University of California, Santa Cruz

University Library

Hayden White: Frontiers of Consciousness at UCSC

Interviewed and Edited by

Cameron Vanderscoff

Santa Cruz

2013

Table of Contents

Introduction

Professor Hayden White is known for his successful and influential publishing career, which helped carry him to the top ranks of the professorate and has earned him an international reputation in the humanities. His work has been fueled in large part by his interest in examining the constructed ways in which the past is accessed and represented. I set out to conduct this oral history with him—my second—without seriously questioning the phrase of 'oral history,' or much consideration of the theoretical relationship of oral history to written history and the past. I was taken aback when, in the course of our on and off the audio record conversations, White challenged the very idea that history can be oral, arguing that history must be written. "Oral archive," he told me off the audio record, is a more apt label for these interviews. While the contents of the interviews themselves stride over a landscape of academic debates, political ideas, notions on teaching and thoughts on affairs local, national and global, there was, for this project, a framing discussion about the genre itself, centered around this question: can oral history fairly be called history?

Keeping this inquiry in mind, I'll return to these meta-oral-historical concerns at the close of the preface, and for the moment try to illustrate the context that gave rise to these questions. Dr. White's first words on tape express a wish to keep his "biographical materials quite truncated." As an alumnus of UC Santa Cruz's literature department, I have been taught that to pedal too heavy on biography in analyzing a book and its author doesn't make for sound scholarship. However, the hope of this oral history was to knead in a few personal questions with the professional, asking not only about the history of

consciousness of program, about UCSC, about teaching and writing, but to cast some light (however retrospectively reconstructive) on the justifications that bridge these involvements and interests. And, of course, a part of understanding where someone is, and what they have constructed their professional lives around—in White's case, teaching, writing and thinking—is asking where they've come from.

Hayden White was born in Martin, Tennessee in 1928. During the Depression he moved with his family to Detroit in search of work, where his father became a union organizer in the automotive world. This urban scene of workers' struggles to organize in the face of sometimes-violent corporate opposition was a watershed moment in informing White's political consciousness. He charts his original interest in social studies, broadly defined, as being inspired by his father political work, and by the end of high school he had developed a "distinct class consciousness." After a stint in the military he describes as "not challenging," (going so far as to compare flying naval aircraft to driving a bus), he used the GI Bill to go to Wayne State University. At Wayne State White found a key mentor in Professor William J. Bossenbrook, who presented history as something profoundly "intellectually challenging." White went on to graduate school at the University of Michigan, an experience he found, like military service, essentially unchallenging, a process designed to discipline him into "routine research work." It is these early expressions of frustration with disciplinary constraints and traditional professionalization that one can see the beginnings of an interest in interdisciplinarity, for approaches that don't fall into academic disciplinary grooves but rather shift between them.

Dr. White spent a full twenty-three years teaching at other institutions before he found a fertile space for this conception of scholarly work at UCSC. He taught at Wayne State for a three-year stint starting in 1955 before accepting a position at the University of Rochester. He arrived at UCLA in 1968 at the height of anti-Vietnam War protests, where he and the ACLU brought suit against the LAPD for their surveillance of students—a case that went all the way to the California Supreme Court. He was teaching at Wesleyan when, in 1978, he accepted an appointment to head the board of history of consciousness at UCSC, a graduate program which, prior to his arrival, had no full-time faculty appointments. It was in a near-constant state of flux, renowned for both its explorative innovation and its destabilizing disorganization. Dr. White took the job of, essentially, straightening it out and creating a new, more structured program anchored by a docket of full-time faculty. In our interviews I ask him why he was attracted to the program—he replies by saying that "there was no program," a fair indication of his sense of the malleable situation he hoped to help shape.

White started out with substantial leeway to bring into being a program informed by his interest in interdisciplinarity, where different styles and approaches could mix and collaborate without having to conform to the strictures and limitations of particular disciplines like literature or sociology or philosophy. The first hire after his arrival was Dr. James Clifford, a historian engaged with anthropology and well versed in French Theory. The next to come into the fold was Dr. Donna Haraway, a historian of biology who was one of the first feminist theory hires in the history of academia. In these interviews Dr. White argues that, by virtue of its molten, interdisciplinary approach, the scope

of inquiry of the history of consciousness program is essentially the sum of its professors and students at any given moment in time. Later hires included Dr. Teresa de Lauretis, who highlighted psychoanalytic, semiotic, and cinematic perspectives and Dr. Angela Davis, who reinforced the program's strong politically activist basis, with professors like Stephen Heath and Victor Burgin further enabling a pioneering focus on film prior to the establishment of most film studies programs. White relates that histcon gradually came to occupy a shifting territory that ranged from deep in the artistic side of the humanities well into the social sciences, and served as a haven for people interested in studying unconventional or cutting edge topics that weren't at home in disciplinary graduate programs. The program actively recruited both gay students and students of color, seeking traditionally devalued perspectives, and ultimately, according to White, had a higher percentage of non-white students than any other humanities doctoral program anywhere.

In these interviews he explains that he personally intended histcon's diversity of topics and subjects to have an underlying engagement with "theory," and ultimately concluded a plausible—if still somewhat illusory—'center' for histcon was its "historical approach to the evolution of the human sciences." However, White relates that its ever-changing, expanding nature made the program difficult to pin down definitely, and that he had to essentially "pretend" there was a concrete program when he talked about it to outsiders. Even the name itself is something of a shape shifter, initially striking him as akin to intellectual history, but meaning different things to different people. Like the program it refers to, the very name of history of consciousness is something of a Rorschach.

But in spite of this remarkable state of exploration, this resistance to conventional definition—or perhaps because of it—the program and its contingent of full-time faculty went on to become phenomenally successful. By late 80s and early 90s it was one of the most renowned humanities Ph.D. programs in the country, with an annual acceptance rate of five to six students for three to four hundred applicants. In a field where competing private schools and more well-funded public schools could offer big fellowships, histcon students had little to no fellowship money, but in spite of this fiscal obstacle the program built an international reputation, and had an unusually high rate of post-degree job placement for its students. In these interviews White candidly charts the personalities and ideas and debates that gave shape and direction to this flagship humanities program, including those perspectives that changed the program—and him personally—in ways he hadn't anticipated, like feminist studies and cultural studies.

Given White's stated intent to be an intellectual engaged with broader culture, rather than an academic engaged strictly with academic concerns, it isn't surprising that these interviews weave through a wide range of topics. In these sessions White discusses not just histcon and UCSC, but illuminates their broader contexts, discussing at length the fiscally slashed state of the humanities, the changing academic scene and wider geopolitical issues. More personally, he reflects on his philosophies on teaching, which he terms "a nobler designation," and discusses his own writing and the historiographical subject matter that has inspired so much of his work. These interviews provide a vehicle for White to track the relationship of metahistory (the subject of his landmark book of the

same name) to history, and explain his conception of moral relativism and different means of interacting with the past.

A particular recurring emphasis is placed on the ways capitalism and corporate culture intersect with personal psychology and with the educational system today. He discusses how the educational institution in recent years has become much more concerned with "certification" instead of "cultivation," and much more engaged with, and informed by, corporate business practice. He stresses the role of the teacher, rejecting the corporate-inflected language of the student as "customer," and instead insisting the student is a teacher's sacred "charge." More expansively, he takes an explicitly "nihilist" perspective on social change, and assesses the qualitative role that the humanities and—more importantly, he argues—the arts play in a society that is increasingly quantitative and limited in its imagination. These conversations, all recorded at his kitchen table in Santa Cruz, move between these different realms of the political and the personal, the individual and the public, navigating different arenas of consciousness.

I first sat down with Hayden White in April of 2012, and I had no idea what I was in for. I had heard of his outstanding reputation as an essayist and his accomplishments with history of consciousness, but we had never met. In the month prior I had been offered an assignment, in my capacity as a contract oral historian, to conduct his oral history on behalf of UCSC's Regional History Project. I got in touch with him and we met up for a cup of tea at a coffee shop. We introduced ourselves, and I was gearing up to give my spiel about oral history when he stopped me, saying, "Tell me why you're qualified to do this project." I set off explaining my experience—I had completed an oral history

with his colleague John Dizikes—and went on to explain that I had "always been interested in story." He again stopped me: "No, you haven't been." I paused, and wondered what sort of perverse conversational crosshairs I'd stumbled into. I tried to explain that, no, that's incorrect, I *have* always been interested in stories, my grandparents told me stories about themselves from when I was a kid, and I've always enjoyed reading, but again he insisted, "No. You've not *always* been. You picked it up somewhere. You learned it somewhere. Think deeper. Ask more questions. Don't assume."

I illustrate this first encounter in such detail because from the beginning this entire project has been one that has pushed me—like White did in that first meeting, and in those that followed—to ask more questions of my work and my ideas. This trend continued through the interviews themselves, which were recorded in late July and early August of the same year, after White returned from a long stay in Rome.[1] In keeping with the note set in our first meeting, White was a full-court press narrator, incisive and acerbic in his tone and subject matter, and provocative and exploratory in his replies to my questions. The first interview was more biographical in tone, going through his life and teaching career, and discussing in detail his involvement with history of consciousness and UCSC. The second interview was centered on his thoughts on teaching and writing, and the third was conducted in a more retrospective, meditative mode on histcon, UCSC, the humanities and the state of education today.

I find that different narrators take divergent approaches to their oral histories. Some construct outlines in response to my questions, which I provide in advance, and other make notes. If this set of interviews with White has a

[1] In preparations for these interviews, I consulted several books by/about White, such as

particularly improvisatory, in-the-moment feeling—and I think it does—it is because he opted to go through these sessions without notes, and indeed, after the first session, without having the questions in front of him. So our conversation was particularly shaped by the space it was in. White would indicate various objects around the room, and at times, such as when he references *New York* magazine, use them as props for his discussion.

And just as our conversation was influenced by the space it was in, so too are the contents of these interviews packaged and contextualized by the label applied to them. My conversations with Hayden White pushed me to reconsider the effectiveness of the label 'oral history.' White argues that 'oral history' is essentially a contradiction in terms, because history exists in the process of inscription. We have a dialogue over this in the interviews in which he relates that there is a difference between Herodotus telling his stories "in the public square" and Herodotus writing them down for posterity. Later, after the interviews were completed and edited, I wrote White to ask his opinions about oral history to inform this preface, and extend the dialogue that began in our interviews. He was gracious enough to agree, and clarified that he is open to changing his position on this issue with persuasive argument, and has a "professional interest" in the possibilities orality offers in negotiating the past. So, while our recorded interviews were contained to three sessions, they were informed by a larger back-and-forth, one that White initiated in the coffee shop, and persisted through our final round of emails. In these sessions he mentions that he is not interested in indoctrinating or preaching to people, but rather pushing them to be more rigorous and self-analytical. This was exactly the tone he took with me in our ongoing discussion; he was always engaged with what I

had to say, but was thorough in his arguments and precise in his language, and in doing so encouraged me to deepen my own critical processes. I hope that including this contextualizing conversation in this preface enriches the interviews themselves for readers, and enables a chance for this project to inspire reflection on different ways of representing the past.

In our email messages, White maintains that while he is interested in dialogue as to how oral understandings of the past function, and what they can do that inscription does not, essentially oral history is concerned with a "memory-meaning" which is "poetic" rather than prosaic. Within the context of our recorded interviews, he makes the case oral history is closer to myth than conventional history—which is not to say it is invalid, or wrong, but is basically and "neutrally" a different way of accessing the past than history.

I am still in debate over my own level of agreement with these assessments—noticeably, these interviews are still categorized as an oral history in the McHenry's online archive. As an interviewer, I hope to understand, if not events-as-they-actually occurred (which White has pointed out in his own writing is a problematic claim for any historian to make), then at least events-as-they-were-experienced by an individual. In other words, I am in search of stories that reflect the distinctive and the personal in collusion and/or conflict with collective social experience of past events. I found them in my conversations with White—I hope readers find his stories as compelling as I have. And while story and orality are certainly imbued with poetic, mythical aspects, it seems to me that oral testimony has more to do with the modern conception of history (inquiry and representation of the past) than the modern conception of myth (misconception/purely symbolic understanding of the past).

But this is speculation—now the recorder is off. I think my brief case would be even less compelling in an improvisatory, oral mode, which lends credence to White's assertions about the more complex capacities of historical writing. However, there isn't an opportunity for fresh dialogue in the inscribed constraints of this preface—beyond this the interviews will have to speak for themselves. I will close out these theoretical considerations with a quote from White, who concluded his last email in our oral historical dialogue with this: "Oral performance has nothing to do with truth; it has to do with feeling. It is the same with interpretation: nothing to do with truth, but with adequacy."

White waived his chance to edit our three 90-minute sessions, explaining that he felt it was important his answers be left unvarnished, and an interviewee not have the chance to polish/alter any of their responses. The text was very lightly edited on a word-and-sentence level for flow and clarity, and has been footnoted to provide additional explanations when I felt they were necessary. There are copies of this oral history archived in the stacks and Special Collections of the McHenry Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and is available online on the Regional History Project web page: http://library.ucsc.edu/regional-history-project

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for all the assistance I received on this project. First, I would like to express my thanks to Hayden. His emphasis on ongoing self-assessment and nurturing a critical mindset pushed me to be less complacent and more restless and questioning in my notions about not just oral history, but the humanities and the act of writing itself. Given his own skepticism about the whole interview format—which he expressed to me in our first meeting—it is indication of his

personal generosity and a teacher's patience that he was willing to put as much time as he did into this project, both in and out of the interviews themselves. Gratitude is due to Irene Reti, director of the Regional History Project, for her managerial guidance, professional insights, auditing and editing know-how, and general guardian angel-ship from beginning to end of this project in all of its twists and turns. There are other people who helped ease my way: James Clifford for his conversation and perspectives on histcon and Hayden; Donna Haraway for providing some key clarifications; John Dizikes for his insights and input, which helped shape several important ideas and questions; Kayla Judd for her well of patience and logistical help; Margaret Brose for trying so hard to escape in silence mid-interview (before confessing criminal intent!); Barb Bisson and her "team of sleuths" who provided me with histcon administrative documents; and the folks at Special Collections who are always so thoughtful and helpful in tracking down archival resources.

The Regional History Project is supported administratively by Beth Remak-Honnef, Head of Special Collections and Archives, and Virginia Steel, University Librarian.

—Cameron Vanderscoff

Interviewer and Editor

Santa Cruz, January 2013

An Education:
Familial, Political and Historical

Cameron Vanderscoff: Today is Monday, July 16, 2012. My name is Cameron Vanderscoff and I'm here with Hayden White for his oral history for the UC Santa Cruz Library's Regional History Project.[2] Let's start with—where were you raised? What influence did your family have on you in terms of how you developed your curiosity about learning and inquiry?

Hayden White: Well, I think we should make the biographical materials quite truncated. I was born just before the Great Depression hit in the South, in Tennessee, and my family made their way to Detroit in the early 1930s in search of work, and so I had a public school education. I can still remember I got my interest in history by the seventh grade. So, I didn't have any idea that I'd be doing academic work as a career, but I think it was my father's experience in the labor unions that got me interested in 'social studies,' you might say. The reading of Karl Marx in high school led me to believe, obviously, to feel that an interest in history could perhaps throw light on how to resolve many of the social issues raised by the Great Depression. And then World War II broke out, raising the whole issue of fascism and its relationship to capitalism, so that when I went to college I was drawn towards study of history and literature.

Vanderscoff: So from a very young age you were drawn to history as a sense of social remedy, or something like that, with this Marxist framework of thought?

[2] All interviews were held at the kitchen table of Dr. White's house in Santa Cruz—Editor.

White: Well, it was a Marxist framework. It was an attempt to understand how advanced social systems turned out inevitably to be exploitative of one portion or another. In other words, the class system.

Vanderscoff: And did you see that with your father's work in the unions?

White: Oh, yeah. There were efforts to break the unions in the Detroit automobile industry at Ford Motor Company, General Motors and so forth. They hired goons who came in, and when the workers tried to organize they—well, they went so far that they killed a number of them. They hired strikebreakers and things like that. So this gave me a sense of class conflict.

Vanderscoff: So, when you were young, did you have any key mentorship figures, a particular history teacher, anyone like that? Do you feel particularly guided by these figures, or was this something that you gradually stumbled upon?

White: No, it was really a matter of the public school system. In those days the school system was much less interested in the development of the child than in the creation of good citizens. So civics was the great—

Vanderscoff: Civic virtue and so on.

White: Yeah. I still today, if I happen to miss an election, feel guilty because your right as a citizen is expressed in your vote. (laughs) You know, things like that. Civics and social studies was really the center of education in the Detroit public school system. So that's where I picked up most of this stuff. It's very difficult for a person of your generation to realize how during the Great Depression—

unemployment now is a pittance compared to what it was. It was well over thirty percent of people who were seeking jobs who couldn't get them, and most people had to go on welfare and depend on that service. One was really aware of class difference and of the power exercised by the moneyed classes of the United States. At the same time, you're getting all of stuff about equality and freedom and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Vanderscoff: And you sensed there was some sort of contradiction there?

White: There seemed to be a definite contradiction. (laughs) It didn't take much intelligence to grasp that.

Vanderscoff: Where did you go to college? How did your undergraduate years influence you and your thought? Did it steer you towards asking different types of questions of the world around you, of history?

White: I went to Wayne State University, which is the city college of Detroit. After I got out of high school, I joined the Navy, and I was in something called the V5 program, which sent me to two years of college. I just went to the local university, Wayne State. It was very highly influenced by the labor union figures, Walter Reuther and people like that, and had a very socially activist faculty. I was in high school during the Second World War; just at the end of it is when I joined the Navy.

Vanderscoff: Was the war over by that time?

White: Yeah, I was seventeen. I joined the Navy, the Naval Air Arm, and got into this program that sent me to college, or paid for my college and books and things

like that. But tuition at that time was, what, something like ninety dollars a year? (laughs) But there was a distinct radical strain in the student body and in the faculty. In fact, I think liberal trade unionism was the dominant political atmosphere.

Vanderscoff: Did your time in the Navy influence your thought on history or on class consciousness?

White: Well, yeah, of course, because what time in the Navy taught me to grasp very quickly is that the romance and the adventure of military life is nothing compared to the boredom and the kind of stupidity of the operation. But since I was growing up in a time with all these Hollywood movies about the war, everyone in my high school was just waiting to get into the service—but I found military life [pause] not challenging.

Vanderscoff: Intellectually?

White: I was in officer training, and it was primarily concerned to turn out routinized thinking: Follow orders, do things by the book, that sort of thing. And that's the way it is. I thought flying would be an adventurous thing, but it turns out that flying an aircraft is like driving a bus, you know, you're given orders to fly from here to there in the shortest time possible. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Greyhound or a Corsair, there's a certain— (laughs)

White: That's right, that's right. But again, it was beneficial to me because my time in the Navy also gave me the GI Bill, so I was able to finish college and go on to graduate school at the University of Michigan. I got a Fulbright

Scholarship, so my whole education has been public and funded by the people—but it's given me a distinct class consciousness.

Vanderscoff: So, when you were in the military you didn't have a sense that that was going to be your career?

White: No.

Vanderscoff: Your notion was that you were going to go on and get your bachelor's and so on?

White: We joined the service to get the GI Bill.

Vanderscoff: So your undergraduate years passed. Did you always have a clear sense in those years that you were you were going to graduate school?

White: Oh yeah, from early on this was—I see you added on here was I "inspired?"[3] Yeah, I fell under the sway of a very brilliant teacher of history, this man named [William J.] Bossenbrook who's kind of a legend at Wayne State University, and he made history seem not only exciting, but really intellectually challenging. He was a Hegelian and Nietzschean and so a large number of well-known professional historians were in my class or in the classes before and after me, turned on by him, inspired by him.

Vanderscoff: So you were in this man's school of influence, to some extent?

White: Definitely.

[3] In reference to and quoting from the list of interview questions and topics.

Vanderscoff: And so he inspired you to go on to graduate school—how did that hone your focus and patterns of thoughts relative to your subject matter?

White: (laughs) Well, I got to graduate school and I found out it wasn't as intellectually challenging as Mr. Bossenbrook had made it sound to me.

Vanderscoff: Really?

White: No, it was—again, it was teaching people to apply methodologies to turn into specialists to do routine research work.

Vanderscoff: This trade school feel in some sense, perhaps?

White: Well, a professional school. You know, it's like medical school or law school. Going into the academic profession is learning the techniques and procedures honored by the profession—and history is essentially a conservative discipline.

Vanderscoff: Why do you say that? In the sense that it's so terribly engaged with the past?

White: Well no, it's conservative because first of all it studies old things; it studies things that are dead. So it has a kind of custodial effect, and in its relationship to any given nation-state it serves the purpose, and has since the early nineteenth century, of providing a kind of genealogy for the state. After all, nations are artificial creations, but they want to appear to be natural creations.

Vanderscoff: Right, this very logical evolution.

White: History was not taught in the university until the early nineteenth century, and it was moved and became a state-funded activity in Europe. All the universities were state except Oxford and Cambridge, and even they were supported by the state. Their function was to create a national identity and provide a genealogy, so this meant you had a custodial function.

Vanderscoff: So there were these nationalist underpinnings?

White: Yeah, it was nationalist, patriotic and so forth. Now see, this is why we want to kick out communists and Marxists and so forth, because they're critical of the state apparatus, whereas most of the professions in the social sciences are indentured in some way to service.

Vanderscoff: So when you developed a sense of what that historical status quo was, this nationalist sensibility that you've been discussing, was that something that you reacted against, or did you feel any sort of affinity towards that?

White: No, I wasn't surprised, because this is what led me to study intellectual history, or a history of ideas, rather than political history, primarily. And so I grasped early on that the one profession that is very bad about writing its own history is history itself. Historians don't take into account that the study of history has a history and that it evolves and develops. They prefer to think of the continuity from ancient Greece to the present, but in reality every society, every new incarnation brings forth its own history.

Vanderscoff: Puts its own stamp on this thing.

White: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: So when you graduated did you immediately—

White: And remember, I graduated right at the beginning of the Cold War, so the universities were being politicized, and McCarthyism was rampant while I was an undergraduate. So for me university education was always politically inflected, and I always believed that the educational system tends to be conservative because its aim is, after all, to socialize young people. So it's very difficult to sustain a radical point of view.

Vanderscoff: In that sort of climate.

White: Yeah, and every so often there's a witch-hunt and they fire people. You know the loyalty oath here in the university—I don't know if you know that they once had a loyalty oath.

Vanderscoff: Yeah, in the fifties. I've heard of that.

Entering the Intellectual Life

Vanderscoff: So, when you went into academia as a teacher, where did you start? Did you have a sense that, though you were a part of this institution, you also had this pull away from it, or against it?

White: Well, it's because I made a distinction between academic life and the intellectual life. I had a romantic conception of an intellectual as having a distinct function in a democratic society. The intellectual is one who is constantly engaging in critique, vetting what goes without saying, vetting the dogmas of the society, challenging them. And that means you're on the left in most issues. The question in modern industrial societies is whether capitalism, which wants

stability above all things for its planning even though it's willing to disrupt everything in order to make profit, whether the universities—which themselves are capitalist enterprises increasingly—whether that institution can sustain genuine intellectuals. That is to say, they're not hospitable to intellectuals insofar as intellectuals tend to be critics of the institution itself. And increasingly now, for example, as the universities become much more run by managers and interested in certification rather than real *Bildung* or cultivation of the mind, and sees intellection primarily in terms of the natural sciences way of doing it. Then you have to be constantly looking for places where you can do the kind of work that I romantically thought one could do.

Vanderscoff: The air is getting thinner, in some sense?

