

Studying Myself in the United States – Studying the United States in Myself

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As the transnational becomes more central to American studies, we are likely to focus not only on the proverbial immigrant who leaves somewhere called 'home' to make a new home in the United States, but also on the endless process of comings and goings that create familial, cultural, linguistic, and economic ties across national borders. (Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Presidential Address, ASA, 2004)

We have to write out of who and where and when we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may." (Margaret Atwood, 1998)

In the end, the future of American Studies in Europe will ... depend on the ability of European scholars ... to establish their American work according to their own methods and standards, learning from each other as much as from the Americans; and it will depend on the spirit of that scholarship. (Sigmund Skard, 1958)¹

My first NAAS conference, which was also the first conference that NAAS organized, was 44 years ago, in Sigtuna in 1961, when I was still

1. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 57.1 (March 2005): 24. Margaret Atwood, "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction," *American Historical Review* 103.5 (December 1998): 1504. Sigmund Skard, *American Studies in Europe: Their History and Present Organization* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958) 653-54. – The present article is a revised version of a talk at the opening of the conference of the Nordic Association for American Studies at Växjö, Sweden, May 26, 2005.

a student.² NAAS has been important in my life for half a century, so now, back in Sweden where it all started, seems a good time to come to a conclusion. I am myself a Norwegian, but from the beginning I have thought of NAAS as a Nordic community of scholars. To me it has seemed that being a part of this Nordic community is more important than also coming from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, or Sweden. My sense of feeling at home in all the Nordic countries and having close historical and cultural ties with my colleagues from these countries has become central to my identity.

Much of my adult life has been focused on the study of the United States. I have found myself happy with my preferred object of study for more than four decades – even though I have not always been happy about the political decisions that have been made in the country of my choice. However, I have come to realize that I may have been led to, rather than chosen the study of the United States as my vocation. Indeed, I may have been genetically predisposed to American Studies: two of my grandchildren are Americans.

A Migrating Family

I say this only partly in jest; for these two young Americans are the latest manifestations of the multigenerational trans-Atlantic migrations of my family. Three of my grandparents were returned immigrants from the United States in the late nineteenth century. My mother's parents immigrated as a family in the 1890s and after some years in Idaho decided to return to Norway; but three of their children later settled in the United States. My father's father spent seven unhappy bachelor years in Mon-

2. The proceedings of the first conference were edited by the organizer, Lars Åhnebrink, Professor of American literature at Uppsala University, as *Amerika och Norden*. Publications of the Nordic Association for American Studies No. 1 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1964). This volume includes the program of the conference and a list of participants. The opening was a rather grand affair with speeches by the Prime Minister of Sweden, Tage Erlander, and the U. S. ambassador to Sweden. The second NAAS conference, in Oslo in 1964, had a similar opening, this time with the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Halvard Lange and the U.S. ambassador to Norway. The conference proceedings were edited by Sigmund Skard as the second volume in the Publications series, entitled *USA in Focus*. The opening ceremonies of later conferences have been lower keyed.

tana working for railroads and on ranches before he wrote to his father in 1893, asking for money for his return ticket.³ All immigrants did not succeed. My paternal grandfather's older brother, Orm (who in Minnesota changed his name to Tom), became editor of a short-lived Knights of Labor newspaper, *The Industrial Age*, in Duluth, and their sister, Martha, went on her own from Duluth to New York where she eventually became a lawyer specializing in corporation law. A thick book she wrote on this subject may be found in American law libraries.⁴ It may be that in writing for publication in the United States I have, sub-consciously, been emulating my American granduncle and grandaunt. My fourth grandparent, my father's mother, did not make it to the United States; but three of her siblings did, and settled in LaSalle County in Illinois. I correspond regularly with one of their descendants.

My family's migrations did not end with my grandparents' generation. In May 1939 my parents took me and my younger brother to North America, to Montreal, where I spent more than seven childhood years. My earliest memory is of a subway ride from Manhattan to Brooklyn on the day of arrival. (I did not understand this memory until my next ride on the same subway line in 1963.) I grew up with the same radio shows and the same magazines and comic books as my American contemporaries. Then, in 1963, my wife and I and our first son continued the pattern of migration when I went to continue my study of the United States at Yale. Since then our family has migrated regularly to the United States. And the pattern has persisted into the next generation. One of our three sons is born in New Haven and today he and his family are Americans.

I am not quite an outsider, then, as a student of the United States; and yet, one impact that my American peregrinations have had on my identity

3. A selection of letters by Hans A. M. Øverland to his father are in Orm Øverland, *Fra Amerika til Norge V: Norske utvandrebrev 1885-1894* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 2005). In English translation they may be read in Solveig Zempel, *In Their Own Words: Letters from Norwegian Immigrants* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

4. Martha Ubo Overland (1866-1914), *A Manual of Statutory Corporation Law* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1906, and later revisions). Martha first joined her brother in Duluth and Superior, working as a dressmaker and then bookkeeper and stenographer before she went to New York where she got her law degree in 1899 and later had offices in William and Wall Streets in Manhattan. Tom (1850-1899) also worked for several Norwegian-American newspapers, in Minneapolis and Duluth. He died destitute at the age of 49 of pneumonia in the spring of 1899 after working all winter in a lumber camp near Duluth. His career in journalism was by then over.

has been to make clear to me that I am indeed a European – *not* an American. Although I feel at home in the United States, the United States is not my home. But I am not entirely comfortable in my European homeland either, and this may be one of the necessary consequences of immersion in the culture and traditions of another country. How did this immersion come about?

