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## *History and Historiography*

YOU MIGHT WONDER why we're taking a detour into history. After all, we're calling this book a "user's guide," but a user's guide is something you can pull out, looking for help, when you are trying to *do something* in the here and now. History, on the other hand, offers stories about things that have *already been done* in the past. Why, then, is an entire section of this book—this user's guide—devoted to the (seemingly arcane) history of American Studies? We have four interconnected reasons. Two of these we'll discuss quickly, the third we'll develop into an extended example of how to navigate and utilize past scholarship. We'll circle back to the fourth (and most controversial) reason at the end of the chapter.

First, and at the simplest level, nobody wants to reinvent the wheel. Knowing the history of your field reduces the risk of wasting time writing something that's already been written. This is harder than it looks. Even if you spent your entire life doing nothing but reading books in American Studies, you'd only have time to read a fraction of a percent of what has been published. As of 2017, the OCLC WorldCat catalog of university libraries listed 66,312 entries for the keyword "American Studies." Books with the exact title of *American Studies*—no subtitle—have been written by Tremaine McDowell (1948), Harry Stessel (1975), Mark Merlis (1994), Louis Menand (2002), and Jim Dow (2011), not to mention journals of that title published by the Midcontinent American Studies Association, the Council for International Exchange of Scholars, the Institute of Social Sciences in Beijing, the German Association for American Studies, Seoul National University, and the University of Warsaw. You do, of course, have to weed out things like *American Studies in Papyrology* (a monograph series published by the American Society of Papyrologists) that aren't really relevant to the field. But you're still left with a lot of texts. And weeding out

false hits is not easy. One might imagine, for example, an ethnographic study of papyrologists who live in the United States but devote their lives to studying ancient texts from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Such a project would fall squarely within the boundaries of American Studies, and it might eventually lead you to *American Studies in Papyrology*.

This hypothetical is not as far-fetched as it sounds—some of the earliest college and university programs in American Studies offered classes in things like forestry and botany, in addition to anthropology, economics, sociology, history, literature, music, and more. Anything related to American culture was fair game. On the other hand, students do not have unlimited room in their schedules, which meant the field was shaped, from the start, by struggles over what—and how—students should read. Some believed the purpose of American Studies was to encourage appreciation for democracy, free enterprise, and, at the University of Wyoming, “the American way.”<sup>1</sup> Others wanted to foster critical thinking about topics like nationalism, militarism, and capitalism, especially when the threat of nuclear annihilation seemed to be looming over American culture like a storm cloud. Over time, these differences morphed into struggles over whether students should focus on a small “canon” of American writers and artists (mostly white men, and many from a single decade—the 1850s), or whether offering classes in American Studies should mean building the curriculum around texts by and about women, immigrants, sailors, slaves, and other marginalized groups.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. There is a second reason to linger on the past of American Studies, and it has to do with method. Scholars in all fields, when embarking on a research project, are expected to identify their method or methods. History matters here, too, because it offers models for how scholars in the past have gone about their work. Imagine, for example, that you are a junior scientist applying for grant money to study lung cancer. You’ll need to be able to answer some basic questions about your methods: How will you conduct the research? Why is your lab the best place to carry it out? And, perhaps most important: How does your study relate to past efforts to understand the disease? It might seem obvious that such research is a worthy cause—nobody in their right mind would oppose curing cancer—but the organization giving you money needs to know if your proposed research is credible. One way that credibility is established is by demonstrating your familiarity with the methods and findings of previous studies. This step is not merely opportunistic and individual; careful articulations of method help to build trust for a body of scholarship as a whole.

A third reason: you need to be able to explain the significance—the “so what?”—of your work by connecting it to a larger conversation. Some of your explanation will revolve around understanding, explaining, and applying methods. But another way to establish the “so what?” of your work is to situate it in relation to the *historiography* or *genealogy* of your field. These might be unfamiliar terms, so let’s linger on them for a moment. Historiography is based on the Greek roots “*historia*” (narrative, history) and “*graphia*” (writing). Genealogy is based on the Greek root “*genos*” (gene, offspring, race) together with the suffix “-logy” (study of), which comes from the Greek “*logos*” (word).