White: Yeah, and it's not because of any kind of overt programmatic suppression. It has to do with the whole tone and atmosphere of professionalization, you see. When I was teaching graduate school at Berkeley, I was really depressed by the careerism in the humanities. I mean, where people are really going to 'make it' in a career that involves primarily intellectual work.

Vanderscoff: You saw this sort of corporate ladder-type sensibility being applied to the humanities?

White: Oh yeah. Not only that: the students competing with one another.

Vanderscoff: The infighting and so on. This Social Darwinism.

White: And I never had a sense of that when I was—well, I did have it when I went to graduate school, but many people who go to graduate school in the

humanities really become disoriented because the very qualities that make you a good undergraduate student have to be suppressed in order for you to become a good graduate student.

Vanderscoff: What specifically do you mean? What are those qualities?

White: Well, undergraduates are valued for their brilliance, and you encourage innovation and experiment and far out experimentation. But a profession is trying to teach you the methodology that is shared by the profession.

Vanderscoff: Within the discipline and so on.

White: Yeah, sure. They try to teach you discipline. So, brilliance is not something that is highly valued in most of the—what they value is competence, you see.

Vanderscoff: Ah. Over innovation.

White: Competence. It shows you can do it the way they've always done it.

Vanderscoff: And you think that trend has definitely been marked since you were in graduate school, versus the nineties, and now?

White: Well that's right, but remember we went through the period of the late sixties, seventies and early eighties, a period of political turmoil, and the places in which the university had to really rethink its relationship to the dominant society, because the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement and the feminist movement really challenged most of the presuppositions of conservative society. So I was right in the middle of that, age-wise, and my career went very well

because I was good and I could relate to these students, but also faculty. Many faculty were disaffected by the duplicity of the government. This was a war that was fought for reasons that no one was really clear about except General Motors. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: And so that impacted the way academics—

White: Yeah, it had an effect on other faculty, especially of my generation, so that many of them became critics of the university. The whole curricula were redesigned and for that you needed thought, not just applying the old-fashioned.

Vanderscoff: So you started teaching in the late fifties or early sixties?

White: My first job was in 1955, and I was at Wayne State University for three years, and then I went to University of Rochester. Then I hit UCLA in 1968, in June 1968.

Vanderscoff: And so over those say, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years, you noticed that there was this very marked change that had occurred in the mindset of your colleagues?

White: Well, you couldn't have but noticed, because look here, the thing that made possible the resistance to the Vietnamese War was the drafting of the children of the middle class. That meant the drafting of the children of my colleagues and professors. This radicalized a large number of people who otherwise would have had no interest in politics.

Vanderscoff: So it changed the conversations that you were having in meetings?

White: Sure. I have a very famous friend who's a very distinguished geneticist. He was strictly scientific. He's exactly my age. This was in Rochester in the late sixties; he had four sons threatened to be sent to Vietnam. He became a Marxist biologist. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: A Marxist in the physical sciences.

White: Yeah, there aren't many.

Vanderscoff: Right. But there was a sense that the times called for that, whereas before or since—?

White: Well, it had to do with the kind of research you were doing, even in the physical sciences—are you going to do research on poison gases; are you going to do research on land mines? You know, someone has to do that; the scientists have to produce those things. The NASA stuff and astronomy, space travel. Radar was developed as a war—cybernetics came out of the war; it helped the problem of how you deal with loading a large number of ships in a harbor and coordination of inflow.

Vanderscoff: This tactical sensibility.

White: Sure.

First Perceptions of History of Consciousness and UCSC

Vanderscoff: So, you have all of this as your context as an academic before you even came to UC Santa Cruz in the late seventies?

White: Oh yeah, yeah.

Vanderscoff: Of course, during your time here you were affiliated with the history of consciousness program.[4] How did you first hear of the history of consciousness program and how did you receive it?

White: Well, Norman O. Brown was a friend of mine and a colleague at the University of Rochester and we were still colleagues when he took the job and came out here. He was appointed in history of consciousness.[5] He was an oddball, and the classics people wouldn't have him. At least that's what he told me. So he went to history of consciousness. So that's how he got involved in the program.

Vanderscoff: Right, because he was involved in it in its very early days, '65, '66, I believe initially.[6]

White: I think it was founded when, '65? Well, when the university was founded.

Vanderscoff: Because UCSC was founded in '65. It was that or the year after, because originally it was the general purpose Ph.D. program.[7]

White: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: So what sort of representation had he given of it to you?

White: Well, just vague. I was interested in the name, of the title of the program, because that seemed to me to be a version of intellectual history. History of

[4] Before Dr. White's arrival, history of consciousness had no full-time faculty appointments, and the program was run by interested faculty from other boards of study.
[5] Norman O. Brown had an unusual division-wide appointment as professor of humanities, which gave him leeway to participate extensively in history of consciousness.
[6] Norman O. Brown came to UCSC in 1968.
[7] According to UCSC's Campus Overview, the program first accepted students in 1966.

consciousness, which I interpreted as the history of what might be called public consciousness, that is to say, such things as—I've always pointed out to my students: there was a time before which Frenchmen called themselves Frenchmen. They called themselves Burgundians or Breton or something like this. After the consolidation of the nation-state there was a concerted attempt—just you have today, by the way, with the European Union. They're trying to create a European identity, because there is none.

Vanderscoff: Yes, this new trans-European consciousness.

White: That's right, this is what they're working at. The European Union funds two advanced graduate research institutes in the human and social sciences, one in Italy and one in Belgium, and their job is to help create a European identity.

Vanderscoff: Like a think tank sort of situation?

White: That's right. That's their job, because they realize—as everyone has found out and anyone who knew anything knew—that you can't have an economic union as a basis for a political union. An economic union needs political instruments in order to discipline people who don't measure up.

Vanderscoff: Some sort of ideology.

White: It means you need a common law, institutions, so forth. So, I thought—that's what I regard as the history of consciousness, where you see communities systematically rewriting their laws, rewriting—for example, you see it today. Marriage: marriage is between a man and a woman, that's what everyone said. No, other people say, "No, we want marriage to be between same sex, same

gender." Okay, now that's a matter of consciousness, you see—what you mean by 'marriage?' And the law gets changed; consciousness changes. Pretty soon you get people saying, "Well yeah, you know, it makes sense." Pipe fitters and truck drivers saying, "Well yeah, it's okay with me." (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Because there's been this adjustment in the ideology, in the national consciousness.

White: Yeah, sure.

Vanderscoff: So more broadly, UC Santa Cruz, of course, was founded on a different track than many of the other UCs. What was your impression of it in the late sixties and early seventies? Was it this outlier school to you? Or did you view it as this interesting experiment?

White: Well remember, I came to UCLA in 1968 and I was there for seven years so I knew what was going on up here. And everyone knows that this place was set up as a conservative school, not as an alternative school. What was alternative about it was the college system. Someone—McHenry, the chancellor at time, even Norman O. Brown, Page Smith—all these guys had gone to Oxford, and they came back and they wanted to make a little Oxford out here on the Pacific coast. That was their aim: to study the classics—

Vanderscoff: Yes, Western civ.

White: —live-in colleges, call people 'lecturers,' don't have departments, have boards of study. This is all borrowed from Oxford. That was their idea, to create

a little elite Oxonion or Cantabrigian University that would turn out English gentlemen. That was the aim.

Vanderscoff: But, of course, it got swept over by the counterculture.[8]

White: Yeah, it got swept over by the counterculture, but all the universities did. But here, because they were just starting up they kept recruiting both faculty and students who thought that they would be getting a more individualized education. It was going to be intimate and small, tutorials, one-on-one, that kind of thing.

Vanderscoff: And so….

White: So I saw it as a kind of conservative place. It wasn't unusual in those days. In the early sixties everyone was trying to—you see, they'd been swamped by the GIs that had come back from the war. The number of people in colleges and universities had increased tenfold since before the war. 200,000 people in colleges and universities before the war, two million immediately after the war. This made for a factory-like atmosphere. I always had classes of sixty, seventy, so forth at Wayne State, and I was grateful to have it. Then there was the movement to create colleges within, usual elite kind of things, based upon the classics, based upon reading, on languages, tutorials rather than lecture classes: an elite kind of thing. You had to have exceptional grades to get in, that sort of thing.

Vanderscoff: And so you perhaps envisioned UCSC as taking that ethos and injecting it into a public school environment.

[8] This observation was drawn from the interviewer's history with John Dizikes. See Cameron Vanderscoff, interviewer and editor, *John Dizikes: Reflections on a Life of Learning and Teaching at UC Santa Cruz*, pg. 20, and pp. 65-70 for context.

White: That is what it was, that's what they wanted to do. I don't know if you've looked at the statements but that's what they had in mind. McHenry, Page Smith and these founding fathers were all educated in England.[9] This is why they recruited their faculty from Harvard and Yale primarily, as much as they could: Ivy League. They wanted an Ivy League kind of elite school. By the way, this was a mistake, because this was talking about undergraduate education just when the whole university was moving towards the research university syndrome. No longer interested in undergraduate education—from now on it would be research. This is was Clark Kerr; he was going to have this little place here as a kind of niche within which undergraduate quality education would be stressed.[10]

Vanderscoff: But elsewhere systemically things would be done differently?

White: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: And, of course, that caught up with UC Santa Cruz eventually in some respects.

White: Yeah, it did.

Vanderscoff: So returning to Norman Brown, who was affiliated with histcon basically from the beginning. He wrote in the late sixties that "Histcon exists under constant threat," and in (January) 1970 he argued that the department

[9] While Page Smith and Dean McHenry received their degrees in America (doctorates at Harvard and Berkeley, respectively), they had a strong engagement with the Oxford/Cambridge model in the construction of UCSC. Several key 'founding fathers' were English-educated, such as Glenn Wilson (second provost of Stevenson), Kenneth Thimann (first provost of Crown and crucial in establishing the sciences), and Jasper Rose (second provost of Cowell). Both Dr. Wilson and Dr. Thimann have been interviewed by the Regional History Project.

[10] See Randall Jarrell, interviewer and editor, *Clark Kerr and the Founding of the University of California, Santa Cruz*, (Regional History Project, University Library, 1972, 1987), for Kerr's perspective on early UCSC history and founding campus ideals.
http://digitalcollections.ucsc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p265101coll13/id/3800

aimed for "not the transmission of the known, but the discussion of the unknown," and its very name had a "pretentious grandeur" that appealed to students dissatisfied with the established disciplines.[11]

White: Yeah, it's all true.

Vanderscoff: So, keeping in mind these statements, were you at all attracted by a sense that in history of consciousness there was a certain grandeur-in-crisis or something like that, that this truly was a special venture? What was your take on it?

White: No. You see, history of consciousness was really invented by these philosophers who were phenomenologists. [Albert] Hofstadter and Maurice Natanson, a couple of other people. They were phenomenologists. By them 'history of consciousness' meant the history of phenomenological thought. What did it mean? Page Smith got the idea from a guy who was his teacher at Dartmouth in the 1930s, a guy named [Eugen] Rosenstock-Huessey.[12] He was a would-be member of the Nazi elite, except he was a Jew. (laughs) He converted to Roman Catholicism, but they still kicked him out. And he came to Dartmouth, where he wrote a very interesting book called *Out of Revolution*, and he has this Karl Schmidt approach. It's a very aristocratic learning, like Leo Strauss, that there's a secret doctrine that the elite knows and the elite teaches an elite. Those are the people who were in Washington, the Neocons; they're Leo Strauss—

---

[11] Excerpted from Norman O. Brown's papers and letters (Box #61) in McHenry Library's Special Collections

[12] For Dr. Smith's perspective on early histcon See Elizabeth Spedding Calciano, interviewer, and Randall Jarrell, editor *Page Smith: Founding Cowell College and UCSC, 1964-1973 (*UCSC Regional History Project, 1996): pp.69-70. Available at http://digitalcollections.ucsc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p265101coll13/id/3479

Vanderscoff: Adherents, yeah.

White: The beauty of history of consciousness was that people could project onto it anything they wanted.

Vanderscoff: This blank canvas.

White: You had these bright students. They would look into graduate programs and they didn't want to take seminars and methodology and so forth; they wanted to develop themselves, have their own views, work out their own philosophies of life, do experimental work. We had people when I came here who were trying to argue that instead of a doctoral dissertation that they could make a film, or write a play. I had to explain to them that a doctoral dissertation has certain minimal requirements; it has to be written. (laughs) So when I came here, by the way, they said, "Maybe we should change the name," because it was a mess. It was really falling apart because everyone had abandoned it. And so when I came here and they said, "We should maybe change the name, call it 'history of ideas.'" I said, "No, the only thing you've got is the name." (laughs). So I said this is real capital, you know, and it turns out to be that way. We were getting three and four hundred people applying every year for this program. Three and four hundred. We had the highest rate of selectivity of any graduate program in the humanities in the country.

Vanderscoff: For how many spots that were available, when you started, say?

White: Oh, there would be five or six. When I came in, the first year we didn't take in anyone, but the second year we took in sixteen, but out of four hundred.

Vanderscoff: So, who contacted you about coming to UCSC, and ultimately why did you agree to come here?

White: Well, I think it was Norman Brown who recommended me when they decided to find someone to come in and remake the program. They were really deciding for a couple of years whether to close it down or rebuild it, give it some stability. 'Some stability' meant appointing at least one person full time.

Vanderscoff: To be exclusively on that board.

White: Yeah. So they had a search and I think Brown brought up my name. Gary Lease was the head of the search committee. He called me at Wesleyan and said, "We'd like you to consider taking over the program." In those days you didn't have to worry too much about making sure you cast your net wide and had a certain number of women and blacks.

Vanderscoff: Right, the principles of affirmative action hadn't set in.

White: Yeah, when I was head of the history department in Rochester I could hire at will. I could invite a person I was interested in hiring in and if he passed muster with the faculty I could hire him on the way back to the airport.

Vanderscoff: (laughs) There's a bit more ribbon to cut now. So you agreed to come here—you were attracted to the program?

White: Well, I have to tell you honestly, I was willing to come here for two reasons. One, I was teaching at Wesleyan, which is a very elite school, private.

Vanderscoff: Yes.

White: And I was committed to public education. So I was looking to get back into public education. I had gone there because my wife and I were married. We were both looking for jobs and Wesleyan wanted me to come and run their Center for the Humanities and my wife got a job at Yale. She commuted; it wasn't too far but it was a commute. We were looking to be in the same place and back on the coast, because we both preferred it out here. And so when this came up she applied for a job in literature. There was an opening in her field, they didn't make one for her, and she had to qualify for that. But I had to take the job before that job became available. But that's the principal reason that I came back. I wanted to get back into public education. And I have to say that the University of California system was really a great system in the years I was associated with it.

Vanderscoff: So this was a door to return back to teaching and scholarship in the mode that you preferred?

White: Well, in the milieu—in a public school, public university, it was a great—it's still a great university, but they're doing everything they can to ruin it.

Vanderscoff: We'll visit that towards the end of the interviews.

White: Okay. So anyway, I came out here. But you couldn't say I was attracted to the program. There was no program. No faculty interested in it, a couple of assistant professors on the search committee.

Vanderscoff: So you walked in on some sort of tumbleweed scene, just drifting across the prairie?

White: That's right, exactly. As a matter of fact they had a sign on the outside of the department office with 'consciousness' misspelled.

Vanderscoff: (laughs) So was that your first step, then?

White: First thing I said, "Better change your sign." (laughs)

Arrival at UCSC: The Reconfiguration of Histcon

Vanderscoff: So, you started—you're saying you essentially started from scratch as it were?

White: Well, there were some people interested in the program. John Schaar and Peter Euben in politics were trying to prop it up. They were very much interested in teaching in it and being associated with it. I think John Schaar was also instrumental in getting me on the short list because he had been a visiting professor at Wesleyan one year while I was there.

Vanderscoff: So, what actions did you take to reshape/revitalize this program, either administratively or pedagogically?

White: Well, first of all I said I had to have at least one other person full-time in the program. I said, "What do we do when I take a leave, maybe, or get sick? Who's going to run it?" Their attitude was, "Well, we'll let the—it'll be done by consensus, you know." But that's first thing I did. And that's how I hired James Clifford.[13] And secondly, I would take any FTE it turned out that no one else

[13] For an in depth account of James Clifford's perspective on the early days of histcon and the program's evolution, please see his oral history with the Regional History Project, Cameron Vanderscoff interviewer, forthcoming in 2013.

wanted. For example, after I got here Gary Lease moved into the department. Because why? He had been in the department of religion and the department of religion had been closed down. And he had no place to go. So, why don't you join us? So we had three. And Barbara Epstein, who was then Barbara Easton, came to me and said she was dissatisfied with the history department, she couldn't do the kind of things she wanted to do, and she had taught a couple courses in history of consciousness, could she move in? So I said, "Fine with me."

Vanderscoff: So I read Donna Haraway's oral history in preparation for this interview. And she said in that that she thinks she was hired by you and the histcon board because you all wanted someone who was "unpredictable in some interesting ways," which partially stemmed from the fact that you personally had a "kind of fundamental hatred of being bored."[14]

White: (Laughs). Well that's not exactly it. What it is, is this: Helene Moglen, who had been appointed dean and came the same year I did—of humanities—made as a condition of her appointment two FTEs, two slots in feminist and women's studies. No other department would take them. I said, "I'll take them." And so you see, you've got to gather your resources, right? So I said, "I'll take them." And then we began our search and Donna Haraway turned out to be the most interesting candidate. We didn't know her, anything about her. She turned out to be the most challenging and interesting candidate. That's why she got the job. It wasn't because I was bored. (laughs)

[14] See Irene Reti, interviewer and editor, *Edges and Ecotones: Donna Haraway's Worlds at UCSC* (Regional History Project, University Library, 2007) at http://digitalcollections.ucsc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p265101coll13/id/3786 for Dr. Haraway's perspectives and insights on history of consciousness.

Vanderscoff: So you had a very motley crew.

White: A motley crew, to put it mildly. Yeah, she had failed to get tenure at Johns Hopkins. And she was really a countercultural person. She did commune life and all that sort of thing. A really radical feminist.

Vanderscoff: And you, of course, predated that, generationally speaking.

White: Oh yeah, I'm ten years older than Jim and Donna, or fourteen, I guess.

Vanderscoff: So keeping in mind this notion of this motley crew, if you were to sit as some sort of rhetorical cartographer and map history of consciousness in context with the academic continent, was it already then, this thing that you helped create, some sort of island or borderland right next to terra incognita and the pictures of sea monsters?

White: Well, see, it was not really a program. (laughs) It wasn't really a program. I had to pretend it was a program in my dealings with the administration, or when I would go give lectures. "What is the history of consciousness?" Everybody wanted to know. So I would make up ideal scenarios. I finally hit upon the idea that basically Donna Haraway was a historian of biology; James Clifford was a historian of anthropology; I was a historian of historiography; Gary Lease was a history of religion; and Barbara Epstein was a historian of social movements. So my argument was that we take an historical approach to the evolution of the human sciences. We do the history of the human sciences because that's the place where the consciousness of the society manifests itself in systematic and study-able way. So that was my pitch, but that wasn't the case. In

reality, the program was and the routine of study was made up of individuals. We wouldn't take in anyone for whom there was not someone with an interest matching. That was one of the ways we could get rid of many of the applicants. We'd just say, "Look, we have no one here who's interested in the sort of thing you're doing." And then when they came in, this person would be their advisor and would try to work out, find two other people on the faculty whose interests vaguely coincided, and that person really then worked with those three people. They directed them and mentored them, carried them through. Sometimes the student's interest changed and they changed mentors, but this was not unusual in the UC system. The UC system has something known as the individual Ph.D. You can petition the University Senate if you get—I believe it's four UC faculty, who say they're willing to serve on your Ph.D. committee, outside of any department. That can be recognized and you can actually do that and tailor an interdisciplinary Ph.D. So in reality we were just doing that.

Vanderscoff: So you functioned as a slightly more formalized vehicle for that?

White: Yeah. Only formalized in the sense that we had a name. You see, people don't understand the importance of a proper name.

Vanderscoff: The sense of reality that gives something.

White: Yeah. The first thing I did when I got here, I said, "We need a logo. We're going to have posters." I invited a lot of famous people like Derrida and Foucault and so forth to come lecture. And that was an advantage, because these were people I knew and they would come and for very little pay, stay two or three days, and give lectures. And so history of consciousness became a kind of

intellectual focus center here at the campus. When I got out here, no one had ever heard of Derrida or Foucault, because the countercultural stuff was really, you know, "Hey, spaced out, man."

Vanderscoff: (laughs)

White: That was really what it was about. You know, The Stones and— (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Now, do you mean the West Coast culturally, or do you mean that had also bled into academia?

White: No, the West Coast culture. When I got here the interest in intellectual work—for example, when James Clifford and I first got here we held a meeting of the Ph.D. students who were still here. We said, "Look, our job is to help you to get your Ph.D. and get a job." Their attitude was, "Fuck off. You know, we're happy the way we are, living as graduate students. Get a little money, live in a commune, rent a big house, things are just fine the way they are." They were not careerists at all. Most of them had a background in social agitation. You've seen the photographs, guys in—what do they call those flared pants?

Vanderscoff: Bellbottoms.

White: Bellbottoms and tie-dyed shirts, you know, with long hair. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: And then you were there in the middle of them, and those are your students and so on.

White: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: Huh. So, basically you're saying when you came out here you were—

White: By the way, I'm going to give credit to Jim and Donna. They're the ones who really created what was more avant-garde than anything that I had in mind, because they were countercultural too. Jim was a bluegrass-picking guy who'd played with a band down here in Santa Cruz even before he applied for the job, and Donna was really countercultural. I don't know if you know anything about her personal life, but she's a commune person. So the two of them actively recruited a kind of offbeat: a lot of lesbians, a lot of militant lesbians, Chicanos—Jim with his interest in ethnicity. We found that we had more people of color in a Ph.D. program in the humanities than any other university in the country.

Vanderscoff: And so did these changes and working with colleagues of those kinds of stripes challenge you intellectually, or change your vision?

White: Oh yeah, I think I really became a feminist through the influence of Donna Haraway and a number of the older women graduate students I met here: Susan Foster, Sharon Traweek—and Teresa de Lauretis. That's why it was very easy for me when they proposed hiring Angela Davis for me to go to bat, because I'd known Angela at UCLA in the antiwar movement.

Vanderscoff: Were you involved in that in any way more than that capacity?

White: Oh yeah.

Vanderscoff: So as a professor in this young, recreated program, you've basically said that you played a role in not just teaching histcon, but defining what it meant.

White: For the outside.

Vanderscoff: For the external world?

White: Inside, it was Jim and Donna, primarily. Jim and Donna and Barbara, who had a commitment to the counterculture in a way that I—I mean, I was always interested in the counterculture, it made perfect sense to me, but I was sufficiently older not to have grown up in it.

Vanderscoff: So how did you personally go about interpreting and presenting what histcon meant to your students? Do you think that if you were to teach a class, or if, say, Jim Clifford or Donna were to teach a class, you would present slightly different interpretations of what history of consciousness meant as a department, or to you personally?

White: Sure, because except for the concept of feminist consciousness, or oppositional consciousness, I don't think Jim and Donna even believe in class consciousness. You see, the concept of consciousness is a good—it's a Hegelian and Marxist idea and it's a psychoanalytic, Freudian idea. So I always said, "Look, the gurus of history of consciousness are Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche." Donna's attitude was, "All males?" (laughs) Jim: "All Western males?" Because

Jim is very much interested in the native, the indigenous.[15] Donna in something like transgendered, a consciousness of cyber—you know, that sort of thing.[16]

Vanderscoff: Right.

White: I work in the tradition of European high culture, you see. For them, that's the enemy.