I Understood as a Child

My study of America began, then, in May 1939 when I disembarked in New York two days after my fourth birthday and went on by train to Montreal where my father was pastor in the Norwegian Seaman's Mission. My first vague awareness of the larger world came with the Nazi invasion of Norway almost a year later. With it I became an exile. As I now see it, my growing but necessarily childish understanding of being an exile was part and parcel of my gradual awareness of the world outside my family. My earliest engagement with American Studies may not have been scholarly, but it was certainly formative, and it has contributed to my sense of being neither quite an outsider nor quite an insider – whether I am in North America or in Europe.⁵

My study of Europe began in 1944 with D-Day. In the pages of the weeklies, *Colliers*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Life Magazine* I followed the progress of the allied forces across Europe in the words and pictures of their reporters, artists, and photographers. On a map of Europe above my bed, colored pins marked the positions of allied armies and divisions. My interest in the war was intensely personal: my return to my land depended on the outcome.⁶ This experience at nine of a little understood war moving across a map of Europe has contributed to my adult awareness that the fates of Europe and the United States are one, and that the liberty and

5. In 1989 I paid my scholarly homage to the country of my childhood: *Johan Schrøder's Travels in Canada, 1863*. Edited, Translated, and with an Introduction by Orm Øverland (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989).

6. The war was close. Even a child could sense the seriousness of war with seamen visiting church and home between convoy duty, many never returning, and father had a uniform, also serving as chaplain in the Norwegian Air Force at their training camp, Little Norway, in Toronto.

strength of Norway depend on the liberty and strength of Europe. The map above my bed started the process that has made me a European.

My study of what it meant to be Norwegian was inseparable from my experience of growing up in a multicultural city. Looking back on those childhood years it is difficult to accept how completely I internalized the attitude of my English-speaking surroundings to my French-speaking neighbors. We lived close to a Catholic and consequently French parochial school but I never met my French Canadian contemporaries. I looked around corners in their neighborhoods, well informed of the dangers that lurked there. We children had a wide selection of derogatory epithets for the French. At home I was Norwegian and at Sunday school I was Scottish Presbyterian. Most of my childhood friends were Jews and on Friday evenings I was a *shabbas goy*, turning on the lights in the storefront temple (*schul* my friends said) across the street and getting a coin wrapped in paper from the rabbi for my services. But I was not really conscious of difference; we were all Canadians except, of course, for the French Canadians. So many of the children in Guy Drummond school were Jewish that when they had their holidays, several classes were merged and we did nothing serious such as arithmetic and grammar until their holiday was over and school went back to normal. In May 1945 I realized that I too had a special holiday and on the morning of the seventeenth – inspired, I later understood, by my Jewish friends – I announced that I was not going to school because this was a Norwegian holiday. Wisely, my parents did not object. I think mine was the strangest 17th of May celebration ever: I simply sat on the front stoop of our apartment house (now one of the buildings of Université de Montreal) until school was out so that all could see that I was not at school. Probably no one noticed, but for me it was – although I did not know the concept – my first public ethnic statement.

We – and by then a sister had been added to the family – returned to Norway in 1946 on a freighter, a Liberty Ship named *Lektor Garbo* carrying wheat from Trois Rivières, Quebec (to me it was then Three Rivers) to Bergen, Norway.⁷ It was a powerful emotional experience for an 11-

7. The ship was named for Ingvald Garbo, a senior high school teacher in Bergen, who in 1941 was executed by the Nazis for placing his typewritten essays in German military vehicles to make the soldiers reflect on what they were participating in. See Gunnar Garbo, *Nu går jeg fra dere. Fortellingen om en fars liv og død i det 20. århundres Bergen* (Bergen: Eide forlag, 2000).

year old to stand on deck one drizzly, dreary early December morning with his father as the mountains of western Norway came into view. Those mountains, of which I had no memory, told me this was where I belonged. But as my Norwegian identity was being confirmed, my literary interest in America had its no less emotional beginning. Our view of the mountains may have inspired my father with the sentimental notion that the pre-war Norway he remembered must be kept pure from pernicious American influences. At least he then and there announced to me that my fair-sized collection of comic books, including many early issues of *Superman* and *Batman*, could not enter our promised land. I was told to get them from the cabin I shared with my brother and dump them over the side of the ship. Disobedience was out of the question. With a heavy heart I carried my pile of literary treasures to the railing and let them fall into the sea. I now see my fascination with American literature as a lifelong attempt to regain that lost treasure.⁸

Studying the “Real” America

I began my studies at the University of Oslo in the mid 1950s – first history, and then English, which for me to a great extent meant the opportunity to read more American books. When time came to decide on a MA thesis my choice was nourished by the inspiring teaching and guidance of the father of American Studies in Norway, Sigmund Skard, one of those rare professors who have more students attending lectures in the second half of the term than in the first.⁹ But my interest in American culture had grown out of my life story. It was in this personal sense and because of

8. When I, towards the end of his life, asked my father about his reason for being so unreasonable he claimed to have no memory of this – for me – so shattering an event. My father was in no way alone in fearing the pernicious effects of comic books on the young nor in seeing them as a potential American cultural infection in the years after WW2. See Ulf Jonas Björk, “American Infection: The Swedish Campaign Against Comic Books, 1952-1957,” an unpublished paper presented at the conference of the Nordic Association for American Studies in 2003. For an account of the United States side of this issue, Björk refers to John A. Lent, ed., *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Post-War Anti-Comics Campaign* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1999).

