

An Interview with Jules Chametzky

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Jules Chametzky, who has just turned ninety-one, belongs to the group of early American Studies scholars who were students at the University of Minnesota in the 1950s. He studied with several of the “founding fathers” and early practitioners of the discipline. Therefore, he is an excellent source of information concerning the ideas, aims, and motives of the emerging discipline. A Jewish scholar married to a German Jewish woman who had barely escaped the Holocaust, the poet Anne Halley, he was also one of the first Americanists to come to Germany with his family, not long after World War II, to teach American literature. He has met many German Americanists since the 1960s, experienced the tumultuous times of 1968 and their aftermath at the Free University of Berlin, and was involved in saving the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies when it was in danger of being dismantled in the 1980s. He was acquainted with numerous American writers, in particular African American and Jewish authors, took part in important developments in American Literary Studies and in institutional struggles within his university (the University of Massachusetts at Amherst) as a union member, founded *The Massachusetts Review*, and has co-edited it for a long time (1963-74, in the 1990s, and now as Editor Emeritus). He has always seen himself as a public intellectual who participates in the debates and political struggles of his time. Among his publications are *From the Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahán*; *Our Decentralized Literature: Cultural Mediations in Selected Jewish and Southern Writers*; and *Out of Brownsville: Encounters with Nobel Laureates and Other Jewish Writers*. He co-edited the *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature* and a volume celebrating ten years of *The Massachusetts Review* called *Black and White in America*, which went through three editions. Since 1958, he has been a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He also taught in Copenhagen, Tübingen, Zagreb, Freiburg, and at both the Kennedy Institute and the Humboldt University in Berlin. Thus, he is a *Zeitzeuge* (contemporary witness) in the true sense of the term. We need these memories, as the present state of the discipline can only be understood in continuity with, but also as a reaction to, earlier American

Studies. As will become clear, the discipline was eminently political and critical of the status quo in U.S.-American politics from the beginning. Contrary to contemporary scholars' recurrent critiques that American Studies before the 1970s were not political enough, America's deficiencies and failings were not overlooked by many scholars in the field. In fact, *The Massachusetts Review* was already publishing African American writers in the 1960s, and the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies was founded at UMass in Amherst in 1970.

I have known Jules Chametzky and his family since the 1980s and interviewed him in early April 2019 at his house in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Out of Brooklyn

Ulfrid Reichardt (UR):

You grew up in Brooklyn, in a Jewish neighborhood during the Depression. These were difficult times; Germany had been taken over by the Nazis in 1933, and the persecution of Jews in Germany had already begun. What was it like to grow up at that time?

Jules Chametzky (JC):

My father was a kosher butcher. We lived in Williamsburg, Greenpoint, in Brooklyn, which is now very chic. It was an overflow from the Lower East Side; people came over the Williamsburg Bridge. In 1932, we moved to Crown Heights, near Prospect Park, which was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux like Manhattan's Central Park, near the Brooklyn Museum. It was an idyllic time; Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president, a time of great hope—except for the Lindbergh kidnapping case. An uncle owned a glove shop. My brother worked there and earned three dollars a week, a cousin five dollars. Philip Roth's great book *American Pastoral* (1997) thematizes a glove factory in New Jersey, and my cousin Sidney might have been a model for the protagonist, the Swede who worked at the Century Glove Company. But this is just a speculation.

UR:

Where did your parents come from?

JC:

My mother grew up in Poland, near Lublin, until she was thirteen years old. Her father had been a handler of cattle—as a Jew he was not allowed to own land. After the Dreyfus Affair, an important influence

was Baron Maurice de Hirsch, who organized three settlements in Palestine, Argentina, and Woodbine, New Jersey. The family emigrated, and my grandfather became a cattle farmer in Woodbine in 1908. Later he went to New York and worked in a garment factory, and was president of his small *shul* in Williamsburg for the rest of his life. My father was brought to the United States in 1913 by his older brother Meyer, who had served in the Tsarist army before coming to America some years earlier. Meyer had served outside Moscow in the cavalry but was not allowed in the city because he was Jewish. My father worked in a garment factory for seven years and couldn't stand it. So he apprenticed himself to a butcher and remained a kosher butcher until his retirement. He owned his own shop in Brownsville for twenty-five years. My parents mostly spoke Yiddish to each other, but my mother increasingly got better at English.