Vanderscoff: Right. Well, because their strains of thought and those schools of thought—correct me if I'm wrong, but they weren't even terribly salient in academia at the time you had been going through for your graduate degree. Is that correct?

White: They weren't what?

Vanderscoff: Salient, they weren't terribly prominent or even taught very much, their sense of consciousness and the sense that, no, you do step away from Western classics.

White: Oh no, no, this is all a product of the seventies—just as the feminist movement was. Remember, the feminist movement is kind of spin-off from the civil rights movement, and that was blacks organizing. See, the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, the antiwar movement is what ignited the demand of women, of the oppressed—or not so much of the oppressed, but

[15] For a current take on Dr. Clifford's interest in indigeneity, consider his upcoming book *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the twenty-first Century* (Harvard University Press, Fall 2013).
[16] For an introductory explanation of Dr. Haraway's interest in things 'cyber,' see "Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Socialist Review*, no. 80 (1985): 65-108. Also: for varying scholarly perspectives on the twenty-first anniversary of this essay's publication, and an interview with Dr. Haraway, see *Theory, Culture and Society*, numbers 7-8 (2006), pp. 135-220.

people who had been left out of the dispensation, who were regarded as subordinate or subaltern. The civil rights movement inspired people like Gloria Steinem and so forth in the women's movement, and this had a big effect on gender theories. Beyond that, then, such things as the family, eroticism, sex, drugs, rock and roll, LSD. See, then that generated many, many different kinds of interests. Behind all this was the idea of the patriarchy, though, as the enemy.

Vanderscoff: Yes.

White: And the patriarchy was white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class males.

Vanderscoff: Right, the great WASP.

White: For example—it's ironic—five years after this thing I would never have been hired here. I would never have been hired.

Vanderscoff: Because of ideologically where you stood, or your patterns of thought?

White: Not my politics. They were looking for their own kind, and that meant—you know, for example, I still think Jim has a very romantic notion of the native.

Vanderscoff: Given that anthropological perspective?

White: Yeah, and Donna's is a very radical feminism. More radical than lesbian feminism, which I regard as the most radical wing of feminism because it challenges the whole concept of the family and what it means, generational relations and so forth. And so I'm for that because I'm a radical. I'd rather than have change than stasis any day. I don't care if it's bad.

Vanderscoff: That sense of motion?

White: See, I'm much more of a nihilist and an anarchist. They have missions in a way that I don't.

Value and Education in a Capitalist Context

White: I feel capitalism is the source of all of the major problems of our society and of the world, increasingly, and that capitalism is suicidal and it thrives on crisis and in the midst of great wealth it creates want, need. So for me, it's the Marxist program that is much more important than elevating the native. There's no point in giving the native a Western education so they can become a middle class suburbanite who's on the same corporate ladder as the rest.

Vanderscoff: So, you talk about your advocacy of nihilism as compared to Jim and Donna's romantic missions and so forth—

White: Well, I don't mean it in a derogatory sense.

Vanderscoff: No, of course not. I understand that. Is this nihilism something that you've progressed into? Did you initially find yourself in a place where you did have a sense of social venture?

White: Well see, look, nihilism has to do with this: it's Nietzschean, and it's the idea that value is inherent in things substantively. See, a nihilist does not believe there is inherent value in anything, because the notion of value is the basis of all hierarchy. I'm against hierarchy. And that means I'm against the idea that some things are inherently more valuable than others. I take the Marxist view: what's the value of the thing? Too bad, it's only its exchange value—it's too bad.

Vanderscoff: It's the price tag you put upon it.

White: Yeah, that's right. And that's what capitalism comes down to. The only value anything has is its market value. And if you say, "Well, no, but what about humanism which says, "Mankind is a value. The human is a value." No—the human is a constructed value. It's commodified. It becomes commodified.

Vanderscoff: In the capitalist context.

White: You can sell the human, right? You can purchase humanity.

Vanderscoff: And you sense some sort of obscenity in that?

White: Yeah. See, that's why capitalism transforms human consciousness in such a way as to make it self-destructive.

Vanderscoff: Self-destructive?

White: Self-destructive. I mean, the person who buys into the capitalist way of life—you can see it on Wall Street, you can see it in Obama. Obama is a well-meaning guy but he got processed into the Ivy League world of elitism. He thinks he's—he probably is more humane than most people. But he cannot entertain a fundamental transformation of this capitalist market system. You can't even argue about it with him. The guy says, "It's natural and the best we can hope for."

Vanderscoff: Because he's grounded in compromise with the status quo and so on?

White: Yeah, it's what happens all the time. I saw it all the time. Radical people say, "I'm going to law school so I can become a radical lawyer," right? But then they get out of law school and they're going to corporations, to corporate law.

Vanderscoff: So it's this sense of human beings processed into a particular way of engaging with things?

White: Yeah, this is what the educational system does in its modern capitalist form. It's a corporation and it produces corporate types.

Vanderscoff: And do you think there's any sort of distinction, or say shades of gray, between public and private educational institutions?

White: Oh, there are shades of gray of course, always. Some of them are more incompetent than others in turning out what they want to turn out. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: And do you see any cause for optimism?

White: Yeah, I'm optimistic. The system is self-destructive. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Oh, something much like a phoenix emerges from those ashes?

White: Well, I don't know. We nihilists do not know. It may well be that the human species is the only one that can actually destroy itself.

Vanderscoff: And so that's the experiment that's going on around us with capitalism?

White: The world would certainly be better off—I mean, the earth would be better off without human beings in it.

Vanderscoff: In the global sense, you'd argue, in terms of other species?

White: Well, yeah. Don't you think so? Look what's happening to the whales, sharks, bird populations, bees. The bees have disappeared.

Vanderscoff: That's true. It's this vision of—I suppose the inherent problem in humans seeing themselves as stewards of the planet?

White: But that's a—'stewards of the planet' means exploiting. The extractive industries, they're called, you know. Mining and oil drilling and so forth. You know how many species are wiped out daily? There's something like four thousand. I don't think therefore doing social work and trying to make people feel better is a solution. This is why you have to take—you see, the state and the police are the immediate problem. Police are supposed to be a solution to the problem. Why have we locked up more people in prisons than any other society in the history of the world? I mean, by about tenfold. Six to seven million people.

Vanderscoff: A society trying to self-regulate itself?

White: Well, it is regulating itself; this is why the police are being increasingly militarized. What you see is exactly what you have in Syria right now, no distinction between the army and the police.

Vanderscoff: The line being blurred.

White: There used to be a difference.

Vanderscoff: So, if you view this capitalist self-destructive tendency as some sort of bomb, and in context with what you said earlier about there being some sort of

value in optimism, is there value in trying to somehow defuse that bomb, socially, whatever?

White: You see, as a historian I don't think we have the instruments. All the instruments are on the side of the capitalists. You see people trying to go the International Monetary Fund or the G7 and try to protest. You know, they just move the venue. These are world institutions. We have nothing but local instruments.

Vanderscoff: And you'd argue that those are insufficient?

White: Yeah, because it's a matter of power. You see, capitalism accumulates more and more wealth and power and gunfire and so forth in smaller and smaller groups. It's what's happened—we keep talking about redistributing the wealth, and how it's one-ninth of one percent or something like that, which has something like eighty percent of the wealth in this country. Supposing I want to attack this group? Where do I find them? They're jet setting on their private aircraft. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: And so as a result of all this, that's why you like to see change, in the sense that that kinetic energy will perhaps spark something in the dark? So change in any form?

White: Yeah, this is the attitude of [Alain] Badiou that the new form of political protest is the riot, as against the revolutionary uprising. The riot, you see, just makes trouble.

Vanderscoff: Impulsive, disorganized….

White: It's disorganized, doesn't have a program. This is what makes Occupy Wall Street an interesting phenomenon for me. They keep saying, "Well, what is your program?" and they say, "We don't have a program, we're just pissed off." I think that is what the nihilist and anarchist attitude is, you see. They keep coming back and saying, "Why don't you write up what you—why don't you tell us?" They say, "No, you're the problem. We can't solve your problem for you."

Vanderscoff: And order can only be answered with disorder, you're saying?

White: Yeah, that's right, yeah. But assembly is, for me, anarchist politics. You stand there and you get in the way. You know, like a rave or something like that. You organize it quickly, you go, you disrupt things for a while. That's about all you can do.

Histcon in a Social and Academic Context

Vanderscoff: Do you think that a program that's based on open inquiry like the history of consciousness has some sort of potential to work in that fashion, in that pattern?

White: No, I don't think so.

Vanderscoff: What is the social function? Do you envision a net good in something like history of consciousness?

White: Well, I'm very proud of the people that have come out of our program. They're all people with social conscience, and they're teaching. I've kept up with a number of them. They have an impact. Almost all of them over the course of

time were frustrated because ultimately they tried to create programs of their own. Of course, what happens is they hire people and then gradually these people regard the people who hired them as old fogeys and end up rejecting them. (laughs) Because unless you are a kind of stamped out version of the classical scholar who knows five languages, who publishes modest articles and so forth—we're not going very fast, are we?[17]

Vanderscoff: No, I'm not worried about that at all.

White: Oh, okay. So I'm a teacher. I believe in teaching, and I think that I like to help people realize what they want to do in the way they want to do it. I'm against teaching methodologies.

Vanderscoff: And so history of consciousness, then, really fit like a glove for that.

White: Yeah, the students I've had are people who've worked out their own topics and the ways of dealing with them to their own satisfaction. And I can do things like helping them get published, which is important for them if they're going to have a career. The only place you can do this kind of intellectual work is in the university. You can't do it in any corporation. You can't do it as a lawyer.

Vanderscoff: So you would argue that academia is the only context in this global culture or particularly American culture that's hospitable to that sort of thought?

White: Well, European universities traditionally have been places where intellectuals can work. But whenever there's a crisis like the one we're

[17] In reference to our progress down the list of questions and topics—Editor.

undergoing now where it's economic crisis—since the Enron thing destroyed the portfolio of the University of California. You know that the University of California invested a portfolio in Enron, right? Since that moment they've been squeezing. So when the economic squeeze comes you get rid of the oddball. While there's wealth flowing in you can afford a lot of pressure from the students to have a Chicano studies program. So if you've got lots of money, hey, you give them three or four FTEs and let them form it, and you put them off to the side, give them an office somewhere and forget about them. But when push comes to shove and you have to decide whether you can fund that or not—

Vanderscoff: The outliers are the first to go under the guillotine.

White: Yeah, they go.

Vanderscoff: And, of course, history of consciousness has, you know—

White: Well, when I talked to the dean recently he said that was one of the things they were considering, whether we don't really need it anymore because all of the programs in the humanities and social sciences have their own Ph.D. programs now. They didn't earlier on, so we had a service function. So why do you need it? I was last on a committee to hire some people and in the middle of the hiring process they dissolved the positions.[18] So James Clifford and Donna Haraway have not been replaced. Nor has Angela Davis.

Vanderscoff: Is that so? So, just three positions that just are gone, then?

[18] Dr. Jim Clifford has related to the interviewer that this took place in 2009 after a year-long search with a letter ready to go out.

White: Gone. Nor was Gary Lease. There were four.

Vanderscoff: And you'd argue that that's a budget thing, that's a product of that?

White: Yeah, because as I said, as the university becomes run by managers, their notion is bottom line—can we afford it? And if we can't afford it we have to make some 'hard decisions.' (laughs)

Vanderscoff: 'It's not you, it's me,' it's the breakup argument (laughs).

White: Right. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: So, history of consciousness—it seems to me that when enough things are said about what histcon is, it seems to me that eventually something will be said or already has been about what it is not. How have the boundaries of histcon evolved and defined themselves over the space of your involvement and afterwards?

White: Okay, look—history of consciousness provided a place for really brilliant individuals like James Clifford, Donna Haraway, Angela Davis, Teresa de Lauretis, two or three others, to do what they want to do in the way they want to do it, without someone saying you've got to teach beginning French. These were people who, because we were only a graduate program—we had to add some undergraduate classes just to survive, by the way, in order to be able to pay.

Vanderscoff: Yes, I have a question or two about that later on.

White: It was in order to pay our graduate students as TAs. Increasingly they wouldn't be used in these other departments that had their own. So we had to create our own undergraduate— But this gave a place for these people. And look at the payoff. These people are all world famous. They're all world famous. I mean, no matter where I am—I was in Sweden, Finland, you know; they've all heard of Donna Haraway; they've all heard of James Clifford. And that's one of the criteria for assessing the value of a scholarly enterprise. Do you have people whose influence is in more than one field, and it's an international reputation? Those are the criteria for really elevated professorships. All of my people are like that.

Vanderscoff: So, do you argue that histcon sits in the vanguard of the humanities, or did, for some time? It was some sort of outlier?

White: Well, I think it really reflected a need of the society that was manifested in various protest movements. I think it manifested that. That's what finally came out. Jim Clifford remains hostile to Western, European, humanistic culture, as does Donna Haraway to Western, European, white male science. Teresa de Lauretis is a foremost lesbian theorist. Angela Davis, well, Angela—vice president of the United States candidate for the Communist Party. (laughs) Angela Davis is a world historical figure. She is everywhere. In Italy I opened up a fashion magazine and there is Angela's face with the Afro.

Vanderscoff: In 1994—I looked at one of the documents published by the External Review Committee [for histcon]—and it argued that histcon had shifted its focus away from the theory of history towards diversity and cultural studies**.**

Historical theory, it seems to me, is a reasonably apt phrase for a lot of what you have a done as a scholar.[19] How were your work and views and teaching impacted by this shift towards cultural studies? Were these matters you'd been interested in before in those terms?

White: Well the shift for cultural studies was a way of regularizing these kinds of social protests, countercultural interests. As you know, cultural studies is kind of a cover term for left political cultural studies, but with the added ethnic-gender-class inflection. I don't recall who was on that committee. I think Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht was one. But you know, that was my particular interest. It wasn't a particular interest of Donna and Jim. Donna and Jim both, to my bewilderment, don't deconstruct the idea of history. See, I deconstruct the idea of history. They claim to be against all this Western male stuff, of which historical consciousness is one of the fundaments. They still do history as if history was a kind of foundation for the kind of radical work they want to do. In other words, give a historicist argument against the white male patriarchy.

Vanderscoff: And so you argue they're using one of those tools of that institution?

White: Yeah. But I made my own contribution. I was primarily interested in teaching students semiotics and semiological techniques of analysis, textualism, literary theory. I was much more interested in that than teaching them philosophy of history.

[19] External review committees, composed of professors from outside the department, are put together to determine how the department is doing. The committee generates a report on the state of the department.

Vanderscoff: Oh, really. So you already had this very particular enclave—

White: Yeah, I've continued to write in it, but only because people push me in that direction.

Vanderscoff: You'd say your own interests have gone more in a linguistic direction?

White: Well, more to do with the idea of theories of discourse, discourse as the kind of operation by which you can create a fetish object for study, like "literature."

Vanderscoff: So ultimately this shift—did it impact your sense of place in the department? Was there a point where you felt the program had in any way outgrown your own vision of it or moved in a direction that wasn't yours?

White: No, I was perfectly behind all the moves that they made. But I did become tired. And so when I turned 65 and they offered me this golden handshake—I don't know if you've heard that expression—

Vanderscoff: Yes, I have.

White: —for retirement I took it, because it's a very stressful program to teach in because every student feels that he has insight that has revolutionary significance. And there was all sorts of internal stress. For example, after we got a certain number of lesbians aboard they began to fight with the straight women. I mean the sectarian disputes: the Chicanos who had nothing to do with the

blacks, or the blacks who had nothing to do with the Chicanos, or blacks who had nothing to do with the whites.

Vanderscoff: And so were those debates over presentation of pedagogy and how you went about that, or how did those [disputes] manifest themselves?

White: It was about what do you study, for example. "Why do we have to read Hegel? Why are you teaching Hegel?" Or you know, real debates over reading someone like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Is Conrad is a racist or is he just representing racists? And I have to say that many of the students we recruited had to do a lot of remedial work. I mean, many of the students were really not trained to do graduate-level work. They needed a year, maybe two sometimes to come up to speed.

Vanderscoff: So they had this certain brilliance but they didn't quite have the tools of the trade?

White: Well, I don't know whether they had brilliance or not, but in general I did not choose the students who came in. Sometimes I was on the admittance committee and sometimes not. But I'll give you an example. Jim and Donna arranged to have a woman who was a kind of Mexican-American shaman come into the program. And she wasn't ready; she couldn't do the work. She was really uneducated.

Vanderscoff: They brought her in as a student?

White: A student, yes. She turned up in my course and we were reading Platonic dialogue and she was unclear about whether this was a stenographic record of a

debate. She had no idea who— Now, this is understandable. Mind you, under attack is the whole idea of the heritage from the Greeks through the Christians. We have students now who have never read the Bible. Forty years ago, fifty years ago, when I began teaching, I could assume that everyone in the class had had some exposure to Jewish or Christian—some exposure—maybe they hadn't read the Bible, but the allusions to the Bible.

Vanderscoff: Right, they would understand.

White: I mean…Job. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Yes. You would get the idea he had a hard time of it.

White: That's not true anymore.

Vanderscoff: So do you personally lament this disconnect from the classics?

White: No, I'm a historian. I'm a nihilist. I don't lament anything. If it goes, it goes. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Then 'so be it,' in some sense?

White: Yeah, that means you have to change the way you teach. You can't say because I've always used Job I'm going to continue to use Job even though you've got a whole class that doesn't relate to it. I don't mean 'doesn't understand'—they don't relate to it.

Vanderscoff: And this comes back to the notion of whether or not there is inherent value in something.

White: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, it has to do with the canon, the classics.

Vanderscoff: Right, and the canon constantly rewriting itself.

White: And, of course, that was another debate that was going on continually in those years, in the late sixties, early seventies. The curriculum had to do with the canon, Western Civ. Everyone turned against Western Civ. They still teach it in many universities, but not in this university. There's nothing close to it as far as I know. You start with the Bible, you go the Greeks, you go to the Romans, you go the Middle Ages, you go to the Renaissance, you go the Enlightenment, nineteenth Century.

Vanderscoff: Well, that's even reflected in the core courses. The core course at Cowell used to be a two-year affair and now it's a quarter.

White: Yeah. That's right. And I always taught freshman seminars, these little freshman seminars that the colleges taught. And so over the years they started out trying to use the classics, but as the population of the university changed, pretty soon I found myself teaching these basic courses. I was teaching Chicano poetry and there weren't a lot of Chicano poets. But the idea had to be that you had to put in the hands of these students who had had an alternative kind of upbringing—for example most of the Chicano students that I knew really couldn't read Spanish. They had kitchen Spanish, but they spoke, you know, call it Spanglish. I could read Spanish better than most of the students. So we couldn't use Spanish texts, so we had to find texts that would— When I was at UCLA and we were setting up Chicano courses and so forth there were people

that were arguing for Atzlán, you know, these mythical entities; Aztec legends, things of that sort. No one has cracked the Aztec language as far as I know yet.

Those were legitimate concerns, I felt. You had 500,000 Chicanos living in Los Angeles County. UCLA had no courses that had anything to do with Mexican-American experience. I was part of the committee that forced them to take it on, but with great reluctance. The faculty resisted it. They said, "Nothing to teach."

Vanderscoff: So it's this very slow echo of changes in greater culture reflected in academia?

White: That's right, that's right. But see, when it comes to debating the canon and things like that, sectarian movements, women want to be represented, straight women—what about the lesbian women? What about transvestites? What about transgender?

Vanderscoff: So you see this increased fracturing?

White: Sure, but that's typical of the kind of culture—the impact of globalization on a culture that is primarily tied to market phenomena. They say anything that will sell brings pressure to bear upon the educational institution to prepare us in some way. See, increasingly we're preparing consumers rather than producers.

Vanderscoff: And when you say "we" are you referring to the academic institution?

White: The universities, the educational institutions, but also the entertainment institutions: the media, magazines, newspapers, television. They're producing consumers. Think of all the people sitting in bars drinking and eating and negotiating sex. What else is there? Divorce, 'Desperate Housewives of Beverly Hills,' Kim Kardashian.

Vanderscoff: And so you sense that's building up to some sort of fever pitch?

White: Yeah. And every time you have a crisis then the pitch intensifies, because what you do is you increase consumerism as a way of life, and then you lay off massive amounts of people. You take these guys between the ages of forty and sixty-five—there are about seven million of them who've been kicked out of the labor force, and these were middle management people and they can't get back in.

Vanderscoff: And so in this onrushing flow of events, this tide, where do you see yourself as an educator, and where do you see a program like history of consciousness? How is it positioned in that? Is moving with that, is it some sort of island in that—what is its function?

White: Well, see, I saw education and the humanities—and the human sciences I would prefer to call them—as teaching critique, teaching this kind of stuff. I think the greatest need we have right now of reform is in the law. Our courts are now completely owned by corporations, and the police force and the prison authorities are all being privatized, just like the security forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. There were more people there in security, civilians, than there were military: 160,000. Our lawyers have been completely suborned by the system.

The law now has been commodified and privatized. Why, you have only to look at the prison population, eighty percent of which is black, Hispanic. If you want to know what a society values, look at whom they lock up and why they lock them up. The upper classes have no problem using drugs, finding drugs. They're never bothered until someone commits suicide like Heath Ledger or someone like that. But these poor schmucks on the street out there selling a little dope and they're given what, ten years or something?

Vanderscoff: Well it's like the classic sentencing disparity between cocaine and crack cocaine, one being more of a Wall Street type of drug and the other being a street drug.

White: Well, they did a survey recently of lawyers and they asked them, "How many of you believe"—young lawyers—"How many of you believe that you must break the law or skirt it significantly in order to be successful in your career as a lawyer?" And twenty-six percent said, "You must be willing to break the law."

Vanderscoff: Twenty-six percent?

White: Yeah. That was in the *Times* yesterday. You see, the legal profession and therefore the courts—as you can see it in the Supreme Court now. The majority of the Supreme Court is manifestly political, engaged in the Republican policy of destroying the opposition, not just beating them. They want to destroy the Democratic Party.

Vanderscoff: Well, in the sense of the way compromise has bled out as any sort of virtue.

White: Yeah, it's gone. It's gone, and the law, which should be regulating the political—I mean the law should be that which is regulating. You see, Obama's absolutely reluctant to regulate the financial institutions, the banks. And again you've got the Barclay's scandal now, this guy Jamie Dimon comes up, he says he lost seven billion dollars, no one knows where it is. He's the great anti-regulator of Morgan Stanley. So for the most part we're deadened by the influx of it. It's not that we have no information. It's that we got too much. It's overload.

Vanderscoff: It's a glut.

White: Yeah. And so what should be function of the educational institution—

Vanderscoff: Yes, if there is indeed some sort of cultural deadening going on, intellectual deadening, as you argue, is history of consciousness somehow breaking up—

White: Well, it became a place where people who don't fit in found a place. These were people who were square pegs in round holes or whatever the term is, and they were misfits. And it was true of the faculty. They were unhappy. I found it so easy to recruit topflight people, so easy, because they're all dissatisfied. All the best people are dissatisfied. Now, many of them can't afford to leave where they are. But an awful lot of them, especially the young ones, are moveable if they can find a place where they can do what they want to do. That's what histcon allows its faculty to do.

Vanderscoff: It offers a certain freedom?

White: Teresa de Lauretis. I recruited her because I met her at a conference and she said, "You've got to get me out of the University of Wisconsin. They've got me teaching beginning French and nothing but that, or beginning Italian." And here is a woman who is one of the great theorists, you know?

[pause]

Vanderscoff: Well, we can rest here for the session and pick up the thread next time with your departure from UCSC, move onto other institutions, and then teaching and so on.

White: But after I left, you see, I don't really have much to do—I have no real knowledge about history of consciousness since then. Not really.