9. This MA thesis, carefully edited by Sigmund Skard, was published as “The Impressionism of Stephen Crane: A Study in Style and Technique,” *Americana Norvegica* 1 (1966): 239-285.

my personal experience that American Studies had become my destined field.

Or so it seemed to me for a long time. For I gave little thought to my older relationship with the United States through my immigrant forebears and American relatives. I had yet to understand the implications of the truism that the United States is a nation of immigrants and that I was closely related to that developing and migrating nation. Looking back, I realize that nor had my teachers, in Oslo or at Yale, demonstrated an understanding of the United States as a nation constantly in the making.

When thirteen English colonies became the United States of America, Americans of English origin were certainly the largest single ethnic group, but their 48% of the total did not quite make them a majority. About 20% were of African origin. Others had forebears from Germany, Holland, Finland, Sweden, and other countries. Earlier generations of American historians had arrived at a more inflated percentage of Anglo-Americans. In 1921 Samuel Orth set the percentage of Americans of English origin in 1790 at 82.1%. There are of course no precise figures; both of these percentages were based on computations. But the difference between Orth's percentage of 82 in 1921 and Roger Daniels's more modest one of 48 in 1991 speaks of a change in the way American scholars perceive American history.¹⁰ This development has also been my development.

Orth called his book *Our Foreigners*. In 1921, "foreigners" was still the common word in American English for Americans of other than English descent. American Studies was consequently not much concerned with them. In the United States the scholarly interest in immigration history as a part of United States history had its slow beginning in the decades between the two World Wars, and three pioneers were of Scandinavian origin: the Norwegian-American Theodore Blegen, the Danish-American Marcus Lee Hansen, and the Swedish-American George Stephenson. But in spite of their efforts immigration history for

10. Samuel P. Orth, *Our Foreigners: A Chronicle of Americans in the Making*. The Chronicles of America Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921) 31. Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) 68. The figures in both cases are computations. I assume that one source of error in Orth's percentage is that he did not include slaves in the total. Orth was a professor of history at Yale University.

some time remained a fairly isolated field in American historical scholarship.

An American Citizen

Today it is difficult for me to understand how unimportant immigration seemed to me when I was a doctoral student – both as a field of academic study and research and as a personal interest in my family’s participation in the making of America. I visited American family members in the Midwest a few times during my three years at Yale Graduate School, but mostly I avoided contact with descendants of Norwegian immigrants and their ethnic traditions and culture. My interest was in “real” Americans – and the “real” America was founded by English Puritans and inhabited mainly by their descendants. So blind were my eyes and so deaf my ears that it took many years before I appreciated the significance of an experience I had coming out from the Sterling Memorial Library one wet and dark evening in New Haven in the fall of 1964.

I had finished my work for the day and was on my way out when I was delayed by an altercation at the desk of the guard whose duty it was to check all bags and parcels of those leaving the library. A woman was refusing to open her bag. A line of impatient students quickly grew behind my back. Finally she gave in – as she must – and opened her bag for inspection. The guard glanced in it, gestured toward the exit and said, “good night.” I followed on her heels and as we came out she turned around, looked up at me, and said with indignation and a marked accent, “Imagine their doing this to me, an American citizen.” What she had been exposed to symbolized all that she had been liberated from by making herself an American. For Americans – like America itself – are in the making. America’s strength is the faith of its citizens in the meaningfulness of their citizenship regardless of their many accents and their many places of origin. The patriotic vision of the woman outside the Sterling Memorial Library, however, is at odds with the vision of America that inspires the Patriot Act. The tension between these two visions has been central in the history of the United States.

Two important experiences on my way to realizing and acknowledging

the multicultural and transnational core of the America I thought I was studying were contemporaneous with but not actually part of my graduate studies. The first in time was my very modest participation in the Great Freedom Summer of 1964, teaching freshmen at the all-black Texas Southern University. This was also the summer of the Bay of Tonkin incident and I could not but identify with the American anti-war movement as it grew through the second half of the 1960s.¹¹ Before concluding, I will return to the impact of the latter on my attitude to the European tradition of criticism of the United States.

But these were extracurricular activities. My tidy image of an Anglo America was not really questioned by my years at Yale. In my book on James Fenimore Cooper and in my early articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature there is nothing, I now see, to suggest that I was a European student of the United States and that my perspective differed significantly from that of my American contemporaries.¹² Indeed, inspired by my great teachers at Yale, in particular by my mentor, the generous Norman Holmes Pearson, my aim was to be indistinguishable from my American colleagues. Since my ideal was objectivity, my identity was irrelevant. I was well into middle age before I felt free to study the American experience of immigrants and before I felt at home in the ethnic niche of Norwegian Americans. If American Studies is my destined field, this is, I now realize, as much because of my long unrecognized family ties with the United States as of my North American childhood.

11. In 1964, graduate students at universities in the Northeast organized a "Southern Teaching Program" that offered the services of students for summer courses at what were then known as "predominantly Negro" colleges and universities. I was watching television with my graduate student colleagues at Texas Southern University when the news of the incident in the Bay of Tonkin broke. None of us could possibly believe the official version of the phony incident that triggered a full-scale war. The most shocking event of that summer – the murder of the three voter-registration volunteers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner – has still not been resolved. June 14, 2005 – more than forty years later – *The New York Times* reports on the jury selection for the murder trial of one of the accused.

12. *The Making and Meaning of an American Classic: James Fenimore Cooper's The Prairie* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1973). In spite of its title, my anthology, *America Perceived: A View from Abroad in the 20th Century* (West Haven, Connecticut: Pendulum Press, 1974), did not represent a more European or Norwegian orientation in my study of the United States.