UR:

Was your Jewish origin an issue for you at this time?

JC:

I went to junior high school with Jewish, Italian, a few Polish kids. Going home from school meant fighting every day, boxing with the Black kids. When the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor happened in December 1941, a Black boy said to me he hoped the Japanese would win, which was unthinkable for me. It was an expression of his situation as a Black person in America at the time. And it was the beginning of my learning about race.

UR:

Did you know what was going on in Germany?

JC:

Absolutely! Yes, we felt it, my father knew about it. When we lived in Williamsburg, I was close to my grandparents. I was a Cub Scout, for boys up to 12 or 13. One time, my grandmother saw me in my dress, dark blue shirt and a yellow kerchief, and she said: "Why are you wearing that fascist shirt?" There were indeed fascists on the street, Italian fascist kids, for example. In the *shul*, the synagogue, they talked about the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. And we knew about the Holocaust already, before America entered the war. In 1942 and 1943 people came to the *shul* and talked about the persecutions. My father's older brother, who had lived before World War I in what later became known as the "bloodlands,"¹ brought my father over in 1913, but his sisters and younger

¹ According to historian Timothy Snyder, "[i]n the middle of Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered some fourteen million people. The place where all of the victims died, the bloodlands, extends from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States" (vii-viii).

brothers and parents stayed behind in Russia. The younger brothers went to Brazil in the early 1920s. They could not come to the United States then because of racially discriminating immigration policies. But the rest of the family, father, mother, two sisters, and their children, who were still in Eastern Europe, were exterminated. We thought by the SS, but research later showed that, actually, Ukrainian fascists murdered all the Jews in the village Poritzk Volyn in August 1941.

UR:

Did you also know about the Stalinist purges?

JC:

Yes, I knew about the purges, but was still a fellow traveler. I read George Orwell's *1984* when it came out, given to me by a friend who was a Trotskyist. She joined the French Communist Party while she was a student at the Sorbonne, yet she never joined the American Communist Party. Later she became the private secretary of Vladimir Horowitz for 25 years. I was a pacifist and read the anti-war novel *Johnny Got His Gun* [by Dalton Trumbo, 1939].

UR:

How did you feel about the war?

JC:

During the war I was very patriotic. My older brother was a staff sergeant and led an infantry platoon, helped capture Algeria, took part in the battle of Tunis, and was the first American to put his foot on land in Sicily. He was captured by an SS paratroop division. They put him and other prisoners of war on an Italian ship. But it was bombed by the British, and thus he was lucky and freed. He was happy to be alive, yet no longer trusted the officers' class. In 1944, when I was sixteen, I enlisted in the New York State Guard and was trained in crowd control. Only later, when I read James Baldwin's writing about a riot in Harlem ("Notes of a Native Son" [1955]), did I realize what we were trained for. It was interesting to learn to shoot a rifle, but I hated the army.

The University of Minnesota and American Studies

UR:

How did you get into American Studies?

JC:

After the end of the war, I first went to Brooklyn Tech and then to Brooklyn College. I wrote plays, was interested in Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. I was teaching English to good but very pale orthodox kids at a Yeshiva. I taught them baseball, replacing the *kippah* with the baseball cap. Then the Korean War broke out. Because I had had an operation on the back of my spine a year before, I did not have to fight in the Korean War. I felt that I had gained two years. A friend was going to the University of Minnesota and invited me to come as well. I went to study playwriting with Eric Bentley, who had written one of the best books on the subject, *The Playwright as Thinker* (1946). He was teaching at the University of Minnesota, as was Robert Penn Warren, who wrote the great book on Huey Long, *All the King's Men* (1946). So I ended up in Minnesota for my graduate studies in 1950, even while Bentley had already left for Columbia and Warren for Yale. I started somewhat in disappointment and would have dropped out until I was encouraged to stay by the graduate advisor, Henry Nash Smith.

