. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 300.

12. Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (ed. William Zinsser; Boston: Houghton & Mifflin, 1995), 119–20.

what is at issue has to do with "re-memory," with efforts to open the flow of those memories that define and locate different peoples? What might it mean for us to engage not the text as rule (*kanon*), and see it as the object to be exegeted for the sake of getting at the "historical" "facts" within and behind the texts, but instead engage the text as human sociality and its striving and power dynamics and relations and making do and play? What might it mean for us to redirect our intensity of interpretive work toward locating, engaging and interpreting the un-ruly, complex, text-ed self, the self formed and defined and determined in relationship to texts?

And how then would our approaches and methods change? What approaches and forms of intellectual practice would inform the critical history of signifying scriptures? And how would such changes (re)define and (re)locate and (re)orient the scholar whose work involves pointing out how a culture signifies and signifies on scriptures? To whom would we then be responsible? To whom would we address ourselves? How might we identify ourselves?

Insofar as the research focus is to be placed on people and the dynamics of their formation the agenda would be complex and not about small things, such as letters and texts and the territories that claim them. Instead, it would be about the sometimes-painful efforts to become a people, to realize ultimate goals that are sighed for, to gain power. It would be about how people manipulate their own and others' imaginations and are manipulated by the same, about why and how they project beyond themselves "realities" that they make up, and about how they make ongoing creative attempts to "live subjunctively"¹³ in relationship to that which is made up.

Such work and the project involving the fathoming of such work and its politics would then be fascinating, heavy, pertinent, compelling. Should we trouble ourselves with a future involving anything less than that?

BREADTH AND DEPTH: A HOPE FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES

Kent Harold Richards

As indicated in the introduction to this volume, the Society of Biblical Literature program unit Graduate Biblical Studies: Ethos and Discipline held sessions at the Annual and International Meetings for a number of years starting in 2003. The sessions provided an opportunity for a variety of colleagues, young and more senior, to discuss a wide range of issues. The papers in this volume are representative of the discussions in the program unit. Of course, not all of the papers and panels could be included in a single volume, but we are grateful for those individuals who have offered their work on a topic so vital to biblical studies.

These essays confirm that biblical studies will continue to grow in breadth and depth. Nothing is more important to an area of study or discipline than to understand the boundaries between the old and new as windows, not barricades. Too often new methods and provocative questions are understood only as challenges to the once-established ways of teaching and doing research. In fact, the new issues, as well as the engagement with long-standing subjects, that emerge from colleagues in this volume and elsewhere in the guild are a beacon of hope.

Sometimes the edges between tradition and innovation seem ragged. The questions and answers appear inconclusive. They are often not the questions and answers we want to hear because they provoke us to examine our own perspectives. However, these edges of discovery are the real openings that will enable us to go forward and refine our work over time. Were it not for these trajectories in our work, the field would not progress and show signs of energy.

Granted, some of the new questions and the answers that emerge will be little more than frivolous paths that eventually lead nowhere. On occasion, however, some of our long-standing results will eventually be seen to be little more than misleading, if not totally incorrect. We must find every mechanism possible to encourage new methods, to refine the old standard questions, and to seek ever more leverage so that the text may come to life for new readers.

13. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 255.