A Book about American Literature

In the winter of 1982-1983, after some unproductive years as Dean, I wrote my first notes on a project I foolhardily embarked on, knowing next to nothing about it: a history of Norwegian-American literature. I do not think I would have done this without the example and inspiration of Dorothy Skårdal.¹³ In my ignorance I thought that so limited a topic could easily be researched and written in a couple of years. It was all of fourteen years, however, before *The Western Home: A Literary Study of Norwegian America* was published in 1996.¹⁴ This book is about how a European immigrant group brought their language to the United States and used it for literary expression over a period of eighty years.

I now see it as a somewhat belated rebellion against my teachers at Yale. There – twenty years earlier – Norwegian had not been accepted as one of the two foreign languages required for entry into the doctoral program. Norwegian, I was informed, was not relevant for American Studies.¹⁵ So there was a certain note of protest in the opening sentence of *The Western Home*: “This is a book about American literature.” In the introductory chapter I found it natural to introduce my journalist granduncle as well as my lawyer-scholar grandaunt. Only recently have I realized that I should have placed my childhood self there as well: I was given my first book about Norwegian immigrants in 1943, when it was read to me by my father. It was called *Muskego Boy* and was lavishly illustrated, as were the other Norwegian-American publications of my childhood years, the Christmas annual, *Jul i Vesterheimen*.¹⁶ These and other publications of the Augsburg Publishing House in Minneapolis entered my childhood home in Montreal because of the close war-time

13. Dorothy Burton Skårdal, *The Divided Heart: Scandinavian Immigrant Experience through Literary Sources* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974). This was the first book devoted to a study of a broad selection of American literature in languages other than English. It was based on a Harvard dissertation supervised by Oscar Handlin. For some years I served as external examiner of MA theses on Norwegian-American authors by students of Dorothy Skårdal at the University of Oslo.

14. *The Western Home: A Literary History of Norwegian America* (Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian-American Historical Association; distributed by University of Illinois Press, 1996).

15. The two standard languages for this requirement were French and German. Strangely, Spanish was then not considered important for American Studies.

16. Edna and Howard Hong, *Muskego Boy*; illustrated by Lee Mero (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943). The Christmas annual *Jul i Vesterheimen* (Christmas in the Western Home) was published by Augsburg from 1911 to 1957.

relations between the Norwegian Seamen's Mission in North America and The Norwegian Lutheran Church in America.¹⁷ Clearly – I now see – both my family ties with the United States and my own North American childhood were essential ingredients awaiting the catalyzing effect of Dorothy Skårdal's indefatigable proselytizing.

In the story I was eventually able to tell in *The Western Home*, the earliest attempts at American poetry and prose in Norwegian were published in Wisconsin newspapers in the 1840s and 1850s. By the late 1870s American books in Norwegian included fiction, verse, and drama in addition to the many religious books. This literature, however, never became part of the American literary culture that was conducted in English nor did it get any attention in the European homeland. Today, moreover, the many writers and their books are unknown even to those who claim a Norwegian-American identity. Immigrant cultures are both marginal and transitional. An American culture that expressed itself in a language other than English was not actually ignored by the majority culture; it was not heard to the extent that it could *be* ignored. Being transitional, moreover, it was doomed to oblivion. You may say that such is the fate of all cultures, but immigrant cultures and their languages have rarely survived into a third generation in the United States. As newcomers moved into the immigrant culture, assimilated Norwegian Americans were moving out of it. As the grandchildren of immigrants remembered only a few scattered phrases of the language of their grandparents, new immigrants were struggling to learn English. An immigrant culture depended on continuing immigration. When mass immigration was interrupted by the First World War and virtually ceased by the late 1920s it was evident to most actors that the end of a dynamic Norwegian-American culture was near. Paradoxically, the 1920s is both the decade with the greatest Norwegian-American literary achievements and the decade when, to all practical purposes, American books in the Norwegian language ceased to be published. A single novel, Ole Edvart Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*

17. See my forthcoming article on the beginning of this relationship, "Sjømannskirken i en krisetid: Minner og brev fra høsten 1939," *Bud og Hilsen* (2005). My father, Berge J. Øverland, was on a three week lecture tour in Minnesota in February 1942, resulting in further support for his work in Montreal as well as increased interest on his part in Norwegian-American institutions and relations.

(1927), has entered into the American literary canon in English translation.¹⁸

Had I realized what a long and arduous project this literary history would be, I probably would not have had the guts to take it up. There was no satisfactory bibliography and no single depository for the work of these obscure authors. During more than a decade, whenever I had the opportunity, I visited American archives and libraries, poring over the dusty pages of long forgotten books and journals in a language now unknown to the descendants of those who had written and read them. It was – I felt – my role to be a medium through whom these forgotten American writers might speak again.¹⁹

The book's programmatic opening sentence – “This is a book about American literature” – may seem bombastic, but I felt I had to make my governing premise clear from the outset: these American writers who wrote in Norwegian for American readers had created an American literature. American librarians, however, have either disregarded the first sentence or not read beyond the title page: they have catalogued and shelved *The Western Home* as a book about Norwegian – not American – literature.²⁰ Immigrants and ethnic groups other than the English are still foreigners in an American literary history that begins with English colonists and focuses on what was later written in their language. The still dominant view is that the languages of foreigners cannot be American languages, nor can the literature written in such languages be American. There are, however, some signs of an important shift in the understanding of what is central and what is peripheral and of what is signifi-

18. Ole E. Rølvaag, *I de dage...* and *Riket grunnlægges* were published in Oslo in 1924 and 1925. In collaboration with Lincoln Colcord, Rølvaag translated the two volumes as one novel: *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1927).