Vanderscoff: Well that's fine, we can also just discuss you and how that impacted you and your thought.

White: Well, but remember, I said the program is nothing but the individuals who were in it. See, this is why as the individuals change the program changes. The kind of people that Gopal Balakrishnan, who's a very brilliant guy, that he wants in the program, they want to study Marx or Freud. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: So you're sensing this full circle thing coming along?

White: Yeah, that's fairly interesting.

Vanderscoff: Well, we can revisit the questions and see what might be pertinent for a second session. So, thank you very much and we'll close off the record for now.

"A Nobler Designation:" Philosophies on Teaching

Vanderscoff: Today is Monday, July 23rd 2012 and we are here to do the second part of Hayden White's oral history. Today we are going to start out by talking about the different functions of being a professor in a research university and we're going to start out with the teaching dimension. I'd like to talk about the mentorship aspect of your life and work, your dynamic with students and teaching. When you went to graduate school and then when you went on to your first appointments were you attracted to the idea of being a teacher as well as a scholar?

White: No, I was primarily interested in becoming a teacher, a university professor, which is one of the few places you can live an intellectual life in the United States while being assured an income. And what you're doing in teaching is examining the very ideas that you're interested in as an intellectual. We don't really have the profession of intellectual in this country as they do in Europe, for example, or as they do in China, for that matter—for many years the literati were a specific class. So the one place that intellectual work—and this includes scientific work, of course, which increasingly moved into the university but gives a different aspect to intellectual work because you require equipment, technology, laboratories, a different kind of equipment to do your work from that required by intellectuals working in the domains of society, culture, the

arts—so, it seemed to me that the one place you could do intellectual work, a lot of which has to do with one's own identity, because it has to do with one's relationship to the public world of politics and so forth—the only place you can do that kind of consistently and not have to do it part time is in the university. And so I entered the university, but before the university had become identified as a research place. When I entered the university, you didn't even have to have a Ph.D. in order to teach at the university in those days. In fact, even as late as the 1930s, a Harvard BA would allow you to teach in the university. The Ph.D. is an importation from Germany, where specialized scholarship was invented on the model of science so that you have extra postgraduate work. So anyway, that's why I ended up in the university. I assumed teaching would be part of it, or the basis of it, and then you would do your research in order to hone your intellectual skills so you could be a better teacher.

Vanderscoff: So in some sense that was the heart of your interest in it, having that dynamic?

White: In my day in graduate school no one spoke very much about publication.

Vanderscoff: Really, so that's something—that's a trend that moved in later as the universities moved towards the research model?

White: Definitely. That is to say, it was always assumed in Germany in the doctoral programs that you publish your dissertation, but after that no particular expectations. And this was true in the English university system, too. The assumption was that when you got your Ph.D. this was your test of your ability

as a scholar. You didn't have to go on proving it indefinitely with more publication.

Vanderscoff: And, of course, now tenure hinges on that in many ways.

White: Yes.

Vanderscoff: Now UCSC, in particular, was, of course, founded on a premise of an intimate undergraduate education.

White: Right.

Vanderscoff: And histcon to this day does not offer an undergraduate major. What relevance did undergraduate teaching have for you?

White: Well, in my earlier career as a young instructor in the 1950s, at a university you were an instructor and you taught nothing but undergraduate classes. You had to earn the right to teach graduate students. The graduate student contingent in the humanities—in those days I feel like history was always small—the graduate students were not expected to be teaching assistants, or if they were they were assistants to the professors. They weren't doing the teaching. And so you had small graduate programs, the main purpose of which was to produce Ph.D.s who would go on become professors themselves, not research scientists. You see, it's one thing to have a graduate program set up to produce research scientists running their own labs and so forth and teaching being considered something like apprenticeship, and it's another thing to have a graduate program set up to produce more professors who are going to be teachers. As the university became more and more oriented towards—as a result

of its alliance with the military-industrial complex—research was done in private labs: Bell Laboratory, places like that. Increasingly though, however, with the space program and the Cold War scientific research in the United States was directed towards two things: revision of new technologies for capitalist commodity production and war. The American economy has been geared for war since 1941 continually. We've been in war continually from there forward.

Vanderscoff: And you think that university system has inevitably gotten drawn into that process?

White: Well, NASA is really about military things.

Vanderscoff: The space race and so on.

White: Sure.

Vanderscoff: Has there been a particular set of values—particularly in the sense of this changing institution, the way the university interacts with society and government and war—has there been a particular set of values that you've tried to impart to your students?

White: No—promote intellectual curiosity, promote learning in the service of good citizenship, active participation. Those are my principal values. I would never try to proselytize for a particular ideology. This doesn't mean that I don't make comments about the current political scene, but my idea is that good intellectual work can be done by political conservatives as well as by political radicals. Intellectual work should be carried out in service to the community, but the community is varied and there are different interests, and if you're going to

think democratically then it would be really a violation of democratic principles to see education as conditioning to produce a particular kind of political program, or convert someone from being a conservative into being a liberal or something of that sort.

Vanderscoff: So it's this sense that wherever someone comes from ideologically, helping them explore that in a serious and thorough fashion?

White: That's right. It seems to me that the problem with the extreme left and the extreme right is they tend towards dogmatism, and dogmatism cuts off thought. If you're a dogmatist you have an automatic reaction for everything. And so the enemy of intellectual work is dogmatism, prejudice, that kind of thing, so you work to create the open mind rather than the closed mind.

Vanderscoff: So as a teacher, how do you position yourself relative to the institution—UCSC and academia in general—that you are a part of? What's your take on the value of adherence to convention in academia, and did you impart that perspective to your students?

White: Well, convention and tradition yes. Again, if those are viewed as sources of dogmatic and prejudicial thinking, they are to be deconstructed. They are to be critically taken apart and examined for their effects and the way in which they will foreclose any kind of open society. That's all I have to say about that. Convention, yeah. One of the things I teach my students is that their doctoral dissertation is a performance in which you show to a group of professionals that you speak their language, that you can do what they do. You may choose not to do it, but if you want your Ph.D. you're trying to get a license to enter a

profession and the profession will have its conventions. You have to show that you can do that. Ideally, you show you can do it better than the conventional way.

Vanderscoff: Right. I would like to talk about a particular incident in your teaching career. As a UCLA teacher in defense of your classroom and students you brought a case against the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] that ultimately went to the state supreme court. What were the circumstances that led to this case?

White: Oh well, it was civil rights protests in the early seventies ticked off by the Cambodian invasion where American troops spilled out of Vietnam into Cambodia in pursuit of the Viet Cong. This was an invasion. In those days they tried to call it 'police action' or something like that. It was an invasion, and it prompted an eruption of antiwar activity, combined as always in that time with civil rights agitation, because the two were seen as twin aspects of the same overreaching of state power. So, there were eruptions all over campuses all over the United States and especially in Berkeley and UCLA: large numbers involved in those two campuses. And you got the usual police response. They came in and overreacted, beat up people indiscriminately, invaded the library—rushed into the library and began beating up people that were not even involved in the demonstrations. (laughs) Again, like the Cambodian invasion, pursuing what they thought were criminals going in the other direction. And in the course of this a number of undercover agents who had been enrolled as students but really gathering information on students and professors who were politically active surfaced, one of whom was in my class, my course—I think he got a 'B.' (laughs)

I encountered him at one of the demonstrations and I confronted him. And he and his partner at the time, both in plainclothes, jumped in their car and sped away, knocking over, hitting one of the people. And they didn't stop, but they kept going. So I considered this hit-and-run. So what did I do, naïve me? I call the police and report it. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: The proper channels, yeah. (laughs)

White: And so I identify the guy, you see. And so he works it out with Chief Davis[20] that Chief Davis will go on television throughout the state of California that night on the evening news and indicate that these police officers were fleeing from me for fear of their lives.

Vanderscoff: You were pursuing them with a pitchfork, or something.

White: Yeah, and they held up an officer's jacket, ripped and torn, that supposedly I had torn from the back—

Vanderscoff: Rent with your bare hands (laughs).

White: Yeah. Although this guy was simply in cahoots. It was a complete setup. This always happens. You accuse the police, they immediately come back and accuse you of a crime: resisting arrest, right, or something like that. And this particular incident then led to further gatherings of the students and demands to close the university down and so forth. And it led to a fair amount of unwanted

[20] Edward M. Davis was chief of the Los Angeles Police Department from 1969-1978 and later a state senator

publicity on my part that led various right-wing groups to start threatening me and so forth.

Vanderscoff: You received hate mail, or something like that?

White: Yeah. Well, telephone calls at three in the morning from these people, these right-wing groups.

Vanderscoff: John Birch types?

White: Yeah, in fact it was John Birch; they were very active in that. So, the ACLU contacted me and said they were interested in this issue of the use of public funds to investigate people secretly who were not suspected of a crime, but who were suspected of the wrong political views: left-wing political views—Marxism, communism—it was always communism, communism everywhere. So they asked me if I would serve as the complainant on this case. They needed someone involved in it because the ACLU has to—I had to go forth as a complainant against the use of public funds. It was a class action suit, and so I never had to appear in court or anything, the ACLU argued it and they lost the first case and then on appeal they won it and then the police department countersued and so it took it to the Supreme Court.

Vanderscoff: And what did the Supreme Court rule, what were the ramifications of that?

White: They ruled that police should not use public funds for this kind of surveillance.[21] They were supposed to desist. But they didn't, of course. They continued. They continue today. It's well known.

Vanderscoff: So you think that's still a factor in terms of the classroom dynamic—surveillance?

White: Well, the first suit was on the basis of violation of civil rights, that it had a chilling effect on free speech, and they lost that one. Knowing that there were police officers undercover, or suspecting, had the chilling effect on free speech—they lost that one, because the idea was even if you suspected it you still have a right to free speech. It's not like being threatened by a police officer for saying something in the classroom.

Vanderscoff: They argued there was a distinction there.

White: So they came back with a class action suit, misuse of public funds, and they won that. It's technically a little more sophisticated. It has to do with—the ACLU filed a complaint asking for an opinion on whether they had grounds for a suit. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: These preliminary measures, yeah.

White: And that's what was at issue. Did it seem *prima facie* that this was a misuse of public funds if it was going on? You see, in other words you didn't have to prove that it was going on.

[21] The Supreme Court ruling for White v. Davis can be accesed at Google Scholar. It includes a summary of the plaintiff's case and the defense's case. The link is: http://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=9178369609897341 25&q=white+v.+davis&hl=en&as_sdt=2,33&as_vis=1

Vanderscoff: So, how did this incident impact your vision of your role and obligations as a teacher?

White: Well, it's quite interesting how I got involved in this. I was already involved in civil rights protests and so forth and became a kind of spokesman for local groups back in Rochester, New York in the late sixties, when black people were being beaten up regularly by the police. My students were involved, and they would say, "Professor White, we're going to have a rally. Would you speak?" So, of course. I can't purport to be a mentor of young people and not support them in what I regard as just causes.

Vanderscoff: So that's a part of your moral obligations as a teacher?

White: Your moral obligation is to show up. (laughs) You've got to show up. If you're going to say something. You got to put your money where your mouth is, or walk the walk if you're going to talk the talk. Yeah, that is my view about the intellectual life: you have to be willing to risk something.

Vanderscoff: And so this incident clarified your sense of—

White: Well, yeah, clarified—but I'm always suspicious of the police. I know that the police exist. They were created to protect the property of the rich from the poor. That's what they were created for in the early nineteenth century in England. It was quite open, you know. Prior to that there were only private police forces you hired. The rich had their own security, as it were. And then in the early nineteenth century, as private property became the rule rather than the exception—there used to be property held in common, sheep runs—

Vanderscoff: The enclosure movement.

White: Yeah, exactly. So I've always been suspicious of the police. When I was in ninth grade I was working at a lifeguard at a swimming pool in the South and the swimming pool had a wooden structure all around it and it burned down one night. So who did the police suspect immediately? People that were employees, not anyone else. Same thing happened to my son who working at a gas station and he was robbed one night at gunpoint. He calls the police and they come over and they suspected that he'd done it. "Who was your buddy?" He was traumatized by that—naïve, call the police, right? I have a lawyer friend who says that black people's experience—one black person kills another and you call the police and they immediately suspect you.

Vanderscoff: So you have a sense that as a teacher there are forces that can be active that aren't conducive to learning and towards free speech and towards the sanctity of the classroom, in some sense?

White: Sure. Modern society does not want free speech anywhere. They've got too many secrets to hide. That's our United States government. The budget of the CIA is secret.

Vanderscoff: And so you position yourself as a teacher in some sense trying to shed light on these things?

White: Transparency. I want transparency. Obama promised transparency, he's doing anything but that. You realize the Obama administration—I just saw this

this morning—has prosecuted more people for whistleblowing than all the presidents' administrations prior to himself?

Vanderscoff: I had not heard that.

White: Well, I just got it this morning from the *Times*. Yeah, I am deeply suspicious of the state. This is one thing that conservatives and radicals agree on, you see.

Vanderscoff: Yes, the libertarians and so on.

White: Isn't that true? The libertarians say, "The state is trying to impinge upon my liberty." They are. The radicals say, "The state is an instrument of exploitation of the poor by the rich." They are. It is.

Vanderscoff: You are quoted as saying in an article in the book *Re-Figuring Hayden White* that, "teaching is no more of a science than medicine and even less of an art."[22] Sum of the parts, keeping in mind this LAPD incident and everything you did at UCSC subsequently, how do you assess your record as a teacher when you reflect on what has been meaningful in your work? How much does that title matter when compared to *scholar*?

White: Well, I think teacher is a nobler designation than scholar. Scholars can do their work in isolation and in fact prefer isolation. A pure scholar doesn't want to be bothered.

Vanderscoff: A monastic sensibility.

---

[22] See Ewa Domanka. "Hayden White: An Academic Teacher." *Re-Figuring Hayden White*. Eds. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domanska and Hans Kellner. (Stanford University Press, 2009).

White: Yeah, exactly. Solitude is very important for a scholar. A teacher is preeminently involved in work in civil society. And the teacher—and this is why all of these instances of child abuse are so terrible. You're given the young people of the generation. You're given charge of them. Joe Paterno—this whole thing at Penn State is not only a terrible thing, it's like the child abuse in the church, you know? There's kind of a social contract that the people turn over their children to you—the teachers—and you have these people that are exploiting them for their own delectation. So I regard the teaching role as a noble calling because it requires a certain amount of self-sacrifice and it requires, as I say, risk. The students are in your charge even when they are grown up as university students. That means that when they get into difficulty you should be with them.

Vanderscoff: There's a sense of very serious obligation there.

White: Oh yeah, a responsibility. You see, now they're turning the university into managerial things where they talk about students as your customers. A student isn't your customer! The student is your charge. You're responsible for them in a way. A corporation is not responsible for its customers. It wants to screw its customers (laughs)!

Vanderscoff: So there's something much more profound and intellectual when it comes to a teacher's dynamic with their student?

White: Oh yeah, in the same way that you expect a parent to stand with their children.

Vanderscoff: So, *in loco parentis* in a very serious sense?

White: Well, yeah, except that that's a bad sign because it assumes that—see, I think that the teacher's charge is more important for this, because you're helping the student detach themselves from the family. You have to ease that movement out of the family into the larger social world, and you're trying to help that transition. So I think that this is a different kind of—this is why people who think that the parents should be able to interfere in the curriculum of the school have got it all wrong. The school's function is not to reinforce the values and the ideals of the family. It's to help the student in the movement from the family into the larger public domain.

Vanderscoff: And so it's this sense of teaching the student certain tools of inquiry?

White: No, it's to teach them to be self-reliant rather than to depend on the authority, some authority that they've been conditioned to say is always right, to believe is always right.

Vanderscoff: You've mentioned, I believe in our previous interview, that the history of consciousness students in particular were famously independent in the way they went about their scholarship. How did that influence your thought?

White: That's right. They were really excellent in that respect. That is to say, what they did was insist upon whatever motives, of say, having input into both the form and the content of the instruction. And that was in general happening all across the country from the late sixties through the seventies. The student movement. The student movements were about student rights and about the necessity of conforming to democratic principles even in the classroom situation,

where typically and traditionally you had authoritarian structures. So, this meant a loosening of the authority of the teacher, and many teachers responded to that negatively. But on the whole I think it was very good. There were typical moments in the late sixties and seventies where someone rises up and says, "Why should we study this?" The traditional response of the professor is, "You're doing it because I tell you it's worth doing and you'll see the benefits later on." But I always felt that a teacher who could not provide adequate reasons to his or her students for studying the materials they were studying really deserved the rebellion that came as a result of that. Because see, the thing about students—this is age-specific, you can't do this with kids in the first grade—but I'm talking about by the time the young people reach adolescence they have a right to ask, "Why are you doing this to me?" (laughs)?

Vanderscoff: And so in some sense history of consciousness and the students who came there were something of a celebration of this new, more open form of teacher-student dynamics?

White: Not really. Many of the people teaching in it really wanted them to learn a professional specialty. Many of the students, given the freedom to wander where they would go across the disciplines, as they came to get their Ph.D.'s said, "Wait, what does it mean, 'history of consciousness,' how can I get a job, there's no such field?" So they wanted something called a special designation that they had majored in, say political science or—

Vanderscoff: A focus within the doctorate.

White: Yeah, a 'focus' they called it. I always told them, "Don't worry about that. If you're any good—first of all, when you're being hired at that level your resume, the interview and then the dissertation you've written—most of these people are looking for smart people. If you're smart and you write a smart dissertation they'll want to hire you. They'll be able to see it.

Vanderscoff: And so your function is to steer a student in that direction rather than into any discipline?

White: Yeah, to have them turn out a good dissertation and have some idea of what they want to do. Why they're studying, what they're studying, why they're *not* specialists in the way a conventional Ph.D. is.

Vanderscoff: And understanding that there's a certain value in that?

White: No, I don't think you can presuppose that. I think that you have to be able to argue it persuasively, because in our time knowledge comes packaged in specialties, disciplines. Many scientists still have a prejudice against the very notion of interdisciplinary work. They say, "Interdisciplinary means 'between disciplines.'"

Vanderscoff: Falling through the cracks or something.

White: Yeah, you fall through the cracks rather than disciplines, and the only kind of learning they recognize is disciplinary learning. They will entertain the idea of 'multi-disciplinary,': biophysics, right? But the idea of something that is negotiating some terrain between the two…. (shrugs)

The Merit of Moral Relativism: Philosophies on Writing and History

Vanderscoff: I'd like to ask a few questions about that other aspect of being a university professor—writing, research, the scholastic aspect. You've written extensively on history as a discipline and your work has drawn criticism, including accusations that it represents some sort of hazardous foray into relativism.

White: Well, it does. (laughs) I accept the title of relativism.

Vanderscoff: So keeping that answer in mind, is your work at all informed by or concerned with cultivating some sense of moral awareness in your audience, even if it be that of a relativistic morality?

White: Well, it seems to me that morality is always relative. You see, I don't believe there is an absolute morality. It seems to me that anyone's moral code is always referable to the social milieu and the cultural milieu in which they've been raised, so that the morality of Pago Pago indigenous people—and I have no idea what it is, right? So, when we talk about 'moral' we're talking about moral codes, notions of what is prescribed and what is proscribed in a culture, and that's always culture-specific. It's true that every culture has dietary laws, for example. Certain things are prohibited. But they vary according the culture. There's no point, you know, in prohibiting seafood for desert people. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: So you'd argue that there's a certain governing moral relativism, really?

White: Well, I think that before you make a moral judgment, before you act on a moral judgment, you have to think: is my judgment only a reflex action reflecting my own values and not taking into account others? This is what's been raised in this debate over women's rights in other cultures, where women say, "We voluntarily submit to the authority of our husbands," or "We like clitoridectomy and you're saying we shouldn't have this because it—or that we should wait until a person is of consensual age." She's going to say, "I don't want it when I'm fifteen," you see, rather than whenever—I guess in some societies women are given this operation at puberty. It's the same thing: the Germans have just passed a law against circumcision, and, of course, Muslims—I think there are four million Muslims in Germany—and, of course, they're circumcised. And, of course, Jews, and the Jews especially are upset about it. The argument all has to do with imposing pain and mutilation on a young person before they're at the age to consent to it. So, my view always about morality is that before you say, "That is wrong, we'll have clitoridectomy here but our own circumcision is perfectly all right and clitoridectomies are not," maybe you ought to think about the relative differences, you see, and expectations of what you consider to be human or humane treatment of young people.

Vanderscoff: And do you conceive of your published work as putting forth that position one way or another, through different modes?

White: Yeah, I think so, because it's always against dogma and prejudice and kneejerk reactions that cause pain—gratuitous pain. There's enough pain being caused every day in animal slaughtering. 300,000 are hit by bullets in this country annually. 30,000 die by automobile accidents annually in the United

States. Is this a cause of moral repugnance? Twelve people are killed by this guy in Colorado at the *Batman* opening and it's a day of national mourning. 30,000 are killed in automobile accidents and no regulations on speed, or—

Vanderscoff: So there's already a moral relativism, you think, inherent in that?

White: Sure, it's always working that way. Justice is always differential in every society. This is why for a long time women were the property of men, of their husbands, or of their fathers. They were the property; they could be disposed of as property. We look upon that as absolutely wrong, right? Many women opposed their own liberation, as they still do.

Vanderscoff: So, in light of these issues of moral relativism and morality in one culture versus another, do you see your work and thought as directly related to social praxis in the sense that a traditional philosophy of history is, say Marx or something in that vein?

White: My view is this. I would like to instill—I don't think you can do it at this age in which I meet my students, who are older than elementary school. But before you act on any moral principle stop and think as to whether this is a thought-through process that you're willing to accept the consequences and so forth, that you can live with them. You know, for example, that's one of the things I discovered about military service. Once I got into the military I could not live with the consequences of ever having killed anybody, whether in battle or not. I couldn't live with those. So the idea that killing is okay in wartime I don't buy. And yet it's built into the law. You're not guilty of murder if you kill someone in the performance of your military duties, under officers' [orders]. So

these are all kinds of issues that I want people to open up to, so there'll be no knee-jerk reaction based upon some putative moral absolute. Stop and think. (pause; laughs)

Vanderscoff: So, your books as a stop sign? (laughs)

White: That's about all you can do with students; "Just stop and think." And then they say, "Well, what do you mean, 'think,'" and that's where you start discussing what thinking is, and what its function is.

Vanderscoff: And applying that in different contexts, disciplinary and so on.

White: Yeah, that one kind of thinking is appropriate in one context and not in another. That when you're having a fight with your girlfriend the analytical mind is not such a great thing. (laughs) If you're having a fight with your girlfriend, if you've reached some pure logic on the part of one of the [members of the] couple it isn't going to help very much.

Vanderscoff: That particularly rigid framework doesn't really snap in place there.

White: No, it won't. There's a time for that if you're in a lab.

Vanderscoff: So, a contextual thought process?

White: Yeah, always context specific. Or as Donna Haraway would say, "situated knowledge."

Vanderscoff: Instead of just having this inscribed tablet of stone, "Well, here it is."

White: That's right. "I know my principles, I'm unyielding in the application of them. They apply in all situations. Never lie." You know, ridiculous.

Vanderscoff: So, your writing hinges in some sense, it seems to me, on this specialized scholarly language. It requires a functioning understanding of rhetoric and tropes and terms like 'prefigure,' 'metahistory,' so on. Do you think that history has developed a more specialized language in the modern area relative to its "golden age" of the nineteenth century? How has this specialized language impacted history and humanistic theory in general in terms of its position on the spectrum between science and art, and in terms of its intended audience?[23]

White: Well, those are good questions Cameron. You've really done your homework. Today, history is both a very important field insofar as everyone has an opinion on it or is allowed to have an opinion; "History teaches this; history proves; history will show," on the one hand. On the other hand it's a very low-level science, and no really thinks it—in certain fields like economic history they brought in metrical measuring. So you've got econometrics and so you've got a kind of pseudoscience of economics, which means it's been quantified. The measurement system has been quantified, and they think this takes it out of the domain of value.

