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Q: Literary history, be it national, local, or regional, is perhaps the most conservative form of literary study, with many claiming that the method is outmoded. What can literary histories do to overcome both the risk of obsolescence and their inherent conservatism?

A: The first thing to recall in addressing this matter is the wide recognition amongst historians that any historical account is a narrative, with specific and identifiable narrative investments and agendas. When it comes to literary history, the question of method is an interesting one, since encounters between history and romance, or the imagined and the factual are foundational elements of the very subject being considered; there is no escaping the “meta” dimension (a narrative about narratives) of literary history. What might be perceived as the anachronistic bent of many older literary histories may be due to a reliance on “methods” that simply replicate received canonical investments instead of challenging them. But this, I suggest, is an incorrect perception: even fairly traditional literary histories, such as the multivolume *Oxford History of English Literature*—those large tomes that proceeded century by century through eight hundred years of literary production in national space that changed considerably over that time—did not merely repeat canonical history, for in many cases, they in fact *made* the canon as they unearthed heretofore ignored works or promoted a specific set of works as being more important than others. And there are shelves-full of literary histories and anthologies which purposely set out to radically reshape the canon as received through the likes of the *Oxford History*. The issue then, for me, is not whether a literary history is conservative or not—it is inevitably conservative in that it is engaging in some form of canon-formation, even if it is a new one—but whether or not it openly engages with its equally inherent radicality in actively reshaping the canon and recognizing its own historical investments and agendas.

Q: Literary histories are known for their preoccupation with identity. Canons are made or broken by them, ideologies are affirmed or restored,

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and writers are recovered or left out. As intellectual enterprises that hold a certain authority over a segment of culture, can they become a culture in and of themselves?

A: I assume the question refers to the tendency of many literary histories to be written based on assumptions about or investments in the generation of national identities, or ethnic identities, or identity as related to gender or class. This question holds true as well for anthologies, encyclopedias, handbooks, etc.—the whole realm of “reference” works—that lay any claim to surveying a certain territory at some level of comprehensiveness or representation. I wouldn’t call identity as such a preoccupation of all of these, but it is true that they are all concerned with materializing the existence of identifiable elements that are critical to the claim that a specific subset of works are more relevant than others to the historical process or time-frame being considered. To the extent that a given literary history accomplishes this work successfully it establishes its own authority, at least in a sheerly professional or institutional sense. But I’d like to open up this question a little by suggesting that literary histories and canons are being made in the digital age well outside the confines of any professional or academic culture and authority. There are now open platforms for the construction of canons and histories available to anyone who wishes to participate in, for example, the Amazon review system, or the Goodreads platform. Since literary histories have always been built upon the foundation of the marketplace, now that the marketplace can, as it were, express itself through a million different anonymous or non-anonymous identities, it will be interesting to see what new senses of literary history emerge via these fractal networks.

Q: For literary histories, literary periods are, first and foremost, instruments of contrast and vehicles of legitimization. Oftentimes, periodization speaks more of literary historiography’s status anxiety and disciplinary autonomy than of their function in describing and investigating literary histories. Does periodization still matter beyond preserving the authority of periodization itself?

A: I’m pulled in a couple of different directions with this question: first, it seems that people *like* to think in terms of periods, centuries, millennia, etc. We do it all the time so that it is a kind of cultural habit that allows us to “package” or get our collective heads around the amorphous mass of reality. And most have developed a healthy skepticism around the total accuracy of any kind of period formation, to the extent that any formation of this kind becomes a fundamentally self-questioning (What is modernism? Did postmodernism actually exist, and if

it did, is it over? When does the long eighteenth century begin and end? Etc.) We know that periodization of any kind poses its own deconstructive questions, yet we still insist on organizing a lot of our thinking around generations and periods and centuries and nations such that doing so must be accomplishing something for us beyond mere self-legitimation. So periodization does continue to matter, but perhaps in different and varying senses over time. Again, I think it is a matter of recognizing investments and making those operational. When my colleagues Lesley Larkin, Stephen Burn and I set out to organize the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Fiction, 1980-2020*, just published by Wiley-Blackwell (apologies for the self-advertisement, but it serves as a convenient example), our purpose was both to recognize important imaginative work that had been produced during this period and bring to light newer work by younger writers that has not received a lot of attention in venues like literary encyclopedias. We knew from the outset that even at two volumes, one million words, and over 250 contributors, the *Encyclopedia* would be selective and would automatically exclude hundreds of authors and topics that we would like to have included were there infinite time and space available to us. And from the outset, by positing the very title of the work and the framework it entailed, we knew we were putting into question the primary elements of period, nation and genre, but in doing so, we stressed with contributors (many of them intentionally recruited from an international cast of specialists that might challenge a strictly nationalist perspective) the necessity of using questions about these contexts, and many others, in developing their entries. The goal in this case was to open up these questions to readers rather than close them down with some claim that the project was comprehensive or representational.

Q: How is contemporaneity, as a historiographic milestone, negotiated in a global context?

A: This is to ask the question, “what is contemporaneity”—one which I am not sure I am equipped to answer, since the answer is so dependent on one’s intellectual experience over time. But I think one aspect of contemporaneity of which I am particularly aware is that of belatedness, the sense that we are always a couple of steps behind the present, catching glimpses of it, but never catching up with it. The sense of belatedness renders a different relation to past, present, and future, and thus to our sense of history, since the history of belatedness registers the present as what has already occurred but is only recognized as a probability in the near future. This is very closely related, of course, to the temporalities of globalism, which occur as “instantaneous” phenomenon, i.e., the sense that we are all connected to each other and the

world moment to moment, nanosecond to nanosecond, via digital networks. Combine this with the growing sense that we are all connected *only* by digital networks, and history of all kinds then becomes transcriptional, analogical, and endless. Clearly, this contemporaneity, if and as it exists, will result in history of an entirely different kind.

Q: How do you comment on the legitimacy of literary histories written by a single author? Should literary histories become the domain of research collectives?

A: For the most part, literary histories already have become the domain of collectives. There will continue to be histories written by individual authors (for example, Steven Moore's phenomenal *The Novel: An Alternative History*, which stands uncompleted at two large volumes) but I think they will be increasingly rare. Now and in the future, I believe, the most important and influential histories will be the result of collective efforts, such as the *1619 Project* which has generated so much interest and controversy in the US. Its effect has already begun to be felt in the teaching of American history in public schools, and wherever one lands in the controversy surrounding it, the teaching of history in the US already has, will, and should be changed dramatically because of it. Singularity is not the future of the writing of history of any kind, including literary history.