19. This idea of being a medium has been further realized in translations I have done. Ole A. Buslett's “The Road to Golden Gate” and Dorthea Dahl's “The Copper Kettle” are in Marc Shell and Werner Sollors, eds., *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 416-59 and 552-75. I have been involved in the publication of two Norwegian-American novels: *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter* by Drude Krog Janson. Translated by Gerald Thorson. Edited, with an Introduction and Notes by Orm Øverland (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), and *The Rise of Jonas Olsen: A Norwegian Immigrant's Saga. A Trilogy* by Johannes B. Wist. Edited, translated and with an introduction and notes by Orm Øverland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). Hopefully, more will follow.

20. Colleagues in Europe recognized it as a book about American literature: it was awarded the American Studies Network Prize for the Best Book in American Studies by a European 1996-1997.

cant and what is insignificant in American Studies.²¹ In her Presidential Address to the (United States) American Studies Association in 2004, one of Shelly Fisher Fishkin's several proclamations was, "As the transnational becomes increasingly central to American Studies, we may well seek to recover chapters of the past that have eluded any archive despite their importance."²² One of the recovery projects she mentioned is the large mass of American texts in languages other than English.

European American Studies

I became a member of the board of the European Association for American Studies for the first time in 1976 and by the late 1980s my active involvement in this organization had played an important role in my changing perspective on American Studies and on my growing awareness of how and why a European perspective must and should be different from an American one.²³ One defining experience was the editing of a volume of articles in English translation by scholars from Eastern and Central Europe, the second volume in an EAAS translation project. It had started out as a volume presenting the work of scholars in what was then known as East Europe, a political rather than a geographical concept. But during the editing process the political division of Europe underwent radical change. One consequence of this change was that some of the articles were not merely translated but were rewritten in the course of the long editing process because the authors felt increasingly free from the political restrictions that had determined the ideological rhetoric and the once obligatory slanting of their scholarly work. The book was eventually published in 1990 as *In the European Grain: Amer-*

21. See Orm Øverland, ed., *Not English Only: Redefining "American" in American Studies*. A Longfellow Institute Book. European Contributions to American Studies 48 (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2001). The Longfellow Institute at Harvard University has, thanks to the efforts of Marc Shell and Werner Sollors, played an important role in this shift.

22. Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures," 25.

23. My participation in an Erasmus thematic network for American Studies with colleagues from universities in Dijon, Ghent, Mainz, Trieste, Vienna, and Winchester was also significant for my awareness that I was a *European American Studies* scholar.

ican Studies from Central and Eastern Europe.²⁴ For the editor the entire process was an education in the potential of a changing Europe, a Europe that was as Russian as it was French and as Polish as it was British. The realization that the United States did not look the same from the many different countries that were Europe was central to a realization of what a European perspective meant: there are at least as many European perspectives on the United States as there are American perspectives on the United States. One thing that all the many European perspectives have in common is that they include the study of *American American Studies*: when Russian or Norwegian Americanists attend the annual meetings of the (United States) American Studies Association they are studying and observing the meeting as well as participating in it. The ASA culture is also an American culture and you may have to have an outside view in order to include it in your American Studies. The many studies of the United States from European perspectives will, however, remain largely irrelevant to our colleagues in the United States as long as their view of the field is limited to work found in journals and books published in the United States.²⁵ The first necessary step to make American Studies international may be that American scholars seriously consider the possibility of the relevance of American Studies scholarship from abroad. The references in United States publications and the reading lists of United States graduate courses suggest that we still may have a long way to go.

Homemaking in the United States

It may have been the exclusion of *The Western Home* from the library shelves reserved for *real* American Studies that drew my attention to how immigrants and their descendants in the not so distant past had found it necessary to argue that they were American. During my work on *The*

24. Orm Øverland, ed., *In the European Grain: American Studies from Central and Eastern Europe* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1990).

25. Two fine series of publications in Germany alone are *Amerikastudien/American Studies* and *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*. Journals devoted to American Studies abound in European countries; many of them have articles in languages other than English.

Western Home I had reacted negatively when my research showed up so many instances of what seemed a Norwegian-American tendency to boast of being such excellent Americans, indeed the very best Americans.²⁶ Immigrants from Norway had unpleasantly high ideas about themselves, I thought. But as my study of immigration history broadened I became aware that all immigrant groups (not only those from Europe)²⁷ at the turn of the nineteenth century boasted of being more American than others. When I was invited to give the opening lecture at the NAAS conference in Oslo in 1995 I had just completed my as yet unpublished *The Western Home* and knew that I wanted to make use of this opportunity to talk about something new, not about what I had already done (– well, I am older now). That lecture became the beginning of a book published five years later: *Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-1930*.²⁸ One shared immigrant project, I realized, has been to make home of a country that insists you are foreign. Let me read to you my opening sentences:

In common American usage the noun foreigner has had one meaning not registered in major dictionaries of American English: *an American or a resident in the United States who is not of British origin*.²⁹ To be characterized as foreign has been central to the experience of so many Americans of first and second generation who came from a European country other than the United Kingdom that one can only wonder why lexicographers of a nation of immigrants have not noted this meaning of the word.

26. See for instance April Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade: Inventing the Norwegian-American through Celebration* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

27. In a reader for Japanese language schools a text on “Good Citizens” admonishes children of Japanese immigrants to “always remember the virtues of the Japanese people.... There is no better way than this for you to serve your nation, America....” Teruko I. Kumei, “Making ‘A Bridge over the Pacific’: Japanese Language Schools in the United States, 1900-1941” in Øverland, *Not English Only* 106.