[23] The term 'golden age' of history, in reference to the works of the nineteenth century, is used consistently throughout Dr. White's book *Metahistory*, which is where the interviewer found the term.

Vanderscoff: Because you can point to a ledger sheet?

White: Yeah, but all you can produce is correlations. You can't produce causal relationships. You can't predict by it except probabilistically and so forth. But certain fields pretend to be scientific. This is true especially of the history of science. It is a special field usually practiced outside the physical sciences, right?

Vanderscoff: Right.

White: Historical knowledge typically, conventionally, historically, has come packaged in commonsensical terms and in ordinary language and in natural language, not in specialized language. In physics, you can mark the time when it became a modern science by the invention of calculus. Calculus is the language by which you talk about physical entities. If you can't put a physical or natural relationship into terms of an algorithm or a formula, then it's not a physical entity. But we can't do that in history, because so much of history is studying intentionality, decision, judgment, action on the basis of judgment. And they keep trying to—this kid that they picked up who did all the shooting—

Vanderscoff: In Colorado?[24]

White: They're trying to find out what could've made him do it, so they're looking into his history. They send him to a psychiatrist and so forth. They're kind of bewildered by the fact that he was a good student, an honors student. Well, how could that be if he was—? (laughs)

[24] Referring to the July 20, 2012 mass shooting in a midnight movie theater screening of *The Dark Night Rises* in Aurora, Colorado carried out by James Eagan Holmes, in which 12 people were killed and 58 injured.

Vanderscoff: Such a malcontent or something like that.

White: Yeah, right.

Vanderscoff: Do you think history has moved towards a more specialized language? Have there been efforts?

White: There have been efforts. The Annales school in Paris tried to utilize measurement techniques over long terms, from Paleolithic times to the present day, climate change—you can measure those kinds of things. Plagues, disease, productivity, those things can all be measured, and for about thirty years they dominated historical sciences in the West, they aspired to a scientific— One of the things they wanted to get rid of was the individual. They were only interested in sets, groups. And the other thing they wanted to get rid of was narrative: no more storytelling. Stories *are* the ideology, they said. But it's come back to narrative now.

Vanderscoff: Returning to story and myth as these very relevant factors?

White: Yeah. Not only that, in political science the guys are coming around saying, "Well, Obama has departed from his original narrative and he has to get a new narrative." They talk about it that way.

Vanderscoff: So he needs to switch his stories.

White: By the way, they don't mean he should lie. They mean he has to take the facts and rearrange them so they tell a different story.

Vanderscoff: They cast light differently.

White: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: It seems to me that when it comes to some works of history—like for example, even to understand a term like 'metahistory' you need to have some sort of grounding in what 'meta' as a prefix means, and that is not something you understand typically as a teenager in high school or something like that.

White: No.

Vanderscoff: And so there is this relatively select pool of people who would be an audience for that. Do you think that this sort of selectivity of language pushes it—history, your writing—towards science in some sense, in this sense that people do need to have this certain level of acumen and vocabulary to grasp it?

White: It pushes it towards philosophy, and philosophy is no science. So it pushes it towards philosophy, but a certain kind of philosophy that has to do with the relationship between thought and language. And then, once you open that up then you have the possibility of different modes of language used, from the poetic to the prosaic, from the literal to the figurative, and so forth. And one of the great problems in philosophy nowadays, since linguistic analysis came in, is how it is that people often times read figurative language literally. Now, 'meta' is just the Greek word for 'post,' or 'after.' But you know, I got a notice in the email two days ago, three days ago; University of Ghent is hiring or wants a professor of metahistory.

Vanderscoff: Really?

White: Yeah. And there's a circle for the study of metahistory in Moscow. It's finally entered the language. I didn't invent the word. The word became prominent around—well, it first appears in the English in the late 1930s, 1940s. The French have a term *posthistoire*, which means metahistory. And the Germans, when they translated the book, they decided to leave it in its English form. They didn't want to say *metageschichte*, so they just left it 'metahistory,' and then left the rest of the title in German.

Vanderscoff: So in some sense using this slightly more specialized language is taking tools from other disciplines and applying them to put history on the operating table, in some sense?

White: Well, not really. I don't think it's more scientific. It's very interesting, I sent a copy of *Metahistory* to an old teacher of mine whom I revered, and he thought I was trying to make history more scientific and he didn't agree with this. But what I was trying to do was say this: we've had histories of historical writing for a couple of centuries. No one would've thought of writing a history of historical writing before the nineteenth century. You wouldn't have a history of historical writing; you'd have historical writing. (laughs) But if you were going to have a history of historical writing would it be a conventional history of that thing called historical writing, or would it not have to have some kind of theory of the nature of writing?

Vanderscoff: In order to be self-conscious?

White: So that you could account for the fact that different histories are cast in different modes. That's why I said there's a tragic way; there's a romantic way,

and so forth.[25] So, I really was saying, "Look, if we're going to have historical writing we have to first look at the writing that historians do, the product of this operation. It's writing, first of all." That's why sometimes when I'm lecturing, they say, "What does a thing have to be in order to be identifiable as a history?" We're discussing this on the history and theory website right now.[26] A number of young people. "Do I have to write narratives?" one guy says. "What does that mean?" I say, "Well, one of the things it has to be is written. If it's going to be a history it first of all has to be written." It can't be oral; and it can't be danced; it can't be gestured.

Vanderscoff: So, history is created, you'd argue, through the process of inscription?

White: Yeah, that's right. That's the presupposition. It isn't until Herodotus writes down his stories he was telling in the public square that it becomes history. After that, if you're going to contribute to the discourse of history it has to be writing. You can't get up in the middle of the American Historical Association and say, "Oh, I have a—I would like to contribute to history!" They'd say, "Write it up, kid, and send it in." (laughs)

[25] See the introduction to *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) for further explanation of these modes, and for general context for this discussion.
[26] The website referenced is http://www.historyandtheory.org/index.html

The Past as Other, the Past as Present: History and Myth, Culture and Nature

Vanderscoff: So, if you were to regard a culture that has more of an oral tradition in how the past is passed down, would you regard that as something that dances more towards myth?

White: Yeah. It would, but in a neutral sense. Mythos means 'plot,' or by the way, so does 'logos' when they're talking about the story. They're both 'plot.' Myth really seems to be about a kind of presentation, whereas the plot—logos—is about the structure of the presentation. It's the different between story and plot. A story is the unfolding of the thing; the plot is the structure you can gradually see being imposed upon the materials being spoken about.

Vanderscoff: And do you envision that there is some sort of collaborative relationship between history and myth in any sense? Does myth exist in history, does history exist in myth? Or is there a bifurcation there?

White: But you see, from the early nineteenth century on history defines itself in its rationality and its scientificity as being against myth. Whatever else it is, it is trying to dispel mythic understandings—or misunderstandings—of history. It's trying to uncover lies, expose lies, fictionalizations, imposition of desire upon the reality, and so that's the critical function of the historian. But in order to do this he must set up a counter-story of the real facts, you see. And that's where he borrows the forms of understanding that inform myth, what makes myth satisfying. I was thinking this morning, whatever else a novelist may be doing, a novelist or a poet is giving us meaning. Now, if I write a history in the form of a

narrative so that it looks like and reads like a novel, am I not endowing the things I'm speaking about with a meaning in excess of what the mere facts recorded seriatim would be? So, it was my effort to try to make historians self-conscious about the ways in which writing mediates whatever intentions they have in conveying their thought about the past and its relationship to the present. I always add that because it seems to me historical inquiry is not only about the past. It's always about what is the relationship of the past to the present that looks different from that past. The present, whatever else it is, is not the past. This means there's some disjunction between the two. How do you bridge that?

Not all cultures feel there's a disjunction between the past and the present, by the way. The past is not a problem for the ancient Hebrews, in the Old Testament the past is always present in the form of the covenant. In a sense it's true of the Greeks with their cyclical notion of history and with their idea of ancestor worship. The ancestors are present in the hearth. So they are always with you, the past is always with you in a way that in modernity we now say, "No, the past is the other." "It's a foreign country," as one guy said.[27]

Vanderscoff: So really when we are talking about history we're really talking about an essentially modernistic conception of what history means, a very culturally bound one?

White: Yeah. And by the way, that's what distinguishes Greek and Roman historical consciousness from everything since the birth of Christ. The Christian

[27] A paraphrase from L.P. Hartley, British writer, from his 1953 novel *The Go-Between*.

conception of history is quite different, utterly different. It allows for real difference. For the Greek in many respects it all comes around to the same thing, forever and ever, whereas for the Christians there's a genuinely open way of thinking you can change. Not only can you change, you can convert.

Vanderscoff: You have related that "we do not have to choose between art and science if hope to continue to speak about culture as against nature, and moreover, to speak about it in ways that are responsible to all the various dimensions of our specifically human being."[28]

White: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: And that's from *Tropics of Discourse*. Is culture/nature a more useful polemic in terms of governing your work and history and the humanities in general as opposed to science/art?

White: Yeah, I think so, because it seems to me that both science and art are in culture and are about nature, as being as well about culture, about their own milieu. That's the difference between modern science and modern art as against its traditional forms, which always presuppose some transcendental reality that they're trying to attain to.

Vanderscoff: Like tap into, or something.

[28] See *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978) for context. In addition to this and previously cited texts, the interviewer also consulted essays from *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature and Theory, 1957-2007* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1987).

White: Yeah, like Plato's theory of the ideal forms or something like that. Or for the Hebrews and the Christians a transcendental God provides a kind of stable platform. But the culture/nature difference: to realize the extent to which people want to believe that everything in culture is an extension or continuation of nature, that it's 'the way things are' in a cosmic— But in reality, as you can see from the effects of modern technology and industry on the environment, culture in some sense—well, Lévi-Strauss says that modern science and art are not either in nature or in culture; they're examining the break that occurs. For example, he takes the incest taboo. There's no incest taboo in the rest of nature. The taboo for him is the thing that distinguishes cultures. Something that would be—you know, dogs shit, they're not ashamed about defecating in public, or fucking in public. It's only human beings that decide there has to be a place for this and a place for that. (laughs) That's culture, not nature.

Vanderscoff: Compartmentalization of all these things.

White: Yeah, right.

Vanderscoff: Interesting. So it's this notion of—

White: I think that's a distinctively modern, anthropological insight. It was available in other cultures but in the form of a radical opposition. That is to say, for Christianity, nature is neutral. Man falls, though, out of it, out of the natural into this condition of frailty and corruption. That's one thing. It's another thing, though, to think of nature/culture as a dynamic interior to the evolution of our humanity. You quoted me, my use of this term. This is a problem for me. I don't believe there's a substantial humanity. But every so often I have to act as if I

believe that in order to point the issues that interest me to their human source and to the implications for human beings.

Vanderscoff: So you're saying there's nothing essentially human, it's all culturally defined?

White: Yes, well it's a construction. That doesn't mean it's not real, because people can act on the basis of these constructions as if they *were* real.

Vanderscoff: Right. And insofar as it influences action there's no real distinction there.

White: It's like legal fictions. For many years, for many centuries, decades in the West they didn't know how to deal with adopted children. They're not natural progeny of the parents, and yet they can inherit in the way of natural progeny. And so they didn't know how to deal with it, and so they considered a legal fiction. It's a fiction, but it's effectively real.

Vanderscoff: And so returning to this idea of science and art, in some sense you're perhaps arguing that they are tools, different tools with which we can understand culture, which is in turn trying to see how it relates to nature?

White: Well see, nature—we don't want to substantialize nature either, because nature is a cultural construction.

Vanderscoff: Everything viewed through that lens.

White: Well, you say, "Let's go study nature" and sometimes that means going out into the forest, but more often it means going to some book somewhere,

right? (laughs) Agronomy, you know. (laughs) Our kids at the [UCSC] farm up here are doing hands-on stuff, but they're also taking classes.

Vanderscoff: And so do you envision that science or art or history—wherever it falls on that spectrum between them—has some tool in giving us a more lucid lens in viewing nature? Is that something you feel is relevant to your work?

White: No, I don't think so. I think it's only useful for clearing away these prejudices and foreclosures of consciousness that close off our access to the kinds of experiences that allow us to clarify our relation to one another and to the natural world, to that world which we call 'natural.'

Vanderscoff: So it's promoting a certain essential honesty about our preconceptions?

White: Well, I wouldn't say 'honesty.' Clarity, maybe. The other day I was reading about black holes. You know, black holes are really unnatural. What does it mean, 'unnatural?' It means it doesn't conform to the conception of nature—

Vanderscoff: —that we have.

White: Yeah. It's like Aristotle and right up through Newton. Newton couldn't imagine a vacuum. I can't imagine a vacuum. Can you?

Vanderscoff: No.

White: And yet—

Vanderscoff: But we talk about it as if—

White: Well, not only that, it's effective. It allows us to account for things like the speed of light.

Vanderscoff: That's true. And so it's this notion of understanding really that when we say 'nature' what we mean is always something that's changing.

White: It's something that is always being constructed anew. A lot of times this depends on the technology that's developed—you know, like optics. People used to think that light was an emanation that came out in particles that struck the eye.

Vanderscoff: And so it's our changing conceptions of the world around us.

White: Yeah. Earlier than that they thought that sight was something that was active, and goes out and illuminates that which it sees, that which it's directed towards.

Vanderscoff: And so you and your thoughts exploring the nature of the artifices that connect the ways in which we view things?

White: Yeah, it's all art, insofar as it's human construction. I suppose you can even say that badgers [beavers] building a dam are engaged in some kind of artistic activity insofar as it's creative, so that you can say that poiesis or creativity or production is inherent in higher forms of animal life that do things.

Vanderscoff: It's this compartmentalization again.

White: Well, it also has to do with the degree of consciousness with which you're doing it. As Marx says, bees build their hives and so forth, but they do it over and over again without consciousness. We build our milieu interceded between it and the rest of the physical world as protection, as a protected environment. The rest of the world has to pay the price of that, because it's like surplus value, surplus energy that's not being used for the rest.

Vanderscoff: And so it's trying to reach a point of clarity about those processes?

White: Yeah, and this is not a very important matter for any culture that doesn't have the concept of history, the Western concept of history. I go and talk to groups sometimes for whom—they don't see the point of history. Why would you think like that? You think that the past is a problem, getting to the past is a problem? Why? The past is all around you.

Vanderscoff: So, I suppose it seems appropriate at this point to ask a fairly elementary question. Why does our conception of the past matter if we view it as somehow split or divorced from the present?

White: Well, it's interesting. I think it matters because it's based upon a notion of a fundamental separation, such that in saying that some part of the world is cut off from you—the past—that it's absent, that you must exert an effort, find a technology in order to make connection with it. To what aim or purpose, why would you need it? Why would you need to do that? As I say, there are these people that—Philippine aborigines' attitude is that, "The past is all around me. It's spatial. There is where my uncle died and over here is where I found my girlfriend and so forth." That's the past, and it's all present. You have to know

where to look for it. That's what walkabout is all about in Australia. They don't feel the need to project a spatialized past disjoined from the present, for which then you need a special science in order to get to, you see. (laughs) In one sense the West, it turns out, has great capacities of alienation, of alienating things from itself and alienating itself from itself. This is what you do when you say: this past is back there, but it's absent, it's not showing itself, it's got to come out. Why not leave it? Why not let it rest? Like with the dead—you don't go and disturb them. Indian groups don't like the idea of you digging up the graves of their ancestors. Same thing with digging up the past—what's the obsession to do this? It seems to be motivated by some kind of anxiety; time anxiety, I think.

Vanderscoff: So by existing so absolutely in the present—culturally in the West—there's this anxiety about the past, trying to find some sort of continuities?

White: Not only that, there's anxiety about the present that leads one to think they would find something in the past that they can't find in the present. And more importantly, that if they don't find it they can't deal with the present. Nietzsche says—you going off?[29] Oh, you're going to the bank?

Margaret Brose: Shhh.[30]

White: Okay. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: The historical record. (laughs)

---

[29] The last words and the ensuing sentence addressed to his wife, Dr. Margaret Brose, who has entered the room.
[30] Pointing at recorder and stealthily going for the door.

White: Oh yes, you're being recorded. (laughs)

Brose: Yes, I'm going to do a heist. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: That's on tape. (laughs)

White: The important thing would be—yeah, supposing a heist takes place now. (laughs) See, the important thing—Nietzsche said the real problem, our problem in the West is we don't know how to live in the present, we don't know how to go into our present. It's what they talk about when they talk about a great tennis player being in the zone, or an actor being in his zone: how to be in that present so that you do not experience it with some anxiety of what's going to happen next. As a tennis player you're not concentrating on the return before you hit it, see? How to be aware, fully mindful of the present, rather than reminiscing about what might have been in the past and what is likely to be in the future. That's anxiety.

Vanderscoff: Yes. As a young student, why did you first start to foray into the past, why did you go into history?

White: Because I really came to culture from a culturally deprived background, so that for me [pause] by the way, it's only the upper classes that are interested in history. The lower classes aren't interested in history. They don't have the luxury. All they have are oral traditions, anyway. Mostly the lower classes are always illiterate—all they know is what grandpa told father, he passed it on to his son, right? So, upper classes are interested in the past because it has to do with legitimacy of descent, genealogy, and transmission of property. Who owns

this property? That's what the Jews are doing in Israel right now; they're trying to establish their right to that property.

Vanderscoff: Through historical means, in some sense?

White: Well, archaeology mostly. They're spending millions every year in archaeological digs to establish the priority of the Jews or the Hebrews to that area.

Vanderscoff: So you talk about these notions of upper classes seeking genealogical legitimacy—

White: Well it's very important for the upper classes because it has to do with the transmission of blood and property. It's very important. The bastard, the illegitimate is always the big problem. Supposing you have no heirs and all you have is your illegitimate son. You have to find some way of making him legitimate.

Vanderscoff: So you talk about these factors as being relevant in why people have done history in the past. You talk about this notion of you being culturally deprived.

White: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: What exactly do you mean by that, and did those other factors influence you, or are those things you set yourself against?

White: Being educated, I was conditioned to believe as a child in public school as having a certain culture, having a wide range of allusion, culturally: musical,

artistic, knowing who painted what, being able to recognize a Mondrian. These are only external manifestations of a breadth of knowledge and a capacity to discriminate between something of value and something that is either fraudulent or of no value at all. And so that's what it meant to be educated: *Bildung*. Italians called it *formaccione*. The French, *formation*: forming oneself. This is an Enlightenment idea. It means you become many-faceted; you know many things about many different areas of life. You're cosmopolitan. You've seen many things, you've travelled, et cetera, et cetera. History comes with it; not only that, history kind of ties it together. The great battle between capitalism and communism was over whether the Marx version of history or Adam Smith's version of history is the right one. (laughs) That's because the West always wants to be able to know the future. You can't play the stock market unless you've got a good idea of what the future holds tomorrow when the DOW opens.

Vanderscoff: So for you in history there was cultural broadening, it was a key to this more expansive vision of the self where you would be able to sort things out.

White: Yeah. Well, it brings meaning. The upper classes have tradition. Lower classes don't. Lower classes have customs. There's a difference between custom and tradition. Custom is a way of life in which you do certain things because that's the way the parents taught you to do them, or someone, or the elders of the town. Everything's kind of implicit. "People just don't do that sort of thing" is what you say. You're scandalized because someone departs from the custom. Tradition is a cultivated custom, customary legacy. It makes distinction between customs that are worthy of being replicated and customs that—you know it may be customary to spit into a spittoon in the late nineteenth century in the bar, but

we don't do that anymore. And this has to do with the nineteenth century philosophy: the idea of taste, the idea of a refined or cultivated as against a barbarian or savage kind of activity.

Vanderscoff: And so history represented a chance for you to develop some sort of refinement in that regard?

White: Yeah, I found out that I could learn it. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: A more honed version of what you'd been given culturally, to kind of whittle away?

White: No, I think—the notion of discrimination or taste is the notion of critical thinking, being able to discriminate between something that is the real item, as against something that's a fake, or that is a mistake. Even to the point where you can say that there are creative mistakes, as well as destructive ones. You get above morality in this. You get beyond good and evil.

Vanderscoff: And perhaps returning to this notion that we were talking about just a bit ago of developing clarity?

White: Self-consciousness, being aware of what you're doing while you're doing it as best you can, rather than just striking back.

Vanderscoff: Well, thank you.

Shifting Disciplines and the Impact of Working in Histcon

Vanderscoff: I would like to close this section with just one or two questions about history and history of consciousness and how that influenced your

thought. Your writings have a strong sense of disciplines as a fluid concept, they move in and out of each other: literature evolved out of something else,[31] there's this gradual process of things. Is history now in the throes of any sort of crisis of self relative to what history does and does not do as a discipline? And what potential do the interdisciplinary modes of inquiry celebrated by history of consciousness have to provide any sort of resolution to this conflict?

White: Well, you know when it comes to the discipline of history it takes care of itself. If it dies out like alchemy, okay. There was a time before which they had alchemy, then they had alchemy, and then it died out. Astrology is another example. History may be like it. There is a time before and a place where historical consciousness begins to be developed for whatever reasons. It seems to have something to do with the Greeks' notion of how can events in the past influence events in the present. Now 'influence,' by the way, is a magical notion. Influence is what you have in astrology, that the stars influence us, or the planets. So the discipline of history, its fortunes wax and wane, especially in modernity, where it always has to measure itself against the sciences—the physical sciences, and the social sciences, which ape the physical sciences. Not very effectively, in my view.

For example, I have absolutely no interest in sociology. I couldn't bear reading a sociology book. But my view of the social sciences is that they ape the physical sciences. Why? Because in the nineteenth century new forms of social organization appeared that were really enigmatic and couldn't be dealt with in the older mythological or historical modes. And so the question became, can we

[31] Dr. White has cited in *Metahistory* that literature evolved out of belles-lettres.

find disciplines to deal with these new phenomena: urbanization, overpopulation, extreme poverty, industrialization, capitalism. These were radically transformative institutions. The modern city is an utterly incomprehensible thing in terms of any older traditions of how people, groups relate.

Vanderscoff: And so you think the social sciences developed out of that, psychology—

White: That's why they evolved. They were therapeutic. They were meant to deal with the problems of industrial society and the new urban life. And they were meant to produce therapies, but they didn't produce anything that turned out to be very useful. All they could do, it turns out, is describe the situation with specialized language. They could never really make a recommendation because they wanted to be value-free, and since they were value-free it meant they had to be objective. They can tell you what is the case, but they can't make any recommendation about how to increase anything other than the efficiency.

So I'm not worried about history. Is it going through a crisis? I don't think so, no more than it has been for the last couple hundred years. In the United States and in Europe as well it had a real big boom after the Second World War because people were saying, "How was totalitarianism possible, we thought we were an enlightened society but suddenly we got Nazis, communists, Stalinists, fascists all over the place." Not to mention the United States, where capitalism was its own form of corporate fascism. Noam Chomsky and I agree completely on this. But it took only a while, because pretty soon people were saying we have

to be more scientific. And that's when the new social history came in and people began studying every village in New England to see if they could grasp the substance of America. How is it possible that these things have happened? Pace of change was another thing. Change used to be diurnal at least. It would take a day for something happen. Now it takes seconds. So how do historians deal with this sudden rapid transformation of things? The fact that a thing can happen and it has world impact immediately: atomic bombing of Hiroshima. AIDS—look at the spread of AIDS, it used to be a plague took years to get from Africa or some place to some place else. No: a guy gets on an airplane and—

Vanderscoff: So the rate of events, the news cycle and so on and the general bridging of these distances that used to take such time to be crossed is reflected in academia?