UR:

What were your ideas about politics at that time?

JC:

That's the time when I became political. I had joined the Labor Youth League in Minneapolis in 1950 for six months. A dear friend wanted to recruit me for the Communist Party in 1950 or 1951. But I could not do it, because I did not agree with them on three points. First, I could not accept how they treated political opposition, for example Trotsky. Secondly, I did not agree with their view on ethnicity and their lack of tolerance for religion. And thirdly, I could not agree with their attitude on literary criticism. I did not believe in social realism. Then in 1952 the Slánský trial took place in Czechoslovakia. The whole central committee of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party was accused of being traitors. Eleven out of the fourteen were Jews; this was in accordance with Stalin's anti-Semitic politics, disguised as anti-Zionism. They were accused of selling arms to Israel and hanged. The communist friend who wanted to recruit me started to tremble when I told him about it.

UR:

The University of Minnesota in the 1950s was one of the main places where American Studies evolved. What was your experience as a graduate student?

JC:

Tremaine McDowell, who founded the magazine *American Studies* in 1948, was there. He was the first chairman of American Studies at Minnesota, and he recruited Henry Nash Smith. Smith became his successor and was my advisor. When I had doubts about my studies at one point and wanted to quit, he encouraged me not to give up. He suggested taking his class on “The Far West in Literature.” I was astonished about this topic—I studied metaphysical poetry at the time—but took the course, which began at 8 o’clock in the morning in an extremely cold winter in Minneapolis. Here I encountered Mark Twain, among other writers. The same year Smith published *Virgin Land: The American West as Myth and Symbol* (1950). This was the most important book for the emerging American Studies for decades. When he gave his lecture on the Far West, he started with the French Enlightenment and went on from there. It was the best course I ever took, and I knew that this was really American Studies. Smith was brought in to head the American Studies program in the upper Midwest by McDowell before he retired. Nevertheless, I got my Ph.D. in Renaissance literature. Leo Marx was already teaching at Minnesota, and we were becoming friends. He later published *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), another founding text of American Studies. Smith got him to come to Minnesota and also wanted him for Berkeley, but Leo did not want to go. Leo Marx taught Melville and Hawthorne, Twain, Howells, and James. Smith and Leo were my guides.

UR:

Was American Studies already interdisciplinary in the 1950s?

JC:

Oh, yes. I got a minor in Political Studies and took a great lecture course in political theory with Mulford Sibley, who wrote a book on conscientious objection [*Conscription of Conscience: The American State and the Conscientious Objector*, 1952], and one on *Political Ideas and Ideologies* (1970), among others.

UR:

Did American Studies go against the grain? Was it very political?

JC:

Yes, there was David Herreshoff, a Trotskyite who wrote a good book, *American Disciples of Marx* (1967). Later he was almost beaten to death by a bunch of Stalinists in Detroit. A Black professor got fired for being a communist, and there was a big demonstration against it. So there was a leftist strain.

UR:

Was there a tension between American Studies scholars and other scholars at Minnesota? Was the tension political or did it concern the view of literature?

JC:

Yes, there was a tension. For example, Henry Nash Smith gave a lecture on the whiteness of the whale and why *Moby-Dick* (1851) is an American book. Yet he did not give a full answer. Leo Marx and I asked ourselves afterwards, why did he hesitate? He was careful because there was an anti-communist group in the audience, a group in the Political Science Department that was strongly anti-communist.

UR:

What was the attitude towards the kinds of literature studied by American Studies at the time?

JC:

A lot of what we did was not taken seriously. Henry Nash Smith was offered a chair at the University of California at Berkeley as the curator of the Twain papers in 1953. The English Department people said, oh, Smith is such a first-class mind, and he is giving his energy now to such a subcultural topic. It was almost seen as working on comic strips, not as a serious topic to be studied. That was the tone, the attitude towards American Studies.

UR:

What was the political climate like in the 1950s?

JC:

The atmosphere was extremely tense politically. It was the time of McCarthyism. I was accused of being a communist in 1954 by some woman who was a little crazy and was married to a guy who was a little crazy.