28. *Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000). The publisher advised against my original title: “This Land Is My Land.” Thanks to David Nye, the NAAS lecture was published as a pamphlet in the work-in-progress series he has initiated: *Home-Making Myths: Immigrants’ Claims to a Special Status in Their New Land*. Odense American Studies International Series No. 20 (Odense, Denmark, 1996).

29. The three American dictionaries consulted were *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield, Massachusetts, 1966), *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* (Chicago, 1940), and *A Dictionary of Americanisms* (Chicago, 1951). *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition (Oxford, 1989), however, notes a parallel usage of “foreign” in British English: “the word is in British use not applied to parts of the United Kingdom, nor, ordinarily, to (former) colonies chiefly inhabited by English-speaking people” (VI: 51).

In this book I demonstrated that European immigrants responded to exclusion by arguing that America was their special home. Central to their argument were narratives where characters of their nationality played important roles in the history of the United States, thus proving that the imagined descendants of these characters (such as Kosciusko or Columbus) had a special right to be Americans. I called such arguments homemaking arguments. The stories immigrants told to support these arguments I called homemaking myths. The function of homemaking myths was to make America the rightful home of an immigrant group. There are three genres of such myths:

- *Myths of foundation* – where the main theme is, “We were here first or at least as early as you.”
- *Myths of sacrifice* – where the main theme is, “We gave our blood for our country.”
- *Myths of a close ideological relationship* – where the main theme is, “We were American before we came to America.”

Stories that made such arguments were told by the cultural and intellectual elite of all European immigrant groups. They taught their fellow immigrants that they had a special right to be at home in America and not be regarded as foreigners in their own land.

These myths may appear self-glorifying. Considered in their historical context, however, they were responses to a politics of exclusion where immigrants and their children were defined as foreigners. These myths supplemented the dominant American historical narrative – equally mythic – where all roles were played by Americans of British descent. The history immigrant children were taught at school had a nation-building function and was intended to make Anglo-American children proud of their heritage. However, these history books did not address the children of immigrants from, say, Finland, Poland, or Germany and their need of pride in *their* heritage. In school texts immigrants were not only outsiders but threats to American culture. The alleged mission of the public school was to make Americans of the children of foreigners; the message was often that they had no right to a home in the United States, as David Muzzey’s widely used *An American History* (1911) made clear. There the children of immigrants, who were in the majority in many

classrooms, were confronted with the question: "Can we assimilate and mold into citizenship the millions who are coming to our shores, or will they remain an ever-increasing body of aliens, an undigested and indigestible element in our body politic, and a constant menace to our free institutions?"³⁰

Not Bunk!

This is now history. By the time of the Second World War few seriously questioned that the descendants of European immigrants were Americans. But it is important that today's descendants of European immigrants be aware of this history so that they do not repeat it. The exclusion of Americans from their land did not end with their grandparents and great grandparents. Japanese Americans were regarded not only as foreigners but as enemies when the United States entered the Second World War; the post-war decades saw a culmination of the bitter struggle to keep African Americans out of their American home; and today immigrants and the children of immigrants from Islamic regions again have the experience of being regarded with suspicion as aliens in their own land – and as a menace to its free institutions. History is more than Henry Ford claimed it to be.

In my work I continue to be fascinated by the making of America. My recent publications are on ethnicity, migration and exile, on aspects of entering the United States and making it home.³¹ My major project has for some years been a seven-volume edition of immigrant letters of which the first four have been published and a fifth should be out by the

30. Quoted by Frances Fitzgerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Atlantic/Little, Brown, 1980) 78. Fitzgerald observes that this and other text books "portrayed the immigrants as nothing more than a problem."

31. Some examples are: "The First World War Americanization Movement and Immigrant Resistance to the Melting Pot," William Boelhower and Alfred Hornung, eds., *Multiculturalism and the American Self* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2000) 139-156; "The Jungle: From Lithuanian Peasant to American Socialist," *American Literary Realism* 37.1 (Fall 2004): 1-23; "Recovering an Unrecognized Novel – Discovering American Literature," Alfred Hornung, ed. *Multicultural America* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2005); "Visions of Home: Exiles and Immigrants," Peter I. Rose, ed., *The Dispossessed: An Anatomy of Exile* (Northampton: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005) 7-26.

end of 2005. This edition is based on a large collection of immigrant letters in the Norwegian National Archives (*Riksarkivet*), a collection initiated in the late 1920s by the American historian, Theodore Blegen and the Norwegian-American Historical Association at a time when there was little interest in Norway and other European countries in the peasants and laborers who had left their country for what they hoped would be a better life in the United States.³²

Immigrant and Native Americans

I have had much to learn from these often semi-literate writers. One lesson that has recently given me cause for reflection is of alternative ways to make America home. Immigrant homemaking has not been without its ethical ambiguities. The vast areas of land settled by European immigrants were not empty before they arrived – even though immigration historians have largely avoided understanding immigration as the displacement of a native population. Indeed, barriers and hindrances have been common tropes for Native Americans in the rhetoric of historians of immigration. Letters from three immigrants may illustrate two contrastive approaches to homemaking in the United States. One, that of exclusion, has been the more common, the other, that of inclusion, may suggest an attitude to homemaking that could have led to an America different from the one most immigrants took part in creating.