White: Well, the crisis of historical consciousness is not reflected among the historians because they're committed to the idea that they know it and they have a discipline to deal with it. Where it's being done is in the novel and in film. All of which increasingly—look at the *New York Times* book review yesterday. Historical novels—every novel is a historical novel. They're all about time and transformation and death and changes that occur when the young woman from a small town goes to the city. Same old story, right? And the films and increasing nostalgia for an earlier, pre-industrial, pre-electronic—people are now nostalgic about the industrial period. (laughs) And these are what our novels—Don DeLillo, all of his novels are historical novels. David Mitchell, Richard Powers—these guys are reexamining America, usually before the First World War, because everyone recognizes the first World War is really a new kind of war, has

a new kind of impact. But it's the novelists that are doing this, because they problematize the past and our relationship to it in a way the historians don't want to do. The historians want to say, "Hey, yeah that's problematical but we've got the solution. Just do your history, do it carefully, footnote it and publish it." See, it has to be published or it's not going to have any function. And who do you write for? Other historians. Novelists aren't writing for other historians. They're examining the problems of historical being, existence, but for the general literate public. Historians—unless the historian makes a distinction between his research and then he writes a popular version, David McCullough's kind of history, sells a million copies: *The Secret Life of the Adams Family*, right, something like that.

Vanderscoff: So there are new modes of inquiry relative to history that are developing outside of academia?

White: They're decided outside of the field of history. Now there is a new generation of historians that are doing different things and it begins with the feminists when they say, "Look, what is women's place in history? Is history something written by men, for men, about men?" Yes, up until the present. And so they raised new questions. Or the native, the subaltern. You know, "What about us? Where are we in this history you white men are writing for one another?"

Vanderscoff: So it's this notion of authorship and audience that comes into play?

White: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: And so relative to history as a discipline, what it can, what it cannot do—

White: Well, let me say one other thing. The historians who criticized me and the kind of other people like me, they're really afraid of relativism. It really drives them up the wall, even though they know there's no absolute. You can't be a historian and believe in an absolute without dropping into myth: the myth of progress, the myth of redemption, so on. So they said, "Look, if the past if does not really exist then I have no way of distinguishing between fact and fiction."

Vanderscoff: Right, they use that as their barometer.

White: In other words, the distinction between fact and fiction depends on my believing in the reality of the past. "White doesn't believe that the past exists." Does it? Where is it? It's either around you here and therefore is not past or you don't have access to it. "White believes there's no distinction between fact and fiction." My answer is it's a matter of levels of discourse: fictions are made, facts are made. That's what the word 'factum' means: 'making.' It comes from the word 'to make.' In law that's what it means. So relativism is the thing that really bothers people because they think it leads to anarchy—everybody can do their own thing and everything is valuable as any other. It doesn't mean that at all. Relativism means being aware that the judgments you make are situation-specific, that the judgments are made up of conflicts or something that you see before you in a particular situation, and these conflicts may not bear any relationship at all to Abraham's conflict over whether he's going to sacrifice his son or not. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: I'd like to close this topic of your work and your thought by turning briefly towards your influences. In history of consciousness you worked with a rich spectrum of colleagues. Was there significant intellectual exchange with them? Can you feel their influence on your work and thought?

White: Well yeah, they've influenced me very much. I've told you that Donna Haraway and Teresa de Lauretis really gave me an education in feminist thinking and writing and so forth. It really changed the way I looked at historical discourse. It was very interesting. The feminist historical theorists divided into at least two main groups, one of which said, "We want to put women in history," which meant adding women to the account that we've already got. And the others had the notion of, "We want to change the way history is conceived, or conceptualized," so that gender itself emerges as one of the organizing categories rather than being something that is seen as just an historical effect. You know, is there a women's way of suffering history, experiencing history? Is there a woman's way of writing history that is distinct in the way that you can argue that there's a gender-inflected way of writing poetry? Not because it's inherent in the nature of things, but because that's the way the culture has developed that makes it very difficult for there to be a gender-neutral way of thinking that can do what poetry or poetic or artistic work is supposed to do.

Secondly, I've always been interested in anthropology, but James Clifford as a historian of anthropology really enlivened me to the weakness—and this is true of the feminists as well—of the weakness of Western humanism, which I was kind of a devotee of. I mean, for me to think historically in a responsible way was to think as a humanist, but I hadn't deconstructed that notion to see the

extent to which it was gendered and Westernized and class-inflected and so forth. So, I think there's a fundamental conflict between a genuine humanism and democracy, for example—and any version of humanism—because it's essentialist thinking and democracy cannot be essentialist in any dimension. It can't be, otherwise—it has to be egalitarian, and essentialism always is like justice, is always distributed. When you say someone got what he deserved, you mean someone else would not have deserved that even if they had done it. For example, the distinction between blue-collar crime and white-collar crime. Only two percent of the crimes prosecuted in the United States are white collar. Ninety-eight percent of the crimes prosecuted are what they call—well, blue collar means someone steals a loaf of bread or sells some pot. White-collar crime is corporate crime, the kind of thing you can do in a corporation.

Vanderscoff: The Bernie Madoff situation and so on.

White: That's right, yeah. And the punishments are not egalitarian at all.

Vanderscoff: And so working in context with your colleagues in histcon you think helped you develop some tools that helped illuminate those facts for you?

White: Well, yeah, they did. I'd say that Marxism and psychoanalysis were, along with the whole philosophical tradition of Nietzsche and so forth—the background of both Marxism and psychoanalysis—those were the two kind of poles around which my own development took place, and both feminism and I don't what to call it—indigeneity or something like that. That is to say, the whole post-colonial thing made me realize that historical knowledge insofar as it had been developed for the last two thousand years was humanist, which meant it

was inflected to the advantage of white, upper class, Western, rich, the wealthy, the powerful, so forth. And it's true even insofar in a legal system like our common law system that is based upon historical precedent. The way you construe a relationship between a precedent and the current case that you're litigating is exactly—this is what Lyotard is talking about in his book *The Différend*, that when people say that the poor have one language and the rich another when they go to court, they're talking completely past each other. And the judge is from the side—

Vanderscoff: So being in dialogue with these people, with your colleagues, forced you to return to some basic assumptions that had not even been aware you'd been making?

White: That's right, because the education as I see it was to achieve control, command and so forth of this endowment, this cultural endowment that seemed to be associated with power, self-control, whatever, responsible citizenship and so forth. It's like having literacy as one of the prerequisites for voting. Is it a good thing or bad? Is it just or unjust, right? So I got an existentialist version of humanism. This is Sartre, Camus, people like that, and it served its purposes very well because it was the *lingua franca* of cultivated life in the West. This meant, by the way—and I was very proud of this—learning languages, foreign languages. By the time I graduated [as an] undergraduate [student] I'd studied three foreign languages. This made me proud, only to find out that one never really knows a foreign language unless you've lived it from youth. (laughs) But I thought that this kind of worldliness in which the classics are complicit too,

right? Learning Greek and Latin is even better than learning—it shows you're even more cultivated.

Vanderscoff: Because you're really getting down to the foundations there.

White: Yeah, that's right. So I realized that even my existentialist tweak on humanism was not sufficiently self-critical. And what they showed me or really introduced me to was the feminist discourse, which I think was really radical, and the discourse of the oppressed—non-West. So it gave me a different sense of what was wrong with the version of humanism that was informing public education in imperialist America. I think that the United States has been a disaster for the world. It's a war society. That's what competition in capitalist terms translates into. The competition comes to a point where you have to use these weapons—and they will use them.

Vanderscoff: And so for you what these encounters represented was a more serious form of self-criticism and self-consciousness relative to you and the culture that informed you as a historian?

White: Well, I think it couldn't be more serious than this kind of humanism, because these humanists are willing to kill people, and most of the feminists I know aren't willing to do that. It's interesting you should say 'serious,' because that's one the terms used against the kind of philosophizing that I do, this Derridian type of deconstruction. They always say, "Well, can you be serious? You can't be serious," is what they say. "You're being frivolous. You're just playing with ideas."

Vanderscoff: And how do you respond to that?

White: I think I said, "Well, I don't see seriousness as the criterion for deciding whether the thing is worthwhile or not." There are many people who are badly mistaken and savage in their attitude who are very serious. It takes a serious man to kill.

Vanderscoff: So, if there is a governing value, what is it then, if not seriousness?

White: No governing value.

Vanderscoff: So is there anything that fills for you personally the space or the vacuum left behind by that—

White: By the loss of the absolute?

Vanderscoff: Yes.

White: No. And that's a good thing. We can't keep leaning on the notion of an absolute. That's what leads us to set up 720 military bases around the world to control the rest of the world who are bended to our will.

Vanderscoff: It's the sense of having too much faith in yourself?

White: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: Well, wonderful, I think that's a good natural resting point for today. We'll pick up the thread next time.

[pause]

White: You mean there's more?

Changes in UCSC:
The Move from the College System to the Research Institution

Vanderscoff: Today is Monday, August 6th, 2012. This is Cameron Vanderscoff here for the Regional History Project doing my third interview with Hayden White. I'd like to start today with a retrospective on UCSC. You shared some thoughts about the college system last time. To return to that topic, what college were you affiliated with as faculty and what relevance did it have to your time here? [sound on background of tape is Dr. White's coffee maker]

White: Well, we were a primarily graduate school operation and the colleges were primarily undergraduate institutions. I mean, their primary charge was dealing with the undergraduates who would be residents in them for the first couple of years, I guess at the beginning. They were charged to introduce into the academic world these freshman seminars and so forth. Membership in the college was not really important for us and I think when we came here I was in College Eight. I was there for a couple of years and then when Helene Moglen wanted to reaggregate in Kresge we moved there and were there for a few years. Then we moved to Oakes and I'm not sure why—oh, we had better space as we expanded. Jim Clifford pointed out to me that at one point we were up to nine full-time people, so we were gradually growing—and we're reduced to two full-time people right now. And so we were gradually growing and needed more space; seminar rooms and things like that. So we went wherever there was space. Usually we had no particular function in the colleges.

Vanderscoff: Now, I remember you mentioning in one of our conversations, I believe, that you did indeed teach the core course at one of those institutions?

White: Oh yeah, at Oakes I taught regularly in the core course. Freshmen. [coffee maker beeping in background] [pause] I teach at all levels.

Vanderscoff: Across the board, as it were.

White: Well, that was one of the things that was supposed to build morale and keep the faculty active across the whole spectrum of activities. There are many people who came here thinking that they wanted to devote themselves to undergraduate teaching. For example, Richard Wasserstrom, a very distinguished philosopher, he came here because he was primarily interested in teaching undergraduates. And when he got here he had to set up a graduate program. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Now, how do you, as someone who is known for your research, your writing, relate to an institution like UCSC with this initial founding focus placed not on research but undergraduate education? Did that dynamic ever affect you in any way, in terms of—that was the basis of the institution you worked for?

White: Well it seemed fine with me. Everyone said that the college system duplicated activities, I mean administrations and so forth. It duplicated personnel processes, because people were both in a—what did they call it, a

committee…not department—and a college.[32] The college membership would have to vote on a person's promotion or not, so it created double jeopardy in that sense. You had two staffs: you had a departmental staff and a college staff. So it was not cost-effective. That had already become apparent by the time I got here. The university had already been operating—well, they set up the college system mid-sixties; I came here in '78. So, it was already beginning to manifest wear and tear and conflict, primarily for economic reasons. People began thinking about making the colleges into nothing more than administrations of student life and separating out departments. There were people who opposed the creation of departments. They had used something like the committee system, which they have at the University of Chicago, which puts together disciplines in different configurations. But it was too expensive. You can do it at Yale; you can do it at University of Chicago, which have modified college systems. But you can't do it in a public institution. Too expensive.

Vanderscoff: And did you feel any sense of conflict inherent in the fact that you have an allegiance not just to the UCSC campus with its system, but to a larger intellectual community? Were the obligations to the institution that hired you and the community of peers that read your work ever in dissonance in any way?

White: Well, I think they were, because I was brought in from the outside as a person who had already established a reputation as a publishing scholar, and the aim of the founders of the college system was to make it like England—Cambridge and Oxford namely—the amateur tradition so that you didn't have to

[32] UCSC's original term was 'board of study,' which was used until it was formally replaced by 'department' for all boards on July 1, 1997, according to "A Guide to Editorial Style at the University of California, Santa Cruz."

put a lot of weight on publication and such things. So there was a certain resistance to us over in the history of consciousness, but that didn't bother me. Many of our colleagues of my generation were right at the cusp of this change from the teaching college to the research university in which the college is just an appendage. Many of the students here thought that the college was the central thing and the graduate programs were an appendage. So they felt conflicted and resentful when resources were given to [graduate programs]. But in the first place you can't any longer—in our time it was already happening. It happened at Wesleyan where I taught for a number of years—the sciences have to have a graduate dimension or they can't keep up. That's not true of the humanities, and at Wesleyan they worked it out so that they don't have graduate programs in the humanities and the soft social sciences. They have them, though, in all the physical sciences. This was a moment at that time.

The really radical transformation that occurred in the universities is the moment at which one stopped seeing the university with the college as its central task of kind of a finishing school for the education of the well-rounded person who then might choose to go into medicine or law or the sciences, and that is your primary obligation. And, the research university—I mean, the research university then, once it's set up, it has its obligations with the corporate world, the military-industrial complex, the government, and it has contracts with them and its research agenda is set by these contracts. So there's a conflict between the desire to teach, make well-rounded citizens and professional researchers. And that's the function of the graduate programs in the sciences—it's to produce other researchers, more researchers. It's not concerned with the development of the person.

Vanderscoff: So you envision the move away from the college system and towards the research university as academia engaging with business culture in a more significant way?

White: Oh, yeah. The corporate world. It's as simple as that. When Sinsheimer came here from Cal Tech as the chancellor everyone was talking about how he'd probably want to transform it to a version of Cal Tech.[33] At Cal Tech you have all of the great science programs and then you have a humanities division that is supposed to give these scientists a bit of culture.

Vanderscoff: Now, what impact did spending so much of your career residing in Santa Cruz as a cultural setting and UCSC as a particular professional setting have on you? What did you gain from this particular context as it changed into this research model?

White: What did I gain? Well, I was brought here to create a graduate program, to reinforce it and so forth. My task became to lead a group of interested faculty in doing this, to produce a graduate program. You see, to be advanced in the university you have to be a scholar who has won an international reputation, a scholar who publishes because that's the only way you can get an international reputation, and you must have an impact on more than one field. The difference between a great chemist who does nothing but chemistry and a chemist who adds to the sciences in general by theoretical work, that's the person who gets the Nobel Prize and so forth, and should. So when I was on personnel cases my

[33] Robert Sinsheimer was chancellor 1977-87. For his take on UCSC, see Randall Jarrell, interviewer and editor, *Robert L. Sinsheimer: University of California, Santa Cruz During a Critical Decade, 1977-1987 (*Regional History Project, UC Santa Cruz Library, 1991). Available in full text [PDF] at http://digitalcollections.ucsc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p265101coll13/id/3491

argument—I would always ask when they were promoting someone in the very high ranks of the professorate, I would ask, "Are they internationally known? Have they had an impact on more than one field? Is their work significant enough to attract other people working in that field who want to work with them?" So that's quite a different thing from promoting a person because they're great teachers of undergraduates—though I regard those as very important to any institution. But the university is changing. It's become a corporation. It's bottom line. It's for profit. And people who bring the older educational and pedagogical idea with them are bound to be frustrated with this. What I saw our opportunity to be was that we weren't limited to a specific discipline, so we could develop people who had two or three barrels to their cannon. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: Two 'Ns' or one 'N' (laughs).

White: And so I promoted people and tried to attract people whose interests were multidisciplinary. I wasn't interested in someone who was a great specialist in any given field of work.

Vanderscoff: And do you think UCSC as a professional context gave you more leeway to do this than other institutions?

White: Well no, it's very difficult to get the notion of the professional board here in the humanities, because it was stocked with people who were fleeing that disciplinary—they recruited people from Berkeley, from the east coast and so forth who were tired of the rat race of professional specialization. And I understood that. I understand that.

Vanderscoff: Did you sympathize with them?

White: Oh yeah, sure. These were people who wanted to develop young people. They were devoted to the teaching function. Yeah, that's very important from my standpoint. But I was never interested in producing a specialist anyway, or a professional. I was always interested in producing intellectuals, not just academic scholars, because intellectuals can have an impact on the larger world in a way than an academic scholar cannot.

Vanderscoff: And do you think UCSC, because of its constituency of...I don't know if malcontents is quite the right word—

White: Well no, they were alternative. They're like Santa Cruz itself. And remember, this was the seventies, eighties—alternative lifestyle academics were already an established phenomenon. As it was among the students who chose to come here, because they had heard it was not a preppy party school, but not a drudge, nerdy school, but a place where you could get off on marijuana and lay back, pursue your ideals and so forth.

Vanderscoff: So, living and working here you have a sense that you've been engaging to some extent with some sort of alternative milieu?

White: Yeah, sure. Well, that was what the sixties created. It created the viability of these alternative lifestyles, although that wasn't the purpose of the people who set up Santa Cruz by any means. These guys were really very conservative people, many of whom, though, had disdain—I'll tell you what it was disdain for: the bourgeoisie, bourgeois, commercial, consumerist culture. They wanted

something that represented quality and so forth, and quality for them meant the Ivy League-Oxford-Cambridge English gentlemen, the guy who's a physicist in the day and plays the cello in his quartet in the evening and then writes his novel on the weekends.

Vanderscoff: (laughs) But by the time you arrived here the UCSC and Santa Cruz you knew had moved away from that particular thing?

White: No, they hadn't moved away from it because there were residues of it, you see, there were pockets—mostly in the humanities—of these people who felt themselves beleaguered and they were digging in.

Vanderscoff: Do you think histcon was one of those pockets?

White: Oh yeah, definitely.

The Student-Teacher Dynamic in Histcon

Vanderscoff: Well I'd like to focus more particularly on histcon in retrospect—

White: That was one of the problems I had when I came here. The graduate students were a completely different breed from the graduate students that I had known in the late sixties and seventies at UCLA.

Vanderscoff: Right, because when you first came you did inherit this docket of students including, famously, Huey P. Newton and a whole slew of others. What did you make of these students, what did you make of the existing vetting processes?

White: Well, a large number of them were kind of functionally illiterate. Huey P. Newton was a very brilliant guy, but he didn't know shit.[34] He thought he did because he's a revolutionary, right? So these were people whose education had been cut short. They were people often times whose undergraduate or graduate student experience had been disrupted by the sixties. Eruptions of civil rights, you know, "Shut it down, shut down the university." My wife was saying that when she was in graduate school that she had lost a whole year of work because effectively—this was Harvard—the school was shut down, started up, people on principle saying, "I'll only hold courses off campus," things like that. So there was a great deal of disruption, and many of these people—and also, you have to recall that by that time we were getting something like open enrollment.[35] Almost anyone who applied could get in.

Vanderscoff: And there was the redirect process and so on.

White: Yeah, yeah. But also the program here was notoriously anti-intellectual, so that they wanted people who were in touch with their feelings.

Vanderscoff: The history of consciousness program?

White: Yeah. And so the students they wanted were communitarian types, organic food, sitting around and chanting and stuff like that. So that, for

[34] For more on Huey P. Newton as a graduate student at UCSC, see James Clifford's forthcoming oral history.

[35] In reference in particular to the drop in UCSC undergraduate applications from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s which precipitated an enrollment crisis at UCSC. For more on this chapter of UCSC's history see Irene Reti, Interviewer and Editor, *"It Became My Case Study": Professor Michael Cowan's Four Decades at UC Santa Cruz* (Regional History Project, UCSC Library, 2013) available at as well as Irene Reti, editor and interviewer, *Growth and Stewardship: Frank Zwart's Four Decades at UC Santa Cruz* (UCSC Library Regional History Project, 2011) available at http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3j5438d7http://digitalcollections.ucsc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p265101coll13/id/3780/show/3779%27%3EPhotograph%20of%20Frank%20Zwart%3C/a%3E

example, my whole approach to advanced work in whatever field is that you have to have theory and they were hostile to theory itself—any theory. It was touchy-feely stuff. Put the classroom, put things in a circle so we're all equal. They'd discuss things like that. They'd spend a great deal of time in the seminars discussing the authoritarian structure of the classroom seating pattern. Yeah, I don't know, I went along with it. There's no point in opposing people that feel they have an interest, a right; they were in rebellion against the disciplinary—You have to realize that prisons, hospitals and educational institutions and the military all had a similar notion of discipline. The child must be disciplined, right? That had permeated American education so that just such things as the arrangement in class by alphabetical order was regarded as arbitrary, and they brought these kinds of rebellions in with them. I remember there was a great deal of discussion of Paolo Freire and people like that at that time. I don't know if you know who he is. Teaching writing—do you do free writing or do you learn grammar? No, throw out grammar; grammar is discipline, see. It's formal and structural. No, you want people to—for example, rebellion against spelling, rules of spelling. Why isn't my spelling as good as yours? (laughs) And they brought this in, you see.

Vanderscoff: So you emerged into a somewhat amorphous field of students here?

White: You have to realize I'm a different generation from Jim and Donna. I'm fifteen years older. I went through the sixties as an active participant, but I was not a convert to the kind of...well, the conceptions of consciousness which were much more, they thought, Asian, Buddhist. You know, Buddhism rather than

European rationalism; rationalism is the problem, people are in a straitjacket of reason, they're not in touch with their emotions. The emotions are a mode of cognition as well, and there are different kinds of enlightenment. So I inherited, or I came into a program where that was dominant, and not merely the alternative or minority view. I'd encountered the minority view at UCLA and I made accommodation to it. I began to see, "This is a different discourse. I can't just teach an old-fashioned kind of Ph.D. seminar, because these people aren't interested in it. But they think they want a Ph.D. in history." I always tried to point out to them, "Look, the people who run the discipline of history speak a certain language. That's what you have to learn. If you learn it and show them you speak that language, get your Ph.D. and then go out and do whatever you want to, and then it will depend on whether you've got real talent or only mistake your resentment for talent." (laughs).

Vanderscoff: So emerging into that environment, how did you go about structuring history of consciousness in terms of the curriculum? I understand from Jim Clifford that you taught a three-quarter class with him and that was the first endeavor as far as—

White: It was just for the entering students. Our minimal requirement was you had to take 'Theory and Methods'—first year people coming in—because we were trying to create a seminar situation where they'd get to know each other, create some sense of identification. And so my idea was, well, we'll have a whole year seminar, 'Theory and Methods.'[36] It was not popular, I don't think. I don't

[36] According to the '78-'79 course catalog, the course was titled *Theory and Methods in the history of consciousness*.

know what Jim—it was not popular, although it turned out to be later. People would say, "Oh, you know that's where I really learned what it was about." But fortunately Jim and I taught it together, and Jim was one of them, you see, and so he could mediate between my tough-guy stance. It was good cop, bad cop. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: So given the lack of a traditional disciplinary context and the student body that you were dealing with, how did you go about determining the material, the reading list for the class?

White: Pretty simple: it was the history of public consciousness, having to do with group identity, and the way in which the individual is socialized into a particular public persona, which they then adjust or adapt or rebel against, and the way in which the legal system, culture, the political system adapts to generational changes and desire. The relationship between desire and public consciousness is really the way I saw it. So this meant that it had for me a psychoanalytic component, political science or political theory, a Marxist class articulation component, and some attention to those aspects of culture that represent utopian aspiration.