Historiography = “*historia*” (history) + “*graphia*” (writing)  
= writing about history

Genealogy = “*genos*” (gene) + “-logy” (study of)  
= the study of genetic origins

We will get to genealogy a little later, but let’s start with historiography. Like “method” and “methodology,” it is easy to get “history” and “historiography” mixed up. These are not synonyms. History, as James Harvey Robinson put it in 1912, is “the vague and comprehensive science of past human affairs.” It includes everything that has happened in the past, all the way down to “this morning’s newspaper.”<sup>2</sup> Historiography, by contrast, refers to the study of what people have written *about* history.

In American Studies, historiography refers to the history of scholarship in the field of American Studies. But it is more than just a matter of surveying individual texts; the key is figuring out how they come together to create scholarly conversations, and how those conversations have changed over time. Paying attention to historiography can help you plan your research by establishing a road map of the places other scholars have gone—both to avoid getting lost in trivia, and to make sure you locate the most interesting questions and landmarks. We think that this particular reason for studying historiography is so important that we’d like to give you an extended example of how it works.

#### AN EXAMPLE: THE PLANTATION HOUSEHOLD

Imagine that you are about to start a project on plantation households in the U. S. South. How do you go about investigating the relevant historiography? An online search can be useful for getting a sense of the lay of the land,

but—as we’ve seen—such searches are sometimes better for quantity than quality. The best approach might be to ask for suggestions from someone who has seriously studied this topic already. Historiographical curation is a *social* activity, even if it’s not always recognized as such. What you’re looking for are the most vibrant conversations about your topic, which is why an experienced guide is invaluable. You could also try to find a published bibliography on your topic, or search for book reviews in a database like JSTOR or Project MUSE. Yet another route is to find one well-respected book on your topic, and then check its introduction and footnotes for additional sources. Usually the introduction will explicitly refer to other sources that you can add to your list, which can help you start mapping out your topic’s historiography.

Together, these methods should leave you with a short list of books to find at the library. We’re going to focus on books for a couple of reasons. A book—as opposed to an article, blog, website, etc.—offers a *long-form* argument. Because of its length, a book is able to tackle a big and important “so what?” question, one that can only be answered through multiple subquestions and sub-subquestions. Done well, a book pulls together years of research into a coherent narrative whole that readers can digest within a few days. For this reason, the book remains the gold standard in American Studies research. We do not want to slight other forms—they all have important functions—but, despite predictions of its demise, a good book remains the goal for many American Studies scholars. For your topic, the initial list of books might look something like this:

Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

Tiya Miles, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

These books are what scholars call monographs, or studies of a single specialized subject as opposed to a broad survey like a textbook. To break that down:

Monograph = “mono” (one) + “graphia” (writing) = book about one thing

You might be thinking, “If these are all credible books on my topic, why should I read all four instead of just one of them?” Without a doubt, each of these books *is* extremely valuable on its own. But they are far from redundant, and in fact the areas where they differ can provide some of the best clues about how *your* voice might fit in. Think of it like joining a group of unfamiliar people at a party. It’s almost always a good idea to listen and pay attention before trying to steer the conversation in a new direction. Is somebody in the middle of telling a story? Are they debating something? How do they know each other? Are they old friends or just getting to know one another? What is the atmosphere of the conversation? Similarly when working in American Studies, paying attention to historiography provides useful information that can help you decide whether and how to join a particular scholarly conversation.