The first of these three immigrants, Jacob Hilton, came to Socorro, New Mexico in the spring of 1881 and wrote to his father on the farm Hilton in Ullensaker, a little north of Oslo, that this is “a new world where white people have just begun to come. Now I am among Indians,

32. The first three volumes were in cooperation with Steinar Kjærheim: *Fra Amerika til Norge I: Norske utvandrerbrev 1838-1857*; *Fra Amerika til Norge II: Norske utvandrerbrev 1858-1868* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1992), *Fra Amerika til Norge III: Norske utvandrerbrev 1869-1874* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1993), and *Fra Amerika til Norge IV: Norske utvandrerbrev i utvalg, 1875-84* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 2002). A fifth volume will be published in 2005/06 and the last two volumes should be ready by 2008. An American two-volume edition of a selection of letters from the seven Norwegian volumes will eventually be published by the Norwegian-American Historical Association.

Mexicans and Spaniards.³³ All three are alike in appearance and one is as dangerous as the other.” But with the arrival of the railroad, he wrote, “white people are beginning to swarm in the mountains and valleys that used to be populated by these lazy and useless people who live like wild animals. I have never felt better since I left home than after I came to this place.” Jacob Hilton acquired a sense of belonging by seeing himself as one of the white people who, he writes in the same letter, have built the United States “from sea to sea. There are still millions of acres of land that have not yet been trod on by white people but as the emigration increases it will all in time be settled by whites. But this place has become my home. Let others go further.” In a letter he wrote some months later he again identified himself as one of the “white people [who] have only come this past year” and expressed his sense of being at home in “the wonderful America.” Then, in November he wrote about a bloody encounter with Apache Indians, “the ‘*poor Indians*’ that people in the eastern states have so much sympathy for. My judgment on such people is that they should be in hell with broken backbones – both the Indians and those who feel such concern for them.” Jacob Hilton created his American identity and his sense of being at home in his new land by defining himself as a white male westerner and excluding the “lazy and useless people” from a place in this home.

In a recent article on the correspondence of Jacob Hilton in *Journal of American Ethnic History*, I observe that he responded not only to his own experience in New Mexico, “but to the heady rhetoric of the local newspapers. For surely Jacob Hilton’s characterizations of the ‘others,’ whether of the ‘lazy and useless people who live like wild animals’ or of the Indian-loving ‘people in the eastern states,’ were not original creations of his own mind but part of the language he had been exposed to on his western journey and that he made his own so soon after arriving in Socorro.”³⁴ You may find him an extremist, but one way of trying to understand Jacob Hilton and his sense of belonging in a new home is to see him responding

33. The earliest Mexican/Spanish settlement in the present New Mexico, led by the controversial conquistador Don Juan de Oñate, was in 1598.

34. Orm Øverland, “Becoming White in 1881: An Immigrant Acquires an American Identity,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 23.4 (Summer 2004) 133-41. The correspondence from Jacob Hilton referred to here is in *Fra Amerika til Norge IV*. The encounter with the Apache Indians involves Gus Hilton, the father of the Conrad Hilton of hotel fame.

to the dominant culture of Socorro in a manner not all that different from the way the child conformed to his neighborhood's views of the ethnic divisions in Montreal or the graduate student responded to the dominant culture of the American Studies Program at Yale Graduate School and identified himself as a student of the real America.

My second immigrant correspondent, Iver Andersen Lee, came to the present North Dakota in 1882. After he had married in 1891 he wrote to his family in Hedalen in Valdres March 2 and told them that his new wife was twenty-five years old, short, and rather fat.³⁵ Among the many other things he thought would interest people in Hedalen he wrote about a five-day journey he had made to visit some friends and buy fish from Native Americans in their vicinity. I would like to share this part of his long letter with you. After telling how he had done a profitable business on his return home with the fish he had bought from the Indians, using some of it to make *rakfisk*, he writes:

The Indians are rather nice people to visit ... In most of their houses they had a stove but in some there were fireplaces. I must say that it was really nice to see a fireplace again, because I haven't seen one since I left you. And the fire burned so brightly in their fireplace that I really felt at home ... There has been quite a lot of trouble with the Indians last fall and winter and they have rebelled in many places. And the government has made regular war against them. There have been several battles and several hundreds have fallen on both sides, but mainly Indians. At the place where I visited there had not been any uprising, but they are said to have done their so-called war dances some time after I was there and that created quite a scare ... Moreover, quite a few exaggerated and some completely false rumors were in circulation and this made the situation look much worse. Many left their cattle and homes behind and fled from the area. But the scare subsided when the exaggerations and falsehoods were revealed. The government is itself responsible for the unrest among the Indians. The situation is that they are in a way the wards of the government. They do not farm the land but have fed themselves by fishing and hunting. So as the land has gradually been taken from them, their sources of livelihood have diminished and as compensation the government has agreed to supply them with food and clothes. This is done through government agents but they have been under so little control that they have made themselves wealthy at the Indians' expense. Thus the Indians have often suffered from hunger and this is what has led them on the warpath. It seems quite reasonable that they would rather fight for survival than die of starvation.³⁶

35. The original letter reads: "Hun er 25 Aar gammel, er liden af Vekst – kort men ganske tyk." The family in Norway spelled their name *Lie*, but for obvious reasons Iver and two brothers changed this to Lee, thus retaining the pronunciation.

36. *Fra Amerika til Norge V*, letter No. 219; my translation. *Rakfisk* is freshwater fish, usually trout, that has been cured by a process of fermentation.