He was head of the Labor Youth League. Later she married an anti-communist. She named twenty-three people at Minneapolis as communists, two of them teaching assistants, one of them being myself.

UR:

How was McCarthyism experienced at your university?

JC:

They were anxious about McCarthy, as he was to come to the state next spring. I wrote a letter to Smith, as I was in distress because of this accusation. Smith responded that I was lucky not to have been fired. He himself had once been fired for teaching *The Big Money* (1936) by John Dos Passos at Southern Methodist University before the war. I had to testify before an investigating committee that was headed by the dean of the Law School. When it came to me being questioned, I stood up for myself, never named a name, and asserted that I had never been a communist and never would be one. The dean said that he would support me if I were in trouble. Yet I never was a communist, I could not lie, even if I were to be fired.

UR:

What was the status of American Studies during this time when New Criticism was reigning supreme?

JC:

Henry Smith was seen very critically during the time of New Criticism. Everything was origin, origin, origin—or New Criticism. My Ph.D. actually was in the tradition of the New Criticism in Renaissance Studies. My advisor was Leonard Unger, with whom I studied metaphysical poetry. Someone called him a Faulknerian Jew, I think, because he studied under Cleanth Brooks at Louisiana State University before World War II. I was later called a Talmudic Faulknerian by Norman Podhoretz. I found American Studies much more stimulating than the courses in the English Department. Yet American Studies was suspect of being too liberal, even radical, by many. That's my take on early American Studies in Minnesota. Minnesota, to sum up, was a bit off the beaten track. There were good people like Alan Trachtenberg, Dick Traven, who wrote on Native Americans, and David Herreshoff, who wrote on early Marxists.

UR:

What idea of America did you have? Recent revisionist Americanists have claimed that there was too much consensus in early American

Studies, that its practitioners believed that the nation and its literature could be described as a unity.

JC:

No, there was not too much consensus, but there were some stupid beliefs in the Myth and Symbol School; for example, a chapter in Smith's *Virgin Land* was called "The Rain Follows the Plough." This referred to a nineteenth-century ideological myth that claimed that there would be more rain when the land was cultivated, an apology for settling and planting the prairies. They were encouraging people to move West. I myself wrote the commentary on Jerome Liebling's documentary *Pow-Wow* about the Chippewa Native Americans in Minnesota. We thought that Native Americans and Blacks were treated badly. And I had Black friends; I had joined the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in 1950. We listened to folk songs, Pete Seeger, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday. We wanted to improve America.

UR:

But wasn't consensus dominant in American Literary Studies in the 1950s?

JC:

Yes, at Harvard, Oscar Handlin, Nathan Glazer, and Moses Rischin propagated consensus, but the American Studies people that I know were all very conscious of where America was failing, what had to be improved, and that was what I carried on into *The Massachusetts Review*. Later, in 1969, Sid Kaplan and myself published the ten years of *The Massachusetts Review* volume *Black and White in American Culture: An Anthology from The Massachusetts Review*. We had pieces on Black Power, pieces by Stokely Carmichael, Charles Hamilton from Columbia, and Michael Thelwell, and a poem by Andrew Goodman—an idealistic Jewish youth, a college boy, one of the three freedom riders who was killed along with Mickey Shwerner, another Jewish youth, and James Cheney, a Black southern youth. It was a shocking and brutal crime by White Mississippi men. I knew his mother and father afterwards.

**University of Massachusetts, Amherst,
and *The Massachusetts Review***

UR:

After finishing your Ph.D., you became professor at the University of Amherst. How did you get the idea of starting *The Massachusetts Review*?

JC:

Smith asked me on campus one day in 1953, when I was still a student in Minnesota, if I would like to edit *Faulkner Studies*. It had been run out of Kansas so far. They had just 100 dollars in the bank. I did it. We published a piece by Smith that he had written when he was in his twenties, an introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*. It was published for the first time in 1931 when Faulkner was still seen as a backwoodsman. I edited *Faulkner Studies* for two years, which made me eligible to start *The Massachusetts Review*, which we began publishing in 1959.

UR:

What was your mission when you began editing *The Massachusetts Review*?

JC:

The first editor of *The Massachusetts Review* was Sid Kaplan. Kaplan went back to the Ralph Waldo Emerson journal called *The Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, and he used the introduction to the first issue. The first page of it was reprinted, where Emerson writes that some men of good spirits got together, and in the next sentences that our country is in bad shape, that we have an unjust war against Mexico, the sin of slavery, a bad press. So we put ourselves in the line of the Transcendentalists.

UR:

Is that a different view of Emerson from the received one?

JC:

Emerson wrote these sentences. He wrote the introduction for *The Dial*, edited by Margaret Fuller. There was a lively discussion in the context of Transcendentalism. We picked this up in *The Massachusetts Review*. We wanted to establish a tradition, a tradition of protest and hope for betterment: we did not come out of nowhere. Emerson wrote: "What are you doing in jail, Henry?" Thoreau wrote: "What are you doing out there,

Ralph?” So we have a tradition of protest, of anti-slavery, for peace, but also the opposite side, the robber barons. And we had the worst war until then, the Civil War; Karl Marx reported on it.

UR:

You also published African Americans, which was not common at the time.

JC:

It certainly was not usual. We were respected by Black intellectuals as the only academic journal that printed Black texts. We published the first story by Toni Cade Bambara, the first story by Shirley Anne Williams, the first story by Julius Lester, and the first stories by Mike Thelwell.

UR:

Had you already met John Hope Franklin then?

JC:

Franklin was an important historian; he wrote *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (1947) and was Chairman at the History Department at Brooklyn College. I wanted to continue publishing texts by African American authors and asked him to give me some names. The first scholar he suggested to us was Sterling Brown at Howard University. We started a graduate program at Amherst with Sid Kaplan as the chairman, the W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies, and Sterling Brown sent us Bernard Bell, Eugene Terry, Esther Terry, and Mike Thelwell, who were his students at Howard.

UR:

When did you meet James Baldwin?

JC:

About 1970. Baldwin came back from Paris. He was nervous, as he thought that the younger generation was disrespecting him, and he felt that they thought he was old hat.

UR:

Was this because of the Black Power Movement?

JC:

A little bit. We got him a three-year appointment at the five colleges in Massachusetts. Mike Thelwell's wife, a Japanese American woman, ran the first theater group that did plays by People of Color. They also did a reading of *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964). Baldwin was very critical watching the rehearsals. And I had a very small role as a lawyer.

UR:

What kind of person was he?

JC:

He was a wonderful person, with a great smile, a pleasure to have a sociable drink with (he preferred Johnny Walker Black Label), a wonderful lecturer, and the greatest American essayist since Emerson.

UR:

Today there is a Baldwin revival. While he had been seen as conservative before, there are now new films and new translations.

JC:

Yes. Critics and general readers are beginning to appreciate him. *Blues for Mr. Charlie* was staged on Broadway. Half of the audience was Black, and Black people did not go to Broadway. White critics were against him. They said that his plays were old hat, that their only topic was racism, but we did them at Amherst. There was also controversy about his plays. But I realized that they had structure to them. These are long plays, but they also have counterpoint, a fugal structure, and they made sense. I came to respect them a lot. Thus, there was a change in my regard of his plays.

UR:

What about his novels?

JC:

Another Country (1962) is a big baggy novel, but I taught it. I taught Baldwin with Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). In my class there were also some writers, and they said that these were the best books they read in graduate school. They were influential, and Baldwin allowed people to write about things that were taboo at the time, as he wrote about sexuality and interracial relationships, for instance. It is not a perfect book, but good stuff.

Coming to Germany

UR:

What brought you to Germany for the first time?

JC:

My wife, Anne Halley, was a student in the English Department at the University of Minnesota. She had barely escaped the Nazis as a German Jew in 1938. Her father was Jewish, the first M. D. from the University of Würzburg before World War I. He served at Verdun and received two Iron Crosses. Her mother was also a physician and a German Lutheran. Her sister protected Anne and her twin sister for two years after their parents left for the United States to escape the Nazis, and she brought the two to America by ship in 1938. I applied for a Fulbright to Israel, and my second choice was Germany, which my wife suggested. I got Germany, which changed my life. Hans-Joachim Lang invited me to Tübingen. We got along well, both being good social democrats.

UR:

You came to Tübingen in 1962. What was German American Studies like at the time? How did you feel about coming to Germany only seventeen years after the end of the war?

JC:

I thought a lot about Germany, obviously. First of all, Tübingen was like a *Märchen*, a beautiful little town. I remember people saying “Ordnung muss sein, Frau Chametzky,” regarding the noise made by our children. We used to get the *Brötchen* every morning. But I had to consciously hold myself together. I had to tell myself that I was teaching young people. They were twenty years old and had nothing to do with the Third Reich. And Hans-Joachim Lang was very sympathetic. He had always been anti-Nazi. He had a Jewish grandmother, so he could not be an officer. He was an orderly in a hospital during the war. One day he stepped out and lost a leg. His sister was married to a Royal Airforce pilot in England, and I met Ralf Dahrendorf, who had been a friend of his in Hamburg. I asked Lang how his family reacted to Nazism. He thought that fifty percent of their friends were anti-Nazi, but after the fall of Paris they discovered that everybody was very joyful and that they could only trust five percent then.

UR:

What was the time after the end of the war like in Germany?

JC:

Lang talked a lot about the past and the Nazis and his family struggle. He told me that towards the end of the war, they were supposed to hold out until the last man. He helped Hamburg to surrender peacefully to the British because he convinced the Mayor that only the very old and disabled were available for a presumed defense. The defense of the city was no longer reasonable. Lang also stressed that the three years after the war were the best years he ever had in Germany, thinking over everything. He worked for the *Hamburger Akademische Rundschau*. Everything was up for grabs—it was the *Stunde Null* (Zero Hour). They examined everything, anew, fresh: democracy, literature. They thought over everything.

UR:

Did your German students talk about Nazism and the past?

JC:

Some students talked about it. One time a student came up to me. He said that his father had been stationed in France. When I asked him how his family felt when Paris fell, he answered: “oh, great, because we thought that the war was over,” which sounded good to me. But then he ruined it. He continued that his father always wanted to have a house in southern France.

UR:

Could you already teach African American and Jewish American literature?

JC:

No, not at that time.

UR:

What were the topics that were taught and researched in German American Studies in the early 1960s?

JC:

Hans-Joachim Lang studied American literature, but he wrote his dissertation on H. G. Wells. Yet he also read 1930s literature. I also taught the literature of that decade, taught Twain, maybe I did Faulkner, Stephen Crane, Kate Chopin. Lang did American Studies of a kind, knew American politics very well; I filled him in. Martin Christadler was his assistant

and did his doctoral work on Faulkner, his habilitation on the American short story. His former wife was Ernst Bloch's assistant in Tübingen.

UR:

Do you have other memories of this time?

JC:

In Tübingen I went to every event, gave lectures everywhere, also at *Gymnasien*, in Nürnberg and Wörpswede. I remember that I saw boxcars at the railroad station in Nürnberg, which had a traumatic effect on me. They looked like the boxcars in which the Jews had been transported to the concentration camps. I had to take a walk to get my balance back. Another time I was invited to Berlin, where I gave a lecture on Bernard Malamud. I read the quote "can't you be human" from one of Malamud's books, and a man from the audience came up to me afterwards. He told me he had a grocery store in Berlin before the war and said, I am so happy that you read that line. It was 1962 or 1963, and I wandered around Berlin a lot.

UR:

How did your wife, Anne Halley, a poet, feel being in Germany?

JC:

She had already come back to Germany, right after the war in 1945. She was traumatized, could not speak a word of German or English when she stepped off the boat. Yet she visited her aunt in Bremerhaven, and they talked things over. During our time in Tübingen we traveled to Bremerhaven again. When we were sitting in a café next to her aunt's house, the owner of the café asked Anne if she was related to Dr. Halle, her father, and if he was planning to come back to Germany. She answered no. He said, tell him that the Krieg family sends their regards. This was, of course, a bit ironic as the family name Krieg means "war" in German.

UR:

Were all of the people you met in Germany friendly?

JC:

Not really. When we went out for Sunday *Kaffee und Kuchen*, people were always frowning at the children because they were noisy. German kids had to be very orderly; parents constantly said, "Sei artig." So when we went to Italy it was a great relief. They love kids; children were much freer there.

At the Free University of Berlin after 1968

UR:

The next time when you came to Germany, which was after 1968, did you see and experience a change, much difference?

JC:

Absolutely, very much. I was invited by Ursula Brumm, whom I had met already in 1963 when I went to an American Studies meeting. We had talked about *Absalom, Absalom!* Later I invited her to come to Nantucket for the summer. I told her that she could do research there in the whaling museum. We had beach buggies, picnics at night, way out on the beach, made a fire, dug clams. She was very relaxed, which she usually was not. Saul Bellow, with whom she was friends, called her “the Prussian.” A few years later she wrote to ask me if I wanted to come to Berlin on a visiting professorship. So in 1970 we went to Berlin, all the family. At the time I met Werner Sollors and worked together with him.

UR:

What was the political climate like at the Free University of Berlin at the time?

JC:

The place was in an uproar because of the developments of 1968. They had changed the whole structure. The *Mittelbau* and others down to the cloakroom attendants had a vote. This changed everything. There was a lot of trouble, and the students were very agitated. Marxist speakers came to the campus. I sided with the *Mittelbau*; Ursula Brumm did not like that. I was against the Vietnam War, Brumm for it. She said, you do not know what the Russians did to us in Berlin. I said, I know, but in Vietnam it is my country, and it is an unjust war that is killing thousands of people. She did not talk to me afterwards. Later we became friends again, and in 1975 she invited me to her house and things evened out.

UR:

What were your research interests in the 1970s?

JC:

While I was in Berlin in the early 1970s, two memorable things happened. I was invited by publishers to look at a manuscript about Black literature by a German professor. It was all clichés, stereotypes, very

backward, a stance that was still common at the time, not unusual in the United States as well. The second thing was that I was invited to give the keynote address at the DGfA annual meeting in 1971. I gave the talk “Our Decentralized Literature” on Charles Chesnutt, Kate Chopin, and Abraham Cahan. They had been read as regionalists in Germany, in Europe generally, which was old-fashioned American Studies. I said that their novels are about the Black question, the woman question, the immigrant and ethnic question, that that’s what we are interested in now. These were new topics, new in American Studies in Germany. Heinz Ickstadt later said it was the most important lecture in ten years. It changed the course of American Studies at the time.

UR:

The atmosphere was highly charged with contending political positions?

JC:

There were two Maoist groups when I first taught in Berlin. I also had a Stalinist group, a Trotskyite, and two Americans in my seminar who did not know what was going on. I was teaching ethnic literature, beginning with Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). One student said, “I want to start with your basic assumptions.” “No,” I said, “I want to start with *Invisible Man*. We can go to a café to argue our basic assumptions.” We did not reach an agreement about this. I said that if they wanted to discuss Marxism, that’s fine. I studied *Das Kapital* and pre-Socratic philosophy, and I am glad to discuss it with you, but not right now. German Marxists were different from the American ones. For instance, the students had to write a protocol, but they did not trust each other because of their political orientations. I suggested, let’s move it around. Because when you had reached a certain point in the Marxist Hegelian world you had to go on, you could not go back, which is not my way of teaching. The German Maoists were more prone to symbolic violence, like overturning a picnic table at an American picnic. The Trotskyite woman ended up working for the Jewish research organization JIVO in New York for the next 25 years. We could only finally start with *Invisible Man* in the third week. It was a good course. All in all that was the tenor of the time.

UR:

Were there African American students in your seminars?

JC:

Only when I invited Mike Thelwell to come and give a week-long seminar did we get Black students to attend, although Werner Sollors and I

got *Ebony* and other Black journals at the U.S. Army store in Dahlem. Some of these students turned out to be from the former German Southwest Africa, Namibia. There was a doctor, a Jamaican married to a German, who, as a representative of the non-violent group, was arguing in The Hague for the independence of Namibia. At one time, we were invited to a dinner party with Gaston Salvatore, Salvador Allende's nephew, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Michelangelo Antonioni's wife, among others. Enzensberger had just recently written in his journal that there was no socialism anywhere in the world. In 1968 he had been one of the leaders. And Salvatore, whose uncle Allende had wanted to make him ambassador to Switzerland and who was gay, said he was never so scared as when he traveled through Algeria, where there had just been a revolution. He only felt safe in Morocco, an authoritarian regime, but safe for gay people. My wife translated one of Salvatore's plays later.

UR:

You mentioned that you came back to Berlin with Alan Trachtenberg in the 1980s. What was the reason?

JC:

When the conservatives wanted to break up the Kennedy Institute in the 1980s, I was asked to join the commission evaluating the Institute. I asked Alan Trachtenberg to come. Winfried Fluck was there; Heinz Ickstadt was there; Werner Sollors, who had been an assistant in the 1970s, was already at Columbia. We had meetings about the Kennedy Institute's future and wrote up a paper. We said that the Kennedy Institute was a good institution, well structured. One professor in the commission who had agreed with us changed the memo unilaterally. Trachtenberg and I stopped him in his tracks. Then the conservatives were voted out, the Social Democrats and Greens came in, and the Kennedy Institute was saved.

UR:

Would you say that your time in Germany gave you another perspective on the United States? If so, was it a helpful one?

JC:

My time in Germany gave me a more sophisticated view of politics and culture. I think of the Frankfurt School, for example.

The Present: American Literature and Fragmentation

UR:

I would like to come back to the concept of a decentralized literature. When you gave that talk at the DGfA in 1971, a unified concept of American literature, such as the American Renaissance, was still dominant. Was the notion of a decentralized literature a new and almost radical concept? And could we not say that today there is a danger that American literature is too fragmented?

JC:

Well it is a radical concept, but it is more accepted. That's the paradox. Black people have come into such prominence with their vote. And they are fighting for more voting rights, also the Latinos. That's the power of the vote. You say fragmented, but I do not think that way. I look at America differently. I think of it as my country, but it has been conservative from the foundation (think of slavery), with only a few exceptions—abolitionism, the progressive movement, and the New Deal—only three movements with progressive ideas, that's it. We do not need a new constitution now; I argue for social democracy. We need the necessary infrastructure, education, basically a new New Deal. We have ethnic movements now, that is our hope.

UR:

I know that we could talk about much more. But I think that you have already given us a very good view of American Studies during the last decades. Thank you for your time.

Through my questions, I was interested in finding out where Jules Chametzky located the origins of American Studies, how he described the context in which the discipline emerged, and what its focus had been on issues of race and social justice in general, and on African American writing in particular, in its earliest years. One of the reasons for this emphasis is that revisionist Americanists have frequently criticized earlier American Studies for being too much a part and parcel of the consensus politics of the 1950s. Leo Marx writes of “the Great Divide in the conception and practice of American Studies that suddenly emerged [...] in the aftermath of the political upheaval of the Vietnam Era” (6). Yet he argues that “the American Studies project was conceived in the politically charged atmosphere of the 1930s” (10), and he points out that “the discourse of American Studies had been inflected from the beginning by the doctrinal ‘doubleness,’ or calculated ambivalence, of the adversary

culture” (14). In the context of contemporary American Studies’ insistent emphasis on social justice and diversity (on several levels), I wanted to excavate the roots, or at least some dimensions, of earlier phases of our discipline and interrogate its struggles with mainstream academic and general politics (or its potential acquiescence to the dominant ideas). Chametzky’s answers underline the fact that, at least in his experience and through his personal engagement, literary criticism and his editing policy have never been untethered from actual political struggles, but have rather been insistently and constantly involved in these struggles. While this historically enlarged, wide-angle view of the discipline does not disqualify today’s critiques, it certainly puts them into perspective and underscores the fact that, even during the supposedly quiet 1950s, American Studies scholars were in the midst of severe political confrontations, in particular in the context of McCarthyism. This is relevant by implication and comparison today, as we are again experiencing a highly charged political environment in which the grounds of liberal democracy are at least endangered.

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