Therefore, history of religion was just as important as the history of politics. That's one of the reasons I wanted Gary Lease in the program, because he was a historian of religion and most of these people were in rebellion against their Christian or Jewish upbringing and as a result they didn't know the Bible. None of them had read the Bible. They were in rebellion—Jews or Christians. Catholics aren't encouraged to study the Bible anyway, and Jews only know the

Torah, if that—the first five books of the Old Testament, as it's called. Protestant families used to read the Bible, but that's gone, long gone. Who sits around and reads the Bible after the meal, or before the meal? And yet the Bible is one of the great meta-codes for our culture, and people who don't get allusions to the Bible, they can't really read the great monuments of world literature. They can't read Dante, they can't read Milton, they can't read Shakespeare.

Most of them were hostile to philosophy because philosophy represents the formal, logical. They were drawn to the performative arts. A lot of them wanted to make movies so they came us, because where can they make a movie? In those days—you have to realize that film studies and media studies is relatively recent. There were none here. Film is always taught in English departments in every other school. Do you realize that, as far as the universities? There were no such things. It wasn't really until the computer revolution that communication media became a separate field. For example, one of my best students was a professional dancer and she wanted a Ph.D. in theory because she wanted to write the theory of dance, dance theory. Most practicing dancers say, "I have no use for theory, it's the moves you learn."

Vanderscoff: So, this initial course functioned as some sort of a crash course or boot camp in theory and philosophy?

White: Well, it did for me with the results. That is to say, some people took to it immediately, enthusiastically, others suffered it and still others resented it. And so they would have meetings protesting. I had to go along with that because I had to meet with them regularly as the chair, because I believe people should

have input into their education. So if they objected to reading a certain text— But this got to a certain point where, for example, the lesbians would be saying, "We can't stand having straight women in the seminars with us, we're inhibited." So they tried to organize lesbian reading groups and so forth, excluding straight women. "Can men enroll?" "Men! Not even straight women." And I had to oversee that sort of thing. I said, "Look, this is against the law, you can't have a seminar that's advertised as being one than anyone can enroll in and exclude groups on the basis of their sexual preferences. Haven't you had enough of that?"

Vanderscoff: So you were working with a broad range of constituencies.

White: Yeah, well political correctness, you know, is very intolerant. People who are politically correct are very intolerant. If you present them with something that seems to be—you know, "We cannot be in a class with straight people, we have suffered too much at the hands of straight people." Well, I understand that feeling, but whether that feeling should determine in a public institution of higher education whether one can be admitted or not to a class—I can't allow that.

Vanderscoff: So history of consciousness in those early years was very much a collaborative venture, not just with your colleagues but the students as well?

White: Yeah, we tried to—Jim especially—he and I were alone for the first couple of years. And then as we took other people in, Gary Lease and Barbara Easton, as she was known then, they were already—they knew the drill here. We tried to make it as communal as possible, but there were certain limits, you know. For

example, people were wanting to take a Ph.D. but they didn't want to write a dissertation. These were the people we inherited. They wanted to make a film, or they wanted to make a dance. I said, "Make a dance if you want to, but you also have to write the dissertation." I said, "I want you see the dance as a supplement to the dissertation."

Vanderscoff: So, out of this give and take—

White: But writing was the enemy, you see. Writing itself is the enemy because that's where the first discipline comes to the child, learning to make your letters correctly and spelling.

Vanderscoff: And so some of those students were tearing down those basic building blocks, or trying to, anyway?

White: Yeah, because they thought that was the problem and in many respects they're right. You see, the educational process is a process of dressage and discipline, and the first discipline is learning to speak correctly. And what does 'correctly' mean? Properly. Pronounce your words correctly, et cetera. The child, therefore, in learning how to speak correctly—just speak correctly, forget writing effectively—has to give up something. Freedom of lalation as they call it in linguistics, the "La la la la la, blah blah blah." You can't just say whatever you want to say. So you give up childhood as you take on the cultural imperatives.

Vanderscoff: And how do you relate to that process of disciplining as a teacher in histcon dealing with these students?

White: What you try to do is explain what discipline means, explain that disciplines can be enabling as well as inhibiting. Discipline, I've always said, a discipline always tells you what not to do. It never tells you what to do, or how to get from good to better, and to learn a discipline is to learn the no-nos that are accredited by the profession. These are purely conventional. I try to teach them to see these are purely conventional. Spelling rules are purely conventional. The upper class paid no attention to spelling rules in the eighteenth century, they spelled however they wanted to. They spelled by sound. And it wasn't until the early nineteenth century when they set up public schools for training secretaries and people like that—*Webster's Dictionary* and *Johnson's Dictionary*, there were no dictionaries before.

Vanderscoff: And so out of this, it seems, somewhat fraught give and take, histcon did become a program of some renown. What do you attribute its success to?

White: Oh, the brightness of the people who are in it. We gave people—one of the big fights I had, which I lost, was fighting this notion of the normative time to degree. That makes sense in a field like chemistry or mathematics. In the humanities, say in philosophy, a person may be working—some of the great philosophers: Rawls, for example, of Harvard—it took him about eighteen years to finish his dissertation. It became this great work, *The Theory of Justice*. Braudel's *The Mediterranean* took him twenty years. It's not unusual for people to embark on projects that require extensive learning of secondary languages, research and so forth. So I opposed the notion—I lost completely because the

committee, the Graduate Council of which I was chair at the time was made up of scientists.

Vanderscoff: And what is that figure, that normative—?

White: I think it's five years now. It becomes a figure after which they won't give you any more support. They're trying to hurry up people through the system, you see. And I said, "In the contemplative disciplines like philosophy, history, and so forth there is no goal that you can set and say you've achieved professional competence, or you've done a project that—you can do it in five years. This is the time at which Princeton was trying to get people through in three years for their Ph.D. It was a speed-up process. And, of course, if you're thinking about intellectual life, you can't rush people. I said, "Take a discipline where you have to learn Greek and Latin before you can even start, you know?" I said, "Greek and Latin are hard to learn. It really takes a number of years of competence for that." But it made no difference.

But we sent out good people. We tried to get people who had real intelligence and give them enough time. We did a lot of remedial work on some of these people, I mean, as I said, people who had no book learnin' when they arrived. They had gone through systems—well, we have all heard of the basketball player who got through college without learning to read, right? I mean, okay, you can do it. You know, the state schools and so forth, even the Ivy Leagues you can get pretty far without having to do any serious work once you're in. Find the easy courses, you know. But we gave them enough time. That's why I fought the normative time to degree thing, because the only

resources they had were from being teaching assistants and so forth, and fellowships. And once they'd passed normative time for degree then you can't give them any money. They're supposed to get out and get a job.

So, we always looked for people with an edge intellectually, usually deriving from some resentment, political, or—I have to say, we sought out gays and lesbians, bright people who were disaffected and who really felt that they couldn't function in these usual—you know, "They're too constraining." At the time we had people who wanted to work on gay and lesbian issues, and there was no other place. They couldn't do it. Even the Holocaust—you realize that for about twenty years after the Second World War people were prohibited from working on the Holocaust as a subject of historical research?

Vanderscoff: I did not know that.

White: It was not recognized as a topic. And you can imagine, therefore, lesbian writers—you study lesbian writers; "Great writing is not gender coded," things like that. So we had people who were working through problems of identity: gay men, gay women, lesbians, Chicanos who were trying to make sense out of what was essentially an education by whites for white, middle-class kids. They were bright. They had come up through these ghetto schools, showed some talent, typically, maybe had gone to community colleges, transferred into a state university, and then sought a graduate program where they would not be—Trying to work out their identity as Chicanos, men or women, straight or gay, turned them to the very idea of Chicanismo. So they wanted to work on that,

work on Chicano writers and things like that. They couldn't do it in the English department. So they would come to us and we were receptive to this.

Vanderscoff: And so you think it was your willingness to see these people who weren't quite at home—

White: They weren't mainstream. And I remember talking to the president of the University one year. He said, "Our aim is to mainstream all of these people." I said, "Why don't you provide enough money to allow the entire faculty of the University of California to take a year off and study Spanish, so the whole faculty would be able to speak Spanish, you know, at a minimal level at least. We've got this huge population of Spanish-speaking people." When he came I said, "Why don't you do this?" And he said, "No. Our aim is to mainstream." Turn them into, you know, straight, white—as the feminist movement said, "I was given an education to turn me into a white, Anglo-Saxon gentleman of the nineteenth century." (laughs).

No, I'm very thankful to Jim and Donna, who were the most ideologically attuned to these problems, so that I could front for them because I had a reputation with the administration of being a recognized scholar. I could bring projects to them. I remember when Barbara Epstein and I tried to get women's studies recognized as a legitimate field, and we had to go before a committee—I don't know if it was a course committee or what it was called—and we had to prove that there were journals devoted to this, refereed journals. So we had to bring the journals in and explain to these guys that women's studies was a field that was burgeoning and we would want to introduce it here. But because I had

the reputation of being internationally known it carried weight, and [Chancellor Robert] Sinsheimer recognized that and gave me a lot of stuff, like a budget so that I could bring interesting speakers in.

Humanities here, I would say, was stuck somewhere around 1939, and they were hostile to people like Derrida and Foucault. This was theory and they didn't believe in theory. They believed in learning.

Vanderscoff: And so you think it was histcon's willingness to embrace these things and embrace these students that cultivated a certain brilliance out of the people who came out of the program?

White: Look here, we would get every year anywhere from 300 to 400 applicants. We had the best selection percentage of any humanities Ph.D. program in the country. We got more people applying for us than they did at Harvard in history. And so, when you take a pool of 300 or 400 people you can find some pretty bright people in there, especially because these are the ones who don't want to go to a straight place, for whatever reason.

Histcon and the Humanities Division

Vanderscoff: Now, I'd like to talk about histcon's dynamic with the humanities division here at UCSC. Starting from your arrival and moving towards the present, how has histcon's relationship with its division changed and evolved over the years?

White: Well now, remember I've been out of it for sixteen years now, and I don't really know the latest chapter. You're going to have to get that from Clifford and

others. But in the beginning we were fortunate to have Helene Moglen appointed dean, and she came in the same year I did. And she was very supportive. She was interested in innovation and things like that, and especially in the promotion of feminist and women's studies. We supported that. Jim reminded me that from the beginning I had advocated expansion in that area. I didn't remember it myself. So she was brought in from outside, rather than being an internal good old boy.

Vanderscoff: Right. And so you think initially there was a certain sympathy for what you were trying to do?

White: Oh she did, she had lots of sympathy. She was an admirer of Norman O. Brown. And Norman O. Brown, who had a big reputation—I was a close friend of his, and he was behind us. He was instrumental in bringing me here, getting the administration to take seriously the kind of thing I did. So that was really important, to have a dean on your side. She also recognized that she couldn't do things like—for example, the first year I was here they decided they were going to close down linguistics. And she consulted with me and I said, "Look, you can't be a major university and not have linguistics. Linguistics is the one new discipline in the human sciences created in the twentieth century. You can't have a university and not have a linguistics department." And so she puts me on the—I was the chair of the committee to find someone to set up, bring in a person from outside. That was [Jorge] Hankamer that we hired. Same thing for philosophy; philosophy was in the doldrums. And so that's how we went and got—I knew Dick Wasserstrom from UCLA days, and we recruited Dick.

So she was interested in building up these departments that were not so much decadent as rather exhausted from their struggle, and had retrenched and were not going anywhere. Remember, this was the time when they decided we're going to be a research university. We had to look down the road to the setting up of Ph.D. programs in philosophy and history. It used to be they didn't have one. The only Ph.D. program they had, I believe, was in literature in the humanities. Yeah, it was the only one.[37] So she wanted to firm up these other departments. She used me and people who were interested in salvaging something of the educational and intellectual purposes of the human sciences, as I prefer to call them to the humanities—to build them up.

Vanderscoff: And so histcon was a part of this boom, this rising tide that happened with Helene Moglen as dean?

White: Yeah. And then I could have an influence on who was appointed in those departments.

Vanderscoff: So initially there was this very sympathetic relationship, and you've mentioned you can't speak to it more recently, but as of the time of your retirement from UCSC how had that dynamic changed? Had it evolved?

White: Well, it had changed largely because of economic reasons. They created something called the Center for Cultural Studies into which they put the research

[37] According to the UCSC campus overview (http://www.ucsc.edu/about/campus-overview.html) the lit grad program started in 1967, which was the only other Ph.D. program offered by the humanities division in the initial years of UCSC.

funds from the whole humanities division.[38] So, history of consciousness no longer had a budget that would allow it to bring in speakers and so forth. Everything had to be channeled now through the center. And so that hampered— You see, when I came here I realized that if you're going to have an impact you have to become a brand. You know what branding is? You've heard of the expression, right? Okay. I wanted history of consciousness to stand out, to be known as a place where serious intellectual work was going on, serious political consciousness was being developed, and that meant bringing in people whom I regarded as avant-garde. And, of course, when I brought them in, overflow crowds—and it was all history of consciousness, we had our famous sphinx posters and they became regular events, and I had enough money to give receptions where we weren't serving just Kraft cheese and Gallo wines. (laughs) Catered, so people would come in order to get a free lunch.

I wanted to make it into a logo, and I wanted people to have a sense of it. So this meant I brought in these famous people: Paul De Man, Fred Jameson, Derrida, Foucault, Gadamer, and so forth. They did the same thing the students did. They projected onto it what they thought they would like to have themselves.

So I was consciously building its reputation. I told Jim and Donna and the other members, I said that "When you go to give a lecture somewhere, stress that you're from the history of consciousness. Stress that that's your area, not that you—" Donna was a historian of science. She could present herself as a historian

[38] James Clifford was the founding director of the Center for Cultural Studies. See his forthcoming oral history for a detailed take on the center, including his perception on how it impacted history of consciousness.

of science or history of consciousness. So too with Angela Davis—to have Angela's name associated with us gives us the left orientation. Well, for black people, think; "Well, any program that has Angela Davis in it as a full professor, a Presidential Professor, that means that they're not prejudiced against blacks."

Vanderscoff: And so you think the funding shortage that started hitting the university in—what was it, the early nineties and so on?

White: Yeah, they had to start consolidating. That's why they started reducing the function of the colleges, too. It was a matter of economics, pure and simple. They began to do what corporations, managers are supposed to do: reduce costs and increase income.

Vanderscoff: So is a program like history of consciousness capable of flourishing during lean times?

White: Well, we were in very lean times. We had virtually no fellowship money. I mean, we didn't have any. I used my money as a Presidential Professor and University Professor to fund graduate students and programs for graduate students—classes, courses, conferences, pay for student travel to conferences. We never had enough money, because the division had no money for graduate students. You see, you only get money for graduate students based on the number of graduate students you got before. So unless you increase these programs, you see—and then, of course, as we kept increasing programs that meant we became eligible for more money from the system, but the system itself then—

Vanderscoff: Was giving out less money anyway?

White: Yeah, especially after the Enron thing that destroyed half of the portfolio of the university, just in the year I was head of this Presidential Humanities Committee.

Vanderscoff: Yes, and we'll visit that a little later on in this interview. How has histcon's lack of an undergraduate major affected its level of involvement with the division relative to funding and cooperation? Do you think there would be any value in an undergraduate version?

White: Well, we considered it a number of times and the principal reason we considered it is we needed a place where, on the basis of enrollments, we could ask for TAs. It's very simple: the principal reason. Our faculty was loaned out to women's studies especially. They would teach courses under the aegis of women's studies, and then they would be able to have three TAs, maybe, because these were big enrollment courses. But as each of these departments became Ph.D. programs, then they recruited their own students to whom they gave their teaching assistantships. So we got squeezed there, no doubt about it. It was hard on our students. They had to go around and talk to faculty and try to sell themselves as their TAs in political thought or politics or economics or what have you.

Vanderscoff: So with that in mind, why was it an undergraduate component never did quite develop?

White: Well, you know it's very interesting. The faculty who came here were really blessed, because people who are writers for whom publication comes just naturally, part of their career, part of their ambitions as intellectuals, to teach only what you want to teach, when you want to teach it to graduate students—it fosters your own development. See, a graduate student in chemistry goes into a chem lab and they learn chemistry, but a graduate student in a field like—well, for example we had many political activists among our students. They could teach us a lot about politics. We had people who were very active in the gay movement and the women's movement. They had had years of experience and they decided they wanted to come back. We took in a lot of older students, reentry people, reentry women especially, and these were people who you don't treat as tyros. You speak to them as equals. And this meant that there was a good exchange. So you can learn a lot and it fosters your own development. Especially they bring to your attention to areas of research that you hadn't even thought of that may bear upon your own. So it's really ideal for anyone whose— It's like being in a think tank, and you don't have to take on a given graduate student if you don't want to. You can select your own people that you're the mentor of. So it's an ideal situation.

So, someone like Professor de Lauretis—she didn't like teaching undergraduates. She says she has a weak voice. She doesn't have this kind of charisma for a large crowd. I love teaching because I'm a performer, as is Donna. But for many people the large classroom, especially in the humanities, really forecloses the possibility of effective education. How many students do you actually interact with in a class of two hundred? Very few. Not only that, you're

in the trimester system; ten weeks, you've only got ten weeks. That's why Berkeley refused to go the trimester system. It's still on a semester system. Not only that, teaching a very large class involves you in administration. You have to meet with your TAs regularly. You have to oversee the grading, the writing of the narrative evaluation, which is another pain in the ass. There were people with thousands of narrative evaluations behind—when they had the Narrative Evaluation System. Teaching a class of 400 is time consuming. You have to plan your lessons, you have to find ways of being an effective lecturer. In the humanities the best kind of teaching is not to be talking at your students but discussing a text or something like that. So we would offer a few classes, but we didn't set up a major. I was willing to do it, but I think most of the histcon faculty— See, teaching a graduate student is time consuming also, because it's one-on-one, and if you're writing your dissertation you want a lot of attention. You're turning in these chapters or drafts, and if you're a good teacher you have to read them, comment on them, discuss them, send them back—and they come back again.

Vanderscoff: And so there wasn't quite a consensus on the issue of the undergraduate major?

White: That's right. Well, we couldn't do it with the number of faculty we had anyway.

Apprehension and Comprehension in (the History of) Consciousness

Vanderscoff: Now, you write in your essay "The Tasks of Intellectual History," which was from the sixties, that because human "apprehension always outstrips

comprehension, histories of consciousness would appear fated to come out as stories of human failure in ways that histories of actions are not."[39] Now, you wrote this before your involvement with the histcon board here at UCSC.

White: Yeah, that's right.

Vanderscoff: But I'm curious about—keeping all these things you just said in mind—how has your definition of 'histories of consciousness,' lower case, been confirmed or challenged by [the department of] history of consciousness?

White: Well, I had forgotten I had written that. But this notion of the relationship between apprehension, or what people anticipate or strive for or wish for or hope for, and what they're actually able to accomplish—there's a dialectical relationship between those things. No aspiration, no accomplishment, but all aspiration never quite works out because you're having to deal with this brute world. But what you do get from that dialectic is a growth of consciousness where you begin to reflect on the process of historical change and the fact that most of it turns out as tragedy rather than comedy. Anyone who looks at the history of the world sees ultimate failure. That's what Hegel says at the introduction of *The Philosophy of History*. "And you have to ask yourself," he says, "what is the meaning of this panorama of failure?" Even the Roman Empire—it finally comes to an end. It lasts two thousand years, the Roman Republic and Empire, and yet it goes under finally. There's a reason why tragedy is considered the most noble of literary genres, right? Comedy gives you a vision of success;

[39] "The Tasks of Intellectual History" can be found in Hayden White (Edited by Robert Doran) *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature and Theory, 1957-2007* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

"They lived happily ever after." Tragedy says, well, "Look at the 'ever after.' Look at that marriage thirty years down the line." (laughs)

Vanderscoff: So, the history of consciousness board—so for you, do you think it was an exploration of these stories of human apprehension and comprehension? Was it one more than the other?

White: "History of public consciousness," I said—the example that I always gave was that look, there was a time before which people living in what we call France thought of themselves as Frenchmen. They thought of themselves as Burgundians or Gascogne or something like that. They identified with their province or region, their town, their family, estate, or what have you. Nationalism and the modern nation-state wipes out that loyalty. There are still people out there—Gildas Hamel, my colleague, still thinks of himself as Bretagne, as a Breton. He really does, much more so than French, and he still speaks Breton as well as French, and he's aware of shifting between the two. This is a matter of consciousness. The same thing is true of gender identification and the sort of thing that Judith Butler talks about, you know, the baby comes out of the womb and the doctor looks at and says, "Oh, it's a boy." That is its destiny, right? But it may not feel like a boy. These are matters of consciousness.

This whole issue of gender, of class identification. Think, when one says "I'm a conservative, politically"—that's a matter of consciousness. No one is a born a conservative. I think primarily it has to do with the study of identification, personal and collective. And what you usually have is a conflict between the two: one's personal identity is in conflict in some way, or usually is, with the

group identity. And one either doesn't fit in or feel that one doesn't fit in or there's no place for one, and these are maters of consciousness. When you say, "Okay, it's a matter of consciousness," it's a matter of educational institutions, so the history of education becomes important, of policing, of disciplining, and so the history of prisons and imprisonment and the law comes in. History of the police force—I know people who don't realize that the public police force is only 180 years old.

Vanderscoff: Yes, I remember you mentioning that last time.

White: What does it mean to say, "I'm a policeman," right? Does that mean I get to wipe out anyone whose skin color is wrong?

Vanderscoff: So, given this huge potential purview for history of consciousness to roam through and study and so on, do you think history of consciousness is best understood not as a discipline but rather as a method of inquiry? How do you pin down that term?

White: It's not a method of inquiry. [pause] This is why it has to be multidisciplinary. For example, the things I've just been talking about could be approached from a standpoint of sociology; it could be approached from a standpoint of psychology, or both, ideally: social psychology. We have to ask ourselves, "To what extent does economic necessity form consciousness?" The feeling of someone who lives under a constant sense or awareness of want, or need, or lack; what kind of world is produced? If you want to understand North Korea—everyone makes fun of North Korea because of this buffoon of a political system, but one ought to ask themselves what kind of anxieties and fear underlie

that kind of activity. The idea of the Olympic Korean gold winner who says, "It's all due to leader Kim Il-Sung that I have pole-vaulted eight feet," or something. (laughs) This is consciousness, you see.

And you know also, many people who came to the program in the seventies thought 'consciousness-raising.' What does it mean to raise your consciousness? I'd be willing to understand that. Higher consciousness, LSD, I mean all that—states of consciousness. We've had a couple of people who went on to become physicians. One of my students went on to medical school and became a psychiatrist. She took her Ph.D. in history of consciousness, went to medical school, and she's now a practicing psychiatrist out here in Aptos.

Vanderscoff: So, given this depth of inquiry into human consciousness and human apprehension and comprehension, has history of consciousness been imitated or emulated? Are there any programs in academia that are cousins to histcon by another name in any way?

White: I don't think so. The closest idea is cultural studies. Cultural studies is the thing that got distilled out sometime in the late seventies, eighties in England, University of Birmingham—Stuart Hall is one name, Raymond Williams another. Cultural studies was the closest to it.

But I've neglected to mention the one thing that I think is key to the understanding of consciousness. I think the key to the understanding of consciousness is the understanding of language, and modern linguistics and semiotics I think give us a way of coordinating psychoanalysis, sociology, legal studies, and politics in order to give us some insight. The advertising industry

knows this; they know how to change consciousness. They can make a person dissatisfied with their inherited identity. They can provide them with a false identity, a fantasy identity that some people actually try to live out. The twentieth century invents propaganda; warfare is won by the implantation of doubt and anxiety in the enemy.

But as I've said many times, the only thing really that is unique about the history of consciousness is this name. It's this name that's its fortune, because it's a name that people can project upon. And our time, which was once called the age of anxiety but you could extend it: the age of risk, the risk society and things like that. When you talk about apprehensions you're talking about anxieties. You're talking about projections. And what we've had under the bombardment of the media is the strong ego of the nineteenth century Christian gentleman has been gradually weakened. For example, you probably don't think of yourself as a guy who has to prove his manliness in battle. And yet I was born in a generation in which a military career was the most honorable and the greatest proof of your manhood, of your masculinity. After that came sports, of course, professional sports.

Vanderscoff: So in terms of investigating these processes, you think language is the ideal avenue?

White: Yeah, that's why literary studies and art in general has a function in it.

Histcon and Disciplinary Inquiry

Vanderscoff: In regards to academia, do you think the interdisciplinary approach of histcon—whether the study of language or whatever it is you want

to project upon that canvas—do you think that interdisciplinary method is the way of the future? Is it setting new patterns?

White: In the humanities, in the modern sciences you can't do single-disciplinary work at an advanced level. You can't be a physicist and not know either biology or chemistry, because at some point your work in subatomic energy physics is going to run into questions of growth, the organic—how electric energy gets transformed into molecular processes, which is what chemistry is concerned about. Now, it's even more so in questions like—you want some coffee, or not?

Vanderscoff: No, thank you.

White: Questions having to do with morality—what is the good society? I have a friend, a philosopher in Holland, who says, "I don't want to live in a good society. I want to live in a beautiful society." So he says, "What you need is an aesthetics of politics, not a morality." So, these disciplines were formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and they became straitjackets, and they created specialized approaches to—for example, art history. Art history should be taught in history departments—and it fractures off and becomes a separate department no longer related to history in general. History of science, the same thing has happened there. History of the law—it's now taught in the law schools, it's not taught in the history departments. Why not? In the nineteenth century, this whole history faculty, as they call it, taught the history of law. That is the fundamental problem of the human sciences in our times. Anthropologists are over there doing their work, historians here, sociologists over there—no

communication between them. They don't read each other's journals. They should.

Vanderscoff: So you position history of consciousness as a part of a move towards the erosion of disciplinary walls?

White: No, I've told you. The whole thing was set up out of economic motives. We made of it what we could. There's no program involved, you see. No, it would be nice to think that someone had a vision, and a program and a methodology, but the people who set it up were phenomenologists, and by consciousness they meant perception and things like that. But they thought it would be—it's kind of like a joke. Page Smith thought up this title because he thought—you know, he had this teacher back in Dartmouth who talked about the 'history of consciousness' all the time, the guy who had come from Germany, driven out by Hitler, and ended up in Dartmouth College. He was Page Smith's professor. And he used the phrase and Smith liked it. So he said, "Hey, let's call it the 'history of consciousness.'" No one knew what it meant when they approved it.[40]

Vanderscoff: Does anyone now?

White: No, that's the whole point. It can be filled with any content. So I don't know what people think when our students say, "I have a Ph.D. in the history of consciousness." Most of our students used to be kind of afraid of ever having to say that because they would think, "What does that mean?" That's why they'd

[40] For Dean McHenry's take on early history of consciousness, see Elizabeth Spedding Calciano, interviewer and editor, *Dean McHenry*, Regional History Project, University Library, 1972, 1987, volume II pp. 761-768. See also the oral history with Page Smith

want their secondary[41]—I'd say, "No," I said, "What you do is you insist on being called a professor of the history of consciousness because this is a new discipline."

Vanderscoff: Now, you have argued in some your writing that history was codified as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, primarily in response to external social pressures and so on.

White: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: Does the late twentieth century and now the twenty-first century in turn demand new modes of academic inquiry; does histcon do anything to answer those demands?

White: On this campus, women's studies, postcolonial studies, media: we had two or three of the best media people in the world, Stephen Heath and Victor Burgin. The former dean of the arts down at UCLA taught with us regularly, Vivian Sobchack. We were the place where you could come and do media studies, and in reality they weren't doing anything over the art field in media. It was only recently they founded something there. So, if you wanted to study film, we had people—Julianne Burton and others, Marshall Leicester and so forth—these were people who had to invent the field for themselves. When I went to UCLA in 1968, at first I said, "You must have a big film archive here. They said they had nothing. They had nothing. I said, "You're living here next to Hollywood and you don't have your own film program?" No, they didn't—it

[41] In reference to the parenthetical focus that was often included in history of consciousness degrees.

was taught in the English department, but they taught the plots of the films. I was involved in efforts to set up things like that. It's very difficult to get a new field because people are divvying up a finite set of resources. And it was resisted for many years. People thought, "Film is not a legitimate art. It's not a real art."

Vanderscoff: So you argue that film has emerged as coherent discipline in response to these pressures. Do you also feel that the interdisciplinary approach is a part of a response to similar pressures?

White: You got to realize these various disciplines have a vested interest in keeping things as they are. When there're funds available, what they will do if there's a pressure for a study of, say, film, they will set it up as what they call a program in which different people interested in film in various departments will form together so a person can do a major. That's the way it was up in Berkeley when I first came here. There was no film studies. There was no media studies. There was a film program, a couple of guys in French who were interested in the French cinema, a couple of people in the English, I'm trying to remember now who else was in it. Maybe someone over in art history. It's very difficult to get a new discipline recognized. When they set up these departments here, or these committees or whatever they called them, they didn't have to go through the senate. They just got the approval of the local Planning and Budget Committee and these people were all creatures of McHenry, the first chancellor, and his buddies, and they were able to make whatever they wanted to. Couldn't do this now—you couldn't set up a history of consciousness program. No one would know what it meant.

Vanderscoff: And they demand to know, if they're going to pay for it.

White: Yeah, they would say, "Are there refereed journals in this field?"

Vanderscoff: So, history of consciousness being very much a product of a particular time in academia?

White: Yeah, it was improvised. There was an opportunity and someone had an idea and they did it. But it's not like setting up a program in biochemistry, where the need is manifest. At a certain point in development of the history of the physical sciences it became obvious that the intersection between biology and chemistry had to be addressed. It was no longer a matter of just doing chemistry or doing biology. Questions arose about the relationship between the molecular and the biological levels, organic levels of life forms. Your physician today can't just analyze the chemistry of your body. He has to analyze the biology as well.

The Custodians of the Old, the Creators of the New: The Humanities, Art and Histcon Today

Vanderscoff: So while we're talking about changes in academia, you chaired a Presidential Humanities Commission for UC systemwide, which was tasked to investigate the state of humanities education in the UC.

White: And make recommendations.

Vanderscoff: Yes—how did you come to be involved, and what were the nature of your recommendations?

White: I was made the co-chair with the dean of humanities at UC Irvine, a woman named Adams, I believe. I had never met her before. We worked very well together. And I was appointed because I was Presidential Professor or something like this, and I was one of only fourteen University Professors in the system. There was one other in astronomy here. But I was the only University Professor outside of astronomy for a number of years. There weren't many in the humanities. Murray Krieger and I, and two or three others. And this was supposed to be a kind of super professorship and so I was appointed. I think I was recommended, probably by Sinsheimer or something. It was a senate committee, and we were given lots of resources, secretarial help, and funds for travel to meet regularly. There was supposed to be a systemwide full-year study. And we had two or three representatives from each of the campuses, people for the most part in the humanities. And what we ran into was people protecting their turf. We wanted to create university-wide research venues so that a person would not be limited to working only with his colleagues on campus or something like that. And so we made recommendations that would have required some millions of dollars to implement, because we were told when we began that we should think in terms of recommendations that might take as much as four to ten million dollars, because the university was rolling in money. Remember, it was the boom. The Enron—you know the Enron thing?

Vanderscoff: Yes, I'm familiar with that.

White: Enron happened at the moment we were turning in our report. We did not even get a response from the administration to the report. It was just thrown out. We did not get a response. This was a year's work by something like twenty-

six faculty, all full professors, trying to imagine new programs of an interdisciplinary sort, a multi-disciplinary sort, with venues where they could be detached from their normal duties at a given campus and work in conjunction. And so we made all these suggestions, and the idea was really to create multidisciplinary crossovers. I'm not sure about the exact nature of the Enron failure, but it wiped out a large part of the investment portfolio of the UC, and that's the moment that poverty really hit us.

Vanderscoff: And did any of the recommendations that you made, were they realized in any way at any later time, even accidentally through some other avenue?

White: No, no. I've even destroyed most of my copies of the report. I didn't need all of them because it was quite evident that—see, they were having these committees for the physical sciences, the social sciences, humanities, the arts, and we wanted to coordinate our work in the humanities especially with the arts. You know, it's quite remarkable that we have the arts in the university in the United States. That's not true anywhere else in the world. The arts are cultivated in academies and so forth. Here they're typically in universities and colleges and they're always sucking hind tit, as we used to say on the farm. They get nothing. you know. They're there for decorative purposes. So we thought that an alliance between the arts—because now people working in the arts are doing all sorts of crossover things, like acoustics, for example. In Europe music is mode of a study of acoustics rather than primarily a branch of aesthetics. So we were thinking in those terms, you see, avant-garde terms. But, as I say, as far as I know no one ever read it. But it was very difficult to do because each of the universities—see,

the campuses, especially Berkeley and UCLA, they get the biggest chunk of the university resources, those two, and third is San Diego because it's big in the sciences. They didn't want to see—they wanted a division of spoils to have the same proportions, you see. If we were to get ten million UCLA wanted to get its—you see, it wasn't a matter of spreading it around. And we wanted to spread it around to all of the campuses, especially among those that were short on resources.

Vanderscoff: How do you assess the humanities now? Do these needs still exist, or do you think they would still be useful in reforming humanities?

White: I think humanities are doomed for the medium term. They will come back in some form. The electronics revolution has rendered book culture—which is what the humanities are based upon—it's rendered it passé. This doesn't mean books are going to disappear or anything like that, but the experience of reading something online as against reading it in a book—your consciousness changes; in the same way that watching action movies with special effects transforms consciousness; in the same way that the editing of MTV or sound bites in the news program transforms anticipation. People's interest spans get conditioned to not like long—reading Proust, you know, stuff like that. (laughs) And, of course, the changes in the university, transforming it into a kind of corporate bottom-line, run by managers rather than by educators. See, because its function is no longer primarily educational; it's training, training of people in research techniques, training people to be surgeons or training people to be lawyers. Its purpose is no longer cultivation. It's certification.

If you ask what counts as an educated person today—it's a project which my colleague Elliot Aronson, the psychologist, is working on. He is not saying, "What is a good education versus a bad education?" He's saying, "What counts as an educated person?" It's difficult to say. One of the tests I have is the crossword puzzle. I see increasingly that I don't get a lot of the allusions, especially to rock bands, rappers, things of that sort. There's a story in the paper today about a local rapper who's decided to quit his day job and become a professional rapper. I've never heard of him, but he was talking about his idea of creation and his calling, his art—he thinks of it as his art. And I said, "Well, at least a rapper takes poetry seriously." (laughs) You know, they do. They think about rhyme at least, and rhythm. But I don't know—maybe we'll have a major in rap some day. Why not?

Vanderscoff: So coming to a conclusion here for our sessions, and keeping in mind all of that, what is the value of being a student of the history of consciousness, or more broadly a humanist, in academia or contemporary American culture at this point?

White: Well, first of all it depends upon the nature of the teachers in the program. The humanities differ from the arts or the sciences by virtue of the fact that the nature of the teacher counts much more. You can learn chemistry or math from a computer. Being in a class with a live teacher allows you to witness the formation of thoughts and attitudes rather than merely respond to the next question because you solved this one. Now, the humanities differ from the rest of the institution by virtue of the fact that they deal in qualities as well as quantitative, and every society, every culture is based upon a hierarchy of

qualities, values. And the humanities is the only place that really considered this as the subject matter. Evaluative thinking is quantitative in the sciences.

So what's the value? I happen to think that the people they've got in the history of consciousness right now are really excellent people. They have different interests from that of the founders and the old guard, including me, but they're very good and they're somewhat—for example, animal studies. A lot of people are interested in animal studies.

Vanderscoff: Carla Freccero.[42]

White: Yeah, and Donna Haraway, companion species and so forth. This is a field that's emerging that has both philosophical and scientific implications. How we relate to 'other.' That's a quite legitimate field. It's as legitimate as when they said, "Well, why do we need a special field in women's studies? Aren't women just ordinary people like the rest of us?" Yeah, but they'd always been treated as a kind of failed men, incomplete men. I still know philosophers who say gender is not a philosophical issue. They say it's a sociological problem. But for something like history of consciousness, your gender identity is crucial. Can you change it? How do you change it? Is there such a thing as bad change as well as good change? What would be a progressive change?

But the other problem is this: everyone's discussing college education today in terms of gross income over the course of your lifetime. And that's the only thing they're talking about. That's the reason for going to college, and that's why there's competition for the better school, because you'll make more money.

[42] Carla Freccero is, according to the histcon web site, current chair of the department.

For me I find it very strange to think of a whole society for whom the purpose in life has to do with increasing your income. This seems to me be to be a very vapid kind of aspiration. It really does seem to me kind of strange. Consumerism—read the Sunday *New York Times*, it's nothing but a catalogue to increase your desire. So every society has to have an ascetic component—asceticism: that means to say something like pleasure deferral or something like self-discipline. The human animal can't survive without a certain amount of self-discipline. That means a certain amount of pain and a way of assessing the advantages of certain kind of pain on the way to certain kind of pleasure. So I think that to think of the brain on the analogy of the computer is a mistake, because the computer has been designed on the analogy of the brain, really, rather than the reverse. And in the process it has lost many functions of the brain, or of consciousness in general. See, the computer has no consciousness. It has intelligence, but it has no consciousness. So you've filtered out the consciousness quotient and you've still got the automatism stuff, the logical connections and so forth. If you start thinking about the mind on the analogy of the computer, then you limit it. You produce people who are interacting with the computer. They can be replaced by the computer.

Vanderscoff: And so being a student of the history of consciousness, or being a humanist, you think that still has some sort of merit or value in that it makes up for the gap between the difference between the computer and a brain?

White: Well no, I wouldn't go that far because I don't know enough about computer engineering. I do know that a culture that would value the production

of a machine because it's believed to be a simulacrum of some organ—we have a problem, for example, what's his name—Pistorius?

Vanderscoff: Oscar Pistorius?

White: Yeah, the prosthetic devices. Hey, maybe we should all get artificial legs, and maybe implanting a computer would be better than having all the problems, psychological and otherwise, than human consciousness generates. I don't know if this program, this computer, anticipates anything.[43]

Vanderscoff: Apprehension.

White: Exactly. It doesn't apprehend anything. It's just there waiting for me to turn it on. (laughs) And possibilities are built into this. They're limited and they're consciously put in the domain of the possible. That means it has no imagination. Now they're dreaming of computers that can build computers, right? That would be the test, finally. But you see, I think that one of the things that the humanities teaches, that we don't get much of from science is the fact that the human species is the only one that has developed a competence to destroy itself, and that this development is really what makes it unique in nature. Other species develop technologies, [beavers] build dams and so forth. But they don't develop a technology that can destroy their own environment.

Vanderscoff: And so this comes back to the notion of the value of understanding or apprehending pain?

White: Well, consciousness.

[43] Indicating his laptop.

Vanderscoff: And the ability to inflict pain on oneself.

White: Yeah, and the idea of imagination. People undertake all kinds of crazy projects on the basis of their imagination. Some of them work out; some of them don't. (laughs) You know, Columbus and that business.

Vanderscoff: And so, in spite of all these changes, there is still something unique in the humanist at least in that they address the qualitative aspect?

White: Well I wouldn't— Put it this way: The approach generated by the sciences—physical and social—has its virtue. They are sciences of control. They give us control. They're therapeutic in some cases, but largely they produce a technology that's extractive and controlling of the world, and destructive of it therefore, oftentimes. What's left over from that is what the humanities is involved in. So I don't want to call them the humanities because they have a given content that we inherit from the Greeks or something like that. I would like to get away from that. What's left over—this is what philosophy is, I mean, they say philosophy loses its function when it says, "Well, the only thing we will honor as knowledge is what's produced by science," because philosophy has always been the questions left over once the science of the time gets its act together, right? So what do we do with the machine? The machine can't answer that question. And every scientist says that too, "Well, the use you make of it is up to you. We're just trying to create this machine. What use you make of it is up to you."

I think that that's where art comes in, really. For me, I'm more interested in art than I am in the humanities, because the humanities are largely custodial.

The humanities set up museums. They keep the past, they say what's valuable or what's worth saving, and they present it. But the arts are seeking things that are fulfilling to the human spirit. And this is why the humanities are less important than the arts. It's more important that we cultivate the arts. See, I would make the arts predominant and the humanities as secondary to them. Take creative writing—should it be in the arts or in the humanities? The humanities don't deal in creative things. The humanities are custodial. They keep alive the things that are worth keeping alive from the past. They exercise critical judgment. But the arts produce the new. They produce new things in a way that science does, too, but in a different domain. It has to do with something like a fullness of being is what the arts aspire to. So, the notion of fullness and realization of things that are potential is what releases the arts from ordinary morality, so that they can examine perversions and such things. Look here, for example, I get a magazine *New York*, not *New Yorker*. [holds up the magazine] Look, this is what its whole issue is devoted to. This is all about perversion.[44] It's about the New York sex scene, where you can find the most perverse—now, it's treated in the same way that their restaurant section is treated. It's like a commodity, right? So here is what they deal with when they deal with food, you see, and then over here is what they deal with, well—see?[45]

Vanderscoff: The juxtaposition, yes.

---

[44] Dr. White demonstrates his points with a copy of *New York* magazine, which was lying on the table top. The front page reads 'Sex: A Romp Through the Urban Libido.' It is the August 6-13th, 2012 edition.

[45] Pointing to various pages as he speaks. The food section depicts a series of juxtaposed soup bowls. He then flips to a page with nude bodies pressed together, side by side.

White: "Honestly, when I'm with one gender I just start to miss the anatomy of the other."[46] This is quite interesting, very legal; "Sex and love and retirement," "The art of kissing." Now this is all meant to sell in the same way that back over here they will show you the apartments that are available that you can buy for a cool three million dollars—two-bedroom. (laughs) So, it's the same story: consumerism. And they're quite open about it. *New York* magazine makes no distinction between the stories and the advertising. It's all about finding the most desirable. And it changes. Like, for example, Jennifer Aniston's shorts are shredded. So suddenly shredded shorts become—hers are really shredded, the pockets hang out. So suddenly you get a whole new line of shredded shorts. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: And how do you envision art as regulating or informing these things?

White: No, it's not regulative. That's the point. See, art escapes regulation. It's constitutive. In philosophy they make a distinction between constitutive and regulative rules, those that make something and then those that regulate something. Art is not regulated. That's why it's always against the censors. The censors are always trying to regulate it. There's a beautiful book by Susan Stewart called *Crimes of Writing*. It's about the efforts of these assholes in Congress to pass laws against obscenity and so forth and the history of that whole operation. No, art is not regulative. Art becomes regulative when a given dogma is put in place, like the golden mean or something like that, or some notion of harmony and balance. I was talking to a friend recently. He said, "I

[46] Quoting various article headings.

don't like music that's not harmonic." I said, "That may well be, but most musicians today are working in non-harmonic, or non-eight tone music. You can't hum it. You can't dance to it." (laughs) But art, like poetry, poetic utterance, is always breaking the last set of regulations that have been put in place. It's always going beyond the horizon that has been established as desirable and possible.

Vanderscoff: And so the humanities in some sense act as custodians of that history?

White: The humanities tend to be regulative. See, that's why they're fundamentally conservative. It's very difficult to get the humanists to take seriously a new art form. This is what happened, for example, with cinema. Right through until about thirty years ago, cinema was not treated as an art by the humanists, or a minor art at best. Now, the same thing happened with video. Bill Viola, the video artist, now is recognized as a great artist, but the idea that you can set a bunch of videos in a space and call it art?

Vanderscoff: And so you retain a certain sense of the value of art in this quantitative culture?

White: It's the only value. Other than morality and morality is always dogmatic. Art is quintessentially productive, not reproductive. Most of our technologies are reproductive, new styles of automobile—modest changes but basically the same format. Artists are thinking beyond any given configuration that is—they think always beyond the normal and the normative. Good artists do.

Vanderscoff: And so therefore, art as the only value.

White: Yeah.

Vanderscoff: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much. Is there anything else that we missed, you think?

White: I don't think so. This kind of peters out here without much content because as I say, I'm not really up on history of consciousness. My view about programs is they come and they go. And you know, if there's a need and someone—and even if there's not a need and someone gets an idea and is able to sell it and it gets institutionalized, it's going to be then subject to the vagaries of institutional life, budgets and things like that. And so a lot of it is luck if it develops well. A number of historians of science have pointed out that new disciplines require allies in other disciplines. As I think I mentioned to you, I recently went as a consultant to a university in Sweden who wants to set up a history of consciousness program. So I have to pretend there was a program. (laughs)

Vanderscoff: So, always recreating and reconfiguring history of consciousness?

White: Well for example, another thing that was interesting—I did not coin the term 'metahistory,' but I popularized it. And everyone says, "What is metahistory? It doesn't mean anything. It's not like metaphysics, which means something. So recently I get a—did I tell you this? I got an ad, someone sent an ad to me from the University of Ghent, in Belgium; they want a professor of metahistory.

Vanderscoff: Yes, I believe you did.

White: And that's quite interesting. [rhetorically] "Now, has any other program called 'history of consciousness' been set up?"

Vanderscoff: Did the one in Sweden—was it realized?

White: Well that was just last year, so—

Vanderscoff: So this is a nascent project?

White: Yeah. See, Europeans don't have any trouble with this title. It's only Americans and British who do, because Americans and British are academic people and tend to be quite conservative and classical in their interest. History of consciousness smells like Hegel. And you see Marx's idea of class consciousness makes it seem a little bit—you know, when you say 'class consciousness,' remember this debate Obama is inaugurating a class war when he points out that one percent of the population has ninety-nine percent— So, consciousness is a loaded term.

Vanderscoff: And we're still unpacking that, in some sense.

White: Yeah, this is why you get this resistance to a discipline like psychoanalysis, or a discourse like psychoanalysis. You'd be surprised how historians, philosophers, and literary scholars resisted psychoanalysis. Anyone who did psychoanalytic criticism was suspect. They're still suspect. [pause] Okay. So if you have any afterthoughts you can give me a call.

Vanderscoff: All right. With that, we will close off the record. Thank you very much.

White: You're welcome.

About the Interviewer

Cameron Vanderscoff is a contract oral historian based out of Santa Cruz, California. His published works include *John Dizikes: A Life of Learning and Teaching at UC Santa Cruz*, and beyond these interviews with Hayden White, he currently is at work on seven separate oral histories under the auspices of the Regional History Project and Cowell College. For him, oral history work is a means of accessing the past that is based on individual narrative—it values the personal, and centers on story. In its scholarly dimensions oral history can be very theoretically concerned and complex, but at the same time it is wonderfully straightforward, a celebration of curiosity, interchange and experience. Cameron finds it a privilege to engage with narrators and listen to their explanations of their lives; their openness in sharing their insights and intentions has provided an ongoing education for him, one that has profoundly impacted his own perspectives and practices.

Cameron graduated magna cum laude from UCSC in June of 2011, with honors in both history and intensive literature (creative writing focus). In his time as a student he was affiliated with Cowell College, where he delivered the commencement address and worked concurrently as college library lead and resident assistant. He is a recipient of the Dizikes Writing Prize for academic essays. Beyond oral history work, he uses his time to write fiction, practice blues/slide and jazz guitar and travel with a notebook when the opportunity reveals itself.