Although there is no substitute for reading books, start to finish, you can start looking for clues right away, before even cracking open any of the books. Lay them out on the table side by side and examine the covers (figures 3–6). What do you notice? The first thing that might jump out at you is that each of the four covers depicts houses. But there are also some subtle differences between these images that offer clues about what you’ll find in the books. For example, both Gordon-Reed and Miles depict specific identifiable houses: Monticello, former home of Thomas Jefferson, and a Cherokee plantation house in Georgia now called the Chief Vann House State Historic Site. Both homes are large, distant, and protected by trees in pastoral settings. By contrast, McCurry’s cover depicts a ramshackle home with chipped paint and uneven siding superimposed on a map. This helps illustrate what is meant by the term “yeoman households.” The pluralization of McCurry’s title—“masters” of small “worlds”—also signals that the book is about a pattern of relations across multiple households in the region, rather than a specific one. By contrast the subtitles of both Gordon-Reed (“An American Family”) and Miles (“A Cherokee Plantation Story”) make it clear that they are utilizing a case study method. But covers can also deceive. As we read, we learn that the Diamond Hill plantation, with its large population of enslaved people, was in operation for many years before the Vann House was constructed, thereby complicating our first impressions.

Glymph’s cover is even more ambiguous. The phrase “out of the house of bondage” alludes to Exodus, signaling that the book deals with the aftermath

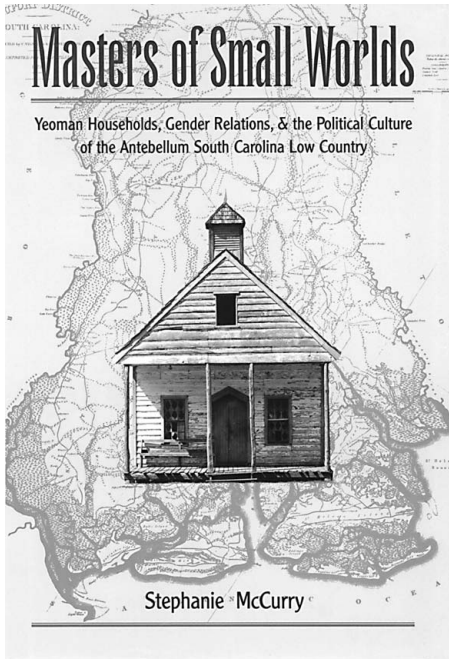


FIGURE 3. Image courtesy of Oxford University Press.

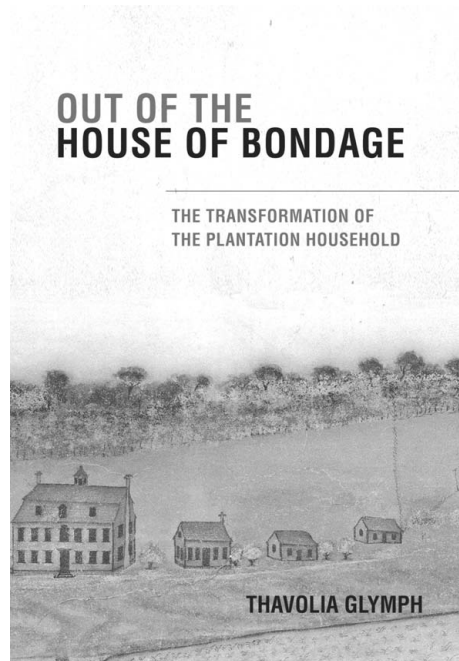


FIGURE 4. Image courtesy of Cambridge University Press.

of chattel slavery, but the subtitle does not point to a specific location, and instead hints at a focus on change over time (“transformation”). The cover art depicts a large house on the left alongside several outbuildings. The landscape is austere, with faint trees and an open field surrounding the row of structures. The crops in the foreground are easy to miss and divided from the field by a line that runs parallel to the forest in the background. As with the other covers, the sky is washed out, and all four books have roughly the same color scheme of earth tones—tan, pale blue, green, black, and a touch of brick red. Flipping over the book identifies the illustration as “Julianton Plantation, ca. 1800,” in Georgia. Will this turn out to be a case study as well? It appears more likely that the image was chosen to create an atmosphere, or perhaps to suggest the multiplicity of living environments within the plantation household.

We haven’t even started reading, and already we can surmise that the books represent different methods: case study, broad pattern, and transformation over time. Other clues can be found by flipping over to the blurbs of praise

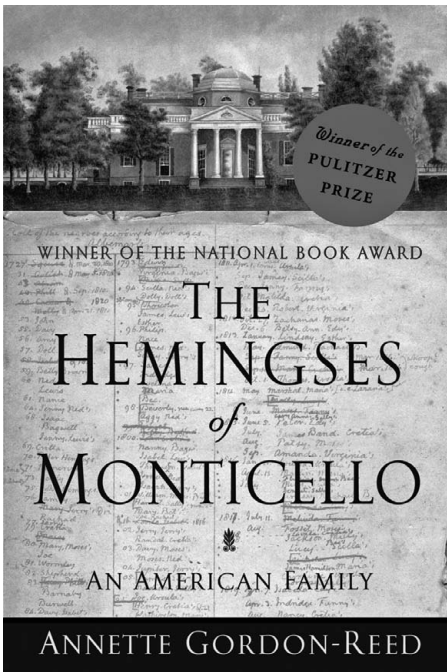


FIGURE 5. Image courtesy of W. W. Norton.

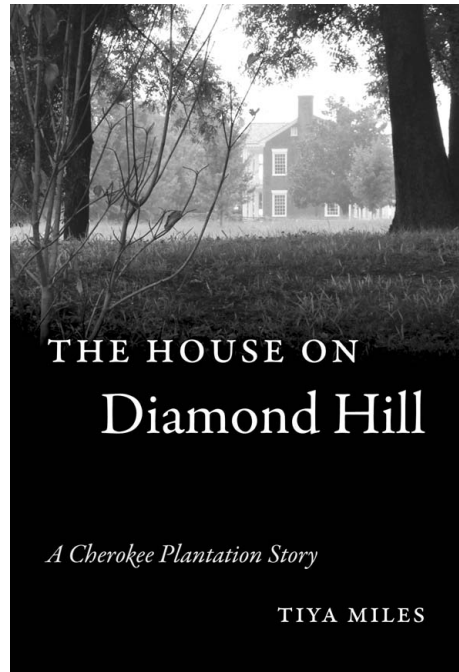


FIGURE 6. Image courtesy of University of North Carolina Press.

from reviewers on the back of the books. To start with *Out of the House of Bondage*, one calls it “a sweeping reinterpretation” that combines “the tools of an economic and social historian.” Another blurb notes that it “demolishes the idea that some form of gender solidarity trumped race and class in plantation households.” These can already get us thinking about the historiographical context. First, it suggests that Glymph is challenging books that portray white and black women as allies against patriarchal oppression. Second, it positions the book within economic and social history, suggesting a concern with structures rather than culture alone. Turning to *Masters of Small Worlds*, published thirteen years earlier, one reviewer asserts that it demonstrates “the centrality of gender as a category for understanding American political thought.” A second blurb calls it “a pioneering beginning to the inclusion of gender in political history.” By now you can make an educated guess, or hypothesis, that *Masters of Small Worlds* might be one of the books that Glymph challenges, with McCurry seemingly pointing to gender as the main avenue of power in plantation life, and Glymph seemingly pointing to race.

Let's see how this hypothesis plays out. Ultimately you would do this by reading both books, cover to cover. What you'd find is that McCurry and Glymph do offer differing interpretations of how power operated in plantation households, but close examination of their arguments, sources, and methods shows the conflict to be much more nuanced than a divide over whether gender or race is more important. As her subtitle suggests, McCurry is interested in the political culture of the antebellum South Carolina low country, and specifically the place of the yeomanry, or small-scale farmers, in a region dominated by large planters. She argues that democratic bonds among white men, rich and poor, revolved around "the virtually unlimited right of an independent man to mastery over his own household and the property that lay within its boundaries" (6). Both marriage and slavery, McCurry argues, were based on this polyvalent metaphor of the family that was echoed in both religion and politics. Instead of creating solidarity between white mistresses and enslaved women, the equating of marriage and slavery was a rhetorical strategy that preachers and politicians used "to endow slavery with the legitimacy of the family" (214). Glymph, on the other hand, is less interested in cultural representations of the plantation household than the "flesh-and-blood practices" that made it, above all, a *workplace* where mistresses exerted brutal violence against domestic slaves. This experience of tyranny shaped the types of freedom sought out by black women after emancipation and, as a result, left its traces in the social life of the new postbellum household economy.

As it turns out, the conversation between McCurry and Glymph is not a conflict over which matters more—race or gender—but rather a discussion of how to think about *both* of these categories when you put them together. Glymph argues that historians have tended to reduce black women's stories to a sort of echo or imitation of white mistresses, thereby missing the texture of their historical experiences. McCurry stresses that overlapping layers of oppression can be found even in a metaphor as deceptively simple as the family. This concept of *intersectionality* has had a major influence on the field of American Studies in recent decades. In fact, one of the key articles on this concept, "It's All in the Family" (1998), by the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, focused on the family as a place where categories such as race and gender intersect. Collins argues that such categories "mutually construct one another" and cannot be properly understood in isolation.

Other conversations between McCurry and Glymph emerge in the footnotes. This is where you can look to track down the evidence a scholar is



using to support their arguments. There are two main kinds of sources: secondary and primary. Secondary sources are things like books and articles—anything written *about* a topic from a distance—whereas primary sources are forms of evidence that directly document the topic that a scholar is researching: letters, photographs, personal diaries, tax records, court filings, and more.

This distinction is blurred when studying historiography, since the secondary sources are themselves the objects of your study. Your goal is to figure out how a number of books are related, and organize them into *conversations*, not just fields. *Masters of Small Worlds*, for example, is hard to place in a single field: it won both the John Hope Franklin Prize for the outstanding book published in American Studies in 1995, but also the Charles Sydnor Prize from the Southern Historical Association. So is it American Studies? History? The very ambiguity of disciplinary categories is why we urge you to spend time in the footnotes of monographs and ask concrete questions such as: Who is this author in conversation with? How has she selected and organized her archives? What are her methods? What can I learn from the way she is using her sources? Can this book lead me to other books?

Both McCurry's and Glymph's footnotes reveal a wide range of primary sources. Glymph devotes particular attention to an archive that, as she explains in a lengthy footnote, is highly contested among historians: the former slave narratives recorded by the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s. This project provided work to unemployed—and mostly (but not exclusively) white—writers during the Great Depression. Its mission was to record life narratives from formerly enslaved African Americans, all of whom were elderly by the time of the project. Glymph notes that Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul: Life in the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999) excludes these narratives because of the distorting effects of the power dynamic between white recorders and former slaves. Indeed, Catherine Stewart's *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project* (2016) notes that some recorders were active United Daughters of the Confederacy members committed to romanticizing the antebellum South. Glymph herself quotes one woman who told her interviewer, "we old 'uns still knows dat we is got ter be perlite to you' white ladies" (13). But Glymph ultimately concludes that these WPA narratives are useful sources, since the "rumblings of renewed freedom" in the 1930s may have encouraged interviewees to speak out, even in a context shaped by ongoing violence. Crucially, it is important to consider Glymph's decision as an act of

scholarly judgment. As Ramzi Fawaz notes, “There is an intuitive element to this part of research, where we have to go on hunches, trust our instincts, and provide evidence of why those hunches make sense.”<sup>3</sup>

The footnotes in both books also identify certain secondary sources as important. For example, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (1988) is credited by both authors for identifying the “plantation household” as an important object of study, with McCurry also pointing to Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (1983) as influential in this regard. Glymph repeatedly cites Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985) and Jacqueline Jones’s *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (1985), while pushing back against the concept of gender solidarity across the color line introduced in Anne Firor Scott’s *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930* (1970). Several of these authors appear in the acknowledgments section: another key place to look, for it reveals the personal networks (often a history of face-to-face conversations, mentorship, and mutual reading) that propelled these books forward. Notably, Glymph mentions McCurry as somebody who was supportive of her work, and she singles out a scholar named Darlene Clark Hine as particularly influential. Both authors thank Fox-Genovese, further underscoring the importance of *Within the Plantation Household* to their work.

Let’s pause for a moment and take stock. We haven’t even gotten to two of our original four texts—*The House on Diamond Hill* and *The Hemingses of Monticello*—and already our web of historiography is growing. What we see here is not simply a bookshelf, but the makings of a conversation (figure 7). We can start organizing them in a number of different ways, using clues such as what McCurry, Glymph, Gordon-Reed, and Miles say about them. In a bibliography they might be organized alphabetically, but we can also start thinking about overarching discursive “clusters” beyond your research topic, such as Southern history, political history, cultural history, and women’s history. Each one contains a number of historiographical conversations, and each might frame any one of these books in terms of the cluster’s own concerns and conversations.

You could also organize these books around questions. Indeed, one of the great benefits of reading historiography is that it helps you figure out what to ask as you embark on your own research:

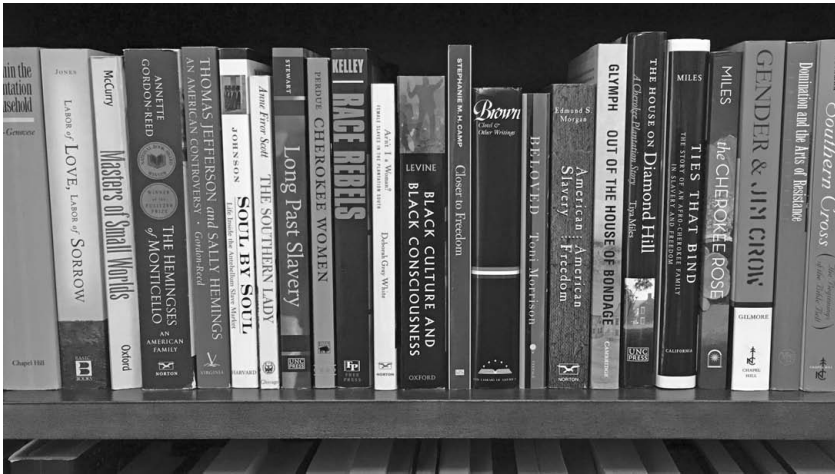


FIGURE 7. Photograph by Alexander Olson.

*Did patriarchy produce solidarity between mistresses and enslaved women, or was their relationship organized around racial violence?*

*Was the plantation household a “private” or “public” space?*

*How did emancipation change the plantation household economy? What did freedom mean from the perspective of formerly enslaved women?*

These questions bring us to the other key term of this chapter: *genealogy*. If historiography involves mapping scholarly *conversations*, genealogy is more about intellectual *influences*. It is also more holistic: a book’s genealogical roots might include a wide range of people, texts, and institutions.

One way to think about “genealogy” is through the more colloquial use of the term as family history. In fact, Annette Gordon-Reed’s *The Heminges of Monticello* is about genealogy in both of these senses. It tells the story of the family of Sally Hemings, a woman enslaved by Thomas Jefferson who bore several children with him—a fact that some historians continue to deny, even after DNA testing in 1999 added further corroboration to documentary and oral history sources. These older sources include the autobiographical narrative of Sally Hemings’s son, Madison Hemings, published in 1873, as well as circumstantial evidence regarding the timing of Jefferson’s visits to Monticello. Also relevant are semi-fictional texts like William Wells Brown’s *Clotel, or the President’s Daughter* (1853), the first novel by an African American writer. Unlike white historians, Brown took the stories about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings seriously. Gordon-Reed argues that the

generations of white historians who dismissed such stories as rumor were reenacting “the world of master and slave in the pages of history” (85). Her explanation of the legal context of slavery in Virginia draws on texts like Edmund Morgan’s *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (1975), which has influenced the study of colonial American history for three decades with its provocative argument that slavery provided not only material support but also the social and cultural scaffolding for U. S. independence.

Mapping the historiographical and genealogical influences on Gordon-Reed’s work opens the door to different kinds of questions, difficult ones focused on historiographical choices:

*Why were historians so eager, for so long, to ignore the evidence that Thomas Jefferson had children with Sally Hemings?*

*How do scholars decide whether a story is credible? How have these criteria changed over time, and why?*

These questions start to reveal some of the rewards of paying attention to historiography and genealogy. Mapping scholarly conversations does not simply mean finding texts that you agree with, but also accounting for texts that have later been discredited. The reasons why some stories get told and others get ignored involve complicated relationships between ideas and institutions that historiographical analysis can help illuminate.

In fact, the effort to shed light on Sally Hemings’s story was part of a larger institutional struggle that accompanied the establishment of African American Studies and Women’s Studies programs in the 1970s and 1980s—a movement that reshaped American Studies as well. In a 2007 article, Deborah Gray White described the practical challenges that she faced to publish her groundbreaking book, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985), noting that “it was an uphill struggle to research, write, and get it published.” She explained that although the WPA narratives were invaluable for her study of enslaved black women’s lives, “I was repeatedly scolded for using them, for they were assumed to be invalid, in part because they were produced by African Americans, and thus were biased.”<sup>24</sup> Crucially, the supposed bias that White’s critics emphasized was very different from the bias that received scrutiny from Glymph, Stewart, and Johnson. Instead of questioning the credibility of the *recorders* involved with the WPA project, the critics of White’s book in the 1980s doubted the credibility of *the former slaves themselves*—on the baldly racist assumption that they would

exaggerate the hardships of slavery. Stepping back, this institutional context is a major reason why, for many decades, historians devoted so much more attention to the so-called founding fathers like George Washington and John Adams. Deborah Gray White and her peers were part of a movement to study the history of American culture “from the bottom up.” Other contributions to this movement included Lawrence Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977), which took seriously a range of sources from the black oral tradition such as jokes and songs. It also spurred the efforts of scholars like James Scott, Stephanie Camp, and Robin D. G. Kelley to develop methods for reading primary sources “against the grain” to find evidence of the voices of the marginalized, or what Scott called “hidden transcripts” and Kelley called “infrapolitics.”

The problem of historical narration brings us to the final book from our original list of four, Tiya Miles’s *The House on Diamond Hill*. Miles tells the story of the many lives—“American Indians, enslaved people of African descent, and Euro-American missionaries, craftsmen, and laborers” (3)—that came together on the plantation operated by the wealthy Cherokee landowner James Vann and his family before removal. Today the house is preserved as the Chief Vann House State Historic Site. The book’s method combines archival research with what is called *participant observation*, or getting to know a group through direct interaction. For Miles, this meant attending events at the Vann House like a “Candlelight Christmas Evening” and getting to know the rangers who operate it. Part of the impetus for her book was the observation that (as with many other Southern plantation homes open to tourists) the interpretive materials at the Vann House did not acknowledge the enslaved men and women who worked there. At these sites, black chattel slavery is “the elephant in the plantation parlor” that, in Miles’s telling, “mars the purity of mint julep moments, undoes the pleasure of white-only leisure, and justifies the wreckage of a bloody Civil War” (11–12).

As a study of a Cherokee plantation that has become a site of heritage tourism, *The House on Diamond Hill* not only engages scholarship on the history of black chattel slavery, but also connects us to adjacent conversations in fields such as Native American Studies. On the question, for example, of whether the Africans who were enslaved by Cherokees became “Indianized,” *The House on Diamond Hill* differs from Miles’s own first book, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom*

(2005), which tells the story of a Cherokee farmer named Shoe Boots and his slave and partner Doll. Since Diamond Hill was much larger—and enslaved far more people—than most other Cherokee plantations, its enslaved people formed a semi-autonomous community. Miles notes that “the black community on Diamond Hill was composed of a diversity of people and family groupings, each with distinct experiences and backgrounds” (88). These included newly arrived Africans as well as slaves who had grown up speaking the Cherokee language, resulting in a cultural and social network that, Miles argues, is impossible to understand through a monolithic lens.

Miles stretches our historiographical mapping in other ways as well. In *Ties That Bind*, she identifies Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) as a major influence on her approach to writing and scholarship. Miles explains that *Beloved*’s “enduring ability to mediate between our present selves and shrouded pasts, has echoed in my thoughts throughout the process of writing this book and thus has left an imprint on the story that I tell” (xxvi). This homage brings to mind the acknowledgments section of Glymph’s *Out of the House of Bondage*, which offers thanks “to John Coltrane, Nina Simone, Leadbelly, and Oleta Adams for knowing and reminding me of what it would take to get this done” (xi). Such sources of intellectual inspiration—novels and music—complicate our historiographical and genealogical analysis in interesting and productive ways. They remind us of the affective dimensions of our work. It’s not simply that we offer our readers an answer to the question, “so what?” It’s that we undertake a project because *we*, as individuals, find reasons to care. We use research and writing to explore our own passions, which often have deep links to literature, art, music, and other forms of emotional experience. In fact, Miles followed the publication of *The House on Diamond Hill* with a fictional story of her own, *Cherokee Rose: A Novel of Gardens and Ghosts* (2015), which imagines a new ending for the intersectional histories she uncovered at Diamond Hill. Our interests and values, in other words, can go hand in hand with historiographical engagement: it’s not a matter of picking one or the other.

At this point, our web of historiography has grown significantly. Let’s recap what we have in the form of a bibliographical table (box 1). If you are a graduate student in American Studies, this is roughly the process that you can use to help build a list of books for your comprehensive exams. Indeed, “A Plantation Household Bibliography” offers a pretty good interdisciplinary mix of sources on plantation culture in the U.S. South, with monographs,

#### BOX 1. A PLANTATION HOUSEHOLD BIBLIOGRAPHY

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novels, cultural theory, and primary sources like Madison Hemings's 1873 narrative. There is a blend of depth and breadth, with more than one book by Tiya Miles and Annette Gordon-Reed, and a range of social, cultural, and economic approaches. But even for the narrow topic of plantation households, and even with the same four books as a starting point, this list is only one of the many possible directions that you could have taken this exercise.

Ultimately, historiography and genealogy are ways to find questions, not answers: What roads should we follow into the past? Where should we look to find the origins of the ideas we study? These things matter, for a good project *requires* a good question, and a good question cannot exist without a historiographical context. Genealogy pushes even further by organizing these contexts into narratives and origin stories. We are not the first to offer genealogies for the field of American Studies. Over the years, many writers have attempted such stories, and we'll give it a shot in the two chapters that follow.

In a field defined by multiplicity—with a long tradition of resisting and rejecting definitions—writing genealogies can be treacherous. Inevitably things get left out of the narrative, and as we noted in the Introduction, American Studies is suspicious of anything that smacks of exclusion. But this brings us to the fourth and final reason why this book opens with the history of American Studies. Quite simply, we believe that many of the classic origin stories of the field get things *wrong*. And this merits taking another look. For example, the origins of American Studies are often linked to the disciplines of history and literature, but if you go back and consult American Studies bibliographies from the early years of the field, you'll find a shocking range of sources, including *American Journal of Psychiatry* and *Bulletin of the Atomic*



*Scientists*.<sup>5</sup> Today, American Studies is often seen through the lens of its primary national academic organization—the American Studies Association—but when you look at the history of the organization it seems, well . . . generally disorganized. Perhaps most importantly, American Studies is often framed as complicit in U.S. global hegemony after World War II, but the reality is much more complex.

In the two chapters that follow, we approach these issues from two distinct modes of intellectual history: scholarship and institutions. The first tracks the story of American Studies through historiographical “mixtapes” of interesting and important works. The second outlines a few of the institutions—curricula, programs, journals, organizations, and more—that helped materialize the field as a concrete thing. We believe that attention to the past helps defamiliarize—or make strange—the assumptions of the present moment. In other words, we believe that understanding the history of American Studies in all its multiplicity might lead us to new and better kinds of writing in the future.