The difference between the attitudes of Jacob Hilton and Iver Lee is neither of place nor of time. My third immigrant, Gulbrand Rundhaug, also wrote from North Dakota and at about the same time as Iver Lee. His letter to the farm Elsrud in Ringerike about the unrest among Native Americans is dated 10 February 1891, a few weeks after the massacre at Wounded Knee. He wrote, "We now live in constant fear of the Indians since they have begun to kill the whites. They have already killed and scalped many white people. They burn them alive in the most horrible manner. The soldiers are out to stop them and they slaughter many, and all here in Dakota who do not have rifles are given rifles by the government. They are really awful people. They are red as blood and worse than wild animals."³⁷ The soldiers are acting on behalf of humanity; there can be no mercy for beings "worse than wild animals." We may imagine later versions of Gulbrand Rundhaug celebrating executions outside penitentiaries.

While two of these writers explicitly denied the humanity of the Native Americans and thus eliminated their occupation of their land as an ethical issue, Iver Lee looked for and found not only a shared humanity but a shared sense of a fireplace as the center of a home. Entering the homes of Indians Iver Lee was reminded of entering a home in his old-home valley of Hedalen. It is important to understand that his letter makes clear that this was a deliberate choice. In his letter he also noted the lack of furniture and the use of the floor for both sitting and sleeping. But rather than focus on what may have felt foreign he chose to focus on what made him feel at home. The situation, the land of origin and the new social and cultural contexts of these three immigrants were much the same; different choices made for their contrasting identity formations and homemaking processes. The historian who writes about Norwegian contributions to the making of America must confront the excluding homemaking of Jacob Hilton and Gulbrand Rundhaug. The homemaking of Iver Lee, however, suggests that late nineteenth-century racism was not a historical necessity and that America could have developed differently. But the majority of immigrants did not contribute much to such a different development.

37. *Fra Amerika til Norge V*, letter No. 215; my translation. His phrase for "slaughter" is even more brutal in the original: "Slagter ned meget." The Norwegian word is almost exclusively used for the killing of animals.

The American and the European Projects

The United States is still in the making, is still a project. The inclusive America of Iver Lee is an idea still to be realized. The land of freedom imagined by the woman outside the Sterling Memorial Library is still a vision. I will not live to see the completion of the American project but my identity is as involved in the study of this project as it is rooted in my sense of being Norwegian and European. I hope that my grandchildren on both continents will be able to grow up with faith in the American project.

Europe is of course no less a project. For many Norwegians *union* remains a word with negative connotations and my country has placed itself on the sidelines and chosen not to be a full partner in the European project. As I continue to study the United States in myself I recognize that my positive response to *union* may have been one effect of my American Studies on my Norwegian identity. More important, though, is my experience of the United States as a multi-ethnic nation. Norway so often seems a closed tribal society in comparison: our concept of “immigrant” is based on skin color, clothing traditions, and religion. I am glad that my study of the United States has made me impatient with the xenophobia so characteristic of my culture.

Indeed, my study of the United States has made me impatient with European intellectuals who seem unable to understand the essential difference between the American tradition of criticizing the United States and the European one of criticizing – well, the United States. In Luke 18:9-14 we find a story of two men in the temple who both were highly critical of the behavior the other. Without any sense of the irony involved, a Norwegian scholar made the following comment about a book on European views of the United States: “When the authors also observe that the foremost critics of the United States are themselves Americans they could have added that many of them actually say the same as their European counterparts.”³⁸ Of the two who were critical of the same person one day in the temple in Jerusalem we are told that “all who exalt themselves

38. Thomas Hylland-Eriksen in a review of Stian Bromark and Dag Herbjørnsrud, *Frykten for Amerika: En europeisk historie* (Oslo: Tiden, 2003). *Aftenposten* 5 November 2003. It would have been more accurate to observe that many Europeans actually say the same as their American counterparts.

will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Self-criticism, however, is not an exercise much practiced by Europeans.

The Scholar and the Person

When I returned to Norway after three years at Yale in 1966 I could finally take part in something that I felt I could not do while I was a guest of the United States: protests against the Viet Nam War. However, I found myself increasingly uncomfortable with the address of these protests: the American Embassy in Oslo. The demonstrations should rather have been organized and aimed at Norwegian institutions such as the *Storting* and addressed to the Norwegian government's support of the war. Americans were criticizing their government; we should criticize our own. I had after all studied Thoreau, who directed his criticism of slavery in the South against the complicity of his own free state of Massachusetts: "What should concern Massachusetts is not the Nebraska Bill, nor the Fugitive Slave Bill, but her own slaveholding and servility. Let the State [i.e. Massachusetts] dissolve her union with the slaveholder."³⁹ Again it has been my experience that the personal and the scholarly are intertwined and interdependent. Views of the United States from abroad must include that which is abroad, must indeed include the viewer – and the beam that may be in the eye of the viewer.

The invitation to talk at this NAAS conference has been an impetus to reflect on how the scholar and the person cannot and should not be separated. The identity and personality of the scholar are his or her most important tools. We are inevitably in our work as our work is in us. There are no objective interpretations of history, literature, or society; nor should we pretend that our choice of what we study is unrelated to our experience, our beliefs, and our values. Thus the United States has had a significant impact on my experience, my views, and my identity just as

39. Henry David Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," *Walden and other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 1950) 674-675. My own quixotic protest took the form of declaring myself no longer a member of the Norwegian armed forces, where I had the rank of sergeant. American Studies took me to court and made me a C.O.

the way in which I understand and interpret the United States is necessarily affected by my experience, my views, and my identity. Perhaps the closest a scholar can come to objectivity is to be aware of its impossibility and, indeed, of its